

“Commission as Function to Commission as Essence:
In What Way Has the Modern Mission Movement Obfuscated the Interpretation of
Matthew 28:16-20, and Can It Be Recovered?”

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The turn of the twentieth century witnessed unprecedented historical optimism for mission concerning the evangelization of unreached people groups, specifically located in Africa and the global south. Most contemporary missiologists suspect the culprit for this missional fervor to be the result of latent enlightenment modern ideals of progress, sustainability, and rationalism. The first great movement toward these modes of thought manifested in the first ecumenical conference on mission in New York in 1900. There, several slogans and watchwords captured the imaginations of thousands of North American Christians, mostly students, compelling several hundreds to be part of “expansion” and the “evangelization of the world in this generation.”¹ Of course, the Scriptural text chosen to ‘commission’ North American Christians to evangelize the world was the very text Jesus Christ used to ‘commission’ his disciples: “The Great Commission,” Matthew 28:16-20.

During the 1900 conference, however, several critical voices chimed among the ecstatic clatter of eager Christians thirsty to convert the heathen. Among them, Gustav Warneck seemed particularly worried that the activist movement would create a harmful reaction against mission. He argued, “There is a great danger of confounding the spread of European and American culture...the missionary command does not say ‘go ye and teach English to every nation.’”² The biblical witness seems to warn against wedding culture and mission together, as Warneck aptly argues. Moreover, the risk of interpreting the Great Commission passage as asserting hasty conversion over timely, self-sacrificing discipleship bears an unfaithful witness to the Matthean pericope. Yates argues, “Mission involves discipling the nations and the apostles did not rush from place to place, but

¹ Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*, (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 19

² Ibid.

organized churches and established and visited them.”³ Perhaps conflict could have been avoided had proper and fervent scholarship been conducted upon this passage prior to it being used as a proof text to justify colonization, paternalization, and inculturation of indigenous people groups into Christian and western ideals.

Presently, biblical scholarship must contend with the challenge of uncovering the layered connotations and presuppositions of Matthew’s final pericope in order to faithfully interpret it within the larger framework of the Gospel. Bosch states, “It is inadmissible to lift these words out of Matthew’s gospel, as it were, allow them a life of their own, and understand them without any reference to the context in which they first appeared.”⁴ This paper will examine the essence and nature of discipleship, as the Gospel according to Matthew asserts, using the historically paradigmatic ‘Great Commission’ narrative, Matthew 28:16-20, specifically verses 19-20, as the centerpiece for discussion. Two questions will be investigated: First, how might have the Matthean community interpreted Jesus’ exhortation to his disciples? Second, how does the Gospel according to Matthew both enable and teach the global church to understand its vocational task – its mission – to ‘make disciples’ of all nations? The structure of this paper will begin with a survey of several different commentaries in order to understand the historical scope of how this particular passage has been interpreted through the history of the church. Subsequently, a personal exegetical analysis using the work of David Bosch and the survey of the aforementioned commentators will attempt to answer the two questions

³ Ibid 18

⁴ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 57

posed to the Great Commission narrative to which dissenting perspectives against this argument also will be raised.

Throughout most of church history, scholars and commentators alike have said little to nothing on this particular passage in the Gospel of Matthew, especially prior to the Enlightenment.⁵ Bosch states, “New Testament scholarship for a long time appeared to have been very little interested in this passage. Even in commentaries on Matthew little attention was paid to it.”⁶ Not until the latter part of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth, at the onset of the modern missionary movement did biblical scholars begin to give right and due attention to the ‘Great Commission’ text. Yet, the first serious work given to this text did not occur until 1941 by Michel and Lohmeyer.⁷ Since their groundbreaking work, the following decades leading up to the present day have witnessed a surge of writings on this passage. The following survey recounts some of the most significant works accomplished by commentators beginning with the Patristic Age through the present time on the final words of Matthew’s Gospel in order to decipher the development, inconsistencies, and commonalities among biblical scholarship.

Since the beginning of the early centuries of the church, the Great Commission has captured the attention of many early thinkers and scholars. Jerome, a fourth century thinker and author of the Vulgate, argues that in the final chapter of Matthew, Jesus commissioned his disciples to first make other disciples of the nations according to his work, baptize them in the name of the Triune God, and then, teach them about his life,

⁵ Unfortunately, this paper cannot give proper consideration to this topic because of the limitations imposed upon its length, but see the first chapter of Timothy Yates’ *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* for a brief and concise history of the modern missionary movement and also chapter nine of Bosch’s *Transforming Mission*.

⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 56

⁷ Ibid

death, and resurrection. For Jerome, Matthew asserts a particular methodological order for mission: discipleship-making – baptizing – teaching. Nothing more, nothing less. Jerome does not seem to expound upon the rationale of this order, except to mention that Matthew asserts a new concept for mission in a particular fashion through Jesus Christ. Although, a logical conclusion can be inferred from Jerome’s rhetorical allusions: one must be sought, then profess faith in the triune God through baptism, and finally, obey all of the commands of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Yet, one may argue that teaching ought to come before baptism, but Jerome does not speak to this dissent.

Like Jerome, John Chrysostom, an important church father and homiletician of the fourth century, mentions very little of the Great Commission, even though he writes a series homilies numbering in the hundreds based on the present day New Testament canon; of which ninety hail from the Gospel of Matthew – more than any other book from the New Testament. He contends that at the event of the commissioning of the disciples, Jesus places the into their hands all of his teachings and commands in the sacrament of baptism. John places heavy emphasis upon this particular sacrament, describing that in baptism, one becomes a true disciple, professes faith in one triune God, and receives all authority to go into the world teaching in the same manner that Jesus taught his disciples. John does not write much else on the Great commission. He implies that the commands Jesus exhorts his disciples to obey may be found within the Gospel, but he does not describe whether it may be found in certain parts of the Gospel or elsewhere in Scripture. Most of the pre-Reformation writings on this pericope offer similar observations.⁸

⁸ Manilo Simonetti, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 1b*, Thomas C. Oden,

John Calvin's 1555 Gospel chorus *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists – Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, however, marks a historical shift from a little understood refrain of scholarship to the beginnings of thought progression and faithful Matthean exploration. Though this momentum shift is partly due to the liberating affects of the Reformation, its characteristics of mission and ecclesiastical reconciliation between the clergy and laity allowed for the possibility of exploring new scholarship concerning missional⁹ texts.

The thrust of Calvin's argument is akin to both Jerome's and Chrysostom's. He advocates that inherent within the Great Commission text lay an order to evangelism centered on baptism. He states, "The meaning amounts to this that by proclaiming the Gospel everywhere, they should bring all nations to the obedience of faith, and next, that they should seal and ratify their doctrine by the sign of the Gospel [baptism]." (383) Yet, the emphasis that Calvin places upon the individual in his exegesis opens a wide door for others to render an individualistic interpretation of this passage. The statement that is particularly troubling is: "they should bring all nations to the obedience of faith." On first read, one may simply gloss over this statement assuming that Calvin is referring to Jesus' disciples, which, of course, he is. The problem with Calvin's statement, however, is agency. According to Calvin's argument, agency rests solely with the individual. The disciples evangelize the nations, the disciples convert the 'heathen,' and the disciples bring the 'heathen' to faith. Notice who is doing each one of the actions in Calvin's

General Ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002)

⁹ The term "missional" incurs several connotations within modern scholarship, which must be clarified. "Missional," at its root definition, conveys the foundational understanding of the nature and essence of both who God is and the relation of the church to its Lord. God, being in very nature God, is a missionary God, a self-sending God, and a God who both disclosed and revealed Godself in the historical, particular person of Jesus Christ. In this same way, God's people, the Body with Christ as its Head, are to be a missionary people, always being sent and sending.

argument: the disciple of Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit, though implicit within this passage, is not the primary actor of evangelism and revealing faith to those without, according to Calvin's argument. Instead, it is the disciple who accomplishes these tasks, which places too much emphasis upon human agency over that of God's. The consequence of Calvin's exegetical interpretation can be clearly seen in the early ecumenical mission movement of the twentieth century, even though paternalism and colonialism in the name of Christ had already been happening for centuries since the Constantinian era.

Calvin's exegetical commentary on the Great Commission passage, however, did incite powerful political controversy in the years following its publication. Using this passage coupled with the emphasis that Mark places upon proclamation, Calvin created a parallel between the importance of preaching and teaching. Because the educational disparity between the parishioners and clergy of the Catholic Church accounted for one of several reasons that instigated the Reformation, the Gospels became a resource and tool for teaching the laity to read and write. Thus, giving the ability for one to understand and interpret Scripture to the individual. He also likens the role of proclamation to the simple 'ease' of kings and popes speaking frivolously from their ornamented chairs. He states, "Let us learn from this passage, that the apostleship is not an empty title, but a laborious office; and that, consequently, nothing is more absurd or intolerable than that this honor should be claimed by hypocrites, who live like kings at their ease, and disdainfully throw away from themselves the office of teaching."¹⁰ His analogy of lazy apostleship, proclaiming the name of Christ without works of service, with royal kingship

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Harmony of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 383

warn the believer against becoming like those whose empty words benefit the elite at the expense of exploiting the weak. He forcefully exclaims that the role of proclamation means absolutely nothing without the arduous task of teaching and the sacrificial cost of discipleship.

