

Discipleship: The Way of Jesus

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Discipleship as the Way of Jesus Christ

Scripture

1 Corinthians 3:23 This verse assures us of our identity as Christians in belonging to Jesus Christ.

Prayer

O God, you come to us in Jesus Christ and call us to be his disciples. May we respond to your call. Draw us into the church community of Christ's followers. Help us to know that in Christ you have broken down the barriers that separate us from others. May we be joined to others and join with others in serving Christ. By your Holy Spirit shape us and reshape us in the image of Christ so we enact his love in our lives and in the life of the world. Make us your faithful disciples. In Christ's name. Amen.

Introduction

Who am I in Jesus Christ? Do I live my life differently because I believe and trust in him? What does he require of me? Am I really his disciple?

No word is more basic to the Christian vocabulary than "discipleship." In many ways, however, it is a strange word, because discipleship makes unusual and unique demands on us. If I am a disciple, I must acknowledge the authority of a master or leader. If I am a disciple, I must agree to submit to the guidance and correction of the community that is organized around this master and to whom I also wish to belong. If I am a disciple, I must commit myself to practicing a way of life that will deepen my distinctive identity as a follower of this master and as a member of this community.

What about us as North American Christians at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Do we have any master greater than ourselves? Do we know to whom we belong? Do we participate in a community that both encourages and corrects us to live more faithfully as followers of Jesus Christ?

We live in a time when the concept and practice of discipleship pose challenges we cannot easily resolve. Discipleship has to do with taking on an identity different from any other identity one already has as a member of a particular nation, race, ethnicity, or political ideology. But the whole notion of identity seems to be up for grabs in contemporary America. Some say each person can create his or her own identity. Others claim we can have multiple identities, being one thing to one group of people and another thing to another group of people. Still others doubt we have any choice in the matter; biological and sociological factors determine our identity, whether we like it or not.

When people are unclear about their core identity, they are also unable to make the commitments discipleship requires. In such a world, people imagine for better or worse that they are “free agents,” unbound from any master or community.

The Failure of Authority

The question of identity today is further complicated by the fact many Americans no longer trust as they once did in the institutions and traditions that used to transmit identity from one generation to the next. History has taught us about the sins and failures of such institutions as the family, the nation, and the church. Perhaps this is why Americans so eagerly snatch up books like *The Da Vinci Code*, where traditional social authorities are depicted as dark, conspiratorial figures seeking to manipulate people for their own gain. Our leading philosophers, writers, and artists have found reason to criticize, even to ridicule, institutions that once claimed divine sanction but now seem all too human and fallible.

In the name of the nation, unjust wars have claimed the lives of millions of people. In the name of the family, innocent children have suffered physical and emotional abuse. In the name of religion, fanatics have exploited their followers for personal gain or provoked them to acts of violence and terrorism in the name of God. Corrupt authority seems to make discipleship a foolhardy, even misguided venture.

Surely not every nation, family, and church has failed. We continue to respect the “authorities” that help to provide for social order and well-being. But an attitude of suspicion has entered our consciousness. We have learned we must question authority, and we have no excuse for submitting uncritically to any human leader, tradition, or institution. We have come to believe we must manage

life on our own terms, supporting authority when it gives us what we want, while resisting it when it violates our self-interest.

Such a stance nevertheless takes a heavy toll on us. When we always have to look out for ourselves and constantly worry about whom we can or cannot trust, when we remove ourselves from communities that guide and correct us, we end up with what sociologist Robert Putnam has called *bowling alone*. We are no longer sure where we fit or what really matters.

In such a world, people frequently long for something more, though they are not sure what it is or how to find it. They sense that despite all the talk about independence and self-determination, life is incomplete when centered just on the self. Those of us who “bowl alone” often wish we could find a group that would include us and would give us a sense of belonging. When we are honest with ourselves, we recognize how much we need people in whom we can trust. We seek wisdom from beyond ourselves to guide us in what we should believe and do. We long for an identity in something bigger than ourselves.

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What can I believe in? What can command my loyalty and affection? Though the word “discipleship” has become strange to us today, questions of discipleship persist. For the Christian, they are ever-present. Despite our ambivalent attitudes toward authority, we continue to look for someone or something to which to give ourselves.

The Living Christ

Questions of discipleship require more than abstract, intellectual answers. Rather, they go to the heart of our relationship with Christ. Do we know him as the living, resurrected Christ who continues to come to us today? Have we heard his call to us personally and to his body, the church? Do we recognize his presence and work among us? Do we belong to a community that we trust to guide us into a deeper relationship with him?

