

GraceLife Articles - Dr. Charlie Bing

No. 19 - Are Disciples Born or Made? - Grace in Focus, May 2005

Synopsis:

Is every Christian a disciple or are the conditions for discipleship different from the condition for eternal salvation? It makes a difference if you want to keep the gospel clear!

Is a disciple merely another name for a person who is born into God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, or is a disciple a believer who meets specific conditions about following Jesus? Knowing the answer to this question is crucial to understanding the gospel of grace and the Christian life.

The Meaning of Disciple

The word disciple comes from the Greek verb *matheteuo* (and noun *mathetes*), which means *to be or become a pupil or learner*. So the essential meaning of disciple is a learner, which could also be called a follower or an apprentice. In ancient culture, a person would follow a master teacher or craftsman in order to become like him ([Matt 10:25](#); [Luke 6:40](#)). This took a certain commitment from the follower.

The Use of Disciple

Though the prevalent use in the New Testament of *mathetes* is specifically in reference to followers of Jesus Christ, disciple was not just a Christian term. The Bible mentions disciples of Moses, of the Pharisees, and of John the Baptist. In addition, not all of Jesus' followers were born again. Jesus said in [John 6:64](#) to a group of His disciples, "There are some of you who do not believe." Judas Iscariot was one of these unbelieving followers of Jesus.

The Book of Acts often uses the term disciples to refer to Christians as a group without distinction about their commitment ([Acts 6:1-2, 7](#); [11:26](#); [14:20, 28](#); [15:10](#); though see 14:22 where the context shows that committed followers are in view). In light of the Great Commission to "go and make disciples" ([Matt 28:19-20](#)), it would be natural to call believers in Acts disciples to show that the commission was being fulfilled. There are actually few examples in Acts of disobedient believers (cf. [Acts 5:1-11](#); [8:13](#); [19:18-19](#)).

The Epistles never use the word disciple(s). However, the idea is communicated in the commands to imitate and follow mature believers who themselves imitate and follow Jesus Christ ([1 Cor 4:16](#); [11:1](#); [Phil 3:17](#); [1 Thess 1:6](#); [2 Thess 3:7, 9](#)).

Discipleship, Unlike Salvation, Is Costly

When looking at discipleship passages in the Gospels, we see that in order for one to be a follower of Jesus Christ, he has to meet certain conditions given by the Lord. These include obeying His Word, denying one's own desires, being willing to suffer for identifying with Him, and actively pursuing His will

([John 8:31](#); [Luke 9:23](#)). There are other conditions as well. All of these conditions involve a commitment, obedience, or some kind of sacrifice. If that is true, then discipleship costs something.

It should be apparent that discipleship is distinct from one's salvation, that disciples are not born but made. If eternal life is free (by grace through faith), but discipleship is costly, then salvation must be distinct from discipleship. This chart should help show the distinctions between salvation and discipleship:

Conclusion

To ask whether disciples are born or made is to ask whether justification is different from sanctification or whether Christian birth is different from Christian growth. To keep the gospel clear, we must not confuse the one condition of eternal salvation (faith in Jesus) with the many conditions of discipleship (commitment, obedience, following).