Reexamining the First Principles of the Local Church

Week 2: Matthew 28:18–20

At the beginning of 2026, seeing that we're entering a new phase in the life of WPBC and some of the work to be done that lays before us, the elders decided that it would be for us to get back to some first principles. What does the Bible have to say about the local church? What is the church and why does it exist? What principles should govern our assembly? What does God want our witness in North County to look like? These are questions we've spent the year trying to answer from Scripture, and this fall we've begun to take the church through that study. Tonight we begin with the most foundational passage of all—namely, the Great Commission in Matthew 28.

01: Preliminary Considerations

Last week we looked at several passages that gave us some preliminary considerations before we embarked on our study. Here those are:

1. We want WPBC to be a lighthouse for the Lord Jesus in North County. God is working in peoples' hearts all around us, which means that we have a tremendous opportunity to be an oasis of the living water of God's Word in this community.

2. God blesses His way, not man's way. He blesses the biblical blueprint, not our skill or creativity (Acts 2:41, 47, 6:7; Eph 4:11–16).

3. The right starting point is not what people want in a church, but what Christ wants in His church, because He is the Lord of the church (Rev 1–3).

4. We can't assume on generalities—e.g., '*The Bible says do all to the glory of God, and that's what we're doing!*' Biblical faithfulness is not the result of good intentions (let alone assumptions), but of the intentional effort to tie everything we do to the Word of God.

5. The essentials can never be taken for granted. We never get to a point where we can move on from the basics. The most stable and successful institutions—whether it's a family, a business or a church—are those that are most solidly grounded in what's most important.

02: Looking at Matthew 28:18–20

The Great Commission (GC) not only contains God's essential principles for the NT church, but it also tells us why the church exists. As article 2 of our Bylaws says: "This church is organized for exclusively religious purposes (including all charitable and related purposes common to a pastoral church ministry as defined by the Bible) *in order to fulfill the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ*, which is contained in [Matthew 28:18-20]" (emphasis added). Here is a literal translation of the GC text:

18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Therefore, [as] you all go, make disciples [of] all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to observe all things of all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you all always, until the completion of the age.”

1. Jesus actually gives just one command in the GC. What is it?

2. Step 1 in the GC is being made a disciple. When and how does that happen?

3. Step 2 in the GC is being baptized. When and how does that happen, ideally and typically?

4. What is step 3 in the GC? When and how does this take place compared with steps 1 and 2?

5. How should we understand Jesus’ phrase, “all things of all that I have commanded you”?[1]

6. The word translated “disciple” here and elsewhere in the NT is *mathetés*, which means *learner, pupil, disciple*. (The verb form is used here—*mathetéuo*, which means *I teach, I instruct, I disciple [another], I make [a] disciple*.) We get our word “math” from this word family. Besides “saints,” Christians are called “learners” more than anything else in the NT. What does this say about the Christian life in general, and the church in particular?

7. Based on all these observations, what does the local church exist to do?

8. Over the past century, a common view of the church has been that the church is primarily for outreach and evangelism. In that view, the goal of our services is to bring as many unbelievers as possible in order to get them saved when the altar call or invitation is given. How does that view square up with what we see in the GC?

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[1] “We believe in the 39 books of the OT, because our Lord Jesus Christ affirmed the OT. And we believe in the 27 books of the NT, because our Lord Jesus Christ authorized His apostles to write the NT” (Nathan Busenitz, course notes for “TH507 Historical Theology I” at The Master’s Seminary, 134–135).

9. The scope of the GC is “all the nations.” What two essential endeavors that are typically used to reach and disciple “all the nations”?

10. The scope of the GC is “all the nations,” which could also be translated “all the Gentiles” (the same Greek word, *ethnos*, is translated both ways throughout the NT). How much of North County does the Lord Jesus want us to “disciple”?

11. The GC begins with the “All authority” clause. What are the implications of this?

12. Based on Jesus’ commands in GC passage, what does the church do that no other human organization can do?

13. What does the church do that other kinds of organizations can do? When are these things right in the church? When are they wrong?

14. What are some things that the church should never try to do?