

Homiletics Analysis: Matthew 28

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Matthew 28 is the concluding chapter of the First Gospel and one of the most theologically dense passages in the New Testament. It divides cleanly into three movements: the resurrection account (vv. 1–10), the soldiers' report and the chief priests' fabrication (vv. 11–15), and the Great Commission on the Galilean mountain (vv. 16–20). The chapter opens in the aftermath of the crucifixion — Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrive at the tomb at dawn on the first day of the week. An angel descends with earthquake force, rolls away the stone, and announces that Jesus is risen. The women depart with fear and great joy to tell the disciples; Jesus himself meets them on the road, and they worship him. Meanwhile, the guards report the events to the chief priests, who bribe them to circulate the lie that the disciples stole the body — a slander Matthew notes was still circulating at the time of his writing. The chapter culminates in the Galilean appearance: the eleven disciples see the risen Jesus, worship him (though some doubted), and receive the Great Commission — all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him; they are therefore to go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe everything he commanded. The chapter — and the Gospel — closes with the promise: *"I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

This Text — Intent

Matthew 28 is not primarily an instruction manual for church methodology. It is a declaration of Lordship. The resurrection has happened; it changes everything. Matthew's intent throughout this chapter is to force a decision: will the reader accept the testimony of the resurrection and submit to the authority of the risen Christ, or will they join those who suppress the truth through bribery and fabrication? The Great Commission does not arrive as a program to be implemented but as a charge flowing inevitably from the fact that all authority now belongs to Jesus. God's intent through this text is to produce in the reader a settled, worshipful submission to the risen Christ — and from that submission, a life shaped by participation in his ongoing mission to the nations. The chapter ends not with a task but with a promise: his presence sustains the commission. Intent is inseparable from the final word: *"I am with you always."*

Subject Sentence: The resurrection of Jesus establishes his universal Lordship and launches his disciples into all-nations mission.

Primary Claim: Because all authority belongs to the risen Christ, his people are not sent into the world as volunteers pursuing a worthy cause — they are sent as ambassadors of the reigning Lord, sustained by his perpetual presence, to make disciples of every nation until the age ends.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Scope of the Great Commission (vv. 18–20)

The most significant interpretive divide in Matthew 28 concerns the scope and nature of the Great Commission. Virtually all traditions affirm the imperative to proclaim the gospel, but they differ on what “make disciples” requires and whom it addresses. The Reformed reading understands the Commission as addressed to the church in its corporate and institutional life — not only to individual believers or uniquely to apostolic figures. The single imperative (*mathēteusate*, “make disciples”) governs three participles: going, baptizing, and teaching. The disciples are not commanded to go, baptize, and teach as three separate tasks but to make disciples *by means of* going, baptizing, and teaching. This is a discipleship-formation process, not an evangelism-alone program. The Baptist tradition rightly emphasizes the priority of individual conversion and believer’s baptism within this commission, and the concern that “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” requires genuine regenerate community is well-placed and worth retaining. Where the Baptist reading risks under-reading is in separating baptism from the ongoing covenantal structure of the church — as if baptism were only a public declaration rather than also an act of incorporation into Christ’s covenant people.

The Authority Claim (v. 18)

Dispensational interpreters have sometimes restricted the “all authority” claim by placing its full realization in a future millennial reign — the authority is given but not yet fully exercised. This reading is not required by the text and cannot be sustained without importing assumptions from a prior eschatological system. Matthew presents the authority declaration in the aorist passive (*edothē*, “has been given”) — a completed act, already accomplished, the basis (*oun*, “therefore”) for the Commission now being issued. The Commission is issued on the grounds of authority already held, not authority yet to be realized. The Reformed reading that Christ’s universal Lordship is a present, not merely future, reality is the natural reading of the grammar and context. That future consummation will bring the full display of this authority is not denied — but the text does not make that future display the foundation of the Commission. The present Lordship is.

Baptism and the Trinitarian Formula (v. 19)

Roman Catholic and some Anglo-Catholic interpreters have read the baptismal formula as establishing sacramental regeneration — baptism as the instrument through which the new birth is conveyed. The text neither requires nor supports this reading. The emphasis in

verse 19 falls on the Trinitarian name — incorporation into the covenant community defined by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — not on the mechanism of regeneration. The Reformed reading affirms baptism as a covenant sign of real significance without making it the instrument of regeneration. The Trinitarian formula itself is among the most theologically compressed statements in the Gospels — three persons, one name — and deserves extended theological treatment in its own right. This is not a proof-text to be mined but a theological mountain to be climbed.

