
What is Discipleship Part I

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Matthew 28:16-20; Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12

What is discipleship and what is Jesus calling us to in Matthew 28:18-20? Is this a command, or a suggestion; does it mean we are just to evangelize and let people find their faith on their own, or does this mean we are to lead others and teach the precepts of the Scriptures and the character of our Lord? Does it require obedience and action on our part, or are we disciples just by being a Christian and being in a church on Sundays?

This passage at the end of Matthew's Gospel is what is called the "Great Commission." This is also the *great failure* of the church! This is the main call to the church from our Lord and Savior, and is the one thing most churches do not do at all! This is the main reason for a church to exist, yet can you name one church that actually teaches people the basics of the faith and then moves them deeper into the precepts of His love and Word through all of the seasons of life? If discipleship is mostly absent from our churches, then most Christians will not understand how to live out their faith. They will not be able to handle problems, witness, share their faith, or grow effectively spiritually, because no one is modeling, or showing them the way! Some churches do a great job with evangelism, but once the people come in, they are *stored* in the pews. Where is discipleship? What is it? Is the back door of the church as big as the front door?

Being a disciple encompasses more than just asking Christ in, and goes far beyond baptism. Our conversion, our acceptance of Christ as Savior, our election, is the beginning, the entrance, into the faith and Christian life. It is not the only act of being a Christian! It would be like joining a club, but never venturing into the club. Baptism is initiation and public dedication. It is to be the door through which we go in our walk of faith, as is also our profession and testimony of our faith publicly. It does not stop there! It **starts** there!

So, what does the average church do about discipleship? In most churches, people are encouraged to accept Christ or make a profession of faith. Then, they are congratulated, put on the membership role, and then quickly forgotten. Sadly, the Church has forsaken discipleship, and has left its members to figure out these spiritual growth things on their own. In doing so, it causes many to give up on Christianity, while others become confused, calloused, or complacent, or they are swept away by false doctrines and cults because they do not know the difference.

The Church Is Called To Make Disciples

"Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

This is perhaps the chief characteristic that most churches somehow forget. It is also the quintessential aspect and reason the church exists. So, why is it that so few churches actually have disciple making as a primary ministry? For most churches, it is something they think they are already doing when in fact they are not. Saying that going to church on Sunday is discipleship, or providing a couple of token adult Sunday school classes that few attend, is not discipleship. Some churches throw it in as an afterthought, or may offer a class or something related to the subject.

Due to our human, fallen thinking, we desire the right to ourselves more than we desire the life that Christ has for us. It is difficult for the non-Christian to except a Savior when they think they have to give up their rights. It is similarly difficult for the Christian to live a life that is truly surrendered and poured out to the sovereignty of God. Yet, true discipleship cannot begin until we learn one key important aspect of life: there is one God and you are not He! We must learn to yield to the Lordship of our God and not to the desires of our will. When we do this, the discipleship process can begin. However, when we refuse, we will be the strife and conflict that gives Christianity a “black eye.” We become the problem rather than the solution.

Therefore, discipleship as a priority gets lost. We make up excuses saying, *“Well, people will not come; We are Christians already, so we are Disciples already; The Spirit will guide them; That is not what Jesus was saying; He is saying for us to evangelize only; we do not have anybody to lead it; etc...”* Excuses, excuses, excuses, and no response to Christ! What they do not realize is we are not responsible for people coming; we are only responsible for obeying our Lord and doing it! The reason there is no one to lead it is that there is an extreme lack of real disciples in the church; that is, people whose lives are surrendered to Christ and out of gratitude to Him are modeling and teaching Biblical precepts to others. Even the Apostle Paul spent three years being disciplined by Barnabas, and he received his call and was empowered directly from Christ Himself!

Humbleness is characterized by the willingness to grow in Christ, and receive learning and experience growth. Peter tells us we ought to be humble toward one other so that we can know the grace of God and not be in opposition to God. Then secondly, he says, we had better be humble, not only toward one another, but toward God. This is so straightforward. This is so essential to be a blessed church, to be a growing church, not in numbers, but in discipleship!

