

MAKING DISCIPLES: RETHINKING THE CHURCH'S MISSION  
A COMPARISON AND CONTRAST OF DISCIPLESHIP CONCEPTS IN THE  
SYNOPTIC GOSPLES WITH DISCIPLESHIP CONCEPTS IN THE EPISTLES

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DR. JIM KING

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MP3-CORE ISSUES FOR CHURCH LEADERSHIP IN GLOBAL MINISTRY  
OUTREACH

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BY

J.B. HIXSON

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## *Introduction*

“Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?”<sup>1</sup> Although originally posed by Paul in the first century, this question might well serve as the motto for many models of discipleship in contemporary churches today. Paul poses this question in his letter to the churches in southern Galatia just after evangelizing them on his first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). The original recipients were being negatively influenced by a group of false teachers who were trying to entice these new Christians back into the Jewish religious system. The issue was circumcision and the false teachers were Judaizers. The message of the Judaizers went something like this: *We know that Paul says you can be saved by faith alone. And that’s fine. But if you really want to be a good Christian and if you really want to be mature, there are a few more things that you must do.* The Judaizers then proceeded to insist that all new Gentile converts become circumcised and keep certain elements of the Jewish law.

In response to this false teaching, Paul writes his letter to the Galatians to clarify two things. First, he reminds his readers that the only true gospel is the gospel he preached to them; namely, salvation by grace through faith alone in Christ alone. Second, Paul makes it clear in his letter that the method of justification, faith, is the same as the method of sanctification. The believer is saved by faith and he must also grow mature by living a life of faith in God, which involves living according to the Spirit’s influence in his life.<sup>2</sup> “What Paul wants his converts to see is that the Christian life is one that starts, is maintained, and comes to culmination only through dependence on the activity of God’s Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 3:3

<sup>2</sup> See Galatians 5:1-6

<sup>3</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 41:Galatians* (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 103.

If, as Paul instructed the Galatians, trusting God on a daily basis is an essential element of spiritual growth, why is it that after nearly two thousand years many churches remain preoccupied with outward behavior as the primary focus of discipleship in the church? As a case in point, consider the following excerpt from Dean Merrill's book, *Fresh Ideas for Discipleship & Nurture*:

Churches that practice believer's baptism often ask people, before they're immersed, to publicly declare their desire "to walk in newness of life." But at First Assembly of God in Jamestown, North Dakota, the "fine print" of the new life is specifically stated. "At the time of baptism, I ask each candidate to promise four things," says Pastor Jack Glass. (1) To regularly attend the services of the church. (2) To live a consistent Christian life. (3) To seek opportunities to share the faith with others. (4) To support the church with tithes and offerings. "The benefits have been outstanding," says Glass. "As each candidate stands in the baptistry, his vows become a sermon to the entire congregation. And 99 percent of our new members begin immediately to tithe and give offerings. *This has certainly helped new believers come more quickly into maturity in their Christian walk [emphasis added].*"<sup>4</sup>

According to Pastor Glass, insistence upon, and public commitment to, outward acts of righteousness help believers become mature. Similarly, Leroy Eims, in his classic work *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* lists thirty objectives which he calls "vital areas that, when built into a life, make up the profile of a disciple."<sup>5</sup> Twenty-three of the thirty objectives focus explicitly on the outward, visible behavior of the disciple. The remaining seven objectives focus on doctrinal beliefs such as assurance of salvation, the Holy Spirit, and the Second Coming of Christ. Yet even among the seven objectives that are more doctrinal than behavioral, Eims suggests that the disciple who has truly mastered the particular doctrine in question will manifest such mastery through outward behavior.<sup>6</sup> Bill Hull, author of *The*

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<sup>4</sup>Dean Merrill, *Fresh Ideas for Discipleship & Nurture* (Carol Stream, Ill.; Waco, TX: Christianity Today; Word Books, 1984), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 75.

<sup>6</sup> For example, number 16 on Eims' list of discipleship training objectives is "faith." According to Eims, this objective is met when the disciple "*evidences fruit [emphasis added] of trusting God for specific needs*" (p. 169). Number 22 on Eims' list is "The Holy Spirit." The disciple has mastered this objective when "he can explain to another person how to walk in the Spirit" (p. 173).

*Disciple Making Pastor*, believes that “a disciple’s profile has six dimensions.”<sup>7</sup> These include (1) remaining in Christ<sup>8</sup>; (2) being obedient; (3) bearing fruit; (4) glorifying God; (5) having joy; and (6) expressing love for others. Tony Evans, in his book *A Guide to Spiritual Success: The Victorious Christian Life*, lists four key components in a section he titles, “The Process of Spiritual Growth.”<sup>9</sup> These are, (1) reading Scripture; (2) prayer; (3) involvement in the local church; and (4) financial giving to the local church. For Evans, as with Eims, Hull and Merrill, the primary emphasis in discipleship is on outward behavior.

The question that most discipleship-training models seem to be answering is: *What activities should a new believer perform in order to help him grow mature?* To that end discipleship-training curricula are replete with calls to read the Bible, pray, witness, attend church, give money to the church, etc. Indeed, an emphasis on outward activities is so prevalent within contemporary models of discipleship-training that such activities are generally accepted as the *sine qua non* of discipleship. But are they truly the primary component of discipleship? Are these activities the essential elements of spiritual growth? Furthermore, if such activities *are* present in the life of a believer, does it necessarily follow that the believer’s spiritual maturity level has increased or is increasing?

In the sections that follow it will be demonstrated that the biblical model for training believers involves first and foremost an emphasis on living life by faith (cf. Gal. 2:20). That is, spiritual maturity is not measured in terms of the quality of one’s outward actions, but rather by the quality of one’s faith. Discipleship concepts in the synoptic gospels will be analyzed and compared with discipleship concepts in the epistles for the purpose of

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<sup>7</sup> Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Pastor* (Tarrytown, NY: Fleming H. Revell, 1988), 61.

<sup>8</sup> Hull defines remaining in Christ as a commitment to Scripture and a commitment to prayer (pp. 62-66).

<sup>9</sup> Tony Evans, *A Guide To Spiritual Success: The Victorious Christian Life* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), 107-186.

demonstrating that although the method of making disciples has changed slightly, vis-à-vis the exact method Jesus used to develop maturity in His disciples is no longer applicable today, nevertheless the main focus of discipleship both in the synoptics and the epistles is to help believers develop a deeper level of trust in God. Finally, the ramifications of an incorrect understanding of the biblical model for spiritual growth will be examined. It will be suggested that in order for the church to have maximum impact in global outreach ministry, it is necessary to rethink the church's mission in light of an accurate understanding of discipleship methodology as revealed in the New Testament epistles.

## *I. Defining the Terms*

The noun *disciple* (μαθητης) is used 261 times in the Greek New Testament. Of these, 233 are found in the Gospels and 28 in the book of Acts. The word is not used in the epistles. The verb *to make a disciple* (μαθητευω) is used four times—three times in Matthew and once in Acts. There is general agreement on the lexical meaning of the term. Consider the following definitions of *disciple*:

- μαθητης is used to denote “a student, learner, or pupil.”<sup>10</sup>
- μαθητης is used “in a wide sense, of Jews who became [Christ’s] adherents, John 6:66; Luke 6:17, some being secretly so, John 19:38; especially of the twelve apostles, Matt. 10:1; Luke 22:11, e.g. A ‘disciple’ was not only a pupil, but an adherent; hence they are spoken of as imitators of their teacher.”<sup>11</sup>
- μαθητης is used to denote “the man who directs his mind to something...The emphasis is not so much on the incompleteness or even deficiency of education as on the fact that the one thus designated is engaged in learning, that his education consists in the appropriation or adoption of specific knowledge or conduct, and that it proceeds deliberately and according to a set plan. There is thus no μαθητης without a διδασκαλος. The process involves a corresponding personal relation.”<sup>12</sup>
- μαθητης is used to denote “a person who learns from another by instruction, whether formal or informal—‘disciple, pupil.’”<sup>13</sup>
- μαθητης is used generally to denote “pupil, apprentice (in contrast to the teacher); adherent.”<sup>14</sup>

The term *disciple*, then, in its simplest form, connotes one who learns from another.

