MAKE DISCIPLES

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Introduction

This is a topic upon which so much has been written that I wonder if anything of value can be added. There are 940 books listed at amazon.com under the title “discipleship.” The Navigators ministry has, for twenty years, produced over 140 issues of Discipleship Journal, which has included articles covering every conceivable aspect of discipleship from an evangelical perspective. There were more than 1200 different journal entrees listed on the computer files at the Christian college library in our area on this topic!

However, I guess there is a unique perspective that everyone brings to a subject due to experience, temperament, etc. So I trust, by God’s grace, this paper might be helpful.

I’ve been a Christian for 30 years and a Bible Presbyterian pastor for 26. Early on in my ministry I saw the need to challenge people to a personal commitment to spiritual growth. I was preaching, teaching, Sunday School, etc. but it seemed there was not enough “growth in grace” among those under my care. As a result I came to the conclusion that accelerated Christian growth required something more on the part of the people. I saw that to become more fully conformed to Christ, they needed to make a personal commitment to growth and to follow it up with the “disciplines of discipleship.” My prayer is that what is presented here will motivate all elders, pastors, teachers, parents…anyone responsible for the growth of souls, to be steadfast and fully committed to this task of “discipling.”

Disciples: The Goal

All Christian leaders must have a picture in their minds of the end results of their work. If we see a fully devoted, mature follower of Christ as the end result we won’t be satisfied with church attenders or lukewarm bodies going through the motions. God’s vision for people must be ours.

The last words of Christ to the church provide a framework for the primary work of believers in this era: “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore, make disciples of all the nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Mt. 28:18-20 NKJV)

The main verb in verse 19 is matheteuo — make disciples. The other activities (going, baptizing and teaching) are subordinate. Disciples are the end product of our going (and proclaiming Mk. 15:16) baptizing and teaching. When you’re at the plate at the church picnic softball game, the ultimate goal is to hit the ball (forward!). “With the bat in position, your feet
planted, your eyes on the ball, swinging level hit the ball.” Jesus is saying to us (note: “even to the end of the age”) “Going to the people groups of this world, evangelizing them, baptizing converts, teaching them everything I’ve taught you – make them into true disciples.” Making disciples is the bottom line, the target, the end product of all we do.

The Great Commission is not the last direct word from Christ to the churches, that is found in Revelation 1-3. If a disciple is defined as a dedicated follower, a mature, well grounded, Christ-like believer, then the last word of Christ in Revelation is on the same topic. He encourages and admonishes the churches to purity, maturity and faithfulness (e.g. 2:6, 10, 19, etc.). In other words—make disciples!

Why should Peter “feed His sheep” (Jn. 21:19)? So they will become genuine disciples who have grown up to maturity through the “milk of the word” (I Pt. 2:2; 2 Pt. 3:18). What is the purpose of Christ’s gift of pastor-teachers to the church (Eph. 4:8)? For the building up of the body, for the equipping of the saints to serve so that the church will grow to maturity: “till we all come… to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children” (Eph. 4:11-13). A mature, solid, reproducing follower of Christ is what we should be after! In other words – make disciples!

Are you satisfied with anything less? Then I don’t think you have God’s vision for the people He’s entrusted to you. What is the purpose of your ministry and work? Glorify God corporately? Fine – but how? Everything we do as churches…defend, preach, teach the Scriptures, fellowship, worship, counsel, administer the sacraments, exercise discipline…all of it is to the end of bringing glory to God by producing disciples.

**Disciples: Clarifying the Vision**

If making disciples is the goal, we have to clarify what a disciple looks like. The word disciple (mathetes) is used over 300 times in the Gospels and Acts to describe a follower of Christ. Its basic meaning is a pupil or learner in distinction to the teacher. But the disciple is not merely a student of the master’s teaching but also an adherent, a follower of the teacher. Baker Dictionary of Theology explains disciple “as a term involving too much personal attachment and commitment to be rendered adequately by ‘pupil’”

John the Baptist had his “disciples” who fasted, were austere and ascetic (Mt. 9:14). The Pharisees had their disciples who were super separatists with lists of religious duties and an extensive holiness code (Mt. 23:13). The question is what does a disciple of Christ look like? What are their characteristics?

