

## *“Is Discipleship the Mission of the Local Church?”*

Prepared by Patrick J. Griffiths © - [pastorpat@waukeshabile.org](mailto:pastorpat@waukeshabile.org)  
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The question needs clarification only because the bottom line as to the mission of the local church, as with all of creation, is “to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” A means whereby this takes place in and through the church is the ministry of discipleship.

Unfortunately in our “Christian culture” the word “discipleship” carries with it the idea of “next level” Christianity, seeming to suggest that within Christianity there are those who are disciples and those who are not disciples. Yet discipleship is at the very core of what it means to be Christian.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (February 4, 1906 – April 9, 1945) was a German Lutheran pastor, theologian and participant in the German resistance movement against Nazism. He was arrested in March 1943, imprisoned and eventually hanged [as a martyr], just before the end of the Second World War in Europe. His book, The Cost of Discipleship, is considered a classic within Christianity. Listen carefully to what he says as one who affirmed his love for God with his life blood.

**Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.** It remains an abstract idea, a myth which has a place for the Fatherhood of God, but omits Christ as the living Son. ... There is trust in God, but no following of Christ. (The Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer 64)

Discipleship strikes at the very core of what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is a disciple of Christ, one who has become identified by Him. The command of Matthew 28:19 uses the word *matheteuo*. It can be translated to teach as well as disciple. This particular word (a verb) is only used four times in the New Testament (Matt. 13:52; 27:57; 28:19; and Acts 14:21).

The noun form of the word is used extensively throughout the four Gospels and Acts but nowhere in the rest of the New Testament. The idea of discipleship is perhaps best captured with the following definition:

A disciple is one who undertakes the discipline of his/her teacher. Disciples not only take in what they are taught and what they learn from being with the teacher, they take it into their core identity, so that it defines who they are.  
<http://www.spirithome.com/definit.html>

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What this means biblically is defined for us by Matthew in 16:21-28.

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, **“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me”** (Matt. 16:24).

According to Matthew 16, discipleship is neither convenient nor comfortable. Yet we have made it both. Discipleship is defined by a controlling identity. Discipleship says, “I am a Christian.” It is defined by who Christ is. Discipleship is always done in the context of a relationship. The relationship can be informal or formal, official or unofficial, stated or assumed, but it is always in a relationship. The relationship always involves at least two people. One is a teacher/student and the other is a student/teacher. I make this necessary qualifier only because every teacher should be a student and every student will teach.

As disciples Christians are always transmitting their faith. This transmission of faith can be intentional or unintentional but it is always being communicated. The question that confronts all of us as a fellowship is whether or not we are a disciple-making church? This automatically embraces evangelism and church planting as the two bookends to the one continuum of discipleship. All three components of evangelism, discipleship, and church planting are inseparably linked. To rip either one from the other is to kill the activity. God’s design is for His work to be carried out in and through the local church who are His people.

As we think on these things may God stir within us a passion for His glory in and through His church. May we find our joy in His joy and may we not rest in the work of God until we see face-to-face the God of the work.