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going concerns of God. We are asked to share in His concerns and make it possible for the people to realise them.’²³

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The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20—A Missionary Mandate or Not?

by PETER T. O’BRIEN

I. THE CURRENT DEBATE

OVER THE past two decades there has been a critical re-examination, by many Christians, of the place and significance of Christian missions and missionary societies. In some quarters at least there has been a fresh appraisal of the Biblical basis of missions and a reaction to a lack of theology of mission evidenced in some quarters by the quoting of proof texts

The Great Commission of [Matthew 28:18–20](#) is one such passage and its use in this connection has been regarded by some as illegitimate on the grounds that it has nothing to do with missionary activity at all beyond the apostolic age. The words, it is argued, were addressed to the eleven disciples (v. [16](#)) and to them alone. A further refinement of this view is that the commission was given to Jewish Christians who were to make disciples among their Fellow Jews of the first century AD that they too might believe in Jesus as Messiah. But either way the passage is said to have no immediate application to the 20th century, or, if so, then only after considerable qualification.

II. THE GREAT COMMISSION IN EARLIER TIMES¹

During the last decade of the 18th century William Carey made his powerful plea for missionary endeavour in the non-Christian world. His urgent call to witness, as is well-known, marked the [P. 255](#) beginning of the great century and a half of missionary proclamation.

In 1792. Carey had published his now-famous booklet entitled *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. In it he argued that Christ’s command of [Matthew 28](#) was as binding on men of his day as it was on the

²³ *Small is Beautiful*, p. 36. pp. 34–6.

¹ Note the treatment of H. R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids, 1961), pp. 15ff., to which I am indebted.

apostles. The command, he asserted, had not been repealed, there were still subjects to obey it, there had been no further revelation to counter it, and nothing stood in the way of obeying it.

That Carey should press these thoughts may seem strange to us. Yet the view he presented was unusual, even radical, for his contemporaries. The Reformers and the majority of the 17th century theologians believed the Great Commission was binding only on the apostles. When they died Christ's command died with them. Both Luther and Calvin held this view as did Martin Bucer, a Reformer with deep missionary concern. Bucer bemoaned the fact that Christian men of his day were willing to go to distant parts and exert themselves in various ways to gain material advantages but showed little concern for the spiritual welfare of those with whom they transacted business. But even Bucer, who encouraged his church's elders to take the matter in hand, did not have a view² different from that of the other Reformers.

How then does the Gospel spread into the world? According to the Reformers. *in principle*, it was declared to the world by the apostles. The preaching begun by them is 'like a stone thrown into the water: it makes ripples and circles around itself which move farther and farther outward ... until they reach the water's edge'.³ From the death of the apostles onward 'the Church expands through witness in her immediate community or as a result of being scattered on account of persecution'.⁴

Although both in England and on the Continent subsequent to the Reformation there were some Christians with a missionary zeal, by and large the Protestant churches had a very poor record regarding missions—in contrast, be it noted, to the Roman Catholics. p. 256

So it was against this background of Reformation and post-Reformation thought that Carey set forth his views. The concern of this article, then, is not to question whether Carey was right in stirring up missionary interest among his contemporaries, but whether his exegesis of [Matthew 28:18–20](#) was correct.

III. THE FORM AND STRUCTURE OF MATTHEW 28:18–20

Although a number of New Testament scholars this century have proposed solutions to the problems of the *literary form* of the Great Commission in the hope of giving a more precise or accurate exegesis⁵ of the paragraph there has as yet been no consensus.⁶ The following are the most important proposals to date:

(a) *An Enthronement Hymn* (Otto Michel).

(b) *An Official Decree* (B. J. Malina).

(c) *A Covenant Renewal Manifesto* (H. Frankmoelle).

(The details of these proposals have been omitted—*Editor*.)

(d) *A Commissioning Narrative*. B. J. Hubbard, after making a scholarly survey of attempts to determine the literary form of [Matthew 28:16–20](#), examined the

² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵ B. J. Malina, 'The Literary Structure and Form of Matthew, XXVIII. 16–20', NTS 17 (1970–71), pp. 87–103, recognised that 'the literary form of these verses has to be determined before any adequate exegesis can be set forth' (p. 88).

