

Discussion Module #1: The Rabbi-Disciple Dynamic

One of the central components of ministry in our family of churches is the commitment to “discipleship”. In fact, one may argue that the expectation of discipleship throughout the church is one of the distinguishing characteristics of our church-movement.

Of all the ways that Jesus Christ could have chosen to appear in the world to launch his New Testament ministry through the church, he chose the form of a sage-rabbi who called adherents to be his disciples. The term “disciple” appears some 240 times in the gospels and the book of Acts. Acts 11:26 indicates the synonymous transition of Jesus’ followers from the term “disciple” to “Christian”. But the rabbi-disciple dynamic was not invented by Jesus. It was a dynamic that was already developing in 1st century Judaism that Jesus chose to utilize as the foundation of his personal ministry and movement.

Understanding the 1st century dynamic of the rabbi-disciple relationship has important implications for our ministry work today. What is still relevant? What is not? What discipling dynamics and expectations do we strive to keep in a church that is no longer bound to the religious-cultural environment of 1st century Judaism wherein “Christian discipleship” was born?

(The following article is an edited adaptation of Doug Greenwold, Teaching Fellow Preserving Bible Times *Reflection # 307* © Doug Greenwold, March 2007.)

What is a Disciple?

When Jesus said *go and make disciples*, it was a Jew speaking to other Jews in a Semitic dialect. As such, those words had a very specific meaning and embodied a well-known paradigm that first-century Jewish listeners well understood. Since then, those words have been translated into Greek, and then into Latin, before being translated into the constraints of the English language more than a thousand years later. To more fully understand what Jesus said, we first need to disconnect from our traditional Hellenistic understanding of those words - easier said than done - and then ask how the Jews who first heard those words would have understood them. Only then are we in a position to ask what might those words mean for our discipling efforts today.

The Role of the Rabbi Every first-century Jew knew that the Scriptures had authority over all aspects of life. God may have been a mystery to them, but behavior was not. Furthermore, it was scrupulous behavior, not the condition of your heart that defined a “righteous” person. Thus, many Jews had a **desire to honor God** by doing all the right things. In the world of Pharisaism, rabbis were the teachers who had been given the authoritative role to interpret God’s Word for the living of a righteous life – defining what behavior would or would not please God.

Willing Submission to Authority It was commonplace for Jews to gather to listen to a rabbi’s discourse on the Law. Jews in the crowd may be persuaded and influenced by the teaching. However, simply being persuaded by a rabbi’s interpretation of Law did not mean you were their “disciple”. A would-be disciple would present themselves to a rabbi, seeking to follow them, ready to forgo other commitments to job and family. If a rabbi ultimately agreed to a would-be-

disciple's request, and allowed him to become a disciple, the disciple-to-be agreed to **totally submit** to the rabbi's authority in all areas of interpreting the Scriptures for his life. This was a cultural given for all observant Jewish young men – something each truly wanted to do. As a result, each disciple came to a rabbinic relationship with a desire and a willingness to do just that - surrender to the authority of God's Word as interpreted by his Rabbi's view of Scripture.

Wresting with the Word of God Yeshivas, or groups of disciples intensely dialoging over an aspect of life and Scripture's claim on it, was a standard part of rabbinic teaching methodology. Studying their rabbi's view of Scripture and **wrestling with the texts** to comprehend God's way for the conduct of their life was the main priority of a disciple and the yeshiva experience. Since all disciples have memorized most, if not all of their Hebrew Scriptures in preparation for their Bar Mitzvahs at age 13, the issue was not what God's word said, rather what did it mean and how was it to be lived out.

Real Life Questions Life questions were the causative factors in searching the Scriptures for authoritative direction. For example, everyone knew about the broad "no work" injunction regarding the Sabbath. But how should that command work itself out in specific terms? Thus, a real-life question regarding Sabbath observance might be, "May I light a candle on the Sabbath?" Or, "How many candles may I light on the Sabbath?" A real-life question regarding marriage might be, "Can I divorce my wife if..." A real-life question regarding tax collectors would be, "If I know my taxes are going to oppress our people, should I pay them?" The rabbi would authoritatively address such daily practical questions concerning righteous living and that response was understood as coming through Scripture as defined and interpreted by the rabbi.

