Discipleship: Towards a Biblical Approach

Kwabena Donkor

Introduction

Loss of membership in mainline Christian churches has become a significant religious problem. By 1990, it was estimated that mainline Protestant denominations (Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and kindred denominations) had lost between one-fifth and one-third of the membership they claimed in 1965.1 From 2009 to 2010, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America’s membership decreased 5.9 percent,2 while during the last decade American Catholics have lost 5% of their membership.3 Although Seventh-day Adventists are numbered among denominations that have experienced some growth in membership in recent years,4 the Church faces the challenge of retaining members. There seems to be clear evidence of a dropout problem. While a 2001 study found “that 73-percent of those reared in the Adventist Church stayed in… that has dropped to 60-percent. The tendency of new generations of Adventists to not bond with our denomination is accelerating.”5

Church membership losses, as an ongoing phenomenon, have created a sense of need for renewal in congregations. Loss of members is seen as symptomatic of a deeper

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underlying problem.⁶ For some time now, this sense of need for renewal has focused some attention on discipleship. At the First International Consultation on Discipleship held in England in 1999, John R. W. Stott seemed to address the contemporary Christian church’s foundational problem when he observed that the church embodies “superficial discipleship.”⁷ Reflecting on the same sentiment, Tokunboh Adeyemo could say, in view of what is described as the “mind-boggling butchery of Christians engaging in the horrors of ethnic cleansing”, that “The church in Africa is one mile long, but one inch deep.”⁸ Going hand in hand with the alleged “superficial discipleship” is a penchant for methodology, which it is acknowledged, “becomes a replacement for the Holy Spirit.”⁹ So, James Houston opines, “What is destroying Christianity is the marketeering of Christianity.”¹⁰

On his part, Mark Mattes faults the contemporary “discipleship model’s” view that “if specific marks of discipleship are encouraged, then one can expect greater commitment to the church—moving the church from an oasis of members to a strip mall of discipleship.”¹¹ Mattes’ critique is two-pronged: first, against the “programs and techniques approach,” usually designed to promote a “God experience” through “praise bands, big-screen video presentations, and flashy showmanship,” and, second, against the “issue-driven church” which focuses on making the world peaceful and just.¹²

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⁸ ibid.
⁹ ibid.
¹⁰ ibid.
¹¹ Mattes, 151.
¹² Ibid, p. 151-158.
In view of the foregoing considerations the question should be asked, on what biblical foundations can the church stand to address the issues of nurture and retention? This paper approaches the question from the position that a correct understanding and pursuit of biblical discipleship will address the concerns of retention and nurture. I take the position based on the presumption that as long as we embrace the biblical view that church membership must entail discipleship, lack of congregational vitality and membership loss may be seen as failure of discipleship at certain critical points in the Christian experience. To deal with nurture and retention issues, then, will require that we attend to issues of discipleship at those significant points. I will approach the question in two steps. First I will try to explore the biblical concept of discipleship and set it forth as the biblical vision for every church member. Second, I will examine what directions can be found in Scripture for achieving the biblical vision of discipleship.

Disciple/Discipleship: The Vision for Every Believer

We begin by examining the words that will be helpful to our understanding of the concept of discipleship.

Terminology

The word “discipleship” does not occur in the New Testament. The idea of disciple, however, is expressed by the term mathetes some 261 times, with the references occurring in the Gospels and the book of Acts. To make someone a disciple is mainly indicated by the verb matheteuo, although the word akolouthein (“to follow after”) is also used some 90 times mainly in the Gospels and Acts. The suffix "ship" in the word

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13 The exclusive use of the word “disciple” in the Gospels and book of Acts have led some to raise the question whether the term may not be the best to use for believers today. See James G. Samra, A Biblical View of Discipleship, Bibliotheca Sacra 160 (2003), p. 219-20, footnote 12. In
discipleship is “derived from the Old English "scipe," meaning "the state of," "contained in," or ‘condition’”

14 The usage of the word mathetes and its verb, however, makes the meaning of the term discipleship, which is derived from them, a little difficult to ascertain. When mathetes is used in an educational, intellectual sense (Matt. 10:24; 13:52), discipleship may be understood as the process of being educated by a teacher. 15 Many other times, however, what is indicated is a transformation of life (Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34), in which case discipleship has to do with the process of becoming like one’s master. Other senses of mathetes in the New Testament could be spelled out, but taken together, discipleship in the Gospels and Acts “involves both becoming a disciple and being a disciple. At times the focus is on the entrance into the process (evangelism), but most often the focus is on growing in the process (maturity); it includes both teaching and life transformation.”