In this manner, Calvin explicitly argues that the disciple must deny him or herself for the sake of following the crucified Christ. His exhortation certainly follows the historical socio-political climate of Reformation Europe. On a daily basis, thousands of people were losing their lives because they protested against the oppression, corruption, and greed of the Catholic Church. Calvin argues for “the ministers of the Gospel to go a distance, in order to spread the doctrine of salvation to every part of the world.”¹¹ Calvin and the reformers knew quite well the cost of following Jesus Christ. Sound doctrine possessed great worth and value, for it was Catholic doctrine that was being used against its people. Calvin understood the importance of teaching right and proper doctrine, even if the expense was one’s life.

Calvin, however, does redeem himself from his exegetical interpretation for personal human agency. In regard to Jesus’ demand that all of his disciples keep his commands, Calvin states, “Let us hold that by these words teachers are appointed over the church, not to put forward whatever they may think proper, but that they, as well as others, may depend on the mouth of the master alone, so as to gain disciples for him, and not for themselves.”¹² Here, agency is clearly re-appropriated from the disciple to God. Calvin knows the danger of the former. If a sinner holds the power of one’s salvation, it

¹¹ Ibid 384

¹² Ibid 390

will corrupt absolutely at the expense of one's witness to the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Thus, agency must be assigned fully to the movement of the Holy Spirit, and though at the end Calvin's exposition of the Great Commission, he clearly states the prominent role of the Holy Spirit, an argument can be made against Calvin's inconsistent interpretation of agency.

After Calvin, a long period of relative silence within biblical scholarship occurred on this passage, though systematic theologians, church dogmaticians, such as Karl Barth, and the Anabaptist movement continued to write extensively on the Great Commission text. Albright and Mann, commenting in the 1971 edition of the *Anchor Bible Commentary*, wrote very little on this passage, but they did take into account allusions made to Daniel 7:14. They write, "Here again Jesus expresses himself in the words of Daniel. The mission which had been limited to Israel in the days of his ministry (15:24) is now extended to all peoples."¹³ Little else is referenced or expanded upon this topic. Furthermore, Albright and Mann expound even less on what Jesus means when he exhorts his disciples to keep all of his commandments. The authors' state, "Elsewhere in this Gospel Jesus commands the inner circle to heal (10:1, 8) and to proclaim (10:7). Now that Jesus' ministry is over, the command to teach is given."¹⁴ To which one must ask, why does Jesus give the command to teach? Why does Matthew emphasize this particular office over others? Why does Jesus choose this moment in time to give this command? Neither Albright nor Mann provides insight into these questions. They simply state the obvious actions of the characters within the larger setting of the Great

¹³ W.F. Albright & C.S. Mann, *Matthew*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 362

¹⁴ *Ibid*

Commission text without interpreting why the event takes place in the manner that it does.

Following suit, David Hill, commenting in the 1990 edition of the *New Century Bible Commentary*, argues that while the Great Commission text commissions the disciples to ‘make disciples’ of the whole world, he admits that in reference to Matthew 10, this probably includes the house of Israel also. Hill, similar to the aforementioned commentators, does not elucidate any further upon this topic. He simply concedes that Matthew contradicts itself on this topic and proceeds to move forward without any further reconciliation.

Hill, however, does argue that the form of the pericope seems to have been written by the author of the Gospel, alluding to work accomplished in redaction criticism. The Great Commission text does not appear to have been lifted from another, but it seems to belong solely to the author. He states, “Three themes which have been of great importance to Matthew reappear here: (i) the supreme authority which is given to Jesus Christ; (ii) the Matthean church, represented by the disciples is receptive to the ethical and missionary instructions of the lord; (iii) the eschatological – indeed, universalist – perspective of the instructions are given.”¹⁵ Hill further states, “Therefore, although part of this pericope (v19) may have taken literary shape at a later time than the rest of the Gospel, the main content of the section is consonant with the work as a whole; and features of the language and style of the verses mark them as having been composed by Matthew himself.”¹⁶

¹⁵ David Hill, *New Century Bible Commentary: Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1990), 360

¹⁶ Ibid 361

Furthermore, Hill argues that Jesus' words: "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you"¹⁷ extends far beyond the boundaries of the Gospel. According to Hill, the author of Matthew fully intended to evoke memories of the Law. Hill contends that Jesus' command is a direct reference to the "the terms used of the Law (15.4, 19.7 and 17; EX 7.2, 29.35; DT 1.41, 4.2; etc)."¹⁸ His references to both Exodus and Deuteronomy draw upon the historical traditions of the first and second giving of the law. For Israel, keeping the laws and commands that God gave to the people through Moses bore witness to the character and nature of the God of Israel in the world. The laws and commands set apart Israel as a holy nation from the evil tyranny of other nations, as well as their idolatrous and violent religious practices, so that the one true God would be made known to all people. Hill further argues, "It is by the disciples' proclamation of Jesus' teaching (including probably for Matthew the orders of church discipline in 18:15-22) that Christ is made known."

