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**By Don Overcash**

### **Following a living lord, not a dead master**

Being a disciple is not used as commonly as it once was and an understanding of discipleship even less understood. Generally viewed through the lens of religious commitment, yet throughout history the passing on of wisdom to the young has been around. The two primary purposes was to promote competence and for development of character. Disciple makers, often called mentors or spiritual guides were to instruct the learner or follower in how to understand and live life . In the Greco-Roman world we see this process at work in the development of Western philosophy as Socrates disciplined Plato who then in turn mentored Aristotle. Each of these men built upon the contributions of the first. The world continues to witness this disciple-making process in many spheres with the most notable in politics and social change. Consider the relationship between Mahatma Gandhi and his followers, most notable being Jawaharlal Nehru who became India's first Prime Minister.

Disciple making still remains a relational process in which a person intentionally follows a teacher or master in order to learn their way of life, internalize their teaching, and be formed to live and act like them. Its intended purposes include preserving and transmitting a tradition or body of wisdom, shaping a disciple's character and habits, and preparing them to carry the teacher's mission or school forward to the next generation. (185)

This brings us to the ongoing question debated over the past 2,000 years. Was Jesus just another teacher, a disciple maker or was Jesus who he claimed to be? The dynamic we see in Jesus' words, "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:13-16) and "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:16-20), is fundamentally different from any other disciple-making project.

First, everything turns on **who is speaking**. In other traditions, the disciple-maker is a gifted but finite human teacher who points beyond himself to a body of wisdom, a law, or a way of life. His authority is derivative and temporary; death eventually ends his access to his students. By contrast, the miraculously risen Christ appears before those who are certain of His death and issues the Great Commission. He begins with a staggering claim: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He does not merely represent God's authority; he embodies it. Christian discipleship is therefore not enrollment in a school of religious thought but a total allegiance to a living Lord who stands on the other side of death and reigns over history.

Second, Jesus moves the conversation from “become like me” to “abide in me.” Any serious disciple-maker expects imitation: “Follow my methods, memorize my sayings, preserve my school.” Jesus does call his disciples to imitate him, but by the time we reach Matthew 28, something deeper has occurred. Through his death and resurrection he has made them a new people who belong to him and live in him. The commission does not end with “remember my teaching” but with “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” The ongoing presence of the Master, not mere memory of the Master, is the engine of Christian discipleship. The disciples do not take over for a departed founder; they participate in the ongoing work of a present Lord.

Third, Jesus grounds mission in identity before assignment. Most disciple-making models begin with tasks: here is the rule, the discipline, the program. Jesus stands his followers on the hillside and first tells them who they already are: “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.” He does not say, “Try to become saltier, work at being brighter.” He names a new reality he has created in them. The Beatitudes have already marked them as the blessed people of the kingdom; their influence flows from that new creation. Christian discipleship, then, is not some self-improvement model that makes us more accepting of ourselves or accepted by others, but living out a new identity bestowed by grace, and is a work in progress.

Finally, the scope and center of the mission are unique. Other masters send disciples to guard a tradition, to stabilize a culture, or to propagate a philosophy within a community. Jesus sends his disciples to “all nations,” and at the heart of that sending is not a code but a Name: they are to baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. They teach “everything I have commanded you,” but the curriculum is gathered around the person and work of Christ himself. Christian disciples do not merely disseminate ideas; they bear witness to a crucified and risen Lord who goes with them.

In every other case, a disciple follows a path laid out by a dead or distant master. In the gospel, the Master has conquered death, names his followers as salt and light, and then walks beside them as they make more disciples in his name. That is the great difference. More to follow on discipleship in the coming weeks.

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makers—often called mentors, teachers, or spiritual guides—train a learner or follower to understand life and to live it well.

In the Greco-Roman world, we see this process in the development of Western philosophy: Socrates disciplined Plato, who in turn mentored Aristotle. Each built on the work of the former. We still see this pattern today, notably in politics and social change. Consider Mahatma Gandhi and his followers, especially Jawaharlal Nehru, who became India's first prime minister.

At its core, disciple making remains a deeply relational process. A person intentionally follows a teacher or master in order to learn their way of life, internalize their teaching, and be formed to live and act like them. The goals include preserving and transmitting a tradition or body of wisdom, shaping a disciple's character and habits, and preparing them to carry the teacher's mission forward into the next generation.

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