

Where Are Jesus' Disciples?

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Where Are Jesus' Disciples?

When Jesus gave the Great Commission to His disciples, He commanded them to continue His work by saying:

"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."
(Matthew 28:18–20)

"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned."
(Mark 16:15–16)

These are not two variant accounts of the same event. Jesus issued the first statement, the Great Commission, on the side of a mountain somewhere along the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. By contrast, He made the second statement, reported by Mark, just before His ascension from the Mount of Olives to the east of Jerusalem. The distinction between the two commands is crucial. While the Church has managed to "preach the gospel" and thus accomplish the task Jesus ordered as related by Mark, it has failed miserably in accomplishing the Great Commission. To understand why that is, one must first understand what Jesus said. The Great Commission contains two key terms, without which one cannot fully appreciate how far short the Church has fallen in its fulfillment of its charter. The two expressions "make disciples" and "teaching them" speak volumes to anyone who would dare to question the Church's unfounded assumption that all is well. These describe how Jesus Christ expected the Church to perpetuate the message He proclaimed.

Jesus intended that a qualified "teacher" "make disciples" and "teach" them *The Teaching* He had taught His own "disciples." These new disciples were then to eagerly study His Teaching until they were qualified to teach it to other disciples. Jesus desired the Church to be an unbroken chain of teachers and disciples stretching all the way from His own day until the time of His return. But it hasn't happened that way. Don't be deceived. If Church history reveals nothing else, it clearly stands as mute testimony to the fact that *The Teaching of Jesus* was lost somewhere along the way. Why, if not, was it necessary for Martin Luther to recover and publish the most basic of all doctrines—salvation by faith—thus inciting the Protestant Reformation? (See "The Authority of Scripture," *The Voice of Elijah*, January 1991.)

The Rabbi

The Gospel writers confirm for us that Jesus was widely recognized as a "Rabbi." Those who addressed Him as such were varied: His disciples (Jn. 4:3; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8); Peter (Mk. 9:5; 11:21); Nathanael (Jn. 1:49); Mary (Jn. 20:16); the disciples of John (Jn. 1:38; 3:26); and Judas (Matt. 26:25, 49; Mk. 14:45). If you add to that number those who reportedly used the Greek term for Rabbi instead of the Hebrew term, the scribes and Pharisees, tax-gatherers and other members of the public at large also recognized Jesus as a Rabbi (Matt. 8:19; 9:1; Lk. 3:12; Mk. 12:14; 10:17). Even Nicodemus, who was a Rabbi himself, addressed Jesus as "Rabbi" on one occasion (Jn. 3:2). But what exactly does the title *Rabbi* tell us about Jesus' commission to the Apostles?

Rabbi is the Hebrew term for "teacher" as John clearly stated in his Gospel (Jn. 1:38). But to leave it at that would be misleading. A Rabbi was not a teacher in the modern sense of the word. The Rabbi sought to recreate himself in each of his "learners" (which is the

actual *meaning* of the Greek term translated “disciple”). Disciples followed a Rabbi for the specific purpose of learning his teaching. But they also sought to “imitate” (another key term) the lifestyle of the Rabbi under whom they studied. As Jesus said, the highest aspiration of the disciple was to become like his teacher:

“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, and the slave like his master.”

(Matthew 10:24–25)

“A disciple is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher.”

(Luke 6:40–41)

The teacher/disciple relationship which provided the basis for the practices of the Jewish Rabbis of Jesus' time actually originated among the philosophers of ancient Greece. Homer was considered by philosophers to be the “teacher of all Greece.” Socrates, who came many centuries later, was called Homer's greatest “disciple,” revealing that one need not learn directly from the teacher to become his disciple.

Socrates, however, disdained the application of the terms “teacher” and “disciple” to the relationship he had with his own students. He refused to apply the term “teaching” to his own dogma, although others did so because they could not accurately determine what he was about.

Socrates sought to institute a new order. He desired to develop in his students a commitment to the subject taught without the corresponding commitment to himself as their teacher. His methods were ultimately to survive as the basis for the modern teacher/pupil relationship. But they have little in common with the normal teacher/disciple relationship of that time.

As you can see from Socrates' aversion to the label, the ancient teacher was more than a source of knowledge, he was also a role model after whom the disciple sought to pattern his life. And although Socrates found in Plato and Aristotle some rather famous advocates of his new practice, the older teacher/disciple relationship continued unabated in many circles in ancient Greece.

