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Bede, the Matthean Great Commission, and the Church's Universal Mission

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The Matthean Great Commission, in which Christ instructed the apostles to evangelise all peoples, has had importance across Christian history, but particularly resounded in the Insular world. Through exploring Bede's engagement with three core themes of Matthew 28. 19–20—the instruction to 'teach all peoples', baptism, and Christ's continued presence—this article argues that the pericope was central to Bede's vision of the Church's universal mission and his wider agenda of ecclesiastical reform. Amid concerns about spiritual complacency within his contemporary society, Bede used the Matthean commission as a framework for the ideal practice and sustainment of the faith.

The gospel of Matthew ends with the 'Great Commission', Christ's final commandment to his apostles to preach to all peoples, a mandate of huge significance for Bede in eighth-century Northumbria.[1] Early Christian tradition held Matthew to be the first evangelist, granting his gospel a certain primacy.[2] For Bede, Matthew's transformation from tax collector to apostle also offered a model for contemporary capacity to progress from sin.[3] Although Matthew's Gospel was an indispensable teaching tool for Bede, it has attracted little attention in Bedan scholarship as he did not write formal exegesis on the gospel.[4] Nevertheless, by working synoptically across his corpus, it becomes clear that Bede's conception of the Church's universal mission and its longevity was rooted in the language of Matthew 28. 19–20.[5] In this pericope, the resurrected Jesus pronounces:

1 The name 'Great Commission' is not found in scripture; this is a term which has been adopted in modern usage.

2 On Matthew's status, see, for example, Jerome, *Commentariorum in Mattheum libri IV*, ed. by David Hurst and Marc Adriaen, C[orpus] C[hristianorum] S[eries] L[atina], 77 (Brepols, 1969), pref., ll. 26–30, p. 2.

3 See Bede's dedicated homily on the calling of Matthew: *Homiliarum euangelii libri II*, I. 21, in Bede, *Opera Homiletica. Opera Rhythmica*, ed. by David Hurst, CCSL, 122 (Brepols, 1955), pp. 1–378 (pp. 148–155).

4 Samuel Cardwell has made the interesting suggestion that Bede perhaps did not write a commentary on Matthew because there may have been a pre-existing 'house' commentary at Wearmouth-Jarrow: see Samuel Cardwell, 'Biblical Exegesis at Wearmouth-Jarrow before Bede? The Hereford Commentary on Matthew', *Early Medieval Europe*, 33.2 (2025), pp. 183–219 (p. 212), doi:10.1111/emed.12762. On Bede's interest in Matthew's Gospel, see Emily Quigley, 'The Tax Collector and the Priest: Matthew the Evangelist in the Writings of Bede (*c*. 673–735)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Nottingham, 2023).

5 On the 'Apostolic Commission' in Bede's era, see Samuel Cardwell, *Ideas of Evangelisation and Mission in Western Christianity from the Early Church to the Age of Bede:*

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> Go ye therefore, and teach all peoples,[6] baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. And behold: I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world.[7]

This conclusion is structured around a sequence of imperatives (teach, baptise, obey), which succinctly distil the Gospel's core purpose. In light of Bede's fears about lax spirituality in the Northumbrian church at the end of his own life, particularly as expounded in his 734 letter to Egbert of York, Matthew's explicit references to teaching and obedience proved beneficial in his own writings, which he envisaged as teaching tools.[8] This article argues not only that the Great Commission shaped Bede's vision of the Church's universal mission, but also that he actively deployed it as a framework for critiquing and reforming his contemporary Northumbrian Church. It will begin with a brief overview of the three core elements of Matthew 28. 19–20 and their influence on Bede's thought, before turning to a thematic analysis of how he employed these elements across his corpus.

I. The Matthean Commission in Bede: An Overview

Matthew 28. 19–20 comprises three core elements: the command to teach all peoples, the instruction to baptise in the name of the Trinity, and Christ's promise of continual presence. Each shaped Bede's thought in distinct yet interconnected ways. This section sets out the interpretive context of the pericope, which serves as a necessary foundation for the more detailed thematic analysis that follows.

The Matthean injunction to 'teach all peoples' shaped Bede's view of the Church as inherently universal and fundamentally dependent on teaching. Although all three synoptic gospels end with Christ commanding his disciples to preach, Matthew's version was treated as distinctive: it was not assigned parallels in the Eusebian canon tables, a uniqueness reflected in the canons of Codex

The Work of the Word, British Academy Monographs (Liverpool University Press, 2026), doi:10.3828/9781805965787.

6 The most accurate translation for *gentes* is 'peoples'; as the word is often translated as 'nations' in modern translations of Bede and the Bible, translations have here been altered to reflect 'peoples' throughout. On the usage of *gentes* and *nationes* by Bede and Cassiodorus, see Alan Thacker, 'Bede, Ceolfrith, and Cassiodorus: Biblical Scholarship at Wearmouth and Jarrow', in *Bede the Scholar*, ed. by Peter Darby and Máirín MacCarron (Manchester University Press, 2023), pp. 141–74 (pp. 151–54), doi:10.7765/9781526153210.00016.

7 'Euntes ergo docete omnes gentes baptizantes eos in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti docentes eos servare omnia quaecumque mandavi vobis et ecce ego vobiscum sum omnibus diebus usque ad consummationem saeculi.' The Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate Bible will be used throughout: *Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem,* ed. by Robert Weber and Roger Gryson (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994; 2007); *The Vulgate Bible, Douay-Rheims Translation, Volume VI: The New Testament,* ed. by Angela M. Kinney (Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 2013).

8 Bede, *Epistola ad Ecgbertum*, in *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica*, ed. by Charles Plummer (Clarendon Press, 1896), I, pp. 405–23.

Amiatinus, produced at Wearmouth-Jarrow in Bede's lifetime.[9] Perhaps the closest parallel is Mark 16. 15, in which Christ instructs the disciples to 'go ye into the whole world, and preach the gospel to every creature'.[10] Meanwhile, Luke 24. 47 emphasises repentance ('penance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all peoples') but shares the phrasing 'omnes gentes' with Matthew.[11] What distinguishes Matthew is its explicit insistence that conversion necessitated teaching ('**docete** omnes gentes'). Bede showed a proclivity for the Matthean version of the commission because of this teaching mandate. This emphasis would have appealed to Bede, given his lifelong interest in the role of teachers and his conviction that their work was essential to the health of the Church. Further, in Matthew, the call for universal evangelisation is directly followed by the phrase 'teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you', a uniquely Matthean phrasing which resonated with Bede's concern for orthodoxy in teaching.

