

ARISE & BUILD

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MEDIOCRE COMMISSION?

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In air warfare, it is said that if you're catching flak, it's because you're over the target. Such an increase in opposition suggests urgency among detractors attempting to

push back against positions they deem not to be Biblical. Regrettably, the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 has been in the crosshairs of more and more critics who wish to stifle its commands and rewire the text so as to deflate it of much of its world-conquering implications. Outwardly, these efforts try to limit their surgical impact to verse nineteen, but as the last three verses of Matthew's Gospel are welded together by the words *therefore* as well as *and*, the entire passage necessarily ends up being muzzled in the rush to narrow and restrict its intended scope.

There has been a flurry of articles and social medial posts appearing recently that seek to "correct" our view of Matthew 28:19, the command to go and disciple the nations. The arguments put forward often rest too much stress on an ambiguity in some (not all) English translations, namely, those that read "Go and make disciples of the nations." The word "of" isn't in the Greek, but to hear our critics, the command should be read "Go and make disciples OF all the nations . . . which means FROM AMONG all the nations. We do not disciple nations, only individuals, so Christ is not commanding anything more than making individual disciples that are selected from among all the world's nations." In this way, the

original command in the Greek has been put through several mutilations so that Christians will set their sights far lower than the Lord has commanded. The Great Commission becomes the Mediocre Commission.

B. H. Carroll (in a different context) refers to scholars "whose inherited or acquired dislike for certain teachings lead them, with great inconsistency, to evade, modify, and explain away their force."¹ This is precisely what is being done with the Great Commission, but with an added air of smug certainty that invites scorn upon anyone who promotes a wider scope to Christ's words than these critics will allow. The critics believe they are doing Christ a service by dismantling a proof-text that puts dangerous ideas in the heads of those who take it as it stands written. To hold that the nations actually are to be disciplined is to invite ridicule and scoffing from the more belligerent of these critics, who offer their rationales as if they were unanswerable.

We propose here to answer these unanswerable challenges to Christ's final commands to us.

OBJECTIONS TO ACTUALLY DISCIPLING THE NATIONS

The objections to taking the Great Commission as it stands written are several. We've alluded to the first one above: that the actual command that Christ gives doesn't connote or denote discipling the nations, but only individuals from the nations. In other words, the task at hand isn't the massively large, impossibly difficult task that it appears to be at first glance. Figuratively speaking, these critics

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have done Atlas a favor by removing the world from his shoulders: he's no longer on the hook for the whole thing. He has a far lighter task to worry about.²

This position is propelled first by an alternate understanding of the command ("Jesus doesn't actually command us to make the nations of the world into Christian disciples"), second by an appeal to impossibility ("it isn't even possible to disciple a nation: nations cannot be disciples"), and third by an appeal to eschatology ("the discipling of all nations conflicts with our view of prophecy, so Christ's command must be read through the lens of amillennialism or premillennialism").

Within this revisionist paradigm, the Great Commission is rewritten as the Mediocre Commission. We regard this as a harmful distortion of our Lord's orders, while proponents of the Mediocre Commission think the same of our view of Christ's words: that we've put a millstone around the Church's neck by insisting that Christ truly has the nations in His eye when He spoke upon that Galilean mountainside.

We need, then, to consider all three aspects of the current effort to scale down the Great Commission. Do the Scriptures speak of nations themselves being disciples? Does Christ only expect representatives from all nations to be discipled? Should this command determine the shape of our eschatologies (our view of final things) or should our eschatologies shape our understanding of what Christ "must really be saying" in Matthew 28? We will necessarily get into some technical detail further down to support our view, given that the flak alluded to at the outset has grown thick indeed. We will start with simpler considerations before going into depth here.

CAN NATIONS BECOME CHRIST'S DISCIPLES?

The objection that nations cannot become disciples is usually offered without proof, as if it didn't need any proof, being self-evident. Men say that nations cannot be discipled. What does God's Word say about this question? This is not

a matter of us blithely trolling our critics with the claim that with God, all things are possible. Rather, we are concerned to see if there is explicit scriptural evidence of nations becoming God's disciples.

If there are Biblical examples of nations becoming discipled, then our critics' objection loses its force. Just as the scribes and Pharisees erred by telling Nicodemus "Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet" (John 7:52, in forgetfulness of Isaiah 9), so too is it factually wrong to deny that nations, as nations, cannot come to Christ.

