

THE GREAT COMMISSION: WHAT TO TEACH

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The words “all that I commanded you” (Matt 28:20) describe the substance of what Christian disciples are to teach in fulfilling Christ’s Great Commission. Since Jesus in the progress of His earthly ministry changed focus in response to Israel’s opposition to Him as their Messiah, understanding what disciples are to teach requires interpretive discernment regarding the historical and theological background of His various utterances. As a sample of His teaching, the Sermon on the Mount is appropriate. The Sermon came in the historical circumstances of Jesus’ emphasis on the coming kingdom promised to David in the OT, and lays down prerequisites for those who want to enter that kingdom. Qualities expressed in the beatitudes enumerate those prerequisites. One in particular in Matt 5:5b promises the privilege of inheriting the land promised to Abraham in Gen 12:7. The Sermon’s theme verse, Matt 5:20, is a rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees who so strongly opposed Jesus during His time on earth. The antitheses that follow in Matt 5:21-48 are corrections to their superficial rabbinic interpretations of the OT. In line with keeping the historical context in view, the term “brother” in the Sermon refers to fellow Israelites, not Christian brothers. Failure to interpret Christ’s instructions properly leads to impediments that hinder fulfillment of the Great Commission.

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In an A.D. 2000 article, “Historical Criticism and the Great Commission,” I pointed out the devastating effects of historical criticism in dismantling the Great Commission.¹ The article pointed out the close adherence to Christ’s instructions in Matthew 28:18-20 by the ancient church and the post-Reformation church, until the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment began raising doubts about whether Christ was the source of the whole Commission, doubts that have been picked up and shared by

¹“Historical Criticism and the Great Commission,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 11/1 (Spring 2000):39-52.

evangelical historical critics since the middle of the twentieth century.

In three places, Cyprian, the third-century church father, cited a portion of the Commission that was the theme for the 59th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, “Teaching Them to Obey” (Matt 28:20a).

The Lord, when, after His resurrection, He sent forth His apostles, charges them, saying, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: *teaching them to observe* all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”²

Lest therefore we should walk in darkness, we ought to follow Christ, and to observe His precepts, because He Himself told His apostles in another place, as He sent them forth, “All power is given unto me in heaven and earth. Go, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: *teaching them to observe* all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”³

Likewise in the Gospel, the Lord after His resurrection says to His disciples: “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, *teaching them to observe* all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”⁴

In that ETS theme, the only difference from Cyprian’s translated quotes is the word “obey” instead of the word “observe,” a change which presumably came as the theme-excerpt was taken from an NIV rendering of τηρεῖν in v. 20.⁵

After a brief comment on “them” (αὐτούς) in v. 20a, this article investigates what the Lord intended by the words “all that I commanded you” (πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν).

THE OBJECTS OF THE TEACHING

The obvious antecedent of the pronoun “them” in v. 20 is “the nations” (τὰ ἔθνη) in v. 19a). In other contexts the word can refer to “Gentiles” as is true of

²*The Epistles of Cyprian* 24:2 (ANF, 5:302) [emphasis added].

³*Ibid.*, 62.18 (ANF, 5:363) [emphasis added].

⁴*The Treatises of Cyprian* 12.2.26 (ANF, 5:526) [emphasis added].

⁵Personally, I prefer the translation “observe” to the rendering of “obey,” because as subsequent discussion will show, Jesus choice of ἐντέλλω to designate the substance of His earlier teaching covers a much wider scope than just the imperatival commands that He had given the disciples.

ἔθνων in Matthew 10:5, but as part of the Great Commission, it includes Israel as well as the Gentiles, making “nations” the correct meaning here. Subsequent instructions to the disciples made plain to them that national Israel as well as the Gentile nations was to be included in their efforts to make disciples. For example, in Acts 1:8 they were told to begin in Jerusalem and eventually expand their efforts beyond territories limited to Jewish inhabitants. An all-inclusive sense of “nations” must be His intention here.

