

Matthew 28:19 and the Mission of the WELS

[Report of the committee appointed by the Conference of Presidents
of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
in response to Resolution No. 3 (Clarifying the Mission of the Synod)
in the Report of Floor Committee No. 2 of the 2005 Synod Convention
April 23, 2007]

Introduction

1. In recent years concerns have been voiced within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) about the mission statement adopted by the synod. One matter that has prompted discussion is the statement that the WELS “exists to make disciples throughout the world...”¹ The phrase “make disciples” comes from Matthew 28:19 as translated in the New International Version and a number of other modern translations of the Bible. The NIV reads, “Therefore go and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”² But the old King James Version translated the beginning of the verse, “Go ye therefore, and *teach* all nations.” Luther’s German translation also used a word for “teach” (*lehret*) instead of “make disciples.”
2. A concern expressed by some in our synod is that human beings can teach God’s Word, but only God can convert people by creating faith in their hearts. That observation has led to questions such as these:
 - Do we distort the doctrine of conversion and claim for ourselves something only God can do when we say our synod “exists to make disciples...”?
 - Is the use of the phrase “make disciples” in our mission statement evidence that we are giving in to Reformed³ or Church Growth influences?
 - Even if we ourselves retain a correct understanding of conversion, do we give a false impression to others?
3. Some who have voiced concern about the translation “make disciples” in Matthew 28:19 have suggested that more attention should be given to other passages in Scripture that speak of the church’s mission. None of those other passages use words for disciple or discipleship or making disciples. Many of them focus in some way on preaching or teaching the gospel. Here too it may be useful to encapsulate concerns in the form of questions:
 - Does an awareness of other passages dealing with the mission of the church tip the balance in favor of the translation “teach” rather than “make disciples” in Matthew 28:19?
 - Would our synod do well to rephrase its mission statement to make it echo the language of those other passages instead of quoting “make disciples” from a debatable translation of Matthew 28:19?
4. The phrase “make disciples” in the synod mission statement has prompted some additional suggestions in the interest of accuracy and clarity. These suggestions can also be expressed as questions:

¹ The mission statement of the WELS is printed on p. ii of the *Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Yearbook 2007*: “As men, women, and children united in faith and worship by the Word of God, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod exists to make disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity, using the gospel in Word and sacrament to win the lost for Christ and to nurture believers for lives of Christian service, all to the glory of God.”

² Italics within Bible passages represent emphasis added by us, not by the translators of the NIV or other versions. Unless otherwise indicated, English translations of the Bible are from the NIV (various editions).

³ It is not clear to us whether those who voiced this concern about Reformed influence were thinking of Calvinists (with whom the term “Reformed” is most strongly associated) or Evangelicals or non-Lutheran Protestants. Many who call themselves Evangelicals or Protestants do not consider themselves Reformed.

- Since the object emphasized in the first part of Matthew 28:19 is “all nations,” do we distort Jesus’ meaning when we omit that object and simply say our task is to “make disciples”?
 - In view of different understandings of what a “disciple” is, would it be clearer to identify our task as preaching the gospel rather than making disciples?
5. The preceding paragraphs cannot claim to list all the points that have been made in discussions about the synod mission statement. But they do include points that have been gathered from a number of documents, and some of those points have surfaced repeatedly. Though not exhaustive, the above paragraphs may perhaps serve as a representative sketch of the issues.
 6. In 2005 the synod in convention decided to address the central issues in the discussion. The convention focused on the use of the words “make disciples” in the synod mission statement, the existence of several Scripture passages dealing with the mission given to Christians, and concerns to avoid misunderstandings of the doctrine of conversion. With those thoughts in view, the convention adopted a two-part resolution:
 - a) That the Synod in convention affirm that it recognizes that the task given by the Lord Jesus to his Church on earth is to proclaim the saving gospel and not to ‘create faith’ or to ‘produce sanctified behavior,’ which is the task of the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace; and...
 - b) That the Synod in convention instruct the Conference of Presidents to conduct and publish a thorough exegetical, doctrinal and confessional study of the ‘commission passages’ of Scripture for use by circuits and congregations.⁴
 7. Later that year the Conference of Presidents appointed a committee and asked it to prepare such a study. The undersigned are the members of that committee, and we offer the present paper as our report.
 8. The body of the report consists of four parts:
 - Part I sets the stage for a study of key Bible passages by looking first at some biblical, Lutheran convictions about conversion. If people have misconceptions in this area, it may be impossible for them to study the commission passages without blinders. But a proper understanding of conversion will help us hear exactly what our Lord has to say in the commission passages.
 - Part II is a study of Matthew 28:16-20. Points of special relevance will get close attention, but we cannot afford to skim over everything else. As so often in Bible study, many of the details in context have a bearing on how we answer the questions we bring to the text. That is one reason for offering a fairly full explanation of how we understand these verses. Another is that these verses are so rich and important. A detailed interpretation of them may have some value quite apart from the present discussion of the mission of the synod.
 - Part III will offer a briefer look at other passages relevant to the church’s mission. That will give us the big picture. It will also help with fine-tuning and confirming our understanding of the details.
 - Part IV will look at WELS mission/purpose statements in the light of the previous parts.

Part I: How people are converted to faith

A. People can’t convert themselves

1. When God aims the spotlight of his Word at the natural condition of human beings, he exposes a dreadful state of affairs. God leads King David to confess, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the

⁴ *Proceedings of the WELS’ Fifty-eighth Biennial Convention Assembled at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., July 25-29, 2005*, Report of Floor Committee No. 2, Resolution No. 3 (Clarifying the Mission of the Synod), pp. 60-61.

time my mother conceived me” (Ps 51:5). Without any special intervention by God, human beings enter this life as persons estranged and separated from God. That alienation from God shows itself in a stream of self-centered thoughts and actions uninterrupted by love for God. Before the great flood, “the LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (Ge 6:5). The flood punished sin but did not cure the problem. God still saw the deep corruption in the heart of man: “every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood” (Ge 8:21).

2. That state of affairs can be summed up as spiritual death. Paul says in Ephesians 2:1-3, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. *All of us* also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. *Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.*”
3. “Objects of wrath,” Paul says. God was justly angry with us because of our estrangement from him and our persistence in disobeying his will. But we were angry, too—unjustly angry with God, ill-disposed toward him. Because sin has corrupted human nature, our natural condition is that we don’t want a holy God controlling our lives with rules and condemning us for violating his rules. In Romans 8:7-8 Paul says that “the sinful mind is *hostile* to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor *can* it do so. *Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.*”
4. But are we naturally hostile to God only as he reveals himself in his law? Do we show we have a better side when we encounter God as he reveals himself in his gospel? Not at all. The heart of the gospel is the message of Christ crucified, and that message offends our self-esteem and our sense of what is reasonable. In 1 Corinthians 1 Paul emphasizes repeatedly that this message strikes people as foolishness. “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (verse 23).
5. Furthermore, the offensive, foolish character of the gospel is evident not only when we focus on the heart of the gospel, namely forgiveness through the crucified and risen Christ, but also when we look at other points of gospel teaching, such as further insights concerning the election of grace, the two natures in Christ, the means of grace, church and ministry, life under the cross, and bodily resurrection. Paul knows that the gospel offends people whether he is preaching a simple version of the gospel to start a congregation (1 Co 2:1-5) or a more advanced, in-depth version of it for mature believers (1 Co 2:6). From beginning to end, what the Spirit has revealed about God’s gospel plan of salvation rubs natural man the wrong way. “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Co 2:14).
6. That is the **first main point about conversion**. Unconverted human beings cannot convert themselves to saving faith in God. By themselves they can’t take the first step toward God, they can’t cooperate with God along the way, they can’t respond positively to his message, and they can’t even *want* to accept God’s plan of salvation. It is offensive foolishness to them. They are hostile to God and his ways and therefore do not want to accept it. They are spiritually dead and therefore unable to do anything truly God-pleasing. Yes, they can make their own decision to go to a church or to read the Bible, but they do so as unbelievers, estranged from God. They can think warm thoughts about a god they imagine, a god who approves of them just the way they are. They can want to go to heaven on their own terms (without Christ crucified as Savior, because they think they are good enough, or because they think God

won't condemn anyone, etc.). But when it comes to making spiritual changes that actually would bring them to God as he really is, they are completely unable and unwilling.

B. Only God converts people

7. The **second main point about conversion** is that it is God and God alone who exercises and controls the power that makes conversion happen in the human heart. He creates faith in Jesus as Savior where previously there was only unbelief. He creates spiritual life where there was only spiritual death. He takes people who were estranged from God, hostile to God, and running away from God, and he turns them around so that they are his children, enjoying his fatherly embrace and eager to do his will. He changes their perception of the gospel of Jesus Christ. What they by nature see as offensive foolishness, they joyfully confess as the saving wisdom of God once they are converted.
8. Let's sample the Scriptures that give God all the credit for our conversion, starting with Paul's extended statement in Ephesians 2. "You were dead...But because of his great love for us, *God*, who is rich in mercy, *made us alive* with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is *by grace* you have been saved. And God *raised us up* with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is *by grace* you have been saved, through faith—and this⁵ not from yourselves, *it is the gift of God*—not by works, so that no one can boast. For *we are God's workmanship*, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:1,4-10).
9. When God gives spiritual life to the spiritually dead, that includes a new will, which fights against the hostility of our old nature toward God (Gal 5:16-18). Through Ezekiel God says, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (36:26). Paul tells us that "it is God who works in you *to will* and to act according to his good purpose" (Php 2:13). This is a huge reassurance for penitent people who want to be saved from their sins by Jesus as he is portrayed in the Bible but are afraid that they don't have faith in him. They couldn't even want to be saved by Jesus if they were still unbelievers and therefore hostile to God and his gospel. The penitent desire to be saved from all our sins by Christ crucified is something only God works in a person, and it shows that God has converted that person to saving faith, no matter how small and weak that faith may be.⁶
10. When the Bible ascribes conversion to God alone, it makes it clear that all three Persons of the holy Trinity are involved in converting us. Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the *Father* who sent me draws him..." (Jn 6:43). But he also says that "no one knows the Father except the *Son* and those to whom the *Son* chooses to reveal him" (Mt 11:27). The Father devised the plan by which we and others would be brought to faith in Christ and be saved. He chose us in Christ before the world began (Eph 1:4)

⁵ The neuter gender of the Greek word for "this" makes it clear that Paul is not thinking only of grace or faith (both are feminine nouns in Greek). Here "this" means the whole reality of our being saved by grace through faith. The whole thing is "the gift of God." Since coming to faith is the turning point between spiritual death and condemnation on the one hand and spiritual life and salvation on the other, "God made us alive" implies "God gave us faith." Besides, if coming to faith were our own achievement, Paul could not rule out all good works and all boasting on our part.

⁶ Referring to Philippians 2:13, the Formula of Concord says, "This precious verse is very comforting for all pious Christians who feel and perceive a tiny glimmer and longing for God's grace and eternal salvation in their hearts. For they know that God has ignited this beginning of true godliness in their hearts and, moreover, that he wants to strengthen them in their great weakness and help them, so that they persevere in true faith to the end." Solid Declaration, Article II, 14, quoted from the Kolb-Wengert edition of *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), p. 546.

and at the right time sent his Son to carry out the plan (Gal 4:4,5). The Son came and carried out his Father's plan, obeying his will completely and offering himself as a sacrifice for humankind (Heb 10:5-10). By his life and deeds and teachings the Son showed us the Father (Jn 14:9), and he gave that revelation still greater depth by his death and resurrection. He revealed God more fully than God had ever revealed himself in Old Testament times, so that in Christ we have the fullest revelation of God that we can have this side of heaven (He 1:1-3; Col 2:9-10). But on our own we don't get it. Jesus is "the Light of the world" (Jn 8:12), but spiritually blind people need a miracle to see that light. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the *Holy Spirit*" (1 Co 12:3). Natural man is offended by the cross of Christ and cannot accept and count on the truths of the gospel until the Spirit enables man to discern those truths spiritually (1 Co 2:14).

11. The work of creating, sustaining, and strengthening faith is specially ascribed to the Holy Spirit, but it remains a work in which all the Persons of the Trinity are involved. The Spirit eternally proceeds from the shared Godhead of the Father and the Son. Accordingly, both the Father and the Son are involved in sending the Spirit into our hearts. On Maundy Thursday Jesus told his disciples, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the *Father* will send in my name, will teach you all things..." (Jn 14:26; cf. Gal 4:6). But that same evening Jesus also spoke of the Holy Spirit as "the Counselor ..., whom I will send to you from the Father..." (Jn 15:26). The Spirit of the Father and the Son brings us to the Father through the Son, who is "the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). Thus the holy Trinity gets all the credit for converting us and ultimately bringing us to heaven.

C. God converts people through his gospel

12. But *how* does our triune God do this? How does he bring people to faith and preserve them in that faith? That brings us to the **third main point about conversion**: God creates faith through his Word, specifically, *though his gospel*.
13. Paul calls the gospel the power of God that results in salvation for everyone who believes (Ro 1:16). What makes it powerful to save? Nothing but the presence of the Holy Spirit with the gospel. Jesus says, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (Jn 6:63). His gospel is the means by which the Spirit gives birth in us to our spirit (our new man) and thus gives us spiritual life (cf. Jn 3:6). Jesus says his words "are spirit" and "are life" in an unqualified way. He doesn't say that his gospel words are *sometimes* spirit and life, as though they become that in some circumstances or for some people. Jesus is talking about a permanent union between his gospel message and the life-giving Spirit. And it doesn't have to be Jesus who does the talking. He assures his followers, "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Lk 10:16). So whenever people encounter the saving message of Jesus, they are encountering the Spirit and his gift of life. The great saving truths taught by Jesus are the mighty thoughts that have been on God's mind from eternity as his way of saving people. From eternity God has focused on his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ and has been thinking, "*This* is how I wish to win sinners' trust and give them forgiveness, life, and salvation!" God's Spirit and saving power can't be absent from that message.
14. What happens when an unbeliever hears that gospel message? What is the result of that encounter between the human mind and the mind of God, between a human soul and the Spirit of God present with his grace and power? There God reveals himself in his good news in a way that is meant to win trust (in other words, create faith). But there can be two outcomes, and we cannot control, predict, or understand them. If man refuses to trust the good news, if he instead chooses to sit in judgment on the message as foolishness and conclude that it has nothing to do with God, that doesn't make it so. God is still present in that message, and man by his refusal makes it an occasion for God to judge him. But "where and

when it pleases God” (Augsburg Confession, Article V), the encounter results in faith, and Paul calls that conversion a “demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (1 Co 2:4). Paul means the power that is right there in the message of the cross (1 Co 1:18,24). If people actually believe the gospel of Christ crucified, a message that looks weak and foolish and offensive, there must be power in the message in spite of its weak and foolish and offensive appearance, and Paul says it is the Spirit’s power.

15. It is not surprising, then, that Scripture repeatedly testifies to the converting power of the gospel and God’s use of it as the means through which he gives faith and spiritual life and salvation. “Since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased *through the foolishness of what was preached* to save those who believe” (1 Co 1:21).⁷ Faith comes from that message (Ro 10:17). Christians “have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, *through the living and enduring word of God*” (1 Pe 1:23). God “chose to give us birth *through the word of truth*” (Jas 1:18).
16. The gospel of Jesus Christ has the Spirit’s power to create faith whether the gospel is shared in the form of bare words or in the form of words clothed with earthly elements in the sacraments. Baptism is the gospel in sacramental form. It washes away sins (Ac 22:16; 1 Co 6:11; Eph 5:26; Col 2:11) and unites us with Christ (Ro 6:3,4; Gal 3:27). Because Baptism is the gospel, it is not surprising to hear of its power to create faith. Jesus tells Nicodemus, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (Jn 3:5). Paul calls Baptism “the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Tt 3:5). We are reborn when God creates faith through his gospel, and that happens in Baptism.
17. The Lord’s Supper is also the gospel in sacramental form. Jesus instituted it to build up a believing remembrance of him as our Savior (“do this in remembrance of me,” Lk 22:19; 1 Co 11:24,25), and that strengthening of faith takes place through the gospel content in the Lord’s Supper. Jesus gives us his body and blood, given and shed for us on the cross, as an assurance of our inclusion in the new covenant of forgiveness (Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; Lk 22:19,20; 1 Co 11:24,25; Jer 31:31,34) and as a special way of uniting us with him and through him with each other (1 Co 10:16,17). The Lord’s Supper was not intended as a way of converting unbelievers into believers; it was given to strengthen those who are already believers. But God’s acts of initially creating faith and of strengthening that faith later on are essentially the same. In both cases, he wins our trust by showing us Christ as the ultimate revelation and proof of his saving love.

D. Confessing the basics of conversion

18. We have been reviewing the three main points the Bible makes about conversion.
 - 1) We can’t convert ourselves to saving faith or contribute to our own conversion in any way.
 - 2) It is God and God alone who converts us in the most proper sense of the term.

⁷ An extremely important passage. The wording, “God was pleased (+ infinitive),” implies a choice or resolve to do something. There is no suggestion that this is one among many plans of salvation that God likes and uses indiscriminately. Instead we see here that God decided to use the gospel of Christ crucified to save those who believe it, and has revealed that as his ordinary way of saving people. The rest of the verse makes it clear that human beings do not arrive at a saving knowledge of God on their own, and nowhere does God reveal any other message or plan as an ordinary way of saving people, i.e., as a genuine alternative to the gospel received by faith. In the larger context of 1 Corinthians 1-4 Paul could not insist on the message of Christ crucified so strongly if other, more palatable options were open to the wisdom-seeking Corinthians.—We are talking here about God’s ordinary means, not about exceptions we may legitimately infer. We may infer on the strength of God’s promises (e.g., Genesis 17:7) that God does save the children of Christians if they die before they can benefit from the ordinary means of grace (in this case, Baptism). But if we encourage people to count on mere guesses that God saves people by other means because he is free to do so, we are unfaithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ and we create false hopes.

3) God works through his gospel (Word and sacraments) to convert us and to preserve and strengthen our faith.

19. Those three points are emphasized in the Lutheran Confessions. They are summarized simply and memorably in Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that *I cannot* by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the *Holy Spirit* has called me by the *gospel*, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."⁸ The same three points are affirmed and explored in greater depth in other parts of the Confessions, above all in the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II.

E. The role of gospel-sharers: What they can't do

20. So far the people we have been focusing on are the ones who are converted through the gospel. What about the people who bring the gospel to them? We need to give attention to their role if we want to examine the phrase "make disciples" from the standpoint of biblical doctrine and ways of speaking. Think of a pastor preaching or baptizing, a Christian schoolteacher visiting the unchurched parents of a schoolchild and telling them about Jesus, a staff minister making evangelism calls in the neighborhood, or Christian lay people sharing their faith with unbelieving friends. When conversions result, can we say that these public ministers and lay people are making disciples?

21. The Bible says two things in answer to that question—something negative, and something positive. The negative point is that Christian ministers and lay people don't do the converting itself in the most proper sense of the term. When Peter confesses faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus says, "This was *not revealed to you by man*, but by my *Father* in heaven" (Mt 16:17). Paul makes the same point when he illustrates gospel ministry with a picture from farming. Paul "planted" by preaching the gospel in Corinth in order to start a congregation there. Apollos "watered" by coming after Paul's departure and doing more gospel preaching. But they didn't actually reach into human hearts and throw the switch, so to speak, to make faith sprout and grow any more than a farmer reaches into a seed and throws the switch to make it sprout and grow. Those are things only God can do. "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Co 3:6,7). Mere human beings don't have any power of their own that could enter someone else's heart and create faith in Jesus. They also don't control God's converting power. They can't dictate when God's power in the gospel they speak will convert someone and when it won't.

E. We confess that we ourselves have no power to convert others*

22. This negative point about the role of gospel-sharers finds expression in the Lutheran Confessions:

In this Word the Holy Spirit is present and opens hearts that they may, like Lydia in Acts 16[:14], listen to it and thus be converted, solely through the grace and power of the *Holy Spirit, who alone accomplishes the conversion* of the human being. For apart from his grace our "willing and exerting," *our planting, sowing, and watering, amount to nothing* "if he does not give the growth" [Rom. 9:16; 1 Cor. 3:7]. As Christ says, "Apart from me, *you can do nothing*" [John 15:5]. With these brief words he denies the free

⁸ *Luther's Small Catechism: a contemporary translation*, published under the auspices of the WELS Board for Parish Education (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), p. 7.

* There are two sections labeled "E" in part I of this document, but that has not been corrected, as this is the form in which the original document was published – WLS Library Staff.

will its powers and ascribes everything to God's grace, so that *no one* has grounds for boasting before God (1 Cor. [9:16]).⁹

Thus the Formula of Concord says there are only two effecting causes of conversion: "The Holy Spirit and God's Word as the instrument of the Holy Spirit, through which he effects conversion."¹⁰ The Spirit and the gospel have an inalienable converting power, and we gospel-sharers do not. That is also the point intended in the first part of the resolution passed by the 2005 synod convention (quoted above in paragraph 6 of the Introduction): the church's task "is to proclaim the saving gospel and not to 'create faith' or to 'produce sanctified behavior,' which is the task of the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace."

F. The role of gospel-sharers: How the Bible speaks positively of their involvement

23. The fact that we gospel-sharers have no power of our own to convert others and no control over the miracle of conversion does not lead God to treat our gospel-sharing as insignificant and irrelevant. Quite the contrary! God has a positive point to make about our role. *People who share God's gospel are genuinely involved in conversion in an instrumental way.* That involvement is so real and important that God says conversion takes place not just through the gospel but also *through the ministers.* That may seem odd. As we have noted, the power is in the gospel, not in the ministers. The gospel goes into the unbeliever's heart; the ministers themselves don't. Nevertheless, God wants us to take our instrumental role in converting others very seriously, and so he brings it out unmistakably in the Bible.
24. The farming picture in 1 Corinthians 3 that showed the inability of Paul and Apollos to give spiritual life and growth in the proper sense is part of a larger discussion that also brings out the positive side of their role. "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants [διδάκονοι, ministers], *through whom* you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and *each will be rewarded* according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building" (verses 5-9). God could have converted the Corinthians without people like Paul and Apollos. He could have written the gospel on the sky, or sent angels to preach it, or communicated it silently to the Corinthians in their hearts. But God wanted to give human beings like Paul and Apollos—and us—the thrill of playing a vital role in the gospel work that saves others and unites them with us. That matters to God so much that ordinarily he creates and strengthens faith *only* through the gospel-sharing activity of us human beings.¹¹ Here in 1 Corinthians 3 he promises to reward that activity (verse 8) and then commands us to stick to the pure gospel in our preaching and teaching to build up the church (verses 10-17). Both the promise and the command show how important our role in gospel-sharing is to God, even though we ourselves have no power to convert others and play only an instrumental role.
25. Paul takes our instrumental role so seriously that he uses some bold expressions. Since people were coming to faith *through Paul* (in the sense that he was God's instrument in bringing them the gospel), Paul says that *he saves people.* "I have become all things to all men, that *I* may by all means *save some*" (1 Co 9:22, NASB; cf. Ro 11:14).

⁹ Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article II, 5,6, (Kolb-Wengert, p. 492, emphasis added).

¹⁰ Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article II, 19 (Kolb-Wengert, p. 494).

¹¹ Even when people are converted or strengthened by reading the Bible, they are benefiting from the ministry of people like Moses and David and Luke and the anonymous writer to the Hebrews.

