

Discipleship in John

by

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INTRODUCTION

Discipleship is a term which inherently raises tremendous interest for believers of all stripes. Throughout the centuries of Christianity there has been a determined effort to “make disciples” desiring to following the Great Commission as found in Matthew 28:19,20. However, in the modern church there has been a resurgence of interest in this area. Not always in how to make disciples, but even more “basic” – what is a disciple? What does a disciple look like? This obviously leads to the questions of what methods to follow, and what model, if any, from the New Testament to emulate?

The writer of this paper often refers to himself as having been “discipled.” However, even this is met with a certain amount of frustration. He has attempted on several occasions to repeat the discipleship he received, and as of yet it has not developed into any observable fruit. Is the model that he experienced flawed? Is there some flaw in this attempt to repeat the same steps? Is there some flaw in the intended result? There are more questions than there are pages to provide answers.

The development of a biblical theology of discipleship, by exegetically studying all the applicable portions of Scripture would be eternally beneficial to the church today. However, it is not possible for a paper of this size to undertake such a task. Therefore, this paper will focus on one section of Scripture, specifically the writings of John, even more specifically the Gospel of John and John’s Epistles.

The purpose of this paper is to develop a Johannine Theology of Discipleship. This purpose will be accomplished by exegeting several key passages in both John's Gospel and his Epistles and forming these observations into a text based definition. The paper will conclude by summarizing some practical implications for the church today. Before proceeding we need to deal with some definitions and concepts.

DEFINING THE TERM – DEVELOPING THE CONCEPT

One would like to accomplish the purpose of this paper by simply studying those passages where the verb μαθητεύω occurs. By doing a contextual word study one could determine the methods John describes in the process of making disciples. However, it is immediately apparent that this approach is insufficient, when it is discovered that this verb only occurs in the New Testament four times¹ and not at all in John's writings. The same holds true for the noun μαθητής. Although John does use this noun seventy-eight times, he only uses it in his Gospel. A quick look at the context in which John uses μαθητής also reveals that a simple contextual word study of John's use of this noun will not reveal a final picture of what a disciple is or should be. These data unveil the need for the consideration of the concept of discipleship rather than conducting a traditional word study.²

At this point a working definition of a disciple as pictured in John's Gospel and Epistles will be given. This definition will serve as a springboard from which the material in these bodies of literature will be evaluated. Although a word study alone

¹ Matthew 13:52, 27:57, 28:19 and Acts 14:21

² I am grateful for the discussion in Kostenberger's work on Mission in the Fourth Gospel for helping me see the importance to this approach. Andreas J. Kostenberger, *The Mission of Jesus & the Disciples: A Study of the Fourth Gospel's Use of the Term μαθητής* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 22-27.

will not suffice in developing this study, those occurrences of the μαθητής word group in John's gospel will serve as a starting point. From there an investigation of John's Epistles will be made to discover whether the concept of a disciple according to the definition given can be found. In the end an evaluation of this working definition will be made and any modifications will be given.

A working definition of a disciple according to John's Gospel and Epistles can be set forth: "A disciple is a genuine believer a follower of Christ, who perseveres in faith."

DISCIPLESHIP IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

Our study of discipleship in John will begin in John's Gospel. We will exegete the three passages where Christ specifically identifies a characteristic of a μαθητής developing a synthesis of the core characteristics of a disciple according to John's Gospel. Next we will evaluate one person and one group of individuals identified as disciples of Christ according to these characteristics, the man born blind in John chapter 9 and the many who turned away in John chapter 6.

ANALYSIS OF THREE EXPLICIT CHARACTERISTICS

The first time Christ gives an explicit characteristic of a disciple is in John 8:31 "If you abide in My word, you are my disciples indeed." Here in John chapter 8, Jesus is in the midst of a discussion with the Jewish leaders regarding His identity and origin. It is in verse 30 that John informs the reader that many who heard Jesus words believed in Him. However, in the immediate following verse Christ gives this characteristic of a true disciple. Jesus does this with the aorist subjunctive of μένω. This is a term that holds significant theological weight in John's Gospel in itself. In

the context of John's Gospel it carries the meaning of perseverance, or one who remains faithful. "Jesus now lays down exactly what it is that separates spurious faith from true faith, fickle disciples from genuine disciples."³ Knowing the hearts of those who are said to believe in Him, Christ turns His attention to addressing the genuineness of their belief. Only if they remain faithful to His word will they be considered true disciples. The first explicit characteristic of a true disciple given by Christ is that of perseverance in His word.

