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FOLLOWING JESUS: THE PLURAL OF DISCIPLE IS CHURCH

What is a disciple?

Extract from Chapter Two of *Following Jesus*

In every life and in every movement there are times when it's important to go back, back to the beginning, back to the key moments of the past, the moments in which the big principles were first laid down. That was true for those first disciples of Jesus; perhaps it was true too for the people for whom Tintoretto and Veronese exploded history on the church walls of Venice. And I think it's true for us. We are living in changing times; and at times of change it's good to go back.

So let's start with the basic question. When Jesus said, "Go and make disciples," what did he mean? What exactly is a disciple of Jesus? Am I a disciple? Are you a disciple? It's an unexpectedly confusing question – Michael Wilkins, author of a classic book on biblical discipleship, says that when he asks his students to raise their hands if they are a true disciple of Jesus, few do so; most are confused and hesitant. But when he asks them to raise their hands if they are a true Christian, they all confidently do so. Why the hesitation? Luke tells us that even after his death, 'disciple' remained the normal word for any person who believed in Jesus – it was not until the gospel spread to Antioch in Syria that the word 'Christian' first came into use. So what *does* it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?

I'm a linguist, and I think words are a bit like clothes. Each year I travel once or twice to Africa to train and support people who want to lead *Rooted in Jesus* groups. People in Africa are very kind, and sometimes they give me a shirt made from beautiful Tanzanian or Zambian cotton. And I take it home, and I wear it, and I wash it. And often I wear it and I wash it so much that the shirt shrinks or it fades; and gradually it stops looking as good as it did. I think that happens with words too – we wear them and wash them so many times that they shrink and they fade, and lose their meaning. And because it happens gradually we don't even notice.



I want to suggest that this is what's happened to the word disciple. When Jesus said "Go and make disciples," he was talking about something new and big and radical, something profound, something that had never been seen before. And yet all too often after we've worn this word disciple, washed it and passed it down from one generation to another, we find ourselves left with something shrunk and faded, something much smaller than it was originally intended to be. And people look at us, and they see this rather shrivelled garment, and they are not impressed – they no longer say, as people said in those early centuries, 'where can I get one of those?'. For us, discipleship has become less than it should be: instead of lying at the heart of our identity as people called and sent by the living God, it has become a word we aren't even sure we can define.



A shrunken understanding of discipleship?

Perhaps this always happens with words which are no longer in common use; bit by bit they lose their meaning. And the inevitable consequence of that, of course, is they are open for redefinition. The shirt which once had been cast aside as shrunken and faded is picked up by passers by, people looking for a word to fit a concept of their own; taking hold of the shirt, they stretch it to suit their own needs. This, I suggest, has

happened with the word disciple: it has become something of an umbrella term – everyone has their own idea of what it means. For some it suggests a programme of Bible study, for others a rather prescriptive shepherding process. For many it's simply a word attached to centrally organised training courses of one kind or another. For yet others, shying away from this academic approach, 'disciple' is just a word for a person who takes a step of commitment to Christ – 'making new disciples' seems to be the latest user-friendly phrase for evangelism. The problem with this, as Stanley Hotay discovered when God spoke to him about the difference between making converts and making disciples, is that making disciples involves a lot more than just leading people to faith.

The result of this stretching of the word disciple and its cognate discipleship is that it now means almost anything you want it to mean – which is another way of saying that it means very little at all. As Dallas Willard sighs, 'the term discipleship has currently been ruined so far as any solid psychological and biblical content is concerned.'

So what is discipleship? What exactly did Jesus mean when he said "Go, and make disciples"?

Mathetes : redefining discipleship

The Greek word μαθητής comes from a verb meaning to learn. It first appears in the writings of Herodotus (C5 BC), but was in wide oral use before then. First used to denote a learner or apprentice in a particular skill or craft (eg dancing, music, writing, wrestling, hunting, medicine), its meaning gradually shifted from learner to pupil, embracing the concept not just of learning but also of commitment to a great teacher or master. By the time of Herodotus, μαθητής indicates a person who was making a significant personal life commitment to the master, learning his practices and living them out.

