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“All the Things I Have Commanded” Matthew’s Conclusion and the Life of the Church

JEFF PETERSON

Anyone who has seen the movies *The Sixth Sense* or *Places in the Heart* knows what a difference a story’s conclusion can make to our appreciation of it. Sometimes, as in *The Sixth Sense*, the ending completely transforms what we’ve made of the story as it has unfolded and leaves us seeing everything that came before in a new light. Sometimes, as in *Places in the Heart*, the ending pulls together the various threads that have been woven throughout the story and ties the package up in a neat bow. The conclusion to Matthew’s Gospel is a lot like the ending of *Places in the Heart* in that way. If we pay attention to the way Matthew ends his story of Jesus’ ministry, death and resurrection, we will discover compressed in a paragraph the main points the Evangelist wants us to take away from the Gospel.¹

If we were going to make a movie of the gospel story, we would probably begin with a pretty good idea how we would film the ending. After Jesus’ crucifixion, the women who followed him from Galilee go to visit his tomb early on the first day of the week. There they find the stone rolled back from the tomb entrance and the tomb itself empty, Jesus’ grave clothes lying inside as though he’d been transported out of them. Inside the tomb, an angel tells them not to fear, for Christ is risen. The women report this to Jesus’ disciples. Then Jesus, risen from the dead, appears to his disciples and commands them to carry the news of his death and resurrection to the ends of the earth. In the very last scene, after Jesus has completed forty days of instruction, he is borne up into heaven away from the presence of the disciples, who then await the descent of the Spirit on Pentecost. If that’s the CliffsNotes version of the way a gospel ends that we carry

1. Otto Michel called Matthew 28.16–20 the “key” to the Gospel, and P. F. Ellis described it as a retrospective table of contents (W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 3 [International Critical Commentary; London and New York, T & T Clark, 1997], 679).

around in our heads, Matthew's conclusion holds some surprises for us.² In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus doesn't leave his disciples; he promises to remain with them, and his last words reported in the Gospel instruct his disciples how to order their lives so that they can live under the kingship of God in the presence of the Son, whom God has raised and exalted to reign over his kingdom.

RECONSTITUTING THE FELLOWSHIP

Matthew's ending opens with the Eleven returning to Galilee to see Jesus (28.16), an invitation extended to them through the women who came to the tomb, first issued by an angel (28.7) and then by the risen Lord himself (28.10). By calling the disciples back together, Jesus reconstitutes the fellowship that was broken on Passover night, when one of the Twelve betrayed him (26.47–50), the most prominent member of the group denied knowing him (26.58, 69–75), and the other disciples abandoned him (26.55–56). The faithless male disciples are restored to fellowship through the mediation of the female disciples who also followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem (27.55–56), who saw where he was buried (27.61), and who returned to the tomb on Easter morning, being met there first by the angel and then the risen Jesus himself. It was to these women, Mary Magdalene notable among them, that the assurance was given that though the disciples had abandoned Jesus, he had not withdrawn his promise to meet them in Galilee after his resurrection (26.31–32).

Most English versions render the last clause of verse 16 along the lines of the NIV: the disciples return to Galilee, "to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go." This is puzzling in the context of the passage, however, as neither the angel nor Jesus specifies any destination more specific than Galilee. If the NIV's understanding of the verse is adopted, we must infer that Jesus gave the disciples more specific instructions than Matthew chooses to report. An alternative is suggested by the rendering of this clause in the ASV, according to which the disciples go "unto the mountain where Jesus had appointed them." The key point here is the suggestion that the verb refers not to the risen Jesus' summons in verse 10 but to an event related earlier in the Gospel.

Still, the ASV translation is also problematic, for there is no passage in Matthew in which Jesus appoints the twelve disciples on a mountain. Indeed, Matthew includes no precise parallel to Mark 3.13–14 at all.

