

A Brief Exposition of the Great Commission in Matthew

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Matthew's account of the Great Commission is found in Matthew 28:19-20. In the New King James Version (NKJV), it reads:

(19) "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, (20) teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

The Great Commission is the Lord Jesus' final marching orders to His church prior to His departure from the earth and ascension into Heaven. In the Great Commission, Jesus instructs His current disciples to "make disciples" (v. 19), that is, to make other disciples. The only command in the original Greek of this passage is the phrase "make disciples." I would like to point out that there is an enormous difference between making a disciple verses merely persuading or inspiring people to make a decision to accept and follow Jesus. A disciple is a committed follower on an ongoing, continuous basis, a serious student of a discipline, much like a person who enters an professional apprenticeship to become an electrician, enrolls in a technical college to become a mechanic, or begins medical school. "Disciple" means a disciplined one, or a person who learns the ways of the one he or she follows. Jesus said this about what it means to be a disciple, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master" (Matthew 10:24-25). So, a disciple is a person who follows after a teacher and disciplines himself to become like that teacher.

The word "go" in this passage translates an Greek aorist participle. This means that Jesus is saying something along the lines of "having gone," "as you go," or more idiomatically "on your way" or "along your way." Literally, Jesus is telling His disciples there on the Mount of Olives, "When you leave this place and go on your way, make disciples."

What follows the Lord's command to make disciples is His instructions on how to make disciples. The two Greek present active participles that follow His command to "make disciples" are "baptizing" and "teaching" (Matthew 28:19) making these two elements the two aspects of how to actively make

disciples of the Lord Jesus. We baptize them, and we teach them. The phrase “baptizing them in the name” means that the Lord’s new disciples must be baptized in water in Jesus’ name by the His current disciples because, as we saw in the last session, water baptism is for the remission, or washing away, of sins. Baptism, then, is the initiatory rite of the Christian church, and it is therefore the entry way into order of Jesus’ disciples.

The next present active participle is “teaching.” Teaching here is not merely the dissemination of information, but it is “teaching them to observe” everything the Lord has commanded. The phrase “teaching them to observe” means training them to put into practice. Teaching someone not only to know something but also how to do or practice something is training. What do we as disciples of Jesus Christ do as we train newer disciples of Jesus Christ to put into practice all things the Lord has commanded us. The Lord says, “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (v. 20).

In verse 19, we see that the phrases “baptizing them” and “teaching them” are the Lord’s explanations on how He expects us to make disciples, and the additional words that go along with each of these two participial phrases are instructions on how to accomplish each of these two actions. We baptize in the name of Jesus because He is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we train other disciples both to know and to do everything the Lord Jesus has commanded for His church.

Finally, Jesus promises that He will be with His followers forever, “even to the end of the age” (v. 20). This speaks of His enduring spiritual presence, which is mentioned in different ways in each of the four accounts of the Great Commission, found toward the end of each of the four gospels. This is the “Spirit” aspect of our new birth by water and Spirit (cf. John 3:3-5). This “born of water and the Spirit” theme from John 3:5 is clearly observable in each individual account of the Great Commission, and we also see it elaborated on in John chapter 14, verses 15-27.

So, in Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus instructs His current disciples both to make disciples and how to make disciples, not disciples unto ourselves, but disciples of Jesus Christ. We see this truth taught in Scripture yet again as we examine the other accounts of the Great Commission in the other three gospels: Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:46-49, and John 20:21-23.