

**Following Jesus: a Re-reading of the Synoptic Gospels Concerning Discipleship
and its Costs and Rewards**

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Abstract

The disciples of Jesus of Nazareth were, according to the four Gospels of the New Testament, the main witnesses to probably the two most important events in history – the ministry and crucifixion/resurrection of Jesus Christ. But what did it mean, for those first followers, to be disciples to Jesus? What did Jesus expect of them? What did he explicitly say about the right way to follow him and what did he imply? How did these disciples put the teachings of Jesus into practice?

This dissertation will consist of three main sections – first, a general review of the biblical evidence for Jesus' views and requirements for discipleship, openly stated or implied. This will concentrate on the three synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, as they arguably constitute one evidence base. It will analyse selected themes of discipleship based on a close reading of the synoptic Gospels. It will examine Jesus' statements and actions, and also characteristics and behaviours displayed by the disciples and the agendas implied by the Gospel authors themselves.

Next, the costs and benefits of discipleship under Jesus are evaluated. The costs included an itinerant life with no fixed abode; begging for food and shelter; little family contact; and the prospect of facing derision and hostility from one's family and friends as well as from others who did not share the disciple's particular beliefs. Finally, there was the real possibility of arrest, torture and agonising death.

Meanwhile, the benefits of discipleship included living a life of service to God, aiding the poor and under-privileged, following a great teacher as Jesus was and feeling in personal righteousness with God, with favoured status in entering the kingdom of God. The dissertation will conclude that, for Jesus' early disciples, the costs and benefits of discipleship were many, complicated, but ultimately worthwhile.

‘If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it’ (Matt. 16:24-25)¹.

Introduction

According to Jesus of Nazareth, anyone can become one of his disciples (Luke 14:21, 23). This dissertation has two main aims. Firstly, to review selected materials within the synoptic Gospels – namely the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke – in relation to their practical and theological teachings on discipleship. This specifically involves what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus in his lifetime and what was required of and expected by Jesus and his followers during and shortly after his lifetime. Secondly, the dissertation will seek to ascertain the main features of discipleship according to the Gospel authors and their varied depictions of Jesus. Taking these two themes together, it will then examine the costs and rewards of this discipleship for those serving Jesus in the very early years of Christianity.

The disciples of Jesus of Nazareth (c.4 BCE - c.30 CE), according to the four Gospels of the New Testament and Christians ever since, were the main witnesses and bore testimony to arguably the two most important events in history – the ministry and crucifixion/resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through the lenses of the Gospels, here and there, we hear of twelve men, whom Christians know as the twelve apostles, often simply known as the Twelve. The names and backgrounds of these men may vary according to the Gospel in question; some barely feature at all other than as names in passing. The names – Simon/Peter/Cephas; his brother Andrew; James and John the sons of Zebedee and the others – ring through our imaginations, some vividly, others less so. But what did it mean, for those first followers, to be disciples to Jesus? What did Jesus expect of them? What did he explicitly say and what did he imply on what he expected from his disciples? Also, what do the Gospel authors themselves explicitly state or imply about this? What were the benefits and deficits of this unique way of life?

¹ Matt. 16:24-25

Structurally, this dissertation will consist of three main sections. First, there is a case-by-case review of Jesus' statements regarding the nature of discipleship according to him, openly stated or implied. This will mainly concentrate on the three synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, as, for textual historical reasons, they arguably constitute one evidence base. Mark is generally recognised by scholars as the earliest², providing the narrative and theological framework from which the other two Gospel authors drew, reinterpreted and at times extrapolated upon. The Gospel of John, with its different narrative and theological themes and emphases, will mainly be used as supporting evidence. Secondary sources will be employed to assist in the analysis and to provide perspectives. The dissertation will also provide a critical look at selected seemingly contradictory statements regarding discipleship both within and in-between the Gospels.

Next, using close reading of the synoptic Gospels (the main primary sources), as well as interrogating secondary sources – notably theological and biblical literary criticism books and articles old and new – the dissertation will analyse selected themes of the costs and benefits of discipleship. It will examine relevant sayings of Jesus himself where he refers to the costs of, or suffering in, the cause of discipleship. Similarly, it will then analyse such sayings and actions of Jesus that relate to the rewards, or benefits of discipleship for the disciples. Furthermore, the dissertation will attempt to formulate a provisional set of characteristics required to be a disciple of Jesus, as stated or implied by the synoptic Gospels alone.

The costs of discipleship included an itinerant life with no fixed abode; of begging for food and shelter; little family contact; and the prospect of facing derision and hostility from one's family and friends and others who did not share one's beliefs. Finally, with the example of their leader Jesus, the disciples also had to face the real possibility of arrest, torture and agonising death in the name of their God and their teacher.

Meanwhile, the benefits of discipleship included living a life in service to God and of serving the poor and under-privileged, which was the background from which most of the Twelve and other early disciples almost certainly originated. In a sense, the early

² Boring 2006 p.101

disciples were helping their own people. Further, the disciples enjoyed important benefits, which likely included following a great teacher such as Jesus, as well as a feeling of personal righteousness with God. There was an expectation of favoured status in the disciples' entering the kingdom of God, whether this was understood as an earthly or spiritual concept.

The dissertation will conclude that, for Jesus' original disciples, the costs and benefits of discipleship were many, complicated, but ultimately worthwhile. The key benefits especially focussed upon understandings about and entry into the kingdom of God and the forgiveness of sins.

Research Question and Methodology

The key research question for this dissertation is: According to the synoptic Gospels, what did it mean to be a disciple of Jesus himself, what did he actually require of his disciples and what were the costs and benefits for them?

The themes of research include service, sacrifice, family, violence/non-violence, failure/lack of understanding of Jesus and his mission, and eschatology. Methodologies include 'reading against the grain' (or against authorial intention, as much as that can be ascertained), in the knowledge of approaching the sources from perspectives that differ significantly from those of the texts' first audiences. Moreover, the texts have been analysed from the viewpoint of a researcher who is 'inside' Christianity, as a relatively open-minded Christian researcher. Therefore, the researcher (and the reader) should be cognizant of their own role(s), including the subjectivity and prejudices always inherent in research work³.

In terms of theological disciplines, the focus in this dissertation is on exegesis: a close, careful reading of the selected texts. This kind of exegesis is related to hermeneutics – a method to understand phenomena in their contexts via moving between aspects of a phenomenon and its environment⁴.

As with all New Testament materials, it can be difficult to distinguish between theological and historical elements. Thus, this dissertation is mainly based on a close reading of the synoptic Gospels taken at face value, with little consideration given to the historicity or any textual redaction carried out by the Gospel authors themselves or by later scribes. Moreover, it does not focus upon later theological developments derived from teachings and events depicted within the synoptic Gospels.

In the end, it is impossible to disentangle the historical Jesus' full intentions and vision, as well as his disciples' experience of discipleship under him, from the attitudes, agendas and prejudices of the writers and redactors of the synoptic Gospels. These Gospels were composed in later, different times, a generation or two after Jesus and

³ Walkerdine et al. 2002

⁴ Gadamer 1977 pp.3-17

his original followers, almost certainly by people who were from entirely different religious and cultural backgrounds to the Galilean peasants who made up the bedrock of Jesus' movement in his earthly lifetime. Thus, we have to take the three synoptic Gospels as we have them and interrogate them, perhaps 'as if through a glass darkly' as Paul the Apostle might say (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The Nature of Discipleship Under Jesus

Next, it is prudent to examine the form of discipleship that Jesus propagated and espoused. W.E. Vine defined the word discipleship from the Greek *mathétēs* (μαθητής) 'learner', derived from *manthanō*, [μανθάνω] 'to learn'. This comes from the root *math*, meaning thought combined with endeavour. This term is used in the Gospels when referring to the 'disciples' of Jesus. In contrast, there is *didaskalos*, (διδάσκαλος) 'a teacher', which means 'one who follows one's teaching'. 'Disciples' were also adherents, thus they were seen as imitators of their teacher (John 8:31, 15:8)⁵.

As Sri (2024) puts it – 'The goal (of discipleship) wasn't merely to master the rabbi's teachings but also to imitate the way he lived: the way he prayed, studied, taught, served the poor, and lived out his relationship with God day-to-day. Jesus himself said when a disciple is fully trained, he "becomes like his teacher"' (Luke 6:40). Sri continues – 'A rabbi's life was meant to be a living example of someone shaped by God's Word'⁶. Sri's analysis is perceptive and implies a possible 'training process' for disciples, where they first observe the master, then imitate and ultimately 'become like', if not replace them.

It is also useful to seek antecedents and precedents further back in time. Wilkins⁷ notes that the phenomenon of discipleship was common in the ancient Mediterranean world, with literature and art of the time bearing witness to the popularity of the idea of master and disciple(s). However, there were as many different types of disciple as there were types of master, from famed philosophers such as Socrates and Plato, to the various Jewish religious leaders and their followers, the latter perhaps exemplified by the Dead Sea Scrolls⁸ group at Qumran from around one-hundred years before Jesus' time.

Wilkins defines ancient discipleship as a relationship that involves a 'sustained commitment of the follower to the master and his particular teaching or mission'. This

⁵ Vine 1996 p.171

⁶ Sri 2024

⁷ Wilkins 2004 pp. 50-51

⁸ Israel Museum Jerusalem 2024

relationship would develop into an imitation of the conduct and moral behaviour of said master and of their specific mission and teachings. This form of discipleship was instituted and recorded long before Christ, including amongst the Greek Sophist philosophers, where the master would teach maxims and parables of virtue and moral knowledge⁹. However, there was a diversity of approaches, with the Greek masters Socrates and Plato opposing the above form of discipleship for epistemological reasons. Instead, they practised a form where dialogue, directed by the master, would be designed to awaken knowledge already existing within the disciples.

This diversity also existed within Judaism, with master-disciple contexts, missions and relationships ranging from the legal/technical (Pharisaic), to the prophetic/eschatological (John the Baptist), both as seen in the Gospels, the similar Dead Sea Scrolls Group, as well as to the Greek-style philosophical and even the revolutionary (Zealots). Wilkins continues that, while the Jesus movement bore an on-the-surface resemblance to previous Jewish and Greco-Roman forms of discipleship, it was singular in one special area. In the eyes of his followers, Jesus was increasingly considered not as another human being with some special wisdom, but to be the Jewish Messiah, the Anointed One according to prophecy in scripture and thus was a unique master, who superseded all others. Consequently, the discipleship under him would also be unique.

