

BAPTIST BIBLE SEMINARY

A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE GREAT COMMISSION IN MATTHEW 28:18-20

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Introduction

Matthew 28:18-20 has to be the central biblical passage for missions today. It is missions' principle text both because it finds its fundamental biblical support in these verses and because it is the most frequently quoted passage regarding biblical support for foreign (and home) missions. Few Christians today even question the applicability of this passage to the modern Church; rather, they simply assume it is just as applicable for Christians today as it was for the apostles. However, it was not always this way.

A Brief Overview of the Major Historical Change Regarding the Church's Understanding of Matthew 28:18-20

Up until two centuries ago, most theologians, including Luther and Calvin, considered Matthew 28:18-20 as being applicable only to the original eleven apostles. O'Brien writes, "The Reformers and the majority of the 17th century theologians believed the Great Commission was binding only on the apostles. When they died Christ's command died with them."¹ This does not mean that they did not care for the lost. It appears that at least a few were more concerned for the lost than many a Christian today. For example, Martin Bucer was a Reformer who had a burden for the lost in other places. O'Brien continues, "Bucer bemoaned the fact that Christian men of his day were willing to go to distant parts and exert themselves in various ways to gain material advantages but showed little concern for the spiritual welfare of those with whom they transacted business."² Still, Bucer did not interpret Matthew 28:18-20 any different than his Reformer colleagues.

¹ Peter O'Brien, "The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 – A Missionary Mandate or Not?" *Evangelical Review of Theology* (Vol. 2, 1978), 255.

² *Ibid.*

It was not until the end of the 18th century, when William Carey began his plea for the souls of those in distant lands, that Bible scholars and theologians alike began to apply this passage to world evangelism in the present. O'Brien writes earlier,

In 1792, Carey had published his now-famous booklet entitled *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. In it he argued that Christ's command in Matthew 28 was as binding on men of his day as it was on the apostles. The command, he asserted, had not been repealed, there were still subjects to obey it, there had been no further revelation to counter it, and nothing stood in the way of obeying it.³

Thus began the modern missions movement for Protestantism. It should be noted that while the modern missions movement for Protestantism has had many great moments of success in the last two centuries, Roman Catholic missions have always overshadowed it numerically.⁴ This does not mean that the latter was motivated by a more correct understanding of Matthew 28:18-20.

Over the last two centuries many questions have been raised by both theologians and missionaries as to what Matthew 28:18-20 means and whether (and how) it is applicable to the Church today. This paper will seek to exegete the main elements of this passage and then comment on its applicability (if any) to Christians today.

A Biblical Understanding of Matthew 28:18-20

Hiebert summarizes Matthew 28:18-20 in three distinct parts: "Jesus declared the universal authority with which He had been invested (v. 18b), delineated the consequent program of activities He instructed His disciples to carry out (vv. 19-20a), and concluded with the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bryant claims that there are over 80,000 Protestant missionaries and over 132,000 Roman Catholic missionaries in the world today. While this study is twenty years old, it is highly doubtful that the proportions would have significantly changed over the last two decades (David Bryant, *In the Gap*, [Ventura CA: Regal, 1984], 160).

assurance of His continuing presence with them (v. 20b).”⁵ While this study is very interested in the context of this passage and the larger context in general, it will concentrate mainly on the middle statement regarding Jesus’ commission to His disciples in verses 19 and 20a.

Upon concluding the initial exegesis and interpretation, some practical application of Matthew 28:18-20 will be given as objections are answered. An attempt will be made to ascertain whether this passage is really a Great Commission. In other words, was it given only to the eleven apostles or to the Church as a whole? Also, has the Great Commission already been fulfilled? More specifically, was it fulfilled in the lifetime of the apostles? Other theologically significant questions will also be raised including: If the Great Commission was not fulfilled in the apostles’ lifetime, were they truly obedient to do it? Consequently, if the Great Commission cannot be fulfilled in one’s lifetime today, can he truly be obedient to fulfill it? And if not, is it worth attempting? Ultimately, is it possible for the Great Commission ever to be fulfilled in the Church period?

Exegesis and Interpretation of Matthew 28:18-20

The Lord’s commission to His apostles begins in Matthew 28:18 with the Lord stating that He has been given all authority in heaven and earth. While Christ’s “authority” (ἐξουσία) refers to both the concept of power and authority, it “denotes not merely the ability to exercise power or authority but also the freedom and right to do so.”⁶ The Father is the One who has obviously given this authority to Christ (cf. John 12:49; 14:10). It is a universal authority in its extent and it adequately covers the “all nations” aspect included in the following commission.

Matthew 28:19 begins with the Greek participle πορεύομαι (“to go”). This word will be examined to understand how it is to be translated in Matthew 28:19 and what connotations, if

⁵ Edmond Hiebert, “An Expository Study of Matthew 28:16-20,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July 1992), 345.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 346.

any, may be included from both its immediate context and its parallel passages. The following word οὖν (“therefore”) will not be dealt with separately as it clearly relates this commission to the previous verse regarding the divine, universal authority that Jesus now has. The main verb of Matthew 28:19 is μαθητεύω (“make disciples”). This word will be carefully studied to show what it infers in its biblical usage as well as its relationship to the previous participle and the following two participles (“baptizing” and “teaching”). A subsection will follow on the meaning of verse 20b, but only as it relates to what Christ has already said in vv. 19 and 20a.

The Meaning of πορεύομαι in Matthew 28:19

In Matthew 28:19, the aorist participle of πορεύομαι is usually translated in the English versions with imperatival force (“go and ...”). Some have suggested that the English participle “going” is a better translation as it reflects the fact that πορεύομαι in Matthew 28:19 is actually a Greek participle and not an imperative.⁷ Others have suggested that πορεύομαι be omitted in the English translation of this verse, as it does not carry the connotation of going (somewhere) in the Greek.⁸ The stakes of a proper translation are high for both missions and the Church program in general.⁹ In order to ascertain (with any certainty) the meaning of πορεύομαι in Matthew 28:19, a brief study will follow regarding its use in the New Testament Greek and in the LXX.

The following study will deal mainly with the specific form of πορεύομαι in Matthew 28:19, along with the form of the connecting verb μαθητεύω. In Matthew 28:19, the word

⁷ See Robert Culver, “What is the Church Commission? Some Exegetical Issues in Matthew 28:16-20,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 125 (July 1968), 243-53; and Roy Zuck, “Greek Words for Teach,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 121 (April 1965), 163.

⁸ See O’Brien, “Great Commission,” 260-61. O’Brien holds that the participle πορεύομαι is acting as an auxiliary to the main verb and is best left untranslated in the English.

⁹ However, one should not (prematurely) arrive at the conclusion that only the first two translations given above are beneficial for missions. The third translation (omitting the word “go” altogether) could be more beneficial for world evangelism if every Christian would take on the responsibility of making disciples in his immediate community (without necessarily going anywhere).

πορεύομαι is an aorist participle and it is followed by an aorist imperative (μαθητεύω).¹⁰ The aorist participle of πορεύομαι is followed by an aorist imperative five other times in the book of Matthew (2:8; 9:13; 11:4; 17:27; 28:7), six other times in the New Testament (Mark 16:15; Luke 7:22; 13:32; 14:10; 17:14; 22:8),¹¹ and four times in the LXX (Gen. 27:9; 27:13; 37:14; 43:2).¹²

A quick survey of the above verses shows that the word πορεύομαι carries one basic meaning (“to go”) in these verses.¹³ Since this is the case, the current study will seek to establish what is emphasized by the word πορεύομαι in its specific contexts and assume it carries the same meaning throughout this study. The above list of verses will be examined to discover whether these verses use the word πορεύομαι to emphasize physical distance or urgency, or whether it is being used as an auxiliary to the main verb. The concept of physical distance (“do this over there [as opposed to here]”) indicates that πορεύομαι is used to refer to some kind of spatial distance that should be traveled (e.g., “Go to the store and buy some bread”). The concept of urgency of action (“do this now [as opposed to later]”) refers to the importance of doing the matter at hand right now (e.g. “Go [now] and get the bread”). The concept of πορεύομαι being used as an auxiliary to the action of the main verb (“do this [as opposed to something else]”) refers to the importance of doing the matter at hand (e.g. “Go and meditate on these things” or simply, “Meditate on these things”).¹⁴ The only other possibility for this study is

¹⁰ The relationship of these two words is important if it can be shown that one of them can influence the meaning of the other, which will be presented in the following study.

