

## Discipleship Can Be Served, But Never Delivered

### Discipleship matters.

The goal is not a crowd, but rather a core of committed Christ followers who are fleshing out the life of Christ at work, in their marriage, their parenting, their finances, their thinking, their politics, their...

... everything.

To borrow from Abraham Kuyper, there is not an inch of any sphere of my life that Christ does not say, "Mine!"

But what is the nature of discipleship?

There seem to be two schools of thought. The first holds that discipleship is all about ongoing investment. Whether classes or seminars, sermons or small groups, everything is designed to "feed" the Christ-follower. The language used to describe and promote this understanding of discipleship puts the entire emphasis on someone or something, *doing* discipleship *to* someone else. The one *being* disciplined is seemingly passive. In other words, discipleship is something *received*.

The other school of thought is less about feeding and more about training. There is an old line that says, "Give me a fish, I eat for a day; teach me to fish, I eat for a lifetime." So rather than providing an ongoing pipeline for biblical teaching (present though that may be) the overarching goal is to teach people how to become Bible students themselves.

So which is the true nature of discipleship?

The answer lies in the word itself.

The word "disciple" is from the Greek word "mathetes" and literally means "learner."

Stop there. Re-read.

*Learner.*

This puts the action firmly into the lap of the one doing the learning. The point is that you, as a disciple, are to be actively learning. It is your responsibility to take up the mantle of self-development.

And yes, this suggests a teacher is involved.

And yes, we talk about someone going to college to receive an education.

And yes, Jesus seemed to fill the teaching/equipping role by inviting 12 men (and more than a few women) to do life with Him for three years.

And yes, they were called "disciples."

But reflect on those early followers: Theirs was an invitation to learn, not to enter into a passive process of being fed. We certainly know that not all of the twelve went to school on Jesus. One in particular didn't seem to learn much of anything. If discipleship was simply something *done* to you, Jesus failed epically with Judas.

(I wonder if Judas ever said he needed to follow another rabbi where he could be better "fed" and thus grow better spiritually than he was under Jesus.)

Growing in faith is something that can be served by others, but ultimately must be owned personally.

This is decisive. Too many followers of Christ view discipleship as something that is done to them and for them – akin to a personal enrichment program. Yet the writer of Hebrews made it abundantly clear that people who keep getting "fed" in this way are in arrested development. Once out of infancy, they should no longer need to be fed, but instead be feeding others (Hebrews 5:11-13).

But even more disquieting is how we have missed out on what it is we should focus on learning. The back-half of the Great Commission exhorts us to teach new believers to obey what Christ has commanded. This is the essence of the content of discipleship.

And what has Christ commanded?

To live our lives in mission to the least and the lost.

In other words, what we are to be *learning* is increased love toward others and increased faith for the task of serving them. We are not to be in search for a feeding station that creates a culture of dependency and endless demand for head-knowledge, but instead for a learning environment where an active life of faith is stretched and encouraged.

I know, knowledge is needed. Doctrine matters. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds. But that transformation only happens when what is in the mind translates into obedience to serving the widow and orphan, and reaching out to the hell-bound and skeptic.

So discipleship is enhanced through practical teaching, learning the personal disciplines of prayer and Bible study, engaging in ministry, engaging in relationships that bring challenge and opportunity, and welcoming circumstances that demand the essence of commitment and obedience.

In other words, faith is stretched by being in the game where you are admonished by teachers/leaders, investing in connecting with God through prayer and the Scriptures, putting

yourself on the front lines of the cause of Christ, mixing it up with other Christians who sharpen you as iron against iron, and being led by God into unique situations that challenge you at the deepest of spiritual levels.

That's not passive, but active.

It's something that can be *served*, but never *delivered*.

It takes a church, but only goes so far as the person is willing to be,

... a true learner.

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