Matthew also intends to link the Resurrected Christ with Israel's anticipated Messiah. In the same way that Israel made God known by keeping all of God's commands, Jesus is made known by the disciples keeping all of his commands, especially the two greatest of all: love God and love others (Matthew 22:37-40). Hill's exegetical interpretation of the Great Commission is similar to Calvin's in this respect. He places high prominence upon the office of teaching, as well as the cost of discipleship and the urgency for obeying Christ's commands. Hill, unlike Calvin, however, does not distinguish between a hierarchical style and a radically egalitarian style of governance

¹⁷ Bible Quotation taken from New International Version (NIV)

¹⁸ David Hill, *New Century Bible Commentary: Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1990), 365

within the church. Instead, Hill understands Jesus' words as a radical catalyst for unification. Jesus' words are a horizontal declaration among a group of disciples for all people, namely the church, which encompasses both the weak and the strong, the poor and the rich, the depraved and the elite, submitting before him as Lord.

In 1993, biblical scholarship continued to progress with Hare's commentary in the critically acclaimed *Interpretation* series. He took into serious consideration the seeming contradiction between Matthew chapters 10 and 28. He states, "The mission to Israel, attended by persecution and frustration, has been unsuccessful. While Jewish converts are by no means excluded, the focus of the church's mission, Matthew seems to suggest, must henceforth be the Gentile world."¹⁹ His initial analysis appears to be entirely misguided. According to this statement, he portrays Jesus and his disciples moving on from evangelizing Israel purely because they were frustrated with the outcome, as if there was not both a theological and ecclesiological reason for doing so. Here, the disciples seem pithy and are simply looking for the easy convert.

Hare, however, does not exclude Jews from the Gentile mission, but instead, he argues that the Great Commission text fulfills the seeming contradiction of Matthew 10. The two passages, in fact, are not opposed to one another, but Matthew 10 chronologically leads into Matthew 28; Luz interprets this issue in a similar manner. Hare states, "Since the evangelist clearly believes in the worldwide mission ('Go, enlist all the Gentiles as disciples,' 28:19), his insertion of this particular saying is baffling. The best explanation seems to be that for Matthew the narrative concerning the Galilean

¹⁹ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 333-334

mission must be appropriated on two levels.”²⁰ First, he states that Matthew 10 must be interpreted historically in that Jesus’ earthly ministry gave priority to the House of Israel, even though Jesus associated with Jewish and non-Jewish alike. Second, the Great Commission narrative “symbolizes the mission of the post-Easter church, for which the earlier limitation has been annulled by the Risen Christ.”²¹ Jesus’ resurrection inaugurated the Kingdom of God for all people in all times and places. Thus, Jesus’ resurrection has universal implications.

Furthermore, Hare notes that Jesus does not give the command to preach, as he does at the end of the Gospel of Mark. Hare claims that the author of Matthew takes for granted that missionary disciples would both preach the Gospel and call for faith among the people, for this is standard operating procedure for evangelism. Conversely, Hare notes that what Matthew does not take for granted is Jesus’ call for moral obedience among his disciples. Hare states, “As we saw in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew’s Jesus does not present himself as a legislator laying down a new code of laws to replace the Mosaic corpus but rather as the God-authorized, final interpreter of Torah. To do what Jesus teaches (‘my words’ 7:24) is to do the will of the Father in heaven (7:21).”²² Thus, Hare and others do agree that the Great Commission recalls the moral integrity of the law for Jesus’ disciples.