Nevertheless, a word’s meaning must be determined by looking beyond the lexicon.

Meaning is derived from usage. Charlie Bing has pointed out that “*etymology* is of little help

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<sup>10</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Rev. Ed. of: *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1995).

<sup>11</sup>W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, Vol. 2* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1996), 171.

<sup>12</sup>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vols. 5-9 Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 Compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976). Vol. 4, 416.

<sup>13</sup>Johannes P. Louw, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains, Vol. 1* (New York, NY: United Bible societies, 1996, c1989), 326.

<sup>14</sup>William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature : A Translation and Adaption of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch Zu Den Schrift En Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Ubrigen Urchristlichen Literatur* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996, c1979), 485.

in understanding the theological implications of being a disciple. However, some issues of *usage*” are crucial to the discussion.<sup>15</sup> D.A. Carson, in his helpful manual *Exegetical Fallacies*, remarks,

I am simply saying that the meaning of a word cannot be reliably determined by etymology, or that a root, once discovered, always projects a certain semantic load onto any word that incorporates that root. Linguistically, meaning is not an intrinsic possession of a word; rather [quoting Eugene Nida here], “it is a set of relations for which a verbal symbol is a sign.”<sup>16</sup>

A survey of the usage of the word *disciple* introduces certain nuances of the term that expand the strict lexical definition.

## ***II. Cultural and Historical Considerations: Discipleship Concepts in the Life of Christ***

The earliest use of the term is in Herodotus (4, 77) where the Scythian Anacharsis is called a μαθητής. The sense is that he (Anacharsis) had adopted Greek wisdom and culture, and become their champion.<sup>17</sup> Some five hundred years after Herodotus, the gospel writers in the New Testament used the term in much the same way. An examination of the context surrounding the use of the word in the synoptic gospels indicates that it refers to one who has adopted, at least at some level, the wisdom of Christ and embraced its resultant cultural implications.

In the Sermon on the Mount at the outset of His ministry, Jesus clearly announced a shift in religious and cultural ideals. His repeated refrain, “You have heard...but I tell you...,”<sup>18</sup> introduced His early followers to this new way of thinking and those who accepted this teaching soon came to be called His *disciples*. J. Dwight Pentecost has observed

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<sup>15</sup> Charles C. Bing, “Coming to Terms with Discipleship,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 5:1 (Spring ‘92): 38.

<sup>16</sup> D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 32.

<sup>17</sup> *TDNT*, vol. 4, 416. Herodotus of Halicarnassus (c. 484–425 B.C.), the first real Greek historian, is described by Cicero as the father of history.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43.

correctly that during the earthly ministry of Christ, there were three classes of disciples.<sup>19</sup> Some were merely curiosity seekers. They were Jesus' disciples because what He said intrigued them and they wanted to hear more only out of curiosity. Thus, they began following Him and in that sense were His *disciples*. A second classification of disciples included those who had become convinced that Jesus' teaching was correct. This group of disciples was made up of true believers who had received the gift of eternal life by acknowledging that Jesus was the only answer to their sin problem. They followed Him because they truly believed that what He was teaching was true. Yet, the degree to which they remained faithful to His teaching varied based on external societal and cultural pressures.<sup>20</sup> A third classification of disciples in the time of Christ included those who were fully committed to His teaching. They had forsaken all to follow Him to the extreme (cf. Matt. 10:32-39; 16:24-27; et. al.). This type of disciple is the ideal disciple. It is this level of discipleship to which Jesus repeatedly called His followers.

The use of the term *disciple* to denote Jesus' followers is in keeping with the Greek culture of the day. I. Howard Marshall writes,

In the Gk. world philosophers were likewise surrounded by their pupils. Since pupils often adopted the distinctive teaching of their masters, the word came to signify the adherent of a particular outlook in religion or philosophy... Although Jesus (like John) was not an officially recognized teacher (Jn. 7:14f.), he was popularly known as a teacher or rabbi (Mk. 9:5; 11:21; Jn. 3:2), and his associates were known as disciples.<sup>21</sup>

Regarding Jewish rabbinic custom, Philip Shuler adds,

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<sup>19</sup> See J. Dwight Pentecost, *Design for Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971).

<sup>20</sup> The occasion of Peter's three denials of Christ on the night He was betrayed presents a classic example of a "convinced disciple" who at the moment was not a "committed disciple." See also Matt. 8:21 where one of Jesus' disciples was hesitant to follow Him consistently.

<sup>21</sup>D. R. W. Wood, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 277.

Closely paralleling rabbinic custom, most NT references to “disciple” designate “followers” of Jesus, often a large group including both his closest associates (the Twelve) and a larger number who followed with varying positive response (Luke 6:17).<sup>22</sup>

The term disciple seems to imply more than just allegiance to a teacher or teaching.

Although the term *disciple* is absent from the Septuagint, nevertheless, the idea of discipleship was “a prominent feature of later Judaism.”<sup>23</sup> G.F. Hawthorne writes,

[Discipleship] always involved a teacher-student relationship...Physical proximity of the student to his teacher was also implied in the meaning of discipleship....The idea of physical adjacency inherent in the word disciple also applied specifically to Jesus’ associates. It was this idea that placed such radical demands on any one desiring to be His disciple. An itinerant rabbi, Jesus was constantly on the move. To be His disciple was in a literal way to be His follower. (Note: the verb ‘to follow’ occurs about eighty times in the gospels, and exclusively describes the relationship between the earthly Jesus and His companions. It became a synonym for disciple.)<sup>24</sup>

The concept of underlings *following* their master is clearly present in the Old Testament.

Thus the warrior follows a leader as the people followed Abimelech in Ju. 9:4, 49. Again, the wife follows her husband or the bride her bridegroom in Jer. 2:2. The prophetic disciple Elisha follows his master Elijah in 1 K. 19:20f....Even this following expresses little more than a relationship of respect. This is fully confirmed by the phrase which follows: “and ministered unto him.” The disciple follows his master as a servant in the strict sense. This last type of following passed over into Rabbinic custom to the extent that this received its impress from the master-pupil relationship. In many stories handed down by tradition we always perceive the same order, the rabbi or rabbis going ahead, perhaps riding on an ass, and their pupils following on behind at an appropriate distance.<sup>25</sup>

The connection between *disciple* and *follower* is solidified by the synoptic writers as they record Jesus’ frequent calls to “follow Me (Gk. ἀκολουθεω).”<sup>26</sup> Referring to ἀκολουθεω, Christian Blendinger notes,

<sup>22</sup>Paul J. Achtemeier, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1985), 222.

<sup>23</sup>Tenney, Merrill C., Ed. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975, 1976), 129-130.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>*TDNT*, Vol. 1, 213.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Matt. 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 16:24; 19:21, 28; Mk. 1:17; 2:14; 8:34; 10:21; Lk. 5:27; 9:23, 59; 18:22; Jn. 1:43; 8:12; 10:27; 12:26; 13:36; 21:19, 22.

It means (a) go somewhere with someone, accompany; (b) go behind someone, follow, and also (with hostile intent) pursue. Alongside the lit. meaning there soon grew up a metaphorical one: follow the drift, understand (Plato), follow someone's opinion, agree (Plato), adapt oneself (Thuc.).

While it is possible that the command to “follow Christ” is used figuratively to connote devotion and allegiance, it seems more likely, in light of the culture of the day, that for the early disciples, “following Christ” meant literally leaving their family and belongings and journeying with their Master for the purpose of learning His teaching. This was certainly true of the twelve (cf. Matt. 19:27; Mk. 1:18, 19; 10:29; see also Matt. 10:37).

Adding to the conclusion that first century discipleship included the element of physical proximity is the evidence that use of the term *disciple* gradually declined in the early days of the Church following Christ's ascension to heaven. Luke's statement in Acts 11:26 is significant: *And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.* Luke, the historian, seems to imply a shift in terminology away from use of the term *disciple*. Clearly by the middle of the first century, as the writing of the New Testament epistles began, the term *disciple* was no longer prominent as a descriptive term for believers. As mentioned, the term *disciple* is absent from the New Testament after the book of Acts. Similarly, the Greek word ἀκολουθεω, “to follow,” is used only twice outside of the Gospels and Acts to describe the relationship between the risen Lord and His adherents (Rev. 14:4; 19:14).<sup>27</sup> Blendingner notes,

The word ἀκολουθεω is essentially restricted to the gospels. In the rest of the NT writings one can sense a struggle to find another terminology to describe the Christian's fellowship with Christ, such as Paul's concept of being “in Christ,” or “imitation” of Christ with its ethical overtones.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Tenney, 130.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, Colin, Ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 483.

Thus, as far as the biblical record is concerned, after Christ's ascension, believers will not be called upon to "follow Christ" again until the Second Coming.

### *III. The Goal of Discipleship*

A first century disciple was one who had "heard the call of Jesus and join[ed] him."<sup>29</sup> To follow Jesus necessitated a literal redirection of one's life. Muller points out, "A man is called a μαθητης when he binds himself to someone else in order to acquire his practical and theoretical knowledge....One can only be a μαθητης in the presence of a διδασκαλος, a master or teacher...."<sup>30</sup> Both the teacher and the pupil were committed to a common goal, whether it be a particular philosophy, religious belief or trade.

True to this form, Jesus clearly had a purpose in mind for His disciples as He called them to follow Him. Theologically, that purpose was to glorify the Father in heaven (Jn. 15:8). But from the disciples' perspective, what was to be gained from answering Jesus' call? Like all disciples, Jesus' disciples learned certain principles from their Teacher that would benefit them in life. Namely, they learned to trust the Father. Referring to Jesus' Upper Room Discourse, Derickson and Radmacher note:

Jesus knows that these beloved men are about to experience traumatic days that, apart from His preparing them, will destroy *their immature faith*. His words are not an attempt to clarify the gospel to a confused group of men, but preparation for testing, for change, and *for His departure*. It is His last opportunity to teach them the things that they, who already believe in Him, will need in order to continue His ministry and *stand firm in the faith*....Jesus was giving them a lesson on sanctified living [italics added throughout].<sup>31</sup>

Derickson and Radmacher keenly point out that what Jesus desired to develop in His disciples was not a certain type of behavior, but a *mature faith* so that in His absence they

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<sup>29</sup> NIDNTT, 480.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>31</sup> Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher, *The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus* (Salem, OR: Charis Press, 2001), 39.

would be able to “stand firm in the faith.” In John 17:13, Jesus prayed that His disciples “may have My joy fulfilled in themselves.” It was this joy—a confident hope in the future—that motivated Jesus throughout His earthly ministry.<sup>32</sup> And likewise it should be this inner joy that sustains and motivates believers as they grow in their faith.

Jesus wanted them to experience His joy. In fact, it is His desire for them to have His joy that may have motivated Him to pray this prayer aloud in their presence. Even so, we see all of that evening’s instruction being given with that ultimate purpose. Jesus is preparing them and comforting them with the anticipation that, as He had said earlier (John 16:22), once all the upcoming events have transpired and they understand this evening’s instructions clearly, no one will be able to take their joy away from them.<sup>33</sup>

Jesus manifested a relationship with the Father that included the elements of reverence (cf. Jn. 17:1ff) and trust (cf. Matt. 26:39). It is this attitude that marks one as spiritually mature. As the disciples walked and talked with Jesus, this attitude on the part of their Master would have been unmistakable.

...because He had dedicated Himself to the Father and was subject to His word, His word became the separator between Jesus and the world as He responded on the basis of its truth and trustworthiness. We should do the same.<sup>34</sup>

When the apostle John wrote in his first epistle, “He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked” (1 John 2:6, NKJV), he was likely referring to Jesus’ example of faith and may very well have been contemplating Jesus’ final instructions given in the Upper Room Discourse. Later, after Jesus departed, the disciples’ faith in God would be tested time and again. But having seen Christ model reverence for and trust in the Father, they were well prepared to respond with a deep trust in God. From Genesis to Revelation the obligation of God’s people is to trust Him. When God’s people fail to trust Him, negative consequences ensue. Conversely, as God’s people trust Him, God does great things on their

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Heb. 12:2 where the author writes that Jesus “endured the cross” for the “joy that was set before Him.”

<sup>33</sup> Derickson and Radmacher, 283.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 290.

behalf. The experiences of the patriarchs teach this lesson well. The faith of Jacob, for example, wavered frequently and thus his earthly life was a series of major failures followed by short-lived successes. By contrast, the story of Joseph is in the Bible to remind the reader of what God can do in the life of a person who steadfastly trusts Him regardless of his particular circumstances.

In Genesis we learn that faith in God is absolutely essential if we are to have fellowship with Him and realize our potential as human beings. Faith is the law of life. If one lives by faith he flourishes, but if he does not, he fails. The four patriarchs are primarily examples of what faith is and how it manifests itself. In each of their lives we learn something new about faith....Joseph's life teaches us what God can do with a person who trusts Him consistently in the face of adversity. The outstanding characteristic of Joseph's life was his faithful loyalty to God. He believed God's two revelations to him in dreams even though God's will did not seem to be working out as he thought it would. Patient faith and its reward shine through the story of Joseph.<sup>35</sup>

The goal of the discipleship process during Jesus' earthly ministry may be succinctly defined as *leading believers into a relationship with the Father that is characterized by a mature level of trust in Him*. The question is, with the term *disciple* absent from the epistles, what has taken its place in the Church Age? Are not believers today called to develop mature faith? An analysis of discipleship concepts in the epistles indicates that although the means of accomplishing this goal has changed in the Church Age, the goal itself remains the same.

#### ***IV. A shift in terminology: A Theological Analysis of Discipleship Concepts in the Epistles***

During Christ's earthly ministry, ἀκολουθεω (follow) and μαθητης (disciple) were the words of choice in the synoptics. This is only natural since Jesus was physically present to be followed. In the epistles, however, the concept of discipleship is broadened as different words come to the forefront of the discipleship arena. In particular the word *walk* takes on

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas L. Constable, *Class Notes on Genesis*, 2001, 4-5.

new significance in New Testament epistolary literature. The word περιπατεω (*walk*) is used 21 times in the synoptics and in every case but one (Mk. 7:5) it refers exclusively to literal walking (cf. Matt. 4:18; Mk. 2:9; Lk. 11:44, et. al.). Of the eight uses of the word in Acts, all but one (Acts 21:21) refer to literal walking. In the epistles, however, περιπατεω is used 44 times and in *every case* it is used figuratively to refer to one's behavior.<sup>36</sup> This contrast between literal walking in the synoptics and figurative walking in the epistles is remarkable. Yet, when one remembers that the synoptics are narrative in genre and the epistles are more instructive, the contrast is not all that surprising. Notwithstanding the difference in genre, however, it is noteworthy that only once in the synoptics is the word *walk* used figuratively to refer to behavior and not once in the epistles is it used to refer to literal walking.

In the epistles believers are encouraged to *walk in love* (Rom. 14:15; Eph. 5:2); *walk in truth* (2 John 4; 3 John 3); *walk in the light* (Eph. 5:8; 1 John 1:7); *walk in wisdom* (Col. 4:5); *walk in the Spirit* (Gal. 5:16); *walk by faith* (2 Cor. 5:7); *walk in Christ* (Col. 2:6); *walk in a worthy manner* (Eph. 4:1; Col. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:12); *walk pleasing to God* (1 Thess. 4:1); *walk according to His commandments* (2 John 6); *walk in good works* (Eph. 2:10); *walk properly* (Rom. 13:13; 1 Thess. 4:12). Believers are further cautioned *against* walking in *darkness* (1 John 1:6; 2:11); *disorderly* (2 Thess. 3:6); *in the flesh* (Rom. 8:1[Majority Text reading], 8:4; 2 Cor. 10:2-3); *as enemies of the cross* (Phil. 3:18); *disobediently* (Col. 3:7); *as Gentiles* (Eph. 4:17).

