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A CLASSIFICATION

OF IMPERATIVES:

A STATISTICAL STUDY\*

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*Much popular exegesis of the Greek imperative mood rests on*

*unwarranted assumptions. Analysis of the actual usage of the impera-*

*tive in the NT reveals that many common exegetical conclusions*

*regarding the imperative are unfounded. For example, a prohibition*

*with the present imperative does not necessarily mean "stop." And*

*when it does, it is context, not some universal rule of the imperative,*

*that determines the meaning. The imperative mood has a wide lati-*

*tude of meanings from which the exegete must choose in light of*

*contextual clues. The temptation to standardize the translation of the*

*various imperatival usages should be resisted.*

\* \* \*

INTRODUCTION

ONE of the clearest and simplest statements of the basic signifi-

cance of the imperative mood is given by Dana and Mantey.

"The imperative is ...the mood of volition. It is the genius of the

imperative to express the appeal of will to will." They go on to

compare it with the other moods. "It expresses neither probability

nor possibility, but only intention, and is, therefore, the furthest

removed from reality." 1 This study will offer a classification of the

\*Informational materials and listings generated in the preparation of this study

may be found in my "Supplemental Manual of Information: Imperative Verbs." Those

interested may secure this manual through their local library by interlibrary loan from

the Morgan Library, Grace Theological Seminary, 200 Seminary Dr., Winona Lake,

IN 46590. Also available is "Supplemental Manual of Information: Infinitive Verbs,"

and "Supplemental Manual of Information: Subjunctive Verbs." These augment my

articles, "The Classification of Infinitives: Statistical Study," GTJ 6 (1985) 3-27 and

"The Classification of Subjunctives: A Statistical Study," GTJ 7 (1986) 3-19. I plan to

prepare other supplemental manuals as time permits, beginning with one on participles.

1H. E. Dana and J. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*

(New York: MacMillan, 1943) 174.

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ways the imperative is used in NT Greek, together with statistical

information and comparisons, and a discussion of several of the

questions related to the understanding of this mood.

CLASSIFICATION OF IMPERATIVE USES

The list of uses proposed here is more detailed than is usually

found in the grammars. Many speak of commands and entreaties, or

requests; some add permission and condition. This study would add a

few that are small in number but interesting enough to merit separate

treatment. They will be listed in order of frequency of occurrence.

*Commands and Prohibitions*

By far the largest number (1357 or 83%)2 belong to this category,

which includes both positive and negative commands. The latter,

often listed separately under the term 'prohibitions,' are introduced

by some form of the negative particle μή. There are 188 of them; they

will be discussed below separately regarding what some suppose to be

peculiarities of usage. Here they are simply included under the term

"commands. "

Commands include a broad spectrum of concepts-injunctions,

orders, admonitions, exhortations-ranging from authoritarian dic-

tates (a centurion ordering his soldier to go or come, Matt 8:9), to the

act of teaching (Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5:2, cf. 12ff.).

Commands are distinguished from requests as "telling" is from "ask-

ing." The distinction, however, is not made by the mood used but by

the situation, the context. They are used in the language of superiors

to subordinates and of subordinates to superiors, and between equals.

Most commonly, imperatives are in the second person (85%), but

they are unlike their English counterparts in that they also occur in

the third person (15%). Later in the article, this third person impera-

tive will be discussed in detail.

*Requests and Prayers*

The second class of imperatives is made up of prayers, petitions,

and requests. Much fewer than the commands, they still are quite

numerous (188, 11 %),3 enough to silence the bothersome claim, "This

is not asking, it's telling; it is in the imperative mood." This ought not

seem strange to English speakers who use it like the Greeks in prayer

("Lord, help us") and in everyday speech ("Pass the potatoes").

2In addition to these are 28 which I have given alternative identification as

command; see below.

3There are 7 more given alternative identification as requests.

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Frequently in the NT this usage is introduced by a word indicating

that it is a request: ἐρωτάω, ἐπερωτάω / 'ask', proseu<xomai / 'pray'.

Indeed, the Lord's prayer is a series of imperatives.

Requests are usually in the second person (93%) and singular

(80%). The tense is usually aorist (80%) which is in accord with the

usual Greek practice and reflects the tendency of requests and prayers

to be occasional and specific. It contrasts sharply, however, with the

use of tenses in the other categories of imperative in the NT, where

the present tense outnumbers the aorist in every instance. The over-

all comparison is 47% aorist to 53% present.

While most requests and petitions are positive, there are a few

negative (4 with μή and the present imperative, 5 with μή and the

aorist subjunctive.)

*Permission*

Next in order of frequency (27 or 2%)4 is that category of

imperatives that expresses permission or consent. Rather than an

appeal to the will, this category involves a response to the will of

another. "The command signified by the imperative may be in com-

pliance with an expressed desire or a manifest inclination on the part

of the one who is the object of the command, thus involving consent

as well as command."5

This permission may be either willing and therefore welcome to

the speaker (as in Luke 7:40 when Jesus asked Peter if he might speak

with him, and he answered, "Say it, teacher") or reluctant (as in John

19:6, where Pilate gave permission to the Jewish leaders to crucify

Jesus although still insisting that he found no fault in him) or neutral

(involving permission given in a situation where either course of

action was acceptable, as in 1 Cor 7: 15). Rev 22: 11 has 4 of these

permissive imperatives; 2 are contrary to the will of the speaker, 2 are

favorable.

The second person imperative is used in 17 of these, compared

with 10 uses of the third person. The present tense occurs 17 times to

10 of the aorist.

*Exclamations*

In 16 examples the imperative appears as an exclamatory word

introducing another statement, thus acting as an interjection. It

stands before a hortatory subjunctive clause or a negative prohibition

subjunctive and serves as an attention-getter, a call to give heed:

4Three more are given alternative identification as permission.

