

Jesus' Call to Discipleship

JAMES D. G. DUNN



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1992

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and
to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1992

Reprinted 1994, 1995, 1998, 1999

Typeset in Trump Mediæval

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data is available

ISBN 0 521 42481 X paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

Contents

| | |
|--|----------------|
| Preface | <i>page ix</i> |
| 1 Introduction | 1 |
| 2 The Call of the Kingdom | 6 |
| 3 Good News for the Poor | 32 |
| 4 The Boundary Breaker | 62 |
| 5 Would Jesus Have Been Disappointed with the Church? | 92 |
| 6 Concluding Reflections | 121 |
| Selected Bibliography | 129 |
| Questions for Discussion | 131 |
| Index | 135 |

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Challenge

In the history of humankind there are few men or women who have had more influence than Jesus. He obviously made a profound impact on many of those he met. We need not enter the long-running debates as to whether he was a man just like any other man, or was unique in unique degree. The fact is that he must have been a person of no little power and personal magnetism. Of no one else has it been said so often down through the centuries, "Would it not have been wonderful to see him for ourselves, to hear his own voice, to spend time with him." And understandably so: An encounter with Jesus evidently proved for many of his contemporaries to be a life-transforming experience. Their lives became oriented round him, as the one who gave it center and focus. And the combined impact was sufficient to launch a movement which became in due course a religion of world importance, shaping the history of nations and the culture of continents.

Discipleship of Jesus, then, is a topic of tremendous interest in itself. Not only is it about following this Jesus, what following him meant. But it is also about those who followed – men and women who in turn have left a very substantial mark on the history of the world in what they accomplished and in the church they launched. And since they put their success down to their discipleship of Jesus, perhaps their discipleship is the key to their success. To inquire, then, what discipleship meant in practice, what following him actually involved, may have a

2 JESUS' CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

wider significance for any interested in the secret of what it is in human relationships that moves minds and hearts and transforms lives.

The topic should be of particular interest to those who already in some sense or other think of themselves as disciples of Jesus. For, any understanding of what discipleship of Jesus is and involves must surely take its lead from the discipleship to which he actually called followers during his life and ministry. Of course, discipleship in the twentieth century cannot be a mere imitation of discipleship in first-century Galilee. That would be playacting at discipleship, motivated by a morbid fascination with first-century trappings rather than by a sincere desire to share the spirit which motivated the first disciples. But discipleship of Jesus must nonetheless draw its understanding of that discipleship from the record of those who literally followed him, otherwise such claims to discipleship can easily become fanciful and subject to distorting pressures from tradition and ecclesiastical vested interest.

The same point can be expressed in more weighty theological terms. In Jesus, Christians believe they have seen the incarnation of God, God showing human creatures what God is like in personal, human terms. In the purpose of God it was evidently necessary to go beyond the words given through inspiration to priest and prophet, to lawgiver, sage and psalmist. It was evidently necessary for God to make himself vulnerable to the processes of history, and his revelation vulnerable to the historical encounter of person with person. The incarnation was the high point of God's self-revelation. All other claims to understand God and the will of God have to be read in its light. As far as Christians are concerned, all other such claims have to be brought to the touchstone of the historical revelation of God in Christ.

And this must include the claim to understand what discipleship means or should mean now or in the future. For the

Christian and/or would-be disciple of Jesus, therefore, it is essential to scrutinize the records of the original discipleship of Jesus, in order to gain insight into the spirit and character of that discipleship, in order to get some kind of yardstick by which to measure one's own discipleship.

The Task

But how much can we learn of the actual discipleship of Jesus? Jesus himself left no manual of discipleship behind him. We have four Gospels, which appear to be written by some of Jesus' first disciples or their immediate associates. But they do not set out to provide manuals of discipleship either. And most people interested in the subject will be aware that their historical value is a matter of considerable debate. Many scholars who have made a special study of the Gospels doubt whether all the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels go back to him. So the question inevitably arises: Can we gain a sufficiently clear picture of the discipleship for which Jesus called?

To this particular question, however, a fairly confident answer, "Yes," can be given. There is a strong probability anyway that the bulk of the traditions in at least the first three Gospels consists of the earliest memories of what Jesus did and said. As we might expect, many of the episodes show evidence of repeated retellings, and many of the sayings and parables show evidence of frequent re-usage. On the one hand, that means stories have been elaborated to speak with greater appeal to different audiences, sayings have been interpreted, with explanations added, to make them clearer and to give them sharper application to subsequent situations. But on the other hand, that same evidence indicates a desire to remember and repeat and re-use these earliest memories. The initial impact on original spectators or hearers was such that some of them had wanted to resavor it in relating it to others. And for the group of

4 JESUS' CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Jesus' disciples these stories and sayings had a crucial importance, since the stories explained (to themselves and others) why they had become members of the group, why the group existed in the first place. The elaboration and interpretation added to the traditions was a way of translating the original impact of the event or saying it to a different audience. In other words, in, with, and through such elaboration and interpretation we have fuller evidence of the impact of the original version.

And this will be particularly true of the discipleship material. For, the events and sayings of Jesus' ministry which called them to discipleship, which shaped the character of their discipleship, or which provided the model for their discipleship will have been among the Jesus traditions which the first disciples were most eager to preserve and pass on. What had called them to discipleship they would hope would work in the same way with others. What had been the greatest stimulus and challenge to their discipleship they would want to keep for their own continuing use and benefit, as well as for others'.

This would continue to be the case in some measure as the circle of discipleship broadened. It is true that the call to discipleship in the early churches was a call to faith in the risen Christ, rather than simply a repeating of the message of Jesus. But the character of that discipleship, as expressed in the attitudes and motivations which governed everyday life, was still more clearly encapsulated in the character of the Jesus traditions than anywhere else. And the form of these traditions was probably already well established in the church at Jerusalem before the major expansion beyond Palestine got under way. Moreover, those who professed discipleship of a Jesus whom they had never seen would almost certainly cherish the accounts of those who had first followed Jesus in Galilee, as an indication to themselves and to others of what such discipleship of the risen Christ still involved.

We can therefore enter upon our task with some confidence. Every so often we shall have to take account of the issue of a key saying's historical value and significance. But for the most part the testimony and the trend of the evidence are consistent and sufficiently strong for us to take them more or less at face value. Of course there will be several points where different scholars would read the evidence differently. But the overall picture which emerges in the following chapters is so clear across the different traditions, and mutually coherent at so many different points in the several traditions, that it is unlikely to suffer more than a few dents.

We will start with the feature of Jesus' message which seems to have been most characteristic of his message and most memorable as such – his proclamation of the Kingdom of God (Chapter 2). In Chapters 3 and 4 we will focus our attention on the question, To whom was Jesus' call to discipleship primarily directed, and what does this tell us about the character of the discipleship to which he called? In Chapter 5 we ask after the communal character of the discipleship of Jesus and attempt to sketch its main features. A final brief conclusion draws together some of the most challenging aspects of the discipleship of Jesus for potential, would-be, and professed disciples today.