

Part II: Reflections on Discipleship Foundations: Disciples in Unity with Others and with the Trinity as “Knowing” Friends and Slaves

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Introduction

Part I focused on a biblical perspective as a foundational part of discipleship: human realities and relationships with God with special reference to the New Testament. Part I explored the importance of relationships and human realities along with the metaphor “children of God.” Part II will address other metaphors that strengthen and deepen the close relationships that believers, as disciples, have in Christ—as witnessed by the New Testament.

Unity among the Trinity and Disciples

To indicate the special, intimate relationship between God and His children through Jesus, John’s Gospel speaks of being one, of being in union with God. The unity of the Church (another Pauline term for it is the body of Christ) is one of the most strongly emphasized terms in the New Testament. For example, unity serves as the theme of many books. Ephesians states that in Christ all (both non-Jew and Jew, ethnic distinctions) are made one and that the occurrences of “ministries” in chapter 4 are not to emphasize the four/five-fold ministries, but to emphasize that all ministries (whatever they are called) of the

church, both local and universal (i.e., local and itinerant), work together to produce maturity so that peace and unity can be obtained and maintained.¹

The Ephesians church had become a multi-ethnic and geographically spaced out group of believers without modern technology to assist them in keeping in touch. Paul, in his writings to the church in Ephesus, highlighted the universal church while also emphasizing the local body of Christ. In Ephesians 4:1-16, Paul focuses on peace and unity. The word for unity (*henotēta*) here occurs only twice in the New Testament and both are here in Ephesians 4—one at the front (v. 3) and the other at the end of the paragraph (v. 13). This bracketing effect emphasizes Paul’s purpose for the paragraph: unity—the goal of the Father and His Son, Jesus, for the Church.

Unity also lurks behind every verse in Romans. This unity is not mystical nor does it refer to absorption as in some ancient pagan religions. Unity is essential and depends on a common life in God, a common purpose (i.e., God’s will), and a common ethical manifestation among believers based, particularly, on divine love.² One could not be more intimate than this.

In like manner, John's Gospel emphasizes unity. Chapter 17 contains Jesus' high priestly prayer, which focuses on the unity of all disciples with one another and with the Father and the Son. Verse 21 speaks loudly to this theme: Jesus prays that "they all may be one, even as the Father is **in** me and I **in** you, that they may be **in** us."³ Notice the special union the disciple has with both the Father and the Son. The word "**in**" (Gr., *en*) denotes an extremely close and intimate relationship. Further, the Greek word for "one" is neuter and expresses this unique relationship among God and His followers and their solidarity with God. The language could not be more expressive—this is a special kind of relationship only experienced by the children of God.

Disciples as Friends of Jesus

Although not widely known among contemporary believers, another metaphor for disciple is the social term "friend." One could not find a more intimate laden idea than this in the ancient world—the privilege of being in Jesus. John 15:14-15 reads:

You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. (NIV)

"Friend," a social term in antiquity, captures a certain reciprocal practice in an honor and shame environment. In this context, the patron and client or the upper class and the lower class person have certain obligations to one another. The patron takes care of the client, providing such things as food and protection, while the client gives the patron honor in public places. This reciprocal response is built into the culture.

Reciprocal between individuals of equal

status granted open ended privileges. One could take whatever he or she needed, even without asking, because of the privileges of the relationship. When Jesus says, "I no longer call you servants ... Instead, I have called you friends," He elevates them to that status of an equal partnership. A friend reveals himself to the other, as if he were his own person. The followers of Jesus experience this type of status change. Jesus uses this social practice to explain the change of status the disciples enjoy when they become His children. In this way, followers of Jesus become informed of the special relationship and benefits they have as children to whom the Father reveals His heart and plans. How precious to have this intimate relationship with God!

Disciple as a Slave: A Conundrum

"One does not volunteer to be a disciple."⁴

What greater conundrum can one experience than being a disciple who is a friend, yet also a slave? At first glimpse, the relationship between these two terms seem to oppose one another. I call this a conundrum because a disciple's relationship with God is both simple and complex. So complex is the reality of discipleship that Scripture uses a variety of labels/metaphors to define and explain the disciple's role with God through Jesus. The social label of "friend" and "slave" illustrate this conundrum. Jesus lifts the disciples' status through the use of the term "friend," but does not dissolve the idea of slave. It connotes a different kind of slave-master relationship than that of the culture. In John 15:20, Jesus retains the metaphor "slave" and notes that the disciple must follow the way of the master in suffering. "Slave" contains the fundamental meaning of one's relationship to Jesus—the person is completely subjected to Jesus, his or her Creator and Lord, and must obey in all

matters—to lose one's life for the sake of Jesus so that he or she may gain it in Him (John 12:25 and parallels).⁵ Though “disciple” occurs exclusively in the Gospel and Acts accounts, “slave” is used alongside (several words with overlapping meaning⁶) discipleship, especially in Jesus’ parables. Matthew 20:25-28 and Mark 10:44 capture this meaning. In this paragraph, Jesus turns upside down the world’s value system, saying about greatness—“Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matt. 20:26). And this is what Jesus did—He came to serve and give His life as a ransom—His followers can do no less.

