

Discipleship and salvation by Keith Glasgow

Acts 11:26 *"the disciples were first called Christian's at Antioch"*

Jesus' earthly ministry began with the call of Peter, James, Andrew and John to be His disciples; and closed with the great command *"Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations"*

Salvation is by grace alone and one cannot 'front load' the gospel with works (saying that we must 'do' in order to be saved), nor can we 'back load' the gospel (saying that once we are saved we need to 'do' in order to stay saved). Alongside this, discipleship (spiritual growth, sanctification, and perseverance) is a marriage of the Spirit's guidance and power, with personal choice and discipline. One aspect of this discipleship is Jesus' call to *"continue in My Word"* (John 8:31 *"To the Jews who had believed Him, Jesus said, "If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples"*)

Salvation and discipleship seem to be conflicting ideas, but are two aspects of the same reality. A believer enters salvation, but also a life of discipleship. Jesus prepared His listeners for this reality by warning that it would be costly to follow Him. Their faith, and ours, must result in works, or it is dead (James 2) and so those at Jesus' time who believed and then followed, showed the reality of their faith by doing so. Those who 'believed' but turned back, showed that their faith was not genuine (1 Peter 1:6-9 verse 6: *"These (trials) have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith ..."*).

The parable of the sower and seed shows that the same Word of God that brought a response of a 'kind' of faith in all but the seed snatched away by the birds (Satan), only produced fruit in those who had the "good soil" (hearts). The others responded initially, but sinful pleasure or trials resulted in them failing to produce fruit.

The Bible makes a distinction between believers and disciples, but that distinction does not separate them into two different categories of people, rather it shows that those who become believers are called to live as disciples (as Christians).

During His earthly ministry, Jesus called disciples to follow Him. In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus called to those who were 'following Him' *"Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

This verse is not speaking of salvation and the ones He was speaking to were burdened with the many laws that Judaism had put on them, to which Jesus said that He would give them rest. He called them to take the yoke He offered (obedience to Him) and to learn from Him, which would bring a rest where, unlike the burden of the laws of Judaism, His burden would be light. Of course the experience of this would not be theirs until after Pentecost when they would experience regeneration and the filling of the Spirit, but the point is that He was calling all His hearers to be His disciples, which meant to follow Him and come under His yoke.

At the time of Christ a disciple was a learner who sat at the feet of a rabbi. In John 9:28 the Jews said *"We are Moses' disciples"* and there were disciples of John the Baptist and disciples of the Pharisees (Mark 2:18). The Greek word 'to learn or to be taught' is *manthanō* from which the word 'disciple' (*mathētēs*) is derived.

During His earthly ministry Jesus had many followers who would be seen as His disciples, as they sat at His feet and learned from Him. But Jesus made it clear that to truly be a disciple of His would mean denying self (showing complete allegiance to Him) and taking up the cross of rejection, suffering and even death. There were many who 'believed' in Him, but He did not believe in them (John 2:23-25)!

When Jesus died and rose again, the disciples who had continued to follow Him (even those who like Peter had faltered), were witnesses of His resurrection and became the first Spirit-filled,

born again believers of the church, followed by all who believed from that time until now. Every believer is a disciple and every disciple is a believer. During the transition from Jesus' earthly ministry to the establishing of the Church, they were all called disciples until in Antioch they were called Christians (Acts 11:26 *"the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch"*). Elsewhere in the book of Acts the word disciple is a synonym for Christian (Acts 6:1-2, 7; 14:20, 22; 15:10).

Christians today are disciples, just as disciples were Christians in the early church!

The issue that creates difficulty is the relationship between the demands of discipleship that Jesus taught, and the salvation of believers that is based on God's grace and has no conditions attached to it. Some separate the two, saying that a believer is not the same thing as a disciple. However, that leads to a belief that you can be a Christian without being a disciple, and even that the Body of Christ has two tiers – believers and disciples.

A believer can be a genuine Christian and yet not live as Jesus called His disciples to live. It is the same as being a Christian and not living up to the NT demands for the Christian life. If you like, it is trusting Jesus as Savior and not living under His lordship. Paul acknowledged that this happens – 1 Cor. 3:3 *"You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?"*

There are those who are true believers who are not living their lives as Jesus called us to live, or as the epistles call us to live. They are disciples / Christians non-the-less. But there are, today, just as at the time of Christ and in the early church, those who have a belief in Jesus and yet are not born again. They believe, but their faith is without works, as James writes, and even the demons have that kind of faith. So genuine faith is evidenced by works, but works are not the condition for salvation – but evidence of salvation.

Justification (being declared righteous) is by faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone; whereas sanctification (growing in Christlikeness by following Him) is a journey that can vary greatly. The kind of faith that saves is not a shallow intellectual confession of truth no matter how accurate; it is a genuine commitment to trust in Christ for salvation.

Note on John 7:31 *"So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples'."*

This verse shows there are real and unreal disciples. Not all belief is saving faith, as the context shows in verse 30: "As He was saying these things, many believed in Him." Jesus doesn't assume that all this belief is real. So He gives a test to show when a person's belief is real faith. A "true disciple" is the same as "true Christian" or "true believer."

"If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples." The word "abide" is simply the word "remain." It implies that you don't leave it, or turn from it.

Lastly, it is important to remember that God's grace is primary in both our salvation and our discipleship. He who begins a good work in us will bring it to completion. He is the one who works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure!