

# The Role of Water Baptism in the Discipleship Process: A Proposal<sup>1</sup>

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Category: Original scientific article

<https://doi.org/10.32862/k.19.1.3>

## Abstract

*This article focuses on how evangelical churches in general, notably in Croatia, view the role and position of water baptism in the discipleship process. However, the relationship between baptism and discipleship will serve as an opportunity to examine other aspects of the discipleship process, primarily the link between evangelism and discipleship. Hence, in the first part of the article, we will briefly discuss and examine some key elements of the Great Commission to get a sense of it and see different interpretations and understandings of that text. Second, based on the Gospels, we will see how Jesus' followers would understand and define discipleship based on their experience with Jesus and how that experience shaped their understanding of the Great Commission. Third, we will discuss the relationship (or, better to say, current dichotomy) between "evangelism" and "discipleship" and argue for an understanding of these two activities that is, I would suggest, more faithful to the NT texts. Finally, we will discuss the role and position of water baptism in the discipleship process. Since the purpose of this discussion is to evaluate the theology and practice of evangelicals regarding a better understanding of water baptism and, consequently, the discipleship process in general, four things are proposed: 1. Adoption of a definition of discipleship that in its core, has relationships and not a method or program or activities; 2. Revision of*

1 This article was written as part of the Zagreb Biblical Institute research project: "The Concept of Discipleship Among Evangelical Churches in Croatia."

*understanding of the relationship between “evangelism” and “discipleship”; 3. A reminder that the purpose of evangelism is to make “disciples” and not “converts”; 4. Restoration of the biblical position of water baptism as a person’s response or their saying “yes” to the gospel message.*

**Keywords:** *discipleship, baptism, evangelism, the Great Commission, evangelical churches*

## Introduction

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. *Go* (πορευθέντες) therefore and make disciples (μαθητεύσατε) of all nations, *baptizing* (βαπτίζοντες) them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching* (διδάσκοντες) them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (NRSV, emphasis mine).

It is well-known that Matthew 28:19-20 contains one main verb, “make disciples,” and three participles, and “baptizing” is one of the three participles. Since for evangelical Christians in Croatia, such as Baptists and Pentecostals, water baptism is something that a person does *after* one’s salvation, baptism is considered an outward act of already existing faith and an opportunity to give testimony about one’s faith to others. Accordingly, this article focuses on how evangelical churches, notably in Croatia, view the role and position of water baptism in the discipleship process in general.

However, the relationship between baptism and discipleship will serve as an opportunity to examine other aspects of the discipleship process, primarily because baptism is one link in the chain of discipleship. Hence, in the first part of the article, we will briefly discuss and examine some key elements of the Great Commission to get a sense of it and see different interpretations and understandings of that text.<sup>2</sup> Second, based on the Gospels, we will see how Jesus’ followers would understand and define discipleship based on their experience with Jesus and how that experience would shape their understanding of the Great Commission. Third, we will discuss the relationship (or, better to say, current dichotomy) between “evangelism” and “discipleship” and argue for an understanding of these two activities that is, I would suggest, more faithful to the NT texts. Finally, based on previous analysis, we will discuss the role and position of water baptism in the discipleship process. The purpose is to evaluate the theology and practice of evangelicals and determine whether our evangelical heritage is beneficial or hinders us

2 We will not discuss the fact and significance of Jesus’ authority to give this Commission or the potential meanings of the expression “all nations.”

from adequately understanding water baptism and, consequently, the discipleship process in general.

## 1. General Outlook on Baptism of Evangelical Churches in Croatia

If we were to enter into any evangelical church in Croatia that does not practice pedobaptism and ask some mature believers there to explain to us how one can become saved, what evangelism and discipleship are, what baptism is, and why it is important, we might hear the process of salvation described like this:

1. First, we share the gospel with someone, and this part is usually called “evangelism.”
2. Then, the person responds to the gospel message by repentance and conversion, and this moment is usually demonstrated through the “sinner’s prayer.”<sup>3</sup>
3. Then, this person, as someone who is already saved, is baptized after a certain period of time. In the meantime, the person goes through some form of teaching or mentoring to prepare for the baptism

Furthermore, evangelicals would more than likely make a distinction between “evangelism” and “discipleship” in the sense that working with a person prior to their conversion is viewed as “evangelism.” In contrast, *after* a person is converted