But what do the Gospels themselves mean by discipleship? Perhaps the best definition is to understand it as the meaning and nature of following Jesus and his teachings. Hull¹⁰ provides some excellent 'bullet points' for defining discipleship under Jesus. First, one should submit to the leader (in the case of the Twelve, Jesus himself); learn and understand the words and teachings of Jesus; learn Jesus' way of doing ministry; imitate Jesus' character and life, and find and teach new disciples of one's own. Best¹¹ noted that the whole central section of Mark (8:22-10:52), revolves around discipleship and Christology, including the way that Jesus' earthly ministry comes to an end.

⁹ Marrou 1956, pp.49-50

¹⁰ Hull 2004 pp.15-22

¹¹ Best 1986

Moreover, Green¹² states that the disciples of Jesus were people 'who heard his invitation to begin a new kind of life, accepted his call to the new life, and became obedient to it'. The central place of Jesus in this spiritual hierarchy stemmed from the fact that his disciples received new life only through him (John 10:7-10). They followed him (Mark 1:16–20) and were expected to hear and obey his teachings (Matt. 5:1–2 ff.). Eventually, they were expected to go out into the world, dispensing forgiveness of sins to all those who would follow Jesus (Matt.28:19-20, Luke 24:47).

In the following, the synoptic Gospels and their salient themes will be discussed in the order of Mark, Matthew and Luke.

¹² Green 1996 p.821

Discipleship in Mark

i) Unique Servants, Calling, Ignorance, Fear, Sacrifice

It is important to note that each Gospel author has their own theological viewpoint, which feeds into their perspective of discipleship under Jesus. These viewpoints are informed by and reflect the concerns and preoccupations of that particular author's audience/community and teach those hearing/reading that Gospel how best to follow Jesus from that author's perspective. For Wilkins, themes of discipleship in Mark include that of the disciples being 'Servants of the Unique Redemptive Servant'¹³. Mark illuminates Jesus as the Unique Master and thus his followers as Unique Disciples, with Jesus's identity as Messiah and Son of God always being a core theme. It is a call to discipleship where one may lose one's life in order to save it (Mark 8:34-38). Jesus' first act as a master in Mark is to proclaim the nearness of the kingdom of God and to call his first disciples (1:14-20), Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John. The disciples immediately obey and follow Jesus to pursue the goal of the kingdom of God, in recognisance of their master's messianic authority. Wilkins states that historically, disciples would request to study with a potential master. With Jesus, the call is from the Lord himself, who thus makes the first move to call a disciple to follow him. Allegiance to his, and only his authority is the singular route into the life of studying and then teaching the kingdom of God. According to John 1:35-42, this was not the first encounter between these men and Jesus, with Andrew in fact being a former disciple of John the Baptist who moved on to join Jesus. There is however also the motif running through Mark that none of Jesus' disciples really understood his message, at least not until the unfolding of the Passion. Indeed, Mark has the disciples not idealise their master. The relationship appears to be more one of respect, with a tinge of fear at Jesus's supernatural powers.

The author of Mark (and Mark's Jesus) both indeed seem keen to highlight the disciples' failure to understand and follow Jesus' teachings, including his criticism of them for this, with Peter in particular being singled out for reproach. The disciples appear confused and perhaps afraid of their master, with the message of the cross causing them to fear and run away (Mark 14:50). While understandable in human

¹³ Wilkins 2004 p.52

terms, this is an interesting approach to take if one is writing a text intended to evangelise people to follow this particular master. However, as Wilkins observes, for Mark, the realisation and acknowledgement of Jesus' identity and mission as Messiah and Lord is at the core of his message. This form of Messianic discipleship and the possibility of one's physical (if not spiritual) death in the name of their master signpost the disciple's road to salvation. At this realisation, the enormity of their commitment to Jesus began to dawn upon the disciples. This necessitated wholesale changes of lifestyle, involving leaving one's family and adopting an itinerant, mendicant way of life, studying with and observing Jesus daily and subsequently teaching the kingdom of God to those who have the 'ears to hear' (Matt. 11:15). 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people' (1:17).

ii) A Lifelong Commitment to Serve

The first four disciples plus the other eight become the first apostles (3:13-19) and come to form Jesus' inner circle, the so-called Twelve. These are full-time followers who can be sent on special missions under Jesus' authority (6:7-13). Unlike some other forms of discipleship, which might simply have involved following a religious or academic programme for a period of time, being a disciple of Jesus was a lifelong and life-changing (and sometimes life-ending) commitment. In Mark, Jesus forms a core group of twelve disciples from a larger pool of followers (Mark 3:13-14). The motivations for why he chose those particular twelve individuals are never made explicit. Keener¹⁴ points out that ancient Israel was made up of twelve tribes, and that when a Jewish religious group chose twelve leaders (as was the case with both the Jesus movement and the earlier Dead Sea Scrolls group), this was done in the belief that these leaders would initiate the renewal/reunification of all of Israel. Boring parallels this view, opining that 'the number twelve is not arbitrary, but resonant with Biblical associations of the twelve-tribe covenant people'¹⁵. Luke's Gospel states that Jesus '... called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles'. The word 'apostle' means 'person sent' in the original Greek¹⁶ and thus was presumably not a word used by Jesus and his Aramaic-speaking disciples during his ministry. For Wilkins, the term Apostle is in fact a special designation reserved for

¹⁴ Keener 2014 p.136

¹⁵ Boring 2006 pp.100-101

¹⁶ Britannica 2024

the Twelve, who are both apostles and disciples whereby, he sees the 'rank' of apostle as pointing towards future leadership in the era following the crucifixion. Nevertheless, this leadership did not raise their status, as for Jesus, leadership was a call to servanthood (10:45). This idea is reflected in the Acts, where 'disciples' (Acts 6:2), are also called 'believers' (Acts 4:32). Meanwhile, the Twelve are consistently referred to as 'apostles'. For Wilkins, the method of the discipleship which Jesus uses is 'unexpected and shocking, because he breaks down barriers between social classes ... and he abolishes slavish adherence to religious cultural traditions'¹⁷ (also see Mark 7:1-13).

A defining feature of the ministry and message of Jesus in Mark is the assurance that 'sinners' will receive 'salvation'. According to Wilkins¹⁸, a sinner was someone whose actions/beliefs went against the will of God. While the Pharisees believed themselves to be in full righteousness with God, as they closely observed the Law, as shown in Mark 2:17, they were unable to see their true sinfulness in the eyes of the Lord. Meanwhile, Jesus' followers were also not without sin. They had been called to salvation by Jesus, and in believing in him, their souls could be saved when the time came for the kingdom of God. It is for such people that Jesus came.

Indeed, Mark 10:45 says – 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'. This could be said to be Jesus' mission statement.

iii) Domestic Asceticism

Vaage¹⁹ maintains, in his article 'An Other Home: Discipleship in Mark as Domestic Asceticism' that the Gospel of Mark is specifically about discipleship. Specifically, for Vaage, it is about the meaning of following Jesus, how this can best be accomplished properly, and to what end. Vaage posits that the Markan view of discipleship is one of 'domestic asceticism', where following Jesus is strenuous and requires intentional effort, including a renunciation of family ties and home comforts. This is supported by Jesus' statement in Mark 10:29-30 – '... there is no one who has left house or brothers

¹⁷ Wilkins 2004 p.55

¹⁸ Wilkins 2004 p.55

¹⁹ Vaage 2009 pp.741-742

or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life’. Vaage²⁰ claims that every one of the Twelve in Mark ultimately fail as disciples and that, in contrast, various ancillary figures in the narrative who find favour with Jesus are presented as successful, even exemplary disciples.

Vaage²¹ goes on to discuss three specific aspects of discipleship in Mark. First, there is the requirement to sever family ties, at least family in the conventional sense. In spite some of his teachings to the contrary (10:19 – to honour one’s father and mother), the anti-(conventional)-family position of Jesus and his disciples still somehow seems to allow them to return home or continue their previously held households. This opens the way for discourse on the kingdom of God, in particular the sayings regarding finding, receiving and entering the kingdom. According to Vaage, all these appear in the middle part of this Gospel, during the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (10:17-31), where Jesus openly gives teaching on the practices of discipleship. Vaage then outlines his view on why these sayings, taken in total, can best be understood under the banner of ‘domestic asceticism’. He concludes that, for the Jesus of Mark, exemplary disciples are figures who exist on the margins of society. Thus the initial step into the kingdom of God involves stepping out of ‘normal’ society, including conventional family life, and adopting a new lifestyle on society’s margins, giving away all personal belongings and relying on donations of food, as well as on benefactors such as Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna (as in Luke 8:1-3).

However, paradoxically, Vaage continues that Mark then points to the idea of returning ‘home’ again. This is because the young man dressed in white at the empty tomb tells Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, who have come to anoint Jesus’ body (Mark 16:7) to – ‘... go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him ...’. So, the Jesus of Mark must return ‘home’ following his resurrection. Only there, back on the fringes of society, back in Galilee it seems, can the ultimate message be revealed. For Vaage²², this confirms Mark’s

²⁰ Vaage 2009 pp.741-742

²¹ Vaage 2009 pp.741-742

²² Vaage 2009 pp.760-761

message of 'domestic asceticism' being the way of the exemplary disciple in many senses.

iv) The Messianic Secret

As observed by William Wrede in his book *The Messianic Secret*, the Jesus of Mark repeatedly commands his disciples to tell no one that he is the Messiah (3:12, 8:30, 9:9). This phenomenon is also present in Matthew (Matt. 9:30, 16:20). Yet, evil supernatural beings such as demons immediately recognise and declare him as the Messiah/Son of God upon seeing him (Matt. 8:23-30)²³. Furthermore, the blind man of Jericho independently identifies Jesus as the Son of David (10:47). For Wrede, this 'secret' is more of a theological matter than an historical one²⁴.

The 'Messianic Secret' may be further evidenced in Mark 4:11-12, where Jesus tells his disciples in private, 'The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables, so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!' While much of the second sentence may be enigmatic, the first sentence's message regarding the disciples having received the kingdom of God and 'those on the outside' merely hearing everything in parables is interesting. This theme continues in 4:33-34 – 'With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything'. The nature of this 'everything', with so little data, must be speculative. That said, perhaps Jesus delivered non-parabolic teaching regarding the relationship between his personal identification as the Messiah and the kingdom of God.

Jesus' reluctance to reveal himself as the Messiah is perhaps explained by his prophetic knowledge that he must be killed and resurrected, an idea possibly supported by Luke 9:18-22. Here he asks the disciples who the crowds say he is, after which he warns them – 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised'.

²³ Wrede 1971 p.15

²⁴ Dunn 1970 p.92

Furthermore, Matthew 26:63-64 has the high priest in Jesus' trial asking him if he is the Messiah, and Jesus tacitly acknowledging this. This evidence and other examples in the Gospels would suggest that Jesus wished to conceal his true nature until he was ready to reveal himself, namely during his trial.

The impact of this choice upon his disciples must have been significant. If Jesus had indeed sworn his disciples to secrecy regarding his Messianic identity, then this would present some interesting issues for his closest followers. It may shed light upon the psychology of Peter's subsequent denials of Jesus in Luke 22:54-57, Mark 14:69-70 and Matthew 26:73-75/Luke 22:59-62. Perhaps he felt that he was following Jesus' instructions. Also, assuming they believed their master, the disciples would probably feel a sense of fear; fear of this powerful being Jesus, fear of what they were getting into. Next, they might have feelings of excitement that they had been chosen to be a follower of this great man. Finally, they might have a sense of great responsibility and perhaps trepidation at where it all might lead. All these factors would require a degree of mental skill in managing the collection of conflicting thoughts and feelings of such a lifestyle. Whether Jesus intended for his disciples to learn from these experiences and perhaps grow in their roles in preparation for their ministries after his time is open to speculation.

v) The Call to Discipleship

The author of Mark (3:13-15) outlines three objectives/requirements for which the disciples were called/appointed. These are – (a) 'to be with him' (Jesus), (b) 'to be sent out to preach' and (c) 'to have authority to drive out demons'²⁵. Coleman²⁶ writes that Jesus' objective was to 'enlist men who could bear witness to his life and carry on his work after he returned to the father'. These men would receive special responsibilities and privileges for their work in realising the kingdom of God. Jesus in the synoptic Gospels is seen to devote most of his earthly ministry to this handful of disciples, staking his entire ministry upon them. Thus, 'being with them' was Jesus' practice of teaching and training this small group of disciples by having them follow and observe him. In summary, the disciples would learn from him (Mark 4:10-12, 33-

²⁵ Adomako-Mensah 2019 p.58

²⁶ Coleman 2010 p.81

34), observe/witness his actions (4:35-5:43), assist him (4:36; 6:41-43; 8:6-9; 11:2-7; 14:12-16), preach/heal/exorcise demons in his name (3:14-15; 6:7-13) and learn from his teachings. In the fullness of time, they would work as his apostles/witnesses (Acts 10:39-1) and pass down the traditions concerning him (Luke 1:2). As they moved around with him, Jesus would speak the Word (the speech/intentions of God) and communicate many of his teachings in parables.

As previously noted, according to Mark 4:33-34, Jesus only communicated his ideas to the general public using parables, but when alone with the disciples, he 'explained everything'. This may refer to him using the Word, which the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the Apostles, received from God (Deut. 18:14-22, John 16:13), of which the greatest revelation is Jesus Christ, who is also known as the 'Word' of God (John 1:1, 14). For Adomako-Mensah²⁷, this implies that his disciples were privileged to be taught the Word clearly by Jesus in private, without resorting to parable or allegory. Meanwhile, I. Howard Marshall claims that 'Mark sees Jesus as giving such instructions to people as they could comprehend (4:33)'. For Marshall²⁸, the nature of discipleship is 'to possess the mystery of the kingdom, meaning to understand what is going on and to partake of it. It is to recognize Jesus as who he really is and to see that the kingdom really is present in him'. Perhaps this was the 'everything' that Jesus explained in private to the disciples.

Ultimately, this fellowship and commitment would grant Jesus' disciples knowledge of 'the secrets of the kingdom of God' (Luke 8:10). Perhaps, as Adomako-Mensah²⁹ states, 'being with him' transformed the characters of the disciples, making them more like their Master in word and deed. So, as the Sanhedrin (the central assembly of Jewish elders in Jerusalem) (Acts 4:13) found – 'when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus'. To come full circle, it is possible that these were the disciples to whom Jesus taught 'everything'.

²⁷ Adomako-Mensah 2019 p.60

²⁸ Marshall 2004 p.81

²⁹ Adomako-Mensah 2019 p.61

For Adomako-Mensah³⁰, the purpose of being a disciple of Jesus was to live a Christ-like life and to replicate 'Christ-likeness' in others. The original disciples then, observed Jesus' earthly ministry as it happened and, in putting his teachings into practice, became Jesus/God's agents on Earth. They would then work to bring the latest word from God (the gospel of Jesus) to the masses, live in line with its rules and preach the word to new audiences until it was time for Jesus to return and for the kingdom of God to arrive. And indeed, from the time the Twelve were appointed in Mark 3:14-15, they did just what Jesus required of them. They were with him as his followers and his primary audience. Boring³¹ postulates that, 'Just as God sends Jesus, so Jesus sends his missionaries (Mark 9:37, 6:7). Boring suggests that Jesus' ultimate purpose in selecting them is not the spiritual self-indulgence of "being with Jesus" but "that he might send them out"', for them to embark upon widening his mission.

Meanwhile, Coleman³² states that (as shown in Mark 6:6 and Matthew 9:35), Jesus realised that his disciples had learned enough and were ready to give him more direct assistance with his mission. Thus, they now needed to go out into the wider world and to practice the things that they had seen him do, as described in Mark 6:7 (and in different words in Matthew 10:5 and Luke 9:1-6) – 'He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits'. Adomako-Mensah³³ adds that this 'sending out' may have been a move on Jesus' part to allow the disciples to 'experiment' with mission work to test what they had so far learned from their master. Also, the text has an awareness of the need for teamwork, with Jesus repeatedly stating he would not be with them at some future point.

As already mentioned, a further aspect of the mission given by Jesus to the Twelve in Mark was 'to have authority to cast out demons' (Mark 3:15). As 6:13 states, 'They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them'. For Adomako-Mensah, the Twelve's Jesus-given authority to cast out demons served

³⁰ Adomako-Mensah 2019 p.61

³¹ Boring 2006 p.101

³² Coleman 2010 p.81

³³ Adomako-Mensah 2019 p.62

a Christological purpose, as it shows the 'greatness'³⁴ of Jesus, the holder of such authority, who is able to delegate such powers to his disciples. Ultimately, it could be said that Jesus was preparing them to be his successors or 'representatives on Earth' following the end of his earthly life.

vi) Self-denial and Sacrifice

A further theme of discipleship according to Mark is self-denial. Adomako-Mensah³⁵ notes that the disciples were at times jockeying for position within the group and arguing as to which of them was the greater (as in Mark 9:33-37). Jesus' responses to such questions, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all' (9:35), '... whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many' (10:42-45). His disciples clearly had much to learn in even these important areas of living in Jesus.

To elucidate further on the theme of self-denial and Jesus' own views on this, Jesus confirms in Mark 8:34, 'If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'. France³⁶ wrote that, for Jesus, self-denial was 'A basic condition of discipleship. It is to join Jesus on the way to execution. [Taking up one's cross] implies the refusal to be guided by one's own interest, to surrender control of one's own destiny'. In effect, observing Jesus' own example can lead to total submission to the wishes of God and a path to one's own death, in the cause of the Lord. As Jesus prayed, '...Yet not what I will, but what you will' (14:36).

Strauss³⁷ concurs, averring that to follow Christ means to renounce oneself and to journey with him 'even to death'. One must renounce one's claim to any personal desires, aspirations and needs, and to deny autonomy/self-sufficiency and to 'submit to Christ as his slave'. For Strauss, to 'take up your cross' means not to submit to a life of hardship, but to metaphorically or actually face the pain and shame of execution by crucifixion. One must renounce all earthly things for Christ, in complete fulfilment

³⁴ Adomako-Mensah 2019 p.62

³⁵ Adomako-Mensah 2019 p.63

³⁶ France 2002 p.339

³⁷ Strauss 2014 p.372

of the meaning of the aforementioned Mark 14:36. Such ideas, when put into practice, were and are surely among the hardest for mere human followers to accept and adhere to.

DeSilva³⁸ elucidates that the Jesus of Mark draws a clear contrast between the way the world evaluates greatness (which could inform the disciples' understanding of Jesus and their place with him, as alluded to above), and God's way of reckoning greatness. In our world, greatness equals superiority, political/military power, societal status, fame and being served and honoured by others. In the eyes of God (or perhaps, more specifically, in the kingdom of God), greatness is self-sacrifice and serving others, which Jesus gives as the reason for his coming (Mark 10:42-45).

A central feature of Jesus' mission in Mark appears to be service, and Jesus particularly highlights the idea that greatness can be found in a form of service which is based on obedience and humility (10:43-44, Matt. 23:12). John 14 echoes this, as Jesus admonishes his disciples and tells them to serve one another in his washing of their feet. Looking beyond the gospels, Paul (Philippians 2:5-11) discusses the importance of Jesus' greatness as a servant and 1 Peter asks its readers to serve and love each other in witness to Christ's example (1 Peter 4:7-11). Thus, entry into the kingdom of God can be seen as commencement of one's service for God.

Themes of self-denial and submission lead to the idea of sacrifice. In Mark 10:21-22, Jesus advises a rich man as to how he could obtain eternal life – 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'. It appears that the rich man did not like what he heard, as he was 'shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions'. Jesus himself clearly states that no one can become his disciple unless they give up all their possessions (Luke 14:33).

Keener³⁹ notes that charity was an important thing in Judaism, and Jewish teachers of the time did expect a prospective disciple to give away all of their possessions. Beyond

³⁸ DeSilva 2004 p.469

³⁹ Keener 2014 p.154

the Jewish world, some radical teachers in Greece demanded that rich acolytes did this to test whether their commitment to the values of the teaching was actually greater than their love for their wealth. Jewish Essenes (a group linked to the Dead Sea Scrolls community) gave away property when they entered the movement and certain Old Testament prophets also made great sacrifices in their service to God (such as 1 Kings 19:19-21). Strauss⁴⁰, when considering the rich man of the Mark narrative (Mark 10:17-31), believed that the man's wealth, his greatest love, prevented him from fulfilling the greatest commandment, specifically to – love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (Deut. 6:5). This is why he leaves in a sad state, without salvation, as he remains ensnared in love of earthly things. This echoes the other synoptic Gospels – 'You cannot serve God and wealth' (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13) and '... the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it' (Matt. 13:45-46). For Adomako-Mensah⁴¹, the exchange between Jesus and the rich man is a central illustration of the author of Mark's message of the 'vital necessity' to sacrifice material possessions for Christ. Adomako-Mensah also notes that the apostle's life of sacrifice has, at its end, the promise of everlasting rewards (Mark 10:28-31).

vii) Rebuke and Failure

That said, the author of Mark makes it clear that the apostles' accomplishments as disciples of Jesus are, at times at least, marked by failure in Jesus' eyes. For example, in Mark 8:31-33, where Peter is rebuked by Jesus thus – 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'. France⁴² states that, in human understanding, Jesus' stated divine purpose (v.31) does not make sense and if even Peter – one of, if not the – lead disciple, cannot overcome his 'human' perspective of Christ's purpose, then what hope is there for the rest of humanity? For France, the heart of the matter is that the human viewpoint cannot hope to understand the divine plan.

With this in mind, it is perhaps useful further to consider discipleship under Jesus through the most prominent and yet 'human' disciple in the synoptic Gospels, Peter.

⁴⁰ Strauss 2014 pp.441-442

⁴¹ Adomako-Mensah 2019 p.64

⁴² France 2002 p.339

Portrayed in Mark as the disciple who questioned Jesus but nearly always gets it wrong, Peter, above all, is a type of audience identification figure, who operates almost in a Platonic 'dialogue'⁴³ with Jesus on matters of discipleship. Peter is an 'ordinary' person; not divine, not a caricature Pharisee or a 'customer' of Jesus seeking healing. We see Peter berated by Jesus in Mark and elsewhere for his lack of faith and understanding (famously in Mark 4:13). However, either by design or accident, Peter is the only disciple in the synoptic Gospels who is afforded significant dialogue and debate with Jesus, who is nonetheless often quite critical of him. It can be said that Peter is both a positive and negative role model for a Jesus disciple in that he is highly committed and yet personally flawed. His development as a disciple was painful for him, with his thrice-denial of his master following Jesus' arrest showing him in a very human light.

Elsewhere in Mark, the disciples in general are presented as flawed human beings. Aside from Peter's denial of Christ (4:66-72), there is the matter of the disciples abandoning Jesus when he is arrested (14:50) and put on trial. Jesus predicts this earlier in the Gospel – 'And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away, for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered"' (14:27), which can be seen as a fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy (Zech. 13:7).

In line with this argument, Danove⁴⁴ argues that the author of Mark is encouraging the audience to both identify with and distance themselves from Jesus' disciples. The audience sees the disciples' potential for 'salvation' and acceptance into the kingdom of God, whilst also noting their continued failure to understand Jesus' teachings and mission. As such, the example of Peter's particular discipleship experience provides an appropriate 'case study' to explore themes of early Christian discipleship and through its example, highlights an element of compassion for those taking up Jesus' cross.

⁴³ Puchner 2010

⁴⁴ Danove 2005

Summary

The major themes of discipleship in Mark therefore are – calling, commitment to serve, domestic asceticism, understandings of Jesus’ identity (the Messianic Secret), self-denial, personal sacrifice and rebuke and failure. When examined together, it becomes clear that the author of Mark is describing life as a disciple of Jesus almost as a spiritual ‘boot camp’. It is a tough lifestyle, where one gives a lifelong commitment to serve the Lord and live a frugal, ascetic life of self-denial, as well as facing social ostracisation, hostility and possible violent death, in the service of an uncompromising, enigmatic master. Finally, through the portrayal of Peter, there is the strong suggestion that the Gospel of Mark can be seen in effect, as some form of training manual for the disciple community.

Discipleship in Matthew

i) The Law and Beyond

Moving on from Mark to the Gospel of Matthew, it is important first to address a central element of Jesus' teachings especially found in Matthew, that of whether and to what degree a follower should follow the Jewish Law as laid out in the Torah. The Jesus of Matthew is unequivocal in this, as witnessed in Matthew 5:17-20 – 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished'. He continues, 'For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'. This perspective is further supported by the succeeding litany of Mosaic teachings known as the Antithesis (5:21–47). The Jesus of Matthew is a Law-abiding Jew through and through and clearly believes that his followers must be the same.

Meanwhile, Wilkins⁴⁵ states that the author of Matthew has 'emphasized the goal of the believers' life of faith through the discipleship stories ... Matthew's Gospel is at least in part a manual on discipleship'. Wilkins continues that many sayings from Jesus' mouth to the disciples are essentially teachings on discipleship. At the Gospel's conclusion, there is a thematic culmination, with the disciples being called and commissioned to execute the mission of creating further disciples. For Wilkins, this mission is one of the author of Matthew's central purposes in their construction of the Gospel. He continues⁴⁶ that Matthew's depiction of the disciples both preserves traditions concerning the Twelve, whilst also exemplifying features of discipleship for the author's church community and ultimately for the entire later church. The disciples in Matthew are a disparate collection of individuals, who arguably present role models seen to overcome their failings through living Jesus' teachings. Thus, the disciples are a paragon of instruction, warning and encouragement for succeeding generations of Christians.

⁴⁵ Wilkins 2014 p.221

⁴⁶ Wilkins 2014 pp.222-224

Furthermore, Jeremias (1963)⁴⁷ considers no fewer than four possible interpretations of discipleship according to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). First, there is the idea that Jesus is preaching a form of 'ethical perfectionism', an idea of obedience that implies personal action over grace, meaning action which offers clemency to breakers of a given law. The second suggests that Jesus is proposing a knowingly impossible standard in an effort to make his audience beg for mercy. Meanwhile, the third posits Jesus laying out an 'interim ethic', relevant only until the prophesied impending arrival of the kingdom of God, via either Jesus' crucifixion/resurrection or some other eschatological event. Finally, the fourth idea presupposes the receipt of God's grace upon acceptance of the gospel, thus delineating a 'lived faith'. For the current author/reader, the third and fourth interpretations certainly have a ring of authenticity to them when reading Matthew and the other two synoptic Gospels.

ii) Discipleship and Family

Barton⁴⁸ approaches Matthew's perspective on discipleship from a different angle, that of household and kinship. Barton holds that these are 'strongly relativized' by the requirements of being a disciple of Jesus. While marriage itself is not criticised – consider for instance Jesus' strict teaching forbidding divorce (Matt. 19:3-9) – Barton stresses that, for the author of Matthew, assisting the coming of the kingdom of heaven was the ultimate duty and priority of every disciple of Jesus, above all else. Nevertheless, the theme of family and household ties is so fundamental in Matthew that it occurs repeatedly through the Gospel's narratives and sayings, particularly in relation to the call to and costs of discipleship. While arguably no other theme has a similar resonance to discipleship in Matthew, Barton is still at pains to point out that this Gospel is not against the family as a concept. Indeed, the genealogies and narratives surrounding Jesus' ancestry and birth early on in the Gospel, not to mention Matthew's apparent esteem for Mary and Joseph, Jesus' divorce prohibition (Matt. 5:31-2; 19:3-9) and support for the fifth commandment (15:1-9; 19:19) all demonstrate this. This is especially reflected in the central Matthean themes of Jesus' relationship

⁴⁷ Jeremias 1963 in Cooper 2013 p.94

⁴⁸ Barton 1994 p.217

to God as Son to Father as well as in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples as part of the 'family' following the will of the Lord.

For Barton⁴⁹, Matthew's Gospel is 'suprafamilial', meaning that God's position as father over the spiritual family, which has Jesus as 'Lord' and 'householder' and bringer of the kingdom of God is of the utmost importance. Perhaps in agreement with Vaage's conception of discipleship in Mark as 'domestic asceticism'⁵⁰, Barton states that all earthly matters and connections are secondary to the eschatological destiny. In Barton's view, Matthew is also in agreement with Mark regarding the negative consequences of discipleship for conventional family ties. The two Gospels also share similar theological and Christological/eschatological perspectives on social values and obligations, in that, to be a disciple of Jesus, one must participate in a mission to announce the coming of the kingdom of God/heaven and the impending arrival of the Son of Man. For the disciples, once they joined Jesus, their birth family's importance was greatly diminished.

In addition, the disciples frequently received hostility and intolerance from their own families and hometowns, as indeed Jesus himself famously utters in Mark 6:4, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown and among their own kin and in their own house'. Barton illustrates how both Matthew and Mark use the disciples as an example of the kind of persecution for their beliefs that those in their own communities might expect, including from their own families. Jesus underlines this very clearly in Matthew 10:34-36, with this controversial statement – 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be members of one's own household.' These words can be interpreted as a warning to prospective disciples as to the costs to their own selves and families of their following him. Familial division, discord and fear may lead to estrangement from one's birth family – with the promise though, of gaining a new, spiritual one.

⁴⁹ Barton 1994 p.218

⁵⁰ Vaage 2009 pp.741-742

As Barton says, this provides 'a theodicy for suffering as a result of kinship-sponsored persecution'⁵¹. He continues that a reason why Matthew accords with Mark's relativisation of family connections was because, like the Markan Christian community, the Matthean community experienced or perhaps nurtured a social outlook based on an itinerant missionary/mendicant lifestyle, in deliberate echo of the teachings and lifestyles of Jesus and the earliest disciples. In all probability, the Matthean community was ostracised from society and perhaps persecuted. At least Jesus' teachings prepared them for this fate.

There are subtle differences however, between the outlooks of the two Gospels. For example, Matthew's approach appears more explicitly communal in terms of doctrine concerning family ties. The concept of Jesus' 'true' family being his followers (Matt. 12:46-50) is built on the concept of his followers being 'related' to him and each other in a 'brotherly relationship'. There is also Matthew's greater emphasis on missionary work within an eschatological context (Matt. 9:35-11:1, 28:18-20) and on the costs of these activities in terms of family ties, as well as on the spiritual rewards waiting for those prepared to pay these costs.

Foster⁵² further elucidates that the missionary activity undertaken by the disciples in Matthew 24:14 and 28:19-20, the narrative of which appears to be aimed at gentile audiences, is also indicative of the disciples perceiving the end of the age. Jesus' eschatology predicts that the coming events will be unlike anything that has occurred before – indeed 'such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be' (Matt. 24:21) – something which even the 'elect' will not survive. This is why the period of time before the eschaton has been shortened (Matt. 24:22).

iii) Discipleship Roles

Vine⁵³ finds five discipleship roles within the Gospel of Matthew, which the evangelist employs to define the nature of being a follower of Jesus. Vine quotes Matthew 10:41-42 – 'Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person

⁵¹ Barton 1994 p.218

⁵² Foster 2020 p.12

⁵³ Vine 2022 p.1

will receive the reward of the righteous ...'. Vine also quotes Matthew 23:34 – 'For this reason I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town'. Vine defines these five roles as prophet, righteous person, disciple, wise man and scribe. For example, he states that, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, Jesus makes reference to true and false prophets (5:12, 7:15), righteous people (7:24-27) and scribes (5:20). Vine also alludes to references to prophets, the righteous and scribes variously in Matthew 13 (v.17, 52), as well as to wise men and to being a disciple (13:11, 52). Matthew 24 and 25 also mention true and false prophets (24:11, 15, 24), righteous and unrighteous people (25:37, 46) and the foolish and the wise (25:1-13). Vine points to these references as a conscious effort on the part of the author of Matthew to include allusions to these five roles throughout his Gospel. He elucidates on the Gospel's cautioning against 'lawlessness' (24:12), a condition aggravated by the existence of similarly lawless scribes.

Vine further argues that the five roles are the tools that Jesus as Messiah/king would use to exercise his sovereignty over 'the nations' (a term generally used in the Gospels to refer to gentile nation states and peoples). For Vine, these five roles are a Matthean critique of late first century CE rulers, in imitation of similar critiques given by the Old Testament prophets of priests, elders, wise men and scribes (Isa. 28:7, Jer. 18:18, Ezek. 7:26). They also act as a template for the mission to the nations discussed in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20).

Vine refers to earlier works such as *The Gospels for All Christians* (1998) by Richard Bauckham and his own *The Audience of Matthew* (2014), arguing that the author of Matthew consistently and perhaps deliberately applies to Jesus' disciples the identities of prophet, righteous person, wise man and scribe. According to these ideas, the evangelist intended to illuminate a vision of nations changed and reborn via the acceptance of the gospel and the sovereignty of the resurrected king Jesus. Vine states that, through a sophisticated theology of discipleship, the Gospel is preparing its contemporary audience for a role in a large, evangelical, eschatological movement.

He⁵⁴ regards all five roles as mutually complimentary and, where relevant, open to combination.

This is discipleship as a communal mission. Vine argues that Matthew shows a wide range of possible mission scenarios, from village, town, city, even nation, with the mission content being adapted and tailored to the various societal hierarchies. Matthew shows disciples entering a community, remaining there if accepted, and moving on if rejected. It presents psychological approaches to mission that are tailored for a specific community, from the distant, spiritual mindset of the prophet, to the more nurturing approach of the educator and the calm experience of the wise person. It shows mission carried out by the literate and illiterate, those with and without formal education and mission without financial input. In this way, the author of Matthew presents a sort of 'training manual', with a series of case studies for disciples for mission in a huge variety of possible societal and cultural contexts. Such examples open the way, on a broader scale, for revolutionary change, taking in all echelons of society, not just the poor and underprivileged. Thus, Matthew is interpreted at least in part as an ambitious programme for change through all strata of society.

Summary

The main themes of discipleship in Matthew include close fidelity to the Jewish Law, how to live in righteousness to God, and family division and discord resulting from following Jesus, as well as a commitment to some form of social reform via evangelical mission. The inner relation between these themes reveals continuity with the Jesus movement's Jewish roots, involving unswerving commitment to the Law and yet the propagation of ideas of ambitious social change via itinerant, mendicant mission interventions. Secondly, the focus on family, both actual and spiritual, is prominent. To be a disciple, it was necessary, if not to renounce, then certainly to relativize one's birth family ties before entering a new, spiritual family. Thus, the relativisation or realignment of family connections in Matthew is a logical consequence of a new interpretation of the Torah based on the Messianic narrative of Jesus being Son of God, sent to preach repentance of sins as the End Times approach. Furthermore, Matthew's picture is of a Messiah come to save his people, a man to be followed and

⁵⁴ Vine 2022 p.164

respected. This was also a description of being a disciple taking precedence over all other allegiances, even those to one's own family. As in Mark, the impression of the Gospel as being, at least in part, a disciple training manual, is also frequently felt.

Discipleship in Luke

i) 'Being With' and Serving Jesus

The author of the Gospel of Luke makes it clear that serving the Lord and his mission is the main requirement for Jesus' disciples (Luke 22:27), now and in the future when he returns (12:37). To this end, Du Plessis⁵⁵ writes that Luke especially concentrates upon the costs of discipleship. In his article, 'Discipleship according to Luke's Gospel', he begins by invoking Joseph Fitzmyer's view that the author of Luke changes the emphasis of the established synoptic Gospel narrative and Jesus' mission from eschatological matters (a preoccupation of both Mark and Matthew) to matters of today (*semeron*). This shifts the narrative and theological focus of the narrative away from the idea of the imminent coming of the kingdom of God and has the effect of allowing the author to present instead their view of Christian discipleship⁵⁶. For Du Plessis, where Mark presents the disciples as servants and objects of criticism, the author of Luke sets out to depict the disciples as exemplars of a new model of discipleship, unfolding a divine plan. He considers that Luke's Gospel is more concerned with pastoral matters, with disciples not so much being 'followers' of Jesus but 'being with' him, an idea adapted from Mark. The author of Luke uses the miracle of the fishes (5:1-11) as a metaphor for Jesus' calling his disciples. Here, Peter's initial reaction to seeing Jesus' power to perform miracles is to admit his own unworthiness. However, he is still prepared to follow Jesus' lead, calling him 'Master' (5:5). Du Plessis finds this noteworthy, as the third evangelist presents this not as a call to discipleship, but instead a sign of prophecy and promise, as in 5:10 – 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people'. In Luke, the first 'called' disciple is Peter, who is apparently so special and important that (only in Luke), even before he (Peter) is called, Jesus visits his house and heals his mother-in-law (4:38-39). Though Peter becomes arguably the senior disciple, Jesus reminds all his disciples (6:39-40) that they must become like him (Jesus), and not aspire to be higher than him. This idea of 'being with' Jesus is later deconstructed by the depiction of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the explosive effect this event had on his followers in the Passion narrative (Luke 9:51-19:28).

⁵⁵ Du Plessis 1995 p.58

⁵⁶ Fitzmeyer 1981 p.235

Furthermore, Du Plessis⁵⁷ points to 5:27-32, to illustrate the sort of disciple that Jesus is looking for. Jesus here reveals why he socialises with sinners. The author of Luke enlarges upon Mark's version of this episode (Mark 2:17) by adding the comment that following Jesus must involve 'repentance' (5:32) – presumably of sins, and not only a surface-level identification with Jesus and his mission. For Du Plessis, this deepens the meaning of the episode. In addition, Jesus' calling of Levi (Luke 5:27-32) is for Du Plessis an indication of Jesus' ideal type of disciple. Here, Jesus eats with Levi and other tax collectors, the type of people who were disdained and socially marginalised by Law-obeisant Jews. In 5:30, when the Pharisees question Jesus regarding his conduct, he responds that his mission is to help guide people back to God. This is evidenced in his ministry when Jesus forgives people for their sins (5:20, 21, 24; 7:48, 49). Thus, as Jesus provides forgiveness, and has the authority to forgive them, he is able to eat with sinners, pushing beyond social and religious morays. His act of forgiveness restores their relationship with God and thus Jesus can eat and drink with them and call them to follow him – 'being with' him.

For Du Plessis⁵⁸, the author of Luke portrays discipleship as both accepting the teaching of the master, but also a personal, existential acceptance of his way of life and indeed final fate. 9:57-62 shows three aspiring disciples learning about the potential cost of the way of life, a core theme in this Gospel. Du Plessis summarises this as follows: The first follower (9:58) learns that Jesus has no true home and lives a poor, mendicant lifestyle, something which might also be required of them. The second (9:60) learns that they may have to sacrifice or effectively renounce their traditional culture and customs. The third, meanwhile (9:62), learns that one's loved ones must also be secondary to following Jesus and the kingdom of God.

Du Plessis⁵⁹ invokes the parable of the sower (8:4-8), where Jesus distinguishes between those 'inside' (his disciples) and those 'outside'. His followers have been given 'special knowledge' or revelation of the meaning of the kingdom of God. This mirrors the theme of the 'Messianic Secret' in Mark (3:12, 8:30, 9:9). That said, Jesus warns against intolerance of 'outsiders' (9:49-50). Next, the parable of the lamp (8:16-

⁵⁷ Du Plessis 1995 p.58

⁵⁸ Du Plessis 1995 p.63

⁵⁹ Du Plessis 1995 p.63

18) encourages the disciples to continue the public preaching of the Word mission started by Jesus.

ii) Poverty and Riches

A central theme in Luke is that of poverty vs. riches. The author of the Gospel implies that most of Jesus' early followers came from poor, underprivileged backgrounds. Even so, he calls for them to abandon all possessions and to follow him (5:11, 18). The author of Luke depicts the disciples as individuals who willingly do this, making it fitting that Jesus opens the Sermon on the Plain (6:20-49) with the words, 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (6:20). In contrast to the more spiritual tendencies of Matthew's Gospel (the 'poor of spirit' of Matthew 5:3), the author of Luke has Jesus referring to the poor as real people living in physical, not spiritual, poverty.

Meanwhile, Moxnes, in his survey of economics in Luke⁶⁰, observed that the author of Luke connected to the theory of 'peasant economy', which describes the circumvention of the inequality of material wealth which existed in the 'patron-client' economic structure of the time. In Moxnes' view, Jesus is a liberator of the oppressed. Thus, his blessing of the poor, and his offer of the kingdom of God to them in particular, can be seen as Jesus promising his materially poor disciples that God would ultimately eradicate all poverty. That said, it appears from Luke that Jesus did not consider poverty an essential requirement for discipleship. Even so, the author of Luke is cognizant of the 'dangers' facing the rich who are not living righteously with God.

iii) 'The Way'

Green⁶¹ observes the well-attested connection between the Gospel of Luke with The Acts of the Apostles, which scholars believe share the same author. Green highlights the Acts' preoccupation with 'the Way', a descriptive term for the teachings and philosophy of the early Jesus movement (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). In Acts, 'the Way' refers to those who are followers and servants of God's plan as illuminated in the Old Testament and in their belief fulfilled in Jesus (cf. Acts 18:24-25; cf., Luke

⁶⁰ Moxnes 1988

⁶¹ Green 1995 p.102, 104

1:6; 20:21). And yet, hand in hand with their faith in 'the Way', the disciples in Luke constantly live with the possibility of 'failure', writ large when one of their own – Judas, is revealed as a traitor (6:16). This possibility remains, as the Twelve continue to misunderstand their master (9:33), fail to utilise the Lord's power when dealing with a possessed child (9:37-41) and persist in internal debates as to which one among them is the greatest (9:46). Still, Jesus declares that each one of them too, must take up their own crosses, their own 'way', from then on (9:23; cf. 14:27).

Green continues⁶² that Jesus regards discipleship as simply following him (9:23), with the disciples resultantly, in accord with Du Plessis, being 'with' him (6:17; 7:11; 8:1, 22; 9:10; 22:11, 14, 28, 39; cf. 8:38; 22:33). While initially a vague concept, this is significantly expanded in the Acts, becoming one of the main qualifications needed for apostolic office (Acts 1:21). 'Being with' Jesus seems to entail being companions to his trials and triumphs, his acceptance and rejection and personally identifying with and being moulded by Jesus' mission and life. Luke 9:43 understands following Jesus to mean self-denial (9:24-26; 12:8-12) and daily cross bearing prepares one for one's own 'crucifixion', be that actual or metaphorical. This cross bearing also means complete acceptance and unwavering service ('setting one's face' – 9:51) to God's redemptive purpose.

iv) Prayer and Praise

For Luke, the coming of Jesus heralds the dawn of a new era, where scriptural promises are fulfilled and God's eschatological agenda in the world is accelerating towards its conclusion in the form of Jesus' salvation ministry. But how should humanity respond to this new call to a type of ultimate discipleship? In addition to repentance and faith, and obedience to the Lord, there are the important activities of praise and prayer. For example, in Luke, the people healed and those witnessing the healings are reported to have 'glorified God' (5:26; 7:16; 13:13; 18:43; cf – Acts 4:2; 11:18; 13:48). For Green⁶³, Luke 7:16 is especially revealing, as it works alongside a response from the crowd – 'A great prophet has risen among us!' Green considers the author of Luke to be showing here public recognition of God's graciousness (cf.

⁶² Green 1995 p.102, 104

⁶³ Green 1995 p.110

1:68, 78) through Jesus. Green sees this as 'enlightened' praise. Holy deliverance has arrived, and this news is celebrated via praise and joy (cf. 15:6, 9, 23-24).

When examining Jesus' instructions concerning prayer, the third Gospel, for Green⁶⁴, has two major aspects – first a strong focus on God, the other on the disciples. As for example in Luke 11:2-13, Jesus teaches his disciples to address the Lord as Father (2:49; 10:21-22; 22:42; 23:43, 46; cf. 22:29; 24:49), starting and finishing by calling God the father of the disciples. Here, he underlines that the disciples have a 'special relationship' with God, and that the gap between heaven and earth has been bridged by the Lord's redemptive work. Jesus states that his disciples should pray for the coming kingdom and for their daily bread (12:2-4), and to trust the Lord that he will bring the kingdom and at the same time, life's essentials (12:31-32). This faith in God releases the disciples to live without fear, trusting their security and survival in God instead of material things and wealth (12:14-21, 32-34). Jesus states that the faithfulness of God far outweighs the goodness one might ideally receive from one's human father (11:13). The author of Luke explains that prayer can grant one the gift of the Holy Spirit, 'the promise of my father' (24:49). Indeed, it is when the disciples are together in prayer that the Holy Spirit is poured out onto all of them (Acts 1:14, 2:1-4). The third Gospel uses prayer as a motif to spotlight God's faithfulness to his followers, as well as to encourage them to be just as faithful in their own lives. They are advised to pray fervently, in the example of Jesus, in the face of adverse situations (Luke 22:40, 46). An earlier parable illustrated the need for steadfast faith and prayer when a widow therein is shown 'to pray always and not to lose heart' (18:1-8). The widow does not lose heart when faced with injustice but continues to seek assistance. As God is faithful, he will act, just as Jesus expects similar steadfastness from his disciples (18:7-8)⁶⁵.

v) Discipleship and Violence

As Matthew 26:52 famously puts it – 'Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will die by the sword.' One of the most debated sections of New Testament scholarship is the Gospels' teaching on violence,

⁶⁴ Green 1995 p.111

⁶⁵ Green 1995 p.111-112

retaliation and bearing arms. Luke, in this important regard, is apparently self-contradictory. The Jesus of Luke, in his teaching (9:51-55), pronouncements (6:26-36) and actions (23:34) is critical of violence and retaliation and when sending his disciples on a mission, requires them to be peaceful (10:2) and to take no belongings with them (10:4). And yet, close to the culmination of his mission, Jesus proclaims to his disciples, 'And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one' (22:36). Okoronkwo, in an exegetical analysis of the Lukan narrative⁶⁶, concludes that the 'sword language' acts as a 'prophetic warning'. The disciples should prepare themselves for the persecution, suffering and martyrdom that may well feature centrally in their mission. For Okoronkwo, the word of God is the metaphorical 'sword' which all believers should revere and treasure beyond all else. This 'sword of the word' gives them the protection of faith in the difficult situations they may encounter.

Summary

The central themes for discipleship in Luke overlap with those found in Mark and Matthew, but with special emphases on 'being with' and serving Jesus, poverty and riches, interaction with sinners, including a connection with the 'Peasant Economy', 'the Way', prayer and praise and an enigmatic, possibly contradictory attitude towards violence. Reading between the lines, the major underlying theme of Lukan discipleship is faith, in Jesus and God, and right conduct in situations ranging from prayer to violent actions. A secondary theme is mission to sinners, in particular gentiles. The subtle theme of 'how to be a good disciple' is again embedded throughout the Gospel.

⁶⁶ Okoronkwo 2014 p.15-16

The Costs of Discipleship

Introduction

In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus is very clear in his statements as to the costs of being one of his disciples. The similar passages in Mark 10:23-27, Matthew 16:24-25 and Luke 9:23-26, Jesus' advice to the scribe (Matt. 8:19-20) and his description of his followers going like 'sheep into the midst of wolves' (Matt. 10:16) show that the disciples had fair warning of what life following the Lord would be like. It would often involve hardship, hunger, physical pain and a potential violent death in the name of their beliefs. Jesus implies that following him would be an unsettled, itinerant life (Matt. 8:19-20) when a scribe approaches him and offers to follow him wherever he (Jesus) goes. Jesus even offers him this analogy – 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'

Such a life was not for everyone, as the previously mentioned Mark 10:17-22 illustrates. The 'rich man' in the episode asks Jesus what he must do in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus simply tells him to follow the Ten Commandments and then advises him to sell his property and give his money to the poor, promising that, if he does, he will have 'treasure in heaven' (10:21). Upon hearing this, the man was 'shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions'. A similar episode in Matthew 8:21-22 reinforces Jesus' ascetic values in this regard when a potential disciple asks him leave to go and bury his father. Jesus gives the following uncompromising reply – 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.' Jesus is here underlining the urgency and importance of following him, perhaps in part wishing to help save the soul of the man before the eschatological kingdom of God arrives. This passage is interesting, as Jesus on the surface appears to be advising the man to disobey one of the Ten Commandments – 'Honor your father and mother' (Ex. 20:12). On the other hand, Jesus' statement may be hyperbole, a rhetorical technique Jesus employs as part of his teaching style; stark, dramatic statements designed to shock, and to make people think about their actions and relationship to God. Even so, Jesus here skilfully underlines the difficult choices and potential consequences a follower of his might face.

i) Renunciation of Family

As discussed in the above section on the Gospel of Matthew, it seems that many of the 'costs' of discipleship involve some form of renunciation of family. Jesus' famous saying in Luke 14:26 – 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple' is a case in point. Some scholars⁶⁷ have argued that the use of the word 'hate' is hyperbole, and is intended to elicit an emotional response from the listener. The same saying is worded slightly differently in Matthew 10:37 as 'Whoever loves father or mother more than me'. Regardless of word choices of the Gospel writers, the idea of familial renunciation before discipleship is a common one in Jesus' sayings. The exchange between Jesus and a bereaved man in Matthew 9:59-60 is equally telling in this regard, where Jesus offers the man discipleship, but the man asks first to bury his father, leading to Jesus' famous response quoted above (Matt. 8:21-22).

ii) Repentance

To understand discipleship and repentance, it is helpful to step back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the strange, tantalising way that Jesus first appears in Mark, regarded by most scholars as the earliest Gospel. Mark includes no virgin birth or nativity story. Instead, Jesus first appears in Mark 1:9, waiting in line to be baptised by John the Baptist in the river Jordan for the repentance of sins. This episode appears to present Jesus in a subordinate role, being baptised by someone else. Worse still, it infers that Jesus had sins that needed to be repented. While this and other Gospels take pains to stress that while John was a great teacher, Jesus was the greater, this Markan account may present some historical evidence, based on the 'criteria of embarrassment'⁶⁸. This a form of biblical textual analysis which favours the historicity of information included by an author which may be considered embarrassing or counter to their main narrative themes. In this case, as some scholars believe⁶⁹, it is that Jesus may have started out as a disciple of John the Baptist, an ascetic, eschatological prophet who also taught repentance in exchange for the forgiveness of sins.

