

What do we mean when we say ‘discipleship’?

The terms ‘disciple’ and ‘discipleship’ have waxed and waned in popularity through the history of the Christian churches. Though never entirely falling out of usage, it has probably increased in currency in the 20th Century,¹ and particularly since the late 1990s – not least in several significant denominational reports, including the Methodist Church’s *Discipleship and the People called Methodists* (2010) and the Church of England report *Developing Discipleship* (2014).

Despite this however, it’s noticeable how comparatively little careful thought there is about what these terms mean. The most striking, and most commonly quoted, line of Jeremy Worthen’s companion paper to the *Developing Discipleship* report is that ‘there is no well-developed authoritative source for the theology of discipleship to which the contemporary Church of England can readily look to inform its teaching here’.² Within the world of ‘professional Christianity’, sometimes it appears to function as a catch-all for the core business of the Church, in much the same way as ‘mission’ and ‘ministry’ have also gone through phases of popularity in recent decades.

If at times ‘discipleship’ appears to mean everything and nothing, it can at other times be identified as primarily a lay concern: the ordained (and some officially approved lay people) do ‘ministry’; everyone else does ‘discipleship’ (this is sometimes reflected in the labels given to different support ministries by dioceses and other local denominations – for some reason the ‘ministry’ officer and ‘discipleship’ officer work with completely different constituencies of people, even though on the other hand few would disagree that all Christians have a ‘ministry’ and that the ‘ordained’ are disciples too).³

If the above is a difficulty with how the word ‘discipleship’ is used by those who work within the institutions of the church, ‘disciple’ and ‘discipleship’ can also be ambiguous terms in everyday language. Whilst those who lead churches may talk easily in terms of ‘discipleship’, this is not always (and in some denominations only very infrequently) the normal language for talking about the ordinary Christian life.⁴ People may think of themselves as ‘Christians’ or by a denominational label, as ‘believers’ within some evangelical or Protestant traditions, and may talk about themselves as having ‘a Christian life’ or a ‘spiritual life’ – but often not about themselves as ‘disciples’ (anyone attempting to research discipleship must therefore understand that the topic may need to be approached obliquely, possibly without ever using the term, and certainly without assuming that it is most Christians’ natural way of describing their life with God).

Meanwhile, others may wish to resist applying the term to themselves, feeling that it should be reserved for ‘serious Christians’ – i.e., those who display evident personal holiness. At one level it’s absolutely right that people probably are reluctant to ascribe this label to themselves if they believe

¹ ‘Probably’ because I need to do some more research to establish just how widely ‘discipleship’ was used to apply to the practice of the ordinary Christian life in earlier centuries.

² Jeremy Worthen, *Towards a contemporary theology of discipleship: sources for the Church of England* (Ministry Division, Education Division, Public Affairs Division of the Church of England, London, 2014), p. 1

³ As Paula Gooder notes, whilst ‘discipleship’ is seen as central to the language of Christian faith and practice in the *Developing Discipleship* report, it is barely mentioned in the companion report on ministerial development.

⁴ As my colleague Simon Foster comments, ‘discipleship’ can often be used as a ‘management term’ rather than as part of a generally agreed vocabulary of Christian faith and practice.

that this is what they understand the label to mean. But the difficulty is that the 'disciple' then becomes merely someone to be inspired by, to learn from, or perhaps even to aspire to – a future goal but not a personal identity in the present.

Finally it's also important to acknowledge that 'discipleship' may denote different things from culture to culture, and at different times in history. In sections of the contemporary US church, 'discipleship' is primarily taken to be the business of discipling *others*, whereas in the UK context, 'discipleship' is primarily about the development of one's *own* life of Christian worship and service. More widely in news media, to be labelled a 'disciple' of someone can either be a vague term, indicating that someone has been inspired by someone else (e.g., the disciples of an artist or composer) or it can be used to describe something more sinister – a slavish devotion to a deviant religious figure (although in this case it can at least be argued that the idea of discipleship as counter-cultural would have made sense to the early Christians).

In similar fashion (and more of this later), 'discipleship' tends to wax and wane throughout Christian history – both the currency of the words 'disciple' and 'discipleship' themselves (which are sometimes heavily used and other times replaced by alternatives such as 'the Christian life', 'holy living' or 'lay piety'), and also the degree of interest amongst the Church's leaders in calling, equipping and sending the people of God to walk the way of Jesus. Given that the word 'disciple' is primarily used in the Gospels and hardly at all in the rest of the New Testament and in much of church history up to the 20th Century, some have even suggested that it 'discipleship' is of severely limited helpfulness as a theological concept. Reactions to the Church of England's *Developing Discipleship* report also highlighted a certain distrust of the idea within the church itself: for the sociologist Linda Woodhead, discipleship is 'theologically peripheral', whilst for the religious commentator Angela Tilby, 'Scripture might therefore suggest that discipleship is not the best description of normative Christian life' and more specifically, that 'discipleship as a convenient term to ramp up the commitment of the laity sounds alien to Anglican instincts, and it is'.⁵ (Though it must also be said that these appear to express a minority view: the majority of people Simon and I have spoken to in the aftermath of the report's publication feel that discipleship is anything but peripheral, and are actually delighted that the Church of England is talking about discipleship quite explicitly...). Another reason for continuing to run with the term 'discipleship', despite its difficulties, is that it's difficult to come up with a more satisfactory alternative, or one which has a stronger pedigree in the New Testament. However, the fact that 'disciple' recedes into the background for many periods in church history does raise very important questions as to why that was the case. (This is one question I am trying to answer in my wider research on 'discipleship' in Christian history).

