

Exegetical Brief: The Meaning Of μαθητεύσατε In Matthew 28:19

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Much has been written, also in our synod, on the meaning of μαθητεύσατε in Matthew 28:19. The basic question might be expressed this way: Is μαθητεύω a synonym for teaching that merely imparts information, or is it teaching that imparts information and also affects the learner's life? This article will not provide a definitive translation for Matthew 28:19 since, as will be shown, there isn't any. Instead, we will note the key elements which must be a part of any discussion of this word in general and what each element contributes to our understanding of μαθητεύω in this verse. It is beyond the scope of this article to address how we are to apply Jesus' command to us in Matthew 28:19.

Cognates

When the meaning of a word is in question, one must examine its cognates. The base word from which μαθητεύω and its cognates come is μανθάνω. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)* suggests that the essential meaning is "to direct one's mind to something" (p 391). An additional idea this word can convey is "an intellectual process which has external results" (p 392). Thus μανθάνω can simply refer to learning some information as it does in John 7:15 and Galatians 3:2 ("I would like to learn just one thing from you."), or to learning that affects a person's life as it does in Matthew 11:29 ("Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...and you will find rest for your souls") and in Ephesians 4:20.

All of the cognates of μαθητεύω show that the idea of learning something is always involved: μάθημα is "a lesson, knowledge"; μάθησος is "the act of learning"; μαθητεία is "instruction from a teacher"; μαθητής is "a learner, pupil"; μαθητικός is "disposed to learning, easily taught." But the use of the cognates in non-NT literature doesn't establish that the learning involved always has effects in one's life, such as living according to the teachings of a certain person.

The only cognate of μαθητεύω used in the NT is μαθητής. It is used over 400 times (the feminine μαθήτρια is used once). The vast majority of these uses are in the Gospels. A couple of times it is used of the disciples or followers of the Pharisees and of John the Baptist. Most of the uses refer to those who were Jesus' disciples, his followers. This use parallels one of the uses of μαθητής in non-NT literature, namely, people who not only have an external connection with a master teacher (i.e., getting information from him) but who also share a fellowship with their teacher and who preserve and transmit his sayings to others (*TDNT*, p 417 and 424).

The only book in the NT outside the Gospels where the word μαθητής is used is Acts. There it is used 28 times. After chapter six it is regularly used as a synonym for "believer," referring either to individual believers or the believers as a group in a certain city. Some people argue that Luke used this term for the very purpose of emphasizing that Christianity is not just a matter of learning some information but also a way of life (cf. Acts 19:23 where Luke refers to Christianity as "the Way"). They point to Luke's frequent use of this term and his remark in Acts 11:26 that "the *disciples* were called Christians first in Antioch" to claim that the word μαθητής is an extremely significant word. But this claim is not very convincing when we note that the Holy Spirit led no writer of any epistle (Paul, Peter, John, James, Jude, or the writer to the Hebrews) to use μαθητής even once. Instead, they all use the substantivized adjective πιστός or a participial of πιστεύω to refer to individual believers or the believers as a group.

It is clear from this brief look at the cognates of μαθητεύω that the basic connotation is not restricted to learning that is simply gaining some information but also includes learning that has an effect on a person's life.

The NT Uses of μαθητεύω

A second consideration in determining the meaning of a word in a given passage is to look at that particular form of the word (noun, adjective, verb) as it is used elsewhere in the New Testament. The verb μαθητεύω is used only three times in the New Testament other than in Matthew 28:19.

In Matthew 13:52 the aorist passive participle (μαθητευθείς) is used attributively to describe a γραμματεὺς (teacher of the law). The NIV translates "who is *instructed* about the kingdom of heaven." Other translations do something similar: "trained" (RSV, GWN) or "taught" (NIRV). Numerous other translations don't reflect the passive. They translate "become a disciple" (TEV, Jerusalem, NEB, Phillips, GW, CEV) or "become a learner" (REB). Although this paraphrase may at first glance seem to be supported by a similar use of the passive in Matthew 27:57 (cf. the next paragraph), in non-NT literature the meaning "to be or become a disciple" is expressed by the *active voice* (TDNT, Liddell and Scott). So arguments have been brought for both meanings of μαθητεύω in this verse ("instruct" and "be a disciple").

In Matthew 27:57, the aorist indicative, passive form (ἐμαθητεύθη) is translated "be or become a disciple" by most versions. The verse is speaking about Joseph of Arimathea coming to ask Pilate for permission to take Jesus' body down from the cross. The NIV translates "who had himself *become a disciple* of Jesus." However, several commentators fault the translations for ignoring the passive voice. For example, John MacArthur (*New Testament Commentary, Matthew 24-28*, Moody, 1989) writes that this verb could be speaking about Joseph being instructed by Jesus even though Joseph was a secret follower of Jesus. MacArthur contends that Joseph may often have accompanied other Sanhedrin members who came to criticize Jesus and used these opportunities to hear Jesus teach and to witness many of his miracles. So again, arguments have been brought for both meanings ("instructed" and "be a disciple").

