

Five Things to Learn from the Discipleship of Jesus

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Abstract

The development and progression of Christianity for more than two thousand years has created many variations in terms of views regarding how to run a church and do discipleship. As a result, there are many debates and frictions when people of different backgrounds and demographics meet as fellow workers in local churches. There are different opinions about how discipleship should be done, from a wide range of backgrounds and scales of local churches whose number of members vary. This paper is written with the purpose of examining several principles of discipleship that Jesus demonstrated in the gospels, as well as seeing their implications for churches in the modern era. This paper discusses the definition of biblical discipleship, and how the initiation for discipleship should come from the disciple maker. When discipleship is forced, there will be discomfort that needs to be embraced in the process. In serving, a disciple maker should take the posture of a servant, not a superintendent, towards the disciple and be involved in the life of the disciple to share life with him or her.

Keywords: Discipleship, Christianity, Disciples, Jesus.

I. INTRODUCTION

The church is an institution that Jesus initiated, whose function is to carry out the Great Commission and become the ambassador of the kingdom of God on earth. There is no doubt that the function and role of the church in the lives of believers is immense, as one of the major essences of Christianity is to bring and introduce people to the person of Christ, baptize and teach them to grow in faith and live it, as Jesus stated in Matthew 28:18-20. In addition, one of the most important things Jesus did when He was still on earth, besides dying on the cross to atone for the sins of mankind, was establishing His church. This is what Jesus mentioned in Matthew 16:18, right after Peter said Jesus was the Messiah. This serves as a proof of the importance of a church's presence from the perspective of Jesus, and how intentional Jesus was in planning for its establishment. Despite that, although Jesus personally came down to earth and taught the disciples and modeled what should have been the heart of the church, in fulfilling the functions that have been established for the growth and dynamics of the church, problems and disputes often occur.

When the church initially was running (in the form of a group of believers) after Jesus rose to heaven as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, the early church leaders were people who were supposed to have the highest proximity or closeness to Jesus, as they were people who experienced living first hand with Jesus during His three-and-a-half years of ministry. It would be appropriate to assume that they should bear resemblance to Jesus in the way they see problems, do discipleship, solve conflicts, and so forth. However, these disciples of Jesus were unique individuals with their own characters and features, and when they made disciples and served, these unique features of them showed up. They had their opposing views when it came to rituals (whether eating meat that was given as an offering in the temple was permissible, for example, and how believers were supposed to deal with non-believers or Gentiles), teachings (whether they would like to spread this teaching to Jews exclusively, or to Gentiles as well), and other variations in serving according to the functions and callings personally given to each of them. Imagine all these unique features multiplied exponentially in the span of more than two thousand years to people whose number has way exceeded that of the early church, and their personalities and views are combined in the way they run the church. There are currently many teachings, doctrines, and methods of running the church that are widely varied with their own uniqueness, and find disagreements and opposing views that can result in teachings that attack one another.

The development of the scales of local churches and their leaders makes the styles of discipleship and teaching in every denomination unique in their own ways, according to the culture and customs of each demographic condition. Ways of discipleship can be widely different, from the more proactive one in churches with a smaller scale, to the 'wait-for-them-to-come' and 'additional' in nature in churches with a higher number of church members. Some do this by reading the bible and going deep into it exclusively, but others focus on social activities and caring. The methods of church discipline and grooming are also various, from one that is very forgiving (sometimes due to the need for workers, and there are not many choices available) to lifestyles that are not in accordance with or reflecting the values of Christianity, to one that is full of demands and terms and conditions, making them rather legalistic should they find any shortcomings in their workers. When a believer moves from one local church to another whose way of discipleship is very different from the one he has used to in the previous local church, he can find friction, as found in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. This paper is intended to evaluate some of the essences of discipleship done by Jesus in making disciples in the Gospel and see their implications for believers today.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research paper is conducted by observation of the Bible and interpreting its implications regarding several books and verses chosen as the points of focus. The books that are used as the major reference are the book of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. These books are read as a whole, and after evaluating the overview of each book, some verses, and scopes of the books are picked to be learned further and understood better. In addition to referring to other books and observations of other scholars, the meanings and interpretations are further enhanced as well with observations of the conditions of relevant situations in modern-day churches especially. After comparing the observations and linking them with the situations of the present day, the paper is written to bridge the biblical interpretation in order to be

applied to the current situation as possible principles for guidelines in doing discipleship.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Biblical Definition of Discipleship

Edmund Chan in the IDMC Conference in 2020 defined discipleship as the process of following Jesus by someone who has accepted the Gospel, been taught in the 'internship' system to obey Jesus (in mind, heart, and action), and afterward making other people followers of Jesus. Discipleship is about bringing people to know the person of Christ to the level of being able to accept and believe Him as Lord and Savior, and after that, guiding them in the process of a spiritual journey to be formed into the likeness of Christ. People who are discipled, as a result, will become disciples of Christ, and disciple makers are people who facilitate these happening through the work of the Holy Spirit in the disciple maker and the disciples. Matthew 28:18-20 stated clearly that the real teacher is Jesus, and what is taught today is what Jesus taught his disciples previously. In discipleship, the focus is always on pointing people to Jesus and teaching them how to live His teaching better everyday, to grow in the maturity of faith and understanding.

