



## Discipleship: Copies of the Original

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When they were hauled before the Sanhedrin, Peter and John, two of Jesus' disciples, gave a very courageous defense to the question, "By what power or what name do you do this?" I love how the leadership responded to Peter's defense. When they "realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, *they were astonished* and they took note that these men had been with Jesus." (Acts 4:13)

I sure wish that was true of Jesus' followers today! Peter and John were not rabbinically trained, yet their courageous stand "astonished" the leadership. They couldn't get over the fact that these men were not formally trained in the Scriptures;<sup>1</sup> and yet, these men answered as if they had been. Where did they get this ability? The leadership had to acknowledge that they were trained through hanging out with their rabbi, who was also unschooled, Jesus. These men had walked with and were a reflection of Jesus, their teacher.

This reaction is what the unbelieving world should be seeing in today's disciples of Jesus. If statistics are any indicators of truth, this is sadly not the reality in American Christianity and places where its influence has been felt. The authors of the book, *The unChristian*, discovered that 80% of unbelievers are *not* seeing what the Sanhedrin saw in first century disciples of Jesus. These people, of whom 80% had gone to church and 84% knew a Christian personally, didn't see Jesus in His people or His church. The lives of those who went to church were no different from the person who didn't go to church. It appeared they only hung out with Jesus at church and no where else.

This is exactly how Paul foresaw the "believers" in 2 Timothy 3:1-5 who would one day fill the seats of our services each weekend. They would be "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – *having a form of godliness but denying its power.*" They looked good on the outside at the service but they looked awful, nothing like Jesus, everywhere else they went.

I believe a research study done by the Barna Group gives us the why to this sad situation. Their study revealed that 9 out of 10 of those who call themselves born-again believers do not live with a biblical worldview, meaning they don't process each day's circumstances through Jesus and His Word.<sup>2</sup> In short, Western believers are simply not experiencing the Jesus of the Bible for themselves, let alone showing Him to the world.

This leads to more eye-opening data from the book, *The Bridger Generation*. From the Builder Generation (aka WW II) on down to Generation Y, people want less and less to do with the church Jesus started. On any given weekend 65% of the Builders will be in a church service. Only 35% of the Boomers will be in a service. Generation X will have 15% and Generation Y will fill only 4% of the seats.

There can be many reasons for these results. Yet one thing is for sure: the outside world is *not seeing Jesus in us*. Somewhere along the line we have either forgotten to make or how to make disciples of Jesus. I believe it's the latter and it's my goal to help us rediscover the biblical meaning of the term and methodology of making disciples of Jesus.

### What is a Disciple?

*Mathetes* (Μαθητής), the biblical term for disciple, means to direct your mind to something or someone not merely to gather facts but to learn from and desire a deep fellowship with the person doing the discipling.<sup>3</sup> A person is a disciple only when he has a teacher. We see an

example of this the first time the word is used in Matthew 5:1. Jesus is getting ready to teach on the side of a hill and His disciples come to Him. Jesus is teaching and they are learning.

Yet the meaning of *mathetes* isn't a mere ascent to the teacher's truths or filling one's head with the right beliefs. It meant the disciple would actually incorporate those teachings into his daily life leading to a changed life and heart. *The disciple had not been disciplined unless what they put into their head came out in their behavior.*

We discover this aspect in what Jesus taught His disciples, "If you actually hold to My teachings, you are really My disciples." (John 8:31-32) This word for "hold" means to practice them throughout each and every day, not just regurgitate the data back on a test or when asked, "What did you get out of the message?" Only after putting into practice what He taught, not before, did He say a disciple would know what Jesus taught was true.

Normally, we want to "get it," "understand it" and "know it's true" before we practice it. This is not what Jesus taught. He said to practice what He taught and *then* you'll know from experience, not from your head, that what He taught was true. How will you know it? Your life will be changed as you experience true freedom. Wow, what chutzpah! He was asking His disciples to trust Him, even if and/or when they thought His teachings might sound crazy.

