

Introduction

In 2016, shortly after the election, the news cycle was covering an interesting fact: then President-elect Trump had nominated a record number of billionaires to his cabinet. That was all over the news for a moment. During that moment, a man I know who is an education policy nerd, a guy who serves on his local school board and whose wife is a public school teacher, made a comment on social media about the billionaire who had just been nominated to be the next Education Secretary. I thought the entire thing was funny and replied, and I quote, “Hey, if you were a billionaire, you could be in his cabinet, too!”

There was nothing about policy—whether education or otherwise—in my joke, yet within a few days I found a couple in my office demanding to know if I were pro-abortion. I was shocked by the question. Of course not! “Why are you asking this?”, I asked them. They mentioned my post. What post? I didn’t post about abortion. They mentioned the post about the person nominated for Education Secretary. “I didn’t post about her.” Then I realized which post they meant: the post in which I poked fun at *the number of billionaires nominated*, which had nothing to do with any particular nominee and nothing to do with any policy.

Somehow these two had conflated a comment about billionaires nominated to government roles with being pro-abortion. I still do not see the connection. That, by the way, was when I stopped posting on Facebook, except for Facebook Marketplace.

Some time ago on another site that I have largely abandoned as well I posted this observation: “I’ve never known a person who was both spiritually mature and politically partisan”. That’s anecdotal. I have never met such a person. I’ve met folk who were spiritually mature and passionate about public policy, but I’ve never met a person who was both spiritually mature and *politically partisan*.

I received some pushback on this post, with some folk who quibbled over the meaning of the term “partisan”. They seemed to want to define the term in a way that one *could* be both spiritually mature and politically partisan. I am absolutely convinced that the real point of disagreement had nothing to do with the meaning of partisan and everything to do with what it means to be *spiritually mature*.

Most often people tend to equate spiritual maturity with a life relatively free of sin—well, external or *visible* sin. A person who doesn’t commit adultery and doesn’t cheat on taxes and who “attends church” regularly and gives generously and reads the Bible regularly—that person is understood to be *spiritually mature*. As we continue our short series on discipleship this morning, we will see that these sorts of markers are not very good markers for evaluating spiritual maturity. We see this in Jesus’ own words in Matthew 7.

Mt 7:21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name,

and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’
23 And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you
workers of lawlessness.’

Matthew 7:21–23

Fruits

What is frightening about this text is what they will claim they did and the way in which Jesus does *not* respond. Think of what they claim they have done in his name. First, they claim they prophesied in his name. That is, they spoke on behalf of God in the name of Jesus. This is what the gift of prophecy is. It is declaring God’s truth with his authority. When you read the Old Testament prophets, they mostly called out the people of God for sin! There was some prediction, certainly, but the overwhelming majority of what the prophets proclaimed was God’s word to his people.

Jesus says many will say to him, “Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name?” He adds that many will also say, “Lord, didn’t we cast out demons in your name?” Think of the spiritual authority on display in casting out demons! These are spiritual beings that submit to the name of Jesus. Many will one day say to Jesus that they had, in fact, cast out demons in his name.

Then he expands their claims. Many will say, “Did we not do many mighty works in your name?” Didn’t we serve you and accomplish great things in ministry and see miracles performed? Didn’t we engage in ministry in such a way that we saw lives changed and transformed and many great things take place? What is frightening is the answer Jesus does *not* give to these claims; he doesn’t say “No, you did not do those things.”

The implication is they did, in fact, do those things. For Jesus, the real test of faithfulness is not the performance even of miraculous things! Instead of declaring they did not do those things, he says he did not *know them*. He does not recognize them. Their *identity* is unknown to him. Clearly, then, merely doing right things is not what Jesus is looking for, else Jesus would have responded, “Yes, you did those things.”

However! What is really interesting for us today is what he had just said right before this.

