

THE MEANING OF DISCIPLESHIP – “I AM GOD’S REPRESENTATIVE TO THE WORLD”

B. Representatives of Christ

A Moment in the Life of a Disciple (2)

Imagine you are living in first century Palestine and you have made a decision to be a follower of Jesus. No big deal. In your culture, many other teachers have followers. Day after day you travel around with Him. It's all very interesting. Jesus has a fresh way of doing things. You have seen miracles beyond your wildest dreams. There is a nascent sense that this man is more than a messenger from God. As “out of the box” as it sounds there is a growing belief that He may be God in human flesh. The Greeks say this happens, but only in mythology. You've heard demons calling Him the Son of God, but it doesn't make sense in terms of what you have been taught about the Oneness of Jehovah. Other religions are polytheistic. The Greeks make fun of their gods and set them against one another; the super-heroes are cleverer than many of the deities. The Romans worship a panoply of gods. So do most other cultures. Moses said, “The Lord your God is One”. Where does this place you? You are identified as one of Jesus' followers and people come to you for advice when they can't get through the crowds to talk to Him. But there is only one Jesus. There are scores of villages that need Him. He can't be everywhere at once. Opposition to His style is growing in some quarters. What if He is silenced? Who will do His work then? Will it last? One day Jesus assembles the group and informs you that you are about to graduate as His representatives. You will be given special powers, including the ability to heal sick people. After your discipleship training (preparation never seems long enough), seventy will be sent out, to every village, every hamlet, throughout Israel, to preach Jesus' message in anticipation of his arrival. The notion of discipleship is about to reach new heights. You feel inadequate. No matter how long you have spent with Jesus, you don't have all the answers. You haven't been educated as a priest, you are not a theologian. What you have had is time with Jesus and your life has been changed. That much is certain. Discipleship is not about living in seclusion with the Master learning trade secrets; it is also about being “in His place” in your world. According to Jesus, there is a “harvest” of people waiting to experience God for the first time; it is your privilege to be part of that harvest. As you go, there is one caveat: don't look for status; some people hate Jesus; you can expect similar treatment.

Disciples as representatives of Jesus

One of the goals (or outcomes) of discipleship is to be God's representatives in the community. Discipleship is a conscious decision that affects every part of our lives and all our relationships (as well as our capacity to effect change) if we embark on that route. The disciples' mission is to be God's people in the world.

This is not something we take lightly. Nor is it merely rhetorical, like “working to eliminate hunger in every nation” or “achieving world peace” (I am reminded of a egregiously sumptuous Banquet Against Hunger that was held in New York when I worked in that city on one occasion). Discipleship is a lifestyle choice.

What is a “representative”? In the world of business or officialdom, “delegates” act according to prescribed legal powers and within defined responsibilities on behalf of others. The positions they take on issues that matter, the words they say, the decisions they are make are taken in the place of those who send them; they are accountable for their actions.

Likewise, God’s people are only doing their “job” if those who study them (rest assured, the community studies and evaluates people who claim to be Christians) see that their lifestyles, attitudes, words and values are truly those of their Boss. If people know we are Christians and we “stuff it up”, we do so in God’s name. If we do well, He receives honour from those who might not otherwise offer it (not yet anyway).

Your marketplace can be an office, a laboratory, hotel, class room, surgery, stage, PC screen, factory, social group, club or living room, wherever you interact with people, literally or virtually. You may be called to function as a disciple of Jesus in education, commerce, industry, music, media, literature, communications, visual arts, public administration, medicine, mental health, high finance, defence, hospitality, international relations or with people in your domestic neighbourhood. You may be His only representative in your workplace.

Functional Discipleship

Relationship, faithfulness and obedience to God and His word are cornerstones of discipleship. This involves:

- following Jesus, in the marketplace (especially outside the sanctuary)
- seeking His will, discernment to apply it and power to live it
- applying His Word (John 8:31)
- heeding His guidance
- esteeming Him more highly than anyone and anything else (Jesus said that, without Him, we can do nothing, see John 15:5)
- representing Him – once we were nothing; now we are His people (1 Peter 2:10). What a transformation!

