

**MOUNT SINAI MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH**  
**DISCIPLESHIP TRAINING**

3

What Are We Talking About?

*The Definition of Disciple Making*

Perhaps you have found yourself in an intense conversation with another person with whom you could not agree on a matter. You may have gone so far as to lose your temper with the person, only to discover that you were not even talking about the same thing. Not only is this embarrassing, but it can leave one feeling a bit silly.

Definitions are important, but how many of us take time to ask another to define his or her terms? For example, *leadership* is a hot topic today with many in the Christian community, yet I have observed that very few people who address this topic pause long enough to define what a leader is. And much of the time I wonder if they are all talking about the same thing. This applies especially to leadership development. How can we know if we are developing leaders if we do not take time to define what a leader is?

In this chapter I will define what disciple making is about in the context of the terms *disciple* and especially *discipleship*. As we have seen in prior chapters, in Matthew 28:19–20 Jesus has given his church instructions on what it is supposed to be doing. There he tells his church to “make disciples.” This is what I am referring to when I use the term *disciple making*. And any discussion of disciple making surfaces two key terms—*disciple* and *discipleship*. But what is a disciple, and what is discipleship? What does each term mean, and how do they relate to disciple making? There are far too many divergent answers, and our goal in this chapter is to discover what the terms mean to better get a grasp of disciple making.

First, we will focus on four views or models of disciple making that illustrate what it is not. Then we will explore several definitions that will help us understand what it is.

**What Disciple Making Is Not**

For years parachurch ministries, such as Campus Crusade for Christ and The Navigators, have been known for their emphasis on discipleship. One of the reasons (often the reason for the founding and existence of parachurch organizations) is the church's failure to make disciples. The founders of parachurch organizations reason that if the church is not going to do what it is supposed to (evangelism, discipleship, leadership development, and so on), then somebody has to do it, and that somebody is "us." In the last twenty or more years, a number of churches have discovered or rediscovered the Great Commission and have made disciples. Along with established and some new parachurch ministries, they have produced a growing literature of discipleship. However, if you explore this material, you will discover a number of different, often conflicting positions on the nature of discipleship.

In his book *Following the Master*, New Testament scholar Michael Wilkins notes this growth and isolates five models or views of discipleship that will help you determine your definitions of a disciple and discipleship. These models are helpful and are similar to the four models I present below. As you read the description of each model and evaluate it, determine which one, if any, best represents your view.

### ***Learners***

The first model of discipleship asserts that a disciple is a learner who follows a great teacher. And discipleship involves the process of following. This was how the term *disciple* was used in New Testament times and helps us understand how people then might have understood its meaning. The great teacher could have been a philosopher or even a religious thinker who challenged his disciples with his teaching. The relationship between the teacher and his disciples could be distant (simply a teacher-student intellectual kind of relationship) or it could be close—in some cases the disciple lived with the teacher and mimicked his behavior.

*Evaluation.* If we compare this model with that in the New Testament, we discover some similarities and discrepancies. First, there were those who considered Jesus to be their teacher and themselves learners, but they were not believers in him. When his teaching became difficult for them, they abandoned him. An example is found in John 6:53–67 where Jesus teaches the crowds that unless they eat his flesh and drink his blood, they will have no life in them. While Jesus did not mean for this to be taken literally, many of his disciples did not understand this and

abandoned him at this point (v. 66). Second, some of his disciples had a distant relationship with Jesus (such as those in John 6:53–67), while others were close, such as the Twelve (see Mark 3:14). Consequently, due to the discrepancies, this model may prove more confusing than helpful.

## **Four Views of Disciple Making**

Disciples are learners.

### ***Committed Believers***

Based on my ministry and research, the most common view of discipleship within the seminary and the churches, currently and in the past few centuries, is that a disciple is a committed believer. Those who hold this view argue that a disciple is a believer in Christ, but a believer is not necessarily a disciple. Thus a disciple is one who has committed his or her life to growing in the faith and serving Jesus, no matter the personal cost. For example, Dwight Pentecost, Bible teacher and retired Dallas Seminary professor, defines *disciple* and *discipleship*:

There is a vast difference between being saved and being a disciple. Not all men who are saved are disciples although all who are disciples are saved. In discussing the question of discipleship, we are not dealing with a man's salvation. We are dealing with a man's relationship to Jesus Christ as his teacher, his Master, and his Lord.

