

What Is Discipleship?

Basics of the Faith

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How Our Children Come to Faith
What Are Election and Predestination?
What Are Spiritual Gifts?
What Is a Reformed Church?
What Is a True Calvinist?
What Is Biblical Preaching?
What Is Church Government?
What Is Discipleship?
What Is Grace?
What Is Hell?
What Is Justification by Faith Alone?
What Is Man?
What Is Perseverance of the Saints?
What Is Providence?
What Is Spiritual Warfare?
What Is the Atonement?
What Is the Christian Worldview?
What Is the Lord's Supper?
What Is True Conversion?
What Is Vocation?
What Is Worship Music?
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Why Do We Baptize Infants?

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Page design by Tobias Design

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smallman, Stephen, 1940-
What is discipleship? / Stephen Smallman.
p. cm. -- (Basics of the faith)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-1-59638-235-0 (pbk.)
1. Discipling (Christianity) I. Title.
BV4520.S527 2011
248.4--dc22

2010054591



▣ “What is Discipleship?”

I have tried to envision who would look over a church or conference book table or scan an online catalogue and choose to read this title. Two possibilities come to mind: (1) You are a person who knows you need to be more conscientious about following Jesus but aren't sure where to start, or (2) you are a church leader who is aware of the proliferation of material available on discipleship and think that an introductory booklet will help you get into this topic. Perhaps you are particularly drawn to the fact that it is part of the Basics of the Faith series. You wonder if there is a distinctly Reformed approach to the biblical challenge to go and make disciples.

I am directing this booklet primarily to those in the second group—leaders who are asking this question in terms of what is happening in your churches. I have previously written an introduction to discipleship for people with little background in the Faith, and those who want something of a new beginning (*The Walk: Steps for New and Renewed Followers of Jesus*, P&R Publishing, 2009). Those of you who are thinking about discipleship personally will want to look at *The Walk*. However, as you read the book you will quickly discover that I don't think we can grow as disciples without the church, so I hope you will find these thoughts helpful as I direct my words to leaders in your church.

The writing of *The Walk* has given me an opportunity to think more about the larger issues affecting how our churches approach discipleship. Motivational books and discipleship materials are available in abundance.¹ However, there must first be a readiness by the leaders of the church to rank disciple-making as a high priority and to build the ministry of their congregations accordingly. I believe that the theology of the Reformation helps significantly to understand how we should fulfill that mandate, and I will occasionally identify what is specifically “Reformed.” But our Reformed theology and practice should contribute to the larger church and her wrestling with discipleship, so what follows is a biblical answer to the question, what is discipleship?

THE CHALLENGE

Church members and leaders who commit to letting Scripture determine the priorities of the church (and that should be all of us) need go no further than a thoughtful consideration of Matthew 28:18–20, a passage known appropriately as “The Great Commission.”

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The studies of this passage I have checked point out that grammatically there is only one command—to make disciples. The other three key words—*go*, *baptizing*, and *teaching*—

explain what is involved in the mandate to make disciples. *Make disciples* is the verb form of the word *disciple*. Literally the command is “disciple all the nations,” but the common translation, “make disciples,” calls attention to the process and is an accurate translation. The KJV translated the word *teach*, which has led to some misunderstandings about the exact nature of Jesus’ commission. Discipleship is more than teaching; it has the sense of following the teacher both as a learner and as an adherent.

Go, or going, reinforces that fact that this must be our essential task as Christians. If we are to be obedient to the commission of our risen Lord we must be *intentional* about making disciples. There are certainly missionary implications, but the mandate itself doesn’t require that we physically go anywhere. The phrase *all nations* means all people (*ethne*, from which we get “ethnic”), not necessarily nations as we use the word today.

The next two key words, *baptizing* and *teaching*, are the two basic phases of making disciples. Therefore, to make disciples we first help people come to the point of baptism, which means publicly confessing Christ and becoming part of his church. This phase of making disciples is traditionally thought of as *evangelism*. Then we guide the new believer in a path of following Jesus in obedience, which has traditionally been called *discipleship*. Clearly, a *continuum* of evangelism and discipleship is the essence of “making disciples” and must be fundamental if we are to understand and implement the Great Commission.

When we consider that Jesus began the Great Commission with a statement of his authority and ended it with an absolute promise of his ongoing presence as this great work is undertaken, we can properly conclude that making disciples of the nations is a work that Jesus himself is doing through his church. Can there be any question then that this is Jesus’ first priority for the work of his church?