As part of this how-should-we-live interactive process, the disciples would debate various rabbinic interpretations of the texts pertaining to a real life issue. This might involve weeks of dialogue and debate, for the rabbis were in no hurry to resolve these issues and questions. However, when the rabbi ultimately did declare his authoritative interpretation on an issue, all further debate ceased. His declared interpretation was now known and therefore binding on his disciples' lives for the rest of their days. As such, the rabbi was the matrix, the filter, the grid, through which every life issue flowed, as well as the lens through which every life issue was viewed.

Transparency There was no preset curriculum or agenda for this multi-year discipling experience. Rather it was a **continual daily relational living experience** where either the rabbi would ask questions of the disciple as he closely observed the disciple's daily life, or the disciple would initiate a discussion by raising an issue or asking a question based on some aspect of his daily life.

In the dynamics of this **intimate** discipling community, all of a disciple's **daily life was observable** by the rabbi. A disciple would expect the rabbi's consistent and persistent question, "Why did you do that?" The emphasis was always on behavior formation, not just the imparting of wisdom and related interpretive information. In this interactive manner, the rabbis functioned to clear up gray areas of understanding and difficult areas of textual interpretation for their disciples. By always asking questions, the rabbis were concentrating on **developing**

discernment in the mind of the disciple, not the imparting of “how to” formulas. Notions of three principles of prayer or four steps to prosperity would be abhorrent to a first-century rabbi.

Emulation While not overtly required, disciples invariably had a **deep desire to emulate** their rabbi. This often included imitating how their rabbi ate, observed the Sabbath, what he liked and disliked, as well as his mannerisms, prejudices and preferences. Some disciples would go to extreme lengths to try to imitate their rabbi. The story is told of one disciple who so wanted to emulate his rabbi that he hid in the rabbi’s bedchamber. That way he would be better able to emulate with his own future wife how the rabbi was intimate with his wife.

Believe is a Verb The Semitic understanding of “believe” was not based on an intellectual assent to a creed, doctrinal statement, or series of faith propositions. Rather, to a first-century disciple **believe is a verb** in which you willingly submitted to your rabbi’s interpretive authority regarding God’s Word in every area of your life. Thus, to say you were a disciple in the name of Gamaliel, meant that you **totally surrendered your life** to Gamaliel’s way of interpreting Scripture. As a result, you conformed all of your life’s behavior to his interpretations.

Summary The essential qualities of first-century disciples were desire and submission and assumed that emulation, biblical literacy, community, transparency and a willingness to wrestle with God’s word where a “given.” This included **a passion together with zeal to give up any and all of their preconceived notions** of how to live one’s life and then to embrace the behavior that their rabbi deemed best to honor God. It was a radical, willing, and **totally conforming submission** to the interpretive authority of their rabbi.

We Do Understand Observe how we develop board certified surgeons, nurses, licensed electricians, schoolteachers, biochemists, counselors, and golf pros today. Common to each are long periods of study, training, mentoring, practical experience, as well as continuing education. We are accustomed to the practice of placing ourselves under the watchful mentoring oversight of others who have established proficiency in our areas of interest. Ironically, we seem to put far more passion, commitment, and dedication into becoming a disciple of someone, or some thing, than we seem to do in developing and nurturing our piety as committed disciples of Jesus Christ. Thus, we are all disciples of some thing or someone - be it hedonism, atheism, career, self-absorption, materialism, our favorite cause, or Jesus Christ.

Some Things to Ponder

Desire, Passion, Submission and Emulation
Community of Intimacy and Transparency
Biblical Literacy and Wrestling with God’s Word

Since we only have one life to live here on this earth, it behooves us to ask: How are we doing as disciples and disciplemakers of Jesus in the Kingdom of God?

This overview of what it meant to be a disciple during the time of Jesus has highlighted some of the assumptions and presuppositions embedded in the rabbi-disciple relationship. These first-century “givens” provide us with issues to wrestle with as we ask questions of ourselves, and

raise issues for our small groups, churches, and informal communities of faith. This wrestling should also include our discipleship programs and ministries.

