

# What Jesus has told the church to do

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon  
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Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."  
Matthew 28:18-20

## Introduction

As I was thinking this week about what I should speak about this Sunday, it seemed to me that, as it is the first Sunday of what might be called the "church year", it would be helpful to remind us from these verses of what it is that the Lord Jesus has called his people to do. So I want us to consider these words from the end of Matthew's Gospel.

These verses are often called "The Great Commission". They are Jesus' parting words to his church before he went up to heaven. Jesus had been raised from the dead and had made several appearances. Now, before he departs, he tells his church what it is to do.

The words were originally addressed to his disciples, but I am sure that we can safely say that the words are addressed not just to Jesus' disciples, nor just to Gospel preachers, but to the whole church.

As we think about Jesus' words, I want to do so under three main headings:

1. The one who is speaking
2. What he has told us to do
3. What he has promised

## 1. The one who is speaking

Jesus says in verse 18, "All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me"

One might ask, why has Jesus been given authority? Surely he is the eternal Son of God from before the creation of the world and so always had authority? Surely during his earthly life he constantly showed his authority, in the way he spoke and in the miracles that he did?

The answer is that, yes, Christ had absolute authority from the before the creation of the world. It was by him that the whole world was created. But he humbled himself and took on human form. He allowed himself to the lowest point, even to death upon a cross. Having humbled himself, the Father the raised him from the dead, and took him back up to heaven, and enthroned him as the exalted king over all things, whether visible or invisible. As the apostle Paul says in Philippians chapter 2 verses 8 to 11, God "exalted him [Jesus] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 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."

This is in fulfilment of the prophecy in Daniel chapter 7, and verses 13 and 14, where the prophet says

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Having raised Jesus from the dead the Father has given Jesus all authority and power. He has crowned him as King of the whole universe. So Jesus is now enthroned in heaven as the King of all Kings and the Lord of all Lords.

It is this Jesus, the Lord of all Lords, who has told the church what to do. It is not for the members of the church to say to themselves, "What shall we do now that God has saved us?" Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the head of the church, has commissioned the church. He has told her what she is to do. Our task is simply to understand what the Lord has told us to do and then to get on with it.

Neither does the church need to get permission from any government to go about its task. Christ, the King of all Kings has told the church what to do. Any government that tries to stop the church from doing what it has been told by Christ to do will find itself in opposition to the King of Kings.

Moreover, no church leader or church member has the power to tell the church what it should do. Nor does any supposed bishop, or archbishop, or pope. The church is Christ's church, and he is the one who has authority over it.

## **2. What Jesus has told the church to do**

We come now to our second main heading, what Jesus has tells his church to do.

Now it is important to notice what he does *not* tell his church to do. He does not tell his church to be involved in political action to change the world and make it a better place. This is not to say that individual Christians cannot be politicians or activists to do what they can to improve the world. But improving the world through political and social action is not, according to Christ, what the church is meant to be doing.

Nor does Jesus here tell the church to provide for people's practical needs. Again, this is not to say that as individual Christians we should not do what we can to help people in their practical needs. Indeed Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that when we give money to the poor we should not let our right hand know what the left hand is doing, implying that individual Christians should help the poor. But Jesus does not here tell the church, as church, to meet people's practical needs, do development work, or provide youth clubs, or toddler groups, or lunch clubs or provide any other service.

Nor does Jesus here tell his church to heal the sick or drive out demons. This where this Great Commission differs from the commission that Jesus he gave his apostles when he was on earth, as recorded in Matthew chapter 10. At that time, as part of his earthly ministry, he did tell the apostles to heal the sick and drive out demons. But now, in his final Great Commission to the church, his orders are for the church to stick to proclaiming the Gospel, and teaching believers to obey Christ.

So having pointed out what Jesus does *not* tell his church to do here, let us now consider what he does tell her to do. We see that the church is told to do four things:

1. To go
2. To make disciples of all nations
3. To baptise them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit
4. To teach them all that Jesus commanded.

Let us think about these four things.

### 1) **Go**

The first thing that Jesus says is we are to go. We are to leave the comforts of our own homes and our circles of family and friends and go and find those who are lost, and make disciples of them.

To whom are we to go? The answer is in the next phrase, “make disciples of all nations”. There is to be no limit to the type of person that we go to, or to the places that we will go to. This includes neighbours, strangers in the street, people of different cultural and racial groups who live near us, people in areas of our country where Christianity is weaker, and people in other parts of the world. This is another difference from Jesus’s commission to the apostles which is recorded in chapter 10 of Matthew. In that commission, Jesus said that the apostles were to go only to the lost sheep of Israel. Now he says that we are to go to all nations.

Why does the Lord command us to go to all men? Because the message of salvation is for all. All men are, in their natural condition, on their way to a terrible eternity in hell. All have sinned. Apart from salvation in Christ they will be condemned. No other religion can save them from this terrible fate. But God has provided an answer in Christ. Christ has made a sacrifice for sinners. He has provided a means of salvation for all who will believe. Now anyone who wishes to be saved can be saved through him. So Jesus commands us to go and take this message of salvation to all.