Included in the Commission with the “teaching them to obey all that I commanded you” is the command “Make disciples of all nations.” Clearly the objects of that command included anyone who had become a disciple through the discipling efforts of Jesus’ first disciples. Having become a disciple, everyone in turn is to obey the teaching command that Jesus gave on this occasion.

That obvious change in Jesus’ ministry illustrates the way that His ministry in response to His negative reception by His own people changed in other respects. He never withdrew the promises of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants, but He did provide for an interim movement to come between His ascension and His second advent, a movement that was unforeseen in the OT. The interim period was of such a nature that OT prophecies had to take on additional meanings to supply biblical support for God’s dealings during this interim period.⁶

“ALL THAT I COMMANDED YOU”

The Changing Focus of Jesus’ Ministry

The subject of what Jesus commanded His disciples to teach is not so easily defined as are the objects who received the command, but it is important to investigate, because it determines how disciples throughout the Christian era are to obey the Great Commission. The word Jesus used for “commanded” is a bit unusual. BDAG gives as a basic meaning for ἐντέλλω—the root from which ἐνετείλαμην comes—“to give or leave instructions.”⁷ The Lord chose not to use other words such as κελεύω, which speaks of verbal orders in general or παραγγέλλω, which has in view especially the commands of a military commander.⁸ Nor did he use τάσσω or

⁶For an elaboration on some of the OT passages dealing with Israel which are in the NT applied to the church, see my chapter 9 in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002).

⁷BDAG, 339.

⁸G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1937) 156.

one of its compounds that speaks of fixed and abiding obligations.⁹ Rather, He chose a word that focuses on the contents of the directions, specific or occasional instructions and duties arising from an office instead of from the personal will of a superior.¹⁰

His choice of ἐντέλλω is appropriate in light of the frequency with which commentators have noticed the conflict between Jesus' command to go to the nations in Matthew 28 and His earlier command forbidding His disciples from going to the Gentiles and the Samaritans and telling them to go only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10:5-6).¹¹ Those commentators, including some who are evangelical, often assume that Jesus never gave the instructions to go to all nations, but hold that the command was added by the early church some time after Jesus' ascension.¹²

Quite obviously, the command of Matt 10:5-6 no longer applies because of a change that came in Jesus' ministry. Therefore, Jesus' intention was for "all that I commanded you" of Matthew 28:20 to be understood in light of the change that came in His teaching. His rejection by the leaders and people of Israel in His day caused Him to anticipate a later turn to a wider audience, i.e., "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold" (John 10:16). Subsequent to Jesus' resurrection, Paul describes in other words the change that came: "I say then, they [i.e., Israel] did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!" (Rom 11:11-12). The Lord's rejection by Israel at His first advent is paramount in understanding Jesus' later teachings in comparison to His earlier ones.

The true intention of Jesus must not have been for the disciples to teach the precise words He taught them, but that they should use discernment in interpreting what and how to teach. They needed to recall the historical context and the theological circumstances of His teachings and to make appropriate judgments as to how some of His commandments fit new circumstances such as going to all nations rather than just to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

To handle the commands and the teachings of Christ correctly, one must keep in mind His narrow focus in choosing listeners during His first advent. Clearly,

⁹ Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Lafayette, Ind.: Archa, 1979) 343.

¹⁰ Ibid.; Abbott-Smith, *Manual Greek Lexicon* 156.

¹¹ E.g., C. G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*, 2 vols. (New York: KTAV, 1968) 1:357, 358; Alan Hugh M'Neile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1961) 435; Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1981) 544-45; David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 362.

¹² Thomas, "Historical Criticism and the Great Commission" 45-47, 50.

He came to serve, first of all, the lost sheep of the house of Israel. That fact is evident in several ways. For instance, He rarely ventured outside the geographical boundaries of that people. Once He went into the regions of Tyre and Sidon (Matt 15:21 = Mark 7:24). There a Canaanite (or Gentile) woman confronted Him with a request that He deliver her daughter from an unclean spirit. Jesus' first response to her was, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24). Because of her faith, however, He did heal her daughter.

Earlier He had gone into Samaritan territory and conversed with a woman there (John 4:4-30). He set her straight regarding the correct way to worship the Father and regarding her own loose lifestyle, but that was only a passing incident.

