

*D. Eric Williams Online*

# **A Brief Definition and Description Of Discipleship**

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February 2, 2018

## Introduction

The term “disciple” has many definitions within the Christian community. Yet, as Putman, Harrington and Coleman say in their book *Discipleshift*, it is critical for church leaders to agree upon a definition of the term in order to be effective in their local fellowship.<sup>1</sup>

In their book on disciple making, Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey boil discipleship down to “a person who has trusted Christ for salvation and has surrendered completely to Him. He or she is committed to practicing the spiritual disciplines in community and developing to their full potential for Christ and His mission.”<sup>2</sup> This definition arises from what they call the three guiding principles of discipleship: sacrificial, relational and transformational.<sup>3</sup> Earley and Dempsey go into some detail concerning the character of discipleship<sup>4</sup> and so forgo the advantage of brevity. Many pastors in active ministry will agree that when it comes to teaching a congregation, the easier it is to remember a concept the better. Thus a simple defining framework has the advantage of being memorable even while supporting more in-depth Bible teaching.

Putman et al. utilize a single Scripture as an outline to delineate discipleship. For them, Matthew 4:19 hits the high points one must acknowledge in defining discipleship. This outline serves the purpose well as long as it is understood as a framework and due diligence is observed in looking to the whole counsel of God in order to define a disciple of Jesus. The definition of discipleship in the following paragraphs will elaborate on Putman, Harrington and Colman’s use of Matthew 4:19.<sup>5</sup>

## Jesus Says “Follow Me”

In first century Palestine it was normally the follower who initiated a relationship with a Rabbi.<sup>6</sup> Yet Matthew portrays Jesus as beginning the encounter with Peter and Andrew and doing so in the form of a command rather than a request. Much ink has been spilled concerning the nature of our salvation and free will. It will suffice to say that no one comes to Jesus Christ apart from the grace of God and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Truly, one becomes a disciple of Jesus Christ because He initiates the contact.

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1 Jim Putman, Bobby Harrington & Robert Coleman, *Discipleshift*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 42.

2 Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is... How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 28.

3 Ibid., 28.

4 Earley and Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is*, 22-28.

5 Putman et al., *Discipleshift*, 46.

6 R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: William B Erdmanns Publishing, 2007), 147.

In a “sidebar” found in the book *Discipleshift*, Robert Coleman suggests a person can be a “pre-disciple”<sup>7</sup> in the sense that God may be drawing him or her unto Himself through the action of the Holy Spirit and the ministrations of a Believer. We may see something of that in the call of Peter and Andrew.<sup>8</sup> We know from the Bible that these brothers were disciples of John the Baptist before they began to follow Jesus (John 1:40). However, the crucial element here is a willingness on the part of a person to give up everything for the sake of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> Time and again the Scripture tells us that a true follower of the Lord holds nothing back in his devotion to Christ. Jesus says our love for Him must be so great that our affection for friends and relatives is like hatred in comparison.<sup>10</sup> Indeed Jesus sums up His demands when He tells us, “...whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:33<sup>11</sup>). Clearly this level of devotion is not for everyone (John 6:66) and this is why Jesus tells potential followers to “count the cost” (Luke 14:28).<sup>12</sup> At the same time those who truly give up everything to follow Jesus are assured that, “...there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life” (Luke 18:29-30). Still, this assurance must not play into our motivation to submit to Jesus the Christ.

### **Jesus Says “I Will Make You”**

A second quality of true discipleship is the ongoing transformation of a person’s life. Putman et al. consider this “primarily a spiritual response to the Holy Spirit.”<sup>13</sup> Clearly transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit but we cannot discount the participation of the person in that process. In his letter to the church in Rome Paul said, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service*. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God*” (Romans 12:1-2). This passage reminds us that the operation of transformation is a work of the Holy Spirit, that we participate in through a willing and active pursuit of godliness. We are to present ourselves as a sacrifice. This is an act of our will. A true disciple knows it is Jesus,

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7 Putman et al., *Discipleshift*, 45.

8 Myron Augsburger, *The Communicators Commentary: Matthew*, (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 55.

9 N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 32.

10 Earley and Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is*, 23.

11 All Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* unless otherwise indicated.

12 Earley and Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is*, 22-23.

13 Putman et al., *Discipleshift*, 49.

by the power of His Spirit, who makes one like the Lord; he also knows he must be a willing participant in that process.

Moreover, a disciple of Jesus works to see his life transformed by the renewing of his mind. Our mind is renewed as we dig deep into the "living and active" word of God (Hebrews 4:12) and meditate upon what the Bible defines as noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, praiseworthy and so on (Philippians 4:8). We are called to diligently study God's Word and seek the face of God in prayer (2 Timothy 3:16-17, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Romans 12:12, Colosians 4:2).<sup>14</sup>

In short, our salvation is entirely a work of God. Our growth in Christ likeness (the second aspect of discipleship) is likewise a work of the Holy Spirit and yet with our participation. This is why we are commanded to "work out our salvation" (Philippians 2:12). In other words, our gift of salvation is realized (personal assurance of salvation and evidence obvious to those around us) as we practice spiritual disciplines. Never forgetting that the effort we put forth in our quest for spiritual growth is empowered by the Holy Spirit, for it is God "who works in [us] both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13, brackets added).

### **Jesus Says (I Will Make You) "Fishers of Men"**

A true disciple of Jesus is one who participates in the command to go into all the world and preach the gospel to everyone (Mark 16:15). However, a true "fisher of men" is concerned with more than simply "saving souls." A disciple of Jesus Christ must also be concerned with the process of discipling those who make a confession of faith in the Lord Jesus. The disciple of Jesus must teach that Jesus Christ is the reigning King of the universe (Matthew 28:18). Jesus plainly said all authority had been given to Him and He will not accept partial worship (Matthew 6:24).

Jesus also made it clear that disciples are made by teaching converts to obey everything He commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). This does not mean we limit ourselves to the sayings of Jesus as they are found in the four Gospels. Rather, all Scripture must be taught to those who trust Jesus for salvation so they might be healthy disciples of the Lord (Romans 15:4, 1 Corinthians 9:10, 10:6, 11, 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Therefore, our duty as "fishers of men" involves more than handing out tracts or leading someone in the "sinner's prayer." A true fisherman knows that much of his work takes place after the catch.

### **Conclusion**

The outline provided by Putman, Harrington and Coleman is fine as far as it goes. However, in order to properly convey the idea of discipleship it is important to recognize the comprehensive character of Jesus words as recorded in Matthew 4:19.

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<sup>14</sup> Earley and Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is*, 23-24.