

Leadership Development 2.1 – Theology of Discipleship

The purpose of this paper is to propose a working “Theology of Discipleship” based upon some of the key concepts of discipling revealed in the book Following the Master by Michael Wilkins, and upon the Biblical accounts of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Wilkins’ book provided an acceptable introduction into the history and practicalities of discipleship, and a structure for thought development. The Gospel of Luke provided insight into Jesus’ application of discipleship for the advancement of His Kingdom prior to Pentecost. The book of Acts provided insight into discipleship after Jesus’ resurrection in the early church and for the church age.

In the world of the ancient Near East, the attachment of an individual as student or apprentice to a master teacher or practitioner was a common method for passing along knowledge and skills to the next generation. According to Michael Wilkins, Hebrew and Aramaic disciple relationships can be easily observed in the Old Testament on the national level of the covenant relationship of Israel and God, on the individual level of faithful followers and God, and on the interpersonal level of individual relationships within the community.ⁱ This relational heritage provided the religious foundation for the first century [AD] Jews and hence the early disciples of Jesus. Additionally, the Greco-Roman culture shaped and influenced this ancient heritage, providing the context for discipleship occurring in the Jewish culture during Jesus’ earthly ministry. The Greek word most commonly used in the New Testament for disciple was *Mathetes* and is translated as meaning “disciple, student, follower; a committed learner and follower, in the NT usually of Jesus Christ.” It is used a total of 245 times in the gospels and in Acts, obviously the writers attributed great significance to discipleship. Equally obvious is that the readers of these early writers knew exactly what the author was speaking about, and hence didn’t need to go into detail as to what the term meant. For us to catch up with these early Christians it is useful to translate a *mathetes* as a “committed follower of a master... the commitment assumed the development of a sustained relationship between follower and master, and the relationship extended to imitation of the conduct of the master.”ⁱⁱ

There were several groups of discipleship within the Jewish culture of the first century when Jesus began His ministry. Wilkins documents five groups of discipleship within Judaismⁱⁱⁱ: 1) disciples of Moses (and Torah) were committed to God’s revelation through His ancient servant and the written record [e.g. all professing Jews], 2) disciples of religious institution [e.g. the Pharisees and the Rabbinical/Pharisaical order], 3) disciples of a prophet proclaiming God’s judgment and call to action [e.g. John the Baptist], 4) separatist disciples of the remnant community of Israel [e.g. the Essenes at Qumran], and 5) disciples of a messianic movement that sought the immediate establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth through Holy War [e.g. zealots, et al]. Each group of discipleship would have a distinct type of leader. Each form of discipleship involved a personal commitment to a renowned master/leader,

Leadership Development 2.1 – Theology of Discipleship

with the kind of dedication and extent of the commitment varied upon the type of leader. Into this context, Jesus would establish an entirely new paradigm.

Wilkins identified five stages of what he called “The Jesus Movement” that have direct implications for discipleship:^{iv} 1) Personal initiative to follow Jesus – where an individual’s interest, curiosity, and questioning lead to belief that Jesus is the Messiah He claimed to be. 2) Jesus’ call to follow – where Jesus initiates a challenge to come out from the relative safety of the crowd into a more committed personal relationship. 3) Jesus sifted and segregated His followers – where followers are aligned with Jesus’ purpose not their own, where submission is affirmed to Jesus and to the will of the Father. 4) The limited group of followers are engaged in the mission of Jesus – where the ‘vast crowd’ has been refined to ‘true Kingdom initiates’ who are physically engaged with Jesus in the work and ministry of Jesus. 5) The early church – where the faithful live in community with the indwelling Holy Spirit allowing individuals to live in the presence of Jesus in His physical absence, and continue His work and mission on earth – specifically the building up and expansion of the Kingdom of God in anticipation of Jesus’ return and consummation of the millennial age. These five stages have an important application for the church age – true discipleship involves all of these stages, not just a selected or preferred few. During His earthly ministry Jesus shepherded an intimate group of disciples, who followed in Jesus’ Personal proximity. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit was freed to complete this work on a global scale – leading, teaching and unifying the Messianic community, and progressively transforming and conforming the disciples into the image of Jesus. This is obviously a radical departure from previous discipleship relations where the frequent hope and expectation was for the student/follower to become greater than their teacher/master. Jesus redirected His disciples who were debating upon which would be greatest among them – Jesus said that their goal is simply to be like their Master – nothing more and nothing less [Matt 10:24-25a]. This is still the goal of all disciples who call Jesus their Lord and King.

