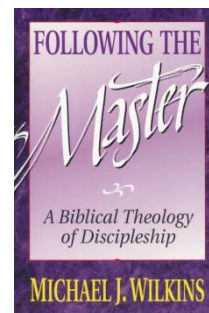


# Michael J Wilkins : Following the Master – a biblical theology of discipleship

Zondervan 1992

Summary by Alison Morgan, June 2013



*This is the best and most thorough book I have come across on discipleship, and recognised to be the standard work on the subject.*

## PART I : FIRST STEPS ON THE JOURNEY

### 1. A preview of the journey

Life is a journey. A young surfer, wanting to know how to live as a Christian in the surfing world. *The vision of Jesus calling and equipping disciples to go and make a difference in their world offers as much hope and meaning to modern men and women as it did to the people of the first century.* 18. And yet some books are based on incomplete/faulty understanding of biblical teaching. This book is based on years of scholarly study of biblical discipleship but also on nearly 20 years of ministry experience. The aim is to give readers a readable and thorough examination of biblical teaching so they can be even more effective in making disciples Jesus' way. *Sometimes our discipleship programs thwart true discipleship* – we become so involved with the programs that we isolate ourselves from real life. Jesus called the disciples to him so that he could teach them how to walk with him in the real world – that is true discipleship.

### 2. Jesus & disciples today

Wilkins often asks people if they can say, in the humble confidence of their heart, that they are a true disciple of Jesus – please raise your hand. Most are confused and hesitant. Then he asks if they can say that they are a true Christian. They all raise their hands.

Perhaps there are 5 prevailing models of discipleship today:

1. Disciples are learners – the word disciple comes from the verb to learn. BUT the Greek term mathetes is used in scripture in a different way (more like follower, cf John the Baptist, whose disciples are more like adherents to a prophet than students of a teacher); and the word is used in Acts to describe all believers.
2. Disciples are committed believers – eg Ortiz says because we are Christians does not mean we are disciples. This model suggests 2 levels within the church, disciples and ordinary believers; a disciple is a more committed Christian than the average Christian. BUT Jesus calls people to discipleship, to follow him, to count the cost before making a commitment; it's a call to salvation, not a call to deeper commitment.
3. Disciples are ministers – believers who have been called out from among lay believers in order to enter into ministry. The disciples of Jesus form a more limited and exclusive group than the crowds. BUT this is to confuse the 12 (who are apostles as well as disciples) with all those (who are also called disciples). The terms apostle and disciple point to different aspects of the 12.
4. Disciples are converts; discipleship comes later – a further stage of growth. BUT this separates the Great Commission (make disciples) from the description of what that means (baptise and teach).
5. Disciples are converts who are in the process of discipleship – discipleship begins at conversion. Bonhoeffer says discipleship is the life that springs from grace, and grace simply means discipleship. Willard says discipleship is about entering into God's gift of life, not about achieving perfection. This model understands the Great Commission as saying discipleship begins with conversion. So all true believers are seen as disciples, and the Christian life is the outworking of Jesus's discipleship teachings. BUT we still need to clarify the difference between the 12 as disciples and the 12 as apostles; and to consider what difference Pentecost made in what it meant to be a disciple.

A helpful distinction: discipleship teaching directed to the crowds deals with the act of becoming a disciple (evangelism), whereas teaching directed to the disciples deals with growth in discipleship.

The 12 are both disciples and apostles; but their apostleship is a calling to leadership. Bruce points out that first of all they were simply believers and companions to Jesus; then followers; finally trainee leaders – but in all three stages they were disciples. In Acts, the term disciple is synonymous with the true believer in Jesus. *Disciple* is the earliest known synonym for *Christian* (11.26). Luke never calls the 12 disciples, only apostles – this stresses the distinctive nature of their calling. *In Acts the Twelve are called apostles to accentuate their leadership role, and the common name for a believer is disciple*. There was a transition in the use of the word disciple – not used at all in the epistles, where the terms brother/sister, saints, believers and Christians came to designate followers of Jesus.

Today the terms disciple, discipleship, discipling imply different things to different users; we need standardisation. And we need to start by understanding the term in its original context – which includes the questions not just what is a disciple, but of whom are they are a disciple and at what time. Basic definitions:

- The NT word for disciple is *mathetes*. In a general sense *A disciple is a committed follower of a great Master*.
- In the specific sense *a disciple of Jesus is one who has come for Jesus for eternal life, has claimed Jesus as Saviour and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Jesus*. It's the common term for believers, and is used in this sense at least 230 times in the gospels and 28 times in Acts.

NB the plural form disciples is generally used – the singular form never occurs in Mark, but does in John where it always refers to a particular person. The singular occurs only 4 times in Acts, where it always refers to a particular person; it designates an individual who professes to believe in and follow Jesus. That the plural form is normally used is important – individual disciples are always seen as part of the community of disciples.

In English perhaps the nearest equivalents are supporter and follower. When we speak of Christian discipleship and discipling we are speaking of what it means to grow as a Christian in every area of life. Since disciple is a referent for Christian, discipleship implies the process of becoming like Christ. See Luke 6.40.

Some ministries have developed wonderful methods of helping Christians grow, but have created confusion by their choice of words; some refer only to those with advanced commitment as disciples (it would be more helpful to say mature disciples). Some imply certain activities make a person a disciple; some reserve the terminology 'discipleship training' for a method that focuses only on a few; we might better speak of 'leadership training'. *Since all true Christians are disciples, the ministry of the church may be seen in its broadest sense as "discipleship"*. Various ministries within the church should be seen as aspects or stages of discipleship training. When Jesus spoke of disciples, he had in mind what would be the normal Christian, not the abnormal (advanced/serious) Christian.

## II. JESUS' DISCIPLESHIP ENVIRONMENT

### 3. The People called to follow God: Discipleship in the OT

Jesus' call had a long prehistory; it was a reiteration and extension of the call God had proffered to the people of Israel centuries before. Abraham (Gen 12.1; Is 43.1-3a; cp Mk 8.34-35; Mt 28.19-20). The roots of biblical discipleship go back to the pattern of divine initiative and human response that is the heart of the concept of covenant – eg Ex 6.7, I will be your God, and you my people.

And yet the absence of discipleship terminology in the OT is striking. The texts that specified master-disciple relationships in later Judaism are absent in the OT (talmidh, taught one; limmudh, taught). Talmidh is the Hebrew equivalent of *mathetes*; it's used only once in the OT (1 Chr 25.8). Limmudh occurs 6 times, but did not become a common term in later Judaism.

On the other hand, the concept of discipleship is there in the OT even if the words aren't – on three levels: the covenant relationship between the nation and God; individual-God; human-human. God stresses his covenantal intention repeatedly; the whole nation was being called to a relationship in which he was with them (eg Lev 26.12). They had no king; they were to follow God, walk in the ways of God, live in the presence

of God. Individuals too were called to walk with God, eg Is 54.13. Leaders of the people were evaluated according to whether or not they were following God and walking in his ways. Individual discipleship in the OT is a personalisation of national discipleship. Finally, people followed individual teachers, whether priest, prophet or sage. *All discipleship relationships are designed to lead Israel and individuals within the nation into a closer walk with the living God.*

Discipleship relationships in the OT include Moses/Joshua, Elijah/Elisha, Jeremiah/Baruch. But these relationships were not intended as an institution; they were special relationships for a special time to carry out a special work of God. Individual master-disciple relationships enabled the leadership function to be passed from one leader to the next.

The OT theme of God with his people finds explicit fulfilment in Jesus with his people. The covenantal relationship between God and Israel anticipated the relationship to which Jesus would call his followers. Following God is the concrete expression of what it means to love him with all of one's heart and soul; to all in the ways of God. The relationship initiated by God in the OT is a discipleship relationship that was to find its fulfilment in Jesus. So the OT metaphorical language of following and walking points ahead to Jesus. The God of the OT has come to earth in Jesus to be with his people. Finally, the human relationships we see in the OT prepare us for the ones Jesus would have with the apostles, and the ones which would develop in the church. – characterised by mentoring, by service and by the growth of leaders.

#### 4. Disciples in the Greco-Roman world

What marks out a Christian disciple from those who followed other masters? In the time of Jesus religious, philosophical and political leaders all had followers who were committed to their cause, teaching and beliefs. The word disciple was one of the most common terms to designate them, and it was used also for the followers of Jesus. So what was unique about them?

The word *mathetes* appears first in Herodotus, C5BC; but was in wide oral use before then. It then appears frequently in Greek literature.

- Learner/apprentice: Early on it was used for a person who was a learner/apprentice – eg in dancing, wrestling, music, astronomy, writing, hunting, medicine. The learner was acquiring knowledge or skill from an expert.
- Pupil/academician: It then transitioned from learner to pupil – embracing the concept not just of learning but also of commitment to a great teacher/master. Eg disciples of Pythagoras or Socrates were not just acquiring skills; they were committed to their master. It was more than just education. The Sophists adopted the word, using it with an academic meaning (they were the first teachers in history to demand a fee from their students!). They taught about law, morality, oratory.
- Disciple/adherent. Herodotus uses it to indicate a person who made a significant, personal, life commitment. You learn about the practices, and you live them out – eg Anarcharsis, so taken with the customs of Greece that he introduced them to his homeland (Scythia). Becoming a disciple of a particular culture now meant that one's lifestyle now reflected that culture.

During the Hellenistic era which followed (C4-C1BC), the focus shifted increasingly to the kind of relationship between master and disciple. It involved a commitment which affected the follower's entire life. In common usage, a *mathetes* was not a committed follower of a significant master. By the time of the NT, religious adherents, esp those within the mystery religions, were called disciples. Learning is minimised in these contexts; religious commitment and imitation of the religious figure's life and character characterise the relationship. Imitation of his conduct becomes important – the disciple was so committed to his master's ability to carry out his or her teaching into life that the disciple tried to emulate the overall lifestyle of the master. The emphasis moved from learning to imitation of conduct.

#### 5. Disciples in the world of Judaism

Many movements had disciples. But any true Jew would call himself a follower of Moses, regardless of sectarian commitments. Various subgroups had their own followers (eg Pharisees) – the forerunner of later master-

disciple relationships that evolved into a formal system for training rabbis, and centred on Torah. Prophets had disciples (eg John the Baptist) – based not on learning but on righteousness and piety. They were adherents of a movement, not members of a religious institution. Qumran also had social structures that could be described as master/disciple within their community. John records that some of Jesus's earlier followers mistook him for one of the popular messianic figures travelling around Palestine.

Implications:

1. The type of discipleship found in Judaism depended on the kind of master/group to which the disciple belonged.
2. Jesus's disciples seemed similar to others.

But Jesus constantly emphasised the practical aspect of the life of discipleship - it was not a theoretical life of scholarship but a practical task of labour in God's vineyard/harvest field. Jesus was not their teacher of right doctrine but their master craftsman whom they were to follow and imitate; discipleship was not matriculation in a rabbinical college, but apprenticeship to the work of the Kingdom. Jesus started out by basing his form of discipleship on the common stream of Jewish hope as based upon the OT expectations, then slowly clarified his distinctive form of discipleship.

Discipleship in the ancient world was a common phenomenon, and not all Jesus' followers understood him in the same way; he was taking a common phenomenon, discipleship, and using it as an expression of his kind of relationship with his followers – patiently teaching them what it meant.

### III : JESUS' FORM OF DISCIPLESHIP

*Discipleship such as Jesus demanded and inspired (a following, not for study but for service – to help the Master in his mission, to carry out his instructions and so on) was apparently a new thing, at all events, something that did not fit in ... with usual Rabbinic customs' – CG Montefiore.*

#### 6. The Jesus Movement

Movements start when a perceived need within a group is addressed by a person/s who offers a solution to that need. There are stages in the Jesus movement:

1. People took a personal initiative to follow Jesus – with various levels of understanding! They came for various reasons: some thought he was the Messiah, others were attracted by his teaching and miracles, others recognised he was a prophetic figure like John the Baptist, others because they had heard about him from friends/family. This was a preparatory stage.
2. Jesus' call. Jesus now initiates his unique approach to discipleship – he calls some to follow him, ie demanding a decision of commitment. Up to now people had come at will; Jesus now extends a gracious, enabling call. This kind of call was not found among other C1st discipling relationships. He is clear what he is offering – and rejects the scribe because he is offering something different from what the scribe anticipates – he has no official school, standing, just a wandering lifestyle and no fixed abode. Other masters did not call their followers. Furthermore, his call broke through the usual barriers that separated clean/unclean, obedient/sinful – he called those who did not seem to enjoy the necessary qualifications... Once he made his call, a response was required – and from now people were either with him or not with him. The response included recognition of his messianic identity, obedience, and a personal commitment based on counting the cost. It then meant the beginning of a new life. The crowds did not exhibit the twin requisites of cost and commitment. The objective of Jesus' ministry among them was to make them disciples.  
Some of the disciples received an additional calling to service – to apostleship. This required additional costs – they travelled with him. Overall the disciples were remarkably diverse – including common people, men and women who travelled with him and supported his ministry, tax collectors, scribes, religious leaders (refs p 110-111). Many are there to welcome him to Jerusalem (Lk 19.37).  
There was a distinction between the majority of the disciples and the Twelve, who received an additional call that designated them as apostles (Mk 6.12-13) – ie commissioned representatives, to become the leaders of the church. As disciples they are examples of what Jesus accomplishes in all believers; as apostles they are specified as the leaders within the new movement to come, the church.

3. Jesus sifts the followers. Stage 3 begins at the time of the feeding of the multitude at Passover. Jesus now begins to emphasize the true nature of his earthly ministry. Many turn away (John 6.66) – they had just liked the excitement of the signs and wonders.
4. The limited group of followers. This came during the final weeks of Jesus' ministry. Fewer travel with him. Faith is tested – eg Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea now come through in public as his disciples. The reduction in numbers sets the stage for the Great Commission – it's completely spelt out.
5. The Early Church – the church is born at Pentecost. Jesus had long promised the Spirit; he now comes. Believers and disciples are the same (Acts 4.32; 6.2); later they would be called Christians (11.26). The growth of the church is the direct fulfilment of the Great Commission – the disciples travelled, baptised, taught – eg 14.21-22, Paul & Barnabas.

It's hard to understand the chronology of the Jesus movement because of the difference between the synoptic and Johannine accounts – neither Matthew, Mark nor Luke show the historical preparation behind the call of the disciples, they just start with it. From John we learn they were already disciples of John the Baptist.

## 7. Becoming like Jesus

*Discipleship is not simply a program. Discipleship is becoming like Jesus as we walk with him in the real world. The real world begins at home.*

Jesus chose a core of 12 disciples from a much larger number of disciples – and the gospels tend to identify the term disciple and the twelve with one another. But they were not implying that the term disciple should be limited to the 12 – rather that the 12 should be taken as examples of how Jesus deals with all believers and trained those who were to be leaders of the movement after his ascension. He also appointed 70 (Lk 10), who had the same mission; and we know he also had women disciples (Lk 8). Luke uses the phrase 'with him' to describe these women; a technical phrase for Luke, indicating much more than mere presence; it indicates discipleship. This is another unique aspect of the form of discipleship Jesus instituted. Women are called to be disciples and to serve Jesus in his public ministry –and the word 'serve' should be taken in the significant sense in which serving one another is the essence of discipleship (eg Lk 22 Last Supper). The feminine form of the word for disciple, *mathetria*, is used of Dorcas (Acts 9.36).

He also had a wider group of disciples. Following him around was not the normal life of the believer in Jesus' day – physical following was for service in Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God. The 12, the 70 and the women from Galilee were called to travel with Jesus; many other disciples were not. The Gerasene demoniac understands discipleship as following – Jesus offers him another model. But figurative following was for everyone; it includes accepting the message of the kingdom, repenting, and becoming an adherent of Jesus, and it includes accepting the cost of all that. It also includes drawing their spiritual nurture from him and growing to become like him. Jesus recognised this – Mat 10.24-25, becoming like the master. The spiritual unity that would be established through the HS guaranteed a likeness unknown in any other kind of discipleship (Jn 17; Rom 8.29).

So the term disciple is simply the most common title for a person who has made a commitment of faith to Jesus. Disciples are never characterised as a higher form of believer. Peter in particular however is isolated by the gospel writers even from among the 12 because of his future leadership role – he acts as their spokesman, and plays a foundational role in the life of the early church. But none of them are portrayed as supersaints – rather the reverse.

Spiritual growth happens in the balance between God's operation in the disciple's life and the disciple's obedience to God's will. Jesus said the Spirit brings the growth; it happens from the inside outwards not vv (Matt 23.25-28; 12.33-37). It requires us to count the cost; to know and apply his teaching (Jn 8, Mt 7); to obey all that he commanded (Mt 28); to pray (Mt 6, Lk 11). His teaching created the basis for an ethical life – to focus on the ultimate ideal (Sermon on Mount); to realise thought and motive are as important as actions (Mt 4); to make love the central theme of your life (Mt 5; Lk 10); and to recognise you will be called to account for all you do (Mt 7). It included a balance of individualism and community. Jesus' teaching about family must be

understood against the context of contemporary teaching, in which the family had taken a primary place within the social life of Judaism - Jesus affirmed family (calling pairs of brothers, directing John to care for Mary), but insisted he must be the primary focus of allegiance.

Growth is the key to discipleship. We must learn, individually, to practise the presence of Jesus; we must learn to have other disciples walk with us.

## 8. The Twelve

Lk 6.13, Jesus chose 12 disciples whom he also designated apostles. They are both disciples and commissioned representatives. The number 12 has salvation-historical significance – the 12 patriarchs of Israel, the 12 tribes. They symbolise the continuity of salvation history.

Lists of the 12 in the 4 gospels, p 151. There is substantial uniformity of names; they are divided into groups of 4; the first group consists of 2 pairs of brothers (Peter & Andrew, James & John); Matthew's list pairs them, which may reflect the 2x2 commission in Mk 6; Peter always comes first.

Profiles of each disciple, p 153ff.

NB James & John most likely sons of Salome, understood by many to be Jesus' mother's sister – so they may have been Jesus' cousins (makes sense of Jesus handing his mother to John). John most commonly understood to be the 'beloved disciple'. Matthew Levi attested as author of the gospel from C2 onwards.

A remarkable personal diversity – friends, business partners, but even those who would have been foes – eg Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot.

## IV: GOSPEL PORTRAITS OF DISCIPLESHIP

### 9. Matthew: examples with a commission

Matthew does not offer a 2 tiered profile of disciples, ordinary believers and committed disciples. He offers a picture of disciples who are a realistic display for all Christians. He, like Mark, refers only to a small group, whereas John and Luke refer to a great crowd of disciples. This small group is closely related to the 12, but the term disciple is not identified only with the 12 – see Mt 8.21, 10.24-42; and the description of Joseph of Arimathea as a disciple.

Matthew has three groups in his story – the disciples, the crowds, and the Jewish leaders. The disciples were Jesus' true followers, the crowds were neutral and the object of his ministry, and the leaders were the antagonists responsible for his crucifixion. He emphasizes that the essence of true discipleship lies in individuals who understand and obey Jesus' teaching: these are the 12. He shows them mostly as a nameless unity, stressing their corporate identity. He told them to make more of what he had made of them (Mt 28) – and this again was unique to his concept of discipleship. He was calling them to serve in the same way God had called Israel to be a blessing to other peoples. Making disciples is done through preaching repentance and forgiveness, through which people receive salvation; and then helping them to grow thereafter.

All the major discourses in Matthew are directed to the disciples, mostly as discipleship teachings; this makes Matthew's gospel a handy resource of discipleship teaching.

Implications:

1. Matthew intends us to understand that the Christian life is equivalent to being with Jesus as his disciple, and it starts with conversion. So discipleship begins with evangelism.
2. Discipleship teaching is directed to all believers, not only to some.
3. Distinctions among disciples are related to function, not to spiritual standing or commitment. The 12 were both disciples and apostles.

## 10. Mark: servants of the redemptive servant

Mark wanted to make the past story of Jesus so alive for his readers that their present lives would be affected. He compels us to consider Jesus as a truly contemporary figure. His simplicity is the clue to understanding the portrait he draws for us. He offers the most ambiguous account of the disciples – chosen, empowered, commissioned. And yet also uncomprehending, slow on the uptake – which leads Judas to betray him, the disciples to forsake him and Peter to deny him. Mark shows us that during Jesus' life his disciples did not fully understand him. It's hard to grasp the mystery of Jesus and the Cross. He places a great deal of emphasis on the concept of servanthood (Mk 9.33-37, 10.35-45). So he has a pastoral motivation – he has the highest regard for the disciples, but uses their failures to instruct his community.

Implications: a rejection of the world's standard of greatness, a stress on servanthood.

## 11. Luke: followers on the costly way

Luke, more than the others, emphasizes the cost of following Jesus – taking up the cross, hating family and life, not looking back, selling all you own. The differences with Matthew and Mark are as follows:

1. A unique account of the calling of the first disciples – miracles.
2. Mention of a large no of disciples recognised by John but not by Mark and Matthew (Lk 6)
3. Recording of the mission of the 70.
4. Recording of a preaching tour in Galilee in which Jesus took the 12 and several women.
5. Greater tenderness towards Peter's denials
6. Tells us that both men and women followers witnessed the crucifixion – 'all those knowing Jesus'.

In Acts the word disciple is a synonym for believers in Christ. Luke foreshadows this usage in his gospel – cf Lk 6.13,17, where Luke distinguishes between a great following of disciples who were not just part of the crowd (but who were not apostles either). So Luke allows us to see concentric circles of disciples around Jesus: 2 sets of brothers in the inner circle, then the 12, then co-labourers including the 72 and the women, then many disciples (committed believers), and outside, the crowds who were interested but not yet believers.

One of his favourite metaphors is the door, the way – entrance being found through faith alone. There is of course a cost, with implications for family, for oneself, for one's possessions. Discipleship comes as one travels on the Way; there is fruit in your life (Lk 6, 19).

Implications: Jesus was calling for a distinct form of discipleship – not a vocational change, a political attachment, not even a new stirring of God: it was a decision as to whether one would follow Jesus as the Way to eternal life. Matthew invites us to 'be with' Jesus as his disciple; Luke invites us to count the cost of that.

## 12. John: believers marked by Jesus

The central characteristic of the disciple for John is belief or acceptance of Jesus' claims re the Father. This belief necessitates a process of gradual understanding and perception. There is a deliberate contrast between believers and unbelievers, disciples and non disciples. The non believer is part of 'the world', which in practice means 'the Jews' – so we have believing disciples and unbelieving Jews. Growth for John means growing belief. In John 6 those who realised they were not his type of disciple left Jesus; and he responded by delineating his form of discipleship – which meant testing the reality of the disciples' belief.

The marks of a true disciple, for John:

1. Abiding in Jesus' words – eg Jn 8
2. Loving one another – Jn 13
3. Bearing fruit – Jn 15.

Implications: Belief in Jesus for salvation is what produces disciples; it is characterised by the above three marks. Discipleship is not something we do, but something which summarises all the activities of our personal, family and church lives. Discipleship is not one program of the church; it summarises the goal of the church.

How? Regeneration (we are made new); and we build our life of discipleship on the three pillars above – we abide in his word, we love other disciples, we bear fruit (showing people how to be filled with the Spirit, and bearing the fruit of the Spirit; and carrying the message of Jesus to a lost world).

## V: DISCIPLESHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH

### 13. Acts: the community of faith

Many people see discipleship as a one-on-one relationship with Jesus. This is good and true; but it overshadows an equally important biblical truth, the idea of community. It is the community which supports and directs our discipleship in the world.

The word disciple appears for the first time in Acts when Luke says the number of disciples was increasing (6.1). He uses 'disciple' for 'believer'; and offers the only feminine use of the word, for Tabitha, a disciple (9.36). The first time the word Christian occurs, it comes with disciple – Acts 11.26, the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. There are just two possible exceptions to this identification of disciples with believers – 9.25, Saul and his disciples; 19.1ss Paul finds disciples already there when he arrives in Ephesus, and they turn out to be disciples of John the Baptist.

*One of the most significant features for us to recognize is that the word disciples is used in the book of Acts to describe the post-Easter believers intimately associated together as the new community of faith, the church.* 256. The word church occurs only twice in the gospels, both times when Jesus speaks prophetically of the future community of believers (Mt 16.18; 18.17). Strictly speaking the church was born at Pentecost; it is God's new creation into which the Spirit brings all new converts. The continuity is found in the continued use of the word disciple in Acts to designate those who were part of this post-Resurrection church; the followers of Jesus have become the church. So *discipleship is a concept that normally occurs within the context of the community.* In fact the singular form disciple never occurs in Mark, but only in John, where it describes a particular individual; in Matthew and Luke the singular occurs only on Jesus' lips; in Acts it comes only 5 times. The plural form is the usual form.

In Acts there is a change – the 12 are never referred to as disciples, but as apostles; Luke now focusses on them as leaders of a new community. They have a unique role in salvation history – in them is a backward look at the ancient constitution of Israel and a forward look to the final form of the messianic community. In Acts 1 Luke records Jesus' final ministry, and it can be summarised in these exhortations:

1. Focus on the teachings of Jesus for living out the meaning of life (vs 1-3)
2. Actualise the unity of community brought about by the Spirit (4-5)
3. Be a good witness to the good news of Jesus in the power of the Spirit (6-8)
4. Let the absence of Jesus be an incentive to hopefulness until his return (9-11)

Under (1), three different categories of discipleship teaching must be recognised:

- Instructions pertinent to the ministry of the disciples while Jesus was with them
- Instructions directed to the 12 with regard to their future leadership role in the church
- Teaching directed towards all disciples, both pre and post Pentecost – most of Jesus's teachings in fact.

Under (2), this means recognising that the Spirit is now not just with the disciples but in them, with all that that means.

Under (3) we see transition in the ministry of the apostles – witnessing becomes key, eg Paul & Barnabas, whose ministry in Asia Minor is summarised as preaching the gospel and making many disciples (Derbe), and strengthening the disciples and encouraging them (Lystra). Luke thus makes a direct connection with the Great Commission to make disciples.

Acts is determinative for our understanding of the transition the disciples made to this age in which we now live. Discipleship consists on the one hand of being moulded by a tradition, empowered by an experience and



being a participant in a community; on the other, it involves both a way to walk and a mission to fulfil (Charles Talbert). Acts gives us the final biblical definition of the term disciple as it was used in the church: disciples are those who have believed on Jesus for salvation, whether men, women, Jew, Samaritan, Gentile, whether active in leadership or an individual in the church. The learning element is only now minimally apparent – the word disciple most naturally designates a follower who has committed his/her faith for salvation to Jesus. *The church therefore is a community of disciples composed of all those who have believed on Jesus for salvation.* 271. We have lost that perspective and need to regain it.

What did it look like in practice to be part of this community of disciples: Luke 2.42.

- The apostles' teaching – 'teach them to obey everything I have commanded you'; to know and obey. Jesus' disciples will live different kinds of lives from other disciples because they will be obeying the most distinctive Teacher and teachings in history – to see disciples as learners is increasingly inappropriate by this stage
- Fellowship
- Breaking of bread
- Prayers.

Today we need to keep in mind that discipling is to be undertaken as an outgrowth of the life of the church, whereas prior to Pentecost it occurred with Jesus personally. Discipleship is the overall goal of the church, including evangelism, nurturing, fellowship, leadership, worship etc. We must challenge the self centred individualism of our day and recognise that Jesus calls us to community.

#### 14. Disappearing disciples?

The word disciple does not occur in the epistles or in Revelation . Why? Some have suggested it's because the word *mathetes* worked fine in Jewish circles but was not appropriate in the Hellenistic world, being used in philosophical schools. But it wasn't a technical term in these schools; Luke shows us it was used to designate believers in Hellenistic Asia Minor, and it's used in all Paul's missionary journeys through the Hellenistic world.. And Jesus used the term because the Jews did (talmidh). Others have suggested *mathetes* dropped out of use because it was so connected with following Jesus during his earthly ministry; the word follower isn't in the epistles either. But most disciples still identified themselves as disciples after Jesus had ascended; and Ignatius, overseer of the church in Antioch, uses the term frequently in his writings. Another explanation is that other terms were replacing disciple; eg believers, those who belonged to the Way, Christians, brothers/sisters. There's probably some truth in the second and third explanations: *mathetes* continued to be an appropriate word to designate adherents to the Master, but since he was no longer present, other terms came into use to describe the relationships of these disciples to their risen Lord, to the community and to society. There is no evidence that the term disciple was dropped from usage. The word is not there in the epistles: is the concept there?

In the gospels and Acts, discipleship primarily indicates a person's relationship with his/her master. Those who became disciples were disciples of Jesus, and not of anyone else. When people speak of discipleship today they tend to be referring to relationships among believers; we have lost the main point.

#### 15. The Epistles: disciples in other words

Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps*, book about a pastor and his congregation in a Midwest town, written about 100 years ago. It asks the question, what would Jesus do? This is the issue for Peter and Paul and the others throughout their letters – how to walk with Jesus, follow his example. Of course the concept of discipleship is there in the epistles. There is a great deal of related terminology:

- Believers – since it was no longer possible to follow Jesus physically, the early church focussed on belief as one of the chief characteristics of their relationship with him in the new age. Paul expands the concept from belief in Jesus to belief in the truth (2Th2.13) – in all that comprises apostolic Christianity.
- Brothers/sisters – stress on family relationship among believers
- Servants
- Church – the appearance of the word church clearly marks a transition from discipleship in the gospels to the epistles. It's a term that provides continuity between believers in the gospels, acts and epistles. Discipleship is not a program within the church; it is the life of the church.

- Christian – common today but occurs only 3 times in the NT - Acts 11.26, 26.28; 1 Peter 4.16. It was common practice to attach 'ianus' to the name of the master when referring to his adherents, et Augustiani, Herodiani. There is no evidence the term was used as a self-designation by the early church. The first time it's used as a self designation is in Didache, used by Ignatius. Polycarp uses it in the C2. Maybe the reticence is because it's the question asked of those accused of believing in Jesus; are you Christians? Yes meant death or trial in Rome!

The 3 marks of discipleship (abiding in his words, loving other disciples, bearing fruit) are all strongly present as themes in the Epistles. Other metaphors are used in the Epistles which were used to express discipleship in the gospels and Acts – walking with Jesus, shepherd and sheep, branches, imitation. It's clear that the work Jesus began with his disciples was transferred to the age of the church.

## 16. Apostolic Fathers : martyrs for the name

Ignatius, bishop of the church at Antioch in Syria, uses discipleship terminology more frequently than any other apostolic father. He was martyred in Rome in AD 110, writing 7 letters on his journey. He'd lost control of warring factions in his church in Antioch and was full of self doubt; he longed for martyrdom.

*I am fighting wild beasts from Syria to Rome, through land and sea, night and day, bound to ten leopards – which is a company of soldiers – who when well treated become worse. By their mistreatment I become more of a disciple... Now at last I am beginning to be a disciple. Fire and cross and battles and wild beasts, mutilation, mangling, wrenching of bones, the hacking of limbs, the crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil – let these come upon me, only let me reach Jesus Christ!*

He used disciple terms in 3 seemingly contradictory ways. Sometimes he simply means a Christian. Sometimes a more committed Christian. Sometimes a martyr. He uses the same verb Jesus used in the Great Commission – *matheteuo*, I make/become a disciple, providing continuity with the activity of the early church. Sometimes he drew on the learner aspect of the term – and uses the word lesson, which does not occur in the NT or anywhere in early Christian literature.

The word disciple also occurs in the *Epistle to Diognetius*, C3rd. It comes 4 times, in one passage: *having been a disciple of Apostles, I am now becoming a teacher of the Gentiles... To those who are becoming disciples of the truth... does anyone who has been rightly taught not seek to learn exactly the things openly made known by the Word to disciples?... He explained [these things] to disciples.* Disciples in this passage are the opposite of unbelievers, so discipleship indicates conversion to Christianity.

The apostolic fathers also used the terms believers, brothers/sisters, Christians and saints to designate disciples. In Ignatius, disciple and Christian are near synonyms. Mostly when Irenaeus wrote disciple he referred simply to those who were believers, right from conversion. But the fathers used the term reverently – perhaps because of the growing persecution.

Ignatius to Polycarp: *if you love good disciples, it is no credit to you; rather with gentleness bring the more troublesome ones into submission.* Discipleship is clearly developmental – a Christian becomes a disciple through conversion, but the life of a disciple is not a static thing; discipleship means growth and progress toward the goal of becoming more like Jesus.

Perhaps the use of the word disciple to describe martyrdom is because it is only in death that we prove the reality of our faith.

## IV : TOWARD THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

The errors we perpetuate in our forms of discipleship lead to the problems that church and parachurch groups experience – it's not just for the elite, it's not optional, it's not for professional ministers. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council introduced the vocabulary of discipleship into official Roman Catholicism, reversing previous false dichotomies between laity and clergy. Council documents use the term disciple as a synonym for Christian.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

1. Discipleship is the Christian life. It implies a process of growth, and is the metaphor most descriptive of the doctrine of progressive sanctification. Our entire lives are to be brought into this process.
2. Discipleship is a lifelong process, not a programme that we take.
3. Discipleship is the ministry of the Church.

### 18. Walking with the Master in your world

Dangers – learning from those groups who failed to understand what Jesus was offering:

- Being traditionalists (like the disciples of Moses), sticking to the familiar things, and thus creating environmental Christianity rather than true discipleship.
- Being academic religionists (like the Pharisees), emphasising legalism and study, thus creating an over-intellectualisation of the Christian life.
- Being members of a movement (like the disciples of John), enjoying the buzz so much you miss the true significance of what is going on
- Being dedicated revolutionists (like the disciples of Jesus who left him), looking for a leader to overthrow the status quo, willing to be disciples on their own terms.

The dangers of institutionalism –focussing so much on the practices of discipleship that we lose sight of the goal. Our institutions start well, but become so important to the goal that they become more important than the individual, who is then made to serve the institution. Are we making disciples of our institutions, or of Jesus? Are we good at programs, or at living a radical relationship with Jesus? Does our attachment to institutions isolate us from the world or equip us for changing it? Are people focussing on us, or on Jesus?

There are two ways to prevent institutionalism: Jesus' example (Mt 28) and Jesus' balance.

1. Make disciples; make use of the profitable methods and practices of the institution, but not so much that we create disciples of the institution rather than of Jesus.
2. Focus on a personalised discipleship – it's a relationship with Jesus, not an alternative lifestyle or new social organisation.
3. Challenge them to count the cost
4. Help them to become like Jesus – refs p 357- esp abiding in the word, loving, bearing fruit. The fruit is the fruit of the Spirit, new converts, good works (Gal 5; Jn 4; Phil 1.11/Col 1.10).

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