“Some Doubted” (v. 17)

The parenthetical note that “some doubted” (*hoi de edistasan*) is frequently softened or explained away. Some interpreters read the doubt as temporary hesitation rather than genuine disbelief, or as applying only to those not yet fully convinced before the commissioning moment. The text does not resolve this cleanly, and that may be Matthew’s point. The Commission is issued to a group that includes both worshipers and doubters — the risen Christ does not wait for unanimous certainty before deploying his people. This is not an endorsement of perpetual doubt but a pastoral observation: the risen Christ works through imperfect, still-processing disciples. This detail guards against both the perfectionist reading (only the fully certain are sent) and the indifferentist reading (doubt is inconsequential). Matthew leaves the tension unresolved because it is genuinely unresolved — and honest exposition should leave it there.

Key Canonical Support

- **Daniel 7:13–14** — The Son of Man receives dominion, glory, and a kingdom from the Ancient of Days — all peoples, nations, and languages will serve him. Matthew 28:18 is the direct fulfillment of this vision: the authority granted in Daniel’s throne room is now announced as accomplished on a Galilean mountain.
- **Genesis 12:1–3** — The Abrahamic covenant promises that all families of the earth will be blessed through Abraham’s seed. The Great Commission is the activation of this promise in its fullest form: the disciples are sent to all nations as the instrument through which the blessing flows.
- **Isaiah 49:6** — The Servant of the LORD is given as “a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Matthew 28 is the moment the Servant’s mission becomes the church’s mission, extended through the disciples into every corner of the earth.
- **Psalms 2:7–9** — The LORD’s Anointed is given the nations as his inheritance and the ends of the earth as his possession. Matthew 28:18–20 is the proclamation that this inheritance has been granted and its collection has begun.
- **Acts 1:8** — The risen Christ’s final words before the ascension in Luke’s account parallel and extend Matthew 28: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all

Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The Spirit’s coming at Pentecost is the empowerment for what Matthew 28 commissions — together they provide the full picture of the church’s missionary basis and sustenance.

Aim: To produce in the reader a settled, worshipful submission to the risen and reigning Christ that transforms the church’s mission from an obligation to be discharged into a participation in the ongoing work of the universal Lord who is always present.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
28:1	Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come to see the tomb at dawn on the first day of the week	“First day of the week” — Sunday becomes the Lord’s Day; the new creation has begun
28:2–4	An angel of the Lord descends with earthquake force, rolls back the stone, sits on it; his appearance is like lightning; the guards shake and become like dead men	The angel’s posture (sitting on the stone) signals the stone’s defeat; the guards’ collapse is ironic — the living become like dead while the dead become alive
28:5–7	The angel addresses the women: “Do not be afraid — I know you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Go quickly and tell his disciples: He has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee”	“As he said” — the resurrection validates all of Jesus’s prior claims; the women are the first witnesses, commissioned to announce the resurrection
28:8	The women depart quickly with fear and great joy to tell the disciples	Fear and great joy together — the resurrection does not produce calm; it produces overwhelm; both responses are appropriate
28:9–10	Jesus meets the women; they take hold of his feet and	The physical contact confirms bodily

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	worship him; he repeats the angel's instruction — go tell his brothers to go to Galilee	resurrection; "his brothers" — the disciples have not been abandoned despite the betrayal and flight
28:11–13	While the women go, the guards report to the chief priests; the priests assemble with the elders, take counsel, and bribe the soldiers to say the disciples stole the body while they slept	The cover-up requires inventing a story in which the guards both slept (dereliction of duty) and somehow witnessed a theft — internally incoherent
28:14–15	The chief priests promise to protect the soldiers if the story reaches the governor; the soldiers take the money and do as directed; this story was spread among the Jews until the time of Matthew's writing	Matthew addresses his Jewish-Christian audience directly — this is a live controversy; the fabrication is the establishment's only answer to an empty tomb
28:16–17	The eleven disciples go to Galilee, to the mountain Jesus had designated; when they see him they worship, but some doubted	"The mountain" — a Matthean theological marker (Sermon on the Mount, Transfiguration); worship and doubt coexist in the same group
28:18	Jesus approaches and declares: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"	<i>Aorist passive</i> : accomplished, complete; the basis for everything that follows; this is the fulfillment of Daniel 7:13–14
28:19	"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"	<i>Mathēteusate</i> : the single imperative; going, baptizing, and teaching are the means; "all nations" expands the covenant from Israel to the world
28:20a	"Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you"	Discipleship is not conversion alone — it is formation into obedience; the whole body of Jesus's

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
28:20b	“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”	teaching is entrusted to the church <i>Behold</i> signals importance; the promise matches the scope of the Commission — “all nations,” “always,” “end of the age”; presence is the sustaining power of mission

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	28:1–10	The Empty Tomb and the Risen Lord — Resurrection Proclaimed and Confirmed
2	28:11–15	The Suppressed Truth — Resurrection Denied and Covered
3	28:16–20	The Universal Commission — Resurrection Applied and Extended

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The resurrection of Jesus establishes his universal Lordship and launches his disciples into all-nations mission.