3 For example, in the book *Experiencing God* (in Croatian: *Iskusiti Boga: znati i činiti volju Božju* (1997). Zagreb: Savez baptističkih crkava u Hrvatskoj), authors discuss how to have a saving relationship with God. They say that a person should confess (agree with God about) his sins and ask Jesus to save him. I presume that when they say “ask,” they think about the sinner’s prayer because they do not mention baptism, but instead, they talk about “making this important decision” (Blackaby, Blackaby, and King 2008, 4). The tract “Ovo je bio tvoj život” (Chick Publications s. a.) advises the reader that after the prayer of salvation and the beginning of a new life with Christ, a person should read the Bible every day, talk to God every day in prayer and be baptized. The tract “Jesi li čuo za četiri duhovna zakona?” (“Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?”) tells the reader that Christ can be received by faith through prayer, but after receiving Christ, the tract does not advise the person to be baptized. The church Riječ života (s. a.), on their website, has one short article called “Sinner’s Prayer” or “Molitva spasenja,” which says that salvation is based on personal faith in the risen Christ. For this purpose, they offer a short text of the sinner’s prayer. After praying this prayer, a person is advised to read the Bible, especially the New Testament, to pray in their own words, and to become a part of a biblical church. The Baptist church from Umag (s. a.) on their website also has instructions on how to pray the sinner’s prayer to receive salvation. If a person prays this prayer in faith, they are saved and encouraged to join the church. Kristova pentekostna crkva (s. a.) on their web site has a tract called “Odabir.” The last page of the tract says that to receive salvation, one has to pray the sinner’s prayer. After that, a person is advised to read the Bible daily, pray, be baptized, fellowship with other Christians, and talk to others about Jesus Christ. The proponents of sinner’s prayer to support their view use biblical texts such as Romans 10:9-10, 13; Luke 18:9-14; Revelation 3:20, etc. See, for example, Thyster 2011, 17; De Courcy 2023; Southers 2008, 181-183.

or saved, the process of discipleship begins. Dwayne Eslick (2019) very nicely captures this intention and tension:

For years, I was like most modern North American Christians. I saw evangelism as the process of sharing the good news with those who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus the Messiah. Discipleship is viewed as the process of helping those who have a relationship with Jesus grow and mature in that relationship. Evangelism is for the lost. Discipleship is for the found.

Similarly, Lindesay Fooshee (2012) says that for years, she thought that evangelism and discipleship were two different things. Evangelism meant sharing the gospel with an unbeliever through handing out gospel tracts, going door-to-door in a college dorm, or creatively communicating the gospel on the streets of a foreign country so that people would become Christians. Discipleship meant helping someone who was already a believer walk out the life of faith through a small group Bible study, a conversation across the table with another woman, or an accountability group.

Furthermore, regarding the view of the relationship between discipleship and water baptism, among evangelicals, we would probably encounter two views: a) discipleship begins at the moment of conversion, and baptism is part of that discipleship process (conversion – discipleship – baptism – continuation of discipleship); b) discipleship begins with water baptism (conversion – baptism/discipleship). In that case, water baptism is a mark that a person truly wants to follow Christ as a disciple and the first step of discipleship.

A. Discipleship begins between conversion and water baptism				
1. Evangelism	2. Conversion	3. Discipleship	4. Baptism	5. Continuation of discipleship
B. Discipleship begins after water baptism				
1. Evangelism	2. Conversion	3. Baptism: the mark of a genuine commitment to Christ	4. Discipleship	

Those who view that discipleship starts after conversion and prior to baptism will usually associate this with the fact that before a person is baptized, he or she will go through some sort of discipling, teaching, or preparation<sup>4</sup> in order to establish that a person is truly converted and has a proper understanding of the act of baptism and its significance (sort of a vetting process). Hence, when a person is baptized, he or she is already in the process of discipleship.

For those who will argue that water baptism is the first step of discipleship or the initial act of discipleship, the following argumentations or explanations can be used: a person does not have to be baptized in order to be saved, but once the

4 See, for example, *Glas Crkve* 2018, 21.

unbeliever accepts Christ, he is also subject to the commands of the Great Commission and must show obedience by being baptized. Hence, baptism is the first step of discipleship and follows the event of repentance and confession of Jesus Christ as Savior (Pickard 2009, 141). Similarly, one can argue that baptism marks only the first step of discipleship, and the second requirement is to teach believers to obey everything that Jesus commanded (Hubbard 2009, 100). Pope similarly argues that water baptism for a believer at the age of accountability is the first step of discipleship and that true discipleship involves teaching people to obey everything Jesus commanded. However, he notices: “Today in America, there are multiplied millions of people who say they believe they have experienced being born-again. Too many of them have not been water baptized and are not in fellowship in a local church” (Pope 2016, 108).

So, if we would summarize in general how evangelicals approach the issue of salvation, baptism, and discipleship, the matrix or outlook is evident and straightforward: a) *evangelism* is working with the lost, *discipleship* is working with the believers; b) person hears gospel message, believes it, becomes saved and then latter is baptized; c) discipleship begins either after conversion or after baptism. The consequence of this outlook is the following:

- a) Baptism is not connected to the beginning of salvation because a person is saved and then baptized.
- b) Discipleship is something that starts after salvation, which supports this distinction between evangelism and discipleship.
- c) The byproduct of this approach is that we will likely make converts who later have to be “converted” into disciples.

## **2. The Great Commission Matthew 28:18-20**

Regarding the text of what is known as “the Great Commission” in Matthew 28:18-20, Jeremy Bohall (2019, 192) notices that many scholars view this passage as the “summary,” “manifesto,” or “climax” of Matthew’s entire gospel, and argues that how one interprets this text has substantial implications for how one reads Matthew, the other gospels and the rest of the Bible, and has significant ramifications for the church today. So, what do we find in this text, and how can we interpret it?

