

ARTICLE 10

Discipleship

Following Jesus

We believe that Jesus calls people who have experienced the joy of new birth to follow him as disciples. By calling his followers to take up the cross, Christ invites them to reject the godless values of the world and offer themselves to God in a life of service. The Holy Spirit, who lives in every Christian, empowers believers to overcome the acts and attitudes of the sinful nature. Filled with love and gratitude, disciples delight to obey God.

United in a Distinct Community

Christians enjoy fellowship with God and other believers. At baptism, believers are joined to the local church, commit themselves to build up the body of Christ, and witness to the good news of the Christian hope. In community, members grow in maturity as they demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit, use their spiritual gifts, and practice mutual accountability in the disciplines of the Christian life. Christians confess sin, repent, and experience God's grace in the life of the Christian community.

Demonstrating True Faith

Jesus teaches that discipleship is the way of self-denial and promises blessing for those who suffer for righteousness. Disciples are to resist worldly values and systems, the sinful nature, and the devil. Disciples give generously and reject materialism, which makes a god out of wealth. Disciples treat others with compassion and gentleness and reject violence as a response to injustice. Disciples speak honestly to build others up and reject dishonest, vulgar, and careless talk; they seek to avoid lawsuits to resolve personal grievances, especially with other believers. Disciples maintain sexual purity and marital faithfulness and reject immoral premarital and extramarital relationships and all homosexual practices. To be a disciple means to be true to Jesus in everyday life.

Psalms 1; 119; Amos 5:24; Matthew 5-7; 18:15-20; Mark 8:34-38; John 8:31-32; 13:34-35; 15:14-15; Acts 2:41-47; Romans 1:24-32; 8:1-30; 12; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 11:1; 12:1-13; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Galatians 2:20; 5:16-26; 6:1-2; Ephesians 4:11-12, 15-16; 5:1, 18; Philippians 2:6-8; Colossians 3:1-17; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8; 5:17; 1 Timothy 1:9-11; 2:1-8; 4:6-8; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Hebrews 12:1-3; 13:4-5; James 1:22-27; 4:7; 1 Peter 2:20-25; 3:15; 5:8-9; 1 John 1:3, 6-9; 2:15-17.

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COMMENTARY

Jesus commanded the disciples, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). We call this the Great Commission. Jesus called for people to imitate his lifelong commitment to God. Discipleship involves the decisive act of the will to commit oneself to live as a follower of Christ as the Bible teaches. Discipleship involves following Jesus in personal commitment to him, uniting in a distinct community with other believers, growing up into Christ through spiritual disciplines, and demonstrating true faith through an obedient lifestyle.

Following Jesus

Discipleship begins with a personal commitment of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The Bible refers to this commitment as the new birth (John 3:3-8; 1 Peter 1:3). When people commit themselves to Jesus Christ, they receive the gift of eternal life (John 1:12) and they commit themselves to live as Jesus did (1 John 2:4-6). One of the marks of genuine new birth is the desire to obey the commands of Jesus.

In the contemporary world, the term “discipleship” may be foreign to those unfamiliar with Christianity. In the world in which Jesus ministered, the concept of following a master, or becoming a disciple, was commonplace. Disciples were students who committed themselves to learning from a master teacher. The discipleship Jesus offered involved not only learning his teachings but also committing to follow Jesus by imitating his life. In this article, we seek to describe what following, or imitating, Jesus means.

Disciples do not conform themselves to the pattern of the present age but have their lives and mindsets transformed in their aim to please God (Romans 12:1-2). The concept of a present age as opposed to the new age in which God rules is Pauline. Paul writes of “this world” as a complex of political and spiritual powers seeking to control and warp human thinking. Paul speaks of a battle for the minds of humanity (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). He envisions a battle between the believers and the spiritual evil forces that follow the ruler of the sinful kingdom (Ephesians 2:1-3; 6:10-18). The present age is contrasted with the new age, the inbreaking reign of God which has already begun (2 Corinthians 5:17) but has not yet been fully revealed.

In this new era of God’s reign, disciples are marked by a servant lifestyle.

Service involves both worshipping God and meeting human need. True religion involves both praising God and serving fellow humans (Hebrews 13:15-16; James 1:27).

All believers are baptized by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). All believers have received the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9), and all are called to be continually filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). Spirit-filling is the equivalent of being obedient to the commands of Christ. Spirit-filled Christians have an obligation to live as God's children (Romans 8:12-17). Paul uses the image of stripping off the sinful lifestyle and being clothed with righteous deeds (Ephesians 4:17-5:21; Colossians 3:5-17). The image of putting to death the old self and putting on new life is also suggested (Romans 6:1-4).

United in a Distinct Community

Discipleship is not a solitary lifestyle. When Jesus called the initial disciples, it was a call not just to follow him but to join a community of followers. In the contemporary culture which values rugged individualism but recognizes personal inadequacy, the call to community offers hope. The Scriptures teach that the community is a source of support and encouragement for those in need (Galatians 6:1-2). In the community, believers are to be accountable to and for one another (Matthew 5:23-26; 18:15-20).

