

Discipleship Part II

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That poor young sailor that I mentioned yesterday who is in such a dilemma because of his understanding, at least that which he had perceived of what it meant to be a disciple, he was in consternation. What am I to be? What is this all about? And we can find ourselves in that place. But my prayer is that for all of us, in a setting like this, an academic professional setting, where we can learn what it means to study the Bible seriously, will help get us prepared to take away some of that anxiety that we may find in the lives of individuals, once we get out into the world of ministry.

Well, I'd like to start with today is overcoming difficulties in discipleship studies. The various models that we have, that I mentioned yesterday, the various models have come about. His people have attempted to get at the heart of Jesus this concept of discipleship. And then they've attempted to apply that to present-day ministries. The major problems surfaced when each model attempts to reconcile seemingly contradictory passages of scripture, especially when reconciling Jesus's gracious call to discipleship with His stringent demands of discipleship, or when reconciling Jesus's ministry to the crowds with His ministry to disciples, or when reconciling general discipleship passages with the role of the twelve, or when reconciling the portrait of the disciples in the Gospels with which, that which we find in the Book of Acts. And then that peculiar curiosity of the complete absence of the word "disciple" in the epistles.

The strength of each model lies in its emphasis upon a particular type of discipleship teaching. And that's the tendency, is they have focused upon one type of teaching. The weakness of each

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discipleship model lies in its de-emphasis of other types of discipleship teachings, not taking all the scripture at one time.

The first suggestion that I'd like to offer to avoid some of these difficulties is, first of all, we must enter Jesus's first century world before following Him in ours. Many difficulties will be overcome if we try to understand, first, the dynamics of discipleship as Jesus was bringing to them then, about in the first century, and that first century cultural setting, before we try to apply it today. Basic hermeneutical principle, but oftentimes I, I have gone through in the bibliography to the book. I didn't do just a regular bibliography. I catalogued literally hundreds of books, technical and popular on discipleship, hundreds of books according to various categories. Many of the programs that I looked through on discipleship tended to be 20th century oriented, more than first century oriented.

Now there's a fun illustration that I used in a lot of my classes. Some of you may have done this. Uh, if so, humor me. I would like to get three volunteers if I could. First volunteer needs to have been in the military at one point in time. Need first, one volunteer, a person who was in the military. Come on, come on, come on, come on. Anybody here who was in the military? All right, Bing. Come on up here. Our dean, was in mil- Give me a hand. All right. Here we go. Okay. Okay. Come right on up here.

We need two other volunteers. See, he's already doing it. Two other volunteers. Okay. Thank you, Kathy. Come on up here.

(Illustration)

Now my point is this. I can take three military persons or four, five from every branch of the military in the United States, I can call them to attention and have them step out and they will all stay in step. Why? Because every branch of the military in the United States steps out on the same foot, and that foot is the left foot. What is the principle for discipleship studies? It is this. When we walk through the Gospels, we need to start out on the left foot. What the left foot signifies is walking in the first century cultural setting. What was Jesus saying in the first century to a particular audience? What did they understand by His teaching? How would they have understood that within their particular setting? Once we have that left foot firmly settled, then and only then, do we transfer to the right foot, and the right foot symbolizes application to our lives today.

We all know the danger that we can get into when we apply Scripture by starting on the right foot, right? When we look at Scripture, we say what does that mean to me today. Yes, we want to do that. But we must understand what was the author's intention. What was understood in the first sensory setting before we apply it to us today? Basic hermeneutical principle that is oftentimes overlooked, sometimes abused in discipleship teachings. We must start on the left foot before we transfer to the right.

