

World Missions – The Message of Christ

Personal discipleship as followers of Christ of the gospels

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PERSONAL DISCIPLESHIP AS FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTION The term *disciple* is very widely used in the Christian church environment. Unfortunately it is a term that is not often well defined or explained. The result is that most, if not all people who regularly attend the worship services of their church on Sundays, would probably affirm themselves to be disciples of Jesus Christ if asked whether they were. It has, in other words, become a cliché to a large extent.

It is widely said that, according to official census results, more than 70% of the South African population are Christian. One only has to look at the crime and divorce statistics to realise that something is seriously wrong with this picture. The same can be said of much of the Christian world at large.

AIM The Bible was written in the context of specific cultures. The aim of this article is to

- explain the concept of discipleship in proper Biblical-cultural context in order to create a better understanding of the term *disciple*; and
- to examine the specific expectations of Jesus Christ against the background of His teaching and demands, and His Great Commission.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

Matthew's Gospel, which is the Gospel account to the Hebrews, ends with the Great Commission:

¹⁸And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you..." (Matthew 28:18-20)

It is clear from the text that Jesus did not merely command His followers to make *believers* of all the nations, but to make *disciples*. The implications go much, much farther than moving someone to recite the so-called sinner's prayer and then labelling them *reborn*!

Sheep can only reproduce sheep. In the same way believers will only be able to make believers. **Disciples are what are needed to make disciples in other words, to fulfil the Great Commission!**

First-century discipleship

Definitions

- **DISCIPLE:** The Oxford Dictionary defines a disciple as a follower or pupil of a leader, teacher, philosophy, etc. and specifically any early believer in Christ, especially one of the twelve Apostles (Tulloch, 1995:413). First-century discipleship, however, involved a deep relationship that is not adequately portrayed by this explanation. This special relationship will be understood better as one progresses through this article.
- **SAGE:** A *sage* is a profoundly wise man. In ancient times sages were traditionally regarded as the wisest of their time (Tulloch, 1995: 1356). The term *guru* that is perhaps better known in modern times reflects a similar meaning.
- **TALMUD and MISHNAH:** *Talmud* is the accumulated oral traditions of theological strivings inside the Jewish community through some centuries, now found in written form. (It was written down between the third and sixth centuries). The *Mishnah* is the first part of the Talmud and is a systemised collection of the oral law of the Old Testament, as well as of the political and civil laws of Judaism. *Mishnah* means "repeated study". (Kjeilen, 1996-2003)

A sage's disciple

The Hebrew community of Jesus' time held the honouring of one's father and mother in very high regard. However, leaving home to study *Torah* (the first five books of the Bible) under a sage's teaching and guidance was regarded as equally important.

Being a sage's disciple in first century Israel often meant leaving one's home and friends to travel the country under austere conditions. It also required a **total commitment**. Consequently a prospective disciple had to be sure of his priorities before making the commitment (Bivin, 2002:1).

Among the hardships a disciple could face was being away from his wife and children. Although disciples were commonly single men, many married men with children also became disciples of sages. According to the Mishnah a married man needed the permission of his wife only if he intended to leave home for longer than thirty days to study with a sage (Bivin, 2002:2). The implication that the man did not need his wife's permission for periods of less than thirty days illustrates in what high esteem the sages and their role in society were held!

A special relationship

Bivin (2002:2-3) states the relationship that developed between the sage and disciple was of such intimacy that the sage became more than a father and in the eyes of the community was to be honoured above the disciple's own father. This special relationship can be seen in the following passages from the Mishnah:

"When one is searching for the lost property both of his father and of his teacher, his teacher's loss takes precedence over that of his father since his father brought him into the life of this world, whereas his teacher, who taught him wisdom [i.e. Torah], has brought him into the life of the World to Come. But if his father is no less a scholar than his teacher, then his father's loss takes precedence..."

If his father and teacher are in captivity, he must first ransom his teacher, and only afterwards his father – unless his father is himself a scholar and then he must first ransom his father". (Bava Metsi'a 2:11, quoted by Bivin, 1995:3).

The above passages illustrate the tremendous love and respect that disciples and the community at large had for the sages of Biblical Israel. To the uninformed (western) mind, because there is so little understanding of the special relationship between the sages and their disciples, it would certainly seem shocking that anyone could ransom his teacher before his own father

The teaching and expectations of Jesus Christ

Total commitment

"¹⁸And when Jesus saw great multitudes about Him, He gave a command to depart to the other side. ¹⁹Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, 'Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.' ²⁰And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.' ²¹Then another of His disciples said to Him, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father.' ²³²But Jesus said to him, 'Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead.'" (Matthew 8:18-22)

"⁶¹And another also said, 'Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.' ⁶²But Jesus said to him, 'No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.'" (Luke 9:61, 62)

To the uninformed these statements by Jesus may seem cruel. However, it would have been regarded as quite reasonable and normal to Jesus' first-century contemporaries. This is illustrated by the reaction of others in Mark 1:17 and 18:

"¹⁷Then Jesus said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.' ¹⁸They immediately left their nets and followed Him."