This variety (perhaps even confusion) of understandings suggests that it may be useful to seek to map out the 'discipleship' terrain a little more fully and systematically. More than one person who knows a lot about this area of Christian believing and belonging has suggested to me that the nearer one gets to 'discipleship' the more slippery it becomes, to the point of scepticism as to one can ever define 'discipleship' at all. I would beg to disagree. If 'discipleship' is slippery it is no more so than

⁵ Linda Woodhead, 'The Challenges that the new C of E Reports Duck', *Church Times*, 23 Jan 2015 [<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2015/23-january/comment/opinion/the-challenges-that-the-new-c-of-e-reports-duck>]; Angela Tilby, 'Dissing the D-Word', *Church Times*, 30 Jan 2015 [<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2015/30-january/comment/columnists/dissing-the-d-word>].

other words we use all the time – such as ‘culture’, ‘ethnicity’ or ‘nationality’. Since the cultural turn taking place in the human sciences in the last decades of the twentieth century, one cannot but acknowledge the fragility and instability of all human language. But a couple of decades beyond the post-modern/post-structuralist moment, most of us have realised that we can still find meaning in significant words and concepts even if we acknowledge our own partiality/provisionality in using them. More than this, however difficult it is to define the content and focus of discipleship, ‘disciple’ comes straight from our New Testament source material in a way which some other labels of Christian identity and purpose do not. It is part of our guiding narrative, however we then interpret it for today. And if we want to understand what helps people grow as Christian disciples, we need to begin from a strong basis of understanding about what ‘discipleship’ is.

This is a massive task, in terms of biblical scholarship, church history and contemporary theology and practice. However, one starting point is to refrain from jumping straight to a definition of discipleship (as if this was going to be a neat, easy job anyway), but instead try to map some of the different ways in which different Christian thinkers have tried to define it, and some of the key ways in which definitions of discipleship might fall along different spectra of possibility. Here I’m trying to blend a variety of disciplines – holding in mind biblical/theological uses of the term with an emerging understanding of its historical variety. But I also want to emphasise that this is not designed to be a comprehensive survey of understandings of discipleship – as a quick glance at the references list at the end will show, what follows very much reflects a fairly eclectic reading career. In particular, I have found myself treating the word in the same way that a structural anthropologist would – trying to create a series of typologies that bring out different ways in which discipleship is understood.

Each of these contain a spectrum of possibilities for understanding the practice of the Christian life. In reality, different movements or traditions within Christianity have tended to emphasise one end of a spectrum over the other. Yet there is something about the whole of the spectrum which helps us towards a rounded understanding of what ‘discipleship’ might mean. (This approach shares something in common with Euan Cameron’s *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches’ Past*, in which he identifies a number of underlying points of continuity between Christian practice in different ages but sees them almost like a set of strings on a musical instrument, which are vibrate more or less strongly at different times, and in different chord combinations).

So, how do we begin to break down what we mean by ‘discipleship’?

1. Content and Process: Is Discipleship a ‘thing’?

The first place to start is with Jesus. As Christian disciples, we follow a person, not a system. In that sense, discipleship is as much a matter of process (the act of following) than it is about content (doing or thinking certain things). In that sense, it is notable that whilst the word ‘disciple’ occurs within the New Testament, the word ‘discipleship’ never does. It is as if the New Testament is cautious about over-reification. And yet if that ‘following’ is open-ended, it also has structure and form; form which is prescribed (or perhaps, invited) by the person, teaching and actions of Jesus, the witness of Scripture and tradition, and the collective experience of disciples through the ages. As a result, it remains possible (and indeed important) to recognise that Christian discipleship has an organising framework, even if the totality of what constitutes Christian discipleship exceeds any framework that we place upon it. We cannot make discipleship anything we want it to be, and yet at the same time we cannot comprehensively and finally pin down what it is using any human system

or structure, without displacing Jesus from his rightful place at the heart of discipleship. We talk about worshipping ‘in Spirit and in truth’ and this captures something important about the shape of discipleship: there is a certain openness to discipleship which derives from a living relationship with the three persons of the Trinity, but also something that is more fixed derived from engaging with the content of that revelation of God (the things Jesus teaches, the pattern of life he lived, etc). At different times and in different movements, Christians have tended to emphasise one more than the other, but both are somehow important.

2. Synchronic and Diachronic: Discipleship in Time

Christian discipleship needs to be thought of both in the present moment (‘synchronic’), and in the perspective of change over time (‘diachronic’). Humanly speaking at least, there is no pure version of ‘discipleship’ which stands outside history – we are always disciples in a particular time and place. What we do is defined by our place in a bigger story (Sam Wells and Tom Wright are just two who have written eloquently and influentially of the *missio dei* as a ‘drama in five acts’, in which we as Christian disciples improvise our part in relation to the drama of creation, fall, covenant, Christ and God’s ultimate reconciliation of all things to himself and the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth⁶), and yet what it means to be a disciple is also always worked out in the present.

