

THE MEANING OF DISCIPLESHIP – “I AM GOD’S REPRESENTATIVE TO THE WORLD”

A. *Starting out – the implications of discipleship*

A Moment in the Life of a Disciple (1)

Imagine you are living in first century Palestine. You have been invited to a party at the home of a local, well-connected businessman. Jesus of Nazareth is the guest of honour. You are from a small town yourself, where news travels quickly. When the guest of honour finally arrives, He is crowded out by people who want to find out what He is like. Is it true that he has power to heal people and perform miracles? He has friends and supporters, but a lot of people are sitting on the fence. His presence in the cool garden of the home, where dinner has been set out, is commanding. All eyes are on him and a small group of traveling companions. They are His closest followers. Even though they never leave His side, they still seem to hang on His every word. You have never seen anyone like Him. His personality is magnetic, charismatic even, more than the local politicians you know. You grab a plate of lamb and vegetables and keep to yourself, watching events. There is usually a vast difference between peoples’ exaggerated reputations of their heroes and the more banal reality. No one is ever as super-human as their followers make them out to be. They all have “weak spots”. As you finish your meal you think it might be interesting to get to know Him, only not get too close. You move to a corner with a drink in your hand and watch Him working the crowd. He is certainly different. His message is challenging. He speaks about loving enemies and encountering God. How can anyone know God? It has been hundreds of years since the last prophets died. Some of them heard from God. But this man calls Jehovah His Heavenly Father. (That must upset the priests! They are concerned about the fine political balance and hate newcomers telling people they have been getting it wrong.) You have mixed feelings. And those disciples; they have left everything (families, friends, jobs) to be with Him. That must have been hard. As you weigh up the pros and cons you notice the crowd parting. He is coming in your direction. There is no place to hide. He comes right up to you. “Excuse me, do I know you?”, you want to ask. Instead, he gets in first, “Leave all this and follow me. Become my disciple.” It feels like your heart stops. Are you prepared to take the plunge? To do so sounds like sheer madness. After all, you have just met Him. But, like millions since, you agree to do so and your life is not the same again.

What do we mean by discipleship?

We are called to *be* “disciples” and to disciple *others*. Sounds reasonable. Or does it? What does the term “disciple” mean, two millennia later? Some people consider it to be over-used. Is it outmoded? Can we be disciples in a way that is free from religious jargon and relevant to our daily lives in the marketplace?

Certain words spring to mind when we think of discipleship:

- novice (beginner), rookie
- student, pupil, learner
- active adherent who identifies with someone
- loyal follower
- believer
- recruit, apprentice, trainee
- one who is teachable and who embraces the teachings of someone else

Each of these words is partially correct, but needs to be contextualized to make sense. The words alone could refer to a wide range of activities, including functioning as an apprentice electrician or a teenager wearing a “Trainee” badge in McDonalds or Hungry Jacks. Obviously these definitions are not enough.

Being a disciple is much more than believing in a person or product, or expressing a preference for one over the other (“Do you want your hamburger with or without mayonnaise?”). Consider the following statements about belief:

- “I believe in protecting the environment”
- “I believe Cadburys chocolate is better than Hershey bars”
- “I firmly believe using the MRT is better than walking”
- “I believe in my religion”

Belief alone is inadequate. In fact, it can be misleading.

The ancient Greeks used the word “disciple” to describe under-studies. The process of discipleship enabled ideologies and knowledge to be transferred from one person to another. Disciples often lived with their teachers. For example, the philosopher Aristotle was a “disciple” of Plato. He became steeped in Plato’s thoughts, feelings, reactions and convictions. He imbibed his attitudes to such an extent that, when Aristotle spoke, people could “hear” Plato. In due course, Aristotle passed on those (and new) ideas to his own disciples. Socrates was another Master who had a bevy of dedicated disciples. In Greek society disciples often paid their Masters and served them. The intention was that, after years of study, they would eventually have sufficient authority and public persona to gather their own disciples who would do likewise (cf 1 Timothy 2:2).

In the Old Testament, Elisha was a disciple of Elijah. He followed him everywhere, watched what he did and, learned from his example. When Elijah was miraculously taken into heaven Elisha knew exactly what to do; he didn’t miss a beat in continuing the work of his Master. At the time of Jesus, Saul (later Paul) literally sat at the feet of his teacher Gamaliel and was instructed in Rabbinical teaching (Acts 22:3).

The New Testament identifies disciples of:

- Moses (John 9:28)

- the Jewish teachers (“rabbis”) and the Pharisees (Matthew 22:15-16; Mark 2:18); by putting it about that they “sat in Moses seat” (Matthew 23:12) they expected people who submitted to the Law to yield to them; when Moses was by-passed the staunchest of the religious leaders considered it a betrayal of all that was important in divine revelation
- John the Baptist (John 1:35; Mark 2:18) – some of them ended up following Jesus (John accepted this as part of God’s plan – John 3:22, 23)
- Theudas and Judas the Galilean, revolutionaries who opposed Rome and were annihilated along with their followers (Acts 5:36-37).

