

Discipleship and Christian Formation*

by Leonard J. Vander Zee

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We have called our Disciples program a curriculum in Christian formation. The relationship between these two concepts may not be clearly understood. Discipleship can be simply defined by Jesus' own call, "Follow me." It's learning from Jesus through personal devotion to him as Lord and obedience to his word, but ultimately it's becoming like him. In first century Jewish culture, the rabbi invited disciples not just to learn some truths, but to live like the rabbi, inculcating his values and modeling his life.

Christian formation can be defined as the process of growth toward wholeness in Christ. It is the journey of being transformed by the Holy Spirit into the likeness of Christ, experiencing and expressing his love for God and for others. The word "formation" comes from the Greek word *morphe*, suggesting that the inner being of a person is radically changed in this process. It's in this sense that Paul used the word in his letter to the Galatians, "until Christ is formed in you," expressing his desire that the character and goodness of Christ grow in the congregation he loved.

It's easy to see, then, that Christian formation and discipleship are two terms for the same reality—transformation—being transformed into "the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13, NRSV). That's what Christ was after with his disciples. That's what the Holy Spirit works in our hearts, and that's what God intends in making a new creation.

By whatever name, this transformation is a lifelong process. It begins in our baptism, and it continues, with ups and downs, freeway speed and tedious detours, until we die. But we expect that as we follow Christ and open our lives to the Holy Spirit, our lives will increasingly reflect the fullness of Christ.

Discipleship is "following Jesus" and therefore involves doing—not just learning or knowing. Christian formation demands commitment and discipline. But ultimately it relies on God's grace. In her book *Soul Feast*, Marjorie Thompson compares this transformation to the relationship between the sailor and the sailboat. Though the sailor cannot control the wind, he or she can set the sails and position the tiller to maximize the effectiveness of the wind. Discipleship and Christian formation require a conscious choice to unfurl our sails in responsiveness to Christ's call and the Spirit's wind.

We tend to think that this growth and transformation into the likeness of Christ by following him primarily involves cognitive knowledge. Learning is essential, and knowledge is required, but that's only part of the process. Learning and knowing must lead to new attitudes and behaviors that are increasingly like the character of Christ. Obedience, doing what Christ commands us to do, seems legalistic and narrow compared with the wonders of increasing knowledge. But as Dallas Willard points out in *The Divine Conspiracy*, obedient living is abundant living. Just as sailors can only enjoy the voyage by attending to the rules of wind and wave, tacking, and choice of sail, so Christians can only enjoy true life by walking in the way of their Master.

Another essential feature of discipleship and Christian formation is growth. Life is growth. When a child doesn't grow, we immediately sense something is wrong. Growth is not an option but an essential and natural feature of life in Christ. The New Testament crackles with the urgency of growth (Eph. 4:13; 2 Pet. 3:18; Heb. 6:1). Many lifelong Christians simply do not catch that urgent message. Instead there's often a spirit of complacent self-satisfaction ("I'm saved"; "I go to church") implying that spiritual growth takes a back seat to career advancement, family life, and even hectic leisure pursuits. Jesus' call of discipleship and the curriculum of Christian formation create a sense of

expectation of growth and maturation in God's people. That expectation of growth must become a natural aspect of congregational life.

With this understanding of discipleship as Christian formation, it becomes clear that the process of making disciples and forming Christlike people stands at the center of the church's mission. The church can undertake no other aspect of the mission of God without beginning here. As Christians grow in discipleship and are formed in Christ, the global mission of the kingdom unfolds.

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