

The Nature of Discipleship in the Gospels.

by
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The following study was written in part as a response to an article which claimed:

- 1. That there are two calls of Jesus in his ministry:** One to follow him, which was for the purpose of **leadership**, and another call to **salvation** which was for everyone. The call to discipleship or followship, it is claimed, was only for those who wanted to be leaders. *Hence all the passages in the Gospels where Jesus called people to follow him were for leadership and not for salvation*, i.e., discipleship and followership did not apply to those who were not in training to be leaders. The call for salvation was only through belief and obedience to his word and it was this that was for everyone.
- 2. It is claimed that salvation was not about following Jesus as a *disciple*.** As such, “there is no connection between ‘followship’ and salvation”. There is a difference, it is claimed, between “true discipleship” which involved only keeping Jesus’ teachings (this discipleship is defined in John 8:31-32), and a discipleship which physically follows Jesus by denying self, taking up one’s cross, and being fishers of men. This view seems to assumed that John 8:31-32 is the only Gospel scripture that speaks of discipleship that is applicable beyond the time of Jesus’ death and the ceasing of his physical presence.
- 3. “Cross-bearing” (such as found in Luke 9), it is claimed, wasn’t a “criterion to be met”** before the apostles started following Jesus. This phrase also is claimed to refer **only** to physical death on a physical cross.
- 4. The concept of "followship", it is urged, should be limited to those who actually followed Jesus *physically*.** In other words the ideas and commands to follow Jesus and be his disciple in the Gospels were tied only to the physical

presence of the one followed or the one to whom you were a disciple. They, by implication, did not have any spiritual dimension which could be applied to today. Hence, the passages which speak of Jesus calling people to follow him are obsolete for today. Also, since the term “disciple” is tied to the physical presence of Jesus and since that physical presence no longer existed, the use of term “disciple” for Christians was soon dropped in the early church and became obsolete. This explains, this view urges, why one finds the term “disciple” only in the Gospels and Acts and not in the epistles. The Epistles use the term “believer” since it was the more relevant term. The lack of the use of the term in the epistles, it is claimed, shows the irrelevance of the terms “disciple” and “follow” for the early church and for us today.

5. It is claimed that there are no “disciples” mentioned in Matt. 28:19 since the noun “disciple” is not there. Hence you do not have to be a disciple to be baptized but just part of a nation. It is claimed that it is the “nations” not disciples that are commanded to be baptized here. So, one could conclude on this reasoning that “discipleship” is not part of salvation and one does not have to be a disciple prior to being baptized.

As a response to the above, I have attempted in the following excursus to show that while Jesus was here on earth the concepts of “following” and “discipleship” did take on a physical (human to human literal physical following) meaning *but* were not void of their spiritual (non-literal physical presence) meaning. As such, passages which speak of following Jesus and being his disciples *are* relevant for us today. I also try to show that Jesus wanted his disciples to follow spiritually in obedience all along during his lifetime (taking John 8:31-32 along with all the other discipleship passages as relevant for today). However, it must be said that it was only after Jesus’ death and resurrection that the spiritual concepts seem to become clear to his disciples. Those physical concepts they had understood while he was here physically came to define the spiritual aspects of following Jesus for today.

In the following I give an in depth discussion of the physical and spiritual components and semantic ranges of the terms “follow” and “disciple” as well as an in depth discussion of Matthew 28:19 and its application to today.

The Physical presence of Jesus and the concepts of *μαθητης* (disciple) and *μαθητευω* (to disciple) in the New Testament.

There is abundant evidence that the Greek terms “disciple” and its verb form “to disciple” do not require physical presence of the teacher or master and do have a spiritual dimension. The noun form ‘disciple’ is found exclusively in the Gospels and Acts in the New Testament and is defined by Bauer¹ as “learner, pupil, disciple, apprentice, adherent”. However, its meaning by the time of Jesus is classified by Bauer as “adherent”. Michael J. Wilkins², in his extensive study, has shown that the term progressed from meaning “learner” to the more technical term “adherent” by the time of Jesus. He states:

The progression to “adherent” in Hellenism at the time of Christ and the early church made *μαθητης* a convenient term to designate the followers of Jesus because emphasis in the common use of the term was not upon “learning”, or upon being a “pupil”, but upon adherence to a great master. Hence a “disciple” of Jesus, designated by the term *μαθητης*, was one who adhered to his master, and the type of adherence was determined by the master himself (p. 217).

Bauer also notes that this term is not exclusively used of the Twelve. In many places, he says, it is “doubtful whether a particular passage really means the Twelve and not a larger or smaller circle”. (In this connection, Bauer cites a few examples of this as Matt. 12:1; 15:2; Mk. 5:31; 6:1, 35, 45; 8:27; Lk. 8:9; John 2:2; 3:22). Bauer also shows that the book of Acts uses this term “almost exclusively to denote the members of the new religious community” (hence, it is used of those who are not in the circle of the Twelve, in the absence of the physical Jesus, and who had not physically followed Jesus). He cites several examples of how “even after Jesus’ departure from this life those who followed him were called *μαθητης*”. As Bauer points out, Socrates is called the disciple of Homer many generations later. The early church uses the term to refer specifically to those who were disciples of the Lord. In Acts 9:1, although Jesus is not physically present, his followers are still called *τους μαθητας του κυριου* (disciples of the

¹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translated by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957, p. 486-487, here after referred to as “Bauer”.

² *The Concept of Disciple in Matthew’s Gospel As Reflected In the Use of the Term μαθητης* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).

Lord). The Pharisees called themselves “disciples of Moses” (John 9:28) in the absence of his physical presence. ***There should be no doubt in the mind of anyone that physical presence of a master or teacher is not an absolutely necessary component of the definition of the term and that it has a spiritual dimension in which the master does not necessarily have to be present.***

One does not cease to be a disciple when the master is not present. This can also clearly be seen when Jesus and other teachers are separated from their disciples. For example, Jesus’ followers are still called “his” disciples in Jesus’ physical absence (Jesus was not actually “with” them but saw them at a distance) in Mk. 6:48, and John the Baptist’s disciples are still called his disciples even when they leave him to question Jesus (Matt. 11:7), not to mention the narratives after Jesus’ resurrection such as Matt. 28:7 where his disciples are called disciples even in his absence. The physical closeness or proximity of a person to the body of Jesus is not a determination as to whether or not he is a disciple. The determination of discipleship seems to be based on something other than proximity to the body of Jesus.

The verb form of the noun disciple “*matheteuo*” is only used four times in the New Testament³ (Matt. 13:52; 27:57; 28:19; Acts 14:21) and likewise, in all the passages except Matt. 13:52, one sees that one can be a disciple or be made a disciple in the absence of the physical presence of Jesus.⁴ Again physical presence is not a requirement of being or becoming a disciple of Jesus.

The New Testament shows that Jesus was making disciples all along during his physical ministry. In fact John 4:1 states that he “was gaining (*μαθητας ποιει*)⁵ and baptizing more disciples than John” even though he did not do the actual baptizing but relegated that to his disciples. Already early on in his ministry Jesus was teaching his disciples how to make disciples and to baptize them. In fact, the number of his disciples became so great that on his triumphal entry there was a whole crowd of his disciples praising God in loud voices. Luke 19:37 states,⁶ “When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of

³ The Greek concordance used in this paper for usage references is *A Concordance to the Greek Testament* by W. F. Moulton and A. S. Geden, Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1975.