The concept of discipleship remains widespread today. Numerous religions describe their adherents, or followers of their founders and leaders, as disciples. I have met Buddhist Masters accompanied by their disciples in South-east Asia; Iranian theologians (otherwise known as “radical fundamentalists”) with Hezbollah disciples in Beirut and Iraqi Sabbean priests travelling with their followers in Jordan.

The *Disciples of Christ* sect was founded in the USA by Alexander Campbell on 1 January 1812. The group emphasizes compliance with church tradition (which its early leaders felt most Christians had forsaken or compromised), but only has a small base today. The problem with some expressions of discipleship that become institutionalized is that they end up becoming exclusive, authoritarian and legalistic and end up out of touch with reality.

The New Testament word for “disciple” (*mathetes*, used 264 times) means “a learner, a pupil”. It is about more than head knowledge. The context suggests total commitment, including lifestyle and decision-making. The disciple of Scripture is a follower-learner, instructed systematically and incrementally by an identified mentor. The general assumption was that a disciple would become like his teacher-master (Matthew 10:25; Luke 6:40).

The English word “discipline” is derived from the same root. We talk about exercising discipline with daily walks, getting up early to go to work or study or keeping appointments amid a busy schedule. When we do so, the focus is on personal effort, will-power and reliability. This sends the wrong message entirely.

The call to Christian discipleship is, as someone has observed, a call “to come and die” rather than bottom lines and achievements for which we take personal credit (Ephesians 2:10). In the Christian life, we are to become like Jesus. People who observe our lives ought to be able to see Him. We are “changed into His likeness” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Is your Christian life a “work in progress?”

Jesus and discipleship

When Jesus came, the dominant religious system in Palestine was riddled with legalism, corruption, politics and divisiveness. Many people wanted to reform the system, but were powerless to influence those at the top and usually did not wish to stand out. There were too many vested interests prepared to squash dissent and to use the despised Roman rulers to do so in the cause of national security.

Jesus preached dynamic messages that usually challenged the status quo, healed sick people, cast out demons, performed miraculous signs and, in the process, took “church” out of the building into the street and peoples’ homes and businesses. It was easier to reach Jesus in the open than to access God, boxed up in the Temple (as people thought).

As He became popular (see Matthew 5:1), it started to be trendy (despite opposition on the part of the powerful establishment) to attend Jesus’ meetings in the marketplace. He was invited to parties by fashionable people. The rich and famous sought his company, as did the common people. (They got over the revulsion they might otherwise have felt knowing He had come from places where lepers hung out and was known for neglecting ceremonial washing.) When he spoke out against inequality and exploitation they cheered (until they saw He was challenging their practices and assumptions as well). If they saw the sick being healed they drew close to Him. However, they weren’t committed to Jesus in any way. Their interests were invariably linked to “results”. If the clergy or political leaders got upset with Jesus they kept their distance. They had never before seen anything like his exorcisms; some asked if he was teaching a new doctrine (Mark 1:27). There were different degrees to which people committed themselves to discipleship and the defining issue was often peer pressure.

On one occasion Jesus’ followers got upset with elements of His teaching and nearly all of them voted with their feet and left him (John 6:60-70). After this exodus He asked the remainder if they also wanted to go. The occasion must have seemed one of the low points of Jesus’ ministry. Only a small number did not walk. Discipleship involves remaining with the Master when it is socially unpopular to do so.

“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?’ “ Matthew 16:24-26

Christian discipleship isn’t about a super-hero amassing a following (a friend of mine used to wear a badge that said, “I knew Jesus before He became a Superstar”), but counting the cost. Jesus knew those who lionized him during the years of His popularity were equally capable of demanding (with as little aforethought) that he be crucified.

The call to discipleship was (and remains) an invitation to give up everything and risk following Jesus to places of execution. In societies where mega-churches are “in places” wielding enormous influence and denominations have greater resources than small countries it is easy to lose sight of what discipleship meant in the early days: When Jesus said, “Follow me”, he was implying, “You never know where you will end up; maybe nailed to a cross.” (With only one exception, the first disciples died for their faith, their successors faced centuries of persecution. Millions of Christians still suffer for their faith.)

The first “real” disciples

Over time, Jesus narrowed the call to discipleship to a select few (Matthew 10:1; Luke 6:13). They came to be known as a “group”. John records a wedding in Cana, to which “Jesus and His disciples” were invited. After turning water into wine at the feast they “believed in Him” (John 2:11).

“He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.” (Matthew 10:2-4)

Let’s have a closer look at the process.