2. This sequence of events does not in fact occur in the earliest text of any of the Gospels but is a composite, like the Christmas card image of shepherds and wise men together around the manger (cf. Matt 2.1–12; Luke 2.8–20). In Matthew, rather than finding the stone rolled away from the tomb (as in Mark 16.4, Luke 24.2, and John 20.1, which mentions only Mary Magdalene), the women witness an angel rolling the stone away, accompanied by an earthquake, and he announces the resurrection before they enter the tomb (Matt 28.2–6). Where Mark tells of one "young man . . . dressed in a white robe" (Mark 16.5 RSV) and Matthew "an angel of the Lord" whose "appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow" (Matt 28.2–3 RSV), Luke has "two men . . . in dazzling apparel" (Luke 24.4 RSV) and John refers to no angelic messenger at all (John 20.1–2). In its earliest manuscripts, Mark famously concludes with the women fleeing the tomb in fearful silence (Mark 16.8; see the NRSV's note to this verse for details of the manuscript evidence). In Matthew, the risen Jesus appears first to the women as they leave the tomb (Matt 28.9–10; cf. John 20.11–18, only to Mary) and then to the Eleven after they have journeyed back to Galilee (Matt 28.16–10), but in Luke his first appearances take place in and around Jerusalem on the same day he was raised (Luke 24.1, 13, 33–34, 36)—to the two at Emmaus (Luke 24.13–35), earlier (apparently) to Simon Peter (Luke 24.33–34) and finally to the Eleven and those with them (24.36–53; cf. John 20.19–23). The ascension is narrated only in Luke's account (Luke 24.50–51; Acts 1.9–11), and the forty days appear only in Acts 1.3, though John alludes to the ascension (John 20.17) and describes appearances taking place over a period of days or weeks (John 20.26–29; 21.1–23). If we insist on treating the Gospels as a transcript of events in Jesus' ministry, recorded with the precision we expect of a video recording (or even a biography of a modern public figure, with events dated by reference to letters and newspaper reports), we will have to draw up a fifth account found in none of the Gospels, and even then we will have great difficulty fitting in every detail. It is better to recognize that each Evangelist set out to paint a literary portrait bringing out the significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. For the Evangelist's purposes some imprecision in details is no more important than the artistic license taken in the painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Washington likely did not stand up in the boat, but the painting nonetheless conveys the "monumental nature of the event" involving "a small group of men, banded together to fight a common cause" and the heroic figure Washington cut in command of the army of the Revolution ("What's wrong with this painting?", Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, <http://www.ushistory.org/washingtoncrossing/history/whatswrong.htm> [accessed June 8, 2011]). For the analogy between painting and the literary art employed in the Gospels, and for the differences between ancient and modern biography, see Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), esp. 1–5.

The same verb translated "told" in Matt 28.16 (NIV), however, is used to mean "give instructions" in the Greek translation of Exodus 29.42. In our passage, following this usage would yield the translation, "The eleven disciples returned to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus *instructed them*."³ Translated in this way, the passage recalls the "mountainside" where Jesus' disciples "came to him, and he began to teach them" in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5.1–2 NIV). It is back to the mountain where Jesus, "the new Moses," first declared the laws governing life under the kingdom of God that he calls the disciples to receive their commission to announce the coming of that kingdom throughout the world.⁴

Jesus does not take the disciples' failure to remain with him in the garden or follow him to the cross as an excuse for dissolving his fellowship with them. Rather, he calls them back to the mountain where he began to teach them what discipleship means. By introducing the story in this way, Matthew teaches us that the fellowship of disciples in the church is a gift of divine grace, not a human achievement. It is truly Christ who builds his church (Matt 16.18).

EXTENDING THE PROCLAMATION OF THE KINGDOM

The risen Christ calls his disciples together under the universal authority he has "been given" by his Father in the resurrection. Jesus had spoken of this coming authority during his ministry when in debate with the Pharisees he quoted Psalm 110.1, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet'" (Matt 22.44). The point Jesus pressed there was that in the psalm David (named as the author by the psalm's inscription) calls the Messiah, his descendant, "Lord" and so acknowledges his superior authority.

The passage that Jesus quotes (Ps 110.1) is the verse most often cited in the New Testament, in which the early church found the significance of his resurrection. Luke reports Peter's interpretation of the passage at the beginning of apostolic proclamation of the Gospel: David speaks not of himself but of Jesus, whom God has raised from the dead and exalted as Lord and Christ to reign alongside him (Acts 2.32–36). Paul echoes the same interpretation in his statement that "God greatly exalted [the crucified Christ] and granted him the name that is above every name," so that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" and "every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2.9–11).⁵ Luke implies that Peter and his fellow disciples were taught this interpretation, as well as the other interpretations of scripture as testimonies to Christ that appear in the sermons of Acts, when the risen Lord "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24.44–47). Though the details of the interpretation are not spelled out in Matthew 28.16, Jesus' statement following his death and resurrection that he has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" points in the same direction.⁶

The risen Christ first uses the authority God has granted him in the resurrection to widen the scope of his disciples' mission. Earlier Jesus had sent his disciples to announce the arrival of God's kingdom and heal only among "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10.6–8), specifically forbidding them to minister

3. Davies and Allison, 681.

4. Allison explores the Moses symbolism employed in Matthew's portrait of Jesus in his book *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Matthew's conclusion is discussed on pp. 262–66.

