

A New Mandate

11) Matt 28:18–20: This final event in the gospel of Matthew provides the key to understanding the rest of the book.¹ Matthew restated and emphasized his most important theme.² With our loyalty belonging to Jesus our king, his ambassadors must expand his realm by making disciples all over the world (Cf. Gen 1:26–28).³ After Jesus rose from the dead, the women he commissioned delivered his message. All his committed followers met in Galilee (Matt 28:5–10; 16–17).⁴ Despite the abject failure of almost all the male disciples, Christ restored them to positions of trust (Matt 26:56; Matt 27:55–57; John 19:25–27; John 20:21–23).⁵ In the midst of their bewildering circumstances and emotions, Jesus brought clarity to their new existence.⁶

This passage takes the form of a chiasm (A-B-C-B'-A') with baptism as the central focus of emphasis.⁷ Jesus used the word “all” (*pas*) four times,⁸ pointing to the comprehensive extent of our mandate as Christians.⁹ The lack of a verbal response by the disciples suggests that Christ expected them to fully receive and obey his command.¹⁰ Matthew wrote, “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.’”

During his previous ministry in Israel, Jesus exercised his ability to heal the sick, to forgive sins, to raise the dead, and to disclose the will of his Father (Matt 9:1–8, 18–25; Matt 11:27–30).¹¹ In Christ’s time of trial in the wilderness, Satan had offered him “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” in exchange for his worship (Matt 4:8–11).¹² Jesus passed the test, unlike the first son of God (Luke 3:38; Gen 3:1–7). While the first Adam failed under the best conditions, the Second Adam succeeded in the worst (Gen 2:7–15; Matt 4:1–2).¹³ By refusing to short-circuit the plan devised within the Trinity, Jesus received far more than the devil promised (John 14:23–31; John 17:1–5; Matt 26:36–42; Acts 4:23–31).¹⁴ Using the divine passive “has been given,”¹⁵ Christ asserted that the Father delivered universal dominion to his vindicated Son.¹⁶ His promised status as the enthroned Son of Man who rules over heaven and earth now reflects reality (Dan 7:13–14; Matt 19:27–30; Matt 26:59–66).¹⁷ Previously handed over to the power of earthly rulers, he now reigns over them all (Luke 22:1–6; John 18:29–19:16; Phil 2:5–11).¹⁸ A new era had arrived in redemptive history,¹⁹ with a world-wide expansion of Christ’s kingdom.²⁰

¹Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 881.

²Wilkins, *Matthew*, 950.

³Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 715.

⁴Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 881.

⁵France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1107–8.

⁶Wilkins, *Matthew*, 950.

⁷Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 882.

⁸France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1109.

⁹Wilkins, *Matthew*, 950–1.

¹⁰France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1112.

¹¹Wilkins, *Matthew*, 951.

¹²France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1113.

¹³Wilkins, *Matthew*, 156.

¹⁴France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1113.

¹⁵Wilkins, *Matthew*, 951.

¹⁶Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 886.

¹⁷France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1112–3.

¹⁸Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19–28*, 682.

¹⁹Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 886.

²⁰Wilkins, *Matthew*, 951.

Jesus authoritatively proclaimed,²¹ “Therefore, after going, make disciples of all the people-groups, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all which I commanded you.” The Greek structure of this sentence consists of one main verb—the command “make disciples”—accompanied by three secondary verbs.²² “Going,” “baptizing,” and “teaching” combine to describe the process of making disciples.²³ In this case, the terms also function as commands,²⁴ so Christ ordered all his followers to take up this mandate.²⁵ It applies to disciples who remain in Israel as well as to those who cross cultures (Cf. Acts 1:12–14; Acts 2:1–11).²⁶

