

# Great Commission - Part 2

by John Stott

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of Jesus' authority in heaven and on earth, which gives him the right and confidence to seek to make disciples of all nations.*

**Duration:** 39:03

**Scripture:** Matthew 28:16, Matthew 28:18-20

**Topics:** "Great Commission"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on Matthew chapter 28, verses 16 to 20, which is known as the Great Commission. The disciples of Jesus have left Jerusalem and traveled to Galilee, where they meet Jesus on a mountain. Jesus tells them that he has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. He instructs them to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that he has commanded. Jesus assures them that he will be with them always until the end of the age. The preacher emphasizes the importance of hearing the word of God and encourages the congregation to open their hearts and minds to receive God's message.

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## Transcript

Matthew chapter 28 and verses 16 to 20. This is the second version of the Great Commission. Let's get our Bibles open again.

We want to hear the Word of God, the Word of Christ this morning. Matthew 28 verse 16. Perhaps as it's so short I could read it again in English.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped 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 lo, I am with you always to the close of the age. Let's pray for a moment.

Lord Jesus, we desire this morning with all our hearts to hear not the words of man, but your own still small voice speaking to us. Our hearts and minds are open before you, before you no secrets are heard. And we pray that in your great grace you will meet our need by speaking to us your Word.

For your name's sake, Amen. Amen. Now more than a week has passed, we don't know exactly how long, since the first Easter day and the first part of the Great Commission that we were considering yesterday morning.

Now the disciples of Jesus have left Jerusalem and the upper room where Jesus first met them, and they've gone to Galilee to a mountain. And there by appointment Jesus met them again. It's probably the same occasion to which the Apostle Paul refers in 1 Corinthians 15, when more than 500 brethren at once were present when the Lord appeared to them.

And we read on this occasion, verse 17, that when they saw him, and it may be at that stage he was still some distance away from them, their reactions varied between the extremes of adoration on the one hand and unbelief on the other. Some worshipped him. New English Bible, they fell prostrate before him, fell on their faces before him, but others doubted.

And then Jesus came up to this mixed multitude of worshippers and doubters and spake to them. First he made an announcement, verse 18, all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Second he issued a command, verses 19 and the beginning of verse 20, go make disciples, baptize, teach.

And thirdly he gave a promise, end of verse 20, lo I am with you always, to the end of the age. Now we consider these three glorious truths this morning together. First the announcement that Jesus made, verse 18, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Now it's vitally important for us to notice that this affirmation of Jesus preceded the Great Commission to go. Indeed without this announcement of Christ's authority, the Great Commission would have lacked any justification, let alone any impetus. It is not until we are convinced of the total authority of Jesus Christ that we are in a position to hear and obey his commission to go.

Now there are two questions about this authority of Jesus that we need to ask and answer. The first is, what was it? And the second is, when was it given? A, what was the authority which Jesus claimed? Well it was all authority in heaven and on earth. In the Greek the prepositions are different, in heaven and on earth.

And these different prepositions that are used seem almost deliberately to distinguish the two spheres, earthly and heavenly, over which Christ claimed to have authority. Let's take the earth first. All authority is given to me on earth, he said.

And since he has all authority on earth, he has authority on us, over us, because we are on earth. And that is doubtless a part of his meaning. His total authority extends over the lives of his servants.

The Lord Jesus is like the commanding officer of an army, who can dispose and deploy his forces as he chooses. He can draft them wherever he likes, sending them wherever he wants them to go. He has authority to say to one, go, and he goes, or he should go.

For he has authority over us on earth. Indeed he has said this to the church, he has said to the church, go. And as a whole the church has dared to disobey its sovereign Lord.

But since Jesus has all authority on earth, it extends beyond us whom he sends, it includes all the nations to whom he sends us. For if he has all authority on earth, he has not only authority on us, but on them as well to whom he sends us. Oh we know that Satan had usurped this authority, Satan had become the

prince of this world, and Satan on one occasion of the temptation had even dared to boast to Christ that he, Satan, could give to Jesus all the kingdoms of the world.

Satan said to Jesus, to you I will give all this authority and all their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. Luke 4 verse 6, and if you then will worship me, Satan said, it shall be yours. And now it was Christ's, not because he had bowed to Satan to get it, but because the father had given it to him.

