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Jesus and Disciples Today

Getting focused:

1. What is a good definition of a disciple of Jesus?
2. Do you agree with the statement, "All disciples are believers, but not all believers are disciples"? Why or why not?
3. Are you a disciple of Jesus? Who is a disciple of Jesus today? Is discipleship optional?

Being a disciple of Jesus is a phenomenon that is simple to appreciate yet incredibly complex fully to comprehend.

Witness this scene. A young sailor is sitting on the floor of a Christian coffee house next to a couch on which is seated a somewhat older man. The young sailor is visibly agitated, wringing his hands, looking desperate. Then he raises his voice and cries out, pleading with the other man, "When will I finally be a disciple of Jesus? What else do I have to do? I want to be one so badly, but I just don't know what else to do!"

That scene haunts me to this day. I was a fairly new believer and had been asked to give my testimony of conversion at a Christian servicemen's center; that sailor was the first person I encountered when entering the center. Here was a young man who had the sincerest desires, yet his conception of discipleship was such that it caused him severe personal turmoil.

The young sailor was captivated by the same complex phenomenon that has captivated the Christian world in the last quarter century. Discipleship appears simple to understand at first glance, yet the more we examine what Jesus was doing with his disciples, the more complex the issues become. John Vincent, writing over thirty years ago, foresaw the essence of the young sailor's dilemma.

Commenting on Jesus' teaching about discipleship, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. . . . Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10:37-39, paraphrase), Vincent wrote:

These words—the *discipleship words* of the Synoptic Gospels—and others like them, have always been either a *fascination* or an *embarrassment* to the Church. For the hermit or the monastic, for the prophet and even for the mystic, they have exercised an irresistible attraction. For some of the greatest names in Christian biography—Benedict, Francis of Assisi, Jacob Boehme, William Law, Soren Kierkegaard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer—here lay the key to the mystery of Christian existence. But for the Church in general, they have always constituted a problem. If the words are to be taken literally, then there can be but few who can be disciples. If they are to be taken symbolically or spiritually, then they plainly mean something different for us than they meant for those who were first called.¹

For many people in the church, as for the young sailor, Vincent's vexation over the discipleship words of Jesus expresses the dilemma clearly. To illustrate this dilemma, when I teach or speak on discipleship in classes or churches or conferences, I regularly ask this question: "How many of you can say, in the humble confidence of your heart, that you are convinced that you are a true disciple of Jesus Christ? Please raise your hand." People are visibly confused as they attempt to answer the question. Most do not put their hand up at all, some do so hesitantly, some put it up then take it down, others put it up half-way.

Then I ask another question: "How many of you can say, in the humble confidence of your heart, that you are convinced that you are a true Christian? Please raise your hand." Immediately most hands shoot up—no hesitation, no doubt!

In the last twenty-plus years, a virtual flood of discipleship studies has swept over the church, yet people may be more confused now than ever. The reason? No consensus reigns in understanding what Jesus was doing and in what we should be doing in making disciples. What is a disciple of Jesus? What should we be like as disciples? Who are to be the objects of discipleship?

DISCIPLESHIP MODELS

Different answers are given to those questions today. As we look at the various responses, we can see several models of discipleship that

¹John James Vincent, "Discipleship and Synoptic Studies," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 16 (1960): 456.

result from those who have studied the biblical data. While some diversity is to be found within each model, distinct characteristics mark each one. We have isolated five models here. Each view of discipleship has both strengths and weaknesses. Which of the following discipleship models represents your own understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus?

Disciples Are Learners

Some suggest that a disciple is a learner who follows a great teacher. They suggest that the term *disciple* refers to one who puts himself/herself under the teaching authority of a great teacher but that it has no reference to whether or not the person is a Christian.² For example, Charles Ryrie suggests the following general definition of a "disciple." "A follower of a teacher and his teachings, involving, in Bible times, traveling with that teacher wherever he went."³ Kenneth Wuest says, "The word merely refers to one who puts himself under the teaching of someone else and learns from him. . . . In the case of the word 'disciple' the context must rule as to whether the particular disciple mentioned is saved or unsaved, not the word itself."⁴ Livingston Blauvelt takes it one step further by saying that

the Greek word "disciple" (*μαθητής* [*mathētēs*]) comes from the verb "to learn" (*μανθάνω* [*manthanō*]). Many people, both saved and unsaved, were learning of Jesus. So He exhorted those who would follow Him to count the cost (Luke 9:23; 14:25–35). That the terms "disciple" and "Christian" are not synonymous is clear from John's Gospel. "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (John 6:66). Then there was Judas, an unsaved disciple.⁵

This view is instructive because it emphasizes the early linguistic relationship between the noun *disciple* and the verb *learn*. Further, this model emphasizes that a variety of different kinds of followers were called disciples. In the Gospels we find that a disciple may be a believer in Jesus Christ or may be a follower of someone else, such as John the Baptist (Jn 1:35) or the Pharisees (Mt 22:15–16).⁶ This

²E.g., Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1989), 155; Livingston Blauvelt, Jr., "Does the Bible Teach Lordship Salvation?" *BS* 143 (1986): 41; Kenneth S. Wuest, *Studies in the Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, vol. 3, *Wuest's Word Studies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 25.

³Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 155.

⁴Wuest, *Studies*, 3:25.

⁵Blauvelt, "Does the Bible. . . ?" 41.

⁶A variation on this view suggests that discipleship was appropriate to Jesus' day, while people could follow him around physically, but that today, since Jesus

model also indicates the historical development of the "disciples" of Jesus within his earthly ministry. At an early point in Jesus' ministry, people became "disciples" of Jesus even though it was revealed later that they were not believers.

This model has two basic difficulties. First, the Greek term for "disciple" (*mathētēs*) is used in Scripture in a manner different than simply to designate a "learner." For example, the followers of John the Baptist are more like adherents to the prophet and the movement surrounding him than students of a teacher. The second difficulty appears when we note the normal use of the term *disciple* in the book of Acts. In Acts the term is generally used without any qualifiers simply to designate "Christians." For example, Acts 11:26 says, "The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." The disciples appear to be more than simply learners.