The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are companion volumes depicting Jesus’ form of discipleship while He was on earth, and that of the church age when He departed leaving His believers in the shepherding care of the Holy Spirit [John 14:15-18]. It is a “wonderfully profound truth of the Christian life – that we do not journey alone. Jesus calls us to follow Him on the journey in the company of the Spirit which is our Guide, Protector, and Example.”^v Jesus’ promise to His original disciples still rings true today – nearly two thousand years later! The apostle Paul would later confirm this when he wrote to the Philippians, “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” [Phil 1:6]. Reading through the Gospel of Luke, many of the theological precepts advanced by Wilkins may be observed. Jesus’ audience as depicted in Luke’s Gospel provides some insight into the development of a discipleship identity. As Jesus began His ministry after His temptation and rejection by His hometown of Nazareth, the initial hearers are called

Leadership Development 2.1 – Theology of Discipleship

simply “people” [Luke 4:31, 36, 40, 41, 42; 5:1, 3]. Initially this is in reference to those who lived locally [περιοικέω v. G4340 (1-1) to live in a neighborhood; (n.) neighbor]. As Jesus fame grew the reference became more general [ὄχλος v. G4063 crowd, people, multitude, mob, a gathering of any size, sometimes with the implication that these are common folk and not leaders or nobility]. “People” is used eighty-eight times in Acts, and eighty-one times in Luke. While “crowd” is used twenty-one times in Acts, and twenty-eight times in Luke. “The aggregation of persons intended in most passages [in the gospels], unless otherwise indicated, are not necessarily God's own special people. On the other hand, in the Epistles the word ‘people’ usually has theological significance, and those indicated are in a unifying relationship with the Lord.”^{vi} It is apparent from the context and word translations that these people depicted in Luke’s Gospel are curious about Jesus; they were intrigued by His teachings and by the miracles He performed, but as yet they are not committed or submitted to Him.

From the general public Jesus began to call out a few individuals to follow Him, the first ones recorded by Luke are Simon, James and John who would become Jesus’ “inner circle” of disciples. It is interesting that those called first were to be the most intimate with Jesus. This certainly is not what happens in the normal course of human interactions, but then Jesus is no normal person. Luke first refers to Jesus’ intimate followers as disciples after the calling of Levi [Luke 5:30], and immediately introduces the juxtaposition of John the Baptist’s disciples and those of the Pharisees [Luke 5:33]. Two forms of disciple are used in Luke, the first – [μαθητής n. G3412 (37-261) disciple, student, follower; a committed learner and follower, in the NT usually of Jesus Christ]; the second – ἀκολουθεῖν [v. G199 (17-90) to follow; accompany; to follow or be a disciple of a leader’s teaching] being the more general form. Luke recorded that Jesus set aside a group of twelve from His disciples after having spent a night in prayer whom He termed “Apostles” [Luke 5:12-16]. Wilkins offers the following insight into this distinction:

“Not only are they Jesus’ disciples (believers), but they are also in training to be His apostles (commissioned representatives or ambassadors). As disciples, the twelve are set aside as examples of what Jesus accomplishes in believers; as apostles the Twelve are set aside as leaders within the new movement to come, the church.”^{vii}

Wilkins makes an important observation about the concentric circles of disciples around Jesus in His public ministry.