Primary Claim: Because all authority belongs to the risen Christ, his people are not sent into the world as volunteers pursuing a worthy cause — they are sent as ambassadors of the reigning Lord, sustained by his perpetual presence, to make disciples of every nation until the age ends.

Applications (Five)

1. Anchor your confidence in what has already happened, not in what you hope will happen. (*Mind/Belief*) The disciples are not sent out to accomplish something uncertain — they are sent out because something decisive has already occurred. “All authority has been given to me” is a completed declaration, not an aspiration. The temptation for contemporary believers is to treat mission as if its outcome is undetermined and its power

is uncertain. Matthew 28 confronts that temptation directly: the Commission flows from a *fait accompli*. The risen Christ holds all authority now. The believer who understands this will engage in mission with the settled confidence of a courier delivering a message from the king — not the anxiety of an advocate making a case the jury might reject.

2. Refuse the functional orphanhood the world offers you. (*Affections/Worship*) The final words of Matthew's Gospel are not a task but a promise: *I am with you always, to the end of the age*. The disciples who received this word were heading into a world that would resist, persecute, and attempt to silence them. The promise was not "you will succeed" but "I will be there." The deepest threat to faithful mission is not external opposition but internal desolation — the felt sense that the believer is alone in the work. Matthew 28 calls the reader to cultivate the worship-posture of the women who took hold of Jesus's feet: proximity to the risen Christ is available and real. Worship him. Receive his presence. Let the promise "I am with you always" do the affective work it was designed to do.

3. Stop treating the Great Commission as something you might choose to participate in if circumstances permit. (*Will/Behavior*) The grammar of verse 19 is imperative. "Make disciples" is not a suggestion or a spiritual gift distributed to a subset of Christians. The Commission is addressed to the whole community of disciples — and through them to every subsequent generation of disciples. The practical implication is concrete: assess your actual life for the presence or absence of intentional investment in the discipleship of another person. Not attendance at church. Not financial support of missionaries. Both of those are good; neither is the thing the Commission demands. The Commission demands that you be personally engaged in the formation of someone else into the obedience of Christ.

4. Understand that the cover-up in verses 11–15 is still happening — and that empty-tomb faith is what holds. (*Mind/Belief*) Matthew includes the soldiers' bribery account not as historical curiosity but as apologetics for his original audience — and for every subsequent generation. The world has always had an alternative story to explain the empty tomb. The disciples stole the body. The women went to the wrong tomb. It was a hallucination. The body was never actually dead. Matthew's point is not that the alternative stories are easy to refute (though they are), but that the alternative stories *are always there* and are always maintained by motivated suppression. The believer who understands this will not be destabilized when the culture confidently advances the cover story. The tomb is empty. The risen Christ appeared. The claim is historically grounded and exegetically coherent. Stand on it.

5. Let the Trinitarian name into which you were baptized reshape your identity before it reshapes your activity. (*Affections/Worship*) The baptismal formula of verse 19 is not administrative language — it is identity language. To be baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to be claimed by the triune God, named with his name, incorporated into his covenant family. Before the Commission is a mandate it is an identity: you are a person who belongs to this God. The practical distortion to resist is treating mission as the defining mark of Christian identity, with the Trinitarian name reduced to a

