

The Centrality of Christ in Discipleship

By Jay Wegter

How do converts become true disciples of Christ? What has to happen in order for a new believer; a babe in Christ to become a disciple? We know that a true disciple denies himself; he takes up his cross daily; he follows the Lamb; he loves the brethren; he puts sin to death; he walks by means of the Spirit; he is zealous for good works; and he serves God.

True disciples grow into disciples as the result of systematic encouragement and teaching by mature brethren. It says in Acts 14:21-22, “Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.”

Disciple-making is the aim or goal of the Great Commission. The Body of Christ is to commit itself to the task of making disciples. But we have many shallow Christians today; folks who follow Christ in a tentative, stuttering and sputtering manner—who are not equipped to reproduce their faith in others.

How we need to return to the Word and uncover again the secret behind Paul’s optimism and effectiveness as a disciple-maker. When we pour over Paul’s New Testament epistles we find the Apostle Paul’s heart throbbing and beating with a disciple-making passion. For Paul, pastor and missionary, disciple-making is his controlling mandate, his sacred trust and deputation—the central work that commands his full attention and energies.

Colossians 1:28-29 encapsulates the lengthy process of disciple-making in just two verses. The near context of these verses is *Christ in you* (a reference to the Christian’s union with Christ – 1:27). Because the believer is *in Christ*; and Christ is *in him*—discipleship and Christian maturity are real and possible.

It is union with Christ that guarantees ultimate conformity to Christ. But that conformity is to begin now; we are not just to wait until glory. In Christ and His promises we have everything we need in relation to life and godliness—our Savior is a fountain of life (2 Pet 1:3-4). This full sufficiency in Christ is a reality which the believer needs to explore and reckon. To be united to Christ is to have as one’s possession all the benefits of Christ’s glorious Person at work in one’s Christian walk. This means that by reason of union with Christ, the believer is in possession of the benefits of His life; His death; His resurrection; His heavenly advocacy; and His endless Priesthood.

This was Paul’s confidence as a disciple-maker. Those eternally united with Christ experience real changes in their being—changes that produce repentance and transformation of character. Union with Christ (or Christ in you) is our *hope of glory* (Col 1:27).

Christ’s vicarious death in our place makes us new creatures (2 Cor 5:17). So radical and monumental was that great exchange—Christ’s life for ours—His righteousness for our sin—that the moment of a sinner is saved; it marks the beginning of conformity to Christ. *Christ in you* means you are being fitted for eternity.

The transforming power of Christ in you was Paul’s hope; it drove his optimism in both evangelism and discipleship. But Paul knew that all his efforts at disciple-making did not ultimately rest upon the forcefulness of his exhortations to self-denial; to devotion; and to repentance. Paul built solely on the foundation of Christ. As we will see in a moment, self-denial is a response to who Christ is—to discovering Him as Lord of All—and what He has done—it is life in Him—the experience of His fullness.

I. The Cost of Discipleship

A true disciple of Jesus Christ is a person who does not live by his natural desires—but instead lives by the loving rule of Christ, his Head. A true disciple is conformed to the will and likeness of his Head.

When Christ set forth the cost of discipleship—He usually did so when talking about His own impending death. It says in John 12:23-26, “And Jesus answered them saying, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say unto you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall my servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.’”

Christ joins His own ordeal (the cross of Calvary) to the ordeal the true disciple will undergo in a life of self-renunciation. The Father gave Christ a ‘Bride’—the elect of every age—a people without number from every tribe, tongue, and nation. But Christ must die for His Bride in order to resurrect His Bride who lies in the cold tomb of her spiritual deadness and depravity.

This is such a thrilling truth. The context of true discipleship is Christ’s own death for us. It was Christ’s cross-work on our behalf that brought forth the infinite fruit of reconciliation; both spiritual reconciliation (salvation), and cosmic reconciliation (the renewal of a decaying creation—Col 1:19-20).

We have a “death” to undergo as well. Self-denial is the cost of true discipleship and it is also the cost of fruitfulness. Jesus gives an illustration from nature in John 12:23-26. A shiny wheat kernel has a tough resilient seed coat. It repels dust and scuffing and moisture.

But in order for that wheat grain to reproduce it must go down into the darkness of the soil—be permeated with water until the seed coat bursts. If you pulled a seed from the ground in that state it would look dead—even rotten—the shiny golden brown appearance is gone (Jn 12:24).

But this death-like state is the prerequisite to germination. The kernel swells and the beginnings of leaves sprout and push their way above the soil line into the sun. When the plant comes to maturity; what was once a single seed has multiplied; it is now a series of wheat heads filled with ripe grain.

What a picture this is of true discipleship. The individual who follows Christ will have to die to self in order to bear fruit. Jesus warned against *abiding alone*—He warned against *loving one’s life in this world* (Jn 12:25).

The Lord Jesus made stringent demands on those who would be His disciples. In today’s culture of consumerism and easy-believism—it is all-too common to think that a person can *add Christ to his life* and then retain the self life. Such is not the case according to our text.

In many Christian circles today, folks are promised that Christianity will save them from hell and guarantee them a place in heaven. The assumption is that once eternal life is secured, the individual has every right to enjoy the best that this life has to offer—selfism reigns as a result of this teaching.

Countless souls are sadly mistaken about the requirements of discipleship; but Christ removes all middle ground. He defines what a commitment to Him actually looks like. Therefore to preach on discipleship passages tends to produce shock among many listeners. For multitudes of professing Christians have the utmost difficulty reconciling the passages on discipleship with their own ideas on divine grace and what Christianity should be and what Christianity should afford them.