For Bede, Christ's instruction to 'teach all peoples' formed the second stage of a tripartite plan for salvation, the stage which Bede understood his contemporary Church to be participating in. Significantly, it was in his dedicated homily on Matthew 28. 16–20 that he most clearly described this plan, explaining that Christ was present first among the Jews, now among the Gentiles, and, in the future, back in Judea before the end of time.[12] The tripartite plan is crucial context to Bede's understanding of the Church's mission, placing earthly conversion in the wider context of the journey towards salvation.[13]

A concern with universal evangelisation was a focal point of continuity from patristic authors to Bede and his contemporaries, particularly with respect

9 Mark 16. 15; Luke 24. 47. See also Acts 1. 8, Mark 13. 10, and Matthew 24. 14. On the Eusebian apparatus, see Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Harmonizing the Truth: Eusebius and the Problem of the Four Gospels', *Traditio*, 65 (2010), pp. 1–29, doi:10.1017/S0362152900000829; and Elizabeth Mullins, 'The Insular Reception of the Eusebian Canon Tables: Exegesis and Iconography', 2 vols (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College Cork, 2001). On the canons in Amiatinus, see Celia Chazelle, *The Codex Amiatinus and its 'Sister' Bibles: Scripture, Liturgy, and Art in the Milieu of the Venerable Bede* (Brill, 2019), pp. 182–95, doi:10.1163/9789004391321.

10 'Euntes in mundum universum praedicate evangelium omni creaturae'.

11 'Praedicari in nomine eius paenitentiam et remissionem peccatorum in omnes gentes'. Another parallel is found in Acts 1. 8: 'you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and even to the uttermost part of the earth', 'Eritis mihi testes in Hierusalem et in omni Iudaea et Samaria et usque ad ultimum terrae'.

12 Bede, *Homiliarum*, II. 8, ll. 196–201, p. 238. See also Bede, *In Lucae euangelium expositio*, 6, ll. 1740–44, in Bede, *Opera Exegetica*, III, *In Lucae euangelium expositio. In Marci euangelium expositio*, ed. by David Hurst, CCSL, 120 (Brepols, 1960), pp. 5–425 (p. 407).

13 On the extension of salvation to the Gentiles in Bede's works, see Diarmuid Scully, 'Bede, Orosius and Gildas on the Early History of Britain', in *The Venerable Bede: Tradition and Posterity*, ed. by Stéphane Lebecq, Michel Perrin, and Olivier Szerwiniak (Publications de l'Institut de recherches historiques du Septentrion, 2005), pp. 31–42, doi:10.4000/books.irhis.308.

to conversion to the four parts of the world.[14] Arguably, though, Matthew 28. 19–20 took on particular importance for Insular authors due to their geographical position.[15] Britain was commonly depicted as a remote island 'at the ends of the earth', a trope developed in the context of Roman total conquest and then adopted in Christian thought.[16] British and Irish Christians came to see themselves as occupying this liminal space at the edge of the earth, St Patrick proclaiming 'we are the witnesses that the Gospel has been preached to the limit beyond which no-one dwells'.[17] There are numerous scriptural references to the 'ends of the earth' (*ultimum/extremum terrae*), most prominently in Acts 1. 8 and 13. 47, but notably Patrick perceived this liminality within the context of the Matthean and Marcan commissions.[18] Similarly, for Bede, conversion of Britain and Ireland was often conceived of in the Matthean context. Considering the isolation of Britain and Ireland's island topography, it was important for Insular authors to be sure of their own inclusion in the Matthean Great Commission—the gospel was

14 See, for example, Bede, *Expositio Actuum apostolorum*, I, ll. 177–85, in Bede, *Opera Exegetica*, IV, *Expositio Actuum apostolorum. Retractatio in Actus apostolorum. Nomina regionum atque locorum de Actibus apostolorum. In epistulas VII catholicas*, ed. by M. L. W. Laistner, CCSL, 121 (Brepols, 1983), pp. 3–99 (p. 12); Bede, *De templo*, II, ll. 721–25, in Bede, *Opera Exegetica*, IIA, *De tabernaculo. De templo. In Ezram et Neemiam*, ed. by David Hurst, CCSL, 119A (Brepols, 1969), pp. 143–234 (p. 210); Bede, *In Marci euangelium expositio*, I, ll. 1278–81, in Bede, *Opera Exegetica*, III, pp. 431–648 (p. 469); Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelem Prophetam*, ed. by Marc Adriaen, CCSL, 142 (Brepols, 1971), I. 3, ll. 125–29, pp. 36–37); Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei*, VII. 8, l. 20, in Augustinus, *De ciuitate Dei, libri I–X*, ed. by Bernard Dombart and Alphonse Kalb, CCSL, 47 (Brepols, 1955), p. 193. Exegetes discussed the earth and its 'four corners' because this is how it was depicted in Revelation 7. 1 and 20. 8. On scriptural number symbolism, see Jennifer O'Reilly, 'Patristic and Insular Traditions of the Evangelists: Exegesis and Iconography', in *Early Medieval Text and Image 1: The Insular Gospels*, ed. by Carol Ann Farr and Elizabeth Mullins (Routledge, 2019), pp. 107–40 (pp. 117–20), doi:10.4324/9780429269257.

15 Matthew 28. 19–20 was frequently treated to special illumination in Insular gospel books: see, for example, Lichfield, Cathedral Library, MS 1, p. 141; Durham, Cathedral Library, A.II.17, fol. 38^{r3}; Durham, Cathedral Library, A.II.10, fol. 3^{v}. On the Matthean ending in the Durham Gospels, see Jennifer O'Reilly, '"Know Who and What He Is": The Context and Inscriptions of the Durham Gospels Crucifixion Image', in *Early Medieval Text*, ed. by Farr and Mullins, pp. 141–60 (pp. 147–51).

16 On this theme, see, for example, Jennifer O'Reilly, 'Islands and Idols at the Ends of the Earth: Exegesis and Conversion in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*', in *History, Hagiography and Biblical Exegesis: Essays on Bede, Adomnán and Thomas Becket*, ed. by Máirín MacCarron and Diarmuid Scully (Routledge, 2019), pp. 36–64; Diarmuid Scully, '"Proud Ocean Has Become a Servant": A Classical Topos in the Literature of Britain's Conquest and Conversion', in *Listen, O Isles, unto Me*, ed. by Diarmuid Scully and Elizabeth Mullins (Cork University Press, 2011), pp. 3–15, doi:10.1017/S0038713412002989; P. C. N. Stewart, 'Inventing Britain: The Roman Creation and Adaptation of an Image', *Britannia*, 26 (1995), pp. 1–10, doi:10.2307/526868.

17 Patrick, *Confessio*, 34, in Patrick, *Confession et Lettre à Coroticus*, ed. by Richard P. C. Hanson and Cécile Blanc, Sources chrétiennes, 249 (Éditions du Cerf, 1978), p. 108; trans. by Daniel Conneely, *The Letters of St Patrick* (An Sagart, 1993), pp. 40–43: 'testes sumus quia euangelium praedicatum est usque ubi nemo ultra est'.

18 See Patrick, *Confessio*, 40. In *Confessio*, 38, Patrick also engaged with the references to the 'ends of the earth' in Jeremiah 16. 19 and Isaiah 49. 6. On evangelisation in *Confessio*, 38–40, see Cardwell, *Ideas of Evangelisation and Mission*, pp. 71–79.

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to be preached to *all* peoples. For Bede, this universal mandate was a practical, pastoral framework for the contemporary Church. As the following sections will show, he consistently returned to this teaching mandate as a means of addressing deficiencies in instruction and reinforcing the foundations of orthodoxy.