5Dana and Mantey, Grammar, 174.

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ὅρατε (4), ὅρα (3), ἴδετε (1), ἄκούετε (1), ἀκούσατε (1), ἄγε (2),

ἄφες (3), ἄφετε (1). These might well be identified as interjections;

indeed, two other words that are clearly interjections (δεῦρο and

δεῦτε) occur in the same constructions and actually have imperatival

endings though they are not verbs.

*Greetings*

An idiomatic form of salutation uses the imperative of the verb

χαίρω (χαῖρε 5, χαίρετε 1). The usual meaning of the word is "to

make glad, to rejoice," but apparently the sense in this construction is

broader: "to be well, to thrive. ,”6 Hence, it is an expression of good

will like our "Good morning," or "How are you?" (expecting an

answer such as "I am well"). Another in this category, ἔρρωσθε, is the

perfect imperative of ῥώννυμι / 'to be strong, to thrive, to prosper'

(the usual formula in closing a letter). The total in this group is 7.

*Challenge to Understanding*

Similar in some respects to the category called "Exclamatory" is

this group that might be called a challenge to understanding (4

examples). These are clearly verb forms, not interjectional, but they

are a call to know, to perceive, to understand. Luke 12:39, "And be

sure of this, that. ..." The verbs involved are γινώσκετε, βλέτε, and

ἀκούετε. All of these could also be identified as simple indicatives.

*Conditional*

Probably the strangest and most controversial category of imper-

atives is that which seems to express some conditional element. Here

it is necessary to distinguish two groups. The first is neither strange

nor controversial; it includes a large number of instances (about 20)

where an imperative is followed by καί and a future indicative verb. It

says, "Do something and this will follow." This combination clearly is

capable of two explanations. It could well be a simple command

followed by a promise. Or it could be understood to imply that the

promise is conditioned upon the doing of the thing commanded, "If

you do something this will follow." Jas 4:7, 8, 10, "Resist the devil,

and he will flee. . . . Draw near to God and He will draw near to

you. ...Humble yourselves. . .and He will exalt you." The familiar

prayer promise, "ask. . .seek. . .knock. . ." (Matt 7:7, Luke 11:9;

cf. also John 16:24), belongs here; it could mean "if you ask you will

6J. H. Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York:

American Book Co., 1889) 664.

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receive." Examples of this kind have been assigned to an alternate

classification; they are either command or condition.

The second group consists of a few passages where condition has

been proposed to explain a difficult passage. Each passage will be

discussed briefly.

John 2:19

Jesus said to the unbelieving temple-defilers, "Destroy this temple

and . . . I will raise it up." John explains that he was speaking of the

temple of his body. Obviously, this is not a command or request.

Conceivably, it could be a reluctant permission; "I will let you do it,

then I will undo it." But it seems to many expositors that the impera-

tive is conditional, "If you do, I will. . . ." It is almost, "Do it if you

dare!"-a challenge with a threat attached.

2 Corinthians 12:16

This passage begins with an imperative, ἔστω δέ, "But be that as

it may," (NASB). The KJV has "But be it so." Literally, it is "Let it

be." The sense seems to be, "Whatever may be the answer to the

question I just asked, it doesn't matter; it doesn't change the situa-

tion." Or, to use an English slang expression (without the negative

connotation), "So what?" In this passage, then, the significance of the

imperative mood seems either to involve permission ("Permit it to be

so") or condition ("If that is the way it is, so be it").

Ephesians 4:26

The problem here is in the first word ὀργίζεσθε 'be angry'. It is

an imperative. Two opposite explanations have traditionally been

offered.

(1) The anger here is said to be "righteous indignation," the kind

of anger God has toward sin, and which Jesus manifested on occa-

sion. Thus the passage is a command. But it seems impossible to

understand this in a good sense in a context (cf. v 31; 2:3; also Matt

5:22, Rom 12:19, Col 3:8, 1 Tim 2:8, Tit 1:7, Jas 1:19) that condemns

anger and orders it to be put away. The word used here, ὀργίζω and

its cognates, is never used in a good sense except in references to the

anger of God and Christ. And "righteous indignation" seems never to

be approved for men. In fact, the scripture says, "For the anger of

man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (Jas 1:20). The

righteous anger of God operates in the area of judgment, and that

area is out of bounds to believers, at least for the present. Besides, if

this is a command to show "righteous indignation," why is the warn-

ing added to end it before the sun goes down?

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(2) Attempt is made to see here an example of some imperatival

use other than command; possibly conditional, "If you do get angry

don't sin by nursing it too long; don't let the sun go down on it." Or

possibly it is an unwilling permission, "Be angry if you must."

*Alternative Classifications*

As already indicated, it is sometimes difficult to decide among

these possible classifications. In such cases alternate choices have

been given. The categories involved and the number of instances

where an alternate classification is possible are as follows:

Command or Condition (see above) . . . . . . . . . . . . . 207

Command or Request . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 68

Permission or Condition (see above) . . . . . . . . . . . . 39

Command or Permission . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 210

Permission or Challenge . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 111

Request or Condition . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 112

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

*Present Versus Aorist in Commands*

Compared with other Greek literature, the NT is unusual in

having a large number of present imperatives as compared with the

aorist (53% present, 47% aorist, 0.2% perfect). The reason for this

undoubtedly lies in the character of the literature. Largely hortatory,

it teaches universal moral principles: "always be doing. ..." And this

is one of the special provinces of the present imperative.

What is the Difference?