⁶ B. J. Hubbard, *The Matthaean Redaction of a Primitive Apostolic Commissioning: An Exegesis of Matthew 26:16–20* (Missoula, 1974), p. 2. and his subsequent survey of the discussion on pp. 2–23.

commissioning narratives of the Old Testament to see whether they might provide a model for Matthew's account of Jesus' commission to his disciples. Twenty-seven commissioning narratives were analysed⁷ beginning with Abraham's call ([Genesis 11:28–30; 12:1–4](#)) and those of other patriarchs, passing on to the commissionings of Moses ([Exodus 3:1ff.](#)) and Joshua ([Deuteronomy 31:14ff.; Joshua 1:1–11](#)), Isaiah ([Isaiah 6](#)), Jeremiah ([Jeremiah 1:1–10](#)), Ezekiel ([Ezekiel 1:1–3:15](#)) and the Servant of the Lord ([Isaiah 49:1–6](#)), through to Cyrus' commissioning of the Jews in Babylon to rebuild the Temple ([Ezra 1:1–5; II Chronicles 36:22ff.](#)). Hubbard detected, with some variations, a basic form consisting of seven elements, five of which could be paralleled in the Matthaean conclusion: p. 257

1. *Introduction*: providing circumstantial details such as time and place ([Matthew 28:16](#)).

2. *Confrontation*: God (or some human commissioner) appears on the scene to address the person(s) to be commissioned ([Matthew 28:17a, 18](#)).

3. *Reaction*: in several instances the person reacts to the divine presence with fear or is overcome with a sense of unworthiness ([Matthew 28:17b](#)).

4. The *Commission* itself: this is the central element in the form (found in all 27 Old Testament passages). In it the person(s) is instructed to undertake a specific task which may require him to assume a new role in life (e.g. the call of a prophet). ([Matthew 28:19b–20a](#)).

5. *Protest*: mentioned in half of the Old Testament passages (cf. 3: the *Reaction*) where the person indicates he is unable or unworthy to accomplish the commission. (No parallel in Matthew).

6. *Reassurance*: a feature which because of its importance to the one being commissioned is sometimes repeated or attended with a supplementary sign ([Matthew 28:20b](#)).

7. *Conclusion*: the commissioning narrative usually concludes with a statement that the one commissioned starts to carry out his work (no parallel in Matthew).

Apart from the structural characteristics, Hubbard drew attention to the following features of these commissionings: first, assuming we are not dealing with a monolithic form, this type 'persists in documents whose span of composition stretches from the Jahwist to the Chronicler.'⁸ Secondly, not only the structure but also several themes, relevant to the Matthaean passage, reappear: the motif of universality, a stress on the observance of God's commandments, and the idea of God's continual protective presence. Thirdly, certain expressions are characteristic of these Biblical commissionings: 'I am (will be) with you', 'behold I', 'go', 'I command', 'all', etc. Finally, Hubbard drew attention to the point that the paragraphs analysed were very significant ones. 'They describe how Israel's patriarchs and prophets were summoned (*via* the commissioning formula) to participate in events which shaped the people's destiny.'⁹ p. 258

(e) *Evaluation*: Of the four structural examinations of [Matthew 28](#) that have been reviewed Hubbard's seems the most reasonable since it is able to explain each of the elements. Further, the recurrence of certain themes and expressions seems to corroborate his formal examination. However, several qualifications are in order. First, Hubbard admits that the commissioning form was not monolithic within the Old Testament. [Matthew 28:16–20](#) itself does not contain all seven elements but omits the

⁷ Hubbard, *op. cit.*, pp. 32ff.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Protest and the Conclusion. The risen Jesus' words to the disciples that he would be with them 'always to the close of the age' form a suitable end to the Gospel as a whole, not simply to the paragraph. A further conclusion to the effect that the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded would have been an anti-climax. On somewhat similar grounds the omission of the Protest is explicable.