And since it is his, you and I long that it should be acknowledged everywhere. All authority is his, though men do not know it. Now the fact of Christ's total authority on earth implies unequivocally that the religion of Jesus is not a Palestinian or a Jewish religion, it is not a Semitic or Asiatic religion, still less is it a Western or a white religion.

It is a world religion, indeed it is the world religion, it is the gospel for the whole world, because all authority is his on earth. Jesus Christ intended it to embrace all the nations then in existence and those which might later be. It was his authority was to transcend all frontiers and all barriers of language and culture, of nationality and color, of race and rank, because all authority on earth is his.

But Christ declared that all authority in heaven was his as well, and what does that mean? No doubt partly it means that the authority that he claimed on earth was recognized in heaven, so the disciples won on earth would be accepted and acknowledged in heaven. But it means more than that, it surely signifies that Jesus Christ, our Lord, has supreme authority not only on earth among men, but in those heavenly places, as the apostle Paul calls them in the Ephesian letter, in which evil principalities and powers operate and wage war. Ephesians 6 verse 12, we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, and against spiritual wickedness in the heavenly places.

And in those heavenly places in which the principalities and the powers operate, Jesus Christ has all authority. Having raised Jesus from the dead, God has made him sit at his right hand far above all principality and power, all authority and dominion, and above every name that is named, and has put all things under his feet, so that all authority in heavenly places belongs to Christ as well. So the authority of Jesus Christ extends today over all creatures, whether they be earthly creatures or heavenly creatures, human or superhuman.

The authority over the church, the authority over the nations, the authority over the devil himself, and all his works, belongs to Jesus Christ. Do you believe that? Then when was that authority given him? On that Galilean mountain, Jesus claimed it as an accomplished fact. He said all authority in heaven and on earth was given, edothi, it is an Aorist tense, was given to me.

When was it given? Probably we should all agree it was given to him by the Father in virtue of the cross, which was the decisive moment of victory, and in anticipation of the ascension, which was his public coronation as it were. Certainly this is confirmed by the rest of the New Testament, it was at the cross that Jesus disarmed principalities and powers, stripping them all from him, making a public show of them, triumphing over them in the cross, Colossians 2. It was by his blood that he ransomed men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, Revelation 5. And it was at his ascension that God highly exalted him and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name, 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, Philippians 2. Now brethren, the fundamental basis of all Christian missionary enterprise is this universal authority of Jesus Christ in heaven and on earth. Now let us think about this for a moment or two

more.

If the authority of Jesus Christ were circumscribed on earth, if Jesus Christ had only some authority on earth and not all authority on earth, if he were only one of many religious teachers, one of many Jewish prophets, one of many divine incarnations, then we would have no mandate to present him to all the nations. And if Jesus Christ's authority were limited in heaven, if he had only some authority in heaven over the principalities and powers, if he had not decisively overthrown them all, then we might still proclaim him to the nations, but we would be doomed to failure from the start. We'd never be able to turn people from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God unless Jesus Christ had all authority in heaven and on earth.

It's only because all authority on earth belongs to Christ that we dare to go to all the nations, and it's only because all authority in heaven is his as well that we have any hope of success. It must have seemed utterly ridiculous to anybody who was watching in those early days to see that tiny nucleus of Palestinian peasants sent out to win the world for Christ. Ridiculous.

It was ridiculous, or would have been, but for the total authority of Christ. And today the task is even more gigantic as the inexorable swing of the pendulum in that clock is reminding us every day and every second of the day. And the church of Christ is hopelessly outnumbered by the hundreds of millions of people who neither know nor acknowledge him.

It seems ridiculous. It seems absurd. It is absurd that we should go to win the nations apart from the authority of Christ, and it's only the unique, the universal authority of Jesus Christ which turns our absurdity into good sense, and which gives us the right and the confidence to seek to make disciples of all the nations.

Before his authority on earth the nations must bow, and before his authority in heaven no demon can stop them. Dear brethren, I want to urge you when you are tempted to doubt, to despair, or to rebel, to meditate much on the authority of Jesus Christ. Say to yourself, he has authority over me.

He has all authority. He has authority over me. I'm not going to disobey his commission.

He has authority over men. These men to whom I'm sent, he deserves their homage. He and only he can secure it.

