

1 *Believers or Disciples?*

The best description of the Christian life portrayed in the New Testament is that of discipleship leading to authentic, active membership in the Body of Christ. Therefore, the first part of this book describes what it means to become a disciple of Jesus. Once we become disciples, however, desiring to do God's will and not our own, then the issue arises of finding our place in the church, Christ's Body. But what is the church from God's perspective?

In the second part of this book, we will explore the nature of the New Testament church, as well as what it means to become a fully functioning member of Christ's Body—in all the richness of its Biblical dimensions. Paul's prayer for the saints in Ephesians 3:14-19 was that they would not be satisfied with only a partial understanding of their calling in Christ, but that they might enter into the full dimensions of that calling. We are saved not just so that we may be freed from the power of sin and escape eternal death in hell, as wonderful as that may be. Rather we are saved so that we may be transformed into the image of Jesus, becoming living stones in the Lord's eternal temple and members of the Bride of Christ:

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

After the first century AD, much of what Paul describes here was lost, buried under a sea of false doctrine, tradition, and oppressive hierarchical religion. Believers in Jesus today are beneficiaries of the great Reformation, which restored much light and truth. Yet in these last days, the greatest need of all is for *Restoration* of the Scriptural pattern, purity, and power of the church of Jesus Christ.

In our day, the term “believers” is used much more often than “disciples” to describe followers of Jesus Christ. Yet the word “believers” appears only twice as a noun in the Greek New Testament, in Acts 5:14 and in 1 Timothy 4:12¹, while the saints are described as “disciple(s)” well over two hundred times. Are we missing something here? Have we made an *end* out of what the Bible describes as only the *beginning* of true spiritual life, coming to believe in Jesus? Please do note, however, that “believe” as a verb appears many times in the New Testament, demonstrating that faith is an action, not just a state of being.

1.1 INSTRUCTED IN HIS WAYS

The word *believer* speaks of one who entrusts his or her well-being to Jesus, by faith in Him.² A small child can be a believer in Jesus just as fully as an experienced, gray-haired saint. *Disciple*, however, has a deeper meaning. The word first appears in English Scripture as translating the Hebrew word, *limmuday* (plural of לְמוֹד, lim-mood), from Isaiah 8:16, “Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my *disciples*.” The word refers to one who is instructed, growing accustomed to the ways of his teacher.³ A disciple is someone who has deliberately set out to know the Lord and His ways, one who walks in the path of God’s Word. The author of Psalm 119 is just such a student of the Almighty, as may be seen in verses 10-16,

With my whole heart I have sought You;
 Oh, let me not wander
 from Your commandments!
 Your word I have hidden in my heart,
 that I might not sin against You.

Blessed are You, O LORD!

Teach me Your statutes.
 With my lips I have declared
 all the judgments of Your mouth.
 I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,
 as much as in all riches.
 I will meditate on Your precepts,
 and contemplate Your ways.

I will delight myself in Your statutes;
I will not forget Your word . . .

We tend, even as Christians, to seek worldly riches. But note that the Psalmist rejoices “in the way of Your testimonies as much as in all riches.” The Hebrew for “your word” in verse 11, אמרה (im-raw)⁴, may be translated as either *word* or *commandment*. There are five other Hebrew words in this passage that also reflect commandment, judgment, or verdict—all describing the authoritative nature of God’s word (*mitzváh, chōq, mishpát, piqqúd, dabár*). The teachings of the Lord are eternal and unchanging, and the disciple pays careful attention to them.

The life-long nature of discipleship is clearly shown in verses 111-112. This is no passing fancy or stage of development:

Your testimonies I have taken
as a heritage forever,
for they are the rejoicing of my heart.
I have inclined my heart
to perform Your statutes
forever, to the very end.

One characteristic common to many today is a deep reluctance to commit to *anything*, other than oneself, for more than a short while. Yet here the psalmist speaks of a commitment to God that has no end, no escape clause, no *if*.

