

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DISCIPLESHIP

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I want to begin by asking what I consider to be a very important question in the area of discipleship. "What do you consider to be the primary function of us as believers and that of the Church; to go and make disciples in answer to the call of the Great Commission in Matthew 28, or first become a disciple ourselves ?" By the term 'disciple' I do not mean becoming a believer, a Christian, but becoming a disciple (follower) of Jesus Christ, because as we shall see, I believe there is a difference in becoming a believer and becoming a disciple.

This is a very challenge question but I have concluded my own personal answer to it is; the primary function of myself as a believer is to become a true disciple of Jesus Christ. If that is true, then we need to define what we mean by the term discipleship where the Christian and the Church are concerned.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian, who was imprisoned for his faith, and eventually killed for his stand, declared "Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ." and his reasoning behind that statement is to suggest that without discipleship Christianity doesn't exist because following Jesus activates the Christian faith.

Patrick Morley "I surrender" "The churches biggest problem is a misconception that we can add Christ to our lives, but not subtract sin. It is a change in belief without a change in behavior, it is revival without reformation and repentance."

We have understand however, that Biblical Discipleship is only achieved when we become a true follower of Jesus Christ and then see as my mission in this world is that of making disciples.

Oswald Chambers said: "Our work as His disciples is to disciple lives until they are wholly yielded to God. One life wholly devoted to God is of more value to God than one hundred lives simply awakened by His Spirit." He is suggesting in that statement, that one true follower of Jesus Christ is of more value that a hundred people who simply believe in Him.

Unfortunately non-discipleship 'Christianity' dominates much of the modern day church and much of contemporary Christianity thinking, allowing Christians and the Church to assimilate themselves into the culture and morality of its day. Without discipleship, in such a situation, the church loses its power and authority.

So what is discipleship?

Dallas Willard in his speech at the Spiritual Formation Forum in LA said; "Discipleship is the relationship I stand into Jesus Christ in order that I might take on his character." Discipleship means that I am learning to live my life in this world as though I were Jesus. In other words we can't truly follow Christ without desiring to become like Him.

So it is important in our understanding of discipleship to accept that the primary function of faith is to follow Christ. This is certainly what Jesus believed and taught - faith means to follow. Listen to the words of Luke 9 v23 -25 "Then he said to them all "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"

From that passage we understand that Biblical discipleship involves all of me for all time. It isn't a program or an event; it is a way of life. It's not for a limited time, but for our while life. Discipleship isn't for beginners alone; it's for all believers for every day of their life. Discipleship isn't just one of the things the church does, it is what the Church does.

"Discipleship, said Oswald Chambers, means a personal passionate devotion to a Person, Our Lord Jesus Christ, it is based on absolute devotion to Him, not an adherence to a belief or creed."

So therefore, discipleship ranks as God's top priority because Jesus practiced it and commanded us to become disciples as well. Later through the Great Commission he commanded his eleven disciples (Matthew 28 v16) to GO and make disciples. When He said in that same passage "All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to

me" v18 He was revealing to them what He saw as their top priority was to first be disciples and then to make disciples. So a commitment to be and make disciples must be the central act of every disciple and every Church.

But how is that possible? TRANSFORMATION.

A transformed people can change the world. It happened through the early Church and it can happen today. The most attractive thing about those early followers of Jesus was not the message they preached but that they were like Jesus. Acts 4 v 13 "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."

William Law: "Christianity is not a school for the teaching of moral virtue, the polishing of our manners, or forming us to live a life of this world with decency and gentility. It is deeper and divine in its designs, and much nobler in its ends. It implies an entire change of life, a dedication of ourselves, our souls, our bodies unto God in the strictest and highest sense of the words."

Discipleship occurs when a transformed person radiates Christ to those around him. It happens when people so deeply experience God's love that they can do nothing other than affect those around them.

The heart of being a disciple involves living in intimate union and daily contact with Christ, such a contact transforms us.

So to be totally transformed to the likeness of Jesus that Paul speaks of in Romans 8 v29 means that I must first be totally surrendered to Him. Paul develops this thought in Romans when he said in 12 v1/2 Therefore I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. "

Transformation is the outcome of total surrender to God and total surrender to God is the essence of discipleship. Participation in fulfilling the Great Commission does not require great learning or ability but it does require regeneration - being a transformed person. Only the indwelling of God in a disciple enables him to answer the call to follow.

