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Discipleship and the Church

A. Boyd Luter, Jr.

In recent years discipleship has become an integral part of evangelicalism. "Training believers the way Jesus did," as most define discipleship, is an idea that has again come of age. However, many Christian workers view discipleship as an activity that is to take place apart from the local church and that has little relationship to the church's major purpose.

With the present boom in books, cassettes, and seminars on discipleship, one might conclude that all has been said on the subject. But that is far from true. In the New Testament there is a virtually untapped reservoir of material on discipleship. The Book of Acts and the Epistles, which so vividly expound the life of the first-century church, provide a wealth of information which can fill in one's understanding of discipleship and how it should relate to the local church.

It is surprising to some people to learn that neither the word *disciple* nor the verb *to make disciples* is found anywhere in the New Testament Epistles. This is in stark contrast to the Gospels and the Book of Acts where these forms are used more than 250 times.¹

But an even more acute question concerns the Great Commission, which has as its thrust the command to make disciples.² Was it ignored and forgotten by the early churches? Did the writers of the Epistles (including Peter and John who were personally discipled by Jesus) forget the risen Savior's final command? Is the Great Commission therefore irrelevant for today and unrelated to the local church?

This article seeks to demonstrate that discipleship is indeed discussed in the Epistles, even though the terms *disciple*, *discipleship*, and *make disciples* are not used, and that discipleship is central to the purpose of the local church.

The Meaning of Discipleship

Though the word *disciple* does not occur in the Epistles, the fact that the concept of discipleship is there can be demonstrated in several ways.

The Bible often presents a doctrine through the use of several different but related terms. This can easily be seen in the unfolding development of such doctrines as sin, grace, redemption, and regeneration. The same principle holds true in the realm of practical theology. To understand sanctification, preaching, teaching, or prayer, one must observe all the parallel concepts that are used in the presentation of these truths. It should not be surprising that the same is true of discipleship.

The English word *disciple* (Greek, μαθητής) is derived from the Latin term *discipulus*³ meaning “learner” or “pupil.”⁴ This definition is helpful in searching for discipleship in the Epistles because its kindred verbal form “to learn” (Greek, μαθάνω) is used in several instructive contexts in these letters.⁵

Perhaps the relevance of the verb “to learn” can best be demonstrated, however, by looking at a significant verse in the Gospels. In Matthew 11:29 Jesus exhorts, “Take My yoke upon you, and *learn* from Me . . .” (NASB). Both Pentecost and Walvoord see this word *learn* as a crucial “call to discipleship.”⁶ Thus although this is a rare usage in the Gospels, it does aptly demonstrate that learning was an activity of the disciples during the life of Christ.

Many mistakenly narrow their concept of discipleship to “the training of the Twelve” (or even the seventy) by Jesus. But that view cannot be supported by the overall usage of the term *disciple* in the Gospels or the Book of Acts.

Certainly the preparation of the Apostles is the classic biblical example of in-depth discipleship. But their training was unique. Jesus was preparing them to become the foundational leaders of the New Testament church (Eph. 2:20). There is no clear record that Jesus did such in-depth training with anyone else, although many others were called disciples (e.g., Luke 6:17; John 6:66). Thus Harrison writes, “Many flocked to Him and attached them-

selves in varying degrees of conviction and loyalty. A broad and narrow use of the term is discernible in the Gospels . . .”⁷

The disciples referred to in the Book of Acts were even less clearly committed to Christ than those in the Gospels. The word *disciples* in Acts became simply “an accepted description of adherents to the Christian movement.”⁸ Acts 19:1-7 speaks of individuals who were extremely limited in their understanding of Christ. Thus in the Epistles (a number of which overlap with Acts chronologically and geographically) true discipleship may have been present though there was not intensive training like that given by Jesus to the Twelve.

In the Book of Acts only gradually does the term *church* achieve regular usage in describing the body of believers in Jesus Christ. On the other hand the plural word *disciples* is used frequently in Acts to describe the same group referred to elsewhere as the “church” (e.g., 8:1; 9:1; 11:26). In other words the word *church* designates the believers as a single unit whereas the term *disciples* describes the believers as individuals.

Since the Epistles focus on the church rather than on individual believers, the absence of the word *disciple* should be expected. However, while the word *disciple* is absent, the concept of discipleship does fit quite naturally into the extensive practical emphasis the Epistles give to the responsibilities of individual believers.