¹¹ Mark 16:15 will be of special interest to this study due to its similar content to Matthew 28:19.

¹² This list of 15 verses will be repeated referred to in the discussion below.

¹³ While BAGD also lists “to conduct oneself, *live, walk*” and to “go to one’s death” as other meanings of πορεύομαι, these do not apply to the uses of πορεύομαι in the verses listed above (BAGD, 853).

¹⁴ This use of πορεύομαι may leave it untranslated in the English. When the emphasis of πορεύομαι is on the importance of doing the action of the main verb, it is possible that there is no difference in meaning between “Go and do likewise!” and “Do likewise!”

a combination of these concepts (e.g. “do this [and not something else] over there [and not here] now [and not later]”) which would indicate that πορεύομαι is used to refer to spatial distance, urgency, as well as emphasizing the action of the main verb (e.g. “Go to the store now and buy milk [not bread]”).

The implication of these emphases for the study of πορεύομαι in Matthew 28:19 is to show whether this word should be translated in English with the imperatival “go” which emphasizes spatial distance (over there and not here), or “go” which emphasizes urgency of action (starting now), or with the participial “going” which emphasizes the priority of the action of the main verb (make disciples and not something else)¹⁵, or a combination of these emphases.

While the use of πορεύομαι as an auxiliary to the action of the main verb may play a significant role in analyzing what is to be done (as opposed to doing something else), unless the context specifically states what the “something else” is, the reader has little way of knowing whether the main verb is being emphasized or it.¹⁶ The only other way of knowing whether πορεύομαι is being used as an auxiliary to the main verb is when neither spatial distance nor urgency of action are being emphasized (as a result of deduction). Consequently, the following study of the 15 verses listed above will focus mainly on whether the emphasis of πορεύομαι is on spatial distance or urgency of action. Another discussion is needed and will follow later in order to discuss whether πορεύομαι is to be understood as an auxiliary to the main verb or not in Matthew 28:19.

¹⁵ With this use of πορεύομαι, the words “go and” could be left untranslated in the English.

¹⁶ It should also be noted that the tone of one’s voice might emphasize one of these aspects over another. For example, if the speaker places an accent on the first word “GO! and do likewise” he would be emphasizing physical distance as opposed to “Go and DO! likewise” where “go” is being used to emphasize the action of the main verb and no physical traveling is necessarily intended. However, since God has chosen to communicate His Word to us through the means of written Scripture, it may be assumed that any emphasis that He intends is communicated in the grammatical constructions of the biblical text.

Beginning then with Matthew's Gospel, the first example of the aorist participle of πορεύομαι followed by an aorist imperative is found in Matthew 2:8. Here, Herod is talking to the Magi: "And sending them to Bethlehem, he said, 'Go and search carefully for the young Child and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him.'" Clearly, in this verse, spatial distance is inferred by the word πορεύομαι. Herod, being in Jerusalem, uses the word πορεύομαι to emphasize the need for the Magi to travel to Bethlehem. Herod also uses the word to communicate the urgency of the action (i.e. "I want you to start searching for the Child right away [not whenever they get around to it]").¹⁷ Rogers writes, "It could possibly be translated 'when you go, search out' but the urgency of Herod certainly demands an imperative 'go and search out.'"¹⁸

The next use of the aorist participle of πορεύομαι followed by an aorist imperative is in Matthew 9:13. Jesus tells the Pharisees, "But go and learn what it means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." Based on this verse's content, the word πορεύομαι here primarily emphasizes the priority of action of the main verb (i.e. "do this"), but it also emphasizes (to a lesser degree) urgency (i.e. "do this now") and spatial distance (i.e. "not here").

The following usage is in Matthew 11:4. Jesus tells John's disciples, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see" (cf. Luke 7:22). The emphasis here appears to be on spatial distance, while not denying the importance and urgency of the action. Rogers once again states the imperative character of the aorist participle πορεύομαι preceding an aorist main verb, "[T]he

¹⁷ Whether the importance of the action of the main verb is being emphasized is not clear (i.e., is Herod saying, "Search for the Child" as opposed to something else [e.g., "Do not worship in the synagogue"]?) Only the context can indicate whether this aspect is being emphasized.

¹⁸ Cleon Rogers, "The Great Commission," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 130 (July 1973), 260-61.

construction in Matthew 11:4, πορευθέντε' απαγγείλατε is without question to be understood in an imperative sense."¹⁹ A similar summary can be made of Jesus' words in Matthew 17:27, "Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you." Both of these verses place the emphasis of πορεύομαι on spatial distance, with emphasis also placed upon urgency of action.

It should be observed from these verses (and it is true of all 15 New Testament and LXX examples listed above) that the aorist participle always takes on the imperative force of the aorist imperative that follows it. Rogers comments, "This was not a matter of 'when you go' or 'as you go' or 'having gone' but 'go and report.'"²⁰ The grammatical grounds for such a translation will be established shortly.

In Matthew 28:7, an angel tells the women at the tomb, "Go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him." The fact that the disciples are not there implies that the women must travel some physical distance. This fact is inherently implied in the use of πορεύομαι here. So, too, the urgency of the action is emphasized by the use of πορεύομαι together with the word ταχύ (quickly).

While the rest of the examples of the aorist participle of πορεύομαι used along with an aorist imperative in the New Testament and LXX add to the overall evidence, they may all be summarized equally as emphasizing (to some extent or another) both the concept of spatial distance and urgency of action. Consequently, the option of πορεύομαι as simply acting an auxiliary to the main verb appears improbable in Matthew 28:19.

¹⁹ Ibid., 261.

²⁰ Ibid. Rogers also offers another example of the same use of this grammatical construction in Acts. Luke records, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (16:9). The aorist participle of διαβάνω is used followed by the aorist imperative of βοηθέω. Both aorists in Acts 16:9 carry an imperatival force.

It should be noted that all the examples from the New Testament and LXX verses listed above have an authority figure speaking (i.e. Jesus [as the One sent by the Father with universal authority], Herod [as king], Rebekah [as mother], and Jacob [as father]). As already observed in Matthew 28:18, Jesus implicitly states the source and explicitly states the extent of His authority before commissioning His disciples.

It should also be noted that in every one of these 15 verses, the immediate context explicitly indicates the concept of spatial distance by direct statement (e.g. “Go to the sea”) or by implied statement (e.g. “Go and tell John”; John being in prison and not there). The implication of this conclusion for the study at hand is that while Matthew 28:19 does not contain any direct statement to go somewhere else and make disciples, it does imply this in the words “all the nations.” Furthermore, Jesus’ commission implies urgency of action (i.e. “not whenever you get around to it”). He is telling His disciples that they are to start now (and so continue) making disciples (which they had not previously been doing). While the obligation of them having to go to other countries is not explicitly stated, the immediate context and content of Matthew 28:19 indicates that the disciples are to physically go. The reference to making disciples *of all nations* implies spatial distance. This commission would be impossible (especially if it is only for the 11 apostles), if the apostles did not go to any other peoples.²¹

The one verse that needs its own special attention in this discussion is Mark 16:15. This verse is unique in the sense that it contains similar content and structure to Matthew 28:19. Jesus, speaking to the eleven apostles, says in Mark 16:15, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” Similar to Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:15 contains the aorist participle of *πορεύομαι* followed by an aorist imperative (here, *κηρύσσω*). However, in this verse the

²¹ Jesus is obviously not implying that people from every nation had to come to the apostles in Jerusalem in order to become disciples. Church history indicates that it was the apostles (at least, most of them) who went to the Gentile nations and made disciples.

concept of spatial distance is both explicitly stated with the words “into all the world” and it is clearly implied in the words “to every creature.” While in Matthew 28:19, the statement, “Go and make disciples of all nations” may not explicitly state going to a foreign country *per se*, this is implied in its immediate context and it is explicitly stated in its parallel passage in Mark’s Gospel.

