

Discipling the Least of These: The Reconciling Work of Christ the Teacher

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I was glad to accept the invitation to present today, because people hardly ever ask me to speak about the New Testament! Even in my preaching invitations, pastors frequently request that I choose an OT passage, “Because,” they sometimes say with chagrin, “it’s been awhile.” And of course, the specialization that is so well-established in the academy leads some to ask me facetiously if, since I am an Old Testament professor, do I ever even read the New Testament, to which I like to respond facetiously, “Well, since Jesus is on every page of the Old, why do I need the New?”

Let me say at the outset of this paper, that I offer these comments as observations of Jesus’ discipleship patterns over four gospels, not as a close textual analysis. And secondly, I would not necessarily argue that everything Jesus did in making disciples is exactly how we should proceed. The specific context of a backwater Jewish province in the first-century Roman world, and the methods and expectations of itinerant rabbis in that world, should probably mitigate our wholesale aping of Jesus’ specific actions. Which is to say that I am interested, for the next few moments, in observing carefully what Jesus did, and that what we must do is a question I will leave for our conversation tomorrow.

Who Were the Disciples?

I would like to start with a quick reminder of something we all know, and then to expand that idea slightly beyond the common conception. So first, the reminder: a disciple in Jesus’ world, in the earliest stages of what we now recognize as rabbinic Judaism, was a student enrolled in an established program of study. In the context of first-century Judaism, the student or disciple of a particular rabbi, like Paul with Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3), received their main instruction in the Law from their rabbi, over the course of an intensive period of study in early adulthood, but then continuing in a learning relationship that could even be lifelong. So when Jesus commissioned us to make disciples, he was not giving a generic, spiritualized charge to rack up more and more conversions, but was borrowing a well-established and specific image of learning and mentoring between teacher and student.

And now to expand the common conception: Jesus disciplined more than just twelve Jewish men. You may remember from your own studies that the term ‘disciples’ (*mathetes*) in the Gospels refers sometimes to the larger group of followers (Luke 6:13), whereas the dozen men are most commonly called The Twelve in Greek (*dōdeka*). For instance, Mark 3:13-19 marks The Twelve as those specifically sent out to preach, and to cast out demons; they are therefore also called ‘apostles’ or ‘sent out ones’ in other passages. However, Mark 4:10 describes a typical teaching scene, “When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables” (NRSV). So he was ‘alone’ supposedly, but so were the twelve, and others? ‘Asked him about the parables’ indicates Jesus’ use of a typical way lessons were initiated in the rabbi’s methodology: give a teaching, and then field questions about it.

I describe it for my students using a series of concentric circles. There appears to have been an inner circle of 3: Peter, James, and John, who were sometimes pulled aside for small-group lessons, like on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9) or in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46); and then expanding outward, the full complement of The Twelve. In the next circle, the larger group of men and women who traveled with Jesus, funded his ministry, hosted him in their homes or met with him when he was in town, and learned at his feet. We don’t know

exactly how many inhabited this circle, or who they all were, but we meet many of them in the Gospels: the financiers Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna (Luke 8:1-3); the siblings from Bethany, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (Luke 10:38-42; John 11-12); secret disciples such as Nicodemus (John 3:1-21) and Joseph of Arimathea (Matthew 27:57; John 19:38); folks like Cleopas and his friend on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:13-25). It seems to have been a sizeable group all together: in Luke 10, 70 of them were sent in pairs to herald the coming of Jesus to the towns where he traveled; after the Ascension in Acts 1, 120 of them waited together in Jerusalem.

A Motley Crew

In this fuller, more accurate picture of Jesus' disciples, I have noticed something for quite a while, which this paper is giving me the chance to name. The people who surrounded Jesus, who sat at his feet and carried his message, didn't really belong together. They were a disparate, mismatched crowd. And there was that one instance of a quarrel over priority on the way to Capernaum (Mark 9:33-34), but otherwise there seems to have been an astonishing lack of infighting and or what my students call 'drama' between them. It could be argued, I suppose, that it is merely a matter of selective reporting on the part of the gospel writers. I would grant that argument more weight, if not for the fact that this motley crew went on to establish a world-wide movement of astonishing continuity (not to say uniformity). And so as I have been contemplating what I might offer today, I keep coming back to this particular fruit of Jesus' ministry: through his discipleship, Jesus unified enemies among his followers, reconciling them not only with the Father but with each other.

