



## Community-Based Discipleship

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**Abstract:** This article presents the biblical meaning of disciple and discipleship and uncovers the importance of community-based discipleship. Literature was engaged to throw light in arguments. The article appeals that a church that seeks to be successful needs to follow the method of Jesus by making disciples through community-based discipleship and relationship principles. Making community-based discipleship a priority will help the church to produce connected and transformed disciples, not just converts to the movement. Strong community-based discipleship builds strong disciples of Jesus and strong churches for mission. The church with the community-based discipleship will successfully fulfill the Great Commission following the method of Jesus (Matt 28:18-20). If the church seeks to be successful, it should follow the method of Jesus in discipling.

**Keywords:** Master; disciple; discipleship; relationship; church, community; learner; follower.

**How to cite:** Ruhongeka, A. (2023). Community-Based Discipleship. East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences 4(1)102-107. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46606/eajess2022v03i06.0261>.

### Introduction

To be a true disciple, it is important for one to understand the meaning of being a disciple and its cost. It is also necessary for one to understand the link between discipleship and the community since there is no service without others just like there is no learning and following in the discipleship system without the master and the disciples (Luke 14:25-33; Matt 10:38; Mark 8:34). A disciple is better developed in the community. This article defines the biblical meaning of disciple and discipleship. It also addresses the history of discipleship and the importance of community-based discipleship.

### Disciple and Discipleship

The term *disciple* as used in the New Testament comes from a Greek word *mathetes*, which means a *learner* (Moon, 2017). To be a disciple is to be a learner. "A disciple, *mathetes*, is a learner or follower - usually someone committed to a significant master" (Hull, 2006, p. 32). From this perspective, a disciple is a committed person who follows a teacher for the purpose of learning and transformation. A disciple imitates the teacher and finally becomes like his/her teacher.

Hull (2006) defines a disciple of Jesus not only as a learner and a follower but also as a reborn and a transformed person to the image of Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). A disciple is someone who commits himself to leave everything and surrender all, then follow the master. Before following the master, the disciple must disconnect from the former life and connect with the new source of life, like Peter who left his net and Matthew who left his business and followed Jesus (Marc 1:16-18; Matt 9:9). A disciple is developed in a community.

Davis (2015, p. 61) describes disciple as "one who moves closer to Jesus as a learner, follower and lover, together with other disciples." Moon (2017) described how the term disciple is used in the New Testament. The word for disciple (*mathetes*) is not found in the New Testament outside the Gospels and Acts. But the concept of discipleship is utilized on metaphorical sense of 'following' and 'working,' especially in the context of imitation" (p. 45). Disciple is the primary term used in the Gospel to refer to Jesus' follower 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 aspect of the individual's relationships with Jesus and others in the faith. The term was used most frequently in this specific sense at least 230 times in the Gospels and 28 times in Acts (Hull, 2006). The term disciple in the Gospels and Acts emphasizes on the person who has a relationship with Jesus and his fellows. Therefore, discipleship without relationship with others and following the Master, according to the Gospel and Acts of Apostles, lacks the major elements since a disciple is better developed in the community.

It is necessary to further capture the meaning of "discipleship." Though both words, disciple and discipleship have the same root and are similar, they don't mean exactly the same thing. Though the term discipleship has been used extensively in the Gospel and Acts, the term discipleship is not a pure biblical expression. Hull (2006) states that "Discipleship, the widely accepted term that describes the ongoing life of the disciple, also describes the broader Christian experience. This word isn't a pure biblical expression, but a derivative. Yet most Christians generally accept discipleship as the process of following Jesus" (p. 35). A disciple is a follower, a learner while discipleship is the state of the learner. "Ship added to the end of *disciple* means 'the state of 'or 'contained in.' Therefore, discipleship means the state of being a disciple. The term *discipleship* has a nice ongoing feel - a sense of journey, the idea of *becoming* a disciple rather than having been *made* a disciple" (Hull, 2006, p. 35). Discipleship is continuous following, learning and being transformed. It is an ongoing journey, not a place to reach and stay.

