
THEOLOGY^{AND} DIAKONIA

Faith in Action

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Discipleship as Service

Mary Sylvia Nwachukwu

This essay is an understanding of discipleship as it is presented in the New Testament (NT), and principally, the essential character of discipleship as service. Discipleship is a dominant NT theme. The Gospels show that Jesus not only invited disciples to become active participants with him in his public ministry, but they also report that he provided for the continuation of his mission in the world through his disciples.¹ To this effect, Matt 28:18-20 states unambiguously that during his post-resurrection appearances, Jesus commissioned the eleven disciples: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. John 20:21 records the same transfer of authority, as Jesus says to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you". Jesus meant that his mission must continue through his disciples. The ability to make others disciples depends largely on this authority. The NT, therefore, is a credible source for the early Church's understanding of the meaning of discipleship and of the challenges which this ministry brings.

After this introduction, which explains the goal, scope and methodology of the present research, the second part of the paper defines the meaning of discipleship. This is done through a study of the Language and Statements about discipleship in the Gospels. The third part finds in other NT texts the occasion of its particular nature as service. Although many works have been written on the theme of discipleship, which clarify the meaning of the term, a great many and new questions from different lived contexts still remain

¹ Cf. Forestell, J.T., *As Ministers of Christ. The Christological Dimension of Ministry in the New Testament*, 1991, 33.

to be answered. Therefore, the last part of the paper discusses, in the light of the NT witness, the questions that discipleship evokes in contemporary Christianity. The essay may not completely give the required attention to all pertinent texts and to all exegetical issues. It aims especially to establish the basis on which discipleship is understood chiefly as service.

Meaning of Discipleship

The obvious place to begin the research into the meaning of discipleship is the study of the terminology, which helps to situate the place of the disciple within the story of Jesus. The idea of a 'disciple' was not a novelty to the world of Jesus. This terminology, which is the English translation of the Greek **μαθητής** and Hebrew **תלמיד**, is used in the Greek and Hebrew cultures for the teacher – disciple relationship. Within the Greek culture, the word **μαθητής** incorporates ideas, denoting both the learning skills of someone under a teacher (*didaskalos*) and him as a committed member of a fraternity, which carefully preserves and transmits the intentions of the teacher.² This meaning of **μαθητής** presents the disciple as a credible representative and transmitter of a received tradition. Below is a brief study of the terminologies that represent the language of discipleship in the New Testament.

The Language of Discipleship

The Gospels register an abundant use of the term **μαθητής**, which defines those whom Jesus called, principally, to stay with him and to participate in his works.³ Their relationship with Jesus make up a considerable part of the Gospel story, showing that these disciples were active participants in the story of Jesus.⁴ However, a different vocabulary indicates the process by which they became disciples.

In Greek and Jewish cultures, the verb that indicates the process by which one becomes a disciple is **μανθάνω** (Hebrew- **לָמַד**), which defines an intellectual learning process. The comparatively

² Cf. K.H. Rengstorf, "manqa,nw ktl" in: Kittel, G., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. IV, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967, 390-393, 416-417, 423-441.

³ Mark 3:14-15.

⁴ The word occurs only in the Gospels (43x in Mark, 76x in Matthew, 37x in Luke, 80x in John) and in Acts (30x).

minor role that this verb plays in the entire NT shows that Jesus' concern was neither to impart intellectual knowledge, as the Greeks philosophers did, nor to produce men who were versed in the Law, as the Rabbis did.⁵ Rather, the Gospel of Mark shows how Jesus' teaching differed from that of the Scribes: a teaching with authority, and confirmed by powerful works (Mark 1:21). Jesus' teaching is not presented as a comprehensive doctrine or system of thought, but as a preaching (**καὶ ἠρῶν κηρύσσων** – Mark 1:38-39), which he proclaimed either in the Synagogue (Mark 1:21,39,62) or to the crowd (Mark 2:13; 3:32; 4:1-2). To his disciples, Jesus gave explanations of the parables (Mark 4:33-34) or what Mark calls 'the secrets of the Kingdom of God' (4:11). This shows that the concern of discipleship lies not in the process of indoctrination but elsewhere. A rare verb is found, **μαθητεύω**, which means 'to be a disciple' or 'to make a disciple'. While the verb occurs only in Matt 28:19 (and 13:52), which is Jesus' last command to his followers to make disciples of all nations; the other one evidence in Acts 14:21 is a report that Paul and Barnabas made many disciples.⁶ Another verbal form, **μαθητεύω**, is found in John 4:1, which is a report that Jesus made more disciples than John the Baptist. This statistics is very instructive. It informs the reader that Jesus actually made disciples (John 4:1) and that he commanded his disciples to do likewise (Matt 28:19). Since the term appears in the Acts of the Apostles as a self-definition of Christians after the death of Jesus,⁷ the reader should rightly infer that the disciples of Jesus carried out this mandate. Moreover, the rarity of the verbal forms in the entire NT, as well as the total absence of the term, **μαθητής**, in the entire Pauline and Catholic Letters might suggest that the terms play a distinctively minor role in the NT description of the fulfilment of this mandate.

