

On the Banks of Jordan

by G.W. North

G.W. North's sermon emphasizes the critical relationship between baptism, true discipleship, and the journey toward sainthood in the Christian faith.

Scripture: Matthew 28:19

Topics: "Baptism", "Discipleship"

Description

G.W. North emphasizes the significance of water baptism as a crucial step in the life of a disciple, illustrating how Jesus' own baptism in the Jordan marked His obedience and the beginning of His ministry. He explains that true discipleship involves a complete renunciation of self and a commitment to follow Christ, as exemplified by the Apostle Paul, who viewed himself as a bond slave of Christ. North contrasts the terms 'disciple' and 'saint,' noting that while Jesus called His followers disciples, Paul referred to them as saints, highlighting a shift in understanding the relationship between believers and Christ's body. The sermon warns against superficial discipleship and stresses the necessity of genuine commitment to attain sainthood, which is characterized by holiness and belonging to the body of Christ. Ultimately, North calls for a deeper understanding of what it means to be a disciple, urging believers to fully embrace their identity in Christ.

Transcript

Another thing the Lord clearly stated which, although not as yet mentioned here, must also be frankly considered by the would-be disciple, it is baptism in water. He considered that to be baptised by John Baptist was another step toward the fulfilment of all righteousness for Him, so He was publicly immersed in Jordan and for His obedience earned the commendation 'Thou art my beloved son in whom I am well-pleased'. He expected all His disciples to be baptised, and authorised His apostles to apply the rite to all their converts, 'baptising them in to the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost'. All disciples must face up to the implications of baptism -- death to and burial away from the world, the flesh, the devil and sin and self. It is a fitting beginning to the life of discipleship, a sign of self-renunciation and utter devotion and of a life swallowed up by God as completely as the grave swallows the dead. Jesus, the anointed Son of God, came through water baptism; it was most important to Him and should be considered of equal importance by every other person who wishes to show by discipleship that he is a son of God.

The word disciple is a general noun implying that the person bearing it has accepted a discipline and by doing so has declared that he no longer wishes to live a life of self-pleasing, but has chosen instead to become a follower and learner of Christ. From that moment he has become a devotee, utterly committed to Him and to His cause. That is how Christ sees it and so did persons like Paul, who suffered the loss of all things and counted them dung and loss so that he may win Christ. He only lived to press toward the mark, forgetting the things that were behind him. This man considered himself to have been bought entirely by God, that he was no longer his own and was in fact a slave, a bond slave of Christ; in other words a true disciple. There came a time in his life when he determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified; from then on he knew himself to be debtor to Christ and to all men for his life and service. He seemed to have understanding of things right from the beginning, for at his first meeting with Christ he acknowledged Him to be the Lord and called Him that.

If ever there was a true disciple of Jesus Christ it was the apostle Paul, yet as far as the records go he never once used the word disciple of himself or of any other. This may be thought more than a little surprising, but to all who have made his acquaintance through his writings it is seen to be typical of the man. His impact on his age and especially on the Church was profound; he was dynamic. Specially raised up of God, his effect upon the apostles themselves was incalculable and his legacy to the churches, particularly those he established, is his epistles, each one of which is absolutely invaluable to us. What influence he had among his peers in the ministry and on the canonical writers -- both apostolic and non-apostolic -- cannot be fully estimated. Perhaps we may assess some of his power from the fact that, following the Acts of the Apostles, indeed long before it runs its course, the word disciple altogether disappears from the sacred page and presumably from the vocabulary of the early church. This is a remarkable phenomenon indeed, for preceding this it had appeared hundreds of times in the New Testament and once in the Old Testament. It is not an Old Testament word in that it does not bear the same meaning in Isaiah as in the Gospels. It was introduced first in connection with John Baptist. Men apparently gathered themselves unto him, accepted his ministry of baptism, learned of him and fondly attached themselves to him, thus becoming known as his disciples.

It was not an unusual thing in Jesus' day for men to say they were Moses' disciples, though nowhere in scripture do we find the children of Israel described in that way. It was therefore quite natural that men should be called disciples if they followed a man or adhered to his teachings and practised his commandments. Gamaliel, a man of great reputation in Jesus' day, draws attention of the Jews to two men in Palestine who had risen up about that time and had attracted people to themselves, pointing out that the movements came to nought because the leaders were slain and there was no-one to follow. Discipleship was popular among fanatical people then and Jesus was well aware of that fact. He therefore, upon occasion, took steps to disenchant people from popular ideas and to discourage fanaticism, lest men and women should become self-deceived and bring discredit to the gospel He came to bring. Perhaps it is for this same reason that Paul and all the other contributors to the New Testament following the Acts utterly refrained from using the word disciple.

Peter addresses himself to the strangers, James writes to the tribes, John pens his second letter to the beloved lady and his third to Gaius, while Paul sends his epistles to the churches. It is chiefly in these letters of Paul that we find the new name for Christians which has substituted the word disciple in scripture, namely saints. To men of understanding it is easy to see how and why the substitution was made, for this word came in with the revelation of the Church which is the body of Christ. This is the reason why it is Paul who introduces the name into the New Testament, for it was mainly to him that the

truth of the body of Christ was revealed. He saw the fullest implications of this truth. The body of Christ is holy, the most sacred body on earth and reason would that if a person has been baptised into that body, he or she being a member of that body is a holy person, a saint.

