Liberty University

**A Research Paper**

**on Historical and Practical Discipleship**

A Paper Submitted to

Dr. Rodney Dempsey,

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of

Historical and Practical Discipleship

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by

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Introduction

For the final submission of your research paper use the information you submitted from part one and expand it to include a 5,000-word research-based paper in current Turabian format that focuses on the historical nature of discipleship throughout church history. The paper must include at least 10 references in current Turabian format in addition to the course textbooks and the Bible. In your paper be sure to include the following:

• The contributions of Guyon, Fenelon, Fox, Bunyan, and Spener related to discipleship models and methods;

• The importance of the reformation and the goals of the reformation as it related to personal discipleship;

• The significance of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the Body of Christ and how that relates to discipleship models and methods; and

• A conclusion that identifies the best or most meaningful discipleship practices from any time period and gives several suggestions on how to apply them to your ministry context.

There is a need for clarity regarding disciple-making in the modern church. Church leaders often use several different descriptions of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. The definitions can certainly be communicated in different ways among different cultures. Still, there should be general agreement that when the concepts are applied to a believer’s life, that believer should exhibit the behaviors of a disciple. A fundamental expectation is that disciples would be able to help others become disciples. The modern church lacks the proliferation of dynamic believers who have been transformed and energized by the Holy Spirit to become adept in helping others experience the same transformation and growth. Across the United States, churches are closing their doors as the local churches appear to be unable to attract and develop new disciples for Christ. Since God remains the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8),[[1]](#footnote-2) the lack of effective disciple-making appears to be related to church leaders losing awareness of what is required to develop a congregation of disciple-making disciples. The early church appeared to have understood these principles and applied them with remarkable results. The early church experienced exponential growth and displaced pagan beliefs throughout the known world at that time.

This paper will examine Scripture to identify the primary passage commanding the church to develop disciples. It will consider how the early church developed disciples in a manner that led to explosive growth during the early centuries after Jesus’ death and resurrection, as well as review the philosophical implications of the church as the Body of Christ and as the Family of God. The paper will conclude by detailing some of the best practices of the church through the ages as they developed disciples.

**The Primary New Testament Passage for Discipleship**

God instructs His followers to disciple new believers throughout Scripture. Three specific passages in Scripture provide the basis for developing disciples in the local church. The first is Matt 22:36-38,[[2]](#footnote-3) often referred to as the Great Commandment. The second passage is a continuation of the first, Matt 22:39-40, and is referred to as The New Commandment. The third passage from Matt 28:28-30, is referred to as the Great Commission. These three passages provide a solid foundation upon which to base a disciple’s life as a devoted follower of Jesus Christ. Stedman describes how the local church can fulfill three primary purposes by teaching the values communicated in these verses. He explains that the church should reflect God’s holiness,[[3]](#footnote-4) reveal God’s glory,[[4]](#footnote-5) and be a witness to Christ.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Great Commandment and the Shema

In Matt 22:36-38, Jesus answered the Pharisees by stating, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” This statement aligned with what the Pharisees and other Jewish teachers would assert as being immensely important. The verse is a quotation of Deut 6:4-5, which states, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” This section of Scripture is part of what is referred to as the “Shema,” which is often used in a morning and evening prayer by those who practice Judaism. It expresses the concept that a faithful believer will have utter devotion to God and that they will live their lives with a singular purpose to serve Him and His will. Given this recognition of purpose, believers should be heavenly-minded and live their lives accordingly. This recognition of purpose should also be evidenced by a lifestyle that is focused on engaging the purpose for their lives that God has revealed to them.

The Shema included Deut 6:6-9 states:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

These verses encourage a believer to actively reflect upon what God has commanded and to seek to follow that direction consistently. The believers should be so immersed in God’s Word that they will come to love that Word, wish to teach the concepts to their children, and be continuously contemplating the Word as they go about their daily lives. The effort is evidence of their devotion to God as they listen and seek direction to serve Him well. The Shema helps a believer to gain clarity concerning God’s sovereignty and leadership in their lives.