Another language comes to the fore when one examines the description in the Gospels of the process by which people became disciples of Jesus. At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus, first of all, called some people to follow him. The nature of this relationship is indicated by the verb **ἀκολουθεῖν** (to follow). As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus

⁵ Cf. Rengstorf, "manqa,nw ktl", 390-406.

⁶ The evidence in Matt 13:52 has no direct bearing on discipleship.

⁷ Cf. Acts 9:26,36; 16:1; 18:23,27.

said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him (Mark 1:16-17).⁸ In the Gospels, therefore, the relationship between Jesus and his disciples is described in terms of following him. Three outstanding meanings derive from the contexts in which this unique term appears:

Firstly, discipleship is a response to a call from Jesus. "Follow me" is an invitation to be a companion of Jesus, who is shown to be on a journey. In about ninety-eight percent of its occurrence in the Gospels, the language of followership is linked to the image of Jesus who is in motion.⁹ Expressed in the present tense, the command to follow would imply a life-long commitment to "keep following me". It is a challenge to exclusive dedication to Jesus as the followers break all other ties and give up their possessions (Mark 1:17-18,20).¹⁰ It is not a matter of personal initiative (Luke 9:57) or a duty accomplished according to one's own terms (Luke 9:58-62), presenting challenges which all cannot accept, as the rich young man showed (Mark 10:17-22).

Secondly, while Jesus appointed Twelve who were to be with him, to teach and to cast out demons (Mark 3:14-15), many others (great crowds) also followed Jesus. Attracted by the power of his teaching and the marvellous works he did, these came to hear him and especially to have their diseases cured.¹¹ Among them were the blind who followed him after they were cured,¹² and some women who gave a remarkable model of discipleship because they not only followed him but also served him by providing for his needs.¹³ Thirdly, the followers are called to be part of a journey that culminated in Jerusalem. In this regard, Jesus delineated clearly the conditions for walking this way of suffering. All four Gospels have statements about discipleship, but there is one on which they express outstanding agreement. The next paragraph takes a closer look at these statements.

⁸ Cf. also Mark 1:20; 2:14; Matt 4:19-20,22; 8:22-23; 9:9; Luke 5:11,27-28; 9:57-61; John 1:43.

⁹ Best, E., *Disciples and Discipleship. Studies in the Gospel According to Mark*, 1986, 4-5.

¹⁰ Also Matt 8:22; Luke 5:27-28.

¹¹ Mark 2:15; 3:7; 5:24-25; Matt 4:25; 8:1,10; 20:29; 21:9; Luke 7:9; 9:11; 23:27; John 6:2.

¹² Mark 10:52; Matt 20:29-34; Luke 18:43.

¹³ Mark 15:41; Matt 27:55; Luke 23:27,49,55.

Statements About Discipleship

The following belong to the different descriptions of the condition of discipleship in the Gospels:

- a. Luke emphasizes more than Mark the radical character of the renunciation that discipleship demands: "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me ... So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (Luke 18:22; 14:33).¹⁴
- b. The Synoptic Gospels agree that discipleship creates a new situation and a commitment to Christ: "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" (Luke 14:26).¹⁵
- c. A third condition of discipleship exists which all four Gospels place within the Passion Prediction context.

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (Mark 8:34).

The passion prediction explains that as the Messiah, it was necessary that Jesus undergoes suffering, persecution and death in order to save others. Therefore, the true mark of discipleship is to follow Jesus in the way of suffering and death. The parallel Gospel texts express this condition alongside the demand to break all ties, and to deprive oneself of possessions.¹⁶ These may represent concrete expressions of the essential demand to carry the cross. John expresses this same condition as the love commandment. God's love for the world, which led Jesus to die, should guide the actions of all disciples of Jesus: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35). This love commandment is fulfilled through the laying down of life for others. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:12-14). This is the only condition for bearing much fruit, for in this the Father is glorified (John 15:8).