Isaiah 19:18-25 is a prophecy of the national conversion of Israel's first two mortal enemies, Egypt and Assyria. These nations construct altars to Jehovah, perform vows vowed to Jehovah, and serve Him so faithfully that the prophecy concludes with putting them *before Israel* in God's enumeration:

In that day shall there be a highway out of Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian shall come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians shall serve with the Assyrians. In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land: Whom the Lord of hosts shall bless, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance. (Isa. 19:23-25)

Are two nations being converted to the Lord something of a fluke, a one-off exception to the rule? Consider Psalm 87, which lists the nations (not individuals) that God proclaims as knowers of Himself (the translation is literal from the Hebrew):

I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon as knowers of Me: behold Philistia, and Tyre, with Ethiopia; this man was born there. And of Zion it shall be said, Each and every man is born in her: and the highest Himself shall establish her. (Psalm 87:4-5)

Here we meet Egypt again, named Rahab. We already know Egypt is going to be a convert, a disciple, since Isaiah said so. Now we add more of Israel's enemies and other nations to the list of those who

comprise Zion, the city of God: Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Ethiopia.

Just as Egypt gets mentioned twice as becoming a disciple, so too does the Philistine nation, for its conversion is vividly predicted by Zechariah:

And I will take away his blood out of his mouth, and his abominations from between his teeth: but he that remaineth, even he, shall be for our God, and he shall be as a governor in Judah, and Ekron as a Jebusite. (Zech. 9:7)

Hengstenberg observes that, just as Matthew 2:6 speaks of the city of Bethlehem being “not the least among the princes of Judah,” so too is the pagan nation of Philistia also elevated to a prince/governor in Judah (where cities and nations are personified).³ Ekron (one of the five cities of Philistia that previously worshipped Baal-zebub) becomes like the Jebusites in status, being fully incorporated into God’s Kingdom, with all idolatry fully abolished as predicted at the outset of the passage.

The claim that the Bible does not support the idea of national conversions is in error. For too many Christians, it is a self-serving error, not an innocent one, justifying an escapist eschatology.

The issue? That if all nations are disciplined, then all the individuals comprising the nations are also disciplined: we face then a Christianized world. It would be Christianized because people took the Great Commission seriously and set about to obey our Lord’s command. This issue between *individuals* and *nations* comes to a head in faulty interpretations of Romans 11:25-26 as well. Meyer, a notable German exegete of the nineteenth century, refutes one pessimistic view being imposed on Romans this way:

Thus there would result as the sense: until *no people* of the Gentile world is any longer found outside the church. This is decidedly at variance with ver. 12, and with the whole context down to its evident concluding verse (ver. 32), according to which not the *peoples as such* (in the lump, as it were), but all *persons* who compose them, must be the subjects of the entrance into the church and of

the divine mercy. The above interpretation is a process of *rationalizing*, artificial and far-fetched, and contrary to the language and the context, by interpreting what is said of the *individuals* as applying to the *nations* ... Limitations from other interests than that of exegesis have been suggested ... [For example] the Reformers were induced to depart from the literal sense of the apostle, not by exegetical, but by dogmatic considerations.⁴

Finally, if it be objected that the Great Commission command to “baptize them” cannot be applied to nations, only individuals, even *that* is an overstatement in light of Isaiah 52:15, which predicts that the Messiah would *sprinkle many nations*.

THE OBJECTION PROVES TOO MUCH

The Mediocre Commission would be based on the idea that only some members of each nation need to be disciplined, not the entire population (making for a national conversion, such as described in the Old Testament prophecies discussed above).

What is the problem with this idea?

If the Mediocre Commission model were correct, you could fulfill the commission by disciplining only *one person* from each nation in the world. Behold, you have just made disciples “of all nations” as that phrase has been wrestled to mean. Job complete. No reason to have Christ be with us “even unto the end of the world” any further.

What purpose is served by Christ proclaiming all authority in heaven and earth, if the task can be fulfilled by disciplining perhaps fewer than a thousand people around the globe? Perhaps there are ways of evading this issue, but how are those not evasions on top of evasions?

The Mediocre Commission has popped up before in history and had been firmly refuted. For example, when Norton attempted to promote this idea, his hypothesis was rejected by no less a scholar than Philip Schaff, who included it in a list of proposed renderings of Matthew’s text:

Norton: *make disciples from all nations* (*from* implies a false restriction).⁵

DANIEL'S SON OF MAN AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

R. T. France argues that Matt. 28:18 echoes Daniel 7:14's teaching of the son of man to whom "was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him."⁶ Moreover, "it is this universal sovereignty that is the essential basis of the commission which is to follow in vv. 19-20..."⁷ The connection with Daniel 7:13-14 is echoed by Alford⁸ as well as Nolland,⁹ Keener,¹¹ Davies & Allison,¹¹ and Hendriksen.¹²

Dr. R. J. Rushdoony also explicitly ties the Great Commission to Daniel 7:13-14.