On another occasion, some Greeks came requesting an audience with Jesus, which He apparently did not grant. Rather, He implicitly pointed them to a time after His glorification when such an audience with Gentiles would be possible (John 12:20-33). He purposely focused His ministry on one people—the people of Israel—during His first advent.

At certain stages Jesus' commands and teachings as recorded in the Gospels need to be interpreted in light of the historical fact that they were directed most specifically to the people of Israel. How did Jesus expect the people of Israel to respond to Him? How did they understand His teachings? Too often, interpreters have disregarded the historical setting and theological circumstances of what Jesus commanded and taught.

In the Great Commission, not enough students of the Gospels have accepted the challenge of defining "all that I have commanded you." Understanding the expression is not as simple as most seem to make it. In light of changes in Jesus' teachings caused by a changing theological environment regarding ministry to Gentiles as reflected in the Great Commission, students of the Gospels would do well to investigate other commands and teachings of Jesus more carefully to see how further light can come to bear on their meanings. As a sample of such an investigation, His Sermon on the Mount with its setting furnishes appropriate excerpts to consider. A common error has been to interpret the Sermon as though Jesus were preaching it to the church. That, however, is the exegetical fallacy of substituting application for interpretation.¹³

The Setting of the Sermon

Regarding the Sermon and its connection with Matthew 4:17, Nolland has perceptively noted, "The content of the coming address is appropriately identified as teaching rather than proclamation, but what Jesus is to say is to be thought of as

¹³See Brian A. Shealy, "Redrawing the Line Between Hermeneutics and Application," in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* 165-94.

grounded in his proclamation of the near approach of the kingdom of God and as clarifying what, for the disciple, lies beyond the repentance called for in 4:17.”¹⁴ Nolland also advocates studying the Sermon in light of Jesus’ proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom (Matt 4:32). But what Nolland does not clarify is the identity of the kingdom of heaven spoken of by John the Baptist (cf. Matt 3:2) and Jesus. The focus of Matthew on the continuity of the promise to David about a Davidic kingdom is pronounced. From the very first verse of his Gospel, Matthew has emphasized his interest in David in relation to God’s promises to Israel through the Davidic Covenant (cf. 2 Sam 7:8-17). That is the kingdom whose nearness was being proclaimed when Jesus gave His Sermon on the Mount.

That kingdom had special relevance to the people of Israel as did the command for them to repent. Repentance meant a certain thing to people of that particular first-century Israelite culture. If they wanted to enjoy the promised blessings of the Davidic kingdom, they needed to turn from their corrupt ways, an action in which—as leaders—the scribes and Pharisees should have led the way. Otherwise, that people could have no expectation of participation in what God had promised their nation through David.

The Sermon on the Mount was therefore an elaboration on what their repentance would entail. It laid down prerequisites for entering that Davidic kingdom.¹⁵ The commands of Jesus and John to repent had a particular meaning for the Jewish people of the days in which the commands were given, but to interpret the commands as having precisely the same meaning for the wider circle of Christ’s followers in the twenty-first century forces onto the text a meaning that Jesus never intended. The commands to repent have plenty of legitimate *applications* to believers of all subsequent ages, but those *applications* must differ from and be controlled by the correct *interpretation* of what John and Jesus explicitly intended for their listeners at the time.

¹⁴John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, in the NIGTC, eds. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 193.

¹⁵Wilkins has the setting all wrong when, about the Sermon on the Mount, he writes, “Matthew now records an extensive message that develops in detail the kind of life available to those who respond to the arrival of God’s kingdom” (Michael J. Wilkins, “Original Meaning, Matthew,” in *NIV Application Commentary, New Testament*: [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004] 190). The Sermon does not describe the kind of life available to those who respond to the arrival of the kingdom; rather, it gives the qualifications of those who will gain admittance to the promised future kingdom. Wilkins also needs to qualify his statement, “He [i.e., Matthew] has gathered together a collection of Jesus’ messages that enable the church for all ages to carry out a crucial component of Jesus’ final commission: ‘teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you’ (28:20)” (ibid.). Is this a collection of Jesus’ messages, or is it a sermon given by Jesus on a single occasion, as Matthew frames it? Matthew must be right. Further, Wilkins and many others need to interpret Jesus’ commands and teachings in light of the historical and theological context in which they were given. Else, the church will fail miserably in carrying out this phase of the Great Commission.

