

5.

Being a Christian Disciple

FISHER HUMPHREYS

I

Imagine a large public high school in a great American city. In a certain classroom, two teenage girls sit side by side. One is a loyal Roman Catholic, the other a loyal Southern Baptist. Both have faith in Jesus Christ, and both are trying to live faithfully for Jesus Christ. In other words, they are attempting to be Christian disciples.

What does that mean? How do they feel about discipleship? What do they do differently because they are disciples? What difference does this commitment to Christ make in their lives? Does it matter that one is a Baptist and the other a Catholic?

In this chapter, we will try to understand discipleship by analyzing it into a dozen components. After we see what those components are, we will first examine how Baptists and Catholics agree about them. Then we will look again at some of the components and see how Baptists and Catholics disagree concerning them.

The components of discipleship can be stated in three sentences. The twelve components will be numbered for clarity. Being a Christian disciple means that (1) through Jesus Christ God calls (2) all Christians (3) to commit themselves totally (4) to live responsibly as Christians (5) motivated by love. Discipleship includes (6) moral integrity, (7) church loyalty, (8) devotional life, (9) personal growth, and (10) service to others. Discipleship is possible only because (11) God helps us, and (12) his help is mediated to us in various ways.

We begin by considering how Catholics and Baptists agree on each of these twelve issues.

THROUGH JESUS CHRIST GOD CALLS

The call to be a disciple comes from God through Jesus Christ. The call may be heard in a sermon or a hymn or an experience during prayer; it may be heard through a parent or a teacher or a friend; but ultimately it comes from God through Jesus Christ.

We hear the call from God through Jesus Christ by reading the New Testament, especially the Gospels. Baptists and Catholics understand the New Testament teachings about discipleship in very much the same way.

A disciple is a learner or apprentice. She learns from her master, or mentor, Jesus Christ. What she learns is not merely abstract truth; she learns a way of life which is consistent with the truth. All four Gospels show Jesus as a rabbi surrounded by disciples who are learning from him about the kingdom of God and how they are to live because the kingdom is at hand.

Each Gospel writer offers his own particular perspective on discipleship. Mark reduces discipleship to its bare essentials: hearing the word of God, responding in faith and conversion, loving God and neighbor, and following in faith on the way of the cross. Matthew stresses that, after Jesus the Messiah and Son of God died, he left behind a community which was to be faithful to his teachings and to translate them into practice. Matthew recognizes that disciples are also those of little faith who need special care and concern from the community. Luke shows how discipleship may lead to an imitation of Jesus' merciful engagement with human suffering and with the social ills that afflict humanity. John emphasizes personal faith and love expressed in attachment to Jesus and concern for other Christians. Within this diversity there is a deep unity in the confession of Jesus as God's Son and Lord of our lives and in the attempt to be faithful witnesses of his life and teaching.

ALL CHRISTIANS

God calls all his children to discipleship. He doesn't call only a spiritual elite.

Both Catholics and Baptists are sometimes tempted to believe that there is a spiritual elite. Baptists are tempted to think that missionaries, for example, are somehow special Christians, and Catholics are tempted to think that priests or nuns are special Christians. We somehow imagine that there is a double standard in discipleship, one standard for these special people and another for ordinary Christians.

This is a mistake. Of course, we recognize that God sometimes calls some people into special service; for example, he called Paul to be an apostle (see Rom. 1:1), a call not given to all Christians.

But the call to live as a disciple does not go just to some Christians. It goes to all Christians equally. On this Catholics and Baptists agree.

TO COMMIT THEMSELVES TOTALLY

God's call to discipleship is a call to total commitment. Being a disciple is not a part-time matter, but a full-time one. It is not a hobby, not something optional for Christians; it is God's absolute call. It is a lifetime call, not a temporary one.

Discipleship is costly. It is not easy to follow Christ and his way of life. It means being unselfish. Sometimes it means sacrifice. And sometimes it may even mean being persecuted and suffering for Christ.

