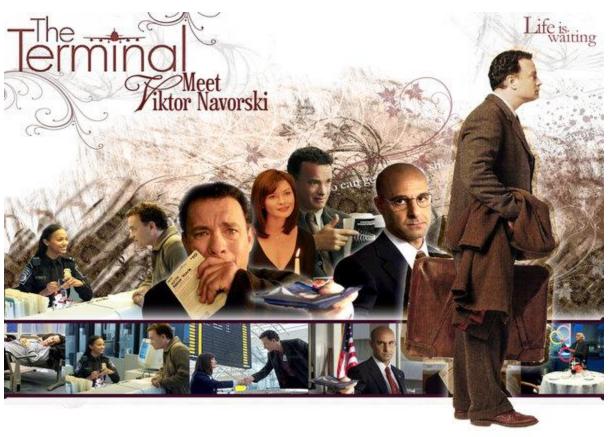# Language Challenged Travelers Stuck At The Terminal

By David Lee Burris

In the late 1940's the City of Boston popularized a ballad heralding a fictitious passenger stuck on the MTA subway which was later made into a hit song by the Kingston Trio about a decade later. The fictitious character caught in an unending loop of motion without movement and direction without destination was highly humorous and totally ridiculous to contemplate. However, once an incident had happened in the world making that fictitious scenario real and providing all the elements of a tragic comedy - we also had the making of a movie masterpiece.

In the 2004 film *The Terminal*, Viktor Navorski (played by Tom Hanks) is stranded at the JFK airport. While he was in the air a revolution erupted in his country. He cannot go home. Nor will the U.S. allow him to enter because the new government of Krakozhia has not been recognized. Navorski lives at JFK's Gate 6 for nine months with both feet firmly planted in midair.

The movie was inspired by the story of Merhan Nasseri, an Iranian refugee. In **1988**, he landed at Charles De Gaulle Airport near Paris, after being denied entry into England, because his passport and United Nations refugee certificate had been stolen. French authorities wouldn't let him leave the airport. He remained in Terminal One, a stateless person with nowhere else to go. He has since been granted permission to either enter France or return to Iran. He chooses to continue to live in the terminal and tell his story to those who will listen. Reportedly, his mental health has deteriorated over the years. When given the opportunity to live in France, he refused because the documents did not name him as "Sir Alfred", and he claims to have forgotten his native Persian. Reportedly, he left the terminal in **August 2006** to be hospitalized for an unspecified illness.

Navorski's story is a tragic comedy based on true events with only one person but it serves as an anecdotal archetype to a deadly serious spiritual travesty in many community churches today. Many a local congregation right now can numerically account for a significant number of baptized believers that never transition to the pews and an even larger group – possibly a critical mass - of pew-sitters that never seem to make the transition from beginner convert to mature follower.

Maybe there's plenty blame enough to be shared among the family of the faithful. Maybe we have mistakenly assumed that if we get people to the terminal they will automatically make the rest of the journey.

The repeated "ask" of Jesus was, "Follow me." Many people believe that having decided to follow Jesus, they have safely arrived at their destination. But they're actually stuck at the terminal. Jesus' invitation speaks more about movement than arrival. So does the Great Commission.

The Great Commission is a mandate for the church: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." *Young's Literal Translation* renders Matthew 28:19 this way: "having gone, then, disciple all the nations." This is a more accurate translation because the word *make* does not appear in the Greek.

Young's treats the Greek word for disciple as a verb rather than as a noun. *Matheteusate* is a charge "to disciple," not "to make disciples." Let me explain.

Dictionary.com defines the English word *make* as, "To bring into existence by shaping or changing material, combining parts, etc. To produce; cause to exist or happen; bring about. To cause to be or become; render."

Can we manage the response of others? Can we bring disciples into existence? Can we produce disciples? Can we cause disciples to be? We cannot make disciples, but we can disciple others.

First Corinthians 3:7 says, "So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, *but only God, who makes things grow*" (*NIV,* emphasis added). If we stay connected to Jesus, we are able to plant and water. We cannot cause growth. Only God can do that. We can disciple. We must. The issue is how to disciple effectively.

While I was typing this article in Microsoft Word, I used the verb, "discipling" several times. Each time I typed it, the program's spell-check feature underlined it to warn me about an errant term. The vast archive of words stored in the program did not include the verb, "discipling". I started to wonder if I had misspelled it or created a word in ignorance, so I Googled "discipling" for a definition. Here's what I found at Dictionary.com:

Verb (used with object); **discipled**, **discipling**.
Archaic. To convert into a disciple.
Obsolete. To Teach; train.

"Disciple" Is Both A Noun & A Verb – Designation & Commandment:

There are two listed definitions for the verb form of the word "disciple". **And these definitions are listed as ARCHAIC and OBSOLETE, respectively.** Three other online dictionaries don't even have disciple listed as a verb!

Although mostly used as a noun, "disciple" is an ACTION word, too!

I did discover that "disciple" is not actually in the Bible as a verb, either. But its meaning as a verb most certainly does exist in scripture! Discipleship is a long-standing principal of the Christian church, and I think the most direct scriptural reference is found in what we call "The Great Commission."

Matthew 28

18 And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.
19 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:
20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.

The part that stands out to me is "*Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.*" In other words, to train!

The definition listed on dictionary.com as "Obsolete" is "To teach; train." In modern usage, "disciple" appears to be nothing more than a *noun*; efforts to use the term in our culture as a *verb* are now deemed "archaic" and "obsolete." It's sad to think that something so explicitly given as a command in the Great Commission is considered obsolete with regard to modern-day usage.

However, we are called to teach people about Jesus so they choose to follow Him, too; then we continue to teach them the truth of His Word, so they can live according to His commandments and lead others in that same knowledge.

The challenge today is to help promote the word "disciple" as a verb in the common English lexicon, by **putting my faith into action**. We are not just "disciples" (noun). We are called to disciple (verb), meaning to make disciples of others!

Relative Comfort Zones in "Disciple" As Noun Versus As Verb

THE REAL QUESTION

But there is a deeper question underlying the issue of grammar. <u>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*?</u>

"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."

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 where he proclaims* "*disciple* can become more of a verb than a noun, **less of an identity and more of an activity**."

These individuals find more comfort *making disciples* than *being a disciple*.

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 question is a double 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 are connected to in the local body of Christ. We need to be emphasizing the activity *and* the state of being of the word "disciple" if we are to engage the process of discipleship the way Jesus intended.

THE ANSWER CONTINUED…

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.

MODELING. We're trying to consistently model both how to *be a disciple* and how to *make disciples.*

LET'S GET TO OUR DESTINATION BY GETTING UNSTUCK FROM OUR LIMITING LANGUAGE!