

July 2024

Review of The Meanings of Discipleship: Being Disciples Then and Now

Cory T. Branham
Liberty University, cbranham1@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/eleu>



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), [Other Legal Studies Commons](#), and the [Social Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Branham, Cory T.. 2024. "Review of The Meanings of Discipleship: Being Disciples Then and Now." *Eleutheria: John W. Rawlings School of Divinity Academic Journal* 8, (1). <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/eleu/vol8/iss1/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Rawlings School of Divinity at Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Eleutheria: John W. Rawlings School of Divinity Academic Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

Review of The Meanings of Discipleship: Being Disciples Then and Now

Abstract

Discipleship is not, and has never been, one specific thing, at one specific time, or place. Rather, it has a rich, but also often unflattering, history. That history is full of ups, downs, rights, wrongs, twists, and turns. Discipleship in the Church can be viewed in two parts; The early Church through the Nineteenth Century being Part I (8). The explosion of Discipleship teachings and tactics that began in the Twentieth Century, and continues to the present, being Part II (9). Discipleship informs some believers to engage socially and politically yet encourages many believers to stay away from those circles.

Keywords

Discipleship, social justice, politics, government, interfaith, Church-race relations

Cover Page Footnote

Cory T. Branham, Doctor of Ministry Candidate, Liberty University

Hayes, Andrew & Stephen Cherry (eds.). *The Meanings of Discipleship: Being Disciples Then and Now*. Norfolk, UK: Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2021. 194 pp. \$32.00.

Christian discipleship can be viewed in two parts, classified by time periods. The first period is the early Church through the nineteenth century (8). The second is the twentieth century on through today (9).¹ The Apostles Peter and John are recognized as ancestors of Christian discipleship (12). Peter and John despite personal failures and hardships brought on by opponents of their faith, were able to navigate the difficult dual roles of a disciple: being with Christ while simultaneously being sent out (16). In *The Meanings of Discipleship: Being Disciples Then and Now*, by Andrew Hayes and Stephen Cherry the public, and costly, nature of discipleship is traced through the ages from a variety of perspectives; historical, social, and denominational.

It is noted that through Christianity's first four hundred years, there were little to no universal methods of discipleship. In the eighth century, church creeds included elements of discipleship that produced commonalities in spiritual growth (41). In increasing measures, after its creedal inclusion, discipleship would become a well-researched and written-about topic by many theologians in the East and West. On a large scale, spiritual growth via discipleship practices became equated with the gaining of wisdom and appropriate experience (53-54).

Several historical theologians are given special mention. Anselm is noted for the composition and sharing of prayers for both public and private use (40). Calvin is particularly noted for his thought that discipleship equaled pious living (60-61). Calvin is also recorded for his teachings explaining Jesus' commandment of discipleship out of His followers via the call to "take up their cross" daily (65). Wesley only used the term discipleship one time in all of his work (71). Yet, his ever-present teachings on the ongoing purification journey of the heart, clearly represent steps on a disciple's path (71, 74). Finally, Bonhoeffer bridges the gap between the disciples of antiquity and modernity. Bonhoeffer argues that Christians have to be "willing participants" in their own discipleship, this growth is not a passive endeavor (93).

Part II begins with a contrast to Part I. Whereas discipleship was rarely codified until the eighth century, modern discipleship can be easily found (105). Because Bonhoeffer's life spans well into the twentieth century, Part II is primarily concerned with the last seventy-five years. In what is truly the strength of the book, its second half aims to apply the previously mentioned historical

¹ Hayes and Cherry each author one section of the book. Generally speaking, each of the seventeen chapters is written by different authors from various traditions, denominations, and discipleship experiences. Hayes and Cherry serve primarily as editors.

contributions to the modern dynamics of Church and secular organizations, Church and social constructs, including race and gender.

In addition to modern mission statements, discipleship is ever-increasingly political. To be a disciple is to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God while simultaneously being a citizen under worldly authorities and rules (121). Due to the political nature of being essentially a dual-citizen, disciples face “secularization” as soon as they step out of the church, and possibly while within. Like Kingdom of God citizens, secularization has a dual nature as well. It includes both poor doctrines creeping into the Church but also includes the Church acting on good doctrine to be more present in various ways in non-Church settings (139).

Jesus is known to have purposefully crossed into secular or adverse cultural settings at least twice. Jesus teaches a Samaritan woman, in public, and has a discussion with a Canaanite woman (150-151).² These interactions are pointed to as a call for “interfaith” opportunities. Working alongside secular institutions and other faiths, disciples collectively serve as “co-gardeners” who plant spiritual seeds, water, and harvest in settings that are not limited to Church functions (174). Historic figures like Bonhoeffer are known to have wrestled with this dual-citizen role, especially where political dynamics are hostile toward disciples who do seek interfaith and secular audiences (84, 179).

Controversial contemporary issues, specifically race relations within the Catholic Church of England, are approached with a pessimistic view. Cases are made for the historical errors of “White Christianity” (160, 162). Perceived progress by White Christians is minimized by the thought that these steps are remembered to be more “heroic” than what they were. Further, it is stated that “all Black Christians” know the truth about racism within the Church, and that Church relations with groups like Black Lives Matter are inadequate (163-164). Minimal evidence is given for these claims, though it is true that these tensions exist and are facing the Church. Similarly, chapter seventeen deals with gender identity issues. While not exhaustive, it is made clear that the Church and gender ideologies will increasingly interact.

A weakness of the book is that the boldest criticisms are often not accompanied by meaningful suggestions for correction. Regarding Church-race relations in England, claims are made as to why Asian and Black Christians are historically and currently oppressed within Catholicism. Blacks, Asians, and female theologians are recognized for the “challenges” they present to the White Church (162). Unfortunately, those minority demographics are simply described as having the truth on their side. However, there are no clear reasons as to how and why that truth was arrived at, and the truth itself is not mentioned in light of discipleship.

² Jn 4; Mt. 7:21-28; Mk. 7:24-29.

Hayes and Cherry's work is undoubtedly relevant for twenty-first century matters of justice and government. Knowing the history of the development of discipleship is a practical study. The modern challenges to discipleship must be understood to properly navigate the dynamic political, social, and interfaith aspects of modernity. Current and future Christian leaders would do well to know and appreciate these perceived and real challenges. Real hurt and controversy exist and therefore, real and meaningful study, dialogue, and understanding will be needed to drive these matters toward positive progress and resolutions.