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DISCIPLESHIP IN THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY

by F.R. Coad

That our title should seem to contain in it something paradoxical is itself an excellent illustration of the two quirks of modern evangelical thought, with which this article will be largely concerned.

In the first place, there is the curiously inverted materialism of our thinking. The discipleship of the man or woman who has made some obvious material renunciation for the sake of Christian witness and service is so taken for granted (although 1 Cor.13: 3 suggests that Paul may not have wholly agreed with us), that the majority who find their calling in normal secular life are left on one side as 'second bests', debarred from the place of real discipleship. This might be good for our souls if it were not that as a result we are too often left defenceless before mammon. Too rarely have we sufficient points of reference within our vision of life to enable us to comprehend such prosperity as the affluent society brings with it, within the circle of our Christian service and witness. We may hoard our prosperity, or waste it, or give it away; but each alternative is irresponsible: our Lord told us to make to ourselves friends of it, for the everlasting habitations (Luke 16: 9-14).

We allow the business man to be successful - provided only he ploughs his profits back into the Church. That the whole gamut of his activity, the contribution which he makes to the economy, his relationships with workers and other businesses, with consumers and the state, the quality of his product and the efficiency of his organisation: that all these and more are an integral part of his Christian witness, often escapes our view.

A young preacher was heard to put forward as evidence of his Christian commitment the fact that he had become a trainee teacher, destined to a life of comparative penury when he could have been earning "two or three times as much" elsewhere. On such an unproven and inherently improbable thesis he built his spiritual self-respect: yet strictly such a consideration was totally irrelevant, the only true criterion being whether he was truly fulfilling the grace which had been given him. It is from such an outlook as that which we have been describing that there can derive

such an obviously distorted statement as the following:-

> ".... a believer should not spend his life doing what the unregenerate could do as well, if not better; .... the function of a job is merely to provide for current necessities while the main vocation of the Christian is to preach the kingdom of God."
>
> (True Discipleship, p.18)

(It depends, of course, on what we mean by the kingdom of God).

Is it possible that, by destroying every other pathway to a dramatic expression of commitment, evangelicalism has destroyed much more than appeared: much more than superficial and wearisome observances, fastings and self-denials?

The second quirk concerns the very meaning of the word discipleship. It has become encrusted with layers of meaning that serve only to conceal its essential simplicity. This second quirk can provide the starting point for our re-appraisal of discipleship today.

Essentially and simply, a 'disciple' is a 'learner', just that: one who accepts and grows into the teachings of another. We shall begin to detect some of the encrustations if we perform the simple exercise of substituting the word 'learner' whenever we wish to use the word 'disciple'. Our Lord's invitation to learn of Him is couched in the most winsome and humane of terms:

> " Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light."
>
> (Matt. 11:28-30)

For proof of this learnership, our Lord laid down three tokens or signs:-

1. Continuance in His word - characterised by the royal freedom of truth (John 8:31,32).
2. Love to one another (John 13:35).
3. The bearing of much fruit (John 15:8).

When our Lord indicated that those of His hearers who were to become learners must sever dearest ties of kinship, and forsake all that they possessed (Luke 14:25-33), He stated something which for them was simple fact. That fact has been repeated countless times in the history of His Church. It is the potential consequence of every learnership: this is the whole point of the exhortation to count the cost, even as the builder plans and costs his tower, or the king his war. It is the potential cost: it is not the distinguishing sign of discipleship.

The history of the early Church makes this clear. Through the New Testament (and, indeed, throughout Christian doctrine) there run two threads, complementary by nature, though superficially contradictory. On the one hand there is the catastrophic, the dramatic: that element which overturns and revolutionises, and is related directly in prospect to the apocalyptic coming of the kingdom of God in the end times. On the other hand, there is the regular, the normal, that which works quietly within the everyday and the regular order, and which is related to those present aspects of a kingdom which is within or among us (Luke 17:20,21), to be received quietly like a little child (Luke 18:17), and which is characterised by righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost (Rom.14:17).