Just about every stripe of first-century Jewish identity was represented among Jesus' disciples. The regional differences and political rivalries of Second-Temple Judaism do not only color Jesus' encounters with his opponents; they also shed light on his followers. The more Hellenized Jews of Galilee, like Peter and Andrew, rubbed along with folks from the Jewish heartland of Judea, like Martha and Mary. A contractor with Rome such as Levi the tax collector (Luke 5:27-32) his rabbi with a Zealot like Simon (Luke 6:15). Pharisees like Nicodemus followed him (John 3:1), but so did people who were willing to pluck grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1). The disciples of Christ comprised an array of people with competing allegiances, but they were reconciled through his work, and eventually became a unified witness to the crucified and risen Son of God.

In addition to this reconciliation of regional, religious, and political rivals, it is nearly impossible to overstate the degree to which Christ reconciled men and women through his discipling work. Women were prominent in his company; not just hopeful hangers-on, but full-fledged learners. Mary of Bethany 'sat at his feet', which many have pointed out is a technical phrase denoting official disciple status (Luke 10:39). Martha was trusted with the teaching on resurrection (John 11:17-27). Joanna, Mary Magdalene, and Susanna traveled with Jesus, funding his itinerancy. And of course Mary Magdalene was given the task of proclaiming the greatest news ever told, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:1-18).

The male disciples did sometimes betray dismissiveness toward their sisters; think of Luke's description of their reaction to the resurrection news, they thought it 'an idle tale' (24:11). However, they did not learn that attitude from their rabbi. I cannot resist here the chance to share a brilliant analysis of Jesus' reconciling love for women, by Dorothy Sayers, the only female scholar among Lewis and Tolkien's Inklings:

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man. . . . A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as "The women, God help us!" or "The ladies, God bless them!"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and

arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything "funny" about woman's nature.¹

Eventually the brothers seem to have caught on, too, as evidenced by the preservation of the women's witness in all four Gospel accounts, and the validation of many women's faith and teachings in the Acts and Letters.

This incongruent crowd of disciples, men and women, Pharisees and fishermen, were almost miraculous in their very composition, but after Jesus' ascension, they would go on to cross even more lines: the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, the boundaries of Jerusalem-Judea-Samaria, to make disciples out of Macedonian sellers of purple (Acts 16), Roman soldiers (Acts 10), and Ethiopian eunuchs (Acts 8:26-40). So, how did he do it? How did he bring them together, in only 3 years of teaching? Of course, the Holy Spirit brought the reconciliation of the disciples into full flower along with the other elements of their growth in the faith. But Jesus' disciples already showed remarkable progress under his teaching before Pentecost.

How He Did It

I won't be addressing the signs and wonders Jesus performed in any level of detail, though they certainly figure heavily in his disciple-making. But our brother Steve will be talking about them this evening, so I will leave that for later.

As recorded in the Gospels, Jesus' teachings as a rabbi—his parables, sayings, and sermons—focused on interpretation of the Law, descriptions of the Kingdom and its King, and the nature and effects of his saving work, among other things. On the face of it, not much is said specifically about tactics for reconciling different kinds of people, or how that is a major goal of discipleship. That one argument, mentioned above, led to the teaching, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:34), and then to our Lord's lifting a child into his arms, and commending the humility and vulnerability of little ones, to those who would enter the Kingdom (Matthew 18:3-4). Reconciliation among disciples requires humility.

There is also the New Commandment, given in John's Gospel, "That you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:34-45). Further, we have the Greatest Commandments about loving God and neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40). Reconciliation among disciples requires love.

There may be other teachings you would add to the list, and I'm actually going to be asking you for further suggestions and discussion about this. But I would add, finally, Jesus' prayer for his disciples in John 17. The Rabbi prays for his disciples, "Holy Father protect them in your name...so that they may be one...While I was with them, I protected them...I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (vv.11-12, 20-21). Reconciliation among disciples requires unity, and please notice that the veracity of the gospel message turns out to depend on that unity.

