

September 02, 2006

## DISCIPLESHIP – What is it, Really?

Basically, a “disciple” is simply a pupil, student, or learner. In biblical terms, a disciple is a pupil or student of Christ – one who learns from and walks in the footsteps of the righteous Son of God. Thus, “discipleship” is the act of being a disciple, of dying to self and living for Christ. Matthew 16:24-25 says, *Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it.*

But what does “discipleship” mean from the perspective of the church – what does it look like in measurable terms? That is the more practical question that we need to answer. Here is my definition: **Discipleship is Spirit-empowered, elder-directed, biblically-focused growth into the likeness of Christ.** There it is. There is much contained in it, so let’s break it down one element at a time.

**First**, true discipleship requires that one be saved and thus sealed in the Holy Spirit. While unsaved persons may be capable of religious and moral lifestyles that resemble Christianity outwardly, true heart salvation is the only originator of true discipleship. An unregenerate person will not ultimately die to self – indeed, they are incapable of dying to that which drives them. Likewise, they are incapable of living for Christ, for how can one live for the glory of a Lord they do not truly know? Some men may be so noble as to define their lives by a spiritual philosophy, but that is wholly different than being defined by a Person, by Jesus Christ. Thus, spiritual regeneration and spiritual empowerment are necessities of true discipleship. We must be saved. The Holy Spirit must be present within us, sanctifying us and filling us with God’s desires and God’s strength. Without the Spirit, discipleship is a futile endeavor or a sham.

**Second**, true discipleship is elder-directed. I use the word “elder” here in both the specific and general senses. First, there are the formal “elders” of the church – those men who bear responsibility for leading, preaching, teaching, and protecting the flock of God. These men bear a primary responsibility to faithfully proclaim right doctrine and to admonish the congregation in the pursuit of spiritual growth and faithful obedience. They are ultimately responsible for “directing” the church in disciple-making. (2 Timothy 2:2 and chapter 4, Hebrews 13:17) Second, there is the more general sense in which I mean “elder” Christians – people who are mature in the faith and who are mentoring younger believers to help set them on the right path to Christian maturity. This type of Titus 2 ministry is what we need more in the church.

**Third**, true discipleship is biblically focused. Christian maturity is impossible apart from proper grounding in God’s holy Word. Remember 2 Timothy 3:16: *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.* Being steeped in the knowledge and wisdom of the Scriptures is the main pursuit of the disciple and the key to the obedience and fervor that mark maturity. Conversely, ignorance of the Scriptures is the greatest sign of Christian immaturity and reprobate living. Remember what Jesus said in the Great Commission in Matthew 28 – making disciples is a matter of *teaching* them all that He has commanded; to teach them His Word.

**Finally**, true discipleship is aimed at growth into the likeness of Christ. Ephesians 5:1-2 says, *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.* 2 Corinthians 3:18 likewise says we are being transformed into the image of the Lord. This is the goal of discipleship – that according to the strength of the Spirit and the truth of the Word, we grow daily into His likeness, thereby becoming living incarnations of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 4:11) So now that you know what it is, what will you do to be a part of it?