He has authority over Satan, and in the name of this Christ of all authority, Satan shall be trodden underfoot. All authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Christ. Without that we cannot go.

Now we move secondly from the announcement that he made to the command that he issued. Go ye therefore, verse 19. We already noticed that this imperative, go ye, immediately followed the indicative, all authority was given to me, because the announcement of Christ's universal authority was an essential preliminary to the great commission.

We go because we ourselves are under his authority. We go to all the nations because they are under his authority too. The commission is no longer to seek the lost sheep of the house of Israel, Matthew 10 verse 16, but to make disciples of all the nations, all the Gentiles.

But that is what the word means. And thus ends this gospel of Matthew, this most Jewish, most particularistic of the four gospels. This Jewish gospel of Matthew, which begins in the providence of God

with the coming of Gentile strangers, the Magi from distant Persia to worship the infant Christ.

This Jewish gospel that ends with the sending out of the church to win the Gentile world for Christ. Now as we go in obedience to the command of Christ, we are given precise instructions to fulfill. And our Lord uses three verbs, make disciples, baptize, and teach.

Some scholars interpret this as a single command, to go and make disciples, baptizing and teaching being the way in which disciples are made. It seems, however, better to take the three verbs separately as three distinct parts or stages of the one great commission of Christ to go. There is then an ABC, a threefold command when we've gone.

A, we are to make disciples. Now the New English Bible rightly renders the phrase, make all nations my disciples. And the addition of this possessive my brings out the sense very well.

You cannot make disciples in the abstract. There's got to be a teacher or a master whose disciples you are making. So to make disciples of all nations means to win disciples for Jesus Christ out of all the nations upon earth.

Now how we are to do this is plain from other versions of the great commission. We are to do it by preaching the gospel. Because in preaching the gospel, we're preaching Christ.

And our purpose in preaching Christ is to win disciples or converts for Christ. And we can never get away from and we can never grow out of this elementary truth that evangelism is to preach Jesus Christ in order to make disciples for Jesus Christ. The central objective of Christian evangelism is to secure men's allegiance to Christ.

No, not to a church or a mission or a denomination. No, not to a system of thought and behavior. But fundamentally to the person of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship of Christ comes first. Church membership, the theology, the ethical conduct, important as they are, follow. Now in summoning people to discipleship, we shall do well not to forget the solemn conditions of this discipleship which Jesus himself laid down.

You will recall in Luke 14 that Jesus said, unless we hate our family and unless we take up our cross and unless we forsake all that we have, we cannot be his disciples. That is to say, unless we put Christ first before our relatives, before our ambitions, and before our possessions, we cannot be his disciples. Now one other thought comes to me here about making disciples.

And that is this, that the only people who can make disciples are themselves disciples. That is what they are called in verse 16. The 11 disciples went to Galilee and Jesus said, go and make disciples.

Your disciples, go and make some more. It takes a disciple to make a disciple. And the more committed our discipleship is, the more likely we are under God to win others to the same discipleship.

That's A, we are to make disciples. B, we are to baptize. Converts who have become disciples of Jesus Christ are to be baptized into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Now the theological importance of this expression is very far-reaching. It teaches that discipleship to Jesus Christ involves, ipso facto, in itself, a relationship to the Father and to the Holy Spirit as well. You can't be a disciple of Christ without being related to the Father and the Spirit also.

It further teaches that although the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are three distinct persons within the Godhead, they are yet one, and they possess one name into which converts are to be baptized. They are not to be baptized into the name of the Father and the name of the Son and the name of the Holy Spirit, as if there were three names, but into the one name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the three are one. It teaches us further that Christian baptism signifies, among other things, union with God.

The God who has revealed himself in the threefold name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Because it isn't just baptism in the name, the Greek is into the name. That is, it signifies union with the name, the God who has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Further, whatever precise significance baptism may have, and doubtless our particular convictions here would be divergent, we would, I am persuaded, all agree that baptism is essentially a public act. People may become disciples of Jesus secretly, but they must be baptized publicly. And at the very least, baptism is the public confession and the public acknowledgement of those who claim to be Christ's disciples.