Author Walter Henrichsen, who serves with The Navigators, says of the believer who has not committed his life to serving Christ:

See that man? He is a believer who has refused to pay the price of becoming a disciple. In making that decision, he has relegated himself to a life of mediocrity. Given a chance to be first, he has chosen to be last. To use the words of the Lord Jesus, he is savorless salt. Whatever you do, don't be like him.

Leroy Eims, who teaches that the goal of the Christian's life—especially the new Christian—is someday to become a disciple, writes: “The commission of Christ to you was to make disciples, not just get converts. So your objective now is to help

this new Christian progress to the point where he is a fruitful, mature, and dedicated disciple.” Thus a disciple is a mature, fruitful, dedicated believer. He also writes that typically it takes approximately two years for a new convert to become a disciple.

This model implies that there are basically two kinds or classes of Christians in the church. The first are ordinary believers, and the second are committed believers who are following Christ as his disciples. And all of us who are believers fall into one category or the other.

*Evaluation.* This model runs into a number of difficulties. I have addressed some near the end of chapter 1. Here I would like to explore this further.

### **Four Views of Disciple Making**

Disciples are learners.

### **Disciples are committed believers.**

#### **Simply Believers**

As we have seen, the Scriptures are clear that a disciple is not necessarily a believer who has committed his or her life to following the Savior, but simply a believer. Committed believers are committed disciples. Uncommitted believers are uncommitted disciples. In the book of Acts, Luke uses the term *disciple* for believers regardless of their commitment to Christ (Acts 6:1–2, 7; 9:1, 26; 11:26; 14:21–22; 15:10; 18:23; 19:9). Let us examine several of these examples.

In Acts 6:1 Luke notes that the Grecian Jews were complaining against the Hebraic Jews because they were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. And this took place at a time “when the number of disciples was increasing” in Jerusalem. It is clear that he was not talking only about those believers who had committed all to follow Christ but also those who were new converts to the faith. Yet he calls them disciples. Then in verse 7 he notes, “the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became

obedient to the faith.” His point is not that uncommitted believers were becoming committed believers but that unbelievers were becoming believers.

In Acts 9:1 Luke writes, “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.” He is not saying that Saul (Paul) was threatening only the committed, mature believers but all believers regardless of their commitment to Christ. And in verse 26 he writes that when the newly converted Saul approached the church in Jerusalem, “he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.” Again, if we attempt to place those who had made a strong commitment to follow Jesus in this passage, it would not make sense. You would have to argue that he tried to join only the mature believers and that they were afraid of him because they were not convinced that he was a committed Christian.

In Acts 11:26 Luke writes, “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” If he were talking only about deeply committed believers, then we would have to assume that those believers who were not as committed were not called Christians.

I could make the same or a similar argument from Acts 14:21–22; 15:10; 18:23; and 19:9. Without question, disciples in the book of Acts were synonymous with believers. Much of Jesus’s teaching in the Gospels focuses on the need for his disciples to make the deepest of commitments to him (see Matt. 16:24–26; Luke 13:34–35). But the concept of biblical discipleship begins when a person accepts Christ. Then the new disciple needs to become a committed, growing disciple.

### **Only One Class of Christian**

The Bible does not teach that there are two kinds or classes of Christians that make up Christ’s church. Scripture does not draw a line in the sand between ordinary Christians and active Christians. If this were the case, we would have to ask, Where do you draw the line? This question is similar to the one we ask of those who profess a works salvation. If salvation is by works, where do you draw the line? Would God let someone into heaven who has done 1,000 good works but slam the door on one who has done only 999? Would he distinguish between one believer who has committed more of his or her life to Christ and another who has committed slightly less to the Savior? Take, for example, the spiritual disciplines.