This, in fact, did happen as "many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him" because His teachings were quite often difficult to grasp, let alone practice (John 6:25-66). Jesus' words "are Spirit and they are life." Watering them down would have only hurt His disciples. So after many disciples had left, Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" He gave them an open door to stop following Him. Yet they stuck around because He alone had "the words of eternal life." Their trust in Him was slowly gaining momentum in their hearts and minds.

The term for disciple carries even more weight than having right beliefs and right behaviors. It's also about being in love with the Teacher. Jesus tells the Ephesian congregation in Revelation 2:4 that they held the right beliefs and had done the right thing, but they were still falling short of being His disciples. He told them they forgot to be in love with Him. He repeated to this church what He had taught the Twelve, "You don't obey Me because of tradition or religious beliefs. I didn't give you a list of behaviors to follow. I gave you Myself. You do what you do now because you love Me." (John 14:15 paraphrased)

Jesus' disciples love and follow Him. It's not about doing *anything for* Jesus, but about doing *everything with* Jesus. Jesus is saying to us, "Do you love Me? Then obey Me. Do you trust Me? Then practice what I'm teaching you."

He knew they were not always going to understand everything He taught them either, so He asked them to trust Him, which is grounded in their love for Him. Jesus gave His disciples a simple "formula," if you will, to live by in John 8:31-32.

- Love Me.
- Trust Me enough to practice what I teach you even though you may not "get it" at the moment you hear it.
- You will know what I taught you is true because your life will be changed! You will know the truth from personal experience, not just head knowledge.
- You will experience freedom from all the negative consequences of your bad choices (aka sin) as your character is replaced with Mine.

This is biblical discipleship. In order to make disciples of Jesus, people must be connected with Jesus in a way that moves them to love and follow Him for themselves. This type of relationship will result in a greater love for and a life changed by Jesus, which will enable the world to see Him.

This was radical stuff in His day. Some stuck with Him while others walked away. Yet Jesus was simply continuing the theme of the Old Testament – a daily relationship with the living God.

### **Disciples in the Old Testament**

If we follow *mathetes* back into the Old Testament by using the Septuagint, we find the word used only once in Isaiah 8:16 as a translation for the Hebrew word לִמּוּד, *limmud*. This occurrence in Isaiah 8:16 reads, “Bind up the testimony and seal up the law among my disciples.”

Whose disciples are they, Isaiah’s or God’s? The context of this verse is a conversation between God and Isaiah that starts in 8:11. Many translations start this conversation in verse 12 and end it after verse 15.<sup>4</sup>

It appears that Isaiah is speaking in verse 17 as it reads, “I will wait for the LORD.” God is not waiting on Himself. Thus, God was telling Isaiah to roll up the scroll that contained His words and give them to His disciples, not Isaiah’s.

This fits the entire context of the Old Testament. Only God had disciples – no one else. This was the message God sent through various means (directly and indirectly through nature, people and written word), “I want a relationship with My people.” They were to direct their minds to loving and walking with Him for themselves. We see this in the fact that He talked directly to and walked with all the major players from Adam to Moses.<sup>5</sup>

When the Israelites were suffering under slavery, God sent Moses to bring a message to His people – have a relationship with Me (Exodus 3:7-10). In fact, during Moses’ recruitment the LORD introduces a new name by which He was to be called. God told Moses to “say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you.’ This is My name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.” (Exodus 3:15)

Even the Law with its sacrificial system (Leviticus 17:5) was to put people into relationship with their God (Leviticus 11:44;<sup>6</sup> Galatians 2:23-25). Joshua, whom God, not Moses, picked to be the next leader after Moses (Numbers 27:15ff), told the people to “come here and listen to the words of the LORD *your* God.” (Joshua 3:9) He didn’t say, “Come listen to my teachings about God.” He said to listen to the Lord *your* God for yourself.

