

The Great Commission - Matthew 28:19, 20"

Let's read together from the end of Matthew's gospel. Few verses there. Beginning at verse 16, Matthew 28, at verse 16.

Now the 11 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.

May God bless to us this reading of His Word. These verses, as you know, are widely quoted to justify mission and evangelism. And because they are so fundamental, because they are so much a part of the foundation of missionary activity and enterprise. We need to really grasp their message and their meaning. And the final paragraph of this Gospel of Matthew speaks of the appearance of Jesus to his disciples as he gives them this wonderful command. In many ways, this final paragraph brings together a number of themes that are present in Matthew's Gospel and provide us with a key to understanding the whole book.

Matthew's story of Jesus begins and ends in Galilee. Jesus leaves Galilee to be baptized by John in the Jordan in chapter three. But after John are he returns to Galilee. He calls his first disciples in Galilee, and now at the end of his ministry, he returns there again. Jesus significantly meets his disciples on a mountain. No reference to the specific mountain. We do know that mountains are particularly significant in Matthew's story of Jesus.

There's the Mount of temptation, the mount where he preached his famous sermon. There's the Mount where the crowd was fed. The Mount of Transfiguration and the Mount of Olives. Discourse. And as he promised, Jesus appears to his disciples. They see him. But there's no emphasis laid on this fact. The main verb in the sentence is they worshiped. And the focus of the following verses is on what Jesus said.

The resurrection was not just something that went on in the minds of the disciples. This was not some kind of collective hallucination when they actually really saw him. And their reaction is wholly appropriate. Verse 17 says they worshiped him, but some doubted. I believe Matthew shows great pastoral sensitivity and including that detail. He wants his readers to take courage.

That as they face their own struggles, as they oscillate between worship and doubt, that the disciples themselves were not Superman, the resurrection was not a matter of wish fulfillment. The Great Commission was not given to spiritual giants who had everything worked out perfectly and completely. It was given to a group of ordinary, devoted followers who were actually prone to doubt and to failure.

And what a daunting task they faced. Events had moved and such a rapid pace for them in recent days. No wonder some of them were rubbing their eyes in disbelief. But to these ordinary men, Jesus issues an authoritative commission in three very closely connected parts. There's a statement about his authority. There's a command about his mission, and there's a promise of his presence.

Only 50 words in the original Greek. But they have resounded more than any others in the international history of Christian church and Christian mission. The words are simple, but they're clear. This astounding and the most resounding note of all is that little word. All Jesus claims, all authority, both earthly and heavenly. The disciples are commissioned to disciple all nations.

Converts are to be taught to obey all that Jesus commanded. And Jesus promises his presence with his disciples all day of every day until the end of the age. And even though we read these verses, and we think that their message is clear and unambiguous, we need to remember that the message of this paragraph was not always received nor implemented in the way that we understand them today.

For many years, there was little reflection on what these verses meant for the early and medieval church in the 18th century. Isaac Watts wrote a hymn based on Psalm 72, which we sang this morning. Christ's kingdom among the Gentiles, he called it. And it has a clear vision of the global reach of Christ's kingdom. And we sing that Jesus shall reign where the sun does his successive journeys run.

His kingdom stretched from shore to shore till noon shall wax. And we are no more. And it included a couple of other verses that have kind of disappeared from our hymnals. Behold the islands with their kings. And Europe. Her best tribute brings from north to south. The princes meet to pay their homage at his feet. They are Persia, glorious to behold.

There India stands in eastern gold and barbarous nations. At his word submit and die, and all and their Lord. Wonderful words and a wonderful hymn. If your effort in London you can visit John Newton's church. He was the minister of Saint Mary's Woolnough in the City of London in 1784. In 1785 he preached 50 sermons based on texts from Handel's Messiah.

The Messiah was then enjoying a successful rerun in Westminster Abbey, but nowhere in all his sermons does Newton show any intention to consider what practical steps need to be taken to extend the Messiah's kingdom. So we look to William Carey as the founder of modern missions. His famous piece was entitled An Inquiry. Whether the condition given by our Lord to his disciples be not still binding upon us.

And Carey, of course, concluded that it was still binding on us. Where a command exists, he says. Nothing can be necessary to render it binding, but a removal of those obstacles which render obedience impossible. And these are removed already. So by September 1794, an article

was printed in the Evangelical Magazine in London, and part of the article reads we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves.