They reason, “How can Christianity be a free gift if following Christ requires me to die to self and lose my life for His sake and the sake of the gospel?” But, the words of Christ are very clear. There is hardly any room for misunderstanding if those words are accepted at face value. Here are the terms of discipleship laid down by the Savior of the world:

A. A supreme love for Jesus Christ.

“If any one comes to Me, and does not hate his father and mother and wife, and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26). This grates on our 21st C. ears. Does Christ really command supreme love to Him without any rivals? Won’t divine grace allow something less than this from those who profess to be saved?

Actually the most difficult clause in this passage is the expression, “Yes, [hate] even his own life.” Self-love is one of the most stubborn hindrances to discipleship. Not until we are willing to lay down our lives are we in the place where He wants us to be.

When preaching the necessity of a disciple's love to Christ, it is essential to stress that our love to Him is *reflexive*. In other words, as the Apostle John says, "We love, because He first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). Our love to Christ is a response to seeing Him as He really is—to seeing who God is towards us in Christ—to tasting His pardoning and adopting love.

Christ is God's infinite treasure given freely to sinners who believe and repent. But the key mark or evidence of believing and repenting is not only turning from sin to God; but also an apprehension of Christ as one's greatest treasure. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matt 13:45-46). This is the fulcrum or balance point of the entire issue. If the sinner sees Christ as precious beyond measure; then in Christ he or she will find their greatest satisfaction—no sacrifice will be considered too great to have Him.

Paul saw this treasure principle as an "*either or prospect*." We must release our hold on all the things that are in the world in order to gain Christ. "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I might gain Christ" (Phil 3:8). Now, the second requirement for true discipleship is a denial of self:

B. A denial of self.

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself. . ." (Matt 16:24). Denial of self is not the same as denying oneself certain activities or pleasures such as foods, drink, pastimes, or possessions. Self denial means complete submission to the lordship of Christ over all of life. It is the affirmation that self has no rights at all—Christ has an absolute right to rule my life.

In self-denial, self abdicates the throne. Paul summarizes this principle in 2 Corinthians 5:9, 14-15. "Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him." "For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf." Thus denial of self is the end of a self-directed life. Self denial results in *universal obedience* to the lordship of Christ—that means obedience to Christ in all areas of our lives. It is living without 'compartments' in one's life. It is living as Christ's possession. Next is a willingness to take up His cross:

C. A deliberate choosing of the cross.

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross. . ." (Matt 16:24). No doubt you have heard some suffering saint utter, "My gout is my cross; or my wayward spouse is my cross." But this is not entirely what Jesus is referring to. The cross taken up by a disciple is not some physical infirmity or mental anguish (although our sufferings in this life are a part of our journey as the Lord's child). The cross we take up and bear daily is a path that is *deliberately chosen*.

It is a path of *radical identification* with Christ which will involve a degree of dishonor and reproach from the world (Heb 13:12-17). Jesus told His followers to expect to be misunderstood and even hated for Christ's sake (Jn 15:18-16:2).

To deliberately choose the cross is to set out on the *narrow way* spoken of by Christ (Matt 7:13-14). The narrow way is the way of transformation and renewal by the Word and the Spirit (Rom 12:1-2). Those who do not choose the narrow way simply allow themselves to *be conformed to this world* and its ways and values. How different is the walk of the true disciple—he is always watching his own steps and making frequent 'course corrections' to assure that he daily choosing the narrow way; the way of the cross. The fourth term required for true discipleship involves a life direction of following Christ:

D. A life spent in following Christ.

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matt 16:24). Christ is our example of obedience. His life was totally conformed to the will of His Father. Christ’s life was lived in the power of the Spirit. It was a life of unselfish service—of zeal, of expenditure, of self-control, of meekness, of kindness, faithfulness, and devotion (Gal 5:22-23). The life of His disciple must manifest the fruit of Christ-likeness (Jn 15:8; 1 Pet 2:21-25).

Those who follow Christ *gather with Him* (Luke 11:23)—they are *fishers of men* (Matt 4:19). They take their “marching orders” from Christ—they have made Christ’s cause (the Father’s glory) their cause. They are *zealous for good works* (Titus 2:14). Their boldness for kingdom values is a result of following Christ. “Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). Next is a fervent love for the brethren:

E. A fervent love for all who belong to Christ.

“By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). This is the love that desires the very highest for a person in light of eternity. It is a love able to esteem others as better than oneself. It is a love which covers a multitude of sins. It is a love that suffers long and is kind (1 Cor 13:4-7). This is a *supernatural love* which can only come from the filling of the Spirit.

It is a love that finds great joy in sacrificing for the sake of the kingdom. In fact one pastor put it this way: the world’s definition of happiness is self acquiring what it desires; but the Christian’s definition of joy is as follows: *When my life intersects with the lives of my brethren at the points of sacrificial love for the kingdom of God—it is inestimable joy.*

John Piper has noted well that the experience of Christ’s love *fits us to love the brethren supernaturally*. “Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart” (1 Pet 1:22).

The reception of God’s love produces an irresistible desire to pass the Father’s love on to others. In fact, loving the brethren is the supreme test of love to God (1 Jn 3:14-24). Says William McDonald, “Without this love, discipleship would be a cold, legalistic asceticism.” But all our instruction, including our training of disciples, is to dove-tail into the action of love. “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Tim 1:5). The sixth mark of true discipleship is diligent attention to the Word of God:

F. An unswerving continuance in His Word.

“If you *continue* in My Word then you are My disciples indeed” (Jn 8:31). Genuine discipleship demonstrates a *track record* of faithfulness. It is not a flash in the pan moment of blazing glory—it is as one pastor has said, *long obedience in the same direction*.

