

Reflections on Discipleship Foundations: As Humans and the Children of God

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The story of two sisters' engagement with Jesus holds a classic model of discipleship (Luke 10:38-42). One sister follows proper protocol of hospitality and is concerned that her guest be properly cared for—good food, nice atmosphere, and gracious service. After all, that is the way it is done. She is busy doing something for her guest. The other sister sits at the feet of their guest and listens to him as he talks, apparently unaware of what manners are, or the protocol, called for. At least that is what her sister thought when she asked their special guest, Jesus, to have Mary get up and help her with the **work**. This is the opportunity for Jesus to tell Martha, the doer, “She [Mary] has chosen the more important thing. She was cultivating her person [and her relationship to Jesus] by paying attention to what Jesus said and taught—thus developing herself through ‘being.’” And the marvelous point of the lesson is taught by two women—not men. This story resembles the discipleship lesson in Luke 10 about being neighborly when the Good Samaritan stopped by to care for the wounds of the man lying by the roadside. Both stories depict true discipleship through their respective narratives.

The church environment, for some time, has focused on “doing” as one of the

foundational cultural pillars. Pragmatism (“doing” is the highest ideal) is much more important than being. Furthermore, works righteousness (i.e., doing/earning) tends to creep in or be reflected in one’s service. These two pillars denote the cultural poles of existence. This biblical story gets right to the heart of the matter—“being” versus “doing.” Jesus’ culture was one of being. Doing flows out of this being. This is the point of grace and righteousness. We are offered grace and then saved by grace through faith—this is God’s work and not ours. In the New Testament, it is expressed by the verb in the indicative mood. Grace is offered and then received; then the imperative mood, i.e., doing flows out of God’s gift of empowering grace. People must respond from the heart to serve a wonderful God who has done so much and will continue to do more for His glory. At the heart of this grace and being are relationships.

The term for “disciple,” in both noun and verb form, swirls around content of the Gospels and Acts. After that, the use of this word drops off.¹ Either the interest in discipleship waned or other terms came into use. I believe it is the latter. Because of the breadth of meaning of the concept of “discipleship” as it appears in various terms

and other ways, this essay will only focus on the foundational relationship between God and the disciple by looking at several of the metaphors significant for discipleship.² Culture has a lot to do with the meaning of discipleship; therefore, this essay will also incorporate these aspects along the way.

Preliminary Observations

“We are made for relationships.”³ In particular, Part I will focus on a biblical perspective as a foundational part of discipleship: relationships with God and human realities with special reference to the New Testament. Scripture shows that relationships are the single most important factor in discipleship. The kind of learning that the Bible showcases is affective in nature. Further, discipleship is a life-long relationship with God. It is built into the very fabric of the “being” of the Church—evangelization and church growth, as stated in the Great Commission (Matt. 28: 19-20; Rom. 1:5).⁴ In particular, four things protrude: (1) **disciple** (another word is evangelization, both ought to be considered somewhat synonymous)⁵ all the nations; (2) recognize that the heart of the process of discipleship is to **identify** with Jesus (i.e., through baptism—Matt. 28:19; Rom. 6:1-11); (3) **obey** everything Jesus commands; and (4) note that authority comes from Jesus who **resides** in His Church always (“I am with you until the end of the age”). Thus, one never “stops” being a disciple and one should never stop growing in this relationship.

A major part of discipleship, then, is working with God to reconcile (i.e., to bring into relationship) sinners to Him.

Consequently, affective learning comes from being with someone and gleaning from that experience; it recognizes the relational component that Jesus abides with the follower forever. This kind of learning, while not trumping cognitive learning, is prominent because it is based on relationships. One can attain valuable learning through cognitive study and research, but that type of learning produces lonely, ivory tower information, isolated from a greater reality. It provides indirect contact between God and the believer; it is an “aboutness” or aloofness, rather than face-to-face intimacy found in a direct relational encounter.⁶ When partnered with relational learning, cognitive discipleship becomes all the more vibrant and effective. As a result, the biblical teaching on this matter serves as foundational and crucial teaching.