“To make/become a disciple” (*mathēteuō*) occurs only four times in the New Testament,²⁷ usually in the passive sense (Matt 13:52; Matt 27:57; Acts 14:21).²⁸ For example, in the verse in Acts, Luke referenced the word as resulting from evangelizing.²⁹ Only here in Matt 28:19 does it appear as a call to action.³⁰ Jesus invested considerable time and energy into recruiting his followers and training them to emulate his righteousness (Matt 4:18–25; Matt 10:1–8; Matt 16:21–27).³¹ In this passage, he commanded his disciples to repeat that pattern of making Christ-followers while this era of human history endures (Cf. Rom 8:29).³²

The word *ethnos* depicts a group of people with common descent, a shared history, and a unified language.³³ Prior to this, Jewish people incorporated gentiles within Israel who desired to join them or welcomed them into their synagogues. Such gentiles had to seek to convert to Judaism; Jewish people did not actively evangelize them (Deut 4:5–8; Josh 2:1–14; Ruth 1:16–18; Ruth 4:9–12; 1 Ki 8:41–43; Matt 1:5–6; Matt 10:5–6).³⁴

However, after his resurrection,³⁵ Christ expanded that mission to extend as wide as the universal dominion of the Son of Man predicted by Isaiah (Isa 11:10–12; Isa 42:5–10; Isa 49:5–7; Matt 24:14).³⁶ His call to reach all people-groups encompasses Jews and gentiles alike (Luke 10:1–2; Luke 24:46–47; Acts 1:8; Acts 13:13–16; 26–39, 43–49).³⁷

During this era, gentiles who chose to convert to Judaism received baptism as a rite of initiation.³⁸ Regarding such an individual, the *Babylonian Talmud* states: “If he accepted, he is circumcised forthwith...As soon as he is healed arrangements are made for his immediate ablution (immersion in water), when two learned men must stand by his side and acquaint him with some of the minor commandments and with some of the major ones. When he comes up after his ablution he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects. In the case of a woman

²¹Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 886.

²²Wilkins, *Matthew*, 951.

²³France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1115.

²⁴Osborne, *Matthew*, 1080.

²⁵Wilkins, *Matthew*, 954.

²⁶Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 718–9.

²⁷Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, “μαθητεύω” (*mathēteuō*), *TDNT* 4:461.

²⁸Wilkins, *Matthew*, 952.

²⁹Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 887.

³⁰Wilkins, *Matthew*, 952.

³¹Osborne, *Matthew*, 1080.

³²Wilkins, *Matthew*, 952.

³³Karl Ludwig Schmidt, “ἔθνος (*ethnos*) in the NT,” *TDNT* 2:369–72, 369.

³⁴Osborne, *Matthew*, 1079.

³⁵Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 887.

³⁶France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1114.

³⁷Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19–28*, 684.

³⁸Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, Second Ed. (IVPBBNT2)*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2014), 125.

proselyte, women make her sit in the water up to her neck, while two learned men stand outside and give her instruction in some of the minor commandments and some of the major ones” (b. Yebamoth 47b).

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus (55–135 AD) also recognized baptism as an indicator of religious conversion.³⁹ He wrote, “When we see anyone wavering, we are wont to say, ‘This is not a Jew, but only acts like one.’ But, when he assumes the sentiments of one who has been baptized and circumcised, then he both really is, and is called, a Jew.”⁴⁰

In the Great Commission, baptism represents the beginning of a new life as a Christian disciple (Cf. Rom 6:1–4).⁴¹ It replaced the baptism of repentance, which anticipated the arrival of the kingdom of God (Matt 3:1–6; John 4:1–2; Acts 19:1–7).⁴² Matthew provided almost no background information regarding the practice,⁴³ most likely due to his original audience’s familiarity with the rite (Acts 2:38–42; Acts 8:12, 30–38).⁴⁴ Being baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” connotes belonging to and fellowship with the Trinity (Acts 9:10–19; Gal 3:26–29). The term “name” (*onoma*) occurs in singular form, pointing to one entity.⁴⁵ Grouping the resurrected Son with the Father and the Spirit elevates Jesus to equality with them and identifies him as worthy of our faith (Col 1:15–23; 2 Cor 13:14).⁴⁶

The *Didache* (ca. 50–120 AD) provides us with the earliest extra-biblical record of Christian practices.⁴⁷ Regarding baptism, it says:

