

STUDY 10

‘All Authority Has Been Given to Me’ (Matthew 28:16–20)

Noel Due

INTRODUCTION ¹

There are numerous places where the sovereign rule of the risen and ascended Jesus is affirmed in the New Testament, but they can all be summed up in the one great cry, ‘Jesus is Lord!’ This was not based on the early Christian community’s theological reflection on the person of Christ (though no doubt they understood all that he had said and done in the light of the Scriptures, and the Scriptures in the light of him!), so much as on the actual living presence and reality of Christ among them. The first apostles had seen him, and had even eaten with and touched him, post-resurrection. They knew he was Lord because he was stronger than death; and if stronger than death he was greater than sin; and if greater than sin then he was the victor over all the principalities and powers in the cosmos. They had been taught by him for a period of 40 days before the ascension, and then filled with the Spirit poured out from the Father, through the Son, on the day of Pentecost. In all this they had understood that the kingdom of God was present to them, that they were in and of that kingdom, and that the rule of Christ would now consummate the great Abrahamic promises to bring God’s blessing to the nations.

The various New Testament congregations understood that they lived under the direct rule of Christ. They had one Lord, and they knew that he ruled over all the kings of the earth and all the powers of darkness that would manifest their opposition to the reign of the Lord’s grace. They understood that from the position of his ascended Lordship, Jesus gave gifts to the Church, not least the ‘word’ gifts mentioned in Ephesians 4:7–17. And they knew that all of these were for the purpose of bringing the people of God to maturity; that they might be filled unto all the fullness of God, so that fully rooted and grounded in love they might go in the Father, Son and Spirit to the uttermost parts of the earth, filling the emptiness and dispelling the darkness by the word of God in the power of the Spirit (as in the first creation).

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the English Standard Version.

All Authority Has Been Given to Me

It comes as no surprise to us, therefore, to see the great missionary church in Antioch, replete as it was with the ministries of the word, being used by the Lord to send the gospel out among the nations (as in Acts 13:1ff.). This means that the Church already understood that the reign of Christ would always and only come in and through the word of the gospel. Thus, Paul understood that his role was to bring about the obedience of the nations to the Son of God, by the preaching of the word of God (see Rom. 1:16–17; cf. 15:14–21; 16:25–27). This means that there is a direct connection between the sovereign reign of the Christ (the last Adam) and the proclamation that he utters through his Church/Bride.

THE COMMISSION OF CHRIST IN MATTHEW 28:16–20

While it is notable that the passage we have come to call the Great Commission does not appear to have been used by the leaders of the New Testament Church to motivate its members for mission, the passage does tell us much about the nature of the mission in which the Church was engaged under the leading of the Spirit. There is no doubt that the apostles in particular watched over the spread of the gospel among the nations, but we do not gain any impression from the book of Acts or the epistles which may suggest that they had to use other means to motivate the Church for mission. They did not preach the obligations of the Great Commission, but rather preached Jesus as Lord, such Lordship being on the basis of his Cross and resurrection. Thus the dynamic for the ongoing proclamation of the gospel lay in the proclamation of the gospel itself. Naturally, such proclamation is only carried on truly in the power of the Spirit, and from a position of the proclaimer's faith in Christ and in the power of his word to be the salvation of the world (Rom. 1:16–17). Thus, the true power of the Kingdom community was and is always the apostolic gospel.

MATTHEW 28:16–20: A LOCATION AND AN AUDIENCE

The encounter spoken of in this passage takes place in a location that is defined by two features—Galilee and the mountain—both of which are significant.

Galilee

For the first (Galilee) we see repeated references to the importance of Galilee as the narrative unfolds (see Matt. 26:32; 28:7, 10, 16). Such references are significant for a number of reasons.

Galilee is important in Old Testament prophecy, and represents the meeting place of God's people and the nations (e.g. Isa. 9:1). In the Old Testament settlement of the land, the nations of that region were never fully expelled from Jewish regions, and at the time of the exile of the northern tribes under Assyria, pagan settlers were shipped back into the region. It lay at the meeting point of Israel's northern reaches with the surrounding nations, and was the route through which the nations invaded the land given to the 12 tribes (hence, it is said to 'sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death').

Galilee is also the place from which Jesus began his ministry. We are shown how he came to be there in Matthew 2:19–23, coming virtually as the incarnation of Israel

All Authority Has Been Given to Me

amidst the nations. We see him coming from Galilee for his baptism in 3:13–17; returning after the temptations in the wilderness and John’s arrest in 4:12–16; beginning his preaching ministry in 4:17, 23ff.; and calling the first of the disciples in 4:18f. The significant impact that this had on the surrounding Gentiles (e.g. vv. 24f.) meant that they were already receiving the light of life (cf. vv. 14–16). This ties in with the strong emphasis in Matthew on the nations and their place in the new covenant blessings of God (e.g. Matt. 1:3–5; 2:1–2; 4:15; 8:5, 11, 28; 11:21–22; 12:41–42; 15:22; 16:13; 24:14; 25:31–32; 27:54), but in accord with the broader pattern in the New Testament (which in turn is built on the primacy of God’s covenant people in the unfolding plan of salvation), Jesus’ ministry was primarily to the Jews first, and then to the Gentiles.