**Total Commitment**

One of the most striking aspects to Christ’s call to discipleship is the high level of commitment He expected. In Luke 14 Jesus is teaching on the cost of discipleship. He warns the crowds that following Him would be costly (vs. 25). He warns them to “count the cost” (28)
and explains the cost as forsaking all he has. “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” Notice that unless this letting go of relationships and “all that he has” (33) takes place you can’t be a true follower, a disciple of Christ.

Jesus wants true disciples not just people who outwardly look like or hang around Him. As salt can look salty but have lost its savor people can seem to be true followers without this level of commitment (34,35). Jesus often made harsh “extreme” statements like this to make the point that a true disciple must make a total commitment to Him. (e.g., John 6:25-66, “eat my flesh,” “drink my blood”; Lk. 9:59-62…no place to lay my head; “let the dead bury their dead,” etc.).

The oft-repeated requirement of self-denial makes the same point of total commitment. “If anyone desires to come to me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23; Mt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; John 12:25). Self denial is essentially the willingness to let go of all the dreams, ambitions, and plans that you might have formulated as the way to happiness and yield yourself totally to His plans for you. The puritan Thomas Manton writes of the wideness of the word self. It does not only involve our persons “But whatever is ours, so far as it standeth in opposition to God, or cometh in competition with Him. A man and all his lusts, a man and all his relations; a man and all his interests; life, and all the appendages of life, is one aggregate thing which in Scripture is called self.” But in making this call Jesus assures would-be disciples that this 100% commitment to Him is the way to true happiness. “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Lk. 9:24).

This is the same thing presented as the essence of practical holiness in the epistles. “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.” (Ro. 12:1). Alan Nelson writes: “He does not want us to present a sacrifice at the altar; he wants us on the altar” To follow Christ in self-sacrifice is the mark of a true disciple. This “whole souled” commitment is the price of happiness and real joy. We follow Jesus “who for the joy set before Him endured the cross” (He. 12:2 cf. Phil. 2:3-9).

To deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus is to “make Him Lord of your life.” Jesus is referred to as Lord (kurios) throughout the New Testament. This acknowledgement of His Lordship is essential to salvation “that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Ro. 10:19).

Genuine disciples are not part-timers, casual Christians, dabblers in religion but people who are ready to die for Christ. To become a disciple of Christ is to begin to really live. If you don’t have anything to die for, you don’t have anything to live for and in a sense you never really live. This is the first step on the great adventure of real life – total commitment to Christ. It is also the first mark of a true disciple.
Consistent Obedience

Another mark of the true disciple of Christ is obedience to the Master. Jesus is the great Teacher of His followers but this involves more than the accumulation of knowledge, theological and ethical. It involves practicing what Jesus teaches.

In another recorded incident of Jesus weeding out the casual followers He says, “If you abide in My word you are My disciples indeed” (Jn. 8:31-context). Proof of true discipleship, Jesus says, is remaining, continuing, dwelling in His teachings. Remember the disciple making of the Great Commission includes “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.” To make disciples therefore you must teach them and get them “to observe,” and practice what they have been taught.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus made obedience to His teaching the proof of being a “good tree” planted by God (Mt. 7:18-21) and a building “on a rock” that endures (7:24-27). Someone has said “Faith and obedience are bound up in the same bundle. He that obeys God, trusts God, and he that trusts God, obeys God.” (cf. Jms. 2:17). The Pharisees had a lot of knowledge but not much true obedience (Mt. 23:2, 3). Alexander Maclaren writes: “There is nothing more impotent than words which lie dormant in our brains and have no influence on our lives.” A disciple of Christ is a consistent obeyer of His teaching. If we profess to love Him we should then obey Him as the proof of that love “If you love me keep my commandments (Jn. 14:15 cf. 14:23,24; 15:10). If we are His followers we should be like Him in His obedience. “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments” (I Jn. 2:3 cf. 3:24). Because we follow the “Holy One” we should be holy like Him (I Pt. 1:16).

