

Discipleship in History with Implications in the Training of Contemporary Young Disciples for Mission

Paskwale Pacoto Okeny

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2986-6039>

Theological Seminary, Adventist University of Africa, Kenya

Email: paskwaleo@aua.ac.ke

Copyright resides with the author(s) in terms of the Creative Commons Attribution CC BY-NC 4.0.
The users may copy, distribute, transmit and adapt the work, but must recognize the author(s) and the
East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences

Abstract

This paper addresses discipleship in history with implication in the training of young people for mission in the contemporary time. The paper surveys literature in both the Old and New Testament time, picking useful experiences that can inspire the training and involvement of young people today in mission. Based on findings in this paper, the researcher recommends that involvement of young people in God's mission is a necessity in the contemporary times. When trained, young people can do great thing for God as seen in the history of the Old and New Testament times. Therefore, there is a serious need of getting young people involved in God's mission in the contemporary time both in local churches and in higher organizations of the church.

Keywords: Discipleship; disciples; training; contemporary youths; in-reach; outreach.

How to cite: Okeny, P. P. (2024). Discipleship in History with Implications in the Training of Contemporary Young Disciples for Mission. East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences 5(1)177-180.

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46606/eajess2024v05i01.0361>.

Introduction

This section begins with a comprehensive definition of "disciples." Collins Dictionary defines the term as "a follower of the doctrine of a teacher or a school of thought," (Collins, 2008). In Greek, the term for disciple is "mathletes" which means "student" (Longman III, 2013) as it appears in Matt 9:14; 22:16; Mark 2:16; John 1:35; 4:1. Harrington and Patrick (2017, p. 35) defined disciple by stating, "a disciple is someone who is following Jesus, being changed by Jesus, and is committed to the mission of Jesus." A working definition by Davis (2015, p. 32) states, "... a disciple is one who works closer to Jesus as a learner, follower and lover, together with other disciples." Therefore, after understanding the meaning of a disciple from Greek, the original language of the New Testament, and from other sources, the author in this article defines a disciple as a student or pupil who is willing to learn from a teacher just as the twelve disciples of Jesus were His students, and Jesus was their teacher (Mark 9:5).

Discipleship in the Bible

The word "disciple" is a New Testament term. The word appeared 240 times in the four gospels. For examples, in Matt 4:18, Jesus called the four fishermen as his disciples. In Mark 2:15, he ate dinner with his disciples in the house of Levi. In Luke 12:22, he told His disciples not to worry about food and dress and in John 2:2, Jesus was invited with his disciples to the wedding in Cana.

Although the word "disciple" is not common in the Old Testament, it is implied in there. Joshua was an assistant to Moses, gaining leadership experiences from Moses. In other words, Joshua was a disciple of Moses. Joshua is mentioned three times as Moses' Assistant (Exodus 19:24; Num. 11:28 and Joshua 1:1). Samuel was a disciple of Eli, the Priest; he learned from Eli how to serve in the Sanctuary and how to respond to God when God calls in a vision (1 Sam. 3:9, 10). As a result, Samuel became a well-known Judge and a prophet in Israel (1 Sam. 7:15-17). Elisha was a disciple of Elijah. He started serving as a servant and was learning from his master Elijah (1 Kings 19:21; 2 Kings 2:3). At the end

of his learning experiences, Elisha succeeded his master as prophet in serving God and performing miracles (2 Kings 2:13-15).

The commission to make disciples is mandatory for all students learning in the school of Jesus in all generations to the time of the end of the world as devoted Christians are commissioned to go out and make disciples for Christ (Nichol et al., 1956). Involvement of young people in mission is evident in both Old and New Testaments.

Young Disciples in the Old Testament

When Moses went up on Mount Sinai to receive the commandment from God, he took with him Joshua his “assistant” (Exod. 24:13). The original word for assistant in Hebrew is “piel” which also means “to minister,” or to “serve,” (Bible Works, 2009). The same expression is found in Numbers 11:28 whereby Joshua was known as one of the chosen men who served as assistant to Moses. In Joshua 1:1, Joshua was introduced as one who served as assistant to Moses. According to Stuart (2006), Joshua was a right-hand man to Moses in various ways. (p. 394). Therefore, Joshua was a disciple of Moses.

Much as young people got involved in the mission of God, the youth can only be effective in “disciples making” when they are well instructed. The experience of discipleship existed between Priest Eli and the boy Samuel. Samuel was a gift child from God to Hannah and Elkanah (1 Sam. 1:10-11, 17, 20). Later, the parents decided to return the child to God, handing the child to Priest Eli at his tender age to serve the Lord (1 Sam. 1:27, 28; 2:18). Bergen (1996, p. 77) commenting on the action of Elkanah’s family, “.... Responsibility of Samuel’s upbringing was now transferred from Elkanah to Eli as the youth was set apart as a lifelong attendant to the Lord.” Eli was a tutor to the young Samuel, training him to provide acceptable service before God. Samuel “ministered to the Lord before Eli the Priest” (1 Sam. 2:11). Samuel was lighting the lamp in the Tabernacle where the Ark was. The two lived in the Tabernacle (2 Sam 3:1-4) and God called Samuel for service (1 Sam. 3: 4-10). Samuel became a successful servant of God throughout his life.

