



## Translation, Interpretation, and Exposition of Matthew 28:16-20

*“Where the Reformation church speaks of word and sacrament given to the church as its constitutive gifts, Matthew tells of a living person in whose imitation the disciples live.” (Ulrich Luz.)*

*“Matthew’s composition makes it clear that the disciples are given Jesus’ own authority and have the same commission as their master.” (Luz, 148.)*

Interim Pastor Prof. Glen Taylor

### THE TEXT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

#### ***The Great Commission***

<sup>16</sup>So the eleven<sup>i</sup> disciples proceeded to the Galilee,<sup>ii</sup> to the mountain where Jesus had instructed<sup>iii</sup> them. <sup>17</sup>And upon seeing Him, they worshiped, but some<sup>iv</sup> doubted.<sup>v</sup> <sup>18</sup>And approaching,<sup>vi</sup> Jesus spoke to them saying:

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and upon the earth.<sup>vii</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Therefore, *going*, make disciples<sup>viii</sup> of all the nations,<sup>ix</sup> *baptizing* them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,<sup>xi</sup> <sup>20</sup>and *teaching*<sup>xii</sup> them to obey<sup>xiii</sup> all things whatsoever I have commanded you;<sup>xiv</sup>

and, look, I myself<sup>xv</sup> am<sup>xvi</sup> with you<sup>xvii</sup> always,<sup>xviii</sup> to the end of the age.<sup>xix</sup>

#### ***Earlier texts that shed light on the Great Commission***

##### **Matthew 10:24-25**

“<sup>24</sup>A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master; <sup>25</sup>It is enough for the disciple to be like his master, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.” (RSV.)

##### **Matthew 10:41-42**

“The one who receives a **prophet** because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and the one who receives a **righteous person** because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. <sup>42</sup> And whoever gives one of these **little ones** even a cup of cold water because he is a **disciple**, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.” (ESV.)

##### **Matthew 13:51-52**

[Jesus speaking to the disciples after his teaching on the Parables of the Kingdom]:

<sup>51</sup>“Have you understood all this?” They said to him, “Yes.” <sup>52</sup>And he said to them, “Therefore every **scribe** who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

##### **Matthew 23:34**

[Jesus speaking to the religious leaders]:

<sup>34</sup>“Therefore I send you **prophets** and **wise men** and **scribes**, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town . . .” (ESV.)

---

<sup>i</sup> Judas is of course no longer with them. One less than twelve underscores the imperfection of those who will soon be commissioned, giving hope to the imperfect who follow: us! The oblique reference to ‘the Twelve’ recalls the first commissioning of the disciples (to Israel alone) in chapter 10 (vss. 1-4), for it was there that the twelve disciples were introduced by name.

<sup>ii</sup> Given their desertion of Jesus, the disciples might have travelled to Galilee wondering what fate awaited them. Hopefully, the women told them Jesus had, reassuringly, referred to them as “my brothers.” Regardless, they obeyed Jesus’ directive and made the long trek to the Galilee (a journey of several days).

Why Galilee? Some regard it as “a fresh beginning” (Nolland, 1090), but in light of the allusion to Galilee as “the way of the Gentiles” in chapter 10, the Israel-only Great Commission (cf. Mt 4:15). I understand Galilee to be chosen because it denotes (starts) a pathway to the Gentile nations. (Luz has suggested that the Galilee serves as a reminder of the earthly Jesus’ teachings, which are commanded to be taught in the Great Commission. It is natural to suppose also that Galilee was chosen for it being, relatively speaking, a place of peace, joy, and insight for the disciples. It was there, for example, that Peter rightly observed that Jesus was ‘the Christ, the son of the living God,’ 16:13).

<sup>iii</sup> Especially given the lack of reference to meeting in Galilee prior to chapter 28 (apart from 26:32), it is possible that Matthew refers not to what the angel and Jesus had said to the women about where to meet up (28:7,10), but to the mountain where Jesus had “taught” them—the Mount of the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:1-12). Though clever and possible, this idea is less likely than that the reference is to 28:7, 10. (Had Matthew intended Jesus’ place of teaching, he would likely have written: “where Jesus taught” [so Olmstead, 413]. The verb actually used is “command, direct, instruct.”)