In addition to the commission given in Mark’s Gospel is the less direct commission given in Luke’s Gospel. In Luke 24:46-49, Jesus tells His disciples, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”²² The emphasis on spatial distance (as well as urgency and importance of action) is clearly communicated in these verses. Forgiveness is to be proclaimed to all the nations beginning from (ἀπὸ) Jerusalem. But before the disciples go out to “all the nations,” they are to wait in Jerusalem (“the city”) until the Holy Spirit is sent. Then they are to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Since the commissions in each of the Synoptics are paralleled by their content, they should be understood as communicating similar truth. Both Mark and Luke indicate that the meaning of πορεύομαι in Matthew 28:19 should not be considered as simply reinforcing the main verb μαθητεύω, but rather, as emphasizing physical distance (“Go to all the nations”) and urgency (“Go” as well as “they went out and preached” in Mark 16:15 and 20; “should be

²² The words “upon you” (ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς, also in Acts 1:8) require a separate study in order to show whether they refer to the Old Testament concept regarding the Holy Spirit coming upon someone for ministry, while not indwelling them (e.g. 1 Sam. 11:6; 16:13; Isa. 32:15) or whether they refer to the Old Testament concept regarding covenantal blessing (e.g. Lev. 26:9; Isa. 9:2).

preached” in Luke 24:47). Rogers writes, “Without the going, the making disciples is not possible, and especially when ‘all nations’ is the object.”²³ According to the (less obvious) parallel passage in John, the disciples were clearly sent. Just as the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends His disciples (John 20:21).

While the translation of “going therefore make disciples” has been proposed, due to the fact that the English participle “going” (woodenly) corresponds to the Greek participle in this verse, such a translation does not hold up in comparison with other uses of the aorist participle of πορεύομαι preceding an aorist imperative in the New Testament and the LXX. In each example in the LXX, the aorist participle of πορεύομαι and the aorist imperative (which follows it) both translate two Qal imperatives in the Hebrew. Regarding these usages of πορεύομαι, the LXX translators understood it best to translate two Hebrew imperatives with the aorist participle of πορεύομαι followed by an aorist imperative.

Not once, in the 15 verses from the above list, is the Greek participle translated with an English participle.²⁴ For example, in Luke 22:8, Jesus tells His disciples, “Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat.” Under no circumstances can this verse be translated, “Going, prepare the Passover ...” The disciples were to go and then prepare the Passover. They could not possibly prepare the Passover while they were on their way (“going”) to the upper room. Rogers writes, “The participle is vitally related to the command contained in the imperative. Without the action of the participle having taken place it would not be possible to carry out the command. The participle proposes the way for the fulfilling of the main verb and in this way

²³ Rogers, “Great Commission,” 262.

²⁴ This holds true in all the major English translations (KJV, NASB, NKJV, NIV, ASV, RSV, NRS, etc.).

also has the form of an imperative.”²⁵ This implies that the aorist participle of πορεύομαι in Matthew 28:19 is best translated “go.”

An example of such a translation of πορεύομαι as “going” or “as you go” in the New Testament is in Matthew 10:7. In this verse, Jesus tells His twelve disciples, “And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” This verse is significantly different from Matthew 28:19 in two regards. Firstly, in Matthew 10:7, Jesus uses the present participle of πορεύομαι followed by a present imperative (κηρύσσω). His use of the aorist participle and aorist imperative in Matthew 28:19 clearly indicates that the two passages should not be equated in their translation and interpretation. Secondly, regarding Matthew 10:7, Jesus has just told His disciples in the previous verse to go (“to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”) and preach. Then, in verse 7, He says, “And as you go, ...” This is noticeably differently from beginning directly with the participle in verse 7 (as He does in Matthew 28:19), as though verses 5 and 6 were not in the immediate context.

The fact that two aorists are used in Matthew 28:19 (as opposed to the present tense) indicates that certain action is implied. Rogers writes, “The aorist aspect makes the command definite and urgent. It is not ‘if you happen to be going’ or ‘whenever you might be’ but rather ‘go and perform an act.’”²⁶ Furthermore, the translations of the aorist participle πορεύομαι (followed by an aorist imperative) as “going” or “as you go” find no New Testament support whatsoever. The lack of any one example that leaves the aorist participle πορεύομαι (when followed by an aorist imperative) untranslated is duly noted. These options are rejected by the overwhelmingly consistent New Testament and LXX translations of “go” (when it has the same grammatical structure as in Matthew 28:19) as a participial imperative.

²⁵ Rogers, “Great Commission,” 261.

²⁶ Ibid., 262.

Commenting on Matthew 28:19, Carson writes, "... computer studies of the Greek NT have shown that although a participle dependent on an imperative normally gains imperatival force when it *precedes* the imperative, its chief force is not normally imperatival when it *follows* the imperative."²⁷ Along the same lines, Culver claims this participial imperative "is very common in the New Testament."²⁸ Rogers calls the use of the participle in Matthew 28:19, the circumstantial participle with an "imperative character." Quoting Adolph Schlatter, Rogers writes, "When two actions are connected with one process, the aorist participle which prepares for the actions is placed before the aorist of the main verb. This sentence structure occurs so often in Matthew that it characterizes the style of Matthew."²⁹ While the above list finds half of the New Testament examples in Matthew's Gospel, these include only the uses of the aorist participle of πορεύομαι.³⁰

Thus, in connection with the above study and quotes, it can be concluded that the aorist participle πορεύομαι in Matthew 28:19 should not be translated with an English participle, but rather, an imperative "Go and make disciples." Rogers concludes similarly, "The structure of the passage indicates the major emphasis of the commission lies in the aorist imperative ("make disciples") which is complemented by an aorist participle ("go") which is also part of the

²⁷ Carson, D. A., "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:597. This quote is also important for the discussion below regarding the other participles in Matthew 28:19-20.

²⁸ Culver, "Church Commission," 250.

²⁹ Rogers, "Great Commission," 260. Quoted from Adolph Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus* (Stuttgart, 1948), 23.

³⁰ Of the 35 aorist participles (of any root) in the New Testament that take on the imperatival force of a succeeding aorist imperative, 13 are used by Matthew (2:8, 13, 20; 6:6; 9:6, 13, 18; 11:4; 17:27; 21:2; 22:13; 28:7, 19). Interestingly, Mark uses only one (Mark 16:15) and Luke 18 (11 times in Luke and 7 in Acts), while John never uses an imperatival participle.

command.”³¹ Furthermore, it can be concluded that πορεύομαι in Matthew 28:19 emphasizes spatial distance and urgency based on the content and immediate context of this verse, its parallel passages in the other Gospels, and the fact that every similar usage of πορεύομαι in the New Testament and the LXX emphasizes spatial distance and urgency.

The Meaning of μαθητεύω in Matthew 28:19

The main verb of Matthew 28:19 is the aorist imperative of μαθητεύω. This verb is used sparsely in the New Testament (only in Matt. 13:52; 27:57; Acts 14:21) and not at all in the LXX.³² Both of the Matthaean texts refer to someone becoming a disciple of Jesus. Matthew uses the aorist participle of μαθητεύω in both of the following verses. He writes, “... every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven ...” (13:52b) and “... Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus” (27:57b). Both of these texts infer that this making of a disciple occurred at some point (assumedly, at their conversion upon belief in Christ). Rengstorff writes causative use of μαθητεύω, “Behind this peculiar New Testament use there possibly stands the insight that one can become a disciple of Jesus – this also stands behind Matthew 13:52 - only on the basis of a call which leads to discipleship.”³³ Although Rengstorff is somewhat hesitant in his conclusion, his differentiation between one’s call to become a disciple and the process of discipleship itself should be carefully noted. While this differentiation in terminology is not observed as such in the Bible, references are made to both of these concepts in Scripture. For example, Paul writes to the Corinthians, “For though you might have ten thousand

³¹ Rogers, “Great Commission,” 262.

