

## **Are Disciples Born or Made?**

Is a disciple merely another name for a Christian who is born into God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, or is a disciple a Christian who meets specific conditions about following Jesus? Knowing the answer to this question is crucial to understanding the gospel of grace and the Christian life.

### **The meaning of disciple**

The word disciple comes from the Greek verb *mathēteuō*, which means *to be or become a pupil or learner*. So the essential meaning of disciple is a learner, which could also be called a follower or an apprentice. In ancient culture, a person would follow a "master" teacher or craftsman in order to become like him (Matt. 10:25; Luke 6:40). This took a certain commitment from the follower.

### **The use of disciple**

Though the prevalent use in the New Testament is in reference to followers of Jesus Christ, *disciple* was not just a Christian term. The Bible mentions disciples of Moses, the Pharisees, and John the Baptist. In fact, it seems that John 6:66 uses the word *disciples* to refer to non-Christians who were following Jesus just out of self-interest or curiosity. In this general way, Judas Iscariot was called a *disciple* because he followed Jesus to some extent.

The book of Acts uses the term *disciple(s)* to refer to Christians as a group without distinction about their commitment (6:1-2, 7; 11:26; 14:20, 22, 28; 15:10; 19:10). This is because Luke, the author, understood discipleship as Jesus explained it, and indeed the Christians in Acts were actively and obediently following Jesus Christ with few exceptions. In light of the great commission to "make disciples" which ends the Gospel era (Matt. 28:19-20), it would be natural to call believers in Acts *disciples* to show that the commission was being fulfilled. The few exceptions of disobedient believers were singled out for special treatment (cf. Acts 5:1-11; 8:13ff.; 19:10-19).

The Epistles never use the word *disciple(s)*. However, the idea is communicated in the commands to imitate mature believers who themselves imitate Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9).

### **The conditions for discipleship**

When looking at discipleship passages in the Gospels, we see that conditions for Christian discipleship are given consistently to believers. In order for one to be a true follower of Jesus Christ, Christians have to meet certain conditions given by the Lord. These include obeying His Word (John 8:31) and denying one's own desires, being willing to suffer for identifying with Him, and actively pursuing His will (Luke 9:23). There are other conditions as well. All of these conditions involve a commitment, obedience, or some kind of sacrifice from the Christian. If that is true, then discipleship costs the believer something.

## The distinction of discipleship

It should be apparent that discipleship is distinct from one's initial salvation, that disciples are not born but made. If salvation is free (by grace through faith), but discipleship is costly, then salvation must be distinct from discipleship. This chart should help show the distinctions between salvation and discipleship:

<b>SALVATION</b>	<b>DISCIPLESHIP</b>
Free gift	Costly
Received through faith	Earned by commitment and obedience
Not by Works	By works
Instant justification	Life-long sanctification
Jesus paid the price	The Christian pays the price
Coming to Jesus as Savior	Following Jesus as Lord
Believe the gospel	Obey the commands

## Conclusion

To ask whether disciples are born or made is to ask whether justification is different from sanctification or whether Christian birth is different from Christian growth. To keep the gospel clear, we must not confuse the one condition of eternal salvation (faith) with the many conditions of discipleship.