

MINISTRY OF DISCIPLESHIP





Lecture 5 The Epistles and Church History

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THE NEW TESTAMENT CULTURAL MILIEU

- During the Hellenistic period, the time when the New Testament was written, the trend toward a variety of relationships associated with the term *mathētēs* continued.
- While learners and pupils in an academic setting could still be designated *mathētai*, disciples or adherents of various kinds of great masters became the more common usage.
- Correspondingly, as the “learning” emphasis decreased, the focus shifted increasingly to the “relationship” between the master and the disciple.



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Implications

- The historical development of the term mathētēs is important for comprehending the way in which people would have understood its meaning at the time of the writing of the New Testament.
- A mathētēs was a committed follower of a great master, although the type of master ranged from philosopher to great thinker, master of the past to religious figures.
- The commitment assumed the development of a sustained relationship between the follower and the master, and the relationship extended to imitation of the conduct of the master.



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Implications

- This is the notion of the word understood by a Greek audience at the time of the writing of the New Testament.
- This broad range of disciples was important to recognize once Christianity moved into the Hellenistic world and the world of the Diaspora.
- As the apostles went into Greek-speaking regions, they encountered people who already had some kind of conception of the meaning of “disciple.”



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DISCIPLESHIP IN THE EPISTLES

- The term, “disciple” virtually disappears when we enter in the writings of the Epistles. Some of the explanations given are the following:
- While the word mathētēs was appropriate to use in Jewish circles, when the church spread into the Hellenistic world it would not have been appropriate.
- They suggest that the term implied, in common Greek usage, a student from one of the philosophical schools.
- Therefore, the writers of the epistles avoided it since they did not want to give rise to the idea that Christianity was simply a philosophical movement.



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DISCIPLESHIP IN THE EPISTLES

- For this reason, the word "disciple" did not make its way into the church in the Greek speaking world and declined in usage in primitive Christianity.
- A wide-spread explanation for the absence of disciple terminology says that other terms, more appropriate to the post-ascension conditions, replaced "disciple" within the Christian community.
- Although "disciple" was still an important term in Acts for describing the relationship of believers to Jesus, other terms expressed more appropriately the relationship of believers to the risen Lord, to each other, and to society.



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DISCIPLESHIP IN THE EPISTLES

- However, we do not see strong evidence that the term “disciple” was actually dropped from usage.
- The chronology of usage in Acts in the very places where the churches of the Epistles and Revelation were located overlaps the origin and development of these churches.
- The converts in these areas were readily and casually called disciples for quite some time, even well into the second century.



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Implications

- The emphasis of the term “disciple” as in the Gospels and the early church of Acts, primarily indicates a disciple's intimate relationship with the Lord.
- The Epistles still demonstrate the concept of discipleship through related terminology - e.g., believers, brothers/sisters, servants, church, “new creation”.



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Related Metaphors and Teachings on Discipleship

- a. Following Jesus (1 Peter 2:21; 1 Thess. 1:6).
- b. Bearing the cross (Gal. 2:20; Rom. 8:13).
- c. Abiding in Jesus' words (1 John 2:3-6; cf. 3:24; 4:13-15; 2 John 9).
- d. Loving other believers (1 John 4:4:16b, 19-21).
- e. Bearing Fruit (Eph 5:18-22; Phil. 1:11; Col. 1:10; Gal. 5:22-23).
- f. Light of the world (Eph. 5:8-10; 1 Thess. 5:6; 1 Jn 1:5-7).
- g. Prayer (Eph. 6:18-20; Col. 1:9; 1 Tim 2:1 2; 1 Thess. 5:17; James 5:13, 16).



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Related Metaphors and Teachings on Discipleship

- h. Righteousness (Rom 6; 7:4; 13:9).
- i. Walking (Gal. 5:16; Eph. 5:1-2; 1 John 2:3-6).
- j. Shepherd and Sheep (Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 5:2-4).
- k. Branches (2 Cor. 5:17; Phil. 2:5-10; Eph. 5:1-2).
- l. Imitation (1 Cor 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess. 3:7,9; 1 Cor 4:16; Phil 3:17).



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DISCIPLESHIP AND THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

- After the majority of Apostles have passed from the scene (esp. A.D. 70-150), the writings of the early church fathers provide significant and often unparalleled glimpses of and insights into the life of Christians and the Christian movement.
- At the time when the apostolic fathers wrote, the churches they addressed had been established for at least a half-century.
- The early wave of conversions had passed for many of these churches, a mounting danger from heresy was exerting itself upon them and increasing persecution from the Roman empire was threatening their very existence.