Time is also important in discipleship in another way, namely in the tension between *being*, and *becoming* a disciple. Leading Christian thinkers have tended to vary in emphasis here – Irenaeus, for example, draws on some aspects of Paul to assert that ‘disciple’ is a status we need to earn over the course of a holy life. Bonhoeffer, by contrast, mines the early chapters of the synoptic gospels, and the stories of Jesus calling the Twelve, to argue that we are already disciples as soon as we take the first step. Both views have some truth to them. Just as the Kingdom of God is ‘near’ and ‘already here’ so it is with discipleship: in some senses we are already disciples the moment we choose to follow, but we spend a lifetime becoming the thing that we long to be.

3. What kind of an enterprise is ‘discipleship’?

If discipleship is about both being and becoming, this forces us to ask what kind of ‘movement’ is taking place, or (to put it a different way) how have people tried to characterise the nature of that ‘being and becoming’ in Christ? The New Testament offers us a number of recurrent images and clues as to the nature of the enterprise. Amongst other things, the New Testament writings speak of discipleship variously as:

- Growth
- Becoming
- Imitation
- Obedience
- Steadiness, firmness or persistence
- Transformation
- A journey
- Fruitfulness

⁶ Sam Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (2004); NT Wright, How can the Bible be Authoritative? [<http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/how-can-the-bible-be-authoritative/>]

- Reflecting (Christ)

The image of 'discipleship' as a journey has been one of the most appealing in Christian spirituality, but it should be noted that it is not by any means the most prominent metaphor in the New Testament, and we could do worse than recover the richness of the alternatives. (One underlying polarity in writing about discipleship is between those who see discipleship as primarily a linear or even non-linear journey – e.g., from immaturity to maturity – and those who don't see it so much as about travel but about resting or abiding – e.g., in obedience to what is set down, or in sitting at Jesus' feet. Something of that tension is present in the NT itself, suggesting that in some respects it's a both/and. However, in reality one has been emphasised more heavily than the other at different times and by different movements within the history of Christianity).

Even within the metaphor of the journey, there are a wide variety of images: in some Christian writing, the path of discipleship is a straight path (think of the *Didache* or the *Shepherd of Hermas*, where there is a straightforward choice between a 'way of life' and a 'way of death' – both clearly marked out. Elsewhere the path is rough, winding and occasionally obscure (think of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*). In some Christian writing, the path of discipleship is smooth; elsewhere it is rough and littered with obstructions. Additionally, the path of discipleship (and the gate through which it leads) may sometimes be conceived as narrow; in other places (though perhaps less frequently) it is wide and well-marked.

Another way of exploring the nature of the enterprise of discipleship is to consider the different ways in which the journey of the Christian life is narrated. In his book, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, the US practical theologian James Hopewell drew on literary types of story to draw out four contrasting orientations of church life. These could equally well apply to discipleship:

- Canonic: discipleship as obedience, or conformity to inherited norms
- Romantic: discipleship as a questing enterprise, about the adventure of faith, being (re)united with the disciple's object of desire (God)
- Comic: discipleship as a journey from dissonance to resolution [define better]
- Ironic: discipleship as perseverance, of endurance amidst a world with no meaning⁷

It would be possible to see all of these, in some ways, represented by different theological writers or Christian movements: Stanley Hauerwas as arguably an example of the 'romantic' tendency (think of his article 'Christianity: It's not a religion, it's an adventure'⁸), medieval papal monarchy as an example of the 'canonic' (with a strong emphasis on obedience to a magisterium), some forms of revivalism as instances of the 'comic' (with a strong emphasis on Jesus/salvation offering the existential resolution to a state of fear and imprisonment).

Here I have chosen to focus on just a few relatively obvious ways of typologising Christian thought on the nature of the 'enterprise' of discipleship, and there are almost innumerable alternative ways of cutting the discipleship cake. Regardless of which of these are particularly helpful to us today, all of them should lead us to ask the question: what kind of an enterprise do we understand Christian discipleship to be?

⁷ James F Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (1987), pp. 67-85

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, 'Christianity: it's not a religion, it's an adventure' in: John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (eds), *The Hauerwas Reader* (2001), pp. 552-536

4. Intentions, means and ends

In the sociology of religion, there is a hoary old debate about whether ‘religion’ is best defined substantively (i.e., by what it is – e.g., beliefs and practices) or functionally (i.e., by what it does – e.g., its social functions). Some more recent scholars have sought to transcend this debate by recasting the whole question. French sociologist Daniele Hervieu-Leger combines both the ‘being’ and ‘doing’ in her description of religion as a ‘chain of memory’.⁹ There is a very similar tension within the concept of discipleship. From one perspective, we can define discipleship by its content, or derive a definition from the results it is said to produce – and yet somehow both are important.

We work with both of these things all the time, both in ‘Christianity as taught’ and ‘Christianity as practised’ (more of that later). However, I suspect that we are mostly not terribly good at untangling and articulating the different languages and imagery we draw upon for inspiration. What follows is an attempt to separate some of these out from each other, although I accept that to some degree they all blur into each other. Here, I am confining myself to those that appear in the New Testament (although only the first of the four groupings here is titled with a biblical word). A much bigger historical survey would almost certainly provide more.

