

“In Conclusion”

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Doubt is not incompatible with worship, obedience, and evangelism.

Matthew 28:16-20

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Bible nerds

My colleague Kevin Watkins smacked me upside the head with a baseball bat this past week. Well, not literally, but biblically. He emailed me Wednesday morning and said that his daily devotional had made reference to this morning’s text. The devotional writer noted that one of the challenges of studying the Bible is asking which words apply to everyone and which ones apply only to the original audience. Everyone thinks Jesus’ words to the Galilean fishermen, “I will make you fishers of men” apply to everyone. Nobody thinks “Go sell everything you have and give to the poor” is for all.

So what about today’s passage? Kevin’s devotional said this:

For most of Christian history...the Great Commission passage at the end of Matthew’s gospel was seen as a specific calling to the remaining eleven Apostles to whom Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations...” (Matthew 28:18). Only later, with the modern missionary movement, was this passage broadly reapplied as a commission given to the whole church.

What? Everybody knows this passage is about “the Great Commission!” I was raised reading it that way. My parents were among the post-World War II generation of the “modern missionary movement.” My bachelor’s and Master’s degrees were earned at a school where one of the core values was “fulfilling the Great Commission.”

What Kevin did for me was to force me to look at the text again. In order to look at this passage through a fresh set of lenses, I’m going to use a “Bible Nerd” approach to

preaching. According to dictionary.com, a “nerd” is a “socially awkward...but single-minded person obsessed with a nonsocial hobby or pursuit.” In other words, a nerd is someone who is more focused on the pursuit than what other people think. There are computer nerds, fitness nerds, Lego nerds, math nerds, book nerds, and more.

Bible nerds are people who love studying the details of Bible structure, words, backgrounds, and even grammar. If you’re a Bible nerd like me, today’s your day. If not, come back last week. That sermon was designed more for a broad audience. I figure people who come to church the Sunday after Easter are OK with a Bible nerd.

In conclusion

Let’s start with Matthew using a literary device much more common in the Bible than you might realize: chiasmus. The word means “cross,” and it’s an inverted structure where the first part and the last part are parallel. We’ve seen simple examples in Matthew: “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matthew 19:30).

Sometimes whole sections can be chiasmic, and that’s what we have in the final section of Matthew. As R. T. France points out, it looks like this –

Jesus is dead and buried (27:57-61)
The guard is set (27:62-66)
The tomb is empty and Jesus has risen (28:1-10)
The guard reports (28:11-15)
Jesus is alive and in charge (18:16-20)

The middle part of a chiasmus is the most important part, so in this case Matthew wants your attention on the risen Jesus. What’s important for our text is that all the sadness and despair of a dead and buried Jesus has been eradicated and replaced with a Jesus who moves about and speaks and controls and makes promises.

This section of Matthew not only forms the end of the chiasmus, but it also reflects the beginning of the gospel with inclusio. Inclusio is like a pair of parentheses. The end parenthesis brackets the entire content. Matthew began with wise men proclaiming Jesus King of the Jews in chapter 2. Now Jesus declares that “all authority in heaven and on earth” (28:18) belongs to him. He’s a universal sovereign.

Also in chapter 1, Jesus fulfills the words of Isaiah’s prophecy, “They will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God with us’). The final words of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel are, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Inclusio.

Words

It’s not just the structure of the Gospel, however. The words Matthew incorporates into his conclusion are words that intentionally connect to the whole Gospel. The Bible nerd in me is so excited to show you this!

Disciple. This is the most common designation of the inner circle of Jesus' followers in Matthew, and he uses the word 78 times, about 50% more than Mark or Luke. It means a "learner" but it's more. It's a learner who is attached to the teacher. Jesus turns the noun into a verb in this text. The Eleven are to "make disciples." These "learners" become "teachers." Later Jesus explicitly says that as they go, they are to "teach." More on that in a moment.

Go. When Jesus tells the disciples to "go" and make disciples (19), he's using language common to this gospel. There's a lot of "coming" and "going" in Matthew. "Come" is used 83 times in these 28 chapters. The wise men said, "We've come to worship him" (2:2) "Come, follow me," Jesus had said to the fishermen (4:19). "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (11:28). Earlier in this chapter the angel said to the women, "Come, see the place where he lay" (28:6).

The Greek verb for "go" is used 30 times in Matthew. Joseph is told to "go" to Egypt (2:20). The disciples are to "Go to the lost sheep of Israel (10:6). The man with 100 sheep will "go" to find the missing one (18:12). Jesus told the women at the tomb, "Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee" (28:10). Now the disciples are to go to the nations. Following Jesus almost never means sitting still, getting comfortable. He invites us to come toward him and go toward those who need him.