How many of the spiritual disciplines would one have to practice to be considered a true disciple?

The ultimate goal of the Great Commission is to produce mature believers. Once a person comes to faith, he or she begins the journey toward maturity. The reality is that all Christians are living at some point along the discipleship or maturity continuum (covered at the end of chapter 1). Some are farther along and more committed than others.

### ***Ministers***

This model believes that disciples are those Christians who give their lives to go into the ministry, the ones God has called to full-time, professional ministry. They are the pastors and staff who serve as the paid professionals in the typical church. Those who hold this view equate the call to radical discipleship with the call to ministry. They would also equate today's pastors and staff with the Twelve. Thus today's ministers would be trained much as Jesus trained and commissioned the Twelve in Matthew 10.

*Evaluation.* The Scriptures that I applied to the previous model would apply to this one. They show that the Bible does not identify two classes of Christians. And the belief that disciples are only those called for full-time ministry or service to the Savior is another problem.

### **Four Views of Disciple Making**

Disciples are learners.

Disciples are committed believers.

**Disciples are ministers.**

***Converts Who Make Christ Lord***

This model represents the view of those who believe in lordship salvation. Next to the second model presented above, this is the most common view in Christian circles today. When believers place their faith in Christ, they must agree to make Christ Lord of their lives to be saved. Grace is free, but it is not cheap. Thus, according to many who hold this view, the unbeliever must place his faith in Christ and agree to a life of discipleship and service to Christ to be saved.

*Evaluation.* There are numerous problems with this model. First, salvation is by faith in Christ alone (John 3:16; Eph. 2:8–9). To argue that, in addition, one must agree to serve Christ as his disciple is to add a second requirement for salvation. This does not square with grace.

Second, how can a lost person even understand such a commitment, much less make it? Scripture teaches that a lost person does not accept the things that come from the Spirit, because he regards them as foolishness, and he cannot possibly understand them because they are discerned only by those who have the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14). A lost person does not have the Spirit dwelling within him (Rom. 8:9). Paul teaches in verses 6–8 that the mind of the lost person is death, is hostile to God, does not submit to God’s law, and cannot please God.

Third, it’s a question again of degree. What does it mean to agree to a life of discipleship? What does that entail? Does one have to commit to live a reasonably good life, or does one have to agree to leave family and friends to follow Jesus as the disciples did in the Gospels (Matt. 19:27, 29)?

Fourth, what happens when a person has supposedly agreed to make Christ Lord (whatever that means), yet he or she fails to follow through with the commitment? Does that mean the person is not saved or was not saved? The problem with this view is that even Paul struggled with sin as a believer, for he writes in Romans 7:14: “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.”

Finally, Charles Ryrie writes:

Confusion enters when we attempt to take the conditions for spiritual growth and make them conditions for becoming a disciple, or when we make the characteristics of the life of discipleship conditions for entering the life of a disciple. In Luke 14:16–24 He related the parable of the great supper into which

entrance was unrestricted, free and for all. In Luke 14:25–33 He taught the restrictions of the life that continues to follow Him in the continuing process of discipleship, and they were very strict. To make these conditions for the life of service requirements for acquiring the life is to confuse the gospel utterly by muddying the clear waters of the grace of God with the works of man.

### **Four Views of Disciple Making**

Disciples are learners.

Disciples are committed believers.

Disciples are ministers.

**Disciples are converts who have agreed to make Christ Lord of their lives.**

### **What Disciple Making Is**

The four models presented above help us to clarify and fine-tune our definition of *disciple making* by determining what it is not. Now it is time to focus on the definitions of a *disciple* and *discipleship* to discover what disciple making is.

#### ***Disciple***

##### **The General Meaning**

Wilkins is correct when he argues that the definition of a disciple must be understood in both a general and a specific sense. In a general sense a disciple, according to Scripture, is *a committed follower of a person*, such as a teacher or master. Examples are the disciples who followed Moses (John 9:28), the disciples of John the Baptist (Matt. 9:14), and the Twelve. In Mark 1:17 Jesus said to Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of



men.” Later on the same day James and John were fishing with their father, and Jesus approached them. Matthew writes, “Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him” (Matt. 4:21–22). In Mark 2:14 Jesus said to Levi (Matthew), “Follow me.” And in John 1:43 Jesus said to Philip, “Follow me.”