Questions of discipleship require us to give account of the hope that is in us. They ask us to testify to the One who

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has become ultimately “authoritative” for our lives. The authority of this master is unlike any other. Christ is not a paternalistic ruler who takes care of our every need, as though we were mere subjects with no personal freedom or integrity. Nor is Christ the “information expert” who claims to have answers we must simply accept, as though we were too immature to think for ourselves. Rather, Christ “authorizes” a new way of life in us. He frees us to give ourselves to God and to one another in love.

Christ breaks down the barriers that separate us from God and from each other, and transforms us into a holy temple, a dwelling place for God. Christ joins us to others to become a community in which strangers are no more because all are sisters and brothers. Our identity in Christ becomes real in the life of a community that cultivates bonds of loyalty and love. We learn discipleship together, as we engage in prayer and worship, and evangelism and justice.

The church, of course, is neither complete nor perfect. It is always a body of imperfect human beings who are still maturing in faith, still growing into the stature of Jesus Christ. Life in Christian community is therefore never without disagreement and struggle. The fragmentation of identity and authority that characterizes the world also infects the church and confuses the question of what exactly discipleship requires of us.

Is Christ best understood as a liberator, therapist, or teacher of pure doctrine? Would he make provision for just war, or always insist on pacifism? What would he have to say about matters of sexuality, immigration, health care, or genetic engineering? Would he vote Democrat or Republican, or start a third party? When competing groups vie to define Christ in terms of their particular social and political interests, the skeptic wonders whether we can really know Christ, or only different human definitions of him.

As contemporary as this problem seems, it reaches back into the earliest decades of the church. Christians had aligned themselves with different leaders: Cephas, Apollos, and Paul (1 Corinthians 1:12). Then, as now, Christ ultimately intervenes to call us back to him alone. In the midst of our church disagreements, Christ promises to confront us anew with his living presence, and asks us to bear with one another, even as he bears with us.

Waiting and Preparing

This kind of discipleship requires us to live in the tension between waiting and preparing. Disciples are not simply passive objects.

Rather, we prepare for the possibility of Christ's transforming presence. But we cannot force it. We must finally wait for Christ to act in his own time and way.

Key practices and disciplines of faith—beginning with prayer—help us develop these skills of waiting and preparing. We learn to think of the Christian life more as a process and less as a level of achievement or completion. Though God's kingdom will not come to fulfillment in our lives here and now, practices of discipleship do open us to God's presence in our midst. Prayer, Scripture reading, worship, and the sacraments give us glimpses of Christ as alive in us even now.

In a world that values efficiency and immediate self-gratification, practices of discipleship become countercultural acts. They prepare us for the possibility of experiencing and expressing God's love, rather than simply maximizing our own self-interest. Just as Christ has given himself to us, we now want to give ourselves to him and to others.

The practices of discipleship discipline us in Christ's way of love. Through prayer and other disciplines of faith, the Holy Spirit

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begins to reshape us into Christ's image and pattern. Christ's way of love comes most fully to expression as we practice the discipline of giving. If every gift says something about the giver, then the greatest gift is oneself. In the context of Christian marriage, friendship, and community, we can learn to practice a self-giving love grounded in Christ's self-giving love for us.

The life of the disciple is not always easy. Though we live out of God's promise to forgive and renew us, we are still caught in a deep tension between our old identity and our new. Though we have experienced transformation in Christ, we constantly struggle against the temptation to revert to previous loyalties and ways of life. The way of Christ inevitably involves us in suffering because it opens us to a broken world. The world often resists Christ's disciples, because they have aligned themselves with a different master and identity.

How, then, shall we sustain a self-giving love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7)? Our strength lies in Christ, who forgave both friends and enemies, called them to a new way of life, and waited patiently, bearing their sins in his own body. We join with Paul in confessing, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,

nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39). Christ promises to live in us and love others through us, even when we ourselves are unable to see the way ahead.

Spiritual Practice

Reflect on your life to discover communities to which you belong; people and places where Christ is breaking down barriers of separation; and ways you are developing disciplines and practices of Christian faith. Plan new ways to reach out to others and give yourself more fully to Christ.

Questions for Reflection

Reflect on ways you see a failure of authority in our culture and the idea of “bowling alone” where people are isolated and lack a sense of belonging. In what ways do you see Jesus Christ breaking down barriers in our society? in your own life?

What are ways we can more faithfully practice disciplines of Christ’s way of love, and what do you think the results of such practices can be?