Paul's use of the word *walk* in 2 Corinthians 5:7 succinctly expresses the central idea in the epistles of the believer's walk in Christ. *For we walk by faith, not by sight.* This statement comes in the midst of Paul's instruction to the Corinthians regarding their future

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<sup>36</sup> A possible exception is Peter's use of a simile in 1 Pet. 5:8 where the devil is said to be "walking around like a roaring lion." While a lion can literally walk, Satan cannot because he does not have literal legs and feet. "Walking" in this context refers indirectly to Satan's goals and actions.

resurrection and subsequent appearance at the judgment seat of Christ. Paul encourages his readers to be confident even though they are “absent from the Lord” because they have the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of their future resurrection and reunion with Christ in the air (2 Cor. 5:1-8; cf. 1 Thess. 4:13-18). In light of this, the readers are to make it their aim “to be well pleasing to Him” knowing that they will be rewarded at the judgment seat (cf. 1 Cor. 3:11-15). Nowhere is the contrast between discipleship in the synoptics and discipleship in the epistles more discernable than in this passage. In the synoptics a disciple was to be in close proximity to Christ. Here, a believer is physically “absent from Christ.” In the synoptics, a disciple walked behind or after Christ so as to watch Him and learn from Him. Here, the believer is blind, metaphorically speaking, and must walk by faith not sight. Ralph Martin states, “Paul presents in 2 Corinthians 5:7 the thought of the invisibility of Christ, not his absence per se.”<sup>37</sup> David K. Lowery adds, “To be at home in the body means to...be in a state of mortality *away from the immediate presence of the Lord* [emphasis added].”<sup>38</sup>

2 Corinthians 5:7 calls to mind Paul’s earlier words in 4:18. *While we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal* (2 Cor. 4:18, NKJV). Martin rightly concludes, “Faith believes in things unseen and is the basis for the Christian’s walk while ‘at home in the body.’”<sup>39</sup> The author of Hebrews defines faith as *the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen* (Heb. 11:1). In his letter to the Romans, Paul similarly describes the Christian’s walk as a life of hope and faith in the unseen.

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<sup>37</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary: 2 Corinthians, Vol. 40* (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 110.

<sup>38</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Vol. 2* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 566.

<sup>39</sup> Martin, 110.

*For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. (Romans 8:24-25, NKJV)*

As mentioned earlier, a review of the word ἀκολουθεω (*follow*) in the epistles also demonstrates a shift in emphasis from external proximity and visibility to internal hope and faith. In the synoptics, ἀκολουθεω is characteristically linked to the preposition ὀπισω (*after*) to denote the literal and physical “action of a man answering the call of Jesus whose life is redirected in [outward] obedience.”<sup>40</sup> But ἀκολουθεω is not used even once in the epistles to refer to believers following after Christ.

In elaborating on the call of believers to grow mature in this life of faith, the epistolary writers, especially Paul, introduce a term not found in the gospels. The verb μιμεομαι (*imitate*) is used four times (2 Thess. 3:7, 9; Heb. 13:7; 3 Jn. 11). The noun μιμητης (*imitator*) is used six times (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; Heb. 6:12). A cognate, συμμιμητης (*fellow-imitator*), is used once in Phil. 3:17. Wolfgang Bauder says of these words:

The words are applied to particular persons who are obvious living examples for *the life of faith* [emphasis added]. When the apostle Paul puts himself forward as such a model (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9), he does not think of himself as the personal embodiment of an ideal which must be imitated. In fact, prior to the demand to imitate him, he deliberately places a confession of his own imperfection (Phil. 3:12). The *typos*, the example or type, is not here a representation of particular qualities, but first conduct which is shaped by a definite goal (Phil. 2:12-15), and secondly the experience of persecution and suffering for Christ’s sake—in short it is life in fellowship with Christ. To be an imitator of the apostle accordingly means laying hold of Christ in the consciousness of one’s own imperfection and letting one’s life be continually re-moulded [sic] by Christ in obedience to him (cf. 3 Jn 11).<sup>41</sup>

Aristotle and Democritus used the verb μιμεομαι with reference to the manner in which men in early civilization learned to weave and spin by watching spiders and learned architectural

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<sup>40</sup> NIDNTT, 480.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 491.

techniques from watching swallows.<sup>42</sup> Thus, similar to the synoptic concept of discipleship, *imitating* involves not merely mimicking for no reason of value, but rather following the example set by another because one has learned from that example and become convinced that there is value in adopting that behavior or belief.

The connection between *walking* by faith and *imitating* the mature faith of others becomes readily apparent as the context surrounding the usage of these words in the epistles is more closely examined. For example, in 2 Thessalonians 3:5, Paul prays that the Lord would direct the hearts of the Thessalonian believers “into the patience of Christ.” Then in verses six and seven, the reader is instructed to withdraw from those who *walk* disorderly and instead *imitate* those who are not disorderly, namely Paul. Those who are disorderly are not walking according to the tradition which they received from Paul (v. 6). On the contrary, Paul and his traveling companions consistently set a good example (v. 9) of what it means to walk in the love of God and patience of Christ (v. 5).

In 1 Corinthians 4:16-17, the readers are encouraged to imitate Paul’s “ways in Christ.” The phrase “in Christ,” a favorite of Paul, expresses intimate fellowship with Christ and thus refers to Paul’s relationship with Christ rather than his conduct for Christ. In 1 Corinthians 11:1 the readers are again exhorted to imitate Paul because He is imitating Christ. In Ephesians 5:1-2, the connection is between imitating God and walking in love with Christ being the ultimate example of one who imitated God. In 1 Thessalonians 1:6, again the ones being imitated (Paul, Timothy and Silas) are placed on the same level as Christ. In other words, the only reason the reader can imitate Paul and his companions is because they first imitated Christ.

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<sup>42</sup> TDNT, Vol. IV, 660.

Perhaps the strongest evidence that what is to be imitated is *faith* and not *actions*, per se, is found in Hebrews 6:12. In that context, the concepts of *walking by faith* and *imitating* the mature faith of others are clearly connected. The author challenges the Hebrew Christians in the late 60s AD not to abandon their faith in spite of the intense persecution they were facing. Rather, they were to *imitate* the faith and patience of those who have gone before them—especially the faith and patience that Christ exhibited during His earthly ministry. Later in 13:7, the writer of Hebrews again expressly encourages his readers to *imitate the faith* of their godly leaders. In his explanation of Paul’s use of the term *imitators* in Ephesians 5:1, Bauder writes, “What is to be imitated is Christ’s obedient adherence to the Father’s will, shown in love and forgiveness.”<sup>43</sup> Like the Old Testament saints in Hebrews 11, Jesus Himself finished the course and received the promised inheritance—although the complete reception of His inheritance vis-à-vis the Millennial Kingdom awaits future fulfillment.

When the terms *imitate* and *walk* in the epistles are analyzed, the essence of discipleship in the Church Age begins to take shape. The incarnate Christ is the ultimate example of one who obediently fulfilled the Father’s will—even to the point of death (Phil. 2:8). Similarly, those who physically followed Him on earth and learned from Him were able to make the ultimate sacrifice in martyrdom. After Christ’s ascension, believers are called to follow not the *presence* of Christ, but the *faith* of Christ. Believers are encouraged to imitate the faith of those who imitate the faith of Christ. Discipleship, for the Church Age, does not involve an outward focus on actions, belongings, proximity, behavior, etc. Rather, in the Church Age, discipleship takes on a decidedly inward focus. Yet, it is worth noting that even during Christ’s earthly ministry the outward element of discipleship was not the

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<sup>43</sup> NIDNTT, 492.

end in itself. It was a means to an end. Jesus' calls to literally abandon father, mother, job, home, and belongings and physically follow Him were intended to teach deep reliance and trust on God.<sup>44</sup> Joseph's experience in Genesis served the same purpose. Though his experiences were not voluntary—that is, he did not answer a specific call to discipleship but rather endured circumstances beyond his control—the purpose was the same: to teach Joseph to trust God.

The demands that Jesus placed on His followers during His earthly ministry must be viewed in light of the cultural and historical practices of the day. The best way for Him to teach believers how to grow mature in their faith was to use the master-teacher discipleship model that was common in His culture. It would be a mistake to import into the Church Age some sort of “do-as-I-do” modeling approach to spiritual training. A better equivalent would be a “trust-as-I-trust” model. The goal is not so much to get believers to *look* like Christ (the classic view of discipleship in most churches today)<sup>45</sup> but to *trust* like Christ. It was not outward actions that Paul encouraged His reader to mimic, but rather the faith that produced those actions. Nevertheless, there is clearly a connection between the degree to which a believer steadfastly trusts God and the degree to which he consistently obeys God.

