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Discipleship: How Christianity is Propagated

Sometimes it is said that since the word disciple is only found in the Gospels and Acts that discipleship is not for today, but was limited to Judaism and the transitional period of Christianity. However, while making disciples is not commanded in the Epistles it is commanded by Christ in the Great Commission of Matt 28:19-21, which is for the Church, is illustrated in the Book of Acts and it is taught by semantic parallel in the Epistles.

It should be understood that discipleship has an ancient history and did not originate with Christianity. Discipleship simply involves a master teacher and a student learner. In the ancient Greco-Roman world master teachers like Aristotle would disciple student learners like Alexander the Great. They taught them philosophy, rhetoric, math and religion and they were paid to do so. Discipling was their way of earning a living. In rabbinic Judaism rabbis like Gamaliel disciplined students like Saul, more well-known as Paul, in the traditions of the Pharisees. They were taught particular interpretations of Scripture and a religious tradition by the question/answer format, repetition and memorization. Over time the disciple would become increasingly devoted to the rabbi's teaching. In time the disciple was expected to become a rabbi and pass the traditions on to new disciples. In Christianity, the master teacher Jesus Christ also had disciples. They were to sit at the master's feet as Martha sat at Christ's feet and to learn from Him. Jesus' method was to use anything and everything as a teaching opportunity. When he commented on wine vats, fig trees or cloud cover, it caused His disciples to think. Later the students would ask questions and Jesus would answer with discourses. When He was about to depart He gave His disciples the Great Commission, telling them to make disciples of others as He had made disciples of them. And this makes sense because Jesus Christ himself had been personally disciplined by the Father as He was awakened each morning to hear the word of God (Isa 50:4-9).

The Great Commission commands the making of disciples, not the making of believers. Evangelizing the lost is not fulfilling the Great Commission. The Great Commission is fulfilled only when believers are being made into disciples. It is one thing to evangelize people; it is another thing to teach them the word of God! One necessarily presupposes the other and both are necessary but the Great Commission directly involves the latter.

According to Jesus, making disciples in the Church age requires two steps: one, baptizing believers (this wet baptism illustrates the believers co-death and co-resurrection with Christ and initiates them into the discipleship process) and two, teaching them all that the Lord has commanded, teaching them the word of God, how to think and how to live, how to follow the master. Certainly we cannot overlook the great example of the twelve who in Acts 6 appointed deacons so they would be freed to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. And what results does Luke report? The word of God kept on spreading and the number of disciples was increasing greatly. Always behind Luke's book of Acts are reports of how the Great Commission was being fulfilled. And even today I am looking with great interest to find those who want to be true disciples of the Lord, who want to sit at the feet of the Scriptures and learn the word of God and follow Him wherever He leads, learning to walk by faith.

Perhaps it is now time to consider Paul and his great ministry of making disciples. Did he not take Sosthenes and Timothy and Luke and teach them the word of God? And besides, why not, the Lord had taken him and taught him for three years in Arabia. And when he came back, Barnabas took him on the first missionary journey and Paul became a master too. So Paul later tells Timothy, "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:2).

So then, discipleship is the process of a teacher taking students and pouring the teaching of the word of God into them for the purpose that the students will one day become a teacher who will take more students and teach them the word of God. Is it easy? No, Paul said because of it "I suffer hardship even to the point of imprisonment as a criminal!" But he also said, "Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." So then, are you a good soldier of Christ Jesus? Are you making disciples? You have the opportunity to do so and indeed this age is precisely about that very goal; fulfilling the Great Commission by making disciples.

In the end, it must be counted a marvel that Christianity has been and is propagated by this very simple method of a teacher taking a student and training him in the word of God. You and I are here today as Christians because of this very method. And today you have the opportunity to be either a teacher or a student. If you are a student stay with the teaching, do not give up, do not quit, run the race all the way to the end. If you are a teacher, do you have some students; have you invited some to follow you? Take some faithful men to yourself and train them, suffer hardship, do the work of a good soldier of Jesus Christ, work hard and when the going gets tough remember what Jesus said when He commanded us to make disciples, "I am with you all the days until the completion of the age." You are not in this alone; you are in this with the Savior!

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