

CHAPTER 1

Discipleship

For Super Christians Only?¹

The word “disciple” occurs 269 times in the New Testament. “Christian” is found three times and was first introduced to refer precisely to disciples of Jesus—in a situation where it was no longer possible to regard them as a sect of the Jews (Acts 11:26). The New Testament is a book about disciples, by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus Christ.

But the point is not merely verbal. What is more important is that the kind of life we see in the earliest church is that of a special type of person. All of the assurances and benefits offered to humankind in the gospel evidently presuppose such a life and do not make realistic sense apart from it. The disciple of Jesus is not the deluxe or heavy-duty model of the Christian—especially padded, textured, streamlined, and empowered for the fast lane on the straight and narrow way. He or she stands on the pages of the New Testament as the first level of basic transportation in the Kingdom of God.

Undisciplined Disciples

For at least several decades the churches of the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship. Contemporary American churches in particular do not require following Christ in his example, spirit, and teachings as a condition of membership—either of entering into or continuing in fellowship of a denomination or local church. I would be glad to learn of any exception to this claim, but it would only serve to highlight its general validity and make the general rule more glaring. So far as the Visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, *discipleship clearly is optional*.

That, of course, is no secret. The best of current literature on discipleship either states outright or assumes that the Christian may not be a disciple at all—even after a lifetime as a church member. A widely used book, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*, presents the Christian life on three possible levels: the convert, the disciple, and the worker. There is a process for bringing persons to each level, it states. Evangelizing produces converts, establishing or “follow—up” produces disciples, and equipping produces workers. Disciples and workers are said to be able to renew the cycle by evangelizing, while only workers can make disciples through follow-up.

¹ “Discipleship:For Super Christians Only?” from *The Great Omission* by Dallas Willard, Chapter 1, pp 3-12. Copyright (c) 2006 by Dallas Willard. Used by permission of Harper Collins Publishers. <https://www.harpercollins.com/products/the-great-omission-dallas-willard>

The picture of “church life” presented by this book conforms generally to American Christian practice. But does that model not make discipleship something entirely optional? Clearly it does, just as whether the disciple will become a “worker” is an option. Vast numbers of converts today thus exercise the options permitted by the message they hear: they choose not to become—or at least do not choose to become—disciples of Jesus Christ. Churches are filled with “undisciplined disciples,” as Jess Moody has called them. Of course there is in reality no such thing. Most problems in contemporary churches can be explained by the fact that members have never decided to follow Christ.

In this situation, little good results from insisting that Christ is *also supposed to be* Lord. To present his Lordship as an option leaves it squarely in the category of the special wheels, tires, and stereo equipment. You can do without it. And it is—alas!—far from clear what you would do with it. Obedience and training in obedience form no intelligible doctrinal or practical unity with the “salvation” presented in recent versions of the gospel.

Great Omissions from the Great Commission

A different model of life was instituted in the “Great Commission” Jesus left for his people. The first goal he set for the early church was to use his all-encompassing power and authority to make disciples without regard to ethnic distinctions—from all “nations” (Matthew 28:19). That made clear a world-historical project and set aside his earlier strategic directive to go only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:6). Having made disciples, these alone were to be baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Given this twofold preparation, they were then to be taught to treasure and keep “all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). The Christian church of the first centuries resulted from following this plan for church growth—a result hard to improve upon.

But in place of Christ’s plan, historical drift has substituted “Make converts (to a particular ‘faith and practice’) and baptize them into church membership.” This causes two great omissions from the Great Commission to stand out. Most important, we start by omitting the making of disciples and enrolling people as Christ’s students, when we should let all else wait for that. Then we also omit, of necessity, the step of taking our converts through training that will bring them ever-increasingly to do what Jesus directed.

These two great omissions are connected in practice into one whole. Not having made our converts disciples, it is impossible for us to teach them how to live as Christ lived and taught (Luke 14:26). That was not a part of the package, not what they converted to. When confronted with the example and teachings of Christ, the response today is less one of rebellion or rejection than one of puzzlement: How do we relate to these? What have they to do with us? Isn’t this bait and switch?