And Christ has taught us that every man is our neighbor. But do we display this love while we are alive? Gross darkness to comfort the nations, and are at no pains to send them the glad tidings of salvation through the sufferings and death of the Son of God. Perhaps we have not considered our duty resulting from that command, which was directed from the supreme authority to every follower of the lamb.

Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. A number of people read that article. And in November 1794, a meeting was held in London to find a new missionary society, and their efforts led to a new missionary endeavor that eventually became the London Missionary Society. And it was active in the Pacific, in South Africa and Madagascar, in Central Africa and India, and in China.

And all because of Carey's reflection on these verses and the fact that their command had not been rescinded. But this was still a burden and an obligation for the Church of Jesus Christ. And the rise of the missionary movement in the 19th century was supported by countless appeals to this great Commission as the motive for missionary effort and missionary engagement, and right up to the present time.

This great Commission remains a key text for World Mission. John Stott, Contemporary Christian, published in 1992, echoes the challenge. Stott says this great commission to the nations has never been rescinded. It's still binding on the people of God. It was issued by the risen Christ, who was able to claim that all authority in heaven and on earth had been conferred on him.

And the link between the all authority he claimed and the all nations he commissioned his followers to disciple is clearly intended. The universal mission of the church springs from the universal authority of Jesus Christ. So if we are to follow the command of Christ, if we are to seek to implement the Great Commission, what principles should control and govern our missionary activity?

Are we just to make it up ourselves? Can we do anything that we think might work? Or does Jesus give us a pattern and a model for mission? I believe there are three key principles in this commission. Themes and principles that are woven into Matthew's Gospel and that come to a climax here in chapter 28. The first is this that we carry out a mission under the authority of Jesus Christ.

Matthew is very concerned to exalt Christ and to show in his gospel that Jesus has authority because he is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, particularly in his description of the birth of Jesus. He makes the point that Jesus is the promised Messiah, that the angel who speaks to Joseph attests, Jesus is the Son of David, and as Emmanuel.

His genealogy in Matthew one indicates that he's the son of Abraham, through whom the whole world will be blessed. In chapter two, the wise men seek the King of the Jews so that they might worship him. In chapter three, John the Baptizer announces the coming of the Lord, and God Himself speaks audibly and attests that Jesus is His dear son.

At his baptism and throughout the gospel, Matthew continues to use significant titles for Jesus. He is Messiah. He is Son of David. He's son of man. He's son of God. But more than the titles, Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses, as the new Israel, the one who is greater than Solomon, greater than, greater even than Jonah. He's greater than the temple.

He's greater than the priesthood. He's the servant prophesied by Isaiah. He is God's wisdom. He is a teacher of matchless authority, whose actions and knowledge suggests that God Himself is at work. And Matthew makes it clear that Jesus demands their total allegiance. He declares that a person's eternal destiny depends on their response to him, and the authority, and the supremacy of Jesus is demonstrated in this gospel.

As he heals the sick and as he casts out demons, as he raises the dead, as he comes storms, as he feeds thousands of people, his authority and his is questioned is criticized by the religious leaders, but it's acknowledged by the crowds as the disciples willingly submit to him and his authority is fully vindicated as he raises again from the dead.

So Christian witness and mission can never be understood apart from the authority of Jesus. This one who has authority, this one who demonstrates his universal dominion and power. He is the one who commissions us to mission. Mission which is universal and global in its reach and in its scope. And it's based on Matthew's careful and deliberate presentation of Jesus as the one who is powerful in both word and deed.

So, friends, we undertake mission with a very clear understanding that we are his ambassadors. We are the representatives of the one who holds all authority. And when we face the challenges and the disappointments, when the road before us seems blocked and impassable, when we feel overwhelmed and discouraged, here's the truth. We remember. We hear our Lord speak to us again.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. And we say, this is your mission. Jesus. We minister. We work under your authority. But secondly, we carry out mission as we make disciples who reflect and to model Jesus, make disciples is the core of Jesus command here. Baptizing and teaching are the participles that are subordinate to this mission.

Command to make disciples. And Matthew. Very structured presentation of the ministry of Jesus presents him as a model for ministry and mission. He begins his preaching and teaching ministry. At the end of chapter four, in chapters 5 to 7, we have his famous sermon on the Mount. He calls his disciples to a life that honors God, that models the life of righteousness and justice which characterizes his kingdom.