The Sermon in part was also an instruction to Jesus' disciples, Simon Peter and Andrew, about what He meant in His command, "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 4:19).¹⁶ It was also part of His proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom (Matt 4:32). In that historical context, Jesus was illustrating to them that fishing for men involved calling them to repentance from the sinful corruption of Judaism of the day so as to enjoy the blessings of the promised kingdom of David.

Davies and Allison typify a common exegetical mistake when they write,

In [Matt] 5:1, the unspecified disciples, who must be a group larger than the four of 4:18-22, are—and this is the key point—contrasted with the crowd and so represent the church. The disciples, in other words, stand for the faithful; they are transparent symbols of believers. So the sermon on the mount is spoken directly to Matthew's Christian readers.¹⁷

By assuming a significant role for the redactor who wrote Matthew, they remove the Sermon from its historical context in Jesus' time and place it in a historical setting several decades later, thereby changing the meaning of various parts. Among evangelical commentators, Wilkins and Gundry do essentially the same by making the crowd symbolic of the Christian church.¹⁸

The Beatitudes

To remove uncertainty about which kingdom Jesus referred to, He began His sermon with a series of beatitudes. Each beatitude related to an OT promise pertaining to the Davidic kingdom, a feature readily recognizable by His Jewish listeners. In identifying the individual with certain qualities, the Lord stirred up memories among His listeners regarding relationships to the predicted kingdom. The qualities describe a person who will be permitted a part in that kingdom.¹⁹

That raises the question as to whether Matthew has ethicized the beatitudes, i.e., turned what were once straightforward blessings into entrance requirements for

¹⁶Ibid., 196.

¹⁷W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC, eds. J. A. Emerton, C. E. B. Cranfield, and G. N. Stanton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) 425.

¹⁸Michael J. Wilkins, *The Concept of Disciple in Matthew's Gospel, As Reflected in the Use of the Term Mathētēs* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988) 149-50; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew, A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994) 481. Note Gundry's remark, "We do not have in these beatitudes a gospel for the unevangelized, but a word of encouragement to the suffering church" (Gundry, *Matthew* 73).

¹⁹Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew* (reprint; Minneapolis: James & Family, n.d.) 115; John Albert Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990) 88.

the kingdom of God.²⁰ That redaction-critical suggestion must be dismissed by those who give credit to Jesus, not Matthew, for the Sermon on the Mount. Though they do not deny an element of imperatival function in Matt 5:3-12, Davies and Allison deny that Matthew's "makarisms" function primarily as imperatives for several reasons, reasons that include the absence of any direct imperatives among them and the beatitude in 5:10-12 in which one can hardly look upon persecution as being a self-achieved virtue.²¹ They rather see the beatitudes as encouragements rather than commands. Several of their other reasons relate to their historical-critical assumptions about Matthew. After granting their point about the absence of any direct commands, one who sees Jesus as the source of the Sermon must acknowledge that the qualities expressed in the beatitudes are prerequisites to entering the kingdom and see an undeniable compulsion to measure up to the standards they express as a primary function.

The first and last third-person beatitudes act as bookends because both pronounce the recipients blessed because of their possession of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3, 10).²² "The poor in spirit" (5:3) recalls the words of Ps 34:19, "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit," where the phrase in the last line in the LXX (33:19) reads "humble in spirit" instead of "poor in spirit." It also recalls Matthew's citation of Isa 61:1 ("to preach good news to the poor," NIV) in 11:5, "the poor have the good news proclaimed to them."²³ Both OT passages, particularly the Isaiah passage, are in contexts of Messianic promise regarding the future of Israel. Listeners would recognize the promise of possessing the Davidic kingdom as the cause of the blessing pronounced.

