
DISCIPLESHIP AND THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

There is so much talk about discipleship in the church today in Africa without a corresponding deep understanding of the theme in relation to the gospel of the cross and spiritual discipline in many quarters. Many see emphasis on the cross which is the true gospel and road map to genuine Christian faith in Africa as archaic and at best an old fashion of Christianity. For them, Jesus has done it all. This casts serious doubt on the authenticity of the faith professed, and, more gravely, creates a bleak future for the survival of the faith in Africa. The main aim of this paper is to emphasize that if the future of the Christian faith in Africa is to be brighter with hopes of revival and genuine Christian living, then discipleship that hinges on the gospel of the cross is indispensable. To achieve this, the paper looks at key passages in the Gospels and Pauline Epistles with a view of using exegetical method to draw the lessons thereof for the region concerned. And the paper recommends that the church should pragmatically follow Jesus' model of discipleship as cardinal to the survival and success of Christian faith in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Discipleship is central to the survival of Christianity. In fact, Christianity is discipleship. To be specific, the future of Christian faith in Africa can be guaranteed in the atmosphere of discipleship. And this discipleship must be sustained under the gospel of the cross.

The cross life is unequivocally the basis of living genuine faith in the face of daunting challenges. The gospel of the cross provides authentic Christian faith that is lived with the consciousness of being aliens in this terrestrial ball called the earth and focusing on heaven. It constantly reminds the cross bearer of the need for dying daily to the sinful flesh and living by the Spirit of God. This provides ample opportunity of having disciplined spiritual life.

This is the basic philosophy of this paper. It argues that the future of Christian faith in Africa though may look bleak with the current challenges; the gospel of the cross as amplified by discipleship provides the answer.

DEFINING KEY CONCEPTS

Discipleship

The word 'disciple' is from the Greek noun μαθητῆς (mathetes) occurring over 200 times in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles, meaning a student, learner, pupil. It could also mean a follower, imitator, one who submits for tutelage under someone. Hence, Christian discipleship is the process of leaning, imitating and following the steps of Jesus daily. According to Todd, "In a broad sense, Jesus used 'disciple' as descriptive of all His followers coming under the influence of His teaching, striving to conform to His principles." (458) He also went on to say "In a restricted sense, disciple (also apostle) applies to the inner circle of the Twelve, called out of the greater company that they might be with Christ, hear Him expound the mysteries of the kingdom reserved for a select group, witness and later perform authenticating signs and wonders, and proclaiming the gospel to the world". (458) Interestingly, the word μαθητης is found in the Old Testament Septuagint translation as in 1Chronicles 25:8. The Hebrew equivalent of the word is למוד (Limud). (Young 257) Thus, the term also prevailed in the Old Testament with notable examples of Moses and Joshua; Elijah and Elisha; Eli and Samuel; the sons of the prophets and others. One of the basic aims of discipleship is conformity to the principles of the master and influencing even outsiders to do same. In the secular context, the students are trained by philosophers or rhetoricians to be like them.

As Christians, discipleship is indispensable to living a life of righteousness. It is a dying life to the lustful passions of the world and daily seeking to be conformed to the ideals of God. Simply put, discipleship is God's kingdom lifestyle.

Christian Faith

These two concepts put together mean a life of allegiance to the person of Jesus Christ as the only way to the Father – God. Consequently, it reveals the incapacitation of man by sin, the inescapable judgment and punishment of God, and the loving mercy of Jesus through his death for the salvation of the sinful. Thus, this faith depends on the renewal power of the Holy Spirit to walk in the steps of Jesus. It is more than a religious dogma with ritualistic and ceremonials innuendos empty of the righteousness, but a lifestyle lived with the consciously of the divine presence.

And in Africa, it is mostly believe that Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion are prevalent. This is not to say there are no other religions in Africa. With an ever increasing population and challenging lifestyles, Christian faith presents an ideal hope for the

region given her wholistic concern to life. However, this succinct hope may be dashed out if the Christian faith itself cannot represent the ideals of the faith. To achieve this desire, discipleship, which is the way of the cross, is necessary.