Throughout church history there have been innumerable times when discipleship has been misunderstood and people believed the most effective way to draw close to Jesus and follow Him was withdrawal. Monastic orders sprang up all over the “Christian” world. Holiness was measured by seclusion and obedience to “orders” approved by Superiors. I have seen caves in the Middle East and Greek Orthodox monasteries in Cyprus (“women and dogs prohibited”) where well-intentioned people believe only physical separation from the world enables Christian believers to maintain their faith and relationship with God.

Church members in the West withdraw in other ways (citing 2 Corinthians 16:7 inter alia, but misunderstanding its application), cutting themselves off from social intercourse with the world (even neighbours) wearing special outfits, using distinctive language and cultural mores behind the closed doors of church buildings (only at certain times of the week, mind you). Jesus' preferred brand of discipleship was always public. "Let your light shine before men" (Matthew 5:16).

What does a representative of Christ look like? How does he or she act? It goes without saying that a mark of discipleship is that we will be growing spiritually. But that does that mean? It sounds so subjective. We should be:

- accountable to the Lordship of Jesus (John 13:13) – this is a vital first step
- hearing and responding to Jesus' call and direction – John 10:27
- seeking every opportunity to be with Jesus – John 12:26 (discipleship is a relationship, not a formula)
- putting the words of Jesus into practice
 - this implies being a diligent student of His teachings
 - it also involves being a conscious "doer" of the Word - Matthew 7:21-27; James 1:21-25; there are far too many theorists
- loving fellow-Christians - John 13:34-35
 - as Jesus loves them – even if they wear different badges and uniforms
 - in such a measure as will be visible to the world
- bearing fruit – John 15:8 – in our character, what we are like under pressure, what actions result from our choices and values, what endures.

After three years of ministry and what appeared to be mixed results Jesus placed the future of His work in the hands of a small group of virtually unproven disciples. That wasn't to say He abrogated responsibility. But one Jesus, restricted to one place, was always going to result in a localized Christology. His message to the church was, "The Holy Spirit will come, He will be with you and in you, giving you divine power to be my representatives" (Acts 1:8). Paul says we are "Ambassadors" for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

Ambassadors for Christ

What does that mean? Ambassadors are the highest ranking diplomatic officials, "sent" (the word "apostle" has the same sense) by Governments to countries or international organizations (such as the United Nations). No Ambassador chooses his or her terms. Their opinions or agenda are not part of the job.

Ambassadors have quirks, limitations and personal views, but nothing in their lifestyle or language is allowed to derogate from the power they represent. The functions, responsibilities and privileges of diplomats are prescribed by an international treaty called the *Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations*, to which most countries in the world are signatories. When an Ambassador (or some other diplomat) speaks, they do so as representatives. That's why they have to be careful what they say and do in public.

In times of war, Ambassadors deal with opposing sides. A strong nation may send an Ambassador to negotiate with (or dictate terms to) a weak one, offering terms of reconciliation. Paul says that as Christians we offer God's reconciliation to a world at war with Him. In times of conflict, Ambassadors are sometimes mistreated by enemy forces. In Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus he declared that he was Christ's Ambassador "in chains" (Ephesians 6:20). The purpose of discipleship is to change, equip and release us, so that we become Jesus' ambassadors and speak on His behalf; only then are we effective representatives of the Kingdom of God in our marketplaces.

I once met a man who told me he was God. He wasn't inebriated. He looked "normal", as far as I could see. He wasn't on a soap box declaiming. Nor was he a New Ager of the Shirley MacLaine genre who believed he was part of a celestial think tank or godhood. As Brian recounted what it was like to exist when there was no universe until he decided to make one, and what he went through during creation, it occurred to me that he actually believed he was God. Strange.

The ultimate representation of God on earth is Jesus. If you want to know what God is like, look at Him. Then study His people. After all, we are God's Family. Non-believers often hold us accountable to higher standards for this reason.

In Roman Catholic tradition, the Pope is considered to be Christ's personal representative on earth. The Vatican officially teaches that: "The Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise." This is an unfortunate turn of phrase, given that the intent of the Bible is that all of God's people be Jesus' personal representatives.

The moment you identify as a Christian you become His representative. Outsiders judge Jesus by His followers. You may have to cope with people who's observations of Christian modelling are poor, but you can be different.