During the Hellenistic era (C4-C1BC) μαθητής was used to denote the nature of the relationship between master and disciple, with the emphasis moving increasingly away from learning towards imitation of conduct. By the time of the New Testament, religious adherents (especially 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.

Μαθητής is used in the gospels both to describe the followers of John the Baptist and as the primary term for the followers of Jesus (those who travelled with him and also those who did not). By the time of Acts it's the normal term for any Christian believer. A disciple of Jesus is now understood to be 'one who has come to Jesus for eternal life, has claimed Jesus as Saviour and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Jesus.'

Summary from Michael Wilkins, *Following the Master – a biblical theology of discipleship*, Zondervan 1992, chapter 4.

APPRENTICED TO JESUS

It depends which translation you are reading, of course, but the English word 'disciple' is used more than 250 times in the New Testament – usually in the plural. The word 'Christian,' by contrast, is used just three times.¹³ A careful analysis of all these instances draws us to the conclusion that the shrinking and fading of the word 'disciple' can be seen in the loss of two features which were key to the way it was understood by Jesus.

In 2011 the Anglican Diocese of Gloucester conducted a survey among its clergy, asking what they regarded as the most important elements of discipleship. The survey reported widespread agreement across the diocese: clergy from all contexts and traditions selected 'Bible study' as the foremost activity of a Christian disciple, followed by 'prayer'. There was no suggestion that discipleship should involve any element either of ministry or lifestyle; indeed, 'personal morality' was rated bottom of the seventeen options offered, along with 'witness' and 'faith at work'.

When we think about discipleship today we tend naturally to think about some form of study. The English word 'disciple' comes from the Latin verb *disco*, which means 'to learn'. We live in a culture of study, and inevitably we bring to the biblical text our own assumptions about what learning involves. For most of us, learning means classrooms and colleges; learning is about understanding, about information, about what we know – it's an activity which takes place in our heads. So it seems natural to help people to become disciples of Jesus by inviting them on a study course – perhaps a Bible study programme to start with, then for the keen ones maybe a diocesan course or some kind of further theological qualification. Viewed in this academic way, discipleship is primarily about qualifications. It's a widespread misunderstanding: the most perfunctory internet search reveals the existence of bishops' certificates in discipleship, discipleship study days and discipleship conferences, discipleship libraries and discipleship journals.

The problem is that this approach, although it fits well with the emphasis our society places on information and qualifications, does not reflect the process by which Jesus taught his first disciples. Such courses may be very helpful in themselves, but they tend to produce not so much Christians equipped to live and share their faith in the context of their daily lives, as recruits to the offices of the church – people who in being taken out of their own context have become disciples not of Jesus but of the institution. 'Sometimes, Michael Wilkins remarks, 'our discipleship programs thwart true discipleship – we can become so involved with our programs that we isolate ourselves from real life.'

What then does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? Perhaps the clue again lies in language – for we may notice that the biblical word for disciple is not Latin but Greek, and in Greek it carries a slightly different meaning. The gospel word for disciple is *mathetes*. And *mathetes* is not a classroom kind of word: in the context in which Jesus used it, it carried a bigger meaning, something more like 'apprentice' – it referred to a process which involved not just learning from your master but learning to actually become like him. So we do not see Jesus teaching his disciples in a classroom, and we do not see him encouraging or equipping them to engage in theological discussion and debate; rather the reverse, for the Pharisees who want to tempt them into this approach are given very short shrift indeed. Jesus taught his disciples in a rather different way: he taught them, apprenticeship style, to do the things which he did – how to live and how to minister. And then, as Matthew records, he told them to teach others to do these things too. So we see Jesus not so much teaching his disciples as training them, in the same practical way that he himself had been trained to be a carpenter. Jesus was indicating, TW Manson suggests, that discipleship was not a theoretical life of scholarship but a practical task of labour in God's vineyard; 'Jesus was ... a 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.'

