Making Disciples 1

Session One

The Biblical imperative to make disciples (Mt. 28:18-20)

1. Introduction

The New Testament is a missionary document. The coming of Jesus and the dawning of the great event of salvation made mission to the nations possible. We and the early disciples go in hope and in confidence to meet our Lord Jesus in the future with the duty of testifying to the whole world of God's love and of the redemption He has provided.

New Testament disciples assumed the possibility of there being a community of people who, even in the face of many tribulations, would keep their eyes steadfastly on the reign of God:

- By praying for its coming
- By being disciples (i.e. modelling their lives on Jesus)
- By proclaiming the reality of the 'Kingdom' and the *'ekklesia'*
- By working for peace and justice in the midst of hatred and oppression
- By looking at working towards God's liberating future

Matthew, in his version of the Great Commission, emphasises the **Model of Discipleship**. Mt. 28:16-20 is pivotal to an understanding of the whole Gospel. The entire Gospel was written to arrive at this great ending. So you can't lift these verses out of Matthew's Gospel and give them a life of their own – like a slogan or a pretext for what we want to do. It is necessary to see the Great Commission against a background of the whole Gospel of Matthew. Don't release the Great Commission from its moorings in Matthew!

1.1 A background to Matthew's Gospel

The Gospel isn't a biography – a 'life of Jesus'. It is a guide to a Jewish/Christian community in crisis as to how it should understand its calling and its mission.

Matthew was a member of a Jewish/Christian community in Palestine that left Judea/Galilee just prior to the Jewish/Roman war that ended in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. This community was spread out in what is now Syria and Jordan in a predominantly Gentile environment. The Gospel was probably written about A.D. 70 – plus or minus 2 or 3 years.

Jewish Christians in Palestine lived with a high degree of insularity within the general cultural life of Judaism. They saw Christianity not as a separate religion, but as a renewal movement within Judaism. They knew about the missionary expansion of the church to the Gentiles by Paul and others. But it happened outside their experience and outside the range of their vision. But now, with the destruction of the temple, everything changed. The synagogue replaced the temple as the place of worship. The Pharisees were in control. The Sadducees, the Zealots and the Essenes all disappeared.

Now Jewish Christians preached that all this was predicted by Jesus and that, as the book of Hebrews points out, Jesus himself replaces the temple, the sacrifice, the priesthood etc. This produced a violent, bitter polemic by the Pharisees against Jewish Christians. About A.D. 85 what is called the 'Twelfth Benediction' was proclaimed by the Jews. *"Let the Nazarenes and the heretics be destroyed in a moment. Let their names be expurgated from the Book of Life and not entered with those of the just."* So the final break with the synagogue had arrived.

The “insider movement” was thrown outside. This produced in Jewish Christians a crisis of unprecedented magnitude with regard to its self-understanding.

- What should it become in the coming years?
- Could they remain as Jews?
- What attitude should it adopt towards the law?
- Should it give up its mission to the Jewish people?

So Matthew writes to these communities, cut off from their roots and divided within themselves, as to what their priorities ought to be as they grope for direction in the face of previously unknown problems.

Matthew's purpose isn’t to comfort these believers, but to help them in developing an ethos that will match the challenges of a new epoch. His call to this community is not to regard itself as a sectarian group, but to boldly and consciously see itself as the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only Gospel writer to use *‘ekklesia’* as the true ‘Israel of God’.

Matthew has two purposes – **pastoral** (giving vision and self-confidence to these communities facing an identity crisis) and **missionary**. He wants to empower these communities to see the opportunities for witness and service to the Gentile peoples around them. Note the roles of Gentiles that are **only** mentioned by Matthew:

- The four non-Jewish women in the genealogy of Jesus (ch. 1)
- The visit of the Magi (ch. 2)
- The centurion of Capernaum who prompts Jesus to say that, ***“Many Gentiles will one day take their places with the patriarchs in the Kingdom”*** (ch. 8)
- The Canaanite woman (ch. 15)
- The Gospel will be preached in all nations (ch. 24)
- Only Matthew says that Pilate’s wife pleads on behalf of Jesus – ‘that righteous man’
- The reaction of the centurion and the **other** soldiers at the Crucifixion was, ***“Truly He was the Son of God!”***

Then again note the role of the future mission to Gentile peoples:

- God's people (the ‘laos’ meaning more than Jewish people) who will be saved from their sin (1:21)
- Galilee of the Gentiles (4:15)
- A summary of the ministry of Jesus: ***“News about Him spread throughout all Syria”*** (4:23-25 and 9:35-38)
- The disciples as the salt of the earth and as lights to the world (5:13)
- “The sons of the Kingdom” are sown in “the world” (13:38)
- The cleansing of the Court of the Gentiles is an indication that Gentiles will be saved
- The spontaneous willingness of Jesus to enter Gentile homes (8:7)

Matthew emphasises that many Gentiles had spontaneous faith in Jesus in contrast to the majority of the Jews. Referring to the centurion (8:10) Jesus says, ***“Truly I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith!”*** Again there is the example of the Magi confessing their faith in Jesus before having seen Him.