Discipleship is a very serious matter. It involves us as whole persons, in every area of our lives. God calls us to commit ourselves to him totally. On this, Catholics and Baptists agree.

TO LIVE RESPONSIBLY AS CHRISTIANS

We are Christians by God's grace; discipleship is God's call to us to live in a way that is appropriate for Christians. It is a demand to express through our lives the salvation which God has given to us. It is a call to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you" (Phil. 2:12-13, RSV). Catholics and Baptists agree that we must do this and do it responsibly.

MOTIVATED BY LOVE

Baptists and Catholics both know that being a Christian means having a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. God, on his side of the relationship, is perfect love and perfect grace. We on our side are to respond with trust, gratitude, and love. These qualities motivate us to live as disciples.

Sometimes, of course, we may be motivated by other, less noble feelings, such as terror of God or a cold obedience to God's will even though our heart is not really in it. Or we can commit ourselves to a Christian way of life rather than, more personally, to Christ and his way of life. Terror and cold obedience are not, however, ideal motives for Christian living; the ideal motives are love for God and gratitude to God for his goodness to us. Catholics and Baptists agree that we are to be committed to Christ personally and to his way of life.

MORAL INTEGRITY

Catholics and Baptists agree that one indispensable component of discipleship is moral integrity. Jesus wants his disciples to live a way of life that is morally upright. Although discipleship is motivated by our personal devotion to God and by our love for him, this does not excuse us from our obligation to the highest moral standards. In fact, the opposite is true: our love for God and Christ must be lived out in terms of obedience to his demands for righteousness. "If you love me, keep my commandments," Jesus said (John 14:15, RSV).

CHURCH LOYALTY

God's call to discipleship is never a call to live in isolation; it is a call to live in community. The first disciples of Jesus Christ formed a community which had Jesus as its center, and the same is true for all disciples at all times. We are to be committed not only to Christ and to his way of life; we are to be committed to our fellow Christians. Loyalty to one's fellow disciples is an indispensable component of discipleship; Baptists and Catholics agree on that.

DEVOTIONAL LIFE

Since discipleship arises out of our personal relationship with God in Christ, it is only to be expected that this relationship will express itself and will need to be nurtured. This is what happens in the devotional life of disciples. We express our love and gratitude to God through prayer; we nurture that love and gratitude, and find resources for living as disciples, by prayer and reading the Scriptures.

Catholics and Baptists agree that devotional life is indispensable for disciples.

PERSONAL GROWTH

Discipleship involves all of our lives, not just the religious and moral areas of life. We are to be disciples in every area of life.

In Luke's gospel, we read that "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Lk. 2:52, RSV). Here we see references to four areas of personal growth for Jesus, and they also are areas of growth for the disciples of Christ: intellectual growth (wisdom), physical well-being (stature), religious and moral growth (favor with God), and social development (favor with man).

Baptists and Catholics agree that God is concerned not only with our religious and moral development, but also with our intellectual growth, and with our physical well-being, and with our social development; to these we could add also that God is concerned about growth in other areas such as psychological self-understanding, ability to make decisions, ability to share in family life, ability to earn and manage money, and so on.

SERVICE TO OTHERS

Jesus said that he came into the world not to be served but to serve other people (Mark 10:45), and when we read the Gospels, we see that he did exactly that. He also said that he wanted his disciples not to be served but to serve others (see Mark 10:42–44). That is still true today.

Discipleship is a matter of giving as well as of getting. It is a

way of life which seeks the welfare of others rather than of oneself. It is unselfish and sacrificial, not selfish and acquisitive. It is the way of a servant not of a master. Baptists and Catholics agree that living as a disciple always includes unselfish service to others.

GOD HELPS US

Clearly discipleship is a difficult way of life. In fact, without God's help, it would be impossible for us to live as disciples. Baptists and Catholics agree that it is only because God helps us that we are able to live as disciples at all.

