

THE FACE OF DISCIPLESHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Virtually every evangelical church has some form of discipleship program in place. But, all systems are not created equal. With the recent release of the Willow Creek’s confession that their discipleship program has done little to create true followers of Christ, many are beginning to re-evaluate their own methodology. But, before believers can evaluate their discipleship methodology they must understand the “face” of discipleship—what it really looks like. The purpose of this short work is to examine Scripture for a proper view of discipleship, including its definition, breadth, and participants. It is the hope of this author that the reader will be refocused by the clarity of Scripture and propelled by its intentional liberty.

DISCIPLESHIP EXAMINED

Basics of Discipleship

If one were to attempt a basic definition of Christian discipleship, it would best be defined as “the process of becoming like Christ.” In the words of Paul, “*For whom He [God, the Father] foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son [Jesus Christ]...*”¹ So, the goal of the believer is to be conformed to the image of Christ. But, what is the method for attaining this goal? Discipleship. The Great Commission given by Jesus to the Church is this: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I command you; and lo, I am with*

¹ Ro. 8.29. NASB.

you always, even to the end of the age.”² Mark records the commission in this way: “*And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.’*”³

Together, these passages provide a complete understanding of what Christ was commanding. Discipleship includes the acts of preaching the gospel (evangelism), baptizing believers, and teaching them the commands of Christ and obedience to those commands. These may be best understood as aspects of discipleship. Interestingly, in this commission, Christ did not say *how* to preach the gospel, baptize—other than in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or teach the commands of Christ and obedience to Him.

It must also be noted that both passages begin with the word *go*. The command is for an active, intentional process. While this is not a grammatical treatment of the text, Matthew’s recorded command could be legitimately read, “while you are going, make disciples.” Jesus truly understood the intentionality in the process. As will be expressed later, during the course of His three year ministry, Jesus was a disciple-maker. Every breath was filled with purpose. That is the mark of a true disciple-maker.

Breadth of Discipleship

Unfortunately for the church, most modern-day discipleship has been relegated to a classroom and is thought to *only* take place within the confines of “the church.” The first difficulty with this mentality is that the church is a group of believers and not a building.⁴ While this seems a petty distinction to some, it affects drastically *where* “valid discipleship” can take place. If the building is “the church,” then all activity must take place on “church grounds.” If

² Mt. 28.20-21.

³ Mk. 16.15.

⁴ Rom. 12.15; Eph. 5.23; Col. 1.18.

“the church” is a group of believers, then church activity takes place wherever these believers are located. Certainly, Christ’s commission aligns with the latter outlook, for it is a personal commission, as well as corporate. It is a commission for the individual, as well as the church as a whole.

The beauty of the Great Commission is that it gives a basic outline of what is involved in discipleship, but does not give a rigid structure for preaching, baptizing, and teaching. Regarding preaching and teaching, Christ, Himself, used a variety of methods. He proclaimed the gospel through various means: commands, appeals, illustrations, and parables. He also used every life-situation as a teaching point. Jesus not only taught the masses, but he also invested heavily in the lives of twelve men—disciples—whom He expected to change the world. He entreated these men to follow Him wherever He went. He taught them through instruction, example, and other means. He also challenged them, questioned them, and even organized training missions for them, as in the case of the sending of the seventy disciples.⁵ So, was Jesus’ discipleship method confined to a classroom? No. Did His discipleship method include what could be considered a classroom environment of instruction? Yes.

