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## The Great Commission in Matthew Understand Authorial Intent

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*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:16-20 ESV)*

Read Matthew. These were the words of Professor Donald Verseput during the first session of his seminary class in which I was enrolled. He told the class that we were going to do something unique in regard to seminary classes on the gospels—read the text. We were going to read through Matthew and also learn to read the other gospels. He told us that the various exams would require us to explain the author's meaning based on the text itself. We were free to use whatever commentaries we wished, but they could hurt our grades. What mattered was the ability to read the text and explain the Biblical author's meaning. We soon found out that giving rote answers from the traditions of church history could make us look rather foolish in class. Dr. Verseput, in some cases, would look over his reading glasses and say, "Read that text again." On the other hand, if a student commented on how the text itself related to other aspects of the particular gospel and Old Testament allusions within the text, such remarks would result in the honor of hearing him say, "That is an astute reading."

As we study the Great Commission in this article, we must read the text and look for the grammatical and thematic links to earlier parts of

Matthew, as well as to see the grammatical links Matthew has already made to OT material. If we are good readers, we will be brought face to face with what God has said through His Holy Spirit-inspired author, Matthew. In the process, we will also have to question whether many of those in church history, past and present, have made bold claims which have no basis in what Matthew wrote. Those claims should be discarded.

The Great Commission is the final scene in Matthew. Jesus came to His disciples and gave His final teaching on a mountain (thematic in Matthew) and included the imperative to "make disciples of all nations." This phrase is critical and has been interpreted to mean "Christianize cultures and nations as geo-political units," with the intention of making Christianity the dominant religion in the world. Some call this the "dominion mandate." The purpose of this article is to do careful exegesis of these verses to understand Matthew's meaning. The only meaning that matters is that of the Holy Spirit-inspired Biblical author. The author, not the reader, determines the meaning. I will show that themes already found throughout Matthew find their culmination in Matthew 28:16-20 and that these themes reveal a far different

meaning than what has been believed and practiced in most of church history. We will reject whatever cannot be justified based on Matthew's meaning.

Matthew reveals his meaning by using repeated themes and words. For example, the term "disciple" appears 72 times in Matthew. The verb "make disciple(s)" is only found 3 times, including Matthew 28:19. It was 11 disciples (Gr. *mathe\_tē\_s*) who traveled into Galilee to the mount where Jesus had sent them. One of the first questions we must address is "who are disciples"? Matthew does not leave us in the dark about that. Whatever "make disciples" means, which we will address, the result should be persons who fit the description of disciples throughout Matthew. Can a disciple have no more than a general, cultural relationship to the Lord whose teachings define disciples? Only the text of Matthew can answer that, not human philosophy or political aspirations.

### The Eleven Go to Galilee, See Jesus and Worship Him

*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. (Matthew 28:16-17)*

The location where Jesus came to the 11 is significant since Galilee is mentioned 16 times in Matthew. It was the location where Jesus went after His temptation by the devil (4:1-11) and then began His teaching ministry (4:12-17). This is also the scene of calling His first disciples (4:18-22). Matthew shows the significance of Galilee by citing Isaiah 9:1-2 (in Matthew 4:15-16) which calls the location "Galilee of the Gentiles." Isaiah predicts that those sitting in darkness will be those upon whom a great Light dawned. Jesus began to preach: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17b). Teaching in Galilee meant

teaching ordinary people such as the first disciples and significantly, not the powerful elite who often oppose Jesus in Matthew. Jesus mentioned Galilee before His crucifixion and resurrection: “*But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee*” (Matthew 26:32). An angel had told them that they would see Him in Galilee (28:7).

There is also significance to the mountain mentioned in Matthew 28:16. We can only speculate which mountain, but many important events in Matthew are associated with mountains. The first mention of a mountain is in the temptation narrative:

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”* (Matthew 4:8-9)

Jesus rejected this (the third temptation) by citing Scripture about worshipping and serving only God (4:10). The next mention of a mountain is the scene of Jesus’ teaching on a mountain which we know as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7). Later, Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him up on a mountain (Mount of Transfiguration: Matthew 17:1-9) where He was transfigured and identified by God’s voice out of the cloud as “My beloved Son” and they were to “listen to Him” (Matthew 17:5). Another key teaching session is done on the Mount of Olives (Matthew chapters 24 and 25) on the topic of eschatology.