This truth continued through the time of the judges (Judges 2:20-23) down to the kings and prophets, which included John the Baptist (John 1:19-27), and through the writings.<sup>7</sup> The entire Old Testament is about God drawing people to learn from and have a relationship directly with Himself.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of a master-disciple relationship is simply foreign to the Old Testament. It is solely about God interacting with His people both relationally and directly. As the Psalmist wrote, “I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on Your statues ... for You Yourself have taught me.” (Psalm 119:99,102)

### **Jesus Defines His Disciples**

From the end of the Old Testament – possibly from the destruction of the 1<sup>st</sup> Temple – to Jesus’ day, the rabbinic model with its *talmidim/mathetes* arose (see Paul’s life in Acts 22:3; cf. Acts 5:34). Though it might have started off with the best of intentions, by the time Jesus arrives on the scene the ideal of being a learner who committed himself to the study of Scripture in order to live it out in daily life was corrupted.

“In ancient Jewish culture, a disciple’s greatest desire was to be covered in the dust of his rabbi. The disciple followed so close to his rabbi that he began to take on not only the beliefs of the rabbi, but also his personality, mannerisms, habits, thoughts, and speech. The purpose was for the disciple to be a duplicate of the rabbi so that he could then train up the next generation of disciples to mimic him. That’s the way that the religious beliefs and the lineage of rabbis were perpetuated.”<sup>9</sup>

Besides the emphasis on following a rabbi rather than God directly, here’s a challenge to this thinking. Even with the best of intentions, the student was a copy of a copy, who was a copy of the copy, etc. As the copy gets further and further away from the original, the pictures and words of the original begin to fade. The further the distance from the original the copy gets, the greater and greater the distortion becomes. God taught in the Old Testament that His people were to copy Him, the original, not to be copies of copies.

He still wants His disciples to learn directly from Him today. “In the past *God spoke to our forefathers* through the prophets at many times in various ways, but in these last days *He has spoken to us by His Son.*” (Hebrews 1:1)

The rabbinical model had three other serious flaws. First, somehow the teachings of the rabbi along with religious traditions were included in the student’s education. It wasn’t just what the Old Testament said that counted, but the rabbi’s interpretation of the Old Testament as well.

A second flaw was that the learners/*talmidim* could only be men. What, God didn’t care to have a relationship with women who were also created in His image? And finally, the rabbi became an indispensable part of the learning equation. The student was to have the same allegiance to his rabbi as a slave would have had to his master. This eventually led to rabbinical schools, which takes us back to Acts 4:13. Jesus’ disciples were not trained in a rabbinical school, but the school of life by being in fellowship with the one and only Master, Jesus Himself.

Jesus attempted to correct these flaws in one fell swoop when He said, “You are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and He is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:8-12)

All believers (men and women, Jew and non-Jew) can and should be plugged into Jesus Himself, not a teacher, not a rabbi, not a pastor (1 Peter 5:1-4 – pastors have a Chief Shepherd – Jesus). Jesus is to be our Master as we are His slaves (Romans 6:22 – slaves/*doulos* of Christ), not men’s (1 Corinthians 7:23).

Jesus is also to be our interpreter of Scripture. “You have heard it said ... But *I tell* you...” (Matthew 5:21-48) Jesus stood on what He said alone, which caught the ears of His listeners. Matthew recorded the people’s reaction to Jesus’ teaching, “The crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and *not as their teachers* of the Law.” (Matthew 7:28-29) They were surprised that He wasn’t quoting what anyone said, but was firm

in what He said. He was telling His listeners, as well as believers today, we are to listen to and learn directly from Him. We are not to be dependent on what our favorite teacher, pastor or rabbi has to say, but on what He says to do for ourselves.

Jesus wasn't done though. He told His disciples not only to listen to Him, but to *be like Him* (John 13:15). This included women as well!<sup>10</sup> Talk about blowing a false paradigm to pieces! His disciples, both men and women, were to listen to and copy only Him, which is what God wanted from the beginning of creation.