formula over the water. The name is not a formula — it is a belonging. Mission flows from belonging, not the other way around. Preach the name before you preach the task. Belong to the Father, Son, and Spirit before you go anywhere.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Matthew 28 is the Gospel’s capstone declaration of Christological Lordship. The resurrection is not presented as resuscitation but as the event that ratifies Jesus’s identity and establishes the ground for universal mission. The “all authority in heaven and on earth” declaration draws directly on the Danielic Son of Man vision (Daniel 7:13–14) and situates the risen Christ as the one who holds cosmic sovereignty over every domain — not merely religious authority or spiritual influence. The Trinitarian formula in verse 19 is among the New Testament’s most compressed and profound statements of Trinitarian theology: one name, three persons, and discipleship formation is explicitly shaped by this Triune identity. The chapter also establishes a creation-level eschatological horizon — “to the end of the age” — that places the church’s mission within the framework of God’s redemptive purposes for the whole of history. Matthew’s Gospel, which opened with “Emmanuel — God with us” (1:23), closes with the promise “I am with you always” — the Incarnation’s logic extended through the resurrection into the ongoing life of the church.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Matthew 28 is foundational to the Reformed understanding of the church’s mission as an expression of Christ’s present, active Lordship — not an anticipation of a Lordship yet to come. The “all authority” declaration is the hermeneutical key to Reformed missiology: mission is not a humanitarian enterprise, a cultural project, or an institutional program — it is the deployment of ambassadors by the already-reigning King. The Great Commission also grounds the Reformed understanding of discipleship as a process of whole-life formation into obedience — “teaching them to observe all that I commanded” — which connects to the Reformed emphasis on the third use of the law as a guide for Christian living. The Trinitarian name into which disciples are baptized grounds the Reformed doctrine of the church as a covenant community constituted by the Triune God’s self-giving, not by human decision or organizational structure. Finally, Matthew 28:20b functions in Reformed theology as a perpetual assurance against the temptation toward ecclesial independence or self-sufficiency: the risen Christ’s sustaining presence is the church’s only real resource, and all fruitfulness in mission flows from dependence on him, not from strategic competence.

Main Takeaway

The tomb is empty, the King is enthroned, and he has given you his permanent presence and his unambiguous commission. You are not being asked to attempt something that might work — you are being sent by the Lord to whom all authority belongs, into a world that is already his, to gather disciples who are already destined for him. Go. He will be there when you arrive.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Reducing the Great Commission to a missions-program text.** The most common homiletical error in Matthew 28 is treating verses 18–20 as an organizational mandate — a call to church-planting strategies, missionary funding, or evangelism programs. These are legitimate applications but they are not the text’s primary claim. The Commission flows from a Lordship declaration. Preach the authority of the risen Christ first and at length. The Commission is the implication, not the center. Congregations who hear only the Commission without the authority declaration will treat mission as one program among many rather than as the inevitable response to a resurrection that actually happened.
- **Skipping verses 11–15 as an embarrassing interruption.** The bribery account is frequently treated as a historical footnote to be acknowledged briefly before moving to the Great Commission. This misses Matthew’s structural intent. The two movements of the chapter — resurrection confirmed (vv. 1–10) and resurrection suppressed (vv. 11–15) — are the theological frame for the Commission. The disciples are sent into a world that has decided to lie about the empty tomb. The Commission is issued with that opposition already in view. Omit verses 11–15 and you lose the apologetic realism of the Commission.
- **Sentimentalizing “I am with you always” into a therapeutic comfort.** The promise of verse 20b is frequently preached as pastoral reassurance — “Jesus is with you in your hard times.” That is not wrong, but it is incomplete. The promise is specifically attached to the Commission: *as you make disciples, I am with you*. It is a missionary promise before it is a pastoral one. The presence of Christ is the sustaining power of mission — which means it is most fully experienced in the pursuit of the Commission, not apart from it. Sever it from the Commission and you produce a privatized comfort rather than a missionary fuel.
- **Domesticating “all nations” into something the congregation can support from a distance.** The phrase *panta ta ethnē* (“all nations/all peoples”) in verse 19 is frequently preached as a call to global missions giving — supporting others who go, while the congregation remains in place. That reading is not wrong but it is

incomplete and, for most congregations, dangerously comfortable. The Commission's participle *poreuomenoi* ("as you go" or "going") assumes movement and engagement as the posture of every disciple. The "all nations" horizon reshapes the disciple's entire orientation — not merely their giving habits.

- **Treating "some doubted" as an embarrassment to explain away.** Preachers frequently harmonize verse 17 into a prior stage of uncertainty that was resolved before the Commission was issued — everyone was worshiping by the time Jesus spoke. The text does not say this. The note is left unresolved. Preaching that explains it away robs the congregation of one of the most honest pastoral observations in the Gospels: the risen Christ commissions doubters. That is not an endorsement of perpetual doubt — it is a call to obedience even in the presence of unresolved questions. Handle this with care, but do not delete it.
- **Preaching the Commission without the Trinitarian name.** Verse 19's baptismal formula is frequently treated as a procedural detail (the correct words to say) rather than a theological declaration (the identity into which the disciple is incorporated). The Trinitarian name is the theological freight of the whole verse. A sermon on the Great Commission that does not substantively engage "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" has left the text's richest vein unmined. The mission is Trinitarian in its basis, Trinitarian in its form, and Trinitarian in its telos — disciples formed in the image of the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit.