

MATTHEW 28:19-20 – MAKING DISCIPLES

By Ashby L. Camp

Copyright © 2025 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

In Mat. 28:19, Jesus famously commanded the apostles, as representative disciples,¹ "Go therefore and *make disciples* (μαθητεύσατε) of all nations." That is the command, the imperative verb, "make disciples." A disciple is a student, a learner; that is what the word means. More specifically, a disciple is a follower, an apprentice, of a certain teacher to whom the disciple has formally attached himself for the purpose of being trained in the understanding and ways of that teacher. The way in which one enters into that relationship, accepts the teacher's invitation to become a disciple, is prescribed by the teacher.

Jesus follows his command to make disciples with two present participles. He says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* (βαπτίζοντες) them in (or into) the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ *teaching* (διδάσκοντες) them to observe all that I have commanded you." These participles are widely recognized to be instrumental participles, also known as participles of means or manner or mode, meaning they explain *how* the disciples are to make disciples, the means they are to use to accomplish that task. As David Bauer observes in *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 111, "The participles 'baptizing' (βαπτίζοντες) and 'teaching' (διδάσκοντες) are generally identified by scholars as instrumental participles, indicating the ways in which disciples are to be made."

For example, Daniel Wallace says in *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 645, baptizing and teaching "obviously make good sense as participles of *means*; i.e., the means by which the disciples were to make disciples was to baptize and then to teach." David Bauer states in "The Theme of Mission in Matthew's Gospel From the Perspective of the Great Commission," *The Asbury Journal* 74/2 (2019), 254, "The process of bringing such persons to discipleship involves baptizing and teaching. These are instrumental participles that, in this case, spell out the substance of 'make disciples.'" A. Chadwick Thornhill states in *Greek for Everyone* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 25, "The following two participial phrases, 'baptizing' (βαπτίζοντες; *baptizontes*) and 'teaching' (διδάσκοντες; *didaskontes*), are likewise dependent and specify how the making of disciples is to occur (i.e., by baptizing and teaching them)." Andreas Köstenberger and Richard Patterson state in *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2021), 483:

In the Greek, the main command is "to make disciples" (μαθητεύσατε, *mathēteusate*), which is modified by two participles, "baptizing" (βαπτίζοντες, *baptizontes*) and "teaching" (διδάσκοντες, *didaskontes*). The way in which the latter are subordinated to the main command suggests that baptizing and teaching is the characteristic *mode* of making disciples (participles of manner). . . .

¹ D. A. Carson, "Matthew" in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 9:666; see also, Daniel Akin, Benjamin Merkle, and George Robinson, *40 Questions About the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2020), 23-28.

Wherever Jesus's followers might go, be it near or far, they are to make disciples of Jesus by baptizing and teaching them.

In Robert Mounce's words in *Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985). 277, "The gist of the sentence is 'make disciples by baptizing and teaching.'"

I am convinced that the teaching to which Jesus refers in v. 20 is post-baptismal instruction in how one is to live *as a disciple*, as a baptized believer. He is not there speaking about the teaching that *precedes* baptism, the teaching of the gospel and the required response to it. As Stanley Porter notes in *Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 253, "This passage seems to indicate a disciple-making ministry for Jesus's followers that involves first baptism and then teaching those baptized to obey his commands." According to Wallace in the quote given above, "the means by which the disciples were to make disciples was to baptize *and then* to teach."²

That the teaching in v. 20 is post-baptismal instruction is suggested not only by the order of the participles – baptizing before teaching³ – but also by the nature and scope of the teaching identified. It is ethical teaching, *commands* that can be *obeyed or observed* (τηρέω), and it is the totality of that teaching, *all* that he has commanded them, all that he has given for development in Christlikeness. The NT church did not teach people all that Jesus had commanded before they baptized them. Rather, they baptized people when their acceptance of the good news of Jesus' saving work led them to repentance, *and then* they instructed them over time in all that is involved in Christian living (e.g., Acts 2:42). As Daniel Akin, Benjamin Merkle, and George Robinson note in *40 Questions About the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2020), 158, "Thus, in the early church, teaching followed baptism."