¹⁴ Cf. Mark 10:21.

¹⁵ Cf. Mark 10:28-29; Matt 10:37; Luke 18:29-30.

¹⁶ Cf. Matt 10:37-39; 16:24; Luke 9:23-25; 14:25-33; John 13:36-37.

This basic condition is prescribed not only to the Twelve but also to anyone who wishes to follow Jesus ('anyone' who wants to be a disciple of mine). A closer look at the passion prediction texts will highlight other important features of discipleship.

The Gospel of Mark presents three predictions of the passion. The first (Mark 8:31-38) is occasioned by a question on the meaning of Jesus' identity as the Messiah. The question "Who do people say that I am?" introduces this first prediction,¹⁷ and through it the point is made clearer that knowledge and understanding regarding the person and mission of Jesus is necessary for discipleship. Since it is shown that discipleship finds its definition only in relation to the cross, the problem of misunderstanding, which the text presents, refers to a fundamental challenge. The response of the disciples to the question about the identity of Jesus becomes the yardstick for measuring both the level of their understanding of Jesus' mission and their ability for discipleship.

In the face of this description of Jesus, the Gospels leave us in no doubt that the disciples would find it difficult, accepting and fulfilling this necessary condition. Their response is significantly expressed in a representative member, Peter, to the effect that Jesus' rebuke to Peter is turned into a teaching to all the disciples.¹⁸ On the basis of their rejection of the cross and the idea of a suffering Messiah (Mark 8:32), the Gospels highlight the ways in which their ability to follow Jesus diminished significantly. They were overcome by fear as they travelled the road to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32), and as Jesus suffered persecution and trial in the hands of Jews and Romans, they betrayed, denied, fled at his arrest, and followed him only from a distance (Luke 22:54).

The second (Mark 9:30-37) and third (Mark 10:32-45) predictions of the passion are addressed only to the Twelve. According to these texts, misunderstanding of the mission of Jesus leads to equal misconstruction of the aims and goals of discipleship. Even here, the motif of misunderstanding (Mark 9:32) is used as a foil to directing attention to other related problems of the Christian community, that is, the disciples' quest for power and positions of honour and the resultant quarrel among them. These texts are important because

¹⁷ Cf. Mark 8:27,29; Matt 16:13-28; Luke 9:18,20.

¹⁸ Cf. Mark 8:33,34-38; 10:38-40,41-50.

they explain that the practical expression of the command to carry the cross is service of others:

He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all (Mark 9:35).

Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant (**dia,konoj**), and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave (**dou/loj**) of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

The attitude of service stands against that of power as the Gentiles do (Mark 10:42) and of love for places of honour and self-seeking, as the Pharisees do (Matt 23:11). These two referents may be pointers to influences coming from Gentile and Jewish environments. Instead, the disciple should be like the Master who gave his life by serving others. This image of Jesus as servant (*diakonos*) justifies the cross motif and provides a concrete expression of discipleship in particular contexts. The next section exposes other NT texts that elaborate this idea of discipleship as service.

Discipleship as Service

This part of the essay determines the occasion for describing discipleship as service. Many words express the idea of service in the NT, but not all are used in relation to discipleship. Of the terms which denote the idea of service, only the term *diakoneō* and its cognates refer to the idea of a service of love, which Jesus demands from his disciples.¹⁹

Discipleship as *diakoneō*

The word group occurs eighty-eight times in the NT, predominating in Acts and the Pauline Letters.²⁰ In the Gospels, the term appears only within the prediction texts.²¹ The evidences in Acts and Paul represent the period when Jesus no longer walked the streets of

¹⁹ They are distinguished from other terms: *qerapeu,w* (to serve with respect and concern), *laireu,w* (to serve for wages), *leitourge,w* (official public service to the state) and *u'phrete,w* (to help another). Cf. Beyer, H.W., "diakone,w ktl" in: Kittel, G., ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 81.

²⁰ Acts (10x); Pauline Letters (51x = 2 Cor 20x; Rom 9x; 1 Tim 6x; Col 5x; 1 Cor 3x; Eph 3x; Gal 1x; Phil 1x; 1 Tess 1x; 2 Tim 1x; Phlm 1x).

²¹ Mark 9:35; 10:43,45; Matt 20:26,28; Luke 22:26-27.

Galilee, calling or drawing people to himself. Therefore the language of **avkolouqe,w** recedes into the background. Another terminology was needed to show how the disciple carries the cross, like the Master, in concrete life situations.