Discipleship as relationship is foundational. It is rather typical in the practice of ministry and discipleship training to understand discipleship exclusively in terms of relationships among church staff members and other such ministries.⁷ However, there is a more basic sense in which it is foundational. Mark L. Strauss astutely declares:

Relationships [in this light] are now defined not through the bonds of family or culture or ethnicity but rather through spiritual identity: Our brothers and sisters are those who do the will of God (Mark 3:35).⁸

Relationships in the New Testament, which we are featuring here, are more basic than

these “normally accepted” ones, including familial, institutional, personal, and the like. They should precede and govern all relationships of believers⁹ in Jesus. These relationships with God should guide all activities and the thought life of believers must demonstrate ethical, holy, and sanctified manifestations both in regards to a relationship with God and among believers. To put it another way, being in a growing relationship with God precedes doing and that means emphasis falls on relationships of integrity.¹⁰ Ministry/discipleship (i.e., other relationships), flows out of this relational integrity.

Relationships differ from culture to culture. For example, the notion and effect of sin or evil differ from a person in Saudi Arabia, who will demonstrate a different notion regarding the effect of sin and evil from a person living in a medium sized city in a mid-western community in the United States, or a person living in a postmodern setting. As such, a Far Eastern cultural perspective sees relationships as absolutely crucial and carrying great implications. Relationships are based on bloodline, kinship realities, and the group to which one belongs. Thus, sin or evil becomes foremost a grievance against the group (be it personal, a family, clan, or tribe). Sin, in this case, is determined by group boundary markers and insider values. This evil, certainly in Scripture, means that something has offended a relationship, causing a rupture. Restoring and mending this broken relationship becomes redemptive and a significant part of discipleship.

Self-identity, in this perspective, comes from the group and one’s conscience is constructed from group mores and values. Thus, in Matthew’s Gospel, forgiveness is emphasized and a requirement. In Jesus’ culture, the unpardonable sin was a lack of forgiveness.¹¹ Each member of the community must express forgiveness, thereby manifesting the character of God who is the **model of a forgiving person.**¹² Thus, at all costs (i.e., the death and resurrection of Jesus), the community must be unified in Jesus, and forgiveness is the major instrument in relational building and maintaining.

In contrast, occidental culture¹³ is connected more by laws that govern one’s life.¹⁴ Individual responsibility and experience builds conscience, isolating a person from others in self-identity which comes from within the individual. Sin or evil, in this instance, is breaking a law; the response to a broken law is to suffer a consequence as demanded by that law demands. Relationships are, thus, more impersonal. Even when people in this kind of culture come together in community, they preeminently are bound by a set of laws. Speaking about the pitfalls of social media, Monika Strachocka-Kile, a licensed clinical social worker, states:

As someone who works with interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, I am always concerned about the level of pseudo intimacy as opposed to genuine intimacy.¹⁵

A Common Bond among Humans: Past, Present and Future

The Bible, especially the New Testament, notes that all humans are sinners, both by nature and by personal action. How this is so or comes to be is not the focus of Scripture—it is just a fact.¹⁶ Every human being, regardless of gender, status, time, religion, and place, is a sinner. Everyone partakes of this “common” sinful nature. This is not the view of every religion or culture, but it reflects the view of Scripture. This means that no person has a positive relationship (or none at all) with God. Scripture calls this “enmity” with God (i.e., we are God’s enemies; cf. Luke 23:12; Rom. 8:7; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 2:14, 16; James 4:4). Humans are the ones who have offended a holy God and are running from Him, having constructed gods to their own liking to replace the one, true God. However, God is always searching for humans in these fractured relationships to reconcile them to Himself through the cross. This is clearly seen in the parables of “lostness” in Luke 15. The shepherd seeks the lost sheep in the mountains, the woman searches for the lost coin, and the father runs out to meet his lost son and grieves over his other lost son. The reality of this “lostness” means that this great sin has an impact on human relationships. The deliberate but concerned seeking in these parables demonstrates the concern of the Father through Jesus to seek the lost. This view of a kinship society helps one understand the Scriptural perspective.

