

Section 1

Focus on Your Current Discipleship Strategy

What Is Your Understanding of Biblical Discipleship?

Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you your life.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer

When you hear the word *discipleship*, what thoughts come to your mind? Like other words, it may have lost the significance of its original meaning. In your church do believers tend to think of discipleship as knowing facts about Jesus or following Jesus in a personal, dependent, obedient relationship? Biblically, discipleship is not a program but a process of becoming Christlike and being zealous to see others become disciples also.

The Gospels and the Book of Acts include 260 references to the word *disciple*. Every time the word is used, it refers to a declared relationship with Jesus Christ, not a level of spiritual or religious achievement. Becoming a Christian, in New Testament understanding, was the same as becoming a disciple of Jesus. The word *disciple* in the New Testament, then, refers primarily to any Christian, not to a subdivision of the Christian community. According to Clarence Drummond, a Georgia pastor, to be a Christian is to be a disciple.¹

Scripture teaches three stages in a Christian's life.

1. *Justification*. God initiates justification to bring a person into right standing with Him. The person becomes justified in God's sight (see Rom. 5:1) by confessing and repenting of his sin and asking God to atone for it through the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Inherent in the person's declaration of need for God to redeem him from the penalty of sin is also a profession of his desire to follow Jesus as the Lord of his life. This profession begins the second stage.
2. *Sanctification*. This stage describes a believer's journey of faith from justification to the end of his earthly life. Sanctification is the process of becoming mature or more Christlike in one's faith. God wants Christians to learn how to live as He wants them to live (see Phil. 2:12).
3. *Glorification*. One day when a believer's earthly life is over, he will be glorified, becoming like Jesus (see 1 John 3:2). The process of discipleship will then be complete (see Phil. 1:6).

Christian discipleship is a lifelong journey of obedience to Christ that spiritually transforms a person's values and behavior and results in ministry in one's home, church, and the world. Dallas Willard, author, professor, and outspoken follower of Christ, said, "We progressively learn to lead our lives as he would if he were we."²

After someone becomes a Christian, becoming like Jesus in character and being obedient to Him should be the main objectives in life (see Gal. 5:22-23). John the apostle wrote, "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' without keeping His commands, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly in him the love of God is perfected.

This is how we know we are in Him: the one who says he remains in Him should walk just as He walked” (1 John 2:4-6).³ The Christian life ought to be more distinctive than any other type of life.

Jesus Defined *Discipleship*

Luke 14 records an encounter Jesus had with a crowd of people who were following Him. Perhaps this passage is the most definitive and clearest of Jesus’ teachings about discipleship.

Now great crowds were traveling with Him. So He turned and said to them: “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, and even his own life—he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

“For which of you, wanting to build a tower, doesn’t first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, after he has laid the foundation and cannot finish it, all the onlookers will begin to make fun of him, saying, ‘This man started to build and wasn’t able to finish.’

“Or what king, going to war against another king, will not first sit down and decide if he is able with 10,000 to oppose the one who comes against him with 20,000? If not, while the other is still far off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. In the same way, therefore, every one of you who does not say good-bye to all his possessions cannot be My disciple.

“Now, salt is good, but if salt should lose its taste, how will it be made salty? It isn’t fit for the soil or for the manure pile; they throw it out. Anyone who has ears to hear should listen!” (Luke 14:25-35).

Jesus stated at least four conditions for becoming His disciple:

1. Jesus talked about the priority of a relationship with Him.
2. Jesus discussed having the right purpose.
3. Jesus told prospective disciples that their commitment must be long-term.
4. Jesus stated that disciples must be willing to give up material possessions.

Let’s look at each of these conditions and make application for followers of Jesus today.

Discipleship Is Rooted in Relationship

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, and even his own life—he cannot be My disciple (Luke 14:26).

