
“As you are going” (Mt 28:19):
Some Reflections on “Unintentional” Mission
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While Steve Smith was professor at Trinity School for Ministry he never forgot to pray for mission. During our times of intercession in chapel in particular he consistently remembered to intercede for graduates of Trinity who were working in cross-cultural situations. This short study of one small aspect of the Bible’s mission message is offered in thanksgiving for Steve’s faithfulness in prayer. Now whether he agrees with this little essay or not is another question....

This essay is an exploration of one word in the Greek text of the passage often referred to (although not called that in Scripture itself) as the Great Commission (Mt 28:16-20). The one Greek word is the word πορευθέντες – usually translated...well...therein lies the problem.

The boring grammatical bit

Πορευθέντες is a participle. Of the participle as it occurs in this verse one commentator writes, “It is notoriously hard to know how to translate this verb.”¹ Participles are used much more frequently in Greek than in English, and it is not always entirely clear how they ought to be translated at the best of times. In this case it is really an interesting puzzle.

There seem to be two options. The first is to translate πορευθέντες as a command: “Go!” This is not impossible (even though the verbal form is a participle rather than an imperative) since in the New Testament an aorist participle followed by an aorist verb often carries the grammatical force of “attendant circumstance.” An attendant circumstance participle is one which carries the same sense as the finite verb in the sentence. In this case, since the aorist imperative verb is μαθητεύσατε means “make disciples,” an aorist participle related by attendant circumstance would have the same imperative sense as the finite verb, hence the usual English translation, “Go!”

¹Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, A Commentary* (Vol. 2 of *The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*; Dallas: Word, 1990), 1096.

One can certainly understand why translating πορευθέντες as a direct command would be attractive for missiological purposes. If Jesus said “Go!”, we’d better go! And we’d better organize mission societies, support missionaries and get on with doing the task which Jesus has commissioned us to do. As people who know me will attest, I have no problem with advocating such actions – sending men and women into cross-cultural situations to preach and live the gospel also seems like an obvious thing for the church to do given the broad advocacy of such an idea in the New Testament, regardless of whether πορευθέντες should be translated “Go!” in Matthew 28:19 or not.

On the other hand, the category of attendant circumstance is not always crystal clear. Some grammarians don’t even think that the category exists. Daniel Wallace, who is a great advocate for the category, thinks that it is not only a valid idea but “*relatively* frequent.”² It does seem to be that when an aorist participle is followed by an indicative or imperative main verb we should usually translate the participle as coordinated with that main verb: “It is translated as a finite verb connected to the main verb by *and*. The participle then, in effect, ‘piggy-backs’ on the mood of the main verb.”³ But even Wallace says the Matthew 28:19 is among those passages that are disputed.⁴ Quite a number of commentators argue that we ought to retain the participial sense of πορευθέντες and translate the word adverbially with a phrase like, “As you are going,” so that the sense of the verse is, “As you are going, make disciples, baptizing ... and teaching”

The intriguing question

But what would it *mean* if we were to translate the word adverbially, meaning “as you are going”? “Go!” seems clear: Jesus gives a command; we obey it. Wallace, in fact resorts to a theological rather than a grammatical argument to make his case for attendant circumstance in Matthew 28:19: “To turn πορευθέντες into an

²Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 640.

³Wallace, *Grammar*, 640, his italics.

⁴Wallace, *Grammar*, 644-45.

adverbial participle is to turn the Great Commission into the Great Suggestion!” he says. Far be it from me to do such a thing.

Wallace goes on to argue that the historical context is important to keep in mind:

...we must read this commission in its historical context, not from the perspective of a late twentieth-century reader. These Apostles of the soon-to-be inaugurated church did not move from Jerusalem until after the martyrdom of Stephen. The reason for this reticence was due, in part at least, to their Jewish background. As Jews, they were ethnocentric in their evangelism (bringing prospective proselytes to Jerusalem); now as Christians, they were to be *ektocentric*, bringing the gospel to those who were non-Jews. In many ways, the book of Acts is a detailed account of how these Apostles accomplished the command of Matt 28:19-20.⁵

We should certainly agree with Wallace that the context of early Christianity shifted the direction of mission – rather than drawing people in, God’s people are now sent out. And he is correct that the book of Acts narrates how this happens. I think, however, that Wallace has not made his case that we must therefore translate *πορευθέντες* as an imperative. In fact, appealing to the book of Acts seems to me to strengthen the case for arguing that the participle should be read adverbially.