Here in Matthew 28:16 the 11 disciples are at the scene of Jesus’ last discourse, which is the Great Commission. Matthew takes us from the first mountain scene where the devil offers the kingdoms of the world in their wicked version of glory to the final mountain scene where Jesus will send ordinary disciples with no worldly glory to the Gentiles to make disciples. Jesus rejected the devil’s temptation by affirming that only God may be worshiped and served. Here on this mountain of the commission, Matthew tells us the disciples “worshiped” the resurrected Lord

(as also in 28:9). At the beginning of Matthew foreigners worshiped Jesus the newborn child (Matthew 2:11). Matthew skillfully ties together narrative themes which reveal the truth about Jesus Christ, and what pleases God and characterizes disciples. There are also previews in Matthew which indicate that Gentiles will be included in the Messianic kingdom and believe what many of the powerful in Israel reject.

The statement that “some doubted” has caused much speculation over the centuries. The Greek word here (*distazo*) is only used two times in the New Testament—both in Matthew (here and in 14:31). It is not the word for unbelief. In Matthew 14:31 Peter had gotten out of the boat and started to sink when he had “doubt”:

*And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.* (Matthew 14:28-32)

Given the context in both cases, we should not see Matthew ascribing failure to some disciples in Matthew 28:17. Some have suggested translating this “hesitated.” However we translate the word, which can also mean “waver” or “to have second thoughts about a matter,”<sup>1</sup> we should look at both contexts and see what lesson applies here. Notice the next verse in the walking on water narrative: “*And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God!’*” (Matthew 14:33). Disciples who are worshipers who confess Christ are not immune from doubts or hesitation. The disciples with faith in the resurrected Christ do not become unbelievers when doubts arise. In both cases the context includes true worship of the Lord Jesus Christ. Judas was the unbe-

liever, not the 11. This statement encourages future disciples that their occasional doubts do not negate the reality of their faith in Christ. Even true disciples can have doubts, but they continue to worship and serve their Lord, showing that they are disciples indeed.

### All Authority In Heaven and On Earth

*And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”* (Matthew 28:18)

Jesus here claims to have all authority over the whole created order which was given to Him by the Father. This claim was made earlier in Matthew and now His bodily resurrection has vindicated the claim. No one else before or since has predicted his own death and resurrection (Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 26:31) and accomplished it. Having such authority is an important theme in Matthew. Jesus’ claim of having all authority was made earlier:

*All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.* (Matthew 11:27)

The fact of Jesus’ bodily resurrection vindicates His earlier assertion about “all things.” The Jerusalem authorities had questioned Jesus’ authority (Matt. 21:23), but Jesus used a question about John the Baptist to expose their mixed motives. They did not answer because of the fear of man (21:25-27). The question concerning Jesus’ authority is now objectively and fully answered by His resurrection. Jesus proclaims it to the 11 here in Matthew 28:18.

The scope of this authority is universal as shown by the statement “in heaven and on earth.” This specifies the whole created order and is an echo from Daniel 7:

*“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him*

*was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13-14)*

Jesus as King is thematic in Matthew. Daniel’s prophecy shows the meaning of the Son of Man references in Matthew as well. It is the Father who gives Jesus this authority over all things. Matthew’s genealogy (Matthew 1:1-17) begins with “Jesus the Messiah the son of David” to establish the fulfillment of the promised coming King. This royal motif carries throughout the book of Matthew and culminates in 28:18-20. It was the Father who gave all authority to Jesus.