16 Beyond the Gospels and the book of Acts, the word “imitation” (mimetes, mimeomai) gains prominence (2 Thess. 3:7-9; Heb. 13:7; 3 John 11). This word is used instead of discipleship but the idea remains. Our effort to understand what discipleship is will therefore focus on the uses of the word disciple and its related terms.

Characteristics of Discipleship

his essay on Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark, though, Heber F. Peacock observes, “A careful reading of the texts shows that in the Gospel of Mark the term ‘disciple’ is never limited to the twelve…or identified exclusively with them…. It seems clear that all followers of Jesus mat be referred to as ‘disciples’ and the term is at times applied to a larger group and at times to a smaller group of followers.” See Heber F. peacock, “Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark, Review & Expositor, 75 no 4 Fall 1978, p. 556.


15 James G. Samra, p. 219-20.

16 Ibid.
Discipleship sets up an ideal, a standard; and as we observe the phenomenon in the Gospels, something of a pattern begins to emerge. To these recurrent features we will try to learn from.

**The Call**

The rabbis in Jesus’ day had disciples, which explains why Jesus was repeatedly addressed as rabbi. Yet, it is at this very point that a significant difference arises. While the rabbis never invited persons to become their disciples, no one became a disciple of Jesus apart from His initiative (Mark 1:16-20; 2:13-14; John 1:43-45; 6:79; 15:16). It was the *call of Jesus and its immediate acceptance that marked the beginning of discipleship.* Quite significantly, in the instances where people volunteered to become disciples of Jesus such attempts failed. The rich young ruler who turned to Jesus and subsequently received the call went away sadly (Mark 10:17-27). The Gerasene demoniac’s request to go with Jesus was turned down (Mark 5:18-19), and Luke 9:57-60 seems to indicate that the intention of several people to become Jesus’ disciples did not materialize.

The call, which marked the beginning of discipleship, appeared to have some important dynamics. It came unexpectedly and demanded an immediate response, thus precipitating the need for a radical break with one’s past. Stories about the calls Jesus made for discipleship clearly show that the concept demands total abandonment of everything else and a subsequent commitment to following Him. Families, possessions, and vocations were left (Mark 1:16-20; 2:12-14; 10:28-30), creating what amounts to a fundamental condition of discipleship, namely, that only those who hated their own families were qualified to become Jesus’ disciples (Luke 14:26). While a break with the past became necessary with the onset of discipleship, we should be careful not to make
the break itself synonymous with discipleship. Thus it has been correctly observed, “it is
discipleship which demands and makes possible the break with the past, but the break
itself is not to be equated with discipleship. The call of Jesus demands and makes
possible the break with the past in as much as it gives the disciple a new future.\textsuperscript{17}

That the call of Jesus makes possible the break with the past and gives a new
future to the disciple is significantly instructive. The rather numinous character of Jesus,
which seems to lay total claim to the person called, shines through all the narratives of
the calls. It is a supernatural encounter that makes the most valuable duties of the past
futile, and thus enables the break with them. It appears that without this “call,”
discipleship is doomed to a false start.

\textbf{A Lifelong, Intimate, Relationship}

The call marks the beginning of discipleship, but it anticipates an ongoing
relationship. In Mark, this is very clear with the twelve where it is said of Jesus that “He
appointed twelve, so that they would be with Him and that He \textit{could} send them out to
preach” (Mark 3:14). So, two reasons are given for the call to discipleship. The first, “that
they would be with Him” is a phrase that indicates discipleship in a unique way. It is in
this sense that, unlike the rabbis, discipleship with Jesus is expressed as following Him
(\textit{akoloutheo}). Being with Jesus or following Him is a figurative way of describing “the
disciples acceptance of the destiny of Jesus for themselves and their complete
commitment to his person.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{Expected Results from Intimate Relationship}