Another discipleship training experience was that of Elijah and Elisha. God commanded Elijah to anoint Elisha to become his successor (1 Kings 19:16, 19, 21). Since that time, Elisha became a powerful servant of God. Elisha received a double portion of the spirit of Elijah. Before Elisha replaced Elijah,

three times Elijah attempted to dissuade Elisha from following him. Yet Elisha persisted following his master until Elijah was taken to heaven (2 Kings 2:2, 4, 6, 9). Elisha passed the test of discipleship and became a prophet in the place of Elijah, receiving double portion of the spirit of Elijah (2 Kings 2: 11-15). Gaebelien (1998, p. 175) comments, “... Elisha was determined to be with his tutor until the last. Accordingly, he would not be dissuaded; he would go where Elijah went.”

God’s service is not limited to adults only. Even youth can serve the Lord. A good example is King Joash who became king of Judah at the age of 7 and did good things before God. He suggested a strategy for fundraising to Jehoiada the chief priest, so that enough money was collected for the repair of the Temple in Jerusalem. It was repaired to “its original condition” (2 Chron. 24: 1-2, 6, 11. 12-13). Josiah became king in Judah at the age of 8 and “he did what was right to the sight of the Lord” (2 Kings. 22: 1-2). He also gave the order for the repair of the house of the Lord when he was 18 years old (2 Kings 22: 3-5). Josiah restored true worship in Jerusalem when the book was discovered in the temple. He found that the people were not obeying what was written in the book. Then he gave order that all people in Jerusalem “... the priests, prophets and all people, both small and great,” to come and hear the word of the covenant written in that book (2 Chron. 23:1-2). Josiah also ordered the burning of the articles used for worship and burning incense to Baal, the sun, moon and stars (2 Chron. 23:4, 5).

Young Disciples in the New Testament

The Great Commission is inclusive of old and young people. Jesus gave the commission to his followers, some of them being young people, especially the two sons of Zebedee –James and John (Matt. 4:21, 22). According to White (1861), John was younger than the other disciples. After training the disciples, Jesus sent them two by two to preach the kingdom, heal the sick and cast out demons. As a result, they came back to Jesus with a successful report, “Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through your name” (Luke 10:17).

After the ascension of Christ, Timothy was a young man working with Apostle Paul (Acts 16:1). Apostle Paul was encouraged into the ministry by Barnabas. Paul whose name was Saul before conversion was a young man when the persecution of Christians started in Jerusalem (Acts 7:58). The young man was later called Paul (Acts 13:9) who became a zealous

defender of the truth. According to Maddox (1979, p.52), "... young Saul of Tarsus witnessed the death of Stephen." Shortly after his conversion in Damascus, he started preaching Christ, surprising many people (Acts 9:20-22). Consequently, there were several attempts to kill Paul. The Jews in Damascus wanted to kill him (Acts 9:23-25), and again in Jerusalem, the Grecian Jews tried to kill him (Acts 9:29-30). Paul went to Tarsus discouraged because of continuous persecutions and death threats. Barnabas went to Tarsus and brought Paul to Antioch (Acts 11:22-26). Although Paul's call was direct from Jesus, he would have wandered away from the ministry. However, through the gifted ministry of Barnabas, he received encouragement that strengthened his faith, and Paul became powerful in making disciples for Jesus.

John Mark was trained by Barnabas and he became useful in the ministry of making disciples (Acts 15:37-39; 2 Tim.4:11). Paul and Barnabas disagreed over John Mark before departing for the second missionary journey (Acts 15:37, 38). Then Barnabas took Mark and trained him and became useful to Paul again in their ministry of making disciples (2 Timothy 4:11).

Many young men and women have within them unrealized talent, energy, and skills that need to be developed. Youth need to be given time and opportunity to learn. Mark learned from Barnabas and realized his talent in God's work, and later his talent and skills in the ministry developed. He had written the Gospel that has been educating generations of humanity to know Jesus Christ and His teaching about the kingdom of heaven.

Timothy was trained by the Apostle Paul, and he became effective in making disciples (Acts 16:1-5; 1 Tim. 1:18). At first, Paul called Timothy his "beloved faithful son in the Lord," (1 Cor. 4:17) as he was training him. Paul after training the young Timothy, commended him to the Christians in Corinth that they should not despise him because he is doing the same work for the Lord as Paul was doing (1 Cor. 16:9, 10). Then he introduced him to the Christians in Rome as a fellow worker (Rom. 16: 21). Finally, Paul after qualifying the work of Timothy introduced himself and Timothy to the Christians in Philippi as "bondservants of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:1).

Priscilla and Aquila trained Apollos at Ephesus. Apollos was a young man who loved to share God's

word, but "knew only the baptism of John." Then Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos more adequately in "the way of the Lord" (Acts 18:24-28). Apollos became a good disciple who strengthened the faith of believers in Achaia (Acts 18:27, 28). When Apollos came to Corinth he became a powerful preacher in the church (Acts 19: 1; Cor. 3:5-7). Therefore, it is important to train young people so that they can be successful in God's mission.

