



THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY

REDISCOVERING OUR HIDDEN LIFE IN GOD

"A masterpiece and a wonder . . .
the book I have been searching for all my life."

—From the Foreword by RICHARD FOSTER

DALLAS WILLARD

ON BEING A DISCIPLE, OR STUDENT, OF JESUS

Go therefore to every ethnic group and help them become
my students.

MATT. 28:19

Jesus the very thought of Thee
With sweetness fills my breast;
But sweeter far Thy face to see,
And in Thy presence rest.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

Who Is Our Teacher?

Who teaches you? Whose disciple are you? Honestly. One thing is sure: You are somebody's disciple. You learned how to live from somebody else. There are no exceptions to this rule, for human beings are just the kind of creatures that have to learn and keep learning from others how to live. Aristotle remarked that we owe more to our teachers than to our parents, for though our parents gave us life, our teachers taught us the good life.

It is hard to come to realistic terms with all this. Today, especially in Western cultures, we prefer to think that we are "our own person." We make up our own minds. But that is only because we have been mastered by those who have taught us that we do or should do so. Such individualism is a part of the legacy that makes us "modern." But we certainly did not come by that individualistic posture through our own individual and independent insight into ultimate truth.

Probably you are the disciple of several "somebodies," and it is very likely that they shaped you in ways that are far from what is best for you, or even coherent. You are quite certainly, as I am, the student of a few crucial people, living and dead, who have been there in crucial times and periods to form your standard responses in thought, feeling, and action. Thankfully, the process is an ongoing one, and is to some extent self-correcting.

Originally we are the disciples of our parents or other family members most intimately related to us. Usually this is very good. They may be dear, strong people who know God and walk in his ways. It has mainly been so for me and for many others.

But not always. Our original family connections may be anything from mildly debilitating to disastrous. We know much more about this today than we did just a few decades ago. We have a pretty good idea, for example, of how children raised with alcoholic parents turn out. They learn from their relationship to their alcoholic parent how to be in this world—fairly tragically in many cases.

Then we are the disciples of our teachers, then of our playmates and peers—one of the most potent of "discipling" relationships—then perhaps again of our teachers. But now, in our teens and twenties, our teachers play quite a different role. They do much to set in stone the major thrusts of our more or less consciously chosen self-image that will make or break us in the important connections of our life.

These last teachers often include some very glamorous and powerful people. They may indeed be teachers—instructors of some type, as in the armed services, or even academic professors. But they may also include public figures of various kinds: artists, musicians, writers, professionals. Nearly always they convey to us a strong impression of what life as a whole is all about. This provides the absolutely necessary orientations of conscious behavior toward ourselves, others—and God. We must have such orientations, even if they be wrong.

It is one of the major transitions of life to recognize who has taught us, mastered us, and then to evaluate the results in us of their teaching. This is a harrowing task, and sometimes we just can't face it. But it can also open the door to choose other masters, possibly better masters, and one Master above all.

The Earthly "Society of Jesus"

The assumption of Jesus' program for his people on earth was that they would live their lives as his students and co-laborers. They would find him so admirable in every respect—wise, beautiful, powerful, and good—that they would constantly seek to be in his presence and be guided, instructed, and helped by him in every aspect of their lives. For he is indeed the living head of the community of prayerful love across all time and space.

On that assumption, his promise to his people was that he would be with them every moment, until this particular "age" is over and the universe enters a new phase (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5-6). More generally, the provisions he made for his people during this period in which we now live are provisions made for those who are, precisely, apprentices to him in kingdom living. Anyone who is not a continual student of Jesus, and who nevertheless reads the great promises of the Bible as if they were for him or her, is like someone trying to cash a check on another person's account. At best, it succeeds only sporadically.

The effect of such continuous study under Jesus would naturally be that we learn how to do everything we do "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17); that is, on his behalf or in his place; that is, once again, as if he himself were doing it. And of course that means we would learn "to conform to everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). In his presence our inner life will be transformed, and we will become the kind of people for whom his course of action is the natural (and supernatural) course of action.