After instructing the disciples to teach all peoples, Christ directs them to baptise in the name of the Trinity. Matthew 28. 19 contains the only reference in the Bible to the Trinitarian baptismal formula ('in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit'). All other scriptural references are to baptism in the name of Christ or with the Holy Spirit.[19] Some scholars have argued that the baptismal formula was a later addition to the Matthean text, pandering to the early Church's doctrinal demands, but this cannot be proved.[20] The formula was in the Vulgate version of Matthew that Bede knew, so, for him, it formed an integral part of Christ's final instructions.

There are many points of debate around the practicalities of baptism in the age of Bede, practicalities which are difficult to determine due to there being no surviving English liturgical books containing the baptismal order dating before the tenth century.[21] Although we do not have contemporary liturgical evidence of the use of the Trinitarian formula in the blessing over the font, there is copious evidence of its importance. Bede commented that 'the rule of the church is that the faithful are baptised in the name of the holy Trinity', attesting to its importance as an orthodox component of the baptismal rite.[22]

Matthew 28. 19 had significance in the fourth century as a proof text against Trinitarian and Christological heresies, and was often cited by authors such as Augustine and Ambrose to reaffirm the singularity and equality of the Trinity.[23] Patristic and eighth-century commentators also sought to emphasise that baptism in the name of Christ was unorthodox, and the Trinitarian formula was the only accepted means.[24] In his commentary on Acts, Bede quoted Ambrose to justify the orthodoxy of baptism in the name of Christ, but we cannot take his Acts exegesis

19 For example, Matthew 3. 11; John 1. 33; Acts 1. 5.

20 On this debate, see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 2007), p. 1117, n. 39.

21 Sarah Foot, '"By Water in the Spirit": The Administration of Baptism in Early Anglo-Saxon England', in *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*, ed. by John Blair and Richard Sharpe (Leicester University Press, 1992), pp. 171–92 (p. 172).

22 Bede, *Expositio Actuum*, x, ll. 189–90, trans. by Lawrence T. Martin, *The Venerable Bede: Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Cistercian Publications, 1989), p. 103: 'ecclesiae regula sit fideles in nomine sanctae trinitatis baptizari'. See also, Bede, *Homiliarum*, II. 18, ll. 42–46.

23 O'Reilly, '"Know Who and What He Is"', pp. 147–50. See, for example, Augustine, *Contra Maximinum* II. 22. 3, ll. 150–51, in Augustinus, *Scripta Arriana Latina*, II, ed. by Pierre-Marie Hombert, CCSL, 87A (Brepols, 2009), pp. 491–692 (p. 639); Augustine, *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus CXXIV*, ed. by R. Willems, CCSL, 36 (Brepols, 1954), VI. 9, ll. 11–15, p. 58; Ambrose, *De spiritu sancto*, III. 19. 148, in Patrologia Latina, 16 (Migne, 1845), cols 703–816 (col. 811B).

24 See, for example, Isidore, *Etymologiarum sive originum*, VI. 19. 45–46, ed. by W. M. Lindsay (Clarendon Press, 1911), I, n.p.; *Epistula* 80 (from Pope Zacharias to Boniface, 1 May

as evidence of the reality of baptismal practices.[25] This comment is in isolation in his corpus, and in the same passage he explicitly stated that baptism via the Trinity was the 'rule' of the Church.[26] Although the Matthean formula was pivotal to these liturgical debates, Bede's engagement with Matthew 28. 19 was more connected to his perception of the external role of baptism in the Christian world and its interplay with the internal virtues. It was closely intertwined with his concerns around teaching and reform, as will be discussed shortly.

The final element of the pericope, Christ's promise to be 'with you all days, even to the consummation of the world', is found only in Matthew. None of the other gospels contain a comparable assurance. Matthew alone links the command for universal evangelisation to Christ's continued presence in the world, giving the gospel an open-ended conclusion that extends into the future of the Church. Christ's promise was of great importance to medieval Christian authors, since it brought them within the fold of the faith first inhabited by the apostles. For Bede, this promise was a source of both comfort and concern. Through it, he explored how Christ's continued presence shaped teaching, discipline, and moral progress in his contemporary world.

Together these three components—teaching, baptism, and Christ's presence—shaped Bede's vision of the Church's universal and enduring mission. Central to this vision was a sustained concern for orthodoxy and reform, with the Matthean pericope serving as a key framework for addressing these issues. From this foundation, Bede's engagement with the Matthean commission across his corpus can now be explored in more detail.

II. Teaching, Orthodoxy, and Reform

Running through Bede's engagement with Matthew 28. 19–20 is a persistent concern that the Great Commission is fundamentally a command to teach, a responsibility which he saw as increasingly deficient in his contemporary Church. His reading of the passage is not purely exegetical, but deeply pastoral, having clear application for improving present-day ecclesiastical practice. This concern is framed, from the outset, by the *global* scope of Christ's mandate. For Bede, the universal mission required the transmission of orthodox teaching across geographical and linguistic boundaries.

In *De tabernaculo,* for example, he quotes Matthew 28. 19 and emphasises that Christ sent the apostles to 'preach not only to the one people of Israel but to the whole world'.[27] A few lines later he reiterates that 'the grace of the gospel was

748), in *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, ed. by Michael Tangl, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae Selectae, 1 (Weidmann, 1916), pp. 172–80.

25 Bede, *Expositio Actuum*, x, ll. 189–207, p. 55.

26 Bede, *Expositio Actuum*, x, ll. 189–90, p. 55.

27 Bede, *De tabernaculo*, I, ll. 29–30, in *Opera Exegetica*, IIA, pp. 5–139 (p. 5); Bede, *On the Tabernacle*, trans. by Arthur G. Holder (Liverpool University Press, 1994), p. 2: 'praedicandum non uni tantum populo israhel sed toto mundo'.

going to reach all nations throughout the world by the preaching of the apostles'.[28] Here Bede's emphasis lies on global evangelisation, rather than the confines of his island home. By comparison, in his *Historia ecclesiastica,* Bede included the 624 letter from Pope Boniface to Bishop Justus of Canterbury in which Boniface quoted Matthew 28. 20, then stated that 'this promise he has in his mercy specially fulfilled in the ministry he has given you, opening the hearts of the Gentiles to receive the wondrous mystery of the gospel you preach'.[29] Boniface directly refers to Justus's audience as the Gentiles, demonstrating wider contemporary mapping of Matthew's message onto Britain. Bede obviously factored his contemporary Northumbrians into the Gentiles, but his approach to Matthew 28. 19 was more inclusive, pertaining to a wider vision of Christendom.

Returning to *De tabernaculo,* Bede emphasised the diversity of those teaching the nations, for the gift of the Holy Spirit was not given to the apostles alone, but

> a very great company of the faithful […] and this [took place] with a distribution of diverse tongues, so that by this particular kind of miracle it might be signified that the Church was going to be praising God in the tongues of all the peoples throughout the world.[30]

In acknowledging and applauding the diversity of languages in which the faith was to be celebrated, it seems Bede saw the value of translating scripture into native tongues to promote evangelisation. In a letter, Cuthbert, a monk of Wearmouth-Jarrow, recorded that Bede was working on translating John's Gospel into the local dialect in his final days.[31] As this translation is not extant, its authenticity cannot be validated; however, this evidence suggests that Bede took some interest in improving the accessibility of the Gospels.

