

THEO 997: Seminar on the Theology of Discipleship

Partial Submission

*The Essence of Discipleship: An Evangelical Perspective*

---

Submitted to

Dr. Michael Mitchell

Liberty University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy, Theology and Apologetics

---

Douglas E. Taylor

101 Muirfield Place

Georgetown, KY 40324

I.D.# L03109823 / (859) 285-9136

December 13, 2013

Professor: Dr. Michael Mitchell

Hours Completed: 12 - Hours Remaining: 45

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
The Need Identified.....	2
Defining the Term .....	5
CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY AS SOURCE INFORMATION.....	11
THE BIBLE AS SOURCE INFORMATION .....	18
Identifying the Term.....	18
Biblical Uses of “Disciple” .....	19
EARLY CHURCH HISTORY AS SOURCE INFORMATION .....	27
Justin Martyr.....	27
Clement of Alexandria .....	29
Origen.....	32
Lactantius .....	35
The Ante-Nicene Summary.....	37
CONCLUSIONS.....	40
WORKS CITED .....	44

## INTRODUCTION

The essence of Christian Discipleship is Jesus Christ – the second person of the Trinity. While one may commit the logical fallacy of circular reasoning by introducing the conclusion into the premise, such is not the intent with this paper. Indeed, it is believed that there is enough confusion and difficulty in defining exactly what discipleship is, much less trying to tackle the essence of discipleship, that there is significant value in clearly stating the answer in the beginning and then demonstrating the strength of that position through the balance of this work.

This paper shall be limited exclusively to Christian Discipleship. Beyond this, specific delimiters shall be employed to focus the evaluation more concisely. Delimiters shall be those elements of the discussion, which are considered to be *a priori*, or a First Principle in nature, or are simply not within scope of this project. Thus, and because this paper is presumed to be written for a Christian audience, no attempt shall be made to prove the existence of God. Further, because God exists, and because it is believed that He has chosen to communicate with mankind either audibly or in written format, no efforts will be made to prove that the Bible is God's message to mankind. In like manner, inerrancy and infallibility are not within the scope of this paper. Lastly, and as the final example related to First Principle matters, because of the *a priori* position that God exists, it is taken that He has the right to make the rules, thus His instructions to mankind are based on His authority, making the Bible authoritative in content.

A second area where delimiters will be applied relates to historical timing. Of particular interest in this work shall be how select early philosophers understood essence. Likewise, it shall be necessary to examine select Biblical passages related to discipleship in order to assess whether or not the passages provide any insight into the essence of discipleship, as it was understood during the Apostolic Era. Lastly, an examination shall be made of writings from the Early Church Fathers, or the Ante-Nicene Fathers, as these were considered to be the Church leaders in the period following the Apostles of Jesus up to A.D. 325. The period between A.D. 325 and A.D. 1900 are purposefully excluded from consideration in this work. One exception to this timeline shall be uses of translations of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, and those translations shall be from A.D. 1885-6. This is not to say that there is nothing to be learned from the era in question, rather it is simply suggested that the era is too far past the point of the origin of the Church to provide insight into what the earliest Christians considered to be the essence of discipleship.

### **The Need Identified**

In preparing for a course on discipleship, it was undoubtedly believed that those attending would not only understand what discipleship is, but also be able to clearly and concisely define what exactly discipleship is in terms of both the whole and the constituent parts. After all, the class was comprised of one professor and thirteen doctoral students; so intellectual horsepower would not be a hindrance. Thus, the first seminar began with what some believed would have been a very direct, elementary, and simplistic question: What is the essence of discipleship? Such a question turned out to be anything but direct, elementary, or simplistic.

Two and a half days later the group was still debating what exactly it means when one is to reference the essence of discipleship. The discussion tended to veer off into praxis, focusing more on what it meant to *do* discipleship rather than identifying what is the essence of discipleship. Recognizing the need to clearly define both discipleship and the essence of discipleship, it was necessary to build functional definitions, relying on consensus, which would help guide the study. To that end, the following two definitions were accepted.

*Discipleship: By the grace of God, Christian discipleship is the process by which the teacher engages and facilitates the training of a follower in self-denial with the goal of producing godliness.*

*Essence of Discipleship: The essence of discipleship is one person helping another person grow in Christlikeness.*

After further study and careful consideration, this writer finds it necessary to dismiss the above definition for the essence of discipleship. This is based on the belief that the two definitions above have such commonality as to render them the same. The justification for this move is based on the following points.

First, it is suggested that both identify what is *done* in discipleship, but neither definition clearly identifies what it is that makes discipleship just that – discipleship. The need for clarity around exactly what constitutes the essence of Christian Discipleship is critical, for if one does not know what something is, how are they to know what it is not. To that end, the purpose of this paper shall be to not only clearly define what it means when one speaks of the essence of anything, but also to define as clearly and concisely as possible the essence of discipleship. Second, it is offered that the provided definition as it relates to the essence of discipleship permits a wide range of subjectivity in the

interpretation and execution of discipleship. An example of this very point can be demonstrated easily.

While insisting that theology is rooted in the concrete life of the church (that is, the life of faith), Schleiermacher attempted to correlate it with the philosophy of his day – Romanticism. Religion, he argued, is no worse off than art or morality, forms of life that are similarly based on modes of human feeling. The feeling that is constitutive of the church and thus of theology as well is for Schleiermacher that of the believer as well as the corporate society of the church. Theology has an autonomy over against philosophy because of this constitutive religious feeling.<sup>1</sup>

Following in the wake of Schleiermacher, nineteenth-century liberal theologians portrayed the Christian faith in general and Jesus' life and teaching in particular as the fulfillment of humankind's highest religious (or moral) aspirations, aspirations that these thinkers thought they found engraved – albeit perhaps only in embryonic form – in (universal) human nature.<sup>2</sup>

An initial problem facing attempts to show the external reference of supposedly objective forms of religious experience is that of identifying its referent. It is often unclear whether the experience is primarily of a state of affairs or of the entity which brings about that state. Is Schleiermacher's 'feeling of absolute dependence', for example, primarily an awareness of our contingency or an immediate awareness of the being on which (or on whom) we depend?<sup>3</sup>

Thus, it is suggested here, and shall be demonstrated in a moment, that the essence of discipleship cannot be based on subjective criterion. To employ the concept of one person helping another person allows for the introduction of a great deal of subjectivity, thus rendering the definition ineffective. Further, utilizing experience as a mode by which to define religion or, in the case of this paper, the essence of discipleship, provides

---

<sup>1</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Christ And Concept: Doing Theology And The "Ministry" Of Philosophy," in *Doing Theology in Today's World*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Raids: Zondervan, 1991), 119-120.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 34.

<sup>3</sup> David A. Palin, *The Anthropological Character of Theology: Conditioning Theological Understanding* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 106.

an unstable foundation from which to build, as there would appear to be no clear method or position from which to quantify, qualify, or define said experiences.

### Defining the Term

Accepting the consensus definition for discipleship, it is necessary to understand what is meant when one asks the question of essence. Thus, a fitting point of departure would be to understand clearly what is meant by the word *essence* as used in modern communication.

Essence – n.

