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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 imperative 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 latitude 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 significance 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: A 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.

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 dictates (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 "asking." 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 imperative 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.

Frequently in the NT this usage is introduced by a word indicating that it is a request: ἐρωτάω, ἐπερωτάω / 'ask', προσεύχομαι / '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 overall 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 compliance 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.

ὄρατε (4), ὄρα (3), ἴδετε (1), ἀκούετε (1), ἀκούσατε (1), ἔγε (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, βλέπετε, and ἀκούετε. All of these could also be identified as simple indicatives.

Conditional

Probably the strangest and most controversial category of imperatives 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.

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 imperative 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 situation." 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 occasion. 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 warning added to end it before the sun goes down?

(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)	20 ⁷
Command or Request	6 ⁸
Permission or Condition (see above)	3 ⁹
Command or Permission	2 ¹⁰
Permission or Challenge	1 ¹¹
Request or Condition	1 ¹²

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 specifically. 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; Gal 6:2; 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.

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 punctiliar 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, *περίμωσο* (Mark 4:39) expresses a true perfect sense.

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:

μή 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 warning 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.

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
Previous 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 as 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.

²¹Best, "A Supplement to Williams Grammar Notes" (Dallas Theological Seminary, 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)."

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 opposite 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; any one 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 not My will, but Thine be done." The last clause, *πλὴν μὴ τὸ θέλημα μου ἀλλὰ τὸ σὸν γενέσθω* contains *μὴ* 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 (Jn 10:37), he said *μὴ πιστεύετε μοι*. 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 *μὴ*.

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 *μὴ* occurs: *μηδὲν ἄνευ γνώμης σου γινέσθω μηδὲ σὺ ἄνευ θεοῦ τι πράσσει, ὅπερ οὐδὲ πράσσει, εὐστάθει* / 'Let nothing be done without your approval, and do nothing yourself without God, as indeed you do nothing; stand fast'.

In public buses in modern Greece, a sign is frequently posted above the driver's seat: *ΜΗ ΟΜΙΛΕΙΤΕ ΕΙΣ ΤΟΝ ΟΔΗΓΟΝ*. It is present imperative with *μὴ*. 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.

²⁸I.V.J. Loeb Classical Library, K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. I (Cambridge: Harvard Univ., 1977) 270-73.

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, + ὀρίζω, 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 categorical, . . . [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 authority, 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: Broadman, 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.'"

³⁰N. 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.

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 occasion, 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 historical factors. The imperative was the last of the moods to develop, and it never completely replaced the older ways of expressing command. In aorist prohibitions the Greek language held to the old way, μή 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.

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.

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 something.” 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 καί 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 εἶμι, 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. . . .”

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 baptized, 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 categories 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 imperatives 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 responsibility of renewing the mind.

Out of this study has come another interesting and helpful observation. 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 imperative,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), ἀποκριθήτε (2), and one each επιμελήθητι, μετεωρίζεσθε, ἔρωσθε.

³⁴There are 38 which I have so classified: αἴρω and καθαρίζω have three each, βάλλω, θροέομαι, 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), ἐνδυναμών (2), and ταρασσω (2).

to be scared," or simply "to fear." Strictly speaking, it is not deponent, 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, ἐνδυναμῶ: active, "to make strong, to strengthen," passive, "to be strengthened, to 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, μμνήσκω in the active means "to remind" someone of something, in the passive it means "to remember" (i.e., "be reminded"); πλανᾶω 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 command; only the context can indicate it. And that is always an exegetical judgment.

Of the 53 possible instances, 39 (74%) were found in citations from the OT. Eleven were used in citations of the Ten Commandments, 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.

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 αἰτήσῃ 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 command . . . used for commands which are always proper to obey." Such language describes quite well the significance of a present imperative, 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.

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 periphrastic imperative.⁴⁰

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

Imperative "ἵνα Clause"

There are examples where a ἵνα clause seems to express a command; two are frequently cited. Eph 5:33, ἡ δὲ γυνὴ ἵνα 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 constructions 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.

"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, πορευθεῖς 12, ἀνάστας 7, ἐγερθεῖς 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. of πορ. 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 imperatival 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.

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 commands 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 significant 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 attending 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.