In his commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah, he remarked: 'not that any one person can preach the Gospel to all nations, but we can all do this in all nations, each of us in his own time and place'.[32] Bede evidently envisaged himself and

28 Bede, *De tabernaculo*, I, ll. 36–37, p. 6; Bede, *On the Tabernacle*, p. 3: 'gratia autem euangelii ad omnes per orbem nationes apostolis praedicantibus'.

29 Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, (Clarendon Press, 1969), II. 8, p. 159: 'Quod specialiter iniuncto uobis ministerio eius clementia demonstrauit, aperiens corda gentium ad suscipiendum praedicationis uestrae singulare mysterium'.

30 Bede, *De tabernaculo*, I, ll. 41–47, p. 6; Bede, *On the Tabernacle*, p. 3: 'sed et donum sancti spiritus quo haec eadem gratia et ueritas euangelii manifestius ecclesiae data est non apostoli solummodo uerum etiam plurima simul caterua fidelium in cenaculo montis sion constituta suscepit et hoc in uariarum diuisione linguarum ut tali esset miraculo ecclesia cunctarum per orbem gentium linguis deum collaudatura signaretur'.

31 Cuthbert, *Epistola de obitu Bedae*, in Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors, p. 583. On the special importance of John to Bede, see Susan Cremin, 'Bede and the Gospel of John: Theology, Preaching and the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*', in *Bede the Scholar*, ed. by Darby and MacCarron, pp. 97–118, doi:10.7765/9781526153210.00014.

32 Bede, *In Ezram et Neemiam*, I, ll. 677–79, in Bede, *Opera Exegetica*, IIA, pp. 237–392 (p. 258); Bede, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, trans. by Scott DeGregorio (Liverpool University Press,

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his contemporaries as active participants in the Great Commission, echoing Augustine's keenness to bring his nation into the fold: 'I fancied that He said, Go, baptise the Africans in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost'.[33] While the original context of Matthew 28. 19–20 pertained to conversion, for Bede its scope was wider. After all, Matthew's mandate concerned teaching, so, as far as Bede was concerned, while lax faith and bad practices were still circulating, the Great Commission was to be a sustained and active effort. As Bede himself was coming to the end of his life, it was contemporary ecclesiasts like Archbishop Egbert of York who could bring about change, but Bede envisaged them evoking the apostles while carrying out Matthew 28. 19.

Amid Bede's discussions of teaching all peoples, there was a persistent concern with the orthodoxy of teaching provisions. Bede looked to 'perfect' Christians (*perfecti*) to provide models for emulation, fulfilling their duty to pass on the word of the Lord, but, when quoting Matthew 28. 19–20, Bede often emphasised that teachers should *only* pass on the word of the Lord.[34] In a discussion of the appointment of priests and Levites in his commentary on Ezra, for example, Bede lamented the appointment of teachers who serve their own pleasure over God's works, then quoted Matthew 28. 19 to underline that 'we must not, therefore, teach our hearers our own commandments but those of the Law and the Gospels'.[35] It was crucial to Bede that teachers were not innovating by providing their own heretical teachings. In a growing body of scholarship on Bede and heresy, it has been recognised that Bede's anxieties did not revolve around a specific heresy but wider degradation of true faith.[36] Alan Thacker has emphasised that heresy for Bede was 'code for a whole spectrum of contemporary problems', but 'above all it was attitude of mind towards catholic truth and unity which was the main issue'.[37] Indeed, Bede's engagement with Matthew 28. 20 reveals an acute concern with purity of faith and the danger of distortion, as he often emphasised the phrase 'teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you'. In *De*

2006), p. 33: 'non quia unus aliquis in omnibus possit gentibus euangelizare sed omnes in omnibus suo quisque tempore uel loco possumus singuli'.

33 Augustine, *In Iohannis*, VI. 10, ll. 6–7, p. 58: 'putaui quia dixit: ite, baptizate afros in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti'.

34 On Bede and the *perfecti* as teachers, see Emily Quigley, 'Bede's *Perfecti* and the Gospel of Matthew', in *Bede the Scholar*, ed. by Darby and MacCarron, pp. 119–40, doi:10.7765/9781526153210.00015.

35 Bede, *In Ezram*, II, ll. 629–31, in Bede, *Opera Exegetica*, IIA, p. 303; Bede, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 103: 'Non ergo nostros auditores nostra propria sed ea quae legis et euangelii sunt mandata docere debemus'.

36 On Bede and heresy, see, for example, Arthur Holder, 'Hunting Snakes in the Grass: Bede as Heresiologist', in *Listen, O Isles*, ed. by Scully and Mullins, pp. 105–14; Alan Thacker, 'Why Did Heresy Matter to Bede? Present and Future Contexts', in *Bede and the Future*, ed. by Peter Darby and Faith Wallis (Routledge, 2014), pp. 47–66, doi:10.4324/9781315568850; and Peter Darby, 'Heresy and Authority in Bede's *Letter to Plegwine*', in *Cities, Saints, and Communities in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. by Scott DeGregorio and Paul Kershaw (Brepols, 2020), pp. 145–70, doi:10.1484/M.SEM-EB.5.119626.

37 Thacker, 'Why Did Heresy Matter to Bede?', p. 66.

templo, Bede quoted this phrase, then immediately stated: 'Whoever, therefore, observes and teaches everything the Lord commanded the apostles, without either adding anything further or omitting any of them, such a one is indeed a pillar in God's house'.[38] Matthew 28. 20 reads 'docentes eos servare omnia quaecumque mandavi vobis', and Bede repeated this language immediately after quoting it: 'quisquis ergo servat ac docet omnia quaecumque mandavit apostolis'.[39] It was clearly too important a point to be said only once. Crucially, Christ *commanded* ('mandavi'), not suggested, so obeying ('servare') was mandatory for Christians. Further, they must follow *all* ('omnia'), not some, of his commands. While Bede mirrored the Matthean language closely, in his discussion he made key tweaks that reflected his concerns. While Christ tells the apostles to teach their listeners to obey, Bede clearly set out that he expected his contemporaries to teach *and* observe all Christ's commands ('servat ac docet'). As emphasised by Faith Wallis, Bede saw 'the man of learning' as most susceptible to heretical influence.[40] While teachers could flourish in the ranks of the *perfecti,* they could also be incredibly dangerous if they were to move away from Matthew's message.

In *De tabernaculo,* Bede stressed that 'neither Moses nor the apostles nor any one of the teachers' ought to teach anything other than the Lord's teachings, in order that 'we should have eternal life'.[41] Bede included himself and his contemporaries here ('uitam nos habere aeternam'), as he saw a chain of succession from the apostles to contemporary teachers. He thus posed a subtle warning to contemporary teachers to be diligent in following scripture accurately. Their eternal life was at stake if they were to be creative with their teachings. With the global expansion of the faith (as mandated by Matthew) came greater demand for teachers, and the more teachers there were the harder it was to monitor them. Bede arguably saw the situation in Northumbria as a microcosm exhibiting the dangers of inadequate teaching, serving to reiterate the importance of remaining diligent in obeying Christ as set out in Matthew.