³² BAGD groups Matthew 13:52 and 27:57 under the definition “to be a pupil,” while it groups Matthew 28:19 and Acts 14:21 under the definition “to cause one to be a pupil, to teach” (BAGD, 609). However, Rengstorff groups Matthew 27:57 separate from the causative meaning of Matthew 13:52; 28:19; and Acts 14:21 (“μαθητεύω,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, [ed. G. Freidreich, transl. and ed. G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967)], 4:461).

³³ Ibid.

instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15). Paul differentiates between the Corinthians’ conversion (becoming disciples) and their training (being disciplined). The Corinthians were made disciples through Paul’s preaching and then they went on to be disciplined by other (faithful) teachers.

Also of significance to this study is the only other New Testament usage of μαθητεύω (outside Matthew). Luke records in Acts 14:21, “And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch.” Both of the phrases “preached the gospel” and “made many disciples” are aorist participles that modify (grammatically) the main verb “returned.” While these two aorist participles in Acts 14:21 are used in parallel and should not be considered as identical actions, they are complementary in nature. Both εὐαγγελίζω and μαθητεύω here refer to two separate and distinct actions; one on the part of the apostle-preachers and the other on behalf of the new converts. However, these participles, while not identical actions, refer to the same event (the preaching of the gospel). Such a grammatical construction can be understood to be complementary, indicating that the making of disciples was the result of the preaching of the gospel. Like two sides of the one coin, preaching is the cause and the result is that many responded to the gospel (and thus, they were made disciples). While Nicoll incorrectly concludes that the present participle is to be preferred here in Acts 14:21, his resulting conclusion regarding Paul’s preaching is correct, “... and the result, many disciples.”³⁴ Since Acts 14:21 is the only New Testament usage of μαθητεύω, outside the Gospel of Matthew, the fact that it is used in direct connection with the preaching of the gospel (εὐαγγελίζω) indicates that it is to be understood in relation to gospel preaching.

³⁴ W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 1:311.

In the following verse in Acts 14, Luke states that Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, “strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith...” (v. 22). While it is not stated how long Paul and Barnabas were in these four cities (including Derbe), it appears to be only a short period of time. Goodwin, in his harmony on the life of Paul, concludes that the “entire [first] journey was apparently a rapid one.”³⁵ Consequently, these disciples must have been relatively new converts (who had yet to be fully discipled; cf. Acts 14:8-20). A quick survey of the Gospels and Acts indicates that the term “disciple” is used throughout these books for new converts from the day of their conversion, when they are first “made” disciples.³⁶ Thus, Acts 14:21-22 similarly uses the New Testament concept of μαθητεύω to refer to the direct, positive result of preaching (i.e. “disciples were made”) and not to a prolonged process of disciple-making.³⁷

A further comparison of Matthew 28:19-20 and Mark 16:15 offers more in regards to the content of disciple-making. Jesus states in Matthew 28:19-20 that His disciples are to make other disciples. In the parallel passage of Mark 16:15, Jesus states that His disciples are to preach the gospel to every creature. By simple comparison, the preaching of the gospel and disciple-making, while not identical, do seem to be very similar concepts (the first emphasizing cause and the second, result). This conclusion is supported by Luke’s report in Acts 14:21-22.

Disciple-making and preaching may be considered as very similar actions. This conclusion is based (in part) on the fact that Matthew 28:19-20 does not explicitly state what the content of disciple-making is, while its parallel passages provide a probable option. The phrase

³⁵ Quoted in Frank Goodwin, *A Harmony of Life of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 44. While Goodwin does quote Hackett here, he offers no bibliographical information.

³⁶ The term “disciple” is not used in the rest of the New Testament.

³⁷ The term “discipleship” better refers to a prolonged training period for disciples.

“make disciples” in Matthew’s Gospel may be considered as equivalent to “preach” in Mark and the “repentance and remission of sins should be preached” in Luke.

The Meaning of βαπτίζω and διδάσκω in Matthew 28:19-20

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus tells His disciples to go and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them. The words βαπτίζω (“to baptize”) and διδάσκω (“to teach”) are both present participles in Matthew 28:19-20. Although they are related to the main verb (the aorist imperative of μαθητεύω), they should not be understood to have any imperatival force as they *follow* the imperative. Furthermore, while these two participles are subordinate to the main verb (“to make disciples”), they do not necessarily need to be understood as the means of disciple-making.³⁸ They can be understood as subordinate in the sense that disciple-making is the primary function that is to be followed by the less important functions of baptizing and teaching. Or they may be understood as being subordinate to disciple-making (conversion) in the sense that they follow it chronologically. Carson writes, “Baptizing and teaching are not the *means* of making disciples, but they characterize it. ... The response of discipleship is baptism and instruction. Therefore baptism and teaching are not coordinate – either grammatically or conceptually – with the action of making disciples.”³⁹ Carson goes on to show that the masculine pronouns of “them” in Matthew 28:19-20 do not naturally refer to the neuter object “nations” (v. 19). While Carson concludes that, “The NT can scarcely conceive of a disciple who is not baptized or is not instructed,”⁴⁰ the concept of making disciples is equated primarily with the conversion of the heathen (who are then to be baptized and instructed). Thus, apostles

³⁸ Rogers disagrees, “The relation of the two present participles to the main verb is not as problematic. They are both obviously intended to indicate the means by which the making disciples is to be accomplished” (“Great Commission,” 262).

³⁹ Carson, “Matthew,” 597.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

are to make other disciples through the preaching of the gospel. The conclusion can be drawn then that the preaching of the gospel is at the core of Jesus' commission to His disciples in Matthew 28:18-20.⁴¹

In responding positively to the preaching of the gospel, unbelievers are made disciples, who are then to be baptized and instructed in the teachings of Christ. The close connection of making disciples and preaching should be separated theologically from the concepts of baptism and teaching. Paul's stated that he was not sent to baptize (rather, he was relieved that he only baptized a few), but that he was sent to preach the gospel (1 Cor. 1:17).

Baptism and instruction should be characteristic of every disciple of Jesus, but this does not mean that they are the means of becoming a disciple. Baptism involves a one-time, public act of submission to the lordship of Christ, while teaching involves learning the teachings of Christ over a prolonged period of time (maybe even a lifetime). Rogers writes concerning these present participles in Matthew 28:19-20, "The present tense of each stresses the continual activity involved."⁴² While both are necessary for every disciple of Jesus, neither one is absolutely essential in order to become a disciple of Jesus (cf. *sola fidei*).

The equating of the concept of making disciples with one-on-one discipleship or pastoral internships over a period of time (while not inherently wrong in themselves) does not respect the biblical usage of "disciple-making" in its New Testament context. Jesus called His disciples at the beginning of His ministry and immediately they were considered His disciples (although they were not yet baptized or instructed). They were not made His disciples upon their completion of their three years of ministering together with Jesus.

⁴¹ Paul's emphasis on the preaching of the gospel is well attested in the New Testament. The principle verse on the gospel in the book of Romans is preceded by a statement on Paul's desiring to preach it (cf. 1:15-16). He writes concerning himself, "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16).

⁴² Rogers, "Great Commission," 262.

In conclusion, the above study has shown, thus far, that the disciples were to go and preach, with emphases placed on both physical distance and the urgent importance of making disciples. Furthermore, they were to make disciples of all nations (through the preaching of the gospel) and then baptize the new disciples and train them in all that Christ had commanded them.⁴³ While this study has not proven that the present participles “baptizing” and “teaching” should not be used to show the means by which disciple-making is done, it has offered a rational, biblical explanation that respects the New Testament usage of disciple-making.