Jesus modeled this kind of biblical discipleship as He stayed in constant connection with His Father throughout His time on earth. In John 5:19 Jesus says, "The Son can do nothing by Himself; He can only do *what He sees His Father* doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." Jesus expands on this in John 8:28-29, "I do nothing on My own but *speaks just what the Father has taught Me.*"

Most interesting about these two statements is what they don't say. He didn't quote chapter and verse of the Old Testament. He didn't say I do what the Bible says, though He knew and used the Word of God (Matthew 4:1-10). He said He did what He saw and heard *from His Father*. He was modeling for us what He wanted done when He gave us the command to "go make disciples." Biblical discipleship is about committing yourself to be in constant relationship with and living daily in the presence of your Master. It started with a walk in the Garden, continued with God living inside the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35), moved on to when God Himself became tabernacled (John 1:14), which eventually resulted in God living inside the believer's tabernacle today (2 Corinthians 6:16-18).

Jesus was creating disciples of Himself, not creating successors. Acts 1:15 shows us that the Apostles were included in the 120 disciples in the upper room. Yes they had a special role to play (Matthew 19:28; Ephesians 2:20), but they were no more important than the other 109 in that room. It was about being a follower or a disciple of Jesus.

Male and female disciples are to listen to, follow and copy the original – Jesus Christ. This form of discipleship, however, was not without its costs. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after Me (literally walk side by side with), he must deny himself (thinking and living your own way) and take up his cross (let the old ways die) and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24) This kind of living could mean the loss of family and friends (Matthew 10:32-42). Why? People will see Jesus in you and some will not like what they see. Jesus told His disciples they would be persecuted, put to death and hated by all nations "because of Me." Paul reiterates this when he writes to Timothy, "Everyone who wants to live *a godly life in Christ Jesus* will be persecuted." (2 Tim. 3:12) If we look like Jesus, we might be mistreated just as Jesus was mistreated.

### **What about the Disciples of John and Paul?**

If Jesus got people back to God's original design of discipleship, why does the Bible talk about John (Matthew 11:2) and Paul (Acts 9:25) having disciples? At first glance it appears the above definition is shattered. Let's take a closer look, however, to discover whether or not this is the case.

John was given the task by God from birth to prepare "the way of the Lord." He gave the same message all the Old Testament prophets had given before him – get right with God. He warned that it wasn't about who they were, but about living consistently with the One in whom they said they believed, especially the One who was coming (Matthew 3:1-12).

After one such message Jesus showed up and John pointed his listeners to the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me.’” (John 1:19-31) A few days later, some of John’s disciples followed Jesus.

John knew his role. He was the best man, not the bridegroom (John 3:22ff). It wasn’t about making his disciples, but followers of the one who was coming after him, Jesus. It was John who said, “He must become greater; I must become less.” His life was about getting people into a relationship with Jesus, not himself, his memory or his legacy. He wasn’t creating followers of John, but followers of God.

We see the transition from John to Jesus when both John’s and the Pharisees’ disciples came to Jesus with a question about fasting. He answered their immediate question by telling them that a time would come for His disciples to fast, but while He was present wasn’t the time. Then Jesus took them deeper into the issue of discipleship when He talked about a new garment and new wine (Matthew 9:14ff). You don’t put new wine into old wineskins. If you do, the wineskins will burst and both the wine and skins will be wasted. It was a new day with new wineskins. Jesus was telling them in part that discipleship was not going to be done in the same way it was done before.

What was that new way? Stay plugged into and experience Jesus for yourself. He is your rabbi. He is your teacher. He is your pastor. Become like Him and be with Him throughout your day.

This is exactly what I believe Paul was doing, *if he had any disciples in the first place*. The only possibility the Scripture gives of Paul having disciples is found in Acts 9:25 where some translators write “his followers” while others wrote “the disciples.” Without getting too technical, the original Greek language of the New Testament supports “the disciples.” The reference clearly indicates these were not Paul’s disciples at all, but the disciples of Jesus.

The closest Paul gets to having his own disciples is found in 1 Corinthians 11:1 where he states, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” Yes the word “example” means to mimic or imitate. Don’t stop there. Paul qualifies his statement. He said to follow him only as long as he followed the Christ. If he was not imitating Christ, they weren’t obliged to follow him. Therefore, the person still needed to know Christ for themselves so they would know if what Paul was teaching (Acts 17:11) or living (Philippians 4:8-9) lined up with the truth of God’s Word, Jesus.