26. Let's take a time-out to talk about word usage with the help of a term generations of Lutherans found useful, the term *proper*. Paul's use of "save" in 1 Corinthians 9:22 does not stick to the most *proper* sense of the word "save." That does not imply that Paul is speaking in an *illegitimate* way here. We should think rather in terms of a contrast between proper and extended usage of a word. A proper meaning is not determined by a word's etymology. Instead we are talking about a speaker's or listener's perception, based on current usage rather than etymology, that a word is being used in a proper sense or in some kind of extended sense. When Christians talk about the problem of sin and say, "God saves us," we perceive that the word "save" is being used in a completely normal and direct and unadjusted way. "God saves people" is clearly a proper usage. "Paul saves people" is clearly an extended usage. But it is a fully legitimate extended usage, as is evident from numerous biblical examples involving this and similar words.¹²
27. Paul speaks in the same way about other public ministers of the gospel. He tells Timothy, "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, *you will save* both yourself and your hearers" (1 Ti 4:16). And he uses the same kind of language to refer to the effect lay people can have on others: "How do you know, wife, whether *you will save* your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether *you will save* your wife?" (1 Co 7:16). It is not sure that a believer will save an unbelieving spouse who wants to end the marriage, but that very way of putting it implies that in other cases there would be reason to hope that the believer *will save* the unbeliever.¹³
28. Other expressions in the Bible show the same tendency of ascribing saving actions and effects to the people through whom God works. Obadiah prophesies God's gift of gospel ministers to the church by announcing, "*Deliverers* will go up on Mount Zion..." (verse 21). The angel Gabriel tells Zechariah about the ministry of his son John the Baptist in these words: "Many of the people of Israel *will he bring back* to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to *turn the hearts* of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to *make ready* a people prepared for the Lord" (Lk 1:16,17). Jesus tells his disciples, "I will make you fishers of men" (Mt 4:20). Let's not suppose Jesus means that they will do a lot of fishing for men but never catch any converts. In Luke's parallel account Jesus says, "From now on you will catch men" (5:10). And although Jesus himself is the light of the world (Jn 8:12; Mt 4:16; Lk 2:32; Isa 49:6), he tells his disciples, "You are the light of the world" (Mt 5:14; cf. Ac 13:47). They are also reapers (Jn 4:36-38). Paul says he became the Corinthians' father through the gospel (1 Co 4:15). None of these speakers or writers seems concerned that expressions like these will diminish God's glory or confuse people about how they are saved. Context keeps the focus on Christ the Savior and his revelation of the Father. Context makes it clear that human beings sent to convert and illuminate others are Christ's servants, not his competitors.
29. When we expand our view from the miracle of conversion to divine miracles in general, we find the same situation. Sometimes the Bible simply says that God does miracles. But sometimes it says God does them through a human being (e.g., Ac 15:12; 19:11), and sometimes it says that the human being

¹² Johann Gerhard's successor at Jena, Salomon Glassius, wrote a large book (*Philologia sacra*) analyzing scriptural ways of speaking and deriving from them canons of interpretation. Book III, Tractate III, Canon XXII says, "Words expressing action are used also in the case of those subjects that do not in the most proper sense and by the most direct operation do that which the words indicate, but only concur in some way." Subpoint 4 notes that an action (e.g., saving) is sometimes ascribed to the one handling the instrumental cause (e.g., the minister handling the gospel), whereas the action is "properly" ascribed to the instrumental cause (the gospel) as also to the principal cause (God), though in different respects. Glassius provides several examples. *Philologia sacra* (Amsterdam: 1711), pp. 375a and 376b.

¹³ Further examples in other writers: Jude 23 tells Christians to save people, and James 5:19,20 says that anyone who brings back a wanderer and turns him from his error will save him from death.

does the miracle. God tells Moses, “*You will bring water out of the rock*” (Nu 20:8). Jesus mentions his own miracles and then adds, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me *will do* what I have been doing. *He will do even greater things* than these, because I am going to the Father” (Jn 14:12). Luke tells us that when Publius was sick, “Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and *healed him*” (Ac 28:8). Here too, context makes it clear that they are not doing miracles by their own power.

30. This survey of biblical expressions indicates that we should not prejudge the translation of Matthew 28:19. Would the translation “make disciples of all nations” be contrary to Bible doctrine? No. Are there biblical parallels for speaking of human beings as the ones who save or convert people or do other miracles? Yes. There are passages that use that kind of language, and they are to be understood as bringing out the genuine instrumental role human beings have when God involves them in carrying out his work. But we still have to investigate whether usage and context support the translation “make disciples” in Matthew 28:19, and we will turn to that in Part II.

G. Does confessional Lutheranism acknowledge the instrumental role of gospel-sharers?

31. Before we move on to Part II, let’s stop to listen again to our Lutheran forefathers. What did they make of the expressions in the Bible that give gospel-sharers an instrumental role in conversion? Did they ignore them? Did they explain them away? Did they warn against using that kind of language as dangerous and too likely to mislead people? We know of no such explanations or warnings. Instead we repeatedly see the Confessions and later confessional Lutherans embracing the instrumental role of gospel-sharers as it is found in the Bible.
32. Our Confessions say that in Baptism, “God, *through a minister who functions in his place*, baptizes us, and offers and presents the forgiveness of sins” (Apology XXIV, 18¹⁴). In an emergency Baptism or absolution, a lay person becomes such a minister (Treatise, 67). God commands ministers to forgive sins (Apology XII, 104; XIII, 176); therefore, when they do as they are commanded, *they* forgive sins in the place of God. In its discussion of conversion, the Formula of Concord refers to a statement in the Large Catechism that “ascribes everything to the Holy Spirit, namely, that *through the ministry of preaching* he brings us into the Christian community...”¹⁵
33. Those are not grudging admissions. In the Apology we confess that
the church has the mandate to appoint ministers, which ought to please us greatly because we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it. Indeed, it is worthwhile to extol the ministry of the Word with every possible kind of praise against fanatics who imagine that the Holy Spirit is not given through the Word but is given on account of certain preparations of their own...¹⁶
34. That helps us see why there are so many places in the Confessions where the confessors talk about the means of grace by using words for *ministry* (e.g., *Predigtamt, Amt, Dienst, ministerium*). Often of course they simply talked about the gospel, the Word, the sacraments, but it is striking how often they chose instead to use some expression highlighting the *ministry* of the gospel, or they put ministry-expressions and Word-expressions side by side to cast light on each other. If we say “the Word” or “the gospel,” people may think only of the content. But the content converts nobody if it remains hidden in the mind

¹⁴ Kolb-Wengert, p. 261, emphasis added.

¹⁵ Solid Declaration, Article II, 38 (Kolb-Wengert, p. 551, emphasis added). Cf. Article II, 90: God uses the preaching and hearing of his Word.

¹⁶ Article XIII, 12,13 (Kolb-Wengert, p. 220, emphasis added).

of God or a closed Bible.¹⁷ It is the Word of God *in use* that converts people, and that aspect of the situation is brought out by ministry-expressions. Incidentally, there has been a great deal of discussion about which passages in the Confessions use ministry-expressions to talk about gospel ministry by any Christian and which ones talk about the public ministry of the specially called, but for the present purpose we need not delve into sorting them out. Either way, we are talking about God *using human beings* to speak his Word and administer his sacraments. For example, Article V of the Augsburg Confession could have simply said that God gives us faith and the Spirit through the gospel and the sacraments. But it seizes the opportunity to talk about ministry. The German text, literally translated, says, “To obtain such faith, God instituted the *Predigtamt* [preaching ministry, ministry of the Word], gave gospel and sacraments...” The Latin text is similar: “In order that we may obtain this faith, the *ministry* of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted.”

35. The Lutheran confessors liked to talk that way for various reasons. Certainly they wanted to squash the false teaching that people can become Christians by ignoring the Bible and preaching and the sacraments and instead forming some kind of direct link with God in their hearts. But even apart from that false teaching, the confessors had reason to bring out some emphases in the Bible. They noticed all the things God did in the Bible to establish the gospel ministry and encourage Christians to share the message. They also noticed how often the Bible highlights words like *preach, announce, testify, tell the good news, speak, say, hear, listen*, as in Romans 10:14-17.
36. Accordingly, the confessors didn’t think of preaching to a congregation as a poor substitute for personal Bible study. They didn’t say, “We would give up preaching if everybody would read the Bible privately, because the inspired, inerrant Bible is better than preaching. But since there is so much illiteracy and Bibles are so expensive, it looks like we’ll have to go on preaching.” Certainly the Bible is inspired and inerrant. Certainly personal Bible study is a means through which the Spirit works, and we do well to encourage it. But God likes to work through living people, as when a believer reaches out in love to unbelievers and they are drawn into fellowship with him through his gospel testimony, or when Christians gather around the Word and serve one another with their varied gifts, expressing thereby the unity of the body of Christ and strengthening its bonds. God loves to see that, loves to encourage it, loves to work through it. That is one of the reasons why Lutherans should appreciate Luther’s emphasis on the oral Word, the living voice of preaching.¹⁸ It also helps us see why the Formula of Concord’s article on conversion contains a warning against despising the proclamation of God’s Word and the congregation of God’s people. The Formula quickly adds the positive note that Christ “offers his grace to all people in the Word and in the holy sacraments, and he earnestly desires that people should hear it. He has promised that where ‘two or three are gathered’ in his name and are occupied with his holy Word, he will be ‘there among them’ [Matt. 18:20].”¹⁹
37. That is the basic model of church life in the Lutheran Confessions. It includes the instrumental role God gives people to involve them in the work of the gospel. The Confessions embrace and celebrate that instrumental role. As we noted above, they “extol the ministry of the Word with every possible kind of praise.”

¹⁷ “Neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ, or believe in him and receive him as Lord, unless these were offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed; Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden so that no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not remain buried but be put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed...” Large Catechism, Creed, 38, quoted from Kolb-Wengert, p. 436.

¹⁸ Smalcald Articles III, IV; Large Catechism IV, 30; V, 31; *Luther’s Works* (American Edition), 35, 123; 30, 3; 26, 431-2; *Luthers Werke* (Weimarer Ausgabe) 7, 721, 15; 8, 33, 31; 10-I-1, 625-7; 36, 220, 23-29.

¹⁹ Solid Declaration, Article II, 57 (Kolb-Wengert, p. 555).

38. The next generations of Lutherans picked up that ball and ran with it. Johann Gerhard notes that divine effects (such as opening eyes, illuminating, begetting children for God, and saving) are ascribed to ministers of the Word, and he concludes (against Schwenkfeld) that ministers are instrumental causes²⁰ of those effects.²¹ Friedrich Balduin likewise explains “you will save” in 1 Timothy 4:16 in terms of the instrumental role of ministers. He happily uses that conclusion against the Calvinists, who drive a wedge between the external Word of preachers and the internal Word of the Spirit and try to “weaken the power of the preached Word as much as they can.”²² Abraham Calov speaks of three causes²³ of faith: the Holy Spirit is the highest, supreme cause, the Word of God is the middle-level cause, and the ministers of the Word are the lowest (*infima*) cause. When he discusses ministers as a cause of faith, he cites many of the passages we have been looking at (and many others) against the Calvinists. He concludes: “The action of the Holy Spirit is not to be separated from the action of the minister, and the effects of the Holy Spirit truly pertain to teachers of the Word in a ministerial way.”²⁴ Johann Andreas Quenstedt also speaks of the forgiving, baptizing, converting, and saving that ministers truly do in an instrumental way and in the manner of a ministerial cause.²⁵ Valentin Ernst Loescher lists the following statement as one of the erroneous teachings of some Pietists: “The teachers and preachers do not kindle faith in the hearts of the hearers, nor do they essentially convert...”²⁶ Our Lutheran forefathers would not have thought there is anything Reformed or otherwise unscriptural about saying that we make disciples.
39. Summary of Part I:
- Human beings have neither the power nor the will to convert themselves to faith.
 - God is the only Being who can convert people in the most proper sense of the term. He is the principal effecting cause of conversion.
 - God creates and strengthens faith through the gospel (Word and sacraments). The gospel is always united with the Holy Spirit and his converting power. Therefore the gospel is also an effecting cause of conversion—the instrumental effecting cause as distinct from the principal effecting cause (God himself).
 - Gospel-sharers have no power of their own to convert people and no control over conversion, and so they are not an effecting cause of conversion in the most proper sense.
 - Nevertheless, gospel-sharers are used by God in conversion as instruments on a lower level, powerless in themselves but fruitful through the gospel they share. Thus they are an instrumental or, more specifically, a ministerial cause of conversion. On that basis the Bible itself says that people come to faith through gospel-sharers and even that gospel-sharers bring back and turn and save people.

²⁰ When the old Lutheran dogmaticians speak of “causes,” they follow a usage going back to Aristotle and include not just the persons or things we would call “causes” but also a wider range of *explanatory factors* (e.g., agent, means, purpose, etc.).

²¹ *Loci theologici*, locus XXIII *de ministerio ecclesiastico*, para. 261.

²² *Commentarius in omnes epistolas Pauli* (Frankfurt, 1655), question 5 on 1 Tim. 4:11-16, p. 1338a.

²³ Cf. footnote 20.

²⁴ *Exegema Augustanae Confessionis*, Article V, Chapter III, para. I and XX, cited from the scanned images at www.lutheranlegacy.org, (images 457 and 481 of volume I of Calov’s *Exegema*).

²⁵ *Theologia didactico-polemica*, Part IV, Chapter XII, Section II, Question V, *θέσεως βεβαίωσις*. Cf. also his discussion of the causes of conversion in Part III, Section I, Theses X-XVII. On the term “cause,” cf. footnote 20.

²⁶ *The Complete Timotheus Verinus* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998), Part I, transl. James L. Langebartels, p. 106.

Part II: A study of Matthew 28:16-20

A. Preliminary remarks

1. It has become customary in English to refer to the last words of Matthew's Gospel as "the Great Commission." What shall we make of that label? It is convenient. And whether or not we agree with Adolf von Harnack's remark that "it is impossible in forty words to say greater and more," we will all agree that Matthew 18b-20 is a weighty and concentrated passage.²⁷ On the other hand, the label "Great Commission" is not part of the text and should not be given too much weight. We don't want to assume from the outset that this text should take precedence in our thinking to the neglect of all other commission passages. We will refrain from further use of the label in the body of this paper.
2. The text we wish to study has a literary and a historical setting. The literary setting is that we are at the end of Matthew's Gospel. We expect the Evangelist to find a suitable way of finishing, and he does not disappoint us. After bringing us through the life and ministry of Jesus from birth to death, he shows us the triumph of the resurrection. Now, with just a few lines left on the page, he shows us how Jesus brings together many themes from earlier chapters and lets the light of Easter shine on himself and his church. The book ends, the promise lingers in our ears, and the wide world lies before us. Both as theology and as literature, it is magnificent.
3. The historical setting is a mountain in Galilee during the forty days between Easter and the ascension. We know of various appearances of the risen Lord Jesus to individuals and groups, but we do not have enough information to arrange all of them in sequence. If we focus on appearances Jesus made to substantial groups of the disciples, we can say at least three such appearances preceded Matthew 28:16-20. The first was on Easter evening in Jerusalem (Jn 20:19-23; Lk 24:33, 36ff). The second came a week later, also in Jerusalem (Jn 20:24-29). Then the disciples went north to Galilee. Jesus appeared to seven of the disciples by the Sea of Galilee (Jn 21:1-14), and John identifies that as "the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples" (verse 14). Presumably the appearance in Matthew 28:16-20 follows that one.
4. There is no other account that can be proved to refer to Jesus' appearance in Matthew 28:16-20. Mark 16:14-18 shows no sign of a Galilean or even an outdoor setting.²⁸ If anything, Mark 16:14 with its strong implication of a meal of the Eleven ("reclining," NASB) reminds us of Luke 24:33, 41-42, which took place indoors in Jerusalem. There is no trace of a meal or an indoor setting in Matthew 28:16-20. There are a few similarities in content between Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15-16 (the word for "go," the worldwide mission, the mention of Baptism), but that does not prove they are two reports of the same occasion. Jesus can of course repeat key ideas on different occasions, and he can also rephrase them and weave them into new discourses with distinctive emphases.²⁹ Thus there is no reason to

²⁷ Harnack's comment on verses 18b-20 is quoted in Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary* (Hermeneia Series), trans. James E. Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), p. 621, note 41. If we count articles with nouns, there are 41 or 42 Greek words in these verses.

²⁸ The cited verses come from the longer ending of Mark's Gospel, i.e., 16:9-20. The longer ending is found in the vast majority of manuscripts and other witnesses to the text of Mark. But there is also ancient evidence of various kinds leading some people to reject the longer ending or to question its authenticity. Differing views on the matter are held within the WELS, but that should not be a problem. What one does with this textual question is not a test of orthodoxy. In the interest of completeness it seems best to include the longer ending in this study while noting that questions can be raised about it.

²⁹ That seems a better explanation than the one R. C. H. Lenski offers in *The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964), p. 763. Lenski wants to start a new paragraph at Mark 16:15 and understand that as a change of setting to Galilee. Compare that interpretation with the text. Previous verses carefully noted changes of time and setting and thus distinguished successive appearances of the risen Lord. Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene (Mk 16:9-11); "afterward" he appeared to two "while they were walking in the country" (verse 12); "later" he "appeared to the Eleven as they were eating" (verse 14). And now, with no

assimilate the details in Matthew 28:16-20 to Mark 16:14-18 or any other account. Among other things, that means the question about the translation of μαθητεύσατε in Matthew 28:19 (make disciples? teach?) cannot be decided by looking at κηρύξατε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (“preach the gospel”) in Mark 16:15.

B. Exegesis of Matthew 28:16-20

5. Text and translation³⁰ of verse 16:

<p>Οἱ δὲ ἑνδεκα μαθηταὶ ἐπορεύθησαν εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν εἰς τὸ ὄρος οὗ ἐτάξατο αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς,</p>	<p>But the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus commanded them (to go).</p>
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6. **“The eleven disciples”** reminds us that Judas has died but has not yet been replaced. Acts 1:26 tells us that after Jesus ascended, Matthias “was added to the eleven apostles.” Filling out the ranks of the Twelve was symbolically important when the church began its mission to the Jews, who still identified their nation as the twelve tribes (Mt 19:28; Ac 26:7). But as Jesus lays upon his church a worldwide mission, the number twelve is not needed.
7. We also note that Matthew says “the eleven disciples,” not “the eleven apostles.” Matthew told us earlier that these same men had been sent out on a mission to Israel with power to heal the sick and exorcise demons (10:5-8). There he called them “apostles” (10:2). But here in 28:16 he doesn’t use that term. As he sets the stage for the commission in verses 19 and 20a, he simply shows us the Eleven in their capacity as disciples.
8. What are the implications of Jesus’ commissioning of the Eleven in their capacity as disciples? The most natural way of understanding it is that the eleven disciples here represent the church as a whole rather than a group within the church such as the specially called public ministers of the gospel. We may recall that in Matthew’s account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, the disciples were communicants, not officiants. The commands addressed to them there were, “Take and eat... Drink...” (26:26,27). Matthew did not record the command of repetition (“Do this...”) that we find in Luke 22:19 and 1 Corinthians 11:24,25, so there is no reason to say that Matthew wants us to focus on the disciples as public ministers who are specially commanded to administer the Lord’s Supper. At the institution of the Supper in Matthew 26 they represent the communing church. Now, at the end of his Gospel, Matthew shows us how Jesus gave a commission to the disciples and thus also to the church they represented. So we can say that Jesus commissioned the church as a whole to carry on his work. In Matthew 28:16-20 there is no special vocabulary limiting our view to the office of the public ministry or any particular form of it.³¹ If we nevertheless choose to assume that Matthew is focusing on the public ministry here,

indication of any passage of time or any change of place, we are supposed to think the author takes us to Galilee for a new appearance of Jesus?

³⁰ The text is the Nestle text available on Gramcord, and the translation is our own.

³¹ Not only do we lack a special term such as “apostle” in this context, but we also find no content that forces us to think of the Eleven in their capacity as apostles or public ministers. For example, Jesus sends the disciples to “all nations.” It is true that after Easter, the apostles received a worldwide call (Ac 1:2,8). But it is also true that the church as a whole has a worldwide mission. In Matthew 28:16-20, the Eleven can see from the commissioning of the church to go to “all nations” that the earlier limited scope of their apostolic call (Mt 10:5,6) has been replaced with a worldwide scope of action. But they have no reason to think that Matthew 28:19,20 applies only to them as apostles. Similarly, we grant that the ordinary administration of Baptism takes place through the public ministry of the gospel. But that does not mean we have to see a direct institution of the public ministry in the command to baptize (28:19), because we know that on a more fundamental level the right to baptize is part of the priesthood of all believers. The same goes for teaching. Cf. Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, vol. IV (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publ. House, 1999), pp.

we will come to grief at 28:20b, “I am with you all the days, to the end of the age.” That is obviously a promise to be with all believers, not just with the apostles and their successors in the public ministry.³² Accordingly, the direct impact of Matthew 28:19,20 is that Jesus commissions his followers (the priesthood of all believers, the church), not that he institutes the public ministry or any form of it.³³

9. Let’s take a closer look at the word μαθητής, “disciple.” The etymological sense, “learner,” is too vague to account for New Testament usage of the word. A μαθητής is not a person who learns this or that isolated bit of information through casual observation or idle curiosity. Rather, as the Bauer/Danker/Arndt/Gingrich lexicon (BDAG) points out, a μαθητής is a “pupil” or “apprentice” who learns from an instructor, or an “adherent” of the teaching provided by a recognized teacher.³⁴ The idea of adherence to Jesus’ teaching was of course a key element in Christian usage of the word. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples” (Jn 8:31). That is why μαθητής became a common word for what we call a Christian before the word Christian was even coined (Ac 11:26; cf. Ac 6:1,2,9; 9:1,10,38; 11:29; 13:52; 14:20,22,28 etc.).
10. Matthew likes to speak of “the disciples” as a definite group of persons who followed Jesus in his travels and learned from him. At times they are distinguished from the crowds who followed Jesus (4:25, 5:1; 14:13-15). In Matthew 8:23 they are a small enough group to get into a boat with Jesus. In the next chapter Matthew himself is added to the group (9:9). Soon afterwards Matthew begins to speak of Jesus’ *twelve* disciples (e.g., 10:1; 11:1; 20:17). He doesn’t always insist that “the disciples” means “all the Twelve and only the Twelve.” But neither does he expect us to be surprised when he speaks of “the disciples” and a moment later refers to them as twelve in number (19:25,28) or, after Judas’ death, eleven (28:8-10,16).
11. That prompts the question: Why does Matthew tend to equate “the disciples” with the persons who made up “the Twelve” if there were others who at times followed Jesus, others who believed in him? A number of things can be said. Matthew is not fighting against the usage we see in Acts, where “disciple”

196f. While we are gathering evidence from the vocabulary in Matthew 28:16-20, we may anticipate our finding that μαθητεύσατε in verse 19 means “make disciples of,” and we may note the echo in Matthew’s choice of words, μαθηταί ... μαθητεύσατε. Jesus commissions *disciples* to make *disciples*, i.e., he commissions believers to make believers. We do not see clear evidence here that Jesus inserts an intermediate step, as though he turns disciples into public ministers in order to have them make disciples of all nations. Without such an intermediate step, the passage makes excellent sense as a commissioning of believers to make believers, but we would distort both μαθηταί and μαθητεύσατε if we took the words to mean that *clergy* are to make *clergy* of all nations.