Discipleship Then

When Jesus walked among humankind there was a certain simplicity to being his disciple. Primarily it meant to go with him, in an attitude of observation, study, obedience, and imitation. There were no correspondence courses. One knew what to do and what it would cost. Simon Peter exclaimed, “Look, we have left everything and followed you” (Mark 10:28). Family and occupations were deserted for long periods to go with Jesus as he walked from place to place announcing, showing, and explaining the here-and-now governance or action of God. Disciples had to be with him to learn how to do what he did.

Imagine doing that today. How would family members, employers, and co-workers react to such abandonment? Probably they would conclude that we did not much care for them, or even for ourselves. Did not Zebedee think this as he watched his two sons desert the family business to keep company with Jesus (Mark 1:20)? Ask any father in a similar situation. So when Jesus observed that one must forsake the dearest things—family, “all that he hath,” and “his own life also” (Luke 14:26, 33)—insofar as that was necessary to accompany him, he stated a simple fact: it was the only possible doorway to discipleship.

Discipleship Now

Though costly, discipleship once had a very clear, straightforward meaning. The mechanics are not the same today. We cannot literally be with him in the same way as his first disciples could. But the priorities and intentions—the heart or inner attitudes—of disciples are forever the same. In the heart of a disciple there is a *desire*, and there is a *decision* or settled intent. Having come to some understanding of what it means, and thus having “counted up the costs,” the disciple of Christ desires above all else to be like him. Thus, “it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher” (Matthew 10:25). And moreover, “everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher” (Luke 6:40).

Given this desire, usually produced by the lives and words of those already in the Way, there is still a decision to be made: the decision to devote oneself to becoming like Christ. The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christ-like and so dwelling in *his* “faith and practice,” systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end. By these decisions and actions, even today, one enrolls in Christ’s training, becomes his pupil or disciple. There is no other way. We must keep this in mind should we, as disciples, decide to *make disciples*.

In contrast, the nondisciple, whether inside or outside the church, has something “more important” to do or undertake than to become like Jesus Christ. He or she has “bought a piece of ground,” perhaps, or even five yoke of oxen, or has taken a spouse (Luke 14:18, 19). Such lame excuses only reveal that something on that dreary list of security, reputation, wealth, power, sensual indulgence, or mere distraction and numbness, still retains his or her ultimate allegiance.

Or if someone has seen through these, he or she may not know the alternative—not know, especially, that it is *possible* to live under the care and governance of God, working and living with Him as Jesus did, always “seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

A mind cluttered by excuses may make a mystery of discipleship, or it may see it as something to be dreaded. But there is no mystery about desiring and intending to be like someone—that is a very common thing. And if we really do intend to be like Christ, that will be obvious to every thoughtful person around us, as well as to ourselves. Of course, attitudes that define the disciple cannot be realized today by leaving family and business to accompany Jesus on his travels about the countryside. But discipleship can be made concrete by actively learning how to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, walk the second mile with an oppressor—in general, living out the gracious inward transformations of faith, hope, and love. Such acts—carried out by the disciplined person with manifest grace, peace, and joy—make discipleship no less tangible and shocking today than were those desertions of long ago. Anyone who will enter into the Way can verify this, and he or she will at the same time prove that discipleship is far from dreadful.

The Cost of Nondiscipleship

In 1937 Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave the world his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. It was a masterful attack on “easy Christianity” or “cheap grace,” in the context of mid-twentieth-century Europe and America. But it did not succeed in setting aside—perhaps it even enforced—the view of discipleship as a costly spiritual excess, and only for those especially driven or called to it. It was right and good of Bonhoeffer to point out that one cannot be a disciple of Christ without forfeiting things normally sought in human life, and that one who pays little in the world’s coinage to bear his name has reason to wonder where he or she stands with God. But the cost of nondiscipleship is far greater, even when this life alone is considered—than the price paid to walk with Jesus, constantly learning from him.

Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God’s overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, nondiscipleship costs you exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10). The cross-shaped yoke of Christ is after all an instrument of liberation and power to those who live in it with him and learn the meekness and lowliness of heart that brings rest to the soul.

"Follow Me. I'm Found!"