The Narrow Way and the Good Tree

Plainly, in the eyes of Jesus there is no good reason for not doing what he said to do, for he only tells us to do what is best. In one situation he asks his students, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). Just try picturing yourself standing before him and explaining why you did not do what he said was best. Now it may be that there are cases in which this would be appropriate. And certainly we can count on his understanding. But it will not do as a general posture in a life of confidence in him. He has made a way for us into easy and happy obedience—really, into personal fulfillment. And that way is apprenticeship to him. It is Christian "discipleship." His gospel is a gospel for life and Christian discipleship.

we "enter the kingdom of the heavens." Naturally we will also enter into its next phase, its fullness, marked by the end of human history and the final settling of accounts.

All of this is the same as saying that, in actually doing what Jesus knows to be best for us, we build a life that is absolutely indestructible, "on the Rock." "And the Rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4).

The great Pauline, Petrine, and Johannine passages, such as 1 Corinthians 13; Colossians 3; 1 Peter 2; 2 Pet. 1:1-15; 1 John 3:1-5:5, all convey exactly the same message in so many words, one of an inward transformation by discipleship to Jesus. In them the central point of reference is always a divine kind of love, *agape*, that comes to characterize the core of our personality. The deeds of "the law" naturally flow from it. The law is not the cause of personal goodness, as we have said before, but it invariably is the course of it.

How Are We to Be with Him?

But if I am to be someone's apprentice, there is one absolutely essential condition. I must be with that person. This is true of the student-teacher relationship in all generality. And it is precisely what it meant to follow Jesus when he was here in human form. To follow him meant, in the first place, to be with him.

If I am Jesus' disciple that means I am with him to learn from him how to be like him. To take cases from ordinary life, a child learning to multiply and divide numbers is an apprentice to its teacher. Children are with their teachers, learning from them how to be like them in a certain respect—similarly for a student of the piano or voice, of the Spanish language, of tennis, and so forth. The "being-with," by watching and by hearing, is an absolute necessity.

And provision has been made for us to be with Jesus, as one person to another, in our daily life. But it is also necessary that we have a practical—though not a metaphysical or even a theological—understanding of this arrangement in order to carry on our side of the apprenticeship relation. Jesus accordingly took great care to instruct his immediate students—both before his death and in the interval between his resurrection and ascension—about the specific manner of his presence with them (and with us) during the long period ahead. He wanted them to understand very clearly before he left them exactly what it would be like.

In John 14, he goes carefully over the fact that he would soon be

taken away from them in the visible human form they had known. Then, he explains, another "strengthener"—"comforter" is just not the right word to use in translating *paracleton* today—would be active and interactive in their lives. The marginal reading of John 14:16 in the New American Standard Version is excellent for the meaning intended: a *paraclete* is "one called alongside to help." This other strengthener (other, that is, than the visible Jesus as they had known him) would be with them to the end.

The human order, or "world" (*cosmos*), by contrast, cannot receive this "spirit of truth," as Jesus describes it, because it can't see it and therefore cannot know it. The human mind in its now standard form does not, generally speaking, accept as reality what it cannot see. The spiritual nature of God, here reaffirmed by Jesus with reference to his own personality, was presented to the Jewish people early in their history (we recall Exod. 20:4; Deut. 4:12, 15, etc.). But it was something even they never quite mastered—though they did understand about idolatry. That is shown by the dominance of the highly visible "rightness of scribes and Pharisees" as late as Jesus' day. One would never attempt to live in such a "rightness" if one thoroughly understood that every thought and intention lay open before an always present God. But many of us still try to do it today.

