

What Is a Disciple?

A Statement of the
First Presbyterian Church of Lakeland, Florida
Approved by Session on May 27, 2025

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Matthew 28:19-20

The elders of First Presbyterian Church of Lakeland, Florida, have repeatedly affirmed that disciple-making is the singular mission priority as a church. Not only is this so because it is commanded of Jesus, but also because it is practical. Success in disciple-making leads to greater depth of faith, passion in worship, commitment to mission, desire to serve, hunger for personal spiritual formation, and desire to help others realize all of these same things.

In the words of this church's mission statement, the people of this church are committed "to make and mature disciples for Jesus Christ." That begs the question of this paper: what is a disciple? In this church, we understand and teach the following definition of a disciple:

A Christian disciple is a person who has been awakened to faith in Jesus Christ and begun to follow the teachings of, learn from, and model their life after Jesus, and help others do the same. A disciple is a student of Jesus. That person has been regenerated, that is, made a "new creation" by the Holy Spirit entering into the heart. The old has died and the new has arisen.

What follows from here is an exploration of the biblical and theological foundations of that definition and practical implications of it. This will include

definitions of disciple, discipling, and discipleship. Also included will be an exploration of the relationship between “disciple” and “Christian.”

Much has been written on disciples, discipling, and discipleship. For this work of definitions and distinctions, foundational support comes from the teaching of theologians Dallas Willard and Michael Wilkins. In addition, Richard Foster’s *Streams of Living Water* will be used to examine the evangelical theological stream of the Presbyterian church and how that both informs and shapes the practice of disciple-making.

Christians Are Disciples

Any person who is a Christ follower is a disciple. Right away, some words need to be defined for clarification of this truth.

Christian

Contrary to an implicit attitude in many churches, a true Christian is not one who attends church services habitually. Just because a person is in church on Sundays or Wednesdays does not automatically make that person a true believer. Simply attending church does not make a person a Christian any more than sitting in a garage makes a person a car.

A true Christian is not one whose ideas, attitudes, and character are shaped by the non-Christian world and then, on occasion, have biblical, Christian thoughts.¹ Cooking an excellent meal on occasion does not make one a gourmet chef.

A true Christian is not one who was baptized as an infant, raised in the church, but can think of no particular moment or age or season when they came to faith in Jesus. The community of faith is an essential entity, but it is not a substitute for a personal commitment to faith. Somewhere along the way, the soul must be awakened.

The definition of a true Christian in this church is a person who has been spiritually awakened² by the power of the Holy Spirit to the truth and joy about

¹ An observation by John Fischer, *What On Earth Are We Doing? Finding Our Place As Christians in the World*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1996), p.13.

² Much has been written about this “awakening” and the steps or process involved. Theologians speak of the “order of salvation” that includes acts such as election, effectual calling, regeneration, conversion, and repentance. These topics will not be explored further but are raised here in order to note that this “awakening” is a large,

Jesus as Lord of life. A Christian is one who has accepted the free gift of grace that God has provided through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and has made a conscious decision to believe in and follow Jesus. The awakening and acceptance results in a personal relationship with Jesus and entering into eternal life. The effect of that awakening is all encompassing—it changes everything from one’s attitude toward the world, other people, and self to how one acts and what one says. Even the thought world is shaped by this awakening. Sin becomes a burden, right living becomes an ambition, and gratitude for God’s grace becomes a way of life.

On Being a Disciple

A Christian is a disciple. “If you have entered into a salvation relationship with Jesus,” Michael Wilkins explains, “he counts you as His disciple.”³ Entering into a salvation relationship with Jesus presumes the spiritual awakening and entering into personal relationship with Jesus, which is a lifelong endeavor.

Generally, a disciple is a “committed follower of a great master.”⁴ In the definition above, a Christian disciple is a person who has been awakened to faith in Jesus Christ and begun a personal journey with Christ in life. That person has been regenerated, that is, made a “new creation” by the Holy Spirit entering into the heart. The old has died and the new has arisen. The new person willfully and intentionally seeks to shape their whole life into the image and after the character of Jesus Christ. Michael Wilkins observes that “*Disciple* is the primary term used in the gospels to refer to Jesus’ followers and is a common referent for those known in the early church as *believers, Christians, brothers/sisters, those of the Way, or saints...*”⁵

Often missing in definitions of disciple, discipling, or discipleship is the understanding of multiplication. A disciple seeks to multiply the faith, that is, to see and help shepherd the faith to come alive in another person. This is the model of Jesus pouring into his disciples. It is critical that it happen with today’s disciples. Greg Ogden has called this making the move from being a spiritual

momentous and transforming process contrary to those who speak of “being saved” as a singular event of the past.

