

## **The Gap Between Comfortable Membership and Genuine Discipleship Within the Church**

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**ABSTRACT:** According to the New Testament, the Church of Jesus Christ is a glorious church. Yet the glory of the Church has not always been fully reflected by the local Churches throughout history. Because of this, many churches are harshly criticized, they are considered irrelevant, obsolete, and are coldly rejected by many. Unfortunately, although there is no doubt that Holy Scripture is essential to spiritual growth, there are many believers who do not know even the most elementary biblical doctrines, although they have been members of the Church for years. There are many believers who are satisfied with a comfortable membership without being authentic disciples. The solution for the outcome of this state consists in a transformation of the Churches without changing the biblical message and without lowering the standards, the ideals, and without losing the purpose which is presented in the Sacred Scripture. To become mature Christians, authentic disciples, believers need biblical teaching to give them theological stability, need profound relationships to satisfy, and need to see people coming to Christ as a result of a personal testimony.

**KEYWORDS:** Church, discipleship, membership, Christian, maturity

Feeling disappointed, especially with the continuous numerical increase of his confession on the setting of a poor Christian life, Findley Edge (1994, 9) said:

At present Churches are going through a period of unprecedented popularity and prosperity. Such a situation would normally be the basis of optimism and

joyful enjoyment. It's weird, but things are not like that. Many religious leaders and many mature Christians show a growing feeling of concern and anxiety. In spite of the impressive buildings of the Churches, despite the increasing number of members and despite many activities taking place in the Church, something is wrong with modern Christianity, something is wrong with it. It is in danger of losing its life and dynamism.

God's true knowledge calls for the call to discipline to be taken seriously. The answer to this call is nothing more than an act of obedience. Speaking of this, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2009, 57) emphasized the following: "Discipleship is an attachment to Christ, and because He exists, there must be discipleship. [...] A Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without Jesus Christ. Discipleship without Jesus Christ is the choice of one's own way."

The Bible highlights not only the message of our faith, but also the method by which faith is passed on to future generations. Note that they cannot be disciples through mass production methods, looking for the shortest path to maturity. In this sense, Robert Coleman (1964, 37) indicates, "Every man must decide what results he desires for his work: the transient applause of human recognition, or the transmission of one's own transformation and spiritual maturity into the lives of a few well-chosen people, to carry on the work after we are no longer here."

Believing in God does not mean, therefore, to be careless and wait for the realization of miracles, but to go with him on the path of discipleship. Note that "Discipleship, as an attachment of the Person of Jesus Christ, places the disciple under the law of Christ, that is, under the cross" (Bonhoeffer 2009, 84). At the same time, "Jesus' call to disciples puts the disciple face to face with his own individuality. [...] Christ wants to separate man from the others, he must only see the One who called him" (p. 91).

Disciple training is not happening at random, it is not limited to a period of time and it is not only addressed to a certain category of people. Moreover, Greg Ogden (2012, 11) said, "Books do not form disciples. God works through people who live the life of Christ in order to nurture those who desire maturity." When it comes to the Church, it must be understood that it is not an institution, a building but a living organism, it is the body of Christ. To be in Christ means to be in the Church, and to be in the Church presupposes being in Christ. Therefore, Bonhoeffer (2009, 219) concluded, "No one can become a new man unless he enters the community through the Body of Christ." Whoever seeks to become a new man on his own remains the same: becoming a new man is to come into the community, to become a member of the Body of Christ."

Strengthening a believer means, in the end, to help him stand firm in his faith, to be able to stand alone even when attacked. An authentic disciple is one who puts Christ first in his life, above all other relationships and even his own desires. An authentic disciple is one who has lovingly and fellowship relationships with other believers. This aspect of discipleship is so important that Christ made of it an actual commandment. (Love is the criterion that people around you can figure out whether a particular person is or not Christ's disciple.)

Remember that in Christ we no longer live our own lives, but Christ lives His life in us. Therefore, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2009, 233-234) said:

In the community, the other is no longer seen as a slave or loose man or woman, but as a member of the Body of Jesus. Of course, this does not mean that the slave is no longer a slave, and the man is no longer a man. On the contrary, from now on, we will no longer address a member of the community in view of his status as a Jew, Greek, free man or slave. Such a thought must cease. We report to each other only from the perspective of our belonging to the Body of Christ, therefore, through the fact that we all became one in Him.