We tend to use somewhat different language to refer to God's help. Baptists frequently refer to seeking God's blessings, for example, and Catholics frequently refer to receiving God's grace; in both cases we are talking about God's helping us to live as disciples. Both of us also refer to the Spirit of God as God's presence in us to help us, but our laypeople are somewhat reticent to speak of the Spirit, perhaps because in America today many people tend to associate the Spirit with extraordinary practices such as speaking in tongues.

GOD'S HELP IS MEDIATED IN VARIOUS WAYS

Catholics and Baptists both recognize that God is free to help us in any way that he chooses; we also agree that God has chosen to channel his help to us in some fairly definite ways. Among the means by which we receive God's help we may mention two. One is the Bible, the Word of God which is food for our souls and light for our path (see Ps. 119:103, 105). The other is the church, which is the people of God and the body of Christ in the world. Baptists and Catholics agree that God helps us live as disciples and that he uses the church and the Bible (and other means) to do so.

II

Concerning discipleship, Baptists and Catholics believe and practice so many things alike that you may wonder if we have any

important differences. But we do differ, and we are convinced that the best way to understand each other is to be attentive to our disagreements as well as to our agreements.

It seems that we do not have any serious disagreements concerning the first four components of discipleship, namely, that God through Christ calls all Christians to commit themselves totally to live responsibly as Christians. Nor do we seem to have any serious disagreement concerning the ninth component, that God is concerned about our personal growth in areas such as intellectual, physical, and social. Nor do we disagree about the tenth component, that God helps us to live as disciples. It is the other six components concerning which we disagree, and we will now consider these.

MOTIVATED BY LOVE

While Baptists and Catholics agree that Christians should be motivated by their love for God to live as disciples, we also have two serious disagreements which have implications for this love. These two disagreements concern the security of believers and the assurance of salvation.

Baptists believe that once you have become a Christian, you are secure; that is, you will never fall away from being a Christian, and when your life on earth is over, you will go to be with God in heaven. Baptists also believe that you can be fully assured throughout your life on earth that you are in fact a Christian, and therefore fully assured that you will go to heaven when you die. Occasionally some Baptists have called these two beliefs into question, but they are the predominant, traditional beliefs of Baptists.

And they have implications for what motivates you to live as a disciple. Since you are assured of your final salvation, you are never motivated by fear of damnation. You are therefore free to live in joy and gratitude and love for God. Therefore, discipleship is in no sense a condition for final salvation, but a consequence of the fact that you have an assurance that you will finally be saved.

The Catholic tradition concerning security and assurance is quite different. Catholics believe just as deeply as Baptists that Christ provided salvation and that salvation is by God's grace, but they also believe that the Bible teaches that you can forfeit the gift of salvation by willful disobedience. While they live with the assurance that God loves and forgives them, in this life they are not finally assured of their own ultimate salvation. To Catholics, it sometimes seems that Baptists are a little presumptuous and even arrogant in their claim to know for sure that they will go to heaven.

These disagreements are serious and provide important points for discussion by Baptists and Catholics.

MORAL INTEGRITY

Baptists and Catholics agree that disciples should live lives of high moral integrity, but they do not always agree about what is right and what is wrong. For example, the official Catholic teaching is that it is wrong for married couples to use artificial contraceptives; Baptists do not think that this is wrong. Again, most Baptists believe that drinking alcohol is wrong; Catholics do not believe that it is wrong.

Also, Baptists and Catholics differ in the way in which they decide what is right and wrong. Baptists believe that the only authoritative guide for moral issues is the Bible; Catholics think that the Bible is an important guide, but they also find authoritative guidance in the church's official teaching. However, this difference may not be as great as it seems, because Baptists get at least some of their moral views from tradition as well as from the Bible; the view that drinking is a sin is a good example of this.

The differences between Baptists and Catholics on what is right and wrong, are serious and deserve to be discussed. But it is best not to exaggerate their importance. After all, there are differences among Baptists on these issues, and also differences among Catholics. Our examples reveal this. Many Baptists do not agree that drinking is wrong; and many Catholics do not agree that using contraceptives is wrong. Perhaps the best thing for

serious disciples to do is just to take these issues as they arise and discuss them openly, seeking to arrive at the best possible understanding by drawing on both traditions.