1. The characteristic or intrinsic feature of a thing, which determines its identity; fundamental nature
2. The most distinctive element of a thing
3. A perfect or complete form of something, esp a person who typifies an abstract quality
4. (Philosophy)
  - a. the unchanging and unchangeable nature of something which is necessary to its being the thing it is; its necessary properties
  - b. the properties in virtue of which something is called by its name
 the nature of something as distinct from, and logically prior to, its existence
5. (Christian Religious Writings / Theology) *Theol* an immaterial or spiritual entity
6. (Life Sciences & Allied Applications / Botany)
  - a. the constituent of a plant, usually an oil, alkaloid, or glycoside, that determines its chemical or pharmacological properties
  - b. an alcoholic solution of such a substance
7. (Chemistry) a substance, usually a liquid, containing the properties of a plat or foodstuff in concentrated form
8. a rare word for perfume<sup>4</sup>

Examining the current definition of essence, it is suggested that only definitions one through five are of interest to this paper. It is cautioned at this point that while an

---

<sup>4</sup> *Collins English Dictionary - Complete and Unabridged*, ninth Edition (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003).

examination of the current definition will help in establishing the denotation of what is meant today when one uses the word essence, the modern definition alone will not suffice in understanding what specifically is the essence of Christian Discipleship without first understanding how those in the past would have understood the same word.

Based on the definition offered, when one would discuss the essence of any given thing, by necessity and indeed default, limits are defined by and specifically about the object in question. Further, if one is to accept the current definition as being consistent over time, and if by essence one means the unchanging or unchangeable aspect of something which is necessary in order for it to be what it is, then how one understands the essence of Christian Discipleship should not be any different today than it was two thousand years ago. If this hypothesis were to be demonstrated correct, then by default the concepts introduced by Schleiermacher whereby theology is defined by experience would be shown false.

By way of example, consider a ball. While a ball does indeed have a circular shape, it is not a circle, and in the same manner a circle is not a ball. The intrinsic feature which determines the identity in this case is the comparison between a two dimensional object and a three dimensional object. A circle exists as having both length and width, whereas a ball has depth included as a feature, thus distinguishing it from a circle. While similarities exist, it is not by way of similarity that the two are defined, or the essence identified. Indeed, if the physical does not provide clarity in identifying the essence of a thing, then how is one to employ any form of subjective criterion and arrive at a definitive answer, for if one is to employ experience or feelings as the source for identifying what is meant when one refers to the essence of any given thing in general –

or Christian Discipleship in particular – then how is one to avoid claims of preference as claims of truth? Beckwith makes a similar argument in comparing preference to morality.

Moral relativism has stunted the ability of many to grasp the nature of moral claims. Some people often confuse *preference-claims* with *moral-claims* or reduce the latter to the former.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond this, it would appear that because religion – including Christianity – appeals to the concept of right and wrong, and because there is an attempt to answer the question of how one ought to live and behave, there must be some criterion extant to the will of man. Charles would seem to agree with this conclusion.

For this reason Gilbert Meilaender reminds us that all serious moral theory will require (1) that we judge actions, in terms of right and wrong; (2) that we judge character, i.e., the goodness or badness of the moral agent; and (3) that we evaluate the goals, values, and intentions of actions.<sup>6</sup>

It would seem fair, then, to say that Charles is ascribing to the idea that the behaviors of individuals are based on something more than experience or feelings. If this is taken to be true, and again turning to the consensus definition for the essence of discipleship, it is insufficient to say that one person helping another person grow in Christlikeness adequately identifies the essence of discipleship. This is concluded based on the openness, or subjectivity allowed, within the definition.

How, then, should one understand what is meant by essence today? Returning to the definition of essence, it can be seen that there are eight key points of interest to the one attempting to define the essence of Christian discipleship. We see 1) there is a particular characteristic, or 2) an intrinsic feature which determines identity, 3) the

---

<sup>5</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>6</sup> J. Daryl Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 148.

essence will be the fundamental nature of the subject in question, 4) the essence is the most distinctive element of the subject, 5) the essence is unchanging and unchangeable, and is indeed necessary for the subject to be the very thing that it is, 6) the essence is what allows the subject to be called by name, 7) the essence is distinct from what it is called and that essence existed prior to the subject, and 8) essence is immaterial or spiritual in terms of its existence.

If these eight characteristics are to be considered the appropriate denotation for essence, then comparing them to the thesis, namely that the essence of Christian Discipleship is nothing short of the person of Jesus Christ, should become apparent. First, what is the characteristic, intrinsic feature by which Christian Discipleship is identified as distinct from all other forms of discipleship, and what is the fundamental nature? To each the only answer is Jesus. Second, what is the most distinctive element of Christian Discipleship? Again, Jesus Christ is the only answer. Third, if the essence of a thing is unchanging or unchangeable, and this fixed status is necessary for the matter at hand to be the very thing that it is, we have no choice but to point to the person of Jesus. Note that here the definition points not to sufficiency, but necessity in order for the essence to be what it is. Next, the essence is what gives the subject its name, so if the subject is Christian Discipleship, one can only point to Jesus as the place from which the name came. Fifth, the essence is distinct from the subject matter and is logically prior to the existence of the subject. Again, looking to Jesus we see that He claimed to exist prior to His earthly ministry and the origination of Christian Discipleship, thus meeting this aspect of the definition.

<sup>57</sup> “You are not yet fifty years old,” the Jews said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!”

<sup>58</sup>“I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” <sup>7</sup>

Finally, if the definition is to be considered accurate, the essence of the subject at hand is considered to be immaterial or spiritual in nature. But if the essence of the subject at hand is a noun, and yet it is believed to be immaterial or spiritual in nature, how then would one know of that existence, much less attempt to identify Jesus as fitting the object of discussion?

Theology, we shall insist, sets out not simply with God as a speculative presupposition but with God known in his revelation. But the appeal to God and to revelation cannot stand alone, if it is to be significant; it must embrace also some agreement on rational methods of inquiry, ways of argument, and criteria for verification. For the critical question today is not simply, “What are the data of theology?” but “How does one proceed from these data to conclusions that commend themselves to rational reflection?” The fundamental issue remains the issue of truth, the truth of theological assertions. No work on theology will be worth its weight if that fundamental issue is obscured. Durable theology must revive and preserve the distinction between true and false religion, a distinction long obscured by neo-Protestant theologians. Either the religion of Jesus Christ is true religion or it is not worth bothering about. True worship is what Jesus demanded: “God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24, RSV). Jesus broke with Jewish religious leaders in his day on the ground that they were falsifying the Old Testament revelation; he came very close, in fact, to denouncing some of the influential religious spokesmen of that time as liars (John 8:44 ff.).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Henry suggests that the immaterial God of Christian Theology has revealed Himself to mankind. He points to the distinction as found in Jesus Christ and his communication that God is Spirit, thus matching the definition.

Based on the examination of what it means to define essence in modern terms, it would appear that Jesus Christ is the only possible response to each point. Christian

---

<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1984 (Jn 8:57–58). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

RSV Revised Standard Version

<sup>8</sup> C. F. H. Henry, *Vol. 1: God, Revelation, and Authority* (14–15). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999.

Discipleship is not built around any single human being. Nobody other than Jesus can lay claim to being the most distinctive element of Christian Discipleship. No human has ever lived a sinless life, thus again pointing to Jesus Christ as the essence. No individual has been unchangeable in nature, thus being the essence of discipleship. No human existed distinct from or logically prior to discipleship and yet still provided the essence of the same. And finally, no human has ever been immaterial or a spiritual entity.

Because of the truth of these individual points as identified from the definition of essence, it is believed that sufficient modern evidence supports the thesis. However, Christian Discipleship has existed for almost two thousand years. Understanding that language changes over time, it shall be necessary to examine not only the Bible for clues as to how people understood discipleship during the Apostolic Era, but also to examine how the early Church understood discipleship following the death of the apostles. In addition to this, it is appropriate to evaluate some philosophical writings to glean an understanding of how, from a philosophical perspective, people understood what was meant when one spoke of the essence of any given thing.

## CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY AS SOURCE INFORMATION

Understanding how essence is defined today is certainly important as one endeavors to understand what constitutes the essence of discipleship. However, and in consideration of the fact the question at hand is to define the essence of Christian Discipleship, it is not only reasonable, but also necessary to examine how essence was understood in the years leading up to and during the formation of the early church. To that end it shall be beneficial to examine how philosophers understood essence. While one might choose to examine multiple philosophers, this paper shall focus on the work of Philo specifically.

Philo is of particular interest for a couple of key reasons. First, he was Jewish, and second he was a contemporary of Jesus and the Apostles. Beyond this, it is known that Philo's writings influenced the early church.

**PHILO JUDAEUS** (Phī' lō Jū dē ūs) Early Jewish interpreter of Scripture known for use of allegory. Also known as Philo of Alexandria, he lived about the same time as Jesus (about 20 B.C. to A.D. 50). A member of a wealthy Jewish family in Alexandria, Egypt, He was well educated in Greek schools and used the Greek OT, the Septuagint, as his Bible.

Philo's writings—particularly his commentaries on the Scriptures—influenced the early church. A literal interpretation was all right for the average scholar, but for the enlightened ones such as himself, he advocated an allegorical interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> J. Taulman, Philo Judaeus. In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen & T. C. Butler, Ed.) (1293–1294). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003.

Little is known of the life of Philo himself; neither his birth nor his death may be dated, the one sure date in his career being his membership in the embassy to Gaius (Caligula) in AD 39. From this it is evident that he was quite old at that time, and conjecturally we may place his dates as approximately 20 BC to AD 45. From his writings it may be deduced that, as a leader of the Jewish community, he spent much of his life in the duties of public service. His natural bent, however, was to the life of contemplation and the pursuit of philosophy, in which, as he asserts, he spent his youth (*Concerning the Special Laws*, 3:1), perhaps in such a community as the Therapeutae, described by him in *Concerning the Contemplative Life*. Although he was obliged to leave this to take up his duties, he found opportunity to produce a body of writings on philosophical and theological topics.<sup>10</sup>

Recognizing that Philo was intentional with regard to his use of the allegorical method of interpreting scripture, what can be learned of his understanding of essence, especially as it related to matters of a religious nature? According to Birdsall, Philo's understanding of God was that while man is made in God's image, God is not in the image of man, and man does not look like God. Note how Birdsall makes reference to the similarity between God and man being the soul, or mind.

XXIII. (69) So then after all the other things, as has been said before, Moses says that man was made in the image and likeness of God. And he says well; for nothing that is born on the earth is more resembling God than man. And let no one think that he is able to judge of this likeness from the characters of the body: for neither is God a being with the form of a man, nor is the human body like the form of God; but the resemblance is spoken of with reference to the most important part of the soul, namely, the mind: for the mind which exists in each individual has been created after the likeness of that one mind which is in the universe as its primitive model, being in some sort the God of that body which carries it about and bears its image within it. In the same rank that the great Governor occupies in the universal world, that same as it seems does the mind of man occupy in man; for it is invisible, though it sees everything itself; and it has an essence which is undiscernible, though it can discern the essences of all other things, and making for itself by art and science all sorts of roads leading in divers directions, and all plain;

---

<sup>10</sup> J. N. Birdsall, Philo. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible Dictionary* (D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman, Ed.) (3rd ed.) (923). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.

it traverses land and sea, investigating everything which is contained in either element.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that when referencing the mind one is not referencing the human organ called the brain, rather the object of consideration is the product of what is presumed to take place in the brain – rational thought. As such, thought in and of itself is not a physical entity; it lacks form and tangibility. Returning to the modern definition of essence, there is no discontinuity between the theory that when one references essence one is actually referencing that which is immaterial, or incorporeal by nature according to Philo. This satisfies the fifth definition.

However, what of the first four definitions? Of particular interest would be the idea that essence is the unchanging or unchangeable nature of something which is necessary to its being the thing it is, and the properties in virtue of which something is called by its name. Moreover, remembering that essence is the nature of something as distinct from, and logically prior to, its existence, there is no room for considering man as being the essence of Christian Discipleship. Rather, it would appear that when considering Philo's example of the mind, the human mind is but a form or copy of the original. Indeed, it would be difficult to impose the idea that the essence of Christian Discipleship could have mankind as the subject rather than the direct object of said discipleship, if for no other reason than the limitations placed by requiring an unchanging or unchangeable nature.

Beyond the need for an unchanging or unchangeable nature, what shall be said about the point whereby the essence is the most distinctive element of a thing? Philo makes no mention of the supremacy of mankind, or the superiority of his intellect.

---

<sup>11</sup> Philo of Alexandria, & Yonge, C. D. *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (10–11). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995.

Rather, the First Principle as set forth by Philo was none other than God. To reference mankind as the distinctive element would be nothing short of a category mistake and at worst a sign of unbridled arrogance. Such would appear to be consistent with what Boa said regarding the product of discipleship.

We can, however, appraise the equipping dimension (teaching and training) and because of this, there is a natural tendency to measure the outcome of discipleship in terms of specific levels of knowledge and/or skill. The human disposition to count, control, measure, and manipulate makes us more comfortable with reducing discipleship to a program than creates a quantifiable product. If we overlook this tendency, we will be inclined to define discipleship in terms of outward conformity rather than inward transformation. To do this is to miss the essence of spiritual formation – becoming like the Master by moving from faith *in* Christ to the faith *of* Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, such a propensity to focus on outward conformity rather than inward transformation, there is significant risk today of misunderstanding the purpose behind Christian Discipleship. Truly, even Bonhoeffer’s understanding of discipleship leaves the door open for measuring what one does outwardly rather than the inner change.

“When Christ calls a man,” says Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “he bids him come and die.” There are different kinds of dying, it is true; but the essence of discipleship is contained in those words.<sup>13</sup>

Returning to Philo, what can be said of his understanding related to the subject of discipleship in general, and theistic discipleship in particular? Consider the following passage:

But those men who have forsaken human instruction, and having become well disposed disciples of God, and having arrived at a comprehension of knowledge acquired without labour, have passed over to the immortal and most perfect race of

---

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 382.

<sup>13</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 11. Bonhoeffer's quote was referenced by G.K.A. Bell in the Foreword.

beings, and have so received an inheritance better than the former generations of created men; and of these men Isaac is reckoned as a companion.<sup>14</sup>

Two points need to be made here regarding this passage. First, Philo indicates explicitly that those to whom he would apply the title “disciples” are in fact disciples of God. Thus, the subject of discipleship is none other than God Himself, with man being the direct object of that discipleship. Second, note that there is indication of forsaking human instruction. This is not to say that training and education are of little or no value. On the contrary, as noted above Philo was a leading member of the Jewish community and as such would have been educated by the Jewish leaders who had come before. As such it is unwarranted to conclude that Philo was denigrating the idea that humans are trained by humans. It is more reasonable to believe that the point of his objection was the reliance on human wisdom rather than on the teaching and person of God. This would appear to be confirmed by Ogden in his assessment of Isaiah 6.