This title, Son of man, in the same sense as Daniel's, Jesus applied to Himself ... Not only did Jesus claim this title, but He also claimed the dominion accorded it, paraphrasing Daniel 7:14 in Matthew 28:18-20, issuing the great commission by virtue of His dominion as foretold by Daniel. This dominion, given Him in the days of the fourth empire (Dan. 2:34f.), reaches worldwide sway when the last manifestations of the false dream are fully shattered and crumble into ruin, reduced to impotence.¹³

The Mediocre Commission stumbles in trying to pull the universality of Daniel 7's Son of Man into alignment with its defanged version of Christ's commands.

THE GREAT COMMISSION EXPOSITED WITHOUT MEDIOCRITY

We here survey several centuries of scholarship regarding the Great Commission to bolster the notion that we are not obliged to bend the knee to newer, easier marching orders. It is our prayer that this survey, though technical at some points, will help our readers gird their loins and rejoice in the huge task that is actually before us, for we serve a mighty God whose Word will not return unto Him void.

R. T. France points out that "... the words He will now utter will leave their failure far behind, swallowed up in the much greater reality of the mission to

which they are now called."¹⁴ This is quite the contrast to those who teach that we don't leave failure far behind but rather celebrate failure as a presumed mark of faithfulness.

Meyer unfolds the meaning with equal clarity:

The fact stated in verse 18 [Christ having been given all power and authority in heaven and earth] is itself the *reason* why *all nations* should be *brought under His government*, and made subject to His sway by means of [being disciplined]. *Matheteusate*, make them my *mathetai* [disciples] ... [here refers to] *all nations without exception*.¹⁵

Lutheran scholar R. C. H. Lenski provides a straightforward translation that doesn't leave any holes open to rationalize away its force: *disciple all the nations*.¹⁶ He adds that the word *Therefore* which begins verse 19 "puts all His power and His authority behind the commission to evangelize the world. This '*therefore*' shows that what otherwise would be absolutely impossible now becomes gloriously possible, yea, an assured reality."¹⁷ "A tremendous task: 'disciple all nations!' Who would not have recoiled from it had not Jesus first declared His omnipotence in heaven on earth ('go ye *therefore*')!"¹⁸ Lenski does not skirt the issue: "The universality of the commission is made plain by *ta ethnē*, 'all nations' of the earth."¹⁹ Note the exposition of the key verb he puts forward:

The heart of the commission is in the one word *matheteusate*. This imperative, of course, means, "to turn into disciples," and its aorist form conveys the thought that this is actually to be done. The verb itself does not indicate *how* disciples are to be made, it designates only an activity that will result in disciples. It connotes results, not methods and ways.²⁰

Dr. Joseph C. Morecraft III's eight-volume *Authentic Christianity*²¹ anticipates the current revisionist temper in the second and fourth errors he identifies below:

Four contemporary errors concerning the Great Commission infect the

modern church. First, theological liberals pervert it to apply only to social and political involvement, consistent generally with a Marxist analysis. Second, fundamentalists narrow it to apply exclusively to saving as many individual souls as possible from this evil life before the rapture. Third, there are those who, by denying the free offer of the gospel, cause the Great Commission to appear harsh, thereby robbing it of its force and drawing power. Fourth, hypocrites neglect it or evade it by finding both doctrinal and practical excuses to excuse their apathy.²²

Dr. Morecraft cites DeRidder favorably in connection with the Great Commission:

No limitation is placed on the proclamation. The extensive character of the power and authority of Christ is exercised by Him immediately as He claims the whole world and creation for Himself as the sphere of His redemptive work and sovereignly sends His witnesses everywhere into that World ... There are no boundaries recognized by Christ to His sovereignty, and in the end all things in heaven and on earth will be subject to Him.²³

TEACHING ALL THINGS WHATSOEVER I HAVE COMMANDED YOU

Nolland's discussion of the full scope of the *all things* brings the previous imperatives that Matthew recorded into the picture in an important way.

