

**When ‘Go’ Becomes ‘Stay’, One Is Left to Ask,
‘Where Do We ‘Go’ from Here?’
Viewing the ‘Go’ of the Great Commission as a Command to
Contextualize the Gospel to the Nations!**

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Abstract

Worldwide, 272 million people live outside of their home country and another 800 million have been forced to migrate within their own county. This massive displacement of people provides a great opportunity in the Church’s own backyard, where many believers should be—and can be—involved in fulfilling Christ’s Great Commission. The ‘going’ in the Great Commission does not geographically move the disciples very far in the first months/years of the early Church; however, with the first outpouring of the Spirit, the Church was stretched contextually into places it never expected to go. This research will examine the aorist participle, ‘go’, in the Great Commission and postulate a contextual understanding of the command to ‘go’. This contextual understanding provides an opportunity to be part of the Great Commission in a world whose borders are closed, due to the world-wide Coved-19 pandemic.

Key Words: aorist participle, diaspora, go, Great Commission, immigrants, Matthew 28:19

Introduction

Worldwide, 272 million people “live outside of their home country—representing about 3% of the world’s population.” As many as 750 million people worldwide would choose migration, if it were possible, and another 800 million have been forced to migrate within their own county (Nguyen 2020, 32). Many of these immigrants have come from among unreached people groups looking for a place to belong that is safe to live, love, and flourish with their families (Pew Research Report 2012). They may be Kachin or Rohingya refugees fleeing religious persecution in Myanmar, they may be Somali refugees fleeing civil war in Africa, and/or they may be Syrian refugees fleeing starvation because the encroaching Al-Qaeda have stolen their crops once again. Millions of such refugees flee first to camps across their own borders and then wait for placement/acceptance, sometimes for more than a decade, in a receptive third country.

This tragic, forced, modern migration of large population groups, once placed, move down the street from churches and live in houses across the back fence from established Christians that give them—both the reached and the unreached—a golden, hitherto unavailable, opportunity to be part of the Great Commission of Christ, “Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them...” (Matt. 28:18-20). “For Christians who participate in God’s redemptive purposes, the migration of people, whether forced or voluntary, should be viewed, not as accidental, but as part of God’s sovereign plan” (Im and Yong 2014, 148). In November of 2006, then UN General Secretary, Kofi Annan, proclaimed, “International migration is one of the greatest issues of the century... We have entered a new era of mobility” (Pocock & Wan 2015, 3). This command to make disciples of all nations no longer requires a geographic understanding of ‘go’ and has provided a great opportunity in the Church’s own backyard, and many believers should be involved with the contextual fulfillment of Christ’s command. Such a contextual opportunity to be part of the Great Commission is even more important in a world whose borders

are closed, due to the world-wide Covid-19 pandemic, and the ability to ‘go’ to some places are no longer possible.

Tim Keller defined contextualization as, “giving people the Bible's answers, which they may not at all want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them” (Keller 2012, 98). Such contextualization always requires a ‘going’, whether it be mental, physical, emotional, or intellectual, and requires a contextual ‘going’ from a place of comfort and safety. There is an unprecedented opportunity to reach masses of people forcefully displaced into our own neighborhoods. This research will demonstrate that it is possible to maintain an imperative understanding of the Greek aorist participle, ‘to go’, while maintaining a broader contextual understanding of the command ‘to go’ through an examination of the exegetical differences of the text and a broader contextual biblical approach to understanding ‘going’.

Summary of Exegetical Agreement

The defining of mission from the command to ‘go’ in Matthew 28:19, and the implications of its use (or the implications of not using this aorist participle with the main imperative verb ‘make disciples’), have been a significant missiological concern for very long time (Kvalbein 1988, 49). Textual consideration is given to πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες... διδάσκοντες... (Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them... teaching them...) (Matt. 28:19a, 20a). Many Greek scholars agree that the imperative weight of the main verb μαθητεύσατε (make disciples) affects the participle πορευθέντες (to go) and gives it imperative weight as well. At the same time, a nuanced view (argued below) of the imperative influenced participle πορευθέντες translated as a command, “Go!” should include, at the very least, a command to contextualize (as a form of going) for the sake of the imperative μαθητεύσατε (making disciples).