The Elements of Discipleship

The purpose of the Great Commission as stated in Matthew 28:19-20 is seen in the imperative “make disciples” (μαθητεύσατε). This is to be accompanied by “going,”⁹ and involves the two steps indicated by the parallel participles “baptizing” (βαπτίζοντες) and “teaching” (διδάσκοντες).¹⁰ Disciple-making involves (a) winning others to Christ (“baptizing” implies their conversion, for water baptism was an outer witness of inner conversion) and (b) teaching the commands of Christ. “Christian instruction is to be a continuous process . . . continuing after baptism with a view to enabling disciples to walk worthily of their vocation.”¹¹

These steps are discernible in the discipleship ministry of the Savior. For example, according to Matthew 4:23-25, as Jesus was “going about,” He was “teaching” and “great multitudes followed Him” (NASB). “Baptizing” normally took place as Jesus was mak-

ing disciples, though the baptizing was done by the Apostles (John 3:22; 4:1-2).

After "the beginning" (Acts 11:15) of the New Testament church on the day of Pentecost, the term "make disciples" occurs only once in Acts (in 14:21 as an aorist participle, μαθητεύσαντες). That word is used in connection with Paul's "going" on his first missionary journey, with "baptizing" highly probable (cf. Paul's custom as stated in 16:15, 33; 19:5), and with teaching (14:21-22). Though the word "teaching" is not used in 14:21-22, it is implied in the words "strengthening the souls of the disciples" and "encouraging them to continue in the faith" (NASB). Thus discipleship — baptizing (with evangelism as its foundation) and teaching — was the process through which local churches were planted and proper leadership prepared (14:23).

These aspects of discipleship were involved in the establishment of the churches at Jerusalem (Acts 2:41-42; 5:21, 25, 42), Antioch (Acts 11:26; 15:35), Corinth (Acts 18:11), and Ephesus (Acts 20:20). Paul also taught in Rome (Acts 28:31). He was known as a teacher of the Jews (21:21, 28). It is clear from these narratives in the Book of Acts that the Great Commission of the risen Lord was carried out as the "going" believers were baptizing and teaching. Christ's universal church (Matt. 16:18) was thus being built as local churches were established and edified (Acts 14:21-23).¹²

The Epistles deal more with the day-to-day needs of the local churches than with geographical expansion (cf. Acts 1:8) as in the Gospels and Acts. Consequently little is said in the Epistles about "baptizing." But as already discussed, baptizing was an integral part of the churches' ministries as seen in the narratives in Acts.

A major focus of the Epistles is on "teaching" and "learning." This activity interlocks with being an "example" (1 Tim. 4:12; 1 Pet. 5:3) which others can imitate (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6).¹³

In connection with "teaching," passages such as Ephesians 4:11-16 and Colossians 3:16 speak of discipleship within the body of Christ. As believers spend time together in a local church (Heb. 10:25) individuals (1 Pet. 2:2, 5) in Christ's universal church (Matt. 16:18) are edified. Frequently (ten times) Paul referred to teaching (Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 14:19; Gal. 6:6; Eph. 4:21; Col. 2:7; 3:16; 2 Thess. 2:15; 1 Tim. 4:11; 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:2) as did the writer to the Hebrews (5:12) and the Apostle John (1 John 2:27). And four times Paul referred to "teachers" (1 Cor. 12:28;

Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11).¹⁴ To the believers in Colossae Paul explained the message and ministry of Christ (Col. 1:24-27; cf. Matt. 28:18-20). Colossians 1:28 gives a clear goal for the life of the disciple — maturity in Christ. This was only hinted at in Matthew 28:20 by the words, “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (NASB).

“Learning” is a comprehensive term related to the activity of discipleship as seen in the Epistles. It includes a broad range of subject matter. Much of what believers learn is under the tutelage of human teachers (Phil. 4:9). But much is learned through the circumstances of life (4:11) in which only the Holy Spirit is the believer’s teacher (John 14:26). It must be remembered that discipleship purposes to help the disciple become like Christ (Eph. 4:20-21), not like a fallible human discipler. Christlikeness is accomplished by means of the Holy Spirit, the primary “Leader” (Gal. 5:18; Rom. 8:11). The Lord uses Spirit-controlled instruments to accomplish His purpose.

The Implications of Discipleship

Acknowledging that discipleship is present in the New Testament Epistles not only gives a more complete understanding of discipleship, but it also lends substantial aid in solving the difficulty of how discipleship fits into ecclesiology. With this in mind, several concluding implications may be suggested.