⁴ Matt. 27:52 may also be an exception since we do not have evidence either way that Joseph of Arimathea actually was physically in close proximity followed Jesus. John 19:38, however, says he was a “secret” disciple and thus may have not gotten in close proximity to him. Yet he himself is said to be a disciple of Jesus.

⁵ This Greek phrase seems to be a synonym to the verb *μαθητευω* (make disciples) in Matt 28:19.

⁶ The Biblical quotes in this paper come from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

disciples began to joyfully praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen.” Jesus’ disciples however were being challenged along the way as to what it meant to be “his” disciple. In John 6:66 we find that as Jesus went along, many of his disciples came to a hard teaching that they could not accept. As such it states, “from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.” The trend in Jesus’ ministry seems to be that he would call people to discipleship and then gradually teach them what that meant resulting in many turning back and no longer following him. But as can be seen from the quotes above, Jesus had many more disciples than the Twelve. These all were followers of Jesus, they were disciples, adherents to Jesus, and those who had responded at least initially to his call.

As stated above, throughout Jesus’ ministry he seems to have been about the business of making disciples. This included the Twelve. He trained them and named them Apostles and sent them out to preach the message that the Kingdom of Heaven was near (Matt. 10:7; Luke 10:9) seemingly for the purpose of making more disciples. They were to go and heal the sick, raise the dead, drive out demons, and cleanse those with leprosy. All these things were part of the salvific kingdom of God, a kingdom different from the earthly Messianic kingdom that was commonly thought of in Jesus day. Jesus’ kingdom was not going to be of this world (Jn. 18:36) but would be spiritual (Lk 17:21). It was to have Jesus as the King, the Apostles⁷ as leaders, and the rest as followers⁸. In this connection, Jesus said “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” And to Peter he said, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 16:18-20). This is all done in the context of Jesus’ making disciples. (Note the discipleship/follow ship passage immediately following in Mt. 16:22, more on this connection later). After his resurrection, Jesus, having received all authority, commanded the eleven to go and make disciples of all nations and baptize them and teach them everything he had commanded them and his presence (spiritual) would be with them to the end of the age (Mt. 28:16-20). Prior to Matt. 28 one sees disciples, disciples making disciples, the teaching of disciples, and Jesus encouraging all of them and others to follow him.

⁷ The term “apostle” seems to be a better term to express the idea of “leadership” than “disciple”. An apostle was one sent with a commission, an ambassador or envoy with the authority and special position given by the sender. On this, cf. Bauer, p. 99, and Rengstorf’s discussion of it (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, “*αποστολος*”, Vol. 1, p. 421 where he states, “It always denotes a man who is sent, and sent with full authority.” It would seem that the Twelve were both apostles and disciples, leaders and followers.

⁸ On this, see my ThM Thesis, *The Meaning of Matthew 21:43 and its Role in the Development of the Rejection Theme of Matthew’s Gospel*, Deerfield, IL: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School Library, 1986.

In several passages, Jesus lays out the requirements of being one of his disciples. This requirement was given not only to the Twelve but also to any one who would be his disciple. Luke (14:25-33) states,

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said, “If **anyone** comes to me and does not hate his father and mother . . . he cannot be my disciple. And **anyone** who does not carry his cross and follow⁹ me cannot be my disciple . . . In the same way **any of you** who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple”.

Clearly, the call to be Jesus’ disciple was not just to the Twelve or to leadership. Basically the call might be boiled down to accepting the lordship of Christ in one’s life, something that even after Jesus resurrection was a requirement of **everyone** for salvation (Rom.10:9).

In a couple other passages, Jesus also presents the evidence of true discipleship. John 13:35, in connection with the command to love as Jesus loved, states, “By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”. Indeed this seems to be addressed to the Twelve (Matt 26:20) but it is addressed to them as disciples and would not seem to me to necessarily be limited to them. Any one who loves as Jesus did would seem to be his disciple.

John 8:31 states, “To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free’”. This call to discipleship, addressed to the Jews¹⁰, is tied to holding on to or remaining in (*μενω*) Jesus’ teaching. The results are salvific in that they will set one free, free from his sin (see verse 34). These Jews had believed him. However, the Greek construction in John seems to indicate that they simply believed him (dative case of “*autos*”) and did not trust *in* him (a Greek construction that uses “*eis*” in John after “*pisteuo*” (believe)). As such these Jews in verse 31 would be distinguished from those in verse 30 who trusted *in (eis)* him.¹¹ If this be the case, then true freedom (i.e., salvation from sin) is found in being a true disciple of Jesus, one who abides in his teaching. These Greek constructions in John seem to distinguish between salvific and non-salvific faith. From this perspective, faith in verse 31 is not to be seen in antithesis with discipleship, but very much a part of it.

⁹ I will discuss the ideas of “follow” and “carry one’s cross” later.

¹⁰ These were Jewish people who clearly felt they were in good standing since they were Abraham’s descendants, see verses 33ff.

¹¹ B. F. Wescott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, p. 133 argues for this. He notes that this construction indicating true faith in Jesus is found in John 2:11, 3:16, 18, 36; 4:39, 6:29, 35,40, 47; 7:5, 31, 38f, 48; 9:35f; 10:42; 11: 25ff, 45, 48; 12:11, 36f, 42, 44, 46; 14: 1; 12; 16:9; 17:20.

The concept of discipleship (Jesus' definition of it) is defined throughout the Gospels. This being the case, how should one understand Matthew 28:19 at the end of the gospel? When one understands that Jesus has been making disciples, teaching discipleship, and giving requirements for anyone who wished (many different people including crowds, Jews, etc., not just the Twelve) being his disciples, how else could one understand the content of the command to "make disciples" other than necessarily including the content of what Jesus had preached? If in the command to make disciples in Matt. 28:19 Jesus meant something other than he preached previously then all the previous contexts must be thrown out and new meaning infused. But there is no evidence that Jesus meant anything other than what he has already preached. We find those after Jesus' resurrection and after the church continued making disciples. Acts 14:21 states, "They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples". Can this "winning of disciples" mean anything different than what Jesus preached? There does not seem to be any textual indication that "discipleship" here in Acts 14 was any different than what Jesus had already set up for those who would be his disciple. In fact the use of both the verbal and noun forms of the word in the book of Acts after Jesus' resurrection and after the beginning of the church seems to indicate that it was Jesus' definition of discipleship which continued. People are still called the "Lord's disciples" (Acts 9:1). There is no indication that the content of the term was emptied or changed from what Jesus taught and what he commanded in Matt. 28. Indeed, Matthew 28:19 when taken contextually (looking at the gospels as a whole) would indicate that Jesus intended discipleship to continue, *discipleship as he defined it*, not some other discipleship.

Why then the lack of the use of the term "disciple" in the epistles? There are several possibilities. One is genre. Of all the occurrences of the Greek term *μαθητης* (*mathetes*, disciple) over 86% occur as editorial¹² comments. That is, the term "disciple" is used by the writer (Matthew, Luke, Mark, or John) as a descriptive term relaying an historical account. The other 14% occur in quotations on the lips of Jesus, Jewish leaders, and others. The point of this is that the term is descriptive and may not be used normally in disciple-disciple communication. Since the epistles are disciple-disciple or believer-believer communication the difference in genre may be a reason why the term "disciple" is not used.