Biblical discipleship starts with personal conviction and commitment to follow the master, but that is not an end. To have complete discipleship, one needs to connect to the community and to make others disciples. Discipleship is an intentional, learning activity in which two or a small group of individuals, typically in a community, holding the same religious beliefs, make a voluntary commitment to each other to form a close, personal relationship for an extended period of time (Mamo, 2017). Discipleship grows the community in the knowledge of God and helps the community to be transformed in the likeness of Christ and to be committed for mission.

Discipleship is an educational journey for the community in which leaders are developed. Mamo

(2017, p. 34) continues to hold that, "Discipleship is an educational strategy, a foundational to ministries of the church, for leadership development and for genuine community building." Christianity without discipleship is the end of Christianity. Without discipleship the Christian life becomes just a routine because Christ is not followed. The History of Christian church testifies how community-based discipleship was operated.

### **The History of Discipleship**

This part explores the history of discipleship in the Greco-Roman world where Christianity started and the history of discipleship in the Bible, especially in the New Testament.

The history of the education system in the Greco-Roman world helps one to better understand the background of biblical discipleship. "Unlike the education system today, in the Greco-Roman world, students sat at the master's feet, formally and informally studying life-based well-rounded education. The education was practical and based on life skills rather than information sharing. It was a continuous commitment to be with the master, learning from him and serving him for a long term" (Mamo, 2017, p. 29). Jesus started His ministry in the Greco-Roman background and His disciples continued in the same background.

In the Old and the New Testaments, discipleship happens in the context of the Greco-Roman world. Moon (2017) comments that, "In the world of the Old and New Testament, this learning was not an academic exercise, rather, leaning was achieved by following a Rabbi, such as John (Matt 9:14), the Pharisees (Matt 22:16) and Moses (John 9:28). Jesus stepped into this world and appointed twelve disciples (Luke 6:12-16) to follow Him, learn from His teachings and obey His instructions. The early Christian church grew in that context of discipleship.

In the fourth century, the new era of discipleship started. "When the early church moved from being a movement to being a structured hierarchical organization with the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century, things changed. The focus of the church shifted from making disciples of the nations to a kind of evangelism that was structurally based and government sponsored" (Mamo, 2017, p. 26). This shift that started in the time of Constantine changed the meaning and purpose of discipleship in Christianity. "Christendom became more concerned with the number of converts than with discipling converts. Contrary to the practice of the early

church, the institutional church appointed many leaders who were not disciples but people who were hungry for power and positions” (Mamo, 2017, p.26). The scenario of changing the meaning of discipleship continued since the fourth century until the time of reformation.

According to Mamo (2017), reformation started the journey of bringing back the light that had been lost during dark ages, including discipleship, but the reformation was not able to restore the entire package of what was lost in discipleship. “Making disciples is about having a relationship with Christ that results in a lifestyle of obedience to Christ’s commands, which requires disciples to make more disciples” (Watson & Watson, 2014, p.48).

When missionaries started their journey to reach other nations, the method they used to make disciples was not comprehensive. “The approach used by missionaries was not discipleship based-evangelism. Influenced by their contemporary context, intentionally or unintentionally, the target of the missionaries was to make converts and civilize the culture of the people they were evangelizing. Their desire was to produce a civilized and educated person through training in schools and churches” (Mamo, 2017, p. 27-28). That system generally produced converts to the movement rather than disciples of Jesus.

That misunderstanding of discipleship has grown in the Christian Church in term of organization, infrastructures and numbers but not disciples developed with discipleship done through community. That misunderstanding has produced the consumers of religious activity instead of producing the disciples.

Many people try to reduce the call to follow Jesus to a study course, a limited program only for new believers or a rigorous life only for monks, missionaries and ministers. Worse, many think that discipleship involves the completion of tasks, the acquisition of skills and the accumulation of knowledge (Hull, 2006, p. 52).

### **Importance of Community-Based Discipleship**

This section focuses on importance of discipleship as a tool to build a strong Christian community and an effective tool to equip people for transformation and mission.