\textsuperscript{17} Hans Weder, “Disciple, Discipleship,” trans. By Richard N. Jones, \textit{The Anchor Bible
\textsuperscript{18} David R. Bauer, “Disciple, Discipleship,” The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 2
The disciples were to share in the vicissitudes of Jesus’ itinerary life—traveling and eating with Him, and being closely connected with every phase of His life. In other words, unlike the rabbinic form of discipleship, the disciple of Jesus was not there merely to learn from the teacher, but to share unreservedly in the totality of His life. Mark’s perspective on discipleship suggests that such intimacy was needed to bring about certain results in the disciples: to have inner knowledge about God’s rule in the world, to have insight born of their faith, to be servants of their fellow men, to be filled with love and compassion, to have a new view about the nature of reality, and to be faithful.19 A few examples will illustrate these points.

Mark 4 reports Jesus’ teaching about the parable of sower, which appears to confound both the disciples and the multitudes. Jesus’ subsequent remarks show that while His teachings appeared as riddles (v. 11) to the Jewish multitudes, that ought not be the case with the disciples.20 Disciples are expected to have inner knowledge of God’s rule in the world. When Mark records the account of Jesus stilling the storm, he has Jesus expressing surprise that the disciples did not have faith (4:39-40). Jesus’ reaction shows faith to be essential for discipleship. Jesus’ expectation of the disciples to be servants of their fellow men shows up in a few places in Mark. He asks the disciples to feed the multitudes (6:37), and He expected them to be able to cast out demons (9:14-19). More explicitly, He taught them that the greatness of the disciple was service and not position (10:43-45). Disciples are expected to have love and compassion; so Jesus rebuked the disciples for not allowing children to be brought to Him (10:13-16). In Mark the lack of

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19 See Heber Peacock for this discussion, p. 558-561.
20 This parable, like the other seed parables, was designed to illustrate aspects of the Kingdom of God by portraying God’s sovereign rule at work in the present but in a way unexpected in Judaism. See R. A Guelich, Mark 1–8:26, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), p. 206.
expected faithfulness on the part of the disciples is perhaps most strongly underlined when in Gethsemane Jesus chided them for being unable to keep watch (14:37).

**Shortcomings of the Twelve**

Scholars have noted the Markan tendency to portray the disciples in a negative light, but his ideals for discipleship are echoed in Matthew. In Matthew, Jesus is meek and lowly (11:29; 21:5) and the same is expected of the disciples (18:3-4; 23:12); the disciples are to be merciful just as Jesus is (9:13, 27, 36; 14:14; 15:22, 25, 32; 17:15 c/f 5:7; 9:13; 12:7; 18:33; 23:23); and, just as through “watching” Jesus was faithful to God’s will even in the midst of persecution (26::40-41), the disciples are to do the same (24:45; 25:13; 26:38).

In both Mark and Matthew, the resurrected Christ was the answer to the disciples’ failures (Mark 14:28; 16:7 c/f Matt. 26:32; 28:16-20). Through the power of Christ’s continuing presence, the disciples were equipped “for the righteous obedience…and vigor in mission that will lead them to make disciples of all nations through baptizing and teaching.”

Do the shortcomings of the disciples nullify the significance of their initial call? Certainly not. One could argue that without the impact of the initial supernatural encounter with Jesus, His resurrection could not have had the vivifying response it subsequently had on the disciples. In Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus, He remarks [through Abraham] that if the living did not hear Moses and the prophets; if they did not respond to their encounter with the Word of the Old Testament, which they had among them, they would not be persuaded even if someone rose from the dead (Luke 16:19-31).

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21 David Bauer, p. 130.
The second reason given by Mark for Jesus’ appointment of the disciples was “that He could send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14). Luke gives the more prominent place to the mission aspect of discipleship in his account in Luke-Acts. Indeed, Luke in his gospel describes the twelve repeatedly as apostles—the sent ones (Luke 6:12-16; 9:10; 11:49; 17:5; 22:14; 24:10) while extending the class of disciples to include the large groups of Jesus’ followers from the Jewish crowds (Luke 6:13, 17; 10:1). Discipleship involves mission. Ellen White observes,

My brethren and sisters, there is something more for you to do than to sit in your churches Sabbath after Sabbath and to listen to the preaching of the Word. You have a work to do for [your] friends and neighbors. God requires . . . that you visit these families and seek to create an interest in the truth for this time. You are not laboring together with God if you neglect the work of helping others to take hold upon eternal realities” (UL 264).