We have all heard the term "ugly American". It comes from a misunderstood title of a book written by book by William Lederer and Eugene Burdick in 1958. Substitute any nationality. If you travel you will come across "ugly" representatives of other countries. As soon as you give someone a passport they become their nation's ambassadors. They can do the job well; or they can be loud, pretentious, demanding and ostentatious. Students studying abroad carry their countries' reputations, as do football "hooligans" (the UK Government banned known hooligans from travelling to World Cup matches in Berlin in 2006), demonstrators, even tourists on buses or trains. The opinions of people in the street as to the country they represent rise or fall with their actions and attitudes.

It is the same in the Christian life. In the marketplace I have witnessed men and women whose lifestyles have drawn hardened cynics to the feet of Jesus; and others who have caused people to oppose the church and all it stands for (Lebanon: "Christian militia guilty of bombing Druze village". Muslim friends in the Middle East told me many stories at both ends of the spectrum.)

We do not represent ourselves

I was working at my desk when the file landed in front of me. It had gone from one Section to another and become a bit of a “hot potato”. No one wanted to touch the case; then unknown hands ferried it to my in-tray. It concerned a man who lived in the far north of Queensland, who had laid claim to a national park and surrounding towns, “in the name of Christ, to establish the Kingdom of God”. His arguments were full of verses from the Bible, invariably taken out of context and conveniently appropriated to mandate his cause, to substantiate the “revelation” he claimed to have received. In the end consideration and resolution of the claims came down to the constitutionality of his arguments. I sent the lot to the Cabinet Minister with my recommendation. When it came back (refused, as anticipated), the Minister had scrawled impatiently across the front of the papers, “This is the third person, claiming to represent God, whom it has been my misfortune to come across this week”. Discipleship gets bad press when “fruitcakes” draw attention to their personal crusades by acting in God’s name.

The true disciple does not represent himself or his denomination. When all the world can see are our culture, ethnicity, occupation, social standing, fashion, foibles, marital status or lifestyle preferences, it is possible we are standing in the middle of the road and obscuring their vision of Jesus. Independent observers ought to be able to look past our personalities, biases, feelings, thoughts, perspectives and opinions (which change over time) and see “something different”. When Peter and John were arrested in Jerusalem and dragged before the Jewish leaders, accused of stirring up the community with their preaching; it was obvious they were “unschooled and ordinary men”. After further enquiry it was discovered they had been with Jesus. He made the difference (Acts 4:13).

It is a human trait to pursue self interest (Philippians 2:21), but the Bible states that God will not share his honour with anyone (Isaiah 42:8). Discipleship is about dying to self and taking on the persona of Jesus. Only when we think beyond self can we use our position to address injustice and live His way.

In the Place of Jesus

Jesus was not speaking rhetorically when he told those who wanted to follow Him that they might as well pick up a cross and nails at that point and be prepared to die on it. Crucifixion was the most common form of execution in His day and victims were assured of slow, painful deaths. Following Christ today can lead to loss of work, forfeiture of family, estrangement, prison and even death.

For millions of Christians, discipleship involves a fine line between life and extinction (or loss of possessions, status and freedom). Believers in Pakistan, Northern Nigeria, India, Central Asia, the Middle East, China, parts of Indonesia, north Africa, Indochina, Burma and a score of other countries live as Christ’s representatives in hostile environments dominated by Hindu nationalism, Muslim extremism, civil wars, ultra-orthodox Jewish radicalism, anti-Western terrorism and Maoist-Leninist insurgencies. They often pay heavy prices for doing so.

I once preached in a shop in the heart of Sydney's gay district, where my listeners represented a wide cross section of people. The chapel had been set up by a hairdresser who had decided to celebrate his own encounter with Jesus Christ by opening his boutique for Christian meetings every Friday night. I shared lessons from story of Zacchaeus, a little man in the Bible who met Christ as he sat in a tree; Jesus passed by, looked up and saw him, called him down and his life was changed (Luke 19:1-9). At the end of the meeting a young man came to me in tears. He wanted to give his life to Christ. After we prayed together I asked him why he was upset. He told me, "My family is Jewish. Every Sabbath we go to the synagogue. When my parents find out I have decided to follow Jesus as the Messiah they will cast me out of the house, my father will disinherit me, my family will hold a funeral service in my name and I will be forever cut off". Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me".