¹² This is according to my count: Matthew uses the term 71 times with 60 editorial, Mark uses it 44 times with 40 as editorial, Luke has it 38 times with 29 editorial, John has it 78 times with 68 editorial, and Acts has it 28 times with 27 editorial.

Secondly, there are a variety of synonyms used to speak of those belonging to Jesus church. They are used interchangeably with each other. An example is found in Acts 18:27 states,

When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, **the brothers** (*adelphoi*) encouraged him and wrote to **the disciples** (*mathetais*) there to welcome him. On arriving he was a great help to **those who** by grace had **believed** (*pepisteukosin*)

Here in one verse three synonyms are used of the same group of people, brothers, disciples, and those who believed. Many other synonyms are also used in the New Testament including “children of God”, “saints”, the “called”, “followers of the Way”, “Christian”, “believer”, etc. Each of these seem to carry a different emphasis on an aspect of the follower of God. For instance, the term “disciple” emphasizes the commitment to or adherent of Jesus, the term “saint” indicates the person made holy by Jesus, the term “child of God” indicates one’s relationship to God, the term “brother” or “sister” indicates one’s spiritual relationship with other children of God, the term “Way” may indicate those devoted to the Jesus who is the way, the term “Christian” means “little Christ” or Christ-like and indicates the nature of the person as to whom they are like, and the term “believer” would tend to note their faith in Christ and especially his resurrection¹³.

The use or lack of use of these terms in parts of the New Testament does not necessarily indicate a change in emphasis or focus of the church. For instance, if this were true then the lack of the use of the term “the Way” in the epistles (it is found only in Acts) might indicate that the church no longer felt Jesus was the way (see Jn. 14:6 and Acts 4:12) or that the Christian way was the only way. But that would be an argument from silence.

The premise of some that the lack of the use of the term “disciple” after Acts in the New Testament suggests that the latter writings of the Bible show that the term had “died out” in use, seems to be a distorted reading of the evidence since the book of Acts covers history up to 62 AD, a time period when many of the epistles were already written. While Paul never uses the term in his epistles¹⁴, it is not foreign to his lips¹⁵ nor was it foreign to Luke his companion who wrote Luke and Acts. It would seem to me that

¹³ On this and why we do not find the term “disciple” in the Epistles of the New Testament, see Douglas Jacoby’s comment in *More answers to Bible Questions you Have Asked* Volume 2, Billerica, Mass: DPI, 2002, p.p. 22-23.

¹⁴ It is never-the-less found on his lips in Acts 20:30 when he exhorts the elders of Ephesus to watch out for savage wolves who will come in and attempt to draw the disciples after them (the commentaries I have read indicate that these are Christian disciples who are drawn away).

¹⁵ See note above.

if there was a change in emphasis in the early church that Luke would have learned it from Paul and would have exclusively used terms other than “disciple” in the book of Acts. As it is however, he uses the term 28 times, most of which describe the believers of Jesus.

The fallacy of depending on silence of Scriptural use of a term to determine the validity or obsolescence of something is fairly easy to show. I found 144 Greek words that, like the term “disciple”, are found only in at least one Gospel and in Acts¹⁶. The term Phillip (the Apostle) is found many times in the Gospels and Acts but not in the epistles. Following the line of reasoning of those who argue from silence, one could conclude that he became unimportant to Christianity as history progressed! But is that really so? The term *nesteuw* (to fast) occurs about 19 times in the Gospels and Acts but not in the Epistles. Does that mean it was not practiced or that it became unimportant in the early church? The term *mnemeion* (grave or memorial) occurs at least 35 times in the Gospels and Acts but not in the epistles. Should we conclude that this became obsolete in early church practice? Many other words occur many times in the Gospels and/or Acts but only few times in the Epistles. The word *numphios* (wedding) occurs at least 12 times in the Gospels and once in Revelation. Does that mean weddings were “out” in the early Church? The word “Peter” occurs about 4 times in the Epistles but over 150 in the Gospels and Acts. Does that mean Peter became unimportant in the church? The word for heal (*therapeuo*) occurs over 40 times in the Gospels and Acts but only twice in an epistle (Revelation). Did concern for healing take a back seat in the early church? The verb *ekballo* (to cast out) occurs over 70 times in the Gospels and Acts but only 4 times in the epistles. Should we attempt to discover a theological significance to this? The word *ploion* (ship) occurs over 60 times in the Gospels and Acts but only 3 times in the epistles. Were ships used less in the latter days of the first century by Christians? There are more, but hopefully these examples help us to see the futility of depending on the silence of scripture to establish or even support a theological position. In almost all the above one could come up with reasons why these words occur in the Gospels and Acts but not much, if any, in the epistles. But these reasons would all ultimately be conjecture. *Silence of word use does not demand or prove anything except that the word was not used.*

There are any number of reasons why these words and the word “disciple” and even the word “follow” (*akoloutheo*) do not occur or occur

¹⁶ Most of these 144 appear only in a small number of occurrences. Never the less there are several that occur frequently.

vary rarely in the epistles. These range from genre, the setting of the writing, author preference, and the abundant synonyms available.

The Scripture is not silent on the use of the word “disciple”. It was defined by Jesus in the Gospel, he commanded his disciples to make more disciples after his resurrection (Matthew 28:16-20), the disciples did just that and made more disciples after the church started (Acts 14:21), and the followers of Christ continued to be called disciples at least up until 62 AD in the New Testament. There is no indication in the text that the content of the meaning of the term “disciple” changed from what Jesus established in the gospels. Once again, the context of the gospels would tend to support the idea that Jesus’ command in Matthew 28:19 to go and make disciples would have to take its meaning from Jesus previous teaching. In addition, it would be hard to conceive that Luke who wrote both Luke and Acts would have a different meaning for being “Jesus” disciple in Acts than is set forth in Luke. Disciples of the Lord in Acts surely means the same as disciples of Jesus in the Gospels¹⁷. Otherwise we have one writer using the term “disciple” in two different ways in a sequential book series with out any hint of the change in the text. There are indeed minute differences in that the physical Jesus was not physically present in Acts, but the presence of the physical body of Jesus as I have shown above is not a necessary aspect of discipleship. The content of commitment to learn from him and follow his teaching and example, to deny self, and yes make him Lord of one’s life remains constant.

Physical presence and the concept of *ακολουθεω* (to follow) and its cognates in the New Testament.

The term *ακολουθεω* (*akoloutheo*) and its cognates (*εξακολουθεω* (*exakolouthelo*) *επακολουθεω* (*epakoloutheo*), *παρακολουθεω* (*parakoloutheo*), and *συνακολουθεω* (*sunakoloutheo*) are all used in the New Testament. None of them are restricted in their semantic range to “physical presence” of a person but also contain a spiritual dimension.

Exakouloutheo is used in II Peter 1:16 for the idea of following “cleverly devised myths” and in 2:2 of following “licentious ways” and in 2:15 of “following the road of Balaam”¹⁸. The word here seems to mean a

¹⁷ I would think that the sum total of what Jesus taught as being his disciple as unveiled in the Gospels would be the least of what it would mean in the book of Acts.

¹⁸ These and the following translation quotes are from the NRSV.

following mentally and morally a way of life. It does not seem to necessitate a physical presence¹⁹ of a person.