Probably the most discussed question encountered in the study

of the imperative mood deals with the distinction in meaning between

the present and aorist tenses. It is here, too, that the most confusion

and misrepresentation occurs. The solution to the confusion is to be

found in examining the basic aspectual significances of the tenses

generally, rather than in the study of the imperative mood specifi-

cally. In other words, finding the distinction between the present and

aorist imperatives lies not in looking at mood but at tense.

7Matt 7:7 (3 times), 27:42; Mark 11:29; Luke 10:28, Luke 11:9 (3 times); John 7:52,

16:24; Acts 9:6 (twice), 16:31; GaI6:2; Eph 5:14 (twice); Jas 4:7,8,10.

8Matt 9:38, 11:15, 13:9,43,17:20; Rev 4:1.

9John 2:19, 2 Cor 12:16, Eph 4:26.

101 Cor 11:6 (twice).

111 Cor 6:4.

12John, 1:39.

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It is obvious that the distinction is not in the time of the action,

for only in the indicative mood is time involved; all the other moods

are future in time reference. Rather, the difference is in the way the

speaker chooses to speak of the types of action.13 There are three

basic kinds: (a) durative, continuing, repeated, or customary, expressed

by the present tense; (b) simple action, "do it," expressed by the aorist

tense; and (c) completed and lasting, expressed by the perfect tense.

Major grammars are usually clear on these.14

Thus the present imperative expresses a command or request

that calls for action that is continuing or repeated, often general,

universal, habitual; action that characterizes the doer. "Love one

another" means, not "do something," but "always be doing things for

one another." On the other hand, the aorist imperative is used to

command or request an action that is specific and occasional, dealing

with everyday procedural decisions, or in general admonitions simply

to say, "Do it."15

13Grammarians have long referred to "kinds of action" (*aktionsart*) for the basic

distinction; durative, punctiliar, completed. But many have confused these terms to

refer to the actual way the action took place; the aorist came to be thought of as single

occurrence-instantaneous, once for all, never to be repeated, happening in a punc-

tiliar way-rather than the speaker's choice of a punctiliar way of speaking of it

without regard to the way it happened, simple (not single) occurrence. More recently

the term "aspect" has come to be used which seems to be less prone to confusion.

14A. T. Robertson, in his *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of*

*Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 832-54, surveys both the history of

the Greek language and also the history of what the grammarians have said about it.

He uses the "kind of action" approach to the tenses, but attempts to safeguard it from

the confusion between the action itself and the way the speaker speaks of the action:

"The 'constative' aorist just treats the act as a single whole entirely irrespective of the

parts or time involved. If the act is a point in itself, well and good. But the aorist can

be used also for an act which is not a point. ...All aorists are punctiliar *in statement*"

(italics mine). A similar approach is used in F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A* *Greek*

*Grammar of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. by

Robert Funk (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1961) 172. N. Turner, in his A Grammar of

New Testament Greek, Vol. 3: Syntax (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963) 59ff., 74-78,

agrees basically, although he uses terminology that sometimes introduces confusion

(for example, he equates punctiliar with instantaneous and comes up with a "once for

all" aorist concept). In his treatment of the imperatives in another of his books,

*Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965) 29-32,

41, he strongly embraces the misconception that a present imperative implies "Stop."

The classical Greek grammars, W. W. Goodwin, *Greek Grammar*, rev. by C. B. Gulick

(Boston: Gin, 1930) 284-85, and H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge: Harvard

Univ., 1976) 409-11, clearly present this same understanding of the significance of tense

in imperative verbs and warn against the same abuses.

15The perfect is extremely rare in the imperative, with only four examples in the

NT. Two (Eph 5:5, Jas 1:19) involve the verb οἶδα, which is perfect in form but present

in meaning, one (Acts 15:29) is a stereotyped epistolary form, the other, πεφίμωσο

(Mark 4:39) expresses a true perfect sense.

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Popular Misconceptions

By far the most prevalent of the inadequate and misleading

claims of popular exegesis is that the present imperative with μή

means "stop" doing something that is already being done, and the

corollary to it, although not so commonly insisted upon nor stated,

says that the aorist prohibition (μή with aorist subjunctive) means

"don't start" doing something that is not yet being done. The "rule" is

used to prove such statements to the effect that the Christians at

Ephesus were continuing to be thieves and drunkards (Eph 4:26,

5:18).

The origin of this notion is usually traced to a "barking dog"

story told by Moulton. He quotes a Dr. Henry Jackson as saying,

"Davidson told me that, when he was learning modern Greek, he had

been puzzled about the distinction [between μή with the present

imperative or aorist subjunctive] until he heard a Greek friend use the

present imperative to a dog which was barking. This gave him the

clue."16

Is the claim valid? If its proponents had read further in Moulton's

grammar, they would have found him demonstrating that, while it is

a helpful insight into one possible meaning of the present imperative,

it is not the only one; he cites examples where it does not work and

continuing the quote, summarizes:

μὴ ποίει accordingly needs mental supplements, and not one only. It is

"Stop doing," or "Do not (from time to time)," or "Do not (as you are

in danger of doing)," or "Do not attempt to do." We are not justified in

excluding, for the purposes of the present imperative in prohibitions,

the various kinds of action which we find attached to the present stem

elsewhere.

Many of the beginning and intermediate grammars present this

inadequate and misleading concept, often without any suggestion that

it is true only part of the time. Dana and Mantey state, "The purpose

of a prohibition, when expressed by the aorist subjunctive, is to

forbid a thing before it has begun; i.e., it commands to never do a

thing. But a prohibition in the present imperative means to forbid the

continuance of an act; it commands to quit doing a thing.,”17 They

even quote Moulton's "barking dog" story with no hint of his warn-

ing against taking this as the whole story. The treatment is similar in

16J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*. Vol. I; Prolegomena

(Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906) 122-23.

17Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 299, 301.