When God does reveal himself as he really is, we either ignore what we see or repress it. We do this because of what God reveals about himself. What we discover about him is too much to handle. The writer of the book of Hebrews says, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31). This was Isaiah’s experience. He was brought face to face with God in his essence – and he trembled to the bone, crying out, “Woe to me!...I am ruined!” (Isaiah 6:5).<sup>15</sup>

Philo turned to the writings of Moses to make the same point about the uniqueness of God, His virtues, and His essence.

For of virtues, the virtues of God are founded in truth, existing according to his essence: since God alone exists in essence, on account of which fact, he speaks of

---

<sup>14</sup> Philo of Alexandria, & Yonge, C. D. *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (94). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 58.

necessity about himself, saying, “I am that I am,”<sup>52</sup> as if those who were with him did not exist according to essence, but only appeared to exist in opinion.<sup>16</sup>

By this, Philo expresses something that exists for only one – something to which all others are dependent. In doing so, and in identifying the same, another aspect of the current definition for essence can be seen. First, in expressing God as existing in essence, he has ascribed to God the most distinctive element of a thing. Second, he has shown God to be the person who typifies an abstract quality, namely essence. Third, by pointing to the self-revealed title *I am that I am*, God has met the criteria of being unchanging. Fourth, God is shown to be distinct from and logically prior to the existence of discipleship.

But what else can be said about Philo’s understanding of essence? Consider the following passage.

Who can venture to affirm of him who is the cause of all things either that he is a body, or that he is incorporeal, or that he has such and such distinctive qualities, or that he has no such qualities? or who, in short, can venture to affirm any thing positively about his essence, or his character, or his constitution, or his movements? But He alone can utter a positive assertion respecting himself, since he alone has an accurate knowledge of his own nature, without the possibility of mistake.<sup>17</sup>

If one is to take this passage at face value, then note that there are clear lines of demarcation between qualities and essence. While it is admitted that by the use of qualities one might be making attempts at showing the most distinctive element of a thing and thus demonstrating the essence of said thing, the question whether that quality is *a priori* or if it is simply a means for describing something greater. Looking to Philo’s own words it would appear that even he believed that what is known of God is known by the

---

<sup>52</sup> Exodus 3:14.

<sup>16</sup> Philo of Alexandria, & Yonge, C. D. *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (129–130). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

self-revelation of God, and then that revelation is only a small portion of who He is in full. The task of Moses was to lead the people of Israel to the Promised Land. The people learned of God and His requirements through the human agent Moses, but what shall be said of the teaching – was it discipleship? If one accepts the consensus definition of discipleship as offered, then yes, this meets the definition. But the essence of the discipleship was not Moses, nor was it even the act of training. The essence of discipleship would go back to the very nature and person of God Himself, for without the intervention of God, there would not have been any Sianatic Covenant. As such neither the leading of the people nor the teaching of the people reaches back to the essence. In order to find the essence, even for Philo, one must return to God Himself.

## THE BIBLE AS SOURCE INFORMATION

Because the Bible is the written record of how God has intervened in history with mankind, it is only fitting that it be used in any attempt to understand what the first Christians would have understood to be the essence of discipleship. It is hopeful that by examining the term used for disciple, one can glean an understanding of what was believed to be the First Principle, *a priori*, or core of Christian Discipleship.

Perhaps some would question why it is worthy to pursue identifying the very essence of Christian Discipleship. While some would focus their energies on praxis of discipleship, others may simply offer that so much time has passed that the culture has shifted, leaving the question moot. But if that is the case, what then are we to do with the Holy Spirit?

It is almost unbelievable that the Holy Spirit condescends to dwell with people. And yet we know that our Lord's parting gift to His disciples was the abiding presence of the third Person of the Trinity. Since Pentecost He has not only been the governor and director of the church, but the personal companion of each individual member.<sup>18</sup>

### Identifying the Term

Part of the difficulty in defining the essence of discipleship may be that one does not find the word "discipleship" in the Bible. To be clear, simply because the word is not

---

<sup>18</sup> C. H. Benson, C. H. *Biblical Faith: Doctrines Every Christian Should Know*. Biblical Essentials Series (36). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003.

used in the text does not mean that the concept or practice is without merit. Indeed, it may rightly be concluded that discipleship is the vehicle by which one grows in Christlikeness, but the process is but a methodology, and methods are subject to review, revision, and correction. The closest that we can get to the word discipleship is disciple, and that shall be sufficient for determining the essence. For as a disciple, one should be able to clearly distinguish between the methodology and the First Principle.

Based on connotation, most believe a disciple to have been a follower of Jesus. But as is often the case, the English leaves something to be desired when trying to express the thoughts of a First-Century Palestinian community of believers. Looking to the Bible, one finds that the word for disciple is μαθηταί. Using the 1984 NIV, it is found that the word disciple occurs 296 times in 284 verses, and of that count the word is used twice in Isaiah, and the balance is found between Matthew and Acts.<sup>19</sup> Again turning to the expressed delimiters for this paper, with the belief that the Bible is God's message to mankind, and that the message is inerrant, infallible, and authoritative, it shall not be necessary to provide an exhaustive examination of all instances of the use of the term disciple.

### **Biblical Uses of "Disciple"**

The first occurrence of the word disciple in the New Testament is found in Matthew 5:1. Here is the famous scene of Jesus teaching the Beatitudes and with Him are His disciples. The word is defined as

---

<sup>19</sup> This word count was based on using Libronix to search the 1984 NIV for the word "disciple." No reference was found in the same version for the word "discipleship".

**27.16 μαθητής<sup>b</sup>, οὔ** *m*: (derivative of *μανθάνω*<sup>a</sup> ‘to learn, to be instructed,’ 27.12) a person who learns from another by instruction, whether formal or informal—‘disciple, pupil.’<sup>6</sup> οὐκ ἔστιν μαθητῆς ὑπὲρ τὸν διδάσκαλον, κατηρητισμένος δὲ πᾶς ἔσται ὡς ὁ διδάσκαλος αὐτοῦ ‘no pupil is greater than his teacher; but every pupil, when he has completed his training, will be like his teacher’ Lk 6:40.<sup>20</sup>

**3412 μαθητής** (*mathētēs*), οὔ (*ou*), ὁ (*ho*): n.masc.; ≡ Str 3101; TDNT 4.415—**1.** LN 36.38 **follower**, often a disciple who is a believer and close follower, though other less committed relationships are indicated (Mt 8:21; 10:1; 12:49; Lk 14:27; Ac 6:1); **2.** LN 27.16 **pupil**, student, one tutored, implying a closer relationship than mere information (Mt 10:24, 25)<sup>21</sup>

But note what is said of the definition. There is a distinction made in the Greek indicating what the individual might see as levels of commitment. While the twentieth century mindset would superimpose the idea that a disciple is a follower of someone, it does not tell the entire story. In one case the word is used to mean someone who is a pupil of another, while at the same time the word can make reference to a student who is a follower of someone, and Swanson indicates that the second definition may even imply a closer relationship than mere information. Thus, the question that is to be answered is whether Christian Discipleship is defined such that a Christian disciple can be in either

---

*m* masculine

<sup>6</sup> ὁ μαθητῆς<sup>b</sup> ‘disciple, pupil’ differs from μαθητῆς<sup>a</sup>, which has the sense of being a disciple or follower of someone (see 36.38).

<sup>20</sup> Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. *Vol. 1: Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (327). New York: United Bible Societies, 1996.

n. noun, or nouns

masc. masculine

Str *Strong’s Lexicon*

TDNT Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*

LN *Louw-Nida Greek-English Lexicon*

LN *Louw-Nida Greek-English Lexicon*

<sup>21</sup> J. Swanson, J. *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc, 1997.

one of these classifications. Again, the significance is in understanding what the earliest Christians believed to be Christian Discipleship.