"Those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness" (Matt 5:10) receive the same promise as "the poor in spirit," thus forming an *inclusio* between the first and eighth beatitudes. "The *inclusio* implies that the promises in beatitudes 2-7 are all different ways of saying the same thing, namely, 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven,' the promise of the first and eighth beatitudes."²⁴

Suggestions as to the correspondence of each beatitude to an OT promise of kingdom conditions are as follows:

²⁰Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew* 439.

²¹Ibid., 439-40.

²²The present tense ἐστίν (5:3) is a futuristic present as indicated by the future tenses in the second members of all the beatitudes to follow in vv. 4-9 (Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew* 446; Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1912) 40, Plummer, *Gospel According to S. Matthew* 50). The same is true for the present tense in 5:10.

²³Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* 199-200.

²⁴Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew* 460.

<i>Beatitude</i>	<i>OT Promise</i>
3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	Isa 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted [i.e., the poor]; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners;
4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.	Isa 61:2 To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn,
5 Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth [i.e., land].	Ps 37:11 But the humble will inherit the land, and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.
6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.	Jer 31:25 For I satisfy the weary ones and refresh everyone who languishes. Isa 55:1 Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Ps 107:9 For He has satisfied the thirsty soul, and the hungry soul He has filled with what is good.
7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.	Ps 112:4 Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for the gracious and compassionate and righteous man. Ps 18:25a With the kind You show Yourself kind. Prov 14:21b But happy is he who is gracious to the poor.

<i>Beatitude</i>	<i>OT Promise</i>
<p>8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.</p>	<p>Ps 24:3-4 Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood, and has not sworn deceitfully.</p>
<p>9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.</p>	<p>Isa 9:6-7 For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of <i>His</i> government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.</p>
<p>10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.</p>	<p>Ps 69:4, 7, 9 Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me. I am forced to restore what I did not steal. . . . For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face. . . . for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.</p>

Discerning what Jesus meant in the beatitudes by γῆ in Matt 5:5b is extremely important, as illustrated by the rendering in most (if not all) English translations: “they shall inherit the earth.”²⁵ In observing the Messianic tone of the sermon, a few have noticed how misleading it is to translate τῆν γῆν by “earth” in light of God’s promise that Abraham and his descendants would inherit the land of

²⁵E.g., KJV, NASB, NIV, ESV, HCSB, RSV, NRSV.

Canaan.²⁶ Psalm 37:11 serves as the background for this beatitude, and in that psalm, γῆ certainly has the meaning of “land” rather than the whole earth. On this issue, Nolland writes,

In Ps. 36(37):11 the γῆ (‘land’) to be inherited is clearly the land of Israel, in the context of God’s covenant promise to his people. But since γῆ can also mean the ‘earth’, what about the meaning in Matthew? The interest in [Matt] 4:25 in the scope of historic Israel (see discussion there) and the evocation of exile and return in the opening beatitudes weigh in favour of Matthew’s also intending γῆ to refer to Israel as the land of covenant promise.²⁷

In contrast to Nolland and the historical background of the Sermon on the Mount, Davies and Allison raise similar questions, but have a different answer. They advance three main reasons for concluding that inheriting τὴν γῆν is “nothing more than a symbol for inheriting the spiritual kingdom of heaven.”²⁸ They continue. (1) “Throughout Matthew nationalistic hopes—which are otherwise absent from 5.3–12—are undone.”²⁹ (2) With one possible exception, the unqualified γῆ in Matthew does not refer to Palestine, but to the earth.³⁰ (3) “[B]ecause in some sense the kingdom is already in some sense present (see on 4:17), the βασιλεία is necessarily spiritualized and divorced from geography. It would seem to follow, then, that in Mt 5.5 ‘to inherit the land’ has been spiritualized. . . .”³¹

Yet their three reasons are without merit. As for reason (1), it has been shown that nationalistic hopes of Israel are thoroughly ingrained in the other beatitudes, and Israel’s hope of Abraham’s promises’ being fulfilled is very much alive in the remainder of Matthew’s Gospel. Reason (2) ignores the meaning of γῆ in Ps 37:11, the source of this beatitude. Reason (3) misrepresents the meaning of Matt 4:17; “the kingdom of heaven has drawn near” does not announce an already present kingdom. To a degree, the issue boils down to what Jesus meant when He

²⁶E.g., Broadus, *Gospel of Matthew* 90.