The Meaning of συντέλεια του αἰῶνος in Matthew 28:20

In Matthew 28:20b, Christ follows the commission to His disciples with the promise, “and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” The last phrase “the end of the age” (συντέλεια του αἰῶνος) is only used four other times by Matthew (13:39, 40, 49; 24:3) and does not occur elsewhere in the New Testament or the LXX.⁴⁴ Matthew always uses the phrase συντέλεια του αἰῶνος to refer to the consummation of the current age, which terminates with Christ’s second advent to earth.

While the disciples may have understood that Jesus would return to earth in their lifetime (unlikely in light of John 21:18-19), Jesus, in His glorified state, knew it would not be so. The point here is that Jesus did not say that He would be with His disciples until their deaths, but rather, until the end of the age (clearly referring to His second advent in light of His other usages of this expression recorded in Matthew). This implies that since the promise given originally by Jesus to His eleven disciples in Matthew 28:20b is valid until His second advent, the commission given by Jesus to His eleven disciples in Matthew 28:19-20a would cover the same period.

⁴³ While the New Testament practice seems to connect the act of salvation and the act of baptism so that they were virtually a single act, theologically they should be considered separately.

⁴⁴ While a similar phrase is used in Hebrews 9:26, here the plural of “age” is used (συντέλεια τῶν αἰώνων). This phrase is used in Hebrews 9:26 to refer to the ages up until Christ’s first advent (cf. Heb. 1:1-3).

While this conclusion is argumentation by association and cannot be proven, it does prohibit the opposite to be true (i.e., on these grounds, it cannot be proven that the commission is not currently valid as long as the promise that directly accompanies it is currently valid). Other evidence must now be examined if the possibility still holds that the Great Commission should not be considered as obligatory for the Church today.

Application of Matthew 28:18-20

While Matthew 28:18-20 has already been exegeted and interpreted (to a certain extent) in the previous section, the discussion will now focus in on the applicability of this passage for the Church today. This section on application will deal primarily with objections to the current orthodox understanding of the Great Commission and provide application to the previous study in the responses given.

Four main questions will be addressed in this section. They relate respectively to the applicability, the (past) fulfillment, the missionary nature, and the possibility of (future) fulfillment of Matthew 28:18-20. First, is Matthew 28:18-20 to be understood as applicable only for the original apostles? Second, has Matthew 28:18-20 already been fulfilled? Third, is Matthew 28:18-20 a missionary commission? And fourth, is Matthew 28:18-20 an impossible mission?

Is Matthew 28:18-20 to be Understood as Applicable Only for the Original Apostles?

This question leads to a major objection to the Great Commission, namely, is it actually a Great Commission? In other words, is Matthew 28:18-20 for the Church today or was it given only to the original apostles? Several related questions also need to be raised in relation to this first question: does Matthew 28:20a (“teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”) include the Great Commission itself? Were the original apostles acting as the Church’s

representatives when they received their missionary mandate? And, if so, is Matthew 28:18-20 a valid command for the Church today? Also, is the Church obligated to perform the Great Commission that it did not directly receive?

While Matthew 28:18-20 records some of the Lord's last words before His ascension, these words were given before the Holy Spirit had come and the Church had begun. When the Church did begin, the apostles were endowed with special powers, spiritual gifts, and authority to record the words of Jesus along with their divine commission. While other disciples also had these gifts and powers in the Early Church (to some extent or another), today no one can prove that he has these same gifts and authority. With the passing of the apostles were also the passing of these gifts, powers, authority, and the closing of the biblical canon. As discussed earlier, for a large portion of Church history, the Church understood Matthew 28:18-20 as being valid only for the original apostles. The Church understood the "Great" Commission as being given only to the eleven apostles and not to the Church as a whole. They also understood that while the teachings of Jesus were to continue as expressed in other New Testament passages (e.g. 2 Tim. 2:2), the apostles' commission was not. Furthermore, the Lord's commission to the apostles is not repeated to the Church as a whole, or to any local church or individual by any New Testament author. This conclusion has led some to understand that the Great Commission is not valid for the Church today. However, more evidence needs to be examined before a conclusion can be drawn.

Practically speaking, if one rejects the Great Commission as not being valid today, then where does the biblical interpreter draw the line regarding what is valid for the Church today and what is not? While not commonly proposed, one may understand what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 2:2 as being valid only for Timothy and not for the Church today. In fact, the whole Bible may

be written off as ancient texts (always written to others) that have no direct applicability for the Church today. All of Scripture was written to some specific individual, local church, or group of people (e.g. Hebrews).

A proper use of biblical hermeneutics, exegesis, and interpretation must include discernment on the part of the interpreter in regards to applicability.⁴⁵ In Matthew 28:20, Jesus commands His disciples to teach other disciples all the things that He has commanded them. This command must have included going and preaching of the gospel that was a major aspect of Jesus' ministry and a major factor of the disciples' commission (cf. Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47). The preaching of the gospel is interwoven with the atoning work of Christ. Some of the last words of Jesus on earth include, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47). The command to preach the gospel (and thus make disciples or converts) is at the very basis of Christianity. Paul tells the Corinthians, "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, ... For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day ..." (1 Cor. 15:1-4). The preaching of the gospel was more important to Paul than anything else (cf. 1 Cor. 9:16). While the preaching of the gospel (in order to make disciples) is only one of the commands Jesus gave His disciples, it was also the most important. It was obvious that Jesus and His disciples did not understand His command in Matthew 28:20 ("teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you") to include everything that Christ ever commanded His disciples to do. For

⁴⁵ The illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is needed more in applying truth to one's own culture and personal life, than in following the established rules of hermeneutics, exegesis, and interpretation.

example, according to Luke 22:8, Jesus commanded two of His disciples to go and prepare the Passover in the upper room (a similar construction of πορεύομαι as in Matt. 28:19). However, it would have been nonsensical if Peter and John repeated this command to their disciples after Pentecost (so that they should obey it in the same way Jesus initially intended). Other examples would highlight contradictions in what Jesus had commanded, if the disciples were not selective in the commands that they chose to pass on for the Church to follow (e.g. Luke 9:3 and 10:4 with Luke 22:36). However, this selection process must not eliminate the commands Christ gave to His disciples that can apply to the Church in this age. For example, the command, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,” can be directly applied to the Church today.

It appears that a general rule for applying the Lord’s commands in this present age may have come from Carey himself. Carey held that Matthew 28:18-20 is valid in this current age because “The command, he asserted, had not been repealed, there were still subjects to obey it, there had been no further revelation to counter it, and nothing stood in the way of obeying it.”⁴⁶ Each command must be understood as being applicable in light of several aspects, including historical context, dispensational factors, and even common sense.

Clearly what the Lord commissioned His disciples to do in Matthew 28:18-20 was only to be done in the present Church age. In fact, the apostles were not to begin their commission until the Church began (cf. Acts 1:4-8; 2:1-4). As discussed earlier from Luke 24:49, the apostles were to wait in Jerusalem until the Spirit came upon them. Then they were to go and preach the gospel of repentance to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem. While some of them stayed a long time in Jerusalem, this is not true of all of them.

⁴⁶ O’Brien, “Great Commission,” 255.

While there are no further statements regarding the Great Commission as such in the rest of the New Testament, it is apparent that the apostles (including Paul) regarded the Lord's words as binding on all Christians and not just themselves. Paul tells Timothy, "... continue in the things you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them" (2 Tim. 3:14). The immediate context includes both Timothy's childhood training as well as Paul's example. Paul writes earlier, "You have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, ..." (v. 10). Paul wanted Timothy to continue in the things he had learned from Paul himself. Paul commanded Timothy to preach the word and do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:2, 5). Paul assumed that the Great Commission of the Lord to His initial disciples was applicable to Timothy as well. There is no record that the Lord appeared personally to Timothy to commission Him. No, it is assumed that the Great Commission is binding on all Christians and should be applied to every Christian's individual situation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ Presumably, this is what Paul wanted from all his followers. He writes to the Corinthians, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 4:15b-17 are also insightful, "... for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church." Paul imitated Christ and as such, he required others to imitate him. This imitation would carry at its basis the preaching of the gospel to the nations.