Two passages shall be sufficient to provide example of the first meaning of disciple – one who is a pupil. Consider Matthew 8:21. In order to provide for context, verses eighteen through twenty-two are shown.

<sup>18</sup> When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. <sup>19</sup> Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”

<sup>20</sup> Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

<sup>21</sup> Another disciple said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

<sup>22</sup> But Jesus told him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” <sup>22</sup>

Note how in 8:21 the author wrote that the person imploring Christ is referenced as a disciple. Turning to the Greek, this is the same word that is used of the twelve that Jesus called to Himself to be His disciples. Yet here we are not provided with the name of the disciple – they are just listed as a disciple. Further, we do not know the level of commitment the person had to Jesus. In fact, this passage does not provide sufficient information to learn whether the person was simply a pupil, or if they were a follower of Jesus. It is one thing to know of someone, or to know of his or her teachings, while it is an entirely different thing to know someone. It is possible that one might infer from Jesus’ response to “follow me” that the individual was merely a pupil, but not a follower of Jesus as a person, and perhaps may even be said to not have had a relationship with Jesus. The response by Jesus was not a suggestion, but a command: Follow me.

---

<sup>22</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1984 (Mt 8:18–22). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Such would appear to have been a common theme during Jesus' ministry. In fact the author of John wrote of how many disciples left Jesus following His teaching that He was the bread of life.

<sup>60</sup> On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

<sup>61</sup> Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? <sup>62</sup> What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! <sup>63</sup> The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit<sup>a</sup> and they are life. <sup>64</sup> Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. <sup>65</sup> He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him."

<sup>66</sup> From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

<sup>67</sup> "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.

<sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup> We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

<sup>70</sup> Then Jesus replied, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!" <sup>71</sup> (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.) <sup>23</sup>

Note how the word disciple is used three times in this passage. First we see that the word is used to indicate that many disciples found Jesus' teaching to be difficult to understand. The use of the word disciple here gives no evidence as to whether or not those expressing difficulty included the twelve Jesus had chosen, or if it was the other followers. Likewise, it gives no indication if these grumbling disciples were mere pupils or if they were followers of Jesus as a person. What comes next is critical to our study of the essence of Christian Discipleship.

Look to verse 64 where we are told that some who were present – yes, some who were called disciples, are shown to have not believed. If this is the case, and we are to

---

<sup>a</sup> Or *Spirit*

<sup>23</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1984 (Jn 6:60–71). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

take the passage as being a true reflection of the circumstances at the time, then it would appear to be clear that it is possible to be a disciple of Jesus and not be a follower of Jesus. Not only were there some who did not believe, note that the passage clearly expresses that from that time on many of the disciples turned away from Jesus and no longer followed Him.

The response of the masses was different from what is seen of the twelve. Christ asked the question of the twelve whether or not they too were going to leave, presumably in an attempt to strengthen their faith in the wake of so many leaving.<sup>24</sup> Note that none of the twelve left Jesus, with Peter giving the reason: Christ was the only one with the answers – He was the Holy One of God. Thus it can be demonstrated that, at least for Peter, being a disciple meant a commitment to following the person and not a pupil of what the teacher might have to say. Clearly there would be points future to this where the faith of the twelve would be shaken.

Based on the Greek it would appear that those who turned away from Jesus at this point did not follow Him in the future, which would be a significant difference from the one we typically have dubbed as Doubting Thomas.

<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”

<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

<sup>28</sup> Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

---

<sup>24</sup> E. A. Blum, E. A. John. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck, Ed.) (Jn 6:66–69). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985.

<sup>29</sup> Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

<sup>30</sup> Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written that you may<sup>a</sup> believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. <sup>25</sup>

Here we see a different picture of a disciple. The timing is post-crucifixion and post-resurrection. Thomas is referenced as one of the twelve, and yet he is also referenced as one who did not believe the resurrection had taken place. Jesus tells Thomas to stop doubting and believe, to which Thomas responded with, “My Lord and my God!” With seeing Jesus and the marks of the crucifixion, Thomas acknowledged the deity of Jesus and apparently initiated a following of the person of Jesus – not simply a pupil who was around to hear what the teacher might have to say.

Interestingly, there are four clear instances where Jesus accepted the worship of men – an act reserved only for God. The first has already been shown above with Thomas. Just prior to this event we see the women at the empty tomb worshipping Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

<sup>8</sup> So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” <sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>a</sup> Some manuscripts *may continue to*

<sup>25</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1984 (Jn 20:24–31). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* (Mt 28:5–10).

Admittedly both of these cases are post-resurrection. However we do have two cases where Jesus received worship prior to His crucifixion and resurrection. Turning to Matthew 14:33 we see the response of the twelve following Jesus and Peter walking on water.

<sup>25</sup> During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. <sup>26</sup> When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

<sup>27</sup> But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

<sup>28</sup> “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

<sup>29</sup> “Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

<sup>31</sup> Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

<sup>32</sup> And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. <sup>33</sup> Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” <sup>27</sup>

It is necessary to return to verse twenty-six to identify that those who were in the boat were the twelve, but it is clear that those in the boat believed Jesus to be more than just someone they could listen to on occasion – He was someone worthy of their worship.

Finally, consider John 9. In this chapter Jesus heals the blind man at the pool of Siloam, which then drew the ire of the Pharisees. After questioning the man as to the miraculous healing, they excommunicated him from the Synagogue. After this, Jesus went to him.

<sup>35</sup> Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

<sup>36</sup> “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

<sup>37</sup> Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

<sup>38</sup> Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. <sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1984 (Mt 14:25–33). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* (Jn 9:35–38).

Reading the following verses we see that not only did the man who had formerly been blind worship Jesus, but also he performed this act of worship in the presence of the Pharisees.

Returning once more to the established definition for discipleship, the goal is to grow in Christlikeness. But the answer being sought is the essence of discipleship. It has been suggested already that the essence of Christian Discipleship is none other than the person of Jesus Christ. Considering the passages offered, it is believed that they demonstrate 1) the intrinsic feature which determines the identity of the twelve, and the disciples at large, was Jesus; 2) the most distinctive element of the ministry and teaching was Jesus; 3) Jesus typified an abstract quality of holiness and devotion to God; 4) Jesus claimed to be the *I AM* of the Bible, and accepted worship of man, thus claiming to be the unchanging and unchangeable nature of something which is necessary to its being the very thing that it is; 5) Jesus was distinct from, and logically prior to, Christian Discipleship, and 6) the properties in virtue of which Christian Discipleship is called by name is based on Jesus. Having met no fewer than six of the key points of the definition, it is believed that it has been soundly demonstrated that, based on the Bible, Jesus is the essence of Christian Discipleship.

## EARLY CHURCH HISTORY AS SOURCE INFORMATION

In further seeking to understand the essence of discipleship, one must look to the earliest church leaders. Understanding that it was the Apostles who first started the church as we know it, what differences, if any, are discernable from the teachings of those Apostles and the men who led the church in their absence? The following are excerpts from four different individuals and their view of what it meant to be a Christian disciple. As with the biblical information introduced, there has been no attempt to provide an exhaustive listing for the use of the term disciple during the Ante-Nicene era. For the purpose of this paper it shall be sufficient to demonstrate continuity from A.D. 100 to A.D. 325. That shall be done through examining Justin Martyr (A.D. 100 -165), Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150 – 215), Origen (A.D. 185 – 254), and Lactantius (A.D. 260 – 330).

