

When is a person not a disciple?

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The title sounds like the beginning to a bad joke but have you ever thought to yourself when it was that the 12 disciples, you know, Pete, Matt, Pip, Jim, Andy, Tom etc., actually became Christians? Now I know they weren't called Christians until later, so in some sense it is a bit of a non-question.

However, have you ever considered when it was that the disciples were saved? Was it the moment that Jesus said 'Follow me'? Was it for Pete when he makes his confession in Mark 8:27-29? Was it after the first Easter Sunday or was it at Pentecost? I'm not sure – maybe you have your own thoughts. There are far better people than me who can argue about this one with far greater knowledge.

But I do know that they were disciples from the moment they were called to follow Jesus. As learners (one of the definitions of a disciple) they committed themselves to learning as much as possible from their slightly unconventional but really exciting teacher, Jesus.

There was a great tradition of religious teachers having disciples in Jesus' time. At around age 14 or 15 years most boys were now learning the family business and starting families of their own. Those left were the best of the best and would now apply to a rabbi to become one of his disciples. The goal of the disciple was not just being a student, not just to learn what the rabbi knew, but to be just like the rabbi.

The rabbi would test the student to check to see if he was up to the task. Did the student have what it took? The rabbi didn't want to waste his time so he wanted to be sure that the boy knew what it would take. If he didn't think he was up to the task he would say something like, you obviously love God and know the Torah but you do not have what it takes to be a rabbi, so go home and continue to learn the family business. However, if the rabbi believed that this kid did have what it took, he would say, "Come, follow me."

Jesus, aged 30 years, the time when a rabbi generally began his public teaching and training of disciples comes to the Sea of Galilee. He sees two brothers who are fishermen. This is important, they have learnt the family business of fishing so they are not disciples, they weren't good enough, couldn't cut it. Jesus calls those who didn't make it and said, "Learn from me and you can become like me."

Later he comes across Jimmy and Johnny, fishing with their dad. They are still learning the trade, the family business. If they are still under the guidance of their dad they may only be 14, 15 or 16 years old. Jesus took these lads not good enough to complete school and changed the course of human history. That is the power of discipleship when Jesus is involved.

Understanding the importance of discipleship has lead me to think that the whole area of discipleship may need to be blown apart to grasp a far wider understanding than we have seen traditionally within evangelical churches here in the UK. The word 'disciple' occurs 269 times in the New Testament compared with only 3 times that the word 'Christian' is used. Maybe we should give this idea some more considered thought and discussion.

The first aspect to consider is that it would have been far easier if we had been called to make converts. How different would the church landscape of this country look if we could count all converts instead of disciples? We often use language around conversion which is not helpful and can limit what we do as leaders in a number of ways. Talk of converts, winning souls and personal salvation appear to suggest an action that needs to take place so that the person is in the gang – got their ticket – their very own get out of jail free card.

However, in The Great Commission we are called to make disciples and not converts. A point made very well by Dallas Willard in his classic 'The Spirit of the Disciplines'. This is not simply praying a prayer (which is not in the Bible!) and off you go. No, discipleship is the 'lets have a conversation rather than a conversion which is going to be over a considerable amount of time and we are committing ourselves to growing, learning, challenging and changing.

One of the first things Jesus said in his public ministry in Mark 1:15 is, "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" Repent and Believe is the two fold part of discipleship. The 'repent' relates to observing, reflecting and discussion while the 'believe' is linked to action, accountability, in other words – behaviour. Becoming disciples is the process that we all need to go through more than once as we receive fresh revelation and insight as we continue in this conversation with our Heavenly Father and those around us who we have made ourselves accountable to as disciples.

There are a few people that I disciple at the moment. Some of them would call themselves Christians and some not. Whether those who don't call themselves Christians are but don't yet fully know it, is another discussion for another time. It appears that Jesus didn't see discipleship beginning at the moment of conversion and it has certainly been my experience that some of my discipling I have done covertly.

Most Mondays at the moment I now meet for coffee with someone who I have been discipling for 11 years. We have developed a close relationship over that time and have shared in many special occasions including the privilege of conducting his marriage. When we get together we discuss all aspects of life, faith, marriage, fatherhood, football and much more. After eleven years of discipling he now prays regularly and describes a relationship with God but doesn't call himself a believer. Has the discipling here failed? No, I don't think so; we are walking together in a conversation as we both are learning what it means to seek to honour God in our lives.

So I will continue to disciple those that God gives me the opportunity to do so with, some may know it and others may not (well at least to begin with). One question I often asked people however old they maybe in the faith is who are you discipling and who is discipling you? It is a question for all of us as we seek to live out The Great Commission.

May I take this opportunity to thank Terry, John, Matt, Matt, Brian, John, Richard and Ian who have all disciplined me at different stages of my life and whom without I would not be the person I am today.

Special mention of Rob Bell's book *Velvet Elvis* for the very helpful insights into how rabbis choose their discipleships.