Finally, the persons whom some disciples follow may not be believers in Christ, such as the Pharisees who had their own disciples (Matt. 22:16; Mark 2:18); and some who are called disciples are not believers (John 6:53–66).

### **The Specific Meaning**

In a specific sense, a disciple is one who has trusted in Christ as Savior. In short, he or she is a *believer in Christ* or a Christian (other perfectly acceptable biblical terms are “brother,” “sister,” “saint,” and so on). We discovered this above as well as in chapter 1, when we studied the use of the term *disciple* in the book of Acts. This is so important to this discussion that it bears repeating: a disciple may be a deeply committed believer who is “sold out” to Christ; however, a disciple may also *not* be a *committed* believer, but still a believer in Christ. Committed disciples are committed believers, and uncommitted disciples are uncommitted believers. What both have in common is that they share a faith in Christ as Savior.

But one might object to this definition based on such passages as Luke 14:25–26 where Luke writes, “Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.’ ” The key to understanding such passages is knowing not only the context but also to whom Jesus is speaking. Here he is speaking to the large crowds that were made up primarily of unbelievers or nondisciples, and he is talking about how to become a disciple or believer. But how does this square with grace? I will address this further in chapter 5.

### ***Discipleship***

The term *discipleship* is not found in Scripture, much to the amazement of many Christians. It is an English word that comes from the terms *disciple* and *disciples*. Thus its meaning is not derived from biblical usage but from how Christians have used it over the years. If we want to use it biblically, we must use it to describe the

ongoing life of a disciple (believer in Christ) that involves following the Savior and becoming more like him. People become disciples through evangelism. Then they grow as Christians through the process of discipleship. To talk about Christian discipleship properly, we must use the term to refer to the growth of a disciple (Christian) in every area of his or her life.

Note that I have referred to discipleship as a process. The Christian is always in process, which will include setbacks as well as progress toward Christian maturity. Michael Wilkins writes:

... conversion marks the beginning point of discipleship, not a later point of commitment or a process of spiritual growth. Degrees of maturity will be realized as one traverses the discipleship path, but all true believers are disciples on that path. Therefore, evangelism is the starting point for making disciples. Jesus said that we are to make disciples of all “nations,” not to make disciples of those who are already believers. With Luke’s additional insights, we can see that prospective converts must somehow be challenged to count the cost of the life of discipleship.

### ***Disciple Making***

Based on the two concepts of a disciple and discipleship, we can now describe true disciple making. The process of making disciples involves leading unbelievers to faith in Christ so that they become disciples (Christians). Disciple making must not end with a person’s conversion, however. It’s an ongoing process that encourages the believer (whether a new believer or an uncommitted Christian) to follow Christ and become more like him. When we become more like Christ, we mature as Christians, which is the goal of making disciples (Eph. 4:13–15; Col. 1:28).

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Of the four models that illustrate four views of discipleship, did you find one or more that reflect your view? If so, how would you respond to the author’s critique of your view? If not, why not?
2. Of the four models, which, if any, would be the view held by your congregation? If you are not the pastor, which, if any, would reflect his or her

view? If you are the pastor and your view differs with that of the board and/or congregation, what will you do about this?

3. Did the section on the four views sharpen and refine your view of discipleship? If so, how?

4. Do you agree with the author when he says that model 2 is the most common view today on discipleship? Is it or was it your view? If so, have you, by any chance, begun to rethink your view or even change your view? If not, why not?

5. If you know people (friends, pastor, church people) who hold to one or several of the four models, will you engage them in conversation over their views? Why or why not? How might you help them to examine their view in light of Scripture?

6. Do you agree with the author's definitions and explanation of the terms *disciple* and *discipleship*? Why or why not?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, [\*Strategic Disciple Making: A Practical Tool for Successful Ministry\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 27–35.