Discipleship Principles in the Old Testament

We can derive several principles from the Old Testament experience of mentorship. First, home education was a priority to Jewish parents. The Jewish parents were instructed by God to teach their children diligently when they sit at home, when they walk with the children, when they go to sleep and when they rise up in the morning (Deut. 6:4-9). The same principles are applicable today when parents are called upon to spend time with their children, teaching them about ways of the Lord.

Persons who became successful prophets and leaders in the Old Testament were at first disciples under experienced leaders who mentored them. Examples are Joshua to Moses and Elisha to Elijah (Exodus 24: 13-18; 2 Kgs. 2:3). This principle can be applied during the internship when young people have completed their university studies and are practicing what they have learned. During the period, they need to be placed under senior workers to supervise and guide them in doing the work and receive further practical training.

Early training of a children determines one's career. A good example is Samuel. When Samuel was weaned, the parents gave him to Priest Eli to train him to serve God, and they left the child to minister to the Lord. (1 Sam. 1:27-28; 2:11, 18, 26). The application to the contemporary time is that every child that has reached school age should be registered in school to start learning, just like Samuel learnt under the feet of Eli.

Discipleship Principles in the New Testament

God works with both young people and adults who are truly converted. The twelve Apostles of Jesus were in mixed ages. John was the younger brother of James (Matt.10: 2-4). All the twelve received the training from Jesus, and eleven of them who were committed to the teaching of Jesus continued preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and they shared the good news of the resurrection of Jesus

(Acts 5: 29-32). But Judas Iscariot who was not converted within three and a half years died miserably by hanging himself (Matt. 27: 3-5). The implication to the youth of the contemporary time is that the truly converted young who are committed to the service of God will continue to grow in the service of God.

No one can stand alone in the work of God. Barnabas as companion of Paul, they worked together in Antioch and strengthened the church for one year (Acts 11: 26). The believers there bore great witnesses in the community and the believers were called Christians (Acts 11:26). Later on, they went together on the first missionary journey (Acts 13: 2, 3). They went preaching the good news in synagogues (Acts 13: 5). In the Second Missionary journey, sent from Jerusalem were Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas (Acts 15: 25-27). Judas and Silas ended up in Antioch, Syria and return to Jerusalem (Acts 15:32). Paul continues with Silas and Timothy preaching the gospel (Acts 16: 1, 40). The application to contemporary people is that teamwork between young people and elders is important because it provides opportunities for learning to the young ones.

Elders should not dwell on the weakness of the young people but should take time to train them. Then the young people will become useful in the ministry. Paul in his second missionary Journey disputed taking Mark with him (Acts 15:37, 38), during the first missionary journey, he deserted them at Pamphylia and returned home (Acts 13: 13). Paul was dwelling on this one incident, but Barnabas as an elderly person who loved for training young people, took Mark and sailed with him to Cyprus (Acts 15: 36-38). Barnabas took time with Mark. After some time of learning from Barnabas, Mark became useful in the ministry even to Paul (2 Tim. 4: 11). The young people in our time now should therefore be valued and trained. They may have weaknesses, but let us be like Barnabas and look positive on young people that they can do better than their mistakes.

When young people committed to doing God's work have made mistakes, we need to correct and instruct them privately in love; they may value the advice and remain faithful to God and active in the church. Aquila and Priscilla, when they saw that Young Apollo was actively preaching the word of God, but had limited knowledge of the baptism of John the Baptist, they took him aside and privately

explained to him more adequately in the way of God (Acts 18: 24-26), and Apollos became more active preaching the word of God and encouraging many believers in Achaia (Acts 18: 27-28).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings in this study, it is concluded that involvement of young people in God's mission is a necessity in the contemporary time. When trained, young people can do great thing for God as seen in the history of the Old and New Testament times. Therefore, there is a serious need of getting young people involved in God's mission in the contemporary time both in local churches and in higher organizations of the church.

References

- Bible Works (2009). Bibleworks-[c:\program file (x86)\bibleworks 8\initbw800.swc] Bible Works LLC.
- Collins, H. (2008) Collins 175 Years of Dictionary Publishing 7th ed. Bishopbriggs Glasgow, UK.
- Davis, C. A. (2015). Making Disciples Across Culture: Missional Principles for A Diverse World. Illinois: InterVarsity Press.
- Gaebelein, F. E. (1988). The Expositor Bible Commentary with NIV, vol. 4. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Harrington, B. and Patrick, J. (2017). A Disciple Maker's Handbook: Seven Elements of A Discipleship Lifestyle. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Longman III, Tremper. (2013). The Baker Illustrative Bible Dictionary. Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks,
- Maddox, R. L. (1979). Bible book Commentary Acts Vol. 19. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.
- Nichol, F. D., Cottrell, R. F., Neufeld, D. F. and Neuffer, J. (1956). The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentaries vol. 5. Washington, DC: Review and Herald.
- Stuart, D. K. (2006). New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture. Vol. 3. Nashville, TN: Publishing Group.
- White, E. G. (1861). The Desire of Ages. Silver Spring, ML: Review and Herald.