The general observation is that participles “baptizing and teaching...further specify what is involved in discipleship” (France 1985, 420), or as J. Knox Chamblin (1995, 760) notices, “Jesus explains what it means to make disciples by the two participles which follow—baptizing and teaching. Discipleship entails both becoming a Christian (being baptized) and being a Christian (obeying Jesus’ teaching).” However, this grammatical construction is the subject of theological debates. As Douglas Finkbeiner (1991, 23) argues: “A key to understanding ‘make

disciples' is to determine the relationship of the accompanying participles to the main verb."

Speaking about the relationship of the two present participles ("baptizing" and "teaching") to the main verb "make disciples," one view is that the two participles are circumstantial, describing the manner or means of "making disciples." Hence, France (2007, 1115) would say that "baptizing" and "teaching" spell out the process of making disciples, and Ferguson (2009, 137) claims that "the two participles subsequent to the verb are circumstantial, describing the means of making disciples, with the 'teaching' accompanying the 'baptizing' (make disciples by baptizing them and [at the same time] teaching them)."

Another view is to see them as coordinated imperatives following the activity of making disciples. Accordingly, "the baptizing goes with making disciples and the teaching all things as a subsequent activity is subordinate to making disciples by baptizing" because "teaching" here refers to "the post-baptismal teaching of how to live after one has become a disciple of Jesus and not the teaching involved in making disciples" (Ferguson 2009, 137).

D. A. Carson (1984, 597) says that "[t]he syntax of the Greek participles for 'baptizing' and 'teaching' forbids the conclusion that baptizing and teaching are to be construed solely as the means of making disciples." Accordingly, "baptizing and teaching are not the means of making disciples, but they characterize it." Carson's argumentation is based on the reasoning that the main verb "to make disciples" "entails both preaching and response" and that "the response of discipleship is baptism and instruction" (Carson 1984, 597; cf. Finkbeiner 1991, 26).

Finkbeiner (1991, 23-24) notices that the aorist participle πορευθέντες "going" is usually understood in four basic ways: 1. as a parallel command to the main verb, that is, as a technical term for mission, 2. as a pleonastic participle with little or no significance, reflecting verbal redundancy from Semitic influence, 3. as a circumstantial participle with no imperatival force, in a sense "having gone" or "while you go," 4. as a preparatory participle that contains imperatival force and should be translated, "go make disciples," and he opts for the fourth option (Finkbeiner 1991, 25).

From this brief overview, we can notice that baptism can be viewed as a means of making someone Jesus' disciple or as a characteristic of someone who is already a disciple because it has responded to the gospel. Whatever approach we take, evangelical Christians consider Matthew 28:18-20 as one of the key texts for the life and work of their churches, for their view and understanding of discipleship and, consequently, water baptism that I briefly presented in the first section. In the sections below, I will address two standard convictions or beliefs among evangelical Christians: the validity of the distinction between evangelism and discipleship and the understanding of baptism as a post-conversion activity.

### 3. Evangelism and Discipleship

Is it valid to see evangelism and discipleship as two activities with different “target groups?” To answer this question, we will first examine who Jesus’ disciples were and then analyze the biblical view of evangelism and discipleship.

#### 3.1. *Discipleship Based on the Gospels – Discipling Unbelievers*

The Gospels are the documents that describe a unique and non-repeatable context. However, within that context, we read about Jesus’ life and ministry and those who first became his disciples. That being said, it is important to note that we cannot read the Great Commission at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, which is devoid of the rest of Matthew’s gospel. The crucial hermeneutical “rule of thumb” is to try to understand how those eleven disciples would understand Jesus’ command about making disciples. In other words, if “I” was one who walked with Jesus for a few years, how would “I” understand this Commission?

From the outset of his Gospel, Matthew clearly and openly presents to his readers Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, the son of David, and the son of Abraham (Mt 1:1). Yet, the disciples who will begin to follow Jesus in chapter 4 onward do not have this advantage. For them, Jesus is a well-known rabbi whom they follow. So, they are his disciples even before they fully understand who Jesus is (Christology). Hence, this poses the question of when precisely those Twelve disciples were converted or saved. The Gospel of Matthew is silent about that (and, for that matter, other gospels as well) in the sense that it does not use specific terminology such as “conversion” or “salvation” in relation to the Twelve. To make things even more complex, the Gospel of Matthew neither mentions that the Twelve were baptized in water. However, they *were* his disciples.<sup>5</sup>

This process of discipleship in Matthew is primarily presented as a process of walking with Jesus and gradually discovering who Jesus truly and fully is. In other words, Jesus’ initial disciples were on their way to discovering whom they were following, and they learned how to obey his teaching. However, we have no