Readers of Matthew should recall the temptation of the devil in Matthew 4:8-11. Jesus refused to succumb to this, the devil’s third temptation, by citing Scripture. The devil claimed to have “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” (4:8) to give in exchange for receiving Jesus’ worship. The claim itself was specious in light of the many assertions in the Scriptures about God’s rule (see Psalm 47:8; Psalm 93:1 and others). The devil’s domain is that of sin, rebellion and darkness. Jesus would soon heal a paralytic to show that He had authority on earth to forgive sins (Matthew 9:6). Jesus would give authority to expel demons and to heal sickness to His disciples (Matthew 10:1). It is wrong to give credibility to the devil’s claim, something Matthew does not do. Jesus’ authority to forgive and heal is an allusion to Daniel 7 as well:

*But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” (Matthew 9:6)*

The “Son of Man” reference is from Daniel 7:13. Here authority on earth is mentioned. In Matthew 28:18 it is expanded to “in heaven and on earth.” It came from the Ancient of Days who never relinquished it. Jesus reveals what is already true, He did not have to take

this back from Satan.

Jesus’ teachings and mighty deeds during His earthly ministry were already powerful and authoritative. Matthew makes this clear in many passages. For example:

*And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. (Matthew 7:28-29)*

Jesus now has an expanded sphere of authority “in heaven and on earth” and over all things. The term “all” (Greek *pas*) is found four times in Matthew 28:18-20: **all** authority, **all** nations, **all** I commanded; **all** the days until the end of the age. Jesus’ kingly authority begins and ends Matthew’s gospel. It is thematic and comprehensive.

### Make Disciples

*Go therefore and make disciples (Matthew 28:19a)*

Having asserted His authority, Jesus issued the command, “make disciples” to the 11. The verb “make disciples” is imperative in the Greek. It is the focus of this verse. The Greek word translated “go” is an aorist, passive participle: “having gone.” This fact does not lessen the importance of going, but is not the command itself. Wherever disciples are, they are to “make disciples.” The verb “to disciple” is only used 4 times in the New Testament, 3 of which are in Matthew. But the noun “disciple” (*mathe\_te\_s*) is found 72 times in Matthew which makes it clearly thematic. However a disciple is defined in this gospel is what Jesus commands the 11 to make. It would be inconceivable that a careful reader of Matthew would get to chapter 28 with no idea of what constitutes a disciple. Some of the usages describe disciples of others than Jesus, or even disciples of Jesus who prove to be false (like Judas); but the meaning of a true disciple of Jesus is clear. They are the ones who know Jesus’ true identity and follow Him. They are followers of Jesus who are committed to Him and listen to His teachings. They are the ones who have

learned the meaning and applications of Jesus’ teachings though the reality of these teachings taking hold in their lives was a process. This process continues all the way to the scene of the Great Commission and will go forward with them after His ascension.

A key passage in Matthew about this process is found in 16:13-20. Jesus begins a discussion about His identity with the disciples in this manner: “Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’” (Matthew 16:13). They give answers they have heard, which leads to His question: “Who do you say I am?” (vs 15b). Here is Peter’s answer and Jesus’ response:

*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 16:16b-17)*

Notice that Jesus called Himself “the Son of Man” in verse 13. This self-identification is revelatory in itself (Daniel 7:13-14). Peter’s confession is what true disciples will confess. This is revealed truth which disciples believe due to God’s gracious work in them. Belief becomes true confession. Jesus’ statements about the rock, the keys of the kingdom, the building of His church, and withstanding the gates of hell are essential but there is no room in this article to expound each of these phrases. Jesus mentions the fact that disciples will do binding and loosing which will be important when we get to Matthew 28:20, and I will return to it.

Disciples are followers of Jesus who know the truth about Jesus’ person and work, confess Him and live according to His teachings. They are those who build on the rock (Matthew 7:24-25) as contrasted to those who build on sand (7:26-27). Those who build on the rock are defined as “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them” (vs 24a). The concept of Jesus building His church on “this the rock” (a literal translation from the Greek of Matthew

16:18) in the context of Peter's confession is likely significant. Disciples enter the narrow gate (Matthew 7:18) and listen to Jesus' teachings and live accordingly. They build on the rock. Some in the larger crowd hear superficially but live however they see fit. They prove not to be disciples but those with other agendas. Many of Jesus' parables reinforce these themes. Therefore, making disciples in Matthew 28:19 is applied to persons who hear the truth about Jesus Christ, believe in Him, and are committed by God's grace to living accordingly.