But Luke also records the failures of the disciples, even as they wished to call fire on their enemies (9:51-56), and would not believe the report of the empty tomb (24:8-12). Here also, it was the encounter with the resurrected Christ and the experience on Pentecost that made them ready for the mission (Luke 24:13-51; Acts 1:8; 2:1-47).

John’s “Abiding” Theme

In the Synoptic gospels we not only have Jesus’ promises to the disciples about His death and resurrection, but accounts of His appearances and the impact they had on them (Matt. 28:9-20; Mark 16:9-20; Luke 26:13-52). But in none of these accounts do we have extended teachings on the significance of the resurrected Christ for the continuing life of the believers. John’s farewell discourses (John 13-17) are instructive on this issue.
Carlton Winbery argues that abiding in Christ is the concept of discipleship in John.\(^\text{22}\)

John seems to move beyond the notion of discipleship merely as a learning process between master and teacher. Thus, following the miracle at Cana his disciples “believed in Him” (2:11), concerning which Winbery observes,

> At various points in the Fourth Gospel, that the disciples "believed in him" (2:11) is stated; but their faith seems to have been a growing faith in which the main element was an abiding relationship with him. The aorist may be interpreted to mean, "they came to faith." The structure (using eis plus the accusative) indicates that the relationship is more than believing things about him. It involves commitment to a person. This is indicated graphically by the phrase to "believe in his name" (1:12).\(^\text{23}\)

John’s Gospel presents discipleship as something that happens in response to Christ’s revealing of the Father, and the Father’s testimony about Christ. This is the reason why the Father is repeatedly noted as the one who makes discipleship to Christ possible (John 6:37, 44, 65; 10:27-29; 17:6). Those who respond positively to the Father’s testimony concerning Christ and become disciples, however, will face trials (9:22; 12:42; 15:18-16:2). John’s answer to disciples in the face of these difficulties is for them to “abide” in Christ. The notion of abiding, then, would seem to address the core concern of the problem of retention. “Abiding” disciples will have a constant and enduring faith and fellowship in the body of Christ, even in the face of difficulties. The word “abide” which translates the verb *meno*, theologically indicates endurance and constancy. This is the idea being communicated, for example, in the phrase “The Messiah

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\(^{23}\) Ibid.
abides forever” (12:34), a concept that links Jesus with the God of the Israel who abides forever (c/f. Dan. 6:26, Septuagint).\textsuperscript{24}

“Abiding in John: Key to Retention?”

In John 16:1, Jesus gives a reason for warning the disciples about persecution. He did it to prevent them from being made to stumble and thereby fall away from faith in Him (cf. 6:61). The immediate context for “these things” in John 16:1 is 15:18-27, but these verses are theologically connected to the section of the farewell discourses preceding them. The farewell discourses are therefore very instructive for the experience of Christians falling away from the faith.

Belief in Jesus and Abiding

John 13 ends with Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s denial and the collapse of his faith. This prediction, together with the prospect of losing Jesus (John 13:26), explains the agitation/turmoil the disciples found themselves in. Consequently, Jesus’ statement, “keep on believing in me,” which may be appropriately rendered as an imperative, underlies the risk of faith-loss that the disciples faced. Of the farewell discourses then, John 14 and 15 in particular, may be read with great benefit as Jesus’ antidote to the risk the disciples faced. The key to remaining faithful in difficult circumstances is to believe in Jesus, which is also true for genuine discipleship. And because for John true discipleship is a response to seeing the Father, and believing His testimony about Jesus, Jesus admonishes the disciples to believe “in God and believe also in me” (14:1). The remainder of the discourse plumbs this call to “keep believing.” In verses 2 and 3 Jesus gives a principal reason why the disciples should maintain faith in Him, even though He

\textsuperscript{24} Non-theologically, the word may mean simply to stay or remain.
will soon be crucified—He is departing them to go and prepare a place for them in His Father’s house, where they will be with Him.

