

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?¹

I. Purpose of a Disciple

By definition a disciple is someone who follows a revered leader and tries to become an exact impersonation of the one who is followed. To be a disciple is to attempt to live, think, believe, respond, and desire as the role model does. A disciple is not a mimicking puppet, but a student who deeply studies the loves, hates, desires, and intents of the one he admires and attempts to have those things become his own. It is out of these that he will interact with the world around him. It is these things that will become his loves, hates, desires, and intents. He will be unified with his master in spirit and mind. He will be an extension of his master at all times and in all the places he goes. A disciple of Christ will be dead to sin, to himself, and to his desires³; and alive to his Master (Romans 6:11, Galatians 5:24, Galatians 2:20, Romans 6:5-11).

Jesus was constantly calling people to be his disciples. He called the twelve apostles saying, "Follow me." He said the same to the rich young ruler and to those who claimed interest in coming after but wished to finish their personal business first. He was constantly presenting people with himself and giving them the choice, to continue with their own lives or to follow him.

Jesus laid down some requirements for disciples. They are intrinsic to the definition of what it means to be a disciple. He said, and I paraphrase, "If any person is going to follow me, they need to be willing to kill their own desires and take on mine." (Mat. 16:24, Mr. 8:34, Mr. 10:21, Lu. 9:23)

A disciple must be willing to surrender all personal will and desire for that of the one whose nature he is taking on. "No man can serve two masters" (Mat. 6:24). No one can follow their own desires and plans and Jesus Christ's at the same time. They take on the nature, desires, and plans of Jesus Christ who they follow. If they have truly taken on the nature and desires of Jesus Christ, they will follow His plan for the world. They will follow Him. Their purpose will be His purpose.

What was the purpose of Jesus? What was His purpose which His disciples are to take on?

One will notice if one reads the words of Jesus that he does not say that his purpose is to come and die. He says that his purpose is to come and do particular things and live a certain way. His disciples are not just a group of people saved by Jesus shed blood, although he did come and bring the blood of atonement. They are a redeemed group of people following Jesus and living in his way. They are actively living a sanctified, triumphant, demon-defeating, sin-defying, death-conquering life.

II. What a Disciple Believes

A. Man was created by God and created for a purpose (James 1:18). God is a relationship of three-in-one. This relationship is love. It is the heart and origination of love. It is where love finds its epitome and fruition. This relationship of love desired to have more love given and received (Having less love given and received did not define a defect in God. One quantity of good is not bad in relation to a greater quantity). To accomplish this, God in Trinity created a place for humans to live and then created humans (Gen. 1, spec. v. 26), individuals with the ability to love. For the relationship between God and humans to be true love, the humans had to have freedom to reject loving God. Some chose/choose to fulfill the purpose for man's existence, friendship with God, and some did not/do not. All disciples of Jesus will seek first and foremost to be friends with God (Matt. 22:37-38, Loving someone=being a friend of).

B. Disciples of Jesus Christ believe that the world is fallen and filled with sin and death. Because the world is fallen and we often do not fully allow Christ to redeem us, there is pain and struggle in the world. But, very remarkable is the fact that disciples of Christ believe that even the pain and struggle in the world can be useful and turned to good by the power of the Lord (Romans 8:28). James 1:2-4 says that struggles bring reliance on God. Difficulties bring the realization that evil cannot be defeated by human strength, but only by divine help. Difficulty brings about strength, patience, and

trust (Romans 5:3-4). Just as work builds up calluses on the hands and makes them tougher, so struggle increases the toughness and strength of the Christian.

C. A follower of Jesus Christ is a member of the Kingdom of God². A follower of Jesus Christ has accepted the Gospel of the Kingdom. The Gospel is not, as many people believe, just about having Jesus cause a person to be justified, simply for the asking. The Gospel is about entering and living in the Kingdom of God through the power of the work of Jesus. It is about living differently than before. It is about being different than the kingdom of this world.

D. The Kingdom of Jesus is sometimes called the “Backwards Kingdom” because there are things about it that defy normal human thinking. One of these is the belief that the humblest servant is the greatest individual in the Kingdom (James 1:9). Jesus Christ came to earth as the greatest example of a suffering servant and He is now exalted above all else (Philippians 2:9, Acts 5:31). The Kingdom’s work is done is through service and humility. He who is the most servile and humble is the most powerful and effective because he is relying on the power of God and not his own.