### **Justin Martyr**

And Ptolemæus, being a lover of truth, and not of a deceitful or false disposition, when he confessed himself to be a Christian, was bound by the centurion, and for a long time punished in the prison. And, at last, when the man<sup>1</sup> came to Urbicus, he was asked this one question only: whether he was a Christian? And again, being conscious of his duty, and the nobility of it through the teaching of Christ, he confessed his discipleship in the divine virtue. For he who denies anything, either denies it because he condemns the thing itself, or he shrinks from confession

---

<sup>1</sup> i.e., Ptolemæus.

because he is conscious of his own unworthiness or alienation from it; neither of which cases is that of the true Christian.<sup>29</sup>

In examining Justin Martyr's comments on Ptolemæus, several key points may be made. First, in stating that his subject was a lover of truth, Justin gives implicit information indicating a belief in the existence of absolute truth. Second, he characterizes Ptolemæus according to his moral practices. Third, we learn that Ptolemæus was a self-professing disciple of Christ. Fourth, Ptolemæus reportedly confessed being a Christian. Now, in reading the words of Justin we find a great deal of interest in the last sentence.

Note that Justin says that no true Christian will condemn Christianity, nor will the true Christian shrink from confessing being a Christian based on unworthiness or alienation from Christ. Ptolemæus identified himself as a disciple, but it may be argued, even if from silence, that his devotion was to the person of Jesus and not to the mere teachings of men or even the established system for training disciples. Considering the question and response as conveyed by Justin, the offense in question was allegiance to Jesus. Remembering that the essence of discipleship is intrinsic, unchanging, unchangeable, and contains properties in virtue of which something is called by its name, there is no reasonable way to infer that Ptolemæus was simply a guy who hung out with the local group of Christians to see what novel ideas they would present this week. If the matter of being a disciple were merely having a head-knowledge of the teachings of Jesus, then it would be easily denied, as knowledge cannot be taken from an individual,

---

<sup>29</sup> Justin Martyr. *The Second Apology of Justin*. In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, Ed.) (189). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

nor can knowledge be seen, as it is of the incorporeal realm. To deny having head knowledge would not lessen that knowledge.

But here we see that for Justin, denial of being a Christian meant to deny the very thing itself – in this case, Christ – or to recognize one’s own unworthiness and alienation from the thing being denied. Paul’s writings would have been known by the Church during the time of Justin, and as such they would surely have known of Paul reminding the Romans that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1), that the believer has been adopted as sons and daughters of God (Ephesians 1:5), and his apology for the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and the future state that awaits the believer in Christ (1 Corinthians 15). Thus, it would appear that the Christian disciple during the time of Justin would have believed themselves to be disciples of Jesus and not a mere seeker of some intellectually held knowledge.

### **Clement of Alexandria**

Now Plato the philosopher, defining the end of happiness, says that it is likeness to God as far as possible; whether concurring with the precept of the law (for great natures that are free of passions somehow hit the mark respecting the truth, as the Pythagorean Philo says in relating the history of Moses), or whether instructed by certain oracles of the time, thirsting as he always was for instruction. For the law says, “Walk after the Lord your God, and keep my commandments.”<sup>830</sup>

He left a book, *De Justitia*, in which he contends for what he represents as Plato’s idea of a community of women in sexual relations. Justly does our author reckon him a destroyer alike of law and Gospel, unworthy even of being classed with decent heretics; and he attributes to his followers all those abominations which had been charged upon the Christians. This illustrates the terrible necessity, which then

---

<sup>8</sup> Deut. 13:4.

<sup>30</sup> Clement of Alexandria. The *Stromata*, or *Miscellanies*. In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume II: Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)* (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, Ed.) (369). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

existed, of drawing a flaming line of demarcation between the Church, and the wolves in sheeps' [sic] clothing, who thus dishonoured the name of Christ, by associating such works of the devil with the adoption of a nominal discipleship.<sup>31</sup>

Clement presents us with some interesting passages from which to consider how he understood Christian Discipleship. First, he points us to Plato and notes that happiness is likeness to God. Such would appear to be consistent with what the instructions of God had been to His people, namely to be holy even as He is holy (Lev 11:44, 45; Lev 19:2; Lev 20:7, 26; 1 Cor 1:2; Eph 1:4; Heb 12:14; 1 Pe 1:15, 16). Thus, imitating the likeness of God may be seen as leading to happiness according to Plato, as cited by Clement. But note what Clement had to say about the practice of discipleship in particular.

Here Clement references that there was a clear division between the Church, or stated more clearly for the culture of today, those who are true, professing believers in Jesus Christ, and the group who would claim the title of Christian, but with little regard for what that title truly entailed. Note that in particular Clement makes reference to those whom he would call "wolves in sheeps' [sic] clothing," and in the very same sentence would levy the charge of the adoption of nominal discipleship. What, then, may be said of Clement's understanding and teaching of discipleship?

Perhaps the best illustration may come from the very church of the twenty-first century, and then even more isolated to the church in North America. Considering the fields of the Midwest, it does not take long to pass farms sporting silos of varying sizes and shapes. Such may be a metaphor for life in the United States, for there is a tendency to compartmentalize life into manageable pieces, separating each by walls that are

---

<sup>31</sup> Clement of Alexandria. *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*. In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume II: Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)* (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, Ed.) (403). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

impenetrable by the contents within each. Being a Christian, or going to church, is something to be done on Sunday mornings and, for the really committed person, perhaps Sunday evenings and an occasional Wednesday. Discipleship is an occasional course offered for the members of the church, with the hope that a few will complete an occasional course of study, leaving both the minister and the student satisfied that something was done. But come Monday morning, church is left behind and work is picked up, for the two are separate and distinct, and in the name of tolerance one dare not confess Christ in the workplace lest they be condemned of being a bigot. Work is left neatly behind in the evenings, where time may be spent with the family. Saturdays are set aside for the silo of sports. All aspects of life are neatly separated and saved – independent of all other areas of life – and brought out at a time of convenience and choice.

While this may sound as though it is a rather harsh assessment of life in the United States, and of Christianity in particular, it does appear to possess an uncomfortable ring of truth. Such was the case being referenced by Clement. Notice his reference to people participating in the works of the devil and practicing nominal discipleship. Indeed, Clement was writing against the very idea that one can segregate their life such that they can participate in the pews with the Prince of Peace on Sunday, only to live life in the Den with the Devil the rest of the time. From this we see that Clement had the very clear idea that discipleship was not a program or pattern of study that started and stopped based on the desires of the individual. No, for Clement the idea of discipleship was obligatory, ongoing, and oriented toward none other than the person of Christ.

## Origen

Among those who placed themselves under his instructions were two young Cappadocians, who had come to Cæsarea with other intentions, but who were so attracted by the whole character and personality of Origen, that they immediately became his pupils. The former of these, afterwards Gregory Thaumaturgus, Bishop of New Cæsarea, has left us, in the panegyric which he wrote after a discipleship of five years, a full and admiring account of the method of his great master.<sup>32</sup>

Notice here how, during the life of Origen, there is mention of two individuals who became pupils of his. Remembering that simply seeking knowledge is but one definition of discipleship, we read further to find mention of yet another individual who pursued knowledge from Origen – Gregory. In fact, we see that Gregory spent five years with Origen as his student. Thus, we see again the picture of discipleship being the following of a person, not a mere accumulation of intellectual knowledge.