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many of the newer grammars, such as Kaufman,18 Kistemaker,19 and

Powers.20 Best21 makes it better by using the qualifying word "usually,"

although that word inadequately represents less than one fourth of

the examples. Turner has a good statement in his grammar ,22 but

strongly applies this inadequate rule in another of his books.23

The final demonstration of the fallacy of this explanation of the

distinction, of course, must be found in a study of the NT passages

where the construction occurs. There are 174 instances of the present

imperative with μή. The results of a study of these are summarized

here.

General exhortations (no indication about present) 100

Previous action explicit in context 26

Previous action explicit, but already stopped 4

Previous action probable from context 12

Pervious action denied in context 32

-Exhortations for a future time 14

-Nature of action such that it can be done only

once: "stop " meaningless 4

-Context explicitly says it is not already being done 8

-Context implies it is not already being done 6

As indicated earlier, general exhortations strongly predominate.

In some cases the negative form is simply a form of litotes; "do not be

careless" is used for "always be careful" (1 Tim 4:14). Sometimes

the present seems to point to attempted action (Matt 19:6, "don't

try to divorce... "; certainly not "husbands, stop divorcing your

wives"). Often it is difficult to make sense if the "stop" translation is

attempted.

In several instances the context makes clear that the action had

been going on previously, but had already been stopped, as indicated

by such words μηκέτι,πάλιν, ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν.24  To use "stop" for

"don't start again" makes the rule rather meaningless.

18P. L. Kaufman, *An Introductory Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Palm

Springs, CA: Haynes, 1982) 123.

19S. Kistemaker, *Introduction to Greek* (Jackson, Miss.: Reformed Theological

Seminary, 1975) 91.

20W. Powers, *Learn to Read the Greek New Testament* (Sidney, Australia: Anzer,

1983)51.

2lnest, "A Supplement to Williams Grammar Notes" (Dallas Theological Semi-

nary, n.d.) 40a.

22N. Turner, *Syntax*, 74-75.

23N. Turner, *Insights*, 29-32, 41.

24John 5:14, 8:11; Gal 5:1; Eph 4:28. Cf. 1 Tim 5:23; it hardly can mean "Stop

drinking water;" rather, "Don't always be a water-drinker (drink something else once

in a while)."

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The exhortations addressed to a future (e.g., eschatological) time25

also prove the fallacy of the "stop" translation-unless one adopts the

concept that at that future time everyone who reads these statements

will be guilty of doing these things and is enjoined to "stop"!

In four instances26 the nature of the action forbidden is such that

it can be done only once, so that to "stop" is meaningless. Note that in

these examples precisely the same construction is used for two oppo-

site cases, one a previously existing condition, the other of the same

condition not previously existing.

The 8 passages listed27 where the context explicitly says that the

action forbidden was not previously going on are crucial; anyone of

them is proof of the fallacy of the notion under discussion. In Luke

22:42, Jesus prayed, "Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup

from me; yet no.t My will, but Thine be done." The last clause, πλὴν

μὴ τὸ φέλημά μου ἀλλὰ τὸ σ[ον γενέσθω contains μή with a present

imperative, yet it cannot be translated "Stop letting my will be done";

for in the larger context of the Bible, Jesus specifically denies that he

ever did his own will, but always did the will of his Father (John 5:30,

6:38, 8:29). In speaking to unbelievers who were accusing him of

blasphemy (In 10:37), he said μή πιστεύετέ. It cannot mean

"Stop believing in me." In 1 Cor 14:39 Paul certainly did not tell the

tongues-loving Corinthians to "stop forbidding to speak in tongues,"

even though it is a present imperative with μή.

Early Christian literature can also be cited in regard to this

discussion. In Ignatius's Letter to Polycarp28 an interesting example of

a present imperative with μή occurs: μηδὲν ἄνευ γνώμης σου γινέσθω  
μηδὲ σὺ ἄνευ θεοῦ τι πρᾶσσε, ὅπερ οὐδὲ πράσσει, εύστάθει / 'Let

nothing be done without your approval, and do nothing yourself

without God, as indeed you do nothing; stand fast'.

In public buses in modem Greece, a sign is frequently posted

above the driver's seat: MH OMΙΛEITE EIΣ TON OΔHΓON. It is

present imperative with μή. Does it mean, "Stop talking to the

driver"? That would hardly be appropriate to one who was boarding

the bus and has not said a word. Does it mean, "Don't speak to the

driver"? That would be unfortunate for those who need directions.

Does it not rather mean, "Don't carry on a conversation with the

driver"? That would be a dangerous practice, and the sign makes

25Matt 10:29,34,24:6; Mark 13:7, 11,21; Luke 9:3, 10:4,7, 12:7, 12:32, 14:12,

21:21; Acts 1:20; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 John 10 (twice).

261 Cor 7:12, 13, 18 (twice).

27Matt 9:30; Luke 22:42; John 10:37; 19:21; Rom 6:12, 13 (cf. v 14); 1 Cor 14:39;

1 John 2: 15 (cf. vs. 16). Three of those listed in the previous footnote also fit here.

28IV.l. Loeb Classical Library, K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. I (Cam-

bridge: Harvard Univ., 1977) 270-73.

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sense. Modern Greek preserves the old distinction of μή with present

imperative in that it reflects the idea of continuing action, in this case,

that of conversation.