Disciples Are Committed Believers

Several others suggest that a disciple is a committed Christian, a believer who has made a commitment to follow Jesus and obey his radical demands of discipleship.⁷ Juan Carlos Ortiz answers one of our original questions by saying, "What is a disciple? A disciple is one who follows Jesus Christ. But because we are Christians does not necessarily mean we are his disciples, even though we are members of his kingdom. Following Christ means acknowledging Him as Lord; it means serving Him as a slave."⁸ Dwight Pentecost similarly asserts that "there is a vast difference between being saved and being a disciple. Not all men who are saved are disciples although all who

has ascended to heaven and believers can no longer follow him physically, it is inappropriate for us to speak of ourselves as disciples. See, for example, Donald R. Rickards, "Discipleship: A Biblical Doctrine?" *Voice* 55 (1976): 5–18; Fred L. Fisher, *Jesus and His Teachings* (Nashville: Broadman, 1972). This view will be considered directly in later chapters.

⁷E.g., Allan Coppedge, *The Biblical Principles of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 40–42; Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids/Colorado Springs: Zondervan/NavPress, 1978), 61ff., 83ff., 181–88; Walter A. Henrichsen, *Disciples Are Made—Not Born* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1974), 18, 40; Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1981), 36–45; *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids/Dallas: Zondervan/Redención Viva, 1989), 67–68, 87; Gary W. Kuhne, *The Dynamics of Discipleship Training: Being and Producing Spiritual Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 15; Juan Carlos Ortiz, *Disciple* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Creation House, 1975), 9; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Design for Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 14; Paul W. Powell, *The Complete Disciple* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1982), 11–12; J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Maturity* (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 108–9.

⁸Ortiz, *Disciple*, 9.

are disciples are saved. In discussing the question of discipleship, we are not dealing with a man's salvation. We are dealing with a man's relationship to Jesus Christ as his teacher, his Master, and his Lord.⁹ Walter Henrichsen points to the average Christian in the church who has not become fully committed to Jesus' discipleship teachings and says, "See that man? He is a believer who has refused to pay the price of becoming a disciple. In making that decision, he has relegated himself to a life of mediocrity. Given a chance to be first, he has chosen to be last. To use the words of the Lord Jesus, he is savorless salt. Whatever you do, don't become like him."¹⁰

This discipleship model emphasizes Jesus' radical challenge to count the cost of discipleship. It points to the small group of disciples who followed Jesus and emphasizes that when they left all to follow Jesus they became models of a higher spiritual calling. It compares Jesus' disciples with the crowds around him and concludes that the difference lay in responding to Jesus' call to commitment. The beginning point of discipleship, therefore, was commitment. This model suggests that there are two levels within the church today—disciples and ordinary believers. A disciple is a more committed Christian than the average Christian. This model of discipleship is quite widespread, being found in several different forms. Some who hold this view make a distinction between active "disciples" (found in some renewal movements and parachurch organizations) and ordinary Christians. Others who hold to this position make a distinction between "Spirit-filled disciples" (found in some churches in the charismatic movement)¹¹ and other Christians.

This model also encounters difficulties. One difficulty lies in the interpretation of Jesus' discipleship messages and the spiritual nature of the audiences to whom he directs his messages. For example, when Jesus gives a message directed to the "crowds," which calls them to count the cost before they become his "disciples" (Lk 14:25-33), or when he tells the rich young ruler to go give all his riches to the poor before he can enter into eternal life (Mt 19:16-22), what is the spiritual nature of the crowds? of the ruler? Are they already believers or not? What is the meaning of the message? Is it a call to deeper commitment or a call to salvation? An additional difficulty appears when we notice that in its various forms this model relies

⁹Pentecost, *Design for Discipleship*, 14.

¹⁰Henrichsen, *Disciples Are Made*, 40.

¹¹An extreme of this view is discovered in the "Shepherding Movement" founded in North America in the 1970s, which, tellingly, has also been called the "Discipleship Movement."

upon a two-class system of Christians, a problematic concept of biblical discipleship.¹²

Disciples Are Ministers

Another model of discipleship suggests that a disciple is the believer who has been called out from among lay believers in order to enter into ministry. Discipleship means to be with Jesus in order to learn from him how to serve the crowd, the church.¹³ Focusing on the distinction between the crowds and the disciples in the gospel of Matthew, Paul Minear maintains that because the crowds represent followers of Jesus, his disciples "form a much more limited and specialized group than is usually supposed. They are those chosen and trained as successors to Jesus in His role as exorcist, healer, prophet, and teacher."¹⁴ Dennis Sweetland has a similar perspective when he says: "Everyone is called to participate in the reign of God, but only some are called to be followers of Jesus: . . . The disciple of Jesus is called to serve other members of the eschatological community (cf. Mk 1:31) and, through the missionary enterprise, those outside the community as well."¹⁵

This model results from observing the close relationship of the twelve disciples with Jesus in his ministry and in their later ministry to the early church.¹⁶ It concludes that the radical call to discipleship

¹²Among those biblical scholars who say that a two-class distinction of Christians cannot be supported from a biblical concept of discipleship are Martin Hengel (*The Charismatic Leader and His Followers* [New York: Crossroad, 1981], 62-63) and Kvalbein ("Go Therefore," 51).

¹³E.g., H.-J. Degenhardt, *Lukas—Evangelist der Armen. Besitz und Besitzverzicht nach den lukanischen Schriften: Eine traditions- und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1965); Karl Hermann Schelkle, *Discipleship and Priesthood*, trans. Joseph Disselhorst, rev. ed. (New York: 1965); Mark Sheridan, "Disciples and Discipleship in Matthew and Luke," *BThB* 3 (1973): 235-55; Paul S. Minear, "The Disciples and the Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew," *ATHR Sup. Series*, 3 (March 1974): 28-44; R. Thysman, *Communauté et directives éthiques: la catéchèse de Matthieu*, *Recherches et Synthèses: Section d'exégèse*, no. 1 (Gembloux: Duculot, 1974); Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 31-33; Demetrios Trakatellis, "'Ακολουθεῖ μοι/Follow Me' (Mk 2:14): Discipleship and Priesthood," *GOThR* 30 (3, 1985): 271-85; Dennis M. Sweetland, *Our Journey with Jesus. Discipleship According to Mark*, GNS 22 (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1987).

¹⁴Minear, "Disciples and Crowds," 31.

¹⁵Sweetland, *Our Journey*, 17, 35.

¹⁶This is the implication of Gerd Theissen's study when he distinguishes "wandering charismatics" (the disciples) from the "sympathizers" in the local communities. Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 8-23.

was intended to be a model of how a believer today is called into ministry. This model of discipleship is also quite widespread, found especially in church traditions that emphasize a hierarchical order within their denominational structure and usually emphasize a distinction between the clergy and the laity. This model is also employed quite often by those who point to Jesus' training of his disciples as examples of how Christian leaders should be trained today.¹⁷

The same difficulties encountered in the second model apply here, but an additional difficulty is encountered because the twelve disciples are often used as the example. A problem arises when a clear distinction is not made between the Twelve as disciples and the Twelve as apostles. Most scholars agree that the terms *disciple* and *apostle* point to significantly different aspects of the Twelve. When do the Twelve function as disciples and when do they function as apostles? That is a crucial distinction for us to make.

Disciples Are Converts; Discipleship Comes Later

Others propose that disciples are converts to Jesus and that discipleship comes later. A disciple is one who has been evangelized, and the later process of growth is called "perfecting" or "discipleship."¹⁸ Donald McGavran says, "Church-growth men use the word 'discipling' to mean the initial step by which people come to Christ and become baptized believers. We go on and say that the second part of church growth is 'perfecting' or growing in grace."¹⁹ Another leader in the church growth movement, Peter Wagner, similarly declares that

a person is not a disciple just because he has been born in a Christian country or in many cases, even if he is a church member. . . . The basic meaning of disciple in the New Testament is equivalent to a true, born-again Christian. . . . Some have confused "making disciples" with "discipleship." Making disciples is the right goal of evangelism and missions according to the Great Commission. Once disciples are made, they then begin the lifetime road of discipleship.²⁰

¹⁷E.g., P. T. Chandapilla, *The Master Trainer* (Bombay: Gospel Literature Service, 1974); M. E. Drushal, "Implementing Theory Z in the Church: Managing People as Jesus Did," *Ashland Theological Bulletin* 20 (1988): 47-62; Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids/Colorado Springs: Zondervan/NavPress, 1978), 61ff., 83ff., 181-88.

¹⁸E.g., Donald A. McGavran and Win Arn, *How to Grow a Church* (Glendale, Calif.: Gospel Light, 1973); C. Peter Wagner, *Stop the World I Want to Get On* (Glendale, Calif.: Regal, 1974), 79.

¹⁹McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 80.

²⁰Wagner, *Stop the World*, 79-80. Wagner confuses the issue somewhat because of his distinction between disciple and discipleship. Elsewhere he

This discipleship model emphasizes that the meaning of the Great Commission's imperative, "make disciples" of all nations, is to make converts out of non-Christians. It stresses conversion as the beginning point of the Christian life, which means that conversion is the beginning point of becoming a disciple. Further, it recognizes that the term *disciple* is the most common designation for a "believer" in the Gospels and Acts.

The difficulty with this model is that it seems to separate the imperative of the Great Commission, "make disciples," from the following participles, "baptizing" and "teaching." The discrepancy may lie in the use of the English terms *disciple*, *discipling*, and *discipleship*. Is it possible to be a *disciple* without being on the road of *discipleship*? Is *discipling* different than *discipleship*?

Disciples Are Converts Who Are in the Process of Discipleship

Still others suggest that a disciple is a true believer who enters the life of discipleship at the time of conversion. In this model, as with the prior view, conversion is the beginning point of becoming a disciple, but discipleship is vitally linked to it as the natural result. Discipleship is not a second step in the Christian life but rather is synonymous with the Christian life. At conversion one becomes a disciple of Jesus, and the process of growth as a Christian is called discipleship. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to speak of entrance to the Christian life without recognizing that it also means entrance into the life of discipleship, is to cheapen the grace of God. He says:

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. . . . Happy are they who know that discipleship means the life which springs from grace, and that grace simply means discipleship. Happy are they who have become Christians in this sense of the word. For them the word of grace has proved a fount of mercy.²¹

Dallas Willard stresses that discipleship is not an optional, second step in the Christian life, and he declares that to conceive of the Christian life in terms of discipleship is not to imply salvation by works. He says, "We are not speaking of perfection, nor of earning God's gift of life. Our concern is only with the manner of entering into that life. While none can merit salvation, all must act if it is to be

seems to make the two synonymous; cf. C. Peter Wagner, "What Is 'Making Disciples'?" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 9 (1973): 285-93.

²¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 47, 60.

theirs."²² Similarly, James Montgomery Boice asserts that "discipleship is not a supposed second step in Christianity, as if one first becomes a believer in Jesus and then, if he chooses, a disciple. From the beginning, discipleship is involved in what it means to be a Christian."²³

This model of discipleship emphasizes that as Jesus called men and women to him, and as he sent his disciples out to make other disciples, he was calling men and women into a saving relationship with himself that would make a difference in the new disciples' lives. Therefore, Jesus' purpose in the Great Commission included both conversion and growth—that is, "making disciples" meant that one became a disciple at the moment of conversion and that growth in discipleship was the natural result of the new disciple's life. As Jesus sent the disciples out to make converts, the demands for discipleship made by Jesus in his teaching were directed, not only to his first followers, but to all true believers.

This model of discipleship is quite widespread, appearing in several different contexts. Some emphasize the personal side of the disciple's committed walk with Jesus,²⁴ while others accentuate the social ramifications of the disciple's impact upon society.²⁵ Some concentrate on the growth that must occur within the context of life within the Christian discipleship community as a witness to the world,²⁶ while others accent leadership training for selective disci-

²²Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 264. This quote is taken from an appendix entitled "Discipleship: For Super-Christians Only?" which first appeared in *Christianity Today*, October 10, 1980.

