Discipleship: A Calling Many Do Not Know

The word 'disciple' has almost disappeared from the speech of Christians today. We call ourselves believers, evangelicals, members of a church, but rarely does anyone say of himself: 'I am a disciple of the Lord Jesus.' What is more, anyone who speaks about discipleship today often stirs up distrust. He is seen as someone bringing a new teaching, and is even suspected of heresy. And yet the Lord Jesus placed this very word at the centre of His command: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” (Matthew 28:19-20). Not 'make members', but 'make disciples'.

What it means to be a disciple

In some translations of the Bible, the word 'disciple' appears alongside or in place of 'follower'. The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language defines a disciple as a 'person who receives teaching from a master', adopts it and carries it on. The disciple takes on the whole of the master's teaching, lives by it and passes it on.

The Lord Jesus gives the same definition: “Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;” (John 8:31). To be a disciple of Christ means to follow Him in everything, to live as the Teacher lived and to carry His teaching onwards.

Disciples, not merely members

In the early Church, those who received the Word did not merely become members, but disciples: “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.” (Acts 2:41). The name we bear was given to them: “And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.” (Acts 11:26). Christians were disciples. There were not disciples and, alongside them, ordinary believers. Discipleship is not the elite class of the Christian life; it is the Christian life itself.

Today, being a member requires only attendance and a few practices. Being a disciple requires one's whole life: “And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:27). Discipleship is a covenant of obedience, not an optional course.

The early Church and its goal

The early Church knew clearly what the goal was: likeness to Christ. That is why, wherever they went, the apostles did not gather mere adherents, but made disciples of Christ. In Jerusalem, “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:7). Paul and Barnabas, after preaching the gospel in Derbe, 'made a great number of disciples', then went back through the cities they had passed through and “And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:21-22). In Ephesus, Paul separated the disciples and taught them “But when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus.” (Acts 19:9).

This discipleship did not have a vague goal. Paul wrote to the Galatians that he felt once again “My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you,” (Galatians 4:19), and he laboured with all his strength “Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus:” (Colossians 1:28). To the Corinthians he said: “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1). The disciple learned from one who, in his turn, followed Christ, and the road always led to the same image: that of the Teacher.

The fruit was visible. When the rulers of the Jews saw the boldness of Peter and John, unlearned and ordinary men, “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus.” (Acts 4:13). Likeness to the Teacher was the sign by which the disciples were recognised. That is why they could bear the name 'Christians': Christ was seen in their lives.

The Anabaptists: the same goal, the same price

The same goal reappeared in the sixteenth century, in the revival movement of the Anabaptists. In the years when the Reformation was calling people to faith in forgiveness by grace, they understood that to believe in Christ means to follow Him in everyday life. One of them, Hans Denck, said: 'No one can truly know Christ unless he follows Him in life.' Following Christ, discipleship, stood at the centre of their faith: a covenant of obedience, a congregation made up of disciples, and a life lived according to the Lord's teachings.

For this vision they paid with their lives. They were persecuted by the Catholic authorities, but also by those of the Reformation. In Zürich, Zwingli's city, Felix Manz was drowned in the River Limmat in 1527, and in the same year Michael Sattler was burned at the stake by the Catholic authorities. In 1531 Luther signed a memorandum supporting the death penalty for them, and Calvin opposed them harshly in his writings. Thousands of Anabaptists died as martyrs, drowned, burned at the stake or beheaded. In the time of the Reformation, they were the

movement that placed discipleship most clearly at the centre of faith, and they paid the highest price for it. Through their lives and their deaths they showed that discipleship is neither a new teaching nor a heresy, but the ancient calling of the Lord, who warned His own: “Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.” (John 15:20).

The means by which we become like Christ

Why has discipleship been lost? Because God's plan has been lost from view. Scripture states it plainly: God “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” (Romans 8:29). When salvation is reduced to forgiveness, discipleship seems superfluous. If God wants to make me like Christ, then I must learn from Christ; and to learn from Christ means to be His disciple.

Just as a medical student allows himself to be taught and corrected in order to become a doctor, the disciple allows himself to be taught by Christ and shaped by the Holy Spirit, so as to be changed “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 3:18). The Lord said: “The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master.” (Luke 6:40). This is the diploma of the school of Christ: “Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:” (Ephesians 4:13).

Without discipleship we do not attain likeness to Him: a new birth without discipleship remains a beginning without a continuation, like a child who no longer grows.

Returning to the forgotten calling

It is time to give back to the word 'disciple' the meaning the Lord gave it. “He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.” (1 John 2:6).

Therefore each of us must ask himself honestly: am I a disciple of the Lord Jesus, who follows Him in everything, or merely a member of a congregation who admires Him from afar? His calling remains the same: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.” (Matthew 11:29).

If you wish to understand this calling better, read the booklet 'Discipleship – A Means of Reaching God's Goal'. In it you will learn how a disciple is born, how we are called to live as the Teacher lived, what the subjects of the school of Christ are, and what the everyday life of a disciple looks like.

An examination in the light of Scripture

If you have arrived at the Unmodified Word website, know that this is its purpose: to help anyone who truly wishes to examine himself in the light of unaltered Scripture. At stake is the most precious thing we can have, eternal life. The Lord linked it to discipleship. After saying, 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me', He added: 'What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, if he loses his soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' (Matthew 16:24, 26). Eternal life cannot be bought with anything, and the road to it passes through the school of Christ.

Today, more than ever, this examination is needed. Numerous human teachings, traditions and interpretations have become mixed with the message of Scripture, and one of the consequences is the very loss of discipleship: the gospel has been reduced to forgiveness, and disciples have become members. Paul's warning remains relevant: “For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.” (2 Corinthians 2:17). If even in the time of the apostles most people were corrupting the Word, all the more carefully must every teaching be examined today, including those about discipleship. Let us do as the Bereans did, who “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” (Acts 17:11).

If you wish to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus, not merely a member of a congregation, you may be asking yourself from whom you should learn. Today every group has its own teachers, its own rules and its own leaders, and the sincere seeker easily gets lost among them. Scripture brings us back to the foundation: “But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.” (1 Corinthians 8:6). In Alba Iulia we regularly hold meetings for the revival of the heart, where together we learn what it truly means to be His disciples and to live as He lived. If you would like to take part, contact us by phone on 0744 574 711 or at contact@cuvantcurat.ro.

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