Discipleship is understood as a matter of imitating leaders in terms of actions, understanding, and processing methods, but it is really about bringing disciples to know Jesus better, more accurately, and through the process, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to understand how they should live it out in their own contexts and conditions. If the disciple maker is the model for duplication or example of living, the discipleship does not make them disciples of Jesus anymore, but disciples of the mentioned disciple maker. Disciples can be manipulated into doing things that are in line with the interest of the disciple maker in the name of discipleship, and they would look for the wisdom of the disciple maker more than the wisdom of God. If the disciple maker has a business that might conflict with the principles of the word of God, there is little chance that he might preach the word of God because of his personal interest. As a result, he could be looking for justifications for such things and teach them as the truth to his disciples. His disharmony with his parents-in-law, for example, could be the reason for him to teach his disciples that harmony in a family is a common and excusable thing if it does not happen in the lives of believers.

3.2 The Disciple Maker Chooses The Disciples

The initiation for discipleship should come from the disciple maker, rather than the disciple. This can be seen in Mark 1:16-20 and Matthew 4:18-22, where Jesus was walking alongside the lake of Galilee and he chose and invited Simon Peter, Andreas, James, and John to follow Him and become His disciples. It is the disciple maker who decides who would be chosen as disciples, and the disciple maker thinks of the suitable means of discipleship for the disciples. Jesus made His own 'curriculum' and methods to disciple His disciples. Jesus often said things that could make Him lose His disciples or followers, as was written in John 6:60. He always said what His disciples would like to hear, as He understood better that what He needed to convey was the right thing, although it was something lack the disciples could fully comprehend at that moment. A disciple should also not feel bad for picking his or her disciples for making their lives more uncomfortable and for making

them deal with difficult choices when he or she understands that all these things will bring good things for the disciples (Anderson, 2022).

In doing discipleship, a disciple maker should take the initiative to choose whom he or she sees fit to disciple in a closer and more personal way, just as Jesus picked Peter, James, and John as His inner circle in discipleship. The disciples Jesus picked were not educated people who were ideal 'ingredients' to be taught about the Scripture, but regular joes who were lack of educated when it came to the Law (Torah). Jesus did not require them to be special humans or to prove themselves through a series of lists of qualifications to become His disciples. This kind of initiation is what disciple makers of this day need: to make their choices from the available ones, and not to make discipleship worthiness qualifications for the disciples as it will become a trap, both for the disciple maker and the disciple. Discipleship should not be done on the basis of the disciple being a readily and easily disciplined person, filled with knowledge, skill, and obedience, or for other reasons of comfort that are not recorded in the Bible as the guideline. The instruction to make disciples of all nations was given without the condition that 'if they were obedient, loving the Word of God, looking for the disciple maker enthusiastically with a teachable heart' or another of that sort.

3.3 Discipleship Should Not Be Forced

The discipleship Jesus did was done by a perfect disciple maker who had nothing lacking in grace and truth. Nevertheless, there were still people who did not accept Him, and there were disciples who finally left Him as was recorded in John 6:66. Jesus also did not force any of His disciples to stay with Him and follow Him, as was written in John 6:67. The dynamics of people leaving and staying, as well as choices of disciples who turn out to be the right or wrong choice according to the original intention of the disciple maker, are common occurrences that will be experienced, even when the disciple maker is a perfect figure. Jesus was not only left and abandoned but He was also betrayed by one of His twelve closest disciples, namely Judas Iscariot.

If a disciple maker's choice to disciple someone turns out to be less than what was intended, there is no need to feel as if it were a failure or lose heart because of such occasion. Such an occurrence is a normal thing in discipleship and the response of the disciple maker should be one that adjusts and adapts to the reality, thinking about better ways to process the disciple according to his or her situation, for the sake of the disciple. If the disciple is at a stage where he or she is not able yet to comprehend the word of God using extra-biblical information, the disciple maker can teach him or her to draw meaning from the text while slowly enriching him or her with cultural or historical backgrounds as well as other sources that could widen his or her views. If the disciple is still not consistent in learning the word of God, the disciple maker can initiate the discussion consistently through having lunch together, or even through a chat while riding the train on the way to work. The 'negative' points of a disciple shall not disqualify them from being a disciple that still needs to be guided and groomed in the word of God. A disciple maker cannot change the reality, but needs to adjust the methods to maximize the growth of the disciple.