Jesus is emphasizing *continuance*. Being a disciple requires endurance, stamina, holding fast, determination. Countless individuals start well only to fall away through neglect (Heb 2:1-3). In the parable of the soils, the good soil is identified by the fact that the *good seed* (the Word of God) dominates exceptionally—bringing the plant to maturity so that there is a harvest! This is God’s Word controlling the life; revolutionizing everything in one’s life—dictating our values on pleasures, cares, possessions, and life direction.

Disciples persevere by *looking unto Jesus* as a habit of life (Heb 12:1-2). They stir themselves to action by feeding their faith on the promises of God’s Word. “And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Heb 6:12-13). Thus we see that true disciples manifest a devotion to the Word that fits them and furnishes them for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17). Next is a loyalty to Christ which is willing to forsake all for Him:

G. A forsaking of all to follow Him.

“So therefore, no one of you can be my disciple who does not give up all his own possessions” (Luke 14:33). This is perhaps the most unpopular of all of Christ’s terms of discipleship. Christ is laying out a specific requirement in regards to the world’s goods. In effect, He is issuing a command not to stock pile this world’s goods. Maintain material possessions that are absolutely essential and that could be used for the spread of the gospel. A true disciple is controlled by a passion to advance the cause of Christ. The genuine disciple invests everything above his current needs in the work of the Lord—and then leaves the future with God.

In seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, the true disciple believes that he will never lack food and clothing. Therefore he cannot hold onto surplus funds and resources when he knows that souls are perishing for want of the gospel. In *giving up all his own possessions*, he offers what he cannot keep anyway, and what he has ceased to love. He plows the cream of his time, talent, affections, and resources into the cause of Christ.

H. Theses seven terms of discipleship are clear and unequivocal.

When we examine our lives in light of these seven requirements—is it not easy to say, “Lord I am an unprofitable servant?” Confessing our past failure, let us courageously face up to the claims of Christ upon us and seek from now on to be true disciples of our Glorious Lord.

How we need to recline upon the mercy and grace of Christ. For our Savior’s grace has brought us into a relationship of sonship, status, favor, and acceptance with God. The grace of Christ holds us up and sustains us—He is our life (Col 3:1-4).

Our steady progress toward maturity cannot be reduced to the mastery of a moral code. Though moral excellence is required of God’s people (2 Pet 1:5). No small part of our conformity to Christ is a result of beholding the glory of Christ. “But we all with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18).

Listen to the Apostle Paul as he speaks about the knowledge of Christ which is central to maturity: “That their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:2-3)). Paul’s passion as a disciple was to *know Christ*—ours must flow from the same motive (Phil 3:10). The saint who is being made like his Savior is steadily growing in his heart-knowledge of Christ.

II. The Cross of Discipleship

Paul’s disciple-making always begins with *we proclaim Him!* The admonishing and the teaching follow. It is the proclamation of Christ in His fullness that is the foundation for all ethical action and devotion to the Lord (Col 1:28-29).

Paul knew that his listeners must also build upon Christ (1 Cor 3:11). All of their own striving and repenting must rest upon *Christ and Him crucified*. The centrality of Christ must always be our proclamation in discipleship or our efforts will be met with disappointment.

We proclaim Him and His cross-work—for only in the Christ-centered—cross-centered life do we find the divine power and love necessary to be a disciple and to make a disciple. Only in His glorious Person and work upon Calvary are found the divinely powerful resources necessary to multiply disciples.

When Paul was among the Corinthians, his message focused upon the heart of the gospel—the truth with which God associates His power (Rom 1:16-17). “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

Paul knew that only the cross produces real transformation—the radical changes that can only be adequately described as an entirely new creation. In Christ’s atoning work there is a death applied to

us; a resurrection performed upon us that implants a new life principle; there is a spiritual circumcision in which the dominance of the flesh is cut, severed, and rolled away (Col 2:11-12).

Christ's death and resurrection affects these changes in the believing sinner. Therefore, our approach to discipleship must have the centrality of Christ at its center. For it is in the hearing and believing of this sweet message of the God-man standing in your room and stead that the poor sinner receives the power and the motives for discipleship. That means that when we proclaim Christ, we do so with the goal in view of making disciples and bringing them to maturity.

For the Word of the Cross is a message filled with divine power. When the converted sinner hears what Christ has done to slay our old man and how we have been resurrected to an entirely new form of existence—it opens his understanding to spiritual realities that are life-changing. He discovers the source of power for personal holiness—*Christ in you*. This has immense consequences and crucial application for our own methodology in making disciples. We must follow the Pauline order—*We Proclaim Him*—then *we Admonish and Teach*.

All of our instruction, exhortation, pleading, and admonishment must be anchored in Christ and His cross, because only Christ and His cross can make a true disciple—you cannot by your own efforts. And here is why—because the devotion, the diligence, and the sacrifices made by a true disciple constitute a series of *faith responses* to Christ, the Lord of Glory. The life of obedience lived out by a true disciple takes place because he has ever clearer views of his Savior. Faith-based obedience is never separated from its object; the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, as pastors and disciple-makers, *we proclaim Him*—for in Christ there is limitless transforming power.

Now at different times in church history these precious truths of Christ's centrality in discipleship have been forgotten. The *pietistic error* has dominated at times. In that error the present power of Christ's atoning work has been obscured and hidden from view; and all the emphasis has been placed upon the individual's pursuit of personal piety. Paul faced this error when he countered the ascetic tendencies among the believers in Colossae.

The pietistic, or holiness movements, have had much to commend; but they have been characterized by foggy view of the comprehensiveness of the Savior's work in our nature. And they have been characterized by weak views of the believer's union with Christ.

Naturally a struggling Christian who is for the most part blind to the glories of his Savior's work will fall back on self in an attempt to perfect the flesh. Dear brothers, *practice* without Christ-centered *doctrine* tends to produce *legalism*—this resembles the Galatians of Paul's day who made an attempt to perfect the flesh apart from the cross.

Another error related to discipleship is *quietism*—"only rest and believe" we are told—God will do the rest—He will do it all. In this error, there is a disproportionate emphasis placed upon the believer's position in Christ without the attending truths of diligence; self-denial; mortification of sin; and zeal for good works.

In the *quietistic error* we see that doctrine without practice leads to *carnal false security* and *antinomianism* (or a disinterest in our Lord's commandments). The *quietism* error is an anemic, passive form Christianity which does not overcome the world; nor does it make true disciples. Both of these errors (*pietism and quietism*) prove to be a departure from the Pauline model of disciple-making.

Paul gives us our pattern—for he joins the power of God in the cross with the believer's response of diligence and consecration. The power of the message of the cross believed produces consecration and devotion to Christ which we will see shortly in our text. Our disciple-making must be characterized by both *proclamation* and *practice*; by *exhibiting* the supremacy of our Savior and by *exhorting* believers to follow Him without limits or reservations.

Today many evangelical pastors have strayed from the Pauline formula of disciple-making. As they seek to shepherd from the pulpit, they have sincerely hoped that exhortation to holy living would gain the result of spiritual victory in the lives of their listeners.

But what they have failed to consider is that consecration to greater obedience is a function of looking unto Jesus and beholding Him (Heb 12:1-3). They are *exhorting to holiness* without *exhibiting Christ* who is the source of holiness.

Bare principles and moral injunction will not produce lasting change in the listener. In the final analysis our most impassioned pleas for our listeners to be good; to try harder; to stop sinning—must be joined to the display of Christ—or the flesh will conclude that in itself are the resources necessary to crucify the flesh.

This author has found that a substantial portion of believers are stuck in cycles of lukewarm-ness; defeat, uncertainty, doubt, fear, guilt. When we call them to greater devotion and consecration and holiness—we must also exhibit Christ their Sanctifier—who is the Author and Finisher of their salvation (Heb 12:2).

If we do not keep exhibiting Christ as Source Person, our poor listeners are apt to conclude that we have shouldered them with a heavy yoke—for where are they to find the strength; the hope; the motivation; the enablement and capacity to measure up? How will they break out of their cycles of mediocrity and compromise and move squarely into victory?

Brethren, we must preach to our hearers what we preach to ourselves—namely that Christ is the Divine Architect of the new man. The cross of Christ has redeemed and purchased us making us God's possessions for His holy and loving purposes. Christ's all-sufficient work as Mediator has poured us into a life mould (defined by the gospel)—totally shaping us to live for God's glory (Col 3:10-11).

On this side of the cross, true discipleship is living the new life Christ has wrought for us. We do not live a life of self-denial so that Christ will accept us—no; God has accepted the believer *in the Beloved*. Discipleship with its life-style of self-denial is living the life Christ has wrought for us—it is living the life that Christ has imparted to us.

Our Savior lives through us (Gal 2:20). Paul's overflowing joy as a disciple of Christ emanated from his understanding that he was living an *exchanged life*. Paul could say with complete confidence that Christ was living His life through Paul.

The old Paul had been *crucified with Christ*. The new Paul was nothing less than a daily cognizance of the reality that *Christ lives in me*. Paul was animated by this truth—it permeated his understanding—*Christ is expressing His personality through the vehicle of my fleshly body* (Gal 2:20). Paul was so conversant with his divine resources in Christ that he could actually say of himself, "It is no longer I who live!"

As saints who are animated by The Great Commission, let us mark this down in our own disciplining—exhortation without this *Word of Christ and Him crucified* can produce exasperation. I remember the formula in this way: *exhortation without enablement equals exasperation*. ***When we exhort—we must never fail to imbue our listeners with their infinite resources in Christ.***

These spiritual realities of identification with Christ stretch our understanding to the limit. Just to think that in the mind of God, the elect were so fully identified with Christ their Head as to gain His life. So intimate was this identification that in Christ's crucifixion, our fallen human natures were judged *so that we should no longer be slaves of sin* (Rom 6:6). God has saved us by identifying us with His Beloved Son; now we are to live to live out this radical identification with Him.

This is Paul's victory cry—*those who have died are freed from sin—sin is no longer master over them*. Our Adamic nature with its original sin—that bottomless vile vent of rebellion and pollution was once and for all judged in the body of Christ in His death.

The Apostle does not relegate this doctrine of co-crucifixion with Christ to the realm of theory. He immediately plows it into practical use. The believer is to *reckon, count, consider himself dead to sin and alive to God*. He is to present the members of his body to God as instruments of righteousness (Rom 6:11-13).

How blessed this is to know that our fruitfulness as disciple-makers is tied to the Word of the Cross. For the message of *Christ and Him crucified* comes with assurances that the message of the gospel is God's power to all who believe.

The proclamation of Christ's indestructible life and His intercession for us in His passion and His glory cannot fail to produce a life of true discipleship in the elect. Believers desperately need that assurance.

In the Corinthian correspondence, Paul was dealing with a local church that was not manifesting true discipleship. The problem in Corinth was that the believers there were still too attracted to the human strength and wisdom. In their spiritual immaturity and pride, they flirted with an earthly value system that was hostile to the cross of Christ. False apostles from Jerusalem found the Corinthians all too ready to have their ears tickled by this fleshly value system of human honor and self-seeking.

By contrast, Paul stressed that true the disciples of Christ are radically identified with Christ. They take their marching orders from the Lord; they operate by means of an eternal value system. The strong meat of the cross-centered life is their spiritual diet.