Notice how here we see individuals who are following Origen based on his fame and popularity. Note also how this is a significant shift from what was seen during the time of the calling of the twelve in that Jesus was not followed due to His popularity, rather he was arguably followed because of the miracles He would perform. Such may be deemed true based on John 6:66 where we see that many turned away and no longer followed Jesus. Additionally, if one turns to 1 Corinthians 1 we read how Paul addressed the idea of following Apollos, Cephas, or Christ. Here Paul seeks to redirect the

---

<sup>32</sup> Introductory Note to the Works of Origen. In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume IV: Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*. 1885 (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, Ed.) (228–229). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

Corinthians to the recognition that their discipleship, or the one they follow, is not the human, but is in reality none other than Jesus.

And yet there are throughout the whole world—throughout all Greece, and all foreign countries—countless individuals who have abandoned the laws of their country, and those whom they had believed to be gods, and have yielded themselves up to the obedience of the law of Moses, and to the discipleship and worship of Christ; and have done this, not without exciting against themselves the intense hatred of the worshippers of images, so as frequently to be exposed to cruel tortures from the latter, and sometimes even to be put to death. And yet they embrace, and with all affection preserve, the words and teaching of Christ.<sup>33</sup>

But the picture of the Church that is painted is not all negative during the time of Origen. Noting the reference to those who had turned away from their lifeless gods, he shows that these were the ones who yielded themselves to the discipleship of Christ and to the worship of Christ. Here we do not see reference to or indication of the commitment to some program of study, or to the written documents that bore testimony to the Christian faith alone, rather there is clear indication of a focus on the person of Jesus Christ not only as the object of worship, but also as the active agent involved in their inward transformation to one more Christlike in nature.

Additionally, as with the passage from Justin Martyr, we read that those espousing to be disciples of Jesus were subject to being punished, up to and including death. Here the reader sees the image of believers in Jesus holding firmly to the words and teachings of Jesus – the very thing that the original disciples were commanded to convey in Matthew 28:18-22 – teaching them to obey everything that Jesus had commanded. And

---

<sup>33</sup> Origen. (De Principiis F. Crombie, Trans.). In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume IV: Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second* (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, Ed.) (350). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

yet even in the face of death the disciples did not yield their faith in the person of Jesus or His teachings, preferring instead death than to disavow that which they had received.

Whereas all Greece, and the barbarous part of our world, contains innumerable zealots, who have deserted the laws of their fathers and the established gods, for the observance of the laws of Moses and the discipleship of the words of Jesus Christ; although those who clave to the law of Moses were hated by the worshippers of images, and those who accepted the words of Jesus Christ were exposed, in addition, to the danger of death.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, in speaking of Origen we see where he spoke of those who had turned away from their gods and pursued the religion of Israel and the law of Moses, as well as the discipleship of the words of Jesus Christ. A significant difference may be seen in how followers of the two groups – Judaism and Christianity – were being treated during the time of Origen. We note how those who would turn to Judaism were said to have been hated by those who were worshipping images, or idols. But of the Christian he states that the hatred went to the point of death. What then shall be said of Origen's position on Christianity? Again, as was indicated with the passages from both Clement and Justin, the commitment of those called Christian during the time of Origen were not individuals who merely listened to the teachings of those who followed Jesus. The hearing of the message being taught by Christians was not the offense, rather it was the following of those teachings.

If, then, this is to be considered an accurate assessment of what it meant to be a Christian, then what can possibly be meant by executing this following? It is offered that this can mean nothing short of what Jesus Himself had called for from those who would

---

<sup>34</sup> Origen. (De Principiis F. Crombie, Trans.). In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume IV: Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second* (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, Ed.) (350). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.

follow Him during His earthly ministry, “Follow me.” This may be concluded based upon the Great Commission as found in Matthew and again in Acts. Jesus commanded His disciples to 1) go and make disciples, 2) teaching them, 3) to obey everything Jesus had commanded. As was demonstrated in Matthew 8, Jesus used the words ἀκολουθεῖ μοι in response to one who would follow Him on his own terms. Based on the Greek it can be seen that the tense is imperative, thus indicating that the instructions, or teachings, were not to be considered optional, but fell squarely into the third part of the Great Commission, which could be summarized with a single word: obey.

### **Lactantius**

The introductory words to Lactantius may be considered as quite different from what is seen of the followers of Christ in any of the Gospels. Here we have a follower of Jesus – a disciple – living some two hundred years after the death of the last Apostle, John. Times had changed, as had the political systems, and persecution of the Church was considered to be a thing of the past with the ascension of Constantine to the throne.

How strange it seems, after three centuries since John the Baptist suffered, to gain a moment when kings are not actually persecuting Christ in His servants!

How marvellous [sic] the change must have been in the experience of the primitive faithful; the Roman Emperor not ashamed of Jesus, and setting up the cross on the standards of his legions! Tertullian, *De Fuga*, and the troubles of Cyprian about *The Lapsed*, are matters of the past. As in a moment, God has changed the world for His people, and their perils become as suddenly reversed. The world’s favour begins to be the trial of faith, as its hatred before. The mild contemplative attitude of the Church at this period is something surprising. It accepts with little exultation this miracle of the Master; but so long has it been habituated to persecution, that it finds much of its discipline, and not less of its prevailing spirit, neutralized by its very triumph. No more the martyr’s heroic testimony and his crown beyond this life; no such call for the celibate as had been enforced before in tomes of the Christian literature; and what need now of Antony’s invitation to the desert and the cell? But, on the other hand, these ascetic forms of heroic faith were all that were now left to minister to the martyr-spirit, and to perpetuate the habits enforced upon

the early believers. The hermitage and the monastery assumed a new attractiveness, and became dear to sentiment, as to principle before. We must not be surprised, then, at the tendencies of the age now rapidly developed; but let us rejoice for a moment in the times of refreshing from the Lord now at last vouchsafed to that “little flock” to which He had promised the kingdom.<sup>35</sup>

History bears witness to the fact that the Church survived the assault of all who would oppose it, whether from a religious or political platform. With the passage of time the martyrs were a thing of the past and thus became stories of old. The focus of many was the belief that the Church had survived and was the remnant, as stated in the quote above. But what of the disciple of Jesus – what may be learned from this period?

Note two key points. First, notice that with the decline of persecution came the decline of discipline. The Church was no longer standing against the world, rather the world was accepting of the Church, thus reducing conflict. Second, the lifestyle of the Christian as had been seen over the previous two hundred years had begun to shift, with the earliest beginnings of the separation of secular and sacred through the institution of the monastery. It should be readily agreed upon at this point that entry into a monastery was not the mark of being a Christian, just as entering seminary is not the mark of being a Christian today. Because there were Christians both inside and outside the monastery, it would appear that two different lifestyles were beginning to emerge within the Church. Based on this separation, it would not be unreasonable, looking forward seventeen hundred years, to see this as the beginning of the false dichotomy whereby the work one completes is considered to be either secular or sacred.

---

<sup>35</sup> Introductory Notice to Lactantius. In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume VII: Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and Liturgies*. 1886 (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, Ed.) (3). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886.

By the time of Constantine we see the persecution of the Church to be on the decline, and as such we see the Church welcoming their being accepted by society. The active agents from the first three hundred years – those who had suffered martyrdom and persecution, were no longer stories of modern struggles, but were instead relegated to the pages of past history. While purely a theory at this point, and admittedly outside the scope of this work, additional research should be done to determine if the end of persecution and acceptance by society at large had an affect on the Christian community such that the overwhelming acceptance actually weakened the bonds of those who were Christians. It is possible that, with the acceptance by others, the Church no longer had to rely on themselves, and instead began mixing and mingling socially and ideologically with the cultures within which they lived.