Oswald Chambers: "You cannot make disciples unless you are a disciple yourself."

The passion required to bring people to know Jesus Christ comes from my own personal passion of knowing Him; a passion itself that comes from being transformed by His work within where as Paul said, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever increasing glory which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." 2 Corinthians 3 v18.

According to Matthew 28 two acts of submission flow out of this transformation.

a. To be baptized.

What is baptized, it is a public declaration and an outward demonstration that I have decided to follow Jesus. Being baptized in the name of the Trinity the follower was declaring that he was following God in His fullness.

In the 21st century we do not face the challenges that those early followers of Jesus faced by such a public declaration. They became marked men and women when they publicly declared their allegiance to Christ. For Christianity to flourish disciples must start out public and remain public.

b. To obey.

To obey everything Christ commanded them. Jesus commanded 212 things summed up in three statements:

- a. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.**
- b. Love your neighbor as yourself.**
- c. Love your enemies.**

It is out of this experience that the command to GO is given. Disciples are missional people, transforming lives through their transformed lives. When you look at the Great Commission in Matthew 28 we are commanded as transformed people to do three things:

- a. Deliverance.**
"..go and make disciples...baptizing them..."
- b. Development.**
"..teaching them to obey.."
- c. Deployment.**
"..go..."
Acts 1 v8 "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses.."

C.T. Studd "The Great Commission is not an option to be considered but a command to be obeyed."

Lets return to the discovery of the Biblical Foundation of Discipleship. Discipleship was not a new thought or trend in Jesus day. There are many pre-Christian examples, in the Greek philosophy and Jewish history; many of the prophets had their disciples who sat at their feet to learn from them. For example, Isaiah had a group of disciples as stated in Isaiah 8 v9. In the time of Christ, there were many schools of religious thought that had their 'learners'; there were many individuals like John the Baptist who had their disciples. When you move over into the history of the Christian Church you will discover then as now that there are many who were committed to a school of thought or to an

individual. Many of the early church father's had their disciples who were basically there to learn from the hand of the master.

It was Jesus however who introduced a new thought where discipleship was concerned. A disciple is one who is a totally committed follower rather than simply a learner. He issued the call for men to follow Him, like the original twelve, or again, like the seventy two who were appointed to go ahead of Him. He issued the call and those to whom He issued that call were certainly unique.

a. Unique because of who he chose.

Ordinary people from the every day walks of life.

b. Unique in how they related to others.

For example Jesus criticism of the Pharisee's in comparison with his own disciples gives us an understanding of this.

"They love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have men call them 'Rabbi'. But you are not to be called Rabbi for you have only one Master and you all are brothers...the greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. " Matthew 23 v7 - 12.

c. Unique in definition.

Term disciple meant 'learner', for Jesus the term meant follower and in that term there were certain requirements. This is why the statement in Luke 9 v23 is so challenging.

Luke 9 v23 "Then he said to them all; 'If anyone would come after me (other translations, 'follow me') he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

Let me take this verse to define the Biblical Call to Discipleship. Here we have seen the foundation of discipleship clearly stated and placed before us.

Firstly Jesus tells us that true discipleship has:

A Sense of Urgency.

"If anyone WOULD come after me..."

Those early disciples were invited by Jesus to "Come, follow me..." Matthew 4 v19. Out from that invitation they discovered a divine imperative; "...At once they left their nets and followed him." Did they understand what it meant, what was involved, where it was going to take them and what was going to happen to them? I don't think so but I believe from the call they sense a divine urgency that they could not refuse.

That sense of urgency is emphasized here in Luke 9. "If anyone would.." I have mentioned in some translations the term "come after me" is interpreted "if anyone would follow me.." It is as I said earlier - a faith that is much deeper than believing it is a faith that commits to following.

Michael Wilkins in his book on discipleship said; "Faith goes much deeper than just believing that Jesus is the Christ; the proof of faith is following him."

So if Jesus calls us to follow Him, He must be our leader... before we move away from that thought just consider the first two words of Jesus invitation "If anyone..." If leaves room for doubt, for options if you will. Jesus is saying, I am not demanding that you follow me I am inviting you, I am not commanding that you follow me, I am giving you a choice but be aware if you do choose to follow me this is what is involved.

Oswald Chambers: "Our Lord never insists on obedience, He tells us very emphatically what we ought to do, but He never takes means to make us do it. I must obey Him, and when I do obey Him I fulfill my spiritual destiny."