The distribution of the word group in the NT help us to distinguish three dimensions of service that discipleship embraces. It includes *diakonia* as:

- a. Waiting at table (Acts 6:1,2)
- b. Service of the Word of God as the comprehensive work of Church leaders through prayer, preaching and witness to the Gospel of God's grace.²²
- c. Services that believers render to God and to one another through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.²³

Principally, this vocabulary describes the comprehensive work of Paul and his co-workers, while those engaged in this ministry are called *diakonos* (*diakonoι*). Although the vocabulary is poorly represented in the Gospels, it is significant that all four Gospels use the concept within the passion prediction texts, as shown above. John 12:26 equates the two terms when he says, "He who serves me follows me". All also agree that *diakonia* as an act of self-giving for others should be the characteristic mark of every disciple of Jesus.

Paul's life and apostolate could be cited here as an example of this ministry. In the Miletus Speech in Acts 20:18b-35, Paul presents his ministry as an example for future leaders and as a model of Christian discipleship.²⁴ In presenting himself as model, Paul, first of all, appealed to what the Ephesians have seen and known about him, that is, of himself as a humble servant of the Lord.

You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews.

²² Acts 1:17, 25; 6:4; 12:25; 20:24; 21:19; Rom 11:13; 12:7; 15:25,31; 1 Cor 16:15,16; 2 Cor 3:6,7,8,9; 4:1; 5:18; 6:3; 8:4,19,20; 9:1,12,13; 11:8; 1 Tim 1:12; 4:6; 2 Tim 4:5,11.

²³ Cf. 1 Cor 12:5; Eph 4:12; Col 4:17; 1 Pet 4:10,11.

²⁴ Cf. Walton, S., *Leadership and Lifestyle. The Portrait of Paul in the Miletus Speech and 1 Thessalonians*, Cambridge 2000, 77.

Paul describes his entire apostolate as service of the Lord. He says this with three qualifiers – 'with humility, with tears, and enduring trials' – which describe how he shares in the passion of Christ.

Paul calls his ministry a *diakonia*, a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18; 3:4-6) and not a matter of standing above others as leader.²⁵ In many of these texts, the service required of *diakonia* is complemented by another word *douleuō*, which denotes servanthood. The relationship between the two words merits attention at this point.

Meaning of *diakoneō* as *douleuō*

Another self-concept for God's servants is *doulos*.²⁶ Mary is designated as the slave girl (**dou,lh**) of the Lord (Luke 1:38,48). The NT meaning of this word would be appreciated from knowledge of its meaning in the dominant Greek language and culture.

In the Greek world, *douleuō* was considered as the most repudiated kind of service because such service was a perversion of human nature; expressing lack of autonomy and personal choice.²⁷ In agreement with Greek thought, the LXX uses words of the *douleuō* group to translate the Hebrew *'ebed*, when the reference is to any restrictive service which a subordinate renders at the whim of a master. This meaning came to be adopted into the language of worship, *douleuein*, understood as total commitment to God as Lord.²⁸ In the NT also, the term describes the exclusiveness of a relationship to a master or lord and a master's claim to the subordination and services of his dependent. According to Paul, one of the benefits of the Christ-event is that it makes believers slaves of righteousness, releasing them from bondage to sin, to the law, to passions and pleasures, and to the elemental spirits of the world.²⁹ Believers have become slaves of Christ, who is the Lord and Master of life.³⁰

²⁵ 2 Cor 1:24.

²⁶ Rom 1:1; Gal 4:10; Tit 1:1; Phil 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; Jam 1:1; Jude 1:1; Acts 4:29; Col 1:7; 4:7,12.

²⁷ Cf. Beyer, "diakone,w ktl", pp. 82-83; K.H. Rengstorf, "dou/loj ktl" in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 261-263.

²⁸ Cf. Rengstorf, "dou/loj ktl", pp.265-269.

²⁹ Cf. Rom 6:6-22; 7:6,25; Gal 4:3,7,8,9; Tit 3:3.

³⁰ Rom 12:11; 14:18; Eph 6:6; 1 Thess 1:9; 1 Pet 2:16.

Though regarded as disparaging, the slave institution gave Christianity the language to describe the kind of total dedication, lowly service and self-annihilation which discipleship demanded of a true follower of Jesus Christ. This idea of discipleship is taken from the model of Christ's total obedience to the will of his Father. Jesus emptied himself, and taking the form of a slave, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death (Phil 2:7-8). Paul claims that for the sake of the Gospel, he became a slave of all so that he might win some of them for Christ (1 Cor 9:19-23), and believers fulfil the love command through becoming slaves of one another (Gal 5:13-15).