We teach that baptism is not only a personal witness of new life in Christ but also a commitment to join Christ's body as expressed in the local congregation (1 Corinthians 12:13; Acts 2:41-47). Through baptism and church membership, disciples acknowledge their task to build up Christ's body (Ephesians 4:16). Each individual is called to witness for Christ (Acts 1:8). At the same time, the church witnesses corporately through its proclamation and lifestyle.

Growing Up into Christ

Discipleship is learned by doing. Christians grow in their faith by practicing the classical spiritual disciplines. The Bible is the believers' guide for faith and practice. Followers of Jesus heed the biblical admonition to read, meditate on, and memorize the Word (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; 19:7-14; 119:9, 11, 105; 2 Timothy 2:15; 3:14-17).

In the conflict with the anti-Christian world system, prayer is the weapon that protects and fortifies the believer. Through prayer, the Christian communicates with God. Prayer and fasting give strength for the battle with the demonic world (Mark 9:29; Ephesians 6:10-18) and become the means by which the Spirit directs the church (Acts 13:1-3). In prayer, believers ask God for the courage to be faithful witnesses (Acts 4:29-30; Colossians

4:4). Prayer offers communion with God and comfort in times of testing.

Confession of sin has largely become a private act in the contemporary church. Historically, the reasons for this privatization are at least twofold. First, Protestants reacted against the abuses of the confessional rites of the medieval Roman Catholic Church by eliminating the practice altogether. Second, although confession of sins characterized early Anabaptists, an excessively legalistic practice of banning and other extreme forms of church discipline have also contributed to the present situation. Biblical teaching is clear, however, that believers should confess their sins one to another (James 5:16).

Disciples are also characterized by the discipline of sharing resources within the community. Members are to use their spiritual gifts to build up the body (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:7). Material resources are to be shared as there is need (Deuteronomy 15:7-11; 2 Corinthians 8:13-15).

The Scriptures teach that growth is God's gift and also that growth results from personal and corporate disciplines. Nowhere is the juxtaposition clearer than in Philippians 2:12-13. From the human perspective, growth in Christ involves work—specifically, the call to obedience. From God's viewpoint, growth is a gift—something that God purposes and produces.

Demonstrating True Faith

The New Testament leaves little doubt that two antagonistic systems are at war for humankind. Galatians 5:16-26 not only provides a list of competing characteristics but also offers the image of conflict between the Spirit and the sinful nature. In 1 John 2:15-17, we read that love for the world is antithetical to loving God. In a world of pluralism and tolerance, the biblical message of conflicting systems may sound outdated. The conflict may at times be more insidious and less obvious, but the battle is, if anything, even fiercer in our day.

For Jesus, the essence of discipleship involved death to self (Mark 8:34-38). Jesus himself understood his mission as one which was leading inevitably to death on the cross. As Christians, we understand that Jesus' death had an unrepeatable, substitutionary character. Romans 5:6-11 teaches that Christ died for us.

Jesus also taught that his death to self was a model for disciples to follow. We understand that death to self by definition demands self-denial. Self-denial involves an attitude that surrenders the right of insisting on personal vindication. Cross-bearing puts that attitude into acts of obedience to Jesus despite any cost. For many believers, cross-bearing has meant and continues to mean persecution and martyrdom. To accept Christ's lordship removes control of our lives from self and places it in the sovereign love of God. As

slaves to Christ, we are called to follow Jesus to death without regard for personal comfort or safety.

Article 10 lists several antithetical statements that describe death to self in practical terms. Disciples reject materialism and are stewards of financial resources (see Article 15). They reject violence and follow the Christian call to love and nonresistance (see Article 13). Disciples reject dishonest behaviour and are called to show integrity by speaking honestly and by doing business in a fair manner (see Article 12). Disciples reject immorality and commit to be sexually pure (see Article 11).

In summary, following Christ must be demonstrated in life. The church has expressed this notion throughout the ages. When confronted by a believer who argued in favour of continuing his pagan trade because he must live, the church father Tertullian asked, “Must you?” The Anabaptist reformer Hans Denk said, “To know Christ one must follow him in life.” In the 20th century Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “The cross is laid on every Christian... When Christ calls persons, he bids them come and die.”

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PASTORAL APPLICATION

Discipleship is the norm for all believers. Discipleship means that every believer is called to follow, learn from, and imitate Christ. Devotion to Christ and spiritual growth are not only for a special few. Our calling as a church is to accept people at different stages in their discipleship journey and to stimulate them toward Christlikeness.

Discipleship as Modelling

Our confession asserts that discipleship involves being united in a distinct community, a local church. This means entering into a covenant relationship with other disciples, not simply becoming part of an institutional program. Imitation is a key concept in the biblical teaching of discipleship. God's people are called to be like God, to imitate the character and actions of God. Jesus invites his followers to "learn from him." The apostle Paul tells Christians to follow his example as he followed Christ.