³ Michael Wilkins, *In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1997), p. 36

⁴ This is Michael Wilkins’ definition in *Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p. 40.

⁵ Ibid.

child to a “spiritual parent.”⁶ A spiritual child is one who receives instruction and care. A spiritual parent gives it to others.

What Is Not Affirmed

As said above, a Christian is a disciple. The thoughts go together. They also preclude the definitions of a disciple offered by others and found in Michael Wilkins’ *Following the Master*.⁷ The following is not affirmed in this church.

- That disciples are limited to those who are “learners.” This does not take into account the synonymous use of “Christian” and “disciple,” in the book of Acts (see Acts 11:26).⁸
- That disciples are limited to the committed believers or those called out to enter into vocational ministry. These create a two-class system of Christians, “a problematic concept of biblical discipleship.”⁹
- That disciples are simply converts who will begin discipleship later. This calls into question one’s understanding of conversion. If God has changed and awakened a heart, what other step is needed to be on the path to committed faith? Wilkins notes that this separates the “making disciples” part of the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20) from the “baptizing” and “teaching” part.¹⁰ The converts to Christianity were baptized and taught (cf. Acts 2:42) as part of the fulfillment of the Great Commission, not as a separate phase.

Dealing with Difficulties

Two difficulties arise with the above definitions: church members who do not live like disciples, and, related to that, whether conversion to Christ always results in outward commitment to the life of faith.

⁶ Author and Presbyterian pastor Greg Ogden used the phrase “spiritual parent” this way in a seminar at our church in June 2022.

⁷ The models are from *ibid.*, pp. 25-34 and were also reviewed in Dr. Ogden’s class under the section *Biblical/Theological foundations*.

⁸ Gerhard Kittel also notes that the use of the word “disciple” meant Christians in general and not just those closest to Jesus, so it would include those people who did not know Jesus personally such as Timothy (Acts 16:1). Gerhard Kittel (ed), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. IV, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 458.

⁹ Wilkins, *Following the Master*, p. 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Church Members Who Don't Act Like Disciples.

The first difficulty such a definition raises is why people who claim to be Christians don't live like God matters or are not living like devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

They are not Christians. It is very likely that some who make claims of being a Christian have not, in reality, had a spiritual awakening and are not true Christians. The reason they don't act like devoted disciples of Jesus and exhibit a low level of discipleship is because they are *not* true Christians and therefore *not* true disciples in the first place. It is all a charade put on for some reason or another.

They are not good disciples. Another explanation is that some may be believers, but they may not fully understand or have worked out what it means to live it out as a disciple. Dallas Willard considers it a "universally conceded" fact of life in the church that one can be a Christian without being a disciple.¹¹ Willard considers a Christian a disciple (our premise) and a disciple an apprentice. One who actually is an apprentice and co-laborer with Jesus is sure to be a "Christian."

"Now, people who are asked whether they are apprentices of a leading politician, musician, lawyer, or screenwriter would not need to think a second to respond. Similarly, for those asked if they are studying Spanish or bricklaying with someone unknown to the public. It is hardly something that would escape one's attention. The same is all the more true if asked about discipleship to Jesus.

But, if asked whether they are good apprentices of whatever person or line of work concerned, they very well might hesitate.... For to be a disciple in any area or relationship is not to be perfect."¹²

The distinction Willard makes is that while a Christian is a disciple (apprentice) of Jesus, whether one is a *good* disciple is another question. "One can be a very raw and incompetent beginner and still be a disciple."¹³

The reasons one may not be a *good* disciple (Christian) may be varied. Greg Ogden speaks of the "discipleship malaise" and identifies eight different

¹¹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God*, (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 282.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

causes of the gap between the biblical expectation for mature discipleship (a *good* disciple) and the low levels of maturity that pervades the American churches (a *bad* disciple).¹⁴ These causes are attributed to problems with the views of pastors, church leaders, and church members.

They are “stuck” on their spiritual journey. The fact that a person can be a Christian (and therefore a disciple) but not a good disciple seems to fit with the stage-like models of faith development. Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich speak of six stages of faith that can be seen as a person matures spiritually.¹⁵ But in describing the journey of faith, they describe getting bogged down.¹⁶ People get stuck on the journey like getting stuck in the mud. It happens when it becomes more comfortable or less frightening to sit than to move. Eventually sitting still spiritually becomes getting stuck, which eventually feels like getting trapped. Somewhere along the line, this person was at a stage where Jesus was the most amazing and magnificent person who ever lived. But then something happens—a crisis hits, an unknown future is faced, negative memories arise and fears or pain surfaces—and spiritual growth stops. It may be that this growth stops for a young Christian (of any age) or far down the road of a person’s Christian life.