God as personality is not a physical reality that everyone must see whether they want to or not. He can, of course, make himself present to the human mind in any way he chooses. But—for good reasons rooted deeply in the nature of the person and of personal relationships—his preferred way is to *speak*, to *communicate*: thus the absolute centrality of scripture to our discipleship. And this, among other things, is the reason why an extensive use of solitude and silence is so basic for growth of the human spirit, for they form an appropriate context for listening and speaking to God.¹

Teaching the Transition

In Acts 1 we have a fascinating account of the forty days Jesus spent with his eleven apostles between his resurrection and his ascension. That account is absolutely central for our understanding of how he is with his people now. It clearly indicates that during the period in question he alternated between communicating with them without being visibly present and communicating with them while being visibly present.

We are told, "He was taken up [the ascension] after he had given directions to the apostles *through the Holy Spirit*."

Then the writer immediately adds, "To them he also presented himself living after his execution by many unmistakable evidences, being seen by them over a forty day period and conversing with them about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:2-3).

The Master teacher takes every step required to make sure the students get the message about how he will be with them. He tells them what is going to happen to them, it happens, and then he talks with them about what happened. And then the lessons are repeated. And so on. That is Jesus as teacher. It is absolutely essential that his friends understand in the strongest way possible how he is going to be with them and how they will continue to be his apprentices and co-workers in the kingdom when they no longer see him in the usual sense. For this is an arrangement that must stand up for the entire period of the church's existence, which means at least up to today.

"Engulfment" in the Spiritual Presence

However, the concrete reality of his nonvisible interactions with them during the preascension period did not immediately clear up all the questions and misunderstandings his assistants had. Pointing to the next step in their development, he reminds them of the ancient promise of engulfment in the spirit of God. This promise had been renewed in the message of John the Baptizer and was repeatedly emphasized by Jesus himself. Now he tells them that they are to stay in Jerusalem, and that in a few days they will be engulfed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5). As Luke 24:49 worded it, they were to wait there until they were "dressed in power from the heights."

It is really unimaginable that they would have waited, as he told them to, without the experience of the reality of the spirit to which he had so carefully introduced them after his resurrection. And even so, they were still asking if he was about to "restore the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6), meaning the visible reality of a political entity. That was still the only way they could think of the promised engulfment or "baptism," he said was about to happen. But the promise was of a "power" that did not depend upon a visible kingdom. It was to be a power without visible position. In the ambiance of that power, his people would exist and bear witness, starting from Jerusalem

and reaching to the farthest places on the earth, from then until now (v. 8).

And thus fortified by teaching and experience, they did wait—though they did not fully understand. And they were engulfed. And they understood enough to be able to say what was happening at that moment. They understood and explained the manifestations of Pentecost in terms of God's promises to Israel and of their experience with Jesus and of what they were now and always to do (Acts 2:14–40).

The engulfment came upon them—with quite a racket, right out of that sky into which only ten days earlier they had seen Jesus disappear (Acts 2:2). Peter then stood at the heart of the Jewish world and reinterpreted the call that God had anciently placed upon the Jewish people to be a light and a blessing to all nations. "The promise of living in a holy power other than ourselves," he said, "was not just for the little group of disciples at the time. It was also to all the people of Jerusalem, as well as to their children, and to others no matter how far away, as the Lord draws them to himself" (2:39).

Life in the Spirit and the Kingdom of the Heavens

The personal presence of Jesus with individuals and groups that trust him was soon understood by Jesus' first students to be the practical reality of the kingdom of God now on earth. That is, it is what the kingdom is as a factor in their lives. This reality is the additional "life" of which the apostle John makes so much in his writings. It is the "in Christ" that forms the backbone of Paul's understanding of redemption.¹

Unfortunately, the relentlessly legalistic bent of the human soul has, over time, led many to identify engulfment in the spirit with its outward manifestations, whether they be signs and wonders; other tongues; poverty, chastity, and obedience; power to convert unbelievers; or certain practices and symbols that have become denominationally distinctive. But, as important as such things are, they are not the reality of the kingdom life itself. The reality of the kingdom life is an inner one, a hidden one, with "the Father who is in secret." And we often find it to be absent in those who convert many others or who manifest tongues, signs, wonders, and the like.