The confession of Christ as shown by Peter's confession is normative for disciples. Such confession has eschatological implications:

*So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:32-33)*

Much mischief has been done to the imperative "make disciples" in the Great Commission by failing to allow the Holy Spirit-inspired author (Matthew) to define what he means by disciple. Matthew was an apostle of Jesus Christ, appointed by Him and wrote the Book of Matthew as part of the inerrant, authoritative Word of God. Read the text and remember that the author determines the meaning, not the reader.

### Of All Nations

*of all nations (Matthew 28:19b)*

The object of "make disciples" is "all the nations." Much debate and theological discourse has arisen in church history about this statement. The best way to understand this is to pay attention to the previews found earlier in Matthew. The term for nations is *ethne* which is a plural noun and can mean "Gentiles" in certain contexts. The singular *ethnos* means "a body of persons united by kinship, culture, and common traditions, nation, people"<sup>2</sup> (in this context). In Matthew the *ethne* are Gentiles whose inclusion in Messianic salvation is both previewed and predicted. The range of

meaning of *ethne* includes nations or tribes more broadly, in eschatological passages (Matthew 24:7, 14; 25:32).<sup>3</sup>

Gentile inclusion in Messianic salvation is predicted in the Old Testament. Consider God's promises to Abraham:

*The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? (Genesis 18:17, 18)*

*and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." (Genesis 22:18)*

In both of these passages, the Septuagint has the exact words we find in Matthew 28:19 (*panta ta ethne*) for "all the nations." The previously mentioned Daniel 7:14 uses *laoi, phulai, glo\_ssa* (peoples, tribes, languages) as those who will serve the King.

The complicating factor is whether tribes as a whole are in view or persons from various tribes. In some contexts nations as tribal units or as geopolitical entities are the topic. For example: "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places (Matthew 24:7). Here in Matthew 24 *ethne* is used twice in one verse and refers to nations as geo-political units with distinctive national interests which lead to war. Elsewhere in Matthew it is predicted that *ethne* (Gentiles) will hope in Christ (as in Matthew 12:21). In Matthew 10:5 the twelve were not to go on the road to the Gentiles (*ethne*) but in Matthew 12:18, Isaiah 42:1 is cited to the effect that the message of justice will go to the Gentiles. In Matthew 20:19 Jesus predicts He will be handed over to Gentiles (*ethnos*) to be mocked, flogged and crucified. He will be raised from the dead on the third day!

Given the varied usages of *ethne* in Matthew, the context of 28:19 is crucial to determine Matthew's meaning in the Great Commission. We have established that disciples in Matthew are per-

sons who are committed followers of Christ (or appear to be until it becomes evident that they were false). They are those who go through the narrow gate and build on the rock. They are hated by all because of Christ (Matthew 10:22). These are persons who trust Christ even when it means rejection by family members (Matthew 10:35-36). These qualities apply to persons, not geo-political units or tribes. We will next discuss baptism which also is something which applies to a person, not a larger cultural unit. Therefore, I conclude that "of all nations" means Gentiles (as well as Jews) without distinction who respond to the universal call to trust in Christ (Matthew 11:28-29). No person is excluded on the basis of ethnicity. The Gentiles are specifically mentioned because it would be taken for granted that the Jewish Messiah came to Jews. The 11 were Jews and they were the ones being commissioned!

### Baptizing Them Into the Name

*baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19c)*

Those who are made disciples, whatever their ethnic status, are to be baptized. Matthew's terminology involves two parallel participles, baptizing and teaching, with identical grammatical forms—present active participle. What stands out as we read Matthew is the Trinitarian so-called "formula." However, it is anachronistic to assume that Matthew uses an official formula which must be repeated at all baptism ceremonies. Over the centuries many have claimed that this verbiage came from a much later church tradition and ended up by some means in Matthew.

However, Matthew previously spoke of the three persons of the Godhead at Jesus' baptism:

*And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son,*

*with whom I am well pleased.”*  
(Matthew 3:16, 17)

I believe it is significant that Matthew 3:16 was the last time the verb for “baptize” was used in Matthew until the current usage in Matthew 28:19. In 3:16 we have the Holy Spirit, and the voice from heaven identifying Jesus as “My beloved Son,” and therefore also the Father whose voice was heard. Just before Jesus’ public ministry was to begin (with only the temptation occurring before Jesus preaches repentance in “Galilee of the Gentiles” as recorded in Matthew 4:12-17) there is the implied Trinity. There is no need to postulate something from a liturgy of church history centuries later for the source of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in Matthew 28 when a Trinitarian reference exists already in Matthew’s gospel. There it is relational, not formulaic. Baptizing disciples who belong to Jesus Christ is also relational. They have a relationship with the Trinitarian God of the Bible.

