

Article of the Month – August 2008

Theology of Suffering (1) – The Cost of Discipleship

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One way of looking at the way Jesus trained His disciples could be formulated by the three words ‘listening’, ‘watching’ and ... ‘war’! When we look at parts of Matthew’s Gospel, we see the listening-part in chapters 5-7, the watching-part in chapters 8 & 9 and the beginning of the war-part in chapter 10. From Jesus’ perspective these same chapters could be summarized as ‘I teach’ (5-7), ‘I do it, you watch’ (8, 9) and ‘you do it, I watch’ (10) followed by a debriefing session.¹

It was a training, unmatched in intensity by any in history. The ‘Bible-school part’ went further than anyone had ever heard, as pointed out by Jesus’ words ‘You have heard what was said before

... but I tell you ...’.² The spiritual caliber was more substantial than that of any rabbinistic discipleship school ever.

The ensuing field trip was quite adventurous too: Jesus healed, cast out demons and raised the dead, meanwhile teaching Kingdom principles along the way and living through what almost became a ship-wreck. Part of the training consisted of handling conflict with the spiritual elite and recruiting another disciple.³ This part ends with an urgent call to prayer for more workers – and the classic situation where the disciples became the first answer to their own prayers.

Thus far there had been little or no suffering for the disciples. That this was about to change, Jesus already indicated by His prayer request, that the Lord of the harvest would *send* laborers into His harvest (*italics mine*). The Greek text does not sound as kind as the English does: the word used⁴ indicates rather that workers would be *kicked out* into the fields. In other words: the main problem of missions is *not* money – as is often believed – but unwilling human hearts. Therefore, disciples need to learn to suffer, before they can hope to suffer as apostles, or rather: missionaries. In this article we concentrate on the former, in the next we’ll look at the latter.

Discipleship suffering can best be summarized by Jesus’ words: ‘If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me.’⁵ Anyone doing less than that ‘is not worthy of Me’, Jesus said. Anyone not taking up his cross daily, may belong to the crowd that follows Jesus from time to time at a distance, but cannot be counted among His disciples, whom He trains hard. The cross must be planted deeply into every area of a disciple’s life. Disciples need to ask themselves *What* occupies most of my daily thoughts? Is it money, status, health, fame, beauty, social life, reputation, education, name, career, time,

¹ Luke 9:10

² Matt. 5:21,22,27,28,33,34,38,39

³ Matthew himself (9:9)

⁴ ΕΞΒΑΛΛΩ (EXBALLOO)

⁵ Luke 9:23; Matt. 10:37,38; 16:24

holidays, success, comfort, sports or other temporal things? The also need to wonder *Who* means most to me? Is it my parents, date, family, children, friends, pastor, spouse, colleagues? If a disciple seeks these things in life he will lose such a life, but if he is willing to let it all go because of Christ, he will find it. The disciple's only way of bearing fruit is by becoming dying grain – not in a physical sense usually (although often it may be easier to die for Christ than to live for Him...).

Dying physically is not asked for, denying ourselves is. Dying means: submitting everything to Christ and accepting the outcome without protest. A mere convert sees Jesus as Savior – and rightly so – but a disciple makes Jesus his Lord. A disciple is prepared to give up his rights; a mere convert will do everything to retain them. A disciple has learned to accept pain because of Jesus; a mere convert will do anything to flee it. The old paradigm remains true that 'if Christ is not Lord *of* all, He is not Lord *at* all'.

The 'war' I spoke about earlier begins in the disciple's own heart. It is there that he decides on his principles. Jesus' years of ministry were preceded by His encounter with the devil in the desert. Had He not conquered there and then, He would never have entered the ministry. For disciples the same rules apply. Resisting the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil are the disciple's regular challenges, and although it is clearly a biblical principle, it doesn't come easy for any serious disciple. Sometimes it even seems that people need special revelation in order to really understand the necessity of discipleship suffering.

Take John the Baptist. He may have heard Jesus' first sermon in Luke 4, where He said that He had come 'to set the captives free'. Now John was suffering in Herod's prison. Why did He not set John free? Was He really the One, then? Or was someone else coming? We can so understand John's doubts. But Jesus assured him that He is the One and that John would be blessed if he took no offense⁶ because of his suffering for the Kingdom.

Or take Peter, 5 chapters later. That Jesus is the Son of God, he had understood by revelation, but the necessity of the suffering Christ had apparently not yet been revealed to him.⁷ Therefore he still lived with a false theology in which there was no legitimate place for suffering.

Paul did get such revelation, when the Lord told Ananias that He would show Paul how much he had to suffer for His name.⁸ This brings us right to next month's article, where we will look at the cost of apostleship.

Maybe we should spend some time this month meditating on whether we are true disciples who accept suffering as 'part of the deal'⁹, thus being made capable of the higher vocation of apostleship suffering, or that we have hidden away in the crowd of distant believers. Mere converts will never change the world; true disciples will!

⁶ Matt. 11:6

⁷ Matt. 16:15-23

⁸ Acts 9:16

⁹ John 15:20; 16:33; 2 Tim. 3:12