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Hate Your Family and Carry Your Cross: A Doctrine of Discipleship

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There are many whose names are on the church books, but who are not under Christ's rule. They are not heeding His instruction or doing His work. Therefore they are under the control of the enemy. They are doing no positive good; therefore they are doing incalculable harm.¹

The word “disciple” comes from the Latin word *discipulus*, which means “pupil” or “learner.” This is the word used in Jerome’s 4th century Latin translation, known as the Vulgate, to translate the Greek word *mathêtes*, which means “learner,” essentially.

In Jesus’ day, both in Jewish culture and in Greek culture, a teacher’s “disciples” followed him everywhere he went. They gathered around him when he stopped, listening eagerly to every word, sometimes questioning, memorizing the teacher’s aphorisms, adopting the teacher’s way of speaking and acting and dressing and looking at life.² Being a disciple differed from merely attending a teacher’s public lectures. It meant devoting all one’s time to the teacher, immersing oneself in him and his teaching, as it were, accepting him as an authority who spoke the truth, and modeling oneself after him.

Because teachers often taught while walking from place to place (the Greeks called philosophers who did this “peripatetic”), a disciple was, literally, often a *follower*. When Jesus “called” His disciples, asked them to join Him, he usually said “Follow me,” and this meant both travel with Him and be His disciple. Indeed, the followers of Jesus came to call the spiritual path on which He led them the Way (Acts 9:2).

¹ Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, [1900] 1941), 304.

² This is a good reason for trusting the accuracy of the Gospels.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Jesus not only asked His disciples to follow, but He *sent them out*. We hear first of the Twelve, then of others, both men and women, being called *apostles*, because the Greek word *apostolos* simply means “sent out.”³ The Old Testament Church is built on the word “come,” with the Gentiles coming to Israel, the crossroads of the world, to learn of the true God. The New Testament Church, on the other hand, is built on the word “go,” go *into the world* and spread the good news, rather than expecting the world to come to you. This is the work of those who are “sent out,” those who are not of “the Twelve,” yet are truly “apostles.”

We know now what the word “disciple” means. What does it mean, though, to be a disciple? What does it mean to make disciples? What does Jesus teach about discipleship? What does the Bible tell us about what discipleship means, to the individual and to the world?

Just before Jesus ascended into heaven He gave His followers what is called “The Great Commission.” This reminds us of commissioning an officer for service in the army, and that’s what it is. Christ is sending His disciples—including all of us—on a mission to the world, a military mission against the Kingdom of this World and its fallen prince. We could call them “soldiers of the Cross,” if we liked, or we could call them *missionaries*.

Matthew tells us, “Then the eleven disciples [Judas being dead and not yet replaced] went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go [note that they are learning to obey, but it would be a long process]. When they saw him, they worshiped him [the appropriate response to God]; but some doubted. [If you wait for your doubts to disappear before you follow Christ, you’ll never go at all. The best way to deal with doubt as you enter discipleship is to step out, move forward, even if you have only as much faith as a grain of mustard seed. Your faith will grow as you see how God keeps His promises and blesses your service to others. If you were already perfect, you wouldn’t need to become a disciple. Disciples seek discipling because they don’t yet know how, but they want to learn!] Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’” (Matt 28:16–20).

There are several points worth noting in the above verse:

On what authority does Christ give this command?: He says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” When Jesus appeared to Mary

³ Usually “apostle” refers to one of “the twelve,” but it could be correctly used of anyone “sent out” by the church leaders (e.g., Rom 16:7, where the otherwise unknown Andronicus and Junia are called “of note among the apostles [*apostolois*]; Luke 10:3, where Jesus says, to the seventy-two being sent on a missionary journey, “I send you” [*apostellō*]). Today’s equivalent could include missionary families, Bible workers, literature evangelists, and even pastors sent to their districts by their leaders.

CHRISTIAN: HATE YOUR FAMILY & CARRY YOUR CROSS

Magdalene after His Resurrection, He told her, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father” (John 20:17). He seems to have meant that although raised from the dead, He still had to ascend to His Father to ascertain if His life and death were sufficient atonement to cover the sins of sinners. If they were, then the Father could give him authority over heaven and earth, and he could *then* tell His disciples to go out to the world and preach Salvation in His name. The Great Commission is proof that the Atonement *is* sufficient.