The next place the reader of John's Gospel encounters Jesus mentioning an explicit characteristic of a disciple is in John 13:35. It is in verse 30 of John chapter 13 that Jesus and his disciples conclude the supper in the upper room. They then leave the room and Jesus begins what is known as His farewell discourse in verse 31. Here, near the very beginning of His farewell speech, Jesus gives a "new commandment". It is not new in the sense that it has never been given before, but it is new in relation to the standard, context and future application. The disciples are told in verse 34 to "love one another: as I have loved you, that you also love one another." They would have been aware from the Old Testament Law that they were to love one another, but now they are given and have observed for some three and half years an example of how this love was to be demonstrated. Soon they will see an even higher standard of love, when they see Christ lay down His life for them. It is in verse 35 that Christ not only identifies this love as a characteristic of true discipleship, but specifies that it is the observable characteristic that will identify them as such to all those around them. The

³ D.A. Carson, *Love One Another*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 348.

second explicit characteristic of a true disciple given by Christ is observable Christ-like love for one another.

It is in John 15:8 that Christ gives His third and final explicit characteristic of a true disciple. He is still in the midst of His farewell discourse prior to His crucifixion. The audience, like in 13:35 is His disciples. However, in chapter 15 verse 1 Jesus begins His extended Vine and branches metaphor. It is in this metaphor that Jesus identifies Himself as the True Vine and the Father as the Vinedresser. In verse 8 Jesus states that there is a direct relationship between their bearing much fruit and their identification as true disciples.

This verse provides one of the more difficult textual variants in the entire Gospel of John.⁴ There is wide support for both the aorist subjunctive (the choice of the UBS translation committee) and the future indicative of γίνομαι. Some who choose the future indicative see a sequence between φέρητε in the ἵνα clause and γίνομαι so that the bearing of much fruit results in one becoming a disciple of Christ. It seems more plausible, regardless of whether the aorist subjunctive or future indicative is taken to see γίνομαι as coordinate with φέρητε therefore showing the actions as being the same. Being Jesus' disciples and bearing much fruit are not two different actions, but rather one. The first is an outward sign of the second.⁵ Therefore the third explicit characteristic of a true disciple of Christ is that he/she will bear much fruit resulting in bringing glory to the Father.

⁴ Hence the 'D' rating given by the UBS translation committee. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies, 1971), 246.

⁵ See the translation notes to the NET bible. www.netbible.org

This of course begs the question, “what is the fruit Christ is speaking about in these verses?” There has been a considerable amount of literature written on this subject, such that one could write an entire paper surveying the history of interpretation. However, for the purpose of this paper we will agree with Carson’s interpretation:

The branch’s purpose is to *be α υφ’ υι* (v. 5), but the next verses show that this fruit is the consequence of prayer in Jesus’ name, and is to the Father’s glory (vv. 7,8,16). This suggests that the ‘fruit’ in the vine imagery represents everything that is the product of effective prayer in Jesus’ name, including obedience to Jesus’ commands (y. 10), experience of Jesus’ joy (v. 11 – as earlier his peace, 14:27), love for one another (v.12), and witness to the world (vv. 16, 27). This fruit is nothing less than the outcome of persevering dependence on the vine, driven by faith, embracing all of the believer’s life and the product of his witness. (italics in original)⁶

Therefore, more specifically, the third and final explicit characteristic of a true disciple given by Christ in John’s Gospel is that he/she perseveres in total dependence on Christ by faith resulting in an outward witness to the world.

EVALUATION OF THE MAN BORN BLIND: JOHN 9:1-38

Now that the three explicit characteristics given by Christ of a true disciple have been delineated we turn our attention to the man born blind of John chapter 9. In verse 27 of chapter 9 the man implies that he is a disciple of Jesus when he asks the question, “Do you also want to become His disciples?” and the leaders of the synagogue refer to him as a disciple of Jesus in verse 28. The purpose of this section is to evaluate what John tells us about this man to determine if he displays the three explicit characteristics given in John’s gospel of a true disciple.

