

# Discipleship: For Super-Christians Only?<sup>1</sup>

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The word "disciple" occurs 269 times in the New Testament. "Christian" is found three times and was first introduced to refer precisely to the disciples—in a situation where it was no longer possible to regard them as a sect of the Jews (Acts 11:26). The New Testament is a book about disciples, by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus Christ.

But the point is not merely verbal. What is more important is that the kind of life we see in the earliest church is that of a special type of person. All of the assurances and benefits offered to humankind in the gospel evidently presuppose such a life and do not make realistic sense apart from it. The disciple of Jesus is not the deluxe or heavy-duty model of the Christian—especially padded, textured, streamlined, and empowered for the fast lane on the straight and narrow way. He stands on the pages of the New Testament as the first level of basic transportation in the Kingdom of God.

## **UNDISCIPLLED DISCIPLES**

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 entering into or continuing in fellowship of a denomination or local church. Any exception to this claim only serves to highlight its general validity and make the general rule more glaring. So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, discipleship clearly is optional.

That, of course, is no secret. The best of current literature on discipleship either states outright or assumes that the Christian may not be a disciple at all—even after a lifetime as a church member. A widely used book, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*, presents the Christian life on three possible levels: the convert, the disciple, and the worker. There is a process for bringing persons to each level, it states. Evangelizing produces converts, establishing or follow-up produces disciples, and equipping produces workers. Disciples and workers are said to be able to renew the cycle by evangelizing, while only workers can make disciples through follow-up.

The picture of church life presented by this book conforms generally to American Christian practice. But does that model not make discipleship something entirely optional? Clearly it does, just as whether or not the disciple will be a worker is an option. Vast numbers of converts today thus exercise the options permitted by the message they hear: they choose not to become—at least do not choose to become—disciples of Jesus Christ. Churches are filled with "undisciplined disciples," as Jess Moody has called them. Most problems in contemporary churches can be explained by the fact that members have not yet decided to follow Christ.

Little good results from insisting that Christ is also supposed to be 'Lord: to present his lordship as an option leaves it squarely in the category of the white-wall tires and stereo equipment for the new car. You can do without it. And it is—alas!—far from clear what you would do with it. Obedience and training in obedience form no intelligible doctrinal or practical unity with the salvation presented in recent versions of the gospel.

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## **GREAT OMISSIONS FROM THE GREAT COMMISSION**

A different model was instituted in the Great Commission Jesus left the church. The first goal he set for the early church was to use his all-encompassing power and authority to make disciples without regard to ethnic distinctions—from all "nations" (Matt. 28:19). That set aside his earlier directive to go only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:5-6). Having made disciples, these alone were to be baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. With this twofold preparation they were to be taught to treasure and keep "all things whatsoever I have commanded you." The Christian church of the first century resulted from following this plan for church growth—a result hard to improve upon.

But in place of Christ's plan, historical drift has substituted: "Make converts (to a particular faith and practice) and baptize them into church membership." This causes two great omissions from the Great Commission to stand out. Most important, we start by omitting the making of disciples or enrolling people as Christ's students, when we should let all else wait for that. We also omit the step of taking our converts through training that will bring them ever increasingly to do what Jesus directed.

These two great omissions are connected. Not having made our converts disciples, it is impossible for us to teach them how to live as Christ lived and taught. That was not a part of the package, not what they converted to. When confronted with the example and teachings of Christ, the response today is less one of rebellion or rejection than one of puzzlement: How do we relate to these? What have they to do with us?

### **DISCIPLESHIP THEN**

When Jesus walked among humankind there was a certain simplicity to being his disciple. Primarily it meant to go with him, in an attitude of study, obedience, and imitation. There were no correspondence courses. One knew what to do and what it would cost. Simon Peter exclaimed: "Look, we've left everything and followed you!" (Mark 10:28). Family and occupations were deserted for long periods to go with Jesus as he walked from place to place announcing, showing, and explaining the governance of God. Disciples had to be with him to learn how to do what he did.

Imagine doing that today. How would family members, employers, and coworkers react to such abandonment? Probably they would conclude that we did not much care for them, or even for ourselves. Did not Zebedee think this as he watched his two sons desert the family business to keep company with Jesus (Mark 1:20)? Ask any father in a similar situation. So when Jesus observed that one must forsake the dearest things—family, "all that he hath," and "his own life also" (Luke 14)—insofar as that was necessary to accompany him, he stated a simple fact: it was the only possible doorway to discipleship.

### **DISCIPLESHIP NOW**

Though costly, discipleship once had a very clear, straightforward meaning. The mechanics are not the same today. We cannot literally be with him in the same way as his first disciples could. But the priorities and intentions—the heart or inner attitudes—of disciples are forever the same. In the heart of a disciple there is a desire, and there is decision or settled intent. Having come to some understanding of what it means, and thus having "counted up the costs," the disciple of Christ desires above all else to be like him. Thus, "It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher" (Matt. 10:25). And moreover, "After he has been fully trained. He will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40).

Given this desire, usually produced by the lives and words of those already in The Way, there is yet a decision to be made: the decision to devote oneself to becoming like Christ. The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christlike and so dwelling in his "faith and practice," systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end. By these actions, even today, one enrolls in Christ's training becomes his pupil or disciple. There is no other way.