⁴⁷ The original apostles were sent to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Paul was initially sent to Damascus and Jerusalem, the regions of Judea, Asia Minor and beyond (2 Cor. 10:16). The geographical regions are not the same for every Christian, but the commission as stated in Matthew 28:19-20 is binding on every disciple of Christ just as Matthew 22:37 is ("Love the Lord your God ...").

Whether the Matthew 28:18-20 has already been fulfilled (particularly, whether this happened in the lifetime of the apostles) will now be discussed.

Has Matthew 28:18-20 Already Been Fulfilled?

This second question will treat this next objection regarding the fulfillment of the Great Commission in relation to its past and present fulfillment. Did the original apostles (including the apostle Paul) fulfill Matthew 28:18-20 in their lifetime?⁴⁸ While the eleven apostles received their commission directly from the Lord on a mountain in Galilee, the apostle Paul also received a special commission directly from the Lord on the road to Damascus several years later.⁴⁹

While the history of many of the apostles remains unknown, it is relatively certain that Peter, the apostle to the circumcised (Gal. 2:7-8), did minister outside of Israel. Peter may have lived in Rome for a time and he may have planted several churches in northern Asia Minor. He addressed his first epistle to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout northern Asia Minor, in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet. 1:1). While this does not necessarily mean that Peter knew these local churches personally, it is implied in his epistle. Blum writes, “Peter may have evangelized the northern region of Asia Minor while Paul founded churches in the southern and the western areas of Asia Minor.”⁵⁰ Earlier Blum writes, “First Clement 5:4-7 names Peter and Paul as victims of persecution. The common understanding is

⁴⁸ While one may argue that Paul did not need a special commission since the Great Commission was valid for all Christians after Pentecost, Paul was specially called to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7-9).

⁴⁹ Goodwin, following Hackett, dates Paul’s conversion in the year 36 A.D. based on several historical events (*Harmony*, 7). The other dates mentioned in this section are all taken from Goodwin’s book.

⁵⁰ Edwin A. Blum, “1 Peter,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 12:212.

that the passage refers to the persecution by Nero at Rome.”⁵¹ These facts indicate that Peter, the key apostle to the Jews, went to the nations.⁵²

However, the New Testament clearly shows that the apostles did not go immediately to the Gentiles.⁵³ Initially they stayed in Jerusalem. When Paul first went to Jerusalem in 39 A.D. he was apparently introduced to the apostles by Barnabas (Acts 9:26-28), although Paul states that he saw only Peter and James (Gal. 1:18-19). When Paul returns on his third visit to Jerusalem in 50 A.D., he sees that the apostles are still in Jerusalem (Acts 15). When Paul makes his fifth visit to Jerusalem in 58 A.D., he still finds James in Jerusalem (Acts 21:18).⁵⁴

After Stephen’s death, many Christians were scattered around Judea and Samaria. Luke records, “At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1). This scattering appears to be a fulfillment of Acts 1:8 (“...you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”). Those scattered traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch preaching the gospel to the Jews there (Acts 11:19). The gospel soon reached those from Cyprus and Cyrene (vv. 20-21).

During this time, Paul traveled to Cyprus and Asia Minor on his first missionary journey. When he returned in 50 A.D. and headed for Jerusalem, he passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, but apparently he did not evangelize these areas this time (probably due to the extensive evangelization already done by those scattered). Luke records, “... they [Paul and Barnabas]

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² It should be mentioned that Peter was the one given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. He not only preached the main message at Pentecost but also was the one sent to Cornelius.

⁵³ Apparently, even Paul was also called to preach to the Jews first (cf. Rom. 1:16; Acts 26:20).

⁵⁴ In Acts, no further mention is made of Peter after chapter 15 and no further mention of any of the Eleven after chapter 21.

passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren” (Acts 15:3). After the Jerusalem Council, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and after “some days” they began (separate) missionary journeys to Asia Minor (Acts 15:36-41).

It appears that while Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria were not 100 percent Christian, they were evangelized to a significant degree. Consequently, Paul did not see the need to stay in these regions, although he had previously evangelized in the regions of Judea (Acts 26:20). Thus, on his second journey, Paul returned to Asia Minor in order to strengthen the churches there. On his second journey, he is called by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel even further in the regions of Macedonia and Greece. On his fourth journey, Paul arrived in Rome, the capital of the Gentile world, where he continued to preach the gospel (i.e. make disciples). The progression away from the more evangelized fields to the less evangelized fields should be noted. Also the fact that not only the apostle Paul was involved in this missionary endeavor but also “uncommissioned” disciples such as Silas, Barnabas, John Mark, Timothy, Titus, and Epaphras.

This background sketch lays the groundwork for a study of several key texts in the New Testament that refer to a fulfillment of the Lord’s commission in Matthew 28:18-20. Paul states in Acts 26:20 that he obeyed his divine call and, “declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.” Whether Paul means that he preached to all the Gentiles must be seen as questionable, considering that later, in Acts 28:31, he is still preaching to the Gentiles.

Paul does state that Romans 15:19 reads, “In mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached (πεπληρωέναι) the gospel of Christ.” “Fully preached” is a loose translation of the perfect infinite of πληρώω (“to make full, fill, complete, finish”). BAGD proposes the following definition of πληρώω for Romans 15:19: “to bring to completion that which was already begun, *complete, finish ... bring* (the preaching of) *the gospel to completion* by proclaiming it in the most remote areas.”⁵⁵ It is not certain how detailed this referral is in regards to Paul having preached the gospel in the most remote areas. If Paul preached once in a particular town, was that sufficient for him to say that the gospel was brought to completion in that area? Did this preaching also include new converts sharing their faith with others and only thus, the gospel was preached to every creature in that town?

The known world of the first century A.D. extended far beyond Illyricum. Paul wanted to go to Spain, but apparently this journey was never realized. He wanted to go to northern Asia Minor but was prevented by the Holy Spirit. It can be confidently estimated that there were still millions of people on the face of the earth that had never heard the gospel from the mouth of the apostle Paul. How this estimation fits in with the following two statements of Paul remains problematic. Colossians 1:6 reads in the NKJV, “[the gospel] which has come to you, as *it has* also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth.” Colossians 1:23 reads, “... the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, ...” The NASB translates both of these verses slightly different. In Colossians 1:6 it reads, “[the gospel] which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, ...” The problem with this

⁵⁵ BAGD, 828. Italics in original.

translation is that it ignores the first occurrence of *καὶ* (“and”) in this verse. The NIV translation (“[the gospel] that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is producing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you ...”) ignores the three occurrences of *καὶ* in this verse. The NASB translates Colossians 1:23 with the more generic “all creation” as opposed to “every creature” (cf. Mark 16:15): “the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, ...” Interestingly, all these translations use the same words (either “all creation” or “every creature”) to translate both Mark 16:15 and Colossians 1:23. Since the same Greek expression (*πάσῃ τῇ κτίσει*) is used in both verses, the latter can be said to be a fulfillment of the former. Whether it is the only fulfillment required for the Great Commission can only be answered as the last two questions are raised and discussed in next two sections.

Regarding these verse in Colossians 1, the historical context also shows that Paul did not conclude that no further preaching was required because the Great Commission had been fulfilled. Paul wrote the book of Colossians during his first captivity in Rome. Goodwin dates the writing of Colossians in the year 61 or 62 A.D.⁵⁶ At this time, Paul states, “Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!” (Acts 28:28). He then remained in Rome for two years, “preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered” (v. 31).