Importance of community-based discipleship includes to educate people. There is no way to talk about Christian education without talking about discipleship. Discipleship serves as “effective educational method for the church” (Hull, 2006, p. 30). What makes discipleship an effective method for the church, touches the head, the heart and the hand. In other words, it touches the knowledge and it changes the behavior and actions. “Learning does not require faith, just intellect. Obedience requires faith” (Watson & Watson, 2014 p.48). A disciple is a learner, with the purpose to be transformed and to become like his Master, not just a theoretical knowledge. “Discipleship as an educational methodology is more than teaching; it is a holistic approach to training” (Hull, 2006, p. 31). Discipleship as the church education system crosscuts in every ministry of the church.

Discipleship benefits the church to build a strong and connected Christian community. “Discipleship is a community-building strategy, an embodiment of Christ and an expression of theology” (Hull, 2006, p. 32). Discipleship is a connector of the community. It is built on a strong relationship and trust between disciples and Jesus and among the disciples. Discipleship is not a personal business, it is not a self-study, it is not a lonely journey but is an interconnected community to help each other, where new believers get help, fellowship and maturity. When true relationship is missing, there is no discipleship. Discipleship is not passing knowledge from far without a friendship connection. Discipleship needs relationship. When the link of friendship is missed, it cannot be called discipleship. “Flight into invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself ceased to follow him” (Bonhoeffer, 1995, p. 118). Discipleship will be manifested in a community of believers who care for each other, who build each other, who support each other. Community-based discipleship grows the community both spiritually and numerically (Matt 28:18-20).

### **Characteristics for a Successful Discipleship**

Success in discipleship is costly and needs commitment and commitment to follow Jesus and His method of discipleship is the only way for the success in discipleship.

### **Personal Commitment to Follow Jesus**

During the ministry of Jesus on earth, following Him required a total commitment and it was costly. Disciples of Jesus were requested to disconnect

from the former life and all its desires and to connect to the new life in Jesus (Luke 14:27). Hull (2006, p. 36) indicates that "Discipleship is fundamentally about the choice to follow Jesus." Disciples of Jesus were successful in their ministry because they were full committed followers. A disciple must therefore make a decision to follow Jesus because there is no Christianity without discipleship. "Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ" (Bonhoeffer, 1995, p. 59). If someone doesn't have Christ, he is not deserving to be called a disciple of Jesus. "You can't be a Christian without being a disciple. Faith as modeled and taught by Jesus requires more than just agreeing to religious truth. It means commitment to follow Christ daily" (Bonhoeffer, 1995, p. 47). The knowledge is good and important, but it is not enough, it requires commitment to follow "Contagious Disciple-Makers focus on helping people come into a dynamic and growing relationship with Christ through prayer, Bible study, worship, evangelism and fellowship" (Watson & Watson, 2014, p.48). Every disciple maker should connect people to Christ not just make convert to the church doctrine. "You can't be a Christian without being a disciple. Faith as modeled and taught by Jesus requires more than just agreeing to religious truth. It means commitment to follow Christ daily" (Bonhoeffer, 1995, p. 47). The knowledge is good and important, but it is not enough, it requires commitment to follow.

If the step to surrender all and follow Him daily is not done properly by a disciple, the church will be full of consumers rather than the disciples. "A disciple is one who embraces and obeys all the teachings of Christ and endeavors by word and deed to make more disciples. A *convert* is one who practices a religion into which he or she was not born, and may or may not encourage others to convert" (Watson & Watson, 2014, p.47). The true gospel produces disciple not just convert to the movement and consumers. "Does the gospel we preach produce disciples or does it produce consumers of religious goods and services?" (Bonhoeffer, 1995, p. 44). A disciple is someone who commits himself to learn and to obey as he follows Jesus with the aim to become like Him. "The gospel requires us to make disciples who learn to obey everything Christ taught. The evidence of salvation is living a life of transformation. The point here is not earning salvation, but the fruits of salvation" (Bonhoeffer, 1995, p. 44). Every disciple must follow

Jesus and be transformed. This step is necessary for success in discipleship.

### **Commitment to Follow the Method of Jesus**

Jesus should be the model for every leader in making disciples. Bonhoeffer (1995) describes what the Bible reveals about the method of Jesus in making disciples. "It was an intentional relationship, not accidental; it was a voluntary commitment, not imposed; and it was a learning community where disciples learned from Jesus and from each other" (p. 38-39). The church should commit itself to follow the steps of Jesus, if it seeks to have a successful discipleship. White (2006) states that "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me'" (p. 119). The discipleship method of Jesus with His disciples was build on relationship, trusting, being part of them through the community.

