

Discipleship Then *and* Now



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 24:14; 28:19, 20; Mark 16:20; John 3:21–30; Acts 5:34–39.*

Memory Text: “Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it” (*Mark 16:20, NIV*).

Discipleship goes back to even before the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. Several centuries before His coming into this world in human flesh, there were disciple-gathering teachers who influenced the lives of others with their instructions. This was true with the Greeks, the Jews, the Chinese, and other ancient cultures. Several of these teachers refused to accept the use of the term teacher in reference to themselves or that of *disciple* in reference to their pupils, so close was the bond between them.

This week's lesson explores discipleship in other settings, compares it with Jesus' discipleship, and examines the implications for the disciples of Jesus who live in the twenty-first century.

The Week at a Glance: What was discipleship like among the Greeks and the Jews? How was discipleship different with John the Baptist and with Jesus of Nazareth? What applications for the contemporary task of discipleship can we gain from discipleship in the time of Jesus?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 12.*

Discipleship Among the Greeks

“Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus’” (*John 12:20, 21, NRSV*).

The fact that these Greeks went to worship at the festival should tell us something about them already. Also, the verses beforehand reveal that so much was happening that the attitude of the Greeks should not be surprising.

Read the following texts. What insight could they shed upon what was happening here? *Jer. 29:13; John 1:9; 6:44; Acts 10:34, 35.*

Last week we saw that Jesus always chose His own disciples. The above texts might, at first glance, indicate something different. Yet, that is not the case. Even here the Spirit was wooing these Greeks.

In Greek culture, discipleship took many different forms. Though some Greek teachers would initiate the call to discipleship, the tradition was for the students to choose the teacher. The students, not the teacher, initiated the relationship. Also, it was common for the teachers to charge a fee for the students who studied with them.

In this case, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, these Greeks were seeking Jesus, to learn from Him. Given that God uses what we know to teach us what we need to know, this is a viable notion. Indeed, Ellen G. White notes that “the Greeks longed to know the truth in regard to His mission.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 622. She also said that Jesus granted their request.

If someone were to come up to you, as these Greeks did to Philip, and say, “We wish to see Jesus,” what would you answer? How would you introduce them to Him?

Discipleship Among the Jews

Pupil-teacher relations are mentioned in the writings of Jewish scholars such as Philo and Josephus. There were also two famed rabbis, Hillel and Shammai, who had rival schools in Jerusalem and who attracted followers. We also are told in Acts that Saul of Tarsus was the pupil of Rabbi Gamaliel, another famed first-century Jewish teacher (*Acts 5:34–39, 22:3*).

Read the above texts. What can we learn about Gamaliel from them?

These teachers were reputed throughout the first century among the Jews. They attracted pupils from the whole world to Jerusalem, the center of theological and juridical knowledge of Judaism, to sit at the feet of these masters. A young Jew who desired to become a rabbi began his education as a pupil at a very early age, perhaps as early as fourteen. He was in personal contact with his teacher, listening to his instructions, imitating his gestures, and learning from him in the classroom and in daily life. In the classroom, he assumed the posture of a learner, sitting at his master's feet. When he mastered the traditional material, he was designated a nonordained scholar. Ordination came later at a prefixed age. At that time, the title rabbi was bestowed upon him, as well as the power to bind or loose for all time the Jews of the entire world.

What we have seen in the preceding paragraphs is consistent with the glimpses of Jewish teacher-pupil relations we get from the New Testament. What light do they shed on the understanding of the following passages? *Matt. 16:19, 18:18*.

Have you known a teacher you have admired, who made a great impact on your life for good? What were the aspects of that teacher that so impressed you? In what ways can you emulate those traits in your own life?

Discipleship With John the Baptist

Read John 3:21–30. Explain what this passage says about John the Baptist in relationship to discipleship. Was he also a disciple-gathering teacher? Because he did not have rabbinical education, what does the title *rabbi* say about the regard his pupils had for him?

It is apparent that some Jews wondered whether John the Baptist was the Messiah. This is implied by the questions of the messengers whom the priests and Levites from Jerusalem sent to John the Baptist (*John 1:19–28*). Their questions are significant, especially when one considers that a two-messiah concept had developed among the Jews during this period between the Old and New Testaments. It anticipated a priestly messiah from the tribe of Levi and a kingly messiah from the tribe of Judah. The fact that priests and Levites were sent is therefore notable since they belonged to the tribe of Levi.

It is possible that the disciples of John saw him as a priestly messiah; after all, he was from the tribe of Levi. This belief could also have motivated the Jerusalem visitors, who inquired of John regarding his mission. Some scholars believe that this was the reason the author of the fourth Gospel recorded so much of what the Baptist said about Jesus. He wanted it to be absolutely clear that John the Baptist saw Jesus, not himself, as the Messiah. Perhaps it is against this background that we must understand John 3:25, 26.

What was the issue that caused some distress among John's disciples? See John 3:21–30. What does their attitude say about them? In contrast, what does John's response tell us about his character? What principle can we learn from John's response that we could apply to our own lives?

Discipleship With Jesus

From the very outset of His public ministry, Jesus had disciples. He appeared on the first-century Jewish scene as a disciple-gathering teacher in the tradition of both Greek and Jewish teachers. There were also points of contact with John the Baptist since John baptized Him in preparation for His mission.

As in both Jewish and Greek traditions, Jesus had disciples who followed Him everywhere, who listened to His teaching, and who imitated Him (*Matt. 5:1, 2; John 1:35–40; 2:1, 2*).