Epakoloutheo is used in I Tim 5:10 to describe a person who devotes herself to doing good. In verse 24 it describes sins that “follow” others. In I Pet 2:21 it is used of following the risen Jesus (non-physical following of Jesus since he is not around physically) in the area of suffering²⁰.

Parakoloutheo also is not limited to the physical sense of following either. For instance II Tim 3:10 speaks of closely following or observing “my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness”. To be sure Timothy was in the presence of Paul many times, but his following now was to imitate Paul’s life in his absence. I Tim 4:6 speaks of Timothy’s following “sound teaching”. This would also not seem to necessitate Paul’s continued physical presence.

Sunakoloutheo while it seems to always be used in the NT (but it only occurs three times there) of physical presence, can be used in the sense of to “follow an argument”²¹. Again, physical presence is not necessarily required.

Akoloutheo also is used of the ideas of following “customs” or obeying “statutes” or the way of truth.²² It is used in II Mac. 8:36 speaking of the Jews who “followed the laws which” God enacted.²³

When these words are used of “following” a person they do usually indicate a physical presence. There are exceptions, however, such as we have seen in II Pet. 2:15 and I Pet. 2:21.

There is also another interesting use of this word group. It is in its use with reference to “divinity” or god/God. When used of divinity, the physical presence of the divine person is not necessary for one to “follow”. For example Judith 5:7 (written around the beginning of the first century AD) uses *akoloutheo* in the following:

The people are descended of the Chaldeans: and they sojourned here to fore in Mesopotamia, and because they were not minded to follow (*ακολουθεω, akoloutheo*) the gods of their fathers, which were in the land of the Chaldeans. And they departed from their parents, and

¹⁹ Bauer, p. 271 shows this word can be used in the sense of “*obey, follow* an authority that may be personal . . . or impersonal”.

²⁰ Bauer, p. 282 shows that this term is used in the sense of “*devote oneself to* something”.

²¹ Liddell and Scott, *A Lexicon Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1982, p. 669.

²² Bauer, p. 30.

²³ References to the Apocrypha and the Greek words used come from R. H. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, Vols. 1 and 2, Oxford: Clarendon, 1913 (here the quote is from Vol. 1, p. 143) and Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and other Greek Versions of the Old Testament (Including the Apocryphal Books)*, in three volumes, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1983.

worshipped the God of heaven, the God whom they knew, and they cast them out from the face of their gods, and they fled to Mesopotamia, and sojourned there many days.²⁴

Epakoloutheo is also used in the sense of following “divinity or god/God. In Numbers 14:24 (LXX) it is used of Caleb to whom the Lord says, “. . . because he has had a different spirit and has followed (*επακολουθεω, epakoloutheo*) me fully, I will bring him into the land”. In Joshua 14:8, Caleb states, “I followed (*επακολουθεω, epakoloutheo*) the Lord my God fully.” Sirach 46:6 (probably written in the 2nd century BC) speaking of Joshua states,

With hailstones and bolts, he cast them down upon hostile people and in going down he destroyed them that rose up. In order that all the nations (devoted to) destruction might know that Jahveh was watching their fighting: And also because he fully followed (*επακολουθεω, epakoloutheo*) after God, and did act in piety in the days of Moses.²⁵

All these instances show that the physical presence, or continued physical presence of a person (whether human or divine) was not an absolute necessity for one to follow another.

Another word used quite often in the Gospels for “following after” someone is the word “*οπισω, (opiso)*”, which in association with a place means “*behind*²⁶” and when in association with going behind a person, it means “*to follow someone*²⁷” and “at the same time figuratively in the sense of ‘be an adherent’”²⁸. This latter sense is referenced by Bauer to Mt. 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Luke 9:23’ and 14:27, all parallel passages of Jesus’ call to follow him. W. Bauder notes how this word is used of following persons but also spiritual objects (II Ki. 13:2; Isa. 65:2; Jer. 3:17) as well as “dedication and obedience to a god (I Ki. 19:21; Jdg. 2:12f; Jer. 2:23; 7:6, 9; Ezek. 20:16; of Yahweh, Deut. 13:4; Sir 46:10)”.²⁹ Hence, this word group “follow”, like the term “disciple”, is not limited to physical presence of the one being followed. When used of divinity whether of God or false gods it takes on a “spiritual” type of following since the physical presence of the deity is not available.

²⁴ Charles, Vol. 1, p. 252.

²⁵ Charles, Vol. 1, p. 491.

²⁶ Bauer, p. 578.

²⁷ Bauer, p. 578.

²⁸ Bauer, p. 578.

²⁹ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* in 3 Volumes, sv. “Disciple”, edited by Colin Brown, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971, vol. 1, p. 492. In support of this is also I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, p. 593.

A closer look at Luke 9:23-27 and its gospel parallels in light of Jesus' nature and his intention.

Luke 9:23 states:

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me (οπισω, opiso), he must deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow (ακολουθεω, akoloutheo) me"

In order to understand what Jesus meant by "come after" and "follow me" it is good to consider the context and nature of the passage. As seen from parallels in Matt. 16:24 and Mark 8:34 this statement was given to "the crowd" (Mk. 8:34) as well as the disciples.³⁰ On a larger contextual view, Jesus was in the region of Caesarea Philippi, a place dedicated to the Greek God Pan³¹. Here also Herod the Great built a temple in honor of the emperor Augustus. Because of this Lane states,

"The area was thus dominated by strong Roman associations, and it may be theologically significant that Jesus' dignity was first recognized in a region devoted to the affirmation that Caesar is lord."³²

It is quite interesting that it is in this type of place, one of the worship of Pan and the exaltation of Caesar, that Jesus asked the question as to whom he really was. In answer, Peter in Mark says, "You are the Christ", in Matthew he states, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" and in Luke he states, "You are the Christ of God." These terms seem to indicate Jesus' special relationship with God³³ as the Messiah and his divinity (as seen in the term "son of God")³⁴, although not fully understood by the disciples until

³⁰ Luke says it was addressed to "them all" which could include the crowds. Matthew only mentions that it was given to the "disciples". This is easily reconcilable since Matthew does not say the crowds were not also addressed but focuses on the disciples.

³¹ Lane. P. 289.

³² P. 289.

³³ Lane, p. 288-89.

³⁴ Cf., Donald A. Carson, *Matthew*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, pp 365-66. Although the term "Son of God" may just be a synonym for "Messiah" (see, Alan Hugh McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, p. 240 and 112) and there is much scholarly debate on the exact meaning of "Son of God" (on this see *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, sv. "Son"), the gospels and the New Testament seem to assert Jesus' divinity (John 1:1; Phil. 2). Jesus, as the Son of God however, is so close to the Father that I. H. Marshall, commenting on John's use of the term with respect to Jesus' and the Father's relationship, states, "So close is the link between them that to deny the Son is to deny the Father . . . Father and Son belong inseparably to each other". Jesus, himself, seems to indicate his divinity as he as the son is also Lord (See Matt 22:37; 12:35; Luke 20:44).

later.³⁵ Jesus then complements Peter on his correct response and tells him that this was revealed to him by the Father in heaven and not by man (Matt. 16:17). Jesus then states that he will build his church and the gates of Hell will not over power it. All of this taken together would seem to highlight the lordship of Jesus, his Messiahship, and his close, even divine, relationship with God. Here we find the first time this concept was confessed by the disciples³⁶ even though they did not totally understand what that meant (as is evidenced by Peter rebuking Jesus for claiming that he would die). It seems that upon this confession, Jesus turned to the consummation of his mission, that of going to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and resurrect. Jesus' association with God, his lordship and his divinity (Jesus and the New Testament certainly seem to describe him as God, although not totally understood at this point by the disciples) and his determination to build his church even though he is going to Jerusalem to die, sets the stage for Peter's rebuke. Jesus "begins" (Mark 8:31; Matt. 16:21) to tell the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer, die, and rise again. Peter, calling him "Lord" (Matt 16:22), rebukes him. Jesus in response rebukes Peter (or is it Satan in his use of Peter?) and addresses the spiritual forces at work by saying, "Get behind me Satan" (Matt. 16:23). This highlights the spiritual battle that is going on here. The spiritual/divine nature of what is spoken of here in this context is further bolstered when one sees that these gospel passages are immediately followed by the passage on the Transfiguration where Jesus is exalted, transfigured, and a voice from Heaven states, "This is my Son whom I have chosen; listen to him" (Luke 9:35). The divine/spiritual element is indeed involved in the context of these passages concerning following Jesus.

