

Discipleship 101: What is a Disciple?

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[This is the first installment of multi-part series on discipleship. Future posts will answer other questions related to discipleship].

What is a disciple? The answer may not be as easy as it might first appear.

First, there is a shift in the meaning of the term 'disciple; from the Gospels to the book of Acts. For instance, in John 6 many of Jesus' 'disciples' leave him. These are the ones who followed him to hear his teaching and to eat his bread, but when he calls them to eat his flesh and drink his blood, they cannot stomach their teacher any longer.

In this situation, disciples are simply those who followed and learned from Jesus, but were not converted by him. You could use this label to describe Judas. He was a disciple in one sense, but not in another. He followed and learned from Jesus, but because he failed to follow Christ until the end he proved to be a false disciple. Thus, in the Scriptures themselves, there is some ambiguity in the term.

But it is not just in the Bible where our labels fail us. In popular Christianity, there are also various definitions of discipleship. And this difference comes before we begin to discuss discipleship programs and practices. So how do we decide what a disciple is?

Not all Definitions of "Disciple" Are Equally Biblical

Two rich studies on discipleship can be found in Michael Wilkins, [Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship](#) and Jonathan Lunde, [Following Jesus The Servant King: A Biblical Theology of Covenantal Discipleship](#). Gleaning from their observations, I would summarize three different ways "disciple(s)" might be defined. Nota Bene: These definitions are not equally biblical.

1. Disciples are *committed* believers.

Salvation is one thing, discipleship is another. There are Christians and then there are disciples. This posits a two-tiered system in the Christian life—with the saved in the first category and the sanctified (i.e., disciples) in the next. The problem with this dichotomy is that it rips apart the unified work of salvation, and it does not fit with biblical language. In Acts 4:32, the church is described as a band of believers; but Acts 6:2 describes the church as "the full number of disciples." Disciples, therefore, are believers; believers are disciple. No tiers!

2. Disciples are ministers.

Like the twelve, disciples are called to a special ministry of service. This results in a view where churches have clergy and laity, disciples and congregants. This separation is often found in special dress for the clergy, or unhealthy veneration of church leaders.

By contrast, the Great Commission calls all people to discipleship and to disciple others. Church work is for everyone. In this way, disciples are ministers, so long as we keep Ephesians 4:11–12 in mind: pastor-teachers are to equip the saints (disciples) for their work of service. Christianity is not a spectator sport. Jesus calls all his disciples to learn his trade and join him in the work.

3. Disciples are Christians. Christians are disciples.

While every follower of Christ is at a different phase in their spiritual pilgrimage, Christianity is not two-tiered. While wisdom cautions against young disciples leading, there is no two-stage approach. Rather, as in any family, there are babes, children, young adults, and mature adults. The same is true in the church. Every member of the church should be considered a disciple of Christ, and every disciple should be passionate about making disciples.

A Definition of Discipleship

In light of these previous observations, here is an provisional definition:

A disciple is a man or woman who is a new creation in Christ that no longer lives for self, but who has (1) believed on Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and (2) lives to learn, follow, and imitate Christ in all areas of life.

To say it another way, if we take our cues from the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20): disciples (a) identify themselves with Jesus Christ in baptism; (b) labor to learn and apply all the commands God has given; and (c) serve our Lord with their various gifts in the process of heralding the message of Christ and reproducing disciples. Put simply, this is Great Commission Christianity. And this is what the twelve did, what Paul did (Acts 14:21), and what Paul called his followers to do (2 Tim 2:2).

For followers of Christ, discipleship is not an optional extra for interested Christians. It is certainly not a program churches can add or subtract. It is at the heart of what Christ is doing in the world. And it is at the center of what it means to be a follower of Christ—to be a disciple who makes disciples.

In the weeks ahead, we will consider this topic more. For now, let us pray and ask God to give us a vision for seeing God raise up disciple-making disciples at Occoquan Bible Church.

For His Glory and your joy, Pastor David