There seems to be only a rare argument among scholars that the aorist imperative μαθητεύσατε (make disciples) is not the main verb in Matthew 28:19-20. Aorist imperatives, in general, convey a sense of urgency and immediacy of action (Wilder 2012, 5) and give the reader of the Matthew text a sense of the importance that the writer attaches to this pericope. Craig Keener concludes that the commission to make disciples “is no afterthought to Matthew's Gospel; rather, it summarizes much of the heart of his message” and that readers should conclude that the writer was utilizing this commission in weaving together the many themes that appear throughout Matthew (Keener 2009, 3). Cleon Rogers, to preserve the act of ‘going’ as the point of the text, argued that the construction of the verse (location of πορευθέντες ‘going’ at the beginning of the sentence) must be translated as an imperative as well, and therefore it is an integral part of making disciples (Rogers 1973, 267). However, while some have followed his example, others still postulate that the only imperative is to μαθητεύσατε ‘make disciples’.

The imperative μαθητεύσατε ‘make disciples’ is supported by three participles: πορευθέντες ‘going’, βαπτίζοντες ‘baptizing’, and διδάσκοντες ‘teaching’. “The main verb describes the aim of the work of the disciples [make disciples]. The last two participles describe the means to reach this aim:” baptizing and teaching (Kvalbein 1988, 48). The first of the three participles is the aorist participle πορευθέντες (‘going’ or ‘to go’), and the other two, βαπτίζοντε (baptizing) and διδάσκοντες (teaching), are present participles (Rogers 1973, 258). The first, the aorist participle πορευθέντες (to go), is used to modify the main verb μαθητεύσατε ‘make disciples’. In

coordination with the action of the imperative, μαθητεύσατε ‘make disciples’, πορευθέντες (to go) takes on imperatival force as well, and together they are most often translated, “Go and make disciples.” “Further, the action of the participle is something of a prerequisite before the action of the main verb can occur, [as if] to say, no making of disciples will take place unless you go: ‘Go and make disciples!’” (Wilder 2012, 5; Heibert 1992, 348).

Summary of Exegetical Disagreement

While in more recent times many Greek scholars often agree with the above conclusions, historically there have been two major exegetical differences that have greatly divided the missiological conclusions of some, depending upon the emphasis one would follow. “One is an emphasis on the imperative character which has led to a strong ‘go’ in the missionary command (explained above). The other is a reaction in which the ‘go’ receives a secondary status, even to the point of omission in translation” (Rogers 1973, 259). Some scholars have concluded that since πορευθέντες (to go) is simply a participle and not a finite verb, then, “the participle πορευθέντες with which the verse begins should be translated ‘as you go’,” ‘having gone’ (Culver 1967, 118), or perhaps not even translated at all (Freeman 1997, 17).

Interestingly, both arguments seem influenced by a strict geographic understanding of the participle πορευθέντες (to go). In the first, the imperative is used to understand the geographic going of missionaries across the world and the Church living out the apostolic sending mission of God. The imperative is used to raise money, convict congregations, call women and men to missionary work, and raise awareness for the needs of the masses overseas. In the second position, as will be demonstrated below, the strict geographic understand does not mesh well with how the biblical text records the living out of this geographic command in the Book of Acts. The disciples did not demonstrate an initial compulsion to “go” on missionary journeys in response to the command of Jesus, and therefore this second position concludes that the geographic “go” is not an imperative and should be translated/understood, “As you are going...”