Bede's engagement with this Matthean passage ultimately underpins a broader reform agenda that has been a prevalent theme in Bedan scholarship.[42]

38 Bede, *De templo*, II, ll. 330–33, p. 200; Bede, *On the Temple*, trans. by Sean Connolly (Liverpool University Press, 1995), p. 76: 'Quisquis ergo seruat ac docet omnia quaecumque mandauit apostolis dominus neque alia superadiciens neque horum quippiam praeteriens ipse profecto columna in domo dei'. See also Bede, *In primam partem Samuhelis*, IV, ll. 1755–62, in Bede, *Opera Exegetica*, II, *In primam partem Samuhelis libri IIII. In Regum librum XXX quaestiones*, ed. by David Hurst, CCSL, 119 (Brepols, 1962), pp. 5–287 (p. 253).

39 Bede, *De templo*, II, l. 330, p. 200.

40 Faith Wallis, '*Rectores* at Risk: Erudition and Heresy in Bede's *Commentary on Proverbs*', in *Cities, Saints, and Communities*, ed. by DeGregorio and Kershaw, pp. 129–44 (pp. 131, 138), doi:10.1484/M.SEM-EB.5.119625.

41 Bede, *De tabernaculo*, I, ll. 51–55, p. 6; Bede, *On the Tabernacle*, pp. 2–3: 'Non ergo moyses non apostoli non quilibet doctorum alia debet populum dei docere praecepta quam quae ipse dominus docuit quaeque in aeterno consilii sui decreto nobis obseruanda praescripsit et in quorum obseruatione uitam nos habere aeternam uoluit'.

42 See, for example, Alan Thacker, 'Bede's Ideal of Reform', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. by Patrick Wormald (Blackwell, 1983), pp. 130–

Matthew's Gospel functioned as an effective tool within this agenda, and the Great Commission in particular offered a concise articulation of the Church's ideal form. As has been seen, Matthew's unique insistence on teaching made it especially useful for highlighting best practice in pastoral care and doctrinal instruction, while implicitly signalling failings in the contemporary Church. Bede's repeated return to Matthew 28. 19–20 suggests that he saw it as a charter for reform on a global scale: a reminder that the Church must teach *only* what Christ commanded, and that any deviation from this standard required correction. By foregrounding Matthew's teaching imperative, Bede framed reform as a return to apostolic norms.

III. Baptism, Instruction, and Good Works

Matthew's teaching mandate is closely bound to his baptismal mandate, and Bede consistently emphasised their mutual importance. This pairing reflected his wider concern, made explicit in his letter to Egbert, that Northumbria lacked sufficient and properly trained clergy to teach and administer baptism.[43] The Matthean sequence of teaching, baptism, and obedience therefore offered a scriptural template for restoring proper instruction within the Church.

Bede's engagement with Matthew 28. 19 further reflects his reforming outlook: he used the passage not only to affirm the necessity of baptism, but also to stress that it must be accompanied by ongoing instruction and moral progress. While baptism was the major stipulation for entry into the Church, Bede did not view it as sufficient to merit entry into heaven, and his focus was less on the rewards of baptism and more on its limitations. This is particularly clear in his dedicated homily on Matthew 28. 16–20, where he explained that

> This is the most correct order of preaching, the one that is to be followed most diligently even by present-day preachers in the Church: first the listener is to be taught; next he should be imbued with the sacraments of the faith; then according to circumstances he should be more fully instructed in observing our Lord's commandments. It is not possible that anyone uninstructed and ignorant about the Christian faith can be purified by the sacraments of this faith, nor is it sufficient that one be cleansed from his sins in the bath of baptism if he does not strive to devote himself to good works after his baptism.[44]

53; Scott DeGregorio, 'Bede's *In Ezram et Neemiam* and the Reform of the Northumbrian Church', *Speculum*, 79.1 (2004), pp. 1–25, doi:10.1017/S0038713400094719; Scott DeGregorio, '"Nostrorum socordiam temporum": The Reforming Impulse of Bede's Later Exegesis', *Early Medieval Europe*, 11.2 (2002), pp. 107–22, doi:10.1111/1468-0254.00104.

43 Bede, *Epistola ad Ecgbertum*, 5, 7.

44 Bede, *Homiliarum*, II. 8, ll. 78–86, p. 235; Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels, Book Two: Lent to The Dedication of the Church*, trans. by Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst (Cistercian Publications, 1991), p. 72: 'Rectissimus autem ordo praedicandi et modernis quoque praedicatoribus ecclesiae diligentissime sectandus ut primo quidem doceatur auditor deinde fidei sacramentis inbuatur deinde seruandis domini mandatis ex tempore liberius instruatur quia neque indoctus quisque et ignarus christianae fidei potest eiusdem fidei sacramentis ablui neque lauacro baptismi a peccatis emundari sufficit, si non post baptisma studeat quisque bonis operibus insistere'. See also Bede, *Homiliarum*, I. 1, ll. 49–55, p. 3.

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There is no doubt here that Bede considered the use of the Matthean wording to be a correct, orthodox component of the baptismal liturgy which he actively expected his contemporaries to be using. He expected the faithful to be instructed both before and after baptism, but the crucial message was that baptism was insufficient to achieve salvation if it was not paired with good works. Here Bede took inspiration from Jerome, who similarly emphasised that 'it is not possible that the body receives the sacrament of baptism unless the soul first receives the truth of the faith'.[45] Bede, however, went further than Jerome and extended his discussion to emphasise the importance of one's behaviour *after* baptism. Here we see the influence of Augustine on Bede, as Augustine emphasised that baptism did not equate to charity, and without charity one is not a good Christian.[46] Augustine used the example that Simon Magus was baptised to prove that baptism alone does not suffice.[47] Like Augustine, Bede viewed baptism as only one component of a pastoral programme for spiritual progression.

In Bede's commentary on Samuel, we see the same emphasis on the need for outward *and* inward spiritual nourishment. Bede quoted Matthew 28. 19–20 in his discussion of recently catechised Jews bestowing the mysteries of Christ on their brothers, once more emphasising that 'Amidst the sacraments of the faith, in which they should be imbued outwardly, they sent also the example of the virtues, by which they would be nourished inwardly'.[48] Here Bede held up the virtues as the inward counterpart to the sacraments.[49] Essential were the theological virtues stemming from I Corinthians 13. 13—faith, hope, and charity/love were 'three virtues without which we cannot arrive at life'.[50] In addition, the four cardinal virtues were prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice, from Wisdom 8. 7.[51] Bede emphasised that teachers have a responsibility to provide an 'example' of

45 Jerome, *Commentariorum in Mattheum*, IV. 28, ll. 2002–04, p. 282; St Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, trans. by T. P. Scheck (Catholic University of America Press, 2008), p. 327: 'non enim potest fieri ut corpus baptismi recipiat sacramentum nisi ante anima fidei susceperit ueritatem'.