- **Fruit:** One helpful way of understanding the nature of Christian discipleship is to ask what kind of impact or difference we are called to make. In short, what kind of fruit should we bear? What kind of outcomes should result from our discipleship? In some respects, the status of ‘disciple’ is not reliant on the fruit we bear - we are saved by grace, not works (at least in a Pauline and Augustinian understanding of faith). Yet at the same time, Paul and Augustine, no less than many other Christian writers, expect certain fruit to emerge from the Christian life. The importance of fruitfulness is shown in the parable of the talents, and other parables underlining that Jesus (and also significant passages in the OT) see true obedience as consisting of doing the will of the Father. As Jesus says ‘whoever did this for the least of these... did it for me’ and ‘not all who say “Lord, Lord” will enter the Kingdom of Heaven’. The New Testament is rich with examples of the kind of fruit we are to bear as followers of Jesus – loving our neighbour, being peacemakers, welcoming strangers, exhibiting joy and self-control, and so on. Overall, what I am saying here is that ‘discipleship’ is in part defined by what it should result in, although different traditions and movements within Christian history have tended to place more or less emphasis on fruitfulness, and have tended to emphasise different sorts of fruit (e.g., personal holiness, or missional impact).
- **Practices:** A quite different organising framework for Christian discipleship is found in the idea of ‘practices’. ‘Practice’ is very apposite to discipleship, as the original Greek word ‘mathetes’ echoes the idea of an apprentice to a master (Paula Gooder defines as ‘one who learns as they follow’¹⁰). We ‘practice’ (as in ‘repeatedly do in order to get better at’) but also ‘practise’ (as in ‘actually do, not just believe or talk about’). At the edges, practices blur

⁹ Daniele Hervieu-Leger (tr. Simon Lee), *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (2000)

¹⁰ Talk given at Pilgrim Presentation Day at St Martin in the Bull Ring, Birmingham - although I have subsequently heard her define discipleship with greater emphasis on the ‘learning’ than the ‘following’. See also: Alison Morgan, *Following Jesus: the Plural of Disciples is Church* (2015) [chapter 2 reproduced at: <https://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/what-is-a-disciple/>].

with fruit: as Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass have noted, ‘practices’ are things which in some way fuse the activity undertaken and the virtue it is designed to promote. A good example is hospitality, in that we extend welcome to others and in so doing seek to allow this to shape us as more hospitable people, open to God and others. ‘Practices’ are, if you like, the kinds of goal-oriented work which Christians are supposed to spend our time doing. Contributors to Volf and Bass’ book deal with Christian practices such as healing, discernment, encounter of the Other, and hospitality, although there are more with a solid foundation in the New Testament.¹¹ Of course, this is not the only way of distinguishing Christian practices – recent years have seen an increasing number of popular devotional books offering their own list of core Christian practices (to take one widely-selling example, Barbara Brown Taylor’s *Altar in the World* offers as a somewhat more thematic list the practices of ‘waking up to God’, ‘paying attention’, ‘wearing skin’, ‘walking on the earth’, ‘getting lost’, encountering others’, ‘living with purpose’, ‘saying no’, ‘carrying water’ [i.e., physical labour], ‘feeling pain’ and ‘being present to God’¹²).

- **Disciplines:** ‘Disciplines’ bleed into ‘practices’ but here I am using the term to connote those things which hold us steady, in our Christian lives, so that Christian *practices* might be seen, Godly *dispositions* might grow, and the *fruit* of the Kingdom of God might result. My own personal favourite list of Christian spiritual disciplines, and the one which feels securely anchored into the richness of Christian thought and practice across 2000 years of history, is that found in Richard Foster’s contemporary classic *Celebration of Discipline*. Foster focuses on twelve disciplines ordered relatively painlessly into three clusters: the ‘inward’ disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting and study), the ‘outward’ disciplines (simplicity, solitude, submission and service) and the ‘corporate’ disciplines (confession, worship, guidance and celebration).¹³ This is helpful particularly helpful understanding Christian discipleship in that Foster resists the perennial temptation to see the Christian life as concerned primarily with the interior or contemplative life. Interior disciplines such as meditation are placed alongside outward disciplines such as service, and corporate disciplines such as confession or celebration. As Foster asserts, the disciplines are not the goal of discipleship; rather, they open the door to a deeper walk with God.
- **Dispositions:** By ‘dispositions’ I mean those virtues or habits of mind which offer a Christian moral compass and guide our actions. They are the stuff of Christian character. ‘Dispositions’ bleed into ‘fruit’ in that things such as patience, self-control and humility are also the fruit or outcomes of a holy life as well as describing some of the manner of living that life. But it is also worth recognising that Jesus and the New Testament writers speak about such things at least as much as godly characteristics with which to clothe oneself, as outcomes of a holy life. In the New Testament, such ‘dispositions’ or ‘virtues’ ultimately boil down to faith, hope and love, although early Christians quite readily embraced some more widely established virtues of the classical period (e.g., temperance) as well as a few that their pagan contemporaries would have struggled to accept (e.g., humility).¹⁴ As with

¹¹ Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (eds), *Practising Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (2001).