²⁷Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* 202.

²⁸Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew* 450. Hagner joins Davies and Allison in his conclusion: “The ‘earth’ (τὴν γῆν) originally referred to the land of Israel, i.e., what was promised to the Jews beginning with the Abrahamic Covenant (cf. Gen 13:15). But in the present context of messianic fulfillment it connotes the regenerated earth (19:28; cf. Rom 4:13, where κόσμος replaces γῆ), promised by the eschatological passages in the prophets (e.g., Isa 65–66)” (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, in vol. 33A of *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker [Dallas: Word, 1993] 92–93).

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

spoke the words versus what Matthew meant when he wrote the words. If they differ from each other—which they do not—the ballot has to favor Jesus.

Yet, how many have ever noticed the mistranslation “earth”? A recent issue of *Christianity Today* contained a page of eight quotations from well-known Christian leaders, which dealt with Matt 5:5, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”³² Not one of the quotations alluded to the historical background of Jesus’ words in reference to the particular territory promised to Abraham in the OT. Most of the quotes simply extolled the positive qualities of meekness, implying that the pronounced blessing results from practicing that virtue and without noticing that the blessedness actually stems from the last half of the verse: possessing the land promised to Israel throughout the OT. One of the contributors to that page, D. A. Carson, in his commentary on Matthew, tries to justify the rendering of “earth” instead of “land” by surveying various usages of the word in the Gospel,³³ but doing that ignores the historical context on the occasion when Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. What Jesus intended and what His listeners understood clearly was the land of Israel over which David’s descendant will reign in the future Messianic Kingdom.

The use of traditional grammatical-historical principles requires that τὴν γῆν be a reference to the land promised to Abraham as part of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:7).

As an introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, the beatitudes are an abbreviated review of OT promises to Israel regarding Israel’s Davidic kingdom.

The Theme Verse

Matthew 5:20 has long been recognized as the theme verse of the Sermon on the Mount:³⁴ “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” To read into this verse a rebuke of Christian antinomianism on the basis of Matt 5:19 which precedes it, as does Gundry,³⁵ is another flagrant abuse of the historical situation in which Jesus preached this sermon. Verse 19 reads, “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus simply rebukes the superficial rabbinic interpretation of the law as

³²Richard A. Kauffman, compiler, “Reflections: Quotations to Stir Heart and Mind,” *Christianity Today* 51/8 (August 2007): 48.

³³D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 8:134, 136.

³⁴Broadus, *Gospel of Matthew* 101; Plummer, *Gospel According to S. Matthew* 77; M’Neile, *Gospel According to St. Matthew* 60; Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew* 499.

³⁵Gundry, *Matthew* 82. Davies and Allison do the same (*Saint Matthew* 500).

reflected in the six antitheses in 5:21-48. Christian antinomianism is far removed from the historical context of Jesus' utterances in the Sermon on the Mount. It may have become an issue later in church history, but an evangelical interpreter is looking for Jesus' meaning, not an application made by the early church at a much later time.

Furthermore, to reason that the Pharisees sought with sincerity to "maintain the purity of Jewish faith against the inroads of Hellenistic culture"³⁶ and "that their level of hostility with Jesus indicates that they held a great deal of commonality with Jesus"³⁷ is specious reasoning. Matthew's harsh picture of the Pharisees must be historically accurate. Otherwise, Scripture would not have painted them that way. To be sure, they were highly respected in Judaism of the day, but Jesus in His teaching dwelt on the high level of corruption characterizing their leadership (see Matt 23:4-36). Davies and Allison attribute Matthew's harsh language in speaking of the Pharisees "to the fact that Matthew's Jewish contemporaries and opponents considered themselves heirs of the Pharisees, in which case our author would see his own enemies in those of Jesus."³⁸ In other words, they say, animosity toward the Pharisees when Matthew wrote his Gospel caused the negative picture of Pharisaism in Matthew's Gospel. That is historically erroneous. The Pharisees of Jesus' own day were the ones against whom Jesus used such strong language. They were guilty of misrepresenting the teachings of the OT. That is the only way to do justice to the historical reliability of Matthew's Gospel.