And baptism thus admits them into the visible Church of Christ. So Jesus, in advancing from discipleship to baptism, moves from the private to the public, from the personal to the corporate, from conversion to church membership. A. We are to make disciples.

B. We are to baptize. C. We are to teach. But the purpose of Christ in the Great Commission is not fulfilled when people have been both discipled and baptized.

They must also be taught. And a lifetime of learning and obeying Christ follows conversion until disciples are conformed to the image of their Lord. Moreover, the substance of the teaching to be given them is explained to us here.

It is all the teaching of Christ. It is all things whatsoever I have commanded you. That's what we're to teach converts.

Please notice what it is. We are not to teach them what they want to hear. We're not going to teach them what we want to give them.

We are to teach them what Christ himself has taught. In other words, we are not really their teachers at all. Christ is their teacher, and we are to introduce them to the teaching of another, to the teaching of Christ himself.

We are to teach them to observe all things whatsoever Christ has commanded them, and they are to observe it, to keep it. Everything he's taught, they are to believe. Everything he's taught, they are to obey.

Now then, we ask, where is this teaching of Christ to be found? It's all very well telling me I've got to teach converts all the teaching of Christ. Where is all the teaching of Christ? The answer is not in the Gospels only. Not just in the speeches, the parables, the precepts of Jesus, but in the whole Bible.

Because properly understood, the teaching of Jesus Christ is coterminous with Scripture. Why? Well, it includes the Old Testament, because Christ set his seal upon the authority and the truth of the Old Testament. And if Christ endorsed the Old Testament, then his teaching includes the Old Testament.

Next, it includes the Gospels, in which his own words are recorded. And next, it includes the rest of the New Testament, because the rest of the New Testament is the teaching of the apostles he appointed to

teach in his name. And through these apostles, Jesus continued to speak, the risen Christ speaking through the lips of the apostles in order to complete his self-revelation.

Thus, we have our Lord's own command to instruct converts with biblical teaching. And it is important from the very beginning that converts understand that the Bible's teaching is Christ's teaching, and that Christ's teaching is the Bible's teaching, and that there is no dichotomy between the two. Converts have become disciples of Christ.

They've been baptized into Christ, as well as the Father and the Spirit. And now they are to be taught what Christ commanded. And these new converts need to understand from the very beginning that they must submit their minds to the teaching of Christ.

And who all is teaching? If they're converted, it means that they've called Christ Lord. And what does the Lordship of Christ mean if it doesn't include his Lordship of our intellect? There are multitudes of people in the church who are not properly converted, because they're not intellectually converted. And no man or woman is intellectually converted who has not brought their mind into submission to the teaching of Christ.

If Jesus is Lord, he's Lord of my mind. And that means submission to scripture, because I have submitted to Christ. The disciples of Jesus have no liberty to pick and choose in the teaching of Jesus, selecting what they like, rejecting what they don't like.

They're not free, we're not free to disagree with Jesus. We're not free to disobey what Jesus has commanded. Jesus Christ is our teacher and our Lord.

And we're under his instruction and under his authority. Jesus still says to us today, you call me teacher and Lord. And you're quite right, that is precisely what I am.

Your teacher to instruct you and your Lord to command you. And the new convert needs to learn this from the beginning, that he is under the instruction of Christ. He is to observe all things whatsoever Christ has commanded us in scripture.

And oh how one longs to see converts grasping clearly this logical implication of their discipleship. One longs to see them taking upon them the yoke of Christ. Not only coming to him to receive rest, but taking his yoke upon them and learning from him.

One longs to see them bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And so growing up into maturity in Christ. Now this lays upon the witness and the evangelist the solemn responsibility to be a good disciple himself.

How can we teach converts to observe all that Christ has commanded us if it is by no means clear that we submit to the teaching of Christ ourselves. Now such brethren is the risen Lord's concept of evangelism. A concept considerably more balanced and comprehensive than much of our modern practice.

Jesus did not send forth his disciples merely to make disciples, that is to make converts. Discipling was only the first stage of the great commission. Two further stages were involved as we've seen baptizing and teaching.

Thus the evangelist who would be loyal to the commission of Christ must have these three major concerns. The first is conversions to Christ. The second is the church membership of converts to which

their baptism introduces them.