³² Some say the disciples in Matthew 28:16-20 simultaneously represent the whole church and the public ministry, but that is a needless complication of the sense. Clear evidence for “and the public ministry” is lacking here. Even those who insist on seeing the calling of the *apostles* as the primary thrust of this passage will find that the text gives no clear indication of how the apostles’ work is to be continued other than that it will be done by persons Jesus will be with “to the end of the age.” We know from other passages in Scripture that there are similarities and differences between the apostles and ordinary public ministers of the gospel. Matthew 28:16-20 does not delve into those details to sort them out for us, and it certainly does not specify that ordinary public ministers must be entrusted with carrying out the full range of Word and sacrament functions so as to be part of the ministry Christ instituted.

³³ In practice of course there needs to be cooperation among the members of the church in carrying out this commission. Jesus is not commanding every Christian to go in person to every nation, convert them, and then personally baptize and teach every convert. The idea of causing every convert to be baptized millions of times just to let each Christian carry out the command in person is too absurd to require refutation. Obviously the commission is addressed to the church as a whole, and each member is directed to take part according to his or her ability and situation. Doing that in an orderly, responsible way will require a public ministry, but here we arrive at that thought only by way of inference or with the help of other passages, not as the direct meaning of this passage. Even on the level of inference we do not have a basis here for concluding that Christ wants the public ministry of the gospel to have a certain specific form. Thus we cannot use Matthew 28:19,20 to say, for example, that we have here Christ’s institution of an all-embracing form of the public ministry of the gospel, and that anything less than an *all-embracing* form of ministry is a merely human office. To learn about the divine institution of the public ministry of the gospel, we go to other passages of Scripture.

³⁴ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third ed., revised and edited by Frederick Danker (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 609b.

often simply means a Christian. He is not trying to create a caste system within Christianity, as though there are lots of ordinary believers but only a few super-Christians who deserve to be called disciples. He is not saying that the Twelve had a monopoly on discipleship (cf. 8:21 and its parallel, Lk 9:59; also Mt 27:57, where we read that Joseph of Arimathea ἐμαθητεύθη τῷ Ἰησοῦ). And he isn't turning the word "disciple" into a technical term for a clergyman. That would be about like trying to redefine the English word "pupil" as "teacher." We know of only one explanation that makes sense. It is precisely because discipleship is so important to Matthew that he wants to give a clear and detailed portrayal of it as it is seen in the men who were closest to Jesus. Matthew shows us those twelve men, warts and all, but at the same time he uses them to show us the life-transforming nature of Jesus' invitation and promises and the all-embracing nature of his claims upon us. More often than not we Christians see ourselves in those disciples. Matthew allows us to do so one last time as he refers to "the eleven *disciples*" in 28:16.

12. They went "**to Galilee.**" Both the resurrection and the ascension took place in the vicinity of Jerusalem, so why the detour to Galilee? Matthew does not give an explicit reason. We recall, however, that Galilee is where Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John received their call to give up fishing and follow Jesus on the road as his *disciples* (4:18-22; 5:1). We also recall that much of Jesus' early ministry took place in Galilee. Matthew made a point of interpreting that phase of Jesus' work as fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy of a great light in "Galilee of the Gentiles," (Mt 4:14-16; Isa 9:1-2). We sense that Galilee is an appropriate scene for sending *disciples to all nations*.³⁵
13. They went "**to the mountain where Jesus commanded them** (to go)." We cannot further identify this location.³⁶ The likeliest interpretation of the "where" clause does not pin it down for us. The relative adverb οὗ, like its English translation "where," can be used to mean either "in which place" if there is no indication of motion or "to which place" if there is motion toward a destination (BDAG οὗ 1a and 1b, pp. 732-3). We take it here in the latter sense and supply "to go" —an easy thing to do in a context like this.³⁷ That interpretation dovetails nicely with the references to Galilee in Matthew 26:32 and 28:7,10 (cf. Mk 14:28; 16:7). Jesus had not only foreseen his Easter victory, but he had also foretold this meeting in Galilee. When he arose, he sent the women to remind the disciples of the promised rendezvous in Galilee. In retrospect the disciples can appreciate the miracle of foreknowledge. They can also recall that the meeting in Galilee was important enough for Jesus to speak of it before his death. That adds still more weight to the weighty commission Jesus gave them in our text.³⁸

³⁵ The same word is used for "Gentiles" in Matthew 4:15 (τῶν ἐθνῶν) and "nations" in 28:19 (τὰ ἔθνη).

³⁶ Did Jesus choose one of the highest heights in Galilee to give his disciples a panoramic view and a sense of the many nations lying in the distance? If that were the point, we suspect Matthew would have spelled it out. A description of Jesus on a "very high mountain" and showing his disciples "all the kingdoms of the world" (cf. Mt 4:8) would have made a fine sequel to Satan's temptation of Jesus: Jesus would now be doing legitimately what Satan had done wickedly. Since Matthew doesn't draw attention to such close parallels, we should be ready to consider other possibilities. Perhaps Jesus met his disciples on a more modest elevation, something we might call a hill. In the Holy Land even a good-sized hill qualifies as an ὄρος. But though it may have been a hill by our standards, we may still wish to call it a mountain for the sake of some biblical associations that easily come to mind. In the Bible, elevated terrain often serves as the scene of revelation or instruction. We think of Sinai, Nebo, and Carmel in the Old Testament; we think of the setting of the Sermon on the Mount and of the transfiguration in Matthew's Gospel. The word ὄρος is used for all of those places, and in English it is customary to refer to them as mountains. Translating the word ὄρος as "mountain" also in Matthew 28:16 helps a reader in English to associate this scene with those other scenes of revelation and instruction, just as Matthew's choice of the word ὄρος helps a reader in Greek to do the same.

³⁷ Cf. Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 1180f: ἴωμεν... ἴν' ἧμῖν τέτακται means "let us go ... where (= to which place) it has been appointed for us (to go)."

³⁸ Those thoughts will not be as relevant in the latter half of Matthew 28:16 if we adopt a different interpretation of τὸ ὄρος οὗ ἐτάξατο αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς. The other meaning of οὗ (= in which place) is possible here if Matthew is using ἐτάξατο (aorist middle of τάσσω) without any implication of what was commanded. Then we would translate, "to the mountain where Jesus gave them commands," and we would probably think of the mountain where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). But that view

14. Did the Eleven go alone, or were they accompanied by other believers? Did they meet up with other believers when they got to Galilee, perhaps the five hundred brothers mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:6? Those possibilities cannot be ruled out absolutely. But Matthew has done nothing to encourage those guesses. His text makes perfect sense if we stay with his explicit cast of characters (Jesus and the Eleven). If we try to bring other people into the picture, we make some of the features of Matthew’s narrative obscure and puzzling.
15. Text and translation of verse 17:

καὶ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν προσεκύνησαν οἱ δὲ ἐδίστασαν	And when they saw him, they worshiped (him); but some doubted.
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16. **“And when they saw him.”** We don’t know in what form Jesus appeared. Did he appear in glory or veil his glory? Were his features completely familiar or somehow altered? Did he descend from the sky, or appear suddenly on earth, or come walking from a great distance? Matthew omits those details. “And when they saw him” simply sets the stage for the main clauses that follow.
17. **“they worshiped (him).”** In Greek, an object that has already occurred with one verb (here, the aorist participle ἰδόντες) can allow us to supply the same object or a similar one with another verb (the aorist indicative προσεκύνησαν) if the sense suggests doing so, as it does here.³⁹ Since Matthew likes to use a dative object with προσκυνέω, we would mentally supply αὐτῷ rather than αὐτόν as the object of προσεκύνησαν. But what exactly does Matthew mean when he says that they προσεκύνησαν Jesus?
18. Under the word προσκυνέω, BDAG offers this extended definition (ordinary font) and these glosses (italics): “to express in attitude or gesture one’s complete dependence on or submission to a high authority figure, (*fall down and*) *worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully.*” Such actions are obviously fitting as homage to God. But we also find them directed at times toward human beings and angels. BDAG observes: “This reverence or worship is paid a) to human beings, but by this act they are to be recognized as belonging to a superhuman realm...” Revelation 3:9 is an interesting example, and the NIV translation of it is worth noting: “I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and *fall down* (προσκυνήσουσιν) at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.” Clearly those people from the synagogue would not be intending to worship the Christians of Philadelphia as divine. They would, however, use this extraordinary gesture to acknowledge that God was manifesting his grace in a very special way in the lives and testimony of those Christians.

has its weak points. First, it is rare to use this verb in the vague sense “give commands.” W. E. Davies and D. C. Allison cite only LXX Exodus 29:43 and Plato, Leg. 772C in support of this use of τάσσω. Cf. Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28 [= Volume III of their International Critical Commentary on Matthew (London: T& T Clark, 2004)], p. 681. Second, the verb Matthew chooses to characterize the Sermon on the Mount is “teach” (5:2; 7:29), not “command.” The word τάσσω does not occur in that Sermon or anywhere else in Matthew’s Gospel other than 28:16. It seems Matthew is not going out of his way to identify the scene of 28:16-20 with any earlier scene in his Gospel.

³⁹ προσεκύνησαν has no explicit object of its own in some important witnesses (NB D 33 and some Latin texts). An explicit object is found in a number of manuscripts, but it varies between αὐτῷ and αὐτόν. That variation strengthens the impression that the text without an explicit object is original.

19. But it's not just a question of what an awe-struck person intends in a demonstration of reverence. It is also a question of what the person being shown that reverence is willing to accept. In Acts 10:25, Cornelius met Peter and "fell at his feet in reverence" (πεσὼν ἐπὶ τοὺς πόδας προσεκύνησεν πεσὼν). But Peter replied, "Stand up. I am only a man myself." In Revelation 19:10, John fell down before an angel to worship (προσκυνῆσαι) him. But the angel said, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship (προσκύνησον) God!" From that point of view it is highly significant that Jesus offers no objection and adds no qualification when the disciples προσεκύνησαν him. Here we can use the translation "worshiped" in the full religious sense of the English word. They paid him divine honor, and he accepted it (cf. Jn 20:28,29). That interpretation of Matthew 28:17 is confirmed when we recall the temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4:8-10. Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world "if you will bow down and worship me (ἐὰν πεσὼν προσκυνήσῃς μοι)." Jesus replied, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship (προσκυνήσεις) the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"
20. **"but some doubted."** The verb could perhaps mean "hesitated." But there seems less reason for Matthew to mention mere hesitation. In the other Gospels we see that Jesus' followers did not always greet the good news of Easter with eager confidence and pure joy; we see various deficiencies in their faith (Mk 16:8,11,13,14; Lk 24:11,25,37,38; Jn 20:25). We should not be surprised to find Matthew mentioning doubt. The meaning "doubt" also fits better than "hesitate" in Matthew 14:31, the only other occurrence of this verb in the New Testament.
21. But who did the doubting? The best view according to grammar and context is that it was some of the Eleven, probably a minority. If Matthew had written οἱ μὲν προσεκύνησαν, οἱ δὲ ἐδίστασαν, we would translate, "some worshiped, but some doubted," and we would probably think of roughly equal groups. Since Matthew does not include the words οἱ μὲν, we translate "they worshiped," and we think of the Eleven as a whole as the worshipers. But then we come to the pronominal (substantival) use of οἱ δὲ in the nominative. That usage regularly signals a change of subject, both in Attic and in New Testament Greek.⁴⁰ Since the context in Matthew 28 mentions no other witnesses of this appearance who could be contrasted with the Eleven, the contrast presumably is within the Eleven. We infer that not all of the Eleven worshiped; some doubted. This use of οἱ δὲ in the sense "but some" in contrast to others just mentioned is found also in classical Greek, even where there is no preceding οἱ μὲν.⁴¹
22. We may wonder, "What was it that they doubted?" Matthew doesn't say. It would be rash to insist that they had become uncertain about Jesus' resurrection in the days since they last saw him. As far as we can see from Matthew 28, they had no other reason for going to Galilee than to see Jesus. Probably their question was not "Did Jesus really rise?" but "Is this really Jesus?" According to verse 18, there must have been at least a little distance between Jesus and the disciples in verse 17. On the other hand, it does not seem likely that their problem was mere nearsightedness or a perfectly innocent confusion about the identity of the person approaching them. In that case Matthew probably would not have mentioned it or called it doubt. In the other passage where Matthew uses this word for doubt, the point is not, "Doubts are inevitable and nothing to be concerned about." Instead, Jesus asks Peter reproachfully, "You of little faith, *why* did you doubt?" (14:31).

⁴⁰ Cf. *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* by James Hope Moulton, Volume III: *Syntax*, by Nigel Turner (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), p. 37.

⁴¹ An exact parallel to the use of οἱ δὲ in Matthew 28:17 is found in Xenophon, *Hellenica* 1,2,14. The same interpretation of οἱ δὲ fits nicely in Matthew 26:67. For more grammatical examples, cf. P. W. van der Horst, "Once More: The Translation of οἱ δὲ in Matthew 28:17," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, vol. 27 (1986), pp. 27-30.

23. Since Matthew doesn't explain the nature of the doubt in 28:17, it seems more useful to ask, "What reason did he have for mentioning doubt but leaving out the details?" The best answer is that Matthew knows his Christian readers and writes for their benefit—our benefit. The church worships Jesus. We join in that worship. But we also experience doubts of various kinds. They are not necessarily the same doubts those disciples wrestled with, but that finally does not matter. We, like those disciples, sometimes suffer from doubts that get in the way of our worship of Jesus. But Matthew wants us to know that we are not disqualified thereby from serving our Lord. Jesus does not demand rock-solid faith and lightning-quick spiritual insight as prerequisites. He addresses his commission to the disciples who worshiped him *and to those who doubted*. What is more, both before and after that commission he speaks reassuring words for the benefit of all of them.

24. Text and translation of verse 18:

<p>καὶ προσελθὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς λέγων· ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ [τῆς] γῆς.</p>	<p>And Jesus approached and spoke to them, saying, “All authority in heaven and on [the] earth has been given to me.”</p>
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25. **“And Jesus approached.”** Matthew is fond of the verb “approach” (προσέρχομαι). He uses it much more than all the other New Testament writers combined (of the 86 or 87 total occurrences, 51 are in Matthew’s Gospel). Very often Matthew shows people approaching Jesus—enemies in a few cases, but usually needy people or disciples. Only once before Matthew 28:18 do we read that *Jesus* approached anyone. That was at the transfiguration, when Jesus came and touched and spoke to the frightened, prostrate disciples to reassure them (17:7).

26. Now we are at another great scene of revelation, and again Jesus brings reassurance. He who took the initiative in arranging the meeting now takes it again by visibly coming to the disciples. In the future he will be invisibly present with them (and us) to carry out his church building work and to give his protection and encouragement; he will not withdraw from his people or force them to find him by their efforts. The visible gesture of coming to the disciples instead of waiting for them to come to him helps to impress that on them.

27. Jesus **“spoke to them, saying...”** The word λέγων (“saying”) is a very common way of introducing a statement or quotation. In the interest of economy with words, Matthew could have simply written, “And Jesus approached them, saying...” Instead he includes as his main verb ἐλάλησεν (“spoke”). In other words, he draws attention to the very fact that Jesus spoke, and only then does he go on to use λέγων to introduce the content of Jesus’ statement. Our translation, “spoke to them, saying...” reflects that. The New English Bible achieves the same result in better style by introducing a sentence break: “Jesus then came up and spoke to them. He said...”

28. **“All authority in heaven and on [the] earth.”** The article before “earth” is textually doubtful but of no consequence. The prepositional phrases “in heaven and on earth” are positioned immediately after “authority” and make good sense as adjectival phrases (modifying “authority”) rather than adverbial (in which case they would tell us where the giving took place).

29. Jesus was given all ἐξουσία. The word has various meanings, a number of which are relevant here. First of all, ἐξουσία can be *freedom* to make choices, a *right* to do something. A man who is not compelled in

some way but can choose among a number of options has this *freedom*, which can be described as *control* over his own will (1 Co 7:37). As a gospel minister Paul has the *right* to eat and drink at congregational expense, though he chooses not to do so (1 Co 9:4). In the area of government ἐξουσία can mean *authority* to rule over others or to perform the duties of a lower office or commission (Rev 17:12; Lk 20:20; Ac 26:12). Whether we are talking about decisions that affect oneself or one's family or a church or a jurisdiction within the system of government, the word ἐξουσία ordinarily implies legitimacy in making those decisions. But sometimes the word veers more in the direction of *power*, the resources to back up and carry out a decision, the physical strength or even the miraculous ability to make something happen. Revelation 9:19 is a telling example of ἐξουσία in the sense of sheer power with little or no thought of decision-making or of legitimate authority to use the power.

30. When we translate ἐξουσία in Matthew 28:18 as “authority,” we are not trying to zero in on one shade of meaning to the exclusion of all others. The adjective “all” in the phrase “all ἐξουσία” prompts us to combine a number of meanings that are usually distinguished. Jesus does not merely hand on decisions dictated to him from above—he has freedom of choice, his will being in perfect harmony with the Father's. Jesus is not merely free to make choices that affect himself—his choices are much more wide-ranging. And when he acts as a ruler over others, he doesn't merely make decisions and then feebly step back to let his powerful Father implement those decisions. Jesus himself is powerful. And his possession of authority makes it clear his power is not reckless or illegitimate. Accordingly, we see here a package combining freedom of choice, legitimate authority, and implementing power, and this package is described as ἐξουσία at the highest level (“all”) with the widest scope of action (“heaven and earth”). That kind of freedom/authority/power is clearly divine. Psalm 135:6 says, “The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth...”
31. Jesus is about to focus on his church, its growth, and its service (verses 19 and 20), but it would be false to conclude that he chooses to exercise his authority only within the church. By his supreme authority he governs the entire universe—every human being, every angel and demon, every galaxy, every molecule—for the good of his church. That is what we find elsewhere in the New Testament, too (Ro 8:18-39; Eph 1:10,11,20-22; Rev 5; etc.).
32. Jesus says this authority **“has been given to me.”** English tense usage and word order do not make it easy to mirror the Greek here. Often we can translate a Greek aorist with an English simple past tense and a Greek perfect with an English perfect, but not always. Here Matthew uses an aorist passive, ἐδόθη, “was given,” and thereby states the giving as a simple fact, a completed action. Since we know who the giver is, we can paraphrase: God gave Jesus all authority. Clearly that action has ongoing significance: Jesus is in possession of all authority as he commissions his followers and promises to be with them. But instead of highlighting that significance by choosing a perfect tense, Matthew uses an aorist to point to the act of giving itself, and he lets the ongoing significance be inferred from context. He even gives his aorist verb some emphasis by putting it first. But “Given to me was all authority” won't do in English. We feel more comfortable putting the subject first and using a perfect tense verb to make the ongoing significance clear: “All authority... has been given to me.”
33. Since Matthew highlights the completed act of giving, we may well wonder, “Exactly what act is he referring to?” We labor under a twofold difficulty. We are talking about profoundly mysterious, supernatural matters, and Matthew has not spelled out for us when or how this act of giving took place. But we also have two things to help us. First of all, Matthew has unfolded his Christology in the course

of his Gospel, showing us the divine⁴² and human natures in Christ and his pathway through the state of humiliation to his exaltation. Second, we have the testimony of the rest of Scripture to keep us from improper conclusions.

34. A clear starting point is that when Matthew says all authority was given to Jesus, he does not mean it was given according to his divine nature. It would be a real stretch to say that this gift of authority coincided with or was one aspect of the Father's eternal generation of the Son. That relationship within the Trinity goes back before creation and thus before there was a heaven or earth. Matthew cannot expect us to take "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" as a direct reference to the eternal generation of the Son unless he steers us in that direction by using more appropriate language or by providing an explanation to justify his language. And it won't make sense to say that after the world was created, the eternal Son received all ἐξουσία in heaven and on earth as an increase in the powers of his divine nature. As God he has always possessed all authority and power and cannot receive an increase. We should take Matthew 28:18 as referring to the giving of divine ἐξουσία to Jesus according to his human nature, as many pious teachers of the ancient church did.⁴³
35. Can we say more? We can if we do justice both to Jesus' incarnation and to his humiliation and exaltation. But we should reckon with a couple of possible approaches to the interpretation of this passage. Some orthodox teachers will regard the incarnation as the event Jesus refers to with the aorist verb ἐδόθη (Mt 28:18). They will explain that the giving of all authority to Jesus according to his human nature was essentially complete the moment the eternal Son assumed a human nature inside the body of his mother. They will add that the Son did not exercise his divine power through his human nature in a full and uninterrupted way until he arose in glory. Other orthodox teachers will explain Matthew 28:18 as summing up a set of events beginning with the incarnation but only completed at the resurrection. They will grant that the real personal union of the human and divine natures in Christ that begins at the incarnation is the foundation on which the exaltation rests. But for their understanding of Matthew 28:18, they will consider it relevant that in the resurrection God gave Jesus a "green light" for the full and uninterrupted use of his divine power also according to his human nature.
36. Both ways of explaining the passage show the same doctrine. The difference is on a purely exegetical level. One person may think the giving of authority should be distinguished from allowing authority to be fully used, and therefore he focuses on the incarnation alone. Another person doesn't see a need to distinguish those concepts here and thinks the setting in chapter 28 makes it natural to include the resurrection as a point of reference for understanding ἐδόθη.⁴⁴
37. In any case, Jesus' possession of all authority in heaven and on earth gives him the right to gather from all nations a church of believers to enjoy his blessings and to serve him obediently. It also gives him the

⁴² In a number of ways Matthew sets Jesus apart from mere human beings and merely human prophets and points with increasing clarity to his divine nature. Some highlights from the first half of Matthew's Gospel are the virgin birth and the name Immanuel (1:18-23), the worship Jesus received in his infancy (2:11) and clearly accepted in his adulthood (14:33; cf. 16:16,17), the Father's assertion of his Sonship at his baptism (3:17), and above all his assertion of the unique relationship he has with the Father and the Father with him (11:27). All these pointers are supported by Jesus' miracles, his authoritative teaching, and his holy life.

⁴³ Cf. Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, transl. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publ. House, 1971). In addition to his own explanation of Matthew 28:18 and related passages (pp. 316-22), Chemnitz quotes ancient teachers on this verse and on the impossibility of augmenting the divine nature, (e.g., pp. 198, 243-45, 347-48, 353-55, 365, 383, 471).

⁴⁴ Cf. Daniel 7:13,14, where we see "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven...He was given (ἐδόθη, LXX and Theodotion) authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshiped him." Christ may well have had those words in mind as he spoke to his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20. Daniel is portraying Christ's return on the last day. That is a later stage in Christ's exaltation than Matthew 28, but it suggests that any manifestation of God's will to exercise his supreme authority through the exalted Christ can be spoken of as a giving of authority to him.

right to use his followers in that work. Finally, it means he has the power to bless their work and be with them always.