You cannot talk about "discipleship" as leader without talking about "relationship." Without relationship, there is no discipleship. Before Jesus called His first disciples, He connected to them first through His teachings, His miracles and His life. "Until this time, none of the disciples had fully united as a colaborers with Jesus. They had witnessed many of His miracles and had listened to His teachings; but they had not entirely forsaken their former employment. ...But now Jesus called them to forsake their former life and unite their interests with His" (White, 2005, p. 246). Relationship serves as a link between disciples and the master-teacher. "The relationship is the glue that held the team together" (Maxwell, 2004, p. 16). Without relationship, there is not discipleship. A success of discipleship starts with relationship. This is why it is important to value the community where relationship is shared.

The Christian church should priorities discipleship. "Following in Christ's footsteps, the church should not prioritize insitutions, programs or organizations before discipleship" (Mamo, 2017, p. 40). Discipleship is build by strong communities and should be a priority for the Christian church (Matt 28:18-20). The church should be clear on how to recruit and equip members for discipleship; that should be the very first mission of the church. "Mission has to be backed by a strong community of disciples who know their calling and commission"

(Mamo, 2017, 40). If the church prioritizes other activities and forgets discipleship through the community, the church will produce converts who don't know their calling instead of producing disciples with a missional heart. "Reports of many missionaries indicate the number of converts, which generates excitement and funding but a discipling process is more difficult to report. The reality in the history of missions is that the emphasis on going and converting has taken precedence over teaching and discipling" (Mamo, 2017, p. 41). Producing disciples through the community is costly, but it is worthy for the Christian church.

"Because we're largely products of a consumer culture, we're easily impressed by big churches. The church has become expert at producing Christians who are nice people, but who aren't formed into the life of Christ" (Hull, 2006, p. 253). The church should accomplish its mission by transformation of hearts, not by producing many unchanged Christians. "Discipleship is much more about the depth of character and spiritual passion of each disciple than it is a plan for church growth" (Hull, 2006, p. 37). Growth will be the fruit of true discipleship, like works of a transformed Christian are the fruit of faith. "The gospel of Jesus is not just information to pass on; it is the power of God to transform individual lives and communities. Transformation can only happen when we train believers to be Disciples of Christ" (Mamo, 2017, p. 41).

Church environment is one of the keys that makes discipleship successful. People feel more comfortable and ready to grow when the church environment is favorable for growing.

We want a place to be real in an honest sense. We want to be honest about our dreams, disappointments and differences. Why is this such a big deal that we come out of our shell? Because when we stay in our shell, religious activity- including well intentioned, well planned and well-led programs- can and often does fail (Hull, 2006, p. 155).

The discipleship is in danger when the relationship environment is not health. "Visitors may feel like outsiders after years of attending the same group, individuals may lose their own sense of value and contribution, and decision making may become gridlocked" (Davis, 2015, p.77). How can you develop in a place where you are fearful and where

you are not trusted? "Can I trust me with you?' I am so sad to say that in majority of Christian Environments, the answer has been 'no. So go back to your shell, we go!" (Hull, 2006, p. 155). People want to be sure that they are in a safe place before they become opened for growth and development "Relationship of trust provides the foundation for transformational discipleship. Only in trusting relationships can we honestly deal with barriers to obedience and overwhelming sins that hold us back from spiritual growth" (Hull, 2006, p. 156). Commitment of the church to make the church a safe community will make the discipleship successful.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Community-based discipleship is biblical and was used by Jesus to make disciples. Jesus created a community-based discipleship with twelve disciples to be under His training for transformation and mission, then He sent them to make other disciples. Making community-based discipleship a priority as Jesus will help the church to produce connected and transformed disciples, not just converts to the movement. Strong community-based discipleship builds strong disciples of Jesus and strong churches in mission. The relationship in the community-based discipleship serves as a connector. The church with the community-based discipleship will fulfill the Great Commission following the method of Jesus (Matt 28:18-20). If the church wants to be successful, it should follow the method of Jesus in discipleship.

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