46 Augustine, *In Iohannis*, VI. 14, ll. 1–18, pp. 60–61. On the influence of Augustine on Bede's baptismal theology, see Susan Cremin, 'Bede, Baptism and his Homily for the Octave of Pentecost', *Revue Bénédictine*, 130.1 (2020), pp. 74–111 (p. 108), doi:10.1484/J.RB.5.120203. On Augustine's overarching influence on Bede, see Alan Thacker, 'Bede and Augustine of Hippo: History and Figure in Sacred Text', Jarrow Lecture 2005.

47 Augustine, *In Iohannis*, VI. 18, ll. 1–41, pp. 62–63.

48 Bede, *In Samuhelis*, III, ll. 272–74, p. 143; Bede, *On First Samuel*, trans. by Scott DeGregorio and Rosalind Love (Liverpool University Press, 2019), p. 329: 'inter sacramenta fidei quibus extrinsecus imbuerentur mittebant etiam uirtutum exempla quibus alerentur interius'.

49 On Bede and the virtues in the context of Psalm 84. 7, see Jennifer O'Reilly, 'Bede on Seeing the God of Gods in Zion', in *History, Hagiography*, ed. by MacCarron and Scully, pp. 65–87 (pp. 71–73).

50 Bede, *In Ezram*, II, ll. 1844–45, p. 334; Bede, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 147: 'Tres namque sunt uirtutes sine quibus ad uitam peruenire nequimus'. See also Bede, *In Ezram*, II, ll. 1428–29, p. 323; Bede, *De tabernaculo*, II, ll. 825–26, p. 63.

51 See Bede, *In Ezram*, II, ll. 448–49, p. 299; Bede, *De templo*, I, ll. 1671–72, p. 189, and II, ll. 932–34, p. 215.

these virtues to their listeners; this teaching by example was to work in tandem with the sacraments. The Church had a pastoral responsibility to provide for the faithful on two levels—outward and inward.

A final example of Bede's conception of the baptism – good works partnership can be found in his commentary on Genesis.[52] Here Bede connected Noah's departure from the ark to Matthew 28. 19–20, saying it

> prefigures the time when all of the faithful, washed clean by the fountain of baptism, also proceed openly to the exercise of good works under the leadership of Christ, to wit, the spiritual Noah, and increase and multiply by the constant augmentation of spiritual virtues.[53]

Bede's message about baptism is familiar: after being baptised, Christians must exercise 'good works' and 'spiritual virtues'. Progression in the virtues was to be a 'constant' journey for Christians—the virtues were not to be employed as contemporaries saw fit, but rather should be a staple of everyday life. Notably, Bede was clear that performance of good works will be done 'under the leadership of Christ'; the faithful would not be alone in their efforts. At the end of his above typological exegesis, Bede did emphasise the strength of baptism and its role as a tool against the devil—baptism 'can in no way stumble, but it endures in the face of all the snares of the devil, forever unconquered and steadfast'.[54] Although Bede saw baptism as a key weapon in the fight against the devil, he was more interested in demonstrating how the rite fitted into the wider Christian toolkit; Matthew 28. 19 was the key scriptural conduit for making this point.

In Matthew 28. 19 Bede saw the opportunity to discuss the wider place of baptism in the Church's universal mission. What was truly significant about the pericope was its coupling of baptism with teaching and obedience, which for Bede were core tenets of the faith. Bede's approach to Matthew 28. 19 speaks to his concerns about contemporary degradation, as his discussions of baptism (outward faith) were always coupled with the virtues (inward faith), imploring his contemporaries to avoid post-baptismal complacency. Interpreting this complacency as widespread, Bede used the Matthean conclusion to prescribe the practices necessary for ecclesiastical reform, urging resistance to the spiritual laxity he saw around him.

52 On Old Testament prefigurations of New Testament figures and events in Bede's commentary on Genesis, see John J. Gallagher, 'Biblical-Textual Criticism in Bede's Commentary on Genesis', in *Bede the Scholar*, ed. by Darby and MacCarron, pp. 198–222, doi:10.7765/9781526153210.00018.

53 Bede, *In Genesim*, II, ll. 1910–14, in Bede, *Opera Exegetica*, I, *Libri quatuor in principium Genesis usque ad nativitatem Isaac et eiectionem Ismahelis adnotationum*, ed. by C. W. Jones, CCSL, 118A (Brepols, 1967), p. 126; Bede, *On Genesis*, trans. by Calvin B. Kendall (Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 198: 'illi tempori figurate conuenit, cum quique fidelium fonte baptismatis abluti ad exercenda etiam in publico bona opera, christo duce spiritali uidelicet noe, procedunt, et continuo uirtutum spiritalium augmento crescunt et multiplicantur'.

54 Bede, *In Genesim*, II, ll. 1925–26, p. 126; Bede, *On Genesis*, p. 198: 'quod nulla possit ex parte titubare, sed aduersus omnes diaboli insidias inuicta semper ac stabilis perduret'.

IV. Christ's Presence and Spiritual Progression

Matthew's Gospel concludes not with a command but a consolation, in Christ's promise to remain with the Church 'to the consummation of the world'. Amid Bede's concern about spiritual decline, this final clause was crucial, as it offers both hope and admonition. Bede used this passage to demonstrate the capacity for salvation of the present-day faithful, for 'even up to the end of the world, the world will not lack those worthy of the divine abiding and indwelling'.[55] Christ was universal and perpetual, being ever-present for eighth-century Northumbrians, remaining as a 'mark of our salvation'.[56] No one was working towards an undetermined end point, but rather salvation at Judgement. On the surface this was a positive message of reassurance, but embedded was a warning, that in promising to be there *always*, Christ would be present not only as spiritual guardian but also as judge. Bede used John 9. 5 ('As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world') and Matthew 28. 20 in tandem to make the point that

> He judges her either by educating her through adversities, or enlightening her with gifts, or delivering her from the nation that is not holy or guiding her towards the heavenly realms, and as a hidden presence he goes around every one of the chosen testing their faith, hope, and love, and daily examining how much each one has progressed in those virtues, whether through him, the one who knows the heart's secrets, or by means of spiritual teachers.[57]

Bede was clear that Christ was judging and testing the faithful, but he explained that this was done via 'educating' ('erudiendo'), 'enlightening' ('illustrando'), 'delivering' ('liberando'), and 'guiding' ('perducendo'). He ultimately presented Christ as benevolent and patient. After all, the faithful were on a *journey* of progression towards salvation and thus needed Christ's help. In Christ's promise, Bede saw a reciprocal relationship—in exchange for devotion, good Christians would merit Christ's assistance against trials. Considering the 'present church's condition being shaken by stormy trials', Bede saw the need for Christ's assistance to be greater than ever.[58] Thus, Northumbrians needed to commit to good works

55 Bede, *Homiliarum*, II. 8, ll. 103–05, pp. 235–36; Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels, Book Two*, pp. 72–73: 'Ex quo intellegitur quod usque ad finem saeculi non sunt defuturi in mundo qui diuina mansione et inhabitatione sint digni'.