¹² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Altar in the World: Finding the Sacred Beneath our Feet* (2009).

¹³ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (1978).

¹⁴ Tom Wright, *After you Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (2010), p. 36.

fruit, the relationship between grace and works is a subtle one in mainstream Christian thought: on one hand, these godly dispositions grow as a work of the Holy Spirit, but equally, the Christian disciple is in no way absolved of responsibility for actively seeking to cultivate them. In that respect, as with discipleship more generally, it is fundamentally a partnership between us and God. A recent example of this primarily disposition-based treatment of discipleship would be something like John Stott's *The Radical Disciple*, which organises the book around qualities including non-conformity, maturity, simplicity, balance, and dependence.¹⁵

5. The Purpose or Destination of Discipleship

If 'discipleship' is partly given shape and form by the fruit it's intended to produce, the practices which constitute it, the character attributes which undergird it, and the disciplines which keep it on track, it is also given form by its ultimate purpose and destination. In short, where are God's purposes for creation heading and what is our calling as a result? To give a few brief examples:

- In missiology, David Bosch's influential *Transforming Mission* offers at least six different 'paradigms' of Christian mission – six alternative visions of the calling and purpose of the Church in history, each with a secure foundation in the Bible and theology but each with a somewhat different emphasis. In his *SCM Study Guide to Christian Mission*, Stephen Spencer draws on Bosch's mission paradigms and sums them up in the following way:
 - 'Filling the Ark' (i.e., a search and rescue mission to bring as many people as possible into the safety of the church) – characteristic of the Apostolic period
 - 'Radiating Eternal Truth' (i.e., being an authentic and faithful worshipping presence so that people are attracted to the light of God) – characteristic of the 2nd to 4th centuries
 - 'Establishing Christendom' (i.e., seeking a full-scale fusion of religious, political, social and cultural life) – characteristic of the 4th to 16th centuries
 - 'The Conversion of Souls' (i.e., seeking to nurture personal religious conviction and practice, not merely social conformity) – characteristic of the 16th to early 19th centuries
 - 'Building the Kingdom on Earth' (i.e., i.e., seeking to order society along Gospel lines) – characteristic of 19th and 20th Centuries
 - 'Finding hope within local communities' (this one is more diverse – probably because it's more difficult to reflect on something which is still emerging, but is essentially about learning to act contextually and prophetically from the margins) – characteristic of late 20th Century onwards¹⁶

In both Bosch and Spencer these are predominant characteristics of particular periods of history, but because they do not entirely encapsulate any given period, and can also be seen in other periods, they also take on the status of alternative 'paradigms' of Christian mission. One could make a case for saying that each of them convey something of the end-goal of the Christian life, but each of them also possess drawbacks and dangers if one thinks only within the limits of a particular paradigm. As

¹⁵ John Stott, *The Radical Disciple* (2010).

¹⁶ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (1992); Stephen Spencer, *SCM Study Guide: Christian Mission* (2007).

far as discipleship is concerned, one could say each of the paradigms represent some important aspect of the life of discipleship:

- Evangelism and a degree of distinctiveness from 'the world'
 - A lifestyle of worship and holiness
 - A synthesis of faith and the rest of life
 - Personal repentance and conversion
 - Action for social justice and the transformation of society
 - Incarnational, prophetic living from the margins
- In spirituality, Richard Foster and Gayle Beebe's *Longing for God* offers seven 'paths of Christian devotion' which characterise recurrent themes within the Christian spiritual tradition.¹⁷ Though they are described as paths, they are as much important underlying dimensions of Christian spirituality, and in some respects each of them applies to the active Christian life as well as the contemplative, thus potentially offering yet another way of typologising Christian conceptions of discipleship in terms of its ultimate goal. The seven paths are:
 - The right ordering of our love for God
 - The spiritual life as a journey
 - The recovery of knowledge of God lost in the Fall
 - Intimacy with Jesus Christ
 - The right ordering of our experiences of God
 - Action and contemplation
 - Divine assent
 - There are a whole variety of other books which discuss discipleship primarily in terms of purpose. A very widely-read example which has been influential in and beyond evangelical circles over the past decade and a half Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*.¹⁸ For me, this is a flawed and relatively narrow book, but by no means irredeemable. It constructs the Christian life around five purposes: worship, fellowship, discipleship [by which he means personal spiritual disciplines], ministry [by which he means discovery and practice of both a unique personal calling and a more universal collective calling as church], and evangelism [which I would expand to become 'mission' as a whole].

6. Navigating: Four Compass Points for Discipleship

If the preceding few sections have tried to explore something about the nature and content of the journey of discipleship, this section explores the reference points which hold that journey on course. Implicit in the above, we could say that our discipleship is arguably measured off from four compass points or reference points, which together constitute the totality of our call and response as Christian disciples. I have long found the following a helpful way of thinking about mission, but it is only recently that I have come to feel its potential salience for the concept of 'discipleship' too. I cannot think that what follows is entirely original thinking, but I have never actually read it anywhere else in this form:

¹⁷ Richard Foster and Gayle Beebe, *Longing for God: Seven Paths of Christian Devotion* (2009).