In Acts 14:21, Luke uses the aorist participle of μαθητεύω transitively with an object (μαθητεύσαντες ἰκανοῦς) to describe what Paul and Barnabas did in Derbe before returning to Lystra. What is particularly noteworthy is that μαθητεύσαντες is used coordinately with the participle εὐαγγελιζόμενοι. This tells us that μαθητεύω does mean something more than just preaching the gospel in this passage. The NIV translates, "They preached the good news...and *won* a large number of *disciples*." Other versions translate μαθητεύσαντες ἰκανοῦς in the same or a similar way: "gained many converts" (NEB), "won followers" (NIRV), "won people to the Lord" (CEV).

Although the translation of "winning" or "gaining" followers makes good sense, it gives μαθητεύω a meaning that is different from all of its cognates (i.e., instructing). "Winning" followers would also be a meaning that is different from its meaning in non-NT literature where μαθητεύω is used transitively with the simple meaning "to instruct" or a number of times with the extended meaning "to instruct to be a disciple." Either of these latter meanings would also make good sense in this context: "They preached the good news . . . and *instructed* many (or, instructed many to *be disciples*)."

What have we learned from these three NT passages that contributes to our understanding of μαθητεύω in Matthew 28:19? The context of the two passages that have the passive forms allow either of the two meanings established from a study of the cognates: learning that is simply the gaining of information, or learning that has an effect on a person's life. So one could use these passages to argue either meaning for μαθητεύω in Matthew 28:19. In the Acts passage the transitive use of μαθητεύω does mean something more than preaching the gospel, especially since it is an action which Paul and Barnabas are described as doing in addition to preaching the gospel.

μαθητεύω in the context of Matthew 28:19

The principles of proper interpretation require that we use the meaning of a word derived from a study of its cognates and from the meaning of that form of the word (here the verb) established by its use in other NT passages to guide us in determining the meaning of that word in the particular verse under discussion. However, the immediate context is still the prime consideration in determining the exact shading of meaning in that passage.

There are two points from the context in particular which contribute to our understanding of what μαθητεύω means in this verse. One is that it is used transitively; the other is that two circumstantial participles are used coordinately to modify μαθητεύσατε. Since the participles are coordinate (not independent as they would be without the conjunction καὶ), they must be taken as the same kind of circumstantial participle. The suggestion that these participles might be *accompanying* circumstance doesn't fit this context. By definition, an accompanying circumstance is *an additional action* that is taking place *at the same time as* the action of the main verb. Baptizing infants is not an additional action that is done simultaneously with instructing. Instead, the context leads us to recognize that both circumstantial participles express manner. They explain how the action of this command is to be accomplished.

Jesus uses an aorist imperative (μαθητεύσατε) with an object (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη). The aorist imperative calls for action. "Don't just have good intentions," Jesus is saying, "but also get this action done." The direct object indicates on whom the action of the imperative is to be carried out. "Don't just carry this action out on a few people," Jesus is saying, "but do it to everyone."

Does the meaning of μαθητεύω tell us that the action to be done is only the imparting of information? Or is it to be instruction that also aims at having an effect on the life of the person? Our study of the cognates of μαθητεύω indicated that it could be either, but in any case the verb should include the idea of instruction. Our study of the one other passage in the NT where μαθητεύω is used transitively (Acts 14:21) established that it can mean more than just preaching the gospel.

Perhaps the translation "instruct them to be disciples" seems to catch both the root meaning of this word and its meaning when used transitively. However, this translation works well only with the second of the two modifying participles. "Instruct people to be disciples" is indeed explained very nicely in the second modifying phrase which tells us that this is done by "teaching people to hold on to and put into practice everything I commanded you." In this second modifying phrase the dual idea of instruction and instruction that has effects on a person's life is expressed by the participle and its complementary infinitive. The participle διδάσκοντες speaks of a person who has certain knowledge instructing one less knowledgeable. The complementary infinitive τηρεῖν adds the idea that this learning includes not only a firm grasp on the information imparted but also doing what one was taught. Note how the translation of τηρέω in the NT varies between "keep [hold on to]" (Eph 4:3, 2 Ti 4:7) and "obey" (Mt 23:3).