What we obey, of course, is the Word of God, just as Jesus did. Disciples follow and conform to their Master (Mt. 10:23,25). He was the obedient Servant always doing those things that please the Father (Jn. 8:29). His mind and ministry were permeated with Scripture. He came as the fullfiller not the destroyer of the Word (Mt. 5:17-19). He constantly quotes the Word in His teaching ministry (Mt. 4:4; 5:17-20). For Jesus, Scripture (in contradistinction to tradition) was the authoritative standard for faith and practice, theology and ethics (Mt. 15:3-9; 22:29). A true disciple, therefore, must be a student of the Word.

All disciples are learners. Christ’s disciples are learners of His Word. To make disciples we must teach them to observe what’s been commanded. This involves the systematic communication of Biblical truth. The veins of a true disciple run “bibline.” His heart, mind, and soul are saturated with the Word. He is filled with Christ by His Spirit and His Spirit fills the heart saturated with the Word (Eph.5:18-20; cf. Col. 3:16-17).

Disciplined

Discipline is implied in the word “disciple.” Pupils grow and learn through the process of disciplined study, practice and training. Jesus’ disciples are called to a disciplined life. They are expected to exercise their renewed wills to learn and apply Christ’s teaching. This involves
the personal utilization of the “means of grace” (Scripture, prayer, worship, sacraments, fellowship, etc.) on a regular and a consistent basis.

This aspect of discipleship comes out in the similes for the Christian found in Scripture (i.e. soldier, farmer, student, athlete, 2 Tim. 2:3-15). In all of these endeavors discipline is required in order to “obtain the prize” (1 Cor. 9:24-25). Paul urges Timothy to “exercise” himself toward godliness (1 Tim. 4:7). The word used is gymnazo, which means to train vigorously. Godliness, Christ-like, maturity, comes through such training. A form of the word is used in Hebrews 5:14 where mature Christians are described as those “who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” This “discipline of godliness” is expected in the admonitions to “not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin” (Ro. 6:13) and “that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man” (Eph. 4:22). Discipline is certainly implied in the commands to “flee”: fornication, idolatry, the evil desires of youth, and the love of money (1 Cor. 6:18; 10:14; 2 Tim. 2:22; 1 Tim. 6:11). It is also a part of the admonitions to “endeavor” (spoudazo – make effort, be diligent, labor) to: “do what leads to peace,” “keep the unity of the Spirit,” “be found spotless,” etc. (Ro. 14:9; Eph. 4:3; 2 Pet. 1:5; 3:14).

The disciple of Christ is disciplined unto godliness. This is not the self-effort of the unregenerate trying to merit salvation (Gal. 3:3-11). But rather the God given “sound mind” (sophronismos – self-control, moderation); it is the “self-control” that the Spirit produces (2 Tim. 1:7; Gal. 5:23).

Every disciple of Christ lives a disciplined life. He regularly reads, studies, and listens to the Word being preached. He fellowships and worships with the people of God. He’s involved in ministries where his gifts can be exercised. He prays privately and corporately with God’s people. Disciples continue “steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers.” (Acts 2:42).

**Conclusion**

It is obvious from this description of true disciples that there is a progressive aspect to this. In one sense every Christian is a disciple. These qualities of commitment, obedience and discipline are in every believer to some degree. But in another sense “disciples are made not born.” People grow to maturity, they progress in holiness, sanctification is a work in progress. It is the responsibility of pastors, elders, teachers and all those entrusted with the nurture of souls to be facilitating this process by feeding, building and watering (1 Cor. 3:6-10). The questions of how best to do this will have to be answered elsewhere. But from what has been said here I trust you see God’s vision for each person He brings to you. – A Disciple of Christ.

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1 Evangelical Dictionary of Theology. 1984 ed.

2 The Biblical Illustrator. 1975 ed. Vol. 11 [John-I couldn’t find the exact spot where this quote came from.]