“And concerning baptism, thus baptize ye: Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit in living [running] water. But if thou have not living water, baptize into other water; and if thou canst not in cold, then warm. But if thou have not either, pour out water thrice upon the head into the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism, let the baptizer fast, and the baptized, and whatever others can; but thou shalt order the baptized to fast one or two days before.”⁴⁸

Jesus also requires that his disciples help new believers to grow in faith by “teaching them to keep all which [he] commanded.” Christ calls each of his followers to adhere to this mandate.⁴⁹ Those with greater maturity should instruct others how to live in a way which emulates, obeys, and honors the Lord (Matt 5:17–20; Matt 7:15–29; Matt 12:46–50). Matthew intended his account of Jesus’s words and life to achieve that goal.⁵⁰

³⁹Keener, *IVPBBCNT2*, 779.

⁴⁰Epictetus, “Discourses,” in *The Works of Epictetus: His Discourses, in Four Books, the Enchiridion, and Fragments* (trans. Thomas Wentworth Higginson; New York: Thomas Nelson, 1890), 2.9, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0237%3Atext%3Ddisc%3Abook%3D2%3Achapter%3D9>.

⁴¹Wilkins, *Matthew*, 952.

⁴²Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 720.

⁴³Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 887.

⁴⁴France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1117.

⁴⁵Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19–28*, 685.

⁴⁶France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1108.

⁴⁷Hurtado, “Christology: Didache” in *DLNT*, 181.

⁴⁸Riddle, trans., “The Didache: The Lord’s Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations,” in *ANF* 7, 7, 379, <https://archive.org/details/antenicenefather071913robe/page/378>.

⁴⁹Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 888.

⁵⁰Wilkins, *Matthew*, 956–7.

In contrast to the convention of that era, this applies to every believer: both male and female (Acts 18:24–28; Rom 16:1–12; 1 Cor 11:4–6).⁵¹ While some rabbis asserted that men should teach the Mosaic law to their daughters, others charged that doing so amounted to debauchery (*m. Sotah* 3.4). The Jerusalem Talmud went further, contending, “Let the words of the law be burned rather than committed to women” (*y. Sotah* 3:19).⁵² Consequently, few Jewish women received training in the law,⁵³ although they did acquire some basic instruction to enable them to teach their children. Prior to Jesus’s ministry, women in Israel could neither travel with nor study under a formal religious instructor (John 4:25–27; Luke 8:1–3; Luke 10:38–42).⁵⁴

This gospel concludes with a grand promise. Jesus proclaimed, “And behold, I am with you all the days until the completion of the present age.” As we labor to live for Christ and accomplish the task of evangelizing every people-group, his presence goes with us.⁵⁵ He fulfills the meaning of the name Immanuel (Isa 41:10; Matt 1:23).⁵⁶ Through his power, we can accomplish his purpose for our lives as we await the day when Jesus returns to set all things right (Matt 13:24–30, 36–52; Matt 25:31–46).⁵⁷ May all of us walk closely with Christ as we proclaim the good news of the kingdom among the nations.⁵⁸

Read Matt 28:18–20. How do we know that the women who met Christ at the tomb delivered Jesus’s message? Why did the Father grant all authority to the Son? What process do we use to make disciples? How would you define a “people-group”? What does baptism signify? Why did Jesus indicate that the Father, Son, and Spirit share one name? What made Christ’s command about teaching radical for his era? How does Jesus’s enduring presence encourage you?

⁵¹Wilkins, *Matthew*, 956.

⁵²John Lightfoot, *From the Talmud and Hebraica: A Commentary on the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 580, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/lightfoot/talmud.vii.iii.html>.

⁵³Keener, *IVPBCNT*, 1 Tim 2:11.

⁵⁴Ben Witherington III, “Women: New Testament,” *ABD* 6: 957–61, 957.

⁵⁵France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1119.

⁵⁶Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 888.

⁵⁷France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1119.

⁵⁸Wilkins, *Matthew*, 959.