Aorist Imperative More Urgent

Perhaps because English does not have a tense called "aorist,"

students have come to feel that this tense must be something special

and have become accustomed to think of it in superlatives. This is not

correct. Even the name the Greeks used for this tense indicates its

non-special character (ἀ-privative, + ὁρίζω, a verb indicating limits,

boundaries; hence unlimited, unbounded, the tense that can be used

for anything). When one does not want to call particular attention to

continued or repeated action, or to abiding results from a completed

action, he would use the aorist. English does have the equivalent to

the aorist. In the indicative where time is involved it is the simple past

tense, "He did it." In other moods it is the simple verb. For our

present consideration it is the simple imperative, "Do it." This is the

thrust of what the grammarians are indicating when they call it "point

action" or "punctiliar." It does not mean that the action occurred in a

single point of time, in a split second, nor that it will not be repeated.

It means that the speaker is not pointing to how it happened, he is

just saying, "It happened."

This tendency to glamorize the aorist has influenced the way

some have described the aorist imperative. It is frequently claimed to

be "more urgent.”29 Some have called it "preemptory and cate-

gorical, ... [the present is] less pressing, less rude, less ruthless.”30

In evaluating these claims, several things need to be considered.

First, it is contrary to the basic significance of the aorist to make it

special in any way. Second, these terms (i.e., "urgent," "categorical,"

etc.) do not convey clearly defined distinctions. In what sense is the

aorist "more urgent"? This might be understood to mean it carries

more force, more authority. Obviously, some commands produce

more pressure than others, but the pressure is in the rank, the author-

ity, or the desperation of the speaker, not in the wording of the

command. And the aorist is used by kings and by slaves, by God

29H. L. Drumwright, *An Introduction to New Testament* Greek (Nashville: Broad-

man, 1980) 130, says, "Usually a note of urgency is suggested by aorist imperative."

D. Wallace, "Selected Notes on the Syntax of New Testament Greek" (unpublished

intermediate Greek syllabus, Grace Theological Seminary, 1981) 205-6, repeatedly uses

'urgent': "The stress is on the urgency of the action. ..on the solemnity and urgency of

the action. . . 'Make this your top priority.'"

3ON. Turner, Syntax, 74-75. BDF, 137, and Robert Funk, *Beginning-Intermediate*

*Grammar of Hellenistic Greek*. Vol. 2 (Society of Biblical Literature, 1973) 640, also

use the term.

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speaking both to men and by men, both saints and sinners, speaking

to God. Would an aorist command from a slave to a king have more

force than a present imperative from God to a believer?

Or, "urgent" might be related to the time issue, to priority; it

might be demanding first attention, "right now," or ''as soon as

possible." Some justification for such a use of the term may be found

in the unquestioned fact that the aorist is often occasional, used to

answer questions like "What shall I do?" These are usually asked

when a decision is pending. But the urgency is in the situation, not in

the aorist.

"Categorical" is another term that is not completely clear in this

context. What is the difference between a "categorical imperative"

and one that is not? A dictionary defines it as meaning unconditional,

unqualified, unequivocal: absolute, positive, direct, explicit. "Love

one another" is a present tense imperative in the NT, yet all these

terms could be used of it except possibly the last.

Third, the study of aorist commands does not warrant these

imprecise distinctions. There are 40 examples (45%) where the aorist

prohibition was qualified by explanations, reasons, or exceptions; the

terms "categorical," or "unequivocal" are therefore inappropriate. In

a few examples, time urgency was explicit (Matt 21:19, Acts 16:28,

23:21); it may be present to some degree in many others, but it does

not warrant being considered the characteristic distinctive of aorist

commands. Rather, 65% were specific, related to a particular occa-

sion, and 35% were general or universal, of such a character that they

could have been stated with a present imperative had the speaker

wished to emphasize their durative quality, but apparently chose to

say simply, "Do not do it."

*Subjunctive versus Imperative in Aorist Prohibitions*

Though it may seem strange that the aorist subjunctive is used in

negative commands or entreaties rather than the imperative mood, it

is by far the most common way. Grammarians explain it from his-

torical factors. The imperative was the last of the moods to develop,

and it never completely replaced the older ways of expressing com-

mand. In aorist prohibitions the Greek language held to the old way,

mh< with subjunctive. Perhaps a parallel may be seen in English. We

use the imperative without the subject in the second person: "go,"

"do," "be." But in the third person we express command by saying

"let him go," "let it be," which is a subjunctive. For example, the first

petition in the Lord's prayer is "Hallowed be Thy name." It could be

stated in more normal word order, "Thy name be hallowed." Or in

normal speech it might be, "Let thy name be hallowed." Is there a

difference in meaning? Probably not.

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The subjunctive of prohibition is not always used in NT Greek.

It occurs 88 times, but the aorist imperative is also used with μή

8 times.31 And there seems to be no distinguishable difference in

meaning. In Matt 6:3 the aorist imperative is used in parallel with the

more common μή with the subjunctive in Matt 6:2. The other

6 occurrences are all found in parallel accounts of one statement of

Christ. Interestingly, Luke records this statement twice in his gospel,

once using the aorist imperative with μή, in the other the present

imperative with μή, clearly indicating that tense is not dealing with

different kinds of action, but different ways of looking at action.

*Significance of Third Person Imperative*

English has no distinct third person imperative, but Greek has.

This makes it difficult to translate. We correctly use the periphrastic

expression "let him do," but it seems strange to English students to

address one person and give a command to a third person. What is

expected of the one spoken to? Why is he told instead of the third

party? The interrelationships of third person imperatives in the NT32

are classified as follows.

Indirect Command to "You"

Most of the third person imperatives are aimed indirectly at the

one addressed and are therefore basically not much different from

second person imperatives.

*Some part of you*. The simplest and most obvious of these has

the command addressed to some part or quality of the one spoken to.

Matt 5:16 "let your light shine"; 6:10 "Thy will be done"; John 14:1

"Let not your heart be troubled." These account for 7% of the third

person imperatives.