²³James Montgomery Boice, *Christ's Call to Discipleship* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 16.

²⁴E.g., Boice (*Christ's Call*), Bonhoeffer (*Cost of Discipleship*), and Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, as well as Michael Griffiths, *The Example of Jesus*, The Jesus Library, ed. Michael Green (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 43; Hans Kvalbein, "'Go Therefore and Make Disciples . . .': The Concept of Discipleship in the New Testament," *Themelios* 13 (1988): 48–53; John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean When He Says "Follow Me"?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 196ff.; William MacDonald, *True Discipleship* (Kansas City, Kans.: Walterick, 1975), 3–9.

²⁵E.g., Bonhoeffer (*Cost of Discipleship*), as well as Jim Wallis, *Agenda for Biblical People* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 23–26; Christopher Sugden, *Radical Discipleship* (Hants, England: Marshall, Morgan, & Scott, 1981), cf. 75; John R. Martin, *Ventures in Discipleship: A Handbook for Groups or Individuals* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1984), 17; Tom Sine, *Taking Discipleship Seriously: A Radical Biblical Approach* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1985); Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988), 7–8.

²⁶E.g., Alice Fryling, ed., *Disciplemakers' Handbook: Helping People Grow in Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 18; Allen Hadidian, *Successful Discipling* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 19ff.; Bill Hull, *The Disciplemak-*

ples,²⁷ and still others focus on the evangelistic and missionary work that will result from right discipleship emphases.²⁸ In spite of the diversity, the common denominator of this model is that all true believers are seen as disciples, and the Christian life is the outworking of Jesus' discipleship teachings.

This model of discipleship displays several difficulties. First, this model does not always clarify which of the demands of discipleship given by Jesus were for whom, nor does it specify the purpose for which the demands were given. Jesus' radical discipleship admonitions are often presented as a whole without distinguishing the audience to whom they were presented nor the purpose for which they were given. Are all disciples/believers under the obligations of all of the discipleship teachings? For example, does discipleship today mean that everyone must literally leave everything to follow Jesus, including family and occupation? Must all Christians give all their riches to the poor? What was the purpose of the discipleship challenges given by Christ in his public ministry?

This last question leads to the second difficulty. This model has been accused of confusing conversion and commitment because it does not always clarify what it means to "count the cost" prior to becoming a believer. Must a person perform acts of commitment prior to conversion? If so, how does this square with grace? If not, what does it mean to count the cost?

A third difficulty appears, as with some of the other discipleship models, when this model does not clarify the difference between the Twelve as disciples and the Twelve as apostles. What was uniquely intended for the Twelve as apostles, and what was directed to them as disciples?

Fourth, is there a difference between discipleship as it is found in the Gospels and as it is found in the early church in Acts? Pentecost seemed to mark a major turning point in the lives of the disciples. Did Pentecost make a difference in what it meant to be a disciple? Finally, what of the church today? If—as this model emphasizes—a two-level conception of Christianity is not valid, then what is the

ing Pastor: The Key to Building Healthy Christians in Today's Church (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1988), 52; John R. Martin, *Ventures in Discipleship: A Handbook for Groups or Individuals* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1984), 17.

²⁷E.g., A. B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve*, 1871, reprint (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971). Bruce calls all believers disciples but notes that some, like the Twelve, are called to leadership roles (cf. 11–12).

²⁸E.g., Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 2d ed. (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1964), 52; Richard R. DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations*, 1971, reprint (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 183; Carl Wilson, *With Christ in the School of Disciple Building: A Study of Christ's Method of Building Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 79ff.

spiritual state of the many people in churches today who apparently are not living their lives in conformity with Jesus' discipleship teachings? Is there a clear understanding of a relationship between salvation and discipleship in the church today? Are the discipleship teachings of Jesus so radical that they are no longer a practical reality for us in the modern world?

OVERCOMING DIFFICULTIES IN DISCIPLESHIP STUDIES

No wonder that poor young sailor I met in the servicemen's center was so troubled! Each of these models is represented by wonderful men and women of God who are serious about heeding Jesus' call to discipleship. If they cannot agree, how could he hope to understand Jesus' call to discipleship! Each model has correctly accented—at least partially—biblical teaching. Why the different models? Why the problems?

These various models have come about as people have attempted to get at the heart of Jesus' conception of discipleship and then have attempted to apply that conception to present-day ministry. The major problems surface when each model attempts to reconcile seemingly contradictory passages, especially when reconciling Jesus' gracious call to discipleship with his stringent demands of discipleship, or when reconciling Jesus' ministry to the crowds with his ministry to the disciples, or when reconciling general discipleship passages with the role of the Twelve, or when reconciling the portrait of disciples in the Gospels with their occurrence in the Acts and the nonoccurrence of the term *disciple* in the Epistles. The strength of each discipleship model lies in its emphasis upon a particular type of discipleship teaching. The weakness of each discipleship model lies in its deemphasis of other types of discipleship teachings. As we prepare to embark upon our journey through the first-century world of discipleship, several observations should be kept in mind.

Enter Jesus' First-Century World Before Following Him in Ours

Many difficulties can be overcome if we try to understand, first, the dynamics of discipleship as they occurred within the cultural setting of the first century before we try to apply those dynamics to our own lives.

With each new class studying the Gospels I like to perform a fun exercise. I take a few volunteers and ask them to stand on the platform in the large auditorium in which the lecture is held. I inform them that when I was a drill sergeant in the Army one of my

responsibilities was to teach the new recruits how to march. "So," I tell them, "I'm going to teach you how to march through the Gospels." As the volunteers line up, I call out, "Forward, march!" They go a few steps and then, after they stop, I ask them to tell me which foot they started out on. Some say right; some say left; others don't remember! Then I tell them how it is that military people always stay in step with each other: they always start out on the same foot, and that is always the *left* foot.

Likewise, when walking through the Gospels we must always start out on the same foot, the left foot. The left foot represents starting with understanding the Gospels first from the standpoint of what was happening in the first century as Jesus walked and taught all around Palestine. What did the discipleship saying of Jesus mean to those who first heard it while Jesus was with them? What was Jesus' intention in his first-century setting? Then, after our left foot is solidly planted, we can go to the right foot, which represents applying the passage to our lives today. Once we understand what the discipleship sayings meant to Jesus' original audience, we will be able to take the essential principles and apply them to our own setting. If we start with the right foot, we run the risk of reading our own set of values and circumstances back into the Gospels. We must allow the original intention to interpret our own application.²⁹ Several difficulties found in the above discipleship models result from starting with the right foot! We must be as clear as possible in our understanding of what it meant to follow Jesus in the first century if we are to be clear about what it means to follow Jesus in our modern world. We must start with the left foot!

Identify with the Appropriate Audience

Several difficulties in the discipleship models result from a lack of precision concerning the audiences who heard Jesus' teachings. Even as preachers and teachers today try to know their audiences so that they can minister to appropriate needs and circumstances, Jesus gave teaching that was appropriate for the spiritual state of his listeners. He gave teaching and offered invitations that were uniquely suited for the particular audience that surrounded him. For example, in his parabolic discourse Jesus gave parables that had one intention for the crowds (hiding the mysteries of the kingdom) and one intention for the disciples (revealing the mysteries of the

²⁹On the technical side, this reveals my hermeneutical approach, which flies in the face of much contemporary hermeneutics, especially certain literary-critical approaches that deny the reality of authorial intentionality.

kingdom) (cf. Mt 13:1–2, 10–17; Mk 4:1–12). If we do not precisely specify the audience, we will not identify with the audience and teaching that is appropriate for our spiritual state. Overall, discipleship teaching that is directed to the crowds deals with the act of becoming a disciple (evangelism), whereas teaching directed to the disciples deals with growth in discipleship (Christian growth).

Distinguish Between the Twelve as Disciples and the Twelve as Apostles

Throughout the history of the church a certain tension has been felt when looking at the lives of the Twelve. Special comfort has been drawn from recognizing that they are really not that much different than we are. If Jesus could make something of their lives, then he certainly can do something with ours! Yet, on the other hand, they seem so different than we are. The Twelve were used in the founding of the early church in ways not duplicated. When have we experienced such a ministry?

This points to a special difficulty that was observed when the Twelve were used in the above discipleship models: a clear distinction was not always made between the Twelve as disciples and the Twelve as apostles. Although the Twelve were both disciples and apostles, scholars agree that the terms *disciple* and *apostle* point to significantly different aspects. Indeed, while in the Gospels the Twelve are almost always called disciples, in the book of Acts the Twelve are never called disciples. In Acts they are only called apostles, to emphasize their leadership role in the early church. Therefore our preliminary observation is that as disciples the Twelve give us an example of how Jesus works with all believers, and as apostles the Twelve give us an example of how Jesus works with leaders of the church.

A. B. Bruce, in his classic study, *The Training of the Twelve*, provides clarification when he recognizes three stages in the history of the Twelve's relationship with Jesus. In the first stage they were simply believers in Jesus as the Christ and were his occasional companions (e.g., Jn 2:1, 12, 17, 22; 3:22; 4:1–27, 31, 43–45). In the second stage fellowship with Christ assumed the form of an uninterrupted attendance on his person, involving entire, or at least habitual abandonment of secular occupations (e.g., Mt 4:18–22; 9:9). In the third stage the twelve entered on the last and highest stage of their life's calling when they were chosen by the Master from the mass of his followers and formed into a select band to be trained for the great

work of the apostleship.³⁰ What is important to note is that in every stage, whether they were first-stage believers, second-stage attendants, or third-stage apostles, the Twelve were *disciples*. The word *disciple* expressed the most basic aspect of their life with Jesus: they were *his followers*, not followers of any other master. The second and third stages represent different points in their relationship with the Lord as he trained them for later ministry.

My own experience has certain similarities. As new believers, my wife and I were a part of the fellowship of other believers. When we were asked to lead a high school youth group we were called church workers. When we were led to go to seminary and later entered into the pastorate, I was designated a pastor. At each stage we considered ourselves to be disciples of Jesus, no different than any other disciples in the church. Yet at the same time we were different because of the different leadership roles to which the Lord called us. If we are to learn from the example of the Twelve, we must be careful to observe the role they played at any one particular point in their relationship with their Lord.

Allow the Book of Acts to Help Us Interpret the Meaning of Discipleship Terminology

Several difficulties have already been mentioned which are best resolved when we allow the book of Acts to help us interpret discipleship terminology. By the time of the early church, as recorded in Acts, the term *disciple* was synonymous with the true believer in Jesus. Luke speaks of the multitude of "believers" in Acts 4:32 and the multitude or congregation of "disciples," in Acts 6:2. In Luke's writings, the expressions "those who believe" and "the disciples" signify the same group of people (cf. Ac 6:7; 9:26; 11:26; 14:21–22). Acts clarifies for us that the common word for a believer in the early church was *disciple*. *Disciple* was also the earliest synonym for *Christian* (11:26).

Luke also makes clear the use of the terms *disciple* and *apostle* with reference to the Twelve. Unlike in his gospel, Luke in Acts never calls the Twelve "disciples." Since the Twelve are only called apostles in Acts, Luke stresses the distinctive role that the Twelve played as apostles in the early church. In Acts the Twelve are called apostles to accentuate their leadership role, and the common name for a believer is *disciple*.

The book of Acts also helps us see the transitions that took place in discipleship terminology. In the Gospels *disciple* is the most

³⁰A. B. Bruce, *Training of the Twelve*, 11–12.

common word used to designate the followers of Jesus, but the word does not occur at all in the Epistles. Instead, other terms, such as *brother/sister*, *saints*, *believers*, and *Christians* came to be the prominent terms used to designate followers of Jesus. We will explore the reasons for this transition in terminology in a later chapter. For now we simply need to point to the transition and emphasize that although the term *disciple* does not occur in the epistles, the book of Acts allows us to see that at the same basic historical period as the writing of the Epistles the terminology and concept of discipleship flourished.