Recognizing that the teaching referred to in v. 20 comes after baptism does not mean that there is *no* teaching before one is baptized. Rather, the directive to administer Christian baptism – baptism into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – is not a directive to immerse just anyone but a directive to immerse those who put their trust in Jesus and repented of their sin. The penitent faith of the baptizand was understood to be an essential and

² Bauer states in (2019), 242 (fn. 95):

Contra Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 137, who argues that the absence of a connective (καί or δέ) between the participles indicates that the teaching takes place at the time of baptizing (a "taught" baptism). But this claim places far too much weight on the absence of the connective and fails adequately to account for the sequence of the participles, since, practically speaking, this would involve a process of teaching prior to baptism. The absence of *καί* here is best explained by a desire to join together βαπτίζοντες and διδάσκοντες so as to set the statement off over against v. 20b, which begins with *καί*.

³ Wim J. C. Weren comments in *Studies in Matthew's Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 263, that baptism "was performed after a brief period of elementary instruction ('making them disciples'). After their baptism, the new members were further initiated in the teachings of Jesus for a longer period." He states in the footnote, "This can be inferred from the order of the participles in 28:19-20 (βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς [. . .] διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς). See Georg Scheuermann *Gemeinde im Umbruch: Eine sozialgeschichtliche Studie zum Matthäusevangelium* (FB 77; Würzburg: Echter, 1996)." Kirsten Marie Hartvigsen observes in "Matthew 28:9-20 and Mark 16:9-20" in David Hellholm, et al., eds., *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), 671, "The sequence of baptism and teaching may furthermore suggest that teaching refers to the continued teaching of the church after baptism has taken place."

inherent part of the rite and was thus implicit in the directive. See, for example, Mk. 16:15-16,⁴ Acts 2:14-41, and Acts 8:29-38. Jack Cottrell says in *Baptism A Biblical Study* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing, 1989), 16, "In terms of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, baptism is something taught *before* conversion with a view to *becoming* a disciple, while 'teaching them to observe all that I commanded you' *follows* conversion and deals with the details of the Christian life."

It is clear throughout the NT that a Christian is someone who believed the good news of Christ's saving work and who in penitent faith submitted to baptism,⁵ and it is also clear that "Christian" is just another name for a "disciple." As Luke reports in Acts 11:26, "in Antioch the *disciples* were first called *Christians*." Baptism is how one signs on as a disciple, how one accepts the Lord's invitation to follow him. That is why, in the words of the late great Baptist scholar G. R. Beasley-Murray in his famous book *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 88, "the New Testament Epistles do not appear to reckon with the phenomenon of an unbaptized disciple." Indeed, "unbaptized disciple" in terms of the Christian faith is a phantom, a contradiction, like an "unmarried husband."

Those baptized in penitent faith have fallen in behind the Lord and are following him as those committed to becoming all that he wants them to be. It is at that point that one begins one's journey as a disciple. Bauer says (2019), 255, "It is clear that baptism marks the initiation into discipleship." Beasley-Murray concludes (p. 89), "It is when a hearer believes and is baptized that he becomes a full disciple; which is the same as saying that a disciple is made such *in baptism by faith*."⁶

Referring to Paul's brief time in the city of Derbe, Luke says in Acts 14:21, "When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch." They were able to make many disciples in a relatively short time because disciples are made by preaching the gospel and baptizing those who respond in penitent faith. The text does not mention their baptism, but an attentive reader of Acts would know that was implied, as Acts 2 makes clear that baptism accompanies acceptance of the gospel.

The link between being baptized and becoming a disciple is also suggested in John 4:1, which reports that "Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John." As J. Ramsey Michaels remarks in *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 232, "The terminology suggests that water baptism was the normal way by which a person became a

⁴ Even if not originally in Mark, it reflects the early Christian understanding.

⁵ See, Ashby L. Camp, [Some Thoughts on Baptism](#).

⁶ Regarding the assertion that *autous* ("them") in the phrase βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς ("baptizing them") must refer to disciples and thus proves that they are disciples before being baptized, Stanley Fowler states in *Rethinking Baptism: Some Baptist Reflections* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 15:

The assertion by Gill and others that the shift from the neuter *ethnē* to the masculine *autous* means that the object of "baptizing" must be "disciples" rather than "nations" is also unconvincing. The same verbal shift occurs in Matthew 25:32, where we read that at the coming of Christ in glory all the nations (*ethnē*) will be gathered before him, and he will separate them (*autous*) into two groups with two eternal destinies. Clearly the two words denote the same people in that text, with the first word describing humans as people groups, and the second as individuals. Similarly in Matthew 28:19, the use of *autous* is appropriate, because baptism is done to individuals and not to nations as groups, but this does not imply that the individuals baptized are already disciples prior to their baptism.