- Jesus’ disciples were called publicly. If they couldn’t acknowledge Him before men he wasn’t prepared to do so to His Father (Matthew 10:32-33).
- They were identified as “disciples”, not members. They became linked to Jesus. His purpose was that they be with Him (Mark 13:13-15).
- He was the centre of the relationship (John 10:7-10).
- They were called to obey His teachings (Matthew 5:1-2), but were free to leave at any time. One (Judas) eventually betrayed Him (Jesus knew in advance that he would do so, John 6:70-71).
- Some had family commitments which were set aside as the need arose (would we expect or tolerate that today?)
- They were called to leave their jobs and follow Jesus (read, for example, Mark 1:14-20 and Matthew in Mark 2:14).
- The public had high expectations of them (Matthew 17:14-21)
- They were established as disciples before they became preachers, church planters, teachers and apostles.

In the book of Acts the first Christians were simply called disciples (Acts 4:32; 6:2 check). This was long before people in Antioch coined the name “Christian” (Acts 11:26). I once had dinner with the Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and the East in Damascus. He told me he preferred to be called a “Disciple”, rather than a “Christian”. In a sense, you ought to be a disciple of integrity before you call yourself a Christian and publicly link your lifestyle to that of Jesus. Your reputation will influence His.

A disciple is a convert, but not all converts are disciples. Becoming a Christian is only the start. Going on to maturity and developing into an effective disciple are what count. In the years of Jesus’ popularity it felt good to the chosen Twelve to be with Him. His popularity was unmistakable and they basked in the glow. It felt good to be with someone so powerful and so popular. They were convinced He would become King, and when He did they would be by His side (Matthew 20:21).

In other words, they had still not understood what discipleship was all about. They were enjoying the good times. Jesus tried to warn them he would be betrayed and killed, but they tried to talk Him out of it (Matthew 16:21-22). When He was ultimately taken prisoner and sentenced to death they were shocked to the core and the majority fled for their lives. It seemed the experiment had suddenly gone badly wrong.

The death and resurrection of Jesus was a watershed in the disciples' understanding of what it meant to be committed to Christ. Before the cross, it involved a great deal of excitement and anticipation; after Calvary it involved persecution and martyrdom. Then the truth sunk in. Maybe that's why Judas Iscariot decided to cut his losses and disassociate himself from Jesus before he got caught up in the plot to kill Jesus that the religious leadership in Jerusalem were hatching.

Discipleship is a journey that starts with 'seekers' taking steps to Christ, being established in the foundations of Christianity, growing into strong followers and then finally become disciple-makers. However, as we have seen, it is not a road to prominence, but to crucifixion, one of the most barbarous forms of state sanctioned public execution known to the ancient world. Jesus is saying, in effect, "Carry your electric chair, or your lethal injection, with you and be prepared for those who hate me (and you, because of me) to use them on you." Being a Christian would carry a stigma.

There are important differences between the way Jesus called His disciples and other forms of discipleship.

- Jesus did not call His followers to incremental theoretical knowledge, but to die. This was to be no sinecure. "They will persecute me, and they will do precisely the same to you, if you are associated with me". We talk about justice and rights; the call to discipleship is a call to abrogate our "rights", to throw them away and run the risk of ostracism.
- He was not paid by His followers, as was usually the case. He called them to abandon everything for Him.
- He served them, not the other way around.
- He put more emphases on personal relationship with God than mere head knowledge. It is relationship with God that keeps us going, not our understanding of theology.
- They did not choose him, as pupils normally did; rather, He chose them (John 15 16). When tell people they need to decide whether or not to accept Christ, we are suggesting it is optional; we ought to be urging them to hear Him calling them to follow Him.
- Instead of pursuing discipleship as a career (pupils of the Rabbinical schools aspired to become "Masters in Israel" and often competed with one another), they chose self-sacrifice (John 15:21 check).
- Jesus actively discouraged His disciples from walking around the marketplace hoping to be greeted as "Father" or "Teacher" (Matthew 23:8-12), as the proud Pharisees did.

The goal of discipleship

The ultimate goal of the disciple is to be like Jesus. There is no “discipleship training manual” as such.

“Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ” (Ephesians 4:13-15).

Discipleship is more than weekend Christianity. It is a complete surrender to Jesus. Don't start the journey unless you are committed to it. The Bible has numerous examples of people who were called by Jesus but tried to avoid the issue or make it conditional. Luke records a few cases.

“As they were walking along the road, a man said to Jesus, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.’ He said to another man, ‘Follow me.’ But the man replied, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ Still another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good bye to my family.’ Jesus replied, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.’” (Luke 9:57-62)

Are you really a disciple?

The call of Jesus is to count all we hold dear, ego, security, possessions, relationships, as nothing compared to Him, to “let go of it all”. What a challenge!

*“Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: ‘If anyone comes to me and does **not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.” Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not **give up everything he has** cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:25-33)***