Biblical Discipleship: Its Meaning, Importance, Models, and Principles

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ABSTRACT—In recent years the Seventh-day Adventist Church has attempted to find reasons for its existence in discipleship. With such a shift of emphasis arises a need for a careful study of Scripture about the meaning, importance, and models of discipleship. Hence, this paper attempts to explain the meaning, importance, and models of discipleship from Scripture, the writings of Ellen White, and other relevant literature. The study affirms that the disciple-making ministry is a command given by Jesus. It is mission-oriented, relational, and practical.

Keywords: Disciple, Discipleship, Christian Mission.

I. Introduction

In recent years the Seventh-day Adventist Church has made several attempts to refocus on discipleship as the reason for its existence. A case in point is the articulation of its mission statement as “Make disciples of Jesus Christ who live as His loving witnesses and proclaim to all people the everlasting gospel of the Three Angels’ Messages in preparation for His soon return.” (Tsegaw, 2019, p. 11). Such a shift of emphasis from mere evangelism to discipleship is critical to address the membership loss the church suffers at an alarming rate. David Trim (2018, p. 7) reported 563,205 losses from 1,352,931 accessions in the records of the church for 2017. Indeed, this 41.6% loss demands immediate intervention.
Thus, it is important to carefully study Scripture to understand the meaning, importance, and models of discipleship. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this end by exploring the biblical texts, the writings of Ellen White, as well as other literature on the topic of discipleship.

II. The Meaning of Discipleship

Bill Hull (2006, p. 35) defines discipleship as “the ongoing life of a disciple” and elaborates further as follows:

Ship added to the end of disciple means “the state of” or “contained in.” So discipleship means the state of being a disciple. In fact, the term discipleship has a nice ongoing feel—a sense of journey, the idea of becoming a disciple rather than having made a disciple (Ibid.)

So, what does the word “disciple” mean? How do the Old and New Testaments present it? What is the understanding of discipleship in the writings of Ellen White? In an attempt to have a better grasp of the meaning of discipleship, passages that mention the word “disciple” or “disciples” are studied in Scripture and a summary of the study is presented below.

A. The Word “Disciple”

The word “disciple” is derived from its Latin root discipulus, which means “pupil” or “learner.” “This is the word used in Jerome’s 4th century Latin translation, known as the Vulgate, to translate the Greek word mathetes, which means ‘learner’ essentially” (Christian, 1999, p. 259). In secular Greek usage, a person is called disciple “when he binds himself to someone else in order to acquire his practical and theoretical knowledge.” (Muller, 1979, p. 484). In this paper, the term disciple will be used to mean this mentoring relationship that a person is invited to have with Jesus Christ: “Come to me . . . . [A]nd learn from me.” (Matt 11:28, 29, NKJV)