Following Hare in 1995, Hagner wrote a monumental work on Matthew in the *World Biblical Commentary*, which at the time was unparalleled. First, Hagner asserts the primacy given to the Great Commission text. He refers to Michel who “goes so far as

²⁰ Ibid 334

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

to say, in italics, that ‘Matt. 28:16-20 is the key to the understanding of the whole book,’²³ an accolade to which Bosch will later agree. The text highlights some of the larger themes of the text within only a few verses, as Hare argued. Hagner states, “Here we find especially Christology and discipleship but also ecclesiology and righteousness—emphases familiar from the earlier parts of the Gospel.”²⁴ Second, Hagner affirms Hill’s argument that the content of the Great Commission narrative is unique to Matthew, though several parallels may also be found in the other Synoptic Gospels. Hagner, though, examines each one of the parallels found in the Great Commission text with Mark and Luke. Third, Hagner significantly expounds upon the structure of the Great Commission narrative. He states, “Indeed, it is possible to see a concentric structure: A, authority (v. 18b); B, making disciples (v. 19a); C, the central element, baptizing (v. 19b); B’, teaching (v. 20a); and A’, presence (v. 20b).”²⁵ He also commends the reader to note that the term all (Greek: panta) occurs four times in this short text; this notes both the literary and theological significance of this term appearing nearly once in four consecutive verses. Fourth, Hagner dispels all of the notions that the Great Commission text easily fits into a particular genre. As already concluded, Matthew seems to be writing a fresh text. Although other scholars have indicated that this text plays off of both traditional commissioning narratives, specifically pertaining to the disciples, and enthronement narratives, in regard to Jesus, this text does not fit “*exactly*.”²⁶ He also agrees that the passage draws upon Daniel 7, but not enough to build an entire argument upon, which contradicts Albright and Mann’s thesis. Fifth, Hagner argues that the words

²³ Donald A. Hagner, *World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 33B* (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 881

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid 882

²⁶ Ibid

of Jesus in Matthew are authentic to him, even though Matthew reworks it using his own vocabulary. He argues, “For it is that glorious figure who speaks here and who may readily be thought of as capable of such words. The limitations of the earthly Jesus have been left behind. Here from the mouth of Jesus is the vindication of the legitimacy of the Gentile mission (*pace* Hill).”²⁷ Here, he references Hill’s argument that the legitimacy of Jesus’ words has been validated in his resurrection. Moreover, Hagner also agrees, but expands upon, both Hill and Hare in regard to their argument concerning the evangelization of the world, including the house of Israel. He states, “It is shocking now to find Israel thus subordinated and absorbed into the comprehensive reference to the nations. In the now completed salvific work of the Messiah, Israel has accomplished her special role in salvation history. She now too is to enjoy the fruit of that accomplishment as *primus inter pares*.”²⁸ This poses theological problems when worked out against the Apostle Paul’s writings, specifically Romans chapters 9-11.²⁹

In 1997, another monumental work on the Gospel of Matthew appeared by W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison in the *International Critical Commentary* series. Both Hagner and Davies and Allison dissect the structure and form of the text in order to discern any issues of redaction.³⁰ Yet, in regard to the connotations of the Torah expressed in the Great Commission, Davies and Allison interpret a slightly different nuance than the rest. They write, “More persistent has been the proposal, usually tentative and muted, that

²⁷ Ibid 883

²⁸ Ibid 887

²⁹ In a similar manner regarding the mission enterprise of the twentieth century, this topic does not avail the argument of this paper, but one may reference for further study N.T. Wright’s *Justification* and Leander Keck’s *Romans* from the *Abingdon New Testament Commentary Series*, among several others.

³⁰ Though Davies and Allison’s argument concerning the form and structure of the Great Commission is compelling, the similarities between their commentary and Hagner’s far outweigh the nuances.

28:16-20 evokes Moses. The mountain itself, given its Mosaic associations throughout Matthew, is suggestive. Moreover, Moses ended his earthly career on a mountain.”³¹

Davies and Allison stress that readers of the Gospel of Matthew, both the Matthean community and present day, must “exercise their scripturally informed imaginations”³² in order to see the connection that the author of Matthew is making: Jesus is the fulfillment of Moses.

Occasionally, one might hear that Jesus is the *second* Moses, attempting to build upon the Mosaic motif, but this argument does not work because Jesus cannot be reduced to merely the second form of a past human being. Rather, Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, and by this truth, Jesus fulfills all notions of Israel’s anticipated Messiah. Thus, authority in verse 18 truly means that all God’s authority has been given to Jesus as the Redeemer, Reconciler, and Savior of all things. Davies and Allison conclude their commentary of the Great Commission narrative by stating, “Scripture is fulfilled and the word of Jesus (24:20; 26:64) vindicated. And the implicit comparison of Jesus with Moses and of the eleven with Joshua reactivates once more the Moses typology.”³³

Davies and Allison propound upon the link between Jesus and the Torah more so than any other theme in Matthew.

