



**CANADIAN CONFERENCE**  
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

**ARTICLE 10 [MB Confession of Faith]**

# Discipleship

COMMENTARY

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Jesus commanded the disciples, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). We call this the Great Commission. Jesus called for people to imitate his lifelong commitment to God. Discipleship involves the decisive act of the will to commit oneself to live as a follower of Christ as the Bible teaches. Discipleship involves following Jesus in personal commitment to him, uniting in a distinct community with other believers, growing up into Christ through spiritual disciplines, and demonstrating true faith through an obedient lifestyle.

## Following Jesus

Discipleship begins with a personal commitment of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The Bible refers to this commitment as the new birth (John 3:3-8; 1 Pet. 1:3). When people commit themselves to Jesus Christ, they receive the gift of eternal life (John 1:12) and they commit themselves to live as Jesus did (1 John 2:4-6). One of the marks of genuine new birth is the desire to obey the commands of Jesus.

In the contemporary world the term “discipleship” may be foreign to those unfamiliar with Christianity. In the world in which Jesus ministered the concept of following a master, or becoming a disciple, was commonplace. Disciples were students who committed themselves to learning from a master teacher. The discipleship Jesus offered involved not only learning his teachings but also committing to follow Jesus by imitating his life. In this article we seek to describe what following, or imitating, Jesus means.

Disciples do not conform themselves to the pattern of the present age but have their lives and mindsets transformed in their aim to please God (Rom. 12:1-2). The concept of a present age as opposed to the new age in which God rules is Pauline. Paul writes of “this world” as a complex of political and spiritual powers seeking to control and warp human thinking. Paul speaks of a battle for the minds of humanity (2 Cor. 10:4-5). He envisions a battle between the believers and the spiritual evil forces that follow the ruler of the sinful kingdom (Eph. 2:1-3; 6:10-18). The present age is contrasted with the new age, the inbreaking reign of God which has already begun (2 Cor. 5:17) but has not yet been fully revealed.

In this new era of God’s reign disciples are marked by a servant lifestyle. Service involves both worshipping God and meeting human need. True religion involves both praising God and serving fellow humans (Heb. 13:15-16; James 1:27).

All believers are baptized by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). All believers have received the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9), and all are called to be continually filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). Spirit-filling is the equivalent of being obedient to the commands of Christ. Spirit-filled Christians have an obligation to live as God’s children (Rom. 8:12-17). Paul uses the image of stripping off the sinful lifestyle and being clothed with righteous deeds (Eph. 4:17-5:21; Col. 3:5-17). The image of putting to death the old self and putting on new life is also suggested (Rom. 6:1-4).

## United in a Distinct Community

Discipleship is not a solitary lifestyle. When Jesus called the initial disciples, it was a call not just to follow him but to join a community of followers. In the contemporary culture which values rugged



individualism but recognizes personal inadequacy, the call to community offers hope. The Scriptures teach that the community is a source of support and encouragement for those in need (Gal. 6:1-2). In the community believers are to be accountable to and for one another (Matt. 5:23-26; 18:15-20).

We teach that baptism is not only a personal witness of new life in Christ but also a commitment to join Christ's body as expressed in the local congregation (1 Cor. 12:13; Acts 2:41-47). Through baptism and church membership disciples acknowledge their task to build up Christ's body (Eph. 4:16). Each individual is called to witness for Christ (Acts 1:8). At the same time the church witnesses corporately through its proclamation and lifestyle.

### **Growing Up into Christ**

Discipleship is learned by doing. Christians grow in their faith by practicing the classical spiritual disciplines. The Bible is the believers' guide for faith and practice. Followers of Jesus heed the biblical admonition to read, meditate on, and memorize the Word (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2; 19:7-14; 119:9,11,105; 2 Tim. 2:15; 3:14-17).

In the conflict with the antichristian world system, prayer is the weapon that protects and fortifies the believer. Through prayer the Christian communicates with God. Prayer and fasting give strength for the battle with the demonic world (Mark 9:29; Eph. 6:10-18) and become the means by which the Spirit directs the church (Acts 13:1-3). In prayer believers ask God for the courage to be faithful witnesses (Acts 4:29-30; Col. 4:4). Prayer offers communion with God and comfort in times of testing.

Confession of sin has largely become a private act in the contemporary church. Historically, the reasons for this privatization are at least twofold. First, Protestants reacted against the abuses of the confessional rites of the medieval Roman Catholic Church by eliminating the practice altogether. Second, although confession of sins characterized early Anabaptists, an excessively legalistic practice of banning and other extreme forms of church discipline have also contributed to the present situation. Biblical teaching is clear, however, that believers should confess their sins one to another (James 5:16).

Disciples are also characterized by the discipline of sharing resources within the community. Members are to use their spiritual gifts to build up the body (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:7). Material resources are to be shared as there is need (Deut. 15:7-11; 2 Cor. 8:13-15).

The Scriptures teach that growth is God's gift and also that growth results from personal and corporate disciplines. Nowhere is the juxtaposition clearer than in Philippians 2:12-13. From the human perspective, growth in Christ involves work—specifically, the call to obedience. From God's viewpoint, growth is a gift—something that God purposes and produces.

### **Demonstrating True Faith**

The New Testament leaves little doubt that two antagonistic systems are at war for humankind. Galatians 5:16-26 not only provides a list of competing characteristics but also offers the image of conflict between the Spirit and the sinful nature. In 1 John 2:15-17 we read that love for the world is antithetical to loving God. In a world of pluralism and tolerance the biblical message of conflicting systems may sound outdated. The conflict may at times be more insidious and less obvious, but the battle is, if anything, even fiercer in our day.

For Jesus, the essence of discipleship involved death to self (Mark 8:34-38). Jesus himself understood his mission as one which was leading inevitably to death on the cross. As Christians we understand that Jesus' death had an unrepeatable, substitutionary character. Romans 5:6-11 teaches that Christ died for us.

Jesus also taught that his death to self was a model for disciples to follow. We understand that death to self by definition demands self-denial. Self-denial involves an attitude that surrenders the right of insisting on personal vindication. Cross-bearing puts that attitude into acts of obedience to Jesus despite any cost. For many believers cross-bearing has meant and continues to mean persecution and martyrdom. To accept Christ's lordship removes control of our lives from self and places it in the sovereign love of God. As slaves to Christ, we are called to follow Jesus to death without regard for personal comfort or safety.



Article 10 lists several antithetical statements that describe death to self in practical terms. Disciples reject materialism and are stewards of financial resources (see Article 15). They reject violence and follow the Christian call to love and nonresistance (see Article 13). Disciples reject dishonest behavior and are called to show integrity by speaking honestly and by doing business in a fair manner (see Article 12). Disciples reject immorality and commit to be sexually pure (see Article 11).

In summary, following Christ must be demonstrated in life. The church has expressed this notion throughout the ages. When confronted by a believer who argued in favor of continuing his pagan trade because he must live, the church father Tertullian asked, “Must you?” The Anabaptist reformer Hans Denk said, “To know Christ one must follow him in life.” In the 20th century Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “The cross is laid on every Christian... When Christ calls persons, he bids them come and die.”