Second principle, identify with the appropriate audience. Several difficulties in these models can be overcome because they overlook the audience to whom Jesus was speaking. Even as preachers and teachers today try to know their audiences, so that they can minister to appropriate

needs and circumstances. Jesus gave teaching which was appropriate for the spiritual state of His audience. He gave teaching and offered invitations that were uniquely suited for the particular audience which surrounded Him. For example, in the parabolic discourse, a great one in Matthew 13, Jesus gave parables which had one intention for the crowd, and that intention was to hide the mysteries of the kingdom. But he had another intention for His disciples, which was to reveal the mystery of the kingdom.

If we do not precisely specify the audience, we will not identify with the audience and teaching that is appropriate for our spiritual state. Overall, discipleship teaching that is directed to the crowds in the Gospels deals with the act of becoming a disciple, evangelism, whereas teaching that is directed to the disciples tends to deal with growth in discipleship, Christian growth.

Third principle, distinguish between that the, the twelve as disciples and the twelve as apostles. Very important. Throughout the history of the church, certain tension has been felt when looking at the lives of the twelve. Special comfort has been drawn from recognizing that they are not really that much different than we are. If Jesus could make something of their lives, then certainly He can make something of ours. Yet, on the other hand, those twelve seem so different than we are. The twelve were used in the founding of the early church in ways not duplicated. When have we experience such a ministry?

And this points to a special difficulty that is often found in these five models, uh, four the models in particular. A clear distinction is not always made between the twelve as disciples and the twelve as apostles. Although the twelve were both disciples and apostles, scholars agree that the

terms disciple and apostle point to significantly different aspects of their nature. Indeed, while in the Gospels the twelve are almost always called disciples, in the Book of Acts the twelve are never called disciples. They are referred to as what? Apostles, to emphasize their leadership role in the early church.

Therefore, a preliminary observation that we need to make is that as disciples, the twelve give us an example of how Jesus works with believers in general; as apostles, the twelve give us an example of how Jesus works with leaders of the church.

There is also a very interesting perspective that is gained from seeing the development of their relationship with Jesus. For example, in an old classic, which you should all read at some point in your seminary training, A.B. Bruce's old classic, *The Training of the Twelve*. In that, Bruce clarifies three stages in the history of the twelve's relationship with Jesus. And the earliest stage of their relationship, they were simply believers in Jesus as the Christ and His occasional companions. We find that primarily in John chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4. In the second stage, fellowship with Christ assumed the form of an uninterrupted attendance on His person, leaving occupation to go follow Him. That's the calling that we find in Matthew, Mark, and in Luke. But there is a third stage, and that was the stage when the twelve entered into a calling, by which they were chosen by the Master from the mass of His followers, and formed into a select band to be trained for the great work of apostleship.

What is important to note is that in every stage, whether they were first-stage believers, second-stage attendance, or third-stage apostles, the twelve were disciples. The word "disciple"

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expresses the most basic aspect of their life. They were His followers, not followers of any other master. The second and third stages represent different points in their relationship, by which they were trained for ministry. It's much the same as in our own experience.

When I became a new believer, I was only two days old when I heard about this fine young lady that I ended up marrying about a year later. We grew together as brand new Christians. We went to Bible study after Bible study after Bible study in those first few months, just brand new baby Christians. When we were asked about nine months later to lead a high school youth group, we were called church workers. When we were led to go to seminary, and later entered into the pastorate, I was then designated a pastor. At each stage though we considered ourselves to be disciples of Jesus, no different than any other disciple in the church. Yet, because of God's calling upon our life, we were set up aside for different ministries, all disciples yet different ministries, different terminology.

Next principal, allow the Book of Acts to help us interpret the meaning of discipleship terminology. This is very important as we move into the age that we now call the church, the early church. By the time of the early church is recorded in Acts, the term "disciple" was synonymous with the term believer. If you look at Acts chapter 4 verse 32, compare with Acts chapter 6 verse 2, the terms that are synonymous are the multitude of believers and then the multitude or congregation of disciples.

In Luke's writings, the expressions "those who believe" and "the disciples" signify the same group. Acts clarifies for us that the common word for a believer in the early church was disciple.