### **The Ante-Nicene Summary**

What can be said of the Ante-Nicene period as it relates to the essence of discipleship? Arguably, based on the examples provided it has been demonstrated that the behaviors and focus of the Church changed over time. During the Apostolic Era it was demonstrated that the one who would be called a disciple of Jesus would be one who was following none other than God Himself. The Church was founded on the idea of an unchanging and unchangeable nature of God, the fact that the follower was called a “Christian” because of the name of Jesus Christ; they followed a person who typified an abstract quality; they found Jesus to be distinct from and logically prior to Christianity. Thus, the focus remained clear, and arguably the essence remained to be Jesus.

However, following the deaths of the Apostles, we see a gradual shift in the focus of the Church. Justin was giving apologetic defenses for the faith, and he was followed by Clement of Alexandria who spoke negatively against what he called nominal discipleship. Origen had a following that was at least in part due to public popularity, and by the time of Lactantius the Church appears to have been heading toward becoming either a mixer with society or secluded away from the rest of the world. But what does this mean in terms of the essence of discipleship?

Returning to the definition as has been done repeatedly in this work, the same eight points may be brought back to bear in the discussion. We see 1) there is a particular characteristic, or 2) an intrinsic feature which determines identity, 3) the essence will be the fundamental nature of the subject in question, 4) the essence is the most distinctive element of the subject, 5) the essence is unchanging and unchangeable, and is indeed necessary for the subject to be the very thing that it is, 6) the essence is what allows the subject to be called by name, 7) the essence is distinct from what it is called and that essence existed prior to the subject, and 8) essence is immaterial or spiritual in terms of its existence. The new and more tolerant society could not be the essence, as the political and social climate changed, something counter to the definition. The monastery life was also a change. Similarly, Christianity existed prior to the change in culture and monastic life, but Christianity is not logically prior to itself, so it cannot be the First Principle upon which it is built, so it is not the essence. The key is that although the farther away in time one gets from the earthly ministry of Jesus the more we see things compete for the time and allegiance of the Christian, time and toys can neither meet the definition of nor function as the essence of Christian Discipleship.



## CONCLUSIONS

This work has sought to identify the essence of discipleship. The intent, as stated, was to establish clearly some line of demarcation beyond which nothing remains, thus providing the First Principle, the Uncaused Cause, or the *a priori* beyond which there is no need to seek an answer.

It has been shown that the essence of Christian Discipleship will have a particular characteristic. Unlike Hinduism, Islam, New Age, Scientology, Atheism, or any other religion, Christianity has a characteristic of love. We know that God said that He loved us even while we were sinners, and that the love was deep enough for Him to send a substitute to pay the penalty of our sin. As Christians it is known that Jesus died for our sins. Dying is easy – everyone since Adam has either done it or will do it. Bringing someone back from the dead is the tough part, yet Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead. And He brought a young girl back to life. He brought a young boy back to life. But what can be said of Jesus and His death, for a dead man cannot perform any act to save himself from the grave. Yet Jesus was resurrected bodily from the grave, and thus demonstrated a particular characteristic upon which the Church would be built – the person of Jesus. As such, Jesus is the most distinctive element of Christian Discipleship.

We read in the scriptures about the coming of the anointed one, the Christ. It is from this that we get the name of the Christian. But caution must be urged here, for the issue at hand is not what a follower of Jesus is called, rather what is the essence of

discipleship. While caution is advised, it is also absolutely critical to recognize that it is this very point, the idea that Jesus is the Christ, that is the property in virtue of which the disciple follows Jesus. Thus, because of who Jesus is provides the reason for which people are called to follow. Because of who Jesus is, namely the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, the great I AM, we find that He is unchanging and unchangeable, a necessity in order for something to be the very thing that it is. So without the Christ, there is no foundation for Christianity, and it follows then no foundation for Christian Discipleship.

Essence is by necessity the nature of something as distinct from, and logically prior to, its existence. Jesus claimed in John to have existed in time prior to His physical birth, noting that He existed even before Abraham. Likewise, we see in Colossians 1 that Jesus was the creator of all things that have been made, and that He is the visible image of God. It is beyond the scope of this paper to demonstrate the meaning behind the use of the word “firstborn” by Paul in verse fifteen, but it is offered that this is a reference to position and not any indication of Jesus being a created being. With this thought in mind, Jesus is distinct from Christian Discipleship, or the process by which one grows in Christlikeness, and He is logically prior to Christian Discipleship.

It is offered then, that the essence of Christian Discipleship is none other than Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. The focus of this paper has been to demonstrate this conclusion by way of understanding the definition of essence, looking to how a Jewish philosopher contemporaneous to Jesus understood the term essence, examining the concept of being a follower of Jesus during His earthly ministry, and

finally a select review of how those living after the Apostles and before the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 understood the essence of discipleship.

It is conceded here that there appears to be a shift over the three hundred years in the manner in which Christians understood the idea of Christian Discipleship. Coupling this with the section where the need for this research was laid out, it is suggested that this paper is only a starting point into the study and understanding of the essence of Christian Discipleship. The fear is that while it may be easy, and by this writer believed to be true and warranted, to point to Jesus as the essence of Christian Discipleship, it is not yet clear what this might mean to the Christian today. The one key that may be claimed with absolute certainty is that without Jesus, there is no Christian Discipleship.



## WORKS CITED

- Beckwith, Francis J. *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice*. New York: Cambridge Press, 2007.
- Benson, C. H. *Biblical Faith: Doctrines Every Christian Should Know*. Biblical Essentials Series. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003.
- Birdsall, J. N. *Philo*. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible Dictionary* (D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman, Ed.) (3rd ed.). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
- Blum, E. A. *John*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck, Ed.). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985.
- Boa, Kenneth. *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller. New York: Touchstone, 1995.
- Charles, J. Daryl. *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.
- Clement of Alexandria. *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*. In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume II: Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria* (Entire) (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, Ed.) Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.
- Collins English Dictionary - Complete and Unabridged*. Ninth Edition. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003.
- Grenz, Stanley J., and John R. Franke. *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- Henry, C. F. H. *Vol. 1: God, Revelation, and Authority*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999.
- Introductory Notice to Lactantius*. (1886). In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume VII: Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and Liturgies*. (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, Ed.). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886.

- Introductory Note to the Works of Origen.* In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume IV: Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second.* 1885 (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, Ed.). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.
- Justin Martyr. *The Second Apology of Justin.* In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, Ed.). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.
- Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. *Vol. 1: Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.). New York: United Bible Societies, 1996.
- Ogden, Greg. *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ.* Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007.
- Origen. *De Principiis* F. Crombie, Trans.). In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume IV: Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second* (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson & A. C. Coxe, Ed.). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.
- Palin, David A. *The Anthropological Character of Theology: Conditioning Theological Understanding.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Philo of Alexandria, & Yonge, C. D. *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged.* Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995.
- Swanson, J. *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek* (New Testament) (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc, 1997.
- Taulman, J. *Philo Judaeus.* In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen & T. C. Butler, Ed.). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003.
- The Holy Bible: New International Version. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J.. "Christ And Concept: Doing Theology And The "Ministry" Of Philosophy." In *Doing Theology in Today's World.* Edited by John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey. Grand Raids: Zondervan, 1991.