¹⁸ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002).

- **Compass point 1 – The Big Picture/Meta-historical:** As disciples, we are orientated within, and should align ourselves to, the big picture of salvation history: God’s ultimate plan for the world. This provides the direction for our personal and collective discipleship. Passages such as Ephesians 1 and parts of Romans illustrate this. Compass point 1 relates quite strongly to the ‘goal of discipleship’ in 4, above. This is the territory of Wells’ and Wrights’ ‘drama in five acts’.
- **Compass point 2 – The Generational/epochal:** As disciples, we are inescapably bound to the times in which we live. Different challenges and opportunities are opened up, and closed off, as a result of our context in time and space. One key task of Christian discipleship is to answer the question: what is our particular calling, as followers of Jesus Christ, as a generation living in this time and this place? In the Old Testament, Queen Esther was called ‘for such a time as this’, whilst Jesus warned his hearers: ‘you know how to read the appearance of the sky, but you cannot read the signs of the times’. How would we bear up under this challenge today?
- **Compass point 3 – The Short-Term Strategic:** Orientated by the first two considerations, and the fourth (see below), we act both individually and collectively to decide how we are going to live, and what we are going to do, in the short- to medium- term, in order to be faithful to our calling. It is at this level that Jesus sent out the 70, whilst later Peter, Paul and their associates began their preaching and missionary journeys, and began to organise the emerging communities of believers scattered across the Roman world and beyond.
- **Compass point 4 – The Everyday:** Although we must be conscious of our place in the bigger story, discipleship is equally lived out in our everyday thought, encounters, decisions and practices. This is the level at which much of Jesus’ teaching operates – at least on the surface level. Love your neighbour, visit the sick, don’t hold a grudge against your brother, and so on. It matters no less than the rest how we treat people in the chance encounter or our daily use of time. As Jean-Pierre de Caussade would say, the everyday dimension of discipleship is about embracing ‘the sacrament of the present moment’ – not only in our interior life with God but also in our outward relationships and activity in the world.¹⁹
Compass point 1 relates to the fruit, practices and dispositions of discipleship in 3, above.

All of this matters because historically, the church has been a lot stronger on some of these ‘compass points’ than others. Most sermons we hear today dwell quite a lot on the ‘everyday’ and occasionally on the ‘meta-historical’. Mission Action planning has brought the ‘short-term strategic’ onto the agenda far more prominently for churches, but perhaps we still struggle to grasp its implications for our individual and social actions. The ‘generational/epochal’ is the most difficult to grasp, perhaps because reading the signs of the times, and understanding our calling as a generation, is more the territory of pioneers than settlers, of prophets rather than pastors. It is also one of the two (alongside the short-term strategic) which relies most heavily on improvisation rather than obedience to a particular command in the New Testament. But instinctively I cannot help feeling that keeping oneself orientated in relation to all four compass points is liable to result in the most effective, authentic, God-centred discipleship. And from sociological research, there is some evidence that one characteristic of those who live sustained ‘lives of commitment’ is just such a ‘paradoxical sense of time and space’ in which an awareness of the bigger picture, and of

¹⁹ Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence* [also sometimes entitled *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*] (1741).

contributing to something beyond the span of one's own lifetime, is held together with a sense of 'holy urgency', of the imperative to act within the 'now'.²⁰

7. The Sources of Discipleship

This hardly needs saying but one's conception of discipleship will differ depending on the source material you use. Different conceptions of discipleship have, for example, been reliant more or less on the Bible, on Christian tradition, on reason and on affective experience, and the different weightings particular traditions, thinkers or actors give to each of these.

But we can also think about the sources of discipleship in different ways – for example, if Jesus is our ultimate source material for discipleship, are we thinking primarily about the actions of the earthly Jesus which we might see in the Gospels, or the risen Christ of some of the Epistles, or both (and if both, in what combination?). For example, Rowan Williams suggests that if following Jesus means 'standing where Christ stands', that involves seeking to see from an eternal perspective as well as imitating the things that Jesus did during his earthly life. Yet, echoing Gregory of Nyssa, he continues, 'you do not see the face of someone you are following. In other words, our vision of the glory of God is inseparable from the following of Jesus Christ: if we ask how Gregory understands being in the "place" of Jesus, the answer is, paradoxically, that it is to be always moving in the direction of Jesus' movement, and moving not simply in our strength but being carried along by him'.²¹

The focus of our discipleship may also be weighted towards past, present or future, depending on the source material used. The sociologist Karl Mannheim (*Ideology and Utopia*) suggests that all ideologies locate their ideal vision somewhere in time (Conservatives tend to look back to a golden age, liberals expect a progressively evolutionary journey towards an anticipated future, radicals may disrupt the flow of history in order to bring about their ideal vision in the present). In the same way, conceptions of Christian discipleship may vary depending on their orientation in time.

8. 'Discipleship' and other words we like to use in church

So finally to one further approach to triangulating 'discipleship' – understanding its relationship to some of the other common words we use in an institutional church context to describe what we are doing.

