

# "INTO ALL THE WORLD"

The Great Commission:  
A Vindication and an Interpretation

by

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## CHAPTER FOUR THE AUTHENTICITY AND GENUINENESS OF THE GREAT COMMISSION (Matthew 28:16-20)

**“For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (II Peter 1:16).**

**“For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (Revelation 22:18, 19).**

A genuine book is one written by the person whose name it bears; an authentic book is one which relates matters of fact as they really happened. A passage in a book may be authentic without being genuine and genuine without being authentic. Is the Great Commission either or both? Some higher critics maintain that it is neither.

Readers of the monumental history of *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity* by Adolf Harnack will remember that in his fourth chapter he denies the universality of JESUS' mission and outlook:

"JESUS addressed His Gospel - His message of GOD's imminent kingdom and of judgment, of GOD's fatherly providence, of repentance, holiness, and love - to His fellow-countrymen. He preached only to Jews. Not a syllable shows that He detached this message from its national soil, or set aside the traditional religion as of no value. Upon the contrary, His preaching could be taken as the most powerful corroboration of that religion . . . Such is the 'universalism' of the preaching of JESUS.

“No other kind of universalism can be proved for Him, *and consequently He cannot have given any command upon the mission to the whole world. The Gospels contain such a command, but it is easy to show that it is neither genuine nor a part of the primitive tradition.* It would introduce an entirely strange feature into the preaching of JESUS, and at the same time render many of His genuine sayings unintelligible or empty." [1]

Bishop N. S. Talbot of Great Britain raised the same question:

"Take away the last verses of St. Matthew's Gospel containing the 'Great Commission' - and, with their almost Trinitarian language, they are suspected by the critics - take them away, and how very few sayings of CHRIST are left to make clear the world-wide range of His mission. Indeed, there are sayings, harsh and startling, which tell the other way - **I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel . . . Go not into any city of the Gentiles.**' Were the Gentiles, after all, included in His aim? Did He transcend racial barriers and limitations? Really and historically have the life and teachings of JESUS a world-wide range? They are so very Jewish" (*The Student Movement*, London, November, 1933).

The primary reason for this attitude toward the closing section of the Gospel is the bias of anti-supernaturalism. But, as Dr. Rawlinson of Oxford remarks in his commentary on Mark, "There is no non-supernatural Christianity in the New Testament."

What, then, is the evidence for the genuineness of this Great Commission and its authenticity? The question, surely, is important.

### **I. The theory of Harnack, first of all, has against it all the manuscript evidence.**

*The genuineness of the text of Matthew 28:19-20 is undisputed except on rationalistic ground.*

When Conybeare, about 1901, claimed external evidence against it in the shorter form found as a quotation in Eusebius, he was answered most conclusively by Riggenbach. From the end of the second century to the beginning of the fourth century no trace of the Eusebian shorter form of the text exists. On the contrary, the present form can be traced to the end of the second century in North Africa, Rome and Gaul and to early in the third century in Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt. Riggenbach even traces it back to Tatian and Justin Martyr. We return to this later.

*The evidence of the manuscripts, uncials and cursives, as well as of all the ancient versions, is overwhelmingly in favor of the authenticity of the passage.*

Bernard H. Cuneo writes (p. 37):

"The fact that the Curetonian manuscript has nothing after Matthew 23:25 and the Bobiensis nothing after 15:36 cannot even by the wildest stretch of the imagination be ascribed to efforts to suppress a more ancient and therefore presumably untrinitarian reading of Matthew 28:19."

And F. H. Chase remarks, in answer to Conybeare:

"It is only when we shut our eyes to facts that we can persuade ourselves, or allow ourselves to be persuaded, that it was possible for words to have been interpolated into the text of the Gospels without a trace of their true character surviving in the manuscripts and versions" (*Journal Theol. Studies*, 1905, p. 499).

In *Nestle's Greek text of the New Testament* "the apparatus at the foot of each page indicates every variation of any importance in the resultant text" based on the various manuscripts; but in this passage *there is not a single variation noted, except the omission of "Amen" in some manuscripts.*

The *International Critical Commentary* refers to the articles by Conybeare, Lake, Riggenbach and Chase and then concludes that the evidence of Eusebius, (which they allege to be conclusive) must be regarded as indecisive in view of the fact that all Greek manuscripts and all extant versions contain the clause of Trinitarian baptism (p. 307).

## **II. The conception of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is ancient as the Christian Church itself.**

It was so for Paul, (I Corinthians 12:3; II Corinthians 13:14) ; for Peter (I Peter 1:2); and for John (I John 3:23, 24).

One has only to read the New Testament carefully to realize that the doctrine of the Trinity is found in all the Gospels and all the Epistles like a watermark in bond paper, but one must hold it up to the light of faith and not look on the pages in the darkness of doubt and prejudice.