Mt 7:15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

Matthew 7:15–20

What he says may appear contradictory. Outwardly they look like sheep. That’s the reference to sheep’s clothing. Inwardly, they are ravenous wolves. The way to recognize them is by examining their fruits. If you see an apple, it may look delicious, but if you cut it open, it may well be rotten inside. This is the idea, yet Jesus says you can, by observing

their fruits, know whether they're true *inside* by what you see *outside*. He follows this up by saying many will come with what appears to be good fruit, namely, they prophesy in his name and cast out demons in his name and perform many mighty works in his name.

Outwardly, they appear true! Inwardly, however, their “fruit” is rotten. What did he say in verse 23? He doesn't tell them they didn't prophesy in his name. Instead he says he never knew them and calls them *workers of lawlessness*! They were doing the right thing! How can he call them workers of lawlessness? Remember the rich young ruler “kept” the law—outwardly—but he, too, was a worker of lawlessness. This is because the law was never intended to be this sort of checklist, but God's self-revelation. In this new covenant we have the law of Christ: we have God's self-revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. These workers of lawlessness were not actually being like Jesus, though their outward behavior would have suggested they were! After all, Jesus prophesied. Jesus cast out demons. Jesus did many mighty works. They were doing the things Jesus did!

Good fruit, then, cannot be merely external obedience to a list of rules. There must be a significant change elsewhere in a person. What is this fruit that Jesus says will reveal whether a person were a true disciple or not? Part of the problem is we've separated “discipleship” from carrying our cross. Later in Matthew's Gospel Jesus himself makes this connection:

Mt 16:21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Matthew 16:21–24

A disciple is one who follows his teacher. Jesus declares his disciples must follow him to the cross—not his cross, but their own crosses. That is, they must be willing to give up everything, including their lives, to follow him. This is what he said to the rich young ruler. In his case, it wasn't a physical death he was being called to, but a death to self. He must give up everything for the poor to be the Lord's disciple—and it was too high a price for him to pay. Money, however, is the lowest price we must “pay”.

Disciple

Remember what we're looking at in this series: discipleship. We all know the Great Commission. Jesus appeared to his disciples and told them to go into all nations and make more disciples by baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and by teaching them to observe all he has commanded. It is amazing to me, then, how many times we find the word “disciple” used by the various authors of the New Testament.

Matthew used the word disciple 73 times. Mark used the word disciple 46 times. Luke used the word disciple 37 times. John used the word disciple 78 times. Luke again used the

word disciple 27 times in Acts. That's 261 times the word disciple appears in just the first five books of the New Testament! The authors of Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1–2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation—combined—use the word disciple exactly *zero* times.

Why does the word that was so important to the Gospel writers disappear so suddenly after the book of Acts? What happens in the latter half of the time period covered by the book of Acts that would lead to the authors of the rest of the New Testament—that's Paul and James and Peter and John and the unknown author of Hebrews and Jude—to completely avoid using the term?

In the New Testament the vocabulary for discipleship shifts, while the concept remains. A failure to grasp what it shifts *to* creates a lot of frustration for a lot of people. In the Gospels, Jesus is the Rabbi who disciples his students. They follow him around, sitting at his feet while being taught. This was a very Jewish understanding of being a disciple. This was not what Jesus meant.

In Acts the earliest Christians continued to be disciples of the Rabbi as the church was still overwhelmingly Jewish. As the church spread among Gentiles—among the *nations*—the vocabulary shifts to brothers, to saints, to church, to servants, to children of God, to imitators, to followers, etc. Paul refuses to suggest he is some rabbi with disciples who follow *him*. He can exhort the Corinthians to be *imitators* of him, but only because he imitates Christ! In fact, he strongly criticized the Corinthians for their rabbi / disciple mentality when he rebuked them for some claiming to follow Paul and others claiming to follow Apollos, as if these men were their *rabbis*! That is not the sort of discipleship Jesus had in mind!

It was because the term “disciple” generally focused on *learning from and following a singular teacher* that the apostles moved away from it. Paul emphasizes *union with Christ* more than sitting under the teaching of the Great Rabbi. He stresses *identity* rather than *instruction*. Following Jesus is not merely imitation of his *teaching*, but *participation in his death and resurrection life*!