*General command including you.* The largest group (49%) of

these shows an appeal addressed to the one spoken to as part of a

general class. It seems clear that those spoken to are considered the

ones for whom the command is intended. Matt 11:15, "He who has

ears to hear, let him hear;" Mark 8:34, "If anyone wishes to come

after me, let him deny himself;" Rom 14:3, "Let not him who eats

regard with contempt him who does not eat."

31Matt 6:3, 24:17-18 (twice); Mark 13:15-16 (three times); Luke 17:31 (twice). In

the light of these examples it is hard to understand a statement found in N. Turner,

*Syntax*, 78, "The prohibitive aor. imperative is later than the NT. Horn quotes the first

as iii/ A.D.," unless he refers only to the second person imperative. All the NT

examples are third person.

32There are 230; 196 are singular, 34 are plural.

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*Your responsibility with regard to a third party*. In this group

the sense may be paraphrased by some such expression as "You

require that he do something" or "You see to it that he does some-

thing." While the actual doing may be by the third party, the one

addressed is being asked to be responsible for its doing: Matt 27:22,

"They all said, 'Let Him be crucified!'" The crowd was not asking

permission of Pilate; they were telling him to see to it that it was

done. Seventeen percent are classified thus. Some of these are a

passive transform of a command that in the active voice would be

second person imperative, as in Luke 7:7, "Let my servant be healed"

(or "Heal my servant"). Some are quasi-passives, with the verb and a

predicate adjective which together seem to form a periphrastic passive

verb. Acts 2: 14 τοῦτο ὑμῖν γνωστὸν ἔστω / 'Let this be known to

you' (or 'know this'). The next phrase is connected by kai< and is a

regular second person imperative.

*Your permission that someone else do something*. The term

"permission" is also used to include consent or acquiescence. Found

mostly in prayers and requests, this group might be closest to the

usual sense of the English expression used to translate it, "Let him do

something" or "Let something be done." Matt 26:39, "Let this cup

pass from me"; Col 3:16, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within

you." Ten percent can be placed in this group.

Indirect Command to a Third Party

Sometimes the imperative seems actually to be intended for the

third party but addressed to the hearer or reader for his instruction.

Many of these are threats or warnings, also challenges or invitations.

There seems to be no implication that the hearer is to convey the

message to the third party, or has any responsibility in the matter.

Luke 16:29, "They have Moses. ... Let them hear them." Luke 23:35,

"Let him save himself." Jas 5:14, "Let him call for the elders of the

church." Twelve percent of the total belong to this group.

What is Required of a Third Party

Only 3 passages fit in this category: 1 Tim 3: 12 ("Let deacons be

husbands of only one wife"), Matt 18:17, and 1 Tim 5:4.

Promise or Warning of What Will Be

Occurring usually with the verb γίνομαι or εἰμί, this group (4%)

serves as the announcement or prediction that something will happen,

as in Matt 15:28, "Be it done for you as you wish," and Rom 11:9,

"Let their table become a snare. ...Let their eyes be darkened. ..."

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*Significance of a Passive Imperative*

On the surface there seems to be something strange about a

passive imperative, a command addressed to someone who is not the

doer of the action but its recipient. The inquirer is told to be bap-

tized, to be saved, whereas he can do neither. A tree is told to "be

plucked up and cast into the sea." What is the meaning conveyed by

such a statement?

Of all passive imperatives (154 examples in the NT), two cate-

gories can be discerned: (1) Some seem to carry the meaning of

permit: "allow it to happen," "receive it," "accept it," apparently

asking no personal action from the one addressed. In Mark 1 :41,

Jesus says to a helpless leper, "Be cleansed." (2) Other passive impera-

tives carry a responsibility for action: "see to it," "get it done," "do

what needs to be done to bring it to pass," as in Rom 12:2, "Be

transformed by the renewing of your mind." The Holy Spirit, of

course, does the transforming (cf. 2 Cor 3: 18), but there is the respon-

sibility of renewing the mind.

Out of this study has come another interesting and helpful obser-

vation. There are three types of verbs involved in these passive

imperatives. (1) Passive deponent verbs occur in the imperative.33

Passive in form by definition, they are active in sense, so there is

nothing strange in the significance of the imperative. (2) Some passive

imperatives are simply the passive transform of the active impera-

tive,34 so that they represent only another way of saying what might

have been said in the active voice. In Mark 15:13-14 the cry of those

who wished to kill Jesus is "Crucify him" in the active voice; in Matt

27:22, 23 it is passive, "Let him be crucified," with no difference in

meaning. The demand is addressed to the same person, and the one

responsible for doing it is the same in both; only the way of saying it

is different. (3) A large number of passive imperatives are of verbs

that in the active voice are causative in sense, but in the passive they

express the condition or state resulting from that action.35 To explain

by illustration, the verb φοβέω in the active voice in the older Greek

meant "to frighten, to scare." In the passive it means "to be frightened,

33There are 21 deponent passive imperatives. The verbs involved are γενηθήτω (8),

γενήθητε (1), πορεύθητι (4), δεήθητε (3), δεήθητι (1), ἀποκρίθητε (2), and one each

ἐπιμελήθητι, μετεωρίζεσθε, ἔρρωσθε.

34There are 38 which I have so classified: αἴρω and καθαρίζω have three each,

Βάλλω, θροεομαι, and σταυρόω two each, and 24 others with one each. The list is

available, see the asterisked note above.

35I have identified 95 in this group. The list is available, see above. Those occurring

more than once are φοβέομαι (28), ἐγείρω (6), μιμνήσκω (6), ὑποτάσσω (6), πλανάω (4),

χαίρω (3), ἐνδυναμόω (2), and ταράσσω (2).

