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Reflection Paper I

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Introduction

As one reflects upon the early church, it is apparent that the disciples involved as the body of Christ were highly effective in spreading the gospel and their way of life throughout the known world of their time. In the contemporary American church, effective evangelism is in decline, and the overall number of people attending worship services is also in decline. Some church leaders have proposed that a significant contributing cause to this decline is that modern believers do not behave the way that the early church believers behaved.

This paper will reflect upon what defines a disciple, what concepts define a family in the New Testament, and what the role of the Holy Spirit is in discipleship as well as the importance of the Holy Spirit's actions.

What is a Disciple?

A good starting point would be to arrive at a definition of a disciple that all Christians would agree is consistent with what is revealed in Scripture. Modern believers seem to adhere to the idea that their act of voicing belief in Jesus as Lord is sufficient to be assured of salvation and inducts them into the family of God. In fairness, this concept has been taught to them by clergy for many years. Willard described this concept as follows, "Being a Christian in evangelical terms came to be a matter of professing belief in time-honored tenets of traditional Christianity, with a few additional points about the nature and authority of the Bible and about eschatology."¹ Willard continues by defining this type of belief as nominal Christianity, as the behaviors of

¹ Dallas Willard, Discipleship, (Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology, edited by Gerald McDermott, 2010), Accessed on June 29, 2020, from https://learn.liberty.edu/webapps/blackboard/content/listContent.jsp?course_id=_628058_1&content_id=_40817707_1.

believers do not show any statistical deviation from the practices of non-believers.² Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenged this kind of easy adoption into God's family when he said, "Cheap grace means grace as doctrine, as principle, as system. It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth; it means God's love as merely a Christian idea of God."³ Bonhoeffer certainly did not agree that belief alone was all that is required of a disciple of Christ.

Dempsey proposed that there are ten key attributes of a disciple. The first attribute recognizes that a disciple is aware of the cost of following Jesus (Luke 14:28)⁴, yet chooses to do so, while the second attribute shows the decision to be wholly committed to Christ above any other commitments (Luke 14:26). The third attribute is identified as accepting their burden to endure sacrifice as they serve Jesus and His purposes (Luke 14:27). The fourth attribute is demonstrated by a willingness to give up all earthly possessions (Luke 14:33). The fifth attribute describes how the disciple regularly studies God's Word and embraces the freedoms they experience as servants of God (John 8:31-32). The sixth attribute is evidenced by their love for other believers (John 13:35). The seventh attribute is shown by how the disciple seeks a close relationship with Jesus, characterized by diligent prayer and actions that bear observable fruit, which brings glory to God's name (John 15:5, 7-8). The eighth attribute is that the disciple is Spirit-filled (Acts 13:52), and the ninth attribute is that the disciple is obedient to follow the

² Dallas Willard, *Discipleship*.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* DBW Vol 4 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works), (Fortress Press, Kindle Edition), p. 43.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

directions that the Spirit gives to them (Matt 26:19). Finally, the tenth attribute is that the disciple embraces the Great Commission (Matt 28: 19-20) and makes disciples like themselves.⁵

Dempsey also highlights that disciples develop lifelong learning skills and purposeful habits. Dempsey wrote, “To be a disciple requires that a person be disciplined in spiritual habits and disciplined in purpose.”⁶

New Testament Concept of Family

Among the many concepts that Jesus shared with His followers was a challenge to move their loyalties from their earthly families to their “family in Christ.” Jesus’ statements were challenging for those He spoke to during those days, as they went against firmly held beliefs about familial loyalty in their culture. Hellerman describes how the people in Jesus’ day adhered to “. . . a strong-group culture, the individual is embedded in and draws his personal identity from, the group to which he belongs. And the well-being of the group—not the individual—comes first when a member of the group is faced with life-changing personal decisions.”⁷ This viewpoint differs significantly from the individualistic perspective that most Americans ascribe to. Americans struggle with the idea of placing the “group’s” well-being as a higher priority than their individual interests.

Hellerman continued to explain how families in antiquity viewed their devotion to their families. Hellerman says, “The priority of sibling relations and unswerving family loyalty surfaced as two fundamental characteristics of ancient family systems.”⁸ This idea that sibling

⁵ Rodney Dempsey, “What is God’s Will for My Life?”, in *innovatechurch*, ed. Jonathan Falwell, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008).

