

THOUGHTS ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP

For many years I have reflected upon "discipleship". It seemed that Jesus came from heaven to select a small group of disciples and pour His life into them. I assumed that this was a pattern for His Apostles, as well as for me. I knew that some of the biggest churches in the world were built upon small discipleship groups. Yet, for some reason, I did not feel comfortable with any model with which I was familiar.

As I studied the book of Acts I was unable to find small discipleship groups established by Peter and the other Apostles. The direction of my study was producing more questions than answers.

A college professor in physics has offered some salient advice in problem solving. "If your reasoning," he said, "makes things more complicated, you are going in the wrong direction."

In the last few months I have changed the direction of my thinking. Now, discipleship seems so simple that it is almost frightening. I am now convinced that the concept which Jesus gave to His Apostles is so rudimentary and uncomplicated that it can be replicated in any life and any society.

Jesus did not give us a map and expect us to find our own way. He came to be our Guide, and promised that He would never leave us or forsake us.

Here are a few thoughts for your prayerful consideration.

IN THE GOSPELS

- In the Gr. Commission of Matthew's Gospel there is only one imperative. It is to "make disciples." The Greek word is "mathateusate," which is the 2nd pers. pl. aor. 1, imper. act. of "matheuo." Going, baptizing, and teaching, may have the force of commands, but they are written as participles.
- The Disciples were to teach their students to observe all of the things which Jesus commanded them. They were to replicate His life and follow His example. He promised to be with them in this endeavor until the end of the world.
- The primary command of Jesus to His disciples was "Follow Me!" The verb "to follow" occurs approximately 80 times in the Gospels and almost exclusively describes the relationship between Jesus and His companions. Vine states: "It is used 77 times in the Gospels, of following Christ, and only once otherwise, Mk. 14:13."
- The Greek word for "disciple" is "mathetes". It comes from "manthano" which means "to learn", and is the basis of our English word "math". The Dict. of N.T. Theology states that the noun "mathetes" occurs 264 times in the N.T. (Exclusively in the Gospels and Acts)
- It is interesting that the Disciples, who were commanded to "make disciples", never used the word "disciple" in their epistles. A similar word "manthano," which means "to learn" is found 25 times in the N.T. Scriptures (only six times in the Gospels, and once in Acts).

- The Disciples of Jesus had been raised to observe rituals. With Jesus they maintained a relationship. Jesus seemed to avoid rituals. When He healed the blind, for example, He did it differently every time. Once He spat in the blind man's eyes, another time He spat on the ground, another time He did not spit at all.
- In the absence of rituals the Disciples learned spontaneity and trust. Upon one occasion Jesus sent them forth with no provisions. At another time He promised them that without human planning God would give them special words and wisdom. They came to trust and depend upon Jesus for guidance.
- Jesus led His Disciples many places where they would never have gone without Him. He led them into Gentile territory, through Samaria, to Judea to raise Lazarus, and to Jerusalem where He was to suffer and die. Discipleship meant following Jesus regardless of the cost.
- In the Upper Room, Jesus shocked His Disciples by announcing that He was going where they could not follow. He promised, however, that He would not leave them as orphans. He would return and continue to guide them. In the flesh He could only be one place at a time. As a Spirit He could be with all His Disciples simultaneously.
- After His resurrection He warned the Disciples not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father. They were not to proceed on their own. They were basically to continue the same type of ministry which they had already been involved in for the past three years. Though He was ascending into heaven, they would not be abandoned. His Holy Spirit would come to provide them with guidance and power (Acts 1:4-8).

IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

- The Gospels only tell what Jesus "began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1) The book of Acts records what Jesus continued "to do and teach" by means of His Holy Spirit. Guidance from heaven is evident in virtually every chapter. The Disciples began "to follow" Jesus during His earthly ministry. Now they continued "to follow" the leading of His Spirit.
- Jesus called His Disciples to be "fishers of men" after a miraculous catch of fish. Against human strategy and wisdom, Jesus commanded them to launch out into the deep. His guidance enabled them to catch many fish. Their boats were filled to overflowing. The same type of supernatural guidance would also enable them to catch men.
- The same Spirit that guided Paul to the big cities, guided Philip to leave a big city (see Acts 8:) The same Spirit that led Paul to teach three years in Ephesus, caught away Philip from the Ethiopian eunuch so that he could not teach him. The same Spirit that delivered Peter from prison allowed James to be beheaded in prison (Acts 12:). The Holy Spirit guided different men to do different things, at different times. We are to follow His leading, even when we do not understand it.

- It was the Holy Spirit that separated Barnabas and Saul to their work (Acts 13:) It was the Holy Spirit that pointed out Timothy to Paul (Acts 16: and I Tim. 1:18). It was the Holy Spirit that prevented Paul from entering Asia and Bithynia, and ultimately led him to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10).