Sometime before the birth of Jesus, the Jewish Pharisees adopted the older Greek relationship of the teacher/disciple as a way to defend the Jewish religion

against the encroachment of secular Greek philosophy. It was a “fight fire with fire” tactic. They assumed the practice of the very philosophers whose teaching they feared. Consequently, by the time of Christ, the teacher/disciple relationship was a well established part of Judaism.

The scribes mentioned in the New Testament Gospels were the Rabbis, drawing their disciples from the larger group, the Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees considered themselves to be disciples of Moses, whose teaching they claimed to be perpetuating. As they said to the blind man who had been healed by Jesus:

“You are His disciple; but we are disciples of Moses.”

(John 9:28)

Eventually, the teaching of the Jewish Rabbis came to be written down in Jewish Rabbinic literature such as the Mishnah, the Tosephta, the Talmud and the midrashim. Together, these writings form the basis for modern Judaism.

Many in Christianity today are enamored by the Jewish literature, and seek to borrow from it because of its Jewishness. They are apparently unaware that Judaism is, at its very core, still the religion Jesus vehemently attacked for its legalism. He saw in it a clear-cut case of the blind leading the blind (Matt. 15:14). It was a religion based on the “precepts of men” as Jesus told the Pharisees when they challenged His Teaching:

“You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.’”

(Matthew 15:7–9)

In stark contrast to the Jewish Rabbis of His day who emphasized strict adherence to the laws of Moses, Rabbi Jesus taught a new teaching, a teaching unlike anything the scribes taught:

When Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority and not as their scribes.

(Matthew 7:28–29)

And they were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority!"

(Mark 1:21–8)

The Teaching

Christian theology today is no longer based directly on *The Teaching of Jesus*. It is based, in the main, on the Epistles of Paul and, to a lesser degree, on the other New Testament writings. It finds little to anchor it in the Old Testament Scriptures. Many theologians who will acknowledge these self-evident facts even speak of what appears to them to be a basic contradiction between *The Teaching* of Paul and that of Jesus, as though Paul sought to establish his own religion. Others contrast the two Testaments, claiming they pertain to the ages of "law" and "grace," thereby diminishing the need to fully understand the Old Testament message. They do so only because they don't understand the prophetic message from which Jesus drew His parables.

For whatever reason, modern Christianity does not view the parables found in the Gospels as a repository of Jesus' *Teaching*. They see them instead as a compendium of pithy sayings from which to extract moral lessons. His parables have become, to many a pulpit pioneer, nothing more than a convenient dropping off point from which to break new moral ground. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The parables of Jesus are the very heart of His *Teaching*—*The Teaching* which He taught His disciples and commanded them to pass on to others. Matthew and Mark both state clearly that Jesus taught multitudes throughout the length and breadth of the land of Palestine. They agree that he spoke openly to these people—openly, but in parables (Matt. 13:34; Mk. 4:33–34).

The Gospels also tell us that Jesus' parables needed further explanation, and that He provided that explanation only to His disciples (Matt. 13:36; Mk. 4:34). We have discussed the implications of that fact elsewhere. (See "Jesus Talks About The Mystery," *The Voice of Elijah*, January 1991.) In conspicuous contrast to the neglect they receive today, however, Jesus considered His parables to be a veritable treasure trove of information. After completing a lengthy explanation of His parables, Jesus asked His disciples:

"Have you understood all these things?" They said to Him, "Yes." And He said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a house who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old."

(Matthew 13:51–52)

The expectation of every Rabbi in Jesus' time was that his disciples would not only learn what he taught, but that they would also teach it to others exactly as he had taught them. Jesus taught His followers, however, that they were not to follow the pattern set by the scribes. They were not to seek disciples for themselves to gratify their own ego:

"The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; because they say, and don't do. . . . But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels. And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, 'Rabbi.' But don't be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers."

(Matthew 23:2–8)

Shortly before He ascended from the Mount of Olives, Jesus commanded His disciples to carry on His work by "preaching the Gospel." But He had previously outlined in the Great Commission the exact method they were to follow. The Great Commission tells us Jesus expected His disciples to continue the same teacher/disciple methodology He had used. They were to "make disciples"—not disciples of their own, but disciples for Him. They were, however, to "teach" these new disciples the things He had taught them, so that these new disciples, in turn, could master His *Teaching* and teach it to others.

The New Testament indicates that, at first, the Early Church carried on the work just as Jesus intended. But it also reveals that the process was already in serious peril even before the Apostles died.