In Isaiah 8 the prophet was speaking to an Israelite nation that had so deeply rebelled against the God of Israel that He instructed His prophet to “not walk in the way of this people”—lest he come under the same judgment. Out of all the nations on earth, the Lord had revealed Himself

and His word to Israel. Yet the Jewish people had turned away from their God. Therefore, the very law that He gave to Israel for light and life was about to be turned against them for darkness and judgment:

But the word of the LORD was to them,
“Precept upon precept,
precept upon precept,
Line upon line, line upon line,
Here a little, there a little,”
That they might go and fall backward,
and be broken
and snared and caught.
(Isaiah 28:13)

God Himself was about to become,

“a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem . . . Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. And I will wait on the Lord, who hides His face from the house of Jacob; and I will hope in Him.”
(Isaiah 8:14,16–17)

Only true disciples, followers of the Lord, among the Jewish people would continue to understand the testimony or the law. Why? Because Israel’s heart had turned from trust in the Lord to foreign kings and foreign gods, even to the point of consulting mediums and spiritists as described in verse 19. In response, verse 20 declares,

“To the law and to the testimony:

if they speak not according to this word,
it is because there is no light in them.” (KJV)

Israel had turned from the light of their God to the darkness of this fallen world, and the Lord hid “His face from the house of Jacob...” What a fearful precursor of Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:22–23:

“The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”

In the New Testament, the Greek for disciple, *mathetes* (μαθητής, mah-thay-tes’)⁵, means a learner, a pupil, or again a disciple. In the early church, becoming a *disciple* of Jesus was the normal consequence of becoming a believer. If in our day we often speak of Christians as believers, we need to remind ourselves that believing and being born again are only the beginning of the Christian life, not the end. Becoming a disciple of Jesus is what the Lord intends for the rest of our lives. The Heavenly Father wants us to become *life-long learners* from and *followers* of His Son.

1.2 AN ATTITUDE OF THE HEART

Geoffrey Bull, a British missionary to China who spent years in Communist prisons, captured the essence of discipleship in his book, *When Iron Gates Yield*: “Discipleship is not therefore a state of being, but an attitude of the heart toward the mind of Christ.”⁶ These words clearly

echo Psalms 119:111–112. In short, a true disciple wants to know the Lord and become like Him. He or she yearns to know the truth and to walk in its light. Such a person regards doing the will of God here on earth as the best response to the unspeakable mercy of having been given new life in Christ. What else should that new life be used for but to serve the Heavenly Father, since it is a priceless gift from His Son? As Romans 12:1-2 states, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” Doing the Lord’s will, and not our own, is also the best preparation for dwelling with God forever. As Amos 3:3 points out, “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” Now is the best time to agree with the Lord and to learn His ways, dying to ourselves in the process.

How does this compare with the vision of the Christian life often depicted in our day, especially in the various forms of prosperity teaching? Is it really true that we can have Jesus *and* whatever else we want? Is new life in Christ mainly about *us*—our happiness, our success, and our material well-being? How can the eternal truths of the Gospel find full expression within such narrow expectations? And are some of us who are in positions to teach or preach to others trying to proclaim a more palatable Gospel? Or are we reminding sinners that following Jesus will ultimately cost them everything? “When He had called the people to *Himself* ... He said to them, ‘Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and fol-

low Me.” (Mark 8:34) Are we seeking *self-fulfillment*—as the world does—or are we seeking the fulfillment of God’s purposes, as in Matthew 6:10: “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”?

In the 1980s, I heard a message given to Christian undergraduates at Yale University by an experienced missionary to the Middle East. He declared that the will of God is only for some believers—that those who do His will are generally going to suffer. He asked the students if this was what they really wanted in life. He then stated that the rest of us, those for whom God has no specific plans, should just try to be the best Christians we can, enjoying life wherever it takes us. This is a misleading statement, however. God has purposes for every believer, though not all may be willing to accept God’s will for their life. And if doing the will of God involves suffering, as it may well, we are promised in Scripture that such suffering will bear fruit that will never pass away. Above all, remember 1 John 2:17, “the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.” Should we who are believers therefore spend our lives doing our own thing, or should we do the will of God as lifelong disciples of Jesus?