One application of this command to go must surely be for churches to visit their local neighbourhoods and also preach the Gospel publicly in the open air. The Lord tells us to GO. He does not tell us to wait for people to come in. Of course if people do come in we will welcome them and preach the Gospel to them. But to only preach to those who come to us is not what the Lord commands here. He tells us to GO.

Some say that visitation and open air preaching are not how we should evangelise. They say that we should instead conduct “friendship evangelism”. Of course our evangelism should not be confined to visitation and open air preaching. Each one of us should also seek to speak about Christ with family members, work colleagues, people we meet when out shopping and at toddler groups. We should be outward looking and friendly towards others and seek to evangelise those we befriend. But if we only evangelise our friends and natural contacts we are not fulfilling this Commission of the Lord. We are staying “in”, as it were. We are not “going”. The Lord calls us to go.

Does this mean that every member of the church should go visiting or preach in the open air? No. Not all are gifted to go, and not all have the physical strength. Not all have the time, given the very demanding jobs and family situations that they have. But all should be involved in one way or another in the effort. Some can pray at home. Some can meet together with others to pray while the visiting or street work is going on. Some can be an audience at open airs to listen to the preacher and talk to bystanders. Some can be a “number 2” in a pair of visitors, listening quietly and praying for the person who is doing most of the speaking. Many of us will also be able to give money, in order to fund workers who can go out evangelising, or who can go as missionaries to other parts of the world.

This is not easy. It is far easier to stay in own comfortable homes, with our own friends and families, with whom we feel good. It is painful trying to preach in the open air and having people walk past you as if you do not exist. You feel awkward identifying yourself publicly with those who speak in the open air. It is not pleasant having a door slammed in your face (it does not happen that often – more frequently there is a polite “Not interested thank you” response). It is tiring forcing yourself out after a busy day at work. But I suggest to you that we must, collectively, go out with the Gospel if we are to fulfil the Lord’s Commission.

## **2) Make disciples of all nations**

The second thing that Jesus says we are to do is to “make disciples of all nations”. Note, he does not tell us to get people to “make a decision for Christ” or to make some outward profession of faith which leaves their behaviour unchanged. We are rather to make disciples.

What is a disciple? A disciple is a follower of another, who learns from his teacher, and imitates his teacher, until he becomes like him. Discipleship is more than simply learning ideas. It involves practice as well. So we are to turn people into disciples of Christ.

It is important to state that we are to make disciples of *Christ*, not disciples of ourselves. Some Christian groups make a big thing of discipleship. They say that every believer should be in relationship with another believer, where the older believer discipled the younger believer. Those older believers are in turn discipled by other believers, who in turn are discipled by others. So the whole church is in a sort of discipleship pyramid. These groups sometimes say the discipled are expected to do what their discipler says. This can very quickly become a sort of slavery, where decisions about life, such as how to spend your money, where to live, whom to marry, what job to do, are made by the "discipler", and, ultimately, by the leader at the top of the pyramid. No, those who believe are made disciples of Christ, not of men. The authority that any one of us has over another is limited to the authority of the Word of God.

The start of discipleship is the rebirth, leading to repentance and faith. This then opens up a lifelong process of learning and practicing Christianity.

Jesus says something very remarkable: WE are to make disciples of the nations. But we cannot in and of ourselves do so, because the rebirth is work of the Holy Spirit, who blows where he wills in people's lives. Moreover every advance that someone makes in the Christian life is the outcome of the work of the Spirit in his life. So why does the Lord tell us to make disciples?

The answer is that, whilst it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convert people and to cause them to grow as believers, the Holy Spirit chooses to use God's people to bring this about. He uses the public preaching of the Word of God, the private instruction of individuals, the prayers of his people, and the example of older and more mature believers, to turn people from godless unbelievers into fruitful disciples. So, in that sense, we make disciples of others, as we work in partnership with the Holy Spirit. We have the responsibility to do the work of making disciples.

This is hard work for those who do are involved in it. For those who preach, this involves considerable work in terms of study, preparation and delivery. For those who are involved with personal work with individuals, it involves spending time with others, often in small groups or on a one-to-one basis, sharing the Scriptures with them. Making

disciples involves much prayer, private and corporate, which is also hard work. But if we are to fulfil the Lord's commission we are to not shirk from this responsibility.

### **3) Baptise them**

The third thing that Jesus tells his church to do is to baptise those who have become disciples. He says, "Baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

We see from this verse that baptism is for disciples. There are those who say that baptism corresponds to the circumcision of the Old Testament, and that it is right to baptise the babies of believers. But Jesus says that it is those who have become disciples who should be baptised, not those who we hope one day might be disciples. The fact that baptism is for disciples shows that someone who makes a profession of faith, but whose life is no different from that of a non-Christian, should not be baptised. Having said that, we need to not go to the other extreme and say that only those who are mature believers who fully obey Christ in every respect should be baptised. Baptism should take place at the beginning of the Christian life, to show that someone has become a disciple, and is wanting to follow Christ. Some people unduly put off their baptism because they feel that they have not reached a sufficient level of obedience yet to be baptised, even though there is plenty of evidence from their lives that they have been born again. If you have come to Christ and trusted him as your Saviour, and you have reason to believe that you have been born again, you should be baptised.