Mountain. When Jesus meets the disciples on a mountain (16), it's the eighth time in Matthew's gospel we've seen Jesus on a mountain. Remember the "sermon on the mount" (5:1) and the teaching on the Mount of Olives (24:1)? The latter is the only time Matthew thinks the name of the mountain is important, but Jesus was brought to a high mountain by the devil to show him all the kingdoms of the world to tempt him (4:8). He withdrew to a mountain to pray (14:23), fed 4,000 on a mountain (14:29), was transfigured on a mountain (17:1).

See. When the disciples "saw" him, that too is a Matthew focus. The wise men saw him and worshiped (2:10). The crowds saw his healing miracle and praised God (9:8). The disciples were terrified when they saw him walking on water (14:26). But here's the part that's easy to miss. When Jesus says, "And surely I am with you always" (20), that word "surely" is literally, "Look!" In the King James, it's "Behold." It's the imperative form of "to see." Eighty times in Matthew's gospel something is happening or Jesus is telling a story and he exclaims, "Look!" Joseph is asleep and Look! An angel of the Lord tells him Mary is pregnant (1:21). Jesus is with three of the disciples on a mountain and Look! There's Moses and Elijah and a bright cloud (17:3,5). Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane and Look! Here comes the betrayer (26:46). Matthew loves the visual, and he wants you in your mind to "see."

Worship. When Jesus' disciples saw the resurrected Lord on the mountain, they "worshiped" him. It's the same response that the women had when Jesus met them as they ran from the tomb. Matthew uses this word for "worship" ("bow down") 14 times, much more than any other Gospel, including John, where the emphasis is on Jesus as

the Son of God. The wise men in Matthew worship the toddler Jesus (2:11). A leper bows down before him (8:2). A synagogue ruler worships Jesus (9:18), as does a Canaanite woman (15:25). The disciples worship him when he calms the storm (14:33). So does the mother of James and John when she asks a special favor for her sons (20:20). But most importantly, the women and the disciples worship the risen Lord.

Doubt. Matthew uses the word “doubt” three times more than any other Gospel. OK, they only use the word one time each, but Matthew uses it three. It’s not that Matthew affirms doubt, but he acknowledges doubt is often part of the package deal. The fact that three decades after the ascension he records doubt among the Eleven remaining disciples after the resurrection when they saw the risen Lord (17) is really intriguing. Matthew may have been one of the doubters. Matthew is not encouraging doubt, but he is saying that doubt is not incompatible with worship, obedience, or evangelism. When doubts cross your mind, keep doing the right things.

All. This is a very important word in the entire New Testament, occurring in every single one of the 27 books. It means “all” in the sense of every individual part. It is comprehensive. It’s both extensive and intensive. It’s supposed to catch your attention. Forms of this word occur four times in our text. Jesus says, “All authority” is his (18). The disciples are to make disciples of “all nations” (19). They are to teach others to obey “all things” Jesus has commanded. And he will be with them “all the days” until the end of the age. This is a comprehensive, universal, complete message.

Authority. After the Sermon on the Mount, the crowds were particularly impressed with Jesus because he taught with authority (7:29). He insisted that he had authority on earth to forgive sins (9:6). He gave his disciples authority over impure spirits (10:1) when he sent them out. After he cleansed the temple on Monday of Holy Week he had a major conflict with the Pharisees over his authority to do something like that (21:23-17). All this is setting the stage for Jesus declaring to his disciples on that mountain, “All authority...has been given to me” (18).

Heaven. Matthew uses the word “heaven” more (76 times) than the other three gospels combined (66 times). Jesus refers to God’s rule as “the kingdom of heaven” in Matthew, especially in parables. He often refers to God as “the Father in heaven.” He talks about laying up treasure in heaven.

Earth. Once again, Matthew uses this word more times (24) than the other gospels combined (22). The meek will inherit the earth (5:5). You are the salt of the earth (5:13). To illustrate these two words together, think about the Lord’s prayer. It’s recorded twice in the Gospels. Mark and John don’t have it at all. Luke’s version begins, “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come” (11:2). Matthew’s version is the one you know: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Heaven and earth are huge in Matthew, and at the end of the book Jesus has authority over all of it.

Nations. Some say Matthew is the most Jewish gospel, written by a Jew primarily for Jews. That's probably because he quotes so much Scripture that is "fulfilled" in Jesus. But in Matthew Jesus interpreted his own ministry with words of Isaiah 42 which says that God's servant "will proclaim justice to the nations" (12:18) and "In his name the nations will put their hope" (12:21). Jesus said on the Mount of Olives that his gospel would be "preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (24:14).