Here is what I mean: the disciples heard Jesus give the commission in Matthew 28, but then they didn’t go anywhere. If they “accomplished the command of Matt 28:19-20” it was not because they organized the mission, or even that they intended to obey. Actually, the mission seems to have happened “unintentionally.” Look at Acts 8:1, for example. The apostles seem to be the very ones who do *not* leave Jerusalem. They do not form a mission society. They do not even deputize other people to “Go!” It appears that the mission is accomplished in spite of the apostles. It almost seems to happen by accident – although Luke informs us every step of the way that Providence, in the form of the Holy Spirit, is really in charge.

⁵Wallace, *Grammar*, 645.

The suggestive examples

Perhaps another angle of vision can help us to understand how the spread of the good news often takes place – not only in the book of Acts, but throughout the biblical story and within church history after the book of Acts. If the sense of *πορευθέντες* is adverbial, maybe Jesus is not commanding the church to go, but simply letting them in on the future plans of God. Perhaps Jesus was saying, “whatever your plans may or may not be, the church is going, so ‘as you go’ do it this way: make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching as you are on your way.” In other words, the mission of God to bring the gospel to the whole world does not depend on our plans, our tactics, our techniques, our strategies, and our abilities. Maybe the church grows and people are converted, not primarily because we have started mission societies, but because believers in Jesus have made disciples “as they were going.” Don’t misunderstand me – I’m in favor of planning and strategizing and sending and supporting. But God has been at work even when we have not been very good planners. And perhaps our willingness or unwillingness to go is not the be all and end all of God’s mission in the world.

Let me give a few examples.

The great father and mother of the faith, Abraham and Sarah, were certainly commanded to “go”: “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’” (Gen 12:1). But Abraham (as he was eventually re-named) has no plan, no certain destination. In fact, he does not live to see God’s promises fulfilled in life. Abraham becomes a migrant, a pilgrim. The example of Abraham as a homeless wanderer only continues a theme which began much earlier in Genesis. In a suggestive article the great mission historian Andrew Walls states,

The first recorded migration, according to the book of Genesis, took Adam and Eve out of paradise....But the expulsion from Eden (Gen 3:23) is not the only migration described in the Genesis narrative, for it moves swiftly to the wanderings of Cain (Gen 4:12-16), and soon after that to the mass diffusion of peoples from Babel (Gen 11:8-9), and thereafter to the saga

of Abraham’s migration from Mesopotamia (Gen 12:1ff).
 ...The first book of the Bible might almost as readily have
 been called “Migrations” as Genesis.⁶

And if Genesis is about migration, how much more does the book of Exodus deal with this theme of human existence. The children of Israel, the “Hebrews,” find themselves living as oppressed migrant workers in Egypt after fleeing there as economic refugees a generation earlier. Their freedom from slavery only makes them pilgrims again as they wander in the desert on their way to the promised land.

Stories of immigrants, refugees and exiles fill the pages of the Old Testament. The people who received God’s promises, God’s laws, and God’s presence find themselves time and again landless and dispossessed. Some are fugitives like Jacob and Moses. Some who are exiled from land and family find themselves used by God in their situations of homelessness – Joseph achieves high office in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon, and Esther in Persia.

Of course not all biblical characters who find themselves in exile are elevated to positions of leadership and power. One very instructive story comes from 2 Kings 5. The Syrians under the leadership of a general named Naaman have raided Israel and Naaman has carried off, as part of his booty, a young girl whom he enslaves. This girl was not sent as a “missionary” in any traditional sense of the word. She has not responded to God’s call to “go into all the world.” She has been captured and made a slave. She has been forced to go. But her capture is used by God to bring the message to a foreign land that there is “a prophet in Samaria” (2 Kgs 5:3). As the story unfolds, and as he is cured of the disease of leprosy, Naaman learns the even more wonderful news that “there is no God in all the earth except in Israel” (2 Kgs 5:15). Unintentionally, the mission is being accomplished – all the ends of the earth are learning the saving power of God (see Ps 95), all the nations of the earth are beginning to receive God’s blessing (see Gen 12:3).

⁶Andrew Walls, “Mission and Migration: The Diaspora Factor in Christian History,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 5/2 (2002), 3.

The theme of unintentional, unplanned mission continues into the New Testament. Jesus and his family must flee a cruel tyrant and find refuge in Egypt (Mt 2: 13-15). As an adult Jesus wanders Galilee, Samaria and Judea having “no place to lay his head” (Lk 9:58).

