



The “Great Commission” in Matthew 28:19 is NOT What You’ve Been Taught

Description



You’ve all heard the Great Commission at the end of

Matthew right? The one that goes:

Matthew 28:19

19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

People regularly quote this verse to inspire Christians to go out into the the world and evangelize their co-workers, friends and family. **Unfortunately, that’s not what this verse says at all.** That’s not what it’s about, and it certainly isn’t telling you to run out and get everyone saved.

This verse is badly translated, and as a result many Christians are being slaughtered wholesale (*falling away*), living a defeated life, and the Church in America is dying.

That bugs me.

That bugs me a LOT.

*(NOTE: I absolutely agree that evangelism is **vital** to the Church. I just believe that the most effective way to evangelize is to **not** focus on evangelism. I think the most effective way to evangelize is to focus on what Jesus focused on... but more about that in a minute.)*

EDIT: A fellow emailed me, agreeing with the point of this article, but also saying that this section about the passive participle misses something. He said that when an aorist passive participle (“go” here) is followed an aorist imperative participle, the passive aorist participle (“go” here) should be understood as imperative (*a command*), and specifically a command of instrumentality. That is, “go” should be understood as “go **so that** you can disciple”, making the focus discipling. As evidence, he cited some parallel passages, specifically Matt 28:7 + Mark 16:7, Matt 9:6 + Mark 2:11, and Mark 11:2 + Luke 19:30, where the Holy Spirit inspired an aorist passive participle + an imperative in one place, but inspired a double imperative in the other. Thus, **while the conclusion of this article is correct, there is some imperative force in the aorist passive participle, making the following two sections incorrect**. I will edit this article to correct the following two sections when I get time, but I’m quit low on that right now.

Poor Translation

Okay, first, my accusation that this verse is badly translated.

(*You can double check everything I’m about to say by checking [Matthew 28:19 in an interlinear Bible](#).)*

The first word in Matthew 28:19 is the word “GO” and it is written as an imperative command. This translation leads us to believe that Jesus has commanded us to “GO” out into the world and evangelize. However, in the original Greek, it is **not** an imperative verb.

It’s actually the opposite of a command.

It’s a passive participle.

Participle: a word formed from a verb and used as an adjective or a noun

Jesus did **not** use this word as a verbal command (“Go!”), he used it as an adjective or noun. This is a passive participle, which is VERY different from an imperative command. (“Go!”)

Passive Participle: A participle indicating an **ongoing or completed action or state** in the passive voice, where a noun modified by the participle is taken to represent the patient of the action denoted by the verb.

Jesus was talking about an “ongoing or completed action”. Think about that. He wasn’t giving a command (“Go and do this”). He was describing something that was ongoing (*or finished*).

Many interlinear Bibles translate this “Having gone”, which is good, but in English would tend to indicate a past action. In Greek, it’s in the Aorist aspect which simply means “undefined”. (*the time the action takes place is undefined, so could be past, present, or future*)

)

Simply translating into an English participle, it should be “going”

Not “Go” as a command, but “going”, as an ongoing state/action.

So it’s not:

Matthew 28:19

19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

it’s actually:

Matthew 28:19

(note: I’ve greyed out the word “and” which isn’t in the original Greek)

19 “Going therefore, ~~and~~ make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

But wait, it gets worse

Remember I said it was a passive participle? Well, “passive” has a very specific meaning in Greek. Greek verbs have three different “voices” in which the action is described.

1. **Active verbs** mean the subject does the action: “*He persuaded her*”
2. **Middle verbs** are complicated to explain, and thankfully not relevant here, so I’ll skip them
3. **Passive verbs** mean the action is done to the the subject: “*He was persuaded by Her*”

In a passive verb, the subject does not do the action, but rather the action is done to the subject. It’s not “*The boy threw the ball*”. It’s “*the ball was thrown by the boy*”.

Remember, in a passive verb the action is NOT being done by the subject, but is being done to the subject by someone/something else.

Now for the reveal:

The “go” in the Great Commission is PASSIVE.

Not active, but passive.

Think about that.

Really think about it.

Jesus did **NOT** tell His disciples to “go”; He said someone/something else would make them go.