- Guidance in the book of Acts came in a wide variety of ways. Sometimes it was from a passage of Scripture (Acts 4:25-26). Sometimes it was by common sense (Acts 6:2). By angels (Acts 8:26). By circumstances (Acts 9:23-26). By direct revelation or visions (Acts 10:10-16). By the urging of friends (Acts 19:31). In each instance, however, it is safe to say that our Sovereign God was in control.

IN THE EPISTLES

- The Apostles not only depended upon guidance from God, they taught their converts to do the same. Jesus taught them: **"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27.)** At the same time He promised: **"A stranger they will not follow" (vs. 5.)** As Jesus commanded in the Gr. Commission, they continued to teach their disciples what He had taught them.

- Paul wrote to the Romans: **"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Rom. 8:14.)** This guidance was not just for the Apostles, but for all of God's children.

- To the Corinthians: **"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually judged" (I Cor. 2:14.)**

- To the Philippians: **"If in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you" (Phi. 3:15.)** Apparently, God would help the Philippians with some sort of special revelation and understanding.

- To the Colossians: **"And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Col. 3:15.)** The word "rule" is "brabeuo" which means to act as an umpire. It seems that when a child of God is doing something God does not want them to do, God takes away their peace.

- To the Thessalonians: **"When ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of man, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh in you that believe" (I Thess. 2:13.)** Somehow, God's word somehow "works" in the believer.

- While the Holy Spirit has gifted some as teachers, God teaches some things to His children directly: **"But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another" (I Thess. 4:9.)**

- Guidance can come from the Scriptures when the word of God has "free course" in our lives: **"Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified, even as it is with you" (II Thess. 3:1.)**
- John wrote: **"But ye have an unction from the Holy one, and ye know all things" (I John 2:20).** **"But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things . . ." (I John 2:27).**

THE NECESSITY OF THE NEW BIRTH

- The Kingdom of God does not come with observation. It is within us (Lk. 17:20-21). You have to be "born again" in order to see it (John 3:3).
- The Greek noun "poema" (the basis of our English word "poem") occurs but two times in the Scriptures. It is used in Rom. 1:20 to refer to the physical universe which God created. It is used in Eph. 2:10 to refer to the spiritual universe which God created.
- God is not the Author of confusion, but of peace (I Cor. 14:33). The physical creation is a "universe" and not a "multiverse". Our universe reflects harmony and design. It is like a poem. The spiritual workmanship of God also reflects harmony and design. It is also like a poem.
- Unregenerate man is in rebellion against God. His **"heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9)**. His conduct is predictable. Moses observed that Israel rebelled during his life, and would be worse after his death (Deut. 31:27). He was right.
- Regenerate man is not rebellious. Ezekiel predicted: **"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them" (Ez. 36:26-27).**
- Note that the letters to Christians are filled with optimism that: **"He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6)**. See also I Cor. 1:8; Col. 1:22; I Thess. 3:13; 5:9; 5:23-24; II Thess. 3:3-4; Gal 5:10; Phil. 3:3; etc.
- Even though regenerate man struggles with the remnant of his sinful nature (Rom. 7:) the outcome is predictable so that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). He that is within us is greater than he that is in the world.

LEARNING FROM THE BEASTS

- Job said: **"But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee" (Job 12:7).** There are lessons which we can learn from the lower creatures of earth which can be extrapolated into the world of spiritual things.
- Salmon are spawned in fresh water, spend their lives in salt water, and somehow instinctively are guided to the place of their birth that they may lay eggs and die. They overcome incredible obstacles, swim upstream and even jump waterfalls.
- Scientists have experimented with many types of birds (such as the albatross and homing pigeons). They have deliberately tried to get them lost. Yet, somehow these creatures are guided over hundreds and even thousands of miles to the place where they began.
- Many creatures migrate on land, in the sea, and also in the heavens. The Arctic Tern travels from the Arctic, to Antarctica and back each year without getting lost (a distance of over 22,000 miles). If God can guide birds can He not also guide us?
- Ants are among the most numerous creatures on earth. There are 8,800 known species of ants and someone has estimated that they number ten million billion. This would far exceed the number of all mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians combined. Solomon said: **"Go to the ant thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest" (Prov. 6:6-8).**
- It is not necessary to organize an ant hill. God has already taken care of that. Is it possible that God is also guiding, and orchestrating, the members of His Body upon the earth?
- We are "new creations" in Christ Jesus. Old things are passed away, and all things are new. We have gone through a metamorphosis so that our "natural" desires have been replaced by the presence of His Spirit. The caterpillar crawls along munching leaves. The butterfly soars in the heavens and sips nectar. Christians have gone through a metamorphosis. We are new creations in Christ Jesus

SOME OBVIOUS EXAMPLES

- Jesus is the Head of His Body the Church. By One Spirit we were all baptized into that One Body (I Cor. 12:13). The various members of His Body are compared to a foot, hand, eye, or ear, etc. It is unthinkable that the Head of the Body would not have communication with, and control over, the members of the Body. As members of His Body, we should take directions from the Head rather than imitate one another.

