

La Mesa Graduation

Dr. Justo L. González



Candler School of Theology Graduation
Atlanta, GA
May 9, 2026

La Mesa Graduation

Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to be here, and to be with you once again, this time to send you back to your places of work. It is a particular pleasure, because I was with you on that first session, when you were exploring your way in a program there was a new beginning not only for you, but also for the school itself.

Therefore, I must begin by congratulating you on your achievements, which we celebrate on this day.

Equally important, I must also congratulate the school itself, for this is not just the sending out of one more group of students. This graduation signifies the success—and therefore also the continuation— of a venture that widens the horizons of theological education; particularly of theological education under the umbrella of a world-class research university.

Congratulations, La Mesa class of 2026. Congratulations, Candler School of Theology.

Congratulations, because in future years, when someone writes a history of theological education in the United States, they will have to say that in the early decades of the 21st century there was a significant shift in the scope, methods, and goals of theological education.

And they will have to mention this school, this program, this class!

But let's not get too excited. This event, no matter how great its significance, pales in comparison with the great event that millions upon millions of Christians are supposed to be celebrating these days. Some five weeks ago, we celebrated Easter. Then, the next day, many of us were done with Easter, and simply went back to business as usual.

However, the season of Easter did not end on the day of Resurrection. Now, some five weeks after we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus, we are still in Easter season. Furthermore, this coming Thursday we should be celebrating the Feast of the Ascension. Those of you whose churches follow a lectionary will be reading the stories of the Ascension at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts.

Since this coming Thursday, 40 days after Easter, many will be celebrating the Ascension, I would like to direct your attention to a well-known passage at the end of the Gospel of Matthew that appears precisely in these last days between Resurrection and the Ascension:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Mt 28.18-20)

I said earlier that this occurs between the Resurrection and the Ascension. That is not strictly true, for the ascension of Jesus does not really begin at the Mount of the Ascension, or with the events at the end of Luke. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, the ascension has a wider scope: it does not begin on the mountain, but in that lowest, most dreadful place, usually called "the

place of the dead,” or “the lower regions.” There we read: Therefore it is said, “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.” (When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) [Eph. 4:8-10]

When Jesus meets his disciples after his Resurrection, he has already descended to the lowest of the low; he has faced the worst of the bad; he has challenged the very powers of evil. And he has made captivity captive. His ascension has already begun.

When, with this in mind, we return to the end of Matthew —to what is commonly known as “the Great Commission,” things look somewhat different. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations....” *Therefore?* One does not begin a statement with a “therefore.” One does not simply say “Therefore, I will not do it.” One says, for instance, “What you propose is wrong; therefore, I will not do it.”

Therefore (!!!), when reading the Great Commission, we must begin by clarifying what its “therefore” is. On this point, the text is quite clear: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore...”

This is important. In the Great Commission, Jesus does not tell us to go and make disciples because otherwise they will all go to hell. That may or may not be true; but it is not the reason why we are to go and make disciples. Jesus does not tell us to make disciples because that will make them behave better and create a better society. That may or may not be true; but it is not the reason why we are to go and make disciples. According to the Great Commission, the reason to go and make disciples, the reason to baptize them, and the reason to teach them to obey, is that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus.

This requires that we understand what “*authority*” means. There is a difference between *authority* and *power* —a difference that appears in the New Testament. Here, in Matthew 28, Jesus declares that he has received “*authority*.” In Acts 1, both words appear: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own *authority*. But you will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses.” The Father has authority; the Spirit gives power.

In the Greek of the New Testament, this is expressed in two different words: authority is ἐξουσία, and power is δύναμις. The first, “*authority*,” essentially means to have the right to do something; the other word, “*power*” means to be able to do it, no matter whether one has the right to do it. The distinction is important even in the news we read. The Constitution says that Congress has the authority to declare war. But clearly, the President has the power, and —with or without authority— is able to wage war without actually declaring it.

In contrast to all that, even in the language we use daily the word “authority” derives from “author” —which means that ultimately the only authority is that vested in the Author of all things. The authority of this Author of All Things is such that the Creator is able to give the creature the power to disobey divine authority: “you may eat freely of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.” In other words, you have the power, the ability to eat of every tree; but there is one of which you do not have the authority to eat. You can, but you should not. The human creature has the power to eat of the tree; but not the authority.

We know the continuation of the story. The human creature decides: “I can, and therefore I shall. I have the power; so who cares about the authority?” That is the very nature of sin. Essentially, sin is using the power given by the authority of God to circumvent that authority. Sin is acting as if authority were given by power, and not the other way around. In a word, sin is the usurpation of authority; it is believing that because I can I may.

In the Great Commission, Jesus claims *authority*. In Pentecost, the Spirit gives *power*; but not power to control; not power to turn into authority; not even power to enforce the authority of Jesus. The Spirit gives powers to proclaim the authority of Jesus. No matter how powerful are the gifts that the Spirit gives us, we do not have the power to give more authority to Jesus. All authority is already his. The promise is that when the time comes, that authority will also become power.

Coming down to earth (!!!), this has two important consequences for us and for our own ministries.

The first is a lesson the church has repeatedly been taught —and repeatedly has refused to learn: Acting as if the authority of Jesus could be enhanced by human powers is a hidden form of idolatry that inevitably leads to the corruption of the church, and even to apostasy. All authority in heaven and on earth already belongs to him. The church cannot add to that authority, but only obey it. Emperor Constantine and his successors could not add to that authority. No king, no president, no dictator, no bishop, no prophet, no theologian, no great athlete and no influencers, can add to that authority. Indeed, we know that in the end, “at the name of Jesus every knee shall bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The second lesson is an extension of the first: If all authority on earth has been given to Jesus the Christ, this means that the mission of Christians is not, as we often imagine, to take Christ where he was not. The One in whom we believe, the One whom we proclaim, the One who has given us power to be witnesses, is already there, wherever we go. This is the One who was in the beginning with God, the one through whom all things were made, the One who is “the light of everyone who comes to this world.” This One is already there, wherever we go.

This is of enormous importance, and the consequences of thinking otherwise are vast. Think, for instance, of the first European Christians who came to this hemisphere. What would they have done, had they not imagined that their task was to impose the authority of Jesus by the *power* of the sword? What would have been the story if the church had made it clear to those early European immigrants that they should look for signs of the work of this Jesus to whom belongs all authority in heaven and on earth, and put their own power under his authority?

However, time advances, and we must come back to the present. Soon we will leave this place, some with diplomas, some with friends and family, all to face a world where power seems to confer authority, and where authority seems to depend on power. But, like those disciples atop the mountain, we know that ultimately the truth is otherwise. We know that, no matter how successful it may be, power never confers proper authority. To use any power —political, economic, military, or even religious— as if it conferred authority is usurpation and is doomed to fail.

Go. Go looking for the presence of the One to whom all authority belongs. Go, not to boost his authority by means of human power, not to bend before earthly power as if it were the source of authority, but rather to discover the presence of the great Author to whom all authority ultimately belongs, and to announce that presence. Go to obey the only One with true authority to command. Go to make disciples that do likewise.

And when things get tough, when those who use power to usurp authority make things difficult for you, remember that the One who holds all authority —the One to whom real power ultimately belongs, that One who was already in a deeper hell than any us can ever find ourselves, that one is also the One who has promised: “I am with you always.”

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations; disciples who know that there is no power that can destroy the authority of the One who sends you! Amen. So be it!