Such extremism is expected from those with a low view of biblical inspiration, but when it spills into the ranks of evangelicals who should know better, that is tragic. Keener exemplifies such looseness in handling Matthew's historical reliability:

Because ancient biography normally included some level of historical intention, historical questions are relevant in evaluating the degree to which Matthew was able to achieve the intention his genre implies. This does not require us to demand a narrow precision regarding details, a precision foreign to ancient literature, but to evaluate the *general* fidelity of substance.³⁹

³⁶Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew* 224-25.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 225.

³⁸Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew* 302.

³⁹Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 2-3 (emphasis added). A recent comment about Keener's *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* was surprising and disappointing. In *Bibliotheca Sacra* 655 (July-September 2007):377, David K. Lowery, Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, in reviewing John Nolland's *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, writes, "Both pastors and students will find help in understanding Matthew by their use of this [i.e., Nolland's] commentary. However, the commentary on Matthew by Craig S. Keener (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) is very useful for expository preaching and teaching." Neither commentary endorses the detailed historical accuracy of Matthew.

“General fidelity of substance” is all that he expects from Matthew. He expects nothing better than *guesses* on Matthew’s part:

In some cases, Matthew may have been following rhetorical practices of speech-in-character and historical verisimilitude, making Jesus fit what was known about him in general . . . and, given Matthew’s proximity to Jesus’ situation, his *guesses* are more apt to be correct than ours. In other cases, however, I am reasonably sure that Matthew has re-Judaized Jesus based on solid traditions available to him.⁴⁰

When Jesus told his disciples to teach their disciples to observe all things He had commanded them, He did not intend for His disciples to *guess* what some of those commands and teachings were. Through inspiration of the Gospels, He left them reliable accounts, not approximations, of those commands and teachings. Distorted interpretations of those accounts deprive Jesus’ disciples of an ability to teach observance of and obedience to all that He commanded.

The First Antithesis

Davies and Allison raise a significant question in connection with the first antithesis in the Sermon on the Mount (5:21-26). Does the term “brother” in 5:22 refer to a spiritual relative or to a fellow Israelite? They note the difficulty of the former possibility: “[I]t is a bit awkward for the evangelist to go on to mention the sanhedrin (5.22), the altar (5.23–4, and the prison (5.25–6): these are not peculiarly Christian things.”⁴¹ They note the equation of “brother” with “Neighbour” or “fellow Israelite” in Jer 22:18 and Luke 6:41-42.⁴² M’Neile concurs with that identification, “ἀδελφός . . . , like ὁ πλησίον . . . , would to Jewish ears mean only a fellow Jew. . . .”⁴³ Jesus preached the sermon to Jewish listeners, necessitating such a meaning. That observation could well carry throughout the sermon whenever the word “brother” occurs. The same would hold true in Matt 5:47 and 7:4. Throughout, He does not refer to Christian brothers but to fellow Jews. A redactionist would say that Matthew in writing the book had Christian brothers of his own time in mind,⁴⁴ but the

⁴⁰Keener, *Gospel of Matthew* 13 (emphasis added).

⁴¹Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Matthew* 512-13.

⁴²Ibid., 513.

⁴³M’Neile, *Gospel According to St. Matthew* 61.

⁴⁴E.g., Wilkins takes “brother” as a reference to Jesus’ disciples in general (*Concept of Disciple in Matthew’s Gospel* 242; Donald A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *NIV Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994] 27; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22 of *The New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery [Nashville: Broadman, 1992] 107).

issue from a historical standpoint is what Jesus meant by His use of “brother,” not something different that Matthew meant when he wrote the Gospel many years later.