Although the so-called Great Commission is delivered by Jesus to his disciples in several ways (see not only Mt 28:16-20, but also Jn 20:19-23, Lk 24:44-49, and Acts 1:8),⁷ it is not until after Stephen is martyred, persecution threatens the church, and the believers flee for their lives, that the gospel moves outside of Jerusalem.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.... Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. (Acts 8:1,4)

Philip, we are told, goes to Samaria, outside of the traditional bounds of Judaism, and preaches there (Acts 8:5-25). He then goes a step further and, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, preaches to an African official on his way back to the Sudan from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The official receives the gospel message of Jesus and returns to his own country rejoicing – probably the first Gentile convert,⁸ and probably the first person to bring the message of Jesus to the continent of Africa (Acts 8:25-40). The word of Jesus in Acts 1:8 – “You will be my witnesses in Jeru-

⁷For a longer discussion of these passages see Grant LeMarquand, “From Creation to New Creation: The Mission of God in the Biblical Story,” in *Waging Reconciliation: God’s Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis* (ed. Ian T. Douglas; New York: Church Publishing, 2002), 9-34.

⁸Although many commentators assume Cornelius to have been the first Gentile convert, it is doubtful that the eunuch in Acts 8 was Jewish. It is more probable that he was a Gentile god-fearer and that the story of his conversion is simply one more example of the Holy Spirit moving in peoples’ hearts before the church has had time to catch up. That the “Ethiopian eunuch” was undoubtedly from northern Sudan (the kingdom of Meroë, in the Old Testament called Cush, in a later period known as Nubia), has been discussed in many places. See, for example, Edwin Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), especially chapter 4: “Why the Ethiopian Eunuch was not from Ethiopia.”

salem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" – does not happen because the apostles sit down and draw up plans to evangelize the world in their generation. The message of Jesus is dispersed almost by accident. Philip runs away from home to escape persecution and he does what Christians do: he brings the good news of Jesus with him. The gospel seems to spread naturally as the Christians move from place to place.

And Philip is not the only example of this spontaneous spreading of the gospel.

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. (Acts 11:19-20)

For the second time in the Acts of the Apostles Luke stresses that the spreading of the gospel happens because of the scattering of believers due to the persecution following the death of Stephen. From a human perspective the events of Stephen's martyrdom and the fleeing of believers from Jerusalem are tragic accidents of history. Of course, from Luke's perspective much more is going on: Jesus' prediction that his followers would be his witnesses, not only in Jerusalem, but in Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) is being fulfilled, not by the faithful obedience of the apostles to the Great Commission but by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the seeming accidents of historical events.

In similar fashion, Priscilla and Aquila find themselves in Corinth because the Roman Emperor Claudius had expelled all of the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:1-2).⁹ Not only are this married couple able to participate in establishing a church plant with Paul in that Greek city, but they are able to "disciple" Apollos, an Alexandrian Jewish disciple of John the Baptist who knew of Jesus, but who apparently had not heard the whole story (Acts 18:24-28). These seeming coincidences are taken up into God's missionary

⁹On the expulsion of the Jews from Rome see Suetonius, *Divus Claudius* 25.4.

plan for the world without advanced planning on the part of any church or mission organization.

Related to this idea of spontaneous or unintentional mission is the notion of the church as a pilgrim people. Peter's first epistle is addressed "ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις διασπορᾶς" (1 Pet 1:1; literally, "to the chosen exiles of the dispersion"). Later in the letter he appeals to his readers as "παροίκους καὶ παρεπιδήμους" (1 Pet 2:11; "aliens and exiles"). There is a dimension of Christian existence that is best described as "homelessness." Only when the new heaven and the new earth descend from God (see Rev 21) and the entire cosmos is re-made will this world truly be our home. In the meantime, our Christian existence is necessarily missional, turned outward toward a world in need due to its rebellion against its creator.

Stories of "unintentional mission" do not stop with the closing of the New Testament canon, of course. An early church tradition from Syria tells us of a gathering of disciples after the day of Pentecost in which the world is divided among the twelve by lots. Thomas draws the straw which would make him apostle to India. Thomas, however, true to his somewhat rebellious nature, decides not to go.

At that time we apostles were all in Jerusalem...and we divided the regions of the world, that each one might go to the region of his lot, and to the nation to which the Lord sent him. According to lot, India fell to Judas Thomas, who is also (called) Didymus; but he did not wish to go, saying that through weakness of the flesh he could not travel, and: "How can I, who am a Hebrew, go and preach the truth among the Indians?" And as he considered and said this, the Saviour appeared to him by night and said to him: "Fear not, Thomas, go to India and preach the word there, for my grace is with thee." But he would not obey.¹⁰

¹⁰*The Acts of Thomas*, 1. The English text of *The Acts of Thomas* can be found in *New Testament Apocrypha* (Vol. 2 of *Writings relating to the Apostles; Apocalypses and Related Subjects*; eds. Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneelcher; trans. R. McL. Wilson; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 435-531.

