

## (33) THE MISSION OF GOD: MATTHEW 28:16-20

**Focus Idea:** Because of the finished work of Jesus – and in light of his ongoing reign – followers of the Risen Christ are expected to go to the ends of the earth to continue ministry in his name.

**The Context:** The broad contours of this gospel have been detailed in previous Core40 discussions. Matthew 28:16-20 stands at the end of the book as a sort of “last will and testament” of Jesus Christ. It follows directly upon an extended account of Easter.

**The Characters:** According to verse 16, Jesus is surrounded by his eleven remaining disciples (Judas Iscariot, who had betrayed Jesus, committed suicide on Good Friday morning) on a mountain in Galilee.

**The Core:** It is increasingly common for businesses, nonprofits, and other organizations to draft *mission statements*. These pithy paragraphs describe the purpose, scope, and intended outcomes of their work. If the Christian church has a singular mission statement, it is to be found here in Matthew 28.

The directives Jesus issues in verses 19-20 are the best-known features of this text, commonly known as the “Great Commission”. But to focus only on them ignores the stunning admission of 28:17. The eleven disciples had convened, per Jesus’ instruction, back in Galilee. All eleven are described as worshipping him (an amazing detail in and of itself; persons of Jewish descent bowed only to God, not to human beings). But among these worshipping disciples are some who *doubted!*

Despite living in close contact with Jesus for three years, despite seeing a dead man raised from the dead, and despite the fact that they *worship* this Jesus, some members of Jesus’ closest circle still doubt! While it was certainly within Matthew’s editorial rights to omit this shocking detail, the author includes it. Why? Almost certainly, it is because he wants the world to know that worship of Jesus is not contingent on full and complete intellectual understanding. There are many who will grapple with the hard-to-believe facts of Jesus’ story but who are nonetheless invited to kneel and worship.

Moreover, those who harbor uncertainties belong in the work that Jesus commands. The ministry program includes three central elements. First, followers of Jesus are to make more disciples, inviting others into the pattern of trust, love, and community that the first followers had experienced. These disciples are not to come only from the Jewish family or from natives of Palestine; new followers were to be made of all nations.

The second component was baptism. For millennia, worshippers of the Old Testament God had been circumcised as a visible mark of their inclusion in the covenant family. More recently, Jewish people had begun practicing ceremonial washings called *mikveh*. Jesus merged these practices in some sense, continuing the tradition of John the Baptist. But Jesus’ followers are instructed to baptize with a new and specific formula: in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, the Great Commission calls for teaching obedience to all the commands of Christ. (Notably, the instructions Jesus gives his disciples are about their *teaching*, not others’ obedience!)

These three instructions are a high calling. The work will not be easy. But Jesus gives his church two great assurances as bookends to his commands. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him (vs. 18) and he himself will be with his people until the very end of the age (vs. 20).