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New Testament Terms for Discipleship

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Discipleship means different things to different people, resulting in a confusion of terms, methods, and desired results. “The confusion with terms is more than a semantic problem. It is true that we have confused our definition, but the real problem is that, in one way or another, our experiences have altered our understanding of what Jesus meant in His Great Commission.”¹ An examination of the use of terms relating to discipleship in the New Testament will help clarify the meaning of discipleship in its contemporary application. The New Testament uses two Greek word groups to describe discipleship. The first, *mathetes*, is translated “disciple” and the second, *akoloutheo*, is translated “follow.”

The New Testament Use of the mathetes Word Group

The term *mathetes* means a learner, pupil, disciple, or apprentice, as does the compound form *summathetes* and the feminine form *mathetria*; the verb form *matheteuo* means to become a disciple or to make a disciple of someone.² Each of these terms comes from a root verb for learning, *manthano*, in which “an intellectual process is always implied and this always has external effects.”³ Thus, these terms refer to an educational process of learning and acquiring life skills. The modern use of

the word “apprentice” may come closest to the original meaning of these terms.⁴

The New Testament uses *mathetes* over 260 times, *summathetes* once (John 11:16), *mathetria* once (Acts 9:36), and *matheteuo* four times (Matthew 13:52; 27:57; 28:19; Acts 14:21). In the vast majority of occurrences, these words refer to followers of Jesus. However, on a few occasions the New Testament also refers to disciples of other spiritual leaders and teachers. “In addition, there are references to the ‘disciples’ of John the Baptist (Matt 9:14; 11:2; 14:12; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33; 7:18-19; 11:1; John 1:35, 37; 3:25; 4:1), to ‘disciples’ of the Pharisees (Matt 22:16; Mark 2:18), to ‘disciples’ of Moses (John 9:28), and to relationships between disciples and teachers generally (Matt 10:24-25/Luke 6:40).”⁵ In each case, the New Testament refers to a disciple as a man or woman who is a student, someone who is learning life skills at the feet of a certain teacher or group of teachers. Being a disciple implies a personal relationship between the disciple and the teacher, “the existence of a personal attachment which shapes the whole life of the one described as μαθητης, and which in its particularity leaves no doubt as to who is deploying the formative power.”⁶ The disciple identifies with a teacher, learns that teacher’s lessons, and puts into practice that teacher’s instructions

The New Testament Use of akoloutheo

The New Testament uses the verb *akoloutheo* over 90 times. This term means to follow, come after, go along with, or follow as a disciple.⁷ While *akoloutheo* has a general use, it often becomes a technical term for following Jesus in a teacher-disciple relationship.

‘Following Jesus’ is a technical expression for going after him as his disciple. Some disciples physically followed Jesus in his itinerant ministry (e.g., the Twelve), while a wider group of disciples followed Jesus in a more figurative sense (e.g., Joseph of Arimathea, Jn 19:38). Following Jesus meant togetherness with him while

traveling on the Way, but that following could be manifested in either a physical or figurative sense.⁸

Jesus invited various individuals to follow Him as disciples (Matthew 8:22; 9:9; 19:21; Mark 2:14; 10:21; Luke 5:27; 9:59; 18:22; John 1:43). The synonymous phrase “come after me,” from the exclamatory verb *deute*, carries the same meaning (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17).

Those who accepted Jesus’ direct and personal call to follow Him became a part of His closest band of disciples known as the Twelve. But great crowds also followed Jesus in a more casual relationship as His disciples (Matthew 8:1; Mark 2:15; Luke 7:9; John 6:2). In such contexts, it is apparent that the Gospel writers have identified many people as disciples of Jesus Christ who were outside the body of the Twelve. Longenecker denies that the multitudes that followed Jesus in a casual relationship were considered disciples.⁹ However, a comparison of John 6:2 and 6:66 seems to indicate that the multitudes who followed Jesus casually and eventually stopped following Him were called disciples.

Following Jesus, therefore, implied a teacher-disciple relationship. Some followed Jesus closely, while others followed at a distance. Some followed consistently, while others came and went. Some literally followed Jesus physically as Jesus traveled around Galilee and Judea, while others followed Jesus in the sense of adopting His teachings and accepting His claims. In whatever way a person followed Jesus, that person could be considered a disciple.

Practical Applications of these Discipleship Terms

A disciple is a follower, a student, or an apprentice of Jesus Christ. A disciple is learning life skills from his or her Master. Anyone who has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through faith in Him can claim to be a disciple. However, Jesus consistently called His disciples to develop a closer and closer walk with Him. The Christian life is a growing walk with Jesus. The Lord Jesus Christ invites His followers to follow Him

more closely, to learn His truths more deeply, and to live His life more consistently. The elements of growing in discipleship – the personal study of God’s Word, fellowship within the context of the church community, participation in small groups, and individual mentoring relationships – can enhance the Christians walk with Jesus. Indeed, these elements are essential. Jesus wants His disciples to grow throughout their lifetime. What steps are you taking to walk more closely with Jesus?

¹ Spader, Dann; Mayes, Gary. *Growing a Healthy Church*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1991, p. 17.

² Bauer, Walter; Arndt, William F.; Gingrich, F. Wilbur; Dander, Frederick W. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp. 485-486, 778.

³ Rengstorf, Karl Heinrich. “μαθητῶν” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Gerhard Kittel, editor. Geoffrey W. Bromily, translator and editor. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967, p. 392.

⁴ Rengstorf, p. 416.

⁵ Longenecker, Richard N. (ed.). *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996, p. 4.

⁶ Rengstorf, p. 441.

⁷ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, p. 31.

⁸ Wilkins, Michael J. “Disciples” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall, eds.). Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992, p. 178.

⁹ Longenecker, p. 4.