And of all the Gospels. Matthew outlines most clearly what is required of those who live in God's kingdom, and who live under the rule and reign of King Jesus. Chapters 8 to 9 describe ten mighty and miraculous acts performed by Jesus, which are testimony to his compassion for people, his ministry of reversing and undoing all the effects of the fall.

And as he sends out his disciples on mission in chapter ten, he warns them about rejection and persecution. And as Matthew describes the journey of Jesus to the cross, he tells us about him being tempted by the devil, being hindered by Peter. Hi. Experience, mockery and contempt from the Jewish leaders. But he teaches his disciples about the importance of self-denial, of displaying childlike humility, of the importance of forgiveness, and of being a servant.

And all these qualities he himself displays. And then we can see those features being reproduced in the ministry of the disciples. He travels around and teaches. So did they. They share his authority for those who receive them, for those who receive them, receive him. He's persecuted, and so will they be persecuted. He's delivered over to the authorities. He's killed but vindicated.

And so will they be. Christ's disciples follow Jesus in the way of the cross. And just as Jesus shows love for God and love for the neighbor, so should they. He submits to the will of God. So should they. He is a meek and humble servant who shows compassion to those in need. And all these characteristics should be displayed by those who carry out this great commission.

We are called to walk the same path as he walked. There was a report to the recently held Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization just held back in October. It was entitled the state of the Great Commission, and it notes that with thousands of missionaries fanning out across the globe under the auspices of numerous missionary societies, the evangelization of the two thirds world has reached unprecedented levels of accomplishment.

There has been a huge growth in terms of independent indigenous Christian movements in the global South. But the report goes on to point out that unlike apostolic and post apostolic periods, the modern church's connectedness commitment to witness has not been accompanied by a similar commitment to disciple making. We're forced to concede that today, global Christian spirituality is at risk of becoming thousands of miles wide and one inch deep.

The church has not prepared adequately for the harvest of new believers that would emerge following the faithful witness of vibrant church communities. And that's why I suggest to you tonight, folks, that the task of disciple making, of teaching and training and model in Christian disciple worship is so important. That's why I personally am committed to the task of theological education.

There is a huge demand, a huge interest in many regions of the world for the sort of stuff we offered at Westminster Seminary and undertaking that task and facing that challenge of training and teaching and preparing pastors and disciples. We realize that it requires perseverance. It needs resilience and commitment. It's a much larger task than has been envisaged by some who

think that the task of world evangelization could be fulfilled within that specific, unusually rather short time.

John Payton was a 19th century missionary to the New Hebrides in the Pacific Ocean, now known as Vanuatu, and on the last page of his autobiography, we find this exhortation for those who would come behind him. He says, plunk down your forces in the heart of one tribe or less, for the same language of spoken. Work solidly from that center, building up with patient teaching and lifelong care.

A church that will endure. God may allow some missionaries to see significant progress, to see a task completed in a shorter period of time. But for the vast majority of those who go out to disciple the nations, it's a long, arduous process that has a large price tag in terms of commitment and energy and sacrifice. For John Payton, it took 42 years. For Adeniran Judson it took 40. Peyton lost his first wife and seven children. Judson had two wives and nine children. Both faced sickness, shipwreck spears, broken bones, and a myriad of other trials, but they were ultimately spared by God to finish the work that he had called them to. At one point, rather humorously, Pittman wrote, amongst those who sought to determine to determine what was one dear little Christian gentlemen who is crying in the argument, all of us was the cannibals. The cannibals you'll be eating. You'll be eaten by cannibals. And Pittman replied to this man, Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave. They're to be eaten by worms. I confess to you that if I can live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I'm eaten by cannibals or by worms. And in the great day, my resurrection body will rise as fair as yours, in the likeness of our risen Redeemer. But here is Peyton's final analysis. He says, let me record my immovable conviction that this is the noblest service in which any human being can spend or be spent, and that if God give me back my life to be lived all over again, I would recite one quiver of hesitation.

Let on the altar to Christ that he might use it as before. And similar ministries of love, especially amongst those who have never yet heard the name of Jesus. I see our dear young people here this evening, and I know that if God is speaking to you and you're thinking about your career, then what are you going to give your life to?

Then let me commend to you there is nothing more worthwhile than a life given to Jesus Christ and service of him. And in the cause of the gospel. And perhaps God will speak to you during this conference, and you will feel you have come to a point where you want to dedicate yourself completely to that task. Listen carefully as God, by his Spirit would challenge you, because for nearly 2000 years, the people of God have been marked by patient, quiet, endurance and have left the results to God.