Leo Tolstoy wrote that “man’s whole life is a continual contradiction of what he knows to be his duty. In every department of life he acts in defiant opposition to the dictates of his conscience and his common sense.” In our age of bumper-sticker communications, some clever entrepreneur has devised a frame for the rear license plate that advises, “Don’t follow me. I’m lost.” It has had

amazingly wide use, possibly because it touches with a little humor upon the universal failure referred to by Tolstoy. This failure causes a pervasive and profound hopelessness and sense of worthlessness: a sense that I could never stand in my world as a salty, light-giving example, showing people the Way of Life. Jesus's description of savorless salt sadly serves well to characterize how we feel about ourselves: "no longer good for anything, but [to be] thrown out and trampled under foot" (Matthew 5:13), and not even fit to mollify a manure pile (Luke 14:35).

A common saying expresses the same attitude: "Don't do as I do, do as I say" (more laughs?) Jesus said of certain religious leaders—the scribes and Pharisees—of his day, "Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach" (Matthew 23:3). But that was no joke, and still isn't. We must ask what he would say of us today. Have we not elevated this practice of the scribes and Pharisees into a first principle of the Christian life? Is that not the effect, whether intended or not, of making discipleship optional?

We are not speaking here of *perfection*, nor of *earning* God's gift of life. Our concern is only with the manner of *entering into* that life. While none can merit salvation, or the fullness of life of which it is the root and natural part, all must act if it is to be theirs. By what actions of the heart, what desires and intentions, do we find access to life in Christ? Paul's example instructs us. He could say, in almost one breath, both "I am not perfect" (Philippians 3:12) and "Do what I do" (Philippians 4:9). His shortcomings—whatever they were—lay back of him, but he lived forward into the future through his intention to attain to Christ. He was both intent upon being like Christ (Philippians 3:10-14) and confident of upholding grace for his intention. He could thus say to all, "Follow me. I'm found!" ("Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ"—1 Corinthians 11:1).

Life's Greatest Opportunity

Dr. Rufus Jones has reflected in a recent book upon how little impact the twentieth-century evangelical church has had on societal problems. He attributes the deficiency to a corresponding lack of concern for social justice on the part of conservatives. That, in turn, is traced to reactions against liberal theology, deriving from the fundamentalist/modernist controversy of past decades. These are points we must take very seriously.

Causal connections in society and history are hard to trace, but I believe this is an inadequate diagnosis. After all, the lack of concern for social justice, where that is evident, itself requires an explanation. And the current position of the church in our world may be better explained by *what liberals and conservatives have shared* than by how they differ. For different reasons, and with different emphases, they have agreed that discipleship to Christ is optional to membership in the Christian church. Thus, the very type of life that could change the course of human society—and upon occasion has done so—is excluded or at least omitted from the essential message of the church.

Concerned to enter that radiant life we each must ask, “Am I a disciple, or only a Christian by current standards?” Examination of our ultimate desires and intentions, reflected in the specific responses and choices that make up our lives, can show whether there are things we hold more important than being like him. If there are, then we are not yet his disciples. Being unwilling to follow him, our claim of trusting him must ring hollow. We could never credibly claim to trust a doctor, teacher, or auto mechanic whose directions we would not follow.

For those who lead or minister, there are yet graver questions: What authority or basis do I have to baptize people who have not been brought to a clear decision to be a disciple of Christ? Dare I tell people, as “believers” without discipleship, that they are at peace with God and God with them? Where can I find justification for such a message? Perhaps most important: Do I as a minister have the faith to undertake the work of disciple-making? Is my first aim to make disciples? Or do I just run an operation?

Nothing less than life in the steps of Christ is adequate to the human soul or the needs of our world. Any other offer fails to do justice to the drama of human redemption, deprives the hearer of life’s greatest opportunity, and abandons this present life to the evil powers of the age. The correct perspective is to see following Christ not only as the necessity it is, but as the fulfillment of the highest human possibilities and as life on the highest plane. It is to see, in Helmut Thielicke’s words, that “the Christian stands, not under the dictatorship of a legalistic ‘You ought,’ but in the magnetic field of Christian freedom, under the empowering of the ‘You may.’”



Dallas Albert Willard was one of the most acclaimed Christian thinkers. An academician and educator, he served as the professor of Philosophy but did not limit his profession to the same. Instead, he specialized his studies in Christian spiritual formation. His books, ‘The Divine Conspiracy’ and ‘Renovation of the Heart’ went about to earn the Christianity Today’s Book of the Year Award. A doctorate in philosophy, he came out with various works related to phenomenology in philosophy. In 1965, he started serving as a Professor in Philosophy at the University of Southern California (USC) which he did until his death in 2013.

