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Jesus called the disciples to follow him and to place everything, without reserve, in the service of the reign of God. But does that mean he wanted to call all Israel to discipleship? Was it his goal that gradually everyone in Israel would become a disciple?

There are indications in the New Testament that point in that direction. The Acts of the Apostles often speaks simply of “the disciples.” In that book “disciples” can simply mean “Christian” or “member of the community,” and “the disciples” often means simply the community in Jerusalem or in some other place. Add to this the command at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations!” (Mt 28:19). We could set up an equation: church = discipleship. But is that right?

If we read the New Testament more closely, things look different. The language of the Gospels and Acts does show unmistakably that without discipleship there can be no New Testament-style church. But that usage remains unique within the New Testament. The epistles avoid the word *disciple*. There is no text in which Jesus calls all Israel to discipleship. Above all, he nowhere makes being a disciple a requirement for participation in the reign of God. So we have to suppose that life toward the reign of God—in sociological terms, participation in the Jesus movement—allowed for a number of very different ways of life.

Jesus used a striking and clearly defined symbolic action in choosing the Twelve from a larger group of disciples, making them an eloquent sign of the gathering of the eschatological people (eschatological= those concerned with the end of humankind/end times). We are in the fortunate position of having a few names of disciples who were not among the Twelve but seem to have belonged to the broader group of disciples: Joseph Barsabbas (Acts 1:23); Cleopas (Lk 24:18); Nathanael (Jn 1:45; 21:2); Mary of Magdala (Mk 15:40-41); Mary, the [daughter?] of James the Less (Mk 15:40); Mary, the mother of Joses (Mk 15:40); Salome (Mk 15:40-41); Joanna, the wife of Chuza (Lk 8:1-3); Susanna (Lk 8:1-3); and for a time also Matthias, who then was taken into the group of the Twelve in place of Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:23, 26). The list shows that group of Jesus’ disciples also included women. That was remarkable in an Eastern context and was anything but ordinary. It appears that here Jesus deliberately violated social standards of behavior.

Jesus by no means called everyone who met him openly and in faith to be his disciple. He went to the home of the tax collector Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10) as well as that of the tax collector Levi (Mk 2:14-17). But Zacchaeus did not receive an invitation to discipleship as Levi did. Zacchaeus vows to change his life; in the future he will give half of his wealth to the poor of Israel and return wrongfully obtained money fourfold. But he will stay in Jericho and continue to practice his calling as a tax collector.

The reign of God requires a dedicated community, a form of life into which it can enter and be made visible. The circle of men and women disciples who followed Jesus, their being together with one another, was to show that now, in the midst of Israel, a bit of the “new society” had begun.

According to the Gospel of John there was a very affectionate relationship between Jesus and the family of Lazarus: Jesus and Lazarus were friends (Jn 11:3). When Lazarus died, Jesus wept on the way to his tomb (Jn 11:35). The household of Lazarus (Mary and Martha, his sisters), which was in Bethany, must have been a kind of support station for Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. But nowhere is it said that Lazarus belonged among Jesus’ disciples or followers.

**A Complex Pattern**

The Gospels, especially Mark, reveal a great variety of forms of participation in Jesus’ cause. There were the Twelve. There was the broader circle of disciples. There were those who participated in Jesus’ life. There were the localized, resident adherents who made their houses available. There were people who helped in particular situations, if only by offering a cup of water. Finally, there were those who simply took advantage, who profited from Jesus’ cause and for that very reason did not speak against it.

These structural lines that run through the Gospels are not accidental. They express something that is essential for the eschatological people of God, as Jesus sees it, and is therefore an indispensable part of the church. In today’s church we can find all these forms expressed. It is a complex pattern, as complex as the human body. The openness of the Gospels and of Jesus must warn us against regarding people as lacking in faith if they are unable to adopt a disciple’s way of life or if it is something completely alien to them. In any event, Jesus never did.

Of course, no one may reject the specific call that comes to her or him. It is not only that in such a case one fails to enter into the broad space God wants to open for that person. Rejecting the call also closes the space to others and places obstacles in the way of possibilities of growth for the people of God.

It is also true that one may not assert a claim to a calling. Not every disciple of Jesus could be one of the Twelve. The Twelve are sent to Israel and therefore are clothed with an eschatological office that will continue in the church. That is why they are rightly called “apostles” (those who are sent) even in the Gospels.

It is also true that not everyone can be a disciple, since discipleship also presupposes a special call from Jesus. It does not depend on the will of the individual. It can be that someone wants to follow Jesus but is not made his disciple. Thus, not belonging to the circle of disciples as such is by no means an indication of lack of faith or a sign that someone is marginal. Nowhere does Jesus describe those of his adherents whom he has not called to follow him as undecided or half-hearted. Each person who accepts Jesus’ message about the reign of God has his or her own calling. Each can, in her own way and capacity, contribute to the building up of the whole. No one is second class. The healed man of Gerasa is as important for Jesus’ cause as the disciples who travel with Jesus through the land.

**Radical For All**

Is a disciple’s existence the more radical way of life? Here again we need to be careful. As I explained in *Does God Need the Church?* (Liturgical Press, 1999), the ethos of discipleship is certainly a radical one. Is there anything harder and more inconsiderate than to be called by Jesus to discipleship, to be told that first one must bury one’s father—perhaps recently dead, perhaps lying on his deathbed, perhaps old and ill—to be told, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Lk 9:60)? And yet the ethos of the Sermon on the Mount, which is not just for the disciples but for everyone in the eschatological people of God, is just as radical because it demands that one abandon not only evil deeds but every hurtful word directed at a brother or sister in faith (Mt 5:22). It demands regarding someone else’s marriage (and of course one’s own) as so holy that one may not even look with desire at another’s wife (Mt 5:27-28). It demands that married couples no longer divorce but remain faithful until death (Mt 5:31-32). It commands that there be no twisting and manipulation of language any more but only absolute clarity (Mt 5:37) and that one give to anyone who asks for anything (Mt 5:42).

For a man’s lustful glance at someone else’s wife to be equated with the act of adultery is just as drastic as the demand that disciples leave their families. Jesus demands of the one group an absolute and unbreakable fidelity to their wives (Mt 5:31-32) and of the others absolute and unbreakable fidelity to their task of proclamation (Lk 9:62). This means that Jesus regards the concrete way of life, whether marriage or discipleship for preaching, as sacred. Both ways of life are possible in their radical form only in light of the brilliance and fascination that emanate from the reign of God. But above all, neither way of life exists in isolation and independent of the other. The disciples, as they travel, are sustained by the aid of the families who open their houses to them in the evening, and the families live from and within the new family that began in the circle of disciples.

**Two-Level Ethos? (**Ethos= characteristic, belief or ideal for a particular group or culture)

Thus there is no two-level ethos, one of perfection for the apostles and disciples and a less perfect one for the rest of the people of God. We must admit, certainly, that there is one text in the Gospels that seems to presume such a two-level ethos: the story of the rich man who came to Jesus with the question about how he could “inherit eternal life” (Mk 10:17-22). Jesus points him to the Ten Commandments. The man responds: “I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus looks at him, embraces him, and says: “‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (Mk 10:20-22).

Matthew has reworked the Markan text. The phrase “you lack one thing” has been rewritten to “if you wish to be perfect” (Mt 19:21). The Gospel story of the rich young man has had an extraordinary influence throughout the history of the church. Again and again it has given men and women the strength to abandon their bourgeois existence and begin an alternative life of discipleship in community. The history of the founding of many religious orders began with this text. The Matthean phrase, “if you wish to be perfect,” however, has also given rise to the idea that there must be two orders of life in the church: that of the perfect, who live the life of discipleship, and that of the less-than-perfect, to whom only the Ten Commandments and the commandment of love apply.

But that kind of two-level ethos does not do justice to the text. Neither Mark nor Matthew is formulating norms for the people of God here. The story is about a concrete case. Jesus says “sell what you own” to a particular person who has come to him searching and dissatisfied. Jesus’ demand is addressed to him personally. It is a call to discipleship. Obviously, in the minds of the evangelists this text is also transparent for the later church: there will be many callings to follow, to discipleship, to radical abandonment of possessions. But these calls will also always be specific callings for individuals and not a law for everyone.

This becomes still clearer if we consider the closing words of Matthew’s interpretation. Behind the word “perfect” stands the Hebrew adjective *tamim,* which means “entire,” “undivided,” “complete,” “intact.” Being perfect in the biblical sense, when applied to persons, means living wholly and entirely in the presence of God. The rich man in the story had kept his wealth separate from his relationship to God, and therefore something “more” was required of him. Jesus wants his “whole [self].”

And wholeness or integrity of the self is again not a privilege of disciples alone. The poor widow who puts in two copper coins, in contrast to the rich, who give to the temple only from their surplus, gives away everything she has. She gives “what is hers” entirely (Mk 12:41-44).

This wholeness is different for everyone. For one it can mean abandoning everything. For others it can mean remaining at home and making one’s house available to Jesus’ messengers. Perhaps for a third it can mean just giving a cup of fresh water to the disciples as they pass by. Everyone who lives her or his specific calling “entirely” lives “perfectly.”

The more closely we read the Gospels, the clearer it appears, over and over again, that the various ways of life under the reign of God do not arise out of accidental circumstances but are essential to the Gospel. They sprang not only from the practical-functional point of view that Jesus could not possibly have traveled through Israel with thousands of followers, and they did not derive solely from the fact that only a relative few in Israel became his disciples. We have to look deeper. Ultimately, the variety of callings is a precondition for the freedom of every individual within the people of God.

The division of the church into perfect and less-than-perfect, into better and ordinary, into radical ethos and less radical ethos, ignores the unity of the people of God and the organization of all its members toward the same goal.