In contrast, the non-disciple, whether inside or outside the church, has something more important to do or undertake than to become like Jesus Christ. He or she has bought a piece of ground, perhaps, or even five yoke of oxen, or has taken a spouse (Luke 14:19). Such lame excuses only reveal that something on that dreary list of reputation, wealth, power, sensual indulgence, or mere distraction and numbness still retains his or her ultimate allegiance. Or if someone has seen through these, he or she may not know the alternative--not know, especially, that it is possible to live under the care and governance of God, working and living with him as Jesus did, seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

A mind cluttered by excuses may make a mystery of discipleship, or it may see it as something to be dreaded. But there is no mystery about desiring and intending to be like someone that is a very common thing. And if we intend to be like Christ, that will be obvious to every thoughtful person around us, as well as to ourselves. Of course, attitudes that define the disciple cannot be realized today by leaving family and business to accompany Jesus on his travels about the countryside. But discipleship can be made concrete by loving our enemies, blessing those who curse us, walking the second mile with an oppressor--in general, living out the gracious inward transformations of faith, hope, and love. Such acts--carried out by the disciplined person with manifest grace, peace, and joy--make discipleship no less tangible and shocking today than were those desertions of long ago. Anyone who will enter into The Way can verify this, and he or she will prove that discipleship is far from dreadful.

### **THE COST OF NONDISCIPLESHIP**

In 1937 Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave the world his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. It was a masterful attack on "easy Christianity" or "cheap grace," but it did not set aside--perhaps it even enforced the view of discipleship as a costly spiritual excess, and only for those especially driven or called to it. It was right to point out that one cannot be a disciple of Christ without forfeiting things normally sought in human life, and that one who pays little in the world's coinage to bear his name has reason to wonder where he or she stands with God. But the cost of non-discipleship is far greater-- even when this life alone is considered--than the price paid to walk with Jesus.

Non-discipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God's overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10). The cross-shaped yoke of Christ is after all an instrument of liberation and power to those who live in it with him and learn the meekness and lowliness of heart that brings rest to the soul.

## **"FOLLOW ME. I'M FOUND!"**

Leo Tolstoy claimed that "Man's whole life is a continual contradiction of what he knows to be his duty. In every department of life he acts in defiant opposition to the dictates of his conscience and his common sense." In our age of bumper-sticker communications some clever entrepreneur has devised a frame for the rear license plate that advises: "Don't follow me. I'm lost." It has had amazingly wide use, possibly because it touches with humor upon the universal failure referred to by Tolstoy. This failure causes a pervasive and profound hopelessness and sense of worthlessness: a sense that I could never stand in my world as a salty, light-giving example, showing people The Way of Life. Jesus' description of savorless salt sadly serves well to characterize how we feel about ourselves: "Good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men" (Matt. 5:13), and not even fit to mollify a manure pile (Luke 14:35).

A common saying expresses the same attitude: "Don't do as I do, do as I say." (More laughs?) Jesus said of certain religious leaders—the scribes and Pharisees—of his day: "All that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds: for they say, and do not do" (Matt. 23:3). But that was no joke, and still isn't. We must ask what he would say of us today. Have we not elevated this practice of the scribes and Pharisees into a first principle of the Christian life? Is that not the effect, whether intended or not, of making discipleship optional?

We are not speaking of perfection, nor of earning God's gift of life. Our concern is only with the manner of entering into that life. While none can merit salvation, all must act if it is to be theirs. By what actions of the heart, what desires and intentions, do we find access to life in Christ? Paul's example instructs us. He could say in one breath both "I am not perfect" (Phil. 3:12), and "Do what I do" (Phil. 4:9). His shortcomings—whatever they were—lay back of him, but he lived forward into the future through his intention to attain to Christ. He was both intent upon being like Christ (Phil. 3:10-14) and confident of upholding grace for his intention. He could thus say to all: "Follow me. I'm found!"

## **LIFE'S GREATEST OPPORTUNITY**

Dr. Rufus Jones has reflected in a recent book upon how little impact the twentieth-century evangelical church has had on societal problems. He attributes the deficiency to a corresponding lack of concern for social justice on the part of conservatives. That, in turn, is traced to reactions against liberal theology, deriving from the fundamentalist/modernist controversy of past decades.

Causal connections in society and history are hard to trace, but I believe this is an inadequate diagnosis. After all, the lack of concern for social justice, where that is evident, itself requires an explanation. And the current position of the church in our world may be better explained by what liberals and conservatives have shared, than by how they differ. For different reasons, and with different emphases, that they have agreed that discipleship to Christ is optional to membership in the Christian church. Thus the very type of life that could change the course of human society—and upon occasion has done so—is excluded from the essential message of the church.

Concerned to enter that life we ask: "Am I a disciple, or only a Christian by current standards?" Examination of our ultimate desires and intentions, reflected in the specific responses and choices that make up our lives, can show whether there are things we hold more important than being like him. If there are, then we are not yet his disciples. Being unwilling to follow him, our claim of trusting him must ring hollow. We could never claim to trust a doctor, teacher, or auto mechanic whose directions we would not follow.

For those who minister, there are yet graver questions: what authority do I have to baptize people who have not been brought to a clear decision to be a disciple of Christ? Dare I tell people as believers without discipleship that they are at peace with God? Where can I find authority for such a message? Perhaps most important: do I as a minister have the faith to undertake the work of disciple making? Is my first aim to make disciples?

Nothing less than life in the steps of Christ is adequate to the human soul or the needs of our world. Any other offer fails to do justice to the drama of human redemption, deprives the hearer of life's greatest opportunity, and abandons this present life to the evil powers of the age. The correct perspective is to see following Christ not only as the necessity it is, but as the fulfillment of the highest human possibilities and as life on the highest plane. It is to see, in Helmut Thielicke's words, that "The Christian stands, not under the dictatorship of a legalistic 'You ought,' but in the magnetic field of Christian freedom, under the empowering of the 'You may.'"