⁶ Rodney Dempsey, “What is God’s Will for My Life?”.

⁷ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, (B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition), p. 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

relationships were perceived as being closer than the husband-wife relationship is difficult for Americans to understand. Jesus understood this dynamic in the culture and went on to challenge his followers to be willing to shift their loyalty from their blood relatives to the family of God. Even though this was a tremendously difficult concept for them to embrace, the idea highlights how Jesus expects His followers to relate to each other. They are to view each other as blood relatives and be willing to sacrifice for each other, as they would have done with their biological families. Jesus was affirming the culture and inviting both his earthly followers and current day believers into a new “group.” Hellerman points out that “As Jesus evaluated the cultural institutions of His day, He strongly affirmed the “group comes first” orientation of the society in which He lived. And He did so intentionally.”⁹ Dempsey affirmed this same thought when He shared, “The epistles emphasize a relational community where disciples are developed in the context of body of believers. They discover and use their spiritual gifts to love and serve each other and non-believers. Disciples are developed as the body grows in maturity and as each part does its work (Eph. 4:16).”¹⁰

Importance and the Role of the Holy Spirit

The eighth and ninth attributes that Dempsey proposed speak of the actions of the Holy Spirit in a disciple’s life as well as their willingness to interact with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can indwell all believers concurrently and is active in working to sanctify believers. Beyond the amazing work of regeneration that the Holy Spirit performs at the time of a believer’s salvation, the Spirit guides and teaches disciples as they study God’s Word and interact with others. Lawson emphasized the work of the Spirit when he said,

⁹ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, (B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition), p. 74.

¹⁰ Rodney Dempsey, “What is God’s Will for My Life?”.

While in the body Jesus could be in only one place at a time, but the Comforter could be everywhere present to convince men of sin and of righteousness and of judgment (John 16: 8). His three great offices are to convince men of sin, to show them the way of righteousness, and to warn them of coming judgment. He does this by influencing men's hearts and minds from without, or by coming to dwell within them. Upon those in whom He dwells He bestows one or more of His seven different spiritual gifts.¹¹

The Holy Spirit's ability to teach men has a profound impact. Many can testify to reading the same words of Scripture, yet understanding very different applications of the truth presented as they ponder those words. The Spirit can inform the reader of truth that relates to specific issues the reader is experiencing or has questions about. Lawson reminds readers that "The Holy Spirit can teach men more about Christ in one hour than the greatest preacher can teach them in fifty or even in a hundred years without the Spirit enlightening them."¹²

The early church leaders recognized the vital role the Holy Spirit commanded in a believer's life. It was common for early church leaders to gather with a new believer and to lay hands upon them as they prayed for the new believer to experience the "filling of the Holy Spirit."¹³ The early church believed that the Holy Spirit provided spiritual power, and the believer needed to align themselves with the Holy Spirit to receive this power. Lawson explained that "The early Christian church believed in and prayed for the filling of the Holy Spirit, and this was the secret of its power."¹⁴

In addition to the teaching the Spirit provides, the Spirit also provides direction to the disciple as He confirms in their hearts actions they should take or speaks to them of actions they

¹¹ J. Gilchrist Lawson, *Deeper Experiences of Famous Christians* (Jawbone Digital, Kindle Edition), Kindle Locations 310-313.

¹² Ibid., Kindle Locations 369-370.

¹³ Ibid., Kindle Locations 469-470.

¹⁴ Ibid., Kindle Locations 501-502.

should perform. These divine messages also confirm God's activity in the disciple's life and aid in the growth of their faith in God.

Conclusion

The Great Commission defined activities that Jesus expected His disciples to perform to fulfill His will for their lives. Jesus expected them to "make disciples," which requires the disciples to know what defines a disciple. Over time, this definition has become less apparent in the minds of American Christian church leaders. This paper has outlined ten attributes that give evidence that a person is a disciple, explained how Jesus intended for His disciples to interact with devotion toward Him and with each other, and highlighted the necessity of embracing a relationship with the Holy Spirit, being diligent in learning from Him and taking action on the directives that He provides.

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