THE PROBLEM

The future of the Christian faith in Africa today is threatened by many factors. But these factors may be summed up to two. First is what I termed external challenge. By this, I refer to both subtle and outright dexterity of the enemies of the gospel to systematically truncate it. This can be seen in the wave of current Islamic fundamentalism wreaking havoc to Christians and church related activities. In Nigeria for instance, many Christians and church structures have been destroyed by these fanatical fundamentalists. This indeed is a problem.

The second threat is what I called internal challenge. Aside the obvious persecution of the church by fanatical Muslims and others, the church still faces the problem of schism, denominationalism and hypocrisy within. Many people seen as Christians are actually not. This is verified by their conduct. Such people mostly champion personal empires and promote divisiveness as long as their interests are made. They prefer pursuing their personal goals than corporate existence of the church as the body of Christ. This is unfortunate and more dangerous than even the first factor because a house divided against itself is doom. Many Christians are not committed to living the true gospel of the cross and exercising true spiritual discipline. This can be seen as the lost art of discipleship (where self-denial and carrying the cross daily is expected) as rightly observed by Leroy Eims in *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*. Therefore, considering discipleship as solution and hope for the future of Christianity in Africa is necessary.

JESUS' MODEL OF DISCIPLESHIP

For contextual and better methodological discourse on Jesus' model of discipleship as significant to the survival of Christianity in Africa, I will focus on two aspects of the New Testament texts namely the Gospels and Pauline epistles. This is not to say that other texts of the Bible related to the subject may not be referred to where necessary.

In the Gospels

In the gospels, the model of Jesus discipleship hinges on the gospel of the cross. Here, Jesus insisted that discipleship entails self-denial, carrying the cross daily and following. Until this is done, it presupposes that following him may just be a gimmick. Some of the key

passages to this effect are Matthew 10.37-39, 16.24-26; Mark 8.34-38; Luke 9.23-26, and 14.25-27.

Matthew 10.37-39 (cf. Luke 14.25-27) and 16.24-26 present to us the call for discipleship and what it entails. In Matthew 10.37-39 cf. Luke 14.25-27, Jesus insists that his followers must love him above all else and went ahead to present what some scholars have termed 'hate list'. In Matthew's account, the people to be loved less compared to the love of Jesus are father and mother, son and daughter while in Luke's account, there is an addition of wife, brothers and sisters and even oneself, to which Nolland said that it is a call to "disencumberment from family and material goods and the carrying of a cross." (761) The Greek verb use for hate (as in Luke) is $\mu\iota\sigma\omega$ (miseo) meaning to pursue with hatred, detest. According to Mounce, it means "to regard with less affection, love less, esteem less, Matt 6:24; Luke 14:26." (321) This is not in contradiction to the moral law of obedience to parents and loving one another but an intense demonstration of following Christ above all else. According to Marshall, " $\mu\iota\sigma\omega$ ω, 'to hate', is usually said to have its semitic sense, 'to love less' (16:13 par. Mt. 6:24; Gn. 29:31-33; Dt. 21:15-17; 2 Sa. 19:7; Pr. 13:24; Is. 60:15; Mal. 1:2f.; Rom. 9:31-33...). This no doubt how the phrase was understood by Matthew's tradition..." (592 cf., Robert H. Stein, *The New American Commentary Volume 24 Luke*, Nashville: Broadman Press, 2003; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke The NIV Application Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996; R.T France, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary The Gospel of Mark*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002) In other words, Jesus is saying that nothing in life should come between you and me despite seeming human significance of such. He must take precedence over all at all. Without this willing step, following his model of discipleship is impossible. This means that Christianity demands wholehearted submission to God and his will.

