

THE MARCHING ORDERS OF THE CHURCH Matthew 28:16-20

In the 1940s, the UNITED STATES LINES proposed to build a ship called the *SS United States*. Costing \$78 million, it was the largest American-built ship and fastest ship in the world. The government invested \$50 million in the project, with plans to use the ship to transport 10,000 troops in a time of war. The *SS United States* set sail in 1952. It broke several speed records for trans-Atlantic travel that still stand. But it was never used as a troop carrier. It made history as a luxury liner that catered to wealthy patrons. The *United States* stopped passenger service in 1969. It has been docked at Pier 82 on the Delaware River in Philadelphia since 1996, where it remains a popular tourist attraction. It has changed ownership several times recently. And no one really knows what to do with it. At this point, conservators are raising money to save this proud vessel before it rots away.

Matthew 28:18-20 makes it clear that the church is a troop carrier, not a luxury liner. It is a war vessel, not a tourist attraction. The church is on mission for the Lord Jesus Christ. The last command of Jesus must be the first priority of the church.

The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus have already occurred at this point. All that is left for Matthew's Gospel to report is the Lord's post-resurrection reunion with his disciples. Verses 16-17 reports: Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. Then Jesus 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 eleven disciples – minus Judas - saw Jesus walking up this Galilean hillside, they fell on their faces in worship. But some of them did not believe it was actually Jesus. Yet Jesus entrusted his mission to these men. This does not seem to be a good way to begin a worldwide movement. But the Lord chose these weak, fallible, and sinful people to be his ambassadors. With no **money** or **buildings** or **programs**, he sent the disciples to be his witnesses in the world. The early church was so committed to this mission that in Acts 17:6 the people of THESSALONICA said, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also." The gospel still has the power to turn the world upside down. The Lord is still willing to use ordinary people like you and me to be his witnesses. But we must stay on mission. We must obey the marching orders of the church. We must not let the Great Commission become the "Great Omission." What does it mean to be a church on mission for Jesus Christ?

I. BELIEVE THE CLAIM JESUS MAKES

THE GREAT COMMISSION begins with a declaration of the sovereign authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 18 is a claim, not a commission. But the commission rests on this claim. If verse 18 is not true, verses 19-20 are meaningless. Jesus

declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus has all power. But he claims more than that here. Power is the ability to act according to one's will. Authority is jurisdiction, freedom of action, or legal right to use power. In sports, an athlete has the power to move the ball. The referee has the authority to restrict, penalize, or disqualify the athlete's ability. The athlete has great skill, fan support, and a big contract. The referee only has a whistle. Yet the referee's authority trumps the athlete's skill. And the authority the referee has in the sports world is the authority Jesus claims over the universe – except no protest, commissioner, or instant replay can overrule the authority of Christ.

The SCOPE of Jesus' authority is stated in one word: "all." Ephesians 1:20-21 says God: "seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come." No racist gunman, SCOTUS ruling, or any other rebellious usurper can impeach the rule of Christ. If Jesus has all authority, no one else has any. Note the SPHERE of Jesus' authority: "in heaven and on earth." "In heaven" is more than heavenly bodies. It is the entire realm of spirit beings. Michael and his army of angels and Satan and his army of demons must submit to Jesus. "On earth" is more than land and sea. It is about human beings, regardless of race, culture, background, status, or orientation. Philippians 2:10-11 says: "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."

Matthew 28:18 is arguably the most important CHRISTOLOGICAL statement in the New Testament. Jesus claims power of attorney to freely execute divine sovereignty. This unmistakable claim to deity permits no middle ground. You cannot respond by calling Jesus a mere prophet. Either Jesus is a liar or lunatic or Lord of all. In Psalm 2:8, the Lord says to his Anointed, "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession." The Father fulfilled this messianic promise by giving Jesus all authority in heaven and earth. ABRAHAM KUYPER rightly said: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'"

When a man has to announce, "I'm the man of this house!" usually he is not. Is this the case with Jesus? What is the proof Jesus has all authority? Do not judge the authority of Jesus by the breaking news of the day. The proof that Jesus has authority is that he lived to make this claim. Jesus was betrayed, tried, convicted, beaten, and crucified. But God raised him from the dead. Jesus rose to claim all authority in heaven and earth. And Matthew 28:18 is a declaration of war against his enemies. Acts 17:30-31 says: "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." How are things between you and the Lord Jesus today?