56 Bede, *Homiliarum*, I. 17, ll. 296–99, p. 127; Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels, Book One: Advent to Lent*, trans. by Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst (Cistercian Publications, 1991), p. 176: 'titulum nostrae saluationis'. See also, Bede, *In Samuhelis*, I, ll. 694–96, p. 28.

57 Bede, *In Samuhelis*, I, ll. 2279–85, p. 66; Bede, *On First Samuel*, p. 199: 'Iudicat autem eam uel aduersis erudiendo uel illustrando donis uel liberando a gente non sancta uel ad regna superna perducendo it que occulta praesentia per singulos electorum discutiens fidem spem et dilectionem eorum quantum que in supra dictis uirtutibus quisque profecerit uel per se ipse qui nouit occulta cordis uel per magistros cotidie spiritales examinans'.

58 Bede, *In Cantica canticorum*, III. 5, ll. 31–32, in Bede, *Opera Exegetica*, IIB, *In Tobiam. In Proverbia. In Cantica canticorum. In Habacuc*, ed. by David Hurst, CCSL, 119B (Brepols, 1983), pp. 167–375 (p. 272); Bede, *On the Song of Songs and Selected Writings*,

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and repentance. Elsewhere he warned that 'the evil should always be anxious' and 'the good should always rejoice', showing the repercussions of earthly actions.[59]

Again, Bede mentioned that one of Christ's methods of examining the progression of the faithful was 'by means of spiritual teachers'. The Church could not progress without Christ's continual presence, and teachers were an important conduit between Christ and the present faithful; to Bede, Christ was 'the one teacher of teachers who commands those who are his disciples but our teachers'.[60] In treating the disciples as *his* teachers, Bede suggested an unbroken line of teaching from the Apostolic age to the present day. What is clear, though, is that spiritual teachers too were never abandoned by Christ's grace. Bede honed this point in his commentary on the Song of Songs, where he used what Scott DeGregorio and Rosalind Love have termed impersonation exegesis to adopt Christ's voice:

> I have handed my vineyard over to custodians who cultivate it both by their words and by their examples, but you must know that I have entrusted its care to those custodians in such a way that I myself am no less constantly attentive to what is done in it. [...] *Lo, I am with that [vineyard] always, to the end of the world.* But when this occurs, then I will repay them all with the rewards that are due, depending on whether they are labouring in my vineyard, or on behalf of my vineyard, or against my vineyard.[61]

Bede was keen to emphasise that the present importance of spiritual teachers (custodians) in no way reflected a decline in Christ's attentiveness. Rather, he saw teachers as responsible for looking after Christ's people until Judgement, when they would be aptly rewarded. Christ's 'custodians' would be granted a higher reward than the ordinary followers, but they too were naturally sinful, so there was always need for Christ's continual sinless presence. In his commentary on Samuel, Bede once more took on Christ's voice to explain that 'from among the number of those whom I now know that I have shaken free of the devil's hands, by teaching and baptising, choose for me men to be the teachers and future leaders of the

trans. by Arthur G. Holder (Paulist Press, 2011), p. 140: 'praesentis ecclesiae statum procellis temptationum uiderint esse concussum'.

59 Bede, *Homiliarum*, II. 8, ll. 119–23, p. 236; *Homilies on the Gospels, Book Two*, p. 73: 'Unde necesse est ut semper in operibus nequam paueant mali […] et in eius quae propter iustitiam patiuntur gaudeant boni'.

60 Bede, *In Cantica canticorum*, IV. 7, ll. 207–09, p. 320; Bede, *On the Song of Songs*, p. 202: 'ipse magister unus magistrorum qui discipulis suis autem magistris praecipit'.

61 Bede, *In Cantica canticorum*, V. 8, ll. 651–60, p. 354; Bede, *On the Song of Songs*, p. 244: 'uineam meam tradiderim custodibus qui eam uerbis pariter et exemplis excolerent suis, uerum scias quia sic curam illius eiusdem commisi custodibus ut ipse nihilominus quid in ea geratur indesinenter intendam […] Ecce ego cum illa sum omnibus diebus usque ad consummationem saeculi. At ubi hoc apparuerit tunc omnibus qui in uinea mea uel pro uinea mea uel aduersus uineam meam laborant praemia digna rependam'.

church'.[62] This is just part of a lengthy discourse which Bede writes between the apostles and Christ, but the main thrust of the 'quoted' text is Christ asserting the power of repentance and conversion, and how 'teaching and baptism' can make sinners outstanding Christians and thus able to instruct others on avoiding sin. This is strongly reminiscent of Matthew's situation, as despite Matthew's background as a tax collector, Bede had no doubt that he was a fitting conduit for Christ's teachings. Considering the context, it is quite possible that Bede was purposefully alluding to Matthew here. This shows a hopeful side to Bede's reflections on the present state of the Church, as he evidently believed that because Christ would be with them *always,* all had the capacity to progress.

While Matthew 28. 20 contains the positive message of Christ's continual presence, it also explicitly refers to the 'consummation of the world', so could be taken to have eschatological importance. In one homily Bede elaborated on the passage to state that 'at the consummation of the world he will come into the world in his humanity to render to each individual in accord with his work', but this is a rather rare example of Bede using the passage to discuss details of Judgement.[63] There was some degree of precedent for using Matthew 28. 20 as a springboard to discuss the specifics of Judgement; for example, Jerome used the passage to make a point about Christ's knowledge of the day when Judgement will occur.[64] Bede meanwhile was more inclined to focus on Christ's continual presence *during* the age rather than labouring the point about end times.[65] This fits into Bede's wider reluctance to explicitly date end times.[66] Regardless of when Judgement was to occur, Christ was *always* overseeing Christians on their earthly journey, and while earthly life was temporary, heaven and hell are eternal, so it was of utmost importance to exercise good works on the said journey.

In the context of his concerns about spiritual degradation, there is a trend of Bede discussing Matthew 28. 20 with respect to spiritual warfare. Particularly significant here is Bede's commentary on Samuel, the fourth book of which can be clearly dated to the period following Ceolfrith's departure in 716, as Bede lamented his mentor's departure in the book's prologue.[67] It was written at a time of immense emotional upheaval in Bede's life, and in the fourth book we see a

62 Bede, *In Samuhelis*, III, ll. 2652–54, p. 199; Bede, *On First Samuel*, p. 414: 'ex horum mihi numero quos diaboli manibus excussisse me iam noui docendo et baptizando etiam doctores praesules que ecclesiae futuros aptate'.

63 Bede, *Homiliarum*, II. 2, ll. 218–19, p. 199; *Homilies on the Gospels, Book Two*, p. 21: 'qui in consummatione saeculi per humanitatem uenturus est in mundum ut reddat singulis secundum opera eorum'. See also Bede, *De templo*, I, ll. 1061–63, p. 173.

64 Jerome, *Commentariorum in Mattheum*, IV. 28, ll. 2015–21, p. 283.

65 For example, see Bede, *Expositio Actuum*, I, ll. 19–28, p. 6.

66 Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. by C. W. Jones, CCSL, 123B (Brepols, 1977), LXVIII. See Peter Darby, *Bede and the End of Time* (Ashgate, 2012), p. 96.