Unfortunately, the lives of many are characterized by sporadic and superficial relationships. The prevailing idea is that of personal fulfillment based on what each thinks is right for him. "Even fellowship opportunities degenerate into social contacts that differ little from world meetings. Fellowship, or *koinonia*, in the biblical sense, is more than coffee and cakes and more than the establishment of purely human relations" (Getz 1992, 232). It is often forgotten that:

The one who belongs to the Body of Christ is freed from the world, called out of it, and must become visible to the world not only by participating in the divine service and the community, but also by the new fellowship of the fraternal life. When the world despises a brother, the Christian loves him and serves him; when the world hits him, the Christian helps and comforts him; when the world dishonors him and insults him, the Christian forsakes his honor in exchange for his brother's shame. When the world is looking for benefits, it gives up, when the world exploits it, it succumbs, when the world is oppressed, goes and raises the oppressed. If the world refuses to do justice, the Christian pursues mercy, if the world is shrouded in lies, he opens his mouth for the mute and confesses the truth. For the sake of his brother, whether he is Jewish or Greek, a slave or a freeman, strong or weak, of a chosen race, the Christian renounces any fellowship with the world, because he serves the fellowship of the Body of Jesus Christ. As part of this fellowship,

he cannot remain hidden from the world, but is called to go out and follow Christ (Bonhoeffer 2009, 234-235).

Formation of disciples is an essential aspect of the Church. "If I say I am a disciple, then I say something about the quality of my life as a follower of Jesus. To be a Christian means to recognize what Christ has done for me, to be a disciple means to recognize what I do for Christ" (Ogden 2012, 7).

Responding to the question: *What is the training of disciples?*, Greg Ogden (2012, 17) said: "Disciple training is a relationship in which we go along with other disciples in a process in which we encourage, support and encourage each other to grow in maturity in Christ. Also, discipleship training means training to teach others."

In other words, it can be said that apprenticeship training is possible by assuming responsibility, by developing relationships based on trust, by accepting divine guidance and applying the Word to personal life. Disciple training is an expression of the fact that you care about those around you. It is important to note that mass disciples cannot be formed, but only through a personal and intense concern. Therefore, A.B. Bruce (1971, 13), "The careful and sustained education of the disciples made the Teacher's influence upon them permanent and that the Kingdom should be founded on profound and indestructible beliefs in the minds of some people, not on the moving sand of superficial thoughts in the minds of many people".

The focus of the Lord's work on a small group did not limit its influence, on the contrary, it extended it. Robert Coleman (1964, 21) highlights this as follows: "[Jesus] was concerned not with programs by which he could save the crowd, but with people whom the multitude would follow".

When he speaks of what a disciple is, Greg Ogden (2012, 23) emphasized the following: "An disciple is the man who responds by faith and obedience to the call of grace of Jesus Christ. We become disciples through a life-long process and by which we die to ourselves, allowing Jesus Christ to live in us".

Writing from a perspective of a comprehensive understanding of history and culture, Francis Schaeffer (1970, 67) pointed out that: "In a time of rapid change, such as ours, a period of complete overthrowing as ours, making absolutes from non-absolutes guarantees both isolation and the death of the institutionalized organized Church". Discipleship is, after all, one of the most strategic ways of having a continual personal work. It can be made anytime, regardless of age. Discipleship is one of the ways in which the whole Church can be mobilized to engage in ministry. Discipleship will provide the local Church with spiritually mature leadership, in the context of too many

warming the churches of the Churches, contented with a comfortable membership. In this respect, Henrichsen (1992, 58) emphasized that:

Implementing a vision of training, multiplying disciples is the only way to fulfill the command of Christ. Other works and approaches can amplify it, but I cannot replace it. Discipleship is the opportunity we have to reach the endless wealth of God. It is the chance to consecrate our lives to a meaningful goal, not mediocrity.

