

Christ's Fourfold Declaration of Authority (Matt 28:18–20)

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In spite of the emphasis in evangelical circles on Christ's missionary mandate to his disciples in Matthew 28, the bond between the cosmic authority asserted in verse 18 and the church, to which the mission is entrusted in verses 19–20, is not always acknowledged as it should be. Misunderstanding or lack of precision about this point runs the risk of distorting the reason for the missionary mandate, namely by displacing it from its christological focus. We will clarify the precise nature of the bond between Christ's authority and the church by an examination of the passage's fourfold declaration of authority, which reinforces the passage in question and uncovers how this bond establishes the New Testament church as well.

The beginning and end of Matthew teach about the reality of the kingdom. What Jesus declared about the kingdom when he started preaching is crucial for understanding the final passage of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew 4:17 states, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (ESV). Mark 1:27 describes the reactions of those who witnessed this preaching accompanied by manifestations of authority:

And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean

¹ This contribution was originally written in French and was translated by Thea Van Til Rusthoven, a long-time French instructor at Redeemer University College in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

spirits, and they obey him.” And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

From the outset of his ministry, Jesus leaves no doubt as to who possesses authority, even over demons.

Moreover, when Jesus addresses his disciples on the eve of his earthly departure, he establishes the proclamation of this authority the very theme of his disciples’ future preaching. He is the King of the kingdom. From his Father, he has received authority to reign and exercise sovereignty over all things. This kingdom is permanent, destined to last forever; after his victory over death, nothing and no one will be able to take it away from him. The prophecy in Daniel 7:13–14 is fulfilled.² This authority is the very heart of the gospel of the kingdom (*to euangelion tēs basileias*) already preached in Matthew 4:23.

In Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus articulates what is called the *Great Commission*, the missionary commandment to go and make disciples from all the nations. Although Christians often understand this commandment as a significant ecclesiastical activity, they often view it as one among others, and even sometimes as a secondary task. Our text, however, teaches something else, namely, that this passage is nothing less than the founding declaration of the postresurrection church, with a definition of its true characteristics. The Great Commission is thus an integral part of this founding declaration, and it is not one task among others.

We now turn to *the first declaration of authority*, that of cosmic authority (all authority, *pasa exousia*). The misunderstanding about the importance of the bond mentioned above most often arises from the fact that the Great Commission is understood as being expressed solely in verse 19, and not starting already in verse 18b. Such a misreading is easily documented by a survey of various churches’ materials, websites, and brochures dedicated to their missionary activities and their “mission and vision” statements. The materials show that often the relationship between the *indicative mood* of verse 18b and the *imperative mood* beginning in verse 19a is broken, or at least obscured.

In verse 18b, using the indicative mood *edothē moi* (has been given to me),³ Christ indicates what the facts are, written down in the historical decree of the Father, a decree nevertheless anchored in eternity: he is by divine right the king whose authority extends over *all* things (*pasa exousia*) in heaven and on earth. These two places naturally refer us back to Genesis 1:1,

² Jesus had appropriated this prophecy in Matthew 26:64, and this assertion served as the motif for condemnation by the Sanhedrin.

³ The verb *didōmi* is in the aorist indicative passive.

evoking the totality of creation and the origin of the authority in question. Here no partial authority or kingship is in view. There is no place in this *pasa exousia* for a viceroy. The kingdom of God is first characterized by the fact that all authority has been given to Christ. Thus, we can never speak of the *kingdom* without speaking of the total kingship given to Christ and his exercise of it.

The *imperative mood* which follows—“You therefore, go”⁴—is just the necessary consequence of the indicative mood that precedes it. Here, the coordinating conjunction *oun* (“therefore, consequently”) needs to be taken into account.⁵ The King James Version has exemplary clarity in this regard: “Go ye therefore.” In other words, the only reason why the disciples are called to go and make disciples is because of the authority/kingship of Christ, such as it is expressed in verse 18b. It is at the center of the future proclamation. The actions that follow (the aorist imperative *mathēteusate*, “make disciples,” is followed by two present participles that make its content explicit, *baptizontes* . . . *didaskontes*, “baptizing” and “teaching,” vv. 19–20) are included in the dynamics of “you therefore, go,” itself generated and set in motion by the indicative mood of universal authority that precedes it. The mission will invariably fail if it is not grounded on this vision, one which creates it, motivates it, and determines its dynamics. Likewise, not obeying the given mandate would be a *de facto* rejection of the fact that all authority (*pasa exousia*) has been delivered to Christ in heaven and on the earth: a rejection of his authority corresponding in reality to a denial of his kingship.

