Definition: Discipleship

The word does not occur in the Bible, but is frequently used for the way of life expected of those who follow Jesus. The theme is especially common in the Gospels, where Jesus explains that discipleship involves committing one's whole life to God. Jesus is the model for discipleship, with the cross as its symbol (Mark 8:34-5) and his servanthood its pattern (Mark 10:42-5). However, discipleship also results in receiving the blessings of the kingdom of God, both in this life and in the life to come (Mark 10:28-30).

Summary Article: DISCIPLESHIP

From Global Dictionary of Theology

Discipleship is the practice of being a disciple—in Christian usage, a disciple or follower-learner-adherent of Jesus as Master, teacher, Lord (Mt 7:28-29; 8:25; Lk 8:24). In Greek usage, the disciple was an apprentice, an adherent to the teaching of a particular school or person; in Hebrew there is no clear antecedent (with possible references in Is 8:16; 1 Chron 25:8), although in rabbinic practice, wisdom and tradition were passed on through the teacher-disciple commitment.

Jesus and His Disciples

Disciple is used 260 times in the New Testament, 230 of these in the four Gospels (Greek mathētēs, n.; mathēteuein, v. “to be or to make a disciple”). The verb akolouthein, “to walk behind, or to follow,” characteristically used in the New Testament as the specific term for the practice of discipleship, most clearly defines the central quality (79 of 90 occurrences are in the Gospels). Although there are references to disciples of John the Baptist (Mk 2:18); of Moses (Jn 9:28); of the Pharisees (Mk 2:18), the word usually refers to the disciples of Jesus. In contrast to other teachers who were sought out by eager followers, Jesus himself initiated the call, selecting those who formed his inner circle of twelve. He asked that they leave all and follow him (Mk 10:28) and share his difficult path, even face ultimate martyrdom (Mk 8:34). He taught them on the road, in action, in open forum of public teaching, in situations of need in ministry, in confrontations of political witness, in authoritative reinterpretation of Scriptural tradition, in private times of intimate sharing and through daily life. Beyond this circle of twelve close apprentices and the named women who followed him even more faithfully—even to the cross (Mt 27:55-56)—the intimate friends and supporters, he was surrounded by a larger company of disciples of both genders.

Jesus and Discipleship

Jesus saw his ministry as the embodiment of the kingdom of God, become actual in his own person and in the community of disciples he was gathering around him (Lk 11:20-23), and he invited into his circle to share this new existence a great variety of people: a tax man, a Zealot, tradesmen and common people, and most revolutionary, women as well as men. He disregarded social, religious, political and ethnic background, and gender. He summoned the tax collector who stood outside the worshipping community, the Zealot who threatened the status quo. He bid them abandon their old associations, leave boat, toll gate, family and accept discipleship. His call demanded a total break with families, vocations and independent life goals (Mk 1:16-20; 2:14; 8:34; Lk 9:57-60; 14:26-27). He required “saying no to oneself,” separation from past duties in a radical break from customary values. The disciple committed to more than a student relationship, but to: (1) a fundamental life relationship to

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/discipleship
Jesus as person, not simply as an adherent to his teaching; (2) a lifelong relationship of participation in mission—a commitment to “social uprootedness,” political dissidence and life as a resident alien willing to risk suffering, death and possible martyrdom; (3) consequently to represent the new kingdom manner of living, to be dependent on it for all of life when sent out into the world as presence and witness of Jesus’ radical vision.

The closest analogy to the pattern of discipleship that Jesus created is found in the Hebrew Scripture’s account of the prophet’s vocation in which God calls and the person cuts off past life commitments and accepts an exclusive relationship that is unwavering though questioning, unconditional though voluntary and sustained through the struggles of ambiguity and costly sacrifice. The disciple is not portrayed as super-human, not as an exemplar of perfection, not immune to failure, not always demonstrating full and complete understanding of the Master and his teaching, but as a simple follower who in radical commitment practices the way of faithful obedience in love. In summary, the Gospel narratives are clear that Jesus approaches persons, sees them in the depth of love, calls them unexpectedly, and creates disciples through the call, the ensuing relationship, the dynamic of his shared life, service, ministry, witness, stubborn love, suffering and utter faithfulness to God's call.

