

QUESTION 1

What Is the Great Commission?

In the last chapter of Matthew, almost all modern English translations place a subheading before Jesus’s last words to his disciples: “The Great Commission.” If one looks above Mark 16:14, the label occurs again in many English Bibles as well.¹ Many Christians today are familiar with the term. It appears as the theme or title of countless blogs, articles, books, conferences, and sermons. Subheadings and titles like these are helpful because they summarize what passages are teaching. This chapter will explore the meaning of the title “Great Commission,” where it originated, and where and why it appears in Scripture.

The History of the “Great Commission”

Who coined the label “Great Commission” is not certain. Because the phrase is so common today, it is difficult to decipher the history of the title. An author or speaker may refer to someone in history as teaching about the Great Commission even if that historical person did not use the title. For example, many rightly refer to William Carey (1761–1834), the father of the modern missionary movement, as writing about the Great Commission in his work *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. Although Carey’s teaching is congruent with much of our understanding about the Great Commission today, he never used the expression in his famous mission treatise.² Another difficulty, as David Wright reveals, is that “commission” is a common enough noun and “great” is also so common

1. The English Standard Version (ESV), the Christian Standard Bible (CSB), and the New King James Version (NKJV) all place the same header in Mark 16 that occurs in Matthew 28. In the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the heading “The Disciples Commissioned” appears instead of “The Great Commission.” In the New International Version (NIV), there is no heading above the verse.
2. Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 127.

of a descriptor that the phrase “great commission” appears in a general sense long before its modern restricted use.³

Timothy Tennent says the expression seems to first appear in print in 1889 when Eugene Stock published his three-volume work, *History of the Church Mission Society*.⁴ Robbie Castleman writes that it is possible that the Dutch missionary Justinian von Welz (1621–1688) created the label.⁵ But, Malcom Yarnell argues that the earliest identification of Matthew 28:18–19 as the Great Commission appears in Francis Johnson’s 1595 work *A treatise of the ministry of the Church of England*.⁶ Johnson describes the passage with adjectives, calling it the “last and great commission.”⁷ Yarnell further argues that Benjamin Keach, a seventeenth-century particular Baptist, is the first to repeatedly develop “the idea that Matthew 28:16–20 is the Great Commission from which the Christian churches should live their lives.”⁸ However, Johnson’s and Keach’s understanding still differ from the full modern idea of the Great Commission as a title for Matthew 28:16–20 as the missionary mandate.

Although the history of the phrase is not easy to sort, many Christians have adopted the phrase and continue to use it today. Some argue that Hudson Taylor (1832–1905), missionary to China, popularized the use of the label.⁹ Taylor is often attributed with the now famous quote, “The Great Commission is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed.” A source that confirms

3. David F. Wright, “The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word: Reflections Historical and Contemporary on Relations and Priorities,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 25, no. 2 (September 2007): 153. Wright provides a helpful survey and assessment of works that use the words “great commission” in his article.

4. Tennent, *Invitation*, 127.

5. Robbie F. Castleman, “The Last Word: The Great Commission: Ecclesiology,” *Themelios* 32, no. 3 (April 2007): 68. Unfortunately, Castleman does not reference what part of Welz’s work led her to this conclusion.

6. Malcom Yarnell, “Enduring Submission to the Great Commission,” *Love Each Stone*, August 29, 2007, http://loveeachstone.blogspot.com/2007/08/rogers-yarnell-dialogue-on-great_30.html.

7. Francis Johnson, *A Treatise of the Ministry of the Church of England* (1595), 32.

8. Yarnell, “Enduring Submission to the Great Commission.” Here is Keach’s quote in full: “Sir, All that are to be baptized, are, by virtue of the great Commission of our Saviour, to be first taught and made Disciples by teaching; and take heed you add not to his Word, nor attempt to invert the Order of the Charter and gracious Grant of the King of Heaven and Earth” (Benjamin Keach, *The Rector Rectified and Corrected, or, Infant-Baptism Unlawful: Being a Sober Answer to a Late Pamphlet Entituled an Argumentative and Practical Discourse of Infant-Baptism, Published by Mr. William Burkit, Rector of Mildin in Suffolk: Wherein All His Arguments for Pede-Baptism Are Refuted and the Necessity of Immersion, I.e. Dipping, Is Evidenced, and the People Falsly Called Anabaptists Are Cleared from Those Unjust Reproaches and Calumnies Cast Upon Them: Together with a Reply to the Athenian Gazette Added to Their 5th Volume About Infant-Baptism: With Some Remarks Upon Mr. John Flavel’s Last Book in Answer to Mr. Philip Cary* [London: John Harris, 1692], 78).

