

# Is Disciple a Verb

We were a young church plant, still struggling to map out our DNA, our essentials, the values upon which we wanted to build our arm of the body of Christ. We had our definitive statements on paper, but we were puzzled about how to make them live and breathe. We knew what we felt called to, but living out that calling in real time was proving to be another thing entirely.

We felt called to discipleship. To bring together a group of people who intentionally lived life together, encouraging one another's spiritual growth. We wanted to enjoy Christ together, love other people well, and engage the world around us in a meaningful, life-changing way. We envisioned this type of intentional discipleship happening in small groups of 3 or 4, little cells of people spurring one another on to live the life Jesus called us to live.

We thought it sounded simple enough, but problems arose which clouded this vision and made us all see a little blurry. How do we convince people to engage in this type of intimate discipleship when they have never seen it done? How do we ensure that what goes on within those relationships remains gospel-centered and Jesus-focused? How do we form the groups? How do we incorporate newcomers? How do we encourage these discipleship groups to reach the lost?

We certainly weren't suffering from a lack of interest. "Disciple" had become a buzz-word in our little church family, especially among people in their 20s. We would often hear questions such as "Are you discipling anyone?" or "Do you know anyone who could disciple me?" floating around in conversations. We rejoiced in the interest in discipleship but continued to struggle with how to make it happen in reality.

## Is "Disciple" a Verb?

One summer, we decided to utilize a sermon series to tackle these problems and wrestle them to the mat. After each message, one of our leaders would facilitate a discussion in which anyone could ask a question relating to the topic. We were hoping to provide clarity about our vision of discipleship and what that could look like in our church body. A lot of great questions were asked that summer and thoughtful answers given in response.

One morning, however, a question was asked that stumped the facilitator. The question-asker was actually a friend of ours visiting from out of town. He had been doing a lot of thinking about discipleship himself and was intrigued with our discussion. After listening to questions regarding "discipling" other people he raised his hand and asked the question, "*Is 'disciple' a verb?*"

Silence.

I don't know whether our facilitator temporarily lost his grasp of English grammar or whether the question honestly didn't make sense, but the question stumped him. "Is 'disciple' a verb?" It was a little cheeky of our friend to ask it that way, really. It might have been more

helpful to our discussion if he went ahead and asked the questions behind the question. What he was really getting at was something more like, “How is the word ‘disciple’ used in the New Testament? As a noun, indicating a person, or as a verb, indicating an action? Are we using the term correctly? Or are we perhaps misusing it?”

Though our friend’s question wasn’t answered well that morning, it prompted me to do a little thinking and research. I knew what he was getting at. The word “disciple” or *mathetes* in Greek is a noun and is used in the New Testament as such. It refers to a person. A New Testament *disciple* is a person who is committed to learning from and following Jesus. But in contemporary church circles, it is popular to use the word as a verb: “So and so is ‘discipling’ me.”

So which is it? A noun or a verb? The question can be answered with grammatical ease. In the New Testament, *mathetes* is used as a noun: disciple, student, learner, follower. A closely related word, *matheteuo*, is a verb used several times in the New Testament, such as when Jesus instructs his disciples to go and *make disciples* (Matthew 28:19).

The action of “making disciples” we have shortened to the term “discipling” – kind of a funny little word that spellcheck continually rejects, but it makes the point. Using “disciple” as a verb indicates the action Jesus commanded when he told us to “make disciples” of all nations. By “discipling” people, we are attempting to obey Jesus by “making disciples.”

### The Real Question

But there is a deeper question underlying the issue of grammar. I’m not sure if our friend intended this question or not, but it’s a question I’ve been asking myself. Does the way we use the word “disciple” indicate something about our hearts? About our preferences? Do we prefer the noun of *being a disciple* or the verb of *making disciples*?

### “Disciple” as a Noun

I can see dangers with an overemphasis either way. If people are more comfortable with “disciple” as a noun, then hopefully they are engaging their own discipleship well. They are seeking after Jesus in the Scriptures, determined to follow him and apply the gift of the gospel to their lives. But if there is no activity of discipleship directed toward others in their lives, I think they’re missing something. They may be taking responsibility for their own discipleship, but not the discipleship of others. They are not obeying Jesus’ command to “make disciples.”

I see evidence of this in our church body. We are a young congregation, both in the age of our church as a whole and in the age of the individuals. To be “old” in our church is to be over the age of 35! The people in this upper age bracket seem to engage their own discipleship well for the most part, but are often unaware that the droves of younger people around them need encouragement. They are more comfortable with *being a disciple* than *making disciples*.

### “Disciple” as a Verb

But the danger can swing the other way as well. When people shift the use of “disciple” from a noun to a verb, a new set of issues arises. It is possible that this group of people is more comfortable with the activity of *making disciples* than with the state of *being a disciple*. They spend their lives investing in their relationships with others, but neglect the most important relationship of all, the one with Jesus himself.

Jonathan Dodson illustrates this distinction well in his recent book *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*. Dodson admits that at one point in his spiritual journey, “disciple became more of a verb than a noun, less of an identity and more of an activity.”<sup>[1]</sup>

He describes that when he was focused on “disciple” as an activity, it was as though he were standing at the top of the stairs of discipleship, looking down on the disciples in his living room. He was comfortable dispensing his knowledge to the eager disciples, but was not willing to come down the stairs and join them on eye-level. In other words, he was more comfortable *making disciples* than *being a disciple*.

I see this shift in our church family as well. We are all buzzing around talking about who is discipling who, focusing on the activity of discipleship. But are we as concerned with the importance of *being disciples*? Are we more interested in seeking a discipler than in seeking Jesus? Are we taking responsibility for our own spiritual growth? Have we forgotten that, regardless of who may or may not be discipling us, we are disciples of Jesus?

### The Answer to the Question

So the answer our friend’s question is yes. “Disciple” is a verb. But “disciple” is also a noun. We must live out both senses of the word if we want to do discipleship well. We must take our personal discipleship seriously as well as the discipleship of the other people we’re connected to in the body of Christ. We need to be emphasizing the activity *and* the state of being of the word “disciple” if we’re to engage the process of discipleship the way Jesus intended.

We don’t have all our questions on discipleship answered in our church, but we’re growing. We’re encouraging the people in our church body both to “own their own spiritual growth” as well as engage in discipleship with other people. We’re trying to consistently model both how to *be a disciple* and how to *make disciples*. That much of our vision, at least, is clear. As for the other blurry problems, well, I guess we need another raised hand after a sermon. Hopefully that next difficult question won’t involve grammar.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Jonathan Dodson, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 16.

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*For more resources on being a disciple and disciple making, check out: Jonathan Dodson's [Unbelievable Gospel](#).*

*Free articles on disciple-making: [The Image Conscious Disciple](#) by Jonathan Dodson, [A Story of Gospel Community](#) by Seth McBee, and [Discipleship 101: How to Disciple a New Believer](#) by Justin Buzzard.*