This illustrates the Pauline shift in the use of the words, both verb and noun, for “disciple” in the Gospels. “Slave” is one of the words Paul uses for a follower of Christ. As previously noted, the term “friend,” in both its forms and usages, drops off after the Gospels and Acts and is replaced, in part, by “slave.” The New Testament writers, by employing the term “slave,” emphasize complete subjection, but change other qualities of the word. It becomes a highly regarded term in Christian contexts noting an elevation in status. In the opening greeting of some of the epistles, Paul (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1), Peter (2 Pet. 1:1), and Jude (1) perceive themselves first as slaves. “Slave” comes before the designation “apostle” in these instances, substantiating the priority of one’s relationship (being) with God over one’s social/professional relationship to humans and over one’s ministry.

Thus far, one notes that the terms disciple, friend, and slave, which characterize various aspects of discipleship, maintain a personal element as well as intimacy.

Special Relationship: Temple of the Holy Spirit

Another metaphor, perhaps the most significant of all, is that of the believer as the temple of God. This metaphor emphasizes and combines several factors. The word(s) for temple in both the Old and New Testament are the same words for “house” or “household.”⁷ It signifies a most sacred, on-going dynamic, intimate relationship between God and His people (i.e., His disciples). It implies a place where continual service and interactive communication occur. In this “place”⁸ disciples not only fellowship constantly with God, but also engage in holy service to and for God, and to His people.

This is one of the most radical transformational continuity themes between the Old and New Testaments. Formerly, God “lived” in a physical tent or buildings of stone, but with the coming of Jesus and the new covenant, He now lives in and among people who have been redeemed by God’s saving action in Jesus and by the sanctifying work of the Spirit as He regenerates and inhabits believers. The warp and woof of the New Testament emphatically and unashamedly teaches that God manifests himself in a special way in the believer (the individual) and all believers (corporately). In this way, God has become intimate in a special manner.

Furthermore, in this new “system,” Jesus is the High Priest and the disciples are merely servants of the High Priest.⁹ The old service ceremonies and participants of the physical temple have now become holy people and servants with new spiritual services (i.e., “spiritual sacrifice/service” (see Rom. 12:1ff, the underlying framework of which is built on Rom. 6) of the most high God. All believers in Jesus have the same status in this new temple; no one has any more

privilege or access with God than any other believer. The difference is in the service. Each disciple, while being a servant of God and rising to the occasion when living a life for God, will function in differing but harmonious ministry roles, subjecting first to God and then to one another in a loving, body-kind of service—all sacred and glorifying to God and beneficial to humans.

So far, the select metaphors discussed have emphasized God's special presence and intimate relationship that all believers, as disciples, experience with God through Jesus and the Spirit. A disciple's dynamic relationship with God is foundational for all other relationships. One last concept encapsulates this relationship.

Knowing God

A limited and different way of “knowing” exists for those who are apart from God. John’s Gospel distinctly notes this with its dualism. There is a heavenly perspective, from above, and an earthly one, from below. The world, consisting of sinners apart from God, does not know the things that are from above; they cannot “know” God nor understand Him or His will. Paul puts it similarly, but uses different words. Especially in Romans, where he lays out his grand theology of missions, he says that all sinners have a darkened heart (understanding) and have completely abandoned God, by their own choice. Romans 1 points out this move to depravity as an interchange between God, who reveals, and depraved humans, who reject and replace this revealing God. In so doing, they fail to worship and glorify God. Instead, they elevate the creature and worship various kinds of idols. Romans 3 concludes the section with Scripture citations from the Psalms about the fact of total and universal depravity.

The condition of sinful humans, thus, is that their minds/hearts are darkened and unable to glorify God of and by themselves. This is the point of Romans 3:23: “For all have sinned and fall short of the **glory** of God.” Paul’s intent is to give reason for the need of the coming of Jesus. By believing on Jesus, who died and rose from the dead, one is recreated anew by the Spirit. This new creation means that a new heart is now in every believer and they can understand (i.e., know) God, hear His voice, communicate with Him, and make decisions that count. They do not have to sin as Romans 6:1-11 declares. Believers must be wholly dedicated to and identified with Jesus. This means that everyone now has the freedom to choose to serve and follow Jesus. That is what Romans 6:12-23 concludes.

