

## Defining Discipleship

During Jesus' earthly ministry, and during the days of the early church, the term that was used most frequently to designate one of Jesus' followers was "disciple(s)" (*mathetes* – is found over 260 times in the Bible). Hence, discipleship is a central theological theme of the Gospels and book of Acts. Discipleship enjoys its most concrete expression in Scripture when Jesus walked with His disciples during His earthly ministry.

Believers in Jesus Christ are called to an intimate relationship with the living God. The roots of Biblical discipleship go deep into the fertile soil of God's calling. That calling is expressed in the pattern of divine initiative and human response that constitutes the heart of the Biblical concept of covenant; which is manifested in the recurrent covenant promise, *"I will be your God, and you shall be my people"* (Exodus 6:7). That call from Yahweh is reiterated in the call of Jesus, when he said, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"* (Matthew 11:28). When giving the Law to Israel in the wilderness God stressed His covenant intent: *"I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people"* (Leviticus 26:12). The nation was called to a relationship in which God was with His people. As such, God has called His people to represent Him on the earth, to be with Him in every circumstance of life, to be transformed in personal character to be like Him. That calling is at the heart of Biblical discipleship. The Old Testament theme of God *with* His people finds explicit fulfillment in Jesus *with* His people. The promise of a coming Davidic Messiah is intertwined with the promise that God Himself would be with His people. The significance of Matthew's interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' name, "Immanuel," therefore, cannot be overstated: *"The virgin will be with Child and will give birth to a Son, and they will call Him 'Immanuel' which means, 'God with us'"* (Matthew 1:23). In Jesus, God has come to be *with* His people, to fulfill the deepest meaning of the covenant God *with* His people as Lord and Savior.

Throughout Jesus' ministry He was calling people into a relationship to be with Him as His disciples (see Matthew 4:19, 9:9; Mark 1:17, 2:14; Luke 5:10-11, 5:27-28; John 15:16). The response to the call to be a disciple involves recognition and belief in Jesus' identity (John 2:11, 6:68-69), obedience to His summons (Mark 1:18-20), and counting the cost of full allegiance to Him (Matthew 19:23-30, Luke 14:25-28). His call is the beginning of something new; it means losing one's old life (Matthew 10:34-37; Luke 9:23-25), and finding new life in the family of God through obeying the will of the Father (Matthew 12:46-50). To fulfill the covenantal relationship means simply that God must be God, giving him preeminence in all things. This covenantal relationship with God finds concrete expression in "following God" and "walking in His ways." During Jesus' earthly ministry the disciple was to "follow" Jesus, an allegiance to His person regarded as *the* decisive act, whether a literal or figurative attachment. Jewish disciples would follow their master around, often literally imitating him. The goal of Jewish disciples was someday to become masters, or rabbis, themselves, and to have their own disciples who would follow them. But Jesus' disciples were to remain disciples of their Master and Teacher, Jesus, and to follow Him only. Following Jesus means togetherness with Him and service to Him while living out one's life for His glory. When Jesus appointed His twelve disciples, Mark 3:14-15 affirms, *"Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons."* The relationship *with* Jesus would reproduce the life of Jesus and His Kingdom works in the world.

The Apostle Peter exhorts those in the church to look at Jesus' example and to follow in His steps (1 Peter 2:21). One of Paul's often used metaphors is "walking with God." The expression indicates how a person "lives" or conducts himself or herself in relationship to God and others. The summary of this theme is found in the statement, *"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh"* (Galatians 5:16). This defines Paul's concept of the Christian life. Therefore, a primary goal of discipleship is becoming like Jesus (Luke 6:40). The process of becoming like Jesus brings the disciple into intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and, as such, is the goal of individual discipleship. We are to be "transformed" into His likeness (i.e. into the image of God-*Imago Dei*) as noted in these passages: *"Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord"* (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). *"For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself"* (Philippians 3:20-21). *"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren"* (Romans 8:28-29). *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy,*

*acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you” (Romans 12:1-2).*

As part of this work of transformation, Jesus declares that servanthood is to be the goal of disciples in relationship to one another (Mark 10:35-45). The reason that this kind of servanthood is possible is because of Jesus' work of servanthood in ransoming disciples. Jesus paid the price of release from the penalty for sin and from the power of sin over pride and self-centered motivation. The motivation of self-serving greatness is broken through the redemption of the Gospel, and disciples are thus enabled to focus upon others in servanthood. This is very similar to Paul's emphasis when he points to Jesus' emptying Himself to become a servant: Jesus provides the example of the way the Philippian believers are to act toward one another (Philippians 2:1-8). The Apostles Mark and Paul declare that even as Jesus was the redemptive servant, thus, authentic discipleship entails selfless servanthood. This is the goal of disciples in relation to one another as the root and foundation of authentic selfless love. The two great commands to love God and to love one another (Matthew 22:36-40) are at the heart of being transformed into Jesus' likeness.

Through His Great Commission Jesus focuses His followers on the ongoing importance of discipleship through, and declares the responsibility of, disciples toward the world: they are to make disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28:16-20). To "make disciples" is to proclaim the Gospel message among those who have not yet received forgiveness of sins. The command finds verbal fulfillment in the activities of the early church, as they went from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth proclaiming the message of Jesus and making disciples. In the early church, to believe in the Gospel message was to become a disciple (cf. Acts 4:32, 6:2). To "*make disciples of all the nations*" is to make more of what Jesus made of them. Jesus concludes the commission with the crucial element of discipleship: the presence of the Master: "*I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20). Both those obeying the command and those responding to the command are comforted by the awareness that the risen Savior, Jesus, will continue to transform all His disciples to be like Him in and for the world. The Master is always present for His disciples to follow. As disciples become salt and light in this world, walking the narrow path, loving and providing hope to the world; they become living examples for others to follow. Such is Paul's entreaty, "*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ*" (1 Corinthians 11:1). Also, "*And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also*" (2 Timothy 2:2). As a growing follower of Jesus Christ, we are all encouraged to follow this example to be investing in others as we also are being disciplined. Following Paul the Apostle's example, who are these significant relationship investments in your life? List their names and pray over these relationships.

- Who is discipling you? \_\_\_\_\_ (Paul had Barnabas)
- Who are your peers? \_\_\_\_\_ (Paul had Silas & Luke)
- Who are you discipling? \_\_\_\_\_ (Paul had Timothy & Titus)

### **Discipleship Relationships**

At the core of discipleship is a relationship between a discipler and a disciple. It is a primary understanding that engagement in Biblical life transformation takes place within relationships. As such, it is strongly encouraged that if an individual desires to be a part of a spiritual growth pathway, there is a need to identify a person or persons with whom they are committed to walk life together at their current stage of life. The participants should identify who is pouring into them, who their Godly influential peers are and who they are also seeking to influence in Jesus Christ. These relationships can be discovered and nurtured through ministry groups, dGroups, employment situations, organized church systems and basically just about any place where maturing Christians live, work and recreate. The following definitions are meant to be helpful in pursuing a relationship for growth as individuals doing life together with the intent of experiencing transformation in Jesus Christ. Many of the terms below are interchangeable within the purpose and design of influencing others for Jesus Christ and are not meant to be limited or exclusive.

**Mentor:** A person with whom an individual has a relational and experiential growth commitment together that empowers a person to experience life transformation and spiritual reproduction through the mentor's example and guidance.

**Disciple Maker:** A person who engages with another believer with an intentional plan to reproduce Christlikeness for the purpose of engaging the Great Commission.

**Spiritual Director:** An individual who engages in the process of accompanying people on their faith

journey. Spiritual direction exists in a context that emphasizes growing closer to God within the various Biblical disciplines for spiritual formation. Guidance is provided that considers a person's unique personal pathway preferences.

**Life-stage Coach:** A life-stage coach seeks to bring out the best in an individual in respect of his or her current life situation in a holistic sense. A coach provides a synergistic relationship with the individual for the purpose of personal growth in reaching new goals within a balanced perspective of faith, family, career and personal development.

**Spiritual Friend:** A Christ-centered friendship with someone with whom an individual can entrust with transparency the deep areas of the heart for mutual growth and confidential accountability. It is a spiritually enriching relationship that bears fruit in reciprocal faith development.

**Peer Relationship:** A peer relationship for growth that focuses on mutual accountability within a specified plan for improvement. It is a shared leadership model that enhances the participants' reciprocal faith development.

**Affinity Group Relational Connection:** A relationship for spiritual growth where participants connect together around common interests and goals.

**Pastoral Leadership Development:** Within a person's leadership role in ministry an individual has a relational and instructional investment for growth that influences a person's life transformation and leadership maturity.

**Classes with Relational Investment:** Within the experience of a class for ministry and spiritual growth or instruction, there is opportunity for instructional investment where the teacher provides personal and accountable enrichment beyond the course curriculum.

**Parent Directed Mentoring:** Within the Biblical mandates it is often most beneficial for parents to be in a primary instructor role for their children as they create a home environment to exemplify Christ and enrich the faith of their offspring.

**rGroup Connections:** Within the context of small group involvement there is opportunity for more intentional relational discipleship as individuals connect more intimately in one-on-one relational growth commitments.

**Rock School of Ministry Personal Mentoring:** Each student in the Rock School of Ministry is paired with a mentor who is responsible for the appropriate equipping in the faith within the individual's experience of life transformation and spiritual reproduction through a regular relational guidance and instruction.

**Ministry training/apprenticeships:** A specialized ministry training experience that includes intentional relational and instructional investment for life transformation and faith development.

**Online mentors:** An online mentor's role is primarily to encourage, motivate and monitor an individual's spiritual formation guidance and goals. This should not replace a person-to-person relationship but would supplement an individual's growth plan. This arrangement at times may be a temporary means for accountable growth when an alternative relationship is not available.

### **Enriching Relationship Guidelines**

As noted, discipling relationships can be made up within various structures and relational commitments and/or covenants. However, in faith-building relationships there are a number of guiding principles that participants should consider as part of their journey together. It is encouraged that these relationships should include the following essential elements:

- Christ-centered grace and character
- Established covenant with expectations, purpose and goals
- Be Biblically based
- Have prayer as a foundation
- Meet on a regular basis
- Engage in a variety of spiritual disciplines
- Involve active ministry service and outreach
- Discover, nurture and engage in one's spiritual gifts
- Have mutual love and respect
- Involve openness and transparency
- Have values of truth and honesty
- Be committed to confidentiality and discretion
- Be positively based towards encouragement and edification
- Have faithful accountability