



The Transforming Impact of True Discipleship

by Thomas A. Tarrants III, D. Min.
Director of Ministry, The C.S. Lewis Institute

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There is a crisis of discipleship in the American church today.

Reams of research confirm the simple observation that in many ways the lives of most professing Christians are not much different from their nonbelieving neighbors. Like ancient Israel and the church in some periods of history, we have adopted the beliefs, values, and behaviors of the surrounding culture to an alarming degree. Although there are exceptions among individuals and congregations, they only serve to confirm the reality.

This sad situation is bringing reproach on the name of Jesus Christ, undermining the credibility of the church, strengthening atheist rhetoric, and bringing frequent charges of hypocrisy against God's people and his work. It stands in stark contrast with the teachings of Jesus about discipleship and the witness of the church in other eras, and it presents us with an urgent and unavoidable challenge.

A significant part of our problem today is widespread misunderstanding about the nature of discipleship. Let's briefly look at what Jesus taught about discipleship, how the early church responded, and where we are today. Perhaps this will help us see more clearly what we need to do.

Jesus on Discipleship

Jesus began his public ministry with a simple message of grace: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17), or, as Mark records it, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15 ESV).

By this Jesus meant that in his own Person, God's kingdom was now uniquely present and people should respond by believing this good news, turning from their sins, and trusting him. Soon after he began his ministry, Jesus called his first followers, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John, who were fishermen. One day, as they were plying their trade on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus came up and said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). The call came at an inconvenient time, took precedence over family, friends, and livelihood and carried a high personal price. All they could do was respond in obedient faith to the command of Jesus or walk away in unbelief.

As Jesus and his small team went out ministering from city to city, he called many other men and women to follow him, and numbers increased. He called them not simply to become admirers or even converts. He called them to turn from their sins, trust him, and become his disciples—people who would seek to learn and obey his word. Most would remain in their communities and workplaces as salt and light, devoted to him, growing in grace, and ministering to those around them. Over time, they would take on the character of their Master: exhibiting love, humility, service, obedience, and endurance. At some point early on, Jesus spent an entire night in prayer (Luke 6:12–16), then selected twelve of them who would form a small community to travel and minister with him



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and serve as apostles. They feature prominently in the Gospels, and their experience with him gives us a down-to-earth case study in how to grow into mature followers of Jesus.

Responding to Jesus' call to conversion and discipleship was the beginning of a long journey for his first followers. To proceed on that journey, they needed instruction about how to live in the kingdom of God. So Jesus took them away for intensive teaching in the fundamentals of kingdom life. In the Sermon on the Mount, he gave them life-changing truths about things like humility, purity of heart, faith, prayer, love of neighbor, and radical obedience to his teachings, to mention only a few. Regular instruction would be a vital part of their community life as they grew in discipleship and ministry. To this day, the Sermon on the Mount remains foundational teaching for everyone who follows Jesus.

On a number of occasions, Jesus told his disciples and the crowds that following him would be costly: "If *anyone* would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24–25; Mark 8:34–35; Luke 9:23–24). Jesus meant that it is possible to follow him only by saying a radical no to one's self-centeredness and embracing the hard fact that faithfulness might cost one's life. Only by decisively reckoning with these sobering realities could people be freed up to follow him faithfully.

On another occasion, Jesus said to a large crowd that was following him, "If *anyone* comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple... So therefore, *any one of you* who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:25, 33). Jesus was saying that love for him must take precedence over all earthly relationships and concerns, without exception. This may sound harsh to our ears, but it was grounded in love, truth, and utter realism. Jesus never minimized the cost of following him for the sake of bigger crowds. Nor did he encourage people to follow him when they were not ready. He wanted everyone to count the cost of putting him first and to be prepared for the separation, rejection, persecution, and suffering that such a commitment could entail.

Although he called for total commitment, Jesus was a man of grace. He didn't load his followers with

impossible demands as the Pharisees did (and some do today). He knew how weak fallen human beings were and how demanding his teaching was. He said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and will give you rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30). He invites all who are weary of burdensome, legalistic religion to cast it off, take up his yoke of discipleship, and learn from him. Paradoxically, his discipleship, while demanding, is easy and his burden is light. This is because Jesus will send the Holy Spirit to empower his disciples to obey his commands. And also because he extends grace and forgiveness when they fail. We need only consider how weak, sinful, and clueless the twelve often were during their three years with him and how patient, kind, and forgiving he was toward them. His persistent grace brought transformation to their lives, as it does to all who follow him.

Before returning to heaven, Jesus commissioned his disciples to carry on the work he had begun: "Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe [obey] all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18–20).

This was a clear, simple, and brilliant plan. It entailed sharing with people of all races and ethnic groups the good news of God's grace and love, demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Those who accepted the message were to be baptized into the fellowship of the church and taught to obey all that Jesus had taught. The goal was not mere converts but committed disciples integrated into a new community, who would, in fellowship with one another, learn and obey what Jesus had taught the twelve. And because what he taught them included this very commission, it ensured that disciples would reproduce themselves from generation to generation until he returned.

Discipleship in the Early Church

The early church was eager to carry on the work Jesus had given them to do. We see them in Acts 1, gathered as a community of 120 disciples ready to "go, and make disciples of all nations," and waiting for the Holy Spirit's empowerment to do so. They did not have

to wait long. When the Holy Spirit fell on the Day of Pentecost, Peter's empowered preaching brought three thousand new believers into the fellowship. A few days later, the number grew to five thousand, and Jewish leaders responded with persecution. As it intensified, the disciples gathered for urgent prayer. Because their passion was to glorify God, they prayed not for protection but for boldness to preach Christ with even greater impact. God answered their prayers, and many more were saved and became a part of this new movement of followers of Jesus.

While on earth, Jesus had led the community of disciples. As he had promised, the Holy Spirit would now expand, lead, and empower them to glorify him and carry on his mission. Their fearless, wholehearted devotion to the risen Jesus in spite of Jewish persecution demonstrated a quality of personal and corporate life that captured the hearts and minds of multitudes, and the gospel continued to spread, eventually reaching Rome.

Roman persecution came under Nero and was brutal. The Roman historian, Tacitus, tells us that in AD 64, Nero rounded up "a vast number" of believers in Rome and put them to death in the cruelest ways imaginable. Neither Tacitus nor the philosopher Seneca, were admirers of the Christians, but they felt sympathy for them because of the way they were wantonly sacrificed to Nero's madness. Some were crucified in mockery of Christ. Others were covered with pitch and resin, chained to poles, and set ablaze to light Nero's gardens for his guests. Still others were sewn into animal skins, thrown to vicious dogs, and torn apart in the arena to entertain the mobs. Both Paul and Peter were martyred in Nero's insane rampage, Paul by beheading and Peter by crucifixion.

One might think that such a blow would destroy the church or at least permanently cripple it. But just the opposite happened. They had the teachings of Jesus and the empowering presence of the Spirit. And just seven years earlier, Paul had sent the believers in Rome an epistle to help ground them in the faith. He had urged them, "By the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). Paul, disciple of Jesus that he was, had called them to respond to God's grace with wholehearted commitment to God no matter the cost. Thus, many withstood Nero's cruelty with courage. And the church continued to grow.

Over the years, other emperors would order persecution: Domitian, Trajan, Septimius Severus, Marcus Aurelius, Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian to mention a few. Many believers, both ordinary church members and notable leaders, were crucified, burned at the stake or thrown into the arena. But the church continued to grow. As Tertullian would later say, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." And indeed it was; by the beginning of the fourth century, 10 percent of the population of the Roman Empire (about six million people) had become followers of Jesus.

To be sure, the early church wasn't perfect. It had problems, as did the churches in the apostolic era. But thorough teaching and discipling, the periodic fires of persecution, and the ever-present possibility of it, tended to purify the church and ensure that most members were sincere followers of Jesus. In general, there was relatively little of the compromise, nominalism, and worldliness that would afflict the church from the time of Constantine on. As Professor David Calhoun has said, "They out-lived, out-thought and out-died the pagans" and thus awakened awe in a world immersed in the darkness of pagan superstition.¹ Summing up the first three centuries of the church, F.F. Bruce, says, "We review the history of Christianity up to 313 with no sense of shame, but with the sense that here is something to evoke gratitude and inspire courage."²

Discipleship, the American Church, and the Challenge of Our Day

There is widespread recognition that discipleship in the American church falls far short of the teaching of Jesus. In many cases, this is because people are unaware of what the Bible really teaches; in others, it is because they are misguided by flawed teaching. Regardless of the reason, relatively few professing believers appear to be living as true disciples of Jesus Christ. As a result, many dishonor him, discredit the church, turn off nonbelievers, and diminish the influence of God's truth in the secular world.

How do we respond to such a situation? Because other articles in this issue will address this more fully, I will conclude with three summary ideas. First, each of us must begin by earnestly seeking God's grace to be a more faithful disciple of Jesus ourselves. This may involve a renewed commitment of all that we are and all that we have to him, no matter the cost. Second, we must seek ways to help our own church become

a community of disciples seeking to fulfill the Great Commission in the power of the Holy Spirit. Third, we must endeavor to live publicly for Christ and seek to be salt and light in the world, influencing our family, friends, colleagues, and community.

This is what the C.S. Lewis Institute has been training believers to do for the past thirty-five years. And more than ever, we are praying that God will raise up a movement back to authentic discipleship that will restore our tattered lives, the church, our society, and most of all God's honor before the watching world. We invite you to join us or some other ministry with this same goal.

Notes

1. David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Covenant Theological Seminary, 1999, course lecture 3.
2. F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 29.

Tom Tarrants, D. Min. has served as President of the C.S. Lewis Institute from 1998 to April 2010. Prior to coming to the Institute, he served as co-pastor of Christ Our Shepherd Church and Director of The School for Urban Mission, both based in Washington, D.C. He is the author of two books and is a consultant for Church Discipleship Services, developing discipleship programs and materials to strengthen the local church. Tom earned a Doctor of Ministry from Fuller Theological Seminary. He is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Church Alliance.

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8001 Braddock Road, Suite 301 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

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