Jesus used strange language to describe the priority of a relationship with Him. Identifying the most intimate of human relationships, He told would-be followers they must hate those people if they were to be His disciples. What did Jesus mean by that? It would be inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture if Jesus meant for His followers to despise their families. Jesus used the word *hate* to indicate a lesser degree of devotion. Disciples of Jesus must love Him more than they love any other person, including their immediate families. Disciples’ love must be a passionate love that reveals itself in daily life. It is the kind of love that enables disciples to meet the other requirements of following Jesus.

How do we grow in our love for Christ so that it becomes passionate? That type of love is born from time spent together. Jesus modeled for us the intimacy He had with the Father while on earth by making time to be alone with Him. His days were full; yet time with His Father was the focal point of His life each day. For us, it means that our daily schedules will be centered on both planned and spontaneous times of prayer, meditation, and Bible study.

Time with God results in changed thinking and changed behavior. Jesus said His disciples were to be salt and light. Salt and light make a difference when they are applied. Disciples of Jesus are to be distinctive in the way they live. When circumstances are at their worst, Christians ought to be at their best. There is no substitute for time intentionally spent with Jesus to develop intimacy with Him as well as passion for Him.

Discipleship Expresses Itself in Purpose

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple (Luke 14:27).

Jesus used this illustration before He experienced His physical death by being crucified on a cross, but He was aware that the Romans used the cross as a means of execution. He was also aware that the cross would be the means of His death in the near future. The cross for Jesus was the means for Him to accomplish the purpose for which He had been born. The purpose of His incarnation was to redeem humankind—to make possible the restoration of a relationship between God and His human creation. Although Jesus modeled such a life and taught His followers how to live in such a relationship, His overarching purpose was to redeem humankind by satisfying the penalty for rebellion against God.

The cross means the same thing for us today. It symbolizes our purpose as disciples of Jesus. Our purpose is not to die for humankind as Jesus did but to die to a self-centered agenda and live to lead people into right relationships with their Heavenly Father. No matter what our livelihood is, our purpose as a disciple of Jesus is to help people know God and to live in fellowship with Him through Christ. Christian disciples should be eager to share their faith experiences with others.

This discipline of the Christian life is perhaps the most difficult because it speaks to the core issue of lordship. We may be willing to do any number of things for Christ, even to sacrifice a great deal, but we want to do it on our own terms. When His purpose becomes our purpose, it means we are also willing to forgo personal freedoms to carry out God's purpose for our lives (see John 3:30).

The Call to Follow Jesus Is Lifelong

Which of you, wanting to build a tower, doesn't first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, after he has laid the foundation and cannot finish it, all the onlookers will begin to make fun of him, saying, "This man started to build and wasn't able to finish."

Or what king, going to war against another king, will not first sit down and decide if he is able with 10,000 to oppose the one who comes against him with 20,000? If not, while the other is still far off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace (Luke 14:28-32).

Jesus' call to follow Him is never meant for an interim period of time. It is always an invitation for the person to commit the whole of life for all of life. Often someone fails to maintain the intimacy with Jesus that enables the commitment to continue. As Jesus said, we can lose our saltiness (see Luke 14:34-35). Spiritual sensitivity can keep us from becoming ineffective in our faith practice.

We may be willing to follow Jesus, but we want to choose the conditions for doing so. We have secularized our faith, carving out specific times and places to practice it. It is far too dangerous to allow Jesus to set the parameters. He will ask for more of us and for a much longer period of time than what we have in mind. In Luke 14 Jesus made it clear that He wanted prospective disciples not to make an emotional decision to follow Him that they might renounce after giving it thought. Rather, He wanted them first to consider the cost, then choose to follow Him even though they knew the cost was great and would extend for the rest of their earthly lives.

Following Jesus Is More Important than Material Gain

Every one of you who does not say good-bye to all his possessions cannot be My disciple (Luke 14:33).

If we have made a relationship with Jesus a priority and have committed to His purpose for a lifetime, we must let go of material wealth. Jesus declared that nothing in life can take the place designed for Him. Things can become gods as easily as people can. If Jesus does not allow people to assume God's place, neither will He allow material possessions to (see Matt. 6:24).