1.2 Matthew's portrayal of the Lord Jesus

Matthew clearly portrays Jesus as both Lord and God who is to be worshipped. But he also portrays Jesus in "close" Christological terms. Jesus is depicted in such a way that His disciples can be close to Him and, like apprentices, can model their lives on His. Jesus isn't pictured as much as a transcendent one sitting at the right hand of God – a sort of 'remote' Jesus. He is Emmanuel – ***'God with us'*** (1:23) right through to the end of the age.

So the emphasis is on the close proximity of Jesus with His disciples. Jesus, who they had known in the flesh, was the one on whom they modelled their ministry as disciples. Being a disciple is modelling yourself on the life and practice of the Lord Jesus.

Matthew 28:16-20

More than a week – we don't know how much time – had passed since that first Easter Day. The disciples had returned to Galilee. There on a mountain, by appointment, the disciples met Jesus again.

Probably this was the occasion mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor. 15:6 when Jesus appeared to more than 500 people at one time. When they first saw Jesus (at first possibly some distance away) their reactions varied. There were both extremes of adoration and unbelief present among these disciples. Some worshipped Jesus and some doubted.

Note the parallel with the temptation of Jesus in Mt. 4:8 ff. Both events occurred on a mountain and in both the central issue was authority.

Then Jesus came up to these disciples and spoke to them, and declared three things:

1. **The announcement He made** (v. 18)
2. **The command He issued** (v. 19)
3. **The promise He gave** (v. 20)

We will look at these three points. It is an amazing masterpiece in just 40 short words.

1. The announcement He made

It is of vital importance that we notice and digest this affirmation that precedes the Great Commission ***"to make disciples"*** in all nations. Without this announcement of the authority of Jesus, the Great Commission would lack any justification, let alone any impetus. Not until we are convinced of the full authority of the Lord Jesus, are we in any position to hear and obey His commission to go!

Many are very hostile to missions. They view missions as **politically disruptive**. Their view is that their identity and culture is like a toffee popcorn ball – the popcorn being the various aspects of their culture held together by the 'toffee' of religion. This is true of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, African traditional religion etc. Not only that, we are religiously very narrow-minded because we make exclusive claims for the Lord Jesus as the <u>only</u> way to God (Jn. 14:6) In the West any attempt to convert people to Christianity is an unpardonable interference in people's lives. Their attitude is: 'My religion is my own affair. Mind your own business, I will mind mine.'

In the light of this, the announcement of the authority of Jesus is very important.

"All authority <u>in</u> heaven and <u>on</u> earth has been given to Me."

Two questions arise:

- **What is this authority that He claims?**
- **When was this authority given to Jesus?**

What was this authority that He claimed?

Two different prepositions are used to distinguish the two spheres – **on** earth (the physical earthly sphere) and **in** heaven (the non-physical spiritual sphere). Jesus is stating that His authority extends over both of these spheres.

Let's take the earthly sphere first – "**on** earth". There are many implications to this:

- Since He has all authority on earth, He has authority over us His disciples. His total authority extends over the lives of all His disciples. He is like a commanding officer who can dispose and deploy his forces as he chooses. He can send them wherever he likes. Jesus has authority to say to us, 'go' and we must go. Sadly, He has said it to the church but, on the whole, the church has dared to disobey her Sovereign Lord.
- In addition, since Jesus has all authority on earth, this authority extends beyond us who believe, to all people in all nations – each of the over 12,000 ethno-linguistic groups. It involves authority over governments, rulers, all power bases – over all cultures and customs etc.
- It includes authority over "the prince of this world" – Satan who usurped this authority. But now because of the victory of the Cross and Resurrection all his authority has been given to the Lord Jesus.
- Finally, this fact of the authority of the Lord Jesus asserts unequivocally that what Jesus taught is not Palestinian or Jewish or Semetic or Asiatic or a Western religion, but a belief system that is for **all** people everywhere at all times. All people everywhere are to embrace the Lordship of Jesus and the salvation He has provided. His Lordship transcends all the barriers of language and culture, nationality and colour, race and rank. He has authority for **all** "on earth".