'disciple,' whether of John or Jesus." Martinus de Boer likewise comments in *John 1-6*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2025), 503: "For Jesus, as for JohnB, making disciples and baptizing them were evidently one and the same act (see critical note above): to become a disciple of the one or the other was to be baptized by him, and to be baptized by the one or the other was to become his disciple (cf. 1:25; 3:22-26)." (Of course, Jesus' submission to John's baptism was uniquely to fulfill all righteousness, but the point stands generally.)

One might wonder whether providing post-baptismal instruction for *maturing a disciple* is distinct from the commanded action of *making* disciples, but as I noted, the Greek grammar suggests that *both participles*, baptizing and teaching, are means by which one "makes disciples." To quote Wallace again, "the means by which the disciples were to make disciples was to baptize *and* then to teach." Bauer states (2019), 254, "The fact that 'baptizing' and 'teaching' are grammatically coordinate indicates that *both* of these tasks form the material content of discipling." In other words, though the teaching under consideration in v. 20 comes after the baptizing, it is still part of the *means*, the how, of making disciples.

Now, given that a person becomes a disciple when he or she is baptized, the question that arises is, "How one can *make* a disciple by teaching Christian ethics to someone who is *already* a disciple by virtue of having been baptized?" The solution to that puzzle is to recognize that the command "make disciples" means more than simply changing a non-disciple into a disciple, which happens at baptism. It includes making the new disciple more the person he is to be *as a disciple*, making him a more mature disciple. As Stanley Fowler puts it in *Rethinking Baptism: Some Baptist Reflections* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 14: "Baptizing and teaching are therefore, the means by which disciples are made or the manner in which they are made. In other words, one becomes a disciple by baptism and grows as a disciple by ongoing obedience to Christ's commands." Bauer likewise states (2019), 255, "It is clear that baptism marks the initiation into discipleship, whereas 'teaching' refers to the ongoing process of discipling."

As an analogy, imagine that men were given a command to "make wives" of all women by *both* "marrying" them *and* "teaching" them all that is involved in being a wife. In that case, the task of "making a wife" encompasses not only the foundational sense of making a woman a wife by marrying her, which by definition moves her from the non-wife to wife category, but also the sense of developing her in the role of a wife. The former happens immediately at marriage, whereas the latter happens gradually as she moves in the direction of the ideal wife, but both are ways of "making a wife" *as specified by the issuer of the command*. I think that is what is going on in the Great Commission.

Accordingly, we as Christians have a duty to develop and mature fellow Christians, fellow disciples, by helping them to become more like Christ. In that way, the Spirit's work in our lives becomes part of his transforming work in their lives.

Now, we often say that in helping other Christians to become more like Christ we are "discipling" them, and that is fine if that is all we mean, but the term "discipling" can be a loaded one that carries the implication that we are maturing them through *a certain method*, by imitating Christ's relationship to his apostles or, more specifically, to Peter, James, and John, so that a

reputedly more mature Christian gets designated as the specific "discipler" of a reputedly less mature Christian, who is expected to be the subordinate learner of that discipler.

Though this notion of discipling is zealously promoted by some and even presented as a biblical requirement, I think it is a mistake to impose that structure on our responsibility to help fellow Christians grow in Christlikeness. Attempts to draw from Scripture an obligation to mature others in that manner are all forced in my view. The fact the sinless and perfect Lord matured his followers through such a relationship does not mean that he calls us, his sinful disciples, to do the same. Because we are sinful, establishing such formal discipler-disciple relationships often, if not inevitably, inflames pride and leads to spiritual abuse and bullying. There is a long and sad history of this inside and outside churches of Christ.

It seems to me that we are to mature one another through a more natural, more organic, less structured process. Paul says in Eph. 4:11-16 that the various ministers of the word who are given to the church by the exalted Christ are given to prepare or condition *the other saints for their work of service*, the purpose or goal of their work being to build up the body of Christ. That this building up of the body of Christ is to continue until the whole church is fully mature, having grown into *the fullness of Christ*, makes clear that the building up refers to growth in Christlikeness, becoming more like him in every way. One consequence or goal of that progressive maturing is that the church as a whole will become more solid in its grasp of the truth, including God's will for Christian living, so as to be less vulnerable to lies and distortions of the truth.

