

What is a Disciple?

In the conclusion of *Superplan*, I gave the following definition: *Disciples are people who love Christ, follow him, obey him, share him with others, allow him to transform their worldview, and train others to do the same.*

Discipleship is too often characterized as the accumulation of knowledge and understanding of doctrine. “Come to our discipleship program” means come to a classroom with a student workbook for lecture-style teaching. One can obtain knowledge and understand doctrine, however, without ever being a disciple of Jesus. Knowledge and doctrine are important, but only as far as they are obeyed.

There are more theologically astute and mature followers of Christ than I am who will emphasize other characteristics of disciples in a definition, and they might have solid reasons for doing so. Nevertheless, I make an attempt at defining a disciple to better understand what a disciple is and does in the New Testament pattern of following Jesus. Jesus instructed us to “make disciples,” yet somehow along the way, people’s salvation and baptism experiences have become our primary focus without adequate attention to what happens to them afterward.

Granted, initial expressions of faith in Christ and baptisms are important and easier to quantify and measure, but the longer and more involved concept of making disciples should not dissuade us from its importance. Since Jesus emphasized making disciples, should we not have the same emphasis? I am still learning how to be a disciple and make disciples. Sometimes I feel like more of a disciple than at other times, but I pass on to you what I am learning.

In my definition, I focus on the activity of being a disciple in relationship with Christ. The attempt is to draw attention to our “relating to” instead of “knowing about.” Therefore, as in any relationship, the act of being a disciple is an ongoing process that can be nurtured, deepened, and matured through time. It also means that no one arrives at a level when

the activities of a disciple cease. None of us have fully arrived. Below, I unpack the definition further. May the Lord help us grow and mature as disciples of Christ who make disciples!

Disciples Are People Who:

Love Christ – Loving Christ, and accepting Christ’s love, are at the core of disciples’ lives and identities. We can have knowledge, ministry gifts, and even extraordinary faith, but if we do not have love, we are nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). If we love anything, or anyone, more than Jesus, we are not worthy of him (Matthew 10:37, Mark 10:17-27). Jesus said the greatest commandments are to love God and love our neighbors (Matthew 22:24-40). People will know we are disciples if we love one another (John 13:35), and what we have done to the least of our neighbors we have done to him (Matthew 25:42-45).

Follow Him – Disciples are apprentices and followers of someone. Their identities and purposes are marked by their close relationship with the one they follow. Disciples of Jesus, therefore, are people who follow him and learn from him, so that his way and life become their own. Jesus’s first disciples answered his invitation: “Follow me” (Luke 5:27). Jesus also told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and *follow me*” (Matthew 16:24, italics mine).

Obey Him – Jesus said that if we love him, we will obey his commands (John 14:15,21). Disciples are to be doers of God’s Word and not hearers only (James 1:22). People cannot obey, however, what they do not know to obey. Therefore, growing in knowledge and understanding of the truth of God’s Word is essential to obedience.

Share Him with Others – When disciples love, follow, and obey Jesus, they share him with others. Being a disciple is not a self-focused endeavor. It is about reflecting God’s glory in and to the world, which

means we must share the good news of Jesus. Jesus told his disciples, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). He also told his disciples, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men” (Mark 1:17).

Allow Him to Transform Their Worldview – All people have particular ways they view the world that are formed at an early age. Worldviews are difficult to acknowledge and change, which means Christians throughout the world have aspects of their worldviews that are more cultural than biblical. Sometimes cultural beliefs and norms are in opposition to God’s Word, but Christians within those cultures may have trouble seeing or changing that aspect of their worldview. Whether Christians’ worldviews are affected by the general culture or family dynamics (e.g., a father’s treatment of a child can affect the child’s view of God), the process of allowing the gospel of Jesus to transform people’s deep-rooted worldviews lasts a lifetime. Disciples are not to conform to the world but are to be transformed by the renewal of their mind (Romans 12:2). A disciple is a new creature in Christ, throwing away the old self to put on the new self in God’s likeness (2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 4:22-24).

Train Others to Do the Same – One of Christ’s last commands to his disciples was to make more disciples (Matthew 28:19). To be a disciple is to make disciples. Paul told Timothy, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). In that one passage, four generations of disciples are present—Paul, Timothy, faithful men, and others. Disciples make disciples that make disciples. The word “train” is deliberately chosen over “teach.” Making disciples entails more than teaching knowledge to someone else. Making disciples involves training others, which involves teaching, but also includes modeling and leading apprentices in a way of life. As disciples, we need to take on apprentices

to tell, and show, what we know. Paul said, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

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