However, the first participle βαπτίζοντες which modifies μαθητεύσατε doesn't work well with the rendering of μαθητεύσατε as "instructing people to be disciples." This participle is talking about baptism, a means of grace in which God forgives our sins and claims us as his dear children, not about instruction. For this same reason the translation "teach" doesn't fit either. When the whole context is taken into consideration, it becomes clearer why a translation such as "make disciples" is probably the best we can do in Matthew 28:19. One might wish that we didn't have to use such a broad expression, but the translation needs to be broad enough to fit both of the modifying participles in this verse.

However, the broad expression "make disciples" can easily be misunderstood. Therefore, when we use or explain these words, we always need to make sure that we clearly distinguish our part in carrying out Jesus' command from God's part. Only God the Holy Spirit can turn people from unbelief to faith and constantly increase that faith. Only God the Holy Spirit can create a living faith that clings to and willingly does all that Christ commands. But we also have a part in this work because God has chosen to use us as his agents to proclaim the Word through which the Spirit does his work. Therefore, God does speak of human beings having a part in bringing people to faith (e.g., Acts 26:17 where Paul is described as opening people's eyes and turning people from darkness to light, from Satan to God). But whenever we cite such passages we need to speak carefully so that the part we have in this action, what we do, is never confused with the Spirit's work, with what he does.

From all the foregoing we have seen that the imperative μαθητεύσατε in Matthew 28:19 can and does mean something more than just preaching the gospel. The possibility that it can mean more than just communicating information is established by the meaning of the cognates of μαθητεύω and by its intransitive use in two NT passages. The fact that it can be used to mean more than preaching the gospel is established by

its coordinate use with the preaching of the gospel in Acts 14:21. That it does mean more in Matthew 28:19 is established by the second modifying phrase used to explain how the command Christ gives in this verse is to be carried out.

It is true that false teaching can be introduced into the interpretation of this passage by someone who speaks about our part in making disciples in a way that is not in line with what the rest of Scripture says about conversion. But we need to answer such false teaching from the rest of Scripture rather than by trying to impose a translation on this verse that may lessen! the chance of false teaching but that doesn't really fit with what Jesus said in the rest of the verse.

Modeling and μαθητεύω

Some writers have suggested that an essential part of this verb's meaning is modeling. But it is clear both from the cognates of μαθητεύω and from the four passages where it is used in the NT that this is not the case.

One writer who asserts that μαθητεύω includes modeling is Larry Richards. In his book, *A Theology of Christian Education* (Zondervan, 1975), he uses the many passages that speak of Jesus' disciples (μαθητής) to define what "make disciples" means in Matthew 28:19. He says, "The making of disciples is an interpersonal and transactional process, involving teacher and learner in a wide range of real life experiences....[It] seems to require a life-context, a model from whom those being *discipled* [emphasis ours] can learn, and a transactional relationship between persons" (p32).

In his book Richards rightly shows that modeling is indeed included when the Bible teaches us about Christian nurture. For example, Scripture speaks of Christ (Jn 13:15, 1 Pe 2:21), the apostle Paul (1 Co 4:16; 11:1), our spiritual leaders (He 13:7), and fellow Christians (1 Th 1:3,7; 2 Co 8:1,8) serving as models for us. to follow in living a sanctified life. But Richards is not correct when he suggests that this is a part of the-basic meaning of μαθητεύω when it is used transitively.

Because Richards and others use the verb "to disciple" and the gerund "discipling" to emphasize that modeling is not only a part of nurture but its basic element, these terms can easily be misunderstood as making modeling part of Jesus' command "make disciples" in Matthew 28:19. This is an example of the fallacy of confusing concepts and terms. Though the concept of modeling is certainly scriptural, including this concept in the term μαθητεύω is not correct. So it is probably the better part of wisdom that we don't speak about "discipling" people.

What about the term "discipleship"? It can, of course, mean simply the state of being a disciple or living like a disciple. But if the term "discipleship" is used to emphasize that modeling is also part of Christian nurture, then it is the same confusion of concepts and terms noted in the previous paragraph.

Conclusion

All things considered, the translation "make disciples" is probably the best way to translate μαθητεύω in Matthew 28:19. The use of the expression "make disciples" to refer to preaching the gospel and the results of that preaching (coming to faith, growing in faith, faith-born love) is certainly in place since that is what it means in Matthew 28:19. But because it is an expression that can be, and has been, misused and misunderstood, it would be the better part of wisdom to carefully circumscribe our use of this expression in a way that clearly distinguishes our part in making disciples from what the Holy Spirit does in making disciples through our proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments.

Abbreviations of Bible translations referred to in this article

NIV = New International Version
 RSV = Revised Standard Version
 GWN = God's Word to the Nations

NirV = New International Reader's Version

TEV = Today's English Version

NEB = New English Bible

GW = God's Word

CEV = Contemporary English Version

REB = Revised English Bible