So, on the one hand, we have such as the apostles - "as the filth of the world, ... the offscouring of all things" (1 Cor.4:13): on the other, such as Erastus, city treasurer of Corinth, and Gaius mine host (Rom.16:23), Philemon, and others "rich in this world" (1 Tim.6:17-19). To some who wished unjustifiably to pass from the second category to the first, and thus to contract out of the ordinary economic life of the community in which they lived, in order to live apart in the light of the parousia, Paul had strong words to say (1 Thess.4:11,12. 2 Thess.3:6-11). The church, indeed, was exhorted to withdraw from such! 'Faith lines', in the wrong place, may be seriously wrong.

There is, then, no economic or occupational norm for discipleship. It is to be worked out by each in the context of his own calling. But there is one tension which learnership must produce. To learn of Christ is to see new things, and to think new thoughts: to receive disturbing conceptions, and to shatter accepted codes. The royal freedom of truth exposes too brutally the fetters of mere conformity.

"Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not?" (Matt.9:14). (Yet fast they would! v.15).

"Thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day." (Matt.12:2)

"Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they wash not their hands ..." (Matt.15:2)

So the shocked complaints ring out. To learn of Christ is to see beneath the surface of things, to challenge glib standards, to evaluate our environment in relation to Him, to penetrate beneath the outward form to the true humanitarianism beneath, to reach for the inner truth, and when its temporary clothing has become its bondage to discard the encumbering package. It does not make us catastrophics, if we are called to be regulars; nor does it bind the catastrophic by the swaddling bands of the regular. To both, it imparts a new vision in the calling in which they are called.

The call of discipleship, therefore, is to learn. To learn of Christ requires us to be radical in our thinking: to probe and to challenge and to question that which we might call 'the conventional wisdom', to borrow the phrase of J.K. Galbraith (The Affluent Society). It is more than that. It is a growing into the practical likeness of Christ Himself. That likeness involves meekness (if we remember that meekness is humanity, not a recessive personality; for even Moses, that tempestuous leader of men, was "very meek" (Num.12:3)). That likeness involves humility, for Jesus was lowly of heart. That likeness involves rest for our souls in the turmoil of the world.

Perhaps these thoughts will be relevant to the debate which has been proceeding in this journal. Does our discipleship bear upon our attitude to the social structure of which we are part, and how? Our answer will depend in part upon our doctrine of the nature of man himself: a matter dealt with elsewhere in this issue. To what extent may we divide man into separate departments, and set soul in opposition to body, and perhaps to spirit? The question of our attitude to society becomes particularly acute if we are 'regulars': for then our calling is among the ordinary stuff of life. We are then essentially part of the social and economic framework of society; in what manner, then, and in what places does our learnership bear upon each part of our living?

The question shows that those three tokens of discipleship already noted are not as straightforward as they may at first have appeared. As to the first, is not Jesus' word relevant to our whole

life? Can we accept any limitation upon the jurisdiction of His Word; and is any of life outside the royal freedom of truth? As to the second, is love to one another inward looking, concerned only with the community of the disciples: or can it be a true love to our fellow disciples if it does not also embrace our neighbour (in the sense of the parable of the good Samaritan)? As to the third, what is included in the 'much fruit'?

The question was raised in our last issue by Drs. Packer and Howard. Dr. Packer cast a spotlight on the cruel paradox that the affluent man often seems the more indifferent to spiritual issues. (A sociological study to ascertain whether in fact this is so might be valuable: after all, a major plaint is that the Christian faith has always been stronger among middle class and more prosperous elements of society than among working class elements. We might suspect that other factors, such as the inherent ability to think in abstract terms, affect the issue.) Accepting the assumption, however, does it invalidate, as true expressions of Christian concern, the attempts which were made to remedy the conditions which he described? If it does not, then those attempts were, after all, for the Christian, part of his discipleship. If it does, then we have no logical resting place short of the repulsive suggestion that men should be kept in such conditions in order to make them the more receptive to the Gospel.

The answer to the dilemmas of time and effort presented by Dr. Packer must surely lie within a true understanding of the koinōnia of the Church, the common participation and sharing in the one universal work of God. Within that fellowship, each has his own individual part to play, and that part may be secular as well as religious. True discipleship therefore is related directly to wide unity of the Church. This brings us to Dr. Howard's emphasis on limits to the Church's commitment. We might well ask here what precisely is meant by 'the Church' in this context. There must clearly be limits to the possible commitment of any local church, or of the Church as a worshipping community - but can there be any such limit on the Church as the unity of all believers in all their activities?

In references to the example of Jesus Himself, we must also be careful lest we build upon anachronisms, or lest we demand anachronisms before we ourselves act. We must not overlook the deliberate self-limitation of His incarnation: the truth of the kenōsis. "Greater works than these shall he do", said our Lord Himself (John 14:12). If Jesus Himself commenced no programme of

social action, there has nevertheless been many a great programme which has derived directly from the 'learning' of the things which He taught. Again and again we are brought back to this fundamental question for our discipleship. Can we divide man into these two separate elements of soul and body in such a manner as to separate so completely the two? Can we separate between personal and social morality? Can there be true personal morality without social justice? We say truly that we must change man, rather than his circumstances: but can we distinguish so clearly between them, when man is inextricably part of his circumstances, both making them and being made by them? Can this not be an excuse for avoiding the issue? If Jesus came presenting no new ethic, is not this to say that the ethic is the same as that which was already there, and which the prophets show so plainly to have been social in its outworking? (see Amos 5:11-12; 8:4-7; Mic.2:1-2; 3:1-3,9-11; 7:2-6; Hos.4:1-2; etc.).

The three occasions when the disciples laid aside mere conformism, which we have quoted, yield some interesting thoughts for the development of these enquiries. Behind each of the occasions there lies a new standard of judgment, which Jesus Himself endorsed. On the first occasion, it was the standard of absolute loyalty to Himself: indeed, of deep love toward Him (Matt.9:14-15). Here is something which the world cannot understand, where the Gospel needs to be stated in practical terms to become meaningful for the man in the world:-

> "An' I says: 'It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust, sometimes.' An' I says: 'Don't you love Jesus?' Well, I thought an'thought, an' finally I says: 'No, I don't know nobody name' Jesus. I know a bunch of stories, but I only love people. An' sometimes I love 'em fit to bust, an' I want to make 'em happy, so I been preachin' somepin I thought would make 'em happy'".
> (Steinbeck. The Grapes of Wrath)

On the second occasion, there was the standard of true humanism: but it was a humanism related to that fulfilment of humanity which is summed up in the Son of Man Himself (Matt.12:1-8 with Mk.2:27,28). On the third occasion it was the standard of discernment: the power to recognise when the outward form had become the enemy of truth, and to discard it that the truth itself might be preserved (Matt.15:1-20).

Do these three standards give us some foundation for our discipleship? Love to God, as revealed in Christ. Love to our

fellow man. Discernment, to see the true reality of things. They are trite enough, and attract lip service enough. How are we to work them out? Our callings will differ; whatever the potential cost of discipleship, at any one moment there will be disciples in circumstances which differ from the extreme of the 'catastrophic' to the settled quietness of the 'regular'. Until we recognise our essential unity transcending those differences, we cannot begin to understand the fullness of discipleship. Within it, in our own individual circumstances, there must always be the cutting edge of the Word of Christ:-

> "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

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When we Christians behave badly, or fail to behave well, we are making Christianity unbelievable to the outside world. The wartime posters told us that Careless Talk costs Lives. It is equally true that Careless Lives cost Talk.

C.S. Lewis.

There cannot be anything imagined more absurd in itself than wise, and sublime, and heavenly prayers, added to a life of vanity and folly, where neither labour nor diversions, neither time nor money are under the direction of the wisdom and heavenly tempers of our prayers.

William Law.