A proper translation – capturing the essence of the Greek – is actually:

Matthew 28:19

“**Being made to go** therefore, **and** make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

We shouldn’t be surprised though because that’s exactly what Jesus told them to do, and exactly what He said would happen.

Matthew 10:23

23 “**But whenever they persecute you in one city, flee to the next**; for truly I say to you, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.

(Note: the “coming” of the Son of Man here likely refers to judgement, not Jesus’ Second Coming. He “came” in judgement in 70AD when the Romans wiped out most of Israel. See my [article on Revelation](#) for more information.)

The disciples listened to Jesus. They stayed in Jerusalem until the persecution came, **then as someone else forced them to leave**, they took the gospel with them... just like Jesus said in the **Great commission**.

So What is the “Great Commission” About Then?

In a single word: discipleship.

(Because that’s the most effective way to evangelize; I’ll explain in a moment)

The Rest of the Great Commission

I’ve been focusing on only two aspects of the Great commission, but there are four verbs in the sentence that we call the Great commission.

Matthew 28:19-20 (*original version*)

19 “Go therefore and **make disciples** of all the nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

20 **teaching** them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Of those four verbs, three are participles (*verbs acting like a noun or adjective*); only one is an active imperative command.

- “**Go**” – as we’ve already covered – is a passive participle meaning something like “being made to go”
- “**Make Disciples**” is in the Greek Active voice, and is an active, imperative command; “Make Disciples” is a good translation because it’s a command to actively do something.
- “**Baptizing**” is a participle in the Greek active voice. It’s not a command, but rather a description of an ongoing action (*that follows from making disciples*).
- “**Teaching**” is the exact same as discipling above.

If I were going to condense, simplify, and paraphrase the Great commission, I would say it this way:

“(As) you’re being made to go, **make disciples** by baptizing them and teaching them everything I taught you.”

Notice again, 3/4 of the verbs are about discipleship and only 1/4 is about “evangelism”. This exact pattern – with the same ratios – is repeated elsewhere.

Ephesians 4:11

11 And He gave **some as apostles**, and **some as prophets**, and **some as evangelists**, and **some as pastors and teachers**,

(*Note: pastors and teachers are linked in the Greek, so the list actually has four items*)

12 for **the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ**;

Again, are 3/4 of the list is about discipling/equipping, but evangelists are only 1/4. Mature/maturing

Christians – i.e. well trained disciples – are the key to winning souls.

The way to win souls is NOT to focus on winning souls; the way to win souls is to focus on maturing/disciplining Christians.

A handful of elite warriors will beat an army of raw recruits every time. (*age and experience will beat youth and enthusiasm...*).

What Jesus and the Apostles did

Jesus Himself did almost zero evangelism.

You must remember that He lived His life around Jews who were serious about their faith; they just missed the forest for the trees. Jesus never chastised them for not observing the Mosaic Law; He chastised them for observing it as a mere religious event and ignoring the heart behind it.

In fact, Jesus commanded the disciples not to evangelize when He sent them out:

Matthew 10:6

5 These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans;

6 but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

I’m not saying evangelism isn’t important – it’s very important – I’m saying that heart behind Jesus’ ministry was discipleship. He spent three years mentoring and growing the twelve disciples (*and others*). Afterward, they went out and changed the world.

Paul did roughly the same thing:

Galatians 1:11-18

11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.

12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

13 For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it;

14 and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.

15 But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased

16 to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, **I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood,**

17 **nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.**

18 **Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem** to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.

Paul also spent three years learning before he became great among the apostles.

(Notice a pattern?)

Galatians leads us to believe Paul learned from Jesus Himself while he was in Arabia. He definitely spent a few years learning before he went out and did anything great. New Christians simply aren't equipped to change the world. It takes time. *(Three years seems to be a pattern.)*

In my opinion, the way to change the world is NOT to focus on evangelism; it's to focus on discipleship.

That's what Jesus did.

That's what happened to Paul, and what Paul did too. He spent three years "in training". After he was trained, he would go to a city, proclaim the gospel, train/equip/disciple the new recruits for a couple years, then move on to the next city. And really, this approach makes a **ton** of sense.

If you were charged with taking over the world, would you want a highly-trained, elite fighting force, or would you charge into battle with raw recruits?