DISCIPLES IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Today the English terms *disciple*, *discipleship*, and *discipling* imply different things to different users, depending upon the background of the user and the context of use. This is part of the problem behind the different discipleship models in existence today. We need standardized definitions of these very important terms or else we will not be talking about the same things. As we define them we must keep in mind three categories of usage: (1) How were the terms used in the general context of the first-century world? (2) How were the terms used in the biblical context? and (3) How are the terms used today? Although we will go into more background of these terms in the following chapters, a brief overview of the history of the term *disciple* is necessary before we can offer our definitions.

Behind our English word *disciple* lie the Latin terms *discipulus* (masculine) /*discipula* (feminine) and the Greek words *mathētēs* (masculine) /*mathētria* (feminine). Since these Latin and Greek nouns have a linguistic relationship to verbs for "learn"³¹ in their earliest history, they were used to refer to "learners" and "students." Eventually the meaning broadened so that they were used to refer to "adherents" of a great master. The Greek term especially, by the late Hellenistic period during the time when the New Testament was written, was used increasingly to refer to an adherent. The type of adherence was determined by the master, but it ranged from being the companion of a philosopher, to being the follower of a great thinker and master of the past, to being the devotee of a religious figure. Therefore, in most common usage, whether in the Roman or Greek world, a "disciple" was a person who was committed to a significant master.³² To say that a disciple is a learner is true, but this

³¹Latin *discere*; Greek *manthanein*.

³²For a discussion of the classical and Hellenistic background to these terms see Wilkins, *Concept of Disciple*, 11–42.

overemphasizes one aspect of the term's meaning and misses what the term primarily signified in the New Testament era. For example, the disciples of John the Baptist were not primarily learners since John was not primarily a teacher but a prophet. A disciple was one who made a life commitment to a particular master and his way of life. The type of "disciple" and the corresponding life of "discipleship" was determined by the type of master, but commitment to the master and his ways was central.

Therefore, it is not enough to ask what a disciple is. Rather, we must ask of whom the person is a disciple and at what period of time. A disciple of Jesus during his earthly ministry was one who made a life commitment to him. Among those who made an early commitment were some who gave up following Jesus around when his way proved to be different than what they had expected (cf. Jn 6:60–66). And one, Judas Iscariot, was proven to be a false disciple. But as Jesus increasingly revealed his messianic identity, those who believed in him claimed him as their Savior and God, and those who remained with him were Jesus' true disciples. Possibly the clearest declaration of what this meant was given by Simon Peter right after many of Jesus' early disciples left him (v. 66). Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Then Peter stepped forward and said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (vv. 67–69). Although even Jesus' closest followers, the Twelve, proved to be less than completely faithful when he went to the cross, the basic word used to designate a true follower of Jesus during his earthly life and the time of the early church was *disciple* (*mathētēs*).

DEFINITIONS

We are now prepared to give basic definitions for some crucial terms. These definitions will be fleshed out as we go through the biblical data, but at this point they should provide some orientation for our journey.

Disciple

In the New Testament the primary word for *disciple* is the Greek term *mathētēs* (*mathētai*, pl.). The definition of a disciple must be given in a general sense as well as in a specific sense with reference to what Jesus intended his disciples to be. This specific sense is seen

most clearly toward the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, in the Great Commission, and in the early church.³³

In the general sense, we may define a disciple as a committed follower of a great master. The general sense of the term has two common applications. (1) It was used nonreferentially to distinguish the disciple from the teacher (Mt 10:24–25; Lk 6:40). (2) It was also used to designate the followers of a great leader or movement. Thus, we find disciples of Moses (Jn 9:28), disciples of the Pharisees (Mt 22:16; Mk 2:18; Lk 5:33), disciples of John the Baptist (Mt 9:14; Mk 2:18; Lk 5:33; Jn 1:35; 3:25), and disciples of Jesus.

In the specific sense, a disciple of Jesus is one who has come to Jesus for eternal life, has claimed Jesus as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Jesus. *Disciple* is the primary term used in the Gospels to refer to Jesus' followers and is a common referent for those known in the early church as *believers*, *Christians*, *brothers/sisters*, *those of the Way*, or *saints*, although each term focuses upon different aspects of the individual's relationship with Jesus and others of the faith. The term was used most frequently in this specific sense; at least 230 times in the Gospels (e.g., Jn 6:66–71) and 28 times in Acts (e.g., Acts 9:1, 10, 19–20).

An interesting and important observation for us to make is that the plural form *disciples* is normally used. The singular form *disciple* never occurs in Mark, but it is frequent in John, where it always refers to a particular person (e.g., Jn 9:28; 18:15, 16; 19:26–28; 20:2–4, 8; 21:7, 20, 23, 24). The singular occurs in Matthew and Luke only on Jesus' lips, where it is used in teachings about the nature of discipleship (Mt 10:24, 25, 42; Lk 6:40; 14:26, 27, 33). The singular occurs only four times in Acts, where it always refers to a particular person (9:10, 26; 16:1; 21:16). The singular form designates an individual who professes to believe in and follow Jesus.³⁴ That the plural form is normally used expresses an important point: *individual disciples* are always seen in conjunction with the *community of disciples*, whether as Jesus' intimate companions or as the church.³⁵

The English term *disciple* has undergone much the same development as did the Greek and Latin terms. Although *disciple* has roots in the Latin noun *discipulus*, which is related to the verb "to learn"

³³Cf. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1:470–71.

³⁴We should note that Judas is called one of Jesus' disciples (Jn 12:4). Here is an individual who professes to be but is not a true believer. See the discussion of Judas in chap. 8.

³⁵The significance of this concept will be discussed in full in later chapters, esp. chap. 13.

(*discere*), present English usage only secondarily associates *disciple* with a person who is a student or learner. The English noun is now associated most often with the words *supporter*, *follower*, or *adherent*. The word *disciple* in contemporary usage "pertains exclusively to someone devoted to a master or patron. Most strictly, *disciple* suggests a religious situation: the *disciples* of Buddha who codified his teachings. In general usage, the word refers to someone's ardent advocacy of any prominent figure or theory: an early disciple of Freud. . . ."³⁶ The words *supporter* and *follower* are perhaps the nearest synonyms: "Supporter is the general term for one who allies himself with a cause or shows allegiance to its leader. . . . Follower and disciple are related in that they emphasize devotion to a leader rather than to its doctrine or cause."³⁷ Hence, in the Christian sense, a disciple of Jesus is one who has come to him for eternal life, has claimed him as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following him.