9. Castleman, “The Last Word,” 68.

the attribution, however, does not exist.¹⁰ Whether Taylor popularized the term cannot be known with certainty, given the dearth of information. But we do know that either during or shortly after Taylor's life, the term became popular. As Wright concludes "it was not until the last decades of the nineteenth century, or even perhaps the earliest years of the twentieth, that Matthew 28:18–20 came to be conventionally referred to as 'the Great Commission.'"¹¹

Why Matthew 28:18–20 Is the "Great Commission"

It is important to consider why Matthew 28:18–20 has this title, its full meaning, and what other passages the title fits. What has prompted writers to label it a "commission," and what is it that makes this commission so "great"?¹² Why is it not—as others have asked—for example, called the *Great Command*, the *Great Declaration*, or the *Great Suggestion*? There are several reasons. First, Jesus's words are not a declaration or a suggestion, because Jesus commands his disciples with the authority of the Creator and Sovereign Lord. He sends out his disciples with "all authority in heaven and on earth." His words require a response. The Greek aorist participle *poreuthentes* should not be translated with a relaxed idea ("as you go") but with an imperatival force ("Go!").¹³ In fact, each participle in this passage (going, baptizing, and teaching) has an imperatival force.¹⁴ The disciples must obey Jesus's words.

Second, Jesus's words are also more than a command. A command is an authoritative order that can be positive or negative. For example, "feed the hungry" and "do not murder" are commands, but they are not commissions. In a commission, one is sent with another's authority to fulfill a task or mission. Artists are commissioned to produce a painting, and ships are commissioned to deploy in service. The one commissioned has the power and authority to act for the one sending them. With his final words, Jesus sends out his disciples to participate in God's mission with his authority and with the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why many have correctly labeled Matthew 28:18–20 as a "commission." God, through Christ, has sent his followers to participate in his mission by making disciples of all nations.

Before asking why this commission is so great, it is important to understand that the Great Commission is only a part, albeit a crucial part, of all that

10. Mitzi J. Smith and Jayachitra Lalitha, *Teaching All Nations: Interrogating the Matthean Great Commission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 58; Wright also makes a similar point ("The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word," 156–57).

11. Wright, "The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word," 132.

12. This wording of the second question comes from Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 40.

13. See Question 16.

14. The imperatival force of "going" (Go!) is stronger than that of the other two participles ("baptizing" and "teaching"). See Question 17.

God is doing. From the entire story of the Bible, the grand redemptive story, we see that there is a larger *missio dei*, a Latin phrase meaning the “mission of God.” From the opening line of “In the beginning” to the closing “Amen,” the Bible tells the story of God’s mission to redeem humanity and creation. As Christopher Wright says, “*The whole Bible is itself a ‘missional’ phenomenon. . . . The Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation.*”¹⁵ Mission is ultimately about what God is doing, which is not limited to what man does. The Great Commission is man’s role in God’s greater work. God is working to bring all creation back to himself, but he gives a specific command within that greater work for his people to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. As Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert write, “There are certain things that God intends to do one day that we are to have no part in. . . . [T]here were also certain elements of Jesus’ mission during his first coming that were unique to him. We have no part, for example in dying for the sins of the world.”¹⁶ Our role is to be a witness of God’s mission in Christ. We understand the Great Commission best then if we understand it as part of God’s mission. John Massey summarizes it well: “‘Mission’ is, therefore, God’s work in the world; the church serves as a sign and instrument for that mission.”¹⁷

If the Great Commission is only a part of God’s mission, then what makes it “great”? First, Robert Plummer answers, “Jesus commissions [the disciples] with language that draws a parallel to his own mission” (John 20:21).¹⁸ The God of all creation is at work in his mission to restore the world and mankind to himself, and he allows his followers to play a part in that mission, a role that parallels the Son of God himself. The Great Commission is our Spirit-empowered work in God’s mission. Second, what makes this commission even more important, as DeYoung and Gilbert demonstrate, is its “strategic placement” at the very end of Matthew to climax all that has occurred prior, and its ability to sum up the major themes of the Gospel.¹⁹ D. A. Carson agrees: “The Great Commission is not simply tacked on at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. Rather, it brings to a climax one of the themes that drives through the entire book.”²⁰ The Great Commission completes Matthew’s teaching that Jesus came to save (Matt. 1:21). Third, these words are also Jesus’s final words

15. Wright, “The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word,” 22 (emphasis added).

16. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 42.

17. John Massey, “The Missionary Mandate of God’s Nature,” in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 102.

18. Robert L. Plummer, “The Great Commission in the New Testament,” *SBTJ* 9, no. 4 (2005): 7.

19. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 43–44.

