

The Missing Participle



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We have all heard messages on Matthew 28:18-20, the passage we refer to as The Great Commission, or have we? That is the question I want to address in this article.

As we know there is only one verb in the passage and that is *mathēteusate*, which comes from *mathētēs*, which is translated “learner” (i.e. pupil) according to Strong’s concordance. All of the major translations translate the verb “make disciples” and it is in the imperative mood so it is a command. We all know that.

A disciple, therefore, is a follower, a learner. He is one who follows the teachings of another person. John the Baptist had disciples (Matthew 9:14). The Pharisees had disciples (Matthew 22:16). Moses had disciples (John 9:28) and, of course, Jesus had disciples.

All of those who became followers of Jesus were referred to as disciples (e.g. Acts 6:1, 2, 7) showing that a disciple was not a second level follower of Jesus. According to Acts 6, a new convert immediately becomes a follower and a learner, a disciple who becomes obedient from the heart (Romans 6:17) and is expected to grow in respect to their salvation.

The implication for the fulfillment of The Great Commission seems clear. We are not fulfilling The Great Commission unless we are producing positional disciples who are growing in respect to their salvation.

THREE PARTICIPLES

Along with the one verb there are three participles which serve as adverbs modifying “make disciples.” We know that as well. The first is *poireuthentes*, or “go.” It is in the aorist tense so can be translated “having gone” or “as you go.” This assumes we, the church, have gone or are going to our world as missionaries.

The second participle is *baptizantes*, a present tense participle translated “baptizing.” The first act of obedience for one who becomes a follower, a disciple, a learner is to be baptized symbolizing their spiritual resurrection to new life in Christ.

The implication of this participle is that we are to be sharing the gospel in order to lead people to place their trust in Jesus Christ.

When we listen closely to those who talk about fulfilling The Great Commission we hear a lot of emphasis on these first two participles. We are exhorted to go, evangelize and plant churches. I am all for leading people to Christ and planting churches! But I don’t want us to forget that there is a third participle, which is also a part of the Great Commission.

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Let’s say we go to an unreached people group and share the gospel with the entire group, lead many to Christ, plant churches among the group and then leave. Have we fulfilled The Great Commission among that unreached group? No, we have not. Why haven’t we? Because we have overlooked the third participle. We have only fulfilled two-thirds of The Great Commission.

The often neglected participle is *didaskontes*, which is translated “teaching.” This is teaching with the intent of bringing them to live lives of obedience.

Jesus said, “Teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.” “Teaching” is the neglected participle in The Great Commission and my experience tells me that it is being overlooked at every level.

FOCUSED ON TWO PARTS

As I have had an opportunity to speak with pastors, missions committees, and representatives of church planting organizations my perception is that “teaching them to obey” is

not a part of our missions focus. Going, baptizing (evangelism), and church planting are the only parts in focus.

Teaching new believers has been the heart of the ministry of the church from the beginning (Acts 2:42; 4:2; 5:21, 25). Paul spent six months in Corinth teaching them to obey (Acts 18:11) and he spent three years in Ephesus teaching them publically and from house to house (Acts 20:20, 31).

Paul was appointed to teach (2 Timothy 1:11) and his passion was to teach and present every man complete (mature) in Christ. A pastor must be able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2). Timothy was to teach (1 Timothy 4:11, 13, 16; 5:17; 6:2) and the references go on. Some form of the word "teach" appears 97 times in the New Testament.

The Great Commission requires us to teach new converts to obey the commands of Christ. Until we do that we are not fulfilling The Great Commission. Leading people to Christ and planting churches are important and crucial... but until we are intentionally teaching converts to obey the commands of Christ we are not fulfilling the Great Commission.

DISCIPLES NEED THE TRUTH

A second thought, when thinking of how this applies to fulfilling The Great Commission, is this. A new convert is a disciple, a follower, a learner. Learners will not learn much without a teacher. Learners will not learn Truth without teachers who know and teach Truth and a teacher will not teach them the truth if he himself has not been taught.

Throughout the world churches are filled with learners who are not learning anything profitable (2 Timothy 3:16). One study revealed that 80% of the evangelical church leaders in the world are themselves untrained, untaught. As a result, massive numbers are learning untruth, are listening to lies and being led astray. Thousands of pastors have no doctrinal foundation yet they are called upon to lead God's flock. False teachers take advantage. Believers remain captives to their traditional religions and worldviews. Much of this is because we are not giving enough attention to the third participle in The Great Commission, "teaching them to obey all that I commanded you."

One final passage I would like to call our attention to that speaks to this often overlooked, often neglected participle is Ephesians 4:11-15. Church leaders are to equip the saints who then get involved in ministry. The body of Christ is then built up. Unity of the faith and the knowledge of the son of God develop. The church becomes mature and is no longer susceptible to false doctrine and no longer victims of false teachers.

REMEMBER THE THIRD PARTICIPLE

In my opinion, false teachers flourish and false doctrine runs rampant in the mission field partly because we have not paid enough attention to the third participle in The Great Commission. Let me encourage us to think about our mission philosophy. Let me encourage us to keep going, keep leading people to Christ (keep baptizing) and keep planting churches. But let me also encourage and even challenge us to follow through on the third leg of The Great Commission as well. Let us be more committed to finishing the task by teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded us to do.

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