<sup>iv</sup> The word “some” in English implies a subset; the expression in Greek denotes a general number that does not clarify how many—whether some, many, or all. Moreover, it isn’t made clear whether those who worshiped and those who doubted are different or belong to the same group. To convey the ambiguity in English: “they worshiped; but there were those who doubted.” Among the possibilities—that those who doubted were all the disciples doubted, those other than the disciples, or some of the disciples—the last is best. (No others are mentioned, making the second option unlikely though, depending on how to interpret 28:7, the women might also have been there. Further in support of ‘some,’ see 26:67 where the same expression refers to a subset of those previously mentioned.)

<sup>v</sup> Here again Matthew tells it like it is: some doubted. (Contrast the lack of reference to such when the two Marys encounter Jesus in 28:9.)

<sup>vi</sup> Only here and after the transfiguration (17:7) is Jesus said to “approach” others (in both cases disciples). The context of the first instance is Jesus coming to Peter, James, and John after the voice of God, who overshadows them in a luminous cloud, interrupts Peter, leading them to fall on their faces, filled with awe (or fear). In both cases the context for the disciples is one of possible rebuke (at least Peter in 17) and, more certainly, of being in need of comfort or reassurance. Jesus explicitly delivers this in 17:7 where “Jesus came *and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.”* In short, Jesus show pastoral sensitivity to the disciples.

<sup>vii</sup> See Daniel 7:13-14. Recall that the passive voice [‘all authority *has been given* to me] is a way of referring to God as the subject without naming Him. In other words, God gave all authority on heaven and on earth to Jesus and it is on this strong basis that he commissions His disciples.

<sup>viii</sup> Matthew makes the common noun “disciple,” into a verb— ‘cause someone to become a disciple or follower of’ [so Olmstead]—something that occurs nowhere else in the NT, apart from Acts 14:21. The other case in Matthew is 13:52. Further on the meaning of the verb, underlying it might be “the insight that one can become a disciple of Jesus . . . only on the basis of a call which leads to discipleship” (cited

---

in A&D, 684). In support A&D add, “That Peter and the others become disciples not in response to his teaching but his call (4.18-22) is suggestive.” (ibid.)

<sup>ix</sup> Is Israel (still) included? With most others, I agree with Nolland: The commission of Jesus “does not turn *from* the Jews *to* the Gentiles” (1265, emphasis mine); he continues, “rather, it widens the scope from that of 10:5, which is in view. Matthew uses *ethnē* [‘nations’] alone when referring to Gentiles, but when he speaks of ‘all the *ethnē*,’ he . . . refers to the whole of humanity [including Jews]” (ibid., slightly adapted.)

<sup>x</sup> What does “into the name of” mean here? “[W]hen the phrase . . . [‘into the name of’] is used with . . . [‘baptize’], the person being baptized is viewed as being passed into the secure possession and ‘dedicated protection’ . . . of the triune God (Mt 28:19) or the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:16; 19:5; cf. 1 Cor 1:13, 15, where a putative baptism into Paul’s name is equated with belonging to Paul)” (Olmstead, 414, citing Harris [emphasis mine]). Compare Tasker, “There is good evidence that the Greek idiom *eis to onoma* (‘into the name’ not ‘in the name’) could convey the meaning of . . . by baptism pass[ing] into the possession of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.” (275, slightly adapted). Nolland notes that the similar use of “into the name of Jesus” in 18:20 “is an expression of solidarity with Jesus.” (1268, emphasis mine.)

<sup>xi</sup> “He [Jesus] was not giving instructions about the actual words to be used in the service of baptism, but . . . was indicating that the baptized person would by baptism pass into the possession of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. . . . Moreover, it would seem that the baptism which the risen Christ is here instructing his disciples to practice was not just a revival of John’s baptism of repentance, nor even a continuation of the baptism practiced by Himself and His disciples earlier in His ministry. It was essentially a new sacrament by which men and women were to come under the influence of the triune God, to be used in his service. The words ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’ are therefore both emphatic and essential to the text. Without them the reference to baptism would be indeterminate and conventional.” (Tasker, *TNTC*, 275–6).