The *second declaration of authority* concerns the geographical area where the authority is exercised (to all the nations, *panta ta ethnē*, v. 19). The geographical declension of the cosmic authority of Christ⁶ is revealed by his sending the disciples to *all* the nations of the earth (*panta ta ethnē*) and not just to some, which would be a denial of its universal dimension. His word, by which he governs the entire universe, must be heard in every place. It is the scepter of his government, referring us back, along with other passages in the broader scope of revelation, from Psalm 2:7–9 for the Old Testament (“Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession”) and to Philippians 2:9–11 for the New Testament (“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus

⁴ *Poreuthentes oun* is literally, “going therefore,” but the aorist participle has an imperative value.

⁵ The variant *nun* (“now”) is hardly affirmed or attested (it is found only in D and a few old Latin versions) and could be explained by an assimilation of the initial omicron into nu.

⁶ Here *gē* indicates the earth as distinguished from heaven.

every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”). In Acts 1:8, just before his ascension to heaven, Jesus indicates the starting and ending points of the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” Any attempt to exclude one of these regions or groups from the sphere of proclamation (in particular the Jewish people, historical custodian of the covenants) would represent a blatant rejection of the *pasa exousia* of Christ, and thus of his kingdom, so that it then becomes entirely useless to invoke this authority about other subjects.

The third declaration of authority expounds the extent of the obedience required (“all the things that I have commanded you,” *panta hosa eneteilamēn hymin*). The “all” or “all the things” that must be taught, retained, and practiced set apart the kingdom of Christ from the kingdoms of other gods, masters or idols, thus showing us the marks of the kingdom. It cannot be about making a personal or subjective choice concerning what can or cannot be obeyed. Here we remember the third and fourth petitions of the Lord’s Prayer: “Your reign/kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven” (Matt 6:10). The visible form of this kingdom coming on earth, of the accomplishment of God’s will on earth as in heaven, is the obedience to the kingdom’s laws as they are taught by the disciples, who were themselves taught by Jesus. The faithful mission is above all a faithful *transmission* (2 Tim 2:2; Jude 3b).

In short, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the scepter by which God wishes to govern the world, and his divine authority is expressed in order that everyone submit to it. Before touching upon the fourth declaration of authority, let us say a few words first about the relationship between the kingdom and the church and then about Jesus as Lord (*Iēsous Kyrios*). In parallel to the relationship between the kingdom and the mission, our pericope illustrates *the relationship between the kingdom and the church*, in the sense that the marks of the church, derived from the universal kingship of Jesus Christ, appear rather clearly:

- a) Proclamation/preaching/faithful catechesis of the Law-Word (20a: “all that I have commanded you”)
- b) Administration of baptism in the name of God—unique Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as a visible sign of belonging to the people of his covenant (19b)
- c) Exercise of spiritual discipline as systematic training in obedience (20a, which makes of a person a *disciplined* disciple)

- d) Universality and unity under the authority of the sovereign, in the plurality of places where preaching/catechesis is done, baptism is administered, and discipline is exercised (19a: “all nations,” city by city, town by town, community by community)⁷

In Matthew 28:18–20, the marks of the true church, namely, the church that obeys her only sovereign, are not presented to us outside of the Great Commission, either after it or even next to it, but, in fact, within the dynamics themselves of this mandate. It is the *raison d'être* of the church, since it proclaims the sovereignty of Christ over all things, Christ exalted at the right hand of the Father. These marks constantly refer us back to the sovereignty; they have no autonomy at all from it. An excellent example of this is the very young Thessalonian church, which the missionary work of Paul and Silas established amid great trials and tribulations (cf. Acts 17:1–9). The Apostle Paul writes at the beginning of his first letter to them,

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. (1 Thess 1:6–8)

In the case of the church of Thessalonica, the mission of the Apostle Paul and his companions resulted in an immediate transmission. This transmission was a sign itself of the dynamic energy of the universal kingdom of Christ that “goes viral,” from place to place, to the far ends of the earth, to such an extent that *we do not need to talk about it*. This proclamation is central to everything that the disciples must teach the nations to obey. It is precisely what the new disciples of Thessalonica had grasped, having received the gospel not only in words “but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and

⁷ Concerning the marks of the true church, the Belgic Confession says in article 29, “The marks by which the true church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure doctrine of the Gospel; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing sins; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.” Quoted from Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 419–20. The English translation provided by Schaff is based on the Latin version. It is worth noting that the last phrase “from which no man has a right to separate himself” is first found in the 1566 French version, thus a year before the execution of Guido de Brès, the author of the Belgic Confession, as a martyr of Evangelical faith. Cf. as well John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.1.9.

with full conviction” (1 Thess 1:5). This made them immediately a missionary church.