⁶⁷ Llewellyn/Robinson 2023 p.44

⁶⁸ De Villiers 2022

⁶⁹ Dapaah 2005 p.3

If Jesus was indeed originally a disciple of John, then an examination of the presentation of the Baptist within the Gospels may be instructive. Importantly, John had disciples of his own, some of whom (unnamed) later joined Jesus' group (John 1:35-40). Nevertheless, as Green illustrates⁷⁰, the idea of repentance is pervasive in the synoptics, especially in Luke, and ultimately concerns the rededication of one's life and heart to serving God. The third Gospel is filled with themes of repentance, including when aspiring disciples refuse to change their lives and Jesus' ensuing criticism thereof (for example Luke 9:57-62). It is interesting how many of those called to repent refuse to do so, affording Jesus the opportunity to fire off some pithy rhetorical rebuke – thus warning the audience of the consequences of failing to repent their own sins.

iii) **Asceticism or 'Gluttony'**

The other major information the Gospels pass on regarding John's disciples comes via criticism of Jesus in Luke 7:33-34, where Jesus says – 'For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'. The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' This contrast, further expounded by Kee⁷¹, perhaps comes from a comparison of the ascetic, wilderness-based ethos of John's group with the more community-based Jesus movement. The whole passage regarding the encounter between the disciples of John with Jesus is presented very similarly in both Matthew 11:2-19 and Luke 7:18-35 and is generally considered to originate in the hypothetical 'Q' Gospel⁷². If Jesus had originally been a disciple of John, then he could have chosen to follow the ascetic lifestyle of John of 'eating no bread and drinking no wine' (Luke 7:33). It appears then, that Jesus' view may have changed, as he and his own followers all came 'eating and drinking', perhaps a concession to Jesus' more community-based ministry. In other respects though, Jesus still subscribed to ascetic principles of having no personal belongings or wealth. Interestingly, the contrast between John's ascetic wilderness ministry and Jesus' more urban, mendicant ministry, is reflected in later forms of Christianity. Some early Christian men adopted ascetic, monastic lifestyles in the wilderness while others came

⁷⁰ Green 1995 p.107

⁷¹ Kee 2009 p.374

⁷² Kee 2009 p.374

to renounce this and followed the mendicant lifestyle of Jesus. The latter owned no property, did no trade, and adopted a subsistence, sometimes itinerant existence, depending upon begging and the support/goodwill of those they preached to. This is reflected in the Lord's Prayer itself – 'Give us this day our daily bread' (Matt. 6:11).

iv) 'Breaking' the Law

As Kee concludes in his article⁷³, for those who defined their idea of God's people by ethnic, legal and ritual criteria, Jesus presented a clear threat to their traditions and position. Like gluttons and drunkards of the past, he and his followers should be denounced and ostracised from society. They were in contravention of the Law as presented in Deuteronomy. For Jesus and his followers, the Wisdom of God was in the process of establishing a new community, superseding the Law (or somehow still within the Law according to Matthew). This conflict formed part of the perceived 'threat' Jesus may have presented to the Pharisaic Jewish leaders. Thus, the conflict this generated with the Jewish/Roman authorities began to justify the persecution of Jesus and his followers. For the latter, these complex 'costs' of being a disciple of the Lord were nevertheless a price worth paying.

v) Taking Up One's Cross

Du Plessis⁷⁴ states that the author of Luke uses the so-called Sermon on the Plain (6:20-49 – the Lucan parallel to the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew 5-7) to teach that Jesus was readying his disciples for their future mission as his witnesses, who will continue his mission after he is gone. The Sermon on the Plain, for Du Plessis, portrays the 'revolutionary character' of Jesus' mission and Jesus' own view of discipleship. It shows to the reader that the path of the disciple is difficult and challenging and that mediocrity is not acceptable. In this sermon, Jesus makes the following demands of anyone desiring to follow him – to be ready to be cursed, excluded and reviled (Luke 6:22) and yet still to bless those who do this (6:28), to 'turn the other cheek' when receiving insults (6:29) and to love one's enemies and pray for those that hate them (6:27). Discipleship according to Jesus then, must surely have

⁷³ Kee 2009 p.393

⁷⁴ Du Plessis 1995 pp.61-62

been difficult to live up to, and a bitter pill for some, given the stark challenges outlined by Jesus here.

Furthermore, Du Plessis⁷⁵ illustrates that Luke utilises the narrative of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and subsequent fate (Luke 9:51-19:28) symbolically, as something to be admired and imitated by readers and aspiring followers of Jesus. They should metaphorically be prepared to walk in Jesus' footsteps through pain, suffering and the cross and then to ultimate triumph through the resurrection. At various points in the entry narrative, the author of Luke reminds readers that Jesus has come to Jerusalem to suffer and die (9:51; 13:22; 17:11; 19:11). These frequent reminders render Jesus' words, promises and mission all the more urgent and important. Indeed, Du Plessis equates them with the words of someone on their deathbed, in that Jesus' words are serious, important and by definition, finite. Jesus' statements and demands regarding discipleship during this final, fateful journey should be taken very seriously and should be accepted by his followers until the end of their own lives. Surely, martyrdom is the ultimate cost of discipleship in Jesus.

⁷⁵ Du Plessis 1995 pp.61-62

The Benefits of Discipleship

i) The Kingdom of God

The Gospel of Mark arguably paints a portrait of Jesus as an eschatological prophet preaching the arrival of the kingdom of God within the lifetime of his generation (Mark 13:30). Therefore, undoubtedly, the greatest 'benefit', as far as followers of Jesus in Mark were concerned, was the hope and eschatological expectation of the arrival of the kingdom of God. For Jesus, at least according to Mark 13:1-27, 14:61-62 and others, a divine intervention into history was imminent, when either a heavenly being known as the Son of Man or the resurrected/post-Ascension Jesus would come from the clouds, destroying all the enemies of Israel and installing a new and just kingdom on Earth. It is even possible that, before his arrest, at least some of Jesus' followers believed that he would, as the Jewish Messiah, be made king of this new kingdom. If this was indeed what Jesus believed and taught, then the entire body of his teachings, including on discipleship, can be viewed through a different lens. It is possible that Jesus was in the business of 'short-term' preaching, to ensure his followers and audience were in righteousness with the Lord before the great events of eschatological prophecy began and the Lord intervened in history, bringing the kingdom of God.

In the course of the Gospel of Matthew, reference is made to the nature of the eschatological future that Jesus expects. For example, Matthew 8:11 describes how the disciples will recline with the Patriarchs, an idea which is developed further with the depiction of the wedding banquet to which 'the wise' are invited, while 'the foolish' are not (Matt. 25:10-12). The righteous will 'shine like the sun' (Matt. 13:43) once they enter the kingdom of heaven and will receive eternal life (Matt. 25:46). The Twelve are told by Jesus that they 'will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel' (Matt. 19:28) – great rewards indeed for illiterate peasants from Galilee.

Perceptions of the idea of the kingdom of God, be it earthly or heavenly, would evolve through the other Gospels and in the centuries to follow. Nevertheless, the promise of being one of those who are favoured by God and allowed to live in this new kingdom, was and indeed remains extremely attractive to Christians. Marcus⁷⁶ states that Jesus'

⁷⁶ Marcus 2005 pp.123-124

original disciples were chosen to be with him both 'in the way of the cross' (Mark 8:34), as well as in a newly empowered life as they begin their hazardous and potentially fatal journey of mission in his name.

As regards Jesus' attitude towards those who have already received 'rewards' on Earth entering the kingdom (Mark 10:23-25) is clear – 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' ... 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' 'They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible' ... 'for God all things are possible.'

To explore the meaning of this, Cranfield⁷⁷ looks back to the Old Testament, where he finds two main perspectives on riches. One view considers possessing riches as a mark of the favour of God, a reward for righteousness, while the other identifies the poor with piety and the rich with ungodliness. For Cranfield, Jesus' resigned pity for the rich here is 'startlingly fresh', as he neither desires their wealth nor despises them. The rich man should be pitied, as he faces greater temptations and obstacles to overcome before he is able potentially to enter the kingdom of God. His attachment to earthly possessions distracts him from the true rewards of following Jesus. However, v.27 reveals that, ultimately it is not possible to enter the kingdom without God's involvement, as all things are possible for him.

The following verses (28-31) have Jesus outline the rewards for those who follow him – if someone has left their home and family for his sake and the sake of the gospel, they will receive a 'hundredfold' what they renounced, but also persecution and, in the 'age to come', eternal life. Jesus reiterates his famous description of the kingdom of God – the world turned upside down, where the first shall be last and the last first.