'Being a Christian'. This was the primary language of faith I grew up with through my local church. 'Being a Christian' and 'being a disciple' are interrelated, but not exactly the same thing. For Bonhoeffer (although not necessarily for some other Christian writers), being a disciple of Christ begins with the 'first step' of following Christ, and acceptance of God's grace may come either at that moment or develop more slowly from thereon. Being a 'disciple' also implies action, movement and participation, whereas simply 'being a Christian' does not depend on our own actions. Yet on

²⁰ Laurent Parks Daloz, Cheryl Keen, James Keen and Sharon Daloz Parks, *Common fire: leading lives of commitment in a complex world* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1996), pp. 203-4

²¹ Rowan Williams, 'To stand where Christ stands', in Ralph Waller and Benedicta Ward (eds), *An introduction to Christian spirituality* (SPCK, London, 1990), pp. 1-13 at p. 6. A slightly different perspective on discipleship, although one which is not inconsistent with the above, is found in Williams' more recent, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (2016), chapter 1, which situates 'being in Christ's company' and 'being attentive to where Christ is going' within the context of the pre-Easter experience of the disciples journeying with Jesus.

the other hand, it can be that too much emphasis on 'being a Christian' (i.e., with our status before God) without an accompanying discourse of 'discipleship' can breed an introspective pietism which is more concerned with our internal spiritual state than with actually living how God wants – indeed, it can make those two things appear more separate in reality than they actually are. Equally however, there have been occasions when churches have placed quite heavy emphasis on 'discipleship' (as the practical outworking of the Christian life) whilst neglecting to maintain a vibrant spiritual life or a deeper journey into our identity as a new creation in Christ. (In retrospect this was arguably the weakness of some of the mainstream free churches in the early- to mid- 20th century, or the 'church inside out' movement of the 1960s, which sailed very close to a primarily works-based understanding of what being a Christian was all about, and perhaps neglected (or were sceptical about the possibility of attending to) a vibrant personal spiritual life).

'Church'. Alison Morgan and others have rightly seen 'disciple' and 'church' as closely interlinked; that 'church' is the plural of 'disciple' and that in this sense 'church' is a movement of disciples. Personally I find that quite helpful, as it emphasises both the collective aspect of discipleship (we're never disciples on our own) but also the kinetic and participatory nature of church. However, within this, constant vigilance is needed to ensure that linking 'discipleship' to 'church' does not pull conceptions of discipleship back towards an understanding of Christian being and doing which is defined primarily in relation to an institution, or to the mere performance of a particular set of ecclesiastically-sanctioned rules or observances. This has been a particular feature of certain historical times and contexts. However, there may be other understandings of 'church' which helpfully illuminate the discipleship task – e.g., Rowan Williams likes to talk about the 'church', the 'ekklesia', as a 'citizens' body for non-citizens'.²²

'Mission' – There are clear overlaps between mission and discipleship, as suggested above in the discussion of Bosch's *Transforming Mission*. There is also a sense in which much of what was described in terms of 'mission' ten years ago is framed in terms of 'discipleship' today. However, I would be reluctant to collapse mission and discipleship entirely into each other. This deserves a much more extended discussion than is given here, but I think there is something important in the way Elizabeth Jordan distinguished between the two at the May 2015 'Developing Disciples' conference at Church House: 'mission is what the church does, but discipleship is what ensures that mission is Christian mission'.²³ In short, God's mission is what gives our discipleship its basic orientation in time.

'Discipleship' and 'Ministry'. The distinction between 'discipleship' and 'ministry' is a widespread one within the contemporary mainstream churches in the UK. Sometimes (particularly where a high theology of priesthood is held) the terms are almost implied to be mutually exclusive ('discipleship' is what the laity do, whereas 'ministry' is what the ordained – or other recognised and authorised lay leaders – do). Even where that implication is rejected, as it is increasingly, we still have a tendency to imply that 'discipleship' is the sphere of the non-ordained – such as in the appointment of 'ministerial development' officers on one hand and 'discipleship development' officers on the other. I recognise that there are complex theological issues here, and without wanting to get into the question of whether our discipleship derives from ministry, or the other way around, I think there

²² Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?* (2005), p. 36.

²³ Elizabeth Jordan, 'A theology of discipleship' (paper presented to *Developing Disciples* conference, 29 April 2015)

remains a sense that 'discipleship' is the calling of all Christians (lay and ordained), that we are called to particular 'ministries' as a result of that, and that some of those ministries happen to be what we describe as ordained or licensed. Some of these ministries fall within the structures of the church; others are beyond it – although in reality I would suggest that most Christians exercise several ministries at once, including some within the congregational sphere and some beyond it. To contend otherwise is to fall prey to a questionable division of labour whereby 'church life' is held to be the responsibility of the clergy, whereas life 'in the world' is the responsibility of the laity. Whilst accepting that the ordained have a particular responsibility vis-à-vis the ecclesiastical/congregational sphere and that lay people have opportunities for mission within the workplace that clergy often do not (unless they are SSMs or equivalent with paid employment outside the institutional church), too hard and fast a division between the supposedly 'proper' spheres of activity of clergy and laity can create weak and over-clericalised congregations. There is of course an opposite danger: that of the so-called 'greedy church' which simply sucks ordinary Christians into more and more congregational activity at the expense of outward engagement.²⁴