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That was the common term in the earliest days of the church for a believer, disciple. Disciple also became the early synonym for the word "Christian," which came about a little bit later. Luke also clarifies that the use of the terms disciple and apostle with reference to the twelve, as we've already mentioned. By the time Luke gets to the Book of Acts, he never refers to the twelve as disciples. He refers to them apostles, as apostles to specify their leadership place. The book of Acts helps us clarify the transitions that took place in discipleship terminology.

One of the reasons why later words became more prominent in the epistles to specify Christians, such as brothers, sisters, saints, was because Jesus was no longer with them personally to follow. And the book of Acts shows a slow transitioning out of that terminology. The book of Acts is very important to see how the word "disciple" transition from the book of, uh, from the Gospels to the early church.

Next, disciples in historical context. Disciples in historical context. We need to understand how they occurred in history. Today the English terms disciple, discipleship, and discipling imply different things to different users, depending upon the background of the user and their context. This is part of the problem behind some of these different discipleship models. We need standardize definitions of these very important terms or else.

And we find this, when you move from church to church or ministry to ministry, when you say discipleship, we are oftentimes talking about different things. How were the terms used in the general context of the first century world, world? How were the terms used in the overall biblical context? How are the terms used today? Behind our English word disciple is the Latin term

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discipulus or the feminine discípula, and the Greek words mathētēs. That's the only Greek words I'm gonna use here, mathētēs. Since these Latin and Greek nouns had a linguistic relationship to verbs for learn, they were oftentimes early on synonyms for learner, learner or student.

Eventually though, this is what's very important for us, eventually the meaning broadens, so that they were used to refer to adherents of a great master, an adherent of a great master. The Greek term especially, by the late Hellenistic period during the time when the New Testament was written, was used increasingly to refer to an adherent, a person who have become committed to a great master. The type of adherence was determined by the master, but it ranged from being the companion of a philosopher to being the follower of a great thinker and master of the past, to being the devotee of a religious leader.

All of those different kinds of masters had disciples. Therefore, in common usage, whether in the Roman or Greek world, a disciple was a person who was committed to his significant master. To say that a disciple is a learner is true, but this overemphasizes one aspect of the term's meaning and misses what the term primarily meant in the New Testament era.

For example, the disciples of John the Baptist. Said you may have known that John had his own disciples as well. Find that recorded especially in John chapters one and two. They were not primarily learners, since John was not primarily a teacher, but rather a prophet. A disciple was one who made a life commitment to a particular master, here John, and his way of life. The type of disciple and the corresponding life of discipleship was determined by the type of master. But

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commitment to the master in his ways was always central. Therefore, it's not enough to ask what is a disciple. Rather, we have to ask a disciple of whom and at what period of time.

A disciple of Jesus during His earthly ministry was one who had made a commitment to Him. Uh, we won't go into it here, but it's fascinating to look at the way that these followers transitioned over Jesus's life. In the early part of Jesus's ministry, He had a mass, a crowd of disciples who followed Him around. Yet, in one of the most tragic passages in all of Scripture, John chapter 6 versus 60 through 66, we find that these, some of these disciples, as a matter of fact, many of them had difficulty with Jesus's words when He was teaching on eating His flesh. Says they had difficulty with His statements. Jesus turns to them, and in verse 64, He says, "There are some of you who do not believe." He then specifies Judas is one of them. And in so drawing this stark contrast between disciples who believe and who don't believe, verse 66, one of the most tragic verses in all the scripture says, "As a result of this many of His disciples left and were not following Him anymore."

The early part of Jesus's ministry, there were a lot of disciples, because they were following on their own expectations, their desires of what Jesus would bring about. But when Jesus didn't conform to their expectations, their desires, they left and didn't follow Him anymore. We are all, are well aware of Judas himself, who turns out, yes a disciple, but not the form of disciple that Jesus wanted.