Note the several aspects of the assignment Christ gave to His disciples, not only the remains of the Twelve, but to all disciples everywhere:

Go: The disciples were not to stay in Israel and wait for people to come to them, but to go into all the world. They were not to merely let their lights “shine before men” by smiling and nodding to their neighbors or being honest, but to “go.”

Make Disciples Of All Nations: It wasn’t enough to merely tell people about Jesus. It wasn’t even enough to get them to pray “the sinner’s prayer.” The disciples were to make disciples, with all that implied, just as Jesus had made disciples. And Salvation was available for the whole world, not just for the Jews. Christ’s disciples were to be missionaries, all of them.

Baptize Them: Baptism was a sign of repentance, of turning away from sin and toward God, and a sign of entry into “the Body of Christ,” the Church, the saved. Some argue that the order here is significant: baptism should follow, and not precede, an entry into discipleship. (This is not to say baptism should be postponed until we have reached perfect discipleship, but until we have decided to surrender everything to Christ and let Him live out His life within us in order to make more disciples).

Teach Them to Obey: It was not enough to simply convince people to surrender to Christ and follow Him and be baptized. (How often we assume the process ends with baptism!) Disciples were also to be teachers, teaching new disciples to obey Christ’s commands, including the ones in the Great Commission. This assumes, of course, that the disciples had themselves been taught. The Twelve had been taught by Christ, but now they would have to teach an ever-widening network of new disciples, as would those who came after them.

The Key to salvation was Christ (Matt 16:19). Christ’s disciples held the key to heaven in their hands and in their hearts. Wherever they would bring people to Christ, they would bind the powers of darkness and loose those who believed from their bondage to sin. But “this gospel of the kingdom” depended on them. Where they failed to do their duty, where they failed to make disciples and baptize and teach, people would remain in bondage. Even those who believed and were baptized—but were not made disciples and taught—remained easy prey for the evil one.

So what does it mean to be a disciple? Actually, discipleship is thoroughly defined in the Bible, but we tend not to notice. This is partly because it is a “hard teaching,” it asks a lot of us, so we don’t want to hear it. Jesus talks about

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

discipleship in many of His parables,⁴ but let's concentrate on other evidence of Christ's definition of "disciple."

Matthew reports Jesus saying, "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be *like* his teacher, and the servant *like* his master" (Matt 10:24–25).

Christ's disciples are not called to be Him—that is, to try to save themselves—but they are called to be like Him. Although He remains the master, disciples are people who try to be like their teacher—He is their model as well as their Savior. What we see Christ doing for others is what we are to be doing for others. The way we see Christ responding to His Father is the way we are to respond to His Father. In the preceding verses (Matt 10:17–24), Jesus warns the Twelve that they will be persecuted. Making disciples means *preparing* people for this fact.

The texts that follow are among the hardest of Jesus' "hard sayings. Are you ready for these?"

Jesus says, to a crowd of followers, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. . . . In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26–27, 33).

In His instructions to the Twelve as he sends them out as missionaries—as "apostles"—Jesus speaks to us, as well. "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household." Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt 10:34–39).

This is a call to all out revolution against the *status quo* of the world and the worldly church, to utter commitment to the cause of bringing the lost to salvation, whatever the cost to ourselves. After a similar call the rich young ruler turned and "went away sorrowing," and millions have joined him over the centuries, preferring the certain pleasures of this world to the promise and hope of a better world to come.

⁴ For example, the when Jesus tells His followers to not hide their lamps under bowls (Matt 5:14–15, He is teaching about discipleship. The parable of the weeds teaches a lesson about how the true disciples of Christ will be recognized (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43). The parable of the talents is crucial (Matt 25:14–30). The definition between the sheep and the goats in Matt 25 is illustrative (vs. 31–46), as is the story of the watchful servants (Luke 12:35–40). Jesus' illustrations about counting the cost of discipleship deserve study (Luke 14:28–33).

CHRISTIAN: HATE YOUR FAMILY & CARRY YOUR CROSS

What is Jesus saying? Isn't the fifth commandment "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Exod 20:12), and doesn't the Torah prescribe the death penalty for cursing one's parents? Yes. Doesn't Jesus Himself speak against those who use vows of gifts to the temple as an excuse for refusing to care for their aged parents (Mark 7:11–13)? Yes. So what does He mean?

Hyperbole is one of Jesus' favorite rhetorical devices—that is to say, He often exaggerates, says extreme things, to make a point. Though there is some exaggeration in these verses, however, Jesus is deadly serious, as well.