So that brings us to the second point of true discipleship. It is not only a sense of urgency but there is:

A Sense of Sacrifice.

"..he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me.."

Discipleship makes demands, as I have already said, it requires all of me. So what does this mean?

a. He must deny himself.

**There is a sense of the imperative here - no options, "He must.."
Does that mean giving up every dream, aspiration desire; does it mean following a code of conduct, a life based upon a list of do's and don'ts?**

For me the greatest denial is giving up control; handing over the right to my future, my decisions, my plans. I decide that Jesus will lead and I will follow. That is the hardest thing of all and possibly the greatest is denial.

The call of Jesus to the twelve was to leave all and follow Him; for them it was leaving the familiar, their family, their future; there is the essence of discipleship; it is total commitment.

b. Take up the cross.

This is a term often misunderstood: does it mean that we have to expect tragedy, that we have to die ? It could, but I think the meaning is far greater than that. Certainly a disciple has to die to self. Galatians 2 v20 "I have been crucified by faith and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Another sense of taking up the cross is identification. I think that this is Paul's thought in Philippians 3 when he shares with us that "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" Philippians 3 v10. He had previously said; "I consider everything loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." v8

c. Follow me.

We have already stated that the essence of discipleship is following; following Jesus speaks of a life style transformation. Paul in Romans 12 v1/2 inviting us to surrender everything to God, inviting us to transformation suggests that this is the way. end of verse 2 "..to be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.

So out from this obedience, this following, we are transformed to be more and more like Jesus.

But what does this transformation in the sense of following Jesus as a disciple look like ?

1. A transformed mind.

Deals with my beliefs

- the original thought of a disciple was that of learner; following to learn from the master. There is a sense in which my following Jesus will mean I will learn from him. The great example of this is the Sermon on Mount - who was that addressed to ? Matthew 5 v1/2 "His disciples came to him and He began to teach them...."

2. A transformed character.

Deals with lifestyle.

Paul, tells us in Philippians 2 v4 "Your attitude should be that of Christ Jesus."

As a follower of Jesus Christ, I will become like the one I am following; the commitment I make in denying myself and following him will bring about a lifestyle change. Priorities change, habits change, I change.

3. A transformed service.

Deals with service and ministry.

When I understand that in following Jesus my ministry is all

about Him, it will revolution my ministry. Jesus said "I came not to be served but to serve.." Matthew 20 v28. Transformation develops a servants heart in us. When Paul tells us that we should have the same attitude as Jesus (Philippians 2 v5) he went on to say "(he) made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.

4. A transformed influence.

Deals with the impact.

The impact I make on others.

Those early followers of Jesus made an impact on other firstly by the lives they lived not by the message they preached. The impact of a godly life is the outcome of being a disciple. Being a disciple develops that godly character so that when people see me they see Jesus.

Philippians 2 v5 - 11 gives us a glimpse of what that will mean.

Paul speaks of:

Humility.

"he humbled himself."

Submission.

"he made himself nothing"

Obedience.

"he became obedient."

Sacrifice.

"to death, even death on a cross."

So in conclusion I suggest to you that the Biblical Foundation of Discipleship lays down the foundation of a radical commitment as the essence of following Christ. We have seen that in the key verse of Luke 9 v23, we can see it in the words of Jesus later on in Luke 14 v23 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sister, yes even his own life, he cannot be my disciple...look at v33 "In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."

At the end of Luke 9 there is a lesson of discipleship through those that wanted to follow Jesus, become a disciple, but had their own time frame, agenda, understanding. The first didn't understand what Jesus was inviting him to, the second didn't understand the priority above all else, and finally the third didn't understand that nothing and no one should be allowed to stand in the way of my following Jesus.

Oswald Chambers: " Our Lord implies that the only men and women He will use in His building enterprises are those who love Him personally, passionately and devotedly beyond any of the closest ties on earth."

So what is the greatest priority for us as believers and as a Church body; to go and make disciples or first become a disciple. Discipleship is my number one priority because until I am a disciple and I never lead someone else into the experience of become a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

Ill: Converge Magazine.

"Today I'm 25 years old and no longer call myself a Christian but a follower of Christ. Each day I strive to better understand what it means to reflect Christ, to show His love and spread His message rather than doing church. Church isn't a building or a high tech well choreographed service, it is a body of believers who together strive to walk in the footsteps of the Master and Creator who died for an ugly, broken and lost world."