When Jesus tells them that they know the place where He is going, and the way to get there (v.4), Thomas voices the collective lack of understanding of the whole group (v. 5). Jesus clarifies the situation by saying that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life (v. 6). As the embodiment of the truth of Father’s revelation and His life, Jesus is the Way to the Father. For this reason, no one comes to the Father except through Jesus both anticipatively in the “now” and finally in the “hereafter.” In response to Jesus’ explanation Philip seems to catch the spiritual significance of seeing the Father—the vision will disperse their doubts and fears (v.8); although he fails to realize that to have fellowship with Jesus is to see God (v. 9-10a). Nevertheless, Philip’s insight is helpful for understanding one key to retention. To see Jesus truly is to see the Father and thereby disperse whatever doubts and fears there may be that serve as precursors to falling away. Indeed, the call to believe in Jesus and the Father is not just an antidote to fears and doubts in the Christian experience. It is given a further motivation: those who believe will even do greater works than what Jesus Himself did, and whatever they ask in Jesus’ name, He will do it, because He is going to the father (v. 11-14).

The picture Jesus holds before the disciples in John 14:1-15 is nothing short of fruitful discipleship, and the key to it, as expressed in this whole section is faith/belief in Jesus— If they will believe in Jesus, they will do greater works than He did, and whatever they ask in His name will be given them.

The Word/Command of Jesus and Abiding
The section of 14:15–24 predicts the giving of the Spirit after Jesus goes to the 
Father, at which time the Spirit will become the means by which Jesus and the Father 
make their dwelling in believers. At the same time, the focus on the section is on love for 
Jesus, which is introduced by the saying, “if you love me, keep my commandments” 
(14:15). D. A Carson agrees with C. K. Barrett on the view that “the protasis If you love 
me ‘controls the grammar of the next two verses (15–17a), and the thought of the next six 
(15–21)”’. Thus, there is a critical connection between love for Jesus, the 
word/commandment of Jesus, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The heart that is fit 
for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the heart that is filled with love for Jesus. And the 
heart that is filled with love for Jesus is a heart that cherishes the word/commandment of 
Jesus.

The point that bears emphasizing is that keeping the word/commandment of Jesus 
is needful for fruitful discipleship. But the commandment of Jesus must be understood 
‘my commands’), ‘commands’ (v. 21), and ‘my teaching’ (lit. ‘my word’ in v. 23, and 
‘my words’ in v. 24) suggest to some that more is at stake than Jesus’ ethical commands. 
What the one who loves Jesus will observe is not simply an array of discrete ethical 
injunctions, but the entire revelation from the Father.” The connection between the 
commandment of Jesus and fruitful discipleship lies in the fact that the one who loves 
Jesus will live in the light of the guidance and power of God’s revealed will. John’s 
apocalypse promises blessings to those hear and keep God’s word (Rev. 1:3; 22:7).

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26 Ibid.
On the critical role the Bible has to play towards fruitful discipleship Ellen G. White writes poignantly,

The whole Bible is a revelation of the glory of God in Christ. Received, believed, obeyed, it is the great instrumentality in the transformation of character. And it is the only sure means of intellectual culture. The reason why the youth, and even those of mature years, are so easily led into temptation and sin is that they do not study the word of God and meditate upon it as they should. The lack of firm, decided will power, which is manifest in life and character, results from their neglect of the sacred instruction of God’s word. They do not by earnest effort direct the mind to that which would inspire pure, holy thought and divert it from that which is impure and untrue. There are few who choose the better part, who sit at the feet of Jesus, as did Mary, to learn of the divine Teacher. Few treasure His words in the heart and practice them in the life” (8T 319).

Furthermore, the section on believing in Jesus that enables one to do greater works, and the one on love for Jesus that requires the keeping of His word/command are connected by the promise of the Holy Spirit. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the manifestation of the Divine presence in the believer’s life (14:21b), which is significantly connected with Jesus’ word/commandment. In John 14:21b, Jesus promises that the one who loves Him will, in turn be loved by Father and Himself, and He will manifest Himself to such. To this promise, Judas wonders aloud why Jesus will manifest Himself to the disciples and not to the world. Judas apparently misunderstands the manner of Jesus’ promised manifestation to the disciples. While Judas may have been thinking of a startling apocalyptic self-disclosure, Jesus was talking about a spiritual counterpart of His resurrection manifestation to the disciples in the believer’s. Jesus’ response to Judas shows that only those who keep His words may have this spiritual experience of Christ’s presence. Only those who keep the word of Jesus get to experience the “theophany” of the divine presence. Indeed, to such both the Father and Himself will come and make
their home there with him or her (14:23). On the other hand, because the world does not keep Jesus’ words, it does not, and cannot receive the Spirit (14:17).

Abiding Illustrated

The need for mutual indwelling of Jesus and the believer was expressed in various ways in chapter 14. No one comes to the Father except through Jesus (v.6); Jesus manifests himself in whoever keeps His words (v. 21), and He and the Father will make their home with such persons. Still, the elements of discipleship noted there, keeping Jesus’ command, loving Him, believing in Him, could be construed in an unhelpful mechanical manner. In chapter 15, Jesus now uses the imagery of the vine to portray, among other important points, the dynamism inherent in the experience of discipleship.

The vine imagery is particularly relevant to the issues of nurture and retention because it seems to have been designed to deal with a problem (whether potential or actual) within the Christian community. It appears evident from 15:2 that some branches are not bearing fruit, meaning, they may be behaving as if they are not believers.\footnote{Fernando F. Segovia, “The Theology and Provenance of John 15:1-17,” \textit{Journal of Biblical Literature} 101/1 (1982), p. 120. Gerald L. Borchert observes, “It is very likely that in the Johannine churches there were a number of people who were identified as Christians but who were not bearing fruit. The problem has only escalated in the years since that time. Sociologically speaking, the question is what constitutes the boundaries of the community?” \textit{The New American Commentary John 12-21} (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holdman Publishers, 2002), p. 140.} If this is indeed the case, then the lessons of the vine imagery are quite instructive for renewal efforts in many of today’s Christian congregations.

The imagery begins (15:1) by identifying the joint activity of the Father (the Gardener) and Jesus (the true vine). The same close working relationship towards discipleship was seen in chapter 14. The problem of unproductive branches was alluded to above, and the Father has the task of distinguishing them from the productive ones and
dealing with both situations appropriately. The unproductive branches are eliminated/taken away/removed (airei) while the productive ones are cleansed/pruned (kathaiei) in order for them to become more productive. Verse 3 begins the direct address to hearers and readers by contrasting the faithful, perhaps not only with the world, but also with those who have fallen away. What is significant for us, however, is the basis of the contrast: Jesus word. Those who are clean are clean because of the word spoken to them. Here, as before, the word does not seem to refer to any particular words or commandments of Jesus but to his overall teaching concerning himself and salvation (cf. 14:24, 26). The solution to the threat that unproductive branches face is to “abide” in the Vine (4), a point we saw already in chapter 14. In the context of the vine imagery, however, “abiding” takes on a meaning that includes but goes beyond simply believing in Jesus. Here, it connotes a life of continuous association or union with Jesus. The vine imagery, through the picture of a branch broken from a vine, portrays “abiding” to be an absolutely, necessary condition to Christian discipleship. Just as the branch does not have a self-contained identity, neither does the Christian. The point is applied in verse 5. Without abiding in Christ, the believer can do nothing. And, not abiding in Christ and bearing fruit has dire consequences (vs. 6).

The situation becomes different, however, with mutual indwelling/abiding. In this case, the disciple can do much, and this ability is linked to prayer (cf. 14:13-14). But the mutual abiding that makes all these things possible is not mystical or magical in nature. Verse 7 marks a change from the indwelling of Christ Himself, to that of His words. And, it is on the condition that the words of Christ abide in the disciple that he/she may accomplish much through praying. Thus, “abiding” is concretely tied to the believer’s

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28 Borchert, p. 142.
assimilation of the teachings and precepts of Christ, which amounts to obedience. But mutual indwelling is not thereby reduced to obedience. As Carson correctly explains, “a test in the observable area of obedience to Christ is a test of the unseen area of genuine spiritual vitality. All this is equivalent to remaining in the vine; that is the union out of which fruit is produced.”

The imagery of the vine (15:1-8) clearly points to the need for an intimate bonding between believers and Christ as a condition for thriving discipleship. Still, as an agricultural metaphor, it is incapable of expressing the dimension of profound love that the notion of abiding requires; first among believers, and second between believers and Christ. Therefore, beginning from verse 14:9, Jesus expounds further on the meaning of the vine imagery. He presents the relationship between the Father and the Son as the paradigm of love relationship required of disciples (14:9-12). In these verses Jesus shows that love for God is tied to and verified by love for other believers. Indeed bearing fruit (thriving discipleship) means loving others as God loves them and giving witness to the world. In this way, love within the Christian community becomes an important indicator of true discipleship (cf. John 13:35).

Summary

From the discussion above, disciples are expected to have a certain experience, and exhibit some traits. First, disciples experience a call that comes about through an encounter with Jesus. It is a call that is radical in its demands, and requires one to evidence a break from one’s past. Second, disciples move on from the initial call to the experience of an ongoing intimate relationship with Christ. Such a relationship is

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29 Carson, p. 518.
31 Borchert, p. 46.
authenticated by the evidence of a sense of inner knowledge and insight about God’s rule in the world born of faith, a decided willingness to be servants of fellow human beings, including proclaiming the good news about Jesus to them, a sense of love and compassion for others, and a desire to be faithful. Third, John’s gospel summarizes the experience of the disciple with the notion of “abiding” in Christ. This notion pivots on “belief” in Jesus, and shows its origin and vitality in a critical connection between love for Jesus, the word/commandment of Jesus, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The Church and Discipleship

So far, we have spent the time trying to paint a picture of the authentic, enduring disciple, namely, the church member. The question is, how do we go about to form these kinds of members? There has been some talk recently about the irrelevance of local churches in forming mature, authentic disciples. Without denying the responsibility of individual members, the Bible, however, straightforwardly entrusts the church with the task of making disciples (Mat 28:18-20). The biblical view, then, is that the church has a responsibility to form all who come into its community into disciples. It also implies that the church is ideally qualified to form such Christians. Therefore we conclude that all church activities must aim at making all members disciples in the sense discipleship has been defined above. Disciple making is not as aspect of the church’s program. It is the reason for the church’s existence. Consequently, what is required is an integrated approach at the level of the local church where key ecclesiological functions of the church are planned intentionally with the goal to form all church members into disciples.

Chris Shirley is definitely correct that when it comes to discipleship

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The tasks of the church form the curriculum. Each task represents a body of knowledge and praxis. Each task alone is insufficient to shape authentic disciples; however, the tasks in concert provide a synergism that creates a productive environment for discipleship. As the church fulfills each of these tasks, authentic disciples are nurtured and the health of the church is enhanced. 33

**Key Function of the Church**

At the beginning of Luke’s account of the life of Christians after Christ’s ascension, he gives what for all purposes is an ideal depiction of life within the Christian community. The relevant section of the scripture from Acts 2:42-47 is worth examining.

> 42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. 44 And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; 45 and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. 46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved (NASB).

Verse 42, quite possibly a summary of the events of Pentecost, appears to provide a useful insight on how members of the new community were incorporated. Four key activities are mentioned in this summary statement. As a matter of first importance, the community devoted itself to the teaching of the apostles. Understandably, this action would involve the apostles passing onto the new Christians what they themselves had been instructed by Jesus. We may assume this instruction included such issues as Christ’s resurrection, His relation to the Old Testament Scriptures, the Christian witness, as well as their own reminiscences of Jesus’ earthly ministry and teachings.

The early Christians devoted themselves to a second activity described as “the fellowship.” *Koinōnia* is the Greek word, which although often used by Paul, appears only here in all of Luke-Acts. Its basic meaning is critical to our understanding of discipleship, which we are suggesting is the answer to issues of nurture and retention in the church. The word basically means “association, communion, fellowship, close relationship. In secular Greek it could involve the sharing of goods, and Paul seems to have used it this way in 2 Cor 9:13. It was also used of communion with a god, especially in the context of a sacred meal; and Paul used it in that sense in 1 Cor 10:16.”

As used here in Acts 2:42, in close relationship to the terms “breaking of bread” and “prayer,” these two latter terms may be seen as elucidations of the notion of “fellowship.” The sense seems to be that in the third element of the early church life, “breaking of bread” the early Christians devoted themselves to a fellowship that was observed in their mutual meals and in their prayer life together. This observation would mean that “the breaking of bread,” would likely carry the cultic sense of sharing a meal with the Lord, as well their participation in a main *agapē* meal together. In this experience we see the priestly prayer of Christ for unity among the believers as essential to discipleship coming to fruition. It involves that deep, experiential knowledge, belief in Christ, and community love for which Christ prayed.