Jesus people- radical representatives

Only "older citizens" remember the "Jesus people". It is worth recounting the story of the Jesus people as a case study, because it still shows how discipleship that is relevant can touch a generation. Not because we look back wistfully to some "Golden Age", but because there are ways and means the Holy Spirit uses Christians in every generation to celebrate the reality of Jesus and the power He gives us to represent the God-man Saviour we worship.

Here's some background. By the late-1960s/early 1970s in the USA, the youth counter-culture (the so-called "hippie movement") reached its peak. The Cold War was raging. The post World War II American Dream was being weighed in the balances and found wanting. The country was divided over race and economic issues. Young people were sick of the conflict in Vietnam, but rejected Communism. They were disillusioned with Government and what they believed to be the hypocrisy of their parents perpetuating social injustice for the sake of political power, or doing nothing to alleviate the ills of the world while they were economically well off. Millions of young people sought an alternative. They burst onto the streets of urban America demanding change. We had hippies, yippies beatniks, "flower people", Woodstock Festival (1969) and calls to "Make love, not war". The problem was, they did not have the finance or power to change the world, so they gave up and turned inwards, looking for answers in alternative religions, "free love" and communal living. Drug abuse became a major problem. The world's media picked up what was occurring and identified similar movements in other countries, including Canada, Australia and the UK. Within a decade it was all over. Sociologists believe the counter-culture was one of the shortest-lived spontaneous popular movements in history.

In the midst of this, significant numbers of young people became Christians. They didn't look like old-style church goers. They had a language of their own. They wore outlandish clothes. Their Bibles were covered with colourful slogans. They opened up "coffee shops" where they could "rap" with non-Christians and win them to Christ. In no time, they were assigned labels, such as "Jesus Freaks," (initially a pejorative term) and "Jesus People".

Many Jesus People sought to get back to the simplicity of the early church. They had public baptisms on the main beaches of California and in the swimming pools of newly converted Christian movie stars. They spoke about a "Jesus Revolution". Most discovered and stuck to Biblical basics. They demanded social justice and tended to live on the edge of the Christian community. They were radical, they were different, but what they had worked. They were often excoriated by mainstream churches that did not have serious agendas of their own to reach the world for Christ. They emphasized salvation through personal faith in Jesus Christ. Large numbers of them experienced the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. Sometimes they went overboard, but at heart they were serious about aligning their lives with Jesus Christ.

Why talk about a movement that reached its height thirty years ago. Most of those who participated are middle aged or beyond. I have included the account for two reasons.

The first is that I was on the fringes of the Jesus Revolution in my own country. I was a teenage Christian and I saw the revolutionary power of Christian young people "turned on to Jesus", making discipleship the most important thing in their lives. The cite just one story, I still have vivid memories of marching with several thousand Christian young people through the streets of Munich after the slaughter of eleven Israeli athletes, and the deaths of five Black September terrorists and a German policeman that upset the so-called "Olympic Games of Peace". The Mayor of Munich asked churches and Christian youth organizations to reach out to the Games, and gave permission for a rally to be held in the centre of the city. The streets were blocked. Many thousands of Germans and tourists lined the side of the road and watched Christians marching by, singing of their love for Jesus, and promising the power of God to transform their lives. As a result, hearts that had been hard were softened. Christian coffee shops overflowed with people enquiring about Christianity. Hundreds of people made first-time decisions to become Christians. The buzz word was "discipleship". Young people with long hair and crazy clothes carried massive Bibles and Gospel tracts and sat in parks, railway stations and cafes discussing the Bible.

The second reason is that the notion of a Jesus Revolution keeps occurring, in America and in Europe. Christian youth groups call themselves "Jesus Revolutionaries", "Jesus Revolution Army" and similar titles. They do not appear as "outlandish" as their predecessors, but they are just as serious about discipleship and witnessing to non-Christians concerning the love of God. Jesus Christ still revolutionizes lives.

Representing God in the contemporary world

We are called to represent Jesus Christ in the marketplace. We don't have to follow precedent, but we do have to know how to function as His envoys. God help us to do so in a way that will draw others to Him in a rapidly changing culture. The Holy Spirit is ready to lead us through the process.