5. See further my discussion of this passage in *The Transforming Word: One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Mark W. Hamilton (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2009), 968–9.

6. Robert Gundry argues on the basis of Matthew 7.29; 9.8; 11.27; and 21.23 that the Gospel depicts Jesus as disposing of universal authority throughout his ministry (*Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 595). Jesus is clearly depicted as authoritative, even over Satan's minions (cf. Matt 8.28–34), but none of the verses cited attributes "all" authority to him during his earthly ministry, as in 28.18. (In context, 11.27 refers not to authority but to the intimate knowledge of himself that the Father has granted to the Son and his disciples.) The central drama of the Gospel is found in Jesus' challenge to the authority Satan exercises over the fallen world (Matt 4.8–9; cf. 2 Cor 4.4; Eph 2.2). In his ministry, Jesus foils all the means by which Satan threatens human well-being (cf. Matt 4.23–24; 8.1–17, 23–34; 9.1–38; 12.15–28) and in his death and resurrection Satan himself is defeated (cf. Matt 16.21–23), effective authority over the creation being wrested from Satan by the Father and given to the Son. For this ancient understanding of the death and resurrection of Jesus, see Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London et al.: SPCK, 1931).

among Gentiles or Samaritans (Matt 10.5). Indeed, he insisted that his own commission in the days of his flesh did not extend beyond Israel's borders (Matt 15.24), though while not seeking Gentiles out he did grant healing to those who found their way to him (Matt 8.5–13; 15.22–28). Once risen from the dead, however, Christ declares the gates of salvation open to all and dispatches his disciples to bear the message of the kingdom to “all the nations” (Matt 28.18).

Contrary to the suggestion that the opening of verse 18 should be translated “As you go, make disciples” (so that Jesus does not in fact command the going), a literal translation would read, “Having gone, make disciples.”⁷ The traditional translation “Go therefore and make disciples” accurately conveys that the risen Jesus here renews the summons to mission that he laid upon his “apostles” (literally, “ones sent forth,” Matt 10.2), extending the instructions that he gave them for the conduct of their mission among Israel (Matt 10.5–42), but also broadening their field of mission to include the whole world. At the same time, he declares that baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the rite of entry into the community of Jesus' disciples gathered from all nations. The entry of disciples into the church thus echoes the scene of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan (Matt 3.13–17), where Father, Son and Spirit are all in evidence.

ORDERING THE COMMUNITY

As we have seen above, Matthew depicts the gathering of disciples from all the nations as an act of God's grace accomplished through the crucified and risen Christ. This does not mean, however, that Jesus' disciples are freed from all obligations to him and to each other. On the contrary, Jesus instructs his disciples to order the life of the communities that they will form in specific ways. He does this by instructing his apostles to teach new disciples “to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28.20). To the reader, these words recall the great teaching discourses of Jesus that Matthew has built into the structure of his Gospel, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount.

The teaching of the Sermon (chapters 5–7) is the most basic recorded in the Gospel, for it concerns the holiness that must mark Jesus' disciples in their individual lives.⁸ In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his disciples how we must live if we are to follow him; his final charge to his disciples to “keep” all that he has taught us shows that the Sermon does not state an unattainable ideal, but that disciples living in the presence of the risen Christ really should strive for a righteousness greater than that of scribes and Pharisees (5.20), whom Jesus critiques as offering God mere lip service (Matt 23.2–3) and obedience only in externals (Matt 23.23–28). Jesus' disciples are rather to be transformed from the heart outward, as Jesus' exposition of the commandments and obligations of the Law illustrates (Matt 5.17–6:23; cf. 15.1–20).