Not that the genuine presence of the kingdom in a person can really be hidden. It cannot, nor, for that matter, can its absence. But it

also cannot be canned, controlled, produced on demand, standardized, or brought to a point at which it can be dispensed by one human being to another.

The reality of spiritual life in Jesus' kingdom, as distinct from its specific manifestations in the visible world, cannot be used to get a monopoly on God and prove that we, after all, are the ones who have "got it right." The spirit cannot be merchandised, even ever so subtly. There is, alas, an unfortunate streak of Simon "the Magnificent" (Acts 8:9-24), whom we met earlier, interwoven with the people of Jesus throughout the ages. We all have to struggle against this Simonizing tendency. But we can be sure that the spirit of Jesus will not cooperate with that tendency.

Thus Paul very simply says, "All who are interactive with the spirit of God are God's children" (Rom. 8:14). The interactive movement he refers to is the inner reality, not the outward manifestations. And: "The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking [whether you do it in one way or in another] but is inner rightness (*dikaiousune*) and peace and joy sustained by the Holy Spirit. For those serving Christ in this way are well-pleasing to God and approved by men" (Rom. 14:17-18).

And when Paul writes to the Colossians, he prays that they will walk worthy of the Lord, pleasing him in every respect, bearing fruit in every good work and constantly growing in their knowledge of God (Col. 1:10). Then he asks that they be "strengthened with all power, in terms of God's glorious power" (v. 11). One might expect that this would be for the sake of some astounding outward manifestations! But no, it is required to enable the Colossians to have "limitless endurance and long-suffering or patience, joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has equipped us for a role in the destiny of the saints in the light." The most exalted outcome of submersion in the risen Christ is the transformation of the inner self to be like him.

So the kingdom of the heavens, *from the practical point of view in which we all must live*, is simply our experience of Jesus' continual interaction with us in history and throughout the days, hours, and moments of our earthly existence. This is why we find Philip the Evangelist in the city of Samaria, as the new kingdom unit begins to spill out beyond Judea, "proclaiming the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12). The kingdom was reality to them through the name of Jesus. Through the use of the name, Jesus himself still acted.

And Paul, at the end of the book of Acts, situated now in Rome, was "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning King Jesus" (Acts 28:23, 31).

Thus was fulfilled Jesus' statement to the Jewish nation—not, we emphasize, to individual Jews—that "the kingdom of God shall be taken from you and will be given to a people producing its fruits" (Matt. 21:43). And those people were the people of the name "Jesus."

And of course it is discipleship, real-life apprenticeship to Jesus, that is the passageway within The Kingdom Among Us from initial faith in Jesus to a life of fulfillment and routine obedience. That is precisely why Jesus told his people, when they saw him for the last time in his familiar visible form, to make disciples, students, apprentices to him from every ethnic group on earth. And to make disciples they would certainly have to be disciples.

Accordingly, we must take a very careful look at discipleship to Jesus. We will consider what it is to be a disciple of Jesus, how to become a disciple of Jesus, and how to make a disciple of Jesus.¹

How to Be a Disciple

The Simplicity of Discipleship

First of all, we should note that being a disciple, or apprentice, of Jesus is a quite definite and obvious kind of thing. To make a mystery of it is to misunderstand it. There is no good reason why people should ever be in doubt as to whether they themselves are his students or not. And the evidence will always be quite clear as to whether any other individual is his student, though we may be in no position to collect that evidence and rarely would have any legitimate occasion to gather or use it.

Now this may seem very startling, even shocking, to many in our religious culture, where there is a long tradition of doubting, or possibly even of being unable to tell, whether or not one is a Christian. The underlying issue in that tradition has always been whether or not one was going to "make the final cut." And that has, in turn, often been thought a matter of whether God has "chosen you" and you are therefore "among the elect." Or else it is a matter of whether or not you have sinned too much, or are good enough. Needless to say, those would be difficult questions to answer with much