CHURCH LOYALTY

Catholics and Baptists agree that Christ wants his followers to be loyal to one another as well as to him. But, as you will see more fully in the following chapter, we hold different understandings of the church.

The principal difference has to do with the local congregation; this is easy to grasp if we notice how Catholics and Baptists answer the following question: "What church do you belong to?" Catholics tend to answer naturally: "The Roman Catholic Church." Baptists would never answer: "The Baptist Church." In fact, Baptists never use this phrase at all. Baptists answer our question as follows: "The First Baptist Church of Memphis" (or whatever local congregation they belong to).

In other words, the most basic meaning of "church" for Baptists is a local congregation, which Catholics call a parish; and the most basic meaning of "church" for Catholics is the Roman Catholic Church, which Baptists call a denomination. And that has a profound effect on church loyalty.

In very general terms, a Catholic thinks of church loyalty in terms of a worldwide family with a visible institutional structure (a pope and bishops) and about eight hundred million members. It is very important to be a loyal member of a really catholic, or worldwide, organization.

A Baptist, on the other hand, thinks of church loyalty in terms of a face-to-face relationship with a limited group of people who live near each other and who share in a life centered around an organization which they all support together. It is very important to be in this place where you know others and others know you, and to do church together.

Of course, this distinction is not absolute. Catholics often share in activities in the life of their parish, and Baptists have commitments to all of the people of God in the world. But the

emphasis for each runs the other way. Perhaps we can learn from each other by discussing what we feel is involved in being loyal to the church.

DEVOTIONAL LIFE

Catholics and Baptists both believe in and practice a personal devotional life. They agree that devotional life is indispensable for disciples. Both see devotional life as an expressing of their personal relationship to Christ and also as a resource which helps the disciple to live faithfully. They agree that prayer and the Bible are very important in personal devotional life. They also agree that there are different kinds of devotional life.

In spite of these agreements, Baptists and Catholics have many differences in their understanding of devotional life. The differences are complex and elusive; we will consider just four of them, related respectively to other persons, to prayer, to sacraments, and to other practices.

We begin with other persons. Baptist devotional life is private; it does not involve others. Of course, a Baptist prays for other people, and she may hear a sermon which encourages her in her devotional life. But the practice of her devotional life is private.

Catholic devotional life involves others. It includes confession to a priest, a practice with no parallel among Baptists. It may include having a spiritual director; Baptists traditionally have not had spiritual directors, and most Baptists do not know what a spiritual director is. Catholic spirituality includes devotion (not worship) to the saints and to Mary; Baptists do not do this and resist it strenuously.

Then, prayer. For Baptists, prayer is talking, either aloud or silently; Baptists do not ordinarily pray wordless prayers. Prayer is spontaneous; with occasional exceptions, Baptists do not use written prayers. The principal kinds of prayer are thanksgiving, confession of sins, and requests; thanksgiving sometimes edges over toward worship.

Catholic prayer includes all that Baptists do, but it also includes a great deal more. Catholics utilize written prayers, from the Bible and elsewhere. They also speak of stages of prayer, and

of moving beyond verbal to non-verbal prayers. They describe a pilgrimage which moves through meditation and contemplation to a mystical experience of God. They utilize images such as a crucifix for mediation, and they use repetitive prayers as in the rosary. Baptists have no parallels for these practices, and no description of stages of development in the life of prayer.

Next, the sacraments. Baptists practice and love the Lord's Supper, but they do not usually associate it with personal devotional life; it is part of their church experience, and while it helps them to live as disciples, it is not understood as contributing directly to their personal relationship with God. Baptists do not speak of sacraments at all; they speak of ordinances, and then of only two, baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Catholics do associate the eucharist with personal devotional life, and unlike Baptists, they feel that this personal devotional life is diminished if they have not received communion for an extended period of time. Further, Catholics share in another sacrament, the sacrament of reconciliation, which includes confessing their sins to a priest; Baptists have no parallel practice.