38. Text and translation of verse 19a:

πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη	Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,
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39. **“Therefore.”** The word οὖν (“therefore”) underscores the thought connections we just summarized in paragraph 37. There are variant readings, but οὖν has some good support.⁴⁵ Even if οὖν were to be considered spurious, the thought connection we have noted between verse 18 and verses 19-20 would still be implied.
40. **“go.”** In Greek this word is πορευθέντες, an aorist participle used in the “preliminary” temporal sense (some prefer to call this a participle of “attendant circumstance”⁴⁶). It is grammatically subordinate to the imperative μαθητεύσατε. But it is probably not a good idea to try to express that subordination with a clumsy participle in English (“having gone”) or a subordinate clause (“when you go,” “after you go,” “if you go,” etc.). We don’t want to make it seem as though Jesus meant his commission to be optional or a low priority matter. Usually a participle of preliminary action or attendant circumstance picks up the flavor of the main verb it is associated with. If the main verb is an imperative (as here), its imperative force rubs off onto the participle. The common technique of translating a participle of that type by making it a coordinate verb and supplying “and” (“go and make disciples...”) brings that out nicely. When we make the verbs coordinate in English, the thoughts themselves make it apparent that disciple-making is more important than simply traveling for the sake of traveling. We don’t need to bring that out by putting “go” into a grammatically subordinate clause or phrase.
41. Since we have found reason to translate πορευθέντες with the English imperative “go,” this is a convenient place to discuss the imperative tone that runs through this entire commissioning sentence as spoken by Jesus. We have here no trace of dunning or ranting (“Go, go, GO, **GO!**”), no disappointed or impatient criticism (“Why are you always so slow and uncooperative? Get moving!”), and no threats (“Obey this commission or else!”). Not surprisingly, Jesus’ approach to evangelism is evangelical. His words are friendly and encouraging. It is a pleasing thought that he wishes to involve us in work that is so dear to his heart—work that he is perfectly capable of doing without us but wants to share with us all the same. From that point of view the words are inviting. But they are not an *optional invitation*. They are a firm and clear command. Of course, when it comes to detailed decisions about how to carry out his commission with specific actions, Jesus leaves much to our discretion, and there can be many good ways of accomplishing his goal. But if we refuse to obey, we by our refusal turn his friendly command into a

⁴⁵ Codex D and most texts of the old Latin version support οὖν instead of οὐν. No connective word at all is found in **ℵ**, A, 0148 (probably), manuscript family 13, the (largely Byzantine) majority of manuscripts, and some copies of the Bohairic Coptic version. We find support for οὖν in a number of important manuscripts (B, W, Δ, Θ, 074, manuscript family 1, minuscule 33, etc.) and most of the early versions (Vulgate and some old Latin, Syriac, and the rest of the Coptic versions). A tendency to quote the commissioning words without verse 18 as context could have led to the omission of οὖν in some texts.

⁴⁶ Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, reprint of the third ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976), para. 449-50, pp. 173-74; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 640-45.

word that judges us.⁴⁷ It becomes that accidentally, so to speak; in essence it remains what it was when Jesus first uttered it, a friendly command coming from the evangelical heart of our Lord and Savior. And that is the tone he wants us to convey in our normal use of this passage to instruct God’s people about evangelism.

42. While we are thinking of the evangelical tone running through Jesus’ words here, we may note a further point about the word “go.” Our evangelical God sent his Son to human beings instead of waiting for human beings to find God on their own. Similarly, Jesus now wants us to be evangelical and go to the nations instead of waiting for them to beat a path to our door. The disciples may well have needed instruction on that very point. A number of Old Testament passages picture the nations streaming to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel (e.g., Isa 2:2,3; 45:20; 55:5; 56:6,7; 60:10-14; 66:19,20; Jer 3:17; Mic 4:1,2; Zec 8:20-23; 14:16-19). But that is picture language, not a literal plan for doing mission work. It pictures Gentiles all over the world becoming part of the church, not the church keeping its headquarters in Jerusalem and letting its reputation for splendor and holiness attract Gentiles to come there. To avoid misunderstanding of those prophecies, Jesus tells us to go to the nations.
43. **“Make disciples of…”** The verb μαθητεύσατε is an aorist active imperative, second person plural. Here it is used transitively, that is, with an accusative direct object (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, “all nations”)—a rather uncommon usage of this verb apart from this passage and the numerous quotations of it in Greek theological writings.⁴⁸ Our primary question is, “Does μαθητεύσατε in Matthew 28:19 mean “teach” or “make disciples of”?”⁴⁹ In the next paragraphs we proceed to summarize our conclusions on this point of exegesis.

⁴⁷ Luther on occasion finds reason to bring that out, e.g., as a way of underscoring the reality of the priesthood of all believers: “... a Christian not only has the right and power to teach God’s word but has the duty to do so on pain of losing his soul and of God’s disfavor,” *Luther’s Works* (American Edition), vol. 39, p. 310. Paul speaks of his apostolic office in similar terms (1 Co 9:16,23,27).

⁴⁸ For this paper a study was undertaken of the ancient usage of μαθητεύω in order to check the dictionaries, translations, and commentaries on the basis of the primary evidence. The digital *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (used by permission of the Regents of the University of California, Irvine) provided the texts of the first 670 datable uses of the verb. Those texts range from Heraclitus in the sixth or fifth century BC to the ecclesiastical writers of the fourth and fifth centuries AD and include the greatest of the Greek theologians. In Greek before New Testament times, μαθητεύω is used as an intransitive active verb with a dative, e.g., “I am a disciple to him” = “I am his disciple.” At some point, perhaps already in the New Testament, a deponent usage develops and becomes quite common in post-NT times. By “deponent usage” we mean that passive (occasionally middle) forms of this verb can have the active meanings “I am a disciple” or “I become a disciple.” The intransitive active and the deponent passive and middle uses are less relevant for our purpose. So are the many texts in which Greek ecclesiastical writers merely quote Bible passages containing μαθητεύω without indicating their understanding of the verb. But there are at least some further examples of the transitive active usage as well as the corresponding passive in a non-deponent sense, and they shed some light on Matthew 28:19.

⁴⁹ One suggestion for fine-tuning our understanding of transitive μαθητεύω is to take it as meaning “establish a teacher-pupil relationship with.” What shall we make of that proposal? On the one hand, the word “establish” implies an *ongoing* relationship, and that fits the normal situation of disciples. A disciple does not ordinarily abandon his teacher shortly after coming to him, and a teacher does not ordinarily reject a disciple shortly after accepting him. In that respect it is at least plausible. But in other respects we may have reservations about the usefulness of the proposal. There are three interlocking issues here: 1) Who are we to think of as the teacher(s) in the teacher-pupil relationship? 2) What exactly is the relationship between teacher(s) and pupils? 3) How is that relationship established? Let’s take them up in that order. 1) Some in our circles have been reluctant to take μαθητεύσατε as a commission to convert others to faith in Jesus, and so they want to take it as “establish a teacher-pupil relationship” in which Jesus’ disciples become the teachers and people of all nations become their pupils. In other words, “Make them your disciples.” With that as the primary explanation of μαθητεύσατε, the thought that God converts some of those people would become a proper inference. But we think that misses the primary meaning of μαθητεύσατε in context. Matthew 23:8,10 emphasizes that *Christ* is the Teacher. That doesn’t rule out a secondary teaching role for us (cf. διδάσκοντες in Mt 28:20), but it strongly suggests that μαθητεύσατε aims first and foremost at producing disciples of Christ, not disciples of his disciples (cf. 1 Co 1:12ff). That is the natural understanding also in Acts 14:21. Both in Matthew and in Acts, the unqualified use of the term μαθητής ordinarily means a disciple of *Christ*. And while that terminology can be applied to Judas and to unbelievers who followed Christ only outwardly, the normal use of the term connotes faith in Christ. 2) What really was the relationship between a conventional teacher and a conventional pupil in the first century? It was not a matter of documented enrollment, academic credits, classroom setting, or any other formal arrangement. The essence of the

44. First we note that there is room for disagreement on this issue because
- When the verb μαθητεύω is used transitively (or in the corresponding passive) in Greek ecclesiastical literature, we sometimes find it used in the sense “make disciples of” and sometimes in the sense “teach.”⁵⁰
 - Many of the important modern dictionaries of ancient Greek in general or of early Christian Greek recognize that μαθητεύω when used transitively can mean “teach” or “make disciples of.”⁵¹
 - Both understandings of μαθητεύσατε in Matthew 28:19 can be found in the writings of ancient Greek theologians.⁵²

relationship was that the teacher was teaching or had taught the pupil. Apart from actual teaching, a conventional teacher-pupil relationship would be an empty shell. From that point of view, “establish a teacher-pupil relationship with” says essentially the same thing as “teach,” a meaning we discuss in the body of the paper. But if Matthew is not primarily interested in conventional teacher-pupil relationships—if a relationship with *Christ* as *his* disciple is Matthew’s primary point in using the words μαθητής and μαθητεύω—then the essence of the relationship is *faith* in Christ, by which believers adhere to the heart of Christ’s gospel message and are open to further instruction from Christ (Jn 8:31). 3) However, if the key word in “establish a teacher-pupil relationship with” is not *relationship* but *establish*, we once again face alternatives. If the immediate purpose is a relationship with Christ that consists in faith, that relationship is *established* by bringing a person to faith through the gospel, and it is fitting to translate μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη as “make disciples of all nations” in the sense “convert them to faith.” But if the immediate purpose is a conventional teacher-pupil relationship with people of all nations, we would *establish* the relationship by getting people to consent to let us teach them. Unbelievers can give that consent, as when they agree to take a Bible Information Class. Some find that understanding attractive because it does not in any way ascribe conversion to us. But it does ascribe to us something that is out of our control all the same. We do not have the power to control or consistently produce even the kind of consent unbelievers can give when they agree to take classes from us. How are we to get that consent? The saving message Christ entrusts to us—the *offensive* message of the cross—aims at the miracle of conversion and not at mere external consent to hear a set of lessons. A likelier method for getting that kind of consent would be to model a life of love. But does any of us seriously believe that the *primary* point of the word μαθητεύσατε is that we are to live lives of Christian love so that unbelievers consent to hear about the message behind the life? All things considered, we do not think “establish a teacher-pupil relationship with” is a useful addition to the usual options, “teach” and “make disciples of.” Either it covers the same ground as those options, or it involves us in further difficulties. And it seems to be motivated by an unnecessary concern to avoid a way of speaking about conversion which is well established in Scripture (cf. Part I, paragraphs 23-38).

⁵⁰ “Make disciples of”: second century *Acts of Peter: Martyrdom of Peter* 41.5, Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 39.2.4; “teach”: Justin Martyr, fragment 14.1,2; Irenaeus *Against Heresies* Book 4, fragment 23.33. It is harder to deal with the still earlier usage of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110). J. B. Lightfoot, a marvelous Greek scholar and specialist in the Ignatian epistles, translates μαθητεύοντες with “as teachers” (*Rom.* 3.1) and the passive μαθητευθῆναι with “take lessons” (*Eph.* 10.1), and in the two other instances he translates the verb with “be a disciple” or “become a disciple” (*Eph.* 3.1; *Rom.* 5.1). But Theodore Zahn, a similarly acute scholar who examined the Ignatian epistles thoroughly and published studies of them in the 1870’s, says categorically in his subsequent commentary on Matthew that the verb means “make (someone) a disciple,” not “teach” (*Das Evangelium des Matthäus*, 4th ed., 1922, p. 723, fnt. 8). Part of the difficulty here is Ignatius’ understanding that he is only in the process of becoming a disciple; he looks forward to martyrdom as that which will enable him to be a disciple (*Rom.* 4.2; 5.3; *Polyc.* 7.1; *Trall.* 5.2)—a notable departure from the use of the term in the New Testament. The result of Ignatius’ view of the matter is that there will often be no discernible difference between *being made a disciple* and *being taught* to embrace and practice all the features of Christianity. Thus his writings shed little light on our question.

⁵¹ Both meanings are found in the current standard classical Greek lexicon by Liddell, Scott, Jones, and Mackenzie (9th ed. with rev. suppl., 1996) as also in the following NT/early Christian Greek lexicons: Grimm (3rd ed., 1888); Thayer (corrected ed., 1889); Cremer and Kögel (10th ed., 1915); Bauer, Aland, and Aland (6th ed., 1988); Zorell (1999); and the current standard work in English, BDAG (2000). The same is true of the standard patristic lexicon by Lampe (1961). Some noteworthy lexicons of the Greek NT that list only “make disciples” and similar phrases as glosses for transitive μαθητεύω include the works by Souter (1916), Rengstorff (his article on μαθητεύω in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, p. 461; the German original dates from 1942), and Louw and Nida (1988). Preuschen (1910) lists only that meaning for NT usage, though he recognizes the idea “teach” for a couple of passages in Ignatius.

⁵² Athanasius notes that the command to baptize in Matthew 28:19 is preceded by the command μαθητεύσατε “in order that faith may be correct on the basis of instruction (μαθήσεως)” (*Three Orations Against the Arians*, vol. 26, p. 237, line 17). On the other hand, Epiphanius quotes the words μαθητεύσατε τὰ ἔθνη and immediately explains, “that is, convert (μεταβάλετε) the nations from wickedness to truth...” (Panarion, vol. 1, p. 231, line 8). Epiphanius may in fact assume that μαθητεύσατε is carried out by teaching, but if so, he clearly has in mind effective teaching when he explains it as meaning “convert.” The same connection between μαθητεύσατε and “converting” (μεταβάλλω) shows up in Theodoret, Interpretation of Jeremiah, vol. 81, p. 500, lines 20-25.

- Both understandings of μαθητεύσατε in Matthew 28:19 have been adopted by important translations (“teach” is more likely to show up in older translations, and “make disciples of” in newer ones).⁵³
- Both translations of μαθητεύσατε in Matthew 28:19 can be understood in a fully orthodox sense. In view of the preceding points, one can mount a defense of either translation of μαθητεύσατε in Matthew 28:19 without compromising one’s standing as a Greek scholar or as a confessional Lutheran theologian.

45. Nevertheless, in the interest of exegetical precision, we add that we think there are three reasons for preferring the translation “make disciples of all nations.” First of all, the context in Matthew 28:19,20 favors “make disciples of all nations.” With that understanding the *gospel* focus of the commission remains intact. For if Matthew means “make disciples of all nations,” he can count on it that his readers will recall, for example, how Jesus used the good news of the kingdom to make disciples (4:17-23) and how he sent the Twelve out to win still others with the same gospel (10:5-7). In that way the paramount role of the *gospel* in conversion is implicit in the meaning “make disciples.” And with that understanding in place, we find that the rest of the verse unfolds in a natural way.
46. By contrast, if Matthew had meant “teach” or “instruct” as he wrote μαθητεύσατε, he would have left us with a number of puzzles. *What* are we to teach all nations? If someone says, “Matthew is about to answer that by quoting the rest of Jesus’ sentence,” we ask: Why do Jesus and Matthew immediately proceed to focus on baptizing rather than the teaching associated with Baptism? It would make sense to say, “Instruct all nations, *telling* them everything that the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit means for them in Baptism, teaching them to keep everything I have commanded.” But that is not what we read. If Matthew means to explain what we are to teach all nations, he has strangely delayed that explanation with a side look at the act of baptizing—and then when he belatedly gets around to making explicit the content of our teaching, he does so in a way that emphasizes the law, “teaching them to keep all things, as many as I commanded you” (more on that later). On the other hand, someone may say, “There never was any doubt about what we are to teach all nations—obviously it is the whole teaching of Jesus, i.e., law and gospel, which Matthew has summarized in his book.” But if that is so obvious, it is hard to see why Matthew tacks on an explanation, “teaching them to keep . . .,” and it is still harder to see why he phrases his explanation in a way that emphasizes the law. All those problems go away if we adopt the translation “make disciples of all nations.”
47. A second reason for preferring “make disciples of all nations” is the usage of μαθητεύω elsewhere in the New Testament. Admittedly, this is not an open-and-shut argument. The verb μαθητεύω occurs in only four New Testament passages, namely Matthew 13:52; 27:57; 28:19; and Acts 14:21. The two earlier passages in Matthew are open to various ways of handling the text, grammar, and meaning.⁵⁴ But Luke’s

⁵³ For a representative list of translations, cf. the appendix to this part of the paper.

⁵⁴ In Matthew 13:52, Jesus speaks of a μαθητευθεὶς τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν and says that such a scribe “is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.” The word μαθητευθεὶς is an aorist passive participle (masc. nom. sg.). Does it have true passive meaning (having been made a disciple? having been instructed?), or is this the deponent use with intransitive active meaning (having become a disciple)? Is τῇ βασιλείᾳ a dative of respect or a dative of advantage? We could entertain translations like “having been instructed about/for the kingdom of the heavens” and “having been made” or (deponent) “having become a disciple/adherent of the kingdom of the heavens” and perhaps some others. The deponent interpretation is attractive because the combination of a deponent passive and a dative of the person or thing followed or adhered to is a popular usage in later ecclesiastical Greek. Still, we can’t be sure that is what we have here. Next we turn to Matthew 27:57, where some manuscripts speak of Joseph of Arimathea as one who ἐμαθητεύθη τῷ Ἰησοῦ (aorist passive indicative plus dative). Here the indicative verb makes a dative of agent unlikely, and thus we are not inclined to translate, “who had been instructed by Jesus.” Rather the dative hooks up with the root idea in the verb—a “disciple to Jesus.” Idiomatically we translate, “who had become a disciple of Jesus.” But a case can be made for the reading of A, B, L, W, family 13, and the majority text: ἐμαθήτευσεν τῷ Ἰησοῦ. There the verb is *aorist* active indicative.

clearer use of μαθητεύω in Acts 14:21 is in some ways more important for our study. Matthew 28:19 and Acts 14:21 are the first texts on record to feature an active form of μαθητεύω used transitively. Both passages are canonical, both come from the time of the apostles, and both use the verb μαθητεύω in an outreach context. All things considered, Luke’s μαθητεύσαντες in Acts 14:21 is the best parallel to Matthew’s μαθητεύσατε in all of Greek literature.

48. The first part of Acts 14:21 tells us about the work of Paul and Barnabas in Derbe: εὐαγγελισάμενοί τε τὴν πόλιν ἐκείνην καὶ μαθητεύσαντες ἱκανοὺς ὑπέστρεψαν εἰς τὴν Λύστραν... A literal translation runs as follows: “And having evangelized that city and having made disciples of many, they returned to Lystra...” Here there is a distinction between what happened to the populace as a whole (Paul and Barnabas preached the good news to them) and what happened only to “many” or “quite a few” of them (Paul and Barnabas converted them). If we try to explain μαθητεύσαντες ἱκανοὺς here as simply meaning “having taught many,” we don’t have a clear distinction anymore since preaching the good news is also a form of teaching. Can we salvage a distinction if we take μαθητεύσαντες as indicating specifically the *follow-up, post-conversion teaching* that the converts received? That would be willful interpretation. We would be giving μαθητεύω here a particular spin that is to the best of our knowledge required by no passage in ancient Greek literature and suggested by no dictionary. Doing so would also put distance between Luke’s use of μαθητεύω and Matthew’s. It won’t make much sense for Jesus to begin his commissioning sentence in Matthew 28:19 by saying, “Go and provide all nations with follow-up instruction.” We can entertain special meanings when we are forced to do so by context, but here we are not. Both Matthew 28:19 and Acts 14:21 make excellent sense when we take μαθητεύω in the active, transitive use to mean “make disciples of.”
49. A third reason for preferring that translation is a plausible reconstruction of the history of the word μαθητεύω. As we have already noted, the active voice of this verb was used long before New Testament times in the intransitive sense (e.g., “I am a disciple” of a philosopher or rhetorician or other teacher). To judge by the surviving evidence, the transitive use of μαθητεύω was an innovation by Christians at the time of the apostles. That is not surprising if the meaning they had in mind was “make disciples of.” Early Christians had reason to talk more than ever before about making disciples and may have sought streamlined ways of doing so. Some of those Christians may have figured, “Why use two words (ποιεῖν μαθητάς) if you can get the idea across with one?”⁵⁵ There was linguistic precedent for that sort of development.⁵⁶ In any case, it is likely that many early Christians found it convenient to use the verb μαθητεύω in ways that highlight the root meaning “disciple,” whereas there was no pressing reason for them to create a new transitive usage of the verb to serve as a mere synonym of διδάσκω, “teach.” The use of μαθητεύω to mean “teach” could have been a somewhat later development; perhaps it came in the second century as an extension of the earlier meaning “make disciples of.” After all, making disciples involves communicating the Word, so it is not surprising if in time people extended the use of μαθητεύω to express that general idea of teaching. Surviving usage does not enable us to trace the history of the word with complete precision and certainty. But whatever the historical line of development was, the fact remains that we have no first century texts in which the meaning “teach” is clearly required for the verb μαθητεύω.

The translation is still “who had become a disciple of Jesus,” but it would be an example of the old classical use of μαθητεύω in the intransitive active rather than one of the new Christian uses.

⁵⁵ The same reasoning could help to account for the rise of the deponent passive of μαθητεύω in the sense “become a disciple.”

⁵⁶ A verb similar to μαθητεύω is βασιλεύω. Both verbs are formed by adding -εύω to a noun stem. Both verbs normally had an intransitive meaning: “I am a disciple,” “I am a king, I reign as king.” But in the Greek translation of 1 Kings 12:1 (= LXX 3 Kingdoms 12:1), βασιλεύω is used transitively in the sense “make (someone) a king.” By analogy, μαθητεύω can be used to mean “make (someone) a disciple.”

50. At this point it may be useful to pay a visit to the sixteenth century. As far as we know, Luther never thought through these details of interpretation in Matthew 28:19. He saw no reason to depart from the time-honored rendering of the Latin Vulgate, which translates μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη as *docete omnes gentes*, “teach all nations.”⁵⁷ But trouble was brewing on the horizon in Luther’s day as the Anabaptist movement arose. Some of the Anabaptists took the traditional rendering of Matthew 28:19, “teach...baptizing...teaching,” as a strictly chronological series and exploited it as an argument against infant Baptism.⁵⁸ Jesus, they said, commanded that teaching should precede Baptism, and that can’t happen in the case of infants. In response, some exegetes of the Greek text argued that a more precise rendering of μαθητεύσατε was “make disciples of” all nations and that the rest of the sentence showed how it takes place: by baptizing, etc. According to that exegesis, infants are not excluded from Baptism. (We shall return to the question whether that is the best way to deal with the participles; cf. paragraphs 90ff below.)
51. We do not know who was the first scholar to use that argument against the Anabaptists. But it quickly caught on among Lutherans, beginning already in the sixteenth century. We find it in the writings of Aegidius Hunnius, Johann Gerhard, and Johann Andreas Quenstedt.⁵⁹ Erasmus Schmidt continued to defend the traditional rendering of μαθητεύσατε as “teach,” but his argument is of interest. He acknowledges that the verb literally means “make disciples,” but he says disciples are made chiefly through teaching and for that reason likes the translation “teach.”⁶⁰ In a similar way, Georg Stoeckhardt doesn’t hesitate to use Luther’s translation of Matthew 28:19 (*lehret*, “teach”), but he adds that “make disciples” is more precise.⁶¹
52. As we noted in the Introduction, some have wondered whether the wording “make disciples” in the WELS Mission Statement betrays Reformed or Church Growth influence. The historical record suggests nothing of the sort. The understanding of μαθητεύσατε held by Hunnius, Schmidt, Gerhard, Quenstedt, and Stoeckhardt cannot be ascribed to the influence of the twentieth-century Church Growth movement. To ascribe it to Reformed influence back in their day would fly in the face of the actual differences between the Lutheran and Reformed positions on conversion as noted above in Part I (especially paragraph 38).
53. We have a few additional comments to make on “go” and on “make disciples of.” But we will come back to them after we lay a foundation by discussing “all nations.”
54. Jesus wants us to make disciples of πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, “**all nations.**” The Greek phrase has the article, but as the Blass/Debrunner/Funk (BDF) grammar notes, in such phrases the article is generic.⁶² English doesn’t use a generic article with plural expressions as extensively as Greek does. “All the nations”

⁵⁷ Did Luther even know that “make disciples of” was a legitimate meaning of μαθητεύω? We do not know of any evidence that he did or any source from which he could easily have learned that meaning. The American Edition of *Luther’s Works* sometimes has Luther quoting Matthew 28:19 in the form “make disciples of all nations,” but where we have checked, the original texts do not support that translation.