III. What a Disciple Does (Whatever ye do in word or deed)

A. How a disciple acts

1. Seek and Find

A disciple of Christ will ask, seek, and knock. Jesus said in Matthew 7:7-8 and Luke 11:9-10 that disciples should honestly and diligently seek, and that in doing so, they will find. It is not a suggestion. It was assumed that disciples would want good. Jesus declares that since good is wanted, it should be searched for, and that it will be found. David told Solomon the same thing in I Chronicles 28:9.

Disciples should cleanse their hearts and thoughts of every evil or deviant thing. Everything that turns the heart of the disciple away from God must be rejected. Again, in I Chronicles 28:9 David tells his son to serve God with a perfect heart and a willing mind. When this is done, followers of Christ will be able to seek God with no impediments, and it is promised that they will “come upon” Him.

2. Baptism

Disciples of Christ have accepted the Gospel and have begun to live as a part of the Kingdom of God on earth. Romans 6:1-4 declares that, as those who have accepted the Gospel, we should turn from sin, be baptized, and begin to walk in newness of life.

Baptism is a symbol of a washed and cleansed life. It signifies a cleaning away of sin and a turn to a life that avoids again being dirtied. It is a sign to all that the one receiving baptism is going to walk as a sanctified, holy disciple of Jesus Christ. It is a symbol of death, burial, and resurrection into a new life (Romans 6:3-6).

Baptism is a public symbol of one’s commitment to the Kingdom of God. As members of the Kingdom of God, we are commanded to be in relationship with other believers. This relationship includes a commitment to giving and receiving discipline. With baptism a believer makes a commitment to abide by the decisions of the Body and to lovingly and diligently confront sin and faults in other members.

3. Church

The author of Hebrews calls the individuals of the Kingdom to meet together regularly (Heb. 10:25). Hebrews 10:24 tells disciples that they should meet together to encourage each other to love and to do right. Hence, the local meeting of believers is a commanded and integral part of the Kingdom of God. A true disciple of Jesus Christ, if at all possible, becomes a part of a local body of believers.

It is as a member of the body of Christ that disciples experience Christ. Here they receive His

love from other believers and fellowship with Him, the Head. It is in the presence of the Body that His work in individuals can be shared with the group and it is through the gathered believers that Christ's words are received.

Matthew 18 gives the way in which the local church is to settle conflicts and determine what or who is right. Christ says in Matthew 16 and 18 that the church has the power to declare what is right and wrong.

It is here that the disciple can find help in right living. People frequently do not see themselves as they really are. Humans frequently do not see their individual faults and do not have the personal discipline to cause themselves to live right. As a member of a local body, the believer has people who love him and can, in love, show him where he needs to change. They can also provide accountability and support for his weaknesses. Here too the believer is to call His brothers and sisters away from sin and to right living.

Teams are stronger than individuals. Throughout human history the team has conquered the group of individuals. It is in becoming part of the Body of Christ on earth that the believer becomes a member of a team and becomes strong because of it. It is here that he can receive encouragement and care (See I Corinthians 12).

We are called to share our gifts with the Body as well. Some gifts are used to call people into the Body, and some are to encourage the Body. The Church gives us the place and the guidance to exercise our gifts for the service of God.

4. Perfection

The disciple will do that which he preaches. I Corinthians 9:14 says that those who preach the gospel should live it. James 1:22 tells us to be doers of the Word, not hearers only.

Disciples will do as they say. They will tell of the Kingdom and how to live in it, and they themselves

will seek to do this as a perfect example.

The disciple will become perfect. Jesus commanded his followers to be perfect just like the Father, and the Son considering they are one, are perfect (Matthew 5:48). Disciples will be able to do this only with the power of the Spirit acting in their life. As they submit to and are filled with the Spirit, they will become perfect.

5. Humble Truth-holding

The disciple of Jesus will hold strongly to what he has learned through experiencing Jesus Christ and studying the Scripture. He will cling strongly to these, but he will be filled with humility and a listening ear. He will not have to be offended if challenged because that which he believes is not what he made up, but what he has received through communication with Jesus. He does need to be willing to hear those who challenge him because it may be through them that Christ is trying to reveal more of Himself.