Finally, Catholics have other forms of devotion which Baptists do not have. These include making the sign of the cross, novenas, the use of candles and of holy water, wearing medals, and having crucifixes and pictures of Christ and of saints.

The differences in devotional practice between Catholics and Baptists are so great that we may be tempted to forget that we have a great deal in common. It is likely that each of us can learn something from the other; one way to find out is to have an open and frank discussion of our differences. Perhaps it would be wise to begin such a discussion, not with what our traditions tell us is supposed to help us, but by candidly answering for ourselves and for each other to the question, "What in fact really does help me in my devotional life?"

SERVICE TO OTHERS

Catholics and Baptists agree that discipleship involves service to others. We also agree that God gives us special skills to be used in the service of others. Baptists call these "gifts," a

word recognized by Catholics; Catholics also refer to these as "charisms," a word not known to most Baptists.

We both agree that there are many kinds of service to others, and that practical considerations often enter into our decision about how to serve others. We also agree that our service should extend to people outside the church, and we both tend to agree that much service should be done for those of the household of faith.

When we begin to actually name kinds of Christian service, we find that there is large agreement also; we agree, for example, that we are to serve the poor by giving them money, by sharing in their pain, by seeking to find them housing and jobs, and so on.

Alongside our large agreements concerning service, run slightly different emphases. Baptists place a special emphasis on evangelism. Baptist pastors constantly urge their people to give a personal verbal witness to the unchurched, and churches have programs (called visitation programs) to assist people to give a personal witness. In fact, Baptists are urged not only to witness for Christ, but to call for a decision for Christ from those to whom they witness.

Catholics believe in evangelism, but they tend to think of it more as the work of the church acting together than as the duty of the individual Christian. When they think of personal evangelism, they think of it as a witness to be given by specially gifted persons rather than by all. And when they think of it for these persons, they tend to think of it more in terms of witness than in terms of calling for a decision on the spot.

On the other hand, Catholics emphasize forms of service which liberate the oppressed, particularly those oppressed by unjust economic, racial, educational, and political arrangements. They also emphasize a connection between devotional life and liberation. This connection is barely known to Baptists, who tend to favor social service over social action, and evangelism over both. A significant exception to this is found among black Baptists, who have often been in the forefront of liberation from racial injustice in America; Martin Luther King, Jr., was a Baptist minister.

These differences should not be exaggerated: Catholics believe in evangelism, and Baptists believe in liberation. But clearly Baptists emphasize evangelism and Catholics emphasize social action when they talk about Christian service. No doubt we can learn from each other in these matters.

GOD'S HELP IS MEDIATED IN VARIOUS WAYS

Catholics tend to speak more directly and more frankly than Baptists of the fact that God's help is given to disciples through various means. Baptists are aware that God's help is given through the Bible and the church, but they do not ordinarily refer to these as means of grace. Baptists also do not think of the Lord's Supper as a medium of grace, yet they are quite aware that God blesses them when they partake of the Lord's Supper.

If Baptists were asked, "How do you get the Lord's help for living your life as a disciple?," the ordinary answer would be, "By praying and asking for it." A second answer would be that, of course, you should read the Bible and be active in the church. Only rarely would a Baptist answer, "By taking the Lord's Supper."

Concerning the means of God's grace, then, fundamentally different emphases are made by Catholics and Baptists. In this matter as in the matter of devotional life, perhaps we can learn from each other, especially if we will begin by honestly asking, "What really helps me in my life of discipleship?"

These, then, are some of the issues included in discipleship. Baptists and Catholics have many agreements and many disagreements. Our God is calling us both to live as disciples; we should both be able to do this more responsibly if we will learn from each other. Perhaps the two teenage girls in our opening story should talk to each other about Christ and about being his disciples, and pray for each other.