⁵⁸ Cf. Abraham Friesen, *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 43-75.

⁵⁹ Aegidius Hunnius, *De Sacramentis Veteris et Novi Testamenti, praecipue de Baptismo et Coena Domini*, Chapter XII *De paedobaptismo*, in the first volume of his Latin works (Wittenberg: Georg Muller, 1607), p. 1054 (image No. 601 in the scanned online text of this work at www.lutheranlegacy.org); Johann Gerhard, *Loci theologici*, locus XX *de sacro baptismo*, para. 185; Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia didactico-polemica*, Part IV, chapter V *de baptismo*, section II, question VI, ἐκδίκησις I.

⁶⁰ *Versio et declaratio Novi Testamenti Graeci, plane nova* (Nuremberg: Michael Endter, 1658), p. 379.

⁶¹ *Die biblische Geschichte des Neuen Testaments* (St. Louis: Concordia Publ. House, 1906), p. 328.

⁶² *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, by F. Blass and A. Debrunner, rev. and transl. by Robert W. Funk (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), para. 275.1.

could suggest that a specific group of nations is in view here. To convey the generic sense clearly, we translate without an article, “all nations.”

55. The word ἔθνη often means the “nations” as distinct from Israel, and in those passages we may bring that out by translating ἔθνη as “Gentiles.” But here we have powerful reasons to conclude that Jesus is talking about “all nations” inclusive of the Jews, not “all Gentiles.” Granted, the setting in Galilee reminds us of “Galilee of the Gentiles” in Matthew 4:15, but that does not suggest a termination of the mission to the Jews in chapter 28 any more than it did in chapter 4. Instead we see that other texts from the forty days between Easter and the ascension specifically command outreach in Jerusalem and Judea (Lk 24:47; Ac 1:8; cf. Mk 16:15,20). In Acts and the Epistles we see how diligently the church obeyed that command. We have no reason to suppose that in our text Jesus chose to revoke the Jewish mission. We also have no reason to say that he silently assumed the Jewish mission but chose on this occasion to give explicit attention only to the Gentile mission. The Jews can be referred to as an ἔθνος (e.g., Jn 11:48,50-52; Ac 10:22), and when Matthew adds “all” to the plural of ἔθνος in 24:9,14 and 25:32, he includes the Jews. We see the same type of phrase and the same inclusive meaning in 28:19.⁶³ Matthew wants us to understand “all nations,” not “all Gentiles.”
56. The inclusion of the Jewish nation in “all nations” prompts an observation. One sometimes hears preachers whose zeal for missions leads them to criticize the disciples as too tardy in carrying out Jesus’ will, too lacking in love for the Gentiles to seize the task of world evangelism promptly. Why didn’t they pack their bags for all points of the compass the moment Jesus said, “Go”? Or if not at that moment, as soon as Jesus ascended, or as soon as he poured out his Spirit on Pentecost? Why did they stay so long in Jerusalem, until the Lord lost patience with them and used the martyrdom of Stephen and the ensuing persecution as a stick of dynamite to get them moving?
57. It would be better to refrain from such criticisms; we are in no position to judge their missionary zeal. The disciples knew that when Jesus told them in Galilee, “Go and make disciples of all nations,” the first place they were to go to was Jerusalem. It’s not just that they were to receive further instructions from Jesus in Jerusalem and wait for the outpouring of the Spirit there. Jerusalem was to be their first mission field. In Luke 24:47 Jesus clearly said “beginning at Jerusalem.” Paul, too, knows that the gospel is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: *first* for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Ro 1:16). Ideally, the church would have converted the Jewish nation as a whole, and then the Jewish nation as a whole would have reached out to convert the Gentiles. It didn’t happen that way, but God wanted to bend over backwards to give the Jews the first bite of the apple. Even Jesus’ sad prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem had pictured Christian Jews still living in Judea as the Roman armies approached (Mt 24:2,15,16). Why then would the disciples assume that they should abandon Jerusalem and move on after a year or two of witnessing? As long as Jerusalem stood, God was giving them a chance to reach out to their fellow Jews in Judea, and that is what the mission-minded Jewish Christians wanted to do above all. When Stephen was killed and persecution scattered many of them, God of course used that turn of events to spread the gospel. But the apostles themselves took it neither as a sign of God’s displeasure with their mission work nor as a reminder to pack their bags for foreign lands. They stayed in Jerusalem (Ac 8:1). We should not be quick to assume a failure in mission-mindedness or a lack of love for the Gentiles simply because the apostles and other Jewish Christians loved the Jews so much and embraced God’s mission plan as they understood it.

⁶³ Luke 24:47, another commission passage from the forty days, also has πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, and the context shows that the Jews are included there. Daniel 7:14, which may have been on Jesus’ mind as he spoke the words of Matthew 28:19, pictures “all peoples” worshipping the Son of Man, and the Jews are included.

58. We return to πάντα τὰ ἔθνη. Some have proposed the translation “all ethnic groups.” There is something to be said for that proposal. An ἔθνος is “a body of persons united by kinship, culture, and common traditions, nation, people” (BDAG ἔθνος 1). “Peoples” or “ethnic groups” would help to avoid some misunderstandings that may arise from “nations.” Jesus is not focusing on nations in the sense of nation-*states* occupying a *territory* with borders and having a central *government*. Territory enters the picture only in so far as it is implied in the word “go.” To use a modern example, the church is to go and make disciples of the Japanese. Obviously it will be useful to go to the territory known as Japan to do so. But we are also to go and make disciples of the Japanese living in American cities, perhaps just down the street from us. As for government, it is irrelevant here. Jesus is not telling us to work through government leaders to make Christianity the state religion for each country. He is not telling us that the church must be organized in ways that correspond to existing levels of government, e.g., a United States national church consisting of fifty district churches in Alabama, Alaska, etc. Rather, Jesus is simply talking about making disciples of all “peoples.”
59. To American ears, however, “peoples” sounds all too formal, even a bit unnatural. We talk a great deal nowadays about diversity of race and culture, but we don’t often use the plural “peoples.” “Ethnic groups” fits modern usage better, but it has its own disadvantages. For one thing, it may suggest a more local focus of attention. It may make us think of persons of various backgrounds within our country rather than all over the world. A second and greater disadvantage is that “ethnic groups” is not a familiar biblical phrase. But that is precisely what we need if we want readers of Matthew 28:19 to recall the Old Testament promises Jesus has in mind.
60. Already in Genesis 12:3 God promised Abram that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Wonderfully, at the very moment God announced his choice of Abram and his descendants as his chosen nation, he made it clear that his purpose in doing so was to bless *all* peoples. Subsequently we find numerous Old Testament passages repeating that point and elaborating upon it. If we go by the NIV translation, none of those passages uses the phrase “ethnic groups.” Some of them use the word “peoples.” But a large number of them use the word “nations” (e.g., Ge 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; Ps 2:8; 22:27; 72:11,17; 86:9; Isa 2:2,4; 60:3; Jer 3:17; Dan 7:14; Mic 4:3; Zec 2:11; 8:22,23).
61. That background helps us appreciate the distinctive wording of our text. Jesus could have said, “Preach the good news to all human beings” or “all creation” (cf. Mk 16:15). But since he says, “Go and make disciples of πάντα τὰ ἔθνη,” we hear the Old Testament allusion. From that point of view it is advantageous to translate πάντα τὰ ἔθνη in Matthew 28:19 as “all nations” to help readers see the connection to the Old Testament promises in which the word “nations” appears.
62. Let’s follow through on that. The promises in the Old Testament that *all nations* will worship God were never meant to say that every individual member of every nation will worship God. We see in the ministry of Jesus and his apostles that many Jews and many Gentiles rejected the message. The church is a little flock, embattled till the end of time. At the last judgment there will be sheep and goats. But representatives from every nation will be among the sheep. In that sense all nations will worship God.
63. That gives us a further insight into the word μαθητεύσατε. The imperative could have been expressed in the present tense to indicate that disciple-making is our ongoing work. But Matthew uses the aorist tense, and the best explanation is that we have here an *effective* aorist. The aorist expresses a completed action. If we focus on making an individual a disciple, that particular act of disciple-making is completed when that person’s conversion is effected. But here we are looking especially at the big picture (“all nations”), and thus the task of disciple-making is completed when the conversion of “all nations” is effected. Since the imperative is in the aorist tense, Jesus is not saying, “Go and work

continually at converting all nations,” but “Go and accomplish the conversion of all nations.” It will take the church until the end of time, but we are told to bring about that result. We have in the aorist imperative an implicit promise from Jesus. The promise is not that every attempt to convert a person will succeed or that all human beings will ultimately become Christians, but that the church’s work will actually result in the conversion of all nations, i.e., all the elect individuals who will represent all the nations of the earth as they gather around God’s throne in heaven and worship him.

64. Text and translation of verse 19b:

<p>βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος,</p>	<p>baptizing them with reference to the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,</p>
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65. First, a few grammatical observations. The antecedent of “them” (αὐτοῦς, masculine) is “nations” (ἔθνη, neuter). The change in gender is an example of a “construction according to sense.” It brings out the fact that we are dealing with persons (the masculine αὐτοὺς covers people of both sexes) and not with the mass conversion of whole nations. The form βαπτίζοντες is a present active participle, masculine nominative plural.⁶⁴ The exact shade of meaning of the participle is something we will discuss later (paragraphs 90 and following) since we need to take into consideration also the other participle, “teaching” (διδάσκοντες, verse 20).
66. **“baptizing.”** Baptism is not introduced here as an utterly new rite. Matthew has told us about the Baptism John administered (3:6,11,13-16) as part of his ministry of preparation for the coming of the Messiah (3:2). The question could have arisen, “Now that John’s ministry of preparation has come to an end, has Baptism come to an end, too?” But here at the end of his Gospel, Matthew makes it clear that Jesus wants the practice of Baptism to continue. Jesus commands his church to baptize people.
67. John’s Baptism was a means of grace. It was a Baptism *for repentance* (Mt 3:11), a divine way of giving repentance (both sorrow over sin and faith in God’s promises) to those who received John’s Baptism. As such, it provided forgiveness. It was “a Baptism of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*” (Mk 1:4). It was therefore a powerful means by which the Holy Spirit worked on the hearts of people.
68. But the full extent of the Spirit’s work was not yet shown in John’s Baptism of the sinners who came to him. God chose to have full spiritual maturity demonstrated first in the life and work of Jesus himself. Only after Jesus completed his redemptive work was it time for him to pour out his Spirit on his believers in New Testament fullness. That gift would enable them to be God’s mature children and grow up toward the perfection that is found in Christ (Eph 4:13,15) to a degree not experienced by God’s immature children, the Old Testament believers (Gal 4:1-7).
69. Jesus’ disciples went through the transition from Old to New Testament believers. At first they didn’t understand some of what Jesus said and some of what he did to fulfill the Scriptures. But when Jesus arose and further instructed them and poured out his Spirit, the light of salvation shone more brightly for them than ever before. Not only did they better understand the Scriptures and the words of Jesus; they also changed from cowering mourners to bold and joyful confessors. In his Gospel and the book of Acts,

⁶⁴ Codex Vaticanus (B) and Codex Bezae (D) have instead the aorist participle βαπτίσαντες. That variant is too poorly attested to be considered original. As Ulrich Luz notes, it may be a scribal attempt to show that Baptism is a one-time event, unlike the ongoing process of teaching (*Matthew 21-28*, p. 615, note 3).

Luke makes the transition clear and highlights the importance of Easter and Pentecost for the new sense of conviction evident in the disciples. John's Gospel also emphasizes their lack of comprehension before they saw the risen Lord and experienced the fuller work of the Spirit made possible by Jesus' victory (Jn 2:22; 7:38,39; 14:16,17; 16:7,13-15; 20:9).

70. Matthew has less to say about the Spirit, but he does make some of the same points in a quieter way. For one thing, he shows that the Twelve were still immature in their discipleship during Jesus' ministry (e.g., Mt 8:25-27; 16:21-23; 17:16,17; 19:13; 20:20-24; 26:33-35, 40-45,51,56, 69-75). And when he introduces John's Baptism, he makes it clear that a better Baptism, Baptism with the Spirit, will be available in the future. He reports these words of John the Baptist: "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Mt 3:11). The future tense is noteworthy. John is not saying, "In the administration of my Baptism, the Messiah baptizes (present tense) with the Spirit while I handle the water." Rather John is drawing a temporal contrast between his present Baptism and a future Baptism. His present Baptism is a means of grace, but he calls it a Baptism with water to highlight the future version of Baptism as a fuller gift of the Spirit that the "more powerful" one will provide. That leaves us with a question as we read on in Matthew's Gospel: When will the other shoe drop? When will the "more powerful" one provide his Baptism with the Spirit? The other shoe drops in Matthew 28, when the risen Jesus lays claim to all power in heaven and on earth and commands his church to baptize with reference to the name of the Father and of the Son *and of the Holy Spirit*. Matthew teaches us to look to that new version of Baptism as a way of receiving the Spirit in New Testament fullness. We need not wait for a personal Pentecost experience. The Spirit Christ poured out on the church at Pentecost is given to us in our Baptism.
71. The word βαπτίζω originally meant "dip, immerse," but as we know, etymology doesn't determine meaning. Current usage does. It is clear enough that in the first century, the word could be used in a broader way to include the more general idea "wash."⁶⁵ Immersion, pouring, and sprinkling are all adequate ways of using the water of Baptism. After all, the removal of dirt by the physical action of the water is not the point of the sacrament (1 Pe 3:21). The contact of the water with the person makes clear that the powerful Word in Baptism applies to the person, regardless of how much of the person gets wet.
72. **"with reference to the name."** We are to baptize people εἰς τὸ ὄνομα. The preposition is sometimes explained as though the phrase were ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι, "in the name," since Koine Greek often uses εἰς + accusative in the sense of ἐν + dative. That explanation will not lead us badly astray, but we can be more precise. Matthew "is more careful than any NT author to preserve the distinction between *eis* and *en*..."⁶⁶ Perhaps Matthew is using an idiom from legal and commercial language in which a transfer of ownership is indicated by entering the acquired property "into the name" (into the account) of the

⁶⁵ Cf. BDAG, βαπτίζω 2, "to use water in a rite for purpose of renewing or establishing a relationship w. God, *plunge, dip, wash, baptize*." In Mark 7:4, "couches" are mentioned in a reading with early and diverse support: literally, "baptisms of cups, pitchers, bronze utensils, and couches." Couches can be washed but hardly immersed. Even if "couches" is textually uncertain, it is at least evidence for the Greek usage of the copyists. We also find Baptism administered under circumstances where immersion would be very unlikely, as in the Baptism of the jailor at Philippi (Acts 16:33). There Luke provides many details to account for the movements of Paul and Silas and the jailor, but he says nothing about a trip to a pool or river in the middle of the night, nor does he suggest that the jailor had his own bathing facilities. It is easier to assume that Luke considered a bucket of water sufficient for washing Paul's and Silas' wounds and baptizing the family than to suppose that Luke equates Baptism with immersion and fails to explain how it could take place under the circumstances. Important extra-biblical evidence is found in the first or second century Didache, written in Greek. In some ways the document is quite strict about the practice of Christianity, but when it comes to directions for Baptism, the pouring of water on the head is explicitly allowed (7.3). The Greek-speaking community that used the *Didache* did not understand the word βαπτίζω to require immersion.

⁶⁶ Moulton's *Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. IV *Style* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976) by Nigel Turner, p. 42.

purchaser (BDAG ὄνομα 1δγ2, p. 713, col. a). That idiom seems to be on Paul's mind in 1 Corinthians 1:13,15, where he is denying ownership or control of the Corinthians (cf. 1 Co 1:12). The Corinthians were not baptized into Paul's name to become Paul's people; they were baptized into *Christ's* name to become *Christ's* people. That understanding of Baptism εἰς τὸ ὄνομα fits the theology of Baptism beautifully. But in Matthew 28 it is not clear that the same legal/commercial idiom is in view since there are no contextual clues pointing specifically in that direction. It seems surer to start here with a very straightforward, well-established meaning of εἰς, "with respect to, with reference to" (BDAG εἰς 5; cf. BDAG βαπτίζω 2c). We are to baptize with reference to the name of God. That is cumbersome in English, but the idea is simple. There is a connection between the washing action performed in Baptism and the name of God, and Jesus wants that connection to be expressed through the use of God's name. That in turn calls to mind another idiom. In Greek one sometimes swears an oath εἰς τὸ ὄνομα of a deity, and the sense is "with mention of the name" (BDAG ὄνομα 1δγ2, p. 713, col. a). The common, general meaning "with reference to the name" and the special meaning "with mention of the name" would fit together closely in a context like this. The baptizer makes reference to God's name by mentioning it during the administration of Baptism. With those thoughts as our basic understanding of Baptism εἰς τὸ ὄνομα of the triune God, we can entertain also the commercial idiom mentioned above (transfer to God's account and ownership) as a further overtone, especially since it fits so well with the gospel implications of the *name* of God. To that we turn next.

73. The word ὄνομα, "name," can be a loaded expression in religious texts. Used of God, it is no mere identifying tag, but a summary full of meaning about who God is and what he does. Since the foremost elements of that meaning are the great truths of the gospel, the name of God is charged with gospel power. Of course, it does not function like a magical charm, as though the precise recitation of the right set of syllables would enable us to force God's hand against his will or manipulate his power apart from him. Instead, the name of God is an expression of his own desire to save, and he authorizes us to use his name to carry out his saving will. In Matthew 28:19,20 Jesus specifically authorizes us to use God's name in the administration of Baptism. Thus it functions in Baptism as a legitimate means of grace, not as a grotesque attempt at magic.
74. The loaded sense of "name" is implicit already in the Old Testament's first mention of "the name of the LORD" (Gen 4:26). It is made crystal clear and emphatic when God reveals himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai by proclaiming the name of the LORD. Proclaiming the name was more than a matter of crying out, "The LORD, the LORD." God continued to proclaim his name by adding, "The compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin..." (Ex 34:5-7). For a New Testament example we may turn to Jesus' great prayer in John 17. There God's name (ὄνομα) is the saving message which Jesus reveals and uses to give his people life, union with him, and spiritual protection (verses 6, 11, 12, and 26).
75. So the name of God can be given in short, summary form or in expanded, explanatory form. The essential point Jesus has in mind in Matthew 28:19 is that the washing should have gospel power by being brought into connection with the triune God's fullest self-revelation in this world, i.e., the gospel message about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which Jesus preached and fulfilled through his Messianic ministry, death, and resurrection.
76. From that point of view it is easy to answer the question, Does Matthew 28:19 give us the formula to be used in Baptism? No, if by formula we mean a precise pattern of words that must be strictly adhered to. But yes, if we mean that the basic thought encapsulated in this verse is essential for the administration of Baptism. And it is excellent if the church directs her ministers to use these words as the standard formula in administering this sacrament. By doing so we honor Christ, who spoke these words, and we

express the gospel in a form we know to be pleasing to him and perfectly fitting for use in this sacrament. Thus we also give our people something clear, simple, and stable to hang on to for the assurance that their church administers a valid Baptism. We would not want to do anything to jeopardize that assurance.

77. Francis Pieper quotes a passage from Johannes Brenz that illustrates the point clearly:

If a minister, after the applicant's recitation of the Apostles' Creed, performed the Baptism with these words: 'I have now heard from thee thy profession of faith, viz., that thou believest in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost; accordingly, upon this thy profession and faith, I baptize thee with water in order that thou mayest be assured that thou hast been grafted into Christ and the communion of all His blessings. Go in peace!' such a Baptism would certainly be a true Baptism because it contains the essentials of Baptism and because the sense of the words of Christ has been publicly expressed, though the sound itself of the words seems to have been a little changed.⁶⁷

Pieper rightly approves of Brenz's explanation. At the same time he rightly emphasizes Brenz's accompanying warning: There are very weighty reasons for retaining Christ's wording. If we indulge in elaborate paraphrase, we will never improve on Christ's wording. Instead, our tinkering could make Baptism doubtful. The sacrament is too important for us to create any doubts about its validity.

78. But we need not be hypersensitive about every detail of wording. While we have noted that exegetical precision favors taking εἰς τὸ ὄνομα as "with reference to the name," we see no need to alter the formula we use in our baptismal practice from the familiar translation, "in the name." The phrase "in the name" is a richly suggestive rendering. One can easily understand the English phrase "in the name" as meaning "in the sphere of the name," and thus "in connection with the revelation."⁶⁸ That gives us the same meaning as "with reference to the name" by a slightly different route. And those who explain the English baptismal formula "in the name of" as meaning "on the authority of" are not destroying the essence of Baptism, either. That may not be the precise sense of εἰς τὸ ὄνομα, but it is clear from the very fact that Jesus himself commands us to baptize that we do so on his authority and thus on the authority of the triune God. Implicit in that is the saving purpose of the triune God in authorizing Baptism. We can be content with implicit meanings here. Jesus himself is content to use the name of God as a summary of his gospel self-revelation. It is of course a fine practice if we include in the ceremony of Baptism a more explicit confession of the gospel truth embodied in the name of God, such as a recitation of the Apostle's Creed, but Jesus doesn't require that.

79. **"of the Father."** God is occasionally called "Father" in the Old Testament, but that designation becomes much more frequent in the teaching of Jesus. What is more, Jesus spells out much more clearly and emphatically that God is *his* Father in a unique sense (e.g., Mt 10:32,33; 11:27), and that is what is highlighted here in Matthew 28:19. By adding "and the Son" immediately after saying "the Father," Jesus in effect identifies the Father as the Father *of the Son*. Through that unique relationship, Jesus is specially qualified to bring us to his Father so that we may know God as *our* Father with all the warmth and boldness of dearly loved children (e.g., Mt 5:16,45; 6:1-9; 10:20). That is one of the fruits of the Baptism Jesus commands here.

80. **"and of the Son."** Jesus is not simply a miracle-worker, teacher, prophet, priest, king. He is the eternal Son who has a unique knowledge of God the Father and his will (Mt. 11:27). That is what gives supreme weight to his redemptive work and supreme authority to his teaching. The centrality of the Son of God

⁶⁷ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. III (St. Louis: Concordia Publ. House, 1953), pp. 260-61.

⁶⁸ As R. C. H. Lenski does in *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), p. 1175.

in the plan of salvation accounts for the emphasis upon him in many of the New Testament references to Baptism. Often we hear of it as Baptism “on (ἐπί, on the basis of) the name of Jesus Christ” (Ac 2:38) or Baptism “into Christ” (Gal 3:27) or a number of other variations on the theme. That is not surprising, for “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col 2:9). Christ reveals the Father and gives the Spirit. Without Christ we do not have God. But when we know Christ as he truly is, we have God (1 Jn 2:23; 2 Jn 9). A further reason why so many of the New Testament references to Baptism focus on Christ (i.e., without mention of the other Persons of the Trinity) is the Jewish matrix in which New Testament Christianity arose. Many Jews who rejected Jesus would have claimed to know God and his Spirit from the Old Testament and might have been ready to accept a Baptism in the name of God and his Spirit. But for them, Baptism in the name of Jesus as the Son of God was unthinkable. Thus Baptism “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” and similar phrases pointed to the most distinctive feature of the church’s sacrament of initiation.

