

A concise look at discipleship and why world evangelization hangs in the balance

by Bill Hull

Discipleship is a coined word; it has been created to describe the existential state of following Jesus. Its most common use is about doing something; getting new believers started, a training program or for special Christians who are more serious than the norm. Most Christians would think of it as a sub-set of Salvation, something you do for a period of time and then you graduate. This common understanding has hurt the church and its mission. It has made discipleship seem like an optional activity for Christians and it has cut off many from discipleship and the result has been the creation of a weak and anemic Church. For the purpose of this article, it would be helpful to hit the restart button and reset discipleship's place in the theological world.

A disciple [mathetes] is a learner, a student of someone, in this case, Jesus. “ Disciple is the primary term used in the Gospels to refer to Jesus’ followers and is a common referent for those known in the early church as believers, Christians, brothers/sisters, those of the way, or saints, although each term focuses upon different aspects of the individual’s relationship with Jesus and others of the faith. The term was used most frequently in this specific sense; at least 320 times in the Gospels and 28 times in Acts.” [i]

A disciple then is a person who answers the call of Christ to follow him and it never ends. [ii] While a person may explain his/her discipleship in terms of a curriculum or a relationship to a more mature believer, the call is extended to them by Christ alone. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, “ No one but Christ himself can make the call to discipleship-the call for discipleship is never for this action or that action-it is always a call for or against Jesus Christ.” [iii]

Becoming a Christian is the same as becoming a disciple. When you decide to believe, following Christ is the natural result. Faith is following; faith is only real in obedience. Faith’s primary property is to act, if there is no action, there is no faith. James made this quite clear in his explanation of the relationship to faith and works. [iv] His point was a simple one, saving faith creates works. Not works that appease God or earn favor with God, but works that he planned for all disciples to engage in from the foundation of the world. [v] The New Testament teaches that discipleship is a natural part of salvation. Discipleship is not a state of being only for the elite, the serious, the special, the clergy, or missionaries. Discipleship is the proof that we have the life of God in us and that we are indeed, Christian. The Gospel includes the call to discipleship, without it there is nothing for the Christ follower to be called to, a Gospel without discipleship creates a passivity that is deadly.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated it well; “ Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.” [vi]

Discipleship requires a relationship with a living Christ. It means daily interaction; a conversation is going on between the teacher and the student. Knowing and doing God's will is more than an abstraction or a paragraph in a theology book, it is something a disciple knows because of intimacy with his leader. It is this reality that lifts discipleship out of the mundane world of filling out curriculum to where it belongs, at the center of the Christian faith and the process of becoming Christ like. [vii] It allows discipleship to become something large, instead of what we have made it, something small. Discipleship to Christ is a life long process. It also is the primary way the Great Commission is to be fulfilled.

The Instructions

Jesus invited his followers to join him when he called them, "Come and See, Come and Follow me, Come and be with me, Remain in me." [viii] He has called every follower for all time when he said, "If anyone would come after me." [ix]

After over three years of living in relationship with his followers, he issued what is commonly called the Great Commission. What did he tell his disciples to do? Make more of the same, to "make disciples" of every people group in the world. It is obvious that the men before him would not be able to complete the mission in their lifetimes, it is clear therefore, that he was addressing his remarks to all who would ever follow him. [x]

There is now a convergence of what a disciple is and what a disciple does. A disciple is a student of Jesus and follows him wherever he is led. A natural part of a disciple's life then is to affect other people around him from his transformed character, which includes behavior. The place where disciples make disciples is a crucial piece of how God plans to transform the world. Jesus tells the story of the wheat and the tares. [xi] The field is where his disciples live; it also is where the people that need Christ reside. There is less a meeting of those who follow Christ and those who need Christ in a church. A church meets less than 5% of normal member's time and the people who need Christ and don't attend are not there 100% of the time. In the local community, Christ's followers and those not following Christ, have multiple encounters daily. Character then becomes the issue, what kind of people are the deployed disciples of Christ? Discipleship as a process is not alone the answer, for many a Christian disciple can be mean, judgmental, and bigoted and give people reasons to run from Christ. Sadly many have been taught and believe that faith means trusting Christ for eternal life, but not to trust him in this life, and it shows. But if there is genuine transformation into Christlikeness from those who have been discipled, then those disciples can truly see people's lives changed for the better. Any meaningful effort to transform society must begin with personal transformation of those who can change culture. This is the reason Jesus chose to work through ordinary men and women who are special because the life of God stirs within them and they must reach out to love others, when they are like Christ, they can't stop themselves.

The evangelization of the world hangs in the balance. The Church in the United States has decided to do many things other than make disciples. Becoming a Christian in a church in the Western Hemisphere has little to do with transformation. We must ask the question, “What does the Gospel we preach naturally lead to?” I am afraid the answer is consumers or users of the Gospel message. A Gospel that centers on being and making disciples is the one that will send well-trained and transformed men and women into the world to establish a Godly presence. When that happens another question that is asked daily by Christians in the workplace can be simply answered, “How do I get Christ into my business?” The answer, “Walk into your place of business and sit down, the kingdom of God has arrived.”

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[i] Michael Wilkins, *Following the Master*, page 38, Zondervan, 1992 Grand Rapids, MI

[ii] Luke 9:23-25

[iii] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, page 202, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2003

[iv] James 2:14-26

[v] Ephesians 2:8-10

[vi] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, page 44

[vii] Luke 6:40

[viii] John 1:35, Mt. 4:19, Mark 3:14, John 15:5

[ix] Luke 9:23

[x] Matthew 28:18-20

[xi] Matthew 13:36-43