Scripture teaches that God is the owner of all possessions (see Ps. 24:1) and that humankind is only a steward charged with their care. Even the church's teaching on tithing is sometimes misunderstood. Some believe that if they give a tithe of their income back to God, the remaining 90 percent is available to be used any way they choose. The reality is that all belongs to God, and a Christian is responsible for using all 100 percent in a way that glorifies God. The tithe is just the prompter.

Biblical discipleship involves following Jesus rather than adhering to a moral code. Although the task seems daunting, it is life at its very finest. Jesus said, "A thief comes only to steal and to kill and to destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10:10). Jesus is not just the giver of abundant life. He desires that all people experience it (see 2 Pet. 3:9). However, it is found only in following Him. The good news is that Jesus enables even the following if someone in faith chooses to do so. That is the work of the Holy Spirit, who comes to indwell the believer at the moment of expressed trust in Jesus' atoning death for him. God Himself is at work in the believer's life to manifest His grace and goodness (see Phil. 2:13). He prompts someone and even arranges circumstances to enable the person to do what He desires, but He never forces or manipulates the person. He always allows the individual to make the decision to follow Him.

Foundational Tenets of Christian Discipleship

Listed below are some core foundations of biblical discipleship. Though not exhaustive, this list highlights what Scripture teaches about what it means to be a follower of Christ.

1. Christian discipleship is the ongoing transformation of an individual's becoming like Jesus in character and purpose as he grows in intimacy with Him (see Matt. 5:48; Eph. 4:13-15; Phil. 2:5).
2. Christian discipleship addresses every dimension of life. It is concerned not only with doing the right thing in every circumstance but also with doing the right thing for the right reason (see Phil. 1:27).
3. Christian discipleship is progressive in nature. When someone stops growing in intimacy with Christ, he ceases to be healthy in his discipleship (see John 15:4).
4. Christian discipleship is a work of grace. It is the Holy Spirit who transforms life, not someone who tries to be good. The term *disciplined grace* describes this process. While God transforms, a believer's spiritual practice creates the transforming environment in which the Holy Spirit works (see Phil. 2:13; 1 Tim. 4: 7-8).
5. Christian discipleship always manifests itself in ministry to others. Every Christian has been spiritually gifted for the purpose of service (see 1 Pet. 4:10).
6. Christian discipleship was intended by Christ to be reproductive. Those who follow Jesus' life and teaching will be prepared to eagerly share their faith experiences and to invest themselves in the spiritual nurture of others (see Matt. 28:18-20; 2 Tim. 2:2).
7. Christian discipleship is centered in the life of a local church, where the fellowship of other disciples encourages, teaches, and safeguards the believer's discipleship process (see Heb. 10:24-25).

1. Clarence Drummond, in remarks given during a Georgia Baptist Convention conference.

2. Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 166.

3. All Scripture quotations in this guide are taken from the Holman Christian Standard Bible®, copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission.

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What Does Discipleship Look like in Your Church?

What do your church schedule and calendar say about your church’s discipleship process?

What takes place during each activity on the calendar?

- What do people get out of participating in each activity?
- Are people enjoying times of fellowship?
- Are people studying the Bible together?
- Are people learning from one another as they apply Bible truths to their everyday lives?
- Are parents using teachable moments to disciple their children?
- Are people serving God in meaningful ways in their church, workplaces, schools, homes, and communities?
- Are people sharing their faith stories with those who have not accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord?

You will also consider other questions as you evaluate all your church is doing to make disciples.

How Does Your Church Make Disciples?

How would you describe the way your church makes disciples?

- Life-application Bible study during Sunday School, through-the-week Bible studies, and other small groups
- Program on Sunday and/or Wednesday evenings
- Discipleship process
- Person-to-person process
- Missions
- Ministry opportunities
- Evangelism
- Other: _____

Describe the way your church makes disciples. _____

Who Does Discipleship in Your Church?

Who are the persons involved in your church’s discipleship actions? Does the biblical view of discipleship affect whom you list as disciple makers?