As one can see, the setting here is not one of only human nature, it is one of divine nature: It was a battle of the Son of God, the Messiah, against Satan. The human element is there of course but we must not miss or exclude the divine (spiritual) element either. All this sets the stage for Jesus' strong statement about what it takes to be his disciple.

Jesus, speaking to the *crowd* (Luke 9:23) (a group of more than just his disciples), states "if *any one* would come after me" (emphasis mine) he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." The concept of "come after me" is a synonym for the idea of "following" (*akoloutho*)³⁷ in the sense of "an adherent"³⁸, which is also another synonym for

³⁵ For instance see Thomas' statement to the risen Jesus. "My Lord and my God" , John 20:28. This concept of what Jesus meant when he spoke of his death and resurrection was not understood by his disciples until after his resurrection. See Mark 9:32; Lk. 9:45; 18:34; cf. Jn. 12:16.

³⁶ McNeile, p. 240.

³⁷ Marshall, p. 373.

³⁸ Bauer, p. 578.

“disciple”.³⁹ Marshall states concerning this verse, “what follows is no longer private teaching for the disciples but . . . rules for all who contemplate following Jesus.”⁴⁰ Thus, this is a statement for all who would follow Jesus. Of each of these would-be (or continue-to-be) disciples were required three things: (1) denial of self, (2) taking up his cross daily, and (3) following Jesus⁴¹.

These three concepts follow hard on the heels of Luke 9:22 (and the other two parallel passages in Matthew and Mark) concerning Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. Hence, the understanding of their meaning must be seen in that context. Denial of self is necessary. One could not follow Jesus in his suffering, death, and resurrection without self-denial. One’s self does not normally want to die. This word seems to be equivalent to the phrase “hate one’s life” (*μισιεν την ψυχη*) in Luke 14:37 where Jesus makes it a requirement of being his disciple.⁴² Lane states:

. . . those who wish to follow him must be prepared to shift the center of gravity in their lives from a concern for self to reckless abandon to the will of God. The central thought in self-denial is a disowning of any claim that may be urged by the self, a sustained willingness to say ‘No’ to oneself in order to be able to say “Yes” to God. This demand is reinforced and intensified by the horrifying image of a death march. Bearing the cross was not a Jewish metaphor, and Jesus’ statement must have sounded repugnant to the crowd and the disciples alike.

³⁹ That this seems to be a synonym for disciple would seem to be the case also from the somewhat parallel passage in Luke 14:25-27 which, like the passage here in Luke 9, depicts the same three criteria for following Jesus, denial of self=hate self, taking up cross=carrying cross, and following Jesus. Marshall seems to agree when he states that the passage in Luke 14:25ff is a repeat of the teaching in 9:23, p. 591.

⁴⁰ Marshall, p. 373, Lane. P. 306. Lane states that the mention of the crowd “indicated that the stringent demand for self-renunciation and cross-bearing extends not only to Church leaders but to all who confess that Jesus is the Messiah. It was the Lord’s intention that those who follow him should not be detached observers of his passion, but men who grow in faith and understanding through participation in his sufferings. Only in following on the way of the cross is it possible to understand either the necessity of Jesus’ humiliation or Jesus himself.”

⁴¹ Lane, p. 307, note 102, comments that Mark 8:34 “is not a call to discipleship, but a statement regarding the conditions for *following* Jesus”. He notes that “discipleship” involves two things, the will of Jesus to have men follow him and their response. This verse seems to represent their response. Hence, in the gospels we might ought to consider the difference between Jesus’ call to discipleship and men’s required response. Just because the people followed him physically did not make them a true disciple of Jesus. Lane (p. 307) here also states that he thinks that the idea of “follow” does not possess the “technical meaning of ‘discipleship’, but refers to that common commitment to Jesus which distinguishes all Christians from those who fail to recognize him as God’s appointed Savior”. But Lane does not, however, develop the idea of a “technical” sense of being a disciple. He does also seem to distinguish between “disciples” and “believers” (p. 306) but does not expand on that or support that idea. Lane is probably looking at this idea only through the eyes of the gospel of Mark not taking in consideration other seemingly parallel passages. I personally see this as a statement as to the conditions of Jesus’ discipleship as I believe it parallels the substance of Luke 14:25-27.

⁴² On this, see Marshall, p. 373.

The saying evokes the picture of a condemned man going out to die who is forced to carry on his back the crossbeam upon which he is to be nailed at the place of execution. By the time Mark prepared his Gospel this had become cruel reality, both for Jesus and for the Church. Jesus' words were a sober caution that the commitment for which he asked permitted no turning back, and if necessary, a willingness to submit to the cross in pursuance of the will of God. His followers must be prepared to die, for they share the same veiledness that permits his own humiliation. The call to follow Jesus, which recapitulates the action in which self-denial and cross-bearing are to be manifested, provides a vivid reminder that suffering with the Messiah is the condition of glorification with him (Rom. 8:17).

Taking up one's cross daily also depicts death. Of this Marshall states: . . . the would be disciple must take up his cross . . . The phrase *αἰρω τον σταυρον* is used literally of carrying one's cross to the place of execution . . . Crucifixion was a common fate in first-century Palestine, and the use of the metaphor requires no elaborate explanation. Jesus calls his followers to be prepared for death by crucifixion⁴³.

Lane's statement that "bearing the cross was not a Jewish metaphor" (see above) may be true but Luke's use of the term "**daily**" indicates that what Jesus **meant** by "take up one's cross" was more an **attitude** than the actual act of marching to the cross carrying the patibulum. Hence, Jesus made it somewhat metaphorical. This must be the case since one can only march to his cross once and die. To do it daily shows that Jesus had something more in mind than just physical death here (although a physical death would not necessarily be excluded). Marshall continues his discussion with the following:

This saying is, however, from the first metaphorical, since it refers to the action of the already condemned man in bearing the patibulum of his cross to the place of execution. Let the disciples take up the position of the man who is already condemned to death. Hence the saying refers not so much to literal martyrdom as to the attitude of self denial which regards its life in this world as *already finished*; it is the attitude of dying to self and sin which Paul demands . . . Hence Luke's addition of the phrase *καθ ημεραν* (daily). Where Mark has in mind

⁴³ P. 373

the initial act of self-renunciation, Luke stresses the need for a daily renewal of such an attitude”.⁴⁴

The third component of man’s requirement to be a disciple is to “follow” Jesus (akoloutheo, compare Luke 14: 27). This requirement also must be seen in light of the context and surrounding terminology. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and rise again. In doing so, Jesus himself has to deny himself and take up his cross (literally, and I would say metaphorically or “daily” on his way to Jerusalem, that is, he has to daily muster his determination to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die and rise again). To follow Jesus *literally* here would be a daily willingness to go to Jerusalem, to suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and be killed and on the third day rise again (Luke 9:21-22). It is interesting that most commentators focus here on the aspect of Jesus’ death (death to self and physical death) as something disciples need to be ready to do in following Jesus. But I have not read of any that mention also in this context the concept of resurrection from the dead. To literally (or spiritually) follow Jesus in this context one must also mean to follow him in his resurrection. This salvific (Jesus’ resurrection to life seems to be salvific) aspect of following seems also to be indicated in the verses which follow. Luke 9:24-27 (compare parallels of Mark 8:35-39 and Matt. 16:25-28) states:

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me **will save it**. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God. (Emphasis mine).

