GROWTH OF DISCIPLESHIP IN THE COMPANY OF JESUS

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When Jesus emerged from his private life to enter upon the work of his public ministry, he was without followers or adherents of any sort. No existing ready-for-work society or church awaited him or welcomed his coming. A certain group of Jews had been aroused by the preaching of John the Baptist into a fresh messianic expectancy of a moral rather than a political sort. In this circle Jesus first appeared and here was the only soil in any wise prepared for his teaching. He did not so much as succeed to the leadership of the rudimentary society brought together by John. Out of this society, however, he gathered his first disciples. Probably most of the disciples of John passed over to the company of Jesus finally, but only after the gradual dissolution of John’s society.

The ministry of Jesus was to be a teaching and preaching ministry, similar to that of John. It was also to be itinerant. These two elements, the teaching and the itinerary, determined the first form of association about Jesus. The name which his first companions bore indicates the nature of the relationship—disciples. The calling of disciples grew out of the nature of his work. He must first of all have hearers. But he must have more than the casual hearer; he must have the constant hearer—the scholar, the student, the disciple. Before him in the history of his own people had been the earlier schools of the prophets and the later schools of the scribes. The Jews were accustomed to this sort of activity in their communities. It was the favorite method of introducing any change in the religious thought or life of the people. The message he brought was not so simple and the change he came to work was not so slight that a single announcement of it would secure acceptance. Never was an enterprise undertaken, for the understanding and promotion of which there was such need of apprenticeship. The teacher was conscious of having many things to say for which his people were not prepared and could not be prepared except by long training. There is every indication in the
simple and quiet way Jesus went about his task that he had in view a long future. His methods were not revolutionary or hotly zealous. His vocation was that of the teacher, and his trust in the power of the truth.

As Jesus was going along the Sea of Galilee he saw some of his earlier acquaintances plying their trade as fishermen. He said to Simon and Andrew, “Come ye after me and I will make you fishers of men.” Apparently without the slightest hesitation they left their work and followed him. He addressed the same invitation to two other brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They likewise left their work in such haste as to give the impression that some inconvenience to their father arose from it. This call was an invitation to personal attendance upon Jesus as traveling companions and listeners. The call involved no other condition or requirement than the purely secular circumstances of the case imposed—the undergoing of whatever inconvenience or discomfort or sacrifice would be necessary in leaving their homes and businesses to accompany Jesus in his itinerary ministry. No conditions as to their religious convictions, duration of companionship, or final attitude toward him and his cause were laid upon them. No inquiry as to their moral character seems to have been made, though Jesus might have satisfied himself on this and all other questions through former acquaintance. He needed them and they gladly responded to the invitation to go with him. That Jesus had ultimate purposes of which they had no knowledge, there can be no doubt. That companionship with Jesus had an increasing meaning and religious value we cannot doubt. But relationship between teacher and pupil began where it always does in the message of the teacher burning for expression, met by an earnest inquiry in the mind of the pupil. Into what the relationship would finally grow and what it would mean for them they had neither hint nor assurance. It all began so simply, so informally, and so naturally. Jesus was willing to take them as they were and they were willing to make the sacrifice necessary to be with him. Their readiness to go after him and the cost which continuous association with him involved, imply a certain confidence in and expectation concerning him on their part. It was ample assurance to Jesus that they were in earnest and were qualified for discipleship. They had had some preparation for the
acceptance of the invitation of Jesus in their contact with John the Baptist. They were members of that earnest, repentant, and spiritually minded community of Israelites, gathered together by John, who were distinguished by a feeling of the nearness of the Messiah's advent and the necessity for a personal, moral preparation for his coming.

I. THE FIRST FORM OF CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION WAS PERSONAL COMPANIONSHIP WITH JESUS

1. The first condition of personal companionship with Jesus was a readiness to make personal sacrifice to be with him.

To go after Jesus, to accept his call, meant first of all, to James and John, Peter and Andrew, the leaving of their business for a longer or shorter time, and the temporary severing of home ties, whatever they might be. There is no intimation that the first disciples called to follow Jesus regarded it as a call to a permanent career or mission. It is scarcely possible to suppose that they saw in the phrase, "I will make you fishers of men," anything more than an enigmatic pleasantry, except by reading back into it the import of subsequent events. The phrase doubtless bore a missionary import in the mind of Jesus; but to say that the disciples understood at the time that it was a call to be the founders and messengers of a new dispensation of eternal truth is to credit them with profounder insight than is warranted by the mistakes and weakness revealed in their subsequent training. Just how great the sacrifice was for the disciples who accepted the call depended upon the extent of their business obligations and the number and closeness of their domestic ties.