Discipleship is entirely rooted in and dependent upon *Christology. One is a disciple to Jesus Christ, not to a theory, theology or lifestyle. Discipleship is the service of Jesus, representing him with authority offered in his characteristic humility, with compassion that transforms the act of caring to a moment of God's grace, as peacemaking yet offering one's life in the pursuit of God's peace.

**Discipleship as Following Christ**

Discipleship is the practice of following Christ. In many Christian traditions, it is the primary and specific basis for Christian living. In the early writings of the Fathers of the Christian church, in particular Catholic orders, in the radical reformation known as the *Anabaptists, in many renewal movements that seek to return to the patterns of the New Testament, and in the worldwide *Charismatic renewal that has spread across all traditional churches, there is a return to the language of discipleship to express the immediate and intimate relationship of living obedience and faithfulness to Jesus as the central empowering and motivating nexus of spirituality, ethics and life in witness and community. The discipleship paradigm of Christian living sees the church as a body of believers (disciples) who commit themselves to following Jesus Christ together. It roots the identity of the church in a restitution of the New Testament story, extends it as a contemporary culturally appropriate expression of the biblical story of faith, and links the practice of being the church today to the church portrayed in the biblical account of the Acts and the Epistles. The emphasis on imitation-participation creates a close continuity between the Biblical accounts of the disciples’ attachment to Jesus and the believing community's current pursuit of a similar attachment. “No one can know Christ truly except those who follow him daily in life,” wrote Hans Denck, a sixteenth-century Anabaptist theologian and martyr.

**Discipleship as Living Out the Teachings of Jesus**

Discipleship can neither be separated from the cross nor from the beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, from the path of suffering or from daily walking in the way of Jesus. The temptation of Christendom has been to separate Jesus as Savior—salvation through his transforming death and resurrection—from Jesus the teacher above all other teachers, the Lord beyond all other Caesars, the example before all other models for personhood and wholeness. Embarrassment before the Sermon on the Mount has led to this giant leap from the incarnation of Christ to the passion of the Christ with...
the resultant loss of the soul of authentic discipleship. The call to return to the way of the disciple comes most poignantly and powerfully in our day from the Christianity in the East and in the Southern Hemisphere. The growth of the Christian church outside Europe and America has frequently been in situations where the life of Jesus is more immediately connected to the cultural patterns of daily life, the teachings of Jesus more resonant with the values that confront the religious patterns being left behind in embracing the gospel of Christ, and the call to discipleship a compelling summons to new life in Christ. A new commitment to faithful discipleship is voiced in these settings where opposition, persecution and costly sacrifice are inevitable for the believer.

**Advocates of Costly Discipleship**

In the turbulent years of the 1930s, German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer articulated a radical theology of discipleship in his classic book, *Nachfolge*, or *Discipleship* (1963), that offered an impassioned call to follow Jesus Christ in a personal and corporate obedience that was guided by Jesus’ own teaching, example and radical obedience to his Father. “Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ,” he wrote. Linking discipleship to radical obedience to Christ, he pronounced the dictum, “Only the believers obey and only the obedient believe.” He insisted that Jesus taught not simply personal, moral, vocational, relational and devotional obedience (which is more easily assimilated into traditional religious categories of practice and thought), but requires political and ultimately life-and-death obedience. Bonhoeffer contrasted cheap and costly grace, saying,

*Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which one must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs us our lives. It is grace because it gives us the only true life.*

(Bonhoeffer, 46)

Among the many Western theologians who have written incisively on discipleship one must mention Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, James McClendon, Miroslav Volf, Glen Stassen, and movement leaders such as Ron Sider, Jim Wallis, Lee Camp and Brian McLaren. The wide recognition of the centrality of discipleship as the heart of faithful obedience to Christ appears as well in theologies emerging from Asia, Africa and Latin America.

*See also* CONVERSION; IMITATION OF CHRIST; SPIRITUALITY.

**Bibliography**

- Bonhoeffer, D, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Macmillan New York, 1963);
- Hau-erwas, S, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (University of Notre Dame Press Notre Dame IN, 1983);
- McClendon, J W., *Ethics*, vol. 1 of Systematic Theology (Abingdon Nashville, 1986);
- G Stassen; D Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (InterVarsity Press Downers Grove IL, 2002);
- Yoder, J H., *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans Grand Rapids, 1972);

D Augsburger