67 Scott DeGregorio and Rosalind Love, 'Introduction', in Bede, *On First Samuel*, pp. 1–93 (pp. 2–3). On the commentary on Samuel, see also George Hardin Brown, 'Bede's Neglected Commentary on Samuel', in *Innovation and Tradition in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*, ed. by Scott DeGregorio (West Virginia University Press, 2006), pp. 121–42; Scott

number of references to Christ's final promise. Peter Darby has highlighted that there was a 'sharpening of Bede's eschatological perspective' in Book III which was sustained in Book IV, fitting into the context of his anxieties about decline.[68] This anxiety is evident in his first reference to Matthew 28. 20 in Book IV, where we are given a stark impression of spiritual warfare:

> From the beginning of the infant world to the end, the godless try to remove Christ from the hearts of the devout, and Christ himself defends the devout, lest at any time they should be conquered by the godless, since he promises that he will remain *always to the end of the age*.[69]

Here Bede uses language of battle, presenting Christ's continual presence as a defensive necessity. In his discussion of this passage, Paul Hilliard recognises Bede's emphasis on the role of champions in spiritual warfare, fitting into the aforementioned discussion of the importance of teachers as conduits of Christ's teachings.[70] Although Bede presented the battle between the Devil and Christ as constant and severe, his purpose was not to make a point about *imminent* Judgement. Rather, Bede wanted his contemporaries to be more aware of the dangers of worldliness and the need for defence, so that they would be prepared for Judgement, when it should come. Elsewhere Bede emphasised that the great trials of earthly life did not take away from Christ's presence, for 'when does he not see those with whom he promised to remain all the days of the world, especially when they are beset with distress?'[71] The faithful were most in need of Christ's aid in times of distress, so Bede was keen to emphasise that not only would the said aid be there in those moments, it would be more obvious than ever. Returning to Book IV of the commentary on Samuel, shortly after emphasising spiritual warfare with the Devil, Bede repeated Matthew 28. 20, but narrowed his focus, moving away from the Christian world engaged in battle to focus on the individual:

> But the individual faithful, once they have carried out the due service of prayer or exhortation or any other form of devotion offered to the Lord,

DeGregorio, 'Bede's Midlife Crisis: The Commentary on First Samuel', in *Cities, Saints, and Communities*, ed. by DeGregorio and Kershaw, pp. 241–64, doi:10.1484/M.SEM-EB.5.119630.

68 Darby, *Bede and the End of Time*, p. 182.

69 Bede, *In Samuhelis*, IV, ll. 213–17, p. 217; Bede, *On First Samuel*, p. 441: 'Ab initio mundi nascentis usque ad finem et impii christum piorum cordibus auferre satagunt et ipse pios ne umquam ab impiis expugnentur defendit cum quibus se mansurum promisit omnibus diebus usque ad consummationem saeculi'.

70 Paul C. Hilliard, '*Quae res quem sit habitura finem, posterior aetas videbit*: Prosperity, Adversity and Bede's Hope for the Future of Northumbria', in *Bede and the Future*, ed. by Darby and Wallis, pp. 181–205 (p. 200).

71 Bede, *Homiliarum*, II. 13, ll. 137–39, p. 270; *Homilies on the Gospels, Book Two*, p. 122: 'Quando enim non uideret suos maxime pressuris circumuentos cum quibus se ipse omnibus diebus saeculi manere promisit?' See also Bede, *Homiliarum*, II. 8, ll. 103–08, pp. 235–36.

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> return to their own consciences, so that at rest from outward action, they may more readily examine themselves.[72]

Here Bede places the onus on the individual, stressing the importance of performing external and internal acts of faith. As previously discussed regarding baptism, Bede did not view external acts as sufficient to merit salvation. Bede's emphasis on self-examination suggests he had concerns that reflection and repentance were being neglected in favour of performative, public acts of faith. The above reads as a manual for how the faithful *should* be behaving, but the fact that Bede felt the need to set it out so plainly certainly indicates he did not think this was the reality.

We see a similar tone in his final use of Matthew 28. 20 in Book IV of *On Samuel*, where he uses impersonation exegesis to provide the disciples' response to Christ's final words, wherein they state that 'we have learnt that we should have no guardian for your grace that rules over us, by which you remain in us, apart from you yourself'.[73] Bede once more emphasised Christ's role as the eternal guardian, but there is an edge of a warning embedded in his words. The faithful must *not* have any other guardian, recalling Bede's prior emphasis that Christ's teachings alone were to be obeyed. Bede once more set out his vision for proper Christian conduct, but again his plainness nods at heretics and false preachers who sought to innovate. Bede evidently felt complacency was rife in Northumbria and contemporaries would benefit from the reminder that Christ was *always* present. He wanted the reminder of Christ's constant presence to act as an incentive for Christians to repent and reflect.

Across these references, Bede's reforming impulse is unmistakable. By framing Christ's presence as both protective and judging, and by emphasising the need for vigilance, repentance, and doctrinal fidelity, Bede used Matthew 28. 20 to address what he saw as widespread complacency. The passage thus became a key means by which he defined and guided proper Christian conduct.

V. Conclusions

While Bede had anxieties about departures from Christ's teachings, he ultimately had hope for the progression of the Church in its universal mission. Matthew 28. 19–20 provided a blueprint of good practice—centred on teaching, baptism, obedience, and Christ's continued presence—that informed his vision of ecclesiastical longevity and reform. By adhering to this Matthean formula, Bede envisaged a Church capable of sustained spiritual progression.

Bede's interest in Matthew 28. 19–20 is visible across his corpus and throughout his life. The pericope is among the most frequently cited passages of

72 Bede, *In Samuhelis*, IV, ll. 266–70, p. 218; Bede, *On First Samuel*, p. 443: 'singuli autem fidelium peracto orationis uel exhortationis uel alterius cuiuslibet oblatae domino deuotionis officio reuertuntur ad conscientiam suam quatenus ab exteriori actione uacantes licentius se'.

73 Bede, *In Samuhelis*, IV, ll. 1758–60, p. 253; Bede, *On First Samuel*, p. 494: 'nos custodem regentis nos gratiae tuae qua permaneas in nobis nullum praeter te ipsum habendum esse didicimus non solum'.

scripture in his works, with references dispersed widely across his exegetical and homiletic writings rather than confined to a single period or genre. This speaks to his lifelong interest in models of orthodox teaching and good works; the Matthean text was a valuable touchstone for highlighting these pastoral themes. It is only by tracing its use across the Bedan corpus that the full extent of Matthew's influence on his exegetical method and reform agenda becomes apparent.

For Bede, the Matthean commission was an essential guide for steering his society through the second stage of the tripartite plan for salvation. His engagement with Matthew 28. 19–20 was therefore not confined to theological commentary, but consistently oriented towards the pastoral realities of the Northumbrian Church. As Matthew had abandoned the tax collector's booth to follow Christ, Bede imagined his contemporaries could abandon their sins and look towards eternal rewards.

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