In the movie "The Last Samurai" starring Tom Cruise, there's a great scene that illustrates the importance of being ready.

(~2 minutes, please watch.)

(BTW, in the movie, these raw recruits were sent into battle and were slaughtered. You can see the battle scene here: [this is what happens when you send raw recruits against battle-hardened warriors](#))

Modern Christians... yeah, "they're not ready".

Most Christians seem like the poor, under-trained peasant who was fumbling to load his rifle under pressure because he wasn't ready.

Mature Christians are far more effective in spreading the gospel than baby Christians.

We don't send human babies/kids to war; we wait until they are old and mature enough to handle the challenge. In the same way, *baby Christians shouldn't do much except learn how to be better followers of Christ*

Make sense?

However, discipleship is sorely lacking in Churches today. Other than a basic version of the Gospel, people aren't given much more instruction besides "go out and get your neighbors saved." That's not enough, and it's throwing new recruits onto the battlefield not fully equipped.

That's a horrible idea!

Everyone talks about the Armor of God. The Roman military it's based on provides the perfect example of how baby Christians can help.

If you look at the early Roman Military formation (*the Triplex Acies*) you'll see that the front line was the inexperienced skirmishers. (*baby Christians*) However, *they never joined battle with the enemy*. They would run up under cover of large shields, throw a couple of javelins, and then run away. The young/inexperienced were involved, but *never* went head-to-head with the enemy because "they're not ready". Front line combat was reserved for the more experienced troops who could handle the challenge.

That's how it should be with the army of God.

(And by the way, the Roman military is arguably the finest military force in world history. So even if the Armor of God wasn't based on them, their tactics are still of note.)

No modern soldier goes to war without first going through bootcamp (*and then AIT*). Sending inexperienced, untrained troops into battle is a sure way to get them killed.

That's why we need discipleship.

The enemy will rip new Christians apart without proper training. Once they've had the training, they can go out and conquer/save the world... but they need the training first.

Would you rather have this:



Or this:



The difference is training (*discipleship*).

The United States Marine Corps is arguably the most effective regular fighting force in the world (*barring special forces*). Is it a coincidence that they have the longest bootcamp and arguably most intense training?

Modern Christians (*in America anyway*) send baby Christians into battle and are surprised when they are slaughtered wholesale (*fall away*), and we're shocked that the Church in this country is dying.

Why are we surprised at that?

Raw recruits have no place in warfare because “*they’re not ready*”; their place is *in training*. It’s only *after* they’ve been properly trained and equipped that they belong on the front lines. Even then, they should be there only with experienced Sergeant (*elder*) to help guide them.

That’s what discipleship is about: proper training and equipping; if you want to win the world, start by having well-trained Christians in the fight.

Make sense?

The way you train them is discipleship, and *that’s what Jesus did*.

He spent 3 years training some raw recruits, then sent them out and they crushed it. (*Paul did the same thing; after he was trained for a few years, he would visit a city, train new believers for a couple years, then move on to the next city.*)

- Jesus focused very little on evangelism, and His disciples turned the world upside down.
- We focus on evangelism, and the Church in our country is *dying*.

Maybe we should realign our priorities a bit. Maybe if we focused on what Jesus focused on, we’d have His results. Jesus said to “make disciples” not merely “*get people saved*”.

Maybe the former is the key to the latter, and that’s why Jesus focused on discipleship.

Just maybe.

Conclusion

There is only one active, imperative command in the Great Commission: “Make Disciples”. That’s it, the rest is *how* disciples are made (*going, baptizing and teaching*).

You would never send a brand new (*baby*) Christian to deepest darkest Africa to be a missionary. You just wouldn’t. You need mature Christians who are “*strong in the Lord and the strength of His might*”, and who have “*taken up the full armor of God*” and thus are “*able to stand against the evil one*.”

Until baby Christians have been trained, I suggest we follow the example of the Roman army that the Armor of God was patterned after. They were arguably the most effective fighting force in the history of the world, and they only used young/inexperienced soldiers in a skirmishing role; never for direct front-line combat.

Jesus’ primary focus was discipleship, and He commanded us make disciples.

I think we should listen because *that’s how we win the world*.