

The Mind of Christ's Disciple

Definitions for Christian Life, Church and Education
(2008)

Christians study to be approved before their God and inherit a confidence that they are filled with the wisdom that the Bible brings by many God ordained witnesses. 2 Timothy 2:15. They are educated by any means to which this term can rightly apply. A person cannot be converted to Jesus Christ and not be or soon become His disciple. There is no such thing as a man who has Jesus as Savior but not as Lord. Such teaching is the detritus of a lazy and cheap gospel. There is no justification to speak of without sanctification in the life of an opportune believer. A Christian is filled with God Himself and He does not move in with silence. Judas Iscariot was not a disciple of Jesus Christ by the same necessary evidences that display disciples after the Day of Pentecost, Acts 2. In fact, this is true of all of Jesus' disciples pre-Pentecost. After Pentecost we read that Christ's true disciples actually and without doubt entered into the New Covenant with God. The eleven others even chose one to replace Judas just before the Holy Spirit was given in His fullness. Acts 1:15-26. Christians today are disciples by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as it is written, "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His," Romans 8:9. How can a person have the Spirit of God in his chest and be devoid of the mind of Christ in his head? He cannot. The church must continue to define its terms well.

There are three terms examined in this letter in an attempt to illuminate the importance of sound terminology. They are: education, spiritual formation and discipleship. While education may prove easy to define, some will have a hard time finding a distinction between spiritual formation and discipleship as stated. The distinction in this letter is mainly to point out that Christian discipleship is a higher calling and perhaps a more fitting term to use than spiritual formation. In the positive aspects of spiritual formation or discipleship they are virtually synonymous, but a person could form negative spiritual influences or practices in their lives as maturing disciples. For instance Peter was a disciple of Christ. This is a spiritual reality as well as his lifestyle; however, he was confronted by another disciple, Paul, for playing the hypocrite as mentioned in Galatians 2:11-14. Peter was publicly rebuked outright. Peter's actions could represent bad spiritual development though he was certainly a disciple. This last distinction of terms will not be examined in depth, but merits mentioning here.

Education could be defined as data. A disciple learns who Jesus Christ is, who He was on earth, what His death meant in relation to Moses and the prophets. The disciple learns dates, times, locations, memorizes scripture and various other data is input into the mind. A person can learn for a lifetime and still not come to the knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 3:7) so education is clearly not what saves. In other words, Christians are not just made by a decision to believe in Jesus. If it were so then men could be taught into the faith by a simple and accurate presentation of acceptable facts. Education is similar to discipleship because all disciples learn; however, not all learners are disciples. Discipleship is a spiritual distinctive whereas educational ability may only be a matter as trivial as financial privilege. A disciple is marked by a grace far beyond education or a spiritually formed allegiance to principle, as it is written, “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus,” Acts 4:13. We have been with Jesus and this is the privilege and promise of His church.

Spiritual formation may be defined as a lifestyle of learning and growth and is certainly a component of grace. This is not dissimilar from discipleship, but some clear distinctions can and perhaps should be made. George Barna says, “Churches have done a good job of promoting the importance of spiritual maturity, but they have mostly failed to provide an environment in which spiritual growth is a lifestyle. Instead of becoming a natural extension of one’s spiritual journey, steady spiritual growth has become the exception to the rule, the domain of the spiritual superstars and fanatics.” (Barna 2001, 55.) If he’s correct and this result is not somehow skewed then perhaps spiritual formation is not synonymous with discipleship. Perhaps spiritual formation is not a good term to use at all. Jesus said, “It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master...” in Matthew 10:25. His disciples will have some measure of maturity like Him. Perhaps spiritual formation is a term that applies to the applicatory side of life for some whereas education or works would for others. Education adorns discipleship and Godly formation follows. Christians, in spiritual formation or transformation, are like raw gold from the earth and Christ is like the perfect and stamped bars in the treasury. Ephesians 4:13.

Discipleship is a term that should evoke much sharper insight into the question of spiritual formation or the role that education takes in the life of a believer. Barna speaks about the marks of a disciple. He writes: “Take a good look at your life...Is your lifestyle one that you could confidently display to God without fear of rebuke? Are you sufficiently conversant in the

principles and purposes of your faith that give you meaning, purpose, hope, and parameters?” (Barna 2001, 28.) I fear that many pastors would never ask their people this question from fear that the challenge would make them leave. Disciples never leave. Notice that Barna is combining the elements discussed mentioning principles, parameters and asking how conversant or educated a person is in the Christian faith. These are good questions. They reveal education and spiritual formation yes, but go much higher. It is disciples alone who can truly come boldly when hearing Jesus say, “...He who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God,” John 3:21. Barna is right. The marks of a disciple are clear and combine both knowledge and principle. It cannot be otherwise because Christ is the master pastor and Chief Shepherd of a disciple’s soul. He is a magnificent teacher. This also can show the difference between the disciples pre and post Pentecost as mentioned earlier.

Historically it can be demonstrated that there are essentially four marks that make for a Godly church body. They are sound preaching, evangelism/missions, taking care of widows, orphans and the poor and the practice of church discipline. I think a church should mostly focus on preaching. They should work to preserve the knowledge of church history, creedal affirmation and the languages of Greek and Hebrew to name a few. This needn’t be done by the pastor alone but by disciples making disciples. In this technological age there are thousands of programs, books and audio messages available to anyone looking that can make laymen qualified to teach inside a week. Churches should find men filled with the Holy Spirit and employ their gifts. The church can focus on sound teaching in classes and small groups as well as from behind the pulpit. Sound doctrine cannot be imitated or balanced out even by love and missions. It is the heart of the faith. The church must make disciples that are, to use Barna’s word, “Conversant.” The church must love the Lord its God with all of its mind and teach its own the same.

Discipleship is a calling that involves spiritual formation along with education but is a much higher term for a much *lowered* person. To become a disciple is a free and cross-bought gift of grace. Jesus told His first disciples, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit...” John 15:16. We too did not choose Him, but our conversation validates our subsequent choices to follow Him. A Christian’s fruits are shown in a spiritual formation/transformation into Jesus’ image, seen in their desire for education about Jesus’ book but most aptly honored in their similarity to His death. This is the joyous formation of educated disciples alone.

Thank you for your attention to this letter.