Note also that the baptism is to be in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. This verse shows is that the doctrine of the Trinity was not made up by the church. It comes from Christ himself. By saying that those who are baptised in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy spirit, Jesus teaches us that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons who are equally God, even though the Scripture is also clear that there is only one God.

### **4) To teach them all that Jesus taught**

The fourth thing that Jesus says that the church is to do is to teach disciples all that Jesus taught. Jesus says, "Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

The job is not done until those who have become disciples have come to complete maturity, and are doing in practice all that Jesus commanded.

We learn from this that the goal of faith is practical obedience to Christ. Faith is not an end in itself, but is the means to the end of obedience. We are not saved by our works, but we are saved for works.

What needs to happen for this to take place? Those who have the job of teaching need to teach, and teach well. They need to study hard and prepare carefully and prayerfully for teaching others. And those who have the role of being taught need to put themselves in a position where they can be taught. This entails being present when the Word of God is taught, and listening carefully, and putting it into practice afterwards. In this regard I would encourage you, if you normally only attend one meeting a week on Sunday mornings, to come back on Sunday afternoons, and to the Bible study midweek, both to be encouraged and to encourage others. Meetings of the church are wonderful occasions when God meets with his people and speaks to them. When we meet together we are fulfilling the Great Commission, because we are learning how to obey the Lord in our lives. The devil knows this, and tries to do everything he can to stop believers from meeting together, or at least limit the number of times that they meet together. We need to resist the devil, and make sure that we do meet frequently with the Lord's people.

We also have a responsibility to build each other up and encourage each other in the truth. There are numerous places in the Scripture where we are told to teach and admonish one another, and to build each other up in the truth. This can take during meetings, after meetings in informal conversations, and as we meet together privately. As we teach and admonish each other, and encourage each other in the truth, and help each other to grow more like Christ, so we are fulfilling this commission of Christ.

Key to all this also is prayer. Every conversion to Christ, and every growth in obedience that a believer makes, is a supernatural work of God. God has chosen to work usually only in answer to the prayers of his people. It is therefore vitally important that we pray, both privately and corporately, for God's work to advance in our lives, and in the lives of those around us.



### **3. Jesus' promise**

We have seen who is speaking, Jesus, who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. We have also seen what he tells us to do, firstly to go to all, secondly to make disciples, thirdly to baptise disciples, and fourthly to teach disciples to obey all that he has commanded. We come now to our third main heading, which is the promise of Christ. He says, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

By saying this, Jesus is directly claiming to be God. How could a mere man be with everybody, everywhere, in all time, who is seeking to fulfil this commission? And if he is God, and if he will be with us, then we can be sure of success.

As we think about this Great Commission, the task is daunting. We are commissioned with the task of turning unbelieving nations into disciples who follow Christ. When we bear in mind the hostility of men to the Gospel, and the strength of false ideas, and the power of the devil who is totally opposed to this, and our own physical weakness, it seems impossible. But thanks be to God. We are not alone as we seek to fulfil this great task. Christ, the mighty God, is with us as we serve him. If he is with us, we cannot fail. We might have disappointments. We might get knocked down. We might get exhausted. But ultimately the Kingdom of God will not fail. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ will be established. All of his elect will be gathered in. The kingdoms of this world, and the religions of this world, will come to nothing.

### **Conclusion**

We see from this passage that Jesus is calling his church to be involved in a tremendous enterprise, which is the conversion of the world to Christ, and making the world obedient to Christ. This is a great task. We all need to join together to enable it to take place.

The church can be likened to a great ship that is propelled by oars. We have two choices. Either we can get on board and enjoy the cruise, being carried along by the others. Or we can pick up our oar and join in the effort to get the ship along. Some can pull a great oar. Others might only have the strength to pick up a little paddle and do their bit with the paddle. The important thing is that we all join together in the great task. As the saying goes, "Many hands make light work". As we all join together in the task, by God's grace it will get done. May God give us all vision to see this great task he calls us to join in, and may he make

us willing to put our shoulder to it, knowing that he will reward us at the resurrection for the efforts we have made.

*This booklet is produced by Poplar Baptist Church, Zetland Street, London E14 6RB, from where further copies may be obtained. Our services on Sunday are at 10.30 a.m. and 5.00 p.m.. You will be very welcome to attend these. The church building is situated on the corner of Zetland Street and the Blackwall Tunnel Approach Road. It is ½ mile south of Bromley-by-Bow underground station, and ¼ mile from Langdon Park DLR station, and the 309 and 108 buses pass the door. If you would like to discuss any spiritual matter arising from this booklet, feel free to contact our Pastor, Henry Dixon, on 020 7001 7776, or enquiries@poplarbaptistchurch.org*

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