“In the inner circle were the two sets of brothers (Peter and Andrew, James and John). Then came the twelve. After the twelve came a circle of co-laborers, including the seventy-two and the women who ministered to Jesus. Then came a circle that included the multitude of disciples, people who were committed believers. Outside this last circle of disciples came the large crowds

Leadership Development 2.1 – Theology of Discipleship

of people who were curious about Jesus and His activities but who were not yet believers”^{viii}

As Jesus continued to teach and to reveal Himself to His disciples and to the crowds who followed Him, His teachings increasingly polarized the crowd, drawing some more closely to Him while causing others to pull away [Luke 14:25-35; John 6:63-68]. This process further defined what Jesus intended a disciple to become, “a disciple of Jesus is one who has come to Him for eternal life, has claimed Him as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Him.”^{ix} “Counting the cost” – that is understanding and accepting the value received in grace and the cost expended in personal discipleship – becomes the pivotal event in the life of an individual believer. Following Him should be understood to be an “all-or-nothing” proposition; it meant submission to Jesus’ authority and to the leadership of the Holy Spirit, with the purpose of being transformed into His likeness – to become like Him.

As Jesus wound down His earthly ministry in preparation for the cross, He informed the twelve about the primacy of service [Luke 22:24-27] – that the greatest among them would be he that serves the others. Additionally, Jesus encouraged them with the promise that the twelve would be co-rulers with Him in the Kingdom of God [Luke 22:29-30]. Jesus also designated a special leadership position for Simon to fulfill on behalf of the twelve and for the community of disciples [Luke 22:31-32] – that Simon should strengthen his brothers. Wilkins offers a conclusion of what discipleship is all about from Luke’s perspective – a disciple is “a person who has given his or her allegiance to Jesus as Savior, who has been ushered into the Way of walking with Jesus as Master, and who is being transformed into the likeness of the Master through obedience to His Word.”^x

In the Gospel of Luke, the term disciple was used for the dedicated followers of Jesus, and often for those closest to Him. In the Book of Acts, the term disciple is used as a synonym for believers in Christ,^{xi} and the word translated as “believers” is in reference to the community of the faithful [Πιστεύω v. G4409 (37-241) to believe, put one’s faith in, trust, with an implication that actions based on that trust may follow; (pass.) entrust]. This distinction reflects the change from those who in Luke were firsthand observers of Jesus earthly ministry to those in Acts who have believed through the testimony of the firsthand observers [converts]. In the Book of Acts, Luke employed specific terms to describe certain groups involved in the dialog and action. The word “Brothers” [ἀδελφός n. G81 (57-343)] is used forty-seven times in Acts, and is translated as “brother, fellow countryman, neighbor (often inclusive in gender); by extension a fellow believer in the family of faith; in the plural brothers regularly refers to men and women.”^{xii} The intention is to convey intimacy in shared belief system that has created a close familial bond; it is the inception of the new community of the faithful that would become known collectively as the Church.

The emphasis of Acts is upon the community of believers as the early church began its

Leadership Development 2.1 – Theology of Discipleship

expansion from the firsthand observers of Jesus. Where Luke's Gospel bears witness to Jesus' mission – displaying the power and glory of Jesus as Savior and Lord, the Book of Acts bears witness to the mission of the Holy Spirit – displaying the power and glory of the Holy Spirit to empower the faithful, convict the world of sin, and complete the Great Commission. The “people” are those for whom the struggle is waged between the faithful apostles/believers and the faithless leaders/rulers of the world order. The leaders of the Jews are intent to fight for maintaining their status quo in their national identity, while the apostles/believers are extending a new identity in Jesus Christ. Luke continues to use the terms “people” and “crowd” to demark those for whom the message of salvation is being sent. In the midst of this conflict, one of the most compelling witnesses to the fact of Jesus' resurrection is the unheralded change evidenced in the boldness and confidence of Peter and the apostles. Prior to the resurrection the apostles were frightened, in hiding or in denial of their identity as followers of Jesus. In the beginning of Acts, we find Peter boldly preaching Jesus and proclaiming the Gospel to the crowds – leading to the conversion of three thousand believers [Acts 2:14-41], to onlookers at the temple [Acts 3:11-26], and to the Sanhedrin [Acts 4:8-13]. There can be no denying that something significant has transformed this man following the crucifixion of Jesus.

In the first four chapters of Acts, the action is focused on Peter and John, and to a significantly lesser degree on the remainder of the apostles, and then in chapter five the action expands to the twelve apostles. In chapter six, the growth of the church created a problem in ministering effectively to everyone, and administrative roles are added. The apostles chose seven men to meet the physical needs of food distribution to the community, and this role would later be termed deacon [Acts 6:3; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8]. The term deacon comes from the Greek noun *diakonos* meaning "servant," "minister," or "deacon"). The verb form *diakoneo* means “to serve” or “to serve as a deacon”. These words are distinctive in that their focus is upon loving action on behalf of a brother or sister or a neighbor, and are indicative of mature believers who were entrusted to serve the administrative needs of the community. The apostles continued to focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word of God, and this role would later be termed elder [Acts 11:30, 15:2; 1 Tim 5:17; Tit 1:5; Jas 5:14; 1 Pet 5:1]. Elders were the most mature believers who functioned as the spiritual leaders of the congregation, and of the wider social community. Significant characteristics of elder leadership that remain constant in the church are the following: 1) Mature members of the local community, whose age and character have won respect, and they were recognized as leaders. 2) Elder-style leadership was not exercised by individuals, but rather was entrusted to groups of men who served as a team in overseeing community life. 3) Elders of the church were known by and drawn from the local community, and were required to have exemplary character that merited respect. While deacons would focus on service to the community, elders would focus on spiritual formation and transformation.

Leadership Development 2.1 – Theology of Discipleship

The new community of believers became known as the church from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which was an affirmation of its corporate identity [Mat 16:18; 18:17]. The term “church” was used to describe small groups that met in homes (Ro 16:5), but it also encompassed a great number of believers living in a large city (Ac 11:22; 13:1; 1 Co 1:2). It was also used for a regional geographical district, such as Asia or Galatia, where it would include more than one local community of believers (1 Co 16:1, 19). *Ekklesia* was also used for “The Body of Christ,” which was the metaphysical unity of believers under the integrating influence of the Holy Spirit [Rom 12:4-5]. Wilkins makes the observation, “The assembly of converts is called the ‘church’ (*ekklesia*) or ‘congregation’ (*plethos*), while individuals within the church are referred to as ‘believers’ (e.g. Acts 2:44; 4:32), ‘brothers’ (e.g. Acts 15:1, 3, 32-33, 36, 40; 16:2, 40), or ‘disciples’ (e.g. Acts 6:1, 2, 7; 9:1,10,19, 26, 36, 38; 11:26, 29; 13:52).”^{xiii} Wilkins goes on to conclude that the use of the term “disciples” both in Luke and in Acts speaks to the continuity between those who followed Jesus during His earthly ministry and those of the post-Resurrection church.

In Acts chapters seven and eight, the church experienced persecution in Jerusalem, and a young zealous Pharisee named Saul became the initial focus of the effort to rein in the church. Saul would encounter Jesus on the road near Damascus, and this encounter forever changed Saul and the direction of church expansion. Interestingly, Simon was renamed Peter and Saul was renamed Paul [Acts 13:9]. New names were employed in scripture to introduce a new identity and a new future [Abram became Abraham, Jacob became Israel, etc.], all of which were used to introduce a new aspect of God’s progressive revelation of Grace [Isa 62:2; Rev 2:17]. With the death of Herod in Acts chapter 12, Peter’s pre-eminent role wanes, and Saul’s role [soon to become Paul] rises in importance. Along with this change is the move of church expansion from the vicinity around Jerusalem, expanding into territories throughout the Roman world. Wilkins observed a continuity between Jesus’ earthly ministry and the Holy Spirit’s post-Pentecostal ministry: “1) focus on the teachings of Jesus for living out the meaning of life; 2) actualize the unity of community brought by the Spirit; 3) be a witness to the good news of Jesus in the power of the Spirit; and 4) let the absence of Jesus be an incentive to hopefulness until His return.”^{xiv} In light of this discipleship continuity, Wilkins suggests there are three categories of Biblical discipleship teaching: 1) some discipleship teachings had relevance specifically to the disciples during Jesus’ earthly ministry; 2) some discipleship teachings had special application for the twelve and should be distinguished from those intended for all believers; 3) those discipleship teachings intended for all disciples – pre and post Pentecost.^{xv}