Given that Jesus' disciples were human beings, it would be logical to expect them to experience feelings of fear as they embarked upon their sometimes-dangerous new lives in mission. Jesus' advice to them in Matthew 10:26-31, especially 28 – 'Do not

⁷⁷ Cranfield 1959 p.331

fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell', merits consideration as both a cost and a reward of discipleship. The latter point promises an immortal heavenly soul, perhaps echoing the Apostle Paul's elaborate visions of new spiritual bodies in his epistle to the Romans. Or like Paul in Philippians 1:21-23, some disciples welcomed death in anticipation of the rewards to come. In this way, a 'cost' (death) may be perceived as a 'benefit' (entry into the kingdom). It is certainly possible, when viewed from, for example, an ascetic perspective, that many of the 'costs' of discipleship may have been regarded by the followers themselves as 'benefits'.

ii) Forgiveness of Sins

Following the important and painful act of repentance, considered above as a 'cost' of discipleship, is the 'reward' of forgiveness of sins. Jesus, of course, died for the forgiveness of sins, a concept at the core of Christianity. His teachings concerning the forgiveness of sins and a disciple's ability to forgive the sins of those who sin against them would have been a source of great spiritual strength, especially when experiencing adversity. Matthew 6:14-15 and 18:21-22 contain some of Jesus' clearest statements as to the importance of forgiveness of sins to those who follow him. Boccaccini⁷⁸ notes that the author of Mark (Mark 2:17) regards healing as 'a manifestation of God's forgiveness.' Boccaccini also observes that God's forgiveness is limitless (3:28-29). The sense of the forgiveness of sins, then, would be highly beneficial for disciples on mission.

iii) Other Benefits of Discipleship

Other benefits of discipleship include some reviewed in detail elsewhere in this dissertation, such as – living a life in service to God; serving the poor and others in need; praying to and praising the Lord; and following Jesus, a great and wise teacher with whom one could 'be' with.

The fact that many of the rewards for discipleship according to Jesus himself appear to have been posthumous or at least post-eschatological, must have at times proven challenging for those already facing hardship in the name of their master and God.

⁷⁸ Boccaccini 2016 p.156

Nonetheless, they underline the hard line message Jesus presented to those wishing to follow his footsteps.

Interlude: The Didache – a Manual for Discipleship

While not a gospel, an important final piece of evidence for the nature of early Christian discipleship is the *Didache* (from the Greek for 'teaching'). Also known as *The Lord's Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations*, the *Didache* is a treatise (catechism) on early Christian ethics, the rituals of baptism and Eucharist and the organisation of the early Church. Rediscovered in 1873, it is believed to date from the late first or early second century CE⁷⁹ and, after the epistles of Paul and the Gospels, is one of the earliest surviving documents of early Christianity. It is near-contemporary with the Gospels, but unlike the Gospels, it has little narrative content. Instead, it actually describes the 'correct' way, according to one Christian community, to conduct baptism and Eucharist rituals. It amounts to a manual for early Christian living. As such, it is an invaluable source for the study of early Christian discipleship.

The *Didache* can be divided into four sections. Part one is the Two Ways, a list of 'do's and do not's', known as the Way of Life and the Way of Death. Chapters 1-6 (The Two Ways) summarise the two ways, life and death, and present a Christian version of Jewish methods of teaching designed to prepare candidates for baptism. The Way of Life is a series of maxims invoking God's commandments from the Torah, especially to love God and one's neighbour and observance of Jesus' Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12, Luke 6:31). It employs phrasing that parallels the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) without naming Jesus directly as the source of its maxims. It even contains a near identical version of the Lord's Prayer found in Matthew, unlike the one found in Luke 11. While the *Didache's* vocabulary and content echo elements of the Gospel of Matthew, it cannot be demonstrated that its authors knew the text of Matthew or originated from a Matthean community. Indeed, the *Didache* refers to 'the Gospel' as a (possibly oral) concept rather than a particular written document. Chapter 5 for example, echoes the Gospels' preoccupation with the poor and marginalised. In turn, 'The Way of Death' includes people who seek profit, or do not pity the poor or do not help the oppressed. Chapters 7-10 discuss the sacraments in practice, dealing with baptism, prayer, fasting and the Eucharist, Chapters 11-15 then concern priesthood and contain rules on how to receive and test itinerant apostles and prophets (in this

⁷⁹ Allen 1903 p.xvi

sense meaning generic Christian missionaries), as well as rules concerning the appointment of bishops and deacons. Finally, Chapter 16 presents an end times prophecy of the Antichrist and the Second Coming of Christ.

In echo of Jesus' command to the Twelve to go forth and evangelise to the wider world, in Mark 6:7, Matthew 10:5 and Luke 9:1-6, the *Didache* is a book of rules and procedures. These concern what appears to be the earliest incarnation of Christian discipleship, namely, itinerant mendicant teachers evangelising the coming of the kingdom of God to new communities as they briefly pass through. However, its rules, particularly regarding the treatment of itinerant, mendicant teachers, appear deeply flawed and ripe for abuse. Nonetheless, the survival of the *Didache* provides a fascinating window into a time before itinerant mendicant ministry was gradually phased out in favour of the more familiar community-based church revolving around local bishops, deacons and priests. It is also important supporting evidence for the nature of expectations, costs and benefits of early discipleship.

Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to review selected materials within the synoptic Gospels – Mark, Matthew and Luke – in order to tease out practical and theological teachings on early Christian discipleship. In particular, it has sought to enquire as to the nature of Jesus' teachings on discipleship found within the synoptic Gospels and the Gospel authors' interpretations of these teachings within their own narratives and theology. This task was achieved by interrogating the synoptic Gospels, the *Didache* and secondary sources, using the modern disciplines of biblical/textual criticism and hermeneutics to ascertain the salient features of discipleship according to the Gospel authors and their depictions of Jesus.

The dissertation then examined the costs and rewards of this discipleship for those serving Jesus. It has completed a critical examination of selected themes of discipleship within the synoptic Gospels. These include – calling; the kingdom of God; lifelong service and mission; family; 'being with' Jesus; the Messianic Secret; ignorance; fear; sacrifice; self-denial; rebuke; failure; violence; prayer and praise; repentance and forgiveness of sins; Jesus' Jewish background including the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible; poverty and riches; 'the Way'; and asceticism versus 'gluttony'.

As a result, it is now possible to draw some conclusions as to the nature of discipleship during and shortly after Jesus' lifetime. First, it can be argued that all three synoptic Gospels were composed at least in part as narrative 'guidebooks' for being a disciple for the first/second century CE communities for which they were written. The rediscovery of the *Didache*, a contemporary practical guide for early Christians (which is often in content in *simpatico* with the Gospel of Matthew), gives additional support to the existence of reasonably consistent perspectives on the meaning and practicalities of discipleship even at this early period. That said, the range of perspectives seen in the synoptics betrays the range of perspectives already in existence early on.

The costs of discipleship, according to the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49) include – being cursed, excluded and reviled, even by family and friends (6:22). Living in Jesus

meant a life of itinerant preaching with no fixed abode, a mendicant lifestyle involving begging for food and shelter with little family contact. There was also a very real possibility that one might be arrested, imprisoned, tortured and even executed in the name of one's beliefs. And yet, these 'costs' are transcended by Jesus' order to 'turn the other cheek' when receiving insults (6:29) and to love and bless one's enemies as well as praying for people that hate you (6:27-28). Discipleship in Jesus then, must surely have been difficult to live up to, given the stark challenges outlined by Jesus.

Conversely, the rewards of discipleship in Jesus included – forgiveness of sins; living a life in service to God; serving the poor and others in need; praying to and praising the Lord and being a follower of Jesus, a great and wise teacher with whom one could 'be' with. According to the disciples' beliefs, Jesus was the only sure route into the kingdom of God and the wonderful rewards Jesus promised.

If one were to compile the core practical traits of an early Jesus disciple for a 'discipleship guidebook', it would be prudent to recall Hull's⁸⁰ list of salient characteristics of discipleship under Jesus. These included – submission to the leader (Jesus); learning and understanding the words and teachings of Jesus; learning Jesus' way of doing ministry; imitating Jesus' character and life; and ultimately, finding and teaching new disciples of one's own.

Thematically, it is apparent that all three synoptic Gospels can be understood, to some degree or other, on a continuum between two seemingly disparate, though not incompatible, critical themes. Both of these were suggested earlier in this dissertation by Jeremias (1963)⁸¹. First, the idea that Jesus is primarily offering 'interim teaching', for those seeking to be in righteousness with God before the coming of an eschatological kingdom of God or some such cosmic intervention into history by the Lord. This is especially prevalent in Mark, reckoned to be the earliest composed Gospel and the one most concerned with end times themes. Yet, however strong the eschatological perspective and hope that Jesus would soon return to establish the kingdom of God on Earth, the slow, dawning realisation and disappointment when this

⁸⁰ Hull 2004 pp.15-22

⁸¹ Jeremias 1963 in Cooper 2013 p.94

did not quickly materialise must have further shaped the movement building around Jesus' ministry and evolving concepts of discipleship as time passed. The gradual acceptance among believers, with the passage of several decades from Jesus' lifetime, that the foretold second coming of Christ/kingdom of God might not be as imminent as originally thought, surely created some cognitive dissonance and the necessity for new interpretations of Christ's teaching.

This realisation leads to the other theme, also suggested by Jeremias – namely the acceptance of the gospel before receiving God's grace. While this theme is present in Matthew, it is arguably discovered in full bloom in Luke, which plays down most of the eschatological rhetoric, exchanging it for a more sober, lived faith. This increasing emphasis on matters of today echoes the above analysis of Du Plessis⁸² and Fitzmyer⁸³.

In echo of Adomako-Manser⁸⁴, a third important theme would be the idea that every person in ministry is expected to find and train their replacement, in continuation of the mission. For these early disciples, it must have been especially difficult, as they were missing their master and friend and lived in a world dominated by pagans and non-believers. They were also working to find the shape of their movement in a post-Jesus world.

The famous saying by Jesus concerning followership, which opened this dissertation, and which occurs in similar forms in Mark 8:34-35, Matthew 16:24-25 and Luke 9:23-26, is perhaps key to the whole matter. For followers of Jesus, the stakes were and are high and involve self-denial and sacrifice, with the costs and rewards clearly laid out from the beginning by Jesus and the Gospel authors.

Looking beyond Jesus' earthly lifetime, the future mission he gave to the twelve disciples, according to Matthew 10:5-14, is to declare the nearness of the kingdom of heaven (as Matthew consistently describes it) and then to – 'Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons. You received without

⁸² Du Plessis 1995 p.58

⁸³ Fitzmeyer 1981 p.235

⁸⁴ Adomako-Mensah 2019 p.65

payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff, for labourers deserve their food' (Matt. 10:8-10). This is almost a mission statement in itself. And, for these first and second generation disciples, the costs and benefits of discipleship were numerous and complex but ultimately, clearly worthwhile.

It is perhaps appropriate to leave the final word to Jesus himself – 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matt. 11:29-30).

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