Instead of remaining in a childish state of theological instability that leaves us vulnerable to every wind of teaching, we are to grow up in every way into Christ. He is the one from whom *the entire body brings about the growth of the body* in accordance with the activity of each of the individual parts. The growth is supplied *from* Christ the head as the body, in union with the head, serves as a conduit for Christ's transforming power through dissemination of divine truth. As indicated in v. 15, it is by speaking the truth out of love for one another, out of a desire for the welfare of each other, that the church becomes more like Christ.

To summarize Eph. 4:11-16, the various ministers of the word who are given to the church by Christ, those who teach the congregation, function as catalysts for the body's growth, its maturation. As those teachers deliver to the church the nutrition of the word of God, the other members of the body are thereby equipped to disseminate that truth throughout the body, to widen and deepen its impact, and thus to nourish the body for growth, for maturing in Christlikeness. Again, by speaking the truth, presenting Christ's will, a task for which the ministers of the word have equipped them, the entire body brings about the growth of the body in accordance with the activity of each member, each of the individual parts.

This picture of the entire body building itself into the likeness of Christ as each member speaks the truth in love, lovingly teaches Christ's will, is echoed in Col. 3:16a. Paul says there, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you [plural] richly, teaching and instructing one another in all wisdom."

The process of disseminating or reverberating Christ's will throughout the body certainly will include close relationships where the opportunity for instruction and influence is enhanced, but that is different from defining formal discipler-disciple relationships and all that goes with that. And it is important to note that some of this teaching about the will of Christ will be disseminated throughout the body not by overt instruction but by example as we live our lives before one another. As Paul told Timothy in 1 Tim. 4:12b, "[B]e an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity." He tells him that because being an example is part of how one transmits to others Christ's will for their lives.

We teach the will of Christ to our brothers and sisters through every act of service, every sacrifice for others, every grant of forgiveness, every expression of kindness, every act of generosity, every demonstration of patience and forbearance, every word of encouragement, every exhibition of spiritual strength, every confession of failure, every appeal to do right, and every acknowledgement that there is a special bond between us as fellow rescued sinners and sharers of God's Spirit. All of this points to Christ and teaches throughout the body the character and qualities that he calls us to have.

Since people must be brought to penitent faith in Christ in order to be baptized and thus to become disciples, and the Lord commanded his disciples to make disciples by baptizing and teaching, we, as disciples, need to be involved in evangelism, in bringing lost sinners to the point of baptism. That is part of our call to make disciples. Much could be said about this subject, but I will make just three brief points.

The first point is that in thinking about our responsibility to share the gospel, it is helpful to appreciate the diversity of ways in which one can participate in evangelism. That work is larger than presenting the gospel directly. That does not excuse an unwillingness to grow in interacting with unbelievers about Jesus, but it allows one to view one's service more holistically and accurately.

One participates in evangelism by supporting it financially. 3 John 5-8 states: Beloved, you act faithfully in whatever you do for the brothers, even though they are strangers. ⁶ They testified to your love before the church. You will do well to *send them on their way in a manner worthy of God.* ⁷ For they went out for the sake of the name, *accepting nothing from the pagans.* ⁸ Therefore, *we ought to support such men so that we may be co-workers in the truth.* Paul tells the Philippians in Phil. 1:5 that he always thanks God for them because of their "sharing" or "partnership" *in the gospel.* They actively participated in furthering the gospel, particularly through their generous support of Paul's missionary effort (Phil. 4:15). They were a missionary church and through that were partners in Paul's evangelistic labor. When we contribute funds that support those who are directly engaged in evangelism, we are coworkers with them in that task. Our love and concern for the lost is expressed in our support of the efforts of others to reach them.

One also participates in evangelism by praying for the efforts of others to reach the lost. Again, this is not an excuse for laziness or timidity in speaking to others personally but is the spiritual fact of the matter. When we pray for the evangelizing work of others, we are

participants in that work. We can affect the doors that are opened and how the message is presented, as Paul makes clear in 2 Thess. 3:1-2, Eph. 6:18-20, and Col. 4:2-4.

The second point is that, though we should grow in our ability to share our faith wisely and effectively, making the most of every opportunity, we must remember that it is ultimately up to the one who hears the gospel whether to accept or reject it. We cannot ensure that people will accept the truth, no matter how well we present it. Some soils are not receptive, and some cultures and periods in history breed a disproportionate number of soils that are not receptive. Our role is simply to sow the seed, without, of course, erecting any unnecessary barriers to its reception.

Finally, I encourage people to develop their own method of fishing. We are all different. Find what works most effectively for you, given your personality, interests, knowledge, ability, and relationships and then look for opportunities to drop your net into the water.