5 Even though Synoptic gospels do not mention that some of the Twelve were disciples of John the Baptist, in the Gospel of John chap. 1, we read about two of his disciples (Andrew being one of them) who started to follow Jesus as their rabbi. We may assume that being the disciples of John, they were baptized by John (they have certainly not been baptized in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:20)), and from John 3:22 and 4:2 we see that Jesus and his disciples were doing baptisms, but also John the Baptist continued to baptize people. Based on this, we can pose at least two questions: 1. Why did John the Baptist continue to baptize people now when Jesus was active in his ministry? 2. Since Jesus/Jesus’ disciples were baptizing people, what kind of baptism was that? The Bible does not provide us with clear answers to these questions. However, it is worth noticing that John 4:1 links baptism with discipleship: “Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, ‘Jesus is making and baptizing *more disciples* than John’” (NRSV, emphasis mine).



record of them being baptized in water or their “conversion”/“salvation.” That is why I have pointed out that the Gospels are documents that describe a unique and non-repeatable context. Moreover, because of this, we are tempted to interpret the Great Commission from a post-factum perspective or, more specifically, from our contemporary context, whatever this context may be.

However, if we were forced to define discipleship based solely on Matthew 1:1-28:15, we would not be able to determine whether Jesus’ disciples were baptized, nor when the point of their conversion or salvation occurred. We can argue that discipleship is a process of following Jesus and gradually discovering who Jesus really is and what it means to follow him. Accordingly, what evangelicals would define as “evangelism” the Gospels view as “discipleship.”

### *3.2. Biblical View of Evangelism and Discipleship*

The nouns “evangelism” and “discipleship” are not found in the Bible. Instead, we have verbs that describe *activities* of evangelizing and making disciples. We already noticed that among evangelicals, there is a tendency to view these activities as two separate activities: we “evangelize” unbelievers, and we “teach/disciple” believers. However, R. T. France (2007, 1115) notices one important thing: “The commission is expressed not in terms of the means, to proclaim the good news, but of the end, to ‘make disciples.’ It is not enough that the nations hear the message; they must also respond with the same whole-hearted commitment that was required of those who became disciples of Jesus during his ministry (see, e.g., 8:19-22; 19:21-22, 27-29).” The significance of his observation is that activities of evangelism and baptizing are not stand-alone activities, but part of the more significant task of making disciples. Hence, the Bible views “evangelism,” “baptizing” or “teaching” as activities that are aimed to make disciples.

For example, the verb εὐαγγελίζω “to proclaim the good news” is coupled with the activity of διδάσκω “teaching.” In Luke 20:1, Jesus is in the temple. He is doing διδάσκω, and εὐαγγελίζω which means that Jesus addressed both his disciples and those who were not his disciples, and as Marshall (1978, 724) notices, “Luke characterizes the teaching as preaching the gospel,” and Bock (1994, Lk 20:1-8) says that “Jesus is teaching the gospel.” The same couple also appears in Acts 5:42, where it is said that “every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to ‘teach’ and ‘proclaim’ Jesus as the Messiah,” and in Acts 15:35, describing the ministry of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch. Acts 14:21 is significant because the verb μαθητεύω<sup>6</sup> that appears in Matthew 28:19 appears in pair with εὐαγγελίζω. There we can see that evangelism resulted in making others Jesus’ disciples.

Διδάσκω is used for teaching both Jesus’ disciples and people in general. For example, Matthew 4:23 and 9:35 describe Jesus as “teaching” and “proclaiming

<sup>6</sup> Μαθητεύω (“to make disciples”) appears only four times in the NT: Mt 13:52; 27:57; 28:19; Acts 14:21.



the good news” in synagogues in Galilee. In the “Sermon on the Mount” (which is not a sermon at all), Jesus is teaching his disciples (Mt 5:2, 19), but in the end, the crowd is amazed at his teaching (Mt 7:28-29). Matthew 11:1 says that after Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities, and in Matthew 13:54, we see Jesus again teaching in the synagogue. Jesus also taught in the temple crowd in general (Mt 21:23; 26:55, etc.), and so did his disciples in the Book of Acts (4:2, 18; 5:21, 25, 28, etc.). We could use other examples from the Gospels, but these are sufficient to see that discipleship is an activity equally applicable to believers and unbelievers.

Based on this, we can conclude that Jesus’s apostles, who observed how their rabbi was preaching and teaching both them, other disciples, and people in general, would not have in their minds this division between evangelism and discipleship that many modern evangelicals have. Accordingly, Bobby Harrington (s. a.) claims the following:

Evangelism is a disrespected word now among many Christians. It may be a good thing. Jesus told us to preach “the gospel” (Mark 13:10), but he never commanded just evangelism. He commanded us to “make disciples.” He gave his command to make disciples in Matthew 28:19-20. Two subordinate phrases describe how we make disciples. The first part of making disciples is when a person comes to faith in Jesus. Matthew 28:19 sees that process being made concrete through baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We commonly think of this as evangelism. The second part of making disciples is “teaching people to obey all that Jesus commanded.” We commonly think of this second part as discipleship. But the second part is no more discipleship than the first part. Evangelism and discipleship (as it is commonly understood) are really the front and back sides of the same coin. The coin is discipleship. Evangelism is simply pre-conversion discipleship.