Discipleship and Discipling

The terms *discipleship* and *discipling*, are English words derived, obviously, from *disciple*. The nearest equivalent to these expressions in the New Testament is the verbal form, *mathēteuō*, "make or become disciples," which occurs only four times (Mt 13:52; 27:57; 28:19; Ac 14:21). In common parlance, *discipleship* and *discipling* today relate to the ongoing life of the disciple. *Discipleship* is the ongoing process of growth as a disciple. *Discipling* implies the responsibility of disciples helping one another to grow as disciples. Therefore, discipleship and discipling can be narrowly understood as a technical discussion of the historical master-disciple relationship, but these terms can also be understood in a broader way as Christian experience—that is, the self-understanding of the early Christian believers as believers: what such a way of life requires, implies, and entails.³⁸ Thus, when we speak of Christian discipleship and discipling we are speaking of what it means to grow as a Christian in every area of life. Since *disciple* is a common referent for *Christian*, *discipleship* and *discipling* imply the process of becoming like Jesus

³⁶S. I. Hayakawa et al., "Student: Pupil, Scholar, Learner, Disciple, Protégé," *Use the Right Word: Modern Guide to Synonyms and Related Words* (Pleasantville, N.Y.: Reader's Digest Association, 1979), 596–97.

³⁷Ibid., "Supporter," 607.

³⁸Fernando F. Segovia, "Introduction: Call and Discipleship—Toward a Re-examination of the Shape and Character of Christian Existence in the New Testament," in *Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 2.

Christ. Discipleship and discipling mean living a fully human life in this world in union with Jesus Christ and growing in conformity to his image.

This definition is much broader than what many conceive of discipleship and discipling. Most conceive of discipleship as a more narrow program or training time. But when Jesus says that "a student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Lk 6:40), he enunciates a principle common to all master-disciple relationships: a disciple is involved in a natural process that will bring him or her to be like the master. That principle is central to biblical discipleship: in this life a disciple is always in a discipleship process, the process of becoming like the Master, Jesus. This establishes a link between explicit discipleship sayings in the Gospels and Acts with similar concepts in the rest of the New Testament, such as Paul's statement that the goal of God's calling in the life of the Christian is to be conformed to the image of Christ (cf. Ro 8:28-30). As one author says, "Indeed, full discipleship and full Christlikeness are the same thing."³⁹ Hence, all who are called to be Jesus' disciples are in the process of becoming more like the Master, Jesus Christ—that is, the process of *discipleship*. Each disciple also has the responsibility to be involved in helping other disciples grow—that is, *discipling*.

IMPLICATIONS

I wish that I could go back and talk to that young sailor in the servicemen's center, but I never saw him again after that night. What would I tell him if I could talk to him right now? I would like to comfort him, to tell him that I understand what he was struggling with, that the issues are complex, indeed as complex as the Christian life itself. But at the same time I would like to encourage him! Jesus wants him to get up and follow him right now as his disciple!

As I have studied and taught and pastored over the years I have seen many other younger and older Christians struggle with the same issues. Most of the difficulties can be attributed to the tension found in many areas of the Christian life, especially in the tension between the "already and the not yet." I want to tell that young sailor that if he is a Christian, he already is a disciple, but during this life he is not yet a complete disciple. He will continue to grow and to develop and to become more fully a disciple of Jesus.

The tendency is to emphasize one over the other. Some of us focus on the "not yet" in a perfectionistic way, and we in ministry often set

³⁹Pierson Parker, "Disciple," *IDB*, 1:845.

up standards that only a few attain. This creates a heavy burden that can result in defeatism or exclusivism. Or some of us focus on the "already" and become so comfortable with the work of grace God has performed in saving us that we do not heed Jesus' call to press forward and grow as his disciples. Once we have responded to Jesus' invitation to follow him, we have become his disciples; we need to rest with that assurance. At the same time, as we rest with this assurance, we must get up and walk on the path of discipleship down which Jesus leads us in this life. We must balance the already and the not yet of discipleship. Everett Harrison declares:

The future-oriented emphasis on life in the Synoptics is congruent with the emphasis they give to the theme of discipleship. People are summoned to follow Jesus, which suggests present incompleteness and progress toward a goal. The consummation lies ahead. Parenthetically, in the very nature of the case discipleship involves protest against any doctrine of sinless perfection in the present life: we will continue to be followers.⁴⁰

The implications of this balanced approach to following the Master will impact significantly our choice of words, our theology, and the practical outworking of our lives. Many other implications will be examined in the process of our study, but these are important to raise now.

Semantical

Some implications are simply semantical. I recently gave a guest lecture at the University of Aberdeen on the occurrence of disciple groups in the first century. I was intrigued by the way two professors were almost convinced that we should give up the use of the English term *disciple* because it is so closely tied to certain expectations in the mind of hearers today. The more we talked, the more we agreed that we need to be more accurate in our use of terminology and not read modern usage back into the first-century context. We need to communicate by the use of our words as closely as possible what Jesus intended his followers to understand and what the biblical authors desired for us to know.

Several discipleship ministries have developed wonderful methods of helping Christians grow, but they have created confusion by their choice of words. Some ministries refer to those only with advanced commitment as "disciples." This implies that those with

⁴⁰Everett F. Harrison, *The Apostolic Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 142.

less commitment are not disciples. Instead, we should call all believers disciples and those with advanced commitment something like "mature disciples."

Some organizations designate only those who are active in the practice of Christian disciplines as "disciples." This implies that certain activities make a person a disciple. Rather, we should emphasize that Jesus called all believers to activity; those who are faithful we might refer to as something like "faithful disciples." Remember, for a period of time, even some of the Twelve were less than completely faithful yet continued to be called disciples.

