

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH Matthew 28:16-20

By the time you reach this closing paragraph of Matthew's Gospel, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus has already taken place. All that is left to report is the promised post-resurrection reunion of Jesus and his disciples. Our text records this report. Verses 16-17 says, "Then the eleven disciples went into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshipped him; but some doubted." After this summary, Matthew tells us that Jesus came to them and issued what we call THE GREAT COMMISSION. Feel the tension between the setting of the Great Commission in verses 16-17 and the statement of it in verses 18-20. When the disciples caught a glimpse of Jesus walking up this Galilean hillside, they fell on their faces in worship. But as they worshipped, some of them didn't really believe it was actually Jesus. Yet Jesus proceeded to entrust his world-mission to these very men.

Think about that. The Lord chose limited, fallible, and sinful human beings as his main vehicle to spread the most important message the world has ever known. He could have chosen angels to do the job. He could have parted the clouds and spoken audibly to mankind. He could have, as in the days past, spoken through a burning bush, appeared in visions, or carved his laws on stone tablets. Instead, the Lord chose ordinary men and women to carry his message of salvation to the world. And the early church was so committed to this mission that in **Acts 17:6** the Thessalonians declared, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also." The gospel of Jesus Christ still has the power to turn the world upside-down. So how did the Great Commission become the great omission? I believe the problem is that the church has lost its sense of mission. We have lost sight of what we are called to be and do. So, I stand to remind us of the Christ-given mission of the church: The church exists to win more Christians and to develop better Christians. Period. We are to be a sign, herald, and foretaste of God's present-but-not-yet kingdom. The Lord has left the Church in the world for the singular purpose of bringing glory to God by fulfilling the Great Commission. And here are three reasons why the last command of Jesus must be the first priority of the Church.

I. THE CHURCH IS ON MISSION WITH DIVINE AUTHORITY.

As the eleven worship but doubt, Jesus approaches them and speaks, saying, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth." The word "authority" translates the verb *exousia*, which means jurisdiction, freedom of action, or the legal right to use power. The KJV uses the word "power." But the original word is much stronger than that. Power is ability, but authority is the right to use that power as you desire. For instance, in the sports world, an athlete may have the power to move the ball, but the referee has the authority to restrict, penalize, or disqualify that athlete's ability. The athlete may have great skill, fan support, and a big contract, but the referee has the whistle. And so the referee's authority trumps the athlete's

power. And the authority that the referee has in the sports world is the authority that Jesus claims over the entire universe – except no protest, commissioner, or instant replay can overrule the authority of Christ. Jesus says, “All authority has been given to me.” The omnipotence of God is mediated through the person, Jesus Christ. Jesus has power of attorney to execute divine sovereignty at his personal discretion. And if Jesus has all authority, then no one or nothing else has any.

Ephesians 1:22-23 says: “And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” **Philippians 2:9-11** says: “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” And **Colossians 2:9-10** says: “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily; and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.” Jesus affirms these passages by claiming divine omnipotence and sovereignty for himself. That’s why verse 18 is one of the most important Christological statements in all of the New Testament.

When Jesus says, “All authority has been given to me,” he is clearly saying, “I am God.” The Father has given him all authority not because the Father can give up being God, but because Jesus is God! And God doesn’t lose anything when he shares authority with himself. However, by making this statement in the context of the Great Commission, the emphasis of the statement is more ecclesiastical than Christological. That is, this statement about the person of Christ is to be understood in connection to the mission of the church. Verse 19 says, “Go therefore and make disciples...” “Therefore” tells us that the command to make disciples in verse 19 is based on the authority of Christ that is declared in verse 18. Verse 18 is not a part of the commission itself. It’s a claim, not a commission. But Jesus introduces the Great Commission with this great claim because he wants us to know that the ability to accomplish that assignment is not based on our limited resources, but on his infinite authority.

Here’s the point: The mission of the church succeeds because of Jesus Christ. The victory of the church is based on her ability to appeal to the ultimate authority in the universe. If verse 18 is not true, then verses 19-20 are meaningless. But if it is true, then Christians are on mission in and through the full authority of the King of kings and Lord of lords. Yes. The Church is on mission with the authority of the One who is heaven’s wonder, hell’s worry, and humanity’s way out of sin, death, and judgment. And this reality should compel us to pursue our mission with joy, confidence, and passion. However, we should also note that this declaration of the sovereign authority of Christ is a word of both liberation and limitation. Of course, the sovereign authority of Jesus puts definite restrictions on the enemies of the church’s mission. But it also puts certain restrictions on the church as it seeks to carry out that mission. Let me mention two of these restrictions the church must minister within.

A. THE CHURCH CANNOT SUCCEED DEPENDING ON ANY OTHER AUTHORITY.

There was a lady who had a small house on the shores of Ireland at the turn of the 20th century. She was quite wealthy, but also quite frugal. Her neighbors were surprised, then, when she decided to be among the first to have electricity in her home. Some weeks after the installation, a meter reader appeared at her door. He asked if her electricity was working, and she assured him it was. "I'm wondering if you can explain something to me," he went on to say. "Your meter shows scarcely any usage. Are you using your power?" "Certainly," she answered. "Each evening when the sun sets, I turn on my lights long enough to light my candles; then I turn them off."