In the light of these things it is significant that the apostles had to meet the risen Lord at this place. The location seems to indicate two things: the new beginning of this ministry to the nations (now to be *through them*) and the *continuation* of his ministry to the nations (as also made plain in Acts 1:1). To the eyes of sight, Jesus’ ministry was finished with the crucifixion. In reality, it was just opening up!

The Mountain

For the second feature of the location (the mountain) we need to have two referent points in mind. It may be that this is the same mountain on which Jesus had begun his open-air ministry (e.g. Matt. 5:1; 8:1 ‘the mountain’), but there is also all the Old Testament background of the ‘mountain of the Lord’.² In short, the mountain of the Lord in the Old Testament is where the Lord is! It the place where he meets with his people, from which he instructs them, in which they worship, and from which the blessing is to flow to the nations.

There are numerous Old Testament texts to which we could refer, but the Old Testament expectation of an eschatological Zion is clear in Isaiah 2:2–3:

It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come, and say:
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.’
For out of Zion shall go the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

² The theology of the mountain of the Lord is extensive. It is worthy of a complete work in its own right, since any full exposition of the biblical theology of the mountain of the Lord would necessitate an analysis of Eden, Moriah, Sinai, Zion/Jerusalem, Calvary and the eschatological mountain to which the new covenant community has been brought in Christ. In addition, one would need to give attention the various ‘mountains’ in the gospel narratives; such as the one connoted in the temptation in the wilderness; the mountain from which Christ taught his disciples; the mountains of prayer; the mount of transfiguration; and the mountain of commissioning from which the disciples were sent out among the nations. This means that the theology of the mountain of the Lord intersects with many great theological themes. It is inseparable from concepts such as covenant, kingship, worship and temple, sacrifice, the divine presence, and hope in the divine promises. ‘Mt Zion’ is thus a term heavily freighted with biblical meaning, and is a phrase which ultimately far surpasses any mere geographical referent.

All Authority Has Been Given to Me

This accords with the thought of Micah 4:1–3:

It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and it shall be lifted up above the hills;
and peoples shall flow to it,
and many nations shall come, and say:
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall decide for strong nations afar off;
and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.

In the New Testament, the writer to the Hebrews (in Heb. 12:22ff., also cf. Paul's statements in Gal. 4:21–31) gives voice to the early Church's understanding of the eschatological fulfilment of the Zion theology of the Old Testament. This mountain is at one time the place to which we have already come, and yet it is to be fully revealed in the last day, as the place from which the word of the Lord would sound forth to the humbled and redeemed nations gathered around the throne.

The Audience

But there is also an audience, and this again is to be considered in two ways. On the one hand, the disciples form the audience for Jesus' teaching and instruction. The eleven (Judas now missing), who had been his closest friends and associates, are now to form the kernel of the new covenant community, from whom the blessing would flow to the nations. 'They worshipped . . . but some doubted [or 'wavered' as some translations have]' (Matt. 28:17). How so? Our own experience will confirm to us that we can worship and waver at the same time! In the face of such human instability the simple fact and grandeur of Jesus' resurrection declares 'peace' over all the wreckage and ruin of their sin! He had mastered them by virtue of his intercession for them.

On the other hand, we can consider the 'audience' in the other way in which the term is used in English. The disciples were present in the company of the Great King, Jesus, from whom they were to receive their commission, and to be assured of his ongoing presence and power. In Matthew's Gospel there is an emphasis on the royal line of Jesus (inherent in Matt. 1:1; acknowledged in Matt. 2:1 and thence throughout the Gospel), culminating in the mocking of his royal status at the time of the crucifixion (e.g. Matt. 27:11, 29, 37).

The Throne of Grace

In a very real sense, the Cross was the throne of the King, and as he took himself up to the Cross, bearing our sins in his body with him, he was exercising his reign of

All Authority Has Been Given to Me

grace by which he would conquer the nations. In Hebrews 4:16 we read of the ‘throne of grace’ which believers are to approach with confidence. The expression occurs only here, but it is not unreasonable (given the pervasive Tabernacle theology/typology in Hebrews) to see this as connected with the Old Testament mercy seat, which was conceived of as either the throne, or footstool of the throne, of Yahweh. Either way, the final revelation of the Lamb of God indicates that the rule of God is only ever that of love, with history being firmly in the grip of the Lamb who was sacrificed for the sins of the world.

So the disciples stand in the presence of the Lord who rules over the nations from the throne of grace, who, as the risen Lamb, holds all history in his hands. Though not perceived as such to unbelieving eyes, Jesus is in fact the Great King, fully receiving all the promises attached to his status as the Son of Man (Dan. 7:13–14). This is matched by the emphasis on the totality of his rule: all *authority*; all *nations*; all his *teaching*; all *places*; and all *time*! There is nothing that is not subject to his Lordship, and no nation which is not to hear him! The declaration of Matthew 28:18 may well be seen not only as the fulfilment of the kingly role of Christ, but also as the fulfilment of the primal mandate to have dominion over all things. So, from that, the command to fill the earth is now being obeyed and fulfilled by Christ through his new Bride, the Church (cf. Eph. 1:19–23).