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DISCIPLESHIP AND THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

- Ignatius (Bishop of Antioch 35 – 107 AD), indicates that a person enters into and advances along the life of discipleship through conversion and Christian growth. When pagans "find God" they "become disciples" (Ign. Eph. 10.1.4).
- Once a person becomes a disciple, growth in discipleship transpires by living one's life in accordance with the characteristics of Christ and His teachings (Ign. Mag. 10.1.3). He just as strongly emphasizes that endurance in the life of discipleship is the proof of belief (Ign. Magn. 9.1.1-6).



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DISCIPLESHIP AND THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

- Discipleship in the apostolic fathers is clearly developmental.
- Although a Christian becomes a disciple through conversion, the life of a disciple is not a static phenomenon.
- Discipleship means growth and progress toward the goal of becoming more like Jesus.
- During this time of persecution if persons were charged with being a Christian, they could simply deny the name of Jesus and they would be set free. Those who continued to claim the name of Jesus demonstrated the reality of their faith.
- This was the ultimate demonstration that they were true followers, their vindication of faithfulness to the Name, to the reality of the Christian life, to Christian ministry.



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DISCIPLESHIP AND THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

- Discipleship and imitation converge in Ignatius' thinking (See also, Clement and Polycarp).
- Discipleship implies devotion to Christ and following His pattern.
- Imitation emphasizes the pattern but assumes the devotion. “Allow me to be an imitator of the suffering of my God. If anyone has Him within himself, let him understand what I long for and sympathize with me, knowing what constrains me” (Ign. Rom. 6.3.1; cf. 1 Pet 2:21).



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DISCIPLESHIP AND THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

- Discipleship and imitation also merge in relationships between believers. Believers are to provide an example of godliness for pagans to follow (Ign. Eph. 10.1.4), and believers are to learn from one another (Ign. Rom. 3.1.2).
- The author of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* suggests that in following the example of another believer one is said to be a disciple of that person (Mart. Pol. 22.2.1).



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THE CATECHUMENATE

- The earliest education program for the church was the Catechumenate, meaning “to teach” or “instruct”, or in the passive, “to listen.”
- This was designed for the purpose of educating adults prior to joining the church through baptism.
- The goal of the catechumenate was to take new converts through a process of initiation into the church family. By the 2nd Century AD, a defined process of catechumenate was in place.
- There were essentially four stages.



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THE CATECHUMENATE

- Stage 1 – Preliminaries or entrance
 - Entrance was not granted immediately. There was a period of probation so the church could determine whether the candidate had experienced conversion.
 - Conversion manifested itself in a changed lifestyle.
 - Mentors or “godparents” were often assigned to candidates.



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- Stage 2 – Catechesis period
 - This typically lasted between 2-3 years. This involved scriptural, theology, and moral instruction within a class or private setting. One of the major sources of instruction was The Didache.
 - If a candidate excelled during this stage, the time of their baptism could be accelerated.
 - The life of the candidates continued to be monitored for moral and ethical uprightness and Christlike attributes.



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- Stage 3 – Competentes or election
 - This involved advanced study in doctrine and tradition and took place usually in the second or third year of training.
 - Before entrance into this stage the candidate would be examined regarding moral living. These were known as “scrutinies”.
 - This was the final stage before entering into advanced training for baptism which often meant as much as three hours of study a day for seven weeks.



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- Stage 4 – Baptismal Period
 - This period appears to coincide with the week prior to Easter Sunday.
 - On the Thursday of that week the candidates would perform ritual baths.
 - On Friday and Saturday, they would fast.
 - The night prior to Easter, they engaged in a prayer vigil throughout the night and the memorization of the Apostle’s Creed.
 - It also involved a “suntasso”, where candidates made a covenant to commit themselves to Christ and the readiness to obey his command.
 - They would then be baptized and formally joined the community of believers.



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DISCIPLESHIP AS MARTYRDOM

- While Ignatius indicates the necessity of conversion and Christian growth, he introduces martyrdom into the realm of discipleship.
 - The Christian life is a process that will be completed only at death and union with Christ.
 - The vindication of our Christian life and ministry happens when we stand before the Lord.
- Some later church fathers misunderstood the apostolic fathers' attitude towards martyrdom, as a special calling towards suffering and sainthood.
- Some also misunderstood the radical commitment to be confined to the spiritually elite within the church.



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Historical Summary

- The role of discipleship over the course of history is long and varied.
- Throughout the centuries, it has included catechisms, the sacraments, the role of worship and the community of believers, to the nature of accountability and the role of the Holy Spirit.
- It is only when the church is rooted in the Great Commission that the priority of discipleship as defined in the Great Commission has the most impact, socially, culturally, and spiritually.