Discussion Questions

- Read the following biblical texts in light of the article. Luke 14:25-34, Mark 1:16-20, 8:31-38, John 8:31-32, 15:9-17, Matthew 28:18-20. Does your view/understanding of these texts change when viewed in light of first century rabbi-disciple dynamic? If so, how?
- What kinds of things described in the 1st century rabbi-disciple dynamic are applicable in Christian discipleship and the church today, and what kinds of things are not? How good are we at emphasizing the difference?
- Modern western culture values things like individualism, independence, self-sufficiency and intellectualism. How does the culture of “discipleship” challenge these attitudes? How can we be effective in introducing the lifestyle and attitude of Christian discipleship to the average modern westerner in an attractive and compelling way?
- What kinds of things do we need to emphasize in our discipling relationships/groups to keep them on track with the spirit of Christ-centered discipleship in our modern church setting?

Discussion Module #2: Jew-Gentile Relationships and Unity in a Multicultural Church

One of the great testimonies of the church, including our family of churches, is the “all nations” mission and makeup of our fellowship. Promoting, preserving and protecting diversity and unity in the church is essential to our mission and Christ’s vision.

As the background materials indicated, the New Testament world was a potent mixture of peoples and nationalities (New Testament Socio-Economic Context, IV. Social Life). On the one hand, the Romans created a unique form of socio-political unity and multicultural mingling in the Mediterranean world. On the other hand, racism, sexism, classism, sectarianism and prejudice were alive and well, and in some ways became even more prominently highlighted through the mingling of races and cultures.

The New Testament Christian Church became a flashpoint. The gospel of Jesus Christ was for all nations and communicated an open ideal of family and equality that the world had not yet seen. Still, the imperfect Christians that populated the church had to work through the prejudices and biases that they brought in with them.

Read the following excerpt and be sure to look up the Scripture references as you go:

Prejudice and Controversy in the First Century Church

The Church at Jerusalem was composed largely of racially biased Jews. Peter was a church leader but still characterized by the traditional Jewish exclusiveness (Acts 10:9-15, AD 40). After Gentiles came to Christ, the Jerusalem Church was suspicious and sent Peter and John, but the Spirit came on these Gentiles so that Peter had to defend his actions (Acts 11:1-18, AD 41). That God would accept Gentiles amazed these Jewish Christians but they finally accepted it (v. 18)! However, eight years later the first Gentile church at Antioch was established. Here Paul still had to publicly rebuke Peter for his prejudice (Gal. 2:11-16, AD 49).

The first major controversy that threatened the unity of the NT church was the hotly debated issue of whether Gentile converts needed to “become Jews” before they could become saved Christians (Jerusalem Council, Acts 15, AD 49). Once again, orthodoxy and fairness prevailed (vv. 23-29).

The Church at Antioch was composed mostly of non-prejudiced Gentile believers. It readily accepted Barnabas, a Jew (Acts 11:19-24), and these believers even welcomed the former persecutor of the church called Paul (Acts 11:25). This stands in stark contrast to Paul’s rejection by the Jerusalem church (Acts 9:26f.). How odd—Paul the Jew was rejected by the Jews but accepted by the Gentiles! Not surprisingly the Antioch Christians were the first to show a missionary concern that reached both Jews and Gentiles outside of their area (Acts 13). Notice the multi-racial mix of their prophets and teachers (v. 1)!

The Church at Rome appeared to have several Jew-Gentile conflicts which Paul addressed: God's choice of Israel and Gentiles (Rom. 9–11), matters of diet (Rom. 14:1-4, 6, 14-16), celebration of special days (Rom. 14:5), etc.

"The Jew-versus-Gentile issue looms large in this letter. Paul did not take sides, but he carefully set forth both sides of the question. On the one hand he emphasized the historical and chronological priority of the Jews—'first for the Jew, then for the Gentile' (Rom. 1:16; cf. 2:9-10). He also stressed the 'advantage . . . in being a Jew' (3:1-2; 9:4-5). On the other hand he pointed out that 'since there is only one God' (3:30), He is the God of the Gentiles as well as the God of the Jews (3:29). As a result 'Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin' (3:9) and alike are saved by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ..." (John Witmer, *BKC*, 2:437).

Years before Paul penned the book to the Romans, he addressed Jewish-Gentile theological controversy head on in his Galatian Epistle (1:6-7). The words written in chapter 3 become a model for what the church should strive for in its ideal, and the fight it continues to wage today within itself:

"...for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

In Christ there is no racism, no classism, no sexism, nor any other kind of dividing "-ism" that obscures the reality that all are in Christ and all are equally heirs to the promise.