By the time we get to the early second century this deeper understanding of the word disciple became more firmly planted. It had begun to lose its sense of a group of followers being led by a rabbi. To be a disciple was to have union with Christ, identification with him in his death and resurrection. We see this understanding in the writings of Ignatius. Ignatius was born in the middle of the first century and would have been in his teens and early 20s when most of the apostles died.

Ignatius, along with men like Clement of Rome, are the bridge between the apostles and the next generation of church leaders. Ignatius was on his way to Rome to be executed in the year 107. On the way he wrote several letters to various churches, including the church in Rome. He wrote this:

Ign Rom 4:1 I am writing to all the churches and am insisting to everyone that I die for God of my own free will—unless you hinder me. I implore you: do not be unseasonably kind to me. Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God. I am God's wheat, and I am being ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, so that I may prove to be pure bread. ² Better yet, coax the wild beasts, so that they may become my tomb and leave nothing of my body behind, lest I become a burden to anyone once I have fallen asleep. Then I will truly be

a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world will no longer see my body. Pray to the Lord on my behalf, so that through these instruments I may prove to be a sacrifice to God.

Ignatius, To the Romans 4:1–2

Notice very carefully what he says after expressing his desire to be faithful unto death: “Then”—having been killed by these wild beasts—then “I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ”. What he’s saying is he will really and truly have followed Jesus by being faithful unto death. It is this ultimate faithfulness that reveals he is a true disciple. He doesn’t want the Roman Christians to interfere with his execution by using whatever contacts they may have in the capital. He wants to be a true disciple. His identification with Jesus in taking up his cross is what makes him a true disciple.

Paul tends to stress corporate identity over individual identity. This is what Ignatius desires: to be counted among God’s people. This is a reason Paul doesn’t use the term disciple. Most often he calls Christians “saints”, emphasizing their corporate nature. They are identified together with Christ. To be identified with Jesus is to be a disciple. This identity is seen, first and foremost, in taking up our crosses.

Corporate Identity

I’ve known a handful of people over the years who have expressed frustration at not being *discipled*. The reality is if you are more like Jesus today than you were a year ago or five years ago or twenty years ago then you most certainly have been discipled because you cannot get there on your own. This is why Paul stresses our *corporate* identity. You’re well aware of New City’s Mission Statement. It’s the name of this series: “Making Disciples. Period.” You should know our philosophy of ministry: “*Discipleship happens in relationship*”.

What is often meant when people claim they are not being or have not been *discipled* is they have not had a weekly meeting over coffee to talk about their ongoing struggle with sin or they have not been in a one-on-one or small-group Bible study or they haven’t signed up for a program. Those things can be places where discipleship happens, but we cannot equate them with discipleship, any more than we can equate prophesying and casting out demons and doing mighty works with discipleship. We tend to have a very Jewish understanding of discipleship. We want to sit at the feet of a rabbi, so to speak, and learn.

In one of his books Phil Newton cited a conversation with a man named Matt Sliger. Matt told him that if the ultimate goal for a person is to become like his mentor, then one-on-one discipleship is sufficient. If the goal is for the person to become like Jesus, however, then discipleship requires the entire church.

As we’ve been seeing, real discipleship is seen in becoming more like Jesus. A mentor can assist in this process, but mentoring is not the same as discipleship. There’s some overlap! Discipleship can occur in a mentoring relationship, but simply being in a mentoring relationship is not the same as being discipled.

Real discipleship is seen in helping one another become more like Jesus, in whatever way this takes place. It can take place over a weekly cup of coffee. It can take place over a shared meal. It can take place in a conversation after the worship service. It can take place in about a half hour or forty-five minutes when the memes start coming in to the men’s

Signal chat. If those memes and comments encourage us and point us to Jesus, they will disciple us. When we adopt the understanding that discipleship is a rabbi with his student or students, we embrace the very thing the writers of Romans through Revelation sought to avoid. We miss what the early church understood when Ignatius said he would be a true disciple when he was faithful unto death.