Being a Christian does not usually lead to persecution unless it actually *makes a difference* in a person, but if it doesn't make a difference, is one really a Christian? One could make a case for answering "Yes" to that question, but clearly such a person would not be a *disciple*, and would not be doing much to further the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ is asking for disciples. That's what He means when He says, "Follow me."

Jesus is not recommending that we actually hate our parents, nor that we dishonor our parents or disobey them, but, as Peter told the Sanhedrin, "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29), and this goes for our parents as well. We should honor our parents in all things, except where they ask us to turn aside from the Word.

Some people are blessed with godly parents, spouses, and children who encourage "speaking boldly for the Lord" (Acts 14:3) and being scrupulously true to the Word. Others have families who love them, but don't want them to turn away from the comfortable *status quo* and become "fanatics" about following God, risking worldly success. Even if one remains firmly within the religious tradition in which one and one's family were raised, being a whole-hearted disciple within that tradition may lead to persecution from one's parents or spouse or children, or even one's priest or pastor.

I've seen church-going men who claim to be Christians divorce their wives because their wives began devoting themselves to prayer and Scripture, even though such prayer and study led the women to be much better wives than they had been before. Sometimes just having a "good" person around can be a great trial for people who know themselves to be walking down "the path that leads to destruction," and this may lead to persecution.

Jesus says if you're not willing to face persecution and even death for His sake, you are not worthy of Him who accepted both for you. The Church is the Bride of Christ. Christ does not want a coy bride who accepts a kiss now and then and appreciates a box of chocolates—He wants a Bride who gives herself completely to Him, who knows Him intimately—in the King James meaning of the word—and with delight and passion.

Disciples may not be *called* to give up everything for the sake of the Gospel, but they must be *willing* to give up everything.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

(Let me give you this word of comfort: the better you get to know your Bridegroom, the more willing you will be to give up everything for Him—this willingness usually happens by way of a number of little steps and several big ones. Your Bridegroom is eager to make you His own, but He is gentle and patient, and He won't ever force you—you have to give yourself to him, voluntarily.)

When Jesus says, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword,” He has two meanings in mind. Within the context, what He means is that the demands of discipleship often lead to discord within families. On the wider level, however, Jesus is saying that while He is the Prince of Peace, the peace He gives His life to bring to the earth cannot come until sin and Satan are destroyed forever.

One of Satan's great deceptions is the belief that there can be true peace on Earth while sin still exists, that a compromise can be worked out between good and evil which will allow them to coexist. Even family members may urge that if only we will compromise our beliefs, not insist on doing what Jesus commands, we can all live in harmony. Harmony is a fine ideal, but not at the cost of Discipleship.

There are those who teach a sort of evolutionary approach to the Kingdom of God, holding that the whole world is getting better and better, and eventually the last remnants of evil will wither away, followed by an age of peace and the eventual return of Christ after that. This is not what the Bible teaches.

“Not peace but a sword” does not mean, however, that we are to go on a military crusade, a *jihad*, a holy war, to wipe out evil. God says, in Zech. 4:6, ““Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty.”

Our military service owed to God consists of putting on “the full armor of God”: “the belt of truth,” “the breastplate of righteousness,” “feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace,” “the shield of faith,” “the helmet of salvation,” and “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,” and prayer (Eph 6:10–18). We are called to be “prayer warriors,” to use a current term, to fight violence and evil with prayer.

God calls us to stamp out evil in our own lives through full submission to Him, but not in the lives of others through laws and police action. That is not God's way, but Satan's way. Where you see people of good intent trying to legislate Christianity, you see Satan at work, despite their good intentions. “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God” (Matt 22:29).

John tells us, “To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you *hold* to my teaching, you are *really* my disciples. *Then* you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’” (John 8:31–32, emphasis added).

To hold to Christ's teaching means to continue in it. It means not only persevering in our faith, but persevering in our relationship with Christ and continuing to do what He asks us to do: make disciples, baptize, teach new disciples to obey God's commands, love one another, and serve those in need.

CHRISTIAN: HATE YOUR FAMILY & CARRY YOUR CROSS

Real disciples hold to Christ's teaching rather than to "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Col 2:8).

Coming to a knowledge of the Truth and being set free by it also depends on our continuing in it. The Disciple's source of truth is the Scriptures, "which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15). The Disciple has to be "into the Word."

Jesus also said, "A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will *know* that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35, emphasis added).