Just as there is no ideal disciple, there is no ideal disciple maker as well today. The disciples of Jesus, even the ones closest to Him, were far from ideal. When Jesus was arrested, put on trial, and crucified, the disciples escaped and even one of the closest few, Peter, denied Jesus when people nearby confronted him. After

escaping, they also returned to their old jobs and did not carry on what Jesus taught and did for them. In an evaluation, that would look far from what a good performance should have been. However, Jesus did not disqualify them because they were less than ideal. After Jesus rose, He came to them and invited them, accepted them again to finally send them in all their imperfections and limitations. More than the ability to teach, a disciple maker should have a heart big enough, filled with the love of Christ, for his or her disciples.

3.3 Discipleship and Discomfort

In doing discipleship, a person with a people-pleasing mentality would have a hard time because he or she would be afraid of rebuking, of having disagreements with the disciples, and of not being liked because the disciples could not understand the fuller picture of what he or she tried to convey. Bear in mind that the Bible recorded Jesus was not afraid of or hesitant in doing discipleship, and He put His disciples through discomfort if it were necessary for the growth of their faith, as was recorded in Mark 4:40 (regarding their disbelief), Mark 6:37 (where Jesus involved His disciples to feed five thousand people when they recommended Jesus to send these people home), or Mark 8:33 (where Jesus rebuked Peter and called him satan because Peter rebuked Him when He was teaching about the suffering and death He had to face).

Discomfort was an important factor in the spiritual growth of the disciples because their nature of flesh had a tendency to stand against and disobey what God wanted as revealed in His word. When they were taught, the nature of flesh would rebel and want to do otherwise, as written by Paul in Galatians 5:17. A disciple maker shall not feel guilty or think that he/she is doing a bad thing if he/she understands that the main goal of the discipleship is for the good of the disciples, so that they can grow in the knowledge of Christ and in the character of a true believer. It is better to have discomfort and a discipleship process that progresses, rather than no discomfort and no progress in the discipleship.

3.4 To Disciple is to Serve

In the book of Mark, Jesus was depicted as a servant who lowered himself in stature. Despite his identity and all the worthiness that was in Him, Jesus took the lowest position and taught this to His disciples in Mark 10:43-45. In this case, a disciple maker should learn from this example and not place himself as a supreme teacher who deserves to be served by his disciples. On the other hand, a disciple maker should take the position of a servant towards his disciples. Being a disciple maker is not similar to being a superintendent or a public official who demands the subordinates to lift, honor, or serve him. Being a disciple maker means placing oneself as a 'stepping stone' so that the disciples can be guided, 'elevated' to a higher understanding that allows them to know Jesus and grow, seeing their needs rather than demanding them to do things the other way round.

3.5 Discipleship is Life Sharing

Discipleship does include learning the word of God so that there might be growth in knowledge of the word, but it is not strictly confined to that only. The kind of discipleship Jesus showed was done by doing and sharing the lives of the disciple maker with the disciples (Putman, 2018). Jesus was not merely present when he wanted to teach them, but He was also with them when one of their family members fell sick (when Peter's mother-in-law was sick in Mark 1:30-31), ate with them,

washed their feet, and was present when the disciples were having their 'small talk' (when the disciples were debating about who is the bigger one among them). Jesus was present for them for the 'small' things because the impact of discipleship should be felt in the changed lives of the disciples daily, not just when it came to dealing with biblical knowledge.

A disciple maker cannot focus only on the biblical literacy and mastery of his disciples, but he should also be involved in their lives and show how all the principles drawn from the bible should be implemented in interactions with other people. In this case, the disciple maker would also be exposed to his disciples should there be any character in him that needs to be further conformed to the word of God, and this is a good thing, for the disciples would be able to understand that even the disciple maker is going through a spiritual journey process of being formed into the likeness of Christ. Sharing life is not just helping the disciple maker to apply biblical principles and be relevant, but it is also helping the disciple maker to see the things about himself that were previously not visible if he only interacts with his disciples weekly in a classroom setting.

When a disciple maker and his disciples share their lives together, there is a vulnerability that is born, as was written in Mark 14:33-34 where Jesus showed His emotional state to His three closest disciples. Where there is vulnerability and transparency that is authentic, the conversation between a disciple maker and his disciples can be deeper and can increase in quality. Through this process, a disciple maker can know his disciples better and see areas of needs in the discipleship more clearly to focus on, and on the other hand, the disciples might also know the characters of their disciple maker better, allowing them to be more understanding of the disciple maker when they were receiving directions or even rebukes from him.