So what is to be taught is to keep—that is, to implement in obedience—what has been commanded. Matthew had earlier used *terein* (“keep”) in 19:17 for keeping the Ten Commandments, and in 23:3 he probably uses it for commitment to all the requirements of the Law of Moses (see discussion there). What Jesus has taught is to take its place alongside, and as interpretive of, the commandments of the Mosaic Law.

Matthew has already used the emphatic *panta hosa* (lit. “all [things]”) as many as four times. It applies now to Jesus's commandments the ‘no exception’ emphasis that the Matthean Jesus had insisted on in 5:18-19 in relation to the commandments of the Mosaic Law.²⁴

Making disciples has wider dimensions

than a casual encounter with Matthew 28 might suggest.

The term “make disciples” places somewhat more stress on the fact that the mind, as well as the heart and the will, must be won for God. A disciple is *a pupil, a learner*.²⁵

Davies and Allison even tie the Great Commission to the promise to Abraham:

The prophecy that in Abraham all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:3) comes to fulfillment in the mission of the church.²⁶

Keener takes note of the extraordinary scope of the discipling project being commanded given how discipling had been conducted up until this point in the world:

But ancient hearers would, and modern hearers should, recognize a drastic innovation in a command to disciple “nations.” To be sure, the discipling of nations is carried out through baptizing and teaching individuals in those nations; although exceptions to grammatical consistency in antiquity abound, it is probably significant that the object “them” attaching to baptizing and teaching (28:19-20) is masculine (*autous*) rather than neuter (*auta*), although “nations” (*ta ethnē*) is neuter. Nevertheless, the stark command to disciple “nations” implies more than producing disciples for any ancient teacher would, and in contrast to other disciplers Jesus's followers would not disciple others to themselves (23:8).²⁷

DAVID BROWN EXPOUNDS THE GREAT COMMISSION

David Brown (1803-1897) notes that the Lord Jesus has the nations in His eye when issuing His final orders to His people:

“Go, conquer the world for Me; carry the glad tidings into all lands and to every ear, and deem not this work at an end till all nations shall have embraced the Gospel and enrolled themselves My disciples.”²⁸

Brown moreover ties the Lord's announcement concerning His unlimited authority to the command to make disci-

ples in the subsequent verse:

“All power in *heaven*”—the whole power of Heaven’s love and wisdom and strength, “and all power in *earth*”—power over all persons, all passions, all principles, all movements—to bend them to this one high object, the evangelization of the world: All this “is *given unto Me*,” as the risen Lord of all, to *be by Me placed at your command*—“Go ye therefore.”²⁹

So long as there is an inhabited spot unreached, or a human being outside the pale of visible discipleship, so long will the Missionary department of the Christian ministry abide in the Church as a divine institution.³⁰

Brown no more narrows the scope of the Great Commission’s command to teach than he limits the scope of the discipling:

For some talk of Christ as the only Lawgiver of Christians, to the exclusion of the Old Testament, as authoritative for Christians; while some would exclude, in this sense, all the New Testament save the Evangelical Records of our Lord’s own teaching. But does not our Lord Himself set His seal on the Old Testament Scriptures at large as the Word of God and the Record of eternal life? And what are all the subsequent portions of the New Testament but the development of Christ’s own teaching by those on whom, for that very end, He set the seal of His own authority? Thus may our Lord be said virtually to have referred His servants to the entire Scripture as their body of instructions.³¹

Brown makes clear that Christ’s confidence, which reverberates throughout this passage, is premised on divine promises that cannot be made void, which should suffice to remove all pessimism concerning the task He has given into our hands:

Dare ye not to hope that the world will fall before you? It is Mine by promise—the heathen for My inheritance, the uttermost parts of the earth for My possession; and to conquer and to keep it *by your agency*, all power in heaven and in earth is given unto Me, and by Me made over to you.³²

Finally, Brown does not hesitate to diag-

nose the current poor state of Christendom as being a result of Christian dereliction in respect to the Great Commission.