- Jesus is the Captain of our salvation. He has enrolled us as His soldiers. It is unthinkable that our Commander in Chief cannot contact and supply His troops. One reason the recent Gulf War was ended so quickly is that Sadaam Hussein lost the ability to communicate with and supply his troops. This will never happen to the Sovereign of the Universe!
- Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He knows His sheep by name. He calls them, and they know His voice. They somehow intuitively know not to follow strangers. It is unthinkable that the Good Shepherd cannot guide and direct His sheep.
- God is the Father of His family. His children have received His "seed", and are destined to display His nature. Jesus taught us to ask our Father for whatever we need, and promised that He would hear and respond. We know that the sons of God are led by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:14).
- There are many other examples in Scripture: husband - wife, King - subject, Master - slave, Vine - branches, etc. Each of these examples pre-supposes a relationship which is constant and vital. It is unthinkable that Jesus cannot communicate with, guide, and supply His people.
- In James 1: God has promised wisdom to those who ask in faith. The first requisite to receive this wisdom is to lack it. We must come to God in utter humility and seek the treasure of His divine wisdom and understand. Then we must ask in faith, nothing doubting. Those who doubt will not receive anything from the Lord.

THE NECESSITY OF DILIGENCE

- The Scriptures admonish us to walk "circumspectly". This literally means "like an acrobat". Lazy and slothful people are in danger of falling.
- Other Scriptural illustrations and analogies emphasize the need for diligence. For example: We are like athletes, soldiers, pilgrims, stewards, sheep in the midst of wolves, etc.
- We need to be diligent to test and confirm whatever guidance we receive for there are many false prophets which have gone out into the world. The devil is a deceiver who transforms himself into an angel of light.
- We must be careful to maintain a conscience which is sensitive to His leading. Anything which we cannot do with confidence, we cannot do, for: **"Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23).**
- The use of our spiritual faculties or "senses," will help us develop the ability to discern good and evil (Heb. 5:14.)

- We are not to be like the horse and the mule which have no understanding, but we are to be so sensitive to the leading of God that He can guide us with His eye (Ps. 32:8.)

WHAT THE FATHER IS DOING

- Jesus said: "**The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do; for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise**" (John 5:19.) Jesus did not have His own agenda, He came to do the will of God. His knowledge of what God was doing, enabled Him to participate in it.
- God is doing some great things today. We have witnessed the collapse of atheistic communism in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe. These countries are so open to the Gospel that Bibles and preachers are even welcome in their public schools.
- Revival has also broken out in China. Some have estimated that there may be more evangelical Christians in China than in any other country on earth.
- God is also opening other great doors of evangelism and opportunity all over the world.
- This is not a time to establish our own program and agenda. It is a time to prayerfully seek guidance from God. The apostles toiled all night long and caught no fish. With a little guidance they had great success.

WHAT ABOUT HIM?

- When Jesus told Peter how he was going to die, Peter beckoned to John and said: "**Lord, and what shall this man do?**" (John 21:21) Jesus told Peter that it was none of his business. Each of us is only responsible for following the leading of God in our own lives.
- Scripture warns us about measuring ourselves by ourselves, and comparing ourselves among ourselves (II Cor. 10:12.) What someone else does, or does not do, is not our primary concern. To their own master they will stand or fall. Our primary responsibility is to discover and follow the leading of God in our own lives.
- It is a common thing for Christians to imitate each other. This is especially true of young preachers emulating the lives of older preachers who are considered to be successful. While God "may" be leading in such an endeavor, it is important to remember that he may be a hand in the Body and you may be a foot. Regardless of what anyone else does, or does not do, we need to follow the leading of God in our own lives.
- It is altogether possible that God has sent us some gifted teacher, or "angel unaware" to change the direction of our lives. When we do change, however, it is important that we do so to please God and not men. If we try to please men we cannot be servants of Christ

(Gal. 1:10.)

- Jeremiah said: **"O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23.)** Solomon said: **"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all of thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Prov. 3:5-6.)**

He does not lead me year by year
nor even day by day
But step by step my path unfolds,
My Lord directs my way.
Tomorrow's plans I do not know,
I only know this minute.
But He will say, "This is the way,
By faith now walk ye in it."
And I am glad that it is so,
Today's enough to bear.
And when tomorrow comes.
His grace is always there.
What need to worry then, or fret?
The God who gave His Son,
Holds all my moments in His hand,
And gives them one by one.
(author unknown)

Lord! Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil!

Boyce Mouton