### **Being a Disciple of Jesus Today**

Being a believer in and disciple of Jesus is about following Him where He is your teacher, the rabbi. He is your pastor, the Shepherd. He is your Master, the Lord. We are in connection with the Father through Jesus. He is the Priest, who gives us access to the Holy of Holies, God’s presence 24/7 (Hebrews 10:19-22). We are to be plugged *into Jesus* in such a way that we will think, act and become more like Him with each passing day.

A.W. Tozer wrote in the *Pursuit of God*, “There is today no lack of Bible teachers to set forth correctly the principles of the doctrines of Christ, but too many of these seem satisfied to teach the fundamentals of the faith year after year, strangely unaware that there is in their ministry no manifest Presence, nor anything unusual in their personal lives. They minister constantly to believers who feel within their breasts a longing which their teaching simply does not satisfy.”

Jesus is God, the one we're to have a personal encounter with on a daily basis, not merely know facts about. He modeled how this was to be done as He was in a personal encounter with His Father. He wants us to have first-hand knowledge and experience of Him, a witness (Acts 1:8), which is one crucial difference between a disciple and a student/*talmidim*. A disciple was one who actually experienced what they were learning, not just putting good Bible facts into their heads. Jesus' disciples were to pass on what they personally witnessed (1 John 1:1-3) so others could personally experience Him as well.

From the Old Testament to the New Testament discipleship has been about pointing people to and having a loving relationship with the LORD God Almighty. We're to learn directly from Jesus who is inviting us to hang out with and become more like Him all day long.

### **Our Involvement in Making Disciples of Jesus**

So what did Jesus mean when He said to "go make disciples" so others can see that "we've been with Him?" I believe our part in making healthy disciples is about giving people the biblical tools so they can listen to Jesus for themselves, and then follow Him throughout their day, not just when they gather for public worship.

Biblical discipleship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must stop focusing on just giving out right beliefs and expecting right behaviors. We must start helping people learn how to stay focused on and living in the presence of Jesus all day long, 365 days a year, by filtering life through those right beliefs. We often say, "Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship." Yet outside observers would greatly disagree with us. They're not seeing Jesus in us or in our gatherings.

Jesus didn't come to add Himself or new behaviors to us. He came to exchange us with Him. In the book, *Faith like Potatoes*, Angus Buchan put it this way, "For the believer, faith should not be a 'one-off' event. We must walk by faith every day in every area of our lives. When someone asks us what God has done for us, we shouldn't be recounting something that happened 20 years ago. Faith is a day-to-day lifestyle and experience of Jesus."

Jesus never said get the truths and then practice them. He said practice what He taught and then you'll know the truth from experience, and live an exchanged life. This life only comes after we love and trust Him enough to do what He says even when it doesn't make sense to us. This is relationship. This is discipleship.

I believe the Word of God and the Spirit of God working through the people of God can get the job done. Jesus doesn't want us to do things for Him, but with Him. He doesn't want us to know facts about Him; He wants us to know Him. He said, "I am the good shepherd; I know My sheep and My sheep know Me." (John 10:14) As His sheep we're to know and respond to His voice. Therefore, are we giving His disciples the tools to do this or are we making them dependent upon us – the discipler, the pastor, the rabbi, the teacher? If you have and are giving them the tools to keep connecting with and learning from Jesus for themselves, you're making Jesus disciples who are copying the Original.

### **A Helpful Tool in Making Disciples of Jesus**

If you're wondering whether you are making these kinds of disciples, I'd like to offer a source to get and give out these biblical tools – *More Than a Sunday Faith*.<sup>11</sup> For my Jewish and Shabbat-observant readers, please excuse the title. You can re-title it to, *More Than a Sabbath Faith*. This book was designed to give each believer the tools that, when used, will help the believer stay close to Jesus throughout their day, not just when they gather for corporate worship.

The 12 easy-to-use tools will help the believer filter out the other voices and messages they hear each day so they can hear directly from Jesus, and then do what He says throughout their day. It teaches them how to move beyond mere knowledge of biblical truth to understand how to use those truths in everyday life (i.e. wisdom). As you experience Jesus for yourself, you will be exchanged with Jesus (1 Corinthians 3:10-15), your love for Jesus will grow, which only increases your ability to trust Him the next time He asks you to apply another truth to your daily life. This process helps the believer get off the sin-confession-sin cycle and onto the love-trust-love cycle.

*More Than a Sunday Faith* ends with a practical method of passing these tools on to others called “Bible Impact Groups” (BIG). A Bible Impact Group gives each believer the opportunity to practice listening to and doing what Jesus says for himself while being involved in following Jesus’ command to make the kind of disciples the non-believing world would want to be around (Matthew 28:18-20).

I understand that any method of discipleship can become mechanical. Yet the questions asked in a BIG are simply designed to help each believer draw closer to and become more like Jesus.

Each believer, no matter their age, gender, level of maturity or biblical knowledge, can be involved in passing along the tools that will set themselves and others free to love Jesus more each day. Simultaneously they will obey His command to make disciples wherever they go. If we’re not doing this, we must ask if we truly following or being a disciple of Christ?

We must **stop going** to church and **starting being** the church everywhere we go. It’s not about the Sabbath, but the Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:7). We are to be involved in making disciples of Jesus, which means giving people the tools to plug into Him for themselves so when people around them see their life they will say what the first century Jewish leadership said, “They have been with Jesus!”

#### End Notes

1. It’s possible the disciples and Jesus received some formal training. In Jesus’ day there were three educational phases. One was called the Bet Sefer. Boys and girls ages six through twelve could attend synagogue school to learn to read and write using the Torah as their textbook. The second phase, called Bet Midrash, was for boys ages thirteen to fifteen only. They studied the Torah and learned the family trade. This is most likely where Jesus and the Twelve’s training ended, if they made it this far (John 7:15). John might have gone this far as he knew or had ties to the high priest (John 18:15). The final phase, Bet Talmud, was for the best of the best of those 15-30, which for the cream meant they could possibly someday become rabbis themselves. Dan Stolebarger, *Discipleship vs. Talmidim*, Koinonia Institute, [www.khouse.org/articles/2005/616](http://www.khouse.org/articles/2005/616).
2. George Barna, “A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on Person’s Life,” [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/131-a-biblical-worldview-has-a-radical-effect-on-a-persons-life), 2009, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/131-a-biblical-worldview-has-a-radical-effect-on-a-persons-life> (accessed May 12, 2010).
3. Gerhard Kittle, Editor, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, translator. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), *μαθητής*, 4:416-461.
4. Biblical Hebrew doesn’t have quotation marks. Therefore, the context must tell the reader when a conversation begins and ends. It is my belief that the conversation ends after verse 16.
5. Adam and Eve – Genesis 1:28; Cain – Genesis 4:6; Noah – Genesis 7:13; Abraham – Genesis 12:1; Isaac – Genesis 26:2; Jacob – Genesis 28:13.
6. cf. 1 Peter 1:13 – “prepare your minds for action...be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’”
7. Kings: Deuteronomy 17:19 – the kings wrote and had their own copy of the Law; Prophets: Jeremiah 1:7 – gave the message God gave him; Writings: 1 Chronicles 25:8 – the only time *תלמיד* *talmid*, scholar /student, which means to trade one’s own will for the will of God, is used is in the context of the singers being trained to speak for God in song.

8. Jesus used the Jewish method of describing the Old Testament when He said in Luke 24:44, “The Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms (writings).”
9. <http://www.mwbcare.net/webarticle2.pdf>.
10. Luke 8:1-3; Acts 1:13-15; 9:36; Gal. 3:26-29.
11. You can find this resource and many others at [morethanasundayfaith.com](http://morethanasundayfaith.com).