A New Humanity

In a new way, Scripture indicates the existence of another human race, distinct

from this in one major sense. It is a new humanity based on Jesus’ person and His work: His death and resurrection. Jesus is the head of this new humanity—a humanity of redeemed people (see 1 Cor. 15:22-23). This corporateness of Jesus is most clearly seen in Matthew 1:13-2:23. Through a series of paragraphs, Matthew ties episodes in Jesus’ life with the Older Testament and intertwines Him with the new and restored people of God who are embodied in the person of Jesus. Clearly, the author points to Jesus as God’s Son whom he has brought out of Egypt, thus connecting Jesus with the corporate identity of His people via the new or second exodus.¹⁷

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’.¹⁸ (Matt. 2:14-15)

A significant part of this new race and new relationship pertains to the Holy Spirit who gives all who believe in Jesus a new and common nature, characterized by eternal life, empowers them, and makes real God’s will for humans. This new humanity is also known as a new creation, distinct from the other race of sinful humans, and from whom the new has come.¹⁹ As the Spirit created all that is, as noted in Genesis 1, so He creates a new humanity—those who embrace Jesus as Savior and Lord. The metaphor for this is “new birth” and underscores the importance of John’s new birth in his Gospel (John 3:3). For example, in the clear contexts of creation, both John’s Gospel and Genesis

speak of the original and the new, purposive creations. Note the words “light” and “darkness” in John 1:1 and his not so subtle echo of these terms in Genesis 1.²⁰ In this context, John uses several metaphors to describe God’s activity in Jesus and the nature of His person.

- Genesis 1
 - v. 1—*darkness* over the face of the deep;
 - v. 3—let there be *light* and there was *light*;
 - v. 4—the *light* was good; God separated *light* from *darkness*;
 - v. 5—God called the *light* day and the night *darkness*.
- John 1
 - vv. 1-3—the Word created all;
 - v. 4—*life* was in the Word and this *life* was the *light*;²¹
 - v. 5—the *light* shines in *darkness* but *darkness* has not understood/snuffed it (out) [i.e., the *light*];²²
 - v. 7—John came as a witness to that *light*, so that everyone could believe;
 - v. 8—he was not that *light*;
 - v. 9—The Word is the true *light* for everyone in the world.

In John 1:12-13, it is clear that God makes a new creation of all those who believe in Jesus (i.e., children of God). For John, this new creation is articulated as “being born again/from above.” Of course, this is the work of the Spirit, as it was in the first creation.

Being born again inaugurates a life of intimacy with God and involves a number of spiritual realities. Though many believers do not remember when they were born again,²³ this does not necessarily mean they are not born again or saved. Conversion itself is mostly a process, but at some point, a person must experience a new creation.²⁴

Conversion as a process may indicate a slower or faster awareness of change, but somewhere in the process, a believer must be born again, without which one is not a new creation and, consequently, not a member of the new humanity—but remains an enemy of God. This is all part of the discipleship process.

Being born again is also associated with “being saved” and it comes by placing one’s complete trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Being born again initiates a believer into a new lifestyle that is characterized by belief. This faith, as a verb, expresses this new lifestyle and involves an intimate relationship. The verb “to believe,” in a context such as this, often occurs in the present tense. Thus, in John 1:12, the verb in the clause “those who **believe**” is present tense, indicating a continuing lifestyle or the new existence and life of a child of God. The same pertains to the verb “believe” in Romans 1:16—the gospel **is** God’s power leading to salvation to everyone who **believes continuously**. This life of belief is one of constant growth and maturity in all matters, and especially trust—which could easily be called a life of discipleship, of nurturing, and strengthening relationships—and a growing sense of intimacy. 1 Peter 2:2 speaks of this in a metaphor. He exhorts

believers “as new born babies” to crave the pure spiritual milk.