Additionally, it requires one carrying the cross of Christ (Matt. 16.24-26). This requirement is central to discipleship and will be surfacing in this paper. Since the Messiah himself will go through the path of suffering represented by the cross (Luke 9.18-22), his followers as students and learners are mandated to follow same path as good pupils. Without this, Jesus says you cannot be my disciples. This is imperative. This cross life consequently produces a disciplined spiritual life. It means that if one desires to live correctly and reflect the light of God, then the gospel of the cross must take center stage. While referring to the art of carrying cross in Roman days, Nolland says, "Taking up the cross refers to the Roman custom of requiring the condemned criminal to carry to the place of execution the cross-bar to be used

in the execution.” (482) And attributing the defeat of the devil to be on the cross, Wright says, “The cross is the defeat of the evil... The cross and the resurrection thus establish the kingdom of the Son of Man.” (29) He outlined four lenses according to Matthew in regard to the cross: The Cross is the decisive royal act; saving act; defeat of the evil; great divine act, (29). It was this rugged cross that actually brought the monsters and powers to complete defeat. And the same cross has the capacity to do same in this region.

Mark 8.34-38 cf. Luke 9.23-26 also give us similar instructions on his pattern of discipleship that demands close scrutiny. Jesus in these passages gave an open invitation to all who truly desires to follow him. This, he starts with a conditional word 'if' as in most English translations. 'If' translates the Greek word εἰ (ei) which is a conditional particle. It implies there is no compulsion in Jesus model of discipleship. Rather, the invitation is free to be accepted or otherwise. And it is open to 'anyone' (τις) for no one is exempted. It covers all and not restricted to some special kind of persons. Jesus loves all including those in Africa. And the specific goal for this open invitation is purely unto discipleship – would follow me/be my disciple. It is definite and clear. It is a call to different yet best kind of life. It is a call to stepping into Jesus kind of life. It is a call unto total loyalty and submission to the Father through Jesus Christ.

Then come the hard truth of responsibility: 'he must'. It is understandable that most translations use 'must' to convey the sense of imperatives in the requirements. The open invitation is optional with a definite goal of following Christ, and if the option is positively considered, then there is no option again for the requirements afterwards, for they are compulsory. First, it is ἐρνησθῶ ὁ αὐτὸς ἑαυτὸν 'let him deny himself'. The Greek verb ἐρνησθῶ (from ἐρνησθαι) is 3rd person aorist middle imperative singular signifying a mandatory disregarding, refusing, disowning, repudiating oneself. It means a deliberate effort by someone to look down on himself not on the basis of inferiority but letting go of any personal ambition and taking on the new course of life. This first requirement is significant because without it, anything done afterwards as religious piety may just be a mere show. It will just be a display of some moral goodness without a genuine inward transformation and renewal. Unfortunately, self-denial is the last thing to be done by fallen mankind. It looks foolish and seen as weakness but is the true test of genuine following Jesus – discipleship. One can possibly let go anything but self. It is very difficult to deal with but discipleship requires radical self-denial and living for Jesus. This is why Nolland says,

The one who would be a disciple of Jesus (as one might have become a disciple of a



rabbi in Jesus' day) is called to a radical denial of self-interest and concern for his or her own natural well-being. Jesus anticipated that loyalty to himself would at times provoke a whole set of life-destroying processes (ostracism, persecution, martyrdom). The disciple needs to be ready to meet these head on; he is, as it were, to place his neck on the chopping block, or to put the rope around his own neck...This is rather like his talk of the need to hate one's own family (Luke 14:26). Such a radical commitment is not one that is called for only in some crisis situation, but one that needs to be renewed daily, and one that needs to undergird all that happens in our daily lives. The call is to a practical denial of our natural inner drive to self-preservation and care for our own interests. Only this is a following of Jesus to the cross. (486)

Second is? ρ? τωτ? νσταυρ? να? το? καθ? ? μ? ραν, 'take up the cross himself throughout day.' The verb ? ρ? τω (from α? ρω) is also 3rd person aorist imperative singular meaning raise, lift, carry along, take up, pick. While the noun σταυρ? ν 'cross' symbolically means suffering and death for the sake of Christ. Jesus is saying you have the option to follow me or not but once you have decided to; be prepared to suffer and even die for me. Besides, he was hated and eventually died, so also his followers. They will be hated for saying and standing for the truth. But if one has not denied self, this will mean nothing. This is why self-denial is top on the list; else one will easily be hurt by others. Besides, crosses in the Roman world were carried by condemned criminals waiting for execution. This means as disciples, we carry the mark of death for Christ daily in our bodies.