We have here the secret of the Church’s poverty during long ages of its past history, and of the world’s present condition, to so appalling an extent estranged from the Christian pale . . . instead of sending forth its healing waters into the vast deserts of heathenism, making the wilderness and the solitary place to rejoice, it kept them pent up within its own narrow boundaries till they stank and bred the pestilence of rancorous controversy and deadly heresy and every evil . . . Within the bosom of Christendom infidelity and irreligion spread apace, while real Christianity came to a very low ebb. Nor could aught else be expected of such unfaithfulness to the Church’s Head. Neglecting either branch of this Great Commission [means that] neither the *Power* nor the *Presence* promised [should] dare be expected.³³

But going forth in faith to both alike, the conquest of the world to Christ—as it might have been achieved long ago, but for the Church’s unbelief, selfishness, apathy, corruption, division—so it will be achieved, when, through the Spirit poured upon it from on high, it shall become “fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners” (Song 6:10).³⁴

CONCLUSION

Unlike unregenerate man, who routinely usurps authority, Christ’s authority is legitimately given to Him by the Father.³⁵ The usurpation of authority by humanists deserves more scrutiny than it usually receives from Christians, who too often justify bending to the will of despots. Once we understand that all authority on heaven and earth belongs to Christ, and that authority rightly derived from Him is alone legitimate, we are in a position to consider the scope of reconstruction needed in any given area. The amount of territory we’ve yielded to the enemy has grown exponentially. Unless we change course, we won’t even be able to return the talent we’ve buried back to our Master.

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In that light, John Gibson's exposition of Matthew's Gospel forcefully asserts the implications of Christ's words for each and every one of us here and now.

"All nations" are to be discipled and brought under His sway,—such is the commission; and to whom is it given? Not to Imperial Caesar, with his legions at command and the civilized world at his feet; not to a commander of intellectual giants, who by the sheer force of genius might turn the world upside down; but to these obscure Galileans of whom Caesar has never heard, not one of whose names has ever been pronounced in the Roman Senate, who have excited no wonder either for intellect or learning even in the villages and countrysides from which they come, — it is to these that the great commission is given to bring the world to the feet of the crucified Nazarene.³⁶

And this same Commission is likewise given to you. 🙌

1. B. H. Carroll, *An Interpretation of the English Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1948), vol. 4, pp. 13-14. Text adjusted slightly for ease of reading.
2. Technically, the fictional Atlas bore the sky (and not the earth) on his back, but that is to quibble.
3. Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament* (MacDill AFB, FL: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.), vol. 2, p. 1026.
4. H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew* (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1979 [reprint of T. & T. Clark edition, 1883]), vol. 5, p. 448.
5. John Philip Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.), p. 555. Schaff edited and translated Lange's commentary, providing textual insights where needed.
6. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 1112.
7. *ibid.*, p. 1113. D. A. Carson also sees a "conscious allusion here to Dan. 7:13-14 ... the Son of Man, once humiliated and suffering, is given universal authority." D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 595.
8. Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Guardian Press, [1844] 1976), vol. 1, p. 306.
9. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 1264.
10. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 716.

11. W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, volume 3 in the *International Critical Commentary* (London: Bloomsbury/T. & T. Clark, 1997), p. 678, 679, 682-683, 688. Eight parallels on page 683 of this commentary are itemized and documented. Note, however, that discernment is required when using this particular commentary.
12. William Hendriksen, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1973), p. 998.
13. R. J. Rushdoony, *Thy Kingdom Come: Studies in Daniel and Revelation* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, [1970] 1998), p. 53.
14. R. T. France, *op. cit.*, p. 1112.
15. H. A. W. Meyer, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 527.
16. R. C. H. Lenski, *An Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), p. 1170.
17. *ibid.*, p. 1172.
18. *ibid.*, p. 1173.
19. *ibid.*
20. *ibid.*, p. 1172.
21. Joseph C. Morecraft III, *Authentic Christianity* (Centreville, AL: Four Falls Press, [2009] 2019), vol. 3, pp. 1248-1261.
22. *ibid.*, p. 1248.
23. *ibid.*, p. 1250, citing Richard R. DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, [1971] 1975), p. 189. Dr. Morecraft also recommends Dr. Kenneth Gentry's volume, *The Greatness of the Great Commission*.
24. Nolland, *op. cit.*, p. 1270.
25. Hendriksen, *op. cit.*, p. 999.
26. Davies & Allison, *op. cit.*, p. 683.
27. Keener, *op. cit.*, p. 719. See D. A. Carson, *op. cit.*, in regard to the argument about masculine versus neuter gender; Keener still argues that more than accumulating individuals from the nations is intended.
28. Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973 reprint), vol. 3, p. 134.
29. *ibid.*
30. *ibid.*
31. *ibid.*, p. 135.
32. *ibid.*
33. *ibid.*
34. *ibid.*
35. John Gill, *Exposition of the Old & New Testaments* (Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2016 reprint of 1809 edition), vol. 7, p. 376.
36. W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor's Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, [1903] 1982), vol. 4, p. 809. John Monro Gibson contributed the exposition of Matthew's Gospel.



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