Faith and obedience are always joined together. ‘Trust and obey, for there’s no other way’ may be so simple a statement as to be considered doggerel rather than poetry. It is, nevertheless, the philosophy of Genesis, and of the Christian religion. *When trust failed, obedience ceased* [emphasis added]...Thus the fundamental truth is taught that man can only realize his own God-created life by trusting God and walking in the way of His commandment.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Ruler (Lk. 18:18-23). Although this is not a discipleship passage, it does give an example of the kind of faith that Jesus demanded of His followers.

<sup>45</sup> See *Introduction* above. See also *Identifying Faulty Views of Discipleship in 21st Century American Evangelicalism* below.

<sup>46</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible, Vol. 1.* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1912), 23-24.

The concept of discipleship in the epistles centers on encouraging believers to develop a deep *trust* in God so that they will then be motivated to *obey* Him regardless of life's circumstances.

Repeatedly, the apostle Paul refers to the quality of the believer's faith in his epistles.<sup>47</sup> In 2 Corinthians 13:5, he expressly exhorts the reader to examine himself and see if he is "in the faith." This passage is often understood to mean that one should look at his outward actions to determine if he is a believer. But Scripture never points the believer to his works to gain assurance. Paul takes the salvation of his readers for granted in the immediate context of 2 Corinthians 13:5.<sup>48</sup> His exhortation is simply a challenge for his readers to see if they are living and walking by faith *at that moment*. It is a challenge to examine the *quality* of their faith, not the existence of it (i.e. their eternal salvation). Peter, too, challenges his readers to obtain a faith that is "steadfast" (1 Pet. 5:9). Additionally, the author of Hebrews makes frequent mention of the importance of dynamic faith in the believer's daily walk.<sup>49</sup>

James, the Lord's brother, witnessed firsthand the faith of the Lord as He watched Him grow up. Even though James evidently did not become a believer until after Christ's resurrection, he nevertheless heard Jesus teach about faith during His ministry.<sup>50</sup> The words of Christ undoubtedly resonated as true in James' ears because he had seen Jesus manifest a deep trust in God the Father throughout His life. Thus, James understood that spiritual maturity came by exercising one's faith. In his epistle he writes, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Rom. 14:1; 2 Cor. 13:5; Col. 1:23; 2:7; 2 Thess. 1:3; Titus 1:13; et. al.

<sup>48</sup> Note his use of "we" in verse 4. Whatever Paul thought of his recipients at that moment, he included himself in the classification. Clearly, he was not questioning their eternal salvation in this context.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Heb. 6:12; 10:22-23, 38; chapter 11; 12:2; 13:7

<sup>50</sup> Cf. John 7:5

nothing.” (James 1:2-4, NKJV). Elsewhere in his epistle he speaks of the qualitative aspect of faith.<sup>51</sup>

This “quality of faith” concept is not new in the epistles. As mentioned above, the goal of discipleship in the synoptics is the development of mature faith. Jesus often spoke of faith in terms of its *quality* (i.e. its strength) not just its *existence*.<sup>52</sup> That the disciples understood this concept of degrees of faith is evidenced by Luke’s description of Stephen and Barnabas as men “full of faith” (Acts 6:5; 11:24). For Luke, faith was not an all or nothing concept. It could be possessed in degrees and it could be “strengthened” (Acts 16:5). In Acts 14:22, Luke writes that Paul returned to the churches of southern Galatia “strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to *continue in the faith*, and saying, ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God’” [emphasis added]. Note the progression of thought here. As a means of strengthening the disciples (what the church today would call the “discipleship process”), Paul exhorted them to *continue in the faith* (i.e. maintain a steadfast trust in the Lord) because they were bound to face difficult circumstances.

What Paul and the other epistolary writers develop in the early days of the Church, like so many other theological concepts, was embodied in the life and ministry of Christ. What Jesus taught by example using the discipleship model, Paul and the others taught by written word of revelatory instruction. Of course, they also modeled this faith in God through their actions, but the specific details of what it takes to grow mature as a believer are spelled out explicitly in their writings. By contrast, the goal behind discipleship in Jesus’ ministry was often mysteriously hidden just beneath the surface in His parables. In the

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. 2:5 and 2:14-26, where James discusses the faith of a believer as being “rich” and “living,” respectively.

<sup>52</sup>Cf. “little faith” (Matt. 6:30); “great faith” (Matt. 8:10); “increased faith” (Lk. 17:5ff)

progress of revelation, it is the epistles that give detailed instruction about the life of faith that for centuries had been only modeled in the great men and women of faith throughout biblical history.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit during the Church Age plays a major role in the shift in discipleship methodology. In the absence of the indwelling Holy Spirit, Old Testament saints and first century believers during the earthly ministry of Christ needed the presence of an earthly διδασκαλος. But with the onset of the Spirit’s ministry of baptism and indwelling, the influence toward faith and obedience moves primarily inward. This does not mean, of course, that earthly teachers no longer have a role. As Paul’s instruction regarding offices in the local church and gifts within the body make clear, earthly teachers are still very much a part of God’s means for developing maturity within the body of Christ, but only to the extent that they encourage their learners to trust in God as the primary means of growing mature. The substance of teaching in the Church Age should not focus, as is so often the case, on what to do and what not to do. Rather, it should focus on whom to trust—namely, God the Creator who wants only the best for His children, and what *not* to trust—namely, our sinful nature.<sup>53</sup>

The *primary* teacher, if you will, is the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16:5-15; 1 Cor. 2:6-16). The Holy Spirit’s role in the Christian walk is vital in the Church Age. Paul said, “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul challenges these new believers to “live by faith” (2:20) and to “eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith” (5:5). Having mentioned that the promise of the Spirit is obtained by

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<sup>53</sup> Again, there is certainly a connection between trusting God and obeying God. What I am suggesting, however, is that contemporary discipleship methodologies often get the cart before the horse. It doesn’t matter how many hours one spends in quiet time, how much one prays, how many people one witnesses to, how regularly one attends church, etc., if one does not fundamentally know how to trust God day by day.

faith (3:14), he goes on to describe the kinds of actions that are produced when a believer “walks in the Spirit” (i.e. “lives by faith”) in contrast to the kinds of behavior that result from walking in the flesh (5:19-24). Most contemporary discipleship programs reverse Paul’s point in this passage. It is important to note that Paul does *not* say that doing the things listed in Galatians 5:22-23 will result in walking in the Spirit. Rather, it is the other way around. When one first walks in the Spirit, the inevitable fruit of such a life of faith will be produced.

Although mature believers model this type of steadfast faith in their Christian walk so that others may *imitate* it, those without a readily accessible external model are nevertheless not loosed from the obligation to respond favorably to the internal convicting work of the Spirit as He leads them to a deeper level of trust in God. Schaeffer eloquently describes the life of faith for the believer:

The reality of living by faith as though we were already dead, of living by faith in open communion with God, and then stepping back into the external world as though we are already raised from the dead — this is not once for all; it is a matter of moment-by-moment faith, and living moment by moment. This morning’s faith will never do for this noon. The faith of this noon will never do for suppertime. The faith of suppertime will never do for the time of going to bed. The faith of midnight will never do for the next morning. Thank God for the reality for which we were created, a moment-by-moment communication with God Himself. We should indeed be thankful because the moment-by-moment quality brings the whole thing to the size which we are, as God has made us.

This being the case, it is obvious that there is no mechanical solution to true spirituality or the true Christian life. Anything that has the mark of the mechanical upon it is a mistake. It is not possible to say, read so many chapters of the Bible every day, and you will have this much sanctification. It is not possible to say, pray so long every day, and you will have a certain amount of sanctification. It is not possible to add the two together and to say, you will have this big a piece of sanctification. This is a purely mechanical solution, and denies the whole Christian position. For the fact is that the Christian life, true spirituality, can never have a mechanical solution. The real solution is being cast up into the moment-by-moment communion, personal communion, with God Himself, and letting Christ’s truth flow through me through the agency of the Holy Spirit.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer : A Christian Worldview*. (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1996, c1982).