Children of God

A significant metaphor which the New Testament uses to describe the relationship of this new humanity with God is “children of God”—a prominent term in all the New Testament, but especially so in John’s writings. This term describes the various facets of a relationship evolving around a father-child relationship.

This term suggests several things about the relationship between God and his new followers. It expresses an intimate and close relationship with all the rights and privileges that a child would have. This term especially echoes the Old Testament covenant relationship between God and his people Israel (cf. Deut. 14:1; Isa. 45; Exod. 19:4 context).²⁵ Paul, by using “adoption” to describe these special rights, has this background in mind and writes in Romans 8:15 that we as God’s children have been adopted into his family. Its use also resonates in a special way in its Roman environment. In Roman society, if fathers wanted their sons to be insured that they would inherit their estates, they would proceed with adoption, even though by birth they were legal sons. Anthropologists use “fictive” to describe this relationship between a father and his adopted child. Fictive means that the adopted child has all the privileges legally without having the same biological relationship. As a child of God, at times, it is difficult to grasp the concept that one has the care and guidance of a most wise and benevolent Father.²⁶ Nevertheless, the follower/disciple of God is

in such a privileged position! This privilege of receiving care from the Father is only made possible, empowered, and enhanced by the person and work of Jesus. John 14:12-14 informs disciples to ask of the Father anything in Jesus’ name and he will do it!²⁷

Paul further emphasizes this privilege by saying we have the family Spirit—not only does the believer have the Spirit in some special way, he or she has been created with a nature commensurate with that of the

heavenly Father.²⁸ This nature is described, according to John’s Gospel, as having “eternal life” but still dependent upon the Spirit for sustenance and existence.

Although believers are children, partaking of the nature of God, they do not possess the attributes of divinity such as omnipresence or omnipotence. However, disciples must develop what Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit (i.e., godliness). Developing these attributes (i.e., being) is the heart of discipleship. It reflects the work of God’s Spirit in a believer who is obeying Christ’s commandments and who is Christ’s slave. These are attributes that make “like father like children.”

Jesus, in John’s writings, is the mediator between the disciple and the Father. Access is always open and active through Jesus. It is the Spirit who makes plain and maintains this dynamic relationship between the child of God and the Father who is always available and near, even within, the disciple. This mediatorship is special because of the way John employs the term “children of God” in his Gospel. He applies this term consistently to Jesus’ disciples and never

uses the term “sons” of God.²⁹ The word “son” is reserved for Jesus who reveals the Father. Jesus as “Son” has been in eternity with the Father and, consequently, knows the Father very well (cf. John 1:1-18). He has come to reveal the Father and to provide a way to the Father. How blessed are His disciples to be children of God!

Conclusion

In Part I we have examined some cultural and lexical elements of discipleship. We have begun to examine some significant metaphors pertinent to the understanding of discipleship in the New Testament. This focus in Part I looked at a neglected area of discipleship—that of a personal relationship with God which should precede and govern all other ones that the believer has. Part II, appearing in the next issue, continues this examination.

¹ See note 4 below. *Mathētēs/mathēteuō* are the two forms of the basic word for disciple.

² Many metaphors exist; however, this limited study will only focus on a few.

³ Katelyn Beaty, “Girls Talk,” *Christianity Today* (April 2013): 71.

⁴ Notice that Romans 1 has dropped out any reference to “disciple” that Matthew has and replaced it with “obedience of faith.”

⁵ In some contexts, evangelization also includes the idea of discipleship. The entire notion of “winning” people for Christ (i.e., evangelizing), is broader than the single event of conversion or confession.

⁶ Much of the contemporary church culture, especially in the evangelical emergent/emerging church also reacts to propositional theological statements *about* God and opt more for experiences with God.

⁷ One can see this implied in church leadership literature—I have found it stated this way, though, in several cases, in just one journal.

⁸ Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 206.

⁹ I use “believer(s)” in the same sense as “disciple(s) throughout this article.

