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Because Context Matters

Is “Discipleship” Dead?

Part V: “Being a First-Century Disciple”

Trying to be a disciple of Jesus is not the same thing as training to be His disciple.

- Bruce Demarest

A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.

- Jesus in Luke 6:40

Continuity We have been exploring whether our Westernized notions of “discipleship” need to die as a necessary first step in biblically (re)discovering what a disciple of Jesus is and how one is made. Three months ago we treated Western “discipleship” as a patient presenting symptoms of anemia. Then we looked at the consequences of using the words “evangelism” and “discipleship” in place of Jesus’ words *make disciples*. Last month we asked if our paradigm for *the priesthood of ALL believers* is big enough for effective *disciple-making*. This month we examine the essential attributes of a first-century disciple in the Rabbi-disciple dynamic.

It’s Obvious, Right? Should we assume that we all know what a disciple (not a convert or a believer) of Jesus looks like? Are we all on the same page with respect to what it means to make disciples? Over the last decade as I have had the opportunity to dialogue with pastors, para-church ministry personnel and an occasional seminary professor, I posed this question: *What are some of the essential attributes of a disciple of Jesus?* As we will see in this Reflection, there are at least eight attributes. In the past ten years, the best answer I have received is three of the eight. Typically I get just one attribute. That response pattern begs the following question: If we are not clear what the essential attributes of a disciple of Jesus are, can we still be clear about what we are trying to make?

What is a Disciple? When Jesus said *go and make disciples*, it was a Jew speaking to other Jews in a Semitic dialect. As such, those words had a very specific (and timeless) meaning and embodied a well-known paradigm that first-century Jewish listeners well understood. Since then, those words have been translated into Greek, then Latin, and more than a thousand years later into the constraints of the English language. To more fully understand what Jesus said, we first need to disconnect from our traditional Hellenistic understanding of those words, e.g. coaching and mentoring, and ask how the Jews who first heard those words would have understood them. Only then are we in a position to ask what those words mean for our discipling efforts today.

The Journey How a young boy became a disciple of an esteemed Rabbi in the First Century is helpful context. It all begins when five-year old boys start attending their local *Bet Midrash* – synagogue school – to memorize the OT Scriptures. After the Pentateuch, the amount of the Writings, Wisdom literature, Historical books, and Prophetic books that were memorized is subject to debate. But one thing is clear. The issue in the Gospels for disciples of Jesus is never: What does God’s Word say? They all knew what it said. The only issue was: What does it mean? Today’s Western malady is very different. The majority of “church” people are surprisingly shallow on what God’s Word even says.

The First of Three “Cuts” After eight years of memorization, the local school (lower case “r”) rabbis huddle and decide which of their 13-year old students are worthy to continue studying the wisdom of the sages – all that extra-biblical interpretation that has accumulated over the Torah – for the next two years. Only a select few are chosen to continue while the rest are dismissed with the phrase *go back to the professions of your fathers*.

After two more years of wisdom-of-the-sages memorization, the local rabbis again huddle and repeat this winnowing process. Now another “cut” is made and an even more select few are chosen to continue, this time to learn debate, argumentation and questioning, while the others are dismissed to *go back to the profession of your fathers*. To use a contemporary analogy, the only ones left after age fifteen are the best of the valedictorians! Then from ages 15-17, the select few still in this process work on what we today might call their apologetic skills. At the end of those two years, the local rabbis caucus one more time and decide who of the seventeen-year olds are worthy to now travel with an esteemed (capital “R”) Rabbi. To continue our contemporary analogy, we are now down to the Rhodes Scholars. Of these few still left and deemed worthy, the local rabbis would advise the student’s father: *He needs to walk with a Rabbi*.

Selecting a Rabbi to Approach There were a number of esteemed Rabbis in the First Century. The issue for this small number of “chosen” students and their fathers was: Which Rabbi to approach? Each Rabbi has his own way of interpreting God’s Word. Some took the Torah literally. Others viewed it from the perspective of the Spirit of the Torah. Other Rabbis had hybrid approaches. And since a disciple is going to be bound for the rest of his days by what his Rabbis believes to be true, it was important to pick the Rabbi very carefully!

Approaching a Rabbi Once it is clear to the father and his son which Rabbi they wanted to approach, there ensued a time of uncertainty. No esteemed Rabbi is going to immediately say “yes” to such a request because this potential disciple may not be worthy enough. The purpose of a Rabbi in this culture is to create little rabbis who can eventually become just like him. So the Rabbi will walk with this prospective disciple for a period of time quizzing, debating, and testing him until he determines whether or not the candidate is worthy enough to join his *yeshiva* (learning community). If he accepts the student, the Rabbi will summon the father and in the presence of his son utter those cherished words: *Follow me*, which means, *come and be with me and submit to my authoritative teaching*. Hearing those *follow me* words is the fulfillment of a decade of hopes and dreams. In our 21st-century culture, little boys grow up progressively dreaming of becoming a fireman, a teacher, a baseball player, or maybe an astronaut. But in this first-century observant Jewish culture, most boys/young men dreamt about being the disciple of an esteemed Rabbi. Hearing those cherished *follow me* words, these dreams and desires were finally realized.

The Role of the Rabbi Every first-century Jew knew that the Scriptures had authority over all aspects of life. God may have been a mystery to them, but behavior was not. Furthermore, it was scrupulous behavior, not the condition of your heart that defined a “righteous” person. Thus, many Jews had a **desire to honor God** by doing all the right things. In the world of Pharisaism, Rabbis were the teachers who had been given the authoritative role to interpret God’s Word for the living of a righteous life – defining what behavior would or would not please God.

Willing Submission to Authority If a Rabbi ultimately agreed to a would-be-disciple’s request, and invited him into his *yeshiva* (learning community), the new disciple agreed to **totally submit** to the Rabbi’s authority in all areas of interpreting the Scriptures for his life. This was a cultural given for all observant Jewish young men – something each truly wanted to do. As a result, each disciple came to a rabbinic relationship with a desire and a willingness to surrender to the authority of God’s Word as interpreted by his Rabbi’s view of Scripture.

Wrestling with the Word of God *Yeshivas*, or groups of disciples intensely dialoging over an aspect of life and Scripture’s claim on it, was a standard part of rabbinic teaching methodology. Studying their Rabbi’s view of Scripture and **wrestling with the texts** to comprehend God’s way for the conduct of their life was the main priority of a disciple and the *yeshiva* experience. The issue was not what God’s Word said (they all knew what it said); rather, what it meant and how it was to be lived out in the minutiae of daily life.

Real Life Questions Life questions were the causative factors in searching the Scriptures for authoritative direction. For example, everyone knew about the broad “no work” injunction regarding the Sabbath. But how should that command be lived out in specific terms? For example, *May I light a candle on the Sabbath?* Or, *How many candles may I light on the Sabbath?* A real-life question regarding marriage might be, *Can I divorce my wife if...* Or tax collectors could wonder, *If I know my taxes are going to oppress our people, should I pay them?* The Rabbi would authoritatively address such daily practical questions concerning righteous living and that response was understood as coming through Scripture as defined and interpreted by the Rabbi.

As part of this how-should-we-live interactive process, the disciples would debate various rabbinic interpretations of the texts pertaining to such issues. This might involve weeks of dialogue and debates, for the Rabbis were in no hurry to resolve these issues and questions. However, when the rabbi ultimately did declare his authoritative interpretation on an issue, all further debate ceased. His declared interpretation was now known and therefore **binding** on his disciples’ lives for the rest of their days. As such, the rabbi was the matrix, the filter, the grid, through which every life issue flowed and was viewed.

Transparency Unlike many of our contemporary “discipleship” approaches,” there was no curriculum or agenda for this multi-year discipling experience. Rather it was a **continual, daily, relational living experience** where either the Rabbi would ask questions of the disciple as he closely observed the disciple’s daily life, or the disciple would initiate a discussion by raising an issue or asking a question based on some aspect of his life.

