

"Discipleship in the New Testament"

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Discipleship

In the Great Commission, Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples. But what is discipleship? Christians weren't the only ones to make disciples in the ancient world. For instance, John the Baptist had disciples (e.g., Matt. 9:14; Luke 7:18–19; John 1:35–37; Acts 19:1–3) as did the Pharisees (e.g., Matt. 22:16; Mark 2:18; John 9:28–29). Moreover, in the New Testament world many philosophical schools, such as the Sophists and Stoics, had disciples. Within all of these groups, discipleship primarily involved imitation, following and adhering to the example of a god or master teachers or both.

Christian discipleship also called for imitation. According to Jesus, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but, once he has been fully trained, the disciple will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40); indeed, as the teacher is, so should the disciple be also (Matt. 10:25). Jesus makes it clear that only his disciples will receive eternal life (e.g., Matt. 16:24–26; 19:21–23; John 10:27–28). Imitating him, however, calls for drastic measures—a willingness to deny self, to forsake possessions, to abandon loved ones, and to suffer persecution (Luke 14:26–27, 33; cf. John 6:60–66). Paul also called disciples to a life of imitation—"Imitate me as I imitate Christ" (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 4:19; 1 Tim. 1:16); "for you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example" (2 Thess. 3:7–9); "be imitators of God" (Eph. 5:1; cf. 4:24); "set an example for the believers" (1 Tim. 4:12). According to Paul, discipleship requires imitation in attitude as well as in action, by cultivating moral virtues (such as humility and love) as well as enacting selfless service (Rom. 15:2–3; 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:1–11). Similarly, the author of Hebrews urged the disciples to emulate the exemplars of faithful endurance (Heb. 6:12; 11:1–12:1; 13:7).

The imitation motif especially occurs in contexts of suffering (1 Thess. 1:6–7; 2:14). For instance, Peter points believers to the example of Christ's suffering so they may follow "in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:21–23). In fact, even God acts as an agent in discipleship by using afflictions to disciple his children (Heb. 12:7–13) and by working suffering for good so the disciples of Christ may be conformed to his image (see Rom. 8:17–29).

Jesus the Teacher

It was his custom to teach. Day after day he taught—in synagogues and in the temple, on the sea and beside it, on plains and upon mountains, from his hometown to Jerusalem. Most were astonished at his teachings, so full of authority and wisdom; but many, including his own disciples, frequently failed to comprehend them. On one occasion, when his disciples did understand his teaching, the majority rejected it and simply walked away (John 6:60–66). Once, Peter even went so far as to rebuke Jesus for his teaching (Mark 8:31–32). While some glorified Jesus when they heard him (Luke 4:15), others accused him of being demon-possessed (John 7:20) and sought to kill him (Mark 11:18; Luke 23:4–5). Although there were exceptions (e.g., John 3:2), many of the Jewish leaders were vexed by such extraordinary teachings



from such an “uneducated” man (John 7:15). In response, Jesus professed that his education came directly from God (John 7:16).

There are at least six methods Jesus used to teach. He taught (1) by using parables, (2) by asking and answering questions, (3) by commenting on Scripture, (4) by proclaiming beatitudes and leveling woes, (5) by contextualizing his messages, and (6) by performing miracles. Jesus taught many things through parables both to instruct and to condemn (see Mark 4:10–20). He based some parables on interpersonal relationships—such as the prodigal son and the good Samaritan—and others on agrarian and economic themes—such as the parable of the sower and of the talents. Jesus also educated others by asking and answering questions: “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4); “David calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?” (Luke 20:44). When asked about taxes, Jesus answered, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” (Matt. 22:21). And when someone inquired about the greatest commandment, Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God” (Mark 12:28–30). Jesus also instructed others by commenting on Scripture, for example, from Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:16–21) and the Pentateuch (Matt. 5:21–48). Furthermore, Jesus taught by declaring blessings and woes—“Blessed are you who are poor. . . . But woe to you who are rich” (Luke 6:20–26; see also Matt. 5:1–11; 23:1–39). Furthermore, Jesus taught with objects around him—be it Herod’s temple (John 2:18–21), Jacob’s well (John 4), or a barren fig tree (Matt. 21:19–22). Finally, Jesus used his miracles as lessons: he heals the paralytic to teach others that he has authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10–11) and follows an exorcism with a lesson on the kingdom of God (Luke 11:14–20). The praise that Jesus gave to Mary may indicate his view of his teaching: she chose what is better, the only thing necessary, that which will not be taken from her—the opportunity to sit at his feet and listen to his teachings (Luke 10:42).