20. D. A. Carson, “Conclusion: Ongoing Imperative for World Mission,” in *The Great Commission: Evangelicals and the History of World Missions*, eds. Martin I. Klauber and Scott M. Manetsch (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 178.

to his apostles before he leaves them. As a result, they carry extra power and importance. Last words are meant to be lasting words. Finally, Ed Stetzer also says, “At this moment the mission shifts in Jesus’ words from a centripetal mission—*up to* Jerusalem—to a centrifugal mission—go therefore *out from* this place.”²¹ The expanded scope of worldwide evangelism is what makes this commission great.

When we place Matthew 28:18–20 in the context of God’s mission and Matthew’s structure, we can see why many have labeled it the *Great Commission*. In it, we reach the top of a mountain, literally and figuratively, seeing all that Christ has done for mankind and all that Christ will do.²² We also see our glorious, life-encompassing marching orders from our Savior.

The Great Commission or Great Commissions?

When Eugene Stock uses the title “Great Commission” in his work, he referred to all the gospel mandates rather than Matthew alone.²³ Matthew 28:18–20 is a crucial part of the Great Commission. But, our understanding of the “Great Commission” must broaden beyond Matthew’s final verses. Mark 13:10,²⁴ Luke 24:46–49, John 20:19–23, and Acts 1:8 each record commissions by Jesus to spread the gospel.²⁵ Although these passages differ in their specific focus, they all capture the command for Christians to spread the gospel. And all but John specifically reference bringing the gospel to the nations/world.²⁶ Timothy Tennent is right then when he says that there are actually Great Commissions (plural) in the Bible and that each adds to the collective force of the Great Commission (singular).²⁷ The benefit of expanding the title to include all of these passages is

21. Ed Stetzer, “To Our Neighbors and the Nations,” in *Finish the Mission: Bringing the Gospel to the Unreached and Unengaged*, eds. John Piper and David Mathis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 125 (emphasis original).

22. Interestingly, many key events in Matthew’s Gospel take place on a mountain, including the giving of the Great Commission. The climactic temptation (4:8–11), the Sermon on the Mount (5–7), the Transformation (17:1), the Olivet Discourse (24–25), and the Great Commission (28:16–20) all occur on a mountain.

23. Tennent, *Invitation*, 127.

24. Mark 14:9 also mentions the prediction of the gospel going out into the whole world. The passage typically labeled in Mark as the Great Commission, Mark 16:15–20, is a part of the longer ending to Mark’s Gospel (Mark 16:9–20), which scholars almost unanimously agree is a latter addition to the book (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 685–88).

25. Technically, Mark 13:10 and Luke 24:46–49 are predictions of the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Nonetheless, we should read them with the other texts as implicit commissions for the church.

26. One can interpret an implicit direction in Jesus sending us to the nations because Jesus’s followers have a parallel mission to his. John also records Jesus giving the disciples the Holy Spirit, which correlates well with the teaching in Acts 1:8 that the reception of the Spirit begins the commission to all of the world (cf. Acts 2:1–4).

27. Tennent, *Invitation*, 128.

that it allows the title to carry the unique contribution of each book, and it highlights the truth that this theme is important to all of the New Testament.

Robert Plummer argues that the Great Commission also appears implicitly in Paul's writings. Paul commands in Philippians 2:16 "to hold out the word of life";²⁸ he encourages the Thessalonians because the word was going out from them everywhere (1 Thess. 1:8); and he commands the church to imitate him, which has an evangelistic component (1 Cor. 4:16).²⁹ The Great Commission is present throughout the New Testament. It reaches its fulfillment as we move toward the *eschaton* (Rev. 5; 7). Its presence should not surprise us because God's mission is central to the story of the whole Bible. We should expect to see our role in it in multiple locations.

Summary

The title "Great Commission" is not in the original New Testament manuscripts, but it faithfully captures the heart of Jesus's words, just like the word "Trinity" faithfully captures the Bible's understanding of God's being, character, and identity. Jesus has sent his disciples to continue his mission and to be witnesses to the great work that God is accomplishing. One day God will complete his mission and his followers will enter into God's perfect rest to enjoy him forever. Until then, we have work to do!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Where does the Great Commission fit into the overall story of the Bible?
2. How does Jesus's commission in the New Testament differ from God's commands to Israel in the Old Testament?
3. Reread the passages this chapter gives as being a part of the Great Commission. What does each contribute?
4. How does placing the Great Commission within God's larger mission give us a proper perspective?
5. In what ways is Jesus's life on earth an example for our work in the Great Commission?

28. Plummer acknowledges that the translation of this verse is debated ("The Great Commission in the New Testament," 8).

29. *Ibid.*