Rather than being students who follow a particular leader around, we are brothers and sisters in Christ. This is significant because in the ancient Roman world, it was the sibling relationship that held society together. To be brothers and sisters puts us on equal footing before the Lord and implies a responsibility toward one another, a responsibility for mutual care and support. This is why Paul's emphasis is on our corporate identity.

Our corporate identity is that of being Christ's people. Our corporate identity as the family of God trumps political ideology and cultural expression and all other things that tend to divide us. There are all sorts of groups in this world that associate together because they have something in common, whether it's a bowling league or a local weightlifting gym or a pub. Some like working with their hands and some are always reading a book. If you're Pete, you do both!

Your commonality can be something more natural like similar skin tones or cultural expressions. Not everyone here listens to the same music. Some of you listen to jazz fusion like Spyro Gyra and some of you like the crunch of Metallica. Some like Top-40-style "praise and worship" music and others prefer classical. There might even be someone here who likes country music. If you find someone who is into the same kind of music as you, you can go to a concert together, but these things do not bring unity because once you get outside the area of common interest you have no real connection.

Siblings don't have to like the same music. Siblings don't have to like the same movies. Siblings don't have to like the same foods. Siblings don't have to like the same fashions. Siblings don't have to have the same priorities in voting. What unites siblings together is they share the same parents. God is our Father! This makes us siblings in Christ and though we may have nothing else in common, this is sufficient for the unity the Spirit creates among us.

Notice that our corporate identity is found in a Person, not in an ethical framework. Christians are those who are becoming like *Jesus*, not those who do certain things. As Christians become more like Jesus they will most certainly engage in behaviors such as prophesying in his name and casting out demons in his name and doing many mighty works in his name, but as we see in Matthew 7, merely doing those things does not identify us as the people of God! Jesus says on the day of judgment *many* will say to him, "Lord, didn't *do these things* in your name?". Again, he won't say, "No", but, "I never knew you". He doesn't recognize *their identity*. This is because they don't have the Spirit of God.

The basis of our corporate identity does not lie within us. It lies within God himself, for he is our Father. He has adopted us into his family. As Peter says, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope, and guards us through faith until we receive the fullness of our inheritance—an inheritance that is rooted entirely in the riches of God who freely gives them to us! The basis for our unity is not anything in us, but everything that is ours in Christ. We didn't cause that, so we cannot claim credit for it. All we can do is work to maintain the unity of the Spirit granted to us by God. That is, we strive to maintain our *corporate identity in Christ*.

Worship

Because our unity is rooted in the identity granted by Christ, the things that are not rooted in that identity cannot be the basis for dividing us. Our political party of choice is not rooted in the identity granted by Christ so if you vote differently than I vote that difference cannot divide us for that similarity is not what unites us in the first place. If you don't like hot sauce, it's okay to be wrong. Love for hot sauce is not rooted in the identity granted by Christ, so loving hot sauce cannot be what gives us our unity, and not loving hot sauce cannot take away our unity. (I'm not really talking about hot sauce.) Our unity is rooted in this and only in this: we belong to the Lord. He has claimed us as his own children. That's our unity, found in our common confession that Jesus is Lord.

We're talking about discipleship, about the process of making disciples—of helping one another become more like Jesus. We saw last week that central to this process is the promise of the new covenant. The central promise is the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Paul's primary argument against the false teachers in Galatia—those who told the Christians there that to really be God's people they would have to keep the law of Moses by receiving circumcision and observing Sabbath and eating kosher—his primary argument was this: the Spirit of God is present and active in your midst without you being circumcised and without you observing Sabbath and without you eating kosher, so what would you gain from adding those things? They already have the promise of the new covenant!

How, then, do we make disciples? We saw last week that the Primary Discippler in the church is the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit works to glorify Jesus in our lives. The Spirit points us to Christ and causes us to become more like him. This morning we're seeing that spiritual maturity is found not in external obedience, but in having the mind of Christ. Jesus told Peter he did not set his mind on the things of God but on the things of man because Peter set his mind on earthly things—things like physically protecting Jesus and thereby preventing his death.