Similarly, Roy T. Edgemon (1980, 540) claims that in the Great Commission, Jesus did not separate evangelism from discipleship. Hence, “[t]he one imperative in Matthew 28:19-20 is *matheteusate* (make disciples), which surely includes the entire process of winning persons to Christ and helping them to grow in their Christian life.”

In this article, I would like to suggest three changes we must make if we want to be more faithful to the biblical record or definitions of evangelism and discipleship. First, we should stop using the label “evangelism” to reach the lost. Given the fact that we have this heritage of separation between discipleship and evangelism, our primary task should be to recover the true meaning of discipleship and embed all other activities (preaching, baptizing, and teaching) into discipleship. Concretely, “evangelism” in the Bible is primarily *an act of proclamation of the gospel*, but as we pointed out, this is not some stand-alone activity. And what

matters is how we do it: are we merely preaching the good news to the people, or are we doing discipleship, and as part of that, we preach the good news? Furthermore, “discipleship,” properly understood, is a label that covers both spectrums: a) leading someone to salvation; b) working with a saved person after salvation. So, “evangelism” can be used for the activity of preaching, but it does not make sense to use this label to reach those who do not know Christ precisely because it supports this false division.

Second, we should “evangelize (proclaiming the gospel) *as* disciples.” Our usual method of evangelism is increasingly through social networks, but if we are in contact with other humans, we usually try to deliver or proclaim the message. We would like to be Peter in Acts 2, standing in the temple, or Paul in Acts 17, standing among the wise men in Athens, and proclaiming the message. And yes, there is a time and place to do that, but “evangelizing as disciples” means inviting others into our lives so they will come to know Christ. Furthermore, “evangelizing as disciples” should also enrich the ways in which we share the gospel. If Jesus reached unbelievers (or evangelized them) through preaching and teaching, and if we would in our “evangelism use more “teaching” in a way that Jesus did (speaking in parables, asking questions, offering examples, etc.), I am positive that this would have a greater impact on people’s lives. After all, teaching includes teaching by example. Edgar Guest (s. a.), in his poem “Sermons We See,” captures this note very well:

*I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;  
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way.  
The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear,  
Fine counsel is confusing, but example's always clear;  
And the best of all the preachers are the men who live their creeds,  
For to see good put in action is what everybody needs.*

Third, our goal is to make disciples, not converts that have to be later “converted” into disciples. But evangelism that is devoid of discipleship and shaped by preaching the gospel messages that do not produce disciples (cf. Allen & Monroe 2023) cannot or hardly can produce disciples. It will produce converts that have to be converted into disciples. Although conversion is part of the process of becoming a disciple, in our day and time, evangelical churches can operate under the premise (consciously or unconsciously) that one can be a “Christian” and not a disciple, a “believer” and not a disciple, a “convert” and not a disciple. On that note, Dallas Willard (2006, 4) says the following:

For at least several decades, the churches of the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship. Contemporary American churches in particular do not require following Christ in his example, spirit, and teachings as a condition of membership—either of enter-

ing into or continuing in fellowship of a denomination or local church.... So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, *discipleship clearly is optional*.

Willard (2006, 5) continues to lament that the best current literature on discipleship states or assumes that a Christian may not be a disciple. Because of things like that, “[v]ast numbers of converts today thus exercise the options permitted by the message they hear: they choose not to become—or at least do not choose to become—disciples of Jesus Christ.” The reason for this, according to Willard, is that Jesus’s Great Commission to make disciples of all nations has been converted into “Make converts (to a particular ‘faith and practice’) and baptize them into church membership.”<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Baptism

The problematic dichotomy between evangelism and discipleship is also reflected in the theology and practice of water baptism. As stated before, in evangelical churches that do not practice pedobaptism, a person responds to the gospel message and is baptized after some time. In this way, baptism becomes a “symbolic” and/or “testimonial” event (a person publicly declares *already* existing faith, hence = testimony). As Cecil W. Stalnaker (2022, 202) notices, instead of water baptism as a means of professing Christ, “[i]n the evangelical world, we often speak of some outward gesture like the raising of a hand, saying ‘a sinner’s prayer’ aloud, or walking an aisle to the front of a church to make a profession of faith.”

For example, in the document that provides the foundational teachings, beliefs, and practices of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Croatia (Balog 2009, 56), baptism is defined as “the public ritual through which an adult believer, *after* repentance and conversion, identifies with Christ’s death and resurrection in faith, thereby becoming part of the Body of Christ” (emphasis mine).<sup>8</sup> The document states that baptism happens after a person’s repentance and conversion, but it does not specify how much time should pass between repentance/conversion

7 “American evangelicalism, the branch of Christianity most enthusiastic about the Great Commission, often reduces the Great Commission to ‘salvation’ by ‘accepting Christ.’ This divorces evangelism from the Biblical call to ‘make disciples who obey.’ This diminished view of salvation and discipleship is without support in Scripture but has become a common form in many churches. Worse, in many congregations, ‘joining the church’ has become the goal of evangelism, with discipleship relegated to voluntary participation in Sunday School” (Scruggs 2023).