Now we will consider the heavenly sphere – "**in** heaven"

Jesus declared that He had been given all authority **in** heaven as well. What are the implications of this?

- In part it means that the authority He claimed on earth is recognised, ratified and affirmed in heaven.
- In part it means that what His disciples accomplish on earth will be acknowledged and approved in heaven.
- But it involves much more than that! It means that the Lord Jesus has supreme authority in ***"the heavenly places"*** – as Paul calls it in Ephesians. In these heavenly places there is still a "cosmic war" going on. The evil, demonic ***"principalities and powers and forces of wickedness"*** are still operating. They are still waging war against God and all the purposes of God. There is a dualism in place – not an absolute metaphysical dualism, for Jesus has disarmed the principalities and powers. (Col. 2:15)
- Having raised Jesus from the dead, God has ***"seated Him at His right hand*** (the place of executive authority – Zech. 3:1 says that Satan stood at the right hand of God as an accuser) ***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 age to come and has put all things under His feet……"*** (Eph. 1:20-22). In Josh. 10:24 ff putting things/people under your feet implies total victory.

So the authority of Jesus extends over all of creation – both human (the physical world) and superhuman (the angels and all demonic powers) **and** over the church, over the nations, over the natural world as well as over the devil and all his minions.

When was this authority given to Jesus?

On that Galilean mountain Jesus claimed that it was an accomplished fact. The tense is aorist – i.e. it **was given**. I believe that it was given to Him by the Father in virtue of the Cross and Resurrection and in anticipation of the Ascension (and the return to heaven to the picture given in Rev. 5). The rest of the New Testament confirms this.

- Paul says that Christ stripped away (*'apekdyomai'*) the weapons of the demonic powers (Col. 2:15). He seems to have specifically in mind the powers of these evil spiritual rulers to condemn believers. Now they have nothing with which to accuse the believer who stands righteous and holy in Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:1, 31-34).
- It was on the Cross, by His blood, that He ransomed people for God from every tribe, tongue, people and nation (Rev. 5:9).
- It was at His Ascension that, ***"God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name, so that 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"*** (Phil. 2:9-11).

So the fundamental basis of Christian mission ***"to make disciples"*** is the universal authority of the Lord Jesus ***"in heaven and on earth"***. For if the authority of Jesus was limited here 'on earth', then He would merely be one of many religious teachers, one of many Jewish prophets or one of many Asiatic divine incarnations and we would have no mandate to present Him to all nations as the Lord and Saviour of the world.

And if the authority of Jesus was limited "in heaven", if He had not decisively overthrown Satan and all the evil principalities and powers, we could still proclaim Him to the nations, but we would never be able to ***"turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God"*** (Acts 26:18).

Only because authority **on earth** belongs to Jesus **dare** we go to all nations! Only because authority **in heaven** is His as well, have we any hope of success! Without this authority, it would have been ridiculous to send a small bunch of Palestinian peasants to win the world for Jesus with love and self-sacrifice. [Others have only partially succeeded with the sword.] As for us today, we are outnumbered by billions of people who neither know Jesus nor acknowledge Him. Our task is even greater.

It is the **unique**, **universal authority** of Jesus Christ that gives us **the right** and **the confidence** to go and seek to make disciples of all nations. For before **His** authority on earth the nations must bow and before **His** authority in heaven no demon can stop us.

2. The threefold command that He gave

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."

Notice the imperative – "***Go therefore"*** immediately after the indicative statement, ***"All authority has been given to Me"***. So the announcement made by the Lord Jesus about His universal authority is the essential preliminary for the Great Commission. We "go" because **we ourselves are under authority**. We go to "all nations" because **they** are under His authority and He has commissioned us to "make disciples" of all nations.

So Matthew's Gospel begins with a genealogy of Jesus that mentions four Gentile women and the coming of Gentile strangers to worship the infant Jesus. It finishes with the sending out of the church to win the Gentile world.

We have three precise instructions to fulfil:

- To make disciples
- To baptize these disciples
- To teach these disciples

We will look at these three stages of the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus to "go".