Jesus seems to have realized that isolating discipleship to one particular method could be detrimental to the development of His disciples. Instead, He chose to utilize every available opportunity to disciple. In light of this, we cannot look at Jesus to justify one individual method of discipleship. Instead, we must look to Jesus and recognize that He commanded it and was a multi-faceted practitioner of it. So, discipleship is not simply an organized 12-week program, but an intentional method of living life for development of Christ-likeness in others. Discipleship

⁵ Lk. 10.

cannot simply be confined to the classroom, but must also be a way of life. In this way, Jesus seems to have embodied the model expressed in Old Testament for the discipleship of children.⁶

Participants in Discipleship

An unfortunate byproduct of the mainstream mentality of discipleship is that obedience to the commission is defined in strict terms. Individuals are being put in a box in which discipleship happens in a rigid prescribed manner. Unfortunately, this makes participation in the discipleship process too formulaic. In other words, individuals must teach a discipleship class, participate in organized evangelism efforts, or whatever else has been labeled as “true discipleship” in order to be considered a disciple-maker. This is not to say that there should be no organized discipleship ministry or that organized discipleship efforts are unbiblical, but rather that there is much more to discipleship. It is a broad, multi-faceted process in which every believer is able to participate.

By limiting the scope of the discipleship process, many individuals are unintentionally being made to feel that they are not or cannot be involved in discipleship. As an illustrative question, can a person without the gift of teaching or evangelism participate in discipleship? For instance, can an elderly widow who is confined to her home participate in discipleship through a simple act like cooking a meal?

The first question would be whether this act could fit into one of the aspects of Jesus’ commission: preaching the gospel, baptizing, or teaching Christ’s commands and obedience to Him. Here are a couple of helpful questions to aid in the answer. Can a meal, given in humility and love, be considered preaching the gospel? It certainly could be considered a fulfillment of the second greatest commandment to love others as yourself, correct?⁷ A brief look at the early

⁶ Dt. 6.4-9. Also referred to as the *Shemah* by Jews.

⁷ Mt. 22.39.

church would show that love for fellow believers was a witness which God used to add to the church.⁸ It is unquestionable that there is a need for a physical hearing of the gospel, in light of Romans 10:17, but can the simple act of a loving meal be the foundation for this presentation? Undoubtedly so. At the very least, this blessed woman's act has paved the way for the gospel.

Secondly, can a humble act of service like giving a meal be considered teaching? Well, did Jesus meet physical needs as an expression of God's love for both believers and non-believers? Of course. If others were to follow the example of the sweet elderly widow, would they be obeying the commands of Christ? Yes. She has taught by example, as Christ also did. Does this mean that anyone who follows her example needs no more instruction? Of course not. There are many other avenues of teaching in order to aid in being conformed to Christ's image. Does this mean that the elderly woman's teaching is any less valid than the trained discipleship class teacher? No. Both are necessary in the discipleship process.

So it would seem that a homebound elderly woman can be an active participant in discipleship. If this conclusion is true, then the scope of discipleship and its participants is quite broad. If the same questions were posed and answered for other tasks such as janitorial services, opening up homes for bible-studies, showing hospitality, and many other activities would fall under the guise of discipleship. Does this demean organized classroom teaching and evangelistic efforts? Certainly not. As was stated earlier, discipleship is a multi-faceted process. With this broader definition, the efforts of many individuals which would otherwise be unrecognized are now deemed as essential partners in the discipleship process as a whole. It would then follow that they will also receive a just reward.⁹

⁸ Ac. 2.44-47.

⁹ Cf. Mt. 10.41.

With all of this in mind, it should be understood that discipleship is a creative process. We tend to suck the creativity out of it when we limit it to the confines of a building. Believers should be set free, being encouraged to be creative in their disciple-making approaches. Should it be grounded in Scripture? Yes. But, at its core, discipleship is a simple and intentional choice of investing in others. So, disciple-making is choosing to live a lifestyle of purpose. Every believer has been gifted for his/her part in the discipleship process; However, that means nothing unless these gifts are being exercised.

CONCLUSION

While much more could be said about discipleship, it is the hope of this author that the content has opened the eyes of the reader to the true “face” of discipleship. It has been discovered that disciple-maker is part of a multi-faceted process to conform an individual to the likeness of Christ. This process cannot be accomplished through any one method and requires the participation of believers who have chosen an intentional lifestyle of investing in others. Perhaps the most exciting and liberating concepts are that believers can be creative in their disciple-making approach and that no one is without the ability to participate and reap the rewards.