New Commandment

Jesus expanded the idea of devotion to God presented in the Shema to describe how believers should relate to those around them. Jesus said in Matt 22:39-40, “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” This assertion declares to believers that how they relate to others was one of the primary purposes that God revealed through the words of the Law and the Prophets that were passed down through the Old Testament.

The Scripture of the Old and New Testaments further defines how believers should behave toward others. Lev 19:17-18 states, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” Similarly, Jesus tells believers in Matt 5:43-45, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” Other verses encourage believers to see others as more important than themselves (Phil 2:3), treat others as they would wish to be treated (Luke 6:31), and to show no discrimination toward others (Gal 3:28).

Great Commission

The third command that Jesus gave to His disciples is recorded in Matt 28:18-20. This command states, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” This command speaks of the sovereignty of Jesus and His authority to set the believer’s purpose. It also gives specific responsibilities to believers. They must actively go forth and share about the relationship they have with God and help others understand God’s invitation to them. The believers were directed to baptize those who accepted the Lordship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus also told believers that He expected them to make disciples who would obey all that He commanded. These disciple-makers would teach them the Great Commandment, the New Commandment, and the Great Commission, as well as the rest of God’s Word. This group of devoted followers would then spread the gospel to all men around the world.

The Primary Passage for New Testament Discipleship

The Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20) is generally considered to be the passage that provides the imperative for disciples to make other disciples. The Great Commandment gives clarity that a disciple should be fully devoted to God and be motivated by their love of God to do as He commands. The New Commandment gives clarity that a disciple should love others and seek to help them enter a loving relationship with God. The Great Commission speaks to the need to make disciples “as they go” and to teach others Jesus’ commands. The Great Commandment and the New Commandment provide the foundation and motivation for a believer to invest their life in the discipleship of others. The Great Commission directive provides an everyday mission to a disciple’s life and should hold a high priority in their life.

**Discipleship as Practice in the First Few Centuries AD**

The churches of the early centuries after Jesus’ death and resurrection worked diligently to expand the Kingdom of God by making disciples. These believers used their close relationships to spread the gospel and to teach others in a trusting environment that provided necessary accountability to each other. 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.”[[6]](#footnote-7)

Medieval believers learned from each other and focused on “right living.” Van Engen stated, “So, for the medieval person, the central concern was on making faith manifest in love.”[[7]](#footnote-8) This focus on living an upright life before God can be viewed as helping entrench the ideas of works-based salvation. Since Christianity had become pervasive in society, Van Engen described that “. . . people tended to take faith for granted. They grew up with it. Everybody they knew was a Christian. So, they concentrated on good works.”[[8]](#footnote-9) They were likely to do questionable actions such as castigating their bodies, go on pilgrimages, and refraining from sexual relations as a demonstration of their intense love for God. Van Engen related, “People in the Middle Ages had a strong sense they were to love God not just with their minds but also with their bodies. By disciplining the body and its passions, they believed they disciplined their souls, pleased God, and prepared themselves to receive grace.”[[9]](#footnote-10)

**Philosophical Implications of Disciple-making Related**

**to the Body of Christ or the Family of God Views**

The apostle Paul described how each disciple was part of the “body of Christ.” Each person was uniquely made and had a specific set of gifts and abilities to serve the body of Christ. This concept is helpful to a believer to learn how to value the way God created and equipped them and provides clarity of how they can be useful to the body of Christ as they serve.

The Body of Christ

The closeness that should exist in the spiritual family provides a fertile ground for believers to serve each other as members of the body of Christ, as well as for training up those who are new to the spiritual family. Those mature believers in the local church can teach those who are younger in the faith as well as demonstrate how to live out a life of holiness practically. These mature folks can help explain how they “think’ about Scripture and answer common questions that arise as a person moves away from secular thinking to a more “Christ-like” mindset.[[10]](#footnote-11)

The gifts of the Spirit are meant to be used in service to the body of Christ and enable believers to be effective in serving others according to Christ’s purpose. Each believer has specific gifts that are given purposefully. The believer is to consider those gifts and how to apply them most effectively to serve others. This challenges the believer to remain focused on serving Christ with those gifts, rather than merely using them to advance the believer’s self-interest. The instruction provided in Phil 2:3-4 reminds the believer, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” The ability to see their fellow believers as a spiritual family provides the motivation to serve others selflessly.[[11]](#footnote-12)

As a believer embraces their relationship with Jesus daily through prayer and meditation, the life-giving relationship that is developed can be expected to “pour out” of the believer as they describe what they are learning and experiencing in that relationship.