2.1 We are to make disciples of all nations

We are to win disciples for the Lord Jesus out of all the nations of the earth – all 12,000 or so ethno-linguistic groups. How are we to do this? In Luke's version of the Great Commission the way to win disciples is ***"that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations"*** (Lk. 24:47). This is what we normally call evangelism. So our job is to go out to the people and indiscriminately preach the Gospel everywhere, to all peoples and then the Holy Spirit will call them to the Father as they hear and see.

Jesus called them "lost sheep" that are scattered throughout the world. He said that they will come home as the Father calls them through the preaching of the Gospel. As they come home they are regenerated and become followers (disciples) of the Lord Jesus.

We should never get away from or grow out of the great truths of evangelism and the necessity to preach them – especially the Cross and the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The central objective of evangelism is to secure the allegiance of men and women – not to a church or to a system of thought or to a particular behaviour, but to the person of the Lord Jesus. Discipleship comes first. Being a follower of Jesus comes first. Church membership, theology and ethics follow.

In summoning people to discipleship we should never forget the solemn conditions laid down by the Lord Jesus for this discipleship:

- We need to 'hate' our family – puts His claims above theirs
- We need to take up our cross
- We need to renounce all that we have

We must put Jesus first before our relatives, our ambitions and our possessions. If we can't do these things, we can't be His disciples.

2.2 We are to baptize these disciples

New believers who become disciples of Jesus are to be baptized ***"into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"*** . The theological and practical implications of this are far-reaching and it would take more time than we have got to fully explain these.

- In part it means that being a disciple of the Lord Jesus involves a relationship with the Father (loved by Him – see 1 Jn. 3:1 and many other passages) and with the Holy Spirit.
- Baptism involves being baptized "into". This implies **union** with the Trinity – in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Rom. 6), with the Holy Spirit (being baptized "into" the Holy Spirit) and with the Father.
- There are differences in the church as to the full implication of all that this means, but all agree that baptism is a **public act**. People can become disciples secretly, but they should be baptized publicly (how publicly is debatable). Baptism is a public confession of a new loyalty and allegiance. It is this event that admits them into the visible church.

So the believer advances from being a beginning disciple to baptism. He/she moves from his/her faith being a private affair to it being a public one – from the personal to the corporate and from being an individual believer to church membership.

Every disciple should be a church member and every church member should be a disciple. Matthew knows that this isn't always so – e.g. the parable of the tares among the wheat (13:24-30). He also records that some worthless fish are caught in the net (13:47-50) and that some new believers are shallow and soon abandon the faith when hardships and persecutions come. Sadly others succumb to the temptations and pressures of the world (13:20-22).

2.3 We are to teach these disciples

The purpose of Jesus in the Great Commission is not fully met when people are discipled and baptized. They must also be fully taught. A lifetime of learning and obeying is ahead of us until we are conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus.

So the essence of mission is **teaching** not proclamation. Matthew uses proclaim/preach of activities directed towards outsiders. Jesus never 'preaches' to His disciples. He **teaches** them. He "taught" in the synagogues and in the temple.

Now to Semetic people **teaching** is not just an intellectual exercise as it is us and for the Romano-Greek world. In Jesus' teaching the emphasis was not directed towards their minds, but to their wills. Note the advice that Jesus gave to the rich young ruler (19:17).

There should be continuity between what Jesus said and did and what we should teach. Discipleship is determined **not** by conformity to a set of rules, but by submission to the Lord Jesus in a personal relationship. Matthew stresses the **deeds** *('orthopraxis'*) of Jesus. He selects from what Jesus said and did and focuses on ***"the deeds of Christ"*** (Mt. 11:2).

For example:

- The importance of bearing fruit
- Doing God's will
- Keeping His commandments
- Being perfect!
- Practicing justice

"A good tree is known only by its fruits" (7:19). So being a disciple involves living out the teachings and deeds of Jesus (which Matthew records in great detail) – including living a life of sacrificial love for people. Discipleship involves a commitment to God's reign on earth, to justice for all, to love and compassion for the unloved and hurting and to obedience to the entire will of God.

So mission is not just providing people with "blessed assurance". It is not just about getting them eternally saved. It is also about making the believers sensitive to the needs of others and opening their eyes and their hearts to injustice, suffering and oppression. It is a false dichotomy to say, *'The Great Commission is about evangelism and the Great Commandment is about social involvement'*. According to Matthew, the Great Commission involves making disciples who are involved in God's call for justice for the poor and love for all people.

So **the substance of our teaching** to disciples is all the teachings of the Lord Jesus – the ***"all things that I have commanded you"***. So what are we to teach? Clearly not what people may want to hear or what we want to say, but what the Lord Jesus taught. Where is this teaching to be found?

