



Discipleship in the New Testament

By Robert L. Foster

The word “disciple” appears in the New Testament 261 times in the gospels and the book of Acts. What did it mean to be a disciple? In the ancient Hellenistic world a disciple was a pupil or learner of a great teacher. Direct contact with the great teacher was not a prerequisite to following their teaching, however. One could follow the teachings of Socrates simply by adopting the way of life promoted by the person of Socrates as developed in the writings of Plato. A disciple could also conform their habits to a way of life that exemplified the virtues of a particular culture or city. Plato’s Socrates in fact speaks in *Protagoras* of those “lovers, enthusiasts, and disciples of Spartan culture.” Thus, a disciple was often devoted to *a way of life* taught by a great teacher or exemplified by a particular culture or city.

Discipleship arose from people’s free desire (or that of their parents) to learn a particular ‘art.’ We should understand ‘art’ in general terms. In the traditional sense, a disciple went to a great teacher to learn to play the flute or paint, by imitating the great teacher’s own practice. However, in terms of philosophy, disciples learned the art of their teacher’s life and teaching. Thus, Dio Chryostom argues in his 55th Discourse *On Homer and Socrates* that Socrates was a disciple of Homer. Socrates lived some several generations after Homer. However, according to Dio, Socrates’ life imitated Homer’s in terms of humility, scorning acquisition of wealth, and devotion to those ends in terms of virtue and vice. The path of discipleship included studying the teacher’s writings, attending public speeches, and joining a school founded by the teacher. Though Socrates scorned Protagoras for demanding a fee of his students, many teachers charged fees of those who came to learn their art.

The first disciples in the gospels actually devoted themselves to the way of life taught by John the Baptist. The gospel of John depicts this time of discipleship as rather short-lived since John the Baptist understood his own work as in part a preparation for the coming of Jesus. According to the gospels, John the Baptist saw Jesus as someone so much greater than himself that he felt unworthy to even untie the sandals on Jesus’ feet (John 1:27; Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16). When Jesus comes on the scene John immediately points his disciples to Jesus, whom the disciples address as “Rabbi,” (“teacher”; John 1:35-39). When John’s disciples express concern over the fact that Jesus’ disciples start to outnumber John’s, John encourages them to embrace this turn of events as devotion to his own teaching about his relationship to Jesus. John portrays himself in the story as one who attends to the needs of the bridegroom at a wedding and rejoices when all the attention turns toward the bridegroom.

Not surprisingly then, the great teacher in the gospels is Jesus. Jesus’ role as a great teacher is not limited to his delivery of great discourses, however. In fact, the earliest canonical gospel, Mark, records only two discourses of any length: the parables in Mark 4 and the “Apocalyptic Discourse” in chapter thirteen. The first disciples of Jesus, according to the gospels, accompanied him on his travels throughout Galilee. On these journeys the disciples observe his encounters with the general populace as well as the

religious leaders, and then listen to Jesus comment on these experiences and their questions.

This model of discipleship as predominantly following Jesus around Galilee and hearing his teachings after an action or encounter stands even in the gospel of Matthew. And it holds in spite of the fact that the gospel includes five major teaching sections (Matthew chs. 5-7, 10, 13, 18, and 23-25). In introducing the reader to Jesus' ministry, the writer of the gospels brackets this introduction via an ***inclusio** summarizing Jesus' work: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and sickness among the people" (4:23; 9:35). As the summary indicates, the readers first encounter what is perhaps the most famous sermon in the gospels, the Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5-7). Still, significant teaching moments occur in the series of stories of Jesus' miracles and outreach to those on the margins of respectable society in chapters eight and nine. These include Jesus' comments on the great faith of the centurion (8:5-13), the cost of discipleship (8:18-21), the demand for mercy (9:9-13), and the practice of fasting (9:14-17). Like other great teachers, Jesus formed disciples in part through great speeches, at least as the gospel of Matthew portrays discipleship. Still, the gospels generally show discipleship in terms of Jesus' actions and interpretations of his actions to his disciples as they follow him throughout the region of Galilee.

We should also note that, in the synoptic gospels especially, Jesus' teachings include instructions about devotion to the way of life that exemplifies the values of the kingdom of God. That is, certain actions and values exemplify the rule of God on earth and those who follow God's rule live up to these standards and expectations. This vision of discipleship as devotion to the kingdom of God reflects the broader Hellenistic understanding of discipleship as sometimes following *a way of life* represented by a particular city or culture. Matthew and Mark initially summarize Jesus' teaching as a proclamation of the good news about the kingdom of God. So, in Mark we read Jesus' declaration "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). Likewise, the gospels of Matthew and Luke agree that when Jesus selects certain disciples to carry his work into Galilee more broadly, Jesus instructs them also to proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near (Matt. 10:7; Luke 10:9).

The author of the gospel of Luke continued to use the term "disciple" in the book of Acts as a term identifying those devoted to the early Jesus-communities in the Mediterranean world. The fact that the stories in Acts portray communities after the resurrection of Jesus actually lessens the distinction between discipleship as devotion to a great teacher (and his teaching) and discipleship as devotion to the way of life of a particular city or culture. In some stories in Acts, those who become disciples in Acts do so in response to the preaching about the kingdom and Jesus. For example, in Acts 8:12 people in Samaria believe the message of Philip, "who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus." The added dimension of Jesus' resurrection strengthens the argument that one ought to follow the teachings of Jesus given his unique status in the cosmos.

We see these three dimensions—devotion to the resurrected Jesus, devotion to Jesus' teaching, and devotion to the way of the kingdom—in the story of Paul's farewell address to the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:17-38). Paul sends for the elders to meet him in Miletus, a seaport town in Southwest Asia Minor some 30 miles from Ephesus. In Paul's speech he summarizes his former preaching and teaching in Ephesus as both calling

people to put their faith in the Lord Jesus (20:21) and also a proclamation of the kingdom of God (20:25). Still, Paul is concerned about the disciples in Ephesus, those devoted to Jesus and the way the kingdom of God. Paul does not want others to rise from within or attack from without and entice the disciples into following a different way of life (20:30). Their continued devotion to the resurrected Jesus and to the way of life under the reign of God means that the disciples ought to follow Jesus' teaching. In emulating Paul's work ethic the Ephesians will provide for those in need and put into practice the instruction of Jesus, "It is better to give than to receive" (20:34-35).

As we have seen, discipleship in the New Testament conforms to the vision of discipleship in other writings of the ancient Hellenistic world. Disciples in the gospels come to follow Jesus the great teacher and learn from him both by means of great teaching discourses and also by Jesus' own life. Often in real life encounters with both the populace of and religious leadership in Galilee Jesus offers some commentary that clarifies expectations of discipleship. Still, discipleship also means devotion to the particular way of life that exemplifies the reign of God. In the book of Acts, the resurrection of Jesus adds a new dimension to discipleship. In a sense, the disciples also devoted themselves to a particular teaching about Jesus, that God raised Jesus from the dead, which in turn further substantiated devotion to Jesus' teaching after his crucifixion at the hands of the Roman imperial authorities.

* **inclusio**: a word or phrase that both begins and ends a particular passage

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