

DISCIPLING, Part 1

A few weeks ago I was browsing through the inventory at Walden Books looking for one of those ubiquitous yellow and black books, you know the ones, “Anything For Dummies.” After looking unsuccessfully for a while I decided to do the undecidably male thing and ask for help. While talking to the manager I queried him regarding the trademark name of the bookstore chain. While “Walden” has a nice ring to it, it hardly evokes imagery of a book-lined study. In fact Thoreau, who made famous the small pond of that name, had very little to read at his tiny residence. He would save scraps of newspapers used for packing or insulation, and even resorted at times to tearing off labels and saving them to read in desperate moments. Although he had been a serious scholar in his former profession as a journalist, his chosen isolated life left him few resources for books. Anyway, after leaving the store manager fully stumped with that problem, I set out with fresh directions to find my particular sought after publication.

Finally, I spotted my prey on the bottom shelf of the small section on the Religions and Spiritual Disciplines of the world, and I reached down to grab the sole copy of Discipling for Dummies (either they didn’t sell many copies or I got real lucky and found the last one.) Thumbing through the index of chapters and the introduction I was caught by a sort of declaration of intent: that now you are a Christian, and God has blessed you with an abundance of stuff, wisdom, and adoring friends, you are responsible to share this new status with everyone you can. It was similar to all of those TV infomercials sponsored by someone who has achieved immense wealth through his special investment system and feels compelled from the goodness of his heart to share it with the world. OOOH, I thought, there’s no real work to this. In fact, according to this, anyone could just say “yesterday I was a pagan, today I am a Christian and I can get people to follow me with these great new truths I possess.”

It didn’t take me long, possessing the sharp mind that I do, to realize that this book might not be as helpful as I originally thought. The first clue should have been the book next to it on the shelf, Dilbert on Discipling. I thought it might be a good idea to do a little research on my own. This required a little more work than I at first envisioned, but I gave it the old college try. So I checked out that dusty primary resource, the Bible, to see what it might tell me. After reading a little in the New Testament (kind of like an update, with new research and discoveries, of the Old Testament), it became apparent to me that there were primarily two individuals who did any large-scale discipling, Jesus and Paul. Jesus apparently came pre-qualified for the job (He somehow had something to do with assisting the numerous authors of the books of the Bible,) and seemed to know what he was talking about. Paul, on the other hand, had to spend a lot of time in the classroom in order to learn what he was talking about. In fact the only mystical thing about his knowledge was a mid-course correction to his logical processes, brought about by a blinding vision while traveling to Damascus. Though he already had what would amount to several college degrees in his field, he then spent the next several years reexamining his prior practices and beliefs.

If this were true, and the author of the little yellow and black book was wrong, what then would it take to become a Discippler, and is this a reasonable goal? Jesus said *Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. (Matt. 4:19)* O.K., I thought, “fishers of men;” not quite the same, but close enough to be a good starting point. These men then

took on the status of “disciples,” called out by Jesus to learn from Him. Apparently those whom Jesus spoke to were just ordinary guys, with no special qualifications, and it appears that he spent the next several years teaching them as much as he could. I guess that was so they could go to work for him once they were qualified. It also appears that part of their qualification included receiving the Holy Spirit: *but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8)

Paul took a little different approach, though, either starting or assisting small groups of believers around the region where he could travel. In addition to meeting with these believers and speaking publicly for the faith, he also wrote letters to these different groups in an attempt to teach them as much as possible about the faith. But he didn’t assume that all of these groups were immediately qualified to teach others just because they were now Christians. In his first letter to the church at Corinth he said: *And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of the flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? (I Cor. 3:2-3)* So, in this particular case, these people were all striving to be more important than the others in their perceived kingdom pecking order, and Paul wrote this to put them in their appropriate place.

As I pondered these qualifiers and disqualifiers of Jesus and Paul for those they would call “disciples,” it seemed then that something was still missing. Something that Paul alluded to, but didn’t state specifically, and something that Jesus stressed of all who would follow Him, not just those who aspired to be leaders. In fact, a verse in the Gospel of Matthew caught my attention, *Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart: and you shall find rest for your souls. (Matt. 11:29)* I also noted that Jesus wasn’t necessarily gentle with everyone, particularly the religious leaders of that day. In fact, he was downright mean to them over what He felt was their abuse of the truth given to them formerly by God. But, if you are a follower of Jesus and desire to learn from Him, then He is gentle and humble of heart. Yet learning isn’t instantaneous, and you don’t get it by osmosis, just sitting close to your Bible. It requires discipline and desire, work over time. You can’t be “one” just because you can spell it.

It appears, then, that both Paul and Jesus were speaking, at times, to many who wanted to be recognized as special, i.e. disciples, yet who were not yet possessed of a heart which made that possible. They had not yet given up that part of themselves which wished for praise and recognition from others. We need to be transparent enough for God to be seen through us. Being a disciple of Jesus is not like being a disciple of some guru. We are not being called to seek enlightenment or inner fulfillment. We are being called to put ourselves aside, to trust God for all our needs, and to lead others to know Jesus. Though we must become disciplined in order to be disciples, it is for all the others who are to enter the kingdom of God that we become such. To that extent God is glorified and we can share in the joy of that accomplishment.

In case any of you still believe the little tale with which I opened this study, good luck hunting for your copy of Discipling for Dummies. For the rest of you, I'll address this subject more fully next week.

Be blessed, Bill Z