Carefully read Matthew 4:18–20; then (going back over Sunday’s and Monday’s lessons) compare the ways in which one came to be a disciple of Jesus, of the Greek teachers, and of the established rabbis. What things did they have in common? What things were different?

“Until this time none of the disciples had fully united as collaborators with Jesus. They had witnessed many of His miracles, and had listened to His teaching; but they had not entirely forsaken their former employment. The imprisonment of John the Baptist had been to them all a bitter disappointment. If such were to be the outcome of John’s mission, they could have little hope for their Master, with all the religious leaders combined against Him. Under the circumstances it was a relief to them to return for a short time to their fishing. But now Jesus called them to forsake their former life, and unite their interests with His. Peter had accepted the call. Upon reaching the shore, Jesus bade the three other disciples, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ Immediately they left all, and followed Him [Matt. 4:19, 20].”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 246–249.

What has Jesus called you to give up in order to follow Him? What has your response to that call been? Might you still be holding on to something that is standing in the way of a full commitment to the Lord?

Contemporary Discipleship

“Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it” (*Mark 16:20, NIV*).

According to the above verse, what was one major characteristic seen in the disciples of Christ? What message is there for us, as well? *See also Matt. 24:14; 28:19, 20; Rev. 14:6–12.*

Beside the fact that the disciples were preaching everywhere, Mark said that the Lord worked with the early disciples after His departure and *confirmed His word* among them by the signs that accompanied it. Are contemporary disciples seeing God’s confirmation of His word among them through signs and miracles? What are some of the signs and miracles we see? How do we define signs and miracles? Should we expect the same kind of signs and miracles in every culture, time, and society?

Are there other ways, besides signs and miracles, for God to *confirm His word* among us? If so, how?

Jesus has no less expectation of His disciples today than He had for the early ones. He requires the same commitment to the task from us. However, He says, “ ‘According to your faith be it unto you’ ” (*Matt. 9:29*). Moreover, He says, “ ‘And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it’ ” (*John 14:13, 14, NIV*).

How involved are you in the work of spreading the gospel? What are your own spiritual gifts, and how can they be used in this work? When was the last time you did anything at all in terms of helping others know the wonderful truths that you have been entrusted with? What does your answer tell you about yourself?

Further Study: Read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 432, 433, 582–585, 932, 1022, 1023; Ellen G. White, “Who Is the Greatest?” p. 432, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“For a time the Baptist’s influence over the nation had been greater than that of its rulers, priests, or princes. If he had announced himself as the Messiah, and raised a revolt against Rome, priests and people would have flocked to his standard. Every consideration that appeals to the ambition of the world’s conquerors Satan had stood ready to urge upon John the Baptist. But with the evidence before him of his power, he had steadfastly refused the splendid bribe. The attention which was fixed upon him he had directed to Another. Now he saw the tide of popularity turning away from himself to the Saviour. Day by day the crowds about him lessened. . . . But the disciples of John looked with jealousy upon the growing popularity of Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 178.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** What is involved in leaving everything behind in order to follow Jesus? What are the different ways such a commitment is made manifest in our lives? In class on Sabbath, be prepared to talk about your own understanding of what this means.
- 2** What roles should our educational institutions have in helping make disciples? How can our churches and our schools better work together in this important challenge?
- 3** Even in the time of Jesus there was a rivalry among disciples. Why is something like this so common, even among a work that is, ideally, so exalted, a work that should by its very nature keep us all humble and eager for the success of others? What practical things can we do to keep ourselves from falling into this trap?
- 4** What about this whole question of signs and wonders and miracles? Do we believe in this? If so, what do we believe about it? What do signs and wonders prove? What do they not prove? Why should we always approach these things with caution, humility, and firm reliance on the Word of God?

Religion Class Discovery

by THOMAS WALTER

Herr Singer teaches religion to fifth- and sixth-grade children in a public school in Germany. One day he saw an ad for the Voice of Hope Bible correspondence course and signed up to take the basic course. Then he asked whether the Bible school offered lessons for children.

The Voice of Hope sent him their children's lessons, and Herr Singer asked permission to use them in his religion class. The Voice of Hope sent lessons for each student, and Herr Singer assigned the lessons to his students, who began completing them. Several students sent questions they had along with their lessons. From the first the teacher, his students, and their parents knew that the materials they studied were sponsored by Seventh-day Adventists.

Herr Singer taught another religion teacher's class when she was ill. When she returned to school her students wanted to continue taking the Bible course and asked Herr Singer to offer a second hour of Bible class so they could continue taking the Bible course. These public school children were willing to stay after school to study the Bible. So, once a week the students met in Herr Singer's class to complete their Bible course.

The other religion teachers at the school learned about Herr Singer's Bible class discovery and asked to use the material in their own religion classes. Herr Singer created a curriculum plan in which he explained how to use the Bible correspondence course to teach religion to children. He sent a copy to the Voice of Hope so that other religion teachers in Germany can use the material if they wish.

When the children completed the basic Bible course, some asked for more Bible material. Herr Singer directed them to the Voice of Hope, where they could study on their own. Six children enrolled in the basic adult course. They completed this course without their teacher's assistance. The course is not easy, and the children began asking their parents for help. When their parents couldn't answer their children's questions, some of them enrolled in the Bible study course in order to help answer their children's questions.

So, one teacher's quest for religious materials has sown seeds of faith in the minds of children and their families in Germany.

Your mission offerings support the Voice of Hope in Germany and around the world.

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