81. **“and of the Holy Spirit.”** As noted above (paragraphs 68-70), the Spirit who was known from the pages of the Old Testament is now to have greater scope for his work thanks to the completed redemptive work of Jesus. Jesus gives his Spirit to his believers, the Spirit of Sonship, and by that Spirit we call God our Father and pray to him as such (Ro 8:15; Gal 4:6). By that Spirit we are enabled to serve God as his children with greater maturity and freedom than God’s Old Testament children and with deeper insight into the meaning of the Scriptures.
82. Matthew 28:19 recalls the Baptism of Jesus (Mt 3:16,17), where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were revealed together. But here at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, the Trinitarian meaning is even clearer. Here we have perfect grammatical parallelism. There are three genitive nouns, each having the article, and all three are joined symmetrically with καί... καί. The three genitives all depend on the singular noun ὄνομα. That situation perhaps could be explained in other ways, but it certainly is consistent with the view that Jesus speaks of one name, one self-revelation. In any case we are in a context where there is every reason for Jesus to choose his words carefully for the sake of the vital role they play in the sacrament of Baptism, and there is every reason for Matthew to report Jesus’ words carefully in this solemn moment at the conclusion of his Gospel. Under those circumstances, how inept it would be to link a mere man with the divine Father and the divine Spirit! How inept it would be to reduce the Spirit to an impersonal force, a mere attribute of God, and pretend that here we have a series consisting of Person, Person, and Thing! What Matthew records is clearly not a collection of misfits but the three Persons who are one God and therefore belong together in one name.
83. Text and translation of verse 20a:

<p>διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν·</p>	<p>teaching them to keep all things, as many as I commanded you.</p>
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84. **“all things, as many as . . .”** Though clumsy, our literal translation accurately reflects the Greek grammar. The only other advantage it has is that it helps the reader see the impressive string of “all’s” in the original: “All authority... all nations... all things... all the days...” But “everything I have commanded you” (NIV) would be better English.
85. **“I commanded.”** We noted earlier that the focus in verse 20a is on the law, or more precisely, on the use of the law as a guide for Christian living (the third use). That is not obvious from διδάσκοντες, “teaching,” since one can teach the law or the gospel. Likewise, τηρεῖν, “keep,” fits with either kind of object. Christians keep God’s law by obeying it, and they keep the gospel in their hearts as a treasure.

But ἐνετειλάμην, “I commanded,” is a form of ἐντέλλομαι, a verb that normally indicates giving directives for a person’s behavior. That is how Matthew uses the verb earlier in his Gospel (4:6; 17:9; 19:7). He has also recorded for us many examples of commands Jesus gave to direct the behavior of his disciples, as in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7).

86. Do we feel awkward about highlighting the law here? Do we feel that the occasion somehow demands a focus on the gospel alone? Luther did not think so. His fine grasp of language led him to take the words in their natural sense as referring to good works. His fine understanding of the distinction between law and gospel led him to emphasize that the good works commanded here follow faith and show that it is alive; they are not commanded as a way of achieving salvation.⁶⁹
87. We can compare the treatment of Matthew 28:20 in *Das Weimarische Bibelwerk*, which served as a People’s Bible of the seventeenth century and was treasured for over two hundred years as a storehouse of Lutheran exposition. A team of Lutheran scholars compiled it under the careful supervision of an editorial team led by Johann Gerhard, who spent untold hours checking it for soundness. At Matthew 28:20 we read, “And teach them to keep (not human commandments, but) everything which I (your LORD and Master) have commanded you (so that they may demonstrate their faith through good works and continually remain in a holy, godly life . . .).” That was considered a sufficient explanation of Matthew 28:20a.
88. Still, one can entertain reasons to broaden that view to include all of Christ’s teachings. That is what Johann Gerhard does in his own more extended study of the text. He starts with the obvious point—Christ’s commands direct our behavior. As Gerhard puts it, the Baptism of adults and infants is to be followed by “διδασκαλία, in which they are taught to keep those things which Christ commanded, that is, to demonstrate faith by good works and to inaugurate a way of life that is holy and worthy of their profession.”⁷⁰ But then Gerhard adds these points:
- Christians also need to grow in the knowledge of the *gospel* after conversion, and that kind of teaching is covered by 2 Timothy 3:16, where Paul defines the purpose of Scripture and thus of the ministry of the Word.
 - In New Testament usage, “teach” and “keep” can take both law and *gospel* as objects.
 - Occasionally the word “commandment” (ἐντολή) is used of God’s desire that we should *believe in Jesus* (1 Jn 3:23).
 - Commands can also be identified by the use of the imperative, and a number of imperatives used by Jesus pertain to reception of the *gospel*, e.g., “Repent” (wide sense, Mt 4:17) and “Believe the gospel” (Mk 1:14).
 - The Christian idea of keeping the law is not that we attain perfection in order to merit eternal life, but that we demonstrate our faith with good deeds while receiving Christ’s *forgiveness* for our daily imperfections (Mt 6:12).

We can add to Gerhard’s list some other imperatives spoken by Christ that pertain to the gospel:

- Jesus commands his church to practice church discipline in an evangelical way (Mt 18:15-18).
- Jesus commands his church to celebrate his Supper (“Take and eat. . . Drink. . .,” Mt 26:26, 27; cf. “Do this,” Lk 22:19; 1 Co 11:24,25).

⁶⁹ A sermon for the Ascension in his *Kirchenpostille* makes the point at length: cf. *Luthers Werke* (St. Louis ed.), XI, coll. 974-76, para. 38-40 (= WA 21,396,29 – 398,5).

⁷⁰ Vol. III of the Peter Chouet edition of the Chemnitz-Leyser-Gerhard *Harmonia Evangelistarum*, p. 452, col. b, para. 3.

- Jesus commands his disciples to go and preach the gospel (Mt 10:7 and implicitly in 28:19, “Go and make disciples of all nations”).

89. In summary we can say that the natural and obvious emphasis in “teaching them to keep all things, as many as I commanded” is the third use of the law, but that we may legitimately include gospel teaching as well, since there are also commands of Christ pertaining to the gospel, and a proper teaching of the third use of the law requires an evangelical context and manner (as in the opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount).
90. Now we are ready to consider the **connection of the participles** “baptizing... teaching” to the main verb, “make disciples.” Both are circumstantial participles, a category which admits a broad range of (sometimes overlapping) shades of meaning. Time, purpose, manner, means, cause, concession, and condition are common “flavors.” Ultimately the shade of meaning is something to be grasped intuitively on the basis of the context. Here in Matthew 28:19,20 we can note first of all the present tense of the participles. The ongoing work of baptizing and teaching takes place within the same time frame as μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη. The church will not finish converting the nations until the end of time, and so the ongoing work of baptizing and teaching also runs its course until the end of time. The bottom line seems to be that Jesus wants disciple-making to be connected or associated somehow with baptizing and teaching. He does not want us to leave converts unbaptized or to leave baptized converts uninstructed about his will for their lives. We can see in these participles an expression of *manner* in the broadest sense: Make disciples of all nations in a manner that brings Baptism and teaching of Jesus’ commands into the picture.⁷¹ Or we could just call them participles of coordinate/associated action and freely translate them as imperatives: “Go and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to keep everything I commanded you.”⁷² Jesus and Matthew could have used a series of imperatives, but by using the participles “baptizing... teaching” they make it clearer that these actions belong with “make disciples.”⁷³ When we stick to that very simple way of connecting the verbs, we are on sure ground. If we assert a more specific shade of meaning, our exegesis may be open to question.
91. For example, many exegetes assert that “baptizing” and “teaching” express the *means* by which we make disciples. Sometimes that is coupled with the notion that Christ in Matthew 28:19,20 put baptizing before teaching because he was foreseeing the common practice of the *established* church, in which Christian parents have their children become disciples through infant Baptism and the instruction that follows.⁷⁴ That notion has little to commend it. Why should Christ ignore the pressing task of first establishing the church in many places through the conversion of adults? Why should he foresee a special future situation without saying so? Why should he picture the established church of the future in a way that might suggest the established church would have little or no use for adult Baptism? Why

⁷¹ That understanding of the text seems to be the basis for Theodore Zahn’s paraphrase: Jesus commands the apostles “hinzu gehen und alle Völker zu Jüngern zu machen und zwar so, dass sie dieselben auf den Namen des Vaters und des Sohnes und des heiligen Geistes taufen und ferner sie alles das beobachten lehren, was Jesus seinen Jüngern befohlen hat,” *Das Evangelium des Matthäus*, 4th ed. (1922), p. 722. The apostles are told “dass das μαθητεύειν nicht ohne Anwendung der Taufe geschehen solle,” p. 724. J. C. K. von Hofmann has a similar exegesis (*Schriftbeweis* 2, 2, 164, cited by A. Nebe, *Auferstehungsgeschichte*, p. 354).

⁷² That in essence is how Luther translated the participles: “Darum gehet hin und lehret alle Völker und taufet sie im Namen des Vaters und des Sohns und des Heiligen Geistes. Und lehret sie halten alles, was ich euch befohlen habe.” Cf. the latter part of footnote 76 below.

⁷³ A fairly close formal parallel is found in Matthew 4:23, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” We could paraphrase that as “Jesus went throughout Galilee in a manner that involved teaching... and preaching... and healing...” Or we could say, “Jesus went ... and taught ... and preached... and healed...” Neither paraphrase disturbs the essential content of the verse. Matthew 9:35 is similar.

⁷⁴ Such is Lenski’s view, *Matthew*, p. 1173.

should we entertain such an explanation when nothing in Matthew 28:19,20 indicates a *focus* on infants or requires us to infer one?⁷⁵

92. But even without the notion that Jesus chooses his words to fit a future situation, there are difficulties in taking the participles as expressing means. If we say that *teaching Christ's commands* is a means of making disciples, we invite confusion about how disciple-making happens. The means by which people become Christians is only the *gospel*. If we say that we make people disciples by teaching them to keep Christ's commands, including particularly his ethical commands, we are forced to make a distinction between Christians (all who believe the gospel) and disciples (those Christians who know all the commands of Jesus). It is hard to find support for that distinction in the Bible.
93. There is also a difficulty in deciding *when* people become disciples if teaching all the commands of Jesus is assumed to be a means of making disciples. Should we say that as soon as baptized believers have been taken through the complete list of Jesus' commands once, *now* they are disciples? That is a caricature of the kind of instruction Jesus wants to take place. The lessons are not learned that quickly and easily. When Jesus' disciples teach, they are to do so not only by word but also by example (Mt 5:14-16), in a living community of faith where evangelical discipline is practiced (Mt 18:15-18). The effort to live a Christian life is to be encouraged with gospel promises (Mt 5:3ff). The more we think about it, the more it looks like a never-ending task. That is good for us to recognize, of course. But if we assume that the never-ending task of teaching Jesus' commands is part of a process of making disciples, we can never say, "This person has been made a disciple." The most we could say is, "This person is in the process of becoming a disciple." But that is out of step with Matthew's usage. Matthew calls people disciples even though they are unfinished products. In fact, even before Peter, Andrew, James, and John have heard the Sermon on the Mount, they are referred to as disciples (Mt 5:1). Matthew also uses an effective aorist (μαθητεύσατε) to communicate Jesus' command at the end of his Gospel. If "make disciples" focuses on conversion, the task can be accomplished through our ministries, and an effective aorist is completely appropriate. But if "making disciples" takes place in part through never-ending teaching, it is never accomplished through our ministries, and Matthew would have done better to use a present imperative, "be making disciples, try to make disciples" (μαθητεύετε).
94. Some commentators recognize the difficulties involved in saying that teaching Jesus' commands is a means of making disciples, so they assert that *baptizing* alone is the means in view here. Their interpretation has more in its favor. One can say that Baptism is a divinely appointed means for a life of discipleship for people of all ages. God wants adults to receive Baptism as the sacramental seal upon their conversion and incorporation into the church, and he wants infants to receive it as the only ordinary means of conversion available to them. But there are still difficulties that raise questions about an unqualified identification of "baptizing" as the ordinary means of making disciples.
95. We cannot pretend that μαθητεύσατε, "make disciples," is a mysterious expression requiring an explanation of how to do it. Matthew has showed us how it happens already in chapter 4. Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom of heaven, and as a result, when he called Peter and others, they followed him (verses 17-22). They were his disciples (5:1). Nothing is said of Baptism as the means whereby they became disciples. When he sends them out to gain more followers, he tells them to preach the gospel of the kingdom (10:7), but nothing is said about Baptism. Evidently Matthew considers it clear enough that adult converts are won over by the preaching of the gospel. Readers who understand that will not

⁷⁵ Cf. the institution of circumcision in Genesis 17. There God does not overlook the application of circumcision to adult males so as to focus on the normal practice of the future, i.e., the circumcision of male infants. Instead he deals first with the circumcision of Abraham (17:10,11), and only then does he speak of the circumcision of eight-day-old males (verse 12). And there the reference to infants is explicit, whereas in Matthew 28:19, 20 there is no explicit mention of infants.

assume that μαθητεύσατε is unclear by itself or that Baptism is the way to make disciples of adults. They will not find it necessary to take “baptizing” as a participle expressing means.⁷⁶

96. Confirmation for the view that one first makes adult disciples by preaching the gospel to them and then baptizes them can be found in John 4:1 (NASB): “...the Pharisees heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John” (ἤκουσαν οἱ Φαρισαῖοι ὅτι Ἰησοῦς πλείονας μαθητὰς ποιεῖ καὶ βαπτίζει ἢ Ἰωάννης). It would be entirely unnecessary and artificial to say that we have here an exegetical καὶ and to translate, “Jesus was making, that is, was baptizing more disciples.” The natural reading of the Greek is that we have here two successive actions. The preaching of Jesus and his disciples was making disciples (winning converts), and these converts then received Baptism.
97. Neither “baptizing” nor “teaching” works well if we take them in an unqualified sense as participles of means, so we are better off taking the connection between the main verb “make disciples” and the participles “baptizing... teaching” as a looser, more flexible connection. It is attractive to think that the loose, unspecified connection is deliberate, because it accommodates a differentiated practice of adult and infant Baptism based on the differentiated practice of circumcision.
98. We cannot fully understand what the Bible says about Baptism—and what it leaves unsaid—unless we take seriously the divinely planned similarity between circumcision and Baptism (Col 2:11). Circumcision goes back to Genesis, the great book of beginnings, and it loomed large in the thinking of the Jews as a covenant God made with their great forefather, Abraham (Gen 17:9-14). God instituted circumcision with a clear difference between the circumcision of adult males and the circumcision of infant males. God had made a believer out of Abraham and instructed him about circumcision before Abraham was circumcised, but God commanded that infant boys were to be circumcised before they could be instructed. That became a template for Jewish thinking and practice. In generation after generation, thousands of Jewish boys were circumcised in infancy and instructed later, whereas adult male converts to Judaism would first receive instruction and profess faith in the God of Israel before receiving circumcision.
99. When John the Baptist came, he called the Jews to repentance and told them their Jewish ancestry would not save them, thus treating them as no better than Gentiles. He told them to receive his Baptism of repentance and forgiveness. In doing so, he had every reason to apply the centuries-old template, for the similarity between the two rites of initiation was striking in spite of obvious differences. Circumcision was a removal of literal flesh and thereby pointed to God’s war on the fleshly nature, the circumcision of the heart; Baptism was a literal washing connected with a spiritual washing away of sins and a new basis on which to serve God. So, just as Gentile males converting to Judaism would submit to circumcision for themselves and their infant sons, John would have given the circumcised Jews a fresh start by administering his Baptism to adults and their children, infants included.⁷⁷ And that pattern in turn would

⁷⁶ Here we may note that some ancient Greek theologians clearly took μαθητεύσατε to refer to an action that precedes the action of βαπτίζοντες. They obviously did not regard baptizing as the means of carrying out the command μαθητεύσατε. Cf. Origen, *Fragments on the Gospel of John*, fragment 36, lines 35ff; the fourth century *Constitutions of the Apostles*, book 7, chapter 40, lines 9-15; and Theodoret, *Interpretation of the XIV Epistles of St. Paul*, vol. 82, p. 233, lines 38-45, and *Compendium of Heretical Tales*, vol. 83, p. 413, lines 24ff. These theologians with their native command of Greek were able to take the present participles in a flexible way, and as a result they saw here a sequence of associated actions: first teach/convert all nations, then baptize them, etc. Further evidence is seen in the ease with which μαθητεύσατε and βαπτίζοντες are paraphrased as parallel imperatives (Theodoret, *Questions on the Octateuch*, p. 95, line 3) or parallel infinitives of indirect command (Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the XII Minor Prophets*, vol. 1, p. 564, lines 19f, and especially p. 681, lines 19-21, where all three verbs become parallel infinitives: Christ commanded them to *disciple... and baptize... and teach...*).

⁷⁷ The point is even more striking if the Jewish practice of proselyte baptism for Gentile converts and their children (including infants) was already in place at the time of John the Baptist and Jesus, as Joachim Jeremias argues in *Infant Baptism in the First Four*

be continued in the Baptisms performed by Jesus’ disciples, both before and after his resurrection. As Johann Gerhard remarks,

Christ did not give the apostles a special and explicit command to baptize infants because it was known to the apostles that infants were received into God’s covenant in the Old Testament through circumcision. Therefore they knew that the same judgment applies to Baptism in the New Testament, for the grace of God is not stricter, narrower, and more limited in the New Testament than it is in the Old.⁷⁸

By the same token it is not surprising if the Baptism of children is never explicitly reported in the New Testament. Thousands and thousands of Jewish boys must have been circumcised over the centuries, yet the ceremony itself is hardly ever reported in the Old Testament. The New Testament writings by contrast cover a much smaller span of time and often focus on a missionary situation in which the conversion of adults is the natural center of attention. In both testaments things that happen routinely as part of a well-known pattern need not be specially mentioned—even things as important to the Jews as the circumcision of their boys and as important to the Christians as the Baptism of their infants.

100. When we keep in mind the template engrained upon the minds of the Jews—the template we can summarize as “Give the rite of initiation to adults after instruction and to infants before instruction”—we can understand why Jesus and Matthew would leave the participle connections loose and flexible: “Make disciples of all nations, baptizing..., teaching...” As noted above, the bottom line in these participles is that Jesus does not want disciples left unbaptized and he does not want baptized disciples left uninstructed about his commands. In the case of adults, we apply Jesus’ command by converting them with the spoken gospel, and then baptizing them, and instructing them about Jesus’ commands (some of that instruction can precede conversion, as when outsiders want to know what the church teaches, and some of it can even occur during the baptismal service itself, as in *Didache* 7.1, but most of it will come afterwards in a lifetime of instruction within the life and worship of a Christian community). In the case of infants, we make them disciples by baptizing them—the loose, flexible participle construction allows for that scenario (Baptism as the *means* by which they become disciples) without forcing us to squeeze adult conversion into the same mold—and instruction follows as the children grow up and live out their lives in a Christian community.

101. Text and translation of verse 20b:

καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἶμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος	and behold, I am with you all the days, until the end of the age.
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102. “**behold.**” The Greek form *i0dou*= developed from the aorist middle imperative, second person singular (*i0dou*= serves to draw attention to or emphasize what follows. Here a literal seeing or beholding doesn’t fit all

Centuries, transl. David Cairns (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 24-40. In that case, what the rabbis required of incoming Gentiles and their children is what John would have required of circumcised Jews and their children—a further demonstration that their Jewish heritage did not save them and that they needed a fresh start through repentance and Baptism no less than Gentiles did. It would also strengthen the claim for seeing infant Baptism implicitly included in Jesus’ command in Matthew 28:19. If it was an established Jewish understanding at that time that Gentile proselytes and their children needed to be baptized, Jesus would have had to explicitly exclude children from his Baptism if that had been his intention for the administration of the sacrament.—It is hard to suppose that Jewish proselyte baptism would have developed after Christian Baptism had become known. The rabbis were not likely to imitate the Christians in this matter. But even if it could be shown that Jewish proselyte baptism was a later development, it would still bear witness to the readiness of Jews to apply the template of circumcision by baptizing not only adult converts but also their children. Why would John the Baptist and Jesus have been any less willing to apply the same template?

⁷⁸ *Loci theologici, locus XXI de baptismo*, chapter VIII *de objecto baptismi*, para. 193.

that well. We can't see the fact that Jesus will be with us for all time. A paraphrase may be better in this instance. The NIV's "surely" is not a bad paraphrase; if Jesus draws attention to the promise that follows, it must be something sure and reliable. But perhaps J. B. Phillips' *New Testament in Modern English* has the best rendering of ἰδοὺ as a way of drawing attention to the promise with which this Gospel ends: "And *remember*, I am with you always..."

103. **"I am with you"** recalls the name given to Jesus in Matthew 1:23, Immanuel, "God with us." Since Jesus is God, he can give the name Immanuel a twist. Instead of saying, "My name Immanuel is a guarantee to you that God is with you," he can more simply and directly say, **"I am with you"** (emphatic ἐγώ) and thereby imply, "I am God." It is his divine nature that enables him to say without explanation or qualification that he is and will be present with us.⁷⁹
104. But his statement is not limited to an assertion of his divine nature. He is and will be with his people *according to both his divine and his human natures*. If he were speaking only according to his divine nature, we might wonder why he mentions only himself and not the other divine Persons who were also just mentioned in connection with Baptism. The reason for singling himself out is that he is and will be with them also according to his human nature, the nature in which he is their brother and our brother (cf. Mt 28:10, "my brothers"). Not only his divine nature but also his human nature is essential for his role as the Savior. That he is humanly with them at the moment of speaking the promise is obvious. That he will be humanly with them in all the days ahead is less obvious, and for that reason he gives this special promise and draws attention to it with "behold."
105. The thought of Christ's abiding presence with us also according to his human nature is a thought very dear to us and a part of confessional Lutheran Christology (cf. FC SD VIII, 80-84). Calvinists fight against it, but they have their hands full in dealing with this text. Ulrich Luz is not a confessional Lutheran, and he has embraced the modern critical approach to exegesis, but he notes in connection with Matthew 28:20b, "The Calvinists are in some difficulty when they assume in the sense of the *Extra Calvinisticum* that the risen Jesus is bodily only in heaven."⁸⁰
106. **"all the days"** is another clumsy literal translation, but it helps to make the string of "all's" obvious.
107. **"until the end of the age."** Jesus' presence with his church does not end when the end of the present age arrives. The point rather is that his forgiving, consoling, encouraging, protecting, and empowering presence with his church and all her members will not be interrupted or terminated no matter how long this present age lasts. We may note a vital implication. As we confess in the opening statement of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession: "It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church."⁸¹ Luther liked to use Matthew 28:20 to prove that point.⁸² And of course it is

⁷⁹ Note by way of contrast the qualified way in which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 5:4, literally, "when you are gathered together *and my spirit*." Paul cannot assert that he will be present with the Corinthians in an unqualified way. His body will be absent from their meeting. His spirit will be present, namely through the Spirit whom Paul and the Corinthians have in common and who will guide them in excommunicating the impenitent offender. We also see Paul's caution lest he say too much in 2 Corinthians 12:2,3. But Jesus has no need to cautiously exclude his body when he says, "I am with you..." and no need to say his presence will be mediated by the Spirit. In his own Person he is God and therefore not subject to the limitations of space and matter, and his human nature by virtue of the personal union is not subject to those limitations either.

⁸⁰ *Matthew 21-28*, p. 635.

⁸¹ Kolb-Wengert edition, p. 42 (translation of the German text of the Augsburg Confession).