Finally, completing the thought about a transformed identity within the context of a vital community, there are five distinctive characteristics that have identified disciples throughout the ages [Acts 2:41-42]:^{xvi} 1) Baptism – the public identification of a disciple with Jesus’ death and resurrection. In baptism we proclaim that we are dead to self, and alive to

Leadership Development 2.1 – Theology of Discipleship

Jesus. It is an outward symbol of an internal transformation of a sinner to a saint. 2) The Apostles teaching – this is the body of materials rendered authoritative because they were Jesus’ teachings commissioned to be delivered through His chosen and empowered servants. 3) Fellowship – the strength and health of the body is not in individual members but in the collective whole. Fellowship includes individual believers participating corporately in the life of the Holy Spirit that unifies the body. 4) The breaking of bread – the community in fellowship performing an act of remembrance of what Jesus has done [salvation], what He is doing [sanctification], and what He has yet promised to provide [hope of eternity together with Jesus]. 5) Prayers – individually and in community we have confidence to approach the “Throne of Grace” and be heard by the Father who loves us. Empowered by the Spirit, we can approach in confidence proclaiming Abba [Daddy] Father – whether for petition, penitence, intercession, or praise.

In conclusion, “Discipleship” has direct relation to those original followers of Jesus nearly two thousand years ago, and to the post-Pentecostal church through the ages. Rather than focusing on specific practices or methodologies, the life of the church is in connection to the Spirit who convicts us of sin, draws us together in unity with other believers and our Risen Lord, supports us in our everyday life as we follow the Way, perfects our faith as we yield to Him and seek to be conformed into the image of our Lord, and focuses our mind and hearts to an eternal reward we’ll share with Jesus and all believers. Wilkins concludes that discipleship will include a number of expressions within the Christian community: one-on-one relationships, mentor relationships, small group relationships, and large assembly or community relationships.^{xvii} In each of these relational settings we seek to encounter the Living God through His Word, through prayer, and to service to others. Oswald Chambers offered a fitting conclusion to a theology of discipleship:

“Our work is not to save souls, but to disciple them. Salvation and sanctification are the work of God’s Sovereign Grace, and our work as His disciples is to disciple other’s lives until they are totally yielded to God. One life totally devoted to God is of more value to Him than one hundred lives which have been simply awakened by His Spirit. As workers for God, we must reproduce our own kind spiritually, and those lives will be God’s testimony to us as His workers. God brings us up to a standard of life through His grace, and we are responsible for reproducing that same standard in others.”^{xviii}

Leadership Development 2.1 – Theology of Discipleship

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- ⁱ Wilkins, Michael J, 1992. Following the Master. Grand Rapids; Zondervan. Page 57ff
- ⁱⁱ Wilkins, page 78
- ⁱⁱⁱ Wilkins, page 81ff
- ^{iv} Wilkins, page 100ff
- ^v Wilkins, page 17
- ^{vi} Richards, Lawrence, New International Encyclopedia of Bible Words. Grand Rapids; Zondervan
- ^{vii} Wilkins, page 149
- ^{viii} Wilkins, page 209
- ^{ix} Wilkins, page 41
- ^x Wilkins, page 220
- ^{xi} Wilkins, page 208
- ^{xii} Greek-English Readers Lexicon of the New Testament. Zondervan, PRADIS Bible Software – Scholar’s Edition
- ^{xiii} Wilkins, page 257
- ^{xiv} Wilkins, page 261
- ^{xv} Wilkins, page 261-265ff
- ^{xvi} Wilkins, page 274-277ff
- ^{xvii} Wilkins, pages 278-280ff
- ^{xviii} Chambers, Oswald, 1992. My Utmost for His Highest. Grand Rapids, Oswald Chambers Publications.
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