1. Making disciples is a process that begins with believers taking the initiative in presenting the gospel to the unsaved in order to bring them to salvation. This is followed by water baptism and by a continued process of teaching the Word of God. “A disciple is not one who has already learned, but one who is always learning. The ‘school-days’ of a Christian are never over.”¹⁵

2. The corporate teaching and fellowship of a local church are indispensable for developing spiritual maturity in individual believers. In the local church spiritual gifts are to be exercised (Rom. 12), and it is “the proper working of each in part” (Eph. 4:16, NASB) that builds up the body of Christ and thus each member.

3. Since discipleship has Christlikeness as its ultimate aim (1 Cor. 11:1; Eph. 4:13, 15, 20; Col. 1:28), the human “discipler” must be careful not to spoil the product. Whether for good or bad, the disciple will become like his teacher (Luke 6:40). Thus it is beneficial for more than one leader to be involved with even close-knit discipleship groups in order to attempt to balance each

other's weaknesses (which all leaders have).¹⁶ Another way to guard against the problem of disciples taking on the weaknesses of their leaders is for the more mature believers in a local church, including the biblically qualified leaders (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1), to be involved as team leaders of discipleship groups. They should all be "leading by example" anyway (1 Pet. 5:3). Furthermore, they are to be imitated (Heb. 13:7) in their life of faith by the other members of the church.

4. In-depth discipleship training was used to equip the foundational leaders of the New Testament church (Eph. 2:20). Thus it is logical that churches today think of discipleship as a step toward developing qualified leadership. As an experienced practitioner Eims has insightfully stated, "If you want to study how to make disciples, study Acts. If you want to study leadership training, study the Gospels."¹⁷

5. Certainly discipling should be a source for producing capable teachers (2 Tim. 2:2). If the responsibility for helping believers to mature in order to be able to teach (Heb. 5:11-14) were taken more seriously, perhaps the problem of teacher shortages in a large number of churches today would be solved.

6. Discipleship is the means to the end of planting and developing local churches (Acts 14:21-23), thus building Christ's universal church (Matt. 16:18). Discipleship was not meant to be carried on in situations disjointed from the nurture of a local church. As McBirnie wrote, "This was never the Apostolic principle. . . ."¹⁸

These thoughts are by no means the only ramifications of the realization that discipleship is "alive and well" in Acts and the Epistles. In fact, they only touch the surface. But these observations about New Testament discipleship can definitely help believers see the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) as the pattern for planting and building churches. The elements of baptizing and teaching were widely applied during the establishing of the church in the New Testament Apostolic era. Following this pattern of making disciples — and thus establishing churches — must be a prime objective for church leaders today.

Notes

- 1 *Theological Word Book of the Bible*, s.v. "Disciple," by F. Y. Campbell, p. 70.
- 2 *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Great Commission," by Everett F. Harrison, p. 131.
- 3 *Ibid.*, s.v. "Disciple," by Everett F. Harrison, p. 166.

- 4 Ibid.; and William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 486.
- 5 See Rick Yohn, *Now That I'm a Disciple* (Irvine, CA: Harvest House, 1976), p. 12, for a brief, important treatment of this subject.
- 6 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Design for Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), p. 23; and John F. Toord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), pp. 84-85.
- 7 *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, p. 166.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 "Going" is an aorist participle, showing action concurrent with the aorist verb "make disciples." The participles "baptizing" and "teaching" are in the present tense. The "going" was in the sense of the disciples taking the initiative toward non-Jews (in contrast to the "Jewish commission" of Matthew 10:1-15).
- 10 For helpful discussions see either Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1963), p. 108; Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), p. 124; or George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), pp. 182-83.
- 11 A. B. Bruce, "Synoptic Gospels," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 5 vols. (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 1:340.
- 12 It seems that discipleship is the means by which Jesus intended to build His ἐκκλησία since the "how" of the building process is left open in Matthew 16:18-19, apparently to be answered later (i.e., in Matt. 28:19-20). See Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Times* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), p. 179.
- 13 *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "μιέομαι," by W. Michaelis, 4:666-74.
- 14 Cf. Roy B. Zuck, "Greek Words for 'Teach,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 122 (April-June 1965): 158-68.
- 15 R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), p. 277.
- 16 Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple-Making* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 106.
- 17 Leroy Eims, sermon preached at Grace Covenant Church, Austin, Texas, March 22, 1979.
- 18 William Steuart McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1973), p. 23.



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