The Revelation

Jesus equipped the Apostles for the task ahead of them by supernaturally revealing the message of the

Old Testament to them before He ascended (See "Jesus Talks About The Mystery," *The Voice of Elijah*, January 1991.) Luke relates how Jesus, after His resurrection, "explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). But the Apostles' understanding of the Old Testament message did not come from this explanation. It was a result of the fact that, some time later, Jesus "opened their mind to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45).

After receiving the complement of the enabling power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the Apostles immediately went out among the people, teaching the message of the Old Testament that they clearly understood (Acts 2:14ff.). This clarity of understanding stands in direct contrast to the fact that, before the resurrection "as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead" (John 20:9). In the Book of Acts, Luke repeatedly emphasized what was for him the essential ingredient in the life of the newborn church. That ingredient was *The Teaching of the Apostles*:

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.
(Acts 2:42)

In these first days of the Church, the focus of its leaders was clear. They set out to make disciples and teach. They were so effective that the Jewish religious leaders became concerned, "because they were teaching the people and proclaiming concerning Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (Acts 4:2). So these religious leaders summoned the Apostles and "commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18). But Luke tells us that after receiving a direct order from the messenger of the Lord who released them from prison, the Apostles immediately went back to the temple and "began to teach" (Acts 5:18). Luke was careful to distinguish between "teaching" and "preaching" in the Book of Acts (Acts 5:42). Both he and Matthew did so in their Gospels as well (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 11:1; Lk. 20:1) because they understood the clear delineation Jesus had made between the two activities.

The role of teaching in the Early Church was to continue the teacher/disciple tradition. But *The Teaching* also provided the platform from which the Apostles

preached the good news of salvation for the purpose of making new disciples. Without *The Teaching* there could be no preaching of the Gospel. *The Teaching* of the Apostles was nothing more than presentation of the hidden message of the Old Testament. Their preaching of the Gospel built on that foundation and included the call to believe that message.

The Church retains in the New Testament a mere scrap of *The Teaching* which Jesus revealed to His Apostles. That original message is no longer understood. Scholars are at a loss to explain even the few statements of the Apostles that Luke included in the Book of Acts. But on the small shred of truth that God ensured would remain available, preaching of the Gospel has continued down through the centuries. It continues still in a few circles. And God still honors the humble response of those few who answer the call to repent with an honest heart, seeking to know the Truth.

The Disciples

Like all Rabbis of His time, Jesus gathered around Himself numerous disciples to whom He taught His *Teaching*. Contrary to popular belief, Jesus had more than just twelve disciples. "The Twelve," as these select few were often called (Matt. 26:14,20,47; Mk. 6:7; 9:35; Lk. 8:1; 9:12), were simply twelve of His disciples whom He also selected to be "Apostles"—a Greek term which means "one sent" for a specific purpose (Mk. 3:13-19; Lk. 6:12-16). In actual fact, the text says that Jesus had "a multitude of disciples" (Lk. 19:37). Joseph of Arimathea was His disciple (Jn. 19:38), and possibly Nicodemus as well (Jn. 3:2; 19:39). It was from some one hundred and twenty of these other disciples (whom Peter calls "the Brethren") that the Early Church leaders chose an individual to replace Judas as Apostle after he committed suicide (Acts 1:15-26).

The Believers in the Early Church had many designations for themselves: "Brethren" (Acts 1:15), "Believers" (Acts 5:14), "Christians" (Acts 11:26), "the church" (Acts 8:1) and those "of the Way" (Acts 9:2), to list but a few. The most telling is the term "disciples" (Acts 6:1,7; 9:10,25,26). The use of this one term removes any shadow of doubt concerning what the Early Church leaders were about. They were following the teacher/disciple pattern just as Jesus had commanded. And in accord with His desires, the Apostles were not acting in the tradition of the Rabbis by mak-

ing disciples for themselves. Not at all. These new disciples were considered to be “disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). Like the other Apostles, Paul also received what he taught by revelation from Jesus Christ:

*But I make known to you, brothers, (as to the Good News proclaimed by me) that it isn't in accordance with men, because I didn't receive it from a man; nor was {I} taught, except through a revelation of Jesus Christ.
(Galatians 1:11–12) —my translation*

He emphasized in a letter to the Corinthians that he was careful to teach only what he had “received” and that his teaching was “according to the Scriptures:”

*Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.
(1 Corinthians 15:1–4)*

Paul also encouraged the Early Church to accept *The Teaching* just as it had been delivered to them:

*So then, Brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.
(2 Thessalonians 2:15)*

Paul repeatedly urged Timothy, who was one of his “disciples,” to teach other disciples what he had been taught and to avoid anyone who wanted to change *The Teaching*:

*Prescribe and teach these things.
(1 Timothy 4:11)*

*Teach and prescribe these principles. If anyone advocates a different doctrine, and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words...
(1 Timothy 6:2)*

Paul also commanded Timothy to carry on the teacher/disciple tradition:

*And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.
(2 Timothy 2:2)*

Paul encouraged another disciple, Titus, by reminding him that the currency of false teaching already in the Church demanded that the leader of each local church must be one who is:

*holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain.
(Titus 1:9–11)*

As is obvious in his warning to Titus, there were already, in Paul's own day, false teachers in the Church who were teaching self-serving doctrines designed to gratify their own ego. Paul realized toward the end of his life that *The Teaching of Jesus* would be irreversibly contaminated by the presence of individuals in the Church who wanted to be recognized as Rabbis. He wrote to Timothy:

*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.
(2 Timothy 4:3–4)*

Given time, the teaching of these false teachers (2 Pet. 2:1) was bound to mix with *The Teaching of Jesus* until confusion obscured the Truth. Accordingly, Paul warned the elders of the Ephesian church concerning what would soon happen in their own little band of believers:

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own

blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them."
(Acts 20:28–32)

It happened just as Paul had warned. By A.D. 95, just sixty-two years after the crucifixion of Jesus, Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the Corinthians because:

"A feud had broken out in the Church at Corinth. Presbyters appointed by Apostles, or their immediate successors, had been unlawfully deposed. A spirit of insubordination was rife."
(J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p.11)

Clement's argument for the legitimacy of the presbyters was the fact that they had received "the Word of God" from the Apostles:

The Apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent from God. So then Christ is from God, and the Apostles are from Christ. Both therefore came of the will of God in the appointed order. Having therefore received a charge, and having been fully assured through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and confirmed in the word of God with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth with the glad tidings that the kingdom of God should come. So preaching everywhere in country and town, they appointed their first-fruits, when they had proved them by the Spirit to be bishops and deacons unto them that should believe.
(*Ibid*, Lightfoot, p.31)

The efforts of the Early Church leaders failed to keep *The Teaching of Jesus* from being adulterated. Less than a century after the death of Jesus Christ, few bothered to ascertain whether one had actually received *The Teaching* from a legitimate Teacher. By A.D. 200, it was no longer a matter of passing along *The Teaching* the Apostles had received from the Greatest Teacher of all time. The learned theologians of the Church had already decided they could understand *The Teaching* for themselves. They were already busy arguing about the "right" way to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures. How little they knew.

Jesus never intended that the Scriptures would be *interpreted*. He intended their message to be *explained*, to be taught by a disciple who had been taught by a disciple who had been taught by a disciple, etc. Peter said this clearly:

But know this first of all, that no prophecy is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies.
(2 Peter 1:20–2:1)

The Church was supposed to have been nourished by a continuous chain of qualified teachers who taught *The Teaching of Jesus Christ*. It has not been so. That Teaching was lost within the first one hundred years after the last of the Apostles died. Consequently, where once there was only one Teaching—*The Apostolic Teaching*—what the Gospel writers call "His Teaching" (Matt. 7:28; Mk. 1:22; Lk. 4:32; Jn. 18:19), and Paul calls "the Teaching" (Titus 1:9), now every pastor and lay person alike fabricates their own teaching. And not one of them agrees completely with the other. That's not surprising. The ruler of this realm is the father of lies and the father of all liars (Jn. 8:44). A liar lies to introduce confusion, so that the truth cannot be discovered. So if confusion reigns in the Church today, it is so only because the Liar has been at work there.

So where are Jesus' Disciples? If what you have read above is true, we now stand at "the time of the End" (Dan. 12:4, 9) as a Church without hope of ever being that Church "without spot or blemish" that Christ envisioned for His own (Eph. 5:27). Or do we? Jesus said His Teaching had one very special quality that set it apart from the teaching of all other Rabbis. And that characteristic alone will accomplish what God desires in these last days. Jesus said:

"My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or {whether} I speak from Myself."
(John 7:16b–17)

Let the one who has ears to hear pay close attention to what the Spirit is saying. ■