Charles Stanley describes walking by faith as follows:

Faith is *believing that God will do as He promised*. Faith is not a power. It's not something we are supposed to drum up inside ourselves. Faith is trusting that God will honor His promises. That is all there is to it. Our part in the faith process is fairly simple. We are to go about our lives—making decisions, handling crises, raising our families, and so on—as if God is really going to do what He said He would do. That is what it means to walk by faith [emphasis original].<sup>55</sup>

#### ***V. Summary of Discipleship Concepts from the Epistles Versus Synoptic Gospels***

An analysis of relevant passages from the epistles and the synoptics suggests that discipleship for the Church Age involves several key components. First, no longer is the proximity between the διδασκαλος and the μαθητης of central importance. Granted, the concept of modeling a life of faith is clearly present in the epistles; nevertheless, the role of the modelers is supplemental, not central to the discipleship process.

Second, faith (daily trust in God) becomes more overtly quantified as the goal of discipleship in the epistles. Whereas in the synoptics, the call is to “follow Christ” and thereby learn how to trust God, in the epistles the call is to directly “trust God.” While the believer may learn such mature faith by watching the lives of other believers, ultimately the life of faith is lived by following the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit as He guides, comforts and convicts each individual believer.

Third, in the epistles the formula for discipleship may be stated as *obedience follows faith*. That is, the degree to which a believer learns to trust God in his daily life directly affects his ability to consistently obey God. In the synoptics, Jesus first issued a strong call to follow Him in obedience so that the disciples could learn how to trust by watching Him. Thus, in a sense, the formula in the synoptics is *faith (daily trust in God) follows obedience*.

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<sup>55</sup> Charles Stanley, *The Wonderful Spirit Filled Life* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), 76.

Fourth, the role of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual growth process takes on new dimensions in the epistles. With Jesus Christ no longer present in bodily form, the believer is required to “walk by faith and not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). Walking by faith means trusting the Spirit and following Him rather than trusting the flesh and obeying its lusts (Gal. 5:16-25). To walk daily by faith is to believe that God is who He says He is; that He will do what He said He will do; and that He is in full control of your life and circumstances no matter how difficult they may seem from a human perspective.

### ***VI. Identifying Faulty Views of Discipleship in 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Evangelicalism***

A review of much of today’s popular literature on the subject of discipleship reveals several faulty views of discipleship. An informal survey of twenty-five local church pastors and Christian leaders throughout America confirms the existence, if not the prevalence, of these faulty views.<sup>56</sup> These views can be summarized into three primary errors. The first is the belief that the discipleship process is primarily about teaching biblical doctrine to new believers. Indeed, many discipleship training programs are structured in such a way as to cover much of the same biblical doctrines that one would find in a typical systematic theology book.

To be sure, learning biblical doctrine is an indispensable and often neglected element in the local church today. In many cases, postmodern thinking has infiltrated the church to the extent that a “needs-based” or “relevance-based” approach is preferred over a teaching approach that focuses on doctrinal fundamentals. As a key component of the local church

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<sup>56</sup> This informal survey was conducted via email between June 25 and August 15, 2002. While the survey was certainly not scientific, it does serve as a sampling of views that this writer believes are representative of mainstream evangelical thought on the subject of discipleship methodologies. To scientifically verify the prevalence of such faulty views in the Church today would require much greater research than the scope and size constraints of this project allowed.

ministry, doctrine must never be neglected.<sup>57</sup> Yet, unless the purpose of learning doctrine—namely, to develop a deep trust in the Lord—is expressed explicitly and frequently in the teaching process, doctrine may become merely stale, academic knowledge with no real impact in the lives of the learners. Derickson and Radmacher, commenting on the occasion at the outset of the Upper Room Discourse when Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, remark:

Before John records the action of Christ, he gives us the source of the action. Jesus knew what to do because He knew what He knew. He knew where He came from. He knew where He was going. He knew what was His mission. He knew all these truths on the basis of the authoritative Word of God. And that knowledge set Him free to do what He did in taking the role of a servant. We see in this a principle of life that is true of every person. What I know determines how I think. How I think determines what I do....By practicing the principle that our actions are determined by our deepest thoughts Jesus was able to do what He did. Because Jesus knew who He was, He could do what He did....When we come to know who we are, it is amazing what we are able to do.<sup>58</sup>

Trusting God, at its most basic level, means knowing who we are and knowing who God is.

J.I. Packer describes those who know the Lord as having (1) a great passion for God’s presence; (2) great thoughts about God; (3) great boldness for God; and (4) great satisfaction and contentment in God.<sup>59</sup>

Knowledge of God’s truth, in and of itself, does not make a believer mature. It only makes one knowledgeable. Many excellent commentaries have been written by educated and scholarly men and women who have little—and in some cases *no*—faith in the Lord. It is only when knowledge and trust unite that maturity develops. The more one knows about the Lord, the more likely he is to trust the Lord daily and thereby grow mature. A.W. Tozer, in his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, stresses this point.

Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, “What comes into your mind when you think about God?” we might predict with certainty

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 4:6, 16; 2 Tim. 2:2; et. al.

<sup>58</sup> Derickson and Radmacher, 40.

<sup>59</sup> See J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973).

the spiritual future of that man. Were we able to know exactly what our most influential religious leaders think of God today, we might be able with some precision to foretell where the Church will stand tomorrow.<sup>60</sup>

Derickson and Radmacher add:

...every believer has an obligation before God to read His word, to study it, to memorize it, and to obey it. We cannot sanctify ourselves to God by going to church on Sunday and by being spoon-fed tidbits of predigested Scripture by our pastors and expect to walk effectively with God. We must let His word dwell in us by knowing it, thinking about it, and letting it influence our thoughts and actions.<sup>61</sup>

Accordingly, doctrinal training, contrary to popular opinion, is not the essence of discipleship. It is merely one means by which a new believer may be aided in his pursuit of the true essence of discipleship, which is faith.

A second prevailing error in today's discipleship methodologies is a fundamental lack of clarity. That is, while churches characteristically emphasize discipleship in their promotional materials, they seldom explain precisely what they mean by the term and even less often articulate what the discipleship process looks like. Is it a class? Is it a booklet? Is it a curriculum? Is it a small group meeting? Is it even something that I need? Mission-statements and vision-statements are quite popular in churches today. In large part, they have replaced doctrinal statements as the chief content in church promotional literature. A church without a well-defined and well-publicized mission statement is considered out of touch with mainstream, evangelical Christianity.

A survey of church bulletins, web sites, newsletters, etc. indicates that one of the more common mission statements, or at least a common component of mission statements, is: *to develop fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ*. While such a statement sounds meaningful and biblical, it begs the question...how? How does one become fully devoted?

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<sup>60</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1961), 1-2.

<sup>61</sup> Derickson and Radmacher, 290.

How does one follow Christ? What does a fully devoted follower of Christ look like, anyway? When pressed for clarity, most pastors or church leaders would acknowledge that the phrase “fully devoted follower of Christ” is synonymous with the phrase “mature believer” or “mature Christian.” But even if one accepts the terminology “follower of Christ” as normative for today,<sup>62</sup> it still leaves unanswered the question of how does one become a “fully devoted” or “mature” believer?

Focusing attention on a problem (i.e. the need for discipleship) and actually developing a plan that effectively addresses the problem are two different things. The federal government has proven this principle to be true in its efforts to address many social issues of our day. For instance, talking about welfare reform does not solve the problem of a failed welfare system. Likewise, emphasizing discipleship in the local church by adopting catchy slogans and implementing creative programs does little to accomplish true spiritual growth in the lives of believers unless the *sine qua non* of spiritual growth—trusting God—is clearly articulated, taught and modeled.

