

The Great Commission: Are We Actually Commanded to “Go”?

By [Matt Newkirk](#)

When theological students first begin to learn the biblical languages, previously untraversed trails of exegesis suddenly present themselves, leading to a vast new world of interpretation that was formerly unavailable. Having received the basic tools necessary to enter this new world, many a young theologian packs up his gear and enters it with confidence, believing he is fully equipped to explore this exciting terrain after only a couple semesters of elementary grammar and perhaps an exegesis class or two.

Problems arise, however, when this young linguistic explorer finishes his basic seminary requirements, believes that by memorizing verb conjugations and vocabulary glosses he now “knows” Greek and Hebrew, and does not continue with the painstaking but necessary work of *continuing* to learn these languages by actually reading the biblical text in them.

Over the years I’ve become persuaded that the only way truly to “know” any language—Greek and Hebrew included—is not simply by understanding the mechanics of its grammar or learning its translational glosses, but by immersing oneself in its use. Grammar and vocabulary are necessary for becoming familiar with a language’s use, of course, but it’s the latter that actually enables us to “know” any language in a meaningful and responsible way. For a spoken language, the best way to acquire such knowledge is to spend time with native speakers; for written languages—like Biblical Greek and Hebrew—this means we must read, and read a lot.

When we do not become familiar with a language’s use, particularly its syntax and idioms, it is very easy to draw incorrect interpretative conclusions that seem patently correct to us. The reason for this is our natural inclination to assume that other languages operate similarly to our own at a syntactic level.

However, the more languages one learns, especially if those languages are diverse, the more clearly one realizes the need to be circumspect when interpreting speech or writing in a foreign language. Approaching a foreign language with the syntactic assumptions of one’s own language will inevitably result in misinterpretation. Having grown up learning Spanish and then studying Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic in seminary, French and German in grad school, and Japanese on the mission field, this reality has been reinforced in my own experience time and time again

The Great Commission: “As you go”?

I provide this rather long introduction in order to discuss an oft-repeated misinterpretation of a well-known and important passage of Scripture: the so-called “Great Commission” of Matt 28:18-20. The ESV translates these famous verses as follows:

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

In virtually every major English translation, the “commission” proper of this passage contains two imperative verbs: “go” and “make disciples” (e.g., KJV, NASB, RSV, NRSV, ESV, NIV [1984 & 2011], TNIV, HCSB, CSB, et al). For this reason, most readers understandably view Jesus’ commission here as comprising two major foci: *going* and *discipling*. Jesus’ followers are to *go* to “all nations” and *disciple* “all nations,” the latter command receiving further explanation by the modifying participial phrases “baptizing them” and “teaching them.”

However, any reader of the Greek text of verse 19 can plainly see that the word translated “go” is not an imperative, but a participle. The only morphological imperative in the verse is *matheteusate*, “make disciples.” For this reason, occasionally one hears an interpretation that suggests that, contrary to virtually every major English translation available, the verb “go” should not be understood as a command.

For example, Anthony Bradley has recently written the following:

Although the phrase “The Great Commission” is found nowhere in the Bible, it has been defended by evangelicals as the core imperative of Christian mission. The problem exegetically, however, is that the word “go” in Matthew 28:16–20 is not an imperative. It’s a participle. According to Robert Culver, the Greek grammar simply does not support “go” as an imperative command unless you are reading a revivalist agenda into the exegesis of the text. Properly translated, the verse should read, “having gone,” or, “as you go.” The aorist participle is not functioning as an imperative in this text and, therefore, the call to “go” is not a particular action by individuals to physically go anywhere in particular.

At first glance this reasoning appears sound. After all, in New Testament Greek, aorist participles most often indicate action that precedes the action of the main

verb, and when an aorist participle relates to an aorist main verb, the participial action is often concurrent with that of the main verb. Since participles in English (“-ing” verbs) do not carry imperatival force, it makes sense why Bradley and others before him have argued that, rather than indicating an imperatival “go,” the first participle of verse 19 is better translated as “having gone” (preceding action) or “as you go” (concurrent action).

On this interpretation, as Bradley says, “the call to ‘go’ is not a particular action by individuals to physically go anywhere in particular.” Rather, according to this interpretation, the idea in this initial participle is, “As you’re going along in your life,” make disciples (see, e.g., here). Of course, this reading suggests that (1) basically every major English translation has mistranslated this clause, and (2) the “Great Commission” doesn’t actually require us to go anywhere; we can fulfill it wherever we happen to be.

The Participle of Attendant Circumstance

The problem with this line of reasoning is that it is taking the *predominant* function of the aorist participle and presuming that it applies in this particular situation without accounting for all the pertinent syntactic data. Although aorist participles typically refer to preceding or concurrent action in an indicative fashion, they do not always function this way. In his well-known textbook on biblical Greek syntax, Daniel Wallace outlines multiple functions of Greek participles, one of which is known as the “participle of attendant circumstance” (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 640).

In short, the participle of attendant circumstance has the following characteristics:

- It communicates action that is coordinate with the main verb
- It is dependent semantically on the main verb
- It is translated as a finite verb (i.e., *not* as an English participle)
- It receives its mood from the main verb
- It is often misunderstood (!)

Wallace provides Matt 2:13 as an example of this use:

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise (egertheis), take (paralabe) the child and his mother,

and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”

In this verse the angel first uses an aorist participle (“rise” [*egertheis*]), followed by an aorist imperative (“take” [*paralabe*]). Based on the context, the angel is clearly not telling Joseph to take Jesus and Mary to safety in Egypt “as he rises up.” Rather, the angel is commanding Joseph to do two things: (1) rise, and (2) take Jesus and Mary to safety in Egypt.

For one more example, consider Acts 10:13:

Then a voice told him, “Get up (anastas), Peter. Kill (thyson) and eat (phage).”

In this text, *anastas* (“Get up”) is an aorist participle, followed by two aorist imperatives: *thyson* (“kill”) and *phage* (“eat”). The voice speaking to Peter here is obviously not advising him to kill and eat “as he gets up” from where he is sitting. Rather, the voice is giving Peter a three-part imperative that includes the action of “getting up.”

Not “As you go,” but “Go!”

Similarly, in Matt 28:19 an aorist participle (“Go” [*poreuthentes*]) is in construction with an aorist imperative (“make disciples” [*matheteusate*]), and therefore like Matt 2:13 and Acts 10:13 (and others!) it is best understood as a participle of attendant circumstance. According to Wallace, virtually all aorist participle + aorist imperative constructions in New Testament narrative function this way (*ibid.*, 642 n. 71). In other words, this was a normal way of expressing a compound imperative, especially when a verb of motion (e.g., “rise,” “get up,” “go”) is involved.

Consequently, we need not worry that the majority of our English translations have mistakenly rendered this participle in the Great Commission as a command. In this commission Jesus is indeed commanding his followers both to “go” and “make disciples” of all nations. This is not describing an action that Jesus’ followers are to engage in as they happen to go about their lives wherever they may be, but rather a strategic effort that the church as a whole is to pursue in order to represent Jesus’ kingly authority across creation.

When one spends time reading the New Testament in Greek and observing the variety of uses that participles have, one is able to guard against importing English-based syntactic assumptions into Greek participial constructions and thereby avoid misinterpreting the text at this exegetical level.

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