But the lack of willingness and obedience does not prevent the Savior from accomplishing his task through the church. According to the story, Jesus arranges for Thomas to be sold as a carpenter-slave to a merchant seaman who delivers the unwilling Thomas to...India. And so the mission is accomplished, in spite of the human desire not to “go into all the world.”

Even one of the most lamented episodes of church history, the destruction of North African Christianity by Islam in the 6th century, turns out to have a positive missiological result. It has frequently been noted that North African Christianity was vulnerable to extinction because the church in Roman North Africa was predominantly Latin, and inadequately indigenized in the local Berber cultures.¹¹ On the other hand, Thomas Oden has recently noted that the North African Christians who fled before the incursions first of barbarians and then of Islam brought their faith and their breadth of theological learning and tradition with them to Europe. European Christianity was strengthened and in fact “shaped” by an infusion of life from African Christianity.¹²

Further to the south and east, the first named Christian “missionaries” to the Kingdom of Axum (Ethiopia), Frumentius and Aedesius, did not enter the Horn of Africa in order to preach the gospel and to plant churches. Rather, they were victims of piracy who found themselves enslaved in Axum. But in the midst of their captivity they did preach the gospel and after their release Frumentius reported the need for missionaries to the bishop of Alexandria, the great St. Athanasius, who promptly ordained Frumentius as missionary bishop and sent him back to minister in Ethiopia.¹³ Although a formal “sending of a missionary” actually happened in this case, the ecclesiastical formality follows the work that God had already done to establish the gospel in Axum.

¹¹See, for example, the assessment of Cecil Northcott (*Christianity in Africa* [London: SCM, 1963], 58) that “from AD 200 to AD 700 Christianity missed its supreme chance of expansion in the immense land empire from the North African coast to the tenth parallel of Latitude North.”

¹²*How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007).

¹³A convenient retelling of the story of the founding the church in Axum (also transliterated Aksum) can be found in Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Stead, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 34-41.

In the modern world stories abound of the gospel taking root and growing in unexpected ways. When China came under communist rule in the 1940’s and the western missionaries were expelled, many observers expected the church in China to disappear – after all, the church had been planted in China several times before and had subsequently been extinguished. But although the church was persecuted under communism and much of Chinese Christianity was pushed underground, the gospel has grown beyond any expectations.¹⁴ Foreign missionaries were expelled, but the gospel was not so easily removed.

Modern migration has led to church growth in surprising ways and places. It is a fascinating detail of modern Christianity in Europe that the largest church on that continent is not only in a former communist country (the Ukraine), but that the pastor of that church is Nigerian. The Anglican Church in Ethiopia was represented, until recently, by only one parish, an ex-patriate congregation in the capital, Addis Ababa. But suddenly today there are nearly 50 Anglican congregations in Ethiopia, most of them planted by Sudanese refugees who were forced to flee the Sudan by persecution, famine and war. These thriving congregations owe little to missionary aid from the outside. They exist not because professional church planters were sent with a program, but because the people preached the gospel and made disciples “as they were going.” I am told that Muslim countries that are “closed” to missionaries still receive the gospel in quiet but effective ways. Filipino maids, for example, are very adept at telling Bible stories to the children under their care.

As one who has worked as a missionary sent by my church to another part of the world, I am by no means allergic to the concept of missionary sending. It is a biblical idea for churches to pray and to set apart certain individuals to go out and preach the gospel (see Acts 13:1-3 for one example of this). There is nothing unbiblical about strategic thinking about mission, or about the learning of practical skills to make cross-cultural ministry more effective. I would, in fact, plead for more and better preparation for cross-cultural workers. On the other hand, God’s hands are

¹⁴On Chinese Christianity see now David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington D.C.: Regnery, 2003).

not tied by our own limited imaginations. God's mission is not limited by what we are able to conceive or plan or do. God is working his purposes out, often in ways we do not see or recognize until much later. What seems to us to be "unintentional" because our human intentions are not involved may very well be God's intentions being worked out through the supposed "accidents" of migration.

Back to the beginning

At the start of this paper, I raised a grammatical issue concerning the translation of πορευθέντες. Should it be translated as attendant circumstance ("Go!") or adverbially ("As you are going")? The examples given above do not settle the grammatical issue. But the many examples of evangelism and mission happening not because people have intended to go, but simply as they were going, do leave open the possibility that πορευθέντες could be translated adverbially. Wallace's suggestion that translating πορευθέντες with a phrase like "as you are going" turns the Great Commission into the "Great Suggestion" makes light of how the gospel actually has gone into the world, which is not predominantly by human effort and planning but in what humans might think of as a "haphazard" fashion. God is in the world, working his purposes out, and as we pilgrims wander, God uses us to do that mission.

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