

Christian discipleship - What is it?

The Greek word translated "disciple" means "follower." A disciple was a person who invested their life and time learning from someone and then spreading that person's teachings to others.

In the New Testament, the last words of Jesus encompass the essential aspects of discipleship. In what Christians call the Great Commission, we read "Jesus came and said to them, '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 of 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'" (Matthew 28:18-20).

The main command in this Great Commission is to "make disciples." Three specific parts are given. First, a disciple is a person willing to "go" make disciples of others. The early followers of Jesus boldly taught the message of the risen Jesus, often facing intense persecution in the process. Yet within a century, churches had emerged across the entire Mediterranean area.

Second, disciples challenge those they encounter to be baptized. Baptism represents acceptance of Christ and a commitment to follow His teachings. While baptism is not what saves a person, it is the public confession of allegiance to Christ and willingness to enter into Christian discipleship.

Third, a disciple teaches others the way of Jesus. While only some believers are gifted in teaching, all believers are called to share what they know about Jesus with others growing in their knowledge of Christ.

An important early example of this way of making disciples is found in the summary of the first church in Acts 2:42-47. Rather than a solely academic process, discipleship involved a holistic approach that included relationship building, financial giving, prayer, learning, worship, and every area of life.

We read, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

And all that believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any have need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Also important is the impact this first church had on its community. Because of its focus on Christian discipleship, we are told new people were saved on a daily basis. As it has been said, true Christian discipleship is the best form of outreach.

Christian discipleship is much more than a program or series of steps. Rather, it is a continual process of growth. A person commits his or her entire life to Jesus and becomes dedicated to learning His ways while also going, sharing, and teaching this way of life to others.