Paul spends much of the second epistle vindicating the genuineness of his apostleship. He does so by both exposing the fleshly value system of the false apostles AND by revealing his own motivations for ministry. When Paul opens his heart, we see that he abides at the base of the cross.

Paul made it known that his motivations for ministry were the polar opposite of the false apostles who preached earthly prosperity. Paul's radical identification with Christ meant that "[He] was always carrying about in his body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus might be manifest in him" (2 Cor 4:10).

The Corinthians were in danger of being deceived by the false apostles. These false teachers from Jerusalem had motives tied to pride, vain-glory, boasting, human wisdom, and the approval of men. The world has always been transfixed by human strength, human honor, and human resources. Christ said, "That which is esteemed by men is detestable in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). How different was Paul. He only was seeking to prove to the consciences of the Corinthians that Christ was in him (2 Cor 13:3), and that all of his motives in ministry issued from the Person and work of Christ.

Paul's point is that only Christ's cross can produce the mindset of a true disciple of Christ. We see this in 2 Corinthians chapter five—here the Apostle expounds his motives for serving God, and he expounds the source of those motives.

Paul's motive for service was the controlling love of Christ. This motive issues forth in an action—the believer no longer lives for himself—he lives the life of a true disciple. "For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf" (2 Cor 5:14-15).

Paul says that he is constrained or controlled by Christ's love—he is so affected by a sense of incarnate love as to be controlled by it. He makes the will of Christ the rule of obedience. The true Christian is controlled by a sense of divine love so as to consecrate his life to Christ. The true believer is a disciple of Christ—his life is characterized by offering, presenting, and giving his life back to Christ as a life direction. By contrast, the one who lives supremely for family, science, world, mankind, or whatever else is not a Christian.

Christ died and rose on our behalf; that is, He died in our stead (2 Cor 5:15). The theology of this verse is more profound than merely the *response of love to love*. The cross has an inner consequence only understood in terms of substitution. He died for me as ***Substitute***. He met the demands of justice for me (which is the basis and reality of my justification). I died with Him (co-crucifixion is the basis for the whole possibility of my discipleship and sanctification).

The power of Christ's cross is life-transforming. The sacrificial work of Christ is not merely an example of ultimate obedience for the disciple of Christ to emulate. The cross of Christ exerts the power to *make new creatures* who are living a different or new life.

This is a profound truth in relation to discipleship because the cross of Christ produces actual changes in the sinner—changes which make the new believer willing to pay the cost of true discipleship! Therefore we must fix in our minds that the cross provides each of the following three necessities for true discipleship. The cross provides the ***motivation*** to live as a disciple (we are controlled by the love of Christ); the cross provides the ***obligation*** to live as a disciple (we are to no longer live for ourselves); the cross provides the ***enablement*** to live as a disciple (we have *died with Christ*).

The nature of the atonement is learned from its effect. One effect is “therefore, all were dead” (literal Greek). His death secured their death. Its design and effect limits (or qualifies) the use of the word “all” in the preceding clause. Thus, “Christ died for all who died when He died” (Hodge, Mac Arthur, et al). Christ’s people are so united with Him that His death is their death. This same argument is found in Romans 6:1-14 and in Galatians 2:20.

Dying with Christ involves death to sin and self and it involves the obligation to die to sin and self (Rom 8:12-13). All who died with Christ receive the benefits of his substitutionary death. The recipients of Christ’s atonement partake of that new life of which Christ’s resurrection is the pledge and pattern—this is the specific character of the atonement; it produces a new life in all of those for whom it was intended (Rom 6:5-8).

This is how Paul defends his conduct before the Corinthians. Christ’s love claims him in such a way that in relation to others, he can no longer exist for himself (in contrast, his opponents boast to the Corinthians that they are religious, spiritual, and something in themselves).

Paul wanted his readers to know that his old self-centered life was gone and now by union with Christ he possesses righteous, resurrection life. Paul’s selfless disinterested motives are a result of the cross. God’s design in the atonement was to ***found*** the relationship with the sinner. Divine love proceeds from Christ and that love streams down to the elect producing conformity to their divine Head (Rom 8:28-29).

“Having concluded this” or “We thus judge” (2 Cor 5:14). This clause assigns the reason why Christ’s love exerts constraining power. Christ’s death not only placed the obligation for devotion, it ***secured that devotion!! They died in Him—they died when He died.*** “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24).

Faith in His having died for us is the source and principle of the Christian life. Paul’s motive—the constraining love of Christ—is followed by another action—as a new creature in Christ; he no longer judges according to the flesh (2 Cor 5:16-17).

To ***judge after the flesh*** means judging by the external, or outward side of life. Paul is saying that since his conversion, he no longer estimates any man by the world’s standard of judgment. Paul exposes the error of his opponents with a powerful argument: his opponents used the same criterion of evaluation on Paul that the unbelieving Jews did on Christ! Christ’s weakness (as the suffering Servant and Savior) was a stumbling block to the unbelieving Jews.

Now that the cross was the center of Paul’s existence (*through the cross Paul had obtained a new knowledge of Christ and a new set of values, and a new orientation—“old things have passed away”*). Paul had known Christ “*according to the flesh.*” By fleshly judgment, Saul of Tarsus viewed Jesus as a crucified messianic pretender, cursed of God. When he saw Christ *according to the flesh*, he viewed Him as unbelieving Israel did, *despised, forsaken, without esteem, smitten of God* (Is 53:3-4).