Some ministries reserve the terminology "discipleship training" for a method that focuses on only a few people who have advanced in the Christian life. Instead, we might speak of "leadership training." Jesus chose the Twelve out from a "multitude of disciples" in order to train them for their future leadership role as apostles. The rest of the disciples continued to be under his teaching as they grew as disciples (cf. Lk 6:12-17).

Our choice of terminology determines the kind of expectations that we communicate to people. Since all true Christians are disciples, the ministry of the church may be seen in its broadest sense as "discipleship." Various ministries within the church should be seen as specialization, aspects, or stages of discipleship training. If we incorrectly use discipleship terminology, we run the risk of communicating that the uncommitted have the option to remain that way if they so desire, or else we place unrealistic expectations upon the committed ones. Discipleship teaching is applicable to all Christians.

Theological

While our study is intended primarily as an inquiry into the nature of biblical discipleship, it will also have profound theological implications. A case in point is the impact serious discipleship study should have on the "Lordship salvation" debate that has raged in some circles of North American evangelicalism off and on throughout the twentieth century. Although both sides of the controversy have used discipleship passages as support, their discussion of those passages tends—at times—to be more polemical than informed. Polemicism can have a place in debate if it helps clarify the issues, but in this case it tends to fuzz them.

For example, both sides of the debate come to amazingly different conclusions when they point to Jesus' startling discipleship words addressed to the crowds, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple" (Lk

14:26). One advocate of "non-Lordship salvation" points to those words and says, "... it should be clear that they have nothing to do with the terms on which we receive eternal life."⁴¹ Because those words delineate conditions for entrance to discipleship, this author apparently interprets all "entrance to discipleship" passages in like manner, saying that none of them addresses the issue of entrance to eternal life. In this case, he even includes the Great Commission's imperative to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19) as only a broad call into a vital experience with God, not as entrance to eternal life.⁴² While we can appreciate his struggle with Jesus' difficult words, eliminating the Great Commission as a message on entrance to salvation is a tenuous interpretation which even few other "non-Lordship salvation" advocates would hold.⁴³

On the other side, one advocate of "Lordship salvation" points to the same discipleship words of Jesus cited above and says that Jesus uses these words "because He is eager to chase the uncommitted away and to draw true disciples to Himself. He does not want half-hearted people deceived into thinking that they are in the kingdom. Unless He is the number one priority, He has not been given His rightful place."⁴⁴ Further, when suggesting that the term *disciple* is a synonym for *Christian*, he says "the call to Christian discipleship explicitly demands just that kind of total dedication. It is full commitment, with nothing knowingly or deliberately held back. No one can come to Christ on any other terms."⁴⁵ The expressions "number one priority," "total dedication," "full commitment," and "nothing held back" have very strong overtones that may confuse people in the church. What do these expressions mean to a person who is coming to Christ for salvation? Such statements need to be carefully explained, or else they can be misunderstood to imply a works salvation. While we appreciate this endeavor to take Jesus' words seriously, we must also be clear about what Jesus intended the crowds to understand by his words and be clear in delivering those words to a present-day audience. We must be sure that we have communicated Jesus' invitation appropriately.

⁴¹Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids/Dallas: Zondervan/Redención Viva, 1989), 68.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 160-61.

⁴³E.g., Charles C. Ryrie understands the Great Commission's imperative to mean entrance to eternal salvation and to be the missionary task of the church; cf. Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1989), 103-6; and *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 1502, n. on Mt 28:19.

⁴⁴John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean When He Says "Follow Me"?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 201.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 197.

Both sides of the contemporary "Lordship/non-Lordship salvation" issue have wonderful men and women of God who contend for their position. Both sides are contending for what they perceive to be the essence of the Gospel message. Although our theological discussions are important to modern life and doctrine, we must be careful not to let our theological agendas compel an interpretation of the text. And we must not cloud the meaning of the text with our rhetoric. What did Jesus mean by those startling discipleship words? What would the crowds have understood those words to mean? We will discuss them more fully in later chapters, but we suggest here in preliminary fashion that they are a challenge for people to count the cost of claiming Jesus Christ as their God. But that challenge was delivered to a particular group of people in first-century Palestine whom Jesus assumed understood what he intended for them to understand.

Jesus' words have caused scholars down through the centuries to struggle with his intended meaning. We will continue to struggle with them here. Our study of his discipleship teachings will have profound theological implications, but we need to allow Jesus to inform our theology rather than allowing our theological agendas to determine our interpretation. We need to hear Jesus' radical discipleship teachings as he intended them to be understood and then appropriately apply them to our own setting. We need to walk with the "left foot" first through such sayings before we interpret them from the "right foot"!

Practical

Serious discipleship study has implications that are forcibly practical as well. Since the discipleship life is the life expected of all believers, then the gauntlet is now thrown down by Jesus for all of us to follow him. Yes, some of us are called to specific areas of ministry and service not intended for all disciples, but when we hear the word *disciple*, do the ears of all of us open with expectancy? Far too often we think, "Disciple? Oh, that's for an extremist. I'm just a normal Christian." Far too often we imply when we say that we are "discipling" someone or when we are starting a "discipleship program," that we have in mind the extraserious Christian. Rather, we need to recognize that when Jesus spoke of disciples he had in mind what would be the *normal* Christian, not the abnormal.

A RADICAL YET REALISTIC SUMMONS

What will our churches and ministries be like if we live out the message that the expectations of discipleship found in the Gospels

are expectations for all Christians, not just for a few committed ones? Jesus wants a church full of disciples who dare to go out into the world to make a difference and to live life the way it was intended to be lived. Yet, as the old hymn goes, "God never gives a call without the enabling." As he calls us to discipleship he is also right there with us to lead the way. Our young sailor needed to understand that Jesus' call to discipleship was a radical yet realistic summons to follow the Master out into the adventure of life's journey. That is precisely the message that Jesus gives to each of us.

Following up:

1. Which of the five models listed above reflects the definition of biblical discipleship you gave at the beginning of this chapter? Under which model were you raised spiritually?
2. How have the strengths and weaknesses of the model under which you were "discipled" affected your life?
3. Why do you think that there are so many models of discipleship?
4. What would you do to help the sailor out of his dilemma? What advice would you give him?