Nolland asks “Why is the solidarity intended now to be expressed with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?” His answer: “We can say first that the choice of language is well rooted in earlier language in Matthew’s narrative. In 1:1 Matthew summarized in a triad of names the genealogy to follow by means of which he defined Jesus in relation to the history of God’s prior dealings with this people. Now at the end Matthew sums up his own narrative and identifies in briefest compass the significance of his chief protagonist by speaking of Jesus as the Son in relation to the Father and as closely linked with the Spirit. Matthew’s story has been about the action of the Father through the Son and by means of the Holy Spirit and this is what the baptized are joined to.” (Nolland, 1269.) (“Father” is often used of “God” in Matthew; “Father” and “Son” are juxtaposed already in 11:27; “Holy Spirit” is used more often in Matthew than “Spirit of God” and “Spirit”—1:18, 20; 3:11; 12:32; 28:19.) (ibid.)

<sup>xii</sup> “As Matthew envisages it here making disciples entails baptizing and teaching” (Olmstead, 413). In other words, “These clauses [headed by baptizing and teaching] practically describe what is meant by ‘make disciples.’” (ibid., citing Runge.) As Nolland notes, the only other place in Matthew where ‘teach’ and ‘disciple’ occur together is in the Sermon on the Mount, which means it has “a special place within the teaching to be given.”

<sup>xiii</sup> The word translated obey is, literally, “keep.” It is important to link this word with “commanded” later in the verse, a word not typically used of Jesus’ teachings or admonitions. As Nolland (1270) notes, the point is likely to allow “‘keep . . . commanded’ to echo the ‘keep the commandments’ of 19:17.”

<sup>xiv</sup> The word “keep,” and “command” are but the beginning of striking parallels to John (14:15-17, 21; 15:10; 1 John 3:22). John’s emphasis is on Jesus’ command to love the brethren, whereas Matthew’s emphasis is comprehensive; as Luz notes, “Matthew specifies and details . . . all things whatsoever. It is a matter of individual commands, not one of which shall pass away, until all things come to pass (5:18). The aorist *eneteilámēn* (I commanded) interprets the commands quite unambiguously as those of the

---

earthly Jesus. . . . The proclamation of the disciples is identical with that of the earthly Jesus.” (*Studies in Matthew*, 136).

The words “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” effectively corrects any who assume, as Christian did throughout most of Christian history (by and large, until the 1800s!), that the Great Commission applied only to the disciples. Yes, Jesus spoke it to them (alone), but here he tells them to teach *others* what he instructs *them*—which includes the Great Commission.

<sup>xv</sup> The pronoun I is emphasized in the original language (by being positioned first). Moreover, the purpose of Jesus’ presence here is enablement. (See Olmstead, 414.)

<sup>xvi</sup> Although not juxtaposed in Greek, the words “I” and “am” in close proximity remind one of God’s statement of self-identity: “I AM” [*egō eimi*].

<sup>xvii</sup> There is strong reason to believe (based on similarities between this passage and so-called “call narratives” in the OT—see Exod. 3, Judges 6, Jeremiah 1— that the note of presence is intended to offer reassurances of the promise of the presence of God in the exigencies of the task assigned; cf. Exod. 3:12 “I will be with you”; Judg 6:16: “I will be with you”; Jer. 1:8: “I am with you” (Nolland, 1271, including wording at times).

<sup>xviii</sup> Literally, “All the days.” “Always” is a perfectly apt translation, but the use of the finite term “days” incrementally breaks down the abstract concept “always” in a way that reminds us of Christ’s presence on a daily basis. (Nolland [1271] suggests that Matthew might have in mind the trying days referred to in Matthew 24 that precede the end of the age.)

<sup>xix</sup> Hauerwas: “[T]he age that he will be present at the end of is the age inaugurated by his birth, ministry, death, and resurrection” (249).