Marshall states (p. 376):

The issue in the earlier verses was that of costly discipleship as the way to ultimate salvation. Now it is made clear why the choice between following and not following Jesus is so crucial. It is upon one’s attitude to Jesus now that ultimate salvation depends; the point is put negatively: to refuse Jesus leads to rejection by the Son of man at the Judgment.

To follow Jesus in his resurrection demands more than man can do on his own. It takes God to raise from the dead. It takes Jesus to raise one from the dead! Only by following him would this be possible. As stated in the Luke

⁴⁴ pp. 373-74.

9:24-27 passage quoted above, saving one's life requires losing it (i.e. self-denial), not being ashamed of Jesus or his words (being willing to suffer up to the point of death on a cross, i.e., taking up one's cross) and being received by the Son of Man, the Father, the Holy angels, and seeing the kingdom of God. Salvation indeed seems to include one following Jesus (i.e. being his disciple) not only up to the point of physical death, but also in Jesus' own resurrection.

In light of all the eschatological elements in this passage, the confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the acclamation of Jesus as the Son of God, the concept of Jesus' and his disciples' resurrection, the coming of the Son of Man, the judgment (as seen in the parallel passage of Matthew 16:27) and the concept of "seeing the kingdom come with power", the assertion that the concepts of "denial of self", "taking up one's cross daily" and "following" Jesus as having only a literal, physical, or earthly connotation would seem to too narrowly restrict their meaning. The context would seem to demand a wider semantic field. If only a literal meaning here is to be understood as Jesus' intent, then the disciples could only have physically followed him up to the point of his death. This would also seem to force the "physical realm" on the context, something that is here not warranted. If one understands the idea of "seeing the kingdom" here as the day of Pentecost and/or the beginning days of the church⁴⁵ it is not possible that Jesus' meant for the disciples to follow him literally and die with him in Jerusalem. That would be the only way a literal understanding of the passage could be taken. They would not be alive to see the kingdom come with power.⁴⁶ If no spiritual dimension is allowed here, the disciples also could not follow him in resurrection. On the contrary, a spiritual dimension seems to be demanded! The context demands that they follow him not only up to the point of death but into the resurrection. How can this be? In order to understand what Jesus is intending to say seems to require us to allow his own death and resurrection to be the interpretive center of his teaching. That would require us to understand that the concept of "following" was broader and intended by Jesus to be broader than the physical. It would also demand

⁴⁵ And there is debate on what "kingdom" here really means, See Marshall p. 379. Carson (pp. 380-82) discusses seven different views of what the "kingdom" in this context means and seems to favor the idea (in the Matthean version (16:28)) of it "having a more general reference—viz., not referring simply to the Resurrection, to Pentecost, or the like, but to the manifestation of Christ's kingly reign exhibited after the Resurrection in a host of ways, not the least of them being the rapid multiplication of disciples and the mission to the Gentiles. Some of those standing there would live to see Jesus' Gospel proclaimed throughout the Roman Empire and a rich 'harvest' (cf. 9:37-38) of converts reaped for Jesus Messiah."

⁴⁶ This is of course unless one sees the coming of the Kingdom as a reference to the Transfiguration. But see Carson's criticism of that idea (p. 380-82).

that we see the meaning of his words through the hindsight of the meaning of his death and resurrection.

Then, what does it mean to “follow” Jesus here? What did Jesus intend? It might help to look at a couple of passages that seem to elucidate what Jesus means by “follow” in the eschatological context of his death and resurrection. Peter was specifically rebuked here in the passages under consideration. He was challenged to deny himself, take up his cross, to follow, and not to be ashamed of Jesus. Indeed all the apostles and other disciples also were to follow Jesus. Peter, in the heat of the moment of Jesus’ arrest, denies Jesus three times and does not follow Jesus (in this spiritual manner, Matt 26:69ff). After his resurrection Jesus seems to reinstate Peter as is seen in John 21. In this context, the gospel of John states (verses, 17b-23):

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of **death** by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “**Follow** (*akoloutheo*) me!” Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following (*akoloutheo*) them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?”) When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus answered, “**If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow** (*akoloutheo*) me”. Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, “**If I want him to remain alive until I come, what is that to you?**” (Emphases mine).

The concept of following Jesus seems here to be elucidated further. It cannot be merely physical following on earth, since Jesus is about to go into heaven. Peter already missed his chance to physically follow Jesus in death and resurrection at Jerusalem. It must be a spiritual following, a following that yes for Peter will mean martyrdom eventually, but one in which he will also follow in the resurrection and result in his entrance into Heaven. This spiritual following was announced to Peter and other disciples even prior to his death in John 13:36 where Jesus states, “Where I am going you cannot follow now, but you will follow (*akoloutheo*) later”. Jesus seems to be talking about Heaven and the “Father’s house” where he was going to “prepare a place” for his disciples (Jn. 14:2, cf. verse 5-6 also and its spiritual dimension to this “following”, this *alkoloutheo*).

The following here is not a literal following of Jesus to Jerusalem to die on the cross there. The whole context of Peter's reinstatement concerns his willingness to follow Jesus in loving Jesus by taking care of his sheep, feeding his sheep, and feeding his lambs (Jn. 21:15-17). That Jesus' statement that one must deny self, take up cross and follow did not require physical death, seems to also here be indicated. Jesus, here in John 21, shows that the matter of the necessity of physical death as part of following him is **not** an absolute requirement as Jesus presents the open possibility of John not going through death (verse 22).

The concept of following Jesus in a **spiritual** manner (though it involves our physical response) seems to be indicated for all Christians/disciples and seems to be to what we are called. Peter himself learned this and taught it. He states (I Peter 2:19-21):

For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow (*επακολουθεω, epakoloutheo*) in his steps.

To follow Jesus involved physical action on the Christian's part but the actual following was spiritual since the physical Jesus was not present. But if following Jesus in his death does not require "physical death" how is it accomplished? The New Testament seems to indicate that that happens at baptism. Romans 6:3 states,

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ we believe we will also live with him.

The way to follow Jesus in his death and resurrection seems to be through baptism. At baptism one dies with (unites with, is buried with) Christ and will participate in the eschatological (yes even I believe a physical) resurrection of the last day. Here then would seem to be the way to the true fulfillment of Jesus' demand to take up one's cross and follow: Denial of

self, taking up one's cross (i.e., being willing to die for him, which is making him Lord), and being baptized. Only in this way can we follow Jesus in his resurrection.