Check out some passages that tell us discipleship and mentoring are not an option, but a command: Matthew 28:16-20; Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Galatians 6:1-10; Mark 1:35 – 2:12. We must follow out of our obedience and mentor in a multigenerational lifestyle, caring for the total person. This will move us from just playing church, to really *being* a church.

The effective church is mentoring, building relationships, and teaching each of the members by other, caring people, who are being disciplined themselves, who are being taught, encouraged, and led. The death of a church happens when we follow political trends, not the national politics, but the patriarchal personalities that want to control people. In addition, when we have a controlling attitude, we do not allow God to control us, thus, we become empty shells and hollow logs. Being hollow means there is

nothing working within us, there is no Creator of the universe leading and directing our ways, so, we become worthless to the Kingdom of God.

Making disciples takes vision and the understanding of Scripture. It gives the church a purpose to form leaders who grow other leaders in an outgrowth of their growth. The Christian, especially the leader, who disciples and equips others is a person who is living the faith for themselves and setting goals for their personal growth before they set goals for others. Their skills and abilities are growing them to be a better worker because first, they are striving to be a better child of God.

From the character of Christ will come the conduct of Christ, if we chose to follow Him. Then, those values of our daily walk, which drive our behaviors, will, in turn, influence others. You cannot lead where you have not been, or where you do not know the direction to go. This is why discipleship is so essential to the aspect of being a Christian. We are called, not to just visualize discipleship, but to do it; not to just talk about it, but to do it. One cannot just think about dinner and satisfy hunger; the meal has to be prepared, then eaten! The effective church will take Scripture and the call of our Lord seriously, and then implement it into functioning!

Jesus' purpose for His three years of earthly ministry was the discipleship and equipping of the 12 Disciples. This was His drive and where most of His time was spent. He was focused on the teaching of the kingdom of God, teaching men to see beyond their present situation to the life to come. With His teaching, Jesus entrusted His church and people to the care of the people He taught. They were to replicate themselves to others. The objective was that every Believer was an equipper, every member a minister, every Christian involved in the life and gifts of the Body to influence the world.

The Word must touch who we are, and transform the very core of our being. This is the knowledge that leads and transforms. One cannot lead where he does not know the way, and to know the way you must have knowledge. Knowledge comes from experience, and experience comes from discipleship. The will of God is for us to study His Word, which will change our behaviors. A Christian and especially a leader in the church must have the knowledge and experience to put into practice the work that needs to be done. The disciple will be studious so that the Word nourishes him. He must study and apply the Scriptures, not just read it occasionally like a novel. The Word must touch who we are and transform the very core of our being. This is the knowledge that leads and transforms.

So, what are we to do?

God does not ask us to seek converts, He simply asks us to do Discipleship. Discipleship is modeling and teaching Christians the precepts of the Bible—mainly prayer, doctrine, Christian living, and worship. Yes, we are still to evangelize, but that is not our main mission and call! When we evangelize, we must realize that it is the role of the Holy Spirit to bring people into an intimate relationship with God. This is an act of divine intervention and grace. He uses us as the tools, but He is the means! We are to care, and share with others His love and character. We obey and reach, but we cannot lead people anywhere. He is the One who leads!

This leads us to our role, which is to model to the convert Christ-like character, encouraging others to surrender themselves to Jesus Christ (Gal. 2:20-21). However, this is only the beginning! Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith. Surrender is the process in which we grow toward Him and His will and away from our Will. Surrender is making Christ Lord of all of our life. We have to get rid of our perceptions, reckless ideas, faulty thinking, and other such things that are barriers to our growth, so we can make room for Him. Jesus authors our faith, and teaches us how to run the race according to God's will, His glory, His worship, and His purpose. Thus, we gain a deeper intimacy with our Lord as our Commander and Friend, as our God and our King, as our Love, and our reason for being. In His purposes, we find real contentment, joy, and fulfillment.