Discipleship happens when mature Christians walk with younger believers in their spiritual journey. Effective modelling requires frequent contact between people over an extended period of time. As believers experience a variety of life situations together, they have opportunities to develop Christian attitudes, values, and actions, and to discuss the principles that guide a Christlike lifestyle. Discipleship also involves learning to practice disciplines that lead to spiritual growth. These include regular prayer, Bible study, meditation, fellowship with other Christians, and sharing of one's faith. A mentoring relationship provides a context for mutual accountability in the practice of these disciplines. Congregations are strengthened when they are intentional about facilitating discipling relationships.

Positive Christian modelling should also take place within the biological family. A church should place high priority on protecting and nurturing families and challenging them to consistent discipleship. At the same time, a church should avoid doing for families what they should do for themselves. Instructing parents to love their children and accept responsibility for educating them in the faith is a key to building spiritually healthy people and relationships within the church.

The prevailing mood of our culture encourages personal independence and individualism. To counter this, many churches are developing small groups within the larger church family. They offer a viable context for

deepening relationships, growing spiritually, meeting special support needs, maintaining accountability in a secure setting, and providing opportunities to sharpen ministry skills.

Developing a variety of small groups and ministry teams helps meet the diverse needs within a church family, with each group providing a context for discipleship. Even task-oriented groups become opportunities for discipleship when they seek to build relationships as they conduct business. Church groups need to share more readily how their faith impacts the decisions they make.

Discipleship and Accountability

Discipleship implies accountability within a community. This accountability can be practiced on several levels. One-to-one relationships and small groups can provide a context for encouragement, challenge, reproof, and correction.

The New Testament teaches that the attitudes and actions of each believer affect the life of the entire body. Congregational discipline ministers to those in the church that are in bondage to sin. Discipline must never be carried out in a spirit of hostility but should be administered in love with the desire to produce conviction, repentance, and restoration. Care must be taken to practice corporate accountability with a clear understanding of relevant Scripture and God's pattern for church discipline. At the same time, leaders and congregations should inform themselves of the various legal issues that this type of accountability may involve.

Discipleship and Separation from the World

Jesus instructed his followers to be in the world but not of the world. Some have understood this separation to mean cultural isolation and the avoidance of particular cultural activities. They associate discipleship with a rigid lifestyle—the more austere, the more godly. Our confessional statement seeks to present non-conformity as a call to separation from the godless values and evil practices in the world. Disciples are set apart as they dedicate themselves to God, aligning their values to God's values and their lives to God's purposes.

Disciples separate themselves from evil practices, but they can never separate themselves from the practical need to love people. Believers are called to be salt and light in a lost world. The perceptive disciple on a redemptive mission will live with the tension between influencing the community and satisfying the expectations of other believers. Jesus certainly frequented the wrong places and met with the wrong people according to the religious legalists. Yet he neither condoned a sinner's sinfulness nor left the sinners to continue in their notorious ways.

Jesus prayed not that the Father would take his disciples out of the world but that He would protect them from the evil one. Great sensitivity is needed to teach disciples to avoid evil but not necessarily every association with victims of the evil one.

Discipleship in Everyday Life

Jesus teaches that discipleship is the way of self-denial. As his followers take up the cross, they consciously decide to represent Christ in the various situations of life. They choose to respect other believers as fellow creations in Christ. They give time and attention to others' interests and money for their welfare. They treat people of other faiths with respect and recognize that it is a privilege to share time, money, and possessions to help spread the gospel and to help the needy.

Disciples learn to speak edifying and encouraging words, avoiding harmful talk. When they are required to speak the truth in unpleasant situations, they do so gently and in love. They determine to be honest and to eliminate evasiveness in business and with government. When personal conflicts occur, disciples work toward reconciliation.

The New Testament instructs believers not to take other believers to court to settle a wrong. In the past, some Mennonite Brethren have taken these instructions to mean that a Christian should never go to court. On closer examination, we see that Christians do not take each other to court because both parties submit to one and the same authority, God, in matters of justice. However, when there is an injustice to be addressed and the other party does not submit to the laws of God, the Bible remains silent on how to proceed. Frequently, believers are asked to make court appearances.

Pastors need to know how to give counsel concerning the use of courts. We believe that the Christian disciple upholds the justice system in our society, including going to court with non-believers if necessary, as long as it is for the good of society and not for personal revenge.

Believers will face inevitable conflicts. They must continue to love each other while finding solutions that are not destructive to interpersonal relationships nor to God's purposes for their congregation. In society, Christians must take initiative to defend the powerless, speak out against injustice, and work toward solutions which reconcile those in conflict.

Some of the decisions disciples make as they follow Jesus in everyday life come at great cost to personal plans, hopes, ambition, and self-interest. As believers grow in discipleship, they also grow in their love for God and experience an intimacy and love with Jesus, which is like "finding the pearl of great price." They know joy, peace, and fulfillment as they are transformed into mature disciples by the liberating work of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.