The word “name” in Matthew 28:19 is singular. The passage literally says, “*baptizing them into the name.*” This immersion done “into” the singular name of the Trinitarian God revealed in Matthew and many other places in the New Testament is relational, not liturgical. The disciple has a relationship with the Father, through the saving work of Christ and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist said, “*I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire*” (Matthew 3:11). The relationship disciples have with their Lord and one another is profound and eternal. The angst throughout church history over mechanical formulas and contrived liturgies buries the gospel in church tradition rather than sees the disciples having been buried in water to demonstrate leaving behind the old life of sin and now going forth with new life in Christ.

All true disciples of Jesus Christ have a relationship with the Trinitarian God of the Bible even if they were baptized in the name of Jesus, as was the case in Acts. The singular “name” of the

Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit signifies the same saving God as the “name of Jesus.” Heretical “Jesus only” groups who deny the Trinity regularly gain adherents by undermining the faith of Christians through interrogating them as to what formula was used at their baptism. This causes some to reject the Biblical doctrine of God in favor of Modalistic Monarchianism or some other means of rejecting the essential unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who eternally exist as three persons. The false teachers often tell disciples that they are going to Hell if they were baptized with the words in Matthew. Having met people who were harmed by this attack on their faith, decades ago I began covering all the bases by saying “by the authority of Jesus’ name I baptize you into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” as the person is immersed. This would not be necessary other than as protection against heretical attacks aimed at undermining the assurance of believers. Followers of the Oneness doctrine are typically harsh, misguidedly self-assured, and will keep up their attacks on the faith of true disciples.

The imperative verb in Matthew 28:19 is “make disciples.” The participle “baptizing” is parallel to the participle “teaching” both of which apply to those who have become disciples through faith in Christ. Baptizing and teaching are not the means of creating disciples from people whatever their ethnic background but characterize how Christians take care of those converted by God’s grace. Conversion is no different in Matthew than it is in Luke any more than baptism is different. Luke emphasizes repentance for forgiveness of sins. Matthew tells of Jesus proclaiming repentance: “From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*’” (Matthew 4:17). The next verses in Matthew describe Jesus calling Peter, James and John to follow Him (Matthew 4:18-22). Likewise forgiveness of sins is emphasized (Matthew 26:28). “Little ones” who believe in Jesus are disciples with no great status in this world. They are those who are converted and become

like children who will enter the kingdom. Causing such disciples to stumble means future judgment (Matthew 18:1-6). The gospels are not meant to be set one against the other.

### Teaching Them to Keep Jesus’ Commands

*teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.* (Matthew 28:20a)

Jesus throughout Matthew (as well as the other gospels) is called the teacher. Jesus’ extensive teaching in the Sermon on the Mount calls for submission and obedience. That sermon at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry calls for comprehension, commitment and fidelity to Jesus and His commands. For example: “*Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 5:19 NASB). Matthew summarizes Jesus’ preaching just before the Sermon on the Mount: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (Matthew 4:17b). Those who do repent are the disciples who “hear” the teachings of Jesus and live accordingly. This is the sense of “observe” or “keep” (Greek: *te\_reo\_*) in 28:20.

The need to “hear” Jesus was underscored on the mount of transfiguration by the very words of the Father: “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him*” (Matthew 17:5b). “Listen” is the verb “hear” (*akouo\_*) in the imperative. Peter, James and John were there on the mount of transfiguration as they are now on a mount receiving the Great Commission. Now they (and the other 8) are told to teach those who will become disciples from the Gentiles as well as the Jews to observe what Jesus taught them. These words are true, powerful and have binding authority directly from God. They are the words of God, not religious ideas contrived by men.

Often in Matthew, when the reality of the authority with which Jesus taught sunk in, the result was amaze-

ment. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew speaks of the response of those who heard Him: “*And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes*” (Matthew 7:28, 29). The word for “astonished” is *ekple\_sso\_*, which is found four times in Matthew (7:28; 13:54; 19:25; 22:33). Here Matthew states that the amazement was due to His authority which is contrasted to that of their scribes. The scribes spoke by the authority of others, citing various respected rabbis and experts in the law. Jesus spoke directly from God with great power and authority. The crowds recognized the difference. Jesus is God the Son who spoke with the very authority of the Father. The disciples knew this, and as we read Matthew, we know it.

When it came to interpreting the Scriptures, Jesus confounded the experts and silenced their objections. For example, in Matthew 22:23-45 He caused the crowds to be astonished (22:33) when He silenced the Sadducees on the matter of marriage and the resurrection. When the Pharisees asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus answered about the commands to love God with one’s whole heart and neighbor as oneself. Jesus asked His own question to the Pharisees about the Christ being the son of David and also the Lord of David (22:43-45), which question they could not answer. Matthew reports that they (nor anyone else) did not dare ask Him another question (22:46). The authority of Jesus’ teaching was such that the only valid response was to hear and obey and thus build on the Rock.

To “teach them to keep all that I commanded you” is an awesome responsibility. The weightiness of it had to impress itself upon the eleven as they were eyewitnesses of the many times Jesus’ teaching had brought crowds face to face with the very truth of God. It could not be lightly dismissed. It was not about better living through Christian religion, but a humble response to the very words and works of God Himself. Jesus’ teachings are to be

kept. To “listen” implies faith in what God has said and obedience to what He has spoken.

I mentioned binding and loosing earlier when discussing Jesus building His church on the rock. Teaching disciples to keep Jesus’ commandments includes determining what is binding on disciples and what is a matter of Christian liberty. This is mentioned twice in Matthew:

*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:19)*

*Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:18)*

Christ and His apostles (the Biblical ones), determine what is authoritative, binding teaching which applies to every disciple. When Jesus spoke these things in Matthew, there were debates among various rabbis from different schools as to what constituted sin based on their interpretations of the Law. What was not binding was loosed (meaning permitted). Jesus’ teaching is binding on disciples. This includes the terms of entrance (keys of the kingdom) and the manner of life which is to be lived as pleasing to God. This may sound burdensome but is, in fact, liberating. The real burden was living a life of hopelessness serving Satan and sin. The religious leaders of the day compounded this and were subjected to Jesus’ denunciation:

*They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. (Matthew 23:4)*

Jesus did not come to bring fickle rules to enhance the power of religious authorities, (such as ever growing rules about Sabbath keeping), but to give true rest. In Matthew 11 He promises this rest:

*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)*

As disciples, in following the Great Commission, teach new disciples from all nations to “observe all that I commanded you,” they should never lose sight of this statement in Matthew 11. If future church authorities make themselves into law-givers, they do so without Christ’s authorization. They will not give rest for souls, but bondage to man-made rules which did not come from God.

### The Promise of His Presence

*And behold, I am with you always, (Matthew 28:20b)*

This blessed promise that Jesus would be with His disciples even until end begins with the imperative “look!” (*idou*) which is found 62 times in Matthew. Here it focuses attention on the importance and significance of the promise. The promise is that of an ongoing, intimate relationship with the Lord who had previously promised that He would be in the midst of even 2 or 3 disciples gathered in His name (Matthew 18:20). This presence is spiritual and not bounded chronologically or geographically. Earlier passages in Matthew indicate that Jesus would not always be with them (bodily). Matthew 9:15 speaks of the bridegroom being taken away at a future time.

The “I am with you” promise goes back to the beginning of Matthew: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (‘which means, God with us’), (Matthew 1:23). This promise echoes the many promises in the OT where Yahweh promises to be with His people. The promise of presence was given to Isaac (Gen. 26:3), Jacob (Gen. 28:15), Moses (Exodus 3:12), Joshua through Moses (Deut. 31:8), Joshua directly from Yahweh (Joshua 1:5), Israel through Haggai (Haggai 1:13) and many others. Yahweh promised, “I am with you.” So when Jesus says to the 11

and to all future disciples, “I am with you,” this promise has the weight of God’s covenant faithfulness. God keeps His promises and the promise of His presence in a saving relationship is eternal and thus the greatest promise. This promise is often associated with commissioning scenes in the OT some of which I reference above.