The sacrificial nature of discipleship appears in much of the teaching of Jesus, and in many incidents of his journeyings. To one who conceived an ill-advised attachment to him and said, "I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest," Jesus replied, "the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." Jesus saw that he had not carefully calculated the cost of personal attendance upon his ministry, as well as the still greater cost of conformity to the words of his teaching, which would be laid upon him if he prolonged his companionship with him. On another occasion Jesus invited one to go with him, but soon discovered the unfitness of the man for discipleship when he
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asked that he might postpone the entrance upon it until he went home to bury his father. This request simply revealed the hold which domestic relations had upon him; a hold all too great to fit him for the privations and discomforts of discipleship. Another declared his purpose of going with Jesus but hesitated to go until he had gone home to bid his friends farewell. Out of the hesitation of this man Jesus draws the spiritual lesson that the kingdom must be sought with undivided attention and unbroken activity. The way to the kingdom lay through the door of personal companionship with Jesus and attention to the things he taught. The issues of life and death were formed for many by so simple a thing as entering or not entering upon discipleship. How decisive this step seemed to Jesus may be gathered from the saying: "So, therefore, whosoever he be of you that renounceth not all that he hath, cannot be my disciple." The issue of an earnest discipleship, he tells them in another place, is worth all that it costs and more: "Verily I say unto you, that ye who have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath left houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life."

In these, as in other sayings of Jesus, the earlier stage of discipleship foreshadows the later and the higher stage. Attachment to the personal ministry of Jesus came later to mean more than a voluntary sacrifice of business interests and domestic comforts. As his enemies increased and hostility deepened around him, those who in any way were related to his life shared the enmity and ostracism that he suffered. It came to pass finally that whoever accepted discipleship, whoever identified himself with the company of Jesus, accepted the possibility of persecution and death. Discipleship to Jesus thus became physically sacrificial in its first outer form, and morally sacrificial in its ultimate inner spirit—the one the adumbration and the analogy of the other.

2. The second condition of personal companionship or discipleship was sympathy with the religious purpose of Jesus.

Jesus required no indorsement of his plan or enterprise as a con-
dition of following him. What conditions there were grew out of the circumstances of his mission. Persons without the readiness to make personal sacrifice or out of sympathy with his purpose would soon discover their unfitness for companionship with him. Sympathy with his purpose was more in the nature of a condition of continued companionship with him, while willingness to make personal sacrifice characterized entrance upon that companionship. Both conditions, however, were present as elements of the deepening discipleship. With the increase of sympathy and appreciation there were new demands laid upon the spirit of sacrifice. Many found it increasingly impossible to go back and walk no more with him as contact with him deepened the impression of his personality upon them. The path by which he was leading them was one of increasing self-denial. The privilege of discipleship was open to anyone who desired to enter upon it, and doubtless many tried to assume it only to fail very shortly. The number of persons who could be counted as disciples reached seventy at one time, and there are evidences that the company was increasing and diminishing from time to time.

We may well believe that close personal association with Jesus would not be prolonged without sympathy with the thing he was doing. Without likemindedness in the broadest sense association would grow absolutely uncongenial. No formal test of faith or avowal of purpose was necessary to protect the personal companionship of Jesus against unbelievers. Living with him was the process by which the sincere disciple was distinguished from the insincere, the wheat from the chaff. No formal arraignment and trial of a pretended follower was necessary to separate him from the company. The man out of sympathy with Jesus' teaching and manner of life would be the first to discover the need of change in himself or separation from the company of the disciples. Jesus' own person was the organizing principle of the new community. Like was attracted and held to like; the unlike was simply not attracted, or if attracted for a time, was not held. Those unlike him, if they persisted in their unlikeness, found it impossible to live in the atmosphere of his life. He did not send them away; the rather did he seek to hold them and win them to his way of life if possible, and if they did not stay with him it was because they were "not of the truth." They came and found nothing
in him. They were not in sympathy with his religious purpose, as he gradually unfolded it in the "gospel of the kingdom."

