

## **Biblical and Theological Framework for Discipleship**

Historically, many organizations gradually and unintentionally shift from their original course and become something quite different in the following generations (e.g., Harvard University, the Y.M.C.A., etc.). The old is forgotten, even scorned; and the new, fully embraced and promoted. Jesus Christ never abolished or modified his strategy for world evangelization or implied that the task could be accomplished through programs or mass evangelism alone. Any possibility of success would ride on the commitment of those who believe in and practice “spiritual multiplication,” the exponential growth of the body of Christ that occurs when mature believers lead others to Christ and then disciple them until they themselves grow to maturity in Christ and are trained to effectively live out their faith before the watching world. Forming a solid biblical and theological foundation for discipleship will help us answer the question that every generation of believers must ask: Will my ministry be built upon pragmatic and methodological concerns or upon careful exegetical activity related to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ? Establishing a sound biblical and theological framework for discipleship will ensure that what we do and say in the name of Christ will have lasting value and preserve His strategy for lasting fruitfulness.

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## I. Introduction

Dr. Michael Wilkins has put his finger on the problem: “In the last twenty-plus years, a virtual flood of discipleship studies has swept over the church, yet people may be more confused now than ever. The reason? No consensus reigns in understanding what Jesus was doing and in what we should be doing in making disciples. What is a disciple of Jesus? What should we be like as disciples? Who are to be the subjects of discipleship?” (*Following the Master*, p. 25). In this brief lecture and discussion, we will seek to look at the exegetical data in the Scripture as it pertains to Jesus’ activity with the Twelve and seek to shape our discipleship practices on a solid biblical and theological framework.

## II. A Biblical Foundation for Discipleship

### A. What do we mean when we use the word *disciple*?

1. A disciple is a *learner* or *pupil*
  
2. Taken from the root word *math*, it denotes the man who directs his mind to something
  
3. A disciple is engaged in learning
  
4. The education consists in the appropriation or adoption of specific knowledge or conduct
  
5. There is no learner without a teacher
  
6. The idea of teaching and learning is preeminent in the word *learning*

B. There are four essential elements that can be discovered in the definition of the word *disciple*: pedagogue, pupil, purpose, and plan. All four “P’s” must be present in a discipling relationship.

1. Pedagogue: A disciplemaker; a wise and knowledgeable teacher who makes a personal investment in the lives of others
2. Pupil: a learner; a disciple; a faithful person who willingly and eagerly seeks to grow to maturity under the leadership of a mentor
3. Purpose: the reason given for establishing a discipling relationship
4. Plan: the strategy employed by which the pupil grows to maturity

C. Who is Jesus’ disciple? A true disciple of Jesus Christ is one who:

1. Loves Him
2. Learns from Him
3. Is loyal to (committed to) Him alone

D. Ten characteristics of a disciple of Jesus Christ

1. He learns from Jesus
2. His whole life is shaped by Jesus
3. His outer and inner life is controlled by Jesus
4. He has been called by Jesus
5. His relationship with Jesus is personal

6. He accepts Jesus' unconditional authority
7. He listens to Jesus
8. He suffers with Jesus
9. He serves Jesus
10. He seeks to lead others to Jesus

E. Jesus as Teacher (Rabbi)

1. Over the course of 3½ years, Jesus trained the Twelve, shaped their lives, and empowered them to fulfill the Great Commission
2. The essence of Jesus training was that He just let the Twelve follow Him
3. Jesus drew His men close to Himself. He was His own school and curriculum
4. The most important part of the Apostles' training consisted in the fact that for years they had been with Jesus
5. We should not be surprised that, since they were with Jesus so long, they would prove to be exceptionally good and noble men when they came before the world as leaders of a great movement and were called on to carry out their responsibilities

F. What is discipleship?

1. Christian discipleship is a concentrated process that occurs when a more mature believer prayerfully enters into a committed relationship with a group of faithful and teachable believers for the purpose of building godly character, imparting true knowledge, and developing ministry skills under the direction and power of the Holy Spirit, so that they will follow Christ without reservation and do what He tells them to do.