Evaluation and Conclusion

The essay unfolds the following essential aspects. Christian discipleship is a Gospel imperative by which Christ determined how his mission would continue in the world after his ascension. The primary assignment of a disciple is to have a direct and personal bond with Jesus, completely obedient to the call and teachings of Christ, and to follow him through a journey of forgiveness, of compassion for the poor, and of self-giving. John 15 describes this bond with the image of the Vine and the Branches. "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me" (15:4). Since discipleship is described as participation in the cross of Christ, the addressee of Jesus' call is the post-resurrection Church, and by extension, present day disciples. The truth is made clear that without a dedicated focus on Jesus as the one who goes before us on the road that demands self-sacrifice, the aim of Christian discipleship is impossible to realize.

The statements about discipleship enfold the challenges which the early Christians encountered in their Gentile and Jewish environments (Mark 10:42; Matt 23:11). The call to follow Christ set the early Christians in the middle of a hostile arena, where they suffered persecution and were humiliated by internal disunity caused by attraction to worldly values, like positions of power and honour. The remedy is the essential requirement to know and understand the person and mission of Jesus as the Messiah, who exercised authority by serving others and by dying for them. The command to carry the cross is expressed practically through humble service of one another.

I present this study as a contribution to the wider discernment process which is the world's concern and need for authentic witness to Christian discipleship. In our world today, the need for Christian discipleship is becoming increasingly more urgent. This need is occasioned by factors external and internal to the Church. Today, many non-Christian religions and sects are winning more and more members to their fold by means of established political and vicious strategies. The human community is threatened both by religious groups that operate according to absolutist principles, and by a general human selfish attitude that expresses itself differently in different cultures. Around Africa, some non-Christian groups send professional care-givers to the door-post of their converts, as they also entice them with gifts and positions that lead to affluence.

While the Christian Church has made significant effort, through her missionary endeavours, to fulfil the mandate given to her to "make disciples of all nations", she must bear in mind that many Christians around the world are in their attitudes like seeds that fell on paths, rocky grounds and among thorns, who become easy victims of predators and who lose their faith to the troubles and the cares of this world (Matt 13:18-22). Like the great crowds that followed Jesus, many Christians come to Jesus in order to have a better life or to have some personal needs met. Some others so deeply misunderstand the identity of the Master that their efforts to serve Christ are directed mainly to mistaken goals.

Therefore, today, evangelisation faces challenges that supersede simply converting more people to the Christian religion or ensuring large membership to a particular Christian denomination. A spirituality is spreading widely across Africa, promoted by some Gospel preachers who assure people that suffering is a curse, which those in communion with God cannot experience. To be ashamed of the cross is to despise and reject the kind of Lord that Jesus is, one who gives his life for others. If the Gospel does not encourage people to deny themselves in order to live for others, the human community may not soon experience the peace and wellbeing it longs for. Moreover, in the face of internal disunity that characterizes many Christian communities, caused by domineering and self-seeking attitudes, the Church should be steadfast in teaching and bearing witness to the inescapable truth about the image of Christ, who came to serve and not to be served. The image of a disciple as servant

slave stands in opposition to power and attitudes of domination. A ministry undertaken for the sake of the Kingdom of God is redemptive to the extent to which it is done with total dedication, in lowly service and self-sacrifice.

Something must also be said about the contribution of women to Christian discipleship. Statistical data on the language of discipleship reveals that among those who followed Jesus were some women who ministered to him by providing for his needs.³¹ This is the only group, among all followers of Jesus, who followed him to the cross and who took care of his dead body. This information should not surprise us because in various cultures, especially in Africa, women are more naturally gifted and capable of the deep commitment and self-sacrifice which discipleship requires. In fact, the symbol of 'woman and child-bearing' is an incarnation of that divine self-giving that gave life to the world. Women should, therefore, use their God-given gifts and energy to fulfill the command of the Lord, rather than allow themselves to be distracted by questions that dismember the body of Christ. Authentic leadership subsists in service.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the language of baptism (Matt 28:19), of followership (Mark 1:17) and of service (Mark 10:43-44), all point to a continuity in the reality they express. They communicate Christ's gracious invitation to us, to deep union with him and participation in his death and resurrection.

³¹ See footnote 13.