Therefore, this objection to the genuineness and authenticity of the Great Commission loses its force. Although the text is found (as we have noted) in all the manuscripts and versions, some critics nevertheless regard it as an interpolation or at least an unauthentic utterance of JESUS.

They argue that the baptisms described in the New Testament are "**in the name of Jesus**" and not into the Triune Name (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). Therefore, so stereotyped a formulation of the Trinitarian doctrine must be of much later date than the Apostolic Age.

But a careful study of baptisms in the New Testament does not at all indicate that the converts to Christianity were not baptized by the formula of Matthew 28:19. The argument from silence is never conclusive. If, however, CHRIST did not speak the words, then we must explain how the formula is of the very early Church.

- It was known to Clement of Rome (A.D. 90) who has three Trinitarian statements.
- It is the basis of the earliest form of the Apostles' Creed (cir. 100 A.D.).
- It is quoted by the Didache (cir. 110 A.D). and
- It is definitely alluded to by Justin Martyr (A.D. 150).

"It may be doubted whether any other single text in the New Testament has such early and satisfactory attestation" (Dummelow, p. 721).

The question whether the Son of Man could utter such words is entirely beside the point.

*Most commentators date the glorification of CHRIST not from His ascension but from the resurrection.*

Here CHRIST speaks as one who has all authority in heaven and on earth. This is the view of Augustine, of most of the Fathers, of Albertus Magnus, of the Schoolmen, and of many modern authorities (Dummelow).

Von Gerlach correctly says: "The resurrection of JESUS and not His ascension was His entrance into the new eternal, divine and heavenly life, as in it all power in heaven and upon earth was already given to Him." A similar opinion is expressed by Milligan and Westcott.

Even Harnack, who denies the authenticity of the Great Commission, admits its appropriateness as the climax to Matthew's account of the King of the Jews (Vol. I, p. 40, footnote).

"On the other hand," he says, "we must observe that the first evangelist opens with the story of the wise men from the East (though even this section admits of a strictly Jewish-Christian interpretation), that he includes 8:11, that he shows his interest in the people who sat in darkness (4:13 f), that he described JESUS (12:21) as One whose Name the Gentiles trust, that he contemplates the preaching of the Gospel to all the Gentiles in the eschatological speech and in the story of the anointing at Bethany, and that no positive proofs can be adduced for regarding 28:19 f, as an interpolation."

So this great scholar and critic admits in a footnote what is denied in his text!

Only negative proofs are available against the authenticity and genuineness of the words of JESUS on the mountain in Galilee. We have repeatedly referred to Harnack because he has influenced very many to follow his view of Matthew 28:16-20.

"What greater evidence of the deity and majesty of CHRIST," says Meinertz, "can we find than this passage in which He possesses all power in the universe; He is omnipresent in the history of His Church; He has a place in the glorious unity of the Trinity - "The Name"; He commands His disciples to a universal mission before He leaves them; and He establishes the sacrament of initiation for a universal fellowship. All this is asserted in forty Greek words - an eloquence greater than that of Moses, even as this one commandment is wider and more glorious than the Ten Commandments of Mt. Sinai" (p. 177).

**III. A third argument against the genuineness of the Great Commission comes from those who maintain that the references of Eusebius to baptism bear on the question and settle it.**

In 1901-02 Conybeare wrote three articles on the Eusebian form of the text (Matthew 28:19): the first in a German theological magazine, the second in the *Hibbert Journal*, and the third, summarizing his conclusion, in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1910) in the article entitled "Baptism." His argument is directed primarily against verse 19 on baptism and not against the entire passage, so that, as Meinertz remarks, even if the baptismal form should be suspect (which it is not), this does not touch the rest of the text in Matthew's Gospel.

But the passages in Eusebius cite the words of Matthew 28:19 in three forms. Of these the first and second do not have the threefold name but the third form even in the Eusebius texts (five times) have the same words as in the textus receptus.

A Roman Catholic theologian, Bernard Henry Cuneo, a Protestant theologian of Basel, Eduard Riggenbach, and two other scholars, F. H. Chase and J. R. Wilkinson, have answered the arguments of Conybeare fully and most convincingly.

"All the surviving Greek codices were not produced by a band of conspirators. They grew up naturally in different portions of the Greek-speaking Church. An interpolation could not be thus foisted into the text of the Gospels, and all evidences of its true character be obliterated" (F. H. Chase in *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1905 - "The Lord's Command to Baptism," p. 499).

Riggenbach explains the shorter form from the tendency to make the sacraments mysterious and hide them - hence the omission of the baptismal formula when Eusebius simply wanted to show that CHRIST sent out disciples.