Believers have engaged in the practice of gathering to encourage each other and celebrate what God is doing in their midst. They also focus on showing reverence and declaring their love for God as they gather. All these behaviors must be taught to a new believer to aid them in their development as a disciple.

The Family of God

Hellerman explains that the Apostle Paul’s teaching on the concept of “spiritual family” can be grouped into four categories: affective solidarity, family unity, material solidarity, and family loyalty.[[12]](#footnote-13)

Affective solidarity is described as the societal norm that is taught to people regarding how important certain relationships should be in their lives. In the Mediterranean region, children of the same father were expected to be emotionally devoted to each other. Paul used the sibling language of “brothers and sisters” to communicate an expectation of natural devotion between siblings in God’s spiritual family. Family unity describes how siblings should interact with each other. There should be harmony and love between siblings, and Paul referenced this expectation in Eph 4. Material solidary is explained as the willingness to provide resources to each other generously and supportively. Finally, family loyalty was promoted by Paul as he encouraged believers to shift their traditional loyalties to their spiritual family and be committed to this new family in all matters. These new believers changed the known world because of the way they acted. Hellerman points out, “People did not convert to Christianity solely because of what the early Christians believed. They converted because of the way in which the early Christians behaved.”[[13]](#footnote-14)

The disciple-making process is meant to occur within close relationships between believers. These relationships are meant to be like those between blood relatives in families. As Jesus and the apostles described what the Kingdom of God was like, they often described concepts based upon the family relationships that existed in biblical times. The culture expected members of a family to be extremely loyal to each other and to be willing to sacrifice their individual goals for the family’s overall benefit. This strong group identity aligns with Jesus’ statement in John 13:35, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

**Best Practices of the New Testament, Early, and Middle Ages Churches**

A study of the development of the church from the birth of churches after Pentecost through the Middle Ages provides the opportunity to identify key behaviors in the churches during each of these time periods. It is interesting to see how the outside pressures of the culture influenced behaviors in the churches as they developed ways to cope with a changing world as the body of Christ.

New Testament Churches

The New Testament Churches were established during a time when familial closeness allowed the Word of God to take hold in family groups and to quickly spread to those to whom they were related. In addition, the willingness of the people to expand their family devotion to those that were of the family of God allowed them to quickly penetrate other family groups. The spread of the gospel in the ancient world was unprecedented, and the people were motivated to spread the Good News about their Lord and Savior to those they loved.

It was common in this time for people to memorize information through rote repetition. Many Jews had the Pentateuch memorized and were able to share this with their Gentile brothers and sisters. As the people of God memorized these books, they were able to relate them to what they learned as the Apostles’ epistles circulated and were memorized as well. Having the Word of God hidden in their hearts enabled them to explain to others who God was and how He had acted on their behalf.

Early Churches

The churches of the Early Church Age grew in a period in which Christianity was becoming more established. There were periods of persecution as pagan leaders sought to keep their own religions preeminent, but the Christians’ love for each other was a defining characteristic that triumphed over the empty pagan practices. Over time, secular leaders recognized the authority of the church, and church leaders became trusted advisors in their nations. The Early Church was hungry to know more of God and to validate His Word. During this time, the Canon was established, and people were taught from a consistent source that was recognized as the Word of God.

The early church spread quickly because they embraced the teachings of the Apostle Paul and took to heart their need to operate as “family” with each other. Hellerman shared, “The movement attracted people because of the Christians’ behavior toward one another and toward those outside the church. Yes, Christian beliefs were appealing. But for Julian and his pagan peers, the way in which Christians treated one another and their pagan neighbors was the more persuasive explanation for the growth of the early church.”[[14]](#footnote-15)

The church focused on teaching key behaviors to believers. Faith in God, love for all men, and seeking to live a holy life were raised to high levels of importance by church leaders.