This was new; so new, Wilkins observes, that it took the disciples themselves some time to get their minds round what was being required of them. Other masters had disciples, so Jesus was working within a recognised framework; but he was changing it into an expression of his own particular relationship with his followers, patiently teaching them what it meant to be his kind of disciple, his kind of follower. This kind of

discipleship, a following not for study but for service as ministers of the kingdom of God, had never been seen before. In other words, it seems that the kind of discipleship we see unfolding in the lives of Jesus's earliest followers is not theoretical, it's practical. 'Watch me,' Jesus said as he healed the sick, freed the oppressed and offered good news to the poor. Then he said, 'You go out now in pairs, try it yourselves, and we'll go through it when you get back.' Then finally, 'I'm off now, and you are to keep on doing this, and teach others to do it too.' The implications of this for the way we train people for ministry today are interesting, for we so often take the exact opposite approach, deliberately removing people from the context of normal life and placing them in an artificial environment where there is no one with whom to share the good news and no opportunity to put into practice what is being learnt – which of course in turn means that what is learnt cannot itself be the ministry skills which Jesus was so concerned to impart to his disciples. Jesus wasn't training theologians; he was training practitioners, and the primary context of the training was not the classroom but the community. You cannot get to be a disciple of Jesus by going on a study course. In fact it seems that discipleship is not about what you know at all; it's much bigger than what's in your head – it's about your whole life, everything that you are and everything that you do. As the Fresh Expressions website notes, 'the term discipleship designates the whole life response of Christians to Jesus Christ.' Discipleship is indeed not about what you know; it's about who you are becoming.

So what about our theological education and Bible study programmes? Bible study is of course essential, for it's in the Bible that we discover all these things. But study is not enough. Reflecting on his own theological education, Brian McLaren laments: 'I could see absolutely no correlation between the amount of theological complexity and the amount of spiritual vitality, Christ-likeness, or fruitfulness – in my life, or in the lives of others.' 'From my desk at college,' writes Shane Claiborne, 'it looked like some time back we had stopped living Christianity and just started studying it. If we are to make disciples, we must do more than help people acquire biblical and theological information. Our task is not simply to study the Word of God; it's to get it off the page and into our lives. The Bible itself often tells us this. 'Don't read it, eat it,' God said to the prophet Ezekiel. 'Don't speak it, live it,' he said to Hosea. 'You claim to know what it says, but you have no understanding of its power,' Jesus said to the Pharisees. 'The Word of God is living and active,' said the writer to the Hebrews; 'it is meant to change us and change the people around us.' 'There is, Dallas Willard insists, 'absolutely no suggestion in the New Testament that being a disciple consists of reading your Bible and praying regularly.' It's much, much bigger than that.

In the early days of Rooted in Jesus a woman living in Mererani, a village near Arusha in Tanzania, had a lifechanging experience. Isaiah Chambala, then the Rooted in Jesus deanery coordinator and now the Bishop of Kiteto, tells the story. This woman was the only Christian living in her village, and each Sunday she would walk to a nearby village to attend church. She was therefore known for her faith, and one night some members of the village, followers of traditional religion, came to her house with a sick girl.

No treatment had worked, and someone had told them that Christians know how to bring healing. The woman was an Anglican, a churchgoer, baptised and confirmed – but she had absolutely no idea how to pray for healing; prayer, she thought, was the pastor's job. Desperate to help, she did the only thing she knew how to do. Closing her eyes and remembering what she had been taught through the catechism, she prayed the Lord's Prayer. Nothing happened. She recited the Ten Commandments. No result. She said the Creed. Still nothing. She reviewed the sacraments, confessed her sins, and said the grace. The girl was as sick as ever. In frustration the woman burst into tears; what use was her faith? She cried and cried, Isaiah said, and rivers of tears flowed, but this time without words; just crying. "I cried not for the sick person but for myself that I didn't know how to pray," she said. When eventually she raised her head, the girl had been healed. This experience changed her life. Determined to learn how to make her faith effective in practice, the woman joined a Rooted in Jesus group. Soon she had led the whole family to Christ. "Why did you delay to bring this course to us?" she demanded.