Third is κα? ? κολουθε? τωμοι 'and let him follow me'. The Greek verb ? κολουθε? τω (from ? κολουθ? ω) meaning to follow, accompany is interestingly also 3rd person singular imperative but present active and not aorist. This implies that the act of following Jesus is not just an imperative but present active, to be done at all times, without break. Only then will the disciple please his master.

From the survey of the passages in the Gospels, it is clear that the path to responsible Christian living is discipleship as laid down by Christ himself, and this is needful for the survival and blossoming of Christian faith in Africa. Now, let's turn to Pauline epistle to see whether this idea still runs through.

In Pauline Epistles

Interestingly, Paul in his epistles continued and emphatically upholds the teachings of Jesus on discipleship as it concerns the cross – suffering and dying for the gospel. Paul himself,

more than most of the early apostles have experienced this kind of life, hence his admonitions are practical. His theology of salvation is intrinsically and inseparably centered on Christ crucified. For Paul, only sharing in the sufferings of Christ can bring true glory (Rom. 8.17). So, the cross is not just where Christ died for our salvation but where we also died with Him. This is a spiritual reality. Though, we were not physically present with Jesus on the cross but our acceptance of him implies we were with him. And it is this cross-life that actually defeats sin. For Paul, there is once for all death of Christ for us and there is a daily one which we share as Christians as emphasized by Jesus. We will consider some few passages in Paul's letters that emphasized this discipleship with a view of relating same to our context.

In one of his earliest epistles and in fact believed to be written first by many scholars, Paul in Galatians 5.11, 6.11, 14 while arguing against legalistic salvation and righteousness insists that the cross which though is stumbling block to some people supersedes human circumcision. In this, Paul is nailing rightly the truth that the cross life which basically is discipleship is the genuine path to Christ. And he quickly outlined that the reason why some preach mere human circumcision is to avoid the obvious persecution that comes with the cross of Christ. The cross and nothing else bears testimony to the truthfulness of the message preached by Paul. In Galatians 2.19-20, Paul himself made it clear that crucifixion life leading to his dead in sin is the reason for his living in Christ.

The preaching of the gospel of the cross was the ultimate goal of the Apostle (1 Cor. 1.17f) because God has reconciled the Jews and Gentiles through the cross (Eph. 2.16, Col 1.20), though painful death (Phil 2.8 cf. Heb. 12.1f). Though Paul knew that some people are enemies of the cross (Phil. 3.18), he would not stop preaching it because it was actually on the cross that victory over sin was won (Phil. 2.14).

Paul uses concepts like 'imitator', 'follower' (e.g. Eph. 5.1; 1 Cor. 4.16; Phil. 3.17; 2 Thess. 3.7-9), to depict discipleship life. To Paul, μιμητ? ς 'imitator' is as well μαθητ? ς which totally agrees with the teaching of Jesus on the subject. A disciple is one who does not just follow but painstakingly imitate his Lord to behave like him. It is living a life worthy of the gospel of the cross. It is manifesting the light of the gospel in every aspect of life.

From the synopsis of both the gospels and Pauline epistles, emphasis on discipleship is clear. The call for self-denial, cross carrying and imitating or following in the steps of the master are apparent. This call basically is unto God's kingdom pattern as inaugurated by Christ himself. Though, it is not an easy path to follow but remains the best because Christianity is a tough pilgrimage. It remains the only gospel that will help the church overcome both internal

and external problems observed above. It allows love in the hearts for those clearly against the gospel and deal with the hypocrisy within by insisting on self-denial and cross carrying.

