Jesus creed: What is the focus of spiritual life?

by Scot McKnight in the September 7, 2004 issue

Discipleship and disciplines: during the past 50 years these two words have expressed for many of us the quintessence of following Christ. We have come especially to associate “discipleship” with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose prophetic voice showed us what it was like to be a Christian under Hitler’s regime. “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die,” we read in Reginald Fuller’s translation—words that challenge us to take up the cross daily, even at the cost of persecution and death.

The Cost of Discipleship, Bonhoeffer’s lectures to students at an underground seminary, had an enormous influence on the American church. It convinced people that following Jesus meant a life of radical commitment to his teachings, especially as crystallized in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7; Luke 6). The pursuit of social justice that dominated the 1960s found a renewed theological basis in the term “discipleship.” Anabaptist writings made their way into American pulpits. Menno Simons, John Howard Yoder and Ronald Sider were no longer seen as extremists but as prophetic voices. Protestants began wearing crosses, sometimes large wooden ones, and to argue that the way of the cross taught by Bonhoeffer had powerful implications for how all Christians were to participate in society and, in particular, in (or against) war. Good recent examples of this orientation can be seen in Virginia Stem Owens’s *Living Next Door to the Death House* and in Jim Wallis’s *Faith Works*.

Almost imperceptibly, however, another voice came to be heard in the ’60s and ’70s, first from the back pew, then from the pulpit itself. Many sensed that succeeding generations would need more spiritual sustenance than was provided by a radical commitment to social justice. A turn inward was made, a turn to find the source of strength to fire the active life.

The superficiality and materialism of culture and the noisiness and stress of the active life spurred many to seek peace and tranquillity. Henri Nouwen’s *Reaching*

Out, which begins by reaching into the deepest part of the self, best expresses this need to turn inward. Nouwen's profound and enduring perception of spiritual formation moves from loneliness to solitude, from hostility to hospitality and from illusion to prayer.

Turning inward to the spiritual disciplines led to a rediscovery of the great traditions of the church. In practicing the disciplines, Protestants joined hands with Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. Protestants read *The Rule of St. Benedict* and Orthodoxy's *The Philokalia*. The evangelical Quaker Richard Foster may have been most instrumental in making the disciplines accessible to a large public, but many others helped in the process. One thinks, for example, of Thomas Merton's books, such as *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), *What Is Contemplation*? (1959) and *The Inner Experience* (2003), and spiritual writers such as Nouwen, Frederick Buechner, Kathleen Norris and Roberta Bondi. Care of the soul has become central to spiritual formation.

What do the terms "discipleship" and "disciplines" evoke about what it means to be a 21st-century Christian? Discipleship refers to a Christian who is radically committed to obeying Jesus Christ, one who studies Jesus' teachings and puts them into practice. Of course, most go beyond these teachings to incorporate the powerful images of the Pauline letters into their practice—images like living in the Spirit and the fruits of the Spirit. But no matter how broadly the image of discipleship is conceived, its foundation is radical commitment.

Discipline evokes the ideas of effort, commitment, will power and regimentation. One of the great impacts of a steady practice of the spiritual disciplines is that it gives a rhythm to one's life. As the ancient Hebrews turned the mundane calendar into a sacred calendar of holy feasts, and as the early Christians turned the Roman calendar into a sacred calendar of Christian days and seasons, so the practice of the disciplines can create a sacred rhythm to our days, weeks, months and years.

One of those rhythms is the observation of the divine hours or divine offices—morning prayer, midday prayer, vespers and compline. Enshrined in the Anglican and Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, but often a stranger to Presbyterians, Methodist and other Protestant groups, the divine hours call the Christian to regular worship, praise and prayer. Instead of interrupting our work, these daily practices remind us what work is for.

Divine hours, writes Annie Dillard, shape our days, and “how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing. A schedule defends us from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time.”

Disciplines are intended to “catch” our days so that we live mindfully. Sometimes a discipline can catch so much of what is passing that the day seems momentarily to stand still, and we get drunk on the flow of God’s gracious time.

But I doubt that either discipleship or discipline can satisfy the soul even if each can energize it. When I get up in the morning, my first thought is not, “Today is a day to be radically committed.” Good though that thought might be, it is not enough to sustain me. It was not enough to sustain Jesus himself, radically committed though he obviously was.