Paul, while seeking to preach the gospel to the whole world, did not succeed in person. According to Goodwin, his proposed visit to Spain did not eventuate.⁵⁷ While many people had heard the gospel (either rejecting or accepting it) surely Paul was not claiming that every living soul on the face of the earth had heard the gospel. While the apostles had tarried for many years in Jerusalem, it was apparent to Paul (in 58 A.D.) that most of the Jews there did not understand

⁵⁶ Goodwin, *Harmony*, 8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

the gospel (as nullifying and replacing the law). In the last year of his life, in the last chapter he wrote, Paul commanded Timothy to preach the word and do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:2, 5). In the same book, he writes, “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Paul’s personal commission by the Lord Himself was passed on (in some extent or another) to Paul’s own disciples. There is no apparent reason why Timothy would not have passed the same onto his disciples and so on until the end of the age. William Carey’s message seems appropriate once again, “The command ... had not been repealed, there were still subjects to obey it, there had been no further revelation to counter it, and nothing stood in the way of obeying it.”⁵⁸

According to the testimony of the New Testament, no one is said to have received water baptism after 53 A.D.⁵⁹ Interestingly, the words of the Lord in Acts 1:5 concerning the Holy Spirit’s baptism replacing water baptism are repeated by Peter in Acts 11 as he defends God’s grace reaching to the Gentiles. Peter states in Acts 11:16, “Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’” The use of the μέν ... δέ construction indicates that a new practice will begin with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

What is important for this study is the fact that water baptism is commanded in the New Testament only in Matthew 28:19 and thus its very existence is tied in with the validity of

⁵⁸ Quoted from O’Brien, “Great Commission,” 255.

⁵⁹ The Acts 18 passage is the last mentioned (chronologically, not canonically) regarding water baptism. Water baptism and the Holy Spirit’s baptism into Christ at salvation should clearly be differentiated. Outside of the Gospels, water baptism is mentioned in Acts 2:41; 8:12-16, 36-38; 9:18; 10:46-47; 16:15, 33; 18:8; and 1 Corinthians 1:13-17. Consequently, the remaining Scripture references are best understood as the Holy Spirit’s baptism into Christ at salvation (e.g. Rom. 6:3-4). In Acts 19, whether the disciples of John were baptized again with water is questionable due to the fact that they had already been baptized by John (as also Jesus had been). Barackman writes regarding the baptism of the Holy Spirit, “Apparently, gospel believers in other places did not receive this baptism until they were contacted by the Lord’s apostles (Acts 19:2-6)” (Floyd Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001], 205).

Matthew 28:18-20 for the Church today. It can be concluded from a quick survey of the New Testament that, apart from Matthew 28:19, no command to baptize with water is given in the New Testament to the Church as a whole, to a local church, or to any individual Christian. If water baptism is to be regarded as binding on all Christians, it must find its base in Matthew 28:18-20. However, if there is no Great Commission today, the ordinance of water baptism may need to be re-examined. Whether water baptism was to cease with the passing of the gifts, powers, miracles and signs of the apostles has to be left for a separate study of its own.

Is Matthew 28:18-20 a Missionary Commission?

This next question focuses in on the use of “go” in Matthew 28:18-20 and at the same time, raises the objection regarding whether “go” can be left untranslated in this text. O’Brien proposes that the “go” of the Great Commission should be omitted so that the Great Commission becomes (grammatically) valid for every Christian and not just missionaries.⁶⁰ O’Brien bases his conclusion in large part on the work of B. J. Hubbard, who lists 27 commissioning narratives in the Old Testament.⁶¹ Hubbard has identified seven common elements that are found (to some degree or another) in all 27 Old Testament commissions. While Hubbard’s seven categories of a biblical commission do shed light on the Lord’s commission to His disciples in Matthew 28:18-20, O’Brien’s conclusions are questionable.

O’Brien writes, “In almost half of the Old Testament commissioning narratives noted above the idiomatic expression ‘go’ (using the same Greek verb, *poreuomai*, as in Matthew 28:19) forms part of the commission (Gen. 12:1; 24:4; Exod. 3:16; Josh. 1:2; Isa. 6:9, etc.).”⁶²

⁶⁰ See O’Brien, “Great Commission,” 260-61.

⁶¹ B. J. Hubbard, *The Matthaean Redaction of a Primitive Apostolic Commissioning: An Exegesis of Matthew 28:16-20* (Missoula, 1974), 2-23.

⁶² O’Brien, “Great Commission,” 260.

However, of the many examples O'Brien lists, most do not contain the word πορεύομαι at all. Regarding the examples given in the above quote, most do not contain the word πορεύομαι.⁶³ Furthermore, while the nine examples given by O'Brien form a similar structure to Matthew 28:19 ("Go and ..."), not one uses the aorist participle of πορεύομαι along with an aorist imperative.

O'Brien continues, "On occasion (e.g., Gen. 12:1; 24:4), a movement from one place to another is indicated. But frequently this verb 'to go' is used as an auxiliary, with little or no force of its own – not only in the commissioning narratives (Judg. 4:6; 1 Kings 19:15) but also in other parts of the Old Testament materials."⁶⁴ However, every example that O'Brien offers either explicitly states or implies in its content or immediate context the concept of traveling (spatial distance). For example, concerning the two references given in the latter part of the above quote, Israel is commanded to "go (ἔρχομαι) and march to Mount Tabor" (Judg. 4:6) and Elijah is commanded to "go (πορεύομαι), return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus" (1 Kings 19:15). These verses (along with all the other passages which O'Brien lists) contain movement from one place to another and this movement is inherent in the imperative force that the participle receives from the imperative that follows it. O'Brien's suggestion that the word πορεύομαι should remain untranslated in the English is undesirable. As shown in a previous section, the aorist participle of πορεύομαι (when followed by an aorist imperative) always emphasizes distance (to be traveled) as well as urgency to act.

In order for O'Brien to claim that πορεύομαι should be understood in Matthew 28:19 as an auxiliary (with little or no force of its own), he must first examine all the uses of the aorist

⁶³ The word "go" translates the Greek ἔρχομαι in Genesis 21:1 and Exodus 3:16, and διαβαίνω in Joshua 1:2. Genesis 24:4 uses the future indicative form of πορεύομαι and Isaiah 6:9 uses its present imperative form. None of examples that O'Brien cites from Hubbard use the aorist participle form of πορεύομαι.

⁶⁴ O'Brien, "Great Commission," 260-61.

participle πορεύομαι (!) when used along with an aorist imperative. Then, he must show that there is a sufficient sample of usages that do not emphasize either distance to be traveled or urgency of action. However, as shown in the above survey of all 15 such usages in the New Testament and the LXX, every one emphasizes (to one extent or another) both physical distance and urgency. Unfortunately, O'Brien writes off all the Matthaean usages of the aorist participle πορεύομαι along with an aorist imperative as auxiliary usages of πορεύομαι.

O'Brien concludes, "The core command is the making of disciples, not the going."⁶⁵ Each example of the aorist participle πορεύομαι used along with an aorist imperative, in both the New Testament and the LXX, equates the imperatival force of this participle and imperative so that they become dual imperatives. While on the surface, the participle in Matthew 28:19 is subordinate to the imperative, it was shown earlier that any aorist participle which precedes an aorist imperative takes on the imperatival force of that imperative, equating the two conceptually (while not grammatically). Thus, the core command must be seen as having two aspects: going and making disciples.

O'Brien continues, "The idea of sending, being sent (i.e. from one place to another) is secondary and unemphasized, and as a result some have suggested the word 'go' is better left untranslated."⁶⁶ A quick comparison of Matthew 28:19 with a (less obvious) parallel passage in John's Gospel clearly indicates that the apostles were sent (20:21). Furthermore, the above study shows that the aorist participle πορεύομαι along with an aorist imperative always emphasizes both the concept of spatial distance and urgency. Thus, the option of an auxiliary explanation for

⁶⁵ Ibid., 261.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

πορεύομαι remains unsubstantiated and this participle should not be left untranslated in Matthew 28:19.

O'Brien incorrectly implies from his conclusion that, "the Eleven were not disobedient to this word by remaining in Jerusalem after Pentecost and making disciples. If the going is not to be emphasized then the important thing for the Eleven was to make disciples, wherever they had opportunity to do so."⁶⁷ However, Luke's Gospel clearly implies that the apostles were not to wait in Jerusalem after Pentecost. Christ states to His disciples that, "... repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:46-49). They were to begin in Jerusalem, but the implication of the statement "to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem" along with the later word "tarry in the city" implies that they were (sooner or later) to go to all the nations. Mark writes that the disciples went out immediately after Pentecost and preached the gospel everywhere (Mark 16:19-20). Luke records that the apostles were commissioned to be Christ's witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Physical distance is inherent in the content of such expressions.