In light of these elements and the example of the church at Thessalonica, it is vital to emphasize—in contrast to so many churches that are often dozing off or self-absorbed—that the church itself (local or universal) does not arbitrarily decide the nature of the relationship that unites her with her King, setting up her own rules and priorities depending on what she thinks is the relationship. On the contrary, it is the King who establishes the relationship by his finished work (indicative mood) and who determines the rules and priorities of his church (imperative mood), of whose body he is the head (Col 1:17–18). Moreover, the very first thing that he commanded his disciples to teach all the nations was his universal authority on which everything else depends.

The lordship of Jesus over all things has been the rallying cry of the church since the beginning of the Christian era, as the recurring phrase *Iēsous Kyrios* attests. That is why the church seemed suspicious in the watchful eyes of the Roman authorities, who were very jealous of their self-divinizing political claims. The extent of the sphere of “all the things that I commanded you” (*panta hosa eneteilamēn*, v. 20) must be specified within the context of the church’s mission, which aims to be both outward⁸ and inward.⁹ The mission is not about preaching to the nations a simple, formal change of religion or about repeating the phrase *Iēsous Kyrios* like an overworked mantra without much discernment, without a progressive exposition of all its aspects. That would be missing the mark with respect to the real nature and behavior of a disciple trained in a systematic discipline.

In order to resist this easy way, under the leading of the Spirit, we should be able and willing to explore all the implications of obedience to the authority of Christ, in a constant renewing of the mind (Rom 12:2; Eph 4:23; 1 Pet 1:14). If the church, submitted to Christ-the-King, desires to take seriously the commandment that sends her outwards into the world, she must also be ready at any time to examine herself in order to confess her cultural sins; obviously not the whole culture as it is, but all the sinful aspects that distort it. The church must continually be dismantling the Asherah poles surreptitiously brought within her, avoiding the traps of compromise with the world and its ideologies, as well as fighting with spiritual clarity to maintain a renewed mind (1 Thess 5:21; 1 John 4:1). Everything that could disqualify

⁸ “Go therefore” (*poreuthentes oun*, v. 19a) indicates the transmission towards the world.

⁹ “Keep, preserve, obey,” (*iērein*, v. 20a) points to the transmission within the people of the covenant.

the church for this mission (and the world never fails to show her failures, though with the mere intention of paralyzing her efforts), can only be corrected by meditating on the *pasa exousia* of the risen Christ: it is the purpose par excellence of her proclamation. In this regard, Hebrews 1:3b–4 reminds the church that the precursor to the Son sitting at the right hand of divine majesty in the highest places has been the fulfillment of the purification of sins, namely the church's sins, the church sanctified by the Spirit of the one who has redeemed her. The *pasa exousia* of the incarnated Christ-the-King was displayed in the swallowing up of the sins of those who became his body, whom he could not abandon, and to whom he remains near.

The fourth declaration of authority is in the form of a promise: Christ's presence "every day [*pasas tas hēmeras*] to the end of the age" (v. 20). In addition to the indicative and imperative moods which form its initial core, the very end of the pericope of Matthew 28:18–20 adds an eschatological promise that is also a declaration of authority, this time about the temporal sphere in which the mandate is carried out through all of the disciples' successive generations (v. 20b): the King is with them every day (*pasa tas hēmeras*) to the end of the age—or the dispensation (*heōs tēs sunteleias tou aiōnos*). In light of Matthew 24:12—"And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come"—we understand that the end of the age in Matthew 18:20b includes both the waiting for and the arrival of the parousia, even if it is not explicitly mentioned here.

This fourth totality, a temporal one, must be understood not only in the sense of a total period but also in a distributive sense, as the plural *pasas tas hēmeras* indicates, each day displaying this accompanying presence. However, the spiritual presence of Christ "with you" (*meth' hymōn*) is only promised to the disciples within the context of obedience to the commission. It would be deceptive to expect to enjoy the benefits of this presence while at the same time ignoring the mandate (cf. again Matt 24:14). In the given and received context, however, this promise is introduced rather solemnly by *idou* ("behold"), which appears sixty-two times in Matthew, here not to indicate a new element of the narrative, like in Matthew 28:1, 10, but to forcefully highlight at the very end of the gospel the *egō eimi* ("I am") of divine significance. The indicative mood "I am" recalls verse 18 and the declaration of Jesus, also made in the indicative mood, concerning the universal authority that was given to him. Conveyed by a historic aorist, this authority is rooted in the eternal decree of the Father; it gives rise here to a verb in the present indicative mood that envisions this same eternity,

beyond the eschatological fulfillment of the present time (*heōs tēs sunteleias tou aiōnos*, Matt 28:20).