II. THE TRANSFORMATION OF PERSONAL COMPANIONSHIP INTO MORAL FELLOWSHIP

Whatever the motive might have been which led a person to attach himself to the company of Jesus it would not be long before the ethical aim and interest of Jesus would become apparent. The center of gravity of his life and work lay in his ethical interest.

The ethical question was forced home upon every attentive listener sooner or later. No person could continue in companionship with Jesus and remain neutral toward the ethical requirements of his teaching. The very first point of application for the teaching was the personal relationship of the disciple's life. Companionship with him and with each other was an ethical opportunity. The first test must be made in their own circle. Their company formed a school, but a school whose pedagogic principle was to learn by doing. Their own immediate company was the first to be ethicized because it was nearest at hand. As their personal lives were to be examples for others so also were their social relationships. The appearance of any spirit or the occurrence of any act in their relationships with each other and the world at large out of harmony with the high ideals of Jesus' life and teaching met with his kindly rebuke and correction. The disciples were not perfect men either first or last. They were in training.

The Gospel record has left indications of the coming of a crisis in the companionship of the disciples with their Master. There are evidences that there were those who mistook personal attention and respect for ethical appreciation and assimilation. He admonished them by saying, "And why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" He represents those who missed the moral meaning and opportunity of companionship with him as saying in the last day, "We did eat and drink in thy presence and thou didst teach in our streets." The critical time finally came for each one of those who followed him to pass over from merely personal companionship to moral fellowship. The dominant moral personality of Jesus made the transition inevitable. There can be real fellowship only between persons of like character. The personality of Jesus was the organiz-
ing force and center of the new society. Immoral persons, that is, persons who persisted in their immoral choices, would be driven from his presence—they could not live freely or happily in the atmosphere of his person. A positive spiritual personality naturally creates the conditions of association with it. The influence of his personal purity and spirituality is seen in the exclamation of Peter: “Depart from me for I am a sinful man.” Impurity, selfishness, and pharisism, found no comfort in his companionship. A selective principle was at work defining and forming the new society, so that in turn the society itself became a positive moral force. Thus the law of like-mindedness, which is the organizing principle of all social groups, was operating in the society of Jesus, insuring its homogeneity. Agreement with the mind and spirit of Jesus became the first test of fellowship, the condition of membership in the new society. To receive Jesus in this way was to receive the Father who had sent him. The man who joined the company of Jesus and remained untouched by the spirit of love, kindness, forgiveness, and unselfishness, soon found the company of Jesus uncongenial. If he would remain in that companionship he must change his mind and spirit.

I. The first condition, therefore, of moral fellowship with Jesus was repentance.

Repentance was the beginning of moral transformation. The man who was satisfied with his character, his motives, and his conduct, would take offense at correction. The ability to stand correction at the hands of Jesus and the disciples, in the spirit of meekness and love, was a test to which a disciple must submit sooner or later, if he would continue a disciple. Correction was a necessary part of the Master’s training. Jesus rebuked Peter for his failure to discern that the giving of self was the law of the righteous life, and the allotted portion of his own life. John was corrected for manifesting a spirit of jealousy and unbrotherly exclusiveness. Through John the rebuke fell upon all the disciples who had had any part in proscribing the beneficent activity of an outsider whom they found casting out devils. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were corrected on two occasions—one for vindictive zeal on behalf of the Master whom they believed to have been affronted by the Samaritans, and again for selfish ambi-
tation in seeking offices in the new society. On another occasion the disciples were rebuked as a company.

It would be manifestly impossible for a self-righteous or proud person to endure the trying and sifting of motive and action which membership in the company of Jesus involved.

2. Hence another inevitable condition of fellowship in the company was humility or the childlike spirit, the ability and the willingness to receive correction and instruction.

A continuous repetition of offenses against the spirit of the Master and his company, with no evidence of regret or of purpose to change, would ultimately separate the offender from the company. In the early stages of the fellowship there was no such thing as formal exclusion. But the time came when there were other interests served in being a member besides delight with the instruction or the desire for moral reformation. There was the desire for the loaves and fishes, the expectancy of a place in the new kingdom, which held men to the company when they had no real agreement with the spirit and mind of the Master.