In the dynamics of this **intimate** discipling community, all of a disciple’s **daily life was observed** by the Rabbi. A disciple would expect the Rabbi’s consistent and persistent question, *why did you do that?* The emphasis was always on behavior formation, not just the imparting of wisdom and related interpretive information. In this interactive manner, the Rabbis functioned to clear up gray areas of understanding and difficult areas of textual interpretation for their disciples. By always asking questions, the Rabbis concentrated on **developing discernment** in the mind of the disciple, not imparting “how to” formulas. Notions of “three principles of prayer” or “four steps to prosperity” would be abhorrent to a first-century Rabbi.

Emulation While not overtly required, disciples invariably had a **deep desire to emulate** their Rabbi. This often included imitating how their rabbi ate, observed the Sabbath, what he liked and disliked, as well as his mannerisms, prejudices and preferences. Some disciples would go to extreme lengths to try to imitate their Rabbi. The story is told of one disciple who so wanted to emulate his Rabbi in all ways that he hid in the Rabbi’s bedchamber. That way he would be better able to emulate with his own future wife how the Rabbi was intimate with his wife.

It may be helpful to take this desire to emulate a Rabbi and put it into a contemporary context. It’s as if a new disciple, Eliezer, of Rabbi Amos takes the hard drive of his personal computer and deletes everything on it. Whatever Eliezer might have thought to be right and true is now irrelevant – so discard it, erase it and forget it. The only thing that matters now is how Rabbi Amos thinks. So after deleting his personal hard drive, Eliezer goes cable to cable with Rabbi Amos’ hard drive and downloads everything from Rabbi Amos’ hard drive onto his own (now empty) hard drive. When that download is complete, he and Rabbi Amos are “one,” always on the same page, in harmony with each other in how they think and respond to things. That is how a disciple views his Rabbi! That erasing and downloading (“renewing of the mind”) is something Eliezer cannot wait to do! Can Western evangelicals say we approach the teachings of Jesus, e.g., Sermon on the Mount, in the same way?

Believe is a Verb The Semitic understanding of “believe” was not based on an intellectual assent to a creed, doctrinal statement, or series of faith propositions. Rather, to a first-century disciple **believe is a (often imperative) verb** in which you willingly submit to your Rabbi’s interpretive authority regarding God’s Word in every area of your life. Thus, to say you were a disciple in the name of Gamaliel meant that you **totally surrendered your life** to Gamaliel’s way of interpreting Scripture. As a result, you conformed all of your life’s behavior to his interpretations.

Summary From a contextual perspective, the essential qualities of first-century disciples were desire and submission. That dynamic assumed that emulation, biblical literacy, community, transparency and a willingness to

wrestle with God's word were a "given." This included a **passion/zeal to want to give up any and all of their preconceived notions** of how to live one's life and then to embrace the behavior that their Rabbi deemed best to honor God. It was a radical, willing, and **totally conforming submission** to the interpretive authority of their Rabbi.

An Observation Reconstructing some of the context implicit in first-century disciples allows us to make some observations regarding discipling and spiritual formation today.

- A disciple of Rabbi Jesus is one who totally surrenders to Him and His way of seeing and doing things. As such, a disciple comes with a willing desire to conform all aspects of his or her life to the authoritative Lordship of Jesus Christ. To Jesus, righteousness was a matter of the heart, not a codification of behavior. Furthermore, Jesus came to further reveal *who God is, what God cares about, and how God does things*, a blended phrase of Dr. James C. Martin, co-Founder of Preserving Bible Times and Dr Randall Smith, my teaching partner on our "*Life and Land of Jesus*" Israel trips and our "*Paul's Response to the Roman World*" Italy trips. Thus, a disciple of Jesus is one who is always asking Jesus, as revealed in Scripture, more about who God is as well as God's will and ways.
- Jesus' disciples should come with a deeply rooted desire to want to surrender to His authority. Jesus is always the authority. He is our Rabbi as well as **The Rabbi**. It is to Him and Him alone that we surrender. Disciples of Jesus today cannot explicitly or implicitly transfer any authority to a pastor, teacher, or well-known author without taking authority away from Him in the process. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus states He will be with His disciples always. Thus, with the continual indwelling of the Spirit of Christ within every believer, there is no need for anyone else to assume His role as Rabbi of His disciples.
- Jesus revealed much about *who God is, what God cares about and how God does things* in His encounters with people. His disciples learn much about what it means to be His disciples by studying the cohesive, integrated context of Jesus' explicit and implicit teachings in these encounters. The role of the teacher-preacher-author in discipling is to be a co-disciple with certain spiritual gifts that can help open the depths and riches of the Scriptures, thus further revealing to all disciples more of who God is, His will and His ways.
- The central issue of being a disciple of Jesus is: Will I willingly surrender – submit for a lifetime - every aspect of my life, including my paradigms, career, personality, emotions, character, ethics, desires, motivations, values, family, ego, sexuality and attitudes to the authority of Jesus and His teachings?
- Small groups and one-on-one relationships can often serve much of the purpose of a *yeshiva* if those involved consistently ask and explore what it means to daily surrender every aspect of their lives to the Lordship of Christ. It is important that these groups and relationships define what they are about, and what their purpose is. The difference between accountability groups, Bible study groups, fellowship groups, and social groups can be vast in terms of their respective impacts (or lack thereof) on the daily, personal holiness of a disciple.

Then and Now In the Gospel texts, Jesus often did not answer a direct question, but responded with another question or a parable. That was standard rabbinic teaching technique. This forced the questioner and the listeners to **wrestle** with the issues that came with their questions as well as with their encounter with Him. Jesus' intent was to **develop discernment** in his listeners regarding who God is, what He cares about and how God does things rather than providing easy answers without the often-rigorous effort of **wrestling** with God's Word and its demands. The *yeshiva* environment was very intentional in **wrestling** with the difficult questions and issues of daily life and God's authority over them.

Today we don't seem to have as much of an appetite to **wrestle** with the biblical text as it relates to the daily issues of our lives and God's authority over them. We seem to prefer quick, simple microwave (give it to me in two minutes on power 10) answers that we can selectively embrace when convenient. Thus, much of what it means to

be a committed follower of Jesus Christ today is often reduced to simple formulas of “how to” steps. As previously observed, all of us are familiar with this simplistic genre with its “four principles of humility” and “five steps to Spirit-filled living.” Such an approach would never have survived rabbinic scrutiny in the first-century *yeshiva* environment. Being disciplined by Jesus was not a quick, fill-in-the-blank Bible study. He was not spooning out “principles” (a non-biblical word and notion) for daily living. Jesus came to reveal God’s Truth. In fact this whole Greek notion of biblical principles was alien to the world of the Rabbis. We would do well to restrict the use of that word in the Kingdom. It is to a Person, not a “principle,” that we are in love with (and submit to).

We Do Understand Observe how we develop board certified surgeons, nurses, licensed electricians, schoolteachers, biochemists, counselors, and golf pros today. Common to each are long periods of study, training, practical experience, as well as continuing education. We are accustomed to the practice of placing ourselves under the watchful oversight of others who have established proficiency in our areas of interest. Ironically, we seem to put far more passion, commitment, and dedication into becoming a disciple of someone, or something, than we seem to do in developing and nurturing our piety as committed disciples of Jesus Christ. Thus, we are all disciples of someone or something - be it hedonism, atheism, career, self-absorption, materialism, our favorite cause, or Jesus Christ.

Some Things to Ponder

This overview of what it meant to be a disciple during the time of Jesus has highlighted some of the assumptions and presuppositions embedded in the Rabbi-disciple relationship. These first-century “givens” provide us with issues to wrestle with as we ask questions of ourselves, and raise issues for our small groups, churches, and informal communities of faith. This wrestling should also include our discipling processes and ministries.

- How would you describe your biblical understanding of making disciples to others? Do you see any cultural expectations that may have shaped our view of “discipleship” (another non-biblical word) today? How would you contrast the discipling of the first century with today’s notions of “discipleship” as you have observed them?
- Is there a difference today between what it means to be a believer in Jesus Christ and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Is “believe” only a creedal statement to you, or is it also an imperative verb to live out each day? Sit down sometime and read that great Hebrews 11 “Faith” chapter and note all the action verbs used to summarize those brothers and sisters who are held up as case histories for us to emulate.
- To what extent do we wrestle today with life issues in relationship to the Scriptures? Are we willing to conform every issue in our life to the Word of God, or do we seem to want to avoid wrestling at all costs? When we do wrestle, are we prepared to place ourselves under the authority of His revealed response in His Word? Have you ever found yourself not bringing an issue to the Scriptures because you didn’t want to hear, or didn’t want to have to encounter God’s authoritative response regarding money, ego, sex, alcohol, career, materialism and pride. The reader is encouraged to add to this list.
- We live in a culture that chafes under almost any concept of authority. “Do your own thing” is the mantra of the day. How might this cultural malaise impact our understanding and willingness to put ourselves under biblical authority? To what extent do we even have a **desire** to surrender to the authority of Jesus today in the same manner that first-century disciples had a willingness to surrender to their rabbi’s interpretive authority?
- Contrast total surrender to the authority of Jesus with a partial surrender, or an occasional surrender, a convenient surrender, or even token surrender to Him. How would you assess your willingness factor in regards to surrendering all areas of your life to the authority of God’s Word? When you do surrender, is it a willing surrender or a surrender that arises from some form of resentful, obligatory obedience?

How much of your hard drive has been erased? Are there any files or subdirectories that are off limits to erasure? In the power of His Spirit, how much of Jesus’ hard drive have you already downloaded?

- In today’s church culture, our facade of Sabbath piety, put on with the refined religious behavioral cosmetics of our day, is about the only thing that is observable about us by our pew mates. Thus, during the week, except perhaps by our family, our real spiritual (or secular) life is not observable by others in our respective communities of faith. As a result, others can’t really use God’s Word in our lives for *teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness* (II Tim. 3:16). How might this tendency towards Lone Rangerism constrain and restrict our spiritual growth and development in maturing us as a disciple of Jesus Christ?
- Are there any areas of your life that are either off limits, or have limited accessibility to the Lordship Authority of Jesus Christ? What are they, and why are they off limits?
- Now I think you can better understand why Simon, John, Andrew, etc., had to have been stunned when Jesus called them to be His disciples. In their own eyes, they couldn’t possibly emulate the healings, exorcisms and teachings of Jesus. Plus, they were back fishing (*go back to the profession of your fathers*). It is a reasonable inference that they had washed out of the educational “system.” They were not good enough to make the “cut.”

Welcome to the world of Jesus where people who are not good enough to make many of this world’s “cuts,” who are just ordinary people living ordinary lives, are called, led and empowered by His Spirit to be a part of accomplishing extraordinary things in the Kingdom of God!

- On a scale of 1-10, how would you assess these distinctive qualities of being a disciple of Jesus in your life:

Desire	very weak	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	very strong
Passion		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Submission		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Emulation		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Community of Intimacy		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Transparency		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Biblical Literacy		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Wrestling with God’s Word		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Developing Discernment		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

Final Questions: Since we only have one life to live here on this earth, it behooves us to ask: How are we doing as disciples and disciplemakers of Jesus in the Kingdom of God? Based on your scoring above, where do you feel the Spirit nudging you? What might you have to deal with, face up to, and/or confront next?

Resources: If you would like more contextual background on the Rabbi-disciple relationship at the time of Jesus and more insight into how Jesus remade the Twelve, see *Making Disciples Jesus Way; Wisdom We Have Missed*. See our website www.preservingbibletimes.org for more details regarding this contextually rich, paradigm-expanding publication.

Shalom Doug Greenwold, PBT Teaching Fellow Reflection #513 © Doug Greenwold 2013

Reading Scripture Though the Lens of Context
Rediscovering “the Rest of the Story”

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