A third faulty view of discipleship today is an unhealthy emphasis on outward works as the goal of the discipleship process. This is perhaps the most common error committed unwittingly by well-meaning pastors and church leaders. It may also be the most detrimental. In an effort to quantify the results of the discipleship process, discipleship leaders often focus on outward, visible changes. The unintended result of this misplaced focus is that the person being disciplined develops the mistaken impression that the more visible activities they engage in—Bible reading, praying, attending church, etc.—the more mature they are. Yet, as discussed above, true maturity is measured by the quality of one’s

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<sup>62</sup> See my discussion of ἀκολουθεω above (pp. 8-9) where it was pointed out that after the ascension of Christ believers are not called to “follow Christ” again until the Second Coming.

faith not the activity of one's life. Just as a morally upright and outwardly righteous individual may appear to be a Christian and yet, in reality not be a Christian at all, likewise an immature believer may do the right things, say the right things, and look very much like a mature believer without actually possessing a firm and steadfast trust in the Lord. Outward activity is no guarantee of the inward condition of one's heart.

The present writer is aware of discipleship programs that require participants to complete a survey at the beginning of the program in which they record such information as how many times a day they pray; how many times a week they read their Bible; how much they give financially to the local church; how often they share the gospel with others; etc. Then at the end of the program—say after a 12-week course, for example—the survey is re-administered. If an increase/improvement in the areas assessed can be quantified, the assumption is made that spiritual growth has occurred. But is this a fair assumption to make? One presumes that the Scribes and Pharisees might have scored high on a similar instrument administered in their day yet clearly they were not spiritually mature believers.

More significantly, however, consider the downside of such an approach to discipleship. Encouraging new believers to focus on their behavior as the single, determinative factor in their spiritual growth has the unfortunate affect of working directly against the *true* measure of spiritual growth: trusting the Lord. One cannot be preoccupied with himself and the Lord at the same time. To be preoccupied with one's own actions and behavior necessarily distracts from the ability to trust and depend on the Lord. The question Paul asked the Galatians is worth revisiting: "Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). Many Christians today make the same mistake. It is as if, having been saved by grace through faith, they then turn

to God and announce, “Thanks for the gift. I’ll take it from here!” Yet, as Paul pointed out to the Galatians, if righteousness could be obtained in one’s own strength, why did Christ have to die in the first place (Gal. 2:21)?

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes, “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, *so walk in Him*, rooted and built up in Him and *established in the faith*, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.” (Colossians 2:6-7, emphasis added). An esteemed, long-time professor of Bible exposition at Dallas Theological Seminary, Dr. Stanley Toussaint, is fond of saying, “The method of sanctification is the same as the method of justification: *faith*.”<sup>63</sup> Contrary to popular discipleship programs today, the outward fruit of righteousness is never intended to be a demonstration of our effort and resolve. Rather, “it is the evidence of our dependency on and sensitivity to the promptings of the Spirit.”<sup>64</sup> The goal of discipleship must be to foster this kind of dependency on the Lord which in turn will produce outward righteousness. A discipleship program that emphasizes only outward righteousness and not inward faith is self-contradicting and self-defeating.

### ***VII. A Suggested Remedy: Rethinking the Church’s Mission***

The three faulty views of discipleship discussed in the preceding section—(1) confusing discipleship with doctrinal training; (2) a lack of clarity in communicating the discipleship process; and (3) an unhealthy preoccupation with outward behavior as the primary focus of discipleship—if left unaddressed, have serious implications on the ministry of the local church. Obviously if the church has an erroneous approach to discipleship, the result is a failure on the part of the church to develop mature believers. This in turn leads to unhealthy churches filled with immature believers who are ill-equipped to handle the

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<sup>63</sup> Quote from class lecture, 1992.

<sup>64</sup> Stanley, 100.

adversity that life brings their way. The problem is self-perpetuating. Those believers who were discipled using an ineffective or unbalanced approach will repeat the mistake as they in turn disciple others. If the church is to have an impact in the world, there must be a fundamental shift in thinking regarding discipleship.

First, the church must redefine the modeling approach that is common today. Notice the key here is *redefining*, not *discarding*. As this study has demonstrated, the idea of mature believers serving as models for younger (or less mature) believers is prevalent in the New Testament epistles. It would be a mistake to neglect the time-honored principle of learning wise counsel from those who are our examples. Modeling predates the earthly ministry of Christ and it continues after the earthly ministry of Christ. Just because Christ is not present in bodily form to serve as an earthly model today, does not mean that we no longer have earthly examples. The popular one-on-one modeling techniques of discipleship that are common today are both appropriate and helpful. What must change, however, are the definition of modeling as well as the qualifications of the models.

Believers who “have it all together” in terms of their outward behavior may not be the best models. Instead, perhaps the ideal models are those who—like Joseph, David, Peter, Paul, and others—have experienced highs and lows, failures and successes throughout their lives and have consequently learned what it means to trust the Lord in good times and bad. Proverbs 15:31 reminds us, “The ear that hears the rebukes of life will abide among the wise.” Maturity is not indicated by one’s perfect attendance pins from Sunday school, or by one’s titles, or by the positions or offices one holds in the church. Rather, the best models may be those who have been rebuked by life. That is, they have been broken and thus learned to trust the Lord. The first remedy for the failed discipleship methods of the past is

to think outside the box. In the “hall of faith” in Hebrews chapter eleven, one finds men and women commended by God not for their outward appearance but for their level of trust in Him. One wonders how many from that list would be selected as “Small Group Directors” or “Ministers of Christian Education and Discipleship” if they lived today.

Second, when it comes to the specific activities of a disciple the emphasis must be not only *what* and *how*, but *why*. People are more apt to adopt a particular behavior or practice if they understand why it will benefit them. For example, it is not enough to say, “Read your Bible and it will help you grow as a Christian.” Instead, leaders must explain that reading your Bible helps one to know the Lord better and the better you know the Lord the more likely you are to trust Him. Then, as one develops a deeper trust in the Lord, he becomes mature. In this quick-fix, instant results society the tendency is to provide simplistic formulas that “get right to the point.” But the reality is keeping a checklist of righteous behavior will not, in and of itself, result in maturity. If discipleship was just a matter of keeping a checklist, robots could be programmed to become mature. Joseph Stowell remarks,

...at the core of it all, it is not a struggle with rules and regulations. The issue is something far more significant, more compelling. Following Christ is a relationship that drives and defines all we are and do...It’s not a project. It’s a Person. It’s a relationship to a Person who perfectly loves and cares for us and who is wise beyond comparison—a Person who has done so much for His followers that they look for ways to please and obey Him. If Christianity is dull and boring, if it is a burden and not a blessing, then most likely we are involved in a project, not a Person—a system not a Savior, rules rather than relationship.<sup>65</sup>

This emphasis on relationship cannot be overstated. If discipleship is first and foremost about trusting God, as the present writer contends, then relationship is the key. Believers must be taught that getting to know Christ better, through Bible study, prayer, worship, etc.,

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<sup>65</sup> Joseph M. Stowell, *Following Christ: Experiencing Life the Way It Was Meant to Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 17.

is what allows them to trust Him more. Thus, the traditional discipleship activities become a means to an end, not the end in itself.

Third, church leaders must strive for *clarity* and *integration* in the terms and approaches to discipleship that are used today. It is very easy in this postmodern age—an age characterized by thirty-second sound bites and Internet breaking news bulletins—to reduce the concept of discipleship to catch phrases that are long on creativity but short on substantive meaning. Discipleship is *not* an easy process. In giving people instruction on what is required to grow mature, it must be made abundantly clear that the process involves pain, stretching, and trusting! The recent trend toward “new-member classes” in churches today has its up sides as well as its down sides. The emphasis on assimilating new believers into the local body is to be commended. In larger churches in particular, such new-member classes can help keep new members from getting lost in the maze of classes, programs, activities, etc. They serve as an orientation to the church’s ministries. Furthermore, these new-member classes can help new believers develop relationships with other believers, which is critical. Nevertheless, the church must work to avoid giving the impression that upon completion of a new-member class, the new believer is somehow “mature.”

The same can be said of “basic discipleship” classes. Many churches are adopting Christian Education programs that involve graduated levels of training. For example, one might attend six weeks of *Discipleship 101* followed by six weeks of *Discipleship 102*, etc. After completing each level, it is not uncommon for churches to acknowledge the students’ completion with a certificate of some type. Again, the church must guard against the impression that by merely completing a curriculum one becomes mature. It must be clarified

to those who participate in new-member classes or discipleship training classes that discipleship is a life-long process that involves growing in faith, not just knowledge.