Secondly, in his concern to stress the structural relationship of [Matthew 28:16-20](#) with the commission narratives of the Old Testament, Hubbard has not given sufficient attention to covenants. Several of the paragraphs examined as commission narratives are to be understood as covenants between God and the individual (e.g. Abraham). Furthermore, the sixth element, the word of reassurance ('I will be with you', or its equivalent) is in fact bound up with the covenant slogan: 'I will be their God and they shall be my people'. Thus, although one may generally accept Hubbard's formal conclusions, it is Frankemöeller who has tied in [Matthew 28](#) closely with the covenantal promises of the Old Testament. Indeed, the great strength of the latter's whole work is that he views Matthew's Gospel, *in toto*, in the light of the fulfilment of covenant promises. This conjunction is seen still more clearly when we note that other covenantal themes and expressions from Genesis and Deuteronomy are taken up in Matthew's Great Commission. These themes and expressions are noted in the exegesis below.

Finally, while it is no doubt correct to note the similarities between the commission narratives of the Old Testament and [Matthew 28](#), one particular distinction stands out. All of God's commissions in the Old Testament have to do with *individual* patriarchs or prophets.¹⁰ That of the risen Lord Jesus concerns p. 259 *disciples as a group*. It has therefore aptly been called 'The Great Commission'.

IV. AN EXEGESIS OF THE PARAGRAPH

These verses of [Matthew 28](#) are among the most important words of the whole Gospel. They serve as the climax, integrally related to the purpose of Matthew as a whole. Several terms and phrases found in this Great Commission which are rather difficult to interpret and on which there has been difference of opinion (e.g. 'make disciples', 'all nations', 'teaching', 'the end of the age'), have already been used in Matthew. These earlier uses help to throw light on the meaning of the Great Commission and thus reference will be made to them in our exegesis.

The division which follows is a three-fold one.¹¹ Yet the three sections are tied together by the word 'all' (Greek *pas*): 'all authority', v. [18](#); 'all the nations', v. [19](#); 'all things', v. [20](#); 'always', v. [20](#). The three statements are bound together.¹² They are all-embracing, all-inclusive.

(a) *The statement of authority by the risen Lord* (v. [18](#)). If v. [16](#) provides the introduction to the commissioning narrative, with its circumstantial details of time and place, then in vv. [17](#) and [18](#) we find that Jesus appears on the scene to address his disciples. His word is a declaration of authority: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (v. [18](#)).

It has been suggested in recent discussion that these words derive from the vision of the Son of Man in [Daniel 7:13-14](#). But is [Matthew 28:18](#) really a fulfilment of this passage?

¹⁰ The Commission of Israel in [Ezra 1:1-5](#) and [2 Chron. 36:22-3](#) is no real exception since it was Cyrus' commissioning.

¹¹ Note the careful exegetical treatment of W. Trilling, *Das Wahre Israel* (Munich, 3, 1964), pp. 21ff.

¹² So Bornkamm, *loc. cit.*, pp. 205-6.

Although there may be echoes of the language of [Daniel 7](#) no mention is made of ‘the Son of Man’, while his coming in [Daniel 7:13–14](#) with the clouds of heaven is understood in the Gospel with reference to the future ([24:30](#); [26:64](#)), probably the *parousia*. Our passage points to an authority or rule exercised by the resurrected Lord *here and now*.

The theme of authority (*exousia*) is mentioned frequently in the Synoptic Gospels and it occurs at significant points in Matthew [p. 260](#) to designate the divine authority of the earthly Jesus. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is said to have taught with authority, in contrast to the scribes ([7:29](#)). His authority over demons is one which may be exercised by his disciples on his behalf ([10:1](#)) as they preach the Kingdom (vv. [7–8](#)). Also significant is the reference to the Son of Man’s authority to forgive sins ([9:6, 8](#)), like [Matthew 28](#), an authority ‘given by God’,¹³ while the answer to the chief priests and Jewish elders’ questions, ‘By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?’ is ‘God’. The only difference between the authority exercised by the earthly Jesus and that given to the risen Lord is its *universal extension*. The Giver and Source of this authority is the same, God himself. The recipient in both cases is one and the same person, the earthly Jesus and the resurrected Lord. In [Matthew 28](#), the authority is said to be complete (‘all’) and universal in its extent (‘in heaven and on earth’). The one who described himself as ‘gentle and lowly in heart’ and who invited men to take his yoke upon them ([11:29](#)) is the same person to whom all things were delivered by his Father ([11:27](#)),¹⁴ and who has been exalted as Lord of all. His claim must therefore be one of total submission.