To love Jesus above all

Jesus made it clear that He expected to come first in the lives of all who would be His disciples:

"²⁶If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, he cannot be My disciple. ²⁷And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple". (Luke 14:26, 27)

- In this context the word *hate* (Greek: *miseo*) does not carry the usual malicious meaning it normally has in English usage. It declares the relative preference for one thing over another (Vine's Dictionary). In this sense and within the specific context it should be interpreted to mean, "love less" or "put in second place". This is similar to the meaning that is found in, for example, Deuteronomy 21:15, where the context shows that the one wife is second in affection and not truly hated in the English sense of the word:

"If a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved (hated),..."

- What Jesus was therefore saying, was that anyone who did not love Him more than his own family or even his own self, could not be his disciple (Bivin, 1995:2).

The rules of Jesus' kingdom

"¹And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. ²Then He opened His mouth and taught them". (Matthew 5:1, 2)

This teaching from Jesus came in the early period of His ministry and is the longest piece of teaching by Him recorded in the gospels. It took place at a time when He was gathering disciples. The Scripture in this instance show that while there were multitudes of people present, it was to His disciples specifically that Jesus addressed this teaching, which is known as the sermon on the mount.

In the sermon on the mount Jesus described the rules of the kingdom life. He was clearly laying down these rules for all those who would in future declare that they have the kingdom. **It is important, however, to note that the teaching was addressed to His disciples and not to the multitudes.**

Throughout His ministry Jesus was preparing the group of disciples who, after His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, would become the foundation layers and builders of His church. They could not fulfil this calling if they themselves were not able or willing to follow these rules for a life that would later be termed to be "in Christ".

Servant leadership

When the other ten close disciples (Jesus' inner circle) overheard James and John asking Jesus to let them sit at His right and left in His glory, they became indignant. And Jesus called them all together and taught them the basic lesson of the servant leadership He came to equip His followers with for all time:

"⁴²... You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. ⁴⁴And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many". (Mark 10:42-45)

Just as He came to serve, Jesus clearly held the same expectation of all who would be His disciples, during His earthly life and the time to come.

Sacrifice of self

The Bible is to a considerable extent, an account of sacrifice. Hebrews 11 is known as the faith-chapter. Once again it gives prominence to the sacrifice of self, for example:

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, ..." (Hebrews 11:17)

Andrew Murray shows that, before Isaac's birth Abraham had nothing to lean upon but the promise. After it he was in danger of leaning on Isaac: therefore, Isaac had to be given up. All gifts of God received in faith may become our trust, and must be given up to Him in a higher faith (1993:461-472).

This expectation is a parallel to the one Jesus proclaimed in Luke 14:26 & 27. For the true disciple it requires a continual self-search and sacrifice wherever it becomes necessary, as even a gift from God may become a hindrance when the disciple begins to rely more on the gift than on the Giver. The message is clear, to be a disciple of Jesus, He must be one's all in all.

Conclusion

A lack of knowledge

The author of this article is 57 years old. He has attended church throughout his life beginning school in 1952 and has served as a deacon and elder in several congregations in South Africa. The term *disciple* has been encountered in church preaching and literature throughout all the years and accepted within the superficial definition given by the Oxford Dictionary.

As the author came across the explanation provided by a Messianic Jewish website on the internet while searching for information to use in a sermon, a whole new perspective opened up and with it a better understanding of important parts of Scripture.

The question now remains: where is the church at large in its knowledge of what discipleship truly means in its Biblical sense? How extensive is this apparent lack of knowledge and how does it affect the message of Christ in the missions effort? Videos such as Go-Tell Ministries' *Gods Of The New Age* show in graphic detail how fanatical the disciples of modern-day gurus become in their commitment and self-sacrifice. The same can be said of the fanatical factions of Islam that are currently terrorising the world. Could the children of the Light, perhaps learn from the children of the darkness in this regard? (Luke 16:8)

First things first

The fact that the church apparently has missed the true meaning of discipleship over a very long time may have been responsible for the ease with which theologians and their followers today are questioning the infallibility of Scripture. The church has simply been bringing an "easy and comfortable message" instead of the message of Christ and the fruit has been a very superficial Christianity.

It is clearly time to put first things first again. To this end, the church at large and its many Bible schools and seminaries will have to focus once again on what Christ meant when He called people disciples, and to make it a primary objective to make disciples instead of believers. This is especially true of those who find themselves in the five-fold ministry or are preparing for such ministry.

Perhaps then, the church can become the nations' conscience again.

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