Further indications of the historical inappropriateness in interpreting the Sermon on the Mount are the mentions of the Sanhedrin in 5:22 and the altar in 5:23-24. Jesus’ command to leave one’s offering at the altar until being reconciled with a brother was impossible to obey after destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. The altar no longer existed. Surely, Jesus did not expect His disciples to teach obedience to that command when He gave the Great Commission. Also, responsibility to the Sanhedrin taught in 5:22 was no longer in play after 70 because, for all practical purposes, the Great Sanhedrin ceased to function in Israel after the Romans destroyed the temple.

The importance of investigating historical background in the Gospels cannot be overstated. As Jesus conducted His public ministry, certain changes took place. A major change transpired when His own people refused to endorse His way of righteousness and were satisfied to continue in the corrupt ways they were being led. They refused to recognize His authority as their promised Messiah, forcing Jesus to pursue different courses of action as the ministry progressed. Failure to recognize the new courses of action has caused and will cause failure in an intelligent fulfilling of the Great Commission’s command to teach all nations to observe all that Jesus commanded.

IMPEDIMENTS SUMMARIZED

Impediments are currently at work in NT scholarship, both nonevangelical and evangelical, to keep the disciplined nations from fulfilling the Great Commission. Several illustrations from the Sermon on the Mount have shown “all that I commanded you” is not being taught in the purity intended by the Lord when He left the Great Commission.

A number of causes contribute to overly simplistic teaching of what Jesus commanded. Summarizing earlier comments, the following are impediments:

(1) Many sources fail to recognize that Jesus came to Israel first, and turned to Gentiles only after Israel’s rejection had become public and official. That failure has caused much misunderstanding of Jesus’ teachings through attempts to apply what He said to groups who are different from those whom Jesus encountered in Israel at His first advent. This is particularly true of the earlier phases of Jesus’ ministry, but has affected later phases as well.

(2) Rarely will one hear or read treatments on the Sermon on the Mount that take into account its close connection with God’s promises to David in 2 Samuel 7. In the context of Matthew 5–7, the Davidic kingdom is quite prominent. This neglect has resulted in many wrong approaches to that sermon and consequently also to all that Jesus told His disciples to observe.

(3) Another related impediment to teaching what the Great Commission requires is a misunderstanding of the purpose of the Beatitudes in tying the Sermon to the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants and their kingdom promises. How often have these “makarisms” been applied superficially, without regard for their promised reward that those who measure up to their standards are Israelites who will possess the kingdom promised to David! More specifically, that amounts to a misunderstanding of γῆ in Matt 5:5 and its specific reference to the land promises made to Abraham and David.

(4) More generally, neglect of the historical background of Jesus’ teachings and commands has resulted in a confusion of *application* to the church with the Sermon’s *interpretation* in relation to Israel. To be sure, interpreting the Sermon properly in the context of Christ’s ministry to Israel yields abundant legitimate applications to the church, but neglect of correct interpretation results in superficial and, often, erroneous applications to the church. Failures along historical lines include theological impediments also. Theologically, God has been and is dealing with Israel differently from the ways He is dealing with the body of Christ, the church.

(5) A further failure in fulfilling the Great Commission has a historical-critical understanding of Matt 5:17-20 to blame. When Jesus in 5:20 faults scribal and Pharisaic righteousness as insufficient for entering the kingdom of heaven, that blame has been shifted from Jesus’ immediate listeners and made to refer to problems confronting Matthew’s church at a time much later than Jesus’ personal sojourn on earth. Instead of faulting Israel’s leadership during Jesus time on earth, historical critics say Matthew fashioned the remarks in that verse to fit his own immediate readers.

(6) That mistake of faulting people of much later times accompanies recent trends among evangelical NT scholars in characterizing Matthew’s Gospel as only generally reliable. That concept, of course, relegates certain portions of the Gospel to the category of embellishments that are not historically accurate. Such an approach to Matthew as well as the rest of the Gospels makes impossible a carrying out of the teaching portion of the Great Commission.

In brief, the lesson in understanding what Jesus meant by “all that I commanded you” at the end of Matthew’s Gospel is a call to strive for a closer and more precise interpretation of Jesus’ teaching and commands in light of the circumstances in which they were given. “Teaching them to observe” requires no less than the disciples’ best efforts in understanding Jesus’ intent when He gave each of those teachings.