The point, Isaiah explains when he tells this story, is this: discipleship is like football – knowing the theory is all very well, but it's not enough to know the theory, you are supposed to actually get the ball into the net; you are meant to win the game. It's no use us just knowing stuff in our heads; being a disciple of Jesus was never meant to be about that. It's about whether we can put it into practice, whether we can live it and help others to live it. Discipleship is not about acquiring information; it is, as Alan Hirsch puts it, 'the irreplaceable and lifelong task of becoming like Jesus by embodying his message.'



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Apprenticeship in community

But there's a second thing I think we have lost too, and this is not the shrinking but the fading. We live in a 'me' world, and that means we tend to see discipleship as an individual thing – as indeed we do all forms of higher education. I think of my own family; I have a son and two daughters, all at college or university, all having chosen what to study according to their own interests and aptitudes – Edward has opted for engineering, Bethy for dance and Katy for classics. We are delighted that they have chosen subjects they are motivated by and good at, and we are hopeful that in due course this will lead to appropriately remunerative employment. It is, however, not the right model for discipleship. For Jesus, discipleship was not an individual process but a community one. His disciples didn't choose a subject or a syllabus, they chose a person (or perhaps they were themselves chosen by him); and they learned not as individuals attending classes but as part of a new, mutually accountable community. Their discipleship was embedded in relationships; it required them to travel together in community with their Master.

This dynamic educational environment meant that much of their learning was done in the context of those relationships – sometimes difficult relationships, for their group included unschooled fishermen, a tax collector, and a political activist; men with very different perspectives on life. There were personality differences too; some were by nature impulsive, some reflective, some doubtful. And there were differences in age and experience; some were old, some still young enough to be accompanied by an ambitious mother. But despite this extraordinary variety in background and perspective they learned to love one another, to recognise and accept one another as brothers and sisters, not to compete with one another or judge one another. They learned to think 'we' instead of 'me'. 'You are not to be called rabbis,' Jesus said, 'and you are not to see yourselves as teachers. What you are is brothers, and your role is not to instruct but to serve, as you have seen me serve.' The task of these first disciples was to become so united that they would seem to be, as Jesus explained to them, like the branches of a single vine. Apprenticed to Jesus himself, the key to their identity lay in their relationships, not just with him but also with one another.

And it seemed that this was not just for those few who travelled with Jesus as he moved between the villages of Galilee, Samaria and Judea; it was a principle which lay at the very heart of the Christian gospel. In time, Paul would tell the Christian believers in Rome, Corinth and Ephesus that they too were no longer individuals, jostling for their rights and pursuing their own desires as they had been accustomed to do; they were now just different parts of a single body, the body of Christ. It's a clever image; for in seeing ourselves as the body of Christ we understand both our identity and our role.

For us today the challenge of community is as great as the challenge of apprenticeship, for we live in a culture which does not prioritise community. The Chief Executive of Leicester City Council, Rodney Green, once remarked that the church of Holy Trinity Leicester was the only place in the city where the gathering was not monochrome, but reflected the many different ethnic and socio-economic communities of which the population was made up. That is how it is meant to be. Being a disciple of Jesus means being joined to other people – people whom we have not chosen and perhaps would be unlikely to choose. We cannot be disciples alone; we can only be disciples together. In Africa, of course, they still know this. “I am, because we are. We are, because He is,” we said together as we prepared to take communion in Christ Church Cathedral, Arusha. Community still comes naturally to most Africans; and where people make a wholehearted commitment, despite the difficult circumstances in which they may live, to follow Jesus together, then the most remarkable things can happen – now as then. The principle is neatly summed up in a proverb quoted by Bishop Jackson ole Sapit, a Masai from SW Kenya: “If you want to travelfast, travel alone; if you want to travel far, travel together.”

Robert Katandula lives in the town of Mansa, in the Luapula region of Zambia, where in addition to earning his living he leads a Rooted in Jesus group in his local church. The group has 33 members, and divides into 6 smaller groups for discussion and prayer. Rooted in Jesus is not an academically demanding course; the challenges it offers are not intellectual but practical and spiritual, and it leads to radical change in the lives of those who embrace them. Many Rooted in Jesus group leaders have written to tell us of the transformation which has come as people commit themselves to Christ and to one another; but Robert’s reports give a particularly helpful insight into how this comes about.