Paul was never a follower of Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh and he saw quite clearly the vast difference between being a disciple following a person and a member belonging to that person's body; it is very important that we also see it. Discipleship and sainthood are not the same. They are not to be regarded as two conflicting ideals though, but as two concepts of spiritual life. A person is not expected to cease to be one in order to be the other and it is necessary for each one of us to understand this. As we shall see there were many in Christ's day who only became temporary disciples and followed Him for a while; they did not leave all to follow Him as did others, but went back. These never went on to sainthood; that is to say they did not utterly commit themselves to the Lord and persevere until they were baptised into His body and made holy people. It is an amazing fact that, with the exception of one reference which is to people of the old covenant, the word saint does not appear in the Gospels. It first comes into use in the Acts of the Apostles; from then onwards it occurs frequently in the writings of the New Testament, chiefly those of Paul and John. In fact Paul addresses his Ephesian letter to the saints and faithful ones in Christ Jesus there.

We see then that the Lord Jesus deliberately refrained from calling people saints, choosing instead to call them disciples, while Paul did exactly the opposite, calling them saints and brethren instead of disciples. This is most significant and indicates a complete change of thought involving new concepts of spiritual life. It would seem that the Lord could not honestly call His followers saints, but named them for what they were, learners only. Experientially they did not then belong to His body. Of the eleven, who for a while followed Him from the supper room en route for Gethsemane and Golgotha, He said they were given Him by His Father. A little earlier He had told them that they were His friends, and in conversation with Mary Magdalene after He rose from the dead He called them His brethren, but never once did He say they were saints. The simple reason for this is that until they were born again they were not holy ones, nor could be until He had died and risen again and had baptised them in the Spirit into His body. Believers they were and disciples, some were even called apostles, but not saints until this great change took place in them.

This was the whole point of His calling and their discipleship. They were called to take up the cross daily and follow Him faithfully all the way. Very few did. In fact in the end only Mary His mother and John His disciple stood by Him on the cross; all the others forsook Him when it came to that. Perhaps none of them knew that the whole point of His calling and leadership was to the cross, and perhaps few today realise that discipleship is to this same end. By the plain implications of scripture discipleship is unto sainthood, and except sainthood (that is a life of holiness) be reached discipleship is in vain. Because of old Jesus called someone, or did something miraculous for someone, or people heard of or saw something wonderful happening to someone, many thousands became followers of Him, at least for a while, but mostly it was because of outward phenomena. Few had anything sufficiently real to keep them going to the end toward which He was moving.

This was the great tragedy of discipleship in His day and He knew it; let it be sufficient warning to us in these days of specious over-indoctrination on the subject of discipleship. The unwarrantable emphasis being laid by modern men on this aspect of truth is dangerous inasmuch as it gives undue importance to organisation, elevating authoritative men and women to positions for which they are not fitted and which Christ never intended. Nevertheless, despite the tendency to overlook fuller truth, there is much for all to learn by the emphasis -- we must obey scripture and buy the truth, determined never to sell it at any price

for any reason.

All four Gospel writers have much to say about the disciples of Christ. At least three of the authors actually knew Him after the flesh and followed Him and two of them, John and Matthew, were chosen apostles and loved Him dearly. One of John's favourite expressions when speaking of himself in relationship to Jesus was the disciple whom Jesus loved'. Perhaps he was the unnamed one of the first two men who followed the Lord from His first public appearance at Jordan; if so he called Him Rabbi -- Master or Teacher from the beginning. If this is indeed true John was a close observer of Him from His earliest ministerial appearance to His last moments on earth. It is perhaps not surprising then that he should be chosen to make such a vast contribution to the New Testament. His input into the scriptures -- a Gospel, three epistles and the Revelation -- was unequalled by any of his contemporaries; not even Paul equalled him, even though numerically his works exceed those of the Senior apostle. It is therefore probably most significant that, in common with Paul, John should drop the word disciple from all of his writings except his Gospel. But true though that is, his references to discipleship and Jesus' teachings about it are so momentous that to miss or ignore them would be calamitous.

Some of the remarks and teachings he has recorded are so frankly uncomplimentary to the chosen disciples, including himself, that he cannot be thought anything other than a most honest and self-effacing man, most concerned that we should know the truth. He was not new to discipleship when he met Jesus. For some time before that John Baptist had been making disciples and John had been baptised by him in Jordan; he was most probably a disciple of his namesake before he became a disciple of Jesus. He was entrusted by God with the task of recording the beginnings of things in a very individual way. He commenced his Gospel with the words 'In the beginning', and in keeping with that records the glimmerings of the beginnings of discipleship which perhaps lay as yet undiscovered in the hearts of the two who stood listening to John Baptist by Jordan that day when he said 'Behold the lamb of God'. At the time Jesus was walking with purpose near the river in which He had been baptised the previous day. Hearing their master's words, John's two disciples followed Jesus, who, seeing them following, said to them, 'What seek ye? They said unto Him, Master where dwellest thou? He saith unto them, Come and see. They came and saw where He dwelt and abode with Him that day'.

They did not then know what lay in His heart for them, or all that true discipleship meant. Their ideas of discipleship were different from His. They thought it was a desultory affair of intermittent comings and goings for longer or shorter periods, for at the beginning they came and went. We cannot be sure, but perhaps that was how they had responded to John Baptist also; they had not left all and gone to him, they had never been expected to do so, but had given him as much time as was consistent with their beliefs and convenient to them. They therefore did not know that the Lord Jesus, being who He was, would demand utmost commitment from them. They were convinced from the beginning that He was the Christ and said so to others, but had no idea that ere long He would be claiming their whole attention. It seems that once they had accepted John Baptist as their teacher and had been baptised by him, their concept of spiritual living had been to go out to him as opportunity presented itself and listen and learn and then retire home again. Peter is an outstanding example of this kind of thinking.

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