Long term missions is part of our heritage, but it's not easy. And if you commit yourself to a life of Christian service in whatever area or whatever region, then you'll face sacrifice and difficulty and challenge and problems. But it's the way of the master, and we follow him for the right and

says, for all our diversity. There's only one kind of Christian who is able to carry forward the Great Commission.

There's only one kind of preacher at our proclaimers one kind of pastor, our church planter, one kind of mission strategist, our marketplace mobilizer, who is able to do the true work of evangelism anywhere in this world. It's someone who embraces Christ like servanthood as a way of life. So we head out into mission under the authority of Jesus Christ.

We go to seek men and women and boys and girls being changed and transformed by the gospel, and for them to become disciples of Jesus also. And the third thing the Great Commission says is this that we carry out mission with the assurance of the presence of Jesus. The message of Matthew from first to last is the message of Emmanuel, God with us.

In times of revival and great growth. For the gospel has been received warmly and in times of suffering, rejection, and even sadly today, times of martyrdom. The sense of the presence of Jesus has been both a reason for rejoicing and a source of comfort, especially in the face of persecution. Knowing the presence of Christ with us is crucial, I think, as John has the Czech martyr who sang psalms as he was led to being burned at the stake.

I think of Martin Luther, who certainly remembered us when he faced the diet of worms, and was the threat of his own execution. Just there, we have heard, when asked to recant all his work. But the next day he returned with steely courage. He was strengthened by the spirit, the spirit of power, the spirit who gives courage. My colleague Ed Welch says this God's grace to us is courage.

It's courage that lets us stand in his presence and know that he will never leave us. It's courage that rests, even in a tumultuous sea, when others are freaking out. It's courage to know that he will be with us in death. We have yet to hear the full story about what happened to our sisters and brothers in Congo today.

But we know of other situations in recent years for people who have been martyred for their faith. On the 12th of February 2015, the Islamic State released a five minute video showing that the heads of 21 Egyptian Christian construction workers who had been kidnapped in Libya a few weeks previously. They're pictured in orange jumpsuits on a beach along the southern Mediterranean coast.

And in the moments before they were killed. An edited audio clip recorded a number of them crying out oh Lord Jesus! And the caption on the video reads In Arabic, they supplicate what they worship and die upon their paganism, suggesting that they'd be given a chance to convert to Islam, but had refused. I suspect we will hear stories in these next couple of days of how there are regions of the Middle East where the underground church risks its life for the gospel, and it's the assurance of God's presence that gives to these sisters and brothers such courage, and we long that they will be sustained.

And that they would be courageous in the knowledge that their Lord is with them, and that he accompanies them and stands with them, and keeps them right to the end. Matthew uses the word father for God 44 times. Far more than any other gospel writer. Jesus is presented as the Son of God. And he talks frequently about my Heavenly Father.

But Jesus also designates a God as your father, referring to his disciples. And it is this assurance that they have an all knowing, all powerful, all present heavenly father that enables him to navigate all the storms and all the choppy waters of this world. And he assures them that wherever they go, especially in obedience to this commission, he will be present with them.

I am with you always, to the end of the age. Jesus has never left his church. Matthew Henry says there's no day, no art of the day, in which our Lord is not present with his churches and his ministers. If there were in that day, and that are they would be undone. The God of Israel, the Savior, is sometimes a God who hides himself, but he's never a God who is at a distance.

And to these precious words he says, Amen is added. And then Matthew Henry goes on to allude to the psalm we thought about this morning. Even so, Lord Jesus, be thy with us and all thy people cause thy face to shine upon us, that they way may be known upon earth. Thy saving health among all nations. And that's our prayer.

Lord, lift up your countenance upon us. Lord, don't leave us. We need you, and we bless you. And we praise you for this assurance of your abiding presence. So we carry out our mission under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. We carry out our mission as we make disciples and as we model Jesus, we carry out our mission with the assurance of the presence of Jesus with us.

Let's pray.

Father, we've returned to these familiar words this evening, and we ask that again. You would write their truths upon our heart, so that in this task of taking the gospel to the world, we know that we're laboring under. You're a sort of a that we're clear in terms of our job description that we're making disciples and that we carry out our mission with this wonderful assurance that you will never leave us. You will never forsake us, but that you will be with us to the very end of the age. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.