(b) *The risen Lord’s commission to the disciples* (vv. [19, 20a](#)). Jesus knows that such authority has been given to him (v. [18](#)). He now wields that authority in the command which follows. Indeed, the statement about all power serves as the ground (‘therefore’) for the commission. Because he possesses all authority and is Lord over all peoples he is able to make the claim on men and women to become his disciples.

i. *A missionary commission or not?* In almost half of the Old Testament commissioning narratives noted above the idiomatic expression ‘go’ (using the same Greek verb, *poreuomai*, as in [Matthew 28:19](#)) forms part of the commission ([Genesis 12:1, 24:4; Exodus 3:16; Joshua 1:2; Isaiah 6:9](#), etc.).¹⁵ On occasion (e.g., [Genesis 12:1; 24:4](#)), a movement from one place to another [p. 261](#) is indicated. But frequently this verb ‘to go’ is used as an auxiliary, with little or no force of its own—not only in the commissioning narratives ([Judges 4:6; I Kings 19:15](#)) but also in other parts of the Old Testament material.¹⁶ The same holds true in Matthew’s Gospel where this verb ‘go’ (as an aorist participle) is simply an auxiliary reinforcing the action of the main verb (e.g., [2:8; 9:13; 11:4; 17:27; 28:7](#) as well as [28:19](#)). ‘In emphasizing the main verb, no idea of going need be present at all’.¹⁷ The core of the command is the making of disciples, not the going. The idea of sending, being sent (i.e. from one place to another) is secondary and

¹³ A. Voegtle, ‘Das christologische und ekklesiologische von Matthew 28, 18–20’, *StEv* 2 (Berlin, 1964), pp. 281–82; and Trilling, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁴ M. J. Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology and Law in Matthew’s Gospel* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970, pp. 99–108; and R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-Existence, Wisdom and the Son of Man* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 68–90.

¹⁵ See Hubbard, *op. cit.*, p. 67, n.2. for further references.

¹⁶ T. O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (London, 1973), pp. 238ff.: and Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley, *Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford, 2, 1910), para. 120.

¹⁷ M. Black, cited by Malina *loc. cit.*, p. 90. Cf. R. R. de Ridder, *The dispersion of the people of God* (Kampen, 1971), p. 184.

unemphasized, and as a result some have suggested the word 'go' is better left untranslated.

If these observations are correct, then two implications follow: first, the Eleven were not disobedient to this word by remaining in Jerusalem after Pentecost and making disciples. If the going is not to be emphasized then the important thing for the Eleven was to make disciples, wherever they had opportunity to do so. Teaching men and women in Jerusalem about Jesus as Lord and Christ, and what it meant to obey his commandments were a fulfilment of this commission from the risen Lord.

Secondly, if the commission to the disciples is applicable to the 20th century (and this point has yet to be established) then it ought not to be restricted to missionaries. If 'the going' is unemphasized and 'the making disciples' receives the stress then clearly this will have reference to Christians generally. The terms '*missionary* commission' or '*missionary* mandate' unnecessarily limit the meaning of the phrase. The term 'Great Commission' is apt, provided this is understood to refer to bringing men and women to submit to Jesus as Lord, to become his disciples, *wherever they may be*.

ii. *Who are 'all the nations'?* New Testament scholars are divided as to the meaning of this phrase. There are, basically, three views: (a) that 'all the nations' is a general expression meaning 'everybody' and that particular contexts determine its scope. Accordingly, it has been suggested by D. W. B. Robinson that the p.262 phrase designates Jews of the Dispersion, those scattered among Gentile nations. The Commission of [Matthew 28](#) is simply an extension of the original commission of the Twelve in [Matthew 10](#) (which was to Jews)—this time to all Jews.

(b) The second view is to interpret the phrase 'all the nations of all Gentile nations' — the whole world minus Israel. D.R.A. Hare and R. Walker have presented this position strongly, arguing that [Matthew 28:19](#) is consistent with the rest of 'the First Gospel (which) ... assumes the abandonment of the mission to Israel'¹⁸ According to the latter, Israel is rejected; the last word has been spoken to the Jews at [Matthew 28:15](#). The time of the mission to Israel (cf. [10:5–6](#)) has come to an end and in its place is that to the Gentile nations. But Hare's and Walker's reconstructions of Matthaean theology in general are unconvincing whether or not their understanding of 'all the nations' in this text is correct.