Whereas Davies and Allison interpret Matthew through the lens of grammatical and source criticism, Ulrich Luz, writing for the 2005 *Hermeneia* edition of the Gospel according to Matthew, approaches it from a different point of view: historical criticism. Luz begins his commentary of 20:19 by exploring the obvious contradiction between

³¹ Dale C. Allison & W. D. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1997), 679

³² Ibid 680

³³ Ibid 688

20:19 and 10:5-6: the commissioning of the twelve to evangelize the “Lost Sheep of the House of Israel” versus Jesus’ commissioning of the eleven to make disciples of the whole world. He attacks the debate straight on, asserting that the question of these two passages “is fundamental for understanding Matthean theology, because it reaches into almost all areas.”³⁴ Other aforementioned commentators either skim or completely avoid this tension, which can be stated using Luz’s words, “In Matthew’s view has the proclamation in Israel definitely failed, and is it now abandoned, or does it continue, alongside the mission to non-Jews that is now commanded by the risen Jesus?”³⁵ Luz acknowledges that throughout the history of interpretation, the Great Commission passage has been mostly overlooked. The ancient church understood Jesus’ charge to his disciples as pertinent to that particular time and place, not to the present church. Furthermore, he also states that the passage remained largely obscured throughout the Patristic Age to the Middle and High Middle Ages and through the Reformation, though Calvin commented on it, as previously stated. According to Luz, the Anabaptist impulse toward evangelization and conversion revived the text, which later became the paradigm for modern ecumenical mission scholarship.

Luz, however, attempted to resolve this tension by identifying a fundamental translational issue, which Hare did not adequately address. He argued that the key to understanding the scope of the Great Commission narrative depends on how one translates *panta ta ethne*. He says that the cultural [read: religious] understanding of the term could refer to both Israel and the Gentiles. It was not limited to an either-or in the way that the English translation renders the term, although instances occur in the Greek

³⁴ Ulrich Luz, *Hermeneia, Matthew 21-28*, ed. Helmut Koester, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 628

³⁵ Ibid 629

language when *ethne* can mean either non-Jewish nations or Gentile nations. Luz asserts that *ethne* must be subjectively understood depending upon its context. Luz simply cannot limit the scope of Jesus' mission to exclude the House of Israel by translating the term *ethne* as 'Gentile' nations. This would be unfaithful to the overall message of Matthew's Gospel. Rather, one must examine the Great Commission text within the larger framework of the Gospel. In this particular scene, Jesus has resurrected, and his call to the disciples now extends to all of his followers. His message is universal in scope, which Hare certainly acknowledges. It no longer excludes the Gentiles, as chapter 10 mandates, nor does it supersede the Jewish mission, as Calvin would argue. Instead, it encompasses all people in all times and in all places. At this moment, the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes a radically universal message. Thus, Luz fervently declares, "The mission command of the Lord of heaven and earth – that is, of the whole world – is, in my judgment, fundamentally universal and is for all nations."³⁶ Therefore, *panta ta ethne* must be read and interpreted as "all the nations," truly meaning every nation, including Israel, and for all nations still unknown.

The process by which Jesus Christ calls the eleven to make disciples is through baptizing and teaching. Yet, throughout the history of the church, questions loomed regarding the content of the instruction. Luz argues that the disciples were not commanded to proclaim the Gospel, to be witnesses to the resurrection, or to be his witnesses in the world. Rather, Jesus commanded his disciples to teach. This seems like an odd command when placed within the greater context of Scripture. Much of the New Testament, especially in Paul's writings, associates following Christ with witness. Luz,

³⁶ Ibid 631

like Bosch, however, states that teaching is akin to preaching, which has the notion of witness incorporated within it. Hare states an idea very similar. Yet, Luz brilliantly locates the task of proclamation solely with Jesus while the office teaching – explicating the Scriptures and wrestling with its meaning – belongs to the disciple. Only Jesus can teach with authority, for he is the Son of God – all power on heaven and on earth has been given solely to him. The task of the disciple, according to Matthew, is to receive his proclamation, then subsequently, teach others to obey it.

Luz argues that the content of Jesus’ teaching begins and ends with Jesus. One can assume, then, that “to obey everything I have commanded you”³⁷ refers to all of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew. Luz, though, does not limit Jesus’ teaching strictly to the Gospel. Luz states, “Although v. 20a is formulated in biblical language, the concern here is not, as in the Bible, with keeping the Torah but with everything what Jesus has commanded the disciples, and that includes the Torah (5:17-19).”³⁸ Luz captures the essence of the content of Jesus’ teaching. It cannot be limited to the Sermon on the Mount, or even Matthew’s Gospel, because Jesus reframes all of the teachings of the Torah into an all-encompassing law that begins and ends with loving God and loving neighbor – the foundational ethic for the Kingdom of God. Jesus does not dispense with the Torah. Rather, Jesus fulfills the Torah and redefines its starting point by asserting an ethic of love over anything else. The Torah is still authoritative, but only insofar as it is read and understood under this new mandate set forth by Jesus Christ. Luz’s insight further develops Hare’s argument regarding the seeming contradiction of Matthew 10 and 28 and Davies and Allison’s argument of the Moses typology.