Church, spiritual maturity is always seen in death, whether like Ignatius you are faithful unto death when you are killed for your faith, or like most followers of Jesus you die to yourself every day by not insisting on your "rights" or your opinions being heard or your preferences being embraced. The day on which you truly begin to take up your cross for the Lord Jesus, is the day on which you begin walking the road of spiritual maturity.

How does this happen? How is it that you and I are formed into the sort of people who will gladly die daily for the Lord Jesus? The early church understood the primary means for this sort of formation was worship. Alan Kreider, in his wonderful book "The Patient Ferment", says the early church did not use their worship services to attract unbelievers. They were not interested in appealing to the world in that way. Unbelievers may attend, but they did not structure their services for unbelievers. They structured them for worship, for they understood that worship formed them.

Kreider explains that worship formed their habitus. Habitus is our deepest sense of identity, complete with our deepest convictions, allegiances, and repulsions. You can see our habitus in our default response to things. If your car breaks down, what is your default response? Is it to fuss and fume and throw things in anger? What is your deepest identity? Is it in Christ who controls all things—including cars? Not if you're fussing and fuming like that.

When confronted with another believer who votes for the *other party*, what is your default response? Is it to wonder if they truly love Jesus? Or is it to remember that your unity is rooted entirely in Jesus and what Jesus has done and who Jesus claims you and that person are? Our habitus is our reflexive response to life that is formed by our deepest identity, and our deepest identity is not primarily intellectual, but stems from our *worship*. Kreider writes,

[T]he ongoing energizing center of Christian communal life was not catechesis but worship. Christians claimed that week by week they encountered God in worship—from the heart (affective) as well as from the head (mental).

...

In their worship services Christians believed they encountered God who was active, sovereign, and unpredictable. God, known to them through Jesus Christ—whose words and ways were often surprising—was unconventional and was making them unconventional.

...

Christians claimed that through their worship services God changed them and strengthened them to cope with precarious realities and daunting problems of daily living.

Alan Kreider, “The Patient Ferment”

The Holy Spirit is the primary Person who disciples us and worship is the primary *means* God has given to disciple us. This is because we become like what we worship. This is why idolatry is so terrible. If we worship money or pleasure or power or status or reputation or possessions, these are the things that begin to shape us. The Holy Spirit—our primary Discipler—makes us, the local church, into his temple where God dwells on earth. His presence and activity is the sign we are in the new covenant. Because the Spirit of God glorifies Jesus, when the Holy Spirit is present and active we worship Jesus. This, our worship of Jesus, makes us more and more like him because we become like what we worship. Here is the apostle Paul’s theology of sanctification, of discipleship, of making us more like Jesus:

2 Cor 3:18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:18

If you are in Christ, if you have been rescued by the Lord Jesus, have been granted a new identity that is rooted entirely in him, in who he is and what he has done, if you have experienced his mercy and grace and have begun participating with him in his plan to restore the entire creation, if you have the Spirit dwelling in you, pointing you to Christ and him crucified as your only hope and salvation, if you have heard his voice and have cried out to him in faith, then the thing you want more than anything else is to worship him. To worship him is to desire to become more and more like him. As the Spirit of God pushes you deeper and deeper and deeper into worship, you become more and more like him. This is God’s plan. This is our spiritual maturity. We become like what we worship. We worship Jesus.

We do this here, in the gathered assembly, for the Lord Jesus promised he would enter into our midst when we assemble in his name. This is what makes us the church. This is why we should not use the language of “going to” church or “attending church”, as if “church” were merely an activity. If someone were to ask you attend, tell them you *worship* with New City. Tell folk you *participate in the life of* New City.

I’ve said before and it’s worth repeating. Too often the very idea of church is that of a bunch of individuals worshiping with a bunch of other individuals at the same time and place. This is not God’s idea of his church. His church is his assembly of those who are being made into the image of Christ, and they do this each week by beholding the glory of the Lord in corporate worship. That worship spills over into our City Groups and into our homes and our private lives, but it begins here, *in the assembly*, as we worship our Lord *together*.