There are three main areas or principles in discipleship:

- 1. Relationships and Mentoring**
- 2. Teaching**
- 3. Service**

Relationships

We are called to build a network of relationships so we can build one another up in the faith through friendship and mentoring! (fishers of men) Most people are intimidated by discipleship out of ignorance, fear, unawareness, or just not wanting to be bothered out of their "comfort zone." The term, *discipleship*, has been viewed as something only for the spiritually mature, or just for certain people, such as Sunday school teachers and Bible study leaders. What we need to see is Barnabus and Paul, and, later, Paul and Timothy, where the elder, more experienced Christian takes the inexperienced Christian under his wing, and helps him to become a better, deeper, more effective Christian for God's glory. Keep in mind that Paul was highly educated and an experienced leader, and although Barnabus may have not been educated formally as Paul was, or at Paul's level in the world, Barnabus was Paul's superior in the experience and knowledge of the Word. Friendship, knowledge, experience combined into mentoring, and the quality of the relationship are the keys for this spiritual growth to have happened. Discipleship equals friendship with a Christ-centered focus. However, it is very important that we make disciples in His image, not ours!

Teaching

The other main principle in discipleship is teaching. We are all called, as a church, to teach one another--not only the kids in Sunday school, but also all Christians at all ages and levels--how to live the Christian life. The new Christian, (and all Christians for that matter) need sound instructions on how to live the Christian life. We do not learn by magic or osmosis. Although the Spirit will lead, it is still our responsibility to learn and grow, and then to teach others! In most churches, there are some opportunities to be in Bible studies, and even teach. The focus must be to teach the basics first--how to study the Bible, how to pray, how to worship, essential doctrine, etc And, as we grow, how to be a Christian family, how to find God's will, our conduct in the work place, discovering our spiritual gifts, leadership, and so forth. Then, the deeper expressions into the faith can be explored, along with accountability, and so forth.

Service

We are all called to put our faith into practice! We now take the relationships, mentoring, and learning, and carry it out in daily life. This is often expressed in service projects and missions, but that is only a small, although necessary aspect of service. Service is how we live our lives and model His character on a daily basis to those around us! When we are in ministry, we need to realize, *it is not what I do, but whom I can equip*. As we practice by reciprocating what we have learned to others, we will also be built up!

All three of these principles collate and build into each other synergistically. Discipleship can be skewed and people fall away if any of these three principles are let go. We will lose valuable opportunities to share and teach one another if, as Jesus stands at the door and knocks, we are watching TV and ignoring His door. Remember, the focus is never the task in and of itself. Rather, it is the glory and worship of our Lord and the enabling of one another to do and be better at the Christian life. What we learn and do here during our short time on earth will echo throughout the vastness of eternity!

Just as anyone can be a friend, anyone in Christ can disciple. We cannot expect only a select few to take up this call and imperative, and we do not need to be spiritual giants to do the work. We just need to be real in Christ, be willing to learn and grow as one of His disciples, and replicate our knowledge to others. Many people may feel anxious when it comes to reaching out, and it requires a big step of faith that many do not want to make. Therefore, the excuses pile on top and over our responsibility. That is a flaw in our human nature, our sinful nature! If we all just sit in the pew and expect someone else to reach out to others, we are slapping our Lord in the face. When no one reaches out, we are condemning others to feel and be lonely and isolated. We must reach out as a team effort, linking people with introverted personalities and who are reticent at interacting with others, with people who are more extroverted and that do not have this problem.

Questions

1. What does the average church do about discipleship?
2. What does your church do about discipleship?
3. What are the typical excuses Christians give for not being discipled?
4. What are the typical excuses Christians give for not discipling others?
5. What are the typical excuses Churches give for not having a discipleship program or some way to grow people deeper in the faith?
6. What is Jesus calling you and your church to in Matthew 28:18-20?
7. **So, what are we to do about discipleship?**