“Sanctification” is a key word here along with attending freedom. In chapter 8, the Spirit empowers each believer to serve and live for Jesus as the sons of God led by the Spirit. The conclusion of this is that embracing Jesus as Lord and Savior and identifying with Him in these ways means that the Spirit now habitually lives in each one and in the body of all believers who follow Jesus. The mind of the believer is now free, under the Lordship of Jesus, to make godly decisions that bless others and glorify God. The Christian’s mind is not evil because of the cross and the Spirit’s work—it is now useful and should be used to grow intellectually and spiritually. Proper education serves as a valuable part of discipleship and, of course, for building relationships. One can no longer sustain the argument that learning is detrimental to faith. However, the Lordship of Jesus must be at the heart of this learning. The Bible assures us of this reality.

It is significant to note that the New Testament language pertaining to this shift from sinner to saint is expressed partly by

the Greek words for “know” and are important for relational discipleship. Two words in various forms are used, especially *oida* (I know) and *ginōskō* (I know). These verbs are used in certain places, especially in John’s and Paul’s writings, to inform about a profound kind of knowing that arises from being born again and possessing the Spirit.¹⁰ With the new ability from that experience comes the fact of knowing Truth,¹¹ as clearly stated in 1 John 5:18-20:

We **know** that anyone *born* of God does not continue to sin; the one who was *born* of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him. We **know** that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We **know** also that the Son of God has come and has given us **understanding**, so that we may **know** him who is **true**. And we are in him who is **true**—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the **true** God and eternal life (NIV).

Conclusion

The foundation for all discipleship and even for all relational aspects of and for disciples

is to have a personal relationship with God through Jesus and the Spirit. This is the most intimate of all relationships. Furthermore, it is not only possible, but necessary, to know what privileges the believer has in Christ. So, the disciple must be informed about these matters we have presented.¹² The Father and Son through the Spirit live in every believer/disciple individually and corporately. This means that each disciple has constant fellowship with God, who calls and loves believers unconditionally. Through His lordship He directs and empowers the disciple in every aspect of life and service for Him—we are His special, sacred place of dwelling. We “know” Him because we have been born again and are in a special relationship with Him as His children, His friends, and His slaves. Through prayer, reflection, Bible reading, and a humble, submissive attitude towards God (i.e., communion), believers will always hear from Him. Because of this special relationship, believers have many great privileges—it is in this context that disciples are free to love, honor, and obey God—forever.

Sources Consulted

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¹ This list is simply suggestive in regards to “titles.” This word for pastor (shepherd) is used in this way only here in Eph. 4. Of the use in the New Testament, most refer figuratively to Jesus and the rest pertain to literal shepherds of sheep. The people of God are “sheep” in the imagery of the New Testament. The dominant image for “pastor” is the caretaker of the family—the father.

² See Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003). “But in any case, the loving unity between the Father and the Son provides a model for believers, not necessarily a metaphysical, mystical ground for it.” 2:1062.

³ My paraphrase.

⁴ Warren Carter, “Matthew 4:18-22 and Matthean Discipleship: An Audience-Oriented Perspective,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59 (1997):67. See also J. D. Kingsbury, “On Following Jesus: The ‘Eager Scribe and the Reluctant Disciple (Matthew 8:18-22),’” *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988):45-59.

⁵ Waters down the meaning of this text.

⁶ In this paragraph, two words for slave (*diakonos* and *doulos*) are used interchangeably. Slave, servant, and minister in English are rather synonymous words for the same concept. Greek words vary also for a variety of subjected services—from field slave, to household servant, to one who serves as aid to the king or a military official (see Matt 8:9). Paul Tanner in “The Cost of Discipleship: Losing One’s Life for Jesus’ Sake,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56 (March 2013):43-61, takes out some of the “cost” of discipleship with his Reformed interpretation.

⁷ See for example in the Old Testament, 2 Samuel 7 and the play upon the Hebrew word for “house” (*beth*) throughout. The word can mean household, house, or temple. The Greek word for both Old and New Testaments is usually *oikos*.

⁸ Actually this word is used in John for the temple; see John 4:20 and 11:48.

⁹ See Num. 8:19 [NIV] for the terms and ideas that have been retained by Paul: “Of all the Israelites, I have given the Levites as gifts to Aaron and his sons to do the work at the Tent of Meeting on behalf of the Israelites and to make atonement for them so that no plague will strike the Israelites when they go near the sanctuary.” Disciples are “gifts” as the Levites to do the “work” (ministry) of God in the new covenant.

¹⁰ It would be appropriate to call this a shift in epistemology, which refers to a way one has of knowing something. Born again believers have a different epistemology from nonbelievers.

¹¹ See Keener, *The Gospel of John* 1:234-47; E. D. Schmitz and E. Schütz, “Knowledge, Experience, Ignorance,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976): 2:390-409. See the allegory of the Good Shepherd in John 10:1-7.

¹² Paul’s use of the word “know” and “ignorant” in Romans 6:1-12 suggests that having certain knowledge and removing one’s ignorance of something is extremely important for living out God’s privileges. One cannot live a certain way, if one does not know about it!