If reconciliation is not a major focus of Jesus' teaching, how did he accomplish the reconciliation so evident among his disciples? Of course, the life of travel is a consummate method

¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Eerdmans, 2005), 68-69.

of building deep bonds between people. Moving as outsiders from place to place causes travel companions to draw together, leaning into their shared experiences, and building loyalties across the boundaries of their normal social lives. If you want to make friends out of enemies, send them on a trip.

And let's not forget that Jesus' travel was no picnic. He and his disciples faced investigation and testing from the authorities, arguments and opposition from misunderstanding audiences, and the indignities of nomadic life. Facing opposition together can reconcile former enemies; as the old truism has it, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

All the while, the disciples were observing their rabbi, who extended dignity and wholeness to the least worthy in every situation: the sick people no one would touch; the demon-possessed who'd been driven away; the women who bled, slept around, and lost their sons and husbands. Jesus accepted the invitations of leaders to dine, but almost always brought along unexpected guests, because tax collectors and women carrying perfume were welcome at his table. At every opportunity, the disciples saw their Teacher not only turn his eyes upon the least of these, but use his words to defend them, from persecution, from judgment, from their own shame. "Leave her alone" (John 12:7). "If you had known...you would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matthew 12:7). "Neither this man nor his parents sinned" (John 9:3). "Do you *see* this woman...she has shown great love." (Luke 7:44). "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone" (John 8:7). "Neither do I condemn you" (John 8:11).

In learning at Jesus' feet, the disciples were taught to go beyond the boundaries of natural affinity and like-mindedness, to make brothers and sisters out of those who used to despise and disdain each other. The Teacher had the knack of imagining how it could look for enemies to become friends, and the divine insight to see much more in each of his disciples than they saw in themselves. This full-hearted love and radical optimism for one's students was the hallmark of Christ's discipleship, and it bore fruit. The church has sometimes struggled to perpetuate the reconciliation effected by Christ's discipling, but that initial band of disciples was a successful test case. They built a church that spanned the Jewish-Gentile divide across the Empire, one that was led and taught by women and men alike, and one that eventually spanned the globe.

Discipleship as reconciliation is not a common model, and it is insufficient in itself. Disciples must of course learn the content of the faith. But like many of you, I have been disturbed by the frequency with which I meet people who can quote the teachings of Jesus verbatim, but who *cannot* bring themselves to say a kind word about their enemy, let alone share a table at the potluck. After investigating the discipling choices of Jesus, I would suggest that our obligation to disciple reconcilers has real implications for church health. If our small groups and Sunday school classes are only ever made up of likeminded folks, we are not discipling believers; we are discipling 'agree-ers'. If the people in our pews are members of only one political party, whichever one it is, we have made converts of only those people we like. If no one in our church would fit the description of a 'least of these', it's likely we have not taught our people to extend dignity like Jesus did, and to imagine that the people we disdain are whole people, worthy of the Good News that brings wholeness. Disciples are marked by the ability to reconcile, which does not mean to convince people to agree, but to love anyway. Unity is only required, after all, where there *is* difference, so if we do not learn together how to fight for unity in the midst of differences, we are not living in the Spirit.

People who know how to reconcile are quick to say, "I am sorry, I was wrong. Will you forgive me?" They care more about loving their conversation partners, and honoring them with casseroles, than about destroying their argument on Facebook. They care more about restoring and maintaining relationship than about restoring and maintaining the boundaries between Us and Them, between the Righteous and the Wicked. Are we making disciples with this willingness and

ability to pursue reconciliation? What personal characteristics and virtues are necessary for reconciliation, and how do we foster them in the Body of Christ?

Discussion

With the rest of our time together, I would like you to think together with me about the work of Jesus.

- Where do you see Jesus teaching the art of reconciling? Get out your Bibles!
- Where do you see points of contact between the groups reconciled amongst Jesus' disciples and the groups needing reconciling today?
- Where do you see the church being effective at reconciliation?
- Where are we struggling? Why?
- What could we do to foster a spirit of reconciliation as a goal of discipleship?