6. Redemption of the World

In John 10:10 Jesus says that He is come so that His sheep (disciples) might have life and have it with increasing abundance. Jesus' disciples are not only to have life in abundance, but they are to spread the blessing of life to their fellow brethren.

Luke 4:18-19 repeats Isaiah "The Spirit of the Lord...hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor;...to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." The job of Jesus and his followers on earth was/is to bring about a resurrection from the effects of sin to life in the Lord.

7. Ethics

In John 4:34 Jesus says that his purpose is to do the will of his Father who sent him. In

the same way Jesus disciples are to do the purpose of the One who sent us.

In Matthew 5-7 Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount. This is the ethic, the Law, the Way of life of the Kingdom. In it Jesus tells of a Kingdom that is different. It is not one in which the weak are coerced with a strong arm, but where the weak can receive ultimate victory through the power which is above all others. In it he outlines a new ethic and allegiance for all who are worthy to follow it: the poor, the sorrowful, the meek, the pure, the self-denying peacemaker, the persecuted, and the rejected. He declares a kingdom that requires those who enter it to have nothing when they enter and to give what they receive after they enter. He declares a kingdom of peace, love for all, good for evil, true religion, good reputation, heartfelt obedience, un-presumption, humility, love of God rather than love of money, trust in God rather than man, goal-oriented living, and authoritative declaration of truth.

Disciples are to have the Spirit of God and are to bear the fruit of His presence (Gal. 5:25). They are to have love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance (Gal. 5:22-23). These are to become an integral part of the character of a disciple of Jesus. These are to be descriptions of a disciple's actions.

Jesus called His followers to return good for evil, to give love for hate, and blessings for cursings (Matt. 5:44, Luke 6:27-29). He told them to love their enemies. He told them not to resist evil but to give good when evil is received (Matt. 5:39). He declared that His Kingdom is not of this world and that its members do not use the weapons of this world, those used to fight. He directly told Pilate that if His followers were of this world, they would fight (John 18:36). But, they were not of this world and therefore were commanded not to fight (Matt. 26:52, John 18:11). The members of the Kingdom of God on earth are to love their enemies and not hate, fight, resist, or retaliate. This is to apply to all parts of life. They are to deny the logic of this world and, instead of resisting, love. It is through this that they are strong (2 Corinthians 13:4). The members of the Kingdom of this Jesus are willing to sacrifice anything, including national allegiances, for the commands and methods of their Master.

They are not willing to take life, because that is God's domain⁴.

8. Power and Weapon

Disciples of Jesus will be in direct contact with and have access to supernatural powers through their relationship with God's Spirit. All disciples are "endued with power from on high" to a greater or lesser degree as they allow the Spirit of Christ to move within them (Luke 24:49, Acts 1:8). Disciples are filled with supernatural power that will allow them to propagate the Gospel with a power that cannot come from them.

Disciples of Jesus will not participate in the governments of this world. The governments of this world use coercion, force, and the sword. This is not the way that the Kingdom of God defeats evil. The weapon of the Church is love. Christ told His disciples that those who use the sword shall die by the sword (Matt. 26:52). This instrument of death does not bring resolution and cooperation. It brings suffering and death to those on both ends of it.

It is also frequently observable in history that those who attempt to participate in the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world generally default to seizing the reigns of coercion and denying the Kingdom of God the ability to use its own, more powerful source of change. This is not to say that the government should not use the sword. The government is of this world and, therefore, it will use the weapons of this world. Paul tells us that the government does so and does it to punish evil (Rom. 13). Still, this is not for the disciple to participate in. It is not the disciple's job to punish evildoers⁵, but rather to call all men to be reconciled to Christ (II Corinthians 5:17-19).

In Luke 4:34 the demons declared that Jesus was come to destroy them. It is the job of Jesus followers to work to destroy the power of the demons in His name.

B. What a disciple says

1. Preach Repentance and Baptism

In Matthew 9:13, Jesus says he is “not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” His disciples too are to call sinners to repentance. Acts 17:30 and many other verses in the New Testament command all people to repent, this is a clear message of the Kingdom of God. John the Baptist, Paul, and John the Revelator all gave strong calls for repentance

Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15-16 relate Jesus final commands to his disciples: Go into the world, preach the news and ethic of the Kingdom, and baptize those who claim it as truth. Disciples are to preach the news of the Kingdom.