And the third is their instruction in all the teaching of Christ. And although it is no doubt legitimate for sporadic evangelistic missions and crusades to concentrate on the first, on making conversions, it would be irresponsible to do so unless adequate provision is also made for the second and the third. That is the admission of converts into church membership and into instruction.

That brings me to the third part of this version of the commission, which is the promise that Christ uttered. We've seen the affirmation, the announcement he made of his authority, the command he gave to go, to disciple, to baptize, to teach. Now the promise he uttered and lo, I am with you always, all the days, even unto the end of the age.

Again it's rather beautiful that the gospel of Matthew ends on the note with which it began. One of the great promises of the first chapter of Matthew was verse 23, Immanuel, God with us. And this promise of Immanuel is confirmed and further fulfilled in the last chapter, I am with you.

Immanuel, God with us in Christ. We should never isolate the great commission from its context. Here in this version of Matthew it's preceded by the announcement of Christ's authority and it is followed by the promise of Christ's presence.

And without these two we could never obey Christ's command and commission. How can we go forth to make disciples and to baptize them and to teach them if we have no assurance of his authority behind us and no assurance of his presence beside us? It is these things that form as it were the sandwich in which the commission is contained. But the commission comes between the authority and the presence of Christ.

Without these we cannot obey the commission. This wasn't the first time that Christ had promised them his risen presence. Earlier in the same gospel in chapter 18 verse 20 he had promised to be in their midst where two or three are gathered in his name.

And now as he repeats the promise of his presence he grounds it upon a different condition. He attaches his promise now not to their worship when you're met in my name but to their witness when they go forth in his name. That is if we want to inherit the promise of Christ and enjoy the presence of Christ it is not enough to meet in his name.

We must go in his name as well. But who is this I? It's very emphatic in the Greek. I am with you.

Who is this I who is with them? Well it's the I who has claimed all authority and who has issued this commission to go. That is the only I who claims to be with the church always. It must therefore remain very questionable whether a stay-at-home church, whether a non-missionary minded church, whether a church that is withdrawn from the world into its own little Christian ghetto, it is very questionable whether such a church disobedient to the great commission and indifferent to the needs of the world is in any position to claim or inherit the promise of Christ's presence.

But to those who go, to those who go into the world as Christ came into the world, to those who live in the world as Christ was in the world, to those who sacrifice their ease and comfort and independence and safety and hazard their lives in the search of disciples, to them comes the promise of the presence of the living Christ. He sends them out and he promises to accompany them as they go. Go, he says, and as you go I'm with you.

But I'm not with you otherwise. And the simple pledge I'm with you is all that we need to know. I'm with you, with you in the person of the Holy Spirit, with you to restrain you, with you to direct you, with you to encourage and empower you, I'm with you all the days.

The days of safety and of peril, the days of failure and of success, days of freedom to preach, and the days of restriction and imprisonment and persecution and even death, days of peace and days of conflict and war, I'm with you all the days, however you fare, even unto the end of the age, unto the end of the age. Think of that. Thus the promise of Christ spans the whole gospel age.

But as he is speaking these words, the new age has only just begun. He's only just died and been raised from the dead, and now he's already thinking of his return in power and great glory at the end of the age. He's just inaugurated the new age and he promises to be with his people throughout the age, from its beginning to its end, from its inauguration to its consummation, even to the close of the age.

Now as I conclude, I pray that we may have gained from this best known version of the Great Commission, its announcement of authority, its command to go and make disciples and baptize and teach, and its promise of the presence of Christ, I pray that we may have gained not only direction as to what we are intended to do, to go to make disciples, to baptize, to teach, we need more than direction. We need fresh courage from the assertion of Christ's authority and the promise of his presence. These three do you see belong together.

It's only when you believe the announcement of his authority that you will obey the command to go, and only when you obey the command to go will you inherit the promise of his presence. Each leads to the next and they belong inexorably together. So as we look back over these verses, we cannot fail to be struck by its comprehensive sweep as indicated by the deliberate four-fold repetition of the little word all.

First, Christ claimed to have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Second, he therefore sends us forth to make disciples of all the nations because of his all authority. And thirdly, he bids us transmit to these disciples all his teaching and not some of it.

And fourth and finally, he promises then if we're faithful to be with us all the days, even as the New English Bible puts it, to the end of time. Hallelujah.

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