Therefore, what we have to re-, make sure that we recognize is that the word "disciple" is used commonly in the first century to specify a follower of a great master. As Jesus developed His

earthly ministry, He began to specify what kind of disciples He wanted, in distinction from disciples of John, disciples of the Pharisees, disciples of Moses. A variety of different kinds of disciples.

Ok, we're gonna press on now to some definitions.

Now is where we come to the heart of what we need to clarify in our own way of thinking. When we come to the wo-, the New Testament that primary word for disciple is mathētēs. The definition of a disciple must be given in a general, as well as specific sense. In a general sense, we may define the disciple as a committed follower of a great master. The general sense of the term has two common applications. One, it was just used simply, nonreferentially. Jesus said a disciple, when he is fully taught, will be like his master. That's just disciple in general. But it is also used to designate followers of a great leader or a movement. So, we find disciples of Moses, John chapter 9 verse 28, disciples of the Pharisees, Matthew 22:16, and disciples of John the Baptist, Matthew 9:14. So the word could be used in a general sense. But in this specific sense, a disciple of Jesus is one who has come to Jesus for eternal life has claimed Jesus as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Him. Disciple is the term that specifies a believer in Jesus Christ for eternal life, who is now in the process of following the master.

The English term disciple has undergone a somewhat similar development as did the Greek and Latin terms. The English noun is now associated most often with the words supporter, follower, or adherent. Early on, it did mean learner, but now it means something much more than that. The word disciple in contemporary usage, here I use a quote from one linguistic schol-, scholar. "The

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word disciple in contemporary usage pertains exclusively to someone devoted to a master or patron. Most strictly, disciple suggests a religious situation. For example, the disciples of Buddha who codified his teachings. In general usage, the word refers to someone's ardent advocacy of any prominent figure or theory. For example, an early disciple of Freud. The words supporter or follower are perhaps the nearest synonyms. Supporter is the general term for one who allies himself with the cause or shows allegiance to its leader. Follower and disciples are related in that they emphasize devotion to a leader, rather than to its doctrine or cause."

Hence in the Christian sense, a disciple of Jesus is one who has come to Him for eternal life, has claimed Him as, as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Him.

Now discipleship and discipling, words that do not occur in a specific sense in Scripture, but they probably come from the nearest verbal form for disciple as is found in the Great Commission, found three other times in Scripture. In common parlance, discipleship and discipling today relate to the ongoing life of the disciple. Discipleship is the ongoing process of growth, at is, as a disciple. Discipling implies the responsibility of disciples, helping one another to grow as a disciple.

In that sense, discipleship is much broader than the way in which many of us conceive of it. I will discuss this more in a practical way tomorrow. But we think of discipleship oftentimes in terms of programs, various programs, a discipleship program that we initiate in our particular local church. In the broader sense, as one author has said, full discipleship and full Christ-

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likeness are the same. Hence, everything that we do in the Christian life should be seen as the development of discipleship.

Now, some implications. Uh, there are some important implications that arise, that are on a practical level that we'll deal with tomorrow. But I think that there are three that we need to look at in a specific way today.

One, there is a, a semantical implication that arises here. The word disciple tends to be used or conjures up certain images in the minds of users that oftentimes cannot be overcome.

I was giving a lecture in a, an academic setting about a year and a half ago. And in that setting, one of the professors who was sitting in on it, was a linguist. And this individual said it's probably best if we give up using the English terms disciple, discipleship, and discipling. The English terms. Why? Because we have such an ingrained perception of what disciples are, what discipleship may entail, that we may not be able to overcome that. Well, I, I don't know if I agree with this individual, but what I think we need to do is to become much clearer what those terms mean from a biblical perspective.

We are finding ministries more and more moving in that direction today, trying to clarify what it means. For example, let me give you an idea of what is oftentimes communicated. Several discipleship ministries have developed wonderful ways of helping Christians grow, but they've created confusion by their choice of words. Some ministries refer to only those with advanced commitment as disciples. This implies that those with less commitment are not disciples. Instead,

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I believe that we should call all believers disciples, and those with advanced commitment something like mature disciples.