The evidence, however, shows that the imperative verb μαθητεύσατε ‘make disciples’ allows for Gundry’s conclusion that going is paramount among the themes of making of disciples among all the nations (1982, 593). However, the placement of the aorist participle πορευθέντες at the beginning of the sentence, its linkage to the imperative μαθητεύσατε, and the weight of other biblical texts must give the participle imperatival force and would indicate that the writer of Matthew has included it to make some important point that must be summed up to include the essentiality of ‘going’ (Rogers 1973, 258-267). Thus, the translators seem to have correctly translated πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.” On one hand this position does not seem to lend to the argument of this paper, that πορευθέντες is not an exclusive command to physically go, but on the other hand, with a strong πορευθέντες (imperatively influenced by the weight of placement and a strong imperative verb), one must deal with the participle ‘to go’ and decide what it means to the reader (both then and now). While keeping all this textual information in mind, consideration will next be given to the larger context of the biblical text.

Considering a Biblical Range of Possibilities for the Aorist Verb “To Go”

As has always been the case, God’s mission required radical change, a radical new start, a radical departure, a radical ‘going’. Those involved in God’s mission are commanded to “Go!” “Go and bless...” (Gen. 12:1-3). “Go and show yourself...” (Isa. 49:9). “Go and preach...” (Matt. 10:7).

“Go and make disciples...” (Matt. 28:19). God’s mission has always required leaving and going. However, “Leaving and going need not necessarily mean actual travel from one geographical place to another.” Rather, those on God’s mission are going out from their known world, and the ‘going’ is a form of leaving that which is “spiritual, mental, and attitudinal—even when it is not physical... it involves the abandonment of the worldview through which the world tells its own story, and adopting [the worldview of] the biblical story of God’s mission” (Wright 2010, 78).

Christopher Wright clearly postulates that the ‘Great Commission’ of Matthew 28:19, “Go and make disciples,” is based upon the mission of God “Go and be a blessing” that runs throughout the Old Testament as “Commissioned to spread the blessings of Abraham” or “Called to be a blessing” (Wright 2010, 73-74). Matthew’s ‘Great Commission’ further emphasizes that this Abrahamic blessing is to be extended to all nations through teaching and consequently baptizing them into God’s blessings. The followers of Yahweh in the Old Testament were often willing to ‘go’ to the promise land or ‘go’ to Jerusalem to worship, yet we find them rarely willing to be a blessing, either at home or abroad. Today, while those responding to Matthew’s command are often willing to ‘go’, many remain unwilling to be a blessing to the ‘nations’ who have moved in next door. “Something is missiologically malignant when we are willing to send people across the ocean, risking life and limb and spending enormous amounts of money, but we are not willing to walk next door and minister to the strangers living there” (Payne 2012, 33).

Broadly one can conclude that “Jesus [was] directing [the first church] to go to all the nations and to makes disciples, and it is entirely appropriate to describe this passage as a mission passage. They are commanded to go” (Blomberg 1992, 431). The problem remains to be argued, what exactly does ‘go’ mean, and how does it modify the process of making disciples? Is ‘go’ solely a geographic command to change locations on a map, or does ‘go’ include something more missiologically? If one concludes that ‘go’ is specific to geography, how far is far enough for the move to be a geographic shift that qualifies one as having fulfilled the Great Commission? Does it require a move to a different country... a different state... a different city... or does across the hall to a different apartment qualify and alleviate the command to go? If these locations all qualify, does this not lend to the watering down of the imperative influence of the main verb (make disciples) to the point that the aorist participle (to go) is relegated *de facto* to the Culver/Freeman position that the translation of the participle is unnecessary and should simply be “Make disciples” not “Go and make disciples”?

The same aorist participle is found in Matthew 10:7, πορευόμενοι δὲ κηρύσσετε, and is translated, “As you go, preach...” In this text translators determined that the imperative verb, κηρύσσετε (to preach), does not lend imperative weight to the aorist participle πορευόμενοι (to go) and is translated passively by most translators, “As you go...” Interestingly, the same translators that translated πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε with imperative weight as “Go and make disciples” chose not to do so in Matthew 10:7. This decision seems to have been based upon context and the overall importance of the text in reference. Matthew 10:7 contains directions given to twelve new disciples in training that would be going locally ‘to preach’, while the presumption of 28:19 is that, with the birth of the new Church, the then trained would reach to the world ‘making disciples of all nations’. While the “mission in Mt. 10 and 28 are addressed to the same group, what has changed between these chapters is not Jesus’ audience, but the time and the objects of mission. There is a connection between eschatology and mission-targets...” (White 2014, 361).