At first the inclusion or exclusion of members took place by the operation of the law of likemindedness—men joined or fell away of their own accord. But the exercise of discipline to preserve the homogeneity and integrity of the new society very soon arose. Jesus gave instruction for the guidance of the company in dealing with an offending brother who persisted in keeping company with the disciples. It was all very simple—the one who had suffered the offense should go to the offender and tell him his fault, and if he would not hear him, then to take one or two more. If he would not hear them, then he should make the offense known to the entire company. If he refused to hear the entire company, then he should be treated as an outsider. Here lies the beginning of meetings of the company for other than instructional purposes.

Other conditions of discipleship naturally grew out of the peculiar nature and purpose of the society. The fellowship of the disciples grew ever closer and more intimate. They were consciously bound together by other than those ties which bound the disciples of a teacher to the master and to each other. Their deepening discipleship deepened also their fellowship. They were no longer merely fellow-
disciples in a school; they were brothers in a family. And if that
intimate relationship was to be made real and permanent they owed
to each other *forgiveness* and *brotherly love*. The preservation of the
very existence of their society called for these qualities.

When the companionship of the disciples with Jesus began, they
knew little of his personal history; and no special estimate of his person
was required as a condition of companionship. As they witnessed
his marvelous works, and came under the spell of his more marvelous
teaching and personality, questions as to his identity must have
arisen in their minds. He was not like other teachers. Various views
began to be entertained concerning his personal history and character.
There seems to have been extreme reserve between the disciples and
the Master on all questions pertaining to his own personal identity.
References to himself were veiled under terms whose import was not
clear to the disciples. The inevitable question finally forced itself
upon their interviews toward the close of his public ministry, as to
who he was. He finally threw down all reserve and introduced the
subject himself. After asking the disciples the opinion of him held
by men generally, he puts the question to them, “Whom do you say
that I am?” The impression which his personality made upon them
through prolonged association with him was expressed by Peter:
“Thou art the Messiah.” That they had entertained this conviction
for some time before this, cannot be doubted. It had become the
common possession of the company. Now, all their surmises and
hopes had found confirmation in the open avowal of Jesus that he
was the Messiah.

What must have been the effect of this announcement upon the
fellowship of the disciples? If their attachment to him and the
company had been loose before this, it must have been immensely
strengthened after it. All of his past words and deeds must have
taken on new meaning in the light of it. Darkness had been deepen-
ing around the little society in the form of opposition and persecution.
The announcement of his messiahship came at the turning of the
tide, at the crisis of events. Upon the heels of it he foreshadows his
suffering and death. That moment which had brought new hope
and strength to the hearts of the disciples, brought also new trial
to their faith and courage. Events were hastening to the close. The
company must be placed upon a new basis of courage and enthusiasm. They now became the companions of Israel’s Messiah, God’s Son. The moral fellowship is momentarily lifted into a messianic enthusiasm. It is doubtful whether the moral fellowship could have survived the tragedy of ensuing events, merely as a moral fellowship. The messianic faith and hope fortified the society for the crucifixion; while the resurrection restored them once more to courage. When the company emerges from the ordeal of the crucifixion and from the experiences of the forty days following the resurrection, its first utterance is a passionate confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Prince of Life.

III. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MORAL FELLOWSHIP INTO A MESSIANIC FRATERNITY

After the incorporation of the messianic element into the organizing principle of the society, no one could become a member, or long remain a member, without agreeing with the mind of the society. New disciples coming to join the company were confronted with this profound conviction which had been elevated into an enthusiasm. Not only conformity to the moral nature of the community would be imposed, but agreement with this messianic conviction which had been put at the service of the moral task.

No sooner had the messiahship of Jesus been made an open confession in the company than the teaching of Jesus began to assume a new content. It is after that confession that the discourses upon the “last things” appear—the question concerning the end of the age, the parables of judgment, the parousia—all of which were more or less closely connected with the person and reign of the Messiah in the Jewish mind.

When the conviction that Jesus was the Messiah took possession of the disciples, they felt themselves living in the messianic or the last times. Expectation of the immediate dissolution of the world, the coming of the end of the age, the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, were elements in the impending drama, in which their Master should play the leading part, and of which they themselves should be witnesses and participators. They counted themselves fortunate in having access to that secret knowledge of the signs of the times by being members of the messianic community. Only those who
were companions of the Messiah or members of the messianic community were in a position to know these things. How important, therefore, to be members of this community, and stand close to the person of the Messiah. Many persons, upon persuasion that Jesus