Paul’s new values include his theology of the cross—to know the power of Christ’s resurrection, we share in His sufferings (we are like Him in His death) (Phil 3:7-14). Paul now recognizes that Christ’s suffering was vicarious—accomplished in the room and stead of Christ’s people. On earth, Christ’s true identity as Lord of Glory was hidden behind weakened mortal flesh – But Paul now knows Christ as both suffering Messiah and exalted Lord of Heaven.

Union with Christ has ***transformed*** Paul—as a new creation, he has a different standard of judgment—old opinions, views, plans, desires, principles, affections have “*passed away.*” Now he has new views of truth, new apprehensions of his destiny and purpose—this is an essential element of true

discipleship. The true believer judges with a different standard of judgment because he now has *the mind of Christ* (1 Cor 2:16).

The Spirit's work in regeneration is a "first fruits" creative work that makes each believer a representative of a coming new world order! The transformation has affected a kingdom transfer *from darkness to light* (Col 1:13). Here we are, radically identified with the cross, yet citizens of the new heavens and the new earth (Phil 3:20-21). The recreated man in Christ is part of the new cosmos coming; the theme is *replacement*—new world, new body, new values.

With this perception comes a new standard of judging—the pretensions of the world sink into insignificance. A new creation by union with Christ is the ground of all our hope. So, a true disciple, like Paul, is animated by Christ's love and a true disciple does all his evaluating by means of kingdom values. Friends of the cross have an eternal value system. No man who sets his mind on earthly things can be said to be a *friend of the cross* (Phil 3:18-19).

III. The Cost of Disciple-making

A. Paul's disciple-making was by proclamation and by admonition (Col 1:28-29).

"And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom that we may present every man complete in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me."

According to Colossians 1:28-29, Paul's message is not a system, but the glorious Person of Christ – "we" refers to Paul's colleagues and Epaphras. Christ fulfills the deepest longing and hope of mankind. Christ is the source of new life in His people. "***We proclaim***" is the message of the resurrection (Acts 4:2); of forgiveness of sins (Acts 13:38); of Christ (Phil 1:17-18); of His death (1 Cor 11:26); of the mystery (1 Cor 2:1).

The Apostle teaches and admonishes. These are the two attendant circumstances or tones of Paul's verbal ministry (and ours as well). To ***admonish*** is to address especially the will and the emotions. It includes the idea of warning. To admonish involves *a putting in mind, it is used of correction and training in righteousness, whether encouragement, reproof, or warning – admonish contains instruction that addresses things that are wrong and call for warning and change – whereas teaching has to do primarily with the impartation of positive truth* (Vines Theol. Dict. pp. 22-23)

The Greek word for admonish (*nouthesia, noutheteo*) is where we get our word for nouthetic counseling. Growing believers are to be adept at admonishment (Rom 15:14). This is a superb reminder that true discipleship contains the element of counseling and admonishment.

When we admonish, we bring to the attention of believers where repentance is needed—correct a wise man, and he will love you (Prov 9:8). "Remind them," and "remember" are frequent terms in the Word of God. Act upon what you have been taught so as to love the truth and be conformed to it.

The goal of Christ-centered teaching is to present every man complete in Christ (Col 1:28)..

Paul will not rest from this goal. This is the heart of everyone who seeks to shepherd God's lambs. It is the heart of a disciple-maker. We labor so that each convert moves to maturity that he may be perfect, mature, complete, irrepachable and blameless at the coming of Christ.

"Perfect" means to have one's heart wholly devoted to God so as to walk blamelessly before Him in His ways and His will (Rom 12:1-2). It is to be assured in all the will of God (Col 4:12). The true pastor/shepherd is not satisfied with anything less than the full maturity of every believer (1 Thess 5:23; 3:13).

B. The goal is to present all complete in Christ at the return of Christ. Such maturity in Christ is possible because of union with Christ.

Union with Him is the guarantee of conformity to Him. (See Romans chapter six).

According to Colossians 1:28-29; Paul gave himself uncompromisingly to this task. In view of full perfection in Christ on the last day, Paul extends all energies in the exercise of his ministry.

Conversion of individuals is only the beginning of growth. The “day of Christ” will test the quality of everyman’s work (1 Cor 3:10-15).

“***I labor***” – Paul exerts himself to the point of weariness. The Greek word for work here speaks of exhaustion from physical labor. In his pastoral efforts, Paul toiled day and night in the cause of the Gospel (1 Thess 2:9; 1 Cor 4:12).

“***Striving***” – The Greek (*agonizomai*) word is where we get our word agonize. In the Greek culture, the word was used of striving and struggle in an athletic contest in an arena. Though the context is different in this passage, the word still retains its original color of an athlete straining as he exerts.

“***According to God’s power***” – the struggle Paul, and we, are engaged in is according to the work of God’s power. The knowledge of God’s almighty assistance will shape the way we strive and think about our work of ministry. We have a supernatural work to do—it is beyond our natural powers. Supernatural power was at work in Paul and in every true believer.

God’s power is at work in His laborers – it is power and strength from above (Eph 1:19; 3:7; 16; 20; 2 Cor 3:5). We struggle, but according to God’s working. God is invisibly, but powerfully at work where Paul toils laboriously and energetically—it is also true of us (1 Cor 15:10; Phil 4:13). Faith in Christ is our link with the source of strength that enables us to rise above natural limitations. Let us not be tempted to constantly measure the size of our task against the weakness of our limitations. God desires through us to impart grace and glory to the recipients of our gospel proclamation.

God actually refers to us as His “co-laborers” or “fellow workers” (1 Cor 3:9). Faith puts our eyes back on Christ instead of on our limitations and the smallness of our harvest. Endurance is needed if we are to reap (1 Cor 15:58 and Gal 6:9).