O'Brien is correct in stating that the apostles were not disobedient to not go to the other nations immediately, but he is incorrect in assuming that they were disobedient in that they did not go to other nations later on. Though the apostles did preach the gospel to much of the known world of their time, it is highly doubtful that every individual person on the face of the earth heard the gospel in the apostles' lifetime.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ This has already been established regarding the well-attested histories of Peter and especially Paul. The histories of the other apostles going as far as India are less well attested. For example, according to Eastern

O'Brien concludes his section by writing,

If the commission to the disciples is applicable to the 20th century ... then it ought not to be restricted to missionaries. If "the going" is unemphasized and the "making disciples" receives the stress then clearly this will have reference to Christians generally. The terms "*missionary* commission" and "*missionary* mandate" unnecessarily limit the meaning of the phrase. The term "Great Commission" is apt, provided this is understood to refer to bringing men and women to submit to Jesus as Lord, to become His disciples, wherever they may be.⁶⁹

The fact that O'Brien conclusion is not far from a proper biblical application of Matthew 28:18-20, does not mean that he has followed proper hermeneutical and exegetical principles to arrive at such a conclusion. While all of the previous quotes from O'Brien are found in his exegesis section on Matthew 28:18-20, the missionary elements (referred to in the above quote) are not inherent anywhere in the biblical text. Rogers, after correctly exegeting Matthew 28:19, provides the following interpretation: "This must not be taken exclusively in the sense of going to a foreign country. The emphasis is on the universal nature of the task – a worldwide undertaking which involves the home country as well as foreign countries."⁷⁰ Furthermore, O'Brien has not shown that "the going," if emphasized in Matthew 28:18-20, should only relate to missionaries. This last statement may be begging the question, but it does reveal O'Brien's implied assumption. He implies that only if "the going" is unemphasized in Matthew 28:18-20 can it then refer to "Christians generally." However, nothing in the text limits it from emphasizing "the going" and referring to Christians in general. All Christians are to be involved and go and preach wherever the Spirit may lead them. By application, the "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" allow the possibility for all Christians to be obedient to the

Orthodox tradition, the apostle Andrew is historically reported to have personally planted the Church in Romania (called Dacia in the first century A.D.).

⁶⁹ O'Brien, "Great Commission," 261.

⁷⁰ Rogers, "Great Commission," 262.

Great Commission, even if the possibilities are not available to go to a distant land. Thus, Matthew 28:18-20 is a missionary commission which does not need to be limited to full-time missionaries and foreign countries.

Is Matthew 28:18-20 an Impossible Mission?

This next objection assumes that Matthew 28:18-20 is directly applicable for the Church today and focuses on the culmination of the Great Commission. While the Great Commission was fulfilled (in part) in the apostles' lifetime, its imperative is still valid for the Church today. But is Matthew 28:18-20 possible in every generation of the Church? Are Christians today to take the gospel to all the nations?⁷¹ If the Great Commission cannot be fulfilled in one's lifetime today, can that Christian truly be obedient to fulfill it? And if not, is it worth attempting? Ultimately, is it possible for the Great Commission ever to be fulfilled in the Church period?

First, if the Great Commission was not fulfilled in the apostles' lifetime, were they truly obedient to do it? While there is some information about the history of the apostles in the Early Church period, there is not sufficient information to show that the apostles did take the gospel to the known world of their time. While it can be said that the apostles were obedient to the Great Commission (in that they preached the gospel to the lost, and baptized and discipled gospel believers), it is pure speculation and unwise to state that they fulfilled the Great Commission. The Great Commission was not annulled upon Paul's statement that the gospel had been preached to every creature (cf. Col. 1:23), for He himself continued to preach the gospel to the Gentiles in Rome (cf. Acts 28:30-31).

The Church has inherited the Great Commission from the New Testament apostles and prophets. The Church is responsible to observe all that the Lord commanded His original

⁷¹ This study will not deal with the concept of "people groups" versus "nations," but will assume the former to be the basic meaning of "nations" in Matthew 28:19.

disciples. While such commands must be selective, the obvious ones that do apply include loving God and one another and preaching the gospel. These commands are paramount in Jesus' ministry and commissioning of His followers and they continue to be so today.

Second, if the Church is commissioned (even indirectly) to preach the gospel to all the nations, is it disobedient if it does not fulfill this commission? While it appears that the apostles (and their disciples) preached the gospel to a large part of their known world, the task is much larger today.⁷² However, it would be difficult to state whether the world is much more difficult to reach today. With all the advances in technology, communication, transportation, and specialist fields (e.g. linguistics), the problem may be that the church is just not mobilized. Despite the massive missionary efforts from the United States today, the United States ranks a dismal sixteenth (per capita) among missionary-sending nations.⁷³ The United States may not be the great missionary nation today that it was once could claim to be. In fact, Korea is projected to send more Protestant missionaries (numerically) than the United States within the next decade or two. The Church is obedient to the Lord's commission when it is active in reaching the world for Christ (as well as baptizing and training new believers) and it is disobedient when it is not performing this Great Commission.

Unfortunately, what propels a lot of mission efforts around the world today is a misinterpretation of Matthew 24. Matthew 24:14 reads, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come." This verse is taken out of its context by many missiologists and Bible scholars alike. Matthew 24:14 is

⁷² The world's population in the first century A.D. is estimated to have been around 250 million (about one twenty-fifth of the world's current population).

⁷³ This statistic includes both Catholic and Protestant missionaries. The USA ranks three places behind Australia which is known for its rampant atheism. Statistics taken from Woodrow Kroll, *The Vanishing Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1991), 25.

wrongly interpreted to motivate the Church to world evangelism in order to bring in the millennial kingdom. However, the context of this verse and a large portion of Matthew 24 clearly refer to the future Tribulation period, when, according to the book of Revelation, the gospel will be preached supernaturally to all the nations. The Apostle John writes, “Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth, to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (Rev. 14:6). The Church must take the gospel to the world (as best it can) in every generation, beginning with the apostles and their successive disciples until the end of the age. While the mission will never be fulfilled until the end of the age, the Church is to strive, as Paul did, to go and preach the gospel, even to the regions beyond, whether persecution comes or not (cf. 2 Cor. 10:16; Acts 28:31). At the end of the age, before the kingdom age begins, the gospel will be preached in all the earth (Matt. 24:14; Rev. 14:6). While the mission may seem possible in the present generation, God will finally succeed in having His Word preached to every living creature, even if He has to use angelic messengers to accomplish such an awesome task.

Conclusion

The previous study has shown that the grammatical structure of Matthew 28:19 requires “go” to be translated with the same imperatival force as “making disciples.” The concept of “making disciples” should be understood as the direct, positive result of preaching the gospel. The concept of discipleship is better reflected in the following concepts of baptism and training in Matthew 28:19-20. This study has also attempted to show that the Great Commission is a universally applicable Scripture that is valid until the end of this age. It was not given to just the original apostles (including Paul), but rather to all of Christ’s disciples down through the Church age. The gospel was first preached in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, as well as to the ends of

the (then known) earth. The gospel has continued to be preached down through the history of the Church, often through the lonely voices of condemned heretics of the official Church. However, due largely to the reviving of modern missions by William Carey, the gospel message has reached far and wide throughout the world in the last two centuries. However, the incompleteness of the Great Commission throughout the history of the Church and even today is a constant reminder that the task is far from being fulfilled and there is still a desperate demand for laborers.

The Lord's promise that He will be with all of His disciples as they carry out their commission until the very end of the age should further stimulate all of His disciples to presently be doing what He has commanded them. Still, the rapture will occur before the gospel is preached to every single person on the face of the earth. Though many may reject the greatest news of all, it must continue to be on every disciple's lips. May the Lord continue to work with His "apostles" today as He did with His apostles at the very beginning of the Great Commission's fulfillment as "they went out and preached everywhere" (Mark 16:20).

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