8 “Each person who has repented for their sins and previous sinful life and confesses faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Savior can be baptized in water. In doing so, they publicly and symbolically demonstrate their surrender to God, their death to their former worldly and sinful ways, and their resurrection with the Lord Jesus Christ for the beginning of a new life with Him, in Him, and through Him” (Balog 2009, 56-57).

and baptism. It is also worth noticing that this document views baptism as a “public” and “symbolic” event. From the research by Eric Maroney, who analyzed the significant trends in conversion among Croatian Baptists between 1970 and 2010, we have insight into the length of time that usually passes between conversion and baptism. According to Maroney, before 1990, nearly two-thirds of Croatian Baptists took more than three years from first hearing the gospel to their conversion. However, during the 1990s, nearly two-thirds of Croatian Baptists converted within three years of first hearing the gospel, and nearly one-third converted the same year that they first heard the gospel. Since the 1990s, the average has been evenly divided above and below the three-year mark, Maroney concludes: “In general, the second half of the conversion timeline has remained steady throughout the four decades. Nearly half of Croatian Baptists are baptized the same year as conversion, and the majority of the remaining individuals are baptized in the first few years following” (Maroney 2016, 74).

Such ideas about baptism that were just presented would probably be puzzling to the disciples who originally received the Great Commission. Even though we do not have a record of the Twelve being baptized by Jesus, the Jewish context of the practice of baptism is very informative: “Baptism was an act of initiation and conversion (see comment on 3:6), so this text suggests that we initiate people into the faith, introducing them to Jesus’ lordship” (Keener 1997, Mt 28:16–20). Also, “[b]ecause baptism was an act of conversion (used for Gentiles converting to Judaism), it means initiating people to the faith” (Keener 2014, 125). The language of “initiation” and “conversion” would mean that baptism should be viewed as a response to the gospel message. Hence, R. T. France (2007, 1115–1116) says about the two participles, “baptizing” and “teaching,” is very informative:

The order in which these two participles occur differs from what has become common practice in subsequent Christian history in that baptism is, in many Christian circles, administered only after a period of “teaching” to those who have already learned. It can become in such circles more a graduation ceremony than an initiation. If the order of Matthew’s participles is meant to be noticed, he is here presenting a different model whereby baptism is the point of enrollment into a process of learning which is never complete; the Christian community is a school of learners at various stages of development rather than divided into the baptized (who have “arrived”) and those who are “not yet ready.”<sup>9</sup>

If we combine what Keener and France say and compare it with the Book of Acts, we will notice that in the Book of Acts, people who responded to the gos-

9 “Very early the church abandoned this practice in favor of a delay in baptism for catechetical instruction that included both doctrine and ethics. In making this move, the post-apostolic church changed the symbolic meaning of baptism from confession of faith to endorsement of moral and intellectual accomplishment” (Umstadd 2018, 6).

pel message did not wait for an additional period of teaching to be baptized.<sup>10</sup> In other words, people *responded* to the gospel message *by* undertaking water baptism.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, if we study NT epistles, we will observe that baptism is not connected to the language of testimony/witness. However, it is embedded in *soteriological* language/terms.

βαπτίζω	βάπτισμα	βαπτισμός
<b>Romans 6:2-3 (NRSV)</b> How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized (βαπτίζω) into Christ Jesus were baptized (βαπτίζω) into his death?	<b>Romans 6:4 (NRSV)</b> Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism (βάπτισμα) into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.	<b>Colossians 2:11-12 (NRSV)</b> In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism (βαπτισμός), you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.
<b>1 Corinthians 12:13 (NRSV)</b> For in the one Spirit we were all baptized (βαπτίζω) into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.	<b>Ephesians 4:4-6 (NRSV)</b> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism (βάπτισμα), one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.	
<b>1 Corinthians 15:29 (NRSV)</b> Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism (βαπτίζω) on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?	<b>1 Peter 3:21 (NRSV)</b> And baptism (βάπτισμα), which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.	
<b>Galatians 3:25-29 (NRSV)</b> But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized (βαπτίζω) into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.		

- 10 "And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned'" (Mk 16:15-16). This text represents strong evidence for an argument that the biblical way to respond and accept the gospel's message is through water baptism and not the sinner's prayer or anything else.
- 11 Acts 2:37-41 – people on the day of Pentecost; Acts 8:5-13 – people in Samaria; Acts 8:36-38 – Ethiopian eunuch; Acts 9:17-19 – Saul; Acts 10:47-48 – Cornelius' household; Acts 16:13-15 – Lydia; Acts 16:27-34 – Philippian jailer; Acts 18:5-8 – people in Corinth; Acts 19:1-5 – disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus.