Even the smallest earthly business venture requires planning, labor, and endurance, how much more so the work of God which lasts to eternity? There is a cost to disciple-making; but it is miniscule compared to the glory to come and the harvest that will surely follow our labors.

C. In our own efforts at disciple-making we are to follow Paul’s example of instruction, exhortation, and nurture (1 Thess 2:10-12).

Great care is needed when handling the biblical subjects of the law and sin. If growth is to be equated with more life, freedom, relationship, and righteousness, then we must not communicate that growth is merely mastering a code (God’s law). Our emphasis should not be upon keeping the creed or the law, but upon ***living the life in the Son***. It is so easy to pile on burdens and to deaden with duty. Christ said that His yoke was easy and His burden was light (Matt 11:30). The child of God by definition is not under sin and law as a dominating, controlling, condemning force. He has passed from death to life—he is free from the controlling principle of sin and death.

In order to preach for growth in the inner man (a necessary component of discipleship), we must deal with our listeners in their being alive! We must not make the Christian life an oppressive harness. Avoid generating a sense of condemnation. We must steer clear of forever talking about duty, focusing on failure, intensifying a sense of grievous disobedience, and deepening a sense of condemnation. This doesn’t promote growth (Hywell Jones, “Preaching for Conversion” sermon, Banner of Truth Conference, 1993).

If we hammer duty too much it can be a symptom of imbalance in our own ministry. Are we trying to make up for our lack of preaching to unbelievers? Are we seeking to assuage our sense of evangelistic failure by projecting our own sense of inadequacy on believers and imparting our sense of failure to them?

Great transparency before the throne of God is needed in the life and ministry of the preacher. Are we piling up precepts on our people? We must guard against “be good” sermons that leave the listener with the impression, “You have so many commissions to fulfill, so many duties to accomplish, will you ever catch up or measure up?.” To preach in this manner is to make them far from grace—it is to place them back under law. It builds a wall to separate them from the fullness of Christ (Hywel Jones).

Our entire eligibility for God's favor is Christ; we have the Savior's blessed availability—all by gracious donation. We must avoid grieving the hearts of the righteous. Sanctification is relational; it is living the life of *toward-ness* to God in Christ as His beloved possession, set apart for Him.

When promoting growth in the disciple, we are to press down the “die of truth” on the understanding and the affections. There are particular truths that promote growth. Make much of the love of Christ. The truth concerning His love is a *constraining truth* that promotes likeness to Him and conformity to His commands (as we saw in the previous section, *The Cross of Discipleship*). Our obedience is achievable by virtue of His energy. When we deepen these “indentations” by means of the die of truth, growth will result.

How easy it is to lose sight of the Lord Jesus Christ. Other things become central and He is marginalized in the process. ***Beloved, the Church thrives only when Christ has preeminence in all things.*** Christian people are right and correct when they hunger to hear how perfectly suited Christ is for their every need (Heb 7:26, 27). Our preaching must hold Him before Christian people. Set Him before them as their “Source Person” and it will cause them to hunger for Him; feed upon Him; and yearn to be like Him.

Our ***strength and energy*** for obedience is the Person of Christ. He is to be preeminent and central in all of ministry. He is to have preeminence in everything. Don't talk more about God than about Christ (1 Cor 2:1-3).

The motivation for growth is the gospel, not the Law—Christ is the theme of the gospel. Use the gospel to keep your people aware of what they owe, who they are, what they were, and where they are headed. The gospel is the Christian's identity, map, and compass” so to speak. The gospel tells him what he was; who he is now; and what he will become. It tells him where he has come from; why he has life; where he is now; and where he is headed. The gospel provides a constant *corrective* to wrong thinking in any of these areas.

D. The precepts and laws of God must be filtered through Christ and Him crucified.

Are we consciously seeking to bring our listeners to delight—so that in their affections they want to receive Christ's love and law in their hearts? Our tendency as ministers is to make biblical commands stand alone from Christ's finished work and present power.

But, it is the experimental knowledge of Christ's love that gives us the disposition to love one another, and to bear one another's burdens. His love gives us the disposition to please. His precepts give us the specifics of how to please God; He directs our love by His precepts. We need to view our living the Christian life in this way instead of merely adherence to a code.

We must understand that our being “in Christ” is our strength. Our union with Christ is vital, living, and organic; it is not merely federal representation. The mind of Christ is available, the might of Christ is available—we don't have to fulfill a single command by ourselves, in our own strength. We operate in the realm of grace full and free. We cannot barter for God's infinite goodness in Christ, we cannot exchange anything for it; it is still for nothing, it is still all of grace (Rom 5:1, 2). The dictates and absolutes of discipleship do not change this ruling principle of divine grace.

E. In order to press down these truths upon the minds and hearts of our hearers, we will have to speak in “three different tones” (Hywell Jones).

This ministry of pressing down the die of truth has three “tones” or “strands” that function together. The Apostle Paul used them in conjunction (1 Thess 2:11). ***“Just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children.”***

Exhorting: is to appeal by argument. It is not the same as laying down the law. It is face to face, side by side ministry as when the Apostle Paul acted as a spiritual father and mother. Laying down the law is not as effective, though it might seem so. By contrast, the exhorting pastor asks the question,

“What will make people rise up, want to be more like Christ, and want to obey?” “What will make them more like Christ in attitude, word, and deed?”

Faithful shepherds keep exhorting. They are willing to patiently reason with the sheep—helping them build a case for obedience and a case against disobedience. We are not to assume that our people have thoroughly thought through the benefits of obedience; and the consequences of disobedience.