How often do we Christians talk about laying down our lives for Jesus, as He laid down His life for us? Do we speak about suffering for Christ, about denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and living for God alone? Do we remind ourselves that we need to pray, as Jesus did, “Not my will, but Thine be done”? Many nineteenth-century Christians, like the English Puritans before them, viewed the building of godly *character* as one of their greatest pursuits in life. They labored at becoming *like* Christ more

than on building a career or even a ministry. Becoming like Jesus is no easy task, as the great nineteenth-century English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, pointed out:

Are you asking the reason for your trials, believer? Look *upward* to your heavenly Father, and behold Him pure and holy. Do you know that you are one day to be like Him? Will you easily be conformed to His image? Will you not require much refining in the “*furnace of affliction*” (Isa. 48:10) to purify you? Will it be an easy thing to get rid of your corruption and make you perfect, “*even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect*”? (Matthew 5:48)⁷

Along with forming godly character, Christians in every century who have desired to be disciples of Jesus have regarded walking in daily *communion* with Him as their first priority. As Jesus said in John 15:5, “He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; *for without Me you can do nothing.*”

Yet do we truly believe what Jesus said? Do we understand that abiding in Christ is our greatest work in life, that He is the fountain from which every good and eternal fruit flows? Can we declare together with the apostle Paul,

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my

own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; *that I may know Him* and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7–11, emphasis added)

Wait a minute! What is Paul so concerned about here? We are all born-again believers, so we already know Jesus, right? Besides, Christians in affluent countries rarely suffer “the loss of all things.” That happens mostly to unfortunate believers in third world countries. We are doubly blessed in that we get to have Jesus *and* our prosperity, too!

Besides, who is concerned in our day about *attaining* “to the resurrection from the dead”? We are already saved, so why would there be any question about *our* taking part in the resurrection from the dead? And as for those believers who do suffer, if they had a little more sense and less fanaticism, they could easily avoid the trouble. At a ministerial gathering I attended a few years ago, a man from India declared that Christians in his country who are persecuted for trying to reach the lost suffer because they are unwise in their methods. With better techniques—and a deeper appreciation of where unbelievers are coming from—they could spare themselves such difficulties!

Some believers may in fact be unwise in their methods, but then there are those like a former Hindu high priest whom I met recently in New York City. Since his conversion through a vision of Christ he received while serving in

a Hindu temple in southeast India, he has led tens of thousands of Hindus to faith in Jesus. His reward for his labors? He has had both of his wrists broken multiple times, his spine was broken as a result of a beating, and he was left for dead after being stoned. On top of that, he was put on public trial for converting Hindus to Christianity, ultimately having to flee his native land to escape from those who were out to kill him. His wife and young daughters had to live in hiding for another year and a half before they were able to escape and rejoin him in New York.

Have we missed something here? Are we so busy living in safe, shallow waters that we do not hear even God Himself calling us out into the Deep? As Hebrews 13:13 states, “Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach.” Written more than one hundred years ago, the words of A.B. Simpson’s hymn, *Launch Out*, are prophetic regarding our generation:

But many, alas! Only stand on the shore
And gaze on the ocean so wide;
They never have ventured
 its depths to explore,
Or to launch on the fathomless tide.

Launch out into the deep,
Oh let the shoreline go;
Launch out, launch out in the ocean divine,
Out where the full tides flow.⁸

Did Jesus stay safely by the shore? Did He try to avoid the trouble, or use a better technique to save us than a bloody cross? Did He seek to escape persecution? Or did

He launch out into the tides of a dangerous, rebellious world—leaving the safety of Heaven behind to rescue us from eternal destruction?