Secondly, some organizations designate only those who are active in the practice of Christian disciplines as disciples. This implies that certain activities make one a disciple. You involved regularly in Bible study, regularly in prayer, regularly in meditation. That implies much more of a program; rather possibly we should refer to them something along the lines of faithful disciples. Some ministries reserved terminology discipleship training for a method that only a few are called toward. Instead, we might speak of leadership training.

Our choice of terminology determines the kinds of expectations that we communicate to our people. I'm afraid with even the illustration that I used among you yesterday that we were communicating to our people that it's okay not to be involved in the process of growing as a disciple of Jesus Christ. That it's okay to be involved just as a, an observer. It's only those who get really committed that then become a disciple.

I'd like to reverse that. We'll see that a moment. I'd like to reverse that, and let our people know that all of the discipleship teaching of Jesus, when properly understood in its historical first century setting, is directed toward us. OK. All right.

Second implication, this is theological. Our study that we have accomplished over the past several years has primarily been into the historical, cultural, biblical setting. There are profound theological implications that arise. For example, one, discussion that has risen in recent years has

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been the quote lordship controversy. Much of it does center on discipleship terminology, in specific of the same way that I mentioned. Some, for example, when you take these words "if anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." Those words, when you read people who were involved in discussing the lordship issue, become polemical with that. And there's been created in the minds of people a great deal of confusion as to what these words mean.

Both sides are trying to contend for what they perceive to be the essence of the gospel message. Although our theological discussions are important to modern life and doctrine, we must be careful not to have our theological agendas compel an interpretation of the text or cloud the meaning of the text with rhetoric. What did Jesus mean by those words? How would the crowds have understood those words to mean to them? Here's where I'll just throw in something. You'll have to read the book to find out how I deal with that. But what I suggest is this: Jesus delivered a challenge that was understood in the first century cultural setting. There was a challenge, first of all, to salvation, and then was a challenge that marked the ongoing life of an individual who responded. So you know where I come out on that.

Practical, practical. Serious discipleship study has implications that are forcibly practical. Since the discipleship life is the life expected of all believers, then the gauntlet is now thrown down by Jesus for all of us to follow Him. Yes, some of us are called to specific areas of mea-, of, of ministry and service, not intended for all other disciples. But when we hear the word disciple, do the years of all of us open with expectancy? Far too often we think, "Disciple? That's for an

extremist. I'm just an ordinary Christian." Far too often we imply when we say that we are discipling someone, or when we are starting a quote discipleship program, that we have in mind the extra serious Christian. Rather, we need to recognize that when Jesus spoke of disciples, He had in mind what would become the normal Christian experience, not the abnormal Christian experience.

I'd like to conclude with what I call a radical, yet realistic summons. What will our churches and ministries be like if we live out the message that the expectations of discipleship found in the gospels are the expectations for all Christians, not just for a few extra committed ones? That was precisely the goal of Jesus. Jesus wanted a church full of disciples, who dare to go out in the world, to make a difference, and to live life the way that it was intended to be lived. Yet as the old hymn goes, "God never gives a call without the enabling." As He calls us to discipleship, He is also right there with us to lead the way.

Our young sailor needed to understand that Jesus's call to discipleship was a radical, yet realistic summons to follow the master out into the adventure of the journey of life. That is the, that is precisely the message that Jesus gives to each one of us. Jesus wants us, not to be in a setting such as a seminary, only those who are disciples, only those who are in a setting like this are the committed ones. Rather, He wants us to simply be those who have been set aside for the great privilege of studying His word and matters related to His word. That will allow us to go back out into the world, and lead our people into a life of being a true disciple of Jesus Christ. That's what changed the world nearly 2000 years ago. Following the master today is still what Jesus calls each of us to.

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Let's close in prayer.