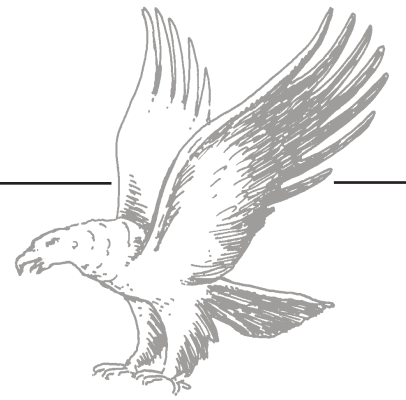


Wings

*"Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles."
Isaiah 40:31*



February 12, 2017

No Disciples in the Epistles?

The total absence of the word "disciple" in the epistles is a puzzle. Why did the authors avoid that term? And what lessons might we learn from its absence?

"And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (Ac. 11:26).



The word "disciple" is used over 250 times in the gospels and Acts to describe the followers of Jesus. Yet in the epistles, the word is not used a single time. Never. Zero. How could a word with such a deep history in the gospels suddenly disappear in all the letters written to the early Christians?

This stark disparity in usage cannot be a fluke. There must be some reason why Paul and the other inspired writers so carefully avoided the term. Given all the talk in modern Christianity about "discipleship" and "making disciples" (one denomination even calls itself "Disciples of Christ"), it is worth our time to dig into this question.

The word "disciple" denotes one who follows a master. It involves more than merely embracing the master's teaching, but a wholesale dedication to imitating the character, and even the lifestyle, of the master. In early rabbinic Judaism, the master/disciple relationship was a common arrangement by which

rabbis transmitted their wisdom to later generations. That's why the concept of discipleship in the gospels is so dominant; we're reading there of people who physically knew Jesus and followed Him around. Their lives—and in some cases their very livelihoods—were reordered to conform to the example of their Master. The men whom we know as "apostles" were rarely called that in the gospels. They were more commonly called disciples, because that's what they were: students who had surrendered their lives to the training of the One they believed to be the Messiah.

In the book of Acts, the word has a mixed usage: sometimes it refers to those who had personally followed Jesus, and other times it is applied to later converts to the faith who had no such personal contact (such as Timothy of Lystra, 16:1). Yet as the history in Acts unfolds, the word gradually fades into the background. The reference to Mnason of Cyprus, "an early disciple," is the last use of the word in the New Testament. The word "Christian," however, first introduced in 11:26 as a syn-

onym for disciple, is recognized even by an unbeliever as the primary label for these people (26:28). And that word is later used in the epistles (1 Pet. 4:16).

K. H. Rengstorf, in an exhaustive review of the word "disciple," concludes that "the use in Acts goes back to the common name by which Palestinian Christians called themselves" (Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, IV:458). As the new faith developed a more universal and Hellenized identity, the idea of the followers of Jesus being "disciples" in the original Jewish sense of the word lost its significance, and believers more commonly became known as "Christians."

Can we call ourselves "disciples" today? In a manner of speaking, yes. But the absence of the word in the epistles should awaken us to a broader truth: It is not as important that we mimic the *lifestyle* of Jesus, as that we honor the deeper *principles* for which He lived and died. It is those principles lived out in our lives—elaborated so eloquently in the epistles—that establish our identity as followers of Christ.

— David King