

A BIBLICAL EXAMINATION OF DISCIPLESHIP

BY BRENT DETWILER

The English word "disciple" is a translation of the Greek word *mathētēs*. It is derived from verbs meaning "to learn." In Greek culture it was commonly used as a designation for a philosopher's understudy and occasionally in the sense of an apprentice (Everett F. Harrison, *BDT*, p. 166). A disciple was a learner, pupil, or student. The idea of discipleship always involved a teacher-student relationship. "Physical proximity of the student to his teacher was also implied in the meaning of discipleship, although there are instances when its meaning was extended to include pupils separated from their masters by centuries" (G.F. Hawthorne, *ZPEB*, p. 130) (cf. John 9:28).

The word "disciple" appears 269 times in the King James Version. By contrast the designation "Christian" only occurs three times in the New Testament (i.e. Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). The context of these verses suggests that the title "Christian" originated with pagan unbelievers and not with the Christians themselves. Pagan unbelievers identified Christians as followers of Christ. The label "Christian" implied loyalty and acceptance of Christ as one's master. A disciple then is a Christian and a Christian is a disciple (Acts 11:26). There is no distinction between the two. One cannot be a Christian without being a disciple.

A disciple of Jesus was called to sacrifice unconditionally every aspect of his life (Luke 9:57-62; 14:26, 27, 33) for the duration of his life (John 8:31, 32). To be a disciple meant to be bound to Jesus and to do his will (Matt. 12:46-50) (Colin Brown, *DNTT*, Vol. I, p. 488). "A disciple was not only a pupil, but an adherent; hence they are spoken of as imitators of their teacher." "It denotes one who follows one's teaching," "...indicating thought accompanied by endeavor" (W.E. Vine, *VED*, p. 316).

The term "disciple" appears only in the Gospels and Acts. John the Baptist is said to have had disciples (Mark 2:18; 6:29; Luke 7:18, 19; 11:1; John 1:35-37; 3:25)

as did the Pharisees (Matt. 22:16; Mark 2:18; cf. Rom. 2:17-24). The Pharisees also referred to themselves as disciples of Moses (John 9:28). The word is also used in a secular sense (Matt. 10:24, 25; Luke 6:40).

Jesus primarily uses the word in its narrower sense as a designation for the twelve apostles or disciples (Matt. 10:1; 11:1; 26:20). There is also reference to a larger circle of seventy others (Luke 10:1; cf. Luke 6:13). In a broader sense, however, it is used with reference to all those who are genuine followers of Christ (Matt. 12:49; Luke 6:17; 19:37; John 4:1; 6:60, 61, 66; 8:31).

The apostles were responsible to teach Christ's commands. The disciples were responsible to obey Christ's commands.

In Acts the word is used exclusively with reference to believers in Christ (e.g. Acts 6:1, 2, 6; 9:36). Disciples are considered "the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). Strictly speaking, the word is only used to describe the relationship of a believer to Christ in its Christian context. The reference to Paul having disciples ("his disciples"—Acts 9:25) is best understood to mean those who had been won to Christ as a result of his preaching in Damascus and not as men he was discipling in a one-on-one fashion.

GO MAKE DISCIPLES

Before his ascension into heaven, Jesus gave his "Great Commission" to the eleven apostles. All authority in heaven and on

earth had been given to him subsequent to his death and resurrection (Matt. 25:18). Because of this, he commanded the eleven apostles to make plans to go into all the world (v. 19).

It is critical however, that we understand what Jesus meant when he said, "and make disciples of all the nations" (v. 19). Certainly he was not intending to say that all literal nations would somehow become his disciples. A nation cannot be baptized, which immediately follows in Jesus' command. It also seems out of context to understand Jesus' words as a commission for the apostles to build "discipling relationships" with individuals.

As I understand it, Jesus is commanding the eleven to go into all the world and genuinely convert or evangelize individuals in every people group that existed in his day. The command to "make disciples" then is synonymous with the command to preach the gospel and thereby make "learners" or "adherents" of Christ. In this context making disciples should be equated with the task of evangelism. It is in this sense that Paul is said to have made disciples (Acts 14:21; cf. Matt. 13:52; 27:57) and to have had disciples (Acts 9:25).

DISCIPLESHIP IN ACTION

Does this mean that we are to evangelize only and not give close personal training to Jesus' disciples? Certainly not. Having made disciples of Jesus, the apostles were responsible for baptizing them and for "teaching them to obey everything" that they had been personally commanded by Christ (v. 20). Here we see the responsibility for "discipling" (teaching with a view to character formation) set forth by the Lord. The apostles were to take all they had received from Christ and pass it on to the new disciples. The apostles were responsible to teach Christ's commands. The disciples were responsible to obey Christ's commands.

Jesus' command in Matthew 28:19-20 is relevant today. We, too, are commanded by Christ to make disciples and to teach the disciples we make. This principle of discipleship is normative and found throughout the New Testament. Its practice is a common theme throughout letters to the early Church. Note the following Scriptures found in the New American Standard Bible:

■ *I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I exhort*

you therefore, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church (1 Cor. 4:14-17).

■ *Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you (1 Cor. 11:1, 2).*

■ *And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ (Eph. 4:11-13).*

■ *Brethren, join in following my example and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us (Phil. 3:17).*

■ *The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things (Phil. 4:9).*

■ *And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me (Col. 1:28, 29).*

■ *You know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2:11, 12).*

■ *And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be*

able to teach others also (2 Tim. 2:2).

But you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecution, and suffering... continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them (2 Tim. 3:10, 11, 14).

■ *Older women... teaching what is good, that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be dishonored (Tit. 2:3-5).*

■ *For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food (Heb. 5:12).*

■ See also: John 13:15; Acts 11:26; 20:31; Rom. 6:17; Gal. 4:11, 19, 20; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 1:6, 7; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:4, 6, 7, 9; 1 Tim. 4:12, 15, 16; 2 Tim. 1:13; Tit. 2:7; 2 John 4; 3 John 3, 4.

Close personal training in learning to obey all of Christ's commands was a way of life for the early disciples. So should it be for us today. Making disciples is more than a method locked up in a first-century evangelism campaign. It is God's way for bringing Christians to maturity and thus his way for seeing his kingdom come in the earth. □



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ONE WAY YONGGI CHO MOTIVATES HIS PEOPLE TO GROW

[An important] truth to impart to... leaders is how they may become spiritually mature. It is not only going to happen by reading the Bible and fellowshiping with other believers; the most effective way is for them to become a "father" or "mother" to a new convert. Remember when you had your first child you found that you simply matured almost overnight; you could no longer be only concerned about yourself. Well, this is also true of "spiritual parents." They will find that they will need to study more because someone will be depending upon them for biblical teaching. They will need to pray more to have answers to the never-ending questions of the new convert. There also comes a new freshness and excitement to their own spiritual experience because they will have a vicarious understanding of the new birth all over again.

—Paul Yonggi Cho from *More Than Numbers*. © 1984 by Word, Inc.