- In the Gospels that is a record of what Jesus said and did.
- In the whole of the Old Testament – for Jesus set His seal upon its truth and its authority.
- In the rest of the New Testament that contains the teaching of the Apostles through whom Jesus continued to speak in order to complete His self-revelation.

So the teaching of the whole Bible is the teaching of Jesus. A new believer who has become a disciple of Jesus and who has been baptized into the Trinity is to be taught all that the Bible teaches.

Matthew's Gospel contains 5 major discourses. They are teachings on:

- Discipleship (ch. 5-7)
- The apostolic mission (ch. 10)

- How the reign of God comes (ch. 13)
- Church discipline (ch. 18)
- False teachers and the end (ch. 23-25)

Probably Matthew is thinking especially of the Sermon on the Mount when he quotes Jesus as saying, ***"All that I commanded you"*** (28:19).

In submitting ourselves to Scripture we have to submit our minds to all of it and not just to some of it. We can't pick and choose what we like and reject what we find inconvenient. We are not at liberty to disagree with Jesus or to disobey Him. Why? Jesus is our Lord and teacher. We are under His authority and His instruction. Jn. 13:13 says, ***"You call me teacher and Lord and you are right for so I am"***. All this lays upon us a solemn responsibility of modelling what it means to be a disciple ourselves. For how effective will our verbal teaching be if it is contradicted by our lifestyle/modelling? How can we teach others to obey all that Jesus has commanded if we don't submit ourselves to Him?

This is the concept of the Lord Jesus about mission. Note how balanced/comprehensive it is.

- We are to make disciples through evangelism.
- We are to incorporate these new believers into church membership through baptism. Disciples function in community.
- We are to teach them, verbally and through modelling, **all** that Jesus taught and did.

Sporadic evangelistic efforts are alright, but they are irresponsible unless there is effective provision for admitting new believers into the community of disciples (church membership) and then instructing them until they are fully mature and like Jesus!

3. The promise that He gave them

"And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age." The promise given in Mt. 1:23 regarding ***"Emmanuel, God with us"*** is confirmed by Jesus and fulfilled at last. Never isolate the Great Commission from its context. The announcement of the authority of the Lord Jesus precedes it and it is followed by the promise of the presence of the Lord Jesus with us. How can I encourage and challenge others to go to this part of the world to make disciples, to baptize them, to plant churches where there are none and to teach them so that they rapidly reproduce, if I have no assurance of the authority of the Lord Jesus standing behind them and no assurance of His presence beside them?

So Jesus repeats the promise of His presence with His disciples. In Mt. 18:20 He promised to be present when two or three disciples were gathered in His name. The context is **worship**. And now, as disciples, when we go out in mission in His name, He promises to be with us. The context is **witness**. And it is very emphatically stated, ***"I am with you <u>always</u>"***.

It is questionable to ask if a stay-at-home church – a church disobedient to the Great Commission – is in any position to claim the fullness of the promised presence of the Lord Jesus! We need to remember that the promise has a condition – mission!

But for those who go out into the world as Jesus came into the world, to those who are willing to sacrifice their ease, their comfort and their independence and who hazard their lives as they search for seekers, **<u>to them</u>** the presence of the Living Lord Jesus is promised. So He sends us out ("go") <u>and</u> **He** accompanies us!

No matter where we go, we have the assurance that the Holy Spirit will be with us:

- Directing us
- Restraining us
- Encouraging us
- Empowering us

At the end of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey they ***"declared all that God had done for them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles"***.

That little word **"always"** is a great comfort in:

- Days of safety and days of peril
- Days of failure and days of success
- Days of freedom to preach and days of persecution
- Days of peace and days of conflict and war

"I am with you always, to the end of the age". The promise of Jesus spans the whole present age. Jesus had just died and been raised to life again. Now He looks ahead to His return in glory – ***"to the end of the age"***. In all this time He promises to be with His people provided they obey His command.

Summary

As we look back over Matthew's version of the Great Commission – its announcement of Jesus' authority, its command and its promise, I am struck with its comprehensive sweep.

Notice the fourfold repetition of the word ***"all"***.

1. Jesus claimed to have been given **all** authority in heaven and on earth.
2. Therefore, He sends us to make disciples of **all** nations.
3. He commands us to transmit to these disciples **all** His teaching.
4. He promises to be with us **all** the days, even until the end of time.