1.3 THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Charles H. Spurgeon wrote about the reality and purpose of suffering in the Christian life. His words are worth considering as he compares Christians to Simon the Cyrenian, the man whom the Romans compelled to bear Jesus' cross on the road to Golgotha:

We see in Simon carrying the cross a picture of the work of the church throughout all generations; she is the cross-bearer for Jesus. Mark, then, Christian: Jesus does not suffer so as to exclude your suffering. He bears a cross, not that you may escape it, but that you may endure it. Christ exempts you from sin, but not from sorrow. Remember that, and expect to suffer. But let us comfort ourselves with this thought: that in our case, as in Simon's, it is not our cross, but Christ's cross that we carry.⁹

Thomas Shepherd also speaks of the need for every believer to bear the cross in one of his famous seventeenth-century hymns,

Must Jesus bear the cross alone,
And all the world go free?
No, there's a cross for ev-'ry one,
And there's a cross for me.¹⁰

The cross is not a convenient reality as it speaks of death, but it is an absolutely necessary one. In order to truly live, we must first reckon ourselves dead to sin, to our old ways of life, and to this fallen world. It is only as we die to self and are crucified with Christ that we realize the full power of Jesus' words in John 8:36, "if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

In fact, those who receive Jesus will indeed be set free, free from the awful power and domination of sin! But do we remember that the purpose of our newfound freedom is to serve the Lord, not our own lusts and desires? As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and *you are not your own*? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, *which are God's*."

Let us also consider the words of Isaac Watts' great eighteenth-century hymn, "Am I a Soldier of the Cross?" Who of us can sing this hymn without being convicted of how far short we fall respecting God's high calling in Christ Jesus?

Am I a soldier of the cross,
A follower of the Lamb,
And shall I fear to own His cause,
Or blush to speak His Name?

Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize,
And sailed through bloody seas?

Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace,
To help me on to God?

Sure I must fight if I would reign;
Increase my courage, Lord.
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by Thy Word.¹¹

I well remember singing this anointed hymn during my childhood in a small-town New England Congregational church. God used its powerful message repeatedly to remind me of His higher calling on my life, something I at times very much wanted to escape. Should I seek to be carried to Heaven “on flowery beds of ease” while others around the globe suffer torments for the sake of Christ? I recently heard about American Christians who wrote to a minister in China. They told him that they were praying for him, that God would deliver him and his church from persecution. This Chinese servant of Christ wrote back that he was praying for them in America as well—that God would allow them to face persecution!

How could he write this? Because he knew from experience that persecution has a way of clarifying matters. It divides between the “wheat” and the “chaff.” One day, when a dear friend teaching in China was feeling especially sorry for believers there because of all they suffer, a young Chinese Christian walked up to him and said, “I feel so sorry for you American Christians.” In shock, my friend asked him what he meant, and he replied, “You think you

can have Jesus *and* everything else. For us in China, following Jesus means losing everything, so we know the true value of having Him.” My friend was surprised by the young student’s words, but learned a valuable lesson that day.

How many Christians are trying to “have it all,” while also seeking to follow Jesus? How many are trying to be a friend to “this vile world,” even while hoping to be the Lord’s friend? How often are success and affluence preached in churches—instead of the necessity of *letting go of our life on earth*, in order to gain the life that will last forever? As Jim Elliot, a missionary to the Waodani (or Auca) people of Ecuador, wrote in his journal on October 28, 1949, “One of the great blessings of heaven is the appreciation of heaven on earth He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”¹² On January 8, 1956, pierced by the spears of those to whom he was bringing the Gospel, he laid down his life.

Are you trying to hold on to your life? Or are you willing to let it go—placing it in the faithful hands of Jesus?

1.4 CALLED TO BE DISCIPLES

The truth is that the Lord has plans for *every* life yielded to Him. He desires *all* of His children to enter into lifelong discipleship. In the timeless words of 1 John 2:15–17,

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father