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to be scared," or simply "to fear." Strictly speaking, it is not depo-

nent, since the active does occur in Greek; but in effect it is a

deponent verb referring to the condition caused by the action involved

in the active form of the verb. This is a common phenomenon in

Greek verbs, and many of the passive imperatives are of this type. Cf.

also, ἐνδυναμόω: active, "to make strong, to strengthen," passive, "to

be strengthened, tο receive strength;" πείθω: active, "to persuade,"

passive, "to be convinced, to be confident." Other verbs of this type

shift from a transitive sense in the active to an intransitive sense in the

passive. For example, μιμνήσκω in the active means "to remind"

someone of something, in the passive it means "to remember" (i.e.,

"be reminded "); πλανάω in the active is "to lead astray," in the

passive it is "to go astray, to be deceived." Since these verbs, like

deponents, have active meanings, their passive imperatives pose no

problems in translating.

*Future Indicative Used as an Imperative*

That the future indicative is sometimes used for commands is

beyond question, for the usual form of the Ten Commandments in

the NT is future indicative. There is nothing strange about this; many

languages, including English, have this usage. It simply tells someone

what to do by saying, "You will do this." Two questions are under

consideration here: (1) How can we identify or distinguish this from

other uses of the future? and (2) Is there a difference in meaning

between this construction and the imperatival command?

How to Identify Future Indicatives

Of all the future indicatives in the Greek NT (there are 1606), 53

examples can be considered imperatival, with 4 questionable.36 This

of course involves personal judgment, and the list may vary from

person to person. There is no mechanical way to recognize a com-

mand; only the context can indicate it. And that is always an exe-

getical judgment.

Of the 53 possible instances, 39 (74%) were found in citations

from the OT. Eleven were used in citations of the Ten Command-

ments, although even here there is variety. "Honor your father and

mother" is always expressed with the imperative, but the negative

commandments are usually expressed with the future indicative

(although in Luke 18:20 the aorist imperative is used). The rest of the

OT citations vary from the "greatest command" of all (Matt 22:36-

39) to the one forbidding the muzzling of an ox (1 Cor 9:9, 1 Tim

36The list is available" see above.

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5: 18). Two of them probably are to be understood as permissive

rather than demanding (Matt 22:24). Two could be considered simple

future statements. The 14 possible examples that are not taken from

OT citations also range from one that is in parallel construction with

the "greatest" commandment (Matt 5:43) to one used by Pilate when

he said "See to that yourself!" (Matt 27:4).

Perhaps the nearest to a "rule" that might be deduced is that

these future indicatives are nearly all in the second person. There are

39 second singular, 9 second plural; the remaining 5 are third singular,

and it is possible to consider all 5 of these to be simple future

statements.37 One place where such a rule would be helpful is 1 John

5:16, where the verb αἰτήσει should be identified as a simple future

statement of what a "brother" will do when he sees another brother in

sin (that is, if he is really a brother-it is a test of "life").

The Significant Use of the Future Indicative

While this construction undoubtedly shows the influence of the

LXX on the language of the NT, it does not get thereby a quasi-

religious or special significance. Jesus used it both in instructing the

disciples what to say to some men they met in a village (Matt 21:3,

Luke 19:31, 22:11) and to rebuke their ambition for rank (Mark

9:35). A landowner used it to order his servant to cut down an

unproductive tree (Luke 13:9). The OT law used it to forbid the use

of muzzles on oxen when they were threshing the grain (1 Cor 9:9,

1 Tim 5:18). In the light of these "common" uses, it is surprising to

find the claim being made38 that " ... the future indicative is used

when the speaker wants to give a solemn, universal, or timeless

command rather than an urgent, particular, or temporary com-

mand. . .used for commands which are always proper to obey."

Such language describes quite well the significance of a present im-

perative, but not of the future indicative.

What then is the significance of the future indicative when it is

used to express a command? It is simply another indication of the

enormous flexibility of language, its ability to say the same thing in

many different ways. It has no "special" significance.

*Other Imperatival Constructions*

In addition to the aorist subjunctive in prohibitions and the

future indicative, there are "other imperatival constructions," each

needing separate treatment. There are three more ways of expressing

37Matt 22:24 (two); Luke 2:23, 19:46; Heb 12:20.

38D. Wallace, "Notes," 204-5.

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the imperatival idea that can be dealt with briefly but need to be

mentioned. Grammarians have often warned against the terminology

sometimes used in saying that something is "used for" something else,

as if implying a conscious substitution. Rather, these varied methods

of expressing the same or similar concepts are better seen as part of

the richness and flexibility of the language.

Imperatival Infinitive

Classical Greek had a true imperatival infinitive use, but there

are no examples in the NT that match the classical pattern for this

construction, namely that the subject be present in the nominative

case. Elsewhere,39 these have been dealt with in an attempt to support

the position that the NT examples may all be satisfactorily explained

as examples of ellipsis, the infinitive being one of indirect discourse

depending upon a verb of speech understood from the context but

not expressed.

Imperatival Participle

The situation is much the same here as with the infinitives. Those

cases where the participle has been claimed to be imperatival may all

be seen as elliptical expressions where an imperative form of the

linking verb is to be supplied, thus making the participle a peri-

phrastic imperative.4O

39See my article, "The Classification of Infinitives: A Statistical Study" GTJ 6

(1985) 14-15.

40See my article, "The Classification of Participles: A Statistical Study" GTJ 5

(1984) 173-74. Reference should be made here to a syntactical structure that has

inaccurately been called an "imperatival participle." This structure involves the use of

an adverbial participle with a main verb that is imperative, thus giving the participle an

imperatival sense. Used primarily, if not solely, in the discussion of Matt 28: 19, it

involves the question whether "go" is a command parallel to "make disciples."