In the same context as Matthew 28:19 is Luke 24:49b, "...tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high." From the text's account, the Lukan rendition is presumably, timewise, shortly (earlier that same day) before the Matthew 28:19a passage and seems to be contradictory if taken literally along geographic lines. Matthew 28:19a's "go" and Luke 24:49b's "stay" geographically seem at odds. While the Luke 24 command to "stay" seems temporary, "until you are endued with power," the Matthew 28 text does not say "after you stay and wait for power, then go!" Rather the imperative weight given, for the above-described reasons, cause translators to translate Jesus's command with the eschatological immediacy, "Go and make disciples." If one is to conclude that 'go' is a geographic command alone, one would also have to conclude that the disciples (the first church) were mostly a dismal failure in geographical moving until persecution forced them to disperse through Europe and Asia. Even then, except for Paul's and his companions' missionary journeys, the first church seemed to be solely seeking sanctuary and a place of safety. Summarily, absent the Apostle Paul, the first church of the Book of Acts is a church that mostly 'stayed' and did little geographic 'going'!

A further statement by Jesus, in the same timeframe of his ascension and shortly after the two statements discussed above (Matthew 10:7b, 28:19a), is Acts 1:8b, "you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." In this text, 'staying' in Jerusalem and 'going' to Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the earth seemingly can be contemporaneous ventures. Yet only in isolated instances does one find anyone going to Samaria and beyond until the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys. Then the church seemed willing to let the 'new convert' carry the torch where Paul and his team begin to exercise their Apostolic prerogatives contextually. The church's stance is one of ambivalence, 'go' or 'stay', just don't rock the boat contextually. The first church seemed eager to see Paul and Barnabas 'go'; the problems arose when customs associated with eating and circumcision were violated. Go, just don't contextualize the traditions, customs, and/or culture of the mother church!

The Disciples Live Out the Command to "Go"

Initially, the disciples were 'staying' in the upper room in Jerusalem. In fact, they were not even 'going' across the street or next door; they took 'staying' literally and did not leave the upper room. The first act of 'disciple making' was the result of the Holy Ghost being noised abroad and the crowd becoming disciples was an act of seekers 'coming', not the first church 'going'! Acts 2:5-12 explains the 'going' of disciples with the contextualizing of the Gospel (in regard to speaking in their native tongues) to at least 14 nations that would become part of the first making of disciples. Clearly if the insistence of 'going' solely mandated a geographic relocation, the disciples missed the boat and surely, if they had disobeyed the final summary command of Christ, the results would not have been so spectacular. Luke's report in the Book of Acts clearly "emphasizes that the Jerusalem Christians, including the apostles, did not mobilize significantly to bring the gospel to the nations; until God himself scattered them through persecution" (Wan 2014, 90).

Unfortunately, despite such biblical evidence, some scholars still argue for a solely geographic understanding of the aorist participle *πορευθέντες*. White asserts that the Great Commission insisted that "Jewish believers in Jesus [were] commanded to travel to all the nations" (White 2014, 353), and Upkong claims, "The fullness of mission is realized at the transcultural geographic level... mission is fully realized when carried out at a transcultural geographical level" (Upkong 1985, 169). However, just as clear as the imperative influence of

the main verb μαθητεύσατε (make disciples) over the aorist participle πορευθέντες (to go) that resulted in the translation of a strong command, “Go ye therefore and make disciples,” it seems equally clear, from the consideration of other biblical commands and the biblical response to such commands by the first church, there must be something beyond the solely geographic understanding of the command ‘to go’.