2. Speak Truth

Jesus commands His disciples not only not to lie, as in the Ten Commandments, but also to speak so that they are understood according to what is true. Cause your listener to understand what is true. Say what you mean and do not intend to mislead. Let your reputation be such that you are believed and understood according to your word. (Matthew 5:37)

3. Speak Encouragement

Disciples of Christ are commanded frequently to encourage one another. Disciples are to build up each other, to encourage one another to have more faith, love, and commitment. Disciples are also to encourage themselves and each other with praise to God. They are commanded to worship in community for their collective encouragement. (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16)

IV. Summary

A disciple is a person who is becoming what humans were intended to be before the fall of man. He is becoming exactly what he was created to be and is doing exactly what he was created to do. Jesus gave an incredibly profound statement of what is the greatest action for man do in answer to a devious Pharisee who was trying to trap Him (Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-33, Luke 10:25-28).

The Pharisee asked what the greatest commandment of all was and Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets (NASB Matthew 22:37-40).”

He is saying that loving God completely and your neighbor as yourself are the summary and completion of all the previous revelations of God. They are the epitome, the whole, the conclusion of what God wants for man.

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is walking in a path of complete love for God and complete care for one’s neighbor as if it were you. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Appendix

¹ This paper is not meant to be a complete definition or statement of Christianity, a manifest of Christian orthodoxy, or a philosophical statement of the Christian worldview. It is simply meant to define what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ from the perspective of this author as understood from his study of Scripture, the traditions of the Christian church and his Anabaptist heritage, and the thoughts and insights gained through discussions with friends and mentors.

²The Kingdom of God is that which was preached and personified by Jesus. He embodied the Kingdom of God come to earth. In Him was a perfect being demonstrating a new ethic in the power of God. The Kingdom of God is composed of those who have become part of Christ in His suffering, death, and resurrection (Philippians 3:9-11, 2 Corinthians 1:5-7) and now live with a completely renewed life (Romans 6:4).

³ Here is a very rough poem written by this author in the midst of a time of wrestling to understand what it means to have complete death to his own will.

But He Required Death

Death is what He requires,
But is not what my flesh desires.
Help for me is what I want,
But death for me fulfills His want.

If feels so cruel,
That He makes this rule.
And I oft mistake myself as dead,
And still He comes and whispers “Death”.

Oh agony, Oh pain, am I not yet dead?
I find a wall and bang my head,
And fight against death with desperate hands.
“Child, that will not do, the command still stands.”

Oh death, to die. Why comes it so hard?
I will go and read from another bard.
But between each line by natural revelation,
I read that word in desperate meditation...

DEATH.

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God created life (Gen. 1, etc.). It is he that holds all things in existence (Col. 1:17). Because life is God’s, He alone maintains the right to decide when it should begin and end. It is not ours to determine. God has determined the day that men are to die (Heb. 9:27) and we are not to be so presumptuous as to think that it is ours to decide.

My testimony as it relates to government participation and war:

I became a Christian at age 14. I was raised in an Anabaptist home and attended Anabaptist schools. And although they have greatly influenced my life, I have studied Scripture for my self and have come to these conclusions.

1. In the Old Testaments the Israelites were God's people. After Christ came He opened the way for all men to become His people. John 3:16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son. That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. This group of people, all who believe in God's son, are called the universal Church. The New Testament was written for this group of people. Now instead of God's people being a political nation, they are a spiritual nation. The people who are members of this spiritual nation have their first allegiance in obeying its laws.

2. God gives the authority to rule and punish to the government in Romans 13. Verse one of this chapter says, Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Verse four says, For he (the ruler or government) is a minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he bareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Civil governments are in place to rule the citizens of the countries of this world. The Bible and the Holy Spirit are the rulers of the Church.

3. The Bible says in Exodus 20:13 Thou shalt not kill. It doesn't say you should not kill your neighbor. It says you should not kill. Matthew 5:44 says, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you. I cannot go to war or participate in any activities that aid war or killing and remain faithful to this verse.

In light of these verses and observations I cannot fight, go to war, kill, participate in activities that aid in war, help one army more than another because of national allegiance, or hate or injure another person intentionally in an attempt to protect myself, my possessions or my earthly country.

I will obey the laws of my earthly country to the best of my ability, as long as it does not cause me to disobey the word of God. I will pray for and respect my earthly authorities as the Bible commands me in Romans 13:7 Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.