As to Origen, it is true that he twice cites Matthew 28:18 and has no reference to baptism or the Trinitarian formula. But there are passages in his Greek writings which show that he probably knew the text (28:19) in full. He connects "**make disciples**" with baptism in speaking of John the Baptist. He also uses the Trinitarian formula in writings which we have only in translation by Rufinus. Riggenbach shows that from the context we see that Origen was not merely referring to a practice, but that he was quoting Matthew. The Clementine Homilies not only contain the Trinitarian baptismal formula but show that it stood in the New Testament, or, as they use Matthew most frequently, they probably refer to Matthew 28:19.

In the Egyptian Church, the Memphitic Version has it. An early gnostic work, says Riggenbach, refers to the Trinitarian baptismal formula in a description which seems to refer to Matthew 28:16 ff. Also in the West, from the end of the second century on, there is more abundant evidence. Cyprian cites Matthew 28:19 in its present form - which must have been the form in their Latin Bible. Also it is cited by a council of eighty bishops who must have had the Greek text.

The conclusion is that from the end of the second century to the beginning of the fourth century no trace of the shorter Eusebian form has been discovered. But on the contrary the text as we have it can be traced to the end of the second century in North Africa, Rome and Gaul, and to early in the third century in Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt.

Hence Conybeare's claim is impossible, viz., that the Trinitarian formula first appeared in the Latin Bible in North Africa and later crept into the Greek manuscript. Riggenbach even traces that formula back to Tatian and Justin Martyr and possibly to Clement of Rome.

Cuneo cites every one of the passages in Eusebius on baptism and shows that even on this evidence the very argument of Conybeare falls to the ground.

He considers each of the alleged passages in detail and concludes:

"Eusebius, in citing Matthew 28:19, was true to that spirit of unfettered license which he generously permitted himself in everyone of his writings . . . The fact that in spite of his carelessness, Eusebius, in five instances in his own works, quotes the passage exactly as we have it in the received text, brings the authenticity of Matthew 28:19 into bold relief" (Cuneo, p. 110).

The notorious omissions, insertions and changes in the numerous citations of Eusebius undermine any inference that the Triune baptismal command was not the common text of the New Testament of his day.

#### **IV. Lastly, we come to Harnack's statement that the Great Commission is not a genuine word of our Saviour because "He preached only to Jews."**

JESUS had no larger horizon than Palestine. He Himself said, **"I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel."**

The first to make the strange affirmation that JESUS' mission was to the Jews only was Reimarus in 1778, followed by Lessing, Pflleiderer, Wellhausen, Helgenfeld, Eduard Meyer, Julicher, Loisy and others.

In reply to these writers of the liberal school, Dr. Max Meinertz wrote his *JESUS und die Heidenmission* in which he shows conclusively the universal viewpoint and mission of JESUS CHRIST.

He first gives a list of those scholars, Roman Catholic, Protestant and liberal, who believe that JESUS CHRIST was conscious of a universal mission and that He had a world-horizon: Keim, Strauss, Hausrath, Bertholet, Baur, Paulus, Neander, Schleiermacher, Ewald, Kahler, Warnack, Barthold, Schlatter, Zahn and others. Furthermore, he quotes from Dr. James Moffatt: "Partly owing to its contents, partly to its omissions, Harnack's chapter on the universal outlook of JESUS is at once the most controversial and perhaps the least convincing in the volume" (*Hibbert Journal*, 1:581).

*The argument of Meinertz (to which we have already referred in Chapter III) is most illuminating.*

He points to the universalism of the Old Testament in its Messianic promises and prophecies. He gives a picture of the universal outlook of contemporary Judaism through the Diaspora and its wide proselytism. Could JESUS have had a narrower horizon than the Pharisees (John 7:35)? Was He less interested in the Gentiles than Rabbi Hillel? The words of CHRIST in Matthew 23:15 were not a criticism of the Jewish propaganda but of its message.

Then, in later chapters, Meinertz describes the implied universalism in JESUS' teaching and in His attitude toward the Judaism of His day; the clearly expressed universalism of His outlook and mission; e.g., in His dealing with Samaritans, His universal terms of invitation (Matthew 11:28), His parables of a universal judgment of the nations. Later chapters deal with the missionary idea latent in His choice of the Twelve and their training, the sending of the Seventy, and many of His parables and prophecies.

- **"This gospel must first be preached in all the world for a witness."**
- **"Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her"** (Matthew 26:13).

And then the author of this remarkable monograph comes to the great closing scene in Matthew 28 with its parallel passages in Mark and Luke and the Acts, confirming their genuineness, illuminating their climactic significance and world-wide, age-long application (pp. 161-196).

One could wish for an English translation of this great missionary volume, the perusal of which is a conclusive reply to modern critical attacks on the authenticity and genuineness of the closing paragraphs of Matthew's Gospel.

**"When they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted."**

To those who believe, His last words are imperative and final. The greatness of the Great Commission is that of Him who gave it - in whom dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

1. Vol. I, pp. 36, 37.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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