In January 2012 Robert wrote: ‘The Rooted in Jesus Christ Group is a Christian group aimed at promoting spiritual growth, sharing the word of God and proclaiming the word of God to members and non members of the Anglican Church in the community. Rooted in Jesus Christ hold prayer meetings from Monday to Saturday in the morning daily. In the meetings on Monday to Friday the group discusses the lessons from the book Rooted in Jesus. Books 1, 2, and 3 have been covered so far.’

Robert went on to describe how the group are putting into practice what they have learned: ‘Each afternoon on Sundays and Mondays the group meets at 1500 hours and goes into the community for visitations. The group gives spiritual support to individuals, families and groups depending on their requests. The group gives counselling, healing prayers, casts out demons and encourages those who are spiritually weak and have stopped attending church meetings. The group has received people from far villages for healing. The group is very much encouraged by the people’s response to the power of prayers. The Rooted in Jesus Christ group is proud of their spiritual growth and the maturity in their lives. The group is seeing miracles happening to people in the community. Many people have been healed, demons are cast out, broken marriages are brought together, lost items are being recovered. Therefore the group is encouraged by how Jesus Christ is answering our prayer requests and also by how some people are changing in their lives.’

The following September Robert wrote again to report on the expanding ministry of the group now that it had completed the final book of Rooted in Jesus: ‘I am proud in Jesus’ name to inform you that our group has started charity work in the community after learning the word of God on ‘salt and light.’ During our visitation to people in the community we found a lot of problems such as lack of food, clothing, proper accommodation, and school support for orphans. The group is overwhelmed with [the] challenges people have in the community. After the lesson members of the group contributed financially and materially. The group raised 24kg of maize grain, 6 bars of soap, salt, and second-hand clothes. In August our group went for a one day outreach meeting to share the word of God with St Paul’s Anglican Church, which is about 35 km from Mansa town. The theme for the meeting

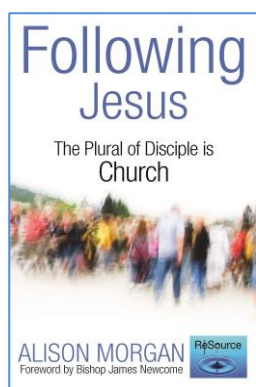
was 'individual relationship with God.' Lessons covered were: introduction to Rooted in Jesus, salt and light, how to receive blessings from God and spiritual healing. I am proud that many Christians surrendered their lives to Jesus as Lord; demons and evil spirits were cast out from many people during the altar call healing prayer time. I thank the power of God [for] releasing many people from the power of darkness to light. The group has planned to reach 8 congregations before December; we are going to start with St Andrews 45 km from Mansa town.'

Robert notes that 'the committed members of the group have been transformed physically and spiritually in their lives due to the completion of the course.' Robert's pastor, Fr Teddy Sichinga, adds: 'We at All Saints Anglican church, Mansa have benefited a lot; the church has grown numerically, spiritually and financially because of the Rooted in Jesus programme.'

Robert's group is an excellent illustration of the nature of discipleship. The members of the group show remarkable commitment to one another; they learn together, they learn in practical ways, and they take immediate steps to apply what they are learning. The impact on their own lives and on those of the people they come into contact with is huge.

So what is Christian discipleship? I have come to define it like this: discipleship is a form of apprenticeship undertaken in community. It's practical, and it's corporate. To recognise this radically changes our understanding of it. It means that the focus of our discipleship should be not on what we know but on who we are becoming. And that's where the challenge lies, because we aren't becoming engineers or dance teachers, we are becoming like Jesus, the Son of God, growing into his likeness day by day as we learn to obey him. This is why the first Christian disciples were Followers of the Way. They were following Jesus, they were going on a journey that no one had ever been on before, and they were going on it together. They were so good at going on it together that people rushed to join them, did indeed want to buy the unshrunk, unfaded T shirt; and the church was born.

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