They are not perfect—yet. Dallas Willard observes that people often assume that a disciple is an advanced spiritual condition. But for many, “All they have necessarily realized at the outset of their apprenticeship to him is, *Jesus is right*. He is the greatest and best. . . . So they have *him*. They do not yet have it.”¹⁷

Many will come into relationship with Jesus with the cry of the father of the boy with a spirit, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24). They have the faith to be saved, but they do not have the beliefs that make them feel at home with God. They are struggling, faltering, imperfect and sinful in their faith, but they are on their way to being otherwise; a process begun in this lifetime and completed in glory.

¹⁴ This includes realities such as pastors being distracted by good and worthy things that cause them to fail at “equipping the saints” (Eph 4:12) or the fact most churches have “no clear pathway to maturity.” A full review can be found Greg Ogden’s *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 39-56.

¹⁵ Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing, 1989).

¹⁶ These next observations are from *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁷ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, pp. 318-319.

This Model Confuses Conversion with Commitment

Some will argue that defining a true Christian as also being a true disciple is a problem because there may be a fundamental lack of commitment at conversion. There must be a complete abandonment of the “old self” for the new. There must be a visible, meaningful commitment to live different than before. If that is not there, some will argue, one cannot be a true disciple of Jesus Christ. The tension here is between weighing the cost of discipleship and grace.

Many who have experienced a conversion criticize those around them for not having a genuine change of heart. The implied message is that if one is not crying and begging God and others for forgiveness for the sins of your past every day, if one does not stand before the elders and confess sins publicly, if one still remains friends with “sinners,” and does not sell all of your possessions as a form of penance (or some other equally dramatic act), then conversion cannot be genuine. Some big, dramatic, visible act must accompany conversion in order to be counted a disciple and friend of Jesus.

The problem of such thinking is that it does not take into account that in the beginning of a faith journey, it may be that the biggest, most dramatic act that accompanies a person’s conversion is not visible to others. It may be that the convert gives up his or her most prized possession—their lives. It may be that “denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus” (Lk 9:23) means, as with Jesus, realizing that our lives are “not our own.” That is the profound and fundamental commitment that takes place.

Believers need not choose between commitment and grace. It is not that there is a fundamental flaw in one’s theology that would force a choice either costly commitment to Jesus or passively receiving grace. As with many issues in the faith, it is simply that both are true. Discipleship will cost everything, and it comes at no cost. Being a disciple means that our lives are not our own, that we “die to self” and we receive mercy from God that brings us salvation.

Supporting Definitions

Discipleship

In considering the above definition of a disciple, it is clear that being a disciple is not a singular event. Being a disciple is something that begins at one’s conversion but is lived out throughout this lifetime. Michael Wilkins in his study of New Testament and early church era understandings of a disciple concludes

that (1) discipleship is the Christian life, (2) discipleship is a process, and (3) discipleship is the ministry of the church.¹⁸ Dallas Willard describes this lifelong process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself as “spiritual formation.”¹⁹ He is describing discipleship. Greg Ogden defines discipleship as “the process of growth into Christ-like maturity and reproduction. Fruitfulness in quality and quantity.”²⁰

Considering all of these concepts, the following definition of discipleship is offered: **Discipleship is a glorious, sometimes arduous, lifelong process of growing into the likeness of Jesus Christ.**

Discipling

Wilkins describes discipling as the responsibility of disciples to help one another grow as disciples.²¹ Ogden expands these ideas with specifics such as the fact that it is an “intentional relationship” between believers, and believers work “toward maturity in Christ,” and discipling includes “equipping the disciple to teach others as well.”²²

With that in mind, the following definition of discipling is offered:
Discipling is an intentional relationship between disciples in which one disciple makes a life investment into the other in order to help the other grow to be a mature disciple.

¹⁸ Wilkins, *Following the Master*, pp. 342-346.

¹⁹ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2002), p.22. This book gives a model of what work can be done to bring about the complete transformation of a person to be like Christ.

²⁰ Greg Ogden, from Pastor John Fullerton’s Doctor of Ministry class notebook under “Biblical/Theological Foundations,” p. 8.

²¹ Wilkins, *Following the Master*, p. 41.

²² Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials*, p. 17.