(c) Although *ta ethne* (= 'the nations') is found on all eight occasions in the First Gospel with reference to the nations minus Israel ([4:15](#); [6:32](#); [10:5](#), [18](#); [12:18](#), [21](#); [20:19](#), [25](#)), a strong case can be made for understanding the four occurrences of *panta ta ethne* (= 'all the nations') as designating all without distinction, i.e., Jews and Gentiles.¹⁹ At ch. [25:32](#), perhaps the clearest reference, in the parable of the Last Judgement 'all the nations' are gathered before the Son of Man. The judgement scene is clearly an universal one. It will not do to assert with Walker that the judgement of Jews is already over. The only distinctions drawn in the passage are between the righteous and the guilty, between those who inherit the Kingdom and those who depart from the King.

At ch. [24:9](#) the words, 'You will be hated of all nations (*panta ta ethne*) for my sake', drives home the same point. Indeed, the Matthaean account, if anything, makes the Marcan parallel ('you will be hated by *all*', [13:13](#)) more explicit by the addition of 'nations'.

¹⁸ D. R. A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 147f.; and more recently Hare and D. J. Harrington, "Make Disciples of all the Gentiles" (Matthew 28:19), *CBQ* 37 (1975), pp. 359–69; of R. Walker, *Die Heilsgeschichte in ersten Evangelium* (Goettingen, 1967), pp. 111–13.

¹⁹ Trilling *op. cit.*, pp. 26–8, has argued along these lines, and he has been followed by Hubbard, *op. cit.*, pp. 84–87. In our view Hare and Harrington's article has not effectively answered Trilling's arguments.

Neither Jews nor Gentiles are excluded from the expression, nor is a contrast between the two possible. p. 263

In v. 14 of ch. 24 reference is made to the Gospel of the Kingdom being preached throughout the whole world as a ‘testimony to *all nations*’. It seems best to regard this as an all-embracing expression, the more so since the related phrase of this verse, ‘throughout the world’, suggests universality.

Two further arguments may be adduced in support of the view that [Matthew 28:19](#) is referring to all nations without restriction.²⁰ First, Matthew in earlier sections of his Gospel has prepared the way for this universal missionary theme. He has done this by his use of the word ‘world’ (*kosmos*). In the interpretation of the parable of the weeds, Jesus explains that the ‘field is the world’ ([13:38](#)). The term indicates an unqualified universalism including Jews and Gentiles alike. A similar use of ‘world’ occurs at [26:13](#) and [5:14](#). A formula quotation ([12:18–21](#)) shows up Matthew’s universalism again, while the story of the Magi ([2:1ff.](#)) points proleptically to the widening of the people of God to include all peoples.

Secondly, we note that in the Old Testament there are some significant uses of the phrase ‘all the nations’. At [Genesis 12:3](#) the covenant promise runs: ‘I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves’. ‘All the families of the earth’ is not quite the same expression. But in [Genesis 18:18](#) and [22:18](#) where the covenant promise is reiterated the Septuagint uses *panta ta ethne* (‘all the nations’), the same expression as in [Matthew 28](#). The covenant promise made to Abraham finds its fulfilment in these magnificent words of the risen Lord Jesus, and this squares with Frankemöeller’s conclusions that the Gospel as a whole is a confirmation of God’s covenant with his people, both Jews and Gentiles, through Jesus.

iii. *What is the meaning of discipleship?* The authoritative command of the risen Lord in [Matthew 28](#) is to ‘make disciples’ of the nations. The verb used, *matheteuo*, is a distinctive feature of Matthew’s account and corresponds to ‘preach’ (*kerusso*) in the parallel ‘mission’ texts ([Mark 16:15](#); [Luke 24:47](#)) as well as in the other ‘universalistic’ passages of the Synoptics ([Mark 13:10](#) and parallels; [Matthew 24:14](#)). The verb employed in our text is more p. 264 specific than ‘preach’ since it signifies the purpose of the activity. Its meaning, as with many other terms in the Great Commission, may be gleaned from other references in the Gospel ([13:52](#); [27:57](#): together with the cognate noun ‘disciple’).