⁸² In his 1539 treatise, *On the Councils and the Church*, Luther repeatedly appeals to Matthew 28:20 to establish the point: "For there must always be saints on earth, and when those die, other saints must live, from the beginning to the end of the world; otherwise, the article would be false, 'I believe in the holy Christian church, the communion of saints,' and Christ would have to be lying when he says, 'I am with you always, to the close of the age' [Matt. 28:20]. There must (I say) always be living saints on earth—they are

not just a promise that the church will continue to exist, but that she will exist with Jesus at her side making available his help and benefits to the church and to every member of the church. Blessed are they who remember Jesus' promise and count on it every day!

108. By way of summary, we note that the translation of μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη as “make disciples of all nations” fits the usage of μαθητεύω and has commended itself to a number of outstanding Lutheran theologians over the centuries. Our exploration of the immediate context and of Matthew's theology and manner of writing has revealed no obstacles in the way of adopting that translation. It lends itself to a consistent and satisfying understanding of Matthew 28:16-20 as the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel.

wherever they can be—otherwise, Christ's kingdom would come to an end...” *Luther's Works* (American Edition), Vol. 41, p. 107. The same point is made on pp. 48, 148, and 155, each time with a quotation from Matthew 28:20.

Appendix to Part II:

How some notable translations render μαθητεύσατε (Mt 28:19)

BIBLE VERSION	YEAR	RENDERING
Vulgate	c. 383	<i>Docete</i>
Luther	1522	<i>Lehret</i>
King James Version	1611	Teach
Darby	1890	Make disciples of
American Standard Version	1901	Make disciples of
Reina-Valera Actualizada	1909	<i>Haced discipulos</i>
Young	1911	Disciple
Moffat	1913	Make disciples of
Revised Standard Version	1946	Make disciples of
The Four Gospels (Rieu)	1953	Make (all nations) your disciples
An Expanded Translation (Wuest)	1956	Teach
The NT in Modern English (Phillips)	1958	Make disciples of
New American Standard Bible	1960	Make disciples of
Today's English Version	1966	Make disciples of
Jerusalem Bible	1966	Make disciples of
New Century Bible	1967	Make followers of
Die Heilige Schrift (Luther, revised)	1967	<i>Machet zu Jüngern</i>
New English Bible	1970	Make (all nations) my disciples
Anchor Bible	1971	Make disciples of
Beck	1976	Make disciples of
New International Version	1978	Make disciples of
The Four Gospels and the Revelation (Lattimore)	1979	Instruct
New King James Version	1982	Make disciples of
God's Word to the Nations	1988	Make disciples of
Revised English Bible	1989	Make (them) my disciples
New Revised Standard Version	1989	Make disciples of
The Message	1993	Train
Contemporary English Version	1995	Make (them) my disciples
New Living Translation	1996	Make disciples of
Nueva Version Internacional	1999	<i>Hagan discipulos</i>
Today's New International Version	2001	Make disciples of
English Standard Version	2002	Make disciples of

Part III: Comparing the New Testament Commission Passages

1. We now compare the various passages in which Jesus gives a commission to his New Testament church or to her ministry. All of these passages have value as the church seeks to understand and articulate her mission. The key passages are Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-18, Luke 24:46-49, Acts 1:4,5,8, and John 20:21-23.
2. Other Old and New Testament passages can be adduced to confirm and elucidate the aforementioned ones, but they do not have the same degree of obvious relevance, so to speak. Old Testament passages often reflect the special circumstances of the theocracy, or the prophetic office in the period before the era of fulfillment, or in general the spiritual immaturity of God's Old Testament children. To some extent we see special circumstances at work also in Jesus' initial sending of the Twelve and the Seventy-two. He sent them to Israel alone and specially authorized them to heal the sick and exorcise demons. We have less need to make allowances for special circumstances when we develop our ecclesiology with the help of later portions of the New Testament. But even there we do not often have the same sense of a concentrated summary statement of the mission of the church and her ministry such as we find in the commission passages spoken by Jesus himself. We turn to those commission passages now.

Matthew 28:18-20

3. Jesus, representing the entire Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, sends us by saying "Go." The scope of our mission is the whole world, "all nations." The gospel focus of our commission is implicit in "make disciples" (namely, by using the gospel). It is clearer in the words "baptizing them with reference to the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The gospel is received by faith, and the thought of faith is implicit in "make disciples of all nations" (= convert them to faith). Fruits of faith are to be demonstrated in the lives of Christians. That is clear from "teaching them to keep all things, as many as I commanded." The disciples who do the teaching need to practice what they teach so that they can be good role models, and the converts likewise need to do what Jesus commands, not just think about it. For both the teaching disciples and the learning disciples, the life of obedience is a series of fruits of faith—and one of the chief fruits is that they all embrace the commission and assist in making more disciples.

Mark 16:15-18

4. (Verse 15) "He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. (16) Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (17) And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; (18) they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.'"⁸³
5. Here Jesus addresses the Eleven (verse 14), and we can take them as representative of the church as a whole. He sends them: "Go." He emphasizes the worldwide scope of the mission with two expressions: "into all the world... to all creation." Since the point is to preach the gospel, which is God's saving message addressed to human beings, we have a contextual limitation of "all the world" (τὸν κόσμον ἅπαντα) to all the *human* world, and of "all creation" (πάσῃ τῇ κτίσει) to all the *human* part of creation. We don't have to go to the uninhabited parts of the planet or preach to the birds. But all preaching of the gospel to human beings is included, whether that preaching takes place in an outreach setting or for the

⁸³ Cf. Part II, paragraph 4 and its footnotes.

edification of the church. We may take the aorist imperative (κηρύξατε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) as an effective aorist: Accomplish the worldwide preaching of the gospel. In addition to the explicit mention of the gospel we have a further gospel note sounded in the expression “whoever believes and is *baptized*” (ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθείς). Although there is no command to baptize in this text, the participle “baptized” is used with the generic article, aptly brought out by the NIV’s “whoever.” Clearly, faith and baptism go hand in hand here. Just as the goal is that all are to be brought to faith, so also the goal is that all are to be brought to Baptism. Thus baptizing is part of the church’s worldwide mission.⁸⁴ Faith, the receiving organ for the gospel, is also highlighted by repeated expressions: “whoever *believes* and is baptized...those who believe.” There is less emphasis in this commission on the fruits of faith, though of course obedience to the commission is itself a fruit of faith. The law makes a brief appearance: unbelievers will be condemned.

6. The occurrence of particular miraculous signs is mentioned—driving out demons, speaking in new tongues, picking up snakes and drinking poison without harm, healing the sick—but they are not spoken of as universal factors. We are not told that all the church will do these things or even all the Eleven. These signs “will accompany” the believers, namely, when and where it pleases God.⁸⁵ Since we are not commanded to do these things and they are not described as necessary or universal in their occurrence, we do not include them in our understanding of the mission of the church or her ministry.

Luke 24:46-49

7. (Verse 46) “He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, (47) and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. (48) You are witnesses of these things. (49) I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’”
8. We can see a distinction between the lasting mission of the church and the special role of the original disciples who were present with Jesus on this occasion. The lasting mission of the church is spoken of in an impersonal passive construction (an ACI): Repentance and forgiveness (based on Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection) *will be preached* (κηρυχθῆναι) to all nations in Jesus’ name. But then Jesus addresses his disciples in the second person, and he includes details that pertained directly to them but not to later generations of Christians. “You,” Jesus says to them, “are witnesses of these things” (ὕμεῖς μάρτυρες τούτων)—witnesses not merely in a secondary sense, but people who could testify as eyewitnesses. They, not we, are the ones who were to stay in Jerusalem until they received the special outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost.
9. For our understanding of the mission of the church we therefore focus chiefly on the first part of the passage. Jesus draws attention to the fact that the Old Testament foretold his suffering, death, and resurrection as well as the preaching of repentance and forgiveness in his name to all nations. Jesus clearly agrees with the Scriptures and adds his authority to theirs. Thus we have here an implicit sending

⁸⁴ Jesus speaks of Baptism as necessary in John 3:3,5, but he does not thereby exclude all exceptions, such as the thief on the cross. A sober theology of the means of grace helps us understand that. Confessional Lutheranism, in imitation of Jesus, affirms the necessity of Baptism (AC IX.1) without making it *absolutely* necessary.

⁸⁵ Should we press “*they* will drive out demons, speak in new tongues, etc.” to mean *all believers* will do all these things, since the antecedent of “they” is “the believers” (τοῖς πιστεύουσιν)? No. There is no *all* in the text, and there are times when it is natural to ascribe to a group the acts of individual members of the group (“the Yankees scored three runs”). The deliberately vague expression, “these signs *will accompany* the believers,” prepares us for that understanding. To ascribe all these signs to all believers would fly in the face of Paul’s emphatic teaching concerning the distribution of gifts (1 Co 12:4-30) and the clear facts of history. No early Christian reader could have imagined that every believer was performing all these signs.

by Jesus and by the Spirit, who spoke in the Scriptures. The scope of the mission is worldwide: “all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” The gospel content is highlighted: “the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead... forgiveness of sins... in his name” (ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ, on the basis of his name). But there is also a place for the law: Jesus wants repentance and forgiveness to be preached. The word “faith” is not mentioned in this text, but the preaching of which Jesus speaks clearly aims to produce faith.⁸⁶ As in Mark 16:15,16, there is no explicit emphasis on fruits of faith, but again the commission itself provides a notable opportunity to let faith blossom into obedience.

10. When Jesus points out the special role of the original disciples as eyewitness-testifiers, he is not implying that only eyewitnesses of the risen Christ can take part in the mission. But it does remind us that the historical events in God’s plan of salvation are of crucial importance, as is the eyewitness testimony that got the New Testament church started. We are not free to dismiss the history in favor of a Bultmannian existential encounter with God, and we must not neglect the testimony of the original witnesses in order to dream up a theology more appealing to modern people. Similarly, when Jesus tells his disciples to wait for the gift of the Spirit, he is not implying that we need to have our own Pentecost experience comparable to that of the original disciples. But it does remind us that Jesus is interested in the spiritual qualifications of those who share his message. He wants us to possess his Spirit through faith in his gospel. It would be an absurdity and an abomination if we were to tell others to believe what we ourselves refuse to believe. And the more fully we enter into the maturity that the Spirit of Christ cultivates through the message of Christ, the better equipped we are to take part in the mission.
11. It seems natural to proceed from the commission at the end of Luke’s Gospel to the one at the beginning of his second volume. We will look at John’s Gospel afterwards.

Acts 1:1-8

12. (Verse 1) “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach (2) until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. (3) After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. (4) On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. (5) For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ (6) So when they met together, they asked him, ‘Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’ (7) He said to them: ‘It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. (8) But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’”
13. At the end of Luke’s Gospel we saw a general mission of the church followed by some specific details pertaining to the role of the original disciples. Now as Luke continues the story in Acts, he once again emphasizes the important role of the original disciples. He focuses attention on the disciples Jesus called to be *apostles* (verse 2). He makes it clear that they were eyewitnesses because Jesus gave them “many convincing proofs that he was alive” (3). They were to wait for that which the Father promised (4), the gift of the Spirit to empower them for their mission (8).

⁸⁶ The NIV follows the majority of manuscripts and translates “repentance *and* forgiveness of sins.” The editors of the UBS Greek New Testament (fourth edition) prefer the reading of \aleph B C* L N 33 and some of the early versions, “repentance *for* the remission of sins (μετάνοιαν εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν). The latter reading demands the wide sense of “repentance” (contrition *and* faith). But even with the other reading, the gospel content of the preaching is meant to produce faith and be received by faith.

14. Jesus says to these apostles, “You will be my witnesses” (8). According to context, the explicit meaning of that statement is not, “All Christians will be my witnesses in a secondary sense by sharing the gospel,” but “You apostles will be my witnesses in the full sense by providing testimony as eyewitnesses.” That understanding of “witness” appears repeatedly in Acts, notably in 1:21,22. There Peter says the replacement for Judas needs to be qualified to serve as “a witness with us of his resurrection.”
15. When Jesus goes on to say, “You will be my witnesses *in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*,” he indicates the worldwide scope of the apostles’ testimony. Here we need not trouble ourselves with questions about whether the apostles reached the ends of the earth in person. Jesus’ words are in the form of a promise, and the promise is legitimately fulfilled when the church takes the testimony of the apostles to the ends of the earth. The church will perpetuate that testimony both to reach out to the world and to nourish the life of the church.
16. Thus we can say that the explicit promise addressed to the apostles in Acts 1:8 is at the same time an implicit commission to the church to take the apostles’ testimony to the ends of the earth. It is also an implicit promise that the church will succeed in doing so. And since the focus of the apostles’ testimony according to context is the resurrection of Jesus and the benefits it brings (e.g., the kingdom of God and the gift of the Spirit, verses 3-5,8), we can use Acts 1:8 to speak of the church’s commission to take the *gospel* to the ends of the earth.

John 20:19-23

17. (Verse 19) “On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ (20) After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. (21) Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ (22) And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. (23) If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’”
18. Confessional Lutherans have disagreed about the exact meaning of “I am sending you” (verse 21) in this context. Is Jesus authorizing the *church* to use the Keys, or is he establishing the *public ministry* of the Keys? For our present purposes it is not a pressing question. Those who see here a focus on the church as possessor of the Keys should recognize from elsewhere in Scripture that Jesus instituted the public ministry for the sake of the orderly, responsible use of the Keys. Those who see here a focus on the establishing of the public ministry should recognize from elsewhere in Scripture that the Keys have been entrusted in the first place to the church and that the establishing of the public ministry does not undo that. The church and her public ministry are not rivals, each clamoring for authority at the expense of the other. Rather they support each other.
19. We note various similarities to the other commission passages. In this passage the mission comes from the triune God. The Father sent Jesus, and Jesus in turn now sends people and gives the Spirit to equip them for the proper use of the Keys. When Jesus says, “I am sending you,” that is of course similar to saying, “Go.” The gospel emphasis of the commission is also clear. Jesus explicitly focuses on forgiveness, the heart of the gospel (23). Even his initial greeting, “Peace be with you” (19), points in that direction. We perceive that this is more than a conventional Jewish greeting, and our perception is confirmed when Jesus repeats his greeting in verse 21. He brings his hearers peace with God and sends them to share that peace with others through the forgiveness of sins. In verse 23 he says, “If you forgive

anyone his sins...” (literally: If you forgive the sins of any persons, ἂν τινῶν ἀφῆτε τὰς ἁμαρτίας). The indefinite pronoun “of any persons” is certainly consistent with and suggestive of the worldwide scope of the gospel. It also includes the ongoing use of the gospel of forgiveness among Christians, as when they are absolved in public worship and in private confession. But immediately thereafter Jesus protects his message from the misunderstanding that forgiveness and its benefits are enjoyed by all automatically and that therefore all people will go to heaven. He authorizes the use of the law: “If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (literally: If you hold in place [the sins] of any persons, they are held in place, ἂν τινῶν κρατῆτε κεκράτηνται).

20. It is worth emphasizing that when Jesus authorizes people to forgive sins, he authorizes them to perform a great miracle. If pronouncing God’s absolution seems less than that because we have done it or witnessed it so many times, we would do well to reread Matthew 9:1-8. There we can learn to see the absolution through the eyes of the observers who were astonished and delighted when Jesus healed the paralytic to prove his authority to forgive sins. That authority does not become less astonishing when we in turn forgive sins as authorized by Jesus. The absolution we speak does not merely remind people of something God has already done, nor is it wishful thinking or some other form of empty talk. The absolution we speak powerfully conveys the forgiveness of sins from God to human beings.⁸⁷ Since Jesus authorizes people to perform the miracle of absolution in John 20, why should we be unwilling to say that he commands us to convert the nations in Matthew 28?⁸⁸

Compilation

21. Exegesis duly notes the distinctive emphases and implications of the various commission passages. For example, Matthew 28:16-20 focuses on the commissioning of the whole church, and Acts 1:1-8 focuses on the special role of the apostles, and Luke 24:46-49 looks first at the general mission of the church and then the special role of the original disciples. But attention to distinctive details should not obscure for us some important similarities. When we put the similarities together and compile the key points, we can formulate a summary statement on the basis of the five commission passages we have been considering. One way of putting it is this: *God our Savior sends his people to all the world with his message of law and gospel, and through their work he creates faith and directs believers toward fruits of faith.* We are not proposing that as a mission statement. It does not bring out the respective roles of law and gospel or the preeminence of the gospel as the only means of grace. It is mainly useful as a way of bringing together key points that are made in the commission passages. A chart may help us see the similarities and differences among those passages.

⁸⁷ One of the theses established at the first convention of the Synodical Conference in Milwaukee (July, 1872) is that “the gospel is not a mere historical account of the work of redemption that has taken place, but much rather a powerful declaration of peace and of God’s gracious promise to the world which was redeemed by Christ. Thus [the gospel is] at all times a powerful means of grace, in which God on his part brings, offers, distributes, gives and bestows the forgiveness of sins and righteousness won by Christ, although not all to whom God extends his earnest call of grace accept the invitation of the reconciled God and thus also fail to become partakers of the resultant benefits.” The translation of this thesis is reproduced from Armin Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference: Ecumenical Endeavor* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publ. House, 2000), pp. 61-62.

⁸⁸ “Actually our mandate requires us to do things which are impossible for mere men. We are to, ‘Make disciples.’ (Mt. 28:19) We are to forgive and retain sins. (John 20:23).” Harold R. John, “God’s Mandate to His Church to Communicate the Gospel” (an essay presented at the WELS World Mission Seminar, East Fork Lutheran Mission, Whiteriver, Arizona, 1984), p. 9.

text	God our Savior	sends his people	to all the world	with his message of law and gospel,	and through their work he creates faith	and directs believers toward fruits of faith.
Mt 28: 18-20	<i>Jesus gives the commission. He mentions <u>Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.</u> He will be with us.</i>	<u>Go</u>	<u>all nations</u>	<i>The gospel is the implicit means for <u>make disciples of.</u> The gospel is highlighted in the words <u>baptizing... Spirit.</u> The law is included in <u>teaching...commanded.</u></i>	<u>make disciples of</u> (namely, through the gospel)	<u>teaching them to keep all things, as many as I commanded</u>
Mk 16: 15-18	<i>Jesus gives the commission. He promises confirmatory signs.</i>	<u>Go</u>	<u>into all the world</u> <u>to all creation</u>	<u>preach the gospel</u> <u>Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved</u> is gospel. It implies that <u>Baptism is part of the commission.</u> <u>Whoever does not believe will be condemned</u> is a statement of the law.	<i>Faith is the implicit goal of gospel preaching. Faith's importance is clear in <u>Whoever believes... whoever does not believe ...</u></i>	<i>Obedience to the commission is an important fruit of faith whereby we model the sanctified life.</i>
Lk 24: 46-49	<i>Jesus gives the commission and backs it with God's Word in the Old Testament. The preaching is to be done <u>in his name.</u> The gift of the Spirit will empower them.</i>	<i>The sending is implicit in <u>will be preached ... to all nations.</u></i>	<u>to all nations,</u> <u>beginning at Jerusalem</u>	<i>Jesus begins with <u>This is what is written.: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.</u></i> <i>He says <u>repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name.</u></i> <i>The testimony of the original witnesses is highlighted.</i>	<i>Faith is the implicit goal of gospel preaching.</i>	<i>Obedience to the commission is an important fruit of faith whereby we model the sanctified life.</i>
Ac 1:1-8	<i>Jesus gives the commission. The gift of the Spirit will empower them.</i>	<i>The sending is implicit in <u>You will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth.</u></i>	<u>in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth</u>	<i>Luke highlights the testimony of the apostles as <u>witnesses</u> who have seen the risen Lord and heard his teaching about the kingdom of God and the gift of the Spirit.</i>	<i>Witnesses testify in order to be believed.</i>	<i>Obedience to the commission is an important fruit of faith whereby we model the sanctified life.</i>
Jn 20: 19-23	<i>Jesus gives the commission. <u>As the Father sent me, I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit.</u></i>	<u>I am sending you</u>	<i>The worldwide scope of the gospel is implicit in <u>If you forgive the sins of anyone...</u></i>	<i>Jesus sets the tone by twice blessing the disciples with his gospel <u>peace.</u></i> <i>He authorizes the disciples to <u>forgive and retain sins.</u></i>	<i>The fact that some sins are retained calls to mind the essential role of faith as the means for receiving the gospel and possessing forgiveness.</i>	<i>Obedience to the commission is an important fruit of faith whereby we model the sanctified life.</i>

22. The last three columns of the chart prompt a few additional comments. The column under the heading “with his message of law and gospel” shows how variously the gospel can be summarized and alluded to. We are reminded that the gospel is a gem with many facets and that we have biblical precedent for speaking about the gospel in many ways. The inclusion of the law here makes it desirable to add some antitheses for the sake of clarity. The law is not the focus of the commission, as though the gospel merely sets the stage so that the real work of reforming man’s character can be done by the law. Neither is the law a further means of grace that assists the gospel in producing faith or life or love. Nor do we imagine two parallel missions, as though we were to use the gospel to win converts to the church and the law to nudge society toward God-pleasing behavior. The law functions here in ways that are entirely subordinate to the gospel. The role of the law in the commission passages is to condemn sin and unbelief, produce contrition, and clarify good works.
23. The translation we are recommending for Matthew 28:19 is “make disciples of all nations.” Granted, none of the other four passages in the chart tells us to make disciples or to convert people. But that is not surprising in view of the striking variety that emerges as we compare the passages on the chart. And if we enlarge our view beyond these five commission passages and look also at commission passages describing the ministry of key individuals, we see that God sent John the Baptist and Paul with the express purpose of converting people (Lk 1:16,17; Ac 26:17,18).
24. The column under the heading “and through their work he creates faith” shows that faith is important in God’s plan of salvation. But it also shows that it is possible to speak of the church’s mission without actually using the words “faith” or “believe.” When we summarize the mission of the church, it is more important to give expression in some way to the gospel itself than to mention the faith which the gospel creates.
25. The last column, “and directs believers toward fruits of faith,” reveals a curious situation. All of the commission passages by their very nature direct believers to produce certain fruits of faith, e.g., gospel testimony. But only Matthew 28:20 explicitly broadens the picture to include obedience to all of Jesus’ commands. What shall we make of that?
26. What we have here are not contradictory but complementary emphases, both of which have divine authority and are useful for the well-being of the church. The commission passages in Mark, Luke, Acts, and John strongly reflect the fact that the gospel alone is the source of the church’s life. Both saving faith and obedient love are important, but both of them are produced by the gospel, not by the law. The men who selected and recorded these commission passages from the many words of Jesus emphasized more strongly than Matthew that the *gospel* is the only means of grace. The Spirit gave them the confidence that such a focus would serve the church well both in its outreach and in its internal growth.
27. Matthew, too, gives expression to the primacy of the gospel. The role of the gospel is implicit in “make disciples of all nations” and it is explicit (at least in summary form) in “baptizing them with reference to the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” But Matthew remembered that much of Jesus’ own teaching had featured the third use of the law. Matthew also knew that in this life believers experience the conflict of the old and the new man in various ways, and the results include confusion and forgetfulness about the way God wants us to think and act. Because of the conflict between the old and the new man, Christians benefit from the third use of the law—not to create life or move believers to obedience, but to clarify God’s will and thus overcome the confusion and forgetfulness caused by our sinful nature. With that understanding of the church’s needs, Jesus included the words “teaching them to keep everything I have commanded” when he commissioned the disciples on the mountain in Galilee. With that same understanding Matthew recorded those words of Jesus for the benefit of the church.