MATTHEW 28:16–20: A COMMAND AND A COMMISSION

The main attention in this passage is on the apostles. While (in a subsidiary sense) this commission is to us, it was specifically to them. To the degree that we share in the apostolic gospel, we share in the command and the commission, but it came first and foremost to the ones he had chosen to be his witnesses. The whole of the Church follows on in their train, but only to the degree that it follows on in the apostolic gospel (as is made clear in Paul’s comments in Gal. 1:3–9, for example).

The command is to ‘disciple’ the nations. This is the only imperative in the passage. The rest are participles, implying that things are already on the move and that the Lord is already empowering and compelling his witnesses. Literally we may translate the meaning as, ‘Having gone, make disciples of the nations, baptising . . . teaching’. The object is to make the nations the disciples of the King. A disciple is one who hears the voice of his teacher and follows him. Thus the nations are to be hearers of the voice of the King. The commission thus means: *having gone* (with and through me), *teach them to hear my voice* (disciple them), then *baptise them into the Name of God* (i.e. bring them to worship me, be submitted to my authority, to be immersed in the Godhead), *and then teach them!*

In places such as Acts 17, this is in effect what happens. The proclamation that Paul gives among the philosophers on Mars Hill arises out of his prior proclamation of Jesus as the resurrected Lord. His message at the Council of the Areopagus ends with the Lordship of Christ and his coming judgement. In between, Paul relates his apostolic proclamation to the Old Testament theology of creation, indicating that the nations are all under the sovereign headship of the One who made heaven and earth. Indeed, the very disposition of the nations in time and space is for the purpose of the gospel (Acts 17:26–27), but now the shadow has given way to the light of the full revelation of the gracious love of God. The nations should therefore turn from the

All Authority Has Been Given to Me

emptiness of their idolatry, and worship the crucified and risen Lord, who offers the forgiveness of sins for the nations' idolatrous rebellion.

However, the very fact that Paul was there, speaking to them on that day, was the result of the present and active Lordship of Christ. The commissioning in Matthew 28:16–20 presumes a going, since the King is on the move to the nations! We are not doing something for God! He is doing something in and through us. He had sent Paul there, through all the diverse circumstances of the ministry that had led him through Macedonia, out of the cells in Philippi, to Thessalonica, to Berea and thence to Athens. I doubt that Paul had incorporated all this into a strategic plan! Jesus statement, 'Behold, I am with you always',³ means that Paul (and we) have to recognise that we are being carried along by him for his purposes. The Church is never to be the initiator of its own plans.

MATTHEW 28:16–20: A GOAL FOR HISTORY

The risen Lord has given this command and commission first to the disciples, and thence to us, as we hear the apostolic gospel, but it is a *time limited* command. The time in focus is 'the end of the age'. That his promise is to be with us is significant, not simply because of the assurance of his ongoing presence, but more importantly that the end of the age is *his* appointed goal. This means that he is working all things together to bring that end of the age about. We are part of his purposes in that ministry, so we do not simply have him with us as company along the way but as the one who is the Lordly author of the mission as well as its goal. He is bringing about the end of the age to which he is leading us.

The nature of that goal is set out for us in many places (e.g. Rom. 8; Phil. 2:1–11; cf. Rev. 22:1–6; 1 Cor. 15:24ff.). Essentially, it is the summing up of all things in the Son, so that all things will be brought to glorify the Father, and in so doing we will see the establishment of the new creation in which God's family exists as the Son's 'peer community' (to use one of Geoffrey Bingham's phrases). This is indeed a glorious and all-encompassing goal, but the means by which the Lordship of the Son is exercised over the nations and by which his enemies are subdued is nothing other than the apostolic gospel. This word of the Cross is the word (*rhēma*) of Christ (Rom. 10:17). The word is used in this context in this way 'to eliminate all doubt as to what is encountered in the gospel proclamation . . . the special interest now is to show that this word is that which Christ speaks (cf. John 3:34; 5:47; 6:63, 68; 12:47–48; 17:8; Acts 5:20; Eph. 5:26; 6:17; 1 Pet. 1:25)'.⁴

We need to tell the nations that this goal is coming: there is a time to hear the voice of the King now, for there is coming a time when the Son of Man will appear, and the kings of the earth who have not fled to his Cross for the mercy of forgiveness will find themselves crying out for the rocks to fall on them (Rev. 6:15ff.). There is a goal, and the Lord is leading the whole of the creation to it. Our part under his commissioning hand and power is to proclaim, 'Behold, the Lamb!'

³ The old translations preserve 'Behold'—i.e. pay attention, observe, take into consideration, be mindful of—the word is to arouse faith!

⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT series, vol. 3, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1968, p. 61.