It should be evident from what we have discussed above that the concept of *akoloutheo* ("to follow") and its cognates do not always demand a physical presence of a person being followed. This is especially the case when the person being followed is also divine! In looking at Luke 9:23 in its context of Messiahship, the Son of God, the idea of following in death and resurrection, the judgment of the last day, and the aspect of seeing the kingdom all point to something in this idea of "following" that is greater than this world. It seems to indicate a context of something larger than our human selves. It seems to indicate a command to follow someone who is of God, a divine person. If that is the case, and I do believe Jesus was God, he was divine, then the term "*akoloutheo*" here in Luke 9:23 would take on a non-physical sense, the sense of following a divine person, a following of God. From this perspective then following Jesus here is not meant to be exclusively physical (it may be physical for a while since Jesus was here physically for a while) but also has a spiritual dimension, which continues after his death and resurrection. This is consistent with the use of *akoloutheo* and its cognates when used of divinity in literature of Jesus' day.

In conjunction with being a disciple of Jesus (I am taking the terms *erchesthai opiso* (come after) and *akoloutheo* (to follow) here to be synonyms indicating discipleship)⁴⁷, I must note that the requirements stated here in Luke 9:23 and parallels are eschatological, belong to the Kingdom age, and are binding on us today just as much as they were on the disciples of Jesus' day. To do otherwise would seem to restrict the Gospel passages to another age and possibly rob them of the content of the divine nature of Jesus. If Jesus is divine, to follow him in his death and resurrection would ultimately seem to require a spiritual (not just physical) following. If these passages are eschatological aspects of the Kingdom of God (which they do seem to be) then they apply to this present age⁴⁸. If this is true, then the salvific elements here also apply to this age. Following Jesus in the way defined by him (i.e., being his disciple) then would be necessary for salvation. If so, it would seem that they should be part of the Gospel message of salvation, which we are to preach.

⁴⁷ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* seems to treat them as synonyms under the common heading of "disciple". Lane, p. 373, also sees these and what follows in that verse indicating "rules of discipleship".

⁴⁸ That is of course if one believes the church age is part of the Kingdom age. Otherwise one would have to posit some type of intermediate age such as some Dispensationalist do who see the Kingdom held in abeyance until later and the Church age temporarily put in its stead.

Another Look at Matthew 28:19

The concepts of “disciple” and “to follow” have both been shown to have semantic fields, which exist with or without the physical presence of the one who is followed. How does all this pan out in what we as disciples are commanded to do for instance in Matthew 28? Matthew 28:19-20 states,

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, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you and remember I am with you always, to the end of the age (*NRSV*).

Jesus here commands his eleven disciples (apostles) (28:16) to go, make disciples, baptize, and to teach. The main verb here is “make disciples” (*matheteuo*). It is in the imperative mood and, as such, is a command. It is surrounded by three participles: “go”, “baptize”, and “teach”. Normally participles surrounding the imperatival verb take on imperatival force⁴⁹. The main command however is to “make disciples”. Here it is to make disciples of all nations. This transitive form is not uncommon for this verb.

Concerning the historical development of the use of this verb in as seem here, Blass and Debrunner⁵⁰ state,

The Hellenistic transformation of intransitive actives into causatives is represented in *μαθητευειν*: it meant first ‘to be a disciple’ (Plut., Mt 27:57 v.1.), then became a deponent (Mt. 13:52, 27:57 v.1.), and from this there developed a new active, ‘to make a disciple of’ (28:19, A 14:21).

Here the concept would then perhaps mean “cause to be a disciple”. This transitive form⁵¹ used here has as its object “*ta ethne*” (all nations)⁵². The command is then to “make disciples of all nations” or perhaps to “disciple the nations”. Although the term can be translated “teach” it seems to have the connotation of “make a pupil of” and not just the action of “teaching” which would seem to be the connotation of “*didasko*”⁵³. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison state, “The transitive form in the NT means ‘make

⁴⁹ On this see D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, p. 595.

⁵⁰ *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, p. 82.

⁵¹ Carson, p. 595.

⁵² Donald Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 38B Mathew 14-28*, Dallas: Word Books, 1995. p. 887, states that “The reference to “all nations” . . . cannot be understood as the collective conversion of national groups.”

⁵³ Cf. Bauer, p. 191.

disciples”⁵⁴. Being a disciple for Jesus seems to be more than just learning what was taught. It involved continuing in or remaining in or keeping “his word” (Jn. 8:31). It involved commitment to a relationship with Jesus and God. This is seen in the concept of “baptizing them in (*εις*, *eis*, “into”) the name of”. Nigel Turner⁵⁵ states of the use of the Greek term “*eis*” (translated “in” here):

In Mt., the epistles, and Rev we can always presume that *εις* has its full sense even where one might suspect that it stood for *εν* (eg. Mt. 28:19 baptism *into* the name, i.e. a relationship as the goal of baptism)”.

Making a disciple of Jesus then involves bringing one to the point of a relationship with Jesus which is consummated in baptism. This would seem to demand that one know the conditions of that relationship and what that relationship would require. The concept of “disciple” would seem to be intrinsic to the verb *matheteuo* “to make a disciple”. The noun *mathetes* would not seem to be required here in the understanding of what is meant.⁵⁶ To understand this command it would seem one would need to know what Jesus meant by “make disciples”. Jesus was in the business of “making disciples” and “baptizing” them as is seen in John 4:1. This passage would seem to be a somewhat parallel passage in the context of ideas. Hence, when one thought of the concept of Jesus making disciples and baptizing them in the gospels, one would, I believe, surely think of John 4:1 and see the idea repeated here in Matt. 28. Otherwise, we would have two different concepts expressed by similar terms both connected with baptism. It would require us to posit a difference in the content of the meanings of the ideas of “*matheteuo*” (“make disciples” using one verb form only) and “*poieo mathetes*” (make disciples using both a verb “make” and the noun

⁵⁴ *The International Critical Commentary: The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Vol. III*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, p. 684.

⁵⁵ *A Grammar of New Testament Greek, Volume III Syntax*, Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1978, p. 255.

⁵⁶ Those who state, “there are no ‘disciples’ in the passage” and that the ones being baptized are “the nations” empty the verb *matheteuo* of its “discipleship” content. They leave out the intrinsic (disciple) aspect of *matheteuo* and its word group. The term includes “disciples” as part of its definition. Here it is the **discipled** nations (i.e. people who have been discipled) that are to be baptized, not just the nations. The term “them” in the phrase “baptizing them” is in the masculine form while “nations” is neuter which seems to indicate that “them” is referring to something apart from just “nations”. Intrinsically, within the word “to disciple” would seem to be the masculine “*mathetes*” (disciple) which would go with the masculine pronoun “them”. In addition, the terms *μαθητας ποιει* (make disciples using the noun (disciple) and the verb (make)) in John 4:1 would seem to be synonymous with the verb *matheteuo* (“make disciples”). The verb *matheteuo* does not seem to need the noun *mathetes* because it is intrinsic to the concept, while the verb *poieo* (“to make”) would need *mathetes* to understand what was indicated.

“disciples) both connected with baptism⁵⁷. It would seem better to allow the two terms to be synonyms than to fragment theology and seek two different meanings for similar concepts in Jesus’ use of the words.