Peter O’Brien concludes that the implication of the above observations of how the disciples responded to the words of Christ was that “the ‘going’ is not to be emphasized” but only to teach and baptize when the opportunity arose to do so. Moreover, he seems to argue that the Great Commission may not even apply to Christian work in the twentieth century. O’Brien concludes that if it does apply, of which he is not convinced, it should only be “understood to refer to bringing men and women to... become disciples” (O’Brien 1976, 73). If an understanding of πορευθέντες (to go) is strictly geographical, the only conclusions that can be construed from the disciples’ response is that the aorist participle is not to be emphasized or the disciples were disobedient by not really ‘going’ until the conversion of the Apostle Paul. Even in the case of Paul’s response, the disciples, who were commanded ‘to go’, did not really go, rather they let the convert Paul go in their stead. Clearly, there must be an additional understanding of what Christ meant with the command to “Go and make disciples!”

Understanding ‘Go’ Contextually

The discussions above that the command ‘to go’ lead to understanding the ‘going’ as a command to contextualize the Gospel so that it can be heard by “each in their own language” and in their own cultural understanding. Acts 2 reports more than just a translation of languages when the Spirit was poured out. Keener, in his effort to explain the difference in the translations of Matthew 10:7b and Matthew 28:19a, seems to make this point. In Matthew 10:7b, the ‘go’ was isolated “to Israel’s lost sheep, and not to Gentile or Samaritan cities,” whereas in Matthew 28:19, “the object of ‘going’ has changed. Jesus’ followers are to make disciples of the nations, so ‘going’ demands crossing cultural barriers to reach the Gentiles” (Keener 2009, 4). Donald Hagner observed that Matthew’s Jewish audience was caught in a cultural “no-man’s land” between their own heritage and traditions and the heritage and traditions of the people to whom God had command them to “Go and make disciples” (Flemming 2005, 244). Jesus added the cross-cultural thrust in the commissioning of His followers to ‘make disciples’ and the command to ‘go’. While certainly including the possibility of a geographic ‘going’, Jesus’s Commission include a contextual ‘going’ that would move Matthew’s readers from the comforts of Judaic culture, customs, language, and traditions. This contextual ‘going’ would force them to make concessions in circumcision, eating habits, women in ministry, economic power, slavery, places of worship/preaching, language usage, positions of power, holidays, and countless other matters. The essence of the gospel would not change; however, it would appear to a Jewish observer much different when disciples were being made during the teaching of the Gentile woman, Lydia, on the banks of a river in the Asian town of Thyatira. It was this contextual kind of ‘going’ that would be difficult at times for the disciples to accept.

Conclusions

What the Church does will be determined by its theology, and its theology will be greatly influenced by how theologians interpret Matthew 28:19. The first conclusion from this research, regarding the aorist participle πορευθέντες (to go), is to interpret with strong influence from the imperative verb μαθητεύσατε ‘make disciples’. The translation, “Go and make disciples,” lends

to the urgency of the times and the passing opportunities. Even though the disciples did not (at least initially) understand πορευθέντες (to go) geographically (Im and Yong 2014, 75), there is an urgency that permeates their disciple-making behavior throughout the Book of Acts that reflects the contextualized imperative “Go!”

Second, if πορευθέντες (to go) is understood with the imperative verb’s influence, then what πορευθέντες (to go) means is important and must be understood appropriately. It seems clear that the disciples from the very first chapter of the Book of Acts understand πορευθέντες (to go) as a contextual command. In Acts 1:8, Luke records the Lord’s words, “you shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” In Acts 2 the outpouring of the Spirit is contextualized so that 14 nations understand and respond in their own ‘tongues’; in Acts 6 the Apostles appoint Greek pastoral caregivers to contextualize care for the widows; in Acts 9 the message is contextualized for/by the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch; in Acts 10 the message is contextualized by Cornelius to include his Gentile household; and, the remainder of the Book of Acts contains Paul’s missionary journeys to continue contextualizing the Gospel to the Gentiles in Asia Minor (the first geographic application of πορευθέντες). All of this happens without the disciples ever ‘going’ anywhere in a strict geographic understanding of the word. The Early Church “quickly moved from a near-cultural context to a slightly different cultural context to a radically different cultural context. Yet, no missionary crossed an ocean. No missionary traveled overseas” (Terry 2015, 399). A contextual understanding of πορευθέντες (to go) seems the only possible understanding that incorporates the nuances of the original text, the behavior of the Apostles, the variants of opportunity that have been presented to the Church throughout history, and the changing demographics in the world today.