Discussion Questions:

- In what ways did prejudice become theological controversy that threatened to split the church and introduce heresy in the first century?
- Although the world-at-large, and the West in particular, has become an increasingly greater multicultural melting pot; how does the world continue to show distressing signs of disunity and prejudice? How can the church continue to lead the way in being a model multicultural community that is *truly* unified?
- What kinds of challenges do we experience in our ministries that are similar to what the first-century church experienced? What kinds of solutions can we implement to address them?

Discussion Module #3: Connecting with “Unchurched” Seekers

Studies and polls in recent years have revealed some undeniable trends in the UK and the West:

- *The fastest growing “religious” demographic is those who claim no religious affiliation (called “nones”).*
- *Atheism and agnosticism are on the rise, especially in the younger generation.*
- *“Spiritual, not religious” is becoming an increasingly popular description.*
- *Attendance in Christian churches across the denominational spectrum is stagnating or declining.*
- *The ranks of the “unchurched” (those without experience or exposure to a church) is growing.*

Some have labeled these trends as a move toward a “post-Christian” society, where the social and institutional influence of Christianity is losing ground. These trends present a unique challenge and opportunity to the church. On the one hand, we confront greater skepticism and less openness to Christianity in the average course of our evangelism. On the other hand, we also have an opportunity to preach Christ to a “clean state”. While this trend may be a modern one in the West, it is not a foreign environment to Christianity.

Greek Philosophical Schools

In Acts 17, Paul was taken to a meeting of the Areopagus after encountering Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the marketplace. In the first century, the Areopagus was a council that directed the internal affairs of Athens, especially in religious matters. Paul found himself in the mission field of Athens where he was preaching to an “unchurched” crowd who were nonetheless somewhat spiritual and heavily influenced by a variety of secular philosophical attitudes. What he encountered and how he approached it serves as a great example for us today:

Hellenistic (Greek) philosophy had been around for centuries before the time of the New Testament. Roman culture revered and venerated Greek philosophy as an influential patriarch of Rome. In the first century, schools of Greek philosophy were still active and influential around the Mediterranean, even among some Jewish scholars. Eventually, Greek philosophy would begin to influence first century Christianity in negative ways in the form of “gnosticism”.

Take some time to review the synopsis below regarding schools of Greek philosophy in the first century, then read Acts 17:16-33. Some of the major schools of Hellenistic philosophy:

- Classical Philosophy: Plato and Aristotle were key figures in philosophy, and established basic methods of inquiry based on logical argumentation, dialectical and deductive reasoning. Plato emphasized the search for reality in the ideas that lay behind the material world, whereas Aristotle emphasized the correspondence of ideas to material world and vice-versa.

- The Skeptics: Skeptics generally took a negative view of about the possibility of gaining “true” knowledge. Some skeptics determine that “suspension of judgment” is always the most reasonable approach to philosophy, which others modify this approach according to probability.
- The Stoics: Skeptics often found themselves at odds with Stoics. Founded by the philosopher Zeno, Stoics were known for their high moral standards and devotion to duty. They believed in a material world governed by “logos” – a fiery divine substance pervading the universe and placing order upon it. Stoics believed this logos to be present in all things, including humans, enabling them to make sense of the universe. For a Stoic, nature, logos and “god” were interchangeable ideas and the goal of the Stoic was to discover how to live in accordance with “nature”.
- The Epicureans: Founded by Epicurus, its adherents countered the traditional view of the Greek gods, believing that they took no notice of human affairs and remained uninvolved. Their view of the universe mirrored that of modern evolutionists – a closed universe emerging from the chance collision of atoms within a void. Thus, Epicureans were not constrained in their view of ethics and saw the pursuit of pleasure as the greatest good. This did not necessarily mean sensual excess, though, as Epicureans also viewed the exercise of prudence, balance and moderation as important to yielding a happy life.

Discussion Questions:

- Western culture and the education system have always been heavily influenced by Greco-Roman philosophy. Considering the schools of Greek thought mentioned above, what are some modern manifestations that you have encountered today among people in their general attitude toward life and faith?
- In what ways do you see Paul make a compelling argument and presentation to the philosophical crowd? How does he create a connection and build a bridge into their way of thinking? How does he introduce a classic Christian message?
- What are some ways that we can be effective in evangelizing and ministering to the unchurched, the “nones”, or an otherwise increasingly skeptical/philosophical mission field in a “post-Christian” environment? What are the bridges we can build? How does it force us to rethink some of our ministry approaches and practices?