Thus, a circle is closed that leaves no place for any usurpation of authority, a circle that gives new weight to the title *Immanuel* (“God with us”), attributed to Jesus by Matthew from 1:23 onwards, as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. Jesus Christ is *Immanuel* for his church sent in mission. Furthermore, he is *Immanuel* only for the church, as a promise and encouragement for their mission, which derives its source and power from him alone.

Before concluding, it is worthwhile to revisit in the Gospel of Matthew the expression *egō eimi*, which only appears four times in that form, in contrast to its numerous occurrences in the Gospel of John. In Matthew 14:27, Jesus tells his frightened disciples in the boat that they are not seeing a ghost, but that it is him walking on the sea and coming to them. He is with them in the midst of the storm; therefore, they need not be afraid. In Matthew 18:20, where Jesus teaches his disciples about relationships inside the *ekklesia*-assembly (verses 15–21), the assurance of his presence (“there,” *ekei*) where two or three are gathered in his name precedes and foreshadows the expression of assurance in Matthew 28:20, which is final, more solemn, and encompasses all of time and space. In Matthew 18:20, the expression of assurance seems to await a greater fulfillment because *eimi* has not yet become *egō eimi*. In Matthew 22:32, speaking to the Sadducees, Jesus quotes Exodus 3:16, where God appeared for the first time to Moses on Mount Horeb to establish the resurrection of the dead (“I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”). In Matthew 24:5, Jesus warns that many will usurp his name by claiming to be the Christ—*egō eimi ho Christos* (“I am the Christ”); we are led beyond these false claims to the expression of assurance in Matthew 28:20. In Matthew 26:63–64, during Jesus’s trial, the expression is indirectly attributed to him by Caiaphas when he asks him under oath “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God”,¹⁰ in turn it mirrors Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi (Matt 16:16). Jesus’s response, “You have said so,” validates the predicate put forth by Caiaphas as unthinkable.

One marvels at the remarkable path that leads to the final affirmation in Matthew 28:20, an *egō eimi* that was prepared and validated throughout the gospel. The quote by Jesus from Exodus 3:16 in Matthew 22:32 seems indeed to play a pivotal role in this progression, since he directly links it to the question of the resurrection of the dead.

¹⁰ “If you are the Christ, the Son of God” (*ei su ei ho Christos, ho huios tou theou*, v. 63).

The exposition of the main elements of Matthew 28:18–20 and their relationships has had the purpose of pointing to a missiology based on the doctrine of the kingdom and the kingship of Christ, which we could call a *basileo-missiology*. This basileo-missiology is too often confused with a “Jesus-ology” in which the authority of the risen Christ is submerged in the demands of a poorly motivated and weakly structured proselytism. In the preceding pericope (Matt 28:11–15), a parallel *mission* was set in motion, involving a false report (a lie bought with money) concerning the body of Jesus snatched on the sly by the disciples. That very act, which the religious authorities saw as plausible and dreaded (Matt 27:62–66), became the official version due to the propaganda spurred on by these authorities, despite the contradicting initial testimony of the guards. This “fake news” was then spread among the Jews (Matt 28:15). However, it is striking that in Matthew’s narrative, the guards were the first witnesses to what happened at the tomb together with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. In Matthew 28:11, the two groups each go and transmit to two other groups the common core of the same fact-based reality of which they were witnesses. The guards “told the chief priests *all* that had taken place [*hapanta ta genomena*]” (v. 11b). The relationship of the women to the other disciples is, however, of a completely different kind, since to this common core is added the command of Jesus to his disciples to come and find him in Galilee; this command foreshadows the encounter related in the final pericope of Matthew.

The reporting by the women is therefore the first postresurrection movement of a mission/transmission that is not limited to bringing the same news that the guards gave to the chief priests, but includes a pressing invitation to the disciples, a commandment to come and meet the King in order to get back to obediently listening to his word and faithfully communicating it to the ends of the earth. The authority by which the gospel must be proclaimed in its totality to all the nations finds its source not in an interior religious movement, whether individual or collective, but in the word of the King whose kingship is the very object of this word.

It is by virtue of this authority that the disciples Peter and John are able fearlessly to confront the religious authorities who threaten them: “But Peter and John answered them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard’” (Acts 4:19–20).

For the church of Christ currently persecuted worldwide, this should act as a first-rate encouragement, since the one who continues to send out his disciples, generation after generation, remains the same one who promises them his presence every single day until the end of the present age.