⁶ D.A. Carson, *John: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 517.

The account of the healing of this man is fascinating on many accounts. We are told right up front that his blindness is not a result of any individual's sin, and that somehow God's work is going to be revealed in him. Unlike the other healings in the gospels, this man does not ask to be healed, nor is there any indication that he even addressed Christ. Jesus simply makes the clay out of His saliva and the dirt, places it on the man's eyes and commands him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. At this point there has not been a word spoken by the man, he simply obeys (9:7). Already showing at least a glimpse of the first characteristic, abiding in Jesus word (John 8:31).

After washing, the man returns seeing (9:7), and the debate among his friends and neighbors begins is this really the one who was blind? At this point the man begins his testimony of what has happened to him that progressively develops into a defense of Christ Himself. Initially he simply verifies to his friends and neighbors that he is in fact the man they all knew (9:9) and then recounts for them how it was that he now sees (9:11). They proceed to take him to the leaders of the synagogue where at first he gives the basic facts of the event (9:15). This leads to a debate among the Jews as to Jesus origin due to the fact that this healing took place on the Sabbath and whether this man really was born blind. The second part of their debate is concluded when the man's parents verify that in fact he is their son and he was born blind (9:20).

The man born blind once again takes center stage, as he is questioned again regarding the person who performed this healing on the Sabbath. The man, not knowing much more than Jesus name (9:11) and the very fact that he was blind, but now he sees (9:25), begins to testify more directly about Christ as he is continually interrogated. By the end of the confrontation the man clearly states that Jesus must be

from God (9:33), infuriating the leaders of the synagogue and resulting in his excommunication (9:34). He has with unwavering conviction persevered in his witness to the world of what Christ had done for him, demonstrating the third characteristic of a true disciple given by Jesus in John 15:8.

The account continues with Jesus returning to the man and asking him, “Do you believe in the Son of God?” (9:35) Unhesitant, the man responds with; “tell me who He is and I will believe” (9:36). Jesus declares Himself to be the Son of God, and the man responds with the only appropriate response, to believe and worship. This man has progressed from not even approaching Christ as He passed by to believing and worshiping Him as the very Son of God. He has beyond all else shown himself to be characterized by abiding in Jesus’ word. Whatever Jesus says, this man believes and demonstrates his belief with obedience.

Although, there is no clear indication in this short account of this man demonstrating love for other disciples, the second characteristic of a true disciple given by Christ in John 13:35, he has very clearly demonstrated both the other two characteristics, and shows himself worthy of a the label, “a disciple indeed” (8:31).

EVALUATION OF THE MANY WHO LEFT: JOHN 6:60-66

In this section of John’s Gospel John uses the term μαθητής to refer to a group of people that stand in stark contrast to the man born blind in chapter 9. Jesus has just concluded His Bread of Life discourse in verse 58 of John chapter 6. It is in this discourse that Jesus identifies Himself as the Bread of Life and gives the metaphor of eating His flesh and drinking His blood to point to His death and the level of commitment He requires of true followers. Within the synagogue in Capernaum (v.

59), where this discourse took place, there was a group of people John identifies as “His [Jesus’] disciples” (v. 60). However, these people do not demonstrate the characteristics of a true disciple identified above.

In verse 60 John gives this group’s reaction to Jesus’ words. They find them hard. Not hard in the sense of hard to understand. The meaning was clear. These people found Jesus word’s harsh or offensive; they did not like what they heard and understood. Rather than abiding in Jesus’ words (8:31) and obeying, they were offended by them. Their response was quite different than that of the man born blind. John completes the description of their reaction in verse 66 when he writes that these people “turned back and walked with Him [Jesus] no more.” The witness was clear. They did not persevere in faith to follow Christ (15:8), but rather turned their back on Him and failed in their witness.