³⁷ Matthew 28:20a NIV

³⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Hermeneia, Matthew 21-28*, ed. Helmut Koester, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 634

These twentieth century commentators each wrote pinnacle works on the Gospel of Matthew, specifically the Great Commission, but after the modern ecumenical mission movement had already damaged the Gospel claim for mission, proving Warneck's foreshadow correct. Yet, a profoundly radical shift in understanding mission theologically occurred when David Bosch, a biblical scholar and missiologist, wrote several articles and works, including his magnum opus *Transforming Mission*, advocating for the Gospel of Matthew to be read entirely as 'discipleship-making' manifesto, giving special attention to the Great Commission narrative as the hermeneutical cipher for interpreting the Gospel. Here, an exegetical analysis attempting to answer the two questions posed to the Great Commission narrative will be examined in conjunction with the work of both David Bosch and the aforementioned commentators.

Since the beginning of the modern mission movement, Bosch states, "The verb *poreuthentes*, the aorist participle of *poreuomai* (to go), has been of special importance."³⁹ The term has been interpreted in such a way that justified the locale of mission over its substance and content. The 1900 New York conference witnessed hundreds of young Christian Americans enrolling to become missionaries in order to evangelize and convert the 'heathen.' Going off to distant lands to fulfill wild and romantic fancies of adventure played into latent-Enlightenment modern monolith of domination, for the dominance of North American culture at the turn of the twentieth century instilled within some a 'command and conquer mentality.' Yates states, "These hardy pioneers developed an understanding of their presence in the New World in terms of God's 'manifest destiny.' Their 'errand in the wilderness' was also a divine calling to

³⁹ David Bosch, "The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:16-20, *Exploring Church Growth*, Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1983), 228

subdue it and civilize it.”⁴⁰ Thus, for the persons present at New York 1900, Matthew’s command to ‘Go!’ sounded more like a cry for battle than a command to make disciples.

The beginning of verse 19 reads in the NIV, “Therefore go and make disciples.” The NRSV reads the same, except reverses the terms ‘therefore’ and ‘go,’ along with the NASB, NKJV, and ESV. Most English translations, however, use the term ‘and’ to separate ‘Go’ and ‘Make Disciples,’ as if to separate two distinct clauses. The Greek literally reads: *poreuthentes oun matheteusate*. This phrase does not contain a *kai* to separate the participle from the imperative clause, nor does the phrase contain two separate clauses in the nominative. The terms compliment each other; both are plural, and the participle refers to the main verb by agreeing in gender and number. This particular literary construction is common among the Gospel text. Bosch says of Schlatter, “When two actions are connected with a single event, Matthew puts the aorist participle of the preparatory action before the aorist of the main verb [read: *matheteusate*, aorist active imperative]. This sentence construction is so common that it may be designated a characteristic of Matthew’s style.”⁴¹ Moreover, the participle is circumstantial, giving it imperative attributes, yet functioning as a participle.

In every passage occurring in Matthew with the ‘participle-imperative’ construction (2:8, 9:13, 10:6-7, and 17:27)⁴², it marks one event, not two. This being the case, *poreuthentes* enhances the meaning of *matheteusate* rather than conveying two

⁴⁰ Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*, (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9

⁴¹ David Bosch, “The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:16-20, *Exploring Church Growth*, Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1983), 229

⁴² Dale C. Allison & W. D. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1997), 686

separate instructions. Moreover, since the participle is always subordinate to the main verb, in this case the imperative, then “*Poreuthentes* serves to underline the urgency and primacy of *matheteusate*.”⁴³ Thus the beginning of verse 19 ought to read: “Therefore, having gone [or going] make disciples.”⁴⁴ In this translation, one senses the aorist tense of both terms, which is how the Matthean community most likely understood the passage. The aspect is undefined, and the sense of urgency, of going somewhere in order to make disciples, not simply going for the sake of going, comes through in the reading. Also, one notes that the act of going is to make disciples; the disciple obeys Jesus’ command in order to fulfill it rather than adhering to legalism. Recognizing this typical Matthean construction informs the reader of its imperative to the community to make disciples. It emphasizes the urgency of baptizing and teaching the commands of Jesus. The result of reading the Gospel in this manner ought to send us both to our neighbors and the to far regions of the world alike, not simply for the adventure, but to serve the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