2. “Discipleship is the ongoing process of growth as a disciple... Thus, when we speak of Christian discipleship and discipling, we are speaking of what it means to grow as a Christian in every area of life” (Michael Wilkins).
3. It is a concentrated process
4. The foundation of discipleship must be prayer
5. It is a committed relationship
6. In Christ-centered discipleship, one can expect to grow in character, knowledge, and ministry skills
7. Real life change only takes place under the direction and power of the Holy Spirit
8. Discipleship is not an end in itself, but a means to reach the nations of the world with the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ

G. The following chart, *The Language of Disciplemaking*, provides a solid biblical framework for seeing the whole process of making disciples from first efforts at evangelism to spiritual multiplication.

No.	Greek Word	Definition	Key Idea	Explanation
1	matheteuo (:V20θ,βT)	“to make a disciple of, to teach, instruct” (transitive)	Evangelism	An obedient Christian shares the gospel with an unbeliever, inviting him to place his faith in Christ alone for his salvation. “The term <i>make disciples</i> places stress on the fact that the mind, as well as the heart and the will, must be won for God.” (Hendriksen).
2	Mathetiao (:V20θ4ςT)	“to wish to become a disciple”	Spiritual Interest	A desiderative (desire) verb formed from the verb <i>manthano</i> ( <i>to direct one’s mind to something, to learn</i> ), this word means <i>to wish to become a disciple</i> . It expresses a <i>desire</i> of doing the action implied in the original verb. Hence, it expresses a person’s desire to become a Christian (i.e., a disciple of Jesus Christ).
3	matheteuo (:V20θ,βT)	“to be or become a disciple or pupil” of someone (intransitive)	Conversion	When a person not only <i>desires</i> to become a Christian but, through repentance and faith, actually receives the free gift of eternal life, he <i>becomes a disciple</i> of Jesus Christ.
4	mathetes (:V20θ↑H)  mathetria (:V2ZθΔ4V)	“a (male) disciple”  “a (female) disciple”	New Believer	Having become a disciple (verb), the new believer is now considered to be a <i>disciple</i> (noun), having been reconciled to God through Christ. Now he/she is the pupil (learner) and Christ his/her Master Teacher.
5	mathetikos (:V20θ46 H̄)  mathematikos (:V20:Vθ46 H̄)	“disposed to learn, mathematical”	Spiritual Hunger	Grateful for Christ’s atoning work on the cross for his sins, the believer experiences a desire for spiritual growth. He is now inclined to learn all that he can about God, God’s Word, and God’s world.
6	mathetos (:V20θ H̄)  matheteos (:V20θΞ=H)	“learned, that may be learned”  “to be learned”	Growth Objectives	Before His ascension, Jesus instructed his disciples to teach new disciples “to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). Those discipling others should devise a plan that clearly outlines a path for bringing these new believers to maturity in Christ.
7	mathesis (:ς20Φ4H)	“learning, the getting of knowledge”	Training	Once the plan is in place and the objectives clear, the disciplemaker begins the process of training the believer. The disciple’s responsibility is to acquire knowledge, skills, and a godly character.
8	Matheteia (:V20θ,,:V)	“lesson, instruction”	Specific Lessons	Jesus trained the Twelve systematically, adding to their knowledge, skills, and character over a period of 3 ½ years. As it takes time to develop a solid, strong oak tree, so lesson by lesson, the disciple of Jesus Christ is brought to maturity.
9	mathema (:ς20:V)  mathos (:ς2=H)	“something that is learned, a lesson, knowledge”  “knowledge, understanding”	Results	From the mentoring relationship, the disciple gains knowledge and understanding, the fruit of his efforts to learn from his mentor. The things he has learned from his disciplemaker, both intellectually and experientially, can now be passed on to those he wins to Christ.

H. What do we see in the Gospels about the way Jesus trained the Twelve?

1. He devoted Himself primarily to the few rather than to the masses.
2. He called them to be “with Him.” He gave Himself to them.
3. He expected them to be obedient to Him.
4. He called upon them to count the cost of following Him.
5. He showed them how to live and give themselves away.
6. He transformed their character, knowledge, and ministry skills.
7. He impressed upon them the need to reach a lost world.
8. He taught them that the primary purpose of the Holy Spirit was to mediate His presence after He was no longer with them physically.
9. He delegated ministry to them.
10. He had them assist Him in training the Seventy.
11. He supervised them and held them accountable.
12. He taught them how to reproduce.

## **Suggested Reading**

Coleman, Robert E. *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming Revell Company, 1963.

Coppedge, Allan. *The Biblical Principles of Discipleship*. Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1989.

Wilkins, Michael J. *Following the Master*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.

Wilson, Carl W. *With Christ in the School of Disciple Building*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2009.