In Romans 6:3-4, baptism is connected with death to sin and being raised to the newness of life. In 1 Corinthians 12:13, baptism is connected with receiving the Spirit and becoming part of the Body. 1 Corinthians 15:29 is a strange text, but it demonstrates that some people in Corinth received baptism on behalf of the dead. The question is, why would they do that if they thought that baptism does not have soteriological connotations? In Galatians 3:27, being baptized into Christ means being clothed with Christ. In Ephesians 4:5, baptism is on the list with other things that are connected with the adjectives εἷς, μία, and ἓν with the meaning of “one.” Hence, baptism is in the group with terms such as “body,” “Spirit,” hope of calling,” “Lord,” “faith,” and “God and Father of all.” 1 Peter 3:21 is connected with the verb σώζω “to save.” This text is complex to explain,<sup>12</sup> but nevertheless, the text somehow connects baptism with salvation and inner change in a person’s life.<sup>13</sup> Finally, in Colossians 2:12, baptism is connected with spiritual circumcision, that is, putting off the body of sin and being raised into new life.

I am suggesting that the presence of soteriological terms in connection with water baptism results from water baptism being a biblical way of saying “yes” to God. However, by separating water baptism as a way of responding, accepting, and submitting to the gospel message, evangelicals have found themselves in an

12 “The author does not here impart any miraculous instrumentality to the water. Passing through the water to the appointed place was what saved them. The author’s design is not to elaborate how water saved Noah, but rather to set the stage for his next assertion. ‘They were saved through water which is also a pattern for you. Now baptism saves!’ With this clear statement the author has reached the climax of his homily. In his opening section (i 3-12) he carefully articulates the foundations of salvation for the new converts. He then moves to an expansion of this using the model of the Exodus-Covenant to give a sense of identity and destiny to the new converts (i 13-ii 10). Then he merges two strains of thought, Christ the grounds of salvation and Christ the model of Christian conduct, and moves deliberately towards baptism as he continues to enhance the role of Christ (iii 13-22). Then in one succinct story (iii 18-21) the role of Christ reaches its full measure just at the moment that baptism bursts into the thought complex. Baptism summarizes and dramatizes all that he has been saying. Being fully aware of the source of salvation, the one who is the object of faith, the demands to obedience, the challenge of the model for conduct, a convert comes to the moment when he is consciously aware that these are the things appropriate to a right relation to God. This is his salvation. This is the moment when he is baptized, for baptism is ‘a declaration of an appropriate awareness toward God.’ That is the convert’s salvation!” (Brooks 1974, 304). For a good discussion about the meaning of “conscience” in this text, see Willis 2018.

13 “An appeal to God for a clear conscience is another way of saying ‘a request for forgiveness of sins and a new heart’. When God gives a sinner a clear conscience, that person has the assurance that every sin has been forgiven and that he or she stands in a right relationship with God (Heb. 9:14 and 10:22 speak this way about the cleansing of one’s conscience through Christ). To be baptized rightly is to make such an appeal to God: ‘Please, God, as I enter this baptism which will cleanse my body outwardly I am asking you to cleanse my heart inwardly, forgive my sins, make me right before you.’ In this way, baptism is an appropriate symbol for the beginning of the Christian life. Once we understand baptism in this way, we can appreciate why ‘Repent, and be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins’ (Acts 2:38) was an evangelistic command in the early church” (Grudem 1988, 171-172).



awkward position: on the one hand, they introduced some new techniques of responding to the gospel message (such as the sinner's prayer), and on the other hand, baptism is turned into testimonial event – an activity that we never found associated with the baptism in the Bible.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Focusing on the question of how evangelical churches, notably in Croatia, view the role and position of water baptism in the discipleship process served as an opportunity to address and evaluate the theology and practice of evangelicals regarding evangelism, conversion, and discipleship in general. As a result, several key points emerged that need to be emphasized in this conclusion.

First, evangelicals in Croatia should be careful to adopt and keep an old (biblical) definition of discipleship that, at its core, has relationships and not just a method, program, or activities:

Ironically, evangelicals' penchant for methodology has both guaranteed statistical success and undermined spiritual life. "What is destroying Christianity is the marketeering of Christianity," said Houston. But disciple-making is not about replicable, transferable methods, but about the mystery of two walking together. Methods treat discipleship as a problem to be solved, but mentoring treats discipleship as a relationship to be lived (Editorial 1999).

However, focusing on the proper method is not the only problem. The problem is also if and when we focus on programs as a means of making disciples. Programs are good, but *more* programs and activities alone will not create disciples as Jesus envisioned.<sup>15</sup>

14 "For a significant part of evangelical Christianity, so-called 'sinner's prayer' is considered as a moment where a person surrenders himself to Christ (being saved), and water baptism is then 'outside declaration and confirmation of already existing faith'" (Budiselić 2020, 23).