The fourth and final element of their life together, another expression of their fellowship, was “the prayers” (RSV). The Greek article appears before the word “prayers.” Hence some interpreters see here a reference to the early believers keeping the formal prayer hours of Judaism in the temple. Because the early Jewish Christian

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believers were faithful in attending temple worship as noted in 2:46 and 3:1, this suggestion made may be the case. Yet, it seems more likely that Luke is giving an account of the early believers’ sharing in prayer together in their private house worship.\footnote{Ibid.}

**Making Authentic Disciples in the Church Today**

Far from the local church being irrelevant to the spiritual development of members, the experience of the early Christian church’s activities outlined above, demonstrates that the local church is rather equipped to form authentic disciples. The results of those early church activities among the believers are evident in verses Act 2:46-47. Polhill observes,

On the giving end, they expressed their joy by praising God for his presence in their life together (v. 47). On the receiving end, they experienced the favor of the nonbelieving Jewish community in Jerusalem. God responded to their faith and blessed the young community, adding new converts daily.\footnote{Ibid, p. 122} Indeed, as with the young Jesus, so it was for the growing church—favor with God and favor with humanity (Luke 2:52).\footnote{Ibid.}

These results demonstrate vibrancy, authenticity, and commitment in the early church. The church today may do likewise and expect similar results. The key seems to avoid over compartmentalization of the church’s activities. All seemed clearly involved in the interrelated activities of teaching, proclamation/evangelism, fellowship and community love, and a deep sense of duty for their responsibility of building the kingdom. Ellen G. White catches these intricate relationships as follows

As the disciples waited for the fulfillment of the promise, they humbled their hearts in true repentance and confessed their unbelief. As they called to remembrance the words that Christ had spoken to them before His death they understood more fully their meaning. Truths which had passed from their memory were again brought to their minds, and these they repeated to one another. …As they meditated upon His pure, holy life they felt that no toil would be too hard, no sacrifice too great, if only they could bear witness in their lives to the loveliness
of Christ's character….how sincerely they sorrowed for having ever grieved Him by a word or an act of unbelief! But they were comforted by the thought that they were forgiven. And they determined that, so far as possible, they would atone for their unbelief by **bravely confessing Him before the world**. The disciples prayed with intense earnestness for a fitness to meet men and in their daily intercourse to speak words that would lead sinners to Christ (AA, 36-37)

Chris Shirley conveniently enumerates the various delivery systems available to the local church in the task of disciple-making responsibility. *First*, on the basis of examples such as Paul’s relationship with Timothy and Titus we notice the importance of intentional, one-on-one, mentoring and coaching personal relationship. Not only does this approach have the advantage of individualizing discipleship according to the maturity, needs, and capabilities of the disciple, it is better suited for greater accountability and more accurate assessment of spiritual growth.37 *Second* is the role of groups as in conferences, small group, Sabbath schools, and men and women’s groups. It must be emphasized that these groups, even if they operate as specialized units must incorporate the various interrelated components of discipleship in their activities. The implication of this observation for groups is an approach that emphasizes shared leadership, targeted learning and emphasizes on "building community" and accountability. We could include the various ministries in the local church in this “groups” category, but the things to guard against, in view of the multifaceted nature of discipleship, is the somewhat in-built bent towards compartmentalization in the departments. Compartmentalization spells programs while discipleship means a dynamic, integrated process for growing mature Christians

**Conclusion**

In many segments of Christianity today, discipleship is being rediscovered as a means of renewing Christian congregations. Discipleship, however, has usually followed

37 ibid, p. 221
one of two models: (i) first, the “programs and techniques approach,” usually designed to promote a “God experience” through “praise bands, big-screen video presentations, and flashy showmanship,” and, (ii) second, the “issue-driven church” method which focuses on social engineering issues such as world peace and justice. None of these approaches appear to be an adequate response to the problem nurture and membership loss. The biblical view of discipleship, on the other hand, incorporates an integrated set of themes, notions, and practices which when understood and put into effect in local churches will bring vitality in struggling congregations.