28. Although Matthew 28:18-20 is the only one of the five chief commission passages to bring out clearly the importance of obedience to all of Christ's commands, the same point receives a large amount of emphasis elsewhere in the Scriptures. Open your Bible at random and start reading. You will not get very far before you encounter some kind of reminder that our obedience—our love—is important to God. A number of passages show that the purpose of God's plan is not simply to save us from death and hell but to make us loving, obedient children of God. Christ "gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Tt 2:14). "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10). Jesus tells his disciples, "I chose you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last" (Jn 15:16). When God makes us "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God," his purpose is "that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pe 2:10). Paul says that Christian love is greater than saving faith (1 Co 13:13). We need not be afraid to include some mention of the Christian life of obedient love when we describe the mission of the church.
29. Summary of Part III: The five key commission passages in the New Testament can be paraphrased and compiled to produce this statement: *God our Savior sends his people to all the world with his message of law and gospel, and through their work he creates faith and directs believers toward fruits of faith.* When we express the mission of the church in our own words, undoubtedly we will want to give expression in some way to the gospel, as is done in all five of the key commission passages. In some circumstances we may choose to stop there so as to achieve maximum brevity and an unmistakable focus on the gospel as the only means of grace. But there should be no objection to fuller statements that bring out the role of the law. In various ways the commission passages remind us that the law produces contrition; it retains the sins of the impenitent; it condemns unbelief; it clarifies how we are to live. There should also be no objection to fuller statements that draw attention to the intended impact of the gospel: It converts people to faith, bestows on them the benefits of Christ's saving work, and produces fruits of faith.

Part IV. WELS Mission/Purpose Statements

1. How important is it for a church to formulate and adopt a concise action-statement defining the church's mission or purpose? Christians may have different answers to that question. Perhaps church historians could tell us how often Christians over the centuries have felt the need to create such a statement. Is the formulation of mission statements a Christian concern of long standing? Is it a more recent innovation? Has the church done as well without mission statements as with them? Those may be difficult questions to answer.
2. But when we go back to the history of the apostolic church as it is recorded in the Bible, we find a fairly clear situation. We know of no biblical evidence that the church as a whole or any local congregation formulated a concise mission statement in their own words and used it as a focused summary of what they were to *do*. Instead we find that they composed and used concise *confessions* of what they *believed*. For example, there is the extremely brief acclamation "Jesus is Lord" (Ro 10:9; 1 Co 12:3; cf. Php 2:11). There is also the more extended creed Paul received from earlier Christians and handed on to his churches as a matter of first importance: "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve" (1 Co 15:3-5). The earliest Christians probably also composed hymns for corporate worship, some of which may be quoted in the New Testament (perhaps Php 2:6-11 and 1 Tim 3:16 are examples). But for their understanding of what they were to *do*, the earliest Christians relied upon the love created by the Spirit through the gospel and upon divine instruction that came to them in various ways: the remembered sayings of Jesus, the properly interpreted Old Testament, the teaching of the apostles and other church leaders, and in some cases special revelation. At their best, the Christians of the apostolic church focused on the gospel and drew their life from the gospel; deeds of love (including evangelism) blossomed as opportunities presented themselves.
3. Without claiming expertise in church history, we suppose that somewhat similar emphases may be found in subsequent generations of Christians. Over the centuries much effort has been expended on formulating and using confessions of faith and hymns and liturgies. These, together with the sacraments, preaching, teaching, Bible reading, other devotional literature, and Christian art, have kept the people of God in touch with the gospel and thus have nourished the life of the church. In addition, the people of God have received over the centuries much instruction by word and example on how to live a Christian life. Church councils have drawn up canons to deal with specific questions. Church orders have given practical directions, sometimes in considerable detail, for the public ministry and the corporate work and worship of the church. But if the formulation of concise mission statements has also been an important part of the picture during the last two millennia, the evidence for it has escaped our attention.
4. Still, in Christian freedom we may draw up and use mission statements. Christians who choose to do so will want to be sure that their mission statements are sound in content. They will also want to be sure to use them properly. Let's give some attention to both issues, beginning with *soundness of content*.
5. The WELS Constitution contains a purpose statement in Article IV: it is the object and purpose of the synod to "extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church" through appropriate help and guidance for its pastors, teachers, and congregations, through educational institutions, through home and world missions and charitable institutions, and through publications.⁸⁹ Stylistically speaking, the phrase "extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical

⁸⁹ *The Constitution and Bylaws of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, adopted July, 1997, amended July, 1999, and printed May, 2000. Issued by the WELS Committee on Constitutional Matters.

Lutheran Church” makes no effort to echo Bible passages. It foregoes warmth of tone and vividness of detail in order to summarize the whole work of the synod in a few words. And in that respect, the phrase is successful. The content is sound. The Lutheran *doctrine* it speaks of is drawn entirely from the Bible. But since some other denominations make the same claim, it is useful to remember that for centuries, Lutheran doctrine has been defined above all by the Lutheran Confessions. The Lutheran Confessions highlight the gospel in Word and sacrament as the only means of grace. They do so in a manner that upholds all the articles of the gospel while giving special emphasis to the heart of the gospel, i.e., forgiveness for Christ’s sake. Furthermore, they renounce Antinomianism and articulate how God wants the law to be used. Lutheran *practice* is also based firmly on the Bible. It makes a special point of the proper use of law and gospel in the corporate life of the church and in the lives of individual believers. Our purpose, according to Article IV of the synod constitution, is to “extend and conserve” Lutheran doctrine and practice. Jesus made it clear that he was giving the church a commission with a worldwide scope, and so we include in this purpose statement the word “extend.” But we also noted as we studied key New Testament passages that our Savior’s commissioning words apply not only to outreach situations but also to the use of God’s Word for the edification of the church. “Conserve” fits the latter situation. In short, although the wording sounds different from the wording of the various commission passages, the statement of purpose in our synod constitution covers essentially the same ground as they do.

6. It is, however, understandable that some would desire a statement that is more vivid and detailed, more reminiscent of Scripture, and warmer in tone than the purpose statement in the synod constitution. The current WELS mission statement has those qualities. “As men, women, and children united in faith and worship by the Word of God, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod exists to make disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity, using the gospel in Word and sacrament to win the lost for Christ and to nurture believers for lives of Christian service, all to the glory of God.”⁹⁰ Let’s briefly consider the content.
7. It begins, “As men, women, and children united in faith and worship by the Word of God...” That is a doctrinally appropriate way of giving God the credit for our existence as a church and ascribing our mission to him. We cannot claim that the commission passages were addressed specifically and solely to the WELS, and we cannot claim to have received a modern revelation from Jesus defining our mission. Nevertheless, we do have a mission from God. The same ancient Word of God that has made us Christians and has united us in faith and worship also tells us what our mission as Christians is.
8. “... the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod exists to make disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity...” The phrase “make disciples” is an appropriate echo of a good translation of Matthew 28:19. It is one of many possible ways of talking about our *gospel* mission. A disciple is an adherent of the Master’s teaching, and properly understood that means a believer in Christ, a Christian of any age, whether a baptized infant or a mature and well-instructed adult. Through faith, disciples adhere to the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ and are open to further instruction from the Master. Through that same faith, they possess both now and in eternity the blessings promised in the gospel: forgiveness, adoption into God’s family, the indwelling Spirit, and the guarantee of eternal life in heaven.
9. “...using the gospel in Word and sacrament to win the lost for Christ and to nurture believers for lives of Christian service...” Here we emphasize the vital role of the gospel in making disciples. When Matthew recorded Jesus’ command to “make disciples” (28:19), earlier chapters of his book made the role of the gospel clear. Our mission statement does not have such a context, and so it is useful to say that we are to

⁹⁰ *Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Yearbook 2007*, p. ii.

make disciples “using the gospel.” In classic Lutheran fashion, we call it “the gospel in Word and sacrament.” We know that Baptism is the only ordinary means of grace available to infants, and we know that the commission passages in Matthew 28 and Mark 16 both emphasize the importance of Baptism. We may also legitimately think of the Lord’s Supper since we use the gospel not only “to win the lost for Christ” but also “to nurture believers for lives of Christian service.” The loving service of Christians is important to God, and the only thing that gives them the spiritual life, strength, and desire to serve God in love is the gospel.

10. “...all to the glory of God.” God is glorified when the gospel wins the lost for Christ. God is glorified when Christians proclaim the gospel to unbelievers even if no one is converted. God is glorified when the gospel strengthens those who are already believers. And God is glorified when that strengthening or nurturing results in lives of Christian service. Every thought, word, and deed that flows from faith in Christ brings glory to God. So when we say “*all* to the glory of God,” all of those previous elements in the mission statement are included.
11. If we wish to speak comprehensively about the mission of the church or, to use slightly different terms, our purpose as Christians, it is good to emphasize not only the gospel work of converting and nurturing but also the ultimate goal, the glory of God. Johann Gerhard has a useful discussion of those two aspects of our purpose (the Bible passages are translated to reflect Gerhard’s understanding):

Out of his immense kindness, God gathers a church to himself from the lost human race. His purpose is to have a people of his own, by whom he may be rightly known, worshiped, and glorified in this life and in eternal life. In the church “they will be called trees of righteousness, a planting of the Lord, in order that he may be glorified” (Isa 61:3). “In Christ we have been called by lot (ἐκκληρώθημεν, we have been called into the Lord’s lot or inheritance, i.e., into the church),... in order that we may be for the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:11,12). “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, in order that you may announce the excellence of him who has called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pe 2:9). Therefore the purpose of the [gospel] call to the church and likewise of the preservation and extension of the church in this world is twofold. There is a subordinate purpose, namely, the conversion of human beings from darkness to light, their transference from the state of wrath to the state of grace, and their becoming heirs of eternal life. And there is a principal purpose, namely, the glorification of God. In other words, to show the incomprehensible riches of his grace, God did not want the human race to remain bound by the chains of eternal destruction, in which the first created human beings had entangled themselves and their descendants. Therefore he sent his Son to the world as the Redeemer, and he offers Christ’s benefits to human beings through the preaching of the gospel, and through that preaching he calls them into the kingdom of grace and the fellowship of the church. If any persons heed this holy call by the power of the Holy Spirit, he transfers them into the kingdom of grace, in order that in it they may rightly know him, serve him in holiness and righteousness, and render the obedience they owe him, and after this life he transfers them (if, that is, they persevere in true faith and worship) into the kingdom of glory, in order that in it they may be joined with the assembly of angels and sing his praises eternally.⁹¹

Let’s focus on the purposes and their relationship to each other. Conversion by the gospel deserves to be highlighted as a purpose because without faith in Christ, a human being cannot properly glorify God (Jn 15:5; Heb 11:6). The use of the gospel after conversion also deserves to be highlighted as a purpose. The gospel is what keeps our faith alive and productive, and it will be the central theme of our praises in heaven. But the principal purpose of the church is to glorify God, and God is glorified not only by the

⁹¹ Joh. Gerhard, *Loci theologici, locus XXII de ecclesia*, chapter XII *de causa finali ecclesiae*, para. 303.

gospel testimony of Christians but by all the good thoughts, words, and deeds they produce as fruits of faith.

12. The synod mission statement does not explain as explicitly as Gerhard does why the glorification of God is the principal purpose and why the making of disciples is subordinate to it. But it certainly can be understood properly. Like the purpose statement in the synod constitution, the mission statement is doctrinally sound as far as it goes.
13. As noted above, Christians who choose to adopt mission or purpose statements will want to be sure not only that their content is sound but also that they use them properly. Here we will focus on the synod's mission statement since it receives much more publicity than the purpose statement in the constitution. We will note six mistakes we want to avoid. We are not suggesting the mission statement includes or encourages those mistakes. But if the Bible itself is often misunderstood and misapplied, we do well to be careful with a statement we have drawn up on the basis of the Bible.
14. *Let's not lose our gospel focus.* That may seem an odd thing to say, but the possibility of confusion is real nevertheless. There is a difference between preaching the gospel and telling people to preach the gospel. There is a difference between portraying Christ and his benefits in glowing colors and urging people to witness for Christ. We can't afford to let an emphasis on evangelism replace an emphasis on the evangel.
15. *Let's not downplay the study of God's Word and the defense of God's doctrine.* Jesus himself said, "teaching them to keep everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19). When Paul gave his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, he strongly emphasized the responsibility of faithfully proclaiming to the church the "whole will of God" and guarding against invading wolves and home-grown heretics who "distort the truth" (Ac 20:18-35). Ideally, a church that is intent on *using the gospel* to win the lost and nurture believers will see the huge importance of *defending the gospel*. Ideally, an evangelical church will drink in all the riches of the gospel, not ignoring or rejecting or compromising any of the articles of the gospel but viewing all of it as a precious gift and source of blessing. But if we think it useful to have a mission statement, let's not lose sight of this portion of our mission. We are glad it is at least expressed in the first Objective listed under the synod's mission statement: "To uphold and testify to the truth of God as fully revealed in the inspired, inerrant, infallible Holy Scriptures and articulated in the Lutheran Confessions, and to use Scripture as the sole authority."⁹² But since the structure of the document makes it easy to quote the Mission apart from the Objectives, let us remember that our constitution gives due prominence to extending and *conserving* Lutheran doctrine and practice. After all, we won't be able to live it and share it if we lose it.
16. *Let's not become Antinomians.* The synod's mission statement makes no mention of the law of God. That in itself is not a problem. Paul identifies himself simply as a minister of the gospel (Eph 3:7; Col 1:23; cf. 2 Co 3:6, 5:18). He says he was sent to preach the gospel (1 Co 1:17; cf. Ac 26:17,18). But that didn't stop him from using the law properly in a manner subordinate to his gospel ministry. We, too, may define our mission in purely gospel terms, but we should not draw false conclusions from that. The law of God remains a legitimate and necessary part of our message.
17. *Let's not lapse into the wrong tone when we promote evangelism.* There is a proper, evangelical way to encourage Christians to share the gospel and support mission work. But it can degenerate into various kinds of harping on evangelism. If we think of outreach simply as a high priority job and an urgent need,

⁹² *Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Yearbook 2007*, p. ii.

we easily lapse into nagging, legalistic arguments: “God commands it, so you had better do it!” Or it becomes a matter of half-hearted routine: “I need to include a point of application in this sermon and I don’t know what to say that would fit the text, so I’ll make yet another pitch for evangelism—that’s always safe.” The whole subject takes on a different color when we recall what faith in the gospel includes. *I trust God for my own salvation. I trust him to save all the elect—none of them will be lost. I also trust God to know what he is doing in using people like me to carry out the important, urgent work of spreading his kingdom. The Holy Spirit has warmed my heart with the message of Jesus. It is good to hear it, good to ponder it, and good to speak it.* When we as a church focus on the gospel itself, the one thing needed is there for the Spirit to use in warming the hearts and illuminating the minds of the members. In such a context, reminders from time to time that God wants us to share the gospel with unbelievers will not strike a false tone, and practical suggestions about how to do it will also be welcome.

18. *Let’s not promote evangelism with false expectations.* When leaders with zeal for evangelism become impatient for others to match their zeal and activity, they may be tempted to stretch the truth in a noble cause. One preacher painted a rosy picture: If only we become zealous enough, pray hard enough, concentrate enough on evangelism, we can bring back the kind of growth the church experienced on Pentecost. But the statement is false. We have no such promise from God. All we can say is that through the gospel, the Holy Spirit works faith “where and when it pleases God” (Augsburg Confession, Article V). Paul, the zealous, seasoned missionary, won many converts in one city and few in another. The matter is beyond human control or prediction. Similarly, the notion that finding just the right method is the key to rapid growth is a foolish dream. In his Bread of Life discourse in John 6, Jesus left us an example to ponder for all time. He preached the gospel, warmly inviting his hearers to enjoy its benefits, but also powerfully communicating the scandal of salvation in Christ alone. The number of his followers plummeted as a result. Did Jesus not know the right way to preach the gospel? Or did he teach us, among other lessons in John 6, a lesson about the possible results of good gospel preaching? The questions answer themselves.

19. *Let’s not reduce the Christian life to outreach.* The desire to replace a meaty sentence with a soundbite may lead some people to reduce the mission statement to these words: “the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod exists to make disciples.” But that bit of editing could open the door to a false view. It is incorrect to say that the only reason we Christians are here on earth is to spread the gospel (or win the lost for Christ). It would also be unfortunate if people would get that sort of impression because outreach is the only activity they hear emphasized or described with passion. Then they might conclude, “We still have to keep the commandments because we can’t afford to anger God, but it seems the only thing that actually *pleases* him is outreach.” The truth is that God is delighted by Christian love (1 Co 13:13) in all its forms: love for God and his Word, love for his church, love for unbelievers, love for friends and family, love for strangers, love for enemies, love in our thoughts, love in our words, love in our deeds. Our outward expressions of love play an important role in supporting and adorning our gospel testimony to the world (Mt 5:16; 1 Pe 2:12; 3:1,2), but it is not simply their strategic value that makes them precious to God. Even our deeds of love that remain hidden in darkness in this life and have zero effect on unbelievers are precious to God, and so are the good motives of Christians that no earthly observer can discover. God remembers them all, and on the last day he will bring them to light and commend his servants for them (1 Co 4:5). Here is a test question to see if we have embraced apostolic perspectives: When we direct Christians toward deeds of love, should we say, “Your fellow Christians already possess salvation, so you should focus more on showing love to unbelievers in the hope of converting them”? Paul says, “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, *especially to those who belong to the family of believers*” (Gal 6:10)—something to remember when controversies arise within the church or budgets decline. In many other passages, Paul and the other apostles cultivate Christian love, especially

the mutual love of fellow members of the church. How earnestly they oppose whatever threatens it! How much time they devote to it in their writings! How warmly they encourage and celebrate it! For our whole life is to be a life of love, and our whole life is to bring glory to God (1 Co 10:31); that is the principal purpose of our existence. Some of those thoughts already find expression in our synod mission statement. Our “lives of Christian service” are an important part of “all to the glory of God.” Let’s keep that in view and put it into practice.

20. As noted above, the statement of purpose in our synod constitution and our synod mission statement are doctrinally sound. The preceding paragraphs on avoiding mistakes and misapplications will serve a positive purpose if they help us to unite in properly carrying out all of what God wants us to do.
21. The Introduction drew attention to seven questions that have been raised about Matthew 28:19 and the wording of the synod mission statement. Though this lengthy report has answered some of them directly and provided a basis for answering the rest, it may be useful to repeat those questions now and answer them concisely.
22. First: *Do we distort the doctrine of conversion and claim for ourselves something only God can do when we say our synod “exists to make disciples...”?* No. We are following well-established biblical usage in this matter. God alone converts people in the proper sense of the term, but God himself repeatedly ascribes conversion in the extended sense to gospel-sharers as a way of bringing out their genuine instrumental role in converting others.
23. Second: *Is the use of the phrase “make disciples” in our mission statement evidence that we are giving in to Reformed or Church Growth influences?* No. Good Lutheran theologians used that sort of translation of Matthew 28:19 long before there was a Church Growth movement. They also used it against the errors of the Reformed (Calvinists) and other sectarians concerning the doctrine of conversion and the efficacy of the Word.
24. Third: *Even if we ourselves retain a correct understanding of conversion, do we give a false impression to others?* We see no reason to fear that. Christians outside our synod are likely to recognize “make disciples” as an echo of Matthew 28:19 since most modern versions translate the passage that way, and they will consider that a sufficient explanation for our inclusion of the phrase in our mission statement. Unbelievers will dismiss the whole statement as foolishness. Their reaction is likely to be, “Nobody is going to make a ‘disciple’ out of me!” rather than, “What further details in the WELS doctrine of conversion are implied here?” Sensible believers and unbelievers will realize that the best way to find out the WELS doctrine of conversion is to study a discussion of it, not to speculate by reading between the lines of a concise sentence. In any case, Jude in his tiny epistle was not afraid to tell Christians to save people (verse 23) even though the epistle contains no explicit discussion of conversion or gospel ministry to ward off misunderstanding. Evidently Jude did not fear that his phrase would be misunderstood.⁹³
25. Fourth: *Does an awareness of other passages dealing with the mission of the church tip the balance in favor of the translation “teach” rather than “make disciples” in Matthew 28:19?* No. The commission passages were uttered by Jesus on various occasions with noteworthy differences in wording and emphasis. There is no need to assimilate the commission reported by Matthew to any of the other

⁹³ It is hard to be sure of the original text in Jude 23 because of numerous variant readings. But every one of the principal variants contains the imperative “save” or “snatch” from fire.

commission passages. Interpreting Matthew 28:19 on the basis of word usage and the context of Matthew's Gospel leads us to prefer the translation "make disciples."

26. Fifth: *Would our synod do well to rephrase its mission statement to make it echo the language of those other passages instead of quoting "make disciples" from a debatable translation of Matthew 28:19?* The synod is free to rephrase it, but we see no doctrinal or exegetical reason to do so. There is no need to choose between Matthew and the other commission passages when we can take words and concepts from all of them. The mission statement takes "make disciples" from Matthew, but it also says "using the gospel." The word "gospel" is explicitly found in Mark 16:15, but the concept of using the gospel is variously expressed in all the commission passages. It is true that the translation of Matthew 28:19 is debatable, but that does not mean that there is anything doubtful about the thought "God wants us to make disciples." Even if Matthew's Gospel had never existed, we could in Christian freedom say we are to make disciples, for there are plenty of biblical parallels for using language like that to express our instrumental role in the conversion of others.
27. Sixth: *Since the object emphasized in the first part of Matthew 28:19 is "all nations," do we distort Jesus' meaning when we omit that object and simply say our task is to "make disciples"?* No. "All nations" is certainly a key point in the passage, but we see no reason to say that the main verb in this commission (μαθητεύσατε) has no emphasis. Perhaps some people who don't like saying that we are to "make disciples of all nations" find it doubly annoying if the thought of making disciples becomes that much more prominent through the omission of the direct object of μαθητεύσατε. But if the translation "make disciples of" is legitimate (and we are convinced it is), there is no reason to object to a slight change from the wording "make disciples of all nations." We cannot say that the WELS alone is to convert all nations. We are not the entire church, and so we do not have a monopoly on the church's mission. Besides, in our day the nations already contain millions of Christians, and it is not our task to convert the already converted. In our circumstances it is more accurate to say that the WELS is to "make disciples *throughout the world*" than to say the WELS is to "make disciples of all nations."
28. Seventh: *In view of different understandings of what a "disciple" is, would it be clearer to identify our task as preaching the gospel rather than making disciples?* It would be hard to find terms that have not been misunderstood. Theologically trained confessional Lutherans may have clarity about the various senses in which the word "gospel" is used and the theology that is summed up in those uses, but there is much debate on the matter within Christendom. It is no exaggeration to say that there have been far more debates over the meaning of "the gospel" than the meaning of "disciples." But if we focus on our own circles, there need not be any more uncertainty about "disciples" than there is about "the gospel." When we talk about making disciples in our day, obviously we are not trying to get people to learn from Jesus by following him on the road literally the way the Twelve did. And obviously we are not trying to produce hypocrites, people who say they embrace Jesus' teaching but don't. We wish to make genuine adherents of the teaching of Christ, people who embrace the heart of his gospel by faith and are open to further instruction from him. Such people are disciples in the sense we intend in our mission statement, even though they remain unfinished products in this life.
29. May God, who has united us in his family of believers through the gospel, fully unite us also in our understanding of our mission. And may God through the gospel increase our love and give us the strength to carry out all of our mission to his glory.

The committee:

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