Third, a final conclusion specific to diaspora missiology is “not geographically divided or confined to home/foreign, regional/global, or urban/rural. Rather, it is borderless. It is transnational and global” (Tira 2013, 155). Conceptually, diaspora missions/missiology de-territorializes geographic boundaries and is simultaneously local and global: “in contrast to the lineal concept of traditional missions, it is multi-directional” (Tira 2013, 155). With modern technology, by reaching out to an immigrant next door who can then reach around the world within seconds to family, friends, and acquaintances through cell phones and the internet, one’s witness to a ‘neighbor’ can instantly impact those in the land from which the neighbor came. Such unprecedented possibilities and opportunities must not be ignored by today’s worldwide Church. “Congregations in the receiving countries can easily practice missions ‘at our doorstep’ without crossing borders geographically, linguistically, and culturally” (Tira 2013, 162-163).

Summary

While this research has argued for an imperative understanding of the aorist participle ‘to go’ in “Go ye therefore and make disciples...”, it has also demonstrated that the biblical text did not originally convey, nor has it ever conveyed, a geographic understanding of that aorist participle, ‘to go’. To reconcile these two points, a contextual understanding of the aorist participle ‘to go’ has been argued, namely that ‘going’ includes the urgent biblical command to make disciples, first among Jews, then among Samaritans, and then among the Gentiles, all the while staying in Jerusalem. The significant point here is not that the Church has no geographic mandate to ‘go’—because that would be included in, but not limited to, a contextual understanding—but rather that the command to “Go and make disciples” is contextually based. A contextually based

understanding of ‘going’ by the Church mandates sharing the gospel with the migrating masses living within our borders and assembling at our borders in a way they can understand and be converted. This requires an adjustment by the Church of outdated, irrelevant, and culturally based methods, even though it will mean participating in uncomfortable, unfamiliar, and unrecognizable expressions of the Gospel.

When Jesus said, “Go, make disciples of all nations,” in the simplest of terms, He called upon all who would become the Church, Jew and Gentile, to be part of the ongoing contextualizing mission of God, “Go and be a blessing!” Christ’s followers “must not concentrate all their thought on ‘coming’ to church. They must also ‘go’ to bring the precious tidings to others” (Hiebert 1992, 348). To ‘go’ is the task of each believer, whether across the street to their neighbor or across the ocean to people they have never seen (Hendriksen 1973, 999). The Matthew 28:19 Great Commission, “Go and make disciples of all nations,” is intended for the Church today, just as it was intended for the first disciples (Culver 1967, 20). The Church consciously and intentionally “must continue to send missionaries throughout the world [and] must also recognize the Great Commission’s opportunity” that is present around our own homes (Payne 2012, 32-33). The arrival of millions of immigrants in churches’ immediate areas should “open our eyes to opportunities for evangelism and ministry right here in our own backyard” (Soerens and Yang 2009, 175), wherever in the world that might be. The ‘immigration problem’ has presented the Church with an “unprecedented opportunity to share God’s love and the gospel message with folks from those countries—not abroad, on their own doorstep” (Soerens and Yang 2009, 162). All Christians “who participate in God’s redemptive purpose, the migration of people, whether forced or voluntary, should be viewed not as accidental, but part of God’s sovereign plan” (Im and Yong 2014, 148). “We must plead with our broken neighbors like weeping prophets, not denounce them like angry moralists. We must gently throw our arms around all those trapped in sin. Love them into the kingdom, and travel with them no matter what the cost in their journey toward wholeness in Christ” (Sider 1996, 177). This ministry of love is the continued ‘going’ of Christ in a world on the move!

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