The other discourses offer a comprehensive guide to life together as Jesus' disciples, awaiting the coming of his Father's kingdom in its fullness. In the mission discourse (Matt 10.5–42), as we have seen, Jesus instructs his followers how to extend the borders of the community that awaits the kingdom. In the discourse on the kingdom (chapter 13), Jesus prepares his disciples for the differing responses their preaching will meet with (Matt 13.1–23) and for the difficulty that the continuing presence of evil will present to the communities planted as a result of this preaching (Matt 13.24–30, 36–43), while also encouraging them by pointing to the ultimate glorious outcome of the mission he calls them to (Matt 13.31–35). In chapter 18, Matthew records Jesus' teaching on how disciples should conduct ourselves in our life together: how to assess greatness in the community of the kingdom (18.1–14; cf. 19.13–15), how to respond when one disciple sins against another (18.15–20), and how steadfast we must be in our practice of forgiveness (18.21–35). In chapters 19–20, Jesus continues his teaching in response to questions, instructing his disciples about subjects including the sanctity of marriage (19.1–12) and the costs and benefits of

7. The translation “as you go” would be suggested if the participle were in the present tense, but in verse 18 the tense is aorist, which in a participle typically describes action prior to the action of the main verb.

8. Paul Minear notes that the organization of Matthew makes it especially useful as a guide to teachers in the church, hence the title of his study *Matthew: The Teacher's Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982).

discipleship (19.16—20.28). In chapters 21–23, Jesus teaches all Israel in the temple, warning of the dangers of rejecting God's salvation and the Son through whom he offers it. Finally, Jesus teaches his disciples about the consummation of God's kingdom (chapter 24) and what it demands of disciples who await it (chapter 25). There is no aspect of the Christian life left out of the teaching of Jesus as Matthew records it, and with his last words recorded in the Gospel, Jesus binds it on his disciples for all time.

THE PLEDGE OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE

Matthew's Gospel concludes not with Jesus' departure but with his promise to remain with his disciples "all the days, even to the consummation of the age" (Matt 28.20). Matthew of course knows that Jesus did not remain physically in the presence of his disciples, but he employs poetic license to close his Gospel with a dramatic depiction of the truth that the risen Christ did not leave us to obey his stringent commands on our own power. He rather remains with us through the agency of his Spirit and makes it possible for his church to live as he has taught, if we consent to be led in that path. In the book of Acts, Luke expands on Matthew's poetic image and details how the Spirit poured out through Christ remained active in the apostles and the communities they founded (cf. Acts 2.33–34).⁹

In the final scene of *Places in the Heart*, the Depression-era household and its neighbors, whose stories the viewer has followed for the two hours preceding, gather in a small, modestly adorned church building. The text read is from 1 Corinthians ("Love never ends"), and as the choir sings and the preacher rehearses the story of the Last Supper, the bread and wine of communion are passed from member to member. The camera follows the tray of communion cups up and down the rows of pews, pausing on the faces of characters we've come to know well, men and women, black and white, blind and sighted, sinning and sinned against. Finally, the communion wine comes to the widowed matriarch whose struggle to preserve her family and protect those in her care has been the center of the story. She drinks and passes the tray on to the man seated next to her, whom the camera reveals as her husband, a sheriff killed in the movie's opening scene. He in turn hands the tray to the black youth who accidentally killed him, and whom the townspeople in turn lynched for his mistake. All of these people, in spite of their differences from each other and their differences with each other, sit bound together in the fellowship of the crucified and resurrected Lord.¹⁰

The conclusion of Matthew strikes a similar note. In the course of 28 chapters, readers of the Gospel have become very familiar with Jesus' disciples and their failings, in which we can easily recognize our own. How, then, can we trust Jesus' promise to build a community against which even the "powers of death shall not prevail" (Matt 16.18 RSV)? How can Jesus build a bright shining city to illuminate the world (Matt 5.14) out of such unlikely raw materials as us? We can trust Jesus' promise, Matthew tells us, because he does not leave us to be his church on our own. His presence abides among his followers, even where only two or three are gathered and committed to ordering our common life in accordance with what he has taught us (Matt 18.19–20).¹¹

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9. For Luke's use of Matthew in addition to Mark in the writing of his Gospel, see Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Marcan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

10. The scene is the richest dramatic presentation of the meaning of communion I am acquainted with; see *Places in the Heart* Closing Scene, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiYcr2ZPMJE> (accessed June 13, 2011).

11. The context of Matthew 18.19–20 makes it clear that the reference here is not simply to Christians gathering for worship in Jesus' name but to a judicial proceeding aimed at the discipline of a brother; as in the Gospel's conclusion, Christ pledges to be present among his disciples who are seriously seeking to live as he has taught us, even when this involves the unpleasant duty of disciplining a brother or sister. For contemporary reflections on the importance of church discipline, see Chuck Colson with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *The Body* (Dallas et al.: Word Publishing, 1992), 130–35.