Middle Age Churches

During the Middle Ages, the church and the state had merged. Many of the secular rulers sat in seats of religious authority as well. This merger was not good for the people of God as the rulers often held positions simply to retain power for themselves. The culture in Christian lands had reached a place where all people were assumed to be believers and were required to be part of the church. Tithes to the church were mandated and were not freewill gifts. Sadly, the church evidenced corruption, and sins could be absolved by paying the priest for indulgences.

The people of God focused on disciplines during this time. They felt that faith was demonstrated by action. Some of their actions seem strange to the modern believer, but the idea that a believer’s actions provide evidence of an inner change is biblical and has much merit. They sought to be caring and gracious to those in need, showing evidence of God’s love flowing through them. The idea of solitude with God, self-sacrifice in service to others, and diligently seeking to please God by serving His kingdom are valid practices that serve us well in current times.

Saint Patrick is one example of an exceptional Middle Ages believer. He overcame significant trials in his life and responded by expanding his efforts to serve those around Him. As he worked to serve the people of Ireland, he developed a group of people who operated with four principles.[[15]](#footnote-16) They did ministry as a team. They believed in a holistic faith and lived and worked in a missional community. They also embraced the idea of biblical hospitality.

**Contributions of Guyon, Fenelon, Fox, Bunyan, and Spener**

The contributions of Guyon, Fenelon, Fox, Bunyan, and Spener related to discipleship models and methods

**Importance and the Goals of the Reformation Related to Personal Discipleship**

The importance of the reformation and the goals of the reformation as it related to personal discipleship

**Bonhoeffer’s Contributions to Discipleship Models and Methods**

The significance of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the Body of Christ and how that relates to discipleship models and methods

**Potential Implementations of Historical Discipleship Practices to The Crossing Church**

A conclusion that identifies the best or most meaningful discipleship practices from any time period and gives several suggestions on how to apply them to your ministry context

Conclusion

The people of God have sought to express their love for God by diligently applying what He commanded in His Word. In the New Testament Church, they embraced the ideal of seeing other believers as blood relatives and loving them like family. This expression of acceptance and love ignited the spread of the gospel throughout the region around the Mediterranean Sea. The Early Church continued to reach others by demonstrating love as they pursued compiling and clarifying God’s Word into what is known as the Bible today. This thirst to know God aided the believers in this time and helped to establish doctrine to the believers in the church. The Middle Ages saw the expansion of the church as a seat of power. This power allowed the church to have a significant presence, which helped to preserve the church as it was assaulted by other religions (i.e., Islam). Unfortunately, many religious leaders were not people of faith and sought their positions for the power they provided. This led to corruption in the church, which serves to highlight how the commands of God differ from the impure ways of man. The believers of this time developed a mindset of devotion and discipline in service to God, which helped to show non-believers what selfless love looked like.

The believers of these times kept love as the firm foundation of their faith. They loved believers as if they were family, which evidences unity. They kept their hope in God rather than human institutions, which gave them stability in times of uncertainty. Believers are encouraged to abide in faith, hope, and love in 1 Cor 13:13, but love is declared to be the greatest of these. This idea of embracing love as the primary motivation and tool in developing disciples will serve disciple-makers well as they consider the examples of the believers of these times.

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1. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ray C. Stedman, *Body Life: The Book That Inspired a Return to the Church's Real Meaning and Mission*, (Discovery House, 1995), Kindle Edition, Kindle Location 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid., Kindle Location 318. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid., Kindle Location 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. “Body of Christ”, (AllAboutGod.com, 2002), Access on July 18, 2020 from https://www.allaboutgod.com/body-of-christ.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family* (B&H Publishing Group, 2009), Kindle Edition, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Ibid., 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family* (B&H Publishing Group, 2009), Kindle Edition, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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