The OT covenant promise of presence is summed up here:

*I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God. (Exodus 29:45, 46)*

Yahweh promised to dwell among His covenant people. He would be their God, they would be His people and He would dwell in their midst. When Jesus promised to be with His disciples always He shows the fulfillment of New Covenant promises: “*For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*” (Jeremiah 31:33).

Under Moses there was an important, specific location where God would meet the people—the Tent of Meeting (Exodus 29:42-44). Later when the temple was established in Jerusalem, that became the place of sacrifice, worship and sacred meeting. The issue of a prescribed location where God would meet believers comes up in Matthew, including in eschatological discussions about judgment and future hope. This brings to the fore the status of the temple in Jerusalem which cannot be ignored in the context of the Great Commission. Much conflict during Jesus’ public ministry was over the temple and its spiritual status. Jesus speaks words of rebuke to its leaders (Matthew 23:16-35). They had heard Him predict destruction (Matthew 26:61).

“Going” to the *ethne* does not imply there is a geographical location where true “presence” is to be found.

God with us is true for disciples everywhere they may go. The prophecies of the destruction of the temple indicate that during the church age the “presence” is Christ in and with His own, in their midst. There is no “holy ground” to be found! Nor is there a cloud of presence to follow to various locations. “Going” (28:19) is governed by God’s providence with no specific locations identified in Matthew. “Of all nations” excludes no persons in particular whatever their ethnicity or national allegiances. The Lord did not command the disciples to create a world headquarters for the church. God deploys His workers on the scene of history as history goes on. There is no person dwelling so far from God’s presence that he or she cannot be converted because of geographical or political considerations.

### The End of The Age

*to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20c)*

The terminology “end of the age” brings us to the topic of eschatology which is prevalent in Matthew. Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple (Matthew 24:2) which happened in seventy AD. Matthew was written before that event since he never mentions it as having happened. The Olivet discourse includes eschatological material in Matthew 24:4-35 which answers the disciples’ second question (what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?) (24:3b). Much of the answer concerned events which did not happen in seventy AD and are yet future. The answer to the first question (when will these things happen?) is found in Matthew 24:36-25:13. The answer is “no one knows” because it will happen suddenly and unexpectedly. Jesus’ presence with the disciples to the “end of the age” has no specified time limit but there will be an “end of the age.” The phrase “end of the age” is found in Matthew 13:39, 40, and 49 where it is used in parables about the future judgment. The wicked and the righteous will coexist until a future time when Messiah will send His angels to cast the wicked into a furnace of fire (Matthew 13:49, 50).

The end of the age is a complex event. Many have tried to simplify it by making all the details mentioned in Matthew 24:4-35 apply only to seventy AD. Doing so is a seriously contrived reading which does not take all of the predictive prophecy in Matthew and elsewhere as significant. Ignoring the details of such prophecy has no merit if we study how Matthew explains previous Biblical prophecy which was fulfilled during the first advent. I searched Matthew for the Greek word *ple\_oo\_* (fulfill) and found 13 instances where Matthew claimed that events happened that Scripture predicted would be fulfilled which covered the events in the birth narrative all the way to 30 pieces of silver as the price of betrayal.<sup>4</sup> Since OT prophecy—spanning the time from just before Jesus’ birth to His rejection and betrayal—was literally fulfilled, often down to specific detail, it is rather absurd to claim that future prophecy either cited by Jesus or given by Jesus Himself will not be fulfilled other than in vague generalities or not at all. Matthew expects what Jesus said would happen will come to pass. After all, Jesus is the Father’s “beloved Son” to whom disciples are commanded to “listen” (Matthew 17:5).

Sadly, parochial, theological positions regularly remove either all or some future Bible prophecy from serious consideration. Rather than doing the exegetical work to read, understand and believe all that is found in Matthew, many take the easy way out and switch hermeneutics from authorial intent (the Holy Spirit-inspired Matthew determines the meaning) to allegorical interpretation by the clever reader. Clearly, as Matthew narrates Jesus’ teachings, they contain many references to future events beyond this current age. An important example is future judgment which includes the sheep and goats judgment (Matthew 25:31-46). Issues like a future kingdom and eternal punishment are taught there. The Son of Man will come in glory with His angels. None of this happened in seventy AD. There is no reason to believe that Matthew did not intend for us to be

sober-minded and take these eschatological passages as future events in which his readers will be subjects of either reward or punishment.

Those who switch hermeneutics when interpreting eschatology are practicing special pleading. This informal logical fallacy is when a person claims an exception from a universal principle without valid justification. In this case, authorial intent explains Matthew other than when he writes about eschatology and the end of the age. This fallacy needs to be identified as such and those who practice it called into account. The Holy Spirit-inspired Matthew and his writings are the very Word of God. We may not understand certain things, but we can be sure that God who cannot lie will bring His promises to pass.

Jesus' predictions which came to pass during the first advent are highly significant in proving His Messianic claims including His bodily resurrection (Matthew 12:40, 26:61; 27:40; 27:63). This being the case, on what grounds do theologians and church authorities dismiss Jesus' other predictions which have not yet come to pass? Eschatology suddenly gets a new, unique hermeneutic which follows some other path than the one which was used to understand everything else in Matthew (the same goes for Bible prophecy in other books). With this unjustified switch of hermeneutics, the "end of the age" which comprises the last words of Matthew becomes amorphous if not totally insignificant. The end of the age is important in Matthew and specific events predicted by Jesus associated with it will happen as He says.

The truth is that the spiritual presence of Jesus is promised throughout the church age as He reigns in heaven. The change comes when the predicted eschatological events transpire, and we will see Him tangibly. The end of the age is a complex event as shown by the many details which describe it. For example: "I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29). This has not happened yet, but it will. Christians have celebrated the Lord's Supper in

anticipation of this throughout the church age. There will be a time when it will happen in the future kingdom. The predictions of future judgment are just as certain.

### Conclusion

When we take the Great Commission to be the capstone of the Gospel of Matthew which brings to the fore the main themes of the entire gospel, we come face to face with an understanding that differs from how the Great Commission has typically been understood in church history. The Great Commission does not authorize church authorities to gain rule over various socio-political communities to either force or entice people who most certainly are not disciples by Jesus' own definitions to start acting like them! Those entering the kingdom and being built upon the rock, one at a time, are not defined by geographical boundaries, political societies, ethnicity, or any other purely human set of descriptions. Disciples are uniquely disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, and what they have in common is the relationship they have with Him and one another. This group has the promise of His presence until the end of the age when they will have the tangible reality of His bodily presence.

Disciples are not defined by earthly families. Their enemies may very well be members of their own households:

*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.*

(Matthew 10:34-36)

This does not preclude multiple people from a family becoming disciples since there were biological brothers within the 11 who received the Great Commission such as Peter and Andrew (Matthew 4:18). What it means is that we cannot manipulate the terms of discipleship to accommodate family mem-

bers and our own descendants when such persons are not truly disciples according to Jesus' definition. Embracing this simple truth would revolutionize our understanding of the church itself. Let's let the Holy Spirit-inspired Matthew speak for himself and whatever changes that means for our traditions and practices should be deemed necessary. It is more important to be faithful disciples than to please the traditions of men.

That seminary class in the late 1990's had a powerful effect on me. I already believed in authorial intent as the only valid hermeneutic. What Dr. Verseput drove home is that we have to consistently practice carefully reading to make sure we understand the biblical author's meaning and allow that meaning to ground our beliefs and determine our applications. Our traditions and personal inclinations have no bearing on Matthew's meaning. They certainly are not binding on the church as defined by the biblical authors. In regard to the Great Commission, "Read Matthew."

### End Notes

1. Arndt, Danker, Bauer, Gingrich; Greek-English Lexicon 2000
2. *ibid.*
3. Carson, D. A. **Matthew** in Expositor's Bible Commentary
4. There are many other specific rereferences to fulfilled prophecy in Matthew which do not use *ple\_roo* but other terminology such as "what has been written" (see Matt. 2:5-6)

#### Critical Issues Commentary

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