'Discipleship' and 'Spirituality' – this is the slipperiest one to untangle. There is considerable overlap, in that each is concerned to form people into the character of Christ. It may be tempting to think of 'spirituality' as interior and 'discipleship' as exterior and practical, but I do not think that is wholly tenable: most of those writing about spirituality would say that Christian spirituality should affect the whole of life, whilst equally, one could not imagine a living Christian discipleship which didn't have some sort of guiding internal engine, namely an encounter with the love of God (cf 1 Cor 13: 'if I have not love...'). Nevertheless 'discipleship' and 'spirituality' are not exactly the same thing. This much is demonstrated by a cursory read through of any of the various anthologies of Christian spirituality currently on sale. However much their compilers assert the importance of outer practice in any genuine Christian spirituality, their primary focus tends to be on the cultivation of the inner life. Viewed one way, it could be argued that 'spirituality' is a sub-set of discipleship which begins with the inner life and expects outward life transformation as a result, whereas 'discipleship' is the whole of a Christian's walk with God and service of God, of which spirituality is a part. Alternatively one could say that discipleship and spirituality differ in terms of their starting point if not in their ultimate concerns; i.e., that 'spirituality' starts with the interior and 'discipleship' with the exterior. However, it is defined it is important to hold the two in creative tension and resist the collapsing of one into the other. When that happens, it seems to me (based on personal experience and a cursory reading of history) that there frequently tends to be a drift inwards at the expense of outward practice.

Finally, **how does 'discipleship' relate to 'Christian education' and 'lay training'?** (This is an important relationship to understand, since this is the sense in which 'discipleship' has been most widely used in the mainstream UK churches at least, in recent years). I would want to resist any attempt to reduce 'discipleship' to 'Christian education', 'lay training' or any of its equivalents, even whilst accepting that the development of discipleship will contain an element of both. 'Christian education' and 'lay training' are important but the focus on these at the expense of a more expansive sense of discipleship probably reflects a particular collection of moments in recent British history – the wider cultural centrality of 'education' as the solution to most things (within a modern

²⁴ Neil Hudson, *Imagine Church: Releasing Whole-Life Disciples* (2012) is one recent work aware of these twin dangers.

liberal way of thinking), and more specifically, the tendency in the 19th and early 20th centuries for faith to become a matter of the intellect and of personal moral behaviour rather than anything else. It may also reflect a particular post-war drive to enhance the status of the 'laity' within the mainstream churches, and to increase the knowledge and understanding of ordinary Christians in the face of an increasingly ignorant and/or sceptical and/or indifferent society. In that sense, the emphasis on Christian education and lay training may have been both useful and necessary. However, in other ways it has seen discipleship fall between two important stools: on one hand emphasis on education and training has served to increase knowledge and understanding but has too often failed to provide systematic help and support to enable Christians actually to practice the things that Jesus commanded. On the other hand, it has failed to offer a more expansive understanding of what discipleship is.

Conclusion

All of the above is essentially an attempt to break 'discipleship' down in order to understand better that it might mean. It's not exhaustive – in particular I have spent less time on the New Testament than it really deserves (indeed, it deserves an exploration all of itself). I'm also well aware that conceptions of discipleship may vary depending on personal preferences related to psychology or personal background, but don't feel in any way qualified to explore that here. Nevertheless, the aim has been to understand what might other kinds of preferences, orientations and emphases might lead to people characterising discipleship in particular ways. And hopefully along the way the different typologies of discipleship which have been discussed help to clarify the nature of the thing.

The focus on different spectra of opinion, and on typologies, is an attempt to take seriously the variety of understandings present through the Church over 2000 years, but also find some workable ways of enabling these to hang together around some central threads. It might be objected that all of this is to make discipleship something prosaic or highly technical. In fact personally, I am much more drawn to the idea of Christianity as 'not a religion [but] an adventure' (to quote Stanley Hauerwas), and most of my Christian heroes are not great thinkers or mystics but courageous and loving individuals who often in quite simple ways put their faith into practice. This piece of writing is not that clarion call to adventurous discipleship, or even a workable definition of discipleship, but is a piece setting out some possible tools and approaches to defining discipleship – effectively, mapping the terrain. In that sense, it's primarily a piece of back-office work.

Even in this sense, it might be objected that the use of a spectrum of concepts or alternatives tends towards an understanding of authentic discipleship as *balance*. That probably reflects an instinctive personal preference, but one which I hope has more in common with Augustine's 'balance of the passions' than a zero sum game in which different aspects of Christian spirituality and practice end up cancelling each other out and resulting in something rather bland and tame. Indeed, I fully accept that a life of authentic and fruitful Christian discipleship can be lived without holding in mind the different sources, compass points, dispositions, disciplines, purposes, etc. outlined above. Some of the most fruitful Christian lives have been lived at the extremes, with no concern whatever for balance. To assume that balanced Christian life was *de facto* the better Christian life would be to raise these typologies and spectrums to the status of idols, and to fall into the trap identified by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 ('I may be able to.... but if I have not love I am nothing'). None of the above is

'discipleship' in and of itself - it merely points towards, and hopefully helps clarify, what real discipleship might be.

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