The use of the verb form in a context that is addressed to “disciples” (the noun form, verse 16) would seem to necessitate and dictate that *matheteuo* include the noun “disciple”. The disciples were to make more disciples. They were to make more of what they were as disciples. The object of their discipling was to be “all nations”.

What does this entail? How does one make disciples of the nations? Contrary to what some think, the concepts of going, baptizing, and teaching to obey were not steps in the discipling of the nations. Carson states⁵⁸,

The syntax of the Greek participles for ‘baptizing’ and ‘teaching’ forbids⁵⁹ the conclusion that baptizing and teaching are to be construed solely as the *means* of making disciples . . . baptizing and teaching are not the *means* of making disciples, but they characterize it. Envisaged is that proclamation of the gospel that will result in repentance and faith, for *matheteuo* (“I disciple”) entails both preaching and response. The response of discipleship is baptism and instruction . . . baptism and teaching are not coordinate-either grammatically or conceptually-with the action of making disciples.

At the same time, discipleship and baptism/instruction were not to be absolutely separated. Carson continues⁶⁰

In any case it would certainly misconstrue the text to absolutize the division between discipleship and baptism-instruction. The NT can scarcely conceive of a disciple who is not baptized or is not instructed. Indeed, the force of this command is to make Jesus’ disciples responsible for making disciples of others, a task characterized by baptism and instruction.⁶¹

⁵⁷ The content and meaning of baptism may have changed somewhat since it was baptism into his death which had not yet happened when John 4:1 occurred, but we have no evidence that the concept of discipleship changed other than Jesus was not physically present

⁵⁸ P. 597.

⁵⁹ Carson bases this comment on computer grammatical studies. He states (p. 597), “. . . computer studies of the Greek NT have shown that although a participle dependent on an imperative normally gains imperatival force when it *precedes* the imperative, its chief force is not normally imperatival when it *follows* the imperative. Luke 6:35 has a close syntactic parallel: ‘And lend (*daneizete*) to them without expecting to get anything back (*apelpizontes*)’. Not expecting anything in return is certainly not the *means* of the lending, but it is modal in that it characterizes the lending; and at the same time at least some imperatival force tinges the participle, even if the participle is primarily modal.”

⁶⁰ P. 597.

⁶¹ Some have said that baptizing and teaching to obey are “steps in the “discipling” of the nations”. Carson is here emphatically stating that” baptizing and teaching are **not** the “*means*” of making disciples” (emphasis is Carson’s).

Baptism and instruction are thus connected to discipleship but are **not** the means of it.

Carson summarizes:⁶²

To disciple a person to Christ is to bring him into a relation of pupil to teacher, ‘taking his yoke’ of authoritative instruction . . . , accepting what he says as true because he says it, and submitting to his requirements as right because he makes them” (Broadus). Disciples are those who hear, understand, and obey Jesus’ teaching (Matt. 12:46-50). The injunction is given at least to the Eleven, but to the Eleven in their own role as disciples (v. 16). Therefore they are paradigms for all disciples . . . it is binding on *all* Jesus’ disciples to make others what they themselves are—disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus already had laid out in the gospel material what he required for people to be his disciples. It included “hating” (with respect to one’s allegiance to Jesus) one’s closest relationships, taking up one’s cross daily, surrendering all that one has, following⁶³ Jesus, loving like Jesus did⁶⁴ and following his teaching.⁶⁵ All these things are requirements of being his disciple (and were not limited to the physical followers of his day). Disciples of Jesus would seem to be those who had made this commitment required by Jesus. Being a disciple of Jesus is in essence what it means to make Jesus “Lord”. It was a decision, after counting its cost (Luke 14:28-32) to surrender all of one’s life to Jesus (Luke 14:33)..

One can see that this also required some other things after Jesus had risen from the dead. One was belief that God had raised Jesus from the dead. Paul states (Rom. 10:9): “. . . if you confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”. It took much faith to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead. There was even doubting among the disciples (e.g., Matt. 28:16) who saw him! “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). It took an incredible amount of faith to believe even when Jesus showed himself to the disciples. Belief that Jesus raised from the dead transformed people’s lives. True belief in this was a life-changing event. It spurred them on to change their lives. It showed them that he was Lord. It required a response⁶⁶. That

⁶² P. 595-96.

⁶³ Luke 9:23 and 14:23-33.

⁶⁴ John 13:35.

⁶⁵ John. 8:31.

⁶⁶ Note how it is the fact of and belief in Jesus’ resurrection that elicited a response in people in the Book of Acts. See for instance Acts 2:32-37.

response was to make Jesus “Lord”, which I see as equivalent (content wise) to what Jesus taught as necessary requirements of following him or being his disciple. This is a possible explanation as to why the term “believer” is used in the epistles and Acts while the term disciple is not used as much. The requirements of being a disciple are the *commitment core* of the person who really believes in the resurrection of Jesus. They can perhaps be a test of whether one really believes in Jesus’ resurrection. One who really believes in Jesus’ resurrection changes his life, gives up all that he has, puts his relationship with Christ first above all, follows Jesus wholeheartedly, obeys his commands, loves others, and takes up his cross daily⁶⁷. The one who truly believes in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead will be a new person. All other things in life will take a second seat. One’s commitment will be total for Jesus, he will die for Jesus. This is essentially what Jesus required of his disciples in Luke 9 and 14.

It would seem to be those who had made this decision of faith, this decision of discipleship, this decision to be a Christian, this decision to be part of the Way, this decision to be a believer, this decision to be a child of God who were the ones who were to be brought into a relationship with Jesus by being baptized and then taught to obey every thing Jesus had commanded. It is this person who has committed him or herself to be a disciple of Jesus who is to be baptized and taught to obey.

In this passage is also the only place in the New Testament that I have found in which those who are disciples are commanded⁶⁸ to “baptize”⁶⁹. It gives us instruction it seems as to whom we are to baptize. It is the disciplined nations that we are to baptize⁷⁰. So how do we know when it is time for us to baptize someone? It would seem that we are commanded to baptize those who have made the decision or have committed to be a disciple of Jesus (by his definition), who believe in his resurrection from the dead, who are willing to deny themselves to make him Lord, who will do it by taking up their cross daily, giving up everything they have, putting their relationship with him above all other relationships, and follow him in his suffering,

⁶⁷ On a side note, this is why I believe that our discipleship study is so important today. It separates those who truly believe that Jesus was raised from the dead from those who do not. It challenges the person to have true faith (which means “trust”) as opposed to a form of “religion”.

⁶⁸ A further reference that baptism is to be taken imperatively here (in addition to its association with the imperative “mathateuo”) is seen from the use of “exousia” (authority) in Matt. 28:18. The whole instructive passage (verses 18-20) are based on and come forth from Jesus’ authority.

⁶⁹ Acts 8:37 is probably not part of the original text.

⁷⁰ Donald Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary, V. 38B: Matthew 14-28*, Dallas: Word Books, 1995, p. 887 supports this and says, “The disciples are . . . told to “baptize” . . . new disciples”. It would seem he would agree that baptism is for those who are already disciples not in order to make them disciples.

death, and resurrection (which is possible through baptism). Basically, it would seem that the criteria for us baptizing someone would be that person's willingness to make Jesus Lord of their life, their having really understood as much as possible at that stage in their life what that entails, their response of faith/belief in his being raised from the dead and being raised to his exalted position by the Father as Lord.