Encouraging: is to comfort humans in their frailty. Distressed minds and hearts need to be consoled. So many are distressed within and without. They are living with turmoil of soul, with stress, fear, anxiety, and condemnation. Even under the Old Covenant, the Levitical priest exemplified compassion and empathy (Heb 5:2, 3). How much more do we, under the new covenant, need to show compassion and empathy. We must not send the message that we have arrived spiritually. We can be too hard. Our own infirmities are always with us. Let us not be too censorious, too overbearing, or too demanding.

Sheep need continual encouragement. Our encouraging of hearts is not only to lift spirits and to comfort; but also to motivate the brethren to love and good deeds (Heb 10:25).

Imploring: is to warn the indifferent; it is to withstand the rebellious face to face. It is to confront in specific areas where obedience is lacking. We implore in the context of a “spiritual family.” We are to implore our people to go to perfection. Yet, some are not of us as the Apostle John cautions (1 Jn 2:19). If individuals persevere in disobedience, that sin might bring them to a point of irrevocable apostasy.

Disobedient believers must be taught to submit to the Heavenly Father’s discipline. In some cases of protracted disobedience in a believer, that correction from God may claim the health and life of the individual that their spirit may be saved in the day of Christ Jesus.

In all three of these tones (exhorting, encouraging and imploring), God is the One who is ultimately speaking. He is the One who calls us to call His people into His glorious kingdom. God is the one who is speaking through us His ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20). We are calling men to communion with Christ. We are setting forth the Son of God—and life in Him.

Christ is the gift of all gifts. We need to inculcate more longing and more yearning to know Christ and to be like Christ in Immanuel’s land. In order to preach to the life of God in the soul, we must preach and speak in all three tones: in speaking truth, we **exhort**, in communicating compassion, we **comfort**, in exercising firmness we **warn**. The Apostle Paul spoke in all three of these tones and so must we if we are to pay the cost of disciple-making (1 Thess 2:11).

CONCLUSION:

Paul was constrained by Gethsemane love—by the Savior who *gave Himself for me*. Paul’s motivations and values were produced by the cross. Christ’s love animated and controlled him. Paul reckoned his sufferings to be a result of union with his Savior who suffered for him.

In this epistles to the Corinthians, Paul takes a knife and lays open his heart. He tells us the reasons why he serves and ministers selflessly. By contrast, the Corinthians were restrained in their affections and transparency. They wouldn’t open their hearts to Paul, because they had carnal (fleshly motives).

Paul’s vindication of his Apostleship to his Corinthian readers is also an admonishment.

Judgment day will be the revealing of motives (1 Cor 4:5). No wonder Paul always spoke of his motives. This truth is directed at you and me. The question is not, “Are you motivated?” but, “What motivates you?” The motives that Paul sets forth are not merely the obligation of every believer; they are the marks of true discipleship – the evidence of union with Christ.

A true disciple dies to self in order to bear fruit says Jesus. He who places high esteem on the perishable will perish with it (*he who loves his life in this world*). A true disciple *hates his life in this world*—he does not *love his life in this world* (Jn 12:24-26).

Beloved it takes a death to produce self-renunciation in place of self-preservation. A true disciple is characterized by self-renunciation; not self-preservation. Self-preservation is instinctive and

natural to us. Self-renunciation, including a willingness to suffer and die for Christ if need be, requires the supernatural work of the Spirit applied to a man.

A true disciple sees his Savior by faith as enthroned Conqueror—who has defeated the enemies of the saints. To be a disciple of Christ is to participate in Christ's conquest—it is to be a fellow overcomer with Him (Rev 2:7).

A disciple is consumed with the Person of Christ. A disciple has Kingdom values. He regards it to be his glory to bear the reproach of Christ (Heb 13:13-16).

A disciple practices Christ-centered looking and cross-centered living. He is constantly about the business of putting off the old man and putting on the new man—that's what it means to *become who you really are in Christ—a new man—a new creation*.

A true disciple lives an exchanged life—he yearns to know Christ better and better. And it is by reckoning our union with Christ that we know the Savior ever better and become conformed to Him in the process of knowing Him.

A disciple is one who cherishes Christ above all else—Christ is His Pearl of infinite price—a genuine disciple will part with anything and everything to have Christ. Like the Apostle Paul; the true disciple reaffirms this decision each day to sell all that he might have Christ. He daily counts it an infinite privilege to know Christ—and therefore is willing to suffer the loss of all things and count them but dung in comparison to knowing Christ.

Can you honestly say today I owe my discipleship to the cross of my Savior? Can you affirm that the love and devotion you have for Christ is because His death was your death—your death to a selfish; self-centered; self-directed life? Do you live by faith in the Son of God? In your Christian walk, can you say that the preached Word of God is constantly mixed with faith and therefore it profits you unto eternal life?

Christ gave Himself to produce a certain guaranteed effect if you will. He gave Himself to this end—that His people might be redeemed from every lawless deed. He gave Himself so that His people might be purified for Himself—to be His own possession. And He gave Himself so that His people would be zealous for good deeds (Titus 2:14).

Christ's cross cannot fail to produce the above effects in His people. This is so significant—we must let this sink in—namely that the cross-work of Christ will produce the mind-set of a disciple in His redeemed child. It cannot fail to do so. This is why we proclaim, admonish, and teach in our disciple-making—because in this manner the message of the cross is released in its life-transforming power. Our exhortations to live the life of a disciple must be joined to the cross. In effect we are to exhort believers to *be who they really are in Christ*. “How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” (Rom 6:2). If God contemplates His children in the Son—then we must contemplate ourselves in Him. This is vital if we are to find our life direction in Christ.

In his own liberation from the world, and his consequent dedication to Christ—Paul was extremely careful to give all the glory to Christ and His cross. “But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