So, how is it that John can call these people μαθητής? They not only fail to show the characteristics of true disciples, but actually clearly reveal the exact opposite character. How can John use the same term to refer to these people and the man born blind in John chapter 9? Carson states:

At the most elementary level, a disciple is someone who is at that point following Jesus, either literally by joining the group that pursued Him from place to place, or metaphorically in regarding Him as the authoritative Teacher. Such a ‘disciple’ is not necessarily a ‘Christian’...⁷

This is exactly John’s point. He does not use disciple as some generic term for Christian, but rather uses it to identify anyone who is at some level following Christ. Later, through the teaching of Christ and the explicit identification of the three

⁷ D.A. Carson, *Who Are the Acceding Disciples?*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 300.

characteristics of a true disciple, John differentiates between a “disciple” (6:66) and a “disciple indeed” (8:31).

SUMMARY OF DISCIPLESHIP IN JOHN’S GOSPEL

John uses a form of the noun μαθητής 78 times in his Gospel. The overwhelming majority of the time he uses it as an identification of an individual or group of individuals. He is not using the term to identify Christians, but those people who to some degree or another followed Christ during His earthly ministry. However, it is significant that John records three instances where Jesus gives an explicit characteristic of a true μαθητής, therefore identifying criteria to use in differentiating a ‘μαθητής’ from a ‘μαθητής indeed’ or a ‘true μαθητής.’ As has been demonstrated these characteristics are: 1. Perseverance in His word (John 8:31). 2. Observable Christ-like love for one another (John 13:35). 3. Glorifying God by a total dependence on Christ by faith resulting in an outward witness to the world (John 15:8).

Although only two examples were evaluated in this paper, it can be demonstrated that one or more of these characteristics is present in the lives of every individual in John’s Gospel who is considered a true disciple of Christ, as in the man born blind (John 9). This is valid even for those individuals who may not be referred to by the term μαθητής, but clearly demonstrate these characteristics in their lives. Equally true, each of these characteristics can be demonstrated as lacking in every individual who is not a true disciple of Christ, even if the term μαθητής is used in reference to them, as in the many who turn back (John 6:66). This conclusion will now be evaluated in light of the writings of John’s Epistles.

DISCIPLESHIP IN JOHN'S EPISTLES

An important observation must be made from the very start. Nowhere in John's Epistles does he use the term μαθητής. Therefore when evaluating the conclusion drawn from John's Gospel, this conclusion must be compared against the presence or lack of presence of the three explicit characteristics not the actual term μαθητής. Are the three characteristics consistent with John's description of a true believer in his Epistles? Is there any indication of the lack of one or more of these characteristics in anyone John designates as not a true believer? This section will proceed to answer these questions with the goal of establishing a consistent motif used throughout John's Gospel and Epistles for the characteristics of a true μαθητής of Christ.

EVALUATION OF JOHN'S FIRST EPISTLE

A cursory reading of John's First Epistle will reveal that many of the motifs used in John's Gospel are repeated and further developed in his First Epistle. Much of this is accomplished by the use of the same or similar terms; light, darkness, truth, abide, etc. However, as has been already stated the term μαθητής is not repeated here, so thematically parallel ideas must be sought.

Consistent with the stated purpose of John's First Epistle found in 5:13, it is no surprise that one finds several references to the explicit characteristics of a true disciple given by Christ in John's Gospel. John is writing his First Epistle to those who already have genuine faith in Christ, to encourage them so that their confidence in their relationship with Christ might grow stronger, and they will persevere. Scattered throughout the First Epistle one finds reference to those characteristics given by Christ in John's Gospel.

The characteristic of persevering in His word (John 8:31) is further developed in John's First Epistle as a characteristic of a genuine believer. 1 John 1:10 states that His word is not in those who claim to indeed have no sin, and to claim such actually makes God a liar. This is further clarified in 1 John 2:5 when John states that one evidence of that a believer is "in Him" is that he/she "keeps His word." In 1 John 2:24 John uses the same term μένω that he uses in John 8:31 to emphasize the perseverance of the believer in what they have "heard from the beginning," which of course is Christ's words.