II. OBEY THE COMMISSION JESUS GIVES

In verse 19, Jesus says, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.” The singular imperative of THE GREAT COMMISSION is to make disciples. A disciple would follow a rabbi to learn from him and become like him. When a disciple finished rabbinical training, he would select his own disciples. But Jesus does not give his disciples permission to make their own disciples. We are to make disciples for Christ. We are to call the lost to repent of their sins, trust the blood and righteousness of Christ for salvation, and follow him as Lord of their lives. This is not just the job for pastors, teachers, evangelists, and missionaries. It is the duty of every Christian to make disciples. Faithful disciples make disciples. ***How are we to make disciples?***

A. WE MAKE DISCIPLES BY GOING.

The first word of verse 18 is the word “Go.” That’s appropriate. You cannot spell “gospel” without first spelling “go.” Jesus does not expect the world to come to the church. He expects the church to go to the world. We are to be a going church for a coming Christ. But that is not the emphasis here. The only imperative in this text is the command to make disciples. The word “go” reads like a command in our English translation. But it is actually a participle that modifies the command to make disciples. Jesus literally says, “As you are going, make disciples...” Disciple making is the Christian lifestyle, not a ministerial elective. This is the divinely commanded, all-inclusive, non-negotiable mission of the church. We are to make disciples of all nations. This is the Christian call to racial reconciliation. Your gospel does not work if it only works with people who look like you. Revelation 5:9-10 says: “Worthy are you to take the scroll and open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

B. WE MAKE DISCIPLES BY BAPTIZING.

Verse 19 instructs us to mark disciples by “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Baptism is not a man-made tradition we can reject at our discretion. Jesus commands the church to mark disciples by water baptism in the name of the holy Trinity. Baptism is a Christian act of civil disobedience. In immersion we pledge our allegiance to Christ and the church. Baptism does not save. But it is the first act of obedience Christ commands the new disciple to obey. It is the outward sign of an inward change. Galatians 3:27-28 says, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ.”

In commanding us to make disciples through baptism, Christ is saying that our mission is to lead lost people to saving-faith. Sheep stealing, saint swapping, and membership transfer does not accomplish the mission of the church. God wants lost

people to be saved. God wants sinners to be converted. God wants dead people to be born again.

A tour guide led a group through a famous church building. The guide boasted about the classic architecture, historic events, and great dignitaries in the cathedral. He then asked, "Are there any questions?" One elderly woman said, "Yes, sir. Has anyone been saved here lately?" At the Judgment Seat of Christ, Jesus will not ask you about the size of anything. What will matter for eternity are changed lives.

**YOU MAY BUILD GREAT CATHEDRALS LARGE OR SMALL
YOU MAY BUILD SKYSCRAPERS GRAND AND TALL
YOU MAY CONQUER ALL THE FAILURES OF YOUR PAST
BUT ONLY WHAT YOU DO FOR CHRIST WILL LAST.**

C. WE MAKE DISCIPLES BY *TEACHING*.

Disciple making is an event that takes place in a moment in time. Disciple making is also a process – a threefold process. We bring people to Jesus through faith and repentance. We bring them into the church through water baptism. Then we bring them to maturity by teaching them to obey the commands of Christ.

Conversion does not end at baptism. Baptism initiates the new disciple into a lifelong process of conversion. In verse 20, Jesus says this process consists of "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." Disciple making necessarily involves biblical teaching. Man-centered worship, therapeutic preaching, and pragmatic ministry may draw big crowds, but they won't make disciples. A disciple-making church must teach the word of God. And it must not be selective. Jesus says we must be "teaching them to observe all things..." 2 Timothy 3:16 says: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." 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, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." We teach disciples to observe or obey the commands of Christ. James 1:22 says: "Be doers of the word, not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

One day, a woman was washing her dishes when she saw Jimmy, her five-year-old neighbor, headed straight toward the back porch. She had just finished painting the handrails, so she shouted, "Come around to the front porch, Jimmy! There's wet paint on the porch." "I'll be careful," Jimmy replied. "No, Jimmy! Don't come up the steps," she shouted, knowing of Jimmy's tendency to mess things up. "I'll be careful," he said. "Jimmy, stop!" she shouted one more time. "I don't want carefulness. I want obedience." Likewise, the Lord doesn't want your carefulness. He wants you to acknowledge his authority by obeying what he commands you to do.

III. EMBRACE THE COMFORT JESUS SHARES

G. CAMPBELL-MORGAN visited a senior member of his congregation that was sick. He read Matthew 28 to her, closing with verse 20: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Then he said, “That is a great promise.” “That’s not a promise,” she replied. “It’s a fact.” She was right. Jesus does not promise, “I will be with you. He declares, “I am with you.” The GREAT COMMISSION ends with the divine assurance of the personal and perpetual presence of Christ.

IT IS A PERSONAL ASSURANCE. The personal assurance of Christ’s presence bookends the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew 1:23 says, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). Then Matthew’s Gospel concludes with Jesus declaring: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” This is not the first time Jesus has given his disciples the assurance of his personal presence. In Matthew 18:20, Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Jesus is with the church when we gather together. But he is also with us when we go out. 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 is also by our side.

IT IS A PERPETUAL ASSURANCE. This great comfort Jesus declares is the fourth universal statement in this text. In verse 18, Jesus claims “all authority.” In verse 19, Jesus commands us to make disciples of “all nations.” In verse 20, Jesus further commands us to teach disciples “all that I have commanded you.” Now Jesus assures his presence with us “always” – literally, “all the days.” He who has all authority is with us at all times. This is the comfort Jesus shares with all who trust and obey him: You are not in it by yourself. Don’t be deceived by the “Great Assumption.” 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, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” Hebrews 13:5 says, “Keep your life free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

- **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 strength is low, he’s there.**