But it's not just the word "nations." Jesus' genealogy in chapter 1 includes Gentile women. The wise men were from the "nations." Matthew is the only Gospel writer to quote Isaiah 9:1-2 as Jesus began his ministry. The reason his headquarters was in Galilee is because its name of old was "Galilee of the Gentiles." These "people walking in darkness" need a "great light" (4:16).

Many have asked why Matthew only records an appearance of Jesus to his disciples in Galilee when Luke and John record several appearances in Judea. It's all part of Matthew's theme. This Jesus emerged from a quasi-Gentile area into the public spotlight. His disciples were mostly Galileans. It was always the plan that they would branch out from there and make disciples of all nations.

Baptize. All the gospels record the connection of Jesus with John the Baptist, but only Matthew explicitly relates Jesus' last command with baptizing.

The name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit. All the gospels focus on the word "name," and all (to varying degrees) speak of the Father, of Jesus as both Son of Man and Son of God, and of the Holy Spirit. Only Matthew offers this baptism formula which has been adopted by churches of almost every label and time. There's even some debate whether Matthew was projecting his own practice of baptism back on to the lips of Jesus, but there's absolutely no evidence for that. While the doctrine of the Trinity wouldn't be fully articulated for a couple of centuries, Jesus here connects his name on equal footing with the Father and the Spirit. This is also another inclusio with 1:1, the threefold title of Jesus – Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham.

Obey. This word has only popped up once before in Matthew, but it's important. When he calmed the sea, Jesus' disciples exclaimed, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!" (8:27) Disciples are to obey like nature does. As John Nolland writes, this faith is a "way of life" not just a "pattern of beliefs."

Commands. In Matthew Jesus affirms the commands of the Torah. "Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great" (5:19). Now, having filled this Gospel full of more of Jesus' teachings and commands than the other Gospels, Matthew reminds his readers that Jesus' commands are to be to them what the Torah is to the Jew. They are to obey all of them. A blogger has identified [49 key commands in Matthew](#), and I would say his

list is too short. “Repent” (4:17). “Rejoice” when you’re persecuted (5:11). “Love your enemies and pray for them” (5:44). The Golden Rule (7:12). Pray for the harvest (9:38). “Let the little children come to me” (18:10). “Forgive 70x7 times” (18:22).

End of the age. Among the four gospels, only Matthew records this phrase on the lips of Jesus, and he records it on three different occasions – the parables in Matthew 13, the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24, and...here at the very end of the Gospel. Matthew doesn’t know how long it will be until the end of the age. He’s the only Gospel writer who tells us that even Jesus doesn’t know the day or the hour of his second coming. But Matthew wants to leave his readers with a clear promise of Jesus, ringing across the Galilean hills and echoing even to us and beyond. Jesus, “God with us,” will be with us to the very end of the age.

Jesus Nerd

If you want one more Bible nerd comment, yes, it’s true what you’ve heard – that there’s only one imperative in the Great Commission: “make disciples.” But the supporting participles have the force of a command – “go,” “baptize,” and “teach.”

So, is this command for all of us or just for the Eleven? The way you answer that question is to compare other Scriptures. The pattern of the entire New Testament is that disciples are to reproduce themselves. The right questions are always, “To whom am I going?” “Whom am I baptizing (leading to Christ) and teaching?” Who is being influenced by me right now so that there’s a new generation of believers that will follow me? That’s on Jesus’ mind in his Great Commission.

As you read through these final verses of Matthew, Matthew records one word that is the most important and used more often in his gospel than any of the other words I have mentioned. It’s not that Matthew uses this word more than the other gospels. He doesn’t. But it’s the word where all four Gospel writers want your attention. It’s Jesus. His name flows from Matthew’s pen 225 times.

It starts in the first verse: “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah” (1:1). All these other words? They all point to this one word. All this Bible nerdity? It makes me a Jesus nerd. Not long after I came as pastor in 1993, someone remarked, “Well, he’s a pretty good pastor, but he sure talks about Jesus a lot.”

Matthew would like that. It’s his conclusion. It’s not about counting the number of times, but there’s no question that this is where he wants to leave his readers. He wants them not so much to be a Bible nerd as to be a Jesus nerd. To be awkward, if necessary, pointing the searchlight on Jesus.

But what does that look like? How do we focus in on who Jesus is and what it looks like to be and make his disciples? For that question, come back next week when we’ll launch a study of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Amen.