LESSONS FOR CHRISTIAN FAITH IN AFRICA

From the foregoing, it is apparent that having a vibrant Christian faith in Africa today and tomorrow is dependent on emphasizing the gospel of the cross and spiritual discipline. Jesus emphasized it and so the apostles. It remains foundational because it focuses on Christ crucified alone and nothing else. Therefore, the concern in this section is to see how discipleship which is basically the gospel and life of the cross be appropriated for the sustenance and advancement of the Christian faith in Africa. Despite the glaring challenges confronting this region, true discipleship provides hope. Thus, there are basically three main lessons that sum up our discussion and will be emphasized here thus:

ü Living the Gospel of the Cross

The consequence of the gospel of the cross is a life in conformity with the cross professed. In other words, what is necessary for Christians in this region to sustain a hopeful future for the church is first to live out the cross life. This comes before preaching. Acts 1.1 says, The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, (NAS). It was an account of what Jesus first began to do before the teaching. This means the success in Jesus ministry hinges primarily on his obedience and living the words of the Father before preaching it to others. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, “The proclamation and activity of the messengers [preachers] are identical with that of Christ himself.” (230) Hence, we will consider some points here base on the context of our study as implying living the gospel of the cross especially as ministers and teachers of God's word:

Self-denial: In looking at the paradigm of Jesus' discipleship, it is clear that self-denial is central. The gospel demands a life of selflessness. It demands prioritizing the things of God above all including family values hence the 'hate list'. It is rather unfortunate that there is so much lack of self-denial within Christian folk today. Many Christians do not want to disown, refuse themselves, rather may prefer to get it at all cost no matter how. This is not the gospel of the cross. Selfishness is at the root of many internal schisms confronting us as a region in every aspect. The disease of denominationalism is unfortunately affecting the Christian faith in Africa and this must stop to avoid repeat of ugly history (cf. John Foster, *Set Back And Recovery Church History 2: AD 500-1500* (London: SPCK, 1998). Lack of self-denial breeds

all manners of evil and does lead to hypocritical Christian living. This is anathema to the gospel of the cross. Self-denial means "...seeking his will and spending time before him so he can lead and guide you in the way you should go." (268)

Carrying the Cross Daily: The issue of suffering for Christ, which is centrally represented by the cross should not be seen as something evil. Christian faith, though preaches eternal life with God in Christ with the beauty of blissfulness, also has its challenging aspects. The principle of sharing in the sufferings of Christ before sharing in his glory is discipleship. We must not be ashamed to suffer in living the life of Christ despite all manner of persecutions. Unfortunately in Nigeria and many parts of Africa, many preachers see the issue of suffering for Christ as needless. To them, Christ death represents ours too which is true in a sense but denied sharing in such suffering. They only want to cling to sharing in glory without suffering. This one-sided understanding of the gospel creates a hypnotized and hypocritical Christian life. It does not accept the fact that suffering for doing what is right for God is essentially part of Christian faith because Jesus lived an example for us. It was not that he sinned yet suffers, so also he clearly said that his followers must encounter such also. Bock rightly says,

This means that we are seeking his kingdom, not our own. Materialism and the pursuit of power, independence, and security are probably the biggest obstacles to spiritual advancement. Everything in our culture from commercials to our education pushes us in the direction of advancing our standard of living for more comfort. To pick up a cross means walking against the grain of cultural values, so that our own expectations and needs take a back seat to God's call. Some things we may have seen as ours by natural right may need to be renounced because they represent a subtle form of idolatry. (321)

We must live daily for him, carrying our cross no matter how tough it could be. This makes our Christian living genuine and sincere.

