

The Cost of Nondiscipleship

excerpts from The Spirit of the Disciplines by Dallas Willard

Discipleship: For Super-Christians Only?

The word "disciple" occurs 269 times in the New Testament. "Christian" is found only three times and was first introduced to refer precisely to the disciples....The New Testament is composed of books about disciples, by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus Christ. But the point is not merely verbal. What is more important is that the kind of life we see in the earliest church is that of a special type of person. All of the assurances and the benefits offered to humankind in the gospel evidently presuppose such a life and do not make realistic sense apart from it. The disciple of Jesus is not the deluxe or heavy-duty model of the Christian - especially padded, textured, streamlined, and empowered for the fast lane on the straight and narrow way. He stands on the pages of the New Testament as the first level of basic transportation in the Kingdom of God. Being a disciple of Jesus is the normal Christian life.

Undisciplined Disciples

For at least several decades the churches of the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship. Contemporary American churches in particular do not require following Christ in his example, spirit, and teachings as a condition of membership - either of entering into or continuing in fellowship of a denomination or a local church. So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, discipleship clearly is optional Churches are filled with "undisciplined disciples," as Jess Moody has called them. Most problems in contemporary churches can be explained by the fact that members have not yet decided to truly follow Christ.

Little good results from insisting that Christ is also supposed to be Lord: to present his lordship as an option leaves it squarely in the category of the white-wall tires and stereo equipment for the new car. You can do without it. And it is - alas! - far from clear what you would do with it. Obedience and training in obedience form no intelligible doctrinal or practical unity with the salvation presented in recent versions of the gospel.

Great Omissions from the Great Commission

A different model was instituted in the Great Commission Jesus left the church. The first goal he set forth for the early church was to use his all-encompassing power and

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authority to make disciples....Having made disciples, these alone were to be baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. With this twofold preparation they were to be taught to treasure and keep "all things whatsoever I have commanded you." The Christian church of the first century resulted from following this plan for church growth - a result hard to improve upon.

But in place of Christ's plan, historical drift has substituted: "Make converts (to a particular faith and practice) and baptize them into church membership." This causes two great omissions from the Great Commission to stand out. Most important, we start by omitting the making of disciples or enrolling people as Christ's students, when we should let all else wait for that. We also omit the step of taking our converts through training that will bring them ever increasingly to do what Jesus directed.

The two great omissions are connected. Not having made converts disciples, it is impossible for us to teach them how to live as Christ lived and taught. That was not part of the package, not what they converted to. When confronted with the example and teachings of Christ the response today is less one of rebellion or rejection than one of puzzlement: How do we relate to these? What have they to do with us?

Discipleship Then

When Jesus walked among humankind there was a certain simplicity to being a disciple. Primarily it meant to go with him, in an attitude of study, obedience, and imitation. There were no correspondence courses. One knew what to do and what it would cost. Simon Peter exclaimed: "Look, we've left everything and followed you!" (Mark 10:28). Family and occupations were deserted for long periods to go with Jesus as he walked from place to place announcing, showing, and explaining the governance of God. Disciples had to be with him to learn how to do what he did.

Imagine doing that today. How would family members, employers, and coworkers react to such abandonment? Probably they would conclude that we did not much care for them, or even for ourselves. Did not Zebedee think this as he watched his two sons desert the family business to keep company with Jesus (Mark 1:20)? Ask any father in a similar situation. So when Jesus observed that one must forsake the dearest things - family, "all that he has," and "his own life also" (Luke 14) - in so far as that was necessary to accompany him, he stated a simple fact: it was the only possible doorway to discipleship.

Discipleship Now

Though costly, discipleship once had a very clear, straightforward meaning. The mechanics are not the same today. We cannot literally be with him in the same way as his first disciples could. But the priorities and intentions - the heart or inner attitudes of

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disciples are forever the same. In the heart of a disciple there is a desire, and there is decision or settled intent. The disciple of Christ desires above all else to be like him.

Given this desire, usually produced by the lives and words of those already in The Way, there is yet a decision to be made: the decision to devote oneself to becoming like Christ. The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christlike and so dwelling in his "faith and practice," systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end. By these actions, even today, one who enrolls in Christ's training, becomes his pupil or disciple.

And if we intend to become like Christ, that will be obvious to every thoughtful person around us, as well as to ourselves. Of course, attitudes that define the disciple cannot be realized today by leaving family and business to accompany Jesus on his travels about the countryside. But discipleship can be made concrete by loving our enemies, blessing those who curse us, walking the second mile with an oppressor – general, living out the gracious inward transformations of faith, hope, and love. Such acts - carried out by the disciplined person with manifest grace, peace, and joy - make discipleship no less tangible and shocking today than were those desertions of long ago. Anyone who will enter into The Way can verify this, and he or she will prove that discipleship is far from dreadful.

The Cost of Nondiscipleship

In 1937 Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave the world his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. It was a masterful attack on "easy Christianity" or "cheap grace," but it did not set aside - perhaps it even enforced - the view of discipleship as a costly spiritual excess, and only for those especially driven or called to it. It was right to point out that one cannot be a disciple of Christ without forfeiting things normally sought in human life, and that one who pays little in the world's coinage to bear his name has reason to wonder where he or she stands with God. But the cost of nondiscipleship is far greater – even when this life alone is considered – than the price paid to walk with Jesus.

Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God's overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10). The cross-shaped yoke of Christ is after all an instrument of liberation and power to those who live in it with him and learn the meekness and lowliness of heart that brings rest to the soul...The correct perspective is to see following Christ not only as the necessity it is, but as the fulfillment of the highest human possibilities and as life on the highest plane.