¹⁰ Questions are now being raised about this: “Churches might be spending too much time preparing us for missions and not enough for motherhood.” Hope Henchey, *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2013/june/youth-ministrys-family-blind-spot> (accessed July 6, 2013). Headline summary of an article expressing concern about too much time exposing youth and young adults to mission trips, etc., without building their faith and life skills.

¹¹ See, for instance, the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:5-14).

¹² This is the whole point of the parable in Luke 17:1-10; there it explains the role of faith and forgiveness.

¹³ I choose this name rather than “West” or “Western” because so many different people groups have moved to Western areas so as to confuse the meaning of this term. A student emphasized this point to me one time in class. Since then, I use this term to refer to people of contractual societies, a name used by anthropologists. Another term used somewhat synonymously with “contractual” is individualism, a term which refers to a culture that emphasizes laws that focus on an individual’s person, e.g., individual rights are stressed rather than one’s relational place in his or her community.

¹⁴ The anthropological term for this is “contractual;” the philosophical, “individualism.” Cf. note 5. Postmodern society seems to be in the midst of great change itself and causing quite the cultural shift.

¹⁵ Monika Strachocka-Kile, *Springfield News-Leader* (Friday, March 22, 2013), 3C; a licensed clinical social worker speaking about the pitfalls of the social media.

¹⁶ Romans 11:32: “For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all” (New American Standard Version). Paul speaks here of Jews and Gentiles; see also Rom. 5:12; 8:18-23; Rom. 11; and John 1:9-13. Noted by Marguerite Shuster, “The Mystery of Original Sin,” *Christianity Today* (April 2013):39-41.

¹⁷ These terms are current in scholarly literature when discussing the salvation model of what God has done in Jesus.

¹⁸ Matthew 2:14-15, quoting Hosea 11:1: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (NIV).

¹⁹ This implies the presence of a clear cut insider/outsider mentality. Some of the postmodern, emergent churches refuse such a scheme. This disputed issue influences how believers evangelize the culture.

²⁰ I use the word “echo” here in the sense of what scholars call intertextuality, where earlier texts influence the meaning of later texts. The influence can be allusions or something stronger like exact words or phrases, but the influence is still present. Here, the influence is fairly strong as indicated by the use of the same words and ideas. In addition, John begins his Gospel in the same way that Genesis begins.

²¹ In John, light is symbolically life. In other words, light equals life. See John chapter 9.

²² There is a choice of meanings here for that Greek word—both are indicated here.

²³ I have asked large classes this question many times and at least one half of students could not remember when they were born again, though they were definitely born again.

²⁴ Several models of conversion exist (a model is an attempt to explain how one comes to Christ and experiences a change in lifestyle): conversion as event or conversion as a process (several subcategories exist here).

²⁵ James La Grand, “Earliest Christian Mission to ‘All Nations’ in Light of Matthew’s Gospel.” (Dissertation *zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde der theologischen Fakultät der Universität Basel*, April 1989), 72: “‘Adoption’ is not a prominent term in the Hebrew Bible and the concept of legal adoption of a child into a nuclear family seems foreign to Israel, but the term ‘covenant’ itself seems to imply divine adoption and, in turn, assimilation into the family of God.”

²⁶ In my earlier days as a pastor of a small church, I taught the intermediate boys class. I offended one of the boys with this father image. He ran out of class when I used it; I later learned that his father was very abusive. I could not use that metaphor with him. Instead, he was into stock car racing so I boned up on stock cars. In American this culture, many people may find it difficult to relate to this image because of the abusive relationships of a father or father figure.

²⁷ The context notes that the request would be for the glory of the Father.

²⁸ I make a difference between the doctrine of God’s presence—being everywhere, equally, and simultaneously—and manifestation of His presence. The Spirit is present in the believer in a different way than in the sinner. The Spirit is active—dynamic in the believer. The metaphor of “temple of the Spirit” is one such way to describe this dwelling of God in believers.

²⁹ Paul does not hesitate to call believers “sons of God.” The same intimate relationship, however, still persists.