IV. CONCLUSION

The development of a church over the span of two thousand years has created many differences in views, methods, and essences of discipleship. Despite being based on verses and presumably similar spirit, the personalities and uniqueness of each human make no discipleship exactly the same for different individuals. Nevertheless, there should be fundamental issues that are not negotiable and should become the main focus of discipleship. These are shown in the discipleship Jesus taught and instructed, and set as an example in the Gospel.

Discipleship is about bringing people to know the person of Christ to the level of accepting and believing in Him as Lord and Saviour, and after that guiding them in a spiritual journey process in order to be formed into the likeness of Christ, and in the process of discipleship initiation, the burden lies with the disciple maker to choose his disciples. A disciple maker should make his choice consciously and not pick his disciples based on the list of qualifications to be met that have been satisfied by the disciples, just as Jesus did not do it that way to His disciples. Discipleship also cannot be forced on those who refuse or eventually are unwilling to go through the processes. In the middle, discipleship will also involve a lot of discomfort because of the nature of the flesh that opposes that of the Spirit. Discomfort is not something to avoid and should be embraced as a part of the process of discipleship. A disciple maker should also take the posture of a servant to serve his disciples, rather than the posture of a superintendent demanding to be served by his disciples. Discipleship was also modeled by Jesus as a process of sharing lives and applying

the word of God in daily situations, rather than confined learning in a classroom setting.

With these principles in mind, some recommendations can be made regarding the situations of the modern-day churches. It is important to understand that while discipleship should involve learning from the Bible and deepening understanding of what it says, it cannot be strictly confined to a Bible study activity. Limiting discipleship to a Bible study setting will negate and discount a lot of what the Bible says about how Jesus dealt with His disciples. In the book of Mark, especially, a lot of activities were written about Jesus, more than sermons toward His disciples. It is essential that involvement in the daily settings be present for discipleship to happen, so that they can see how the things they have learned in their bible study sessions can be implemented in a life-changing journey, as the word of God lives through their interactions with other people and decision making, basing their values on the biblical principles observed.

Leaders and pastors should also understand that elitism should not apply in churches. If disciples are chosen through a series of rigorous and strict qualifications, there would be very few left, and such principles are not what the Bible suggests. Just as Jesus was not an elitist in choosing His disciples, leaders, and pastors need to understand they are responsible for the cards they have been given, and that they need to be good stewards in dealing with each person. It does not mean that everyone would turn out to be a good disciple and be ready for promotion in terms of the capacity in responding to the plans these leaders have planned for each disciple, but the heart still lies in working with everyone God gives in each circle of influence. Pastors and leaders need to stop demanding people to come to the appropriate levels first to be qualified to be discipled; rather, they need to step down from their podium and start working with wherever people are.

When it comes to not forcing, bear in mind that it does not mean one should be left without any encouragement. Most people in nature are not discipled, and it is not logical to assume they would somehow be instantly willing to be discipled once they are believers. A leader needs to let the people he's working with take their time in processing the information, but at the same time, he should not hesitate to help them take the next action step, so that they are also encouraged to live what they have learned and see more aspect of it. These people are not supposed to be forced to follow and obey, but it is also not suggested to leave them to process everything alone without proper guidance and encouragement. If the world of sales and marketing understands to follow up a sales pitch, disciples need to be followed up as well with guidance and action plans.

The servanthood of the leaders needs to be visible as well, in that they should not be beyond the reach of their disciples. If the leaders and pastors set their stature in such a way that they look and feel distant, unreachable, and cold, it is highly unlikely that they would ever serve in a way the disciples can feel and trust. To serve means to be accessible and reachable to help, to be present to help them when they need it, and to put them a priority. If the major interest of the pastors and leaders is not to grow and disciple these people, they could never serve the disciples in the way Jesus intended.

The last, but not the easiest of all, is to share lives with the disciples. Leaders and pastors need to be willing to be involved in the daily issues of the disciples, not just in the set weekly schedule or Bible reading time. If the discipleship process only consists of this, then the individuals who are making disciples will not go beyond being mere instructors of the Bible or even superiors to their disciples. They should

genuinely care for and be involved in the problems the disciples are dealing with, and be willing to listen and share when the disciples are having household or financial problems. Also, they should be willing to cry with them when the disciples lose a loved one and be there to encourage and guide them when they face a difficult season. It is the presence of the disciple maker that will help the disciples realize the relationship is genuine, and it transcends a classroom environment. In the setting of modern churches where everyone is usually busy with his or her own thing, perhaps doing discipleship in the method of Jesus is not feasible, but the heart of such discipleship can still be preserved and implemented today.

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