Along those lines, churches must work to avoid the false distinction between “discipleship” programs in the church and all other programs. In reality, everything the church does should aid in the spiritual growth process of its members. This includes the worship services, the Sunday school ministry, the discipleship training ministry, the small groups ministry and any other component of local church ministry. A church that is committed to the New Testament concepts of discipleship as expounded in the epistles must work to integrate all of its various ministries so that they are all working toward a common goal: to develop mature believers who are learning to trust the Lord more and more as they go through life.

As the church begins to redefine modeling, move beyond the “what” and “how-to” approach to the “why” of discipleship, and clarify and integrate the terms and approaches used, *true* discipleship will take place and spiritual growth in the lives of believers will be the result.

### ***VIII. Ramifications of this Study for Global Ministry Outreach***

The issues and remedies discussed in the previous sections regarding discipleship in the local church have special relevance for global ministry outreach. Indeed, the key component of discipleship—trusting God—is universal. That is, it applies to all believers at all times in every part of the world. One of the fundamental challenges faced by missionaries and church planters in other countries is how to most effectively equip the local leaders in a timely manner so that they can become self-sustaining and less dependent upon American resources and personnel. The traditional approach, although this varies somewhat from

mission agency to mission agency, is to provide on-sight training for a certain period of time during which the missionary or church planter models particular techniques of ministry and assists the local church leadership as they attempt to implement these techniques in the church. Often, after a period of time, the missionary moves to a different locale and the local leaders are left to minister in his or her absence.

By nature, those serving in overseas ministries have less immediate access to experienced, mature believers who can serve as models. Therefore, the less dependent they are on the *visible* physical interaction with the model and the more dependent they are on the *invisible* ministry of the Holy Spirit, the more successful they will be. This makes the emphasis on developing personal trust in the Lord even more important. As missionaries train local church leaders in other countries, an emphasis must be placed on developing the faith of these leaders. Formal training in the areas of doctrine and ministry skills is critical, but not as a substitute for learning how to trust God.

Furthermore, if the goal is to model trust in the Lord, the question must be asked, are missionaries sending the right signals in this regard? Are missionaries themselves too quick to turn to human resources for quick-fix solutions? If so, what message does this send the native pastors who inevitably struggle with major trials and tribulations long after the missionary is gone? The ramifications of a trust-based discipleship methodology are crucial for global ministry outreach. The degree to which pastors in unreached regions of the world are able to trust the heavenly Father to meet their needs and sustain them through difficult periods of ministry will have a direct impact on the measure of success that their ministries have. Likewise, the degree to which missionaries and other church leaders who are engaged in global ministry outreach are able to model consistent faith in the Lord will directly impact

the degree to which they have truly accomplished their goal of making disciples in unreached people groups.

### ***IX. Summary and Conclusion***

The method of the believer's sanctification is the same as the method for his justification: *faith*. "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith..." (Col. 2:6-7). The essence of discipleship is *learning to live by faith*. Jesus modeled this faith during His earthly ministry. He exhibited a reverence for and trust in the Father and a perfect obedience to His will. Those who literally followed Him during His ministry, in keeping with the common rabbi-pupil model of the day, abandoned all so that they might be fully devoted to Jesus' teaching and learn as much as they can from His actions, words, and attitudes. In the epistles, the early Church leaders build on this idea of modeling trust. Believers are to "imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Heb. 6:12). They are to "follow the faith" of those who served as their spiritual leaders (Heb. 13:7). In the absence of the literal presence of the Lord, the Holy Spirit takes on a vital ministry in aiding believers in the maturity process. To "walk by faith" is to walk in obedience to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit, trusting that He knows best. "Walking by faith" (2 Cor. 5:7) and "walking in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16) are synonymous concepts in the epistles.

This emphasis on teaching believers to trust the Lord daily is lacking from most contemporary models of discipleship. The common methodology of today focuses on outward actions, doctrinal truths, and general, ambiguous calls to "follow Christ" without getting to the heart of the "trust" issue. The result is that believers today, not unlike the Scribes and Pharisees in the first century, are prone to think that spiritual maturity is about

what they do rather than about Who they trust. Such thinking leads to pride and a false sense of maturity. It also leaves believers ill-equipped to handle adversity when life throws them a curve. Believers who mistakenly think they have a growing relationship with the Lord because of what they do for the Lord often react with surprise and indignation when negative, unexpected experiences arise. Thoughts such as “I don’t deserve this.” and “It’s not fair!” flood their minds as their faith in the Lord wavers. Truly mature believers are those who can steadfastly abide the storms of life without doubting the ability of the Lord to see them through.

The remedy for these faulty views of discipleship is for the church to re-articulate its view of modeling. Believers need spiritual role models, but they need role models who will model not only actions but faith. The church must also move beyond “how-to” approaches to discipleship and explain the purpose of spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and Bible study, which is to foster faith in the Lord. Finally, the church needs to strive for clarity and integration in its discipleship programs. Every component of the church’s ministry must work together to help believers learn how to trust the Lord day by day.

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live *by faith* in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20, emphasis added). In the final analysis, it is all about faith.

### *Appendix: The Great Commission*

In light of the above conclusions regarding the nature of discipleship in the synoptic gospels versus the epistles, what is one to make of the Great Commission? Precisely what did Jesus mean when He said, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:19-20, NKJV). Even the most casual church-goer is likely to be familiar with this passage. It is, after all, the “Great Commission” of the church. Yet upon closer examination one recognizes that the Church as a formal entity had not been formed at the time the Lord made this statement. The Church, in fact, began at Pentecost some seven to ten days later (Acts 2).<sup>66</sup>

Jesus’ command is best understood in light of the context in which it is given. In essence, using familiar terminology of the day, Jesus tells the eleven who had gathered just prior to His ascension to pass on to others the things that they had learned from Him. As His disciples for three and a half years, the eleven had learned how to trust the Father and glorify Him through their lives. In a word, they had grown (and were continuing to grow) *mature!* The command for the eleven to “make disciples” did not place upon the eleven a burden of developing a following of adherents who were willing to physically follow them and sit under their teaching. Rather, the command was for the eleven to develop spiritually mature believers who know how to trust God by modeling this trust in God for them in ministry.

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<sup>66</sup> For an excellent discussion of the chronology of the Apostolic Age, see Harold Hoehner’s work, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*. As proof that the Church did not officially come into existence until Acts 2, see the following passages: Matt. 16:18 (the church is not in existence yet; it will be built in the future); Acts 1:5 (Jesus promises a baptism of the Holy Spirit); Acts 2:4 (this baptism occurs); Acts 11:15-16 (the baptism of Acts 2 is called a “beginning”); 1 Cor. 12:12-13 (the baptism forms a “body”); Eph. 1:22-23 (this body is called “the church”). Thus, the church began at Pentecost—Acts 2.

The eleven were to engage in ministry that would have the same kind of dramatic, life-changing ministry in the lives of their converts that Jesus' ministry had had on them. In the Great Commission, Jesus was not advocating a particular methodology; rather, He was commanding the eleven simply to *pass it on*.

It has been often pointed out that in Greek there is actually only one command in this passage: make disciples (μαθητευσατε). “Go” (πορευθεντες), “baptizing” (βαπτιζοντες), and “teaching” (διδασκοντες) are all syntactically subordinate participles. The sense of the passage is that as the disciples *go* (literally, *travel about*) they are to be disciple-makers. “The emphasis in the commission thus falls not on the initial proclamation of the gospel but more on the arduous task of nurturing into the experience of discipleship...”<sup>67</sup> The word πορευομαι (*go*) has the sense of “pursuing the journey on which one has entered” or “to order one’s life.”<sup>68</sup> As the eleven pursued the journey of life—a journey for which they were well equipped because of what they had learned from the Lord—they were to help others learn how to similarly order their lives around faith in the risen Lord. He would no longer be with them in body but after the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:8) they would have another Comforter (cf. John 16:5-15) who would provide the source of strength they need to “walk by faith and not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

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<sup>67</sup>Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28*, Vol. 33B (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 887.

<sup>68</sup>James Strong, *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996).

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