Imitating Christ: As we maintained, to imitate Christ is to act like him in all ways. In Pauline epistles, Paul demonstrated how Christ lived (Phil. 2:1-11) and admonished Christians to have the same mind. This means μαθητὴς (disciple, learner, and student) and μιμητὴς (imitator, follower) are closely related (if not meaning the same). Christians in Africa should live Christ-like lives. We should be humble and loving not only to fellow Christians but also to those outside. In this way, we are shining our light in the world and being salt of the earth.

ii Preaching the Gospel of the Cross

After living the life of the gospel of the cross, we can then preach it out to others. Preaching should come from what we have experienced from our discipleship life with

Christ. Apostle John says, What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life (1 Jo 1.1 NAS). This means preaching should come from what has affected our personal lives. This in turn will also affect others positively. The reason why some people do not see the need to accept Jesus is because some who called themselves Christians are presenting bad example of living. The gospel has to save both us and our hearers (1 Tim. 4.16). And this preaching is purely the message of Jesus and not some high sounding philosophy of men empty of Christ's life. It is what others may term foolishness but indeed the basis and only hope of Christianity. We should preach the gospel of the cross no matter how it is, for that is where the hope for a bright Christian faith in Africa lies. The world of Africa is steering at us in the face and we must seek to understand it with its peculiarities as disciples of Christ to preach the gospel appropriately. We must seek to understand our worldview to present the gospel appropriately. This agrees with Dunahoo's view that "To be a disciple of Christ and think God's thought after him, we must develop a way of looking at and interpreting the world around us that is consistent with God's knowledge of his creation." (65)

ü Discipleship in Accordance with the Gospel of the Cross

The commitment to live the true life of the gospel and preaching same is commendable and more commendable is not just preaching but raising true disciples of Jesus who are grounded in the word of God as commanded by Jesus Christ in Matthew 28.18-20 (cf. See Josh Moody, *The God-Centered Life Insights From Jonathan Edwards For Today* Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2006). This will help replicate many who will not only preach the truth but also live it. Once the church in Africa finds discipleship-making central to her life, a brighter future is guaranteed; else we may run into bigger troubles. Hull says, "Unless the church makes making disciples its main agenda, world evangelism is a fantasy." (11) He went on to add, "The refusal to consistently make disciples causes decline that leaves the church more defeated than before, and the world does not become evangelized" (11).

Discipleship in accordance with the gospel of the cross helps people to live victoriously over sin, become strong Christians and remain productive. This requires a genuine concern to knowing God and the world around us. In line with this, Dunahoo says, "Being a disciple of the kingdom and effectively ministering in a postmodern world requires a saving knowledge of God, an accurate knowledge of his Word, a proper knowledge of the world around us, and a true knowledge of ourselves." (viii) Once we are able to live out Christ

life and be spiritually disciplined; committed to preaching the gospel of the cross and engage in discipleship making, then the future of the church in Africa will indeed be bright.

CONCLUSION

Learning from Jesus' model of discipleship, it is necessary to emphasize such within the context of our region especially as ministers and teachers of God's word. Specifically, the three lessons learned are worth emulating. All leading to sound spiritual disciplined and committed life worthy of the gospel received. One critical factor that helped sustained the Christian faith in the first two hundred years despite all challenges is the lifestyle of the believers. In Acts 3.13, the Sanhedrin council could not denied the changed lives of the apostles despite been unschooled, illiterate, unlearned because they had been with Jesus. He has affected their lives so much that it becomes obvious to others. This in turn lends much credence to their preaching because it was coming from changed lives. Christian faith in Africa has a bright future if the Christians truly see the gospel of the cross as the message of Jesus meant to be lived before preaching.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Discipleship should not be seen as just class exercise but a life impacting phenomenon that can take place anywhere.
- Emphasizing the significance of the Cross Life in mainstream Christianity in Africa.
- Lovingly refuting the sham of 'health and wealth preaching' with sound doctrine in Africa.
- Evangelical Biblical Interpretation (EBI) should be emphasized in our seminaries with a view of raising authentic ministers and apologetics of the gospel who in turn can correctly handle the word of truth in Africa.
- Constantly organizing seminars, workshops and conferences for both church leaders and seminary teachers for interaction with an aim of finding a good interface between academics and spirituality.
- Lecturers in theological schools and religious departments in secular institutions should see their roles of teaching and mentoring as basically discipleship. This means they must be disciples before discipling others.

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