Indeed, the word ‘disciple’ is one of a cluster of terms which²¹ refers to those who follow Jesus: e.g., ‘little ones’, [18:6](#), [10](#), [14](#); ‘brothers’, [5:22ff.](#); [18:15](#), [21](#), [35](#); [23:8](#); [25:40](#); [28:10](#); cf. [12:46–50](#); and ‘sons’ (of God, [5:9](#); of the Father in heaven, [5:45](#); of the Kingdom, [13:38](#)). Of particular importance to the First Gospel is the *understanding* of the disciples. Although the disciples on many occasions are no better than the crowd, because they fail to perceive what Jesus is saying, they are given understanding by him as their Teacher (cf. [16:5](#) and [12](#)). Such insight and understanding are directly related to his teaching (often after he has taken them aside and spoken to them privately, [17:13](#)), and stands in contrast to the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees ([16:12](#)). The mark of the disciples is that they are hearers of Jesus’ message (cf. [5:1–2](#); [13:10](#) and [16](#); [16:24](#); [24:3](#)).

For Luke the *apostles* are witnesses to all that Jesus did in Judea and Jerusalem ([Acts 10:39](#)), especially the resurrection ([1:22](#)). They are primarily *eyewitnesses*. For Matthew, however, the *disciples* are men who have heard and understood what Jesus taught during his lifetime—they are *earwitnesses*.

²⁰ So Hubbard, *op. cit.*, pp. 85–6, whose argument is followed here.

²¹ Note the particularly helpful article by U. Luz, ‘Die Juenger in Matthaeus-evangelium’, *ZNW* 62 (1971), pp. 141–71.

Discipleship is not restricted to the Twelve. It includes them but it takes in a wider group as well. If disciples are those who hear and understand the commands and teaching of Jesus so it can be said that they do the will of God (cf. [12:46ff.](#)), then clearly it is not limited to the early apostolic group. In Matthew's Gospel there is a stress on the Twelve and other disciples being linked, joined together in their obedience to the teaching of Jesus. The term 'apostle' which would separate the Twelve from others (quite legitimately so in some contexts) is avoided in Matthew except for one reference—the list of chap. [10:2](#). There are disciples at all times, and although the Twelve on occasion are a paradigm for other followers, a type of what true discipleship should be like, they are at one in *hearing* the teaching of Jesus. p. 265

Thus the injunction of the risen Lord in [Matthew 28](#) is to make disciples of the nations. Remarkably enough, this authoritative word is addressed to the eleven *disciples* (v. [16](#)), not to the eleven apostles, though the latter term might well have been used. The Eleven are to make men and women as they themselves are.²² Those who walked with Jesus for three years, receiving his instruction, listening to his commands, obeying God's will, now have the privilege of making other disciples. The link between the two could not be stronger.

iv. *How are disciples made?* If the above ingredients belong to the essence of discipleship how are the Eleven to make other disciples? How can people who have not walked with Jesus be put on the same footing as those who have? By what means will they become *earwitnesses* and then do the will of God?

The structure of our text is clear. 'Making disciples' is the principal verb of the sentence (vv. [19](#), [20a](#)). The means by which this is achieved is expressed through the two participles that follow: (a) 'baptizing them', and (b) 'teaching them'. Without looking in any detail at the vexed question of baptism—for there are many issues that one might take up—one simply notes that in this context although the term may have several nuances one thing it must include, in our view, is the notion of submission.²³ It is the risen Lord who gives the command. Men are to submit to him, to become his disciples. Anything less than this is entirely unworthy of the person to whom all authority has been given. Baptism has to do with submission—either as a mark of submission, or the submission itself.