There is nothing unusual about the grammatical structure of this passage; it is a

simple adverbial (or circumstantial, as it is termed by some) participle modifying an

imperative verb. Such adverbial participles express a wide variety of ideas; time, cause,

manner, means, condition, concession, purpose, or any other "attendant circumstance."

Which of these possible meanings was intended is always an interpretational choice,

based on context. Time is most frequently indicated, next in order of frequency is the

last one listed, the catch-all category called "attendant circumstance." This one is

usually translated into English by two coordinate verbs connected by "and," as is the

case with Matt 28:19 (KJV, NASB, NIV, RSV, etc.).

Does the fact that the main verb is imperative automatically give an imperatival

sense to the participle? The answer clearly is no. There are 93 examples of adverbial

participles modifying imperative verbs in the NT. As an indication of their varied

character the NASB translates them by English participles 18 times (thus preserving the

anonymity of the original), by "when" (temporal) 7 times, by ''as'' (manner) 5 times, by

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Imperatival Ἵνα Clause

There are examples where a ἵνα clause seems to express a com-

mand; two are frequently cited. Eph 5:33, ἡ δὲ γυνὴ ἴνα φοβεῖται τὸν  
ἄνδρα / 'And let the wife see to it that she respect her husband';

2 Cor 8:7 ἵνα καὶ ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ χάριτι περισσεύητε / 'See that you

abound in this grace also'. The translation given here from the NASB

demonstrates how easily these may be considered as ellipses of an

easily supplied governing imperatival verb. There are many other

examples of such ellipsis with ἵνα clauses,41 although these others do

not involve an imperative.

The propriety of considering these other imperatival construc-

tions to be elliptical should be judged in the light of the fact that

Greek uses ellipsis of the verb much more easily than English.

*The “Rank Relationship” Involved with an Imperative*

One of the goals of this study was to investigate the "rank

relationship" between the one using the imperative and the one to

whom it is addressed. A coded listing was made identifying the

speaker, the one spoken to, and the relative rank or level of authority

between the two, for each imperative verb. These were sorted and

counted by computer and some results are presented here.42

The persons were identified in specific terms and came under

four general categories: (1) God [God, God's word, Holy Spirit,

Jesus]; (2) heavenly beings [angels, demons, Satan]; (3) man [men

generally, man's self, disciples, apostles, unbelievers]; and (4) things.

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"since" or "for" (causal) twice, by "if" (conditional) once, and by the coordinate verbs

with "and"- more than 50 times. Of these, 36 times the participle is of a "verb of

motion" (in order of frequency, πορευθείς 12, ἀνάστας 7, ἐγερθείς 3, ἔλθων 3, ἄρας 2,

ἀπέλθων 2, once each: διάβας, εἰσέλθων, ἐξέλθων, ἐρχόμενος, παρέλθων; in English,

"go," "come," "arise" or "rise," "sit down," "take"). Grammarians (Turner, *Syntax*,

154; BDF, 216) speak of this as a pleonastic participle deriving from the Hebrew idiom

which often puts both verbs in the imperative. "The aor. ptc. por. is oft. used

pleonastically to enliven the narrative. ..in any case the idea of going or traveling is

not emphasized" (BAG, 699; cf. similar comment on ἀνάστας, 69).

The reader is referred to two significant journal articles. Robert D. Culver, "What

is the Church's Commission? Some Exegetical Issues in Matthew 28:16-20"(*BSac* 125

[1968] 243-53), presents the normal "circumstantial participle" view. Cleon Rogers,

"The Great Commission" (*BSac* 130 [1973] 258-67), presents the view that an impera-

tival sense is to be seen from the Hebrew background which often used two imperatives

in similar construction. If there is any "imperatival" sense in this participle it must

come from the Hebrew, not from the Greek. Most have seen the Hebrew idiom as

pleonastic, not imperatival.

41Cf. John 1:8, 13:18, 15:25; 1 John 2:19, 37:1. See above.

42Statistics from this study are available, see above.

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The rank relationship was stated in three categories: the speaker

(1) greater than, (2) less than, or (3) equal to the one spoken to.

As expected, the vast majority (1416 of 1632, 87%) of imperatival

statements were spoken by those who were greater in rank and

authority than those to whom they spoke. Of these, 1310 are com-

mands and 53 are requests. It is this relative rank that puts the force

or pressure upon the hearer to obey, not the imperative itself or its

tense.43 However, not all imperatives are from superiors; a signifi-

cant number (170, or 10%) are spoken by those of lesser rank to

their superiors, mostly in requests and prayers (116 instances), but

even commands are addressed to superiors (47 instances where men

addressed commands to Jesus, whose superior rank they did not

recognize). Both commands and requests are addressed to equals

(46 instances, 3%).

There is no automatic or mechanical correspondence between

relative rank and the imperative mood. The imperative expresses an

appeal of will to will, whether it be command or request, "telling" or

"asking." Only the context indicates which is intended, sometimes not

too distinctly.

CONCLUSION

The exegesis of the imperative mood, like all exegesis, must be

usage-oriented. This study has shown that the imperative mood has a

wide latitude of possible meanings from which the exegete must

choose the one which, in the light of the context, the speaker intended.

This study has attempted to deal with many of the NT passages where

questions have been raised about the meaning of an imperative verb,

and to point to possible answers. It has expressed some warnings

against several of the more commonly encountered errors in the

exegesis of imperatives. The rich potential of the Greek language

provides its user with a most flexible tool for expressing his thought.

The exegete, therefore, must exercise considerable discipline in attend-

ing to the full range of imperatival usage and in avoiding the errors of

popular exegesis. He must resist the temptation to glamorize his

translation while at the same time taking care to maximize his use of

the contextual clues that will enrich that translation while keeping it

faithful to the intent of the writer.

43See above, pp. 45-46.

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