For the Christian, being an apprentice does not mean to do God a favor, but to enjoy himself of this favor. There are certainly a number of factors that have a negative influence on what we would like to make disciples of. Gene Warr (1978, 90-95) presents some of these factors as follows: the lack of interest in those we disciple; lack of personal contact with those we disciple; lack of obedience to their problems; lack of thinking and planning for them; lack of prayer for them and with them. Making disciples means, in the end, to help one faithful to become a 100% disciple of Christ. In this process of discipleship, the personal relationship with the disciple is thus vital. (In the process of apprenticeship it is necessary to establish that type of relationships in which personal and spiritual issues can be freely discussed. It offers the opportunity to serve the person as a whole.)

In his *Excellence* book, John W. Gardner says:

We often make the mistake of believing that happiness necessarily implies convenience, fun, quietness, a state in which all our desires are satisfied. But most do not find happiness in this state of lightness/ease, but in the effort to achieve a significant goal. A person devoted to a cause never achieves all of the proposed goals. His life is a permanent pursuit of targets, some of which remain untouched. He may often be tense, overwhelmed by thoughts and fatigue. He does not have the so-called “happiness of the stories”, but he has found a more meaningful happiness (Henrichsen 1992, 153).

Making disciples consider man in his totality, not just his spiritual needs. In this way, discipleship is effective. Even though the process of discipleship starts slowly, long-term spiritual multiplication encompasses more people than adding through evangelism in the same timeframe. Another advantage of multiplication of disciples through intensive training is that it provides for the formation of good, mature spiritual believers. It can be said that the formation of disciples begins with evangelism and is concretized in a proper relationship with Jesus Christ. But as Hession remarked, “The winning of souls and their apprenticeship requires a broken heart. Our dry and cold sermons,

beautiful songs and prayers without tears, leave nothing but the soul where we find it" (Hession, 1974, 37).

The one who makes disciples knows that his responsibility continues until his disciple becomes a spiritually mature believer and able to reproduce. The one who makes disciples knows how well he instructed his disciple when he sees the disciples of his disciple by teaching others.

Considering all of this, one may say that one of the most important needs for fulfilling the Great Commission is Christian motivation. If the Christian does not have the necessary motivation, he will not do much. A key way to motivate those involved in discipleship is to be a good listener. Only after you know what their position is, you can plan where to go with them.

"Today, as always," says Walter A. Henrichsen (1992, 74-75), "Jesus needs disciples, not just Christians on Sundays". It means engaging in what the Bible calls "spiritual warfare," is to fight the powers of darkness for the souls of men. So often, however, it is desired to obtain the promised results of God without the manifestation of the willingness to pay the price of the service.

Before anyone could act on the promises of God, Henrichsen said, he must fulfill two conditions: to have conviction and vision. If you find a person who is convinced that they have to make disciples without knowing how, you will finally see that he will find a method. But give the man all the methodology in the world, and if he does not have the conviction, he will eventually stop making disciples, no matter how careful you have taught him. The person who has methods without conviction is like a cut bouquet of flowers: impressive on sight, but it will not last (Henrichsen 1992, 137).

In the work of training the new in the faith, one of the goals should also be to help the disciple to discover and cultivate his gifts and not merely to be content with being members of a Church. It is known that workers are the product of a discipleship that takes place in the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The test of any discipleship, however, does not consist in what can be seen now or in what the statistics say, but in the efficiency with which the work continues into the next generation. Thus, in order for discipleship to be effective: "The soul must be awake, must have the enlightened mind, the broken self, the purified conscience and the renewed zeal" (Wilkes, 1995).

In order to reduce as much as possible the gap between a comfortable membership and genuine discipleship within a Church, it is very important to take into account the following aspects:

- ✦ As more and more members of the Church are disciples, the spiritual quality of the Church will increase.
- ✦ As more and more members of the Church are disciples, the impact on the world will be greater.
- ✦ As more and more members of the Church are disciples, the unity of the Church will be ever closer.
- ✦ As more and more members of the Church are disciples, believers will be more willing to take responsibility for the fulfillment of the work in the Church.
- ✦ As more and more members of the Church are disciples, the Church will be able to engage in sending workers to other places to fulfill the Great Commission.

Discipleship must therefore be an indispensable component of the Christian ministry so that the Christian is no longer satisfied with a comfortable membership within the Church.

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