My 20 years of studying and teaching the Gospels have made me very aware of the power of Jesus’ images of discipleship—his admonishment to “be perfect” and to “take up your cross daily,” and his warning that “any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” I also am aware that these texts can be abused and misused, particularly when they are employed to present radical obedience as the entirety of the Christian life. Radical commitment is an important concept, but it is not what the Christian life is all about. There is something behind discipleship.

Is it the disciplines that stand behind discipleship? Jesus prayed, meditated, fasted, kept periods of solitude, lived simply, worshiped and celebrated. But he rarely spoke about the disciplines. They are there, but they are not his focus. Because they are so objective, the spiritual disciplines easily attract legalistic and pietistic barnacles that turn them into ugly monsters. Because the disciplines can be quantified, counted and assessed, they can easily lead people to compare themselves favorably or unfavorably with others. And because they are acts, they can easily lead to a sense of accomplishment and superiority. A discipline-focus for spiritual formation can lead to legalism—as evidenced by the Christians who congratulate themselves on their daily Bible reading, church attendance, or the superior vocations of their children.

Just as the barnacle of legalism can grow onto the disciplines, so also can the barnacle of individualistic pietism. Individual piety is a noble good that produces

other goods like sanity and tranquillity. But it can also lead to an egoistic spirituality that assigns God the task of serving me—of making me a better person, of making the world clear to me, of swooping down to earth just for me. People who fall into this error can be identified by what social scientists call “attribution theory,” a cognitive game in which Christians claim to understand why everything in the course of human events is occurring and what meaning specific events—like getting a flat tire or losing one’s job—have in their lives. That is, “God made my tire flat so I would hear a specific song on the radio so I could use those words in a personal relationship with someone else who needs to hear just those words on this particular day!”

The disciplines are important, they are well-worn paths, but they cannot become the central focus of the spiritual life. As there is something behind discipleship, so there is something beyond the disciplines. What is it that turns discipleship into a commitment that keeps us faithful? What turns the disciplines into a path of spiritual formation? I believe the answer can be found in what I call the “Jesus Creed.”

A scribe comes to Jesus and asks, “What is a life of discipleship? What are the disciplines designed to accomplish?” Because that scribe is a Torah-observant Jew and because Jesus is a Jew as well, the scribe asks this great question in a first-century Jewish manner: “Of all the commandments [and you know Jesus, there are over 600 of them], which is the most important?” “The most important,” Jesus answers, “is this: ‘Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no greater commandment than these” (Mark 12:28-31).

Behind discipleship and beyond the disciplines is love—love of God and love of others. Radical commitment is fine, if it is fired by love. Spiritual formation is noble, if it produces love for God and others. Without love, to modernize Paul’s words, we become either fanatics or egoists. When Jesus says we are to love God he is quoting from the *Shema*, from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, words that were recited according to the “divine hours of Judaism.” Most scholars think observant Jews recited this passage two or three times per day. But when Jesus goes on to say that we are to love others, he tampers with the sacred creed of his contemporaries. He adds to the *Shema* by quoting Leviticus 19:18, and in so doing creates a new creed for his followers, the Jesus Creed. Love of God is to be joined, at all times, with love for others. Both, always. Apart they turn humans into fanatics and egoists. Together

they turn humans into the *imago Dei*, walking expressions of God's love.

As we don't add to the Apostles' Creed and other historic creeds of the church—though we are in the habit of trying to create new ones—so in the time of Jesus. To add to the sacred *Shema* was to reform identity for a new group. The Jesus Creed was to shape the identity of the followers of Jesus. They were to be people who love God and others. By reshaping the *Shema* Jesus gave to his followers a creed to recite daily (and I am in the habit of reciting it many times throughout the day—as I rise, walk, work, drive, retire). This creed is what gives discipleship a foundation and the disciplines a future. If our foundation of radical commitment is love for God and others, we live as God would have us live. And if we practice the disciplines in order to deepen our love for God and others, we live as God would have us live. Discipleship is not so much about radical commitment as it is about radical love, and the disciplines are not so much about spiritual formation as about love formation.

No one has said this better than John Ortberg, the pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church: "The true indicator of spiritual well-being is growth in the ability to love God and people. If we can do this without the practice of any particular spiritual disciplines, then we should by all means skip them."