Disciples love one another. The only way to love is to fall in love. The only way for Disciples to love one another is to fall in love with the Master. This saying is not difficult to understand, but the implications are earth-shaking. Christians have generally failed to "love one another." Because of this failure they have misrepresented God to the world and probably kept millions or even billions from coming to a knowledge of the truth! What kind of penance can possibly atone for that?

In misrepresenting God in this way, in claiming to be something we are not, in claiming for God a power we refuse to let Him manifest in us, are we in effect breaking the third commandment and taking the Lord's name in vain? Are we blaspheming God every time we claim to be His? A sobering thought.

The teacher and evangelist Russell Burrill has said, "When you tire of being a hypocrite you can do one of two things: you can become on the outside what you are on the inside or you can become on the inside what you are on the outside."⁵ Which is it going to be?

Discipleship means allegiance to a person, and that person is Christ. Christ tells His disciples to follow, to go, to make disciples, to baptize, to teach. He also tells his disciples to bear much fruit.

He says to us, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, *showing* yourselves to be my *disciples* . . . You did not choose me, but I *chose* you to go and *bear fruit*—fruit that will *last*. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (John 15:8, 16, emphasis added).

The fruit Jesus is asking us to bear, in this context, is not the "fruits of the Spirit," wonderful and necessary as those are, but *more disciples*. A disciple is a reproducer, which is to say, a missionary. Those who are *not* bringing others to Jesus and making disciples of them *are not themselves disciples* and are not fulfilling the Great Commission of Matthew 28.

⁵ The organization, some of the texts, and some of the ideas for this article come from an unpublished sermon by my friend and teacher Russell Burrill, given at Blue Mountain Academy on 7 February 1997. If you would like a greater challenge to discipleship, I would suggest that you read at least the first chapter of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer was a German theologian who chose to die in a concentration camp while standing firm in his faith rather than betray Jesus and go free.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

In Rev. 14:1–5 Christ reveals the characteristics of the “Invisible Church,” the true disciples of Christ drawn from every denomination and ready for the Bridegroom when He returns for His bride. John is told, “They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.”

The true church today is made up of those who are truly disciples, who are willing to “follow the Lamb wherever he goes,” even if that means following Him to persecution or death, as it does still in many countries. Because they have “his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads,” they are able representatives of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. They are also difficult to deceive, because they have head and heart knowledge of God, rather than a mere superficial acquaintance with the Scriptures. They are people who deliver the “eternal gospel” to “every nation, tribe, language and people” (v. 6), they are the people produced by that message, and they share that message as people see what it has done to them and for them. They are Disciples.

Being a Disciple is a demanding task. You can do it where you live, where you work, where you study, but it demands substantial time and energy and intensity. It is also an exciting task, however, and an all-consuming task.

As you progress along the path of discipleship, you may find you really aren’t very interested in television anymore, because God’s word seems so much more important and interesting. You may find you’re having a hard time listening to your CD collection anymore, because those lyrics are starting to offend you. The more time you spend with God, the less happy you will be at wild parties.

I remember a little song which says, “Turn your eyes upon Jesus / Look full in His wonderful face, / And the things of earth will grow strangely dim / In the light of His glory and grace.” It’s true. Sometimes by the time God calls us to give something up, we’re quite happy and even relieved to give it up if we’re walking with Him.

What if we decide we don’t want to be disciples? What if we decide that’s asking a bit too much? What if we decide we can make it to Heaven just fine by being “born again” at some meeting and then going about “business as usual”?

Here’s a text worth considering. It’s an Old Testament text, but still fully operational, and very sobering. God is speaking to Ezekiel, warning what will happen to him if he refuses to share God’s message with the Israelites. “When I say to the wicked, “O wicked man, you will surely die, and *you do not speak out* to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and *I will hold you accountable* for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself”” (Ezek. 33:8–9, emphasis added).

To me this is about as sobering a Bible text as any I can think of. Its meaning is clear, and it is God’s word to us as well as to Ezekiel. If God gives you an

CHRISTIAN: HATE YOUR FAMILY & CARRY YOUR CROSS

opportunity to lead a sinner to Christ, but you refuse to do so, God will hold you to blame for that person's eternal destruction! What is murder or adultery in the eyes of God compared to this sin, yet who is not guilty of it?

I believe that in the last days before Christ returns, the great aching anguish in the hearts of Disciples will not be whether or not they have confessed every little failing, but the thought of the hundreds of people placed in their paths to whom they never spoke of Jesus, people who might have turned to God but perhaps never did. Thank God for forgiveness and for His sovereign grace and omniscience.

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