After baptizing, the second function of discipleship-making is “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”⁴⁵ This statement appears to be the crux of discipleship-making. The order does not necessarily connote the importance of baptism over teaching, for both are important, but the true content of making disciples is in teaching. Davies and Allison state, “It is better to regard *matheteusate* not as the first in a

⁴³ David Bosch, “The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:16-20, *Exploring Church Growth*, Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1983), 229

⁴⁴ My translation

⁴⁵ Matthew 20:20a NIV

series but as a general imperative filled out (although not exhausted) by what follows: baptism and instruction in obedience belong to discipleship.”⁴⁶

For the global, catholic church to rightly embody its mission, it must discern the content of its teaching to make disciples. Jesus obviously wants his disciples to teach other disciples to keep his commands, but to what extent he meant regarding ‘commands’ raises questions. The phrase *panta hosa eneteilamein* compares with other similar phrases in the Septuagint: Exodus 7:2; Deuteronomy 1:3, 6:1, 30:8; Joshua 1:7, 22:2; Judges 13:14; and, Jeremiah 1:7.⁴⁷ A parallel between these commandment motifs of the Old Testament and the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:20 with the Gospel of Matthew links the command given by Jesus to the laws, blessings, prophecies, and parables of Moses, the prophets, the priests, and the kings. The term *eneteilamein* is a constative aorist, which declares that the commands Jesus gave to be authoritative, drawing back to 20:18. Furthermore, since *eneteilamein* is an aorist, similar to the aorist tenses of *poreuthentes* and *matheteusate*, its tense is undefined; this opens the possibility of all past commands given prior to Jesus as valid for the disciples to teach.

Matthew, however, is not renewing outdated legalistic commands through the person of Jesus Christ. Certainly, Jesus’ mandate to keep all of his commands requires discipline and obedience. Discipleship is costly. Yet, Jesus’ life itself embodies the commands to which he calls his disciples to obey, and at the heart of his life, death, resurrection, and subsequent commission lay the greatest commandment of all: love. Bosch states, “This becomes the principle of interpretation in the face of nascent legalism

⁴⁶ Dale C. Allison & W. D. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1997), 686

⁴⁷ Ibid

in Matthew's own community."⁴⁸ Love of God and love of neighbor become the benchmark for every command thereafter. Bosch argues that how one loves neighbor, whether an individual or a community, bears witness of how one loves God.

Perhaps Warneck was right. The modern mission movement during the first half of the twentieth century did harm to the mission of the Gospel in ways from which the Church is still recovering. Colonialism and paternalism do not bear witness to the love God and neighbor. Moreover, the ways in which the early missionaries proof texted the Great Commission narrative also did violence to the text itself. Bosch states, "It is inadmissible to lift these words out of Matthew's gospel, as it were, allow them a life of their own, and understand them without any reference to the context in which they first appeared."⁴⁹ This paper attempted to reclaim the dignity of this text by exploring the history of its interpretation. It discovered that both theologians and biblical scholars have considered its significance throughout the history of the church, but not extensively. In the middle of the twentieth century, once harm had already occurred to the passage and the church, only then did scholars begin asking serious questions of the text within the larger framework of the Gospel. Exegetical research concludes that the Great Commission possesses great significance for interpreting the whole of Matthew's gospel. In fact, according to Michel, "The entire gospel was written only from the perspective of the presuppositions embodied in this pericope."⁵⁰

Moreover, this paper answered two questions posed to the Great Commission narrative: First, how might have the Matthean community interpreted Jesus' exhortation

⁴⁸ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 67

⁴⁹ *Ibid* 57

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

to his disciples? Second, how does the Gospel both enable and teach the global church to understand its vocational task – its mission – to ‘make disciples’ of all nations? In regard to the first, the Matthean community understood Jesus’ exhortation to the eleven as an extension of his ministry, a witness to all that has been accomplished and fulfilled. To do this, the disciples must teach others, and likewise, they must live a life reflecting the content of their master’s teachings; thus marking the significance of Jesus’ eternal presence with all of his disciples, the church. Second, the Gospel enables one to teach others to understand its vocational task through Jesus’ foundational commandment to love God and love neighbor. Without question, Jesus gives commands for his disciples to follow, but they mean absolutely nothing without love, for if the church can speak in the language of men and angels but does so without love, then it is a resounding gong. If scholars and academics claim to fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if pastors have faith that can move mountains, but we do not have love, then we are nothing. If missionaries surrender themselves to the flames, but have not love, then they gain nothing. The Christian church has been called to go make disciples in love baptizing and teaching all others to keep the commands of Jesus Christ. This requires preparation, courage, and strength from the Holy Spirit, along with sound exegesis and faithful scholarship.