Love for one another (John 13:35) is a prominent theme in John's First Epistle. It could be argued that it is in fact the primary evidence of a true believer given in the Epistle. 1 John 2:9, 10 states clearly that someone cannot claim to be "in the light" – a true believer – and not have love for his brother. It is in 1 John 3:10 – 14 that John further elaborates on the significant importance of having love for one's brother, and goes on through verse 18 to describe what that love is to look like. It is inconceivable to John that someone could be a true believer/disciple of Christ and not have genuine, practical love for his brothers.

True persevering faith glorifies God by manifesting itself to the world (John 15:8) is alluded to throughout John's First Epistle. In 1 John 2:28, John encourages his readers to persevere in Christ, so that they will have no reason to be ashamed when He returns for them. Later in 1 John 5:3,4 John once again encourages his readers, this time in the area of their living as ones who have already overcome with world. Their witness before the world as ones who are living in the present reality of their victory in Christ is a manifestation of their persevering faith (1 John 5:4).

It is no surprise that in a letter intended to encourage believers in their faith, John so clearly elaborates on those explicit characteristics of a true disciple given by Christ in John's Gospel. Here though there is no ambiguity, there is no use of a term or a description for those who are in fact not true believers/disciples. The identification of a genuine believer/disciple is much more black and white. Although the actual term μαθητής is not used, the characteristic descriptions are clear and indisputable.

EVALUATION OF JOHN'S SECOND EPISTLE

In John's Second Epistle he is writing to help his reader(s) identify and avoid false teachers. In this short letter – only 13 verses – John clearly makes reference to two of the three characteristics of a true disciple. In verse two and four John makes reference to abiding and walking in the truth, clear reference back to Christ statements in John 8:31. John is encouraged and finds commonality in the fact that both he and his reader(s) are persevering in Christ's words.

He goes on in verses five and six to remind his reader(s) of the importance of demonstrating love for one another again, a clear reference to Christ's teaching in John 13:25. John even states in verse five that this commandment to love one another is not a new one, but one which they "have had from the beginning."

Furthermore, when giving criteria for identifying a false teacher in verses 9 – 11, John indicates that the most prominent characteristic identifying them as a false teacher is their not "abiding in the doctrine of Christ." Not only is abiding in Christ's word an evidence of a true believer/disciple (John 8:31, 1 John 2:5, 2 John 2, 4), but

the lack of such perseverance is evidence of someone not being a true believer/disciple.

EVALUATION OF JOHN'S THIRD EPISTLE

Here as in John's Second Epistle in a very short amount a space, John elaborates (or for this Epistle one could say illustrates) each of the three characteristics of a genuine disciple given by Christ in John's Gospel.

Gaius, John's friend and possible spiritual son (v. 4), is characterized as one who walks, perseveres in the truth (v. 3, John 8:31) and demonstrates genuine love for fellow believers (John 13:35) who are traveling through his area (v. 6).

On the other hand Diotrephes is identified as one who is a seeker of his own glory (v. 10) rather than God's (John 15:8), therefore a negative example of what a persevering witness is to look like. He is further characterized as keeping his practical love from the brethren, once again demonstrating the reality that his is not a genuine disciple of Christ.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the working definition given in the introduction is insufficient. A genuine disciple of Christ according to John is much more than one who perseveres in faith. A genuine disciple of Christ according to John is one who; perseveres in Christ's word (John 8:31), demonstrates real practical love for the brethren (John 13:35) and glorifies God by his faithful witness (John 15:8).

This complete definition is the result of an exegetical evaluation of the three explicit references by Christ in John's gospel to observable characteristics of a disciple. It was further supported, but an analysis of the man born blind in John

chapter nine and the many who left in John chapter six. This analysis supported that it is the presence of these three characteristics that identifies one as a true disciple of Christ and not simply referring to someone as a μαθητής.

Furthermore, this conclusion was evaluated in light of John's Epistles to validate this definition compared to the further teachings of John. This evaluation resulted in the substantiation of this definition. Each of the three explicit characteristics of a true disciple given by Christ in John's Gospel, were further developed as evidences of a genuine believer in John's Epistles.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

In many ways what is a true disciple? is a better question than, how do you do discipleship? Rather than looking out for the latest and greatest methodology and "discipleship Bible study", the church would be eternally benefited if individual believers got back to the task of living out these three core characteristics in their daily lives and actively reproducing them in the lives of others.

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