15 Greg Ogden (2003, 42-43) is here on the spot: "The second cause of the low estate of discipleship is that we have tried to make disciples through programs. The scriptural context for growing disciples is through relationships. Jesus called the Twelve to be with him, for through personal association, their lives would be transformed. Proximity produces disciples. The apostle Paul had his Timothy's who were ministry partners, for in this side-by-side ministry, leaders could be trained to carry on after his departure. Disciples are made in 'iron sharpens iron' intentional relationships. In today's church, we have replaced person-centered growth with programs as the means of making disciples... All of these programs can contribute to discipleship development, but they miss the central ingredient in discipleship. Each disciple is a unique individual who grows at a rate peculiar to him or her. Unless disciples receive personal attention so that their particular growth needs are addressed in a way that calls them to die to self and live fully to Christ, a disciple will not be made. Since individual, personal investment is costly and time-intensive, we have put programs in its place.... In other words, programs can make it look like we are growing disciples, but that is more illusion than reality, and we know it."



Second, evangelicals in Croatia have to revise their understanding of “evangelism” and “discipleship.”<sup>16</sup> Evangelism has to do with the proclamation of the gospel. However, Jesus did not separate evangelism from teaching, and in this article, I tried to argue that we should “evangelize as disciples.” Accordingly, discipleship does not begin after conversion but rather prior to it. Based on this, I think that the original Jesus’ disciples would not reserve discipleship only for the believers. After all, they observed how their Master called them and others to follow him, and in that followship, they gradually discover who he truly is and what it means to follow him.<sup>17</sup>

Third, the purpose of evangelism is to make disciples and not “converts,” let alone “church members.” I know that, in theory, most agree with this statement, but in practice, many churches do not follow this approach. The measuring test is this: are we reducing the Great Commission to “salvation” by “accepting Jesus”? If yes, this divorces evangelism from the biblical call to “make disciples who obey” and diminishes the biblical view of salvation and discipleship (cf. Scruggs 2023).

Fourth, evangelicals in Croatia have to revise their view of baptism and restore it to its biblical position. If the gospel message is about Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and second coming, is there any better way to say “yes” to all of that, if not by submitting to baptism?

The changes suggested in this article are not unique to the Croatian context because there are voices in the church and academia worldwide who see the need for this. Moreover, even though our heritage is diverse and rich, our heritage (“I’m doing/believing this because this is how we always...” or “...because this is our tradition...”) should not hinder us from a proper understanding of the biblical truths. After all, we are called to be Jesus’ disciples...not disciples of *anyone* or *anything* else. But, the challenge of change is that “we love what we know.” Additionally, evangelicals in Croatia are living as a significant religious minority, which adds to the challenge of change.

16 “In the Great Commission, Jesus says to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and teach them to obey all that Jesus commanded. Which part of that is making disciples? The going part? The baptizing part? The teaching to obey part? The reality is that evangelism and teaching are among the elements of discipleship. Making disciples involves multiple steps, one of which is evangelism. So rather than trying to determine if we should spend our time making disciples or evangelizing, we can spend our time making disciples which includes evangelism” (Fellowship Church 2014).

17 Matthew Fretwell (2018) significantly says: “Disciple-making was always (and is) about continually making disciples from unbelieving people groups for salvific reconciliation harmony with God and a sanctifying journey through life to exalt Christ (Matt. 28:18–20)” and then he makes this bold statement: “*Therefore, all Christians are disciples, but not all disciples are Christians.*”

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## Uloga krštenja vodom u procesu učenja: prijedlog

### Sažetak

Fokus ovog članka je na tome kako evanđeoske crkve, posebice u Hrvatskoj, općenito gledaju na ulogu i položaj krštenja u vodi u procesu učenja. Međutim, odnos između krštenja i učenja poslužit će kao prilika za istraživanje drugih aspekata procesa učenja, posebice odnos između evangelizacije i učenja. Stoga, u prvom dijelu članka ukratko ćemo raspraviti i ispitati neke ključne elemente

„Velikog poslanja“ kako bismo stekli uvid u poslanje te vidjeli različita tumačenja i razumijevanja tog teksta. Na temelju Evanđelja, drugi dio članka istražuje kako bi Isusovi sljedbenici razumjeli i definirali učenje na temelju svog iskustva s Isusom, i kako bi to iskustvo oblikovalo njihovo razumijevanje Velikog poslanja. Treći dio članka bavi se odnosom (ili bolje rečeno dihotomijom) između „evangelizacije“ i „učeništva“ u svrhu postizanja razumijevanja ovih dviju aktivnosti koje je više u skladu s novozavjetnim učenjem. Posljednji dio članka posvećen je ulozi i položaju krštenja u vodi u procesu učenja. Budući da je svrha ove rasprave procijeniti teologiju i praksu evanđeoskih kršćana u pogledu ispravnog razumijevanja krštenja u vodi i posljedično tome, procesa učenja općenito, predlažu se četiri stvari: 1. Usvajanje definicije učenja koja u svojoj srži ima odnose, a ne metodu, program ili aktivnosti; 2. Revizija razumijevanja odnosa između „evangelizacije“ i „učeništva“; 3. Podsjetnik da je svrha evangelizacije stvaranje „učenika“, a ne „obraćenika“; 4. Obnova biblijskog položaja krštenja u vodi koje bi trebalo predstavljati odgovor osobe, tj. njezin „da“ na poruku evanđelja.