The second means by which disciples are made is through their being taught to observe the things Jesus has commanded. This is how (note the repeated 'them') they are to become *earwitnesses*. In Matthew, teaching is an important activity of disciples ([5:19](#); and [13:52](#) where the same verb 'to disciple' is used). Here it is the instrument by which other disciples are made. The content of the teaching is the *commands* of the earthly Jesus, an expression which links the past with the present, so that disciples of later generations p. 266 are put on an equal footing with the Eleven. Trilling²⁴ has pointed out that the expression 'all that (I command)' is frequently found in the Pentateuch, esp. Deuteronomy, to designate the challenging and authoritative will of God ([Exodus 29:35](#); [Deuteronomy 1:3](#), [41](#); [12:11](#), [14](#), and esp. [7:11](#), where the same verb 'command' is employed). Five of the Old Testament commissioning narratives²⁵ examined refer to the observance of all that God has commanded and the wording of four of them is similar to that of the Great Commission: [Exodus 7:2](#); [Joshua 1:7](#); [I Chronicles 22:13](#); and [Jeremiah](#)

²² As Karl Barth correctly put it, 'An Exegetical Study of [Matthew 28:16–20](#)', in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. G. H. Anderson (London, 1961), p. 63.

²³ I am indebted to my friend and colleague, Dr. W. J. Dumbrell, for this suggestion.

²⁴ Trilling, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²⁵ Hubbard, *op. cit.*, pp. 91–2.

[1:7](#). In this context, Jesus is the authoritative Lord whose commands are to be kept, the content of which may be discerned from the rest of the Gospel

(c) *The word of assurance: the presence of the Lord* (v.[20b](#)). The Great Commission concludes with the promise of the risen Lord's presence to the close of the age. The reassurance of the divine presence (e.g., 'I am with you', or 'certainly I will be with you') was a regular feature of the Old Testament commissioning narratives (e.g., [Genesis 17:4; 28:15; Exodus 4:11–12; Joshua 1:5–6, 9](#), etc.) when God assured his servants that his help and assistance would go with them as they carried out his appointed tasks. Here Jesus is depicted as giving to his disciples that same assurance through his active, dynamic presence that God gave in the Old Testament.²⁶

But this word concerning the divine presence, while read against the background of the Old Testament, needs to be interpreted in the light of the Gospel as a whole. At the beginning of Matthew the 'God-with-us' theme is decisively spelled out ([1:23](#)) and it is reiterated in our passage. A similar notion is stated at ch. [18:20](#) where Jesus is present in the midst of his people (cf. [26:29](#)). Several recent writers, particularly Frankemöeller, understand the First Gospel as the fulfilment of the Old Testament covenant, the epitome of which is the Lord's presence with his people. [Matthew 28:20](#) which climaxes the Gospel may thus be regarded as the renewal of the covenant through Jesus. It is ultimately the fulfilment of the covenant promise to Abraham of [Genesis 12:1ff](#). The p. 267 promise of the divine presence, given to the Eleven specifically, is by implication for all disciples, that is, for those who submit to the risen Lord and keep all that he has commanded.

Such an interpretation squares with the final phrase, 'always, to the close of the age'. 'Always', which translates the Greek *pasas tas hemeras* (lit. 'all days'), occurs only here in the New Testament and specifies the duration of Jesus' presence. The apocalyptic phrase, 'to the close of the age', is characteristically Matthaean ([13:39, 40, 49; 24:3](#); and [28:20](#); cf. the similar expression in [Heb. 9:26](#)). As a technical term for the end of history, it stems from the Book of Daniel. The horizon is broad, the glance is into the distance. This expression, like the contrasting phrase, 'the foundation of the world', which is frequent in Matthew, fixes a definite point of time. But how near or far the close of the age will be is not mentioned. The emphasis here is rather upon the continual presence of the risen Christ than on any apocalyptic speculation.

V. CONCLUSIONS

If our exegesis has been correct, then Carey was right in concluding that the Great Commission still had an application beyond the apostolic age. In our view, this point turns on the nature of discipleship (as presented in Matthew) and on understanding the paragraph as a fulfilment of the covenant promises to Abraham. Carey's concern to see men and women from among all the nations become disciples of Jesus the risen Lord was certainly a proper concern. However, when the attention has been focussed on the 'going' rather than upon the 'making of disciples' it has been misplaced. The important point about the Great Commission is that it has to do with bringing men and women to submit to Jesus as Lord, to become his disciples, wherever they may be.

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²⁶ P. Fiedler, *Die Formel "ung Siehe" im Neuen Testament* (Munich, 1969), p. 52.