

## What is the ‘Great Commission’

### Question:

Some maintain that the “**Great Commission**” of Matt. 28 has nothing to do with Christianity. Can such a statement be justified from Scripture?

### Answer:

Matthew’s Gospel knows nothing of the Lord’s ascension nor of the coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell the Assembly—the two defining features of the present time. (When the Lord spoke of the Assembly in Matt. 16: 18, the disciples would understand it then as no more than a called-out company in Israel). Now while the Assembly is here, the Lord is absent. However, the final words of this Gospel are “And behold, *I* am with you all the days, until the completion of the age” (Matt. 28: 20). The use of the emphatic pronoun demands that it is the Lord Himself rather than the Holy Spirit as some think. Thus Matthew presents the Lord as still present here.

Consider now the Lord’s command to baptise in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The NT knows nothing of its fulfilment. The name, when given at baptism, is *always* that of the Lord Jesus (see Acts 2: 38; 8: 16; 10: 48; 19: 5; Rom. 6: 3 and, by inference, 1 Cor. 1: 17). Again, the command was to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28: 19)—an expression that refers to Gentiles as distinct from Israel. Yet it took a vision to get Peter to go to the Gentile Cornelius and when his action was challenged, he never mentioned the command of Matt. 28! The same could be said for the events of the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. Later on, Peter agreed to go to the Jews while Paul went to the Gentiles (see Gal. 2: 7–10). Now either the disciples were grossly disobedient to the Lord’s command, or they knew something that many Christians do not. That they themselves were not ignorant is demonstrated by the fact that in the forty days before Pentecost the Lord “opened their understanding to understand the scriptures” (Luke 24: 45). There is only one conclusion from all this: the commission of Matt. 28 does not belong to the present time, but to the future. So when then will this commission be carried out?

The phrase *completion of the age* is peculiar to Matthew (see Matt. 13: 39, 40, 49; 24: 3; 28: 20). The Jews recognised two ages: that under law and a future one under the Messiah (see Matt. 12: 32). Dispensationally, as the time of the Assembly on earth forms a parenthesis, the age of law has not ended (see Eph. 1: 21). From Heb. 2: 5 we learn that the world to come, or the Millennium when Christ reigns, will not be subject to angels, clearly inferring that the present age is. When the Lord comes, angels come with Him (see Matt. 16: 27; 25: 31; Mark 8: 38; Luke 9: 26; 2 Thess. 1: 7). These *subsequently* gather together the elect (see Matt. 24: 31; Mark 13: 27), separate the lawless from the righteous and the wicked from the just (see Matt. 13: 41–43, 49). All this takes place *after* the Lord has returned to earth and, because the service is angelic, occurs in the closing days at the completion of the present age. This is the time that Matt. 28: 16–20 prophetically envisages.

The events of Zech. 12: 6–14: 9 will have taken place when Matt. 28: 16–20 comes into effect. Israel will have looked with acute repenting bitterness on the Christ “whom they pierced” (Zech. 12: 10), and “his feet” will have stood “in that day upon the mount of Olives” (Zech. 14: 4) having come to this earth and all the holy ones with Him (see v5). As King of kings, Christ is invested with universal power on earth as well as in heaven (see Matt. 28: 18) and thus issues the

great commission. Yes, the Gospel of the Kingdom will have been previously preached as a witness during the period between the appearing and the rapture (see Matt. 24: 14) but there is no thought of gospel, preaching or witness here. Rather, it is discipleship, baptism and teaching. Now the word *disciple* belongs to the kingdom, is much used in the Gospels and Acts, but never once employed in the Epistles. Baptism is always identified with the kingdom and as Paul's ministry was of the Gospel and the Assembly (see (Col. 1: 23, 25), it did not form part of his commission (see 1 Cor. 1: 17). Baptism is also connected with discipleship (see John 4: 1) but the words of Matt. 28: 19 are literally 'disciple all the nations', making the ordinance national rather than individual. Baptism to "the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (v19) will then be the sign of submission of those who previously bowed to the singular god of Islam or the multiplicity of the gods of Hinduism. Thus "Jehovah shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one Jehovah, and his name one" (Zech 14: 9).

**S.D.N.**