It is a sad, weird, and troubling fact that even though the Church has been installed with the life, grace, and power of Christ, we often settle for living and ministering in our dim resources, rather than his brilliant glory. But God's work cannot be performed in human strength. Therefore, we must not put our trust in gimmicks, programs, events, traditions, or personalities. The mission of the Church is accomplished through the power of Christ alone. **Psalm 62:11** says: "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God." **John 15:5** says: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing." And **2 Corinthians 3:5** says: "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God."

B. THE CHURCH CANNOT SUCCEED DOING THINGS THAT CHRIST HAS NOT AUTHORIZED.

On one hand, you cannot do God's will if you don't depend on his authority. But on the other hand, you cannot depend on God's authority if you don't do his will. God does not give his authority to what he has not authorized. He doesn't bless what is not his. He only anoints what he appoints. And so if the Lord Jesus is to be obviously present, actively in-charge, and dynamically at work in the church, we must let the church truly be the church. Let me bottom-line that for you:

- We must not preach a message that he has not authorized.
 - We must not follow leaders that he has not authorized.
 - We must not commit to goals that he has not authorized.
 - We must not engage in practices that he has not authorized.
 - We must not go in a direction that he has not authorized.
-

Numbers 20:1-13 is a passage I lean on to hold me up against the pressure that worldliness, materialism, and pragmatism exert against Christian ministry. The children of Israel complained and contended with Moses, because there was no water. So Moses and Aaron went before the Lord, who told Moses to speak to the rock in the presence of the assembly, and it will bring forth drinking water. As they did this, Moses' anger got the best of him. So he struck the rock with his rod, rather

than speaking to it as God commanded. And guess what happened? The very thing that would have happened if he had obeyed God's commands. The rock became a water fountain. But as the people quenched their thirst, God rebuked Moses and Aaron for not honoring him before the assembly. And they were not allowed to lead Israel into the promised land of Canaan. This story warns that we must never allow the needs of men to cause us to lose sight of the word of God. We should be preoccupied with faithfulness to God, not with success before men. We must remember that only God's work done God's way for God's glory will enjoy God's favor.

II. THE CHURCH IS ON MISSION WITH A DIVINE ASSIGNMENT.

In verse 19, Jesus says, "Go, therefore, make disciples..." The KJV says, "teach." The Greek word being translated is *matheteuo*. It's the verb form of the noun *mathetes*, which means "a disciple." It's verb form means, "to disciple" or "to make a disciple." And it's in the imperative mood here, which means that it's a divinely established, all-inclusive, and non-negotiable command. In fact, the singular imperative, main thrust, and central idea of the Great Commission is to make disciples. Here's the gospel: God is holy and we are not. And you will one day have to answer to God for how you have lived your life. And the only hope for forgiveness is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. And in this commission, Jesus commands his disciples to call lost people to repent of their sins, receive God's forgiveness, and follow him. And this is not just for pastors, teachers, evangelists, and missionaries. It is the responsibility and privilege of every follower of Christ. Therefore, any congregation or any Christian that isn't busy making disciples is being disobedient to the Lord Jesus Christ. So let's examine this Christ-given command to make disciples.

A. NOTICE WHEN WE ARE TO MAKE DISCIPLES.

The first word of the verse 18 is the word "Go." And that's appropriate. You cannot spell the word "GOSPEL," without first spelling the word "GO." Jesus does not expect the world to come to the Church. But he does expect the Church to go to the world. We are called to be a going church for a coming Christ. But that's not the emphasis here. As I mentioned, the only imperative here is to make disciples. And although the word "Go" reads like a command, it's actually a participle that modifies the command to make disciples. A more literal reading would be, "As you are going, therefore, make disciples..." I point out this grammatical distinction in order to clarify that Jesus is not commanding us to go, as if we won't. Instead, he assumes we will be going. The command is to make disciples as we are going. In other words, at home, at work, at school, we are to make disciples. Here's the point: Disciple making is the Christian lifestyle, not a ministerial elective. So what we do here on the Lord's

Day is ultimately and inevitably fruitless if it doesn't equip us to go out and make disciples every day.

B. NOTICE WHO WE ARE TO MAKE DISCIPLES.

Jesus says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations..." This reference to "the nations" has both geographic and ethnic implications. Geographically, Jesus is saying that the church must always look beyond its own needs, goals, and survival. We cannot be so inwardly focused that we forget our world mission. **DIETRICH BONHOEFFER** put it this way: "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others." And so while we nurture those who are a part of the household of faith, we must also reach out to those who don't know Jesus. We must move beyond the walls to reach our city, our nation, and our world for Christ. That's a mission that is as big as six billion people and as small as your neighborhood. But the Great Commission not only has geographic implications, but it also has ethnic implications. "All the nations" does not merely refer to map designations. It refers to people groups.

We are to reach all people in every nation. This means that any spirit of racism in the church is a direct attack against the Christ-given mission of the church. But the sad indictment is that **MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S** observation years ago is still true today: "11:00 AM on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in America." But here's the good news: Jesus is not racist! **Revelation 5:9-10** says: "And they sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and you have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.'" Translation: In a culture that is fixated with white supremacy, afro-centrism, anti-Semitism, and a bunch of other racist foolishness, the church must advance the kingdom of God by winning people who have been redeemed by the blood of the lamb from every tribe, every tongue, every people, and every nation.

C. NOTICE HOW WE ARE TO MAKE DISCIPLES.

In verse 19b-20b, Jesus outlines two essential practices for making disciples. **DISCIPLE MAKING INVOLVES WINNING NEW CHRISTIANS.** According to verse 19, the first step in disciple-making is "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Baptism is not a man-made tradition that we are free to reject at our own discretion. Jesus himself commands the church to make disciples by the symbolic ritual of water baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity. It identifies the believer with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. So in immersion we are declaring our allegiance to Christ and his Body, the church. Now, baptism does not save. But it is the first act of obedience Christ commands of those who are saved. It is the outward sign of an inward change. And in commanding us to make disciples

through baptism, Christ is saying that our goal is to be the winning of new Christians. Mark it down: The mission of the church is not accomplished through sheep-stealing, saint-swapping, and member transfer.

God wants lost people to be saved. God wants sinners to be converted. God wants dead people to be born-again. God wants changed lives, not just transferred membership. That's why there's no need to be jealous of what God is doing in any other church. There is no sinner shortage. And if we are concerned about reaching lost people, rather than competing with one another, then there will always be work to do. A tour guide was showing a group of people through Westminster Abby. And after he boasted about the classic architecture and the famous celebrities who had worshiped in that cathedral, he asked, "Are there any questions?" One elderly woman said, "Yes, sir. Has anyone been saved here lately?" That's the issue. Not bodies, budgets, and buildings – but changed lives.

DISCIPLE MAKING INVOLVES DEVELOPING BETTER CHRISTIANS. On one hand, disciple-making is an event that takes place in a moment in time. That is, when a convert is baptized, they are initiated as disciples. But on the other hand, disciple making is also a process – a threefold process. First, we bring people to Jesus through faith and repentance. We bring them to the church through water baptism. Then we bring them to maturity by diligently teaching them to obey the commands of Christ. So the conversion process does not end at baptism. Rather, baptism initiates the new disciple into a lifelong process of conversion. And in verse 20, Jesus says that this process consists of "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." Notice, first of all, that the disciple-making process necessarily involves teaching. A man-centered worship service, a therapeutic preaching emphasis, and a pragmatic ministry philosophy may consistently draw big crowds, but they won't make disciples. A true disciple-making church must be committed to teaching.

And our teaching must not be selective. Jesus says we must be "teaching them to observe all things..." In other words, we cannot merely teach safe, popular, or attractive subjects. Our teaching must be sound, faithful, courageous, balanced, and systematic. In **Acts 20:26-27**, Paul testifies to this commitment by saying, "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God."

And there's one more important implication here. We are to teach disciples to observe or obey the commands of Christ. Unfortunately, many churches are filled with what **CALVIN MILLER** called "CHRISTAHOLICS," rather than Christians - people who don't really want to follow Jesus; they just want to use him for the sake of their own happiness, health, wealth, and success. But Jesus says that we must teach people to live out the life of the teachings of our faith. **VANCE HAVNER** said: "You have not really learned a commandment until you have obeyed it. Nothing clarifies doctrine like doing. And each new thing learned becomes a millstone until it becomes a milestone."

III. THE CHURCH IS ON MISSION WITH DIVINE ASSURANCE.

G. CAMPBELL MORGAN visited an 85 year-old member. And during the visit, he read **Matthew 28** to her. And when he finished reading the closing words of 28:20 – “And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.” – He said, “That is a great promise.” “That’s not a promise,” she responded, “It’s a fact.” She was right. The Great Commission ends with the divine assurance of the personal and perpetual presence of Christ. In fact, this assurance is a bookend that is placed at the beginning and conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel to hold it up and hold it together. **Matthew 1:23** says, “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us.” And then Matthew’s Gospel concludes with Jesus declaring, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Think about that. The church does its mission with the power of Christ and the presence of Christ. The omnipotent one of verse 18 is the omnipresent one of Verse 20. The transcendent Lord who is above us is also the imminent Savior who is with us. Not only is divine sovereignty on our side, it’s also by our side. He who has all power is with us at all times.

Here’s the point: We’re not in this thing by ourselves.

- When your body is sick, he’s there.
- When your burden is heavy, he’s there.
- When your faith is tested, he’s there.
- When your feet have stumbled, he’s there.
- When your friends are few, he’s there.
- When your heart is broken, he’s there.
- When your pocket is empty, he’s there.
- When your strength is low, he’s there.

Psalm 46:1 says: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” **Isaiah 41:10** says: “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.” And **Hebrews 13:5** says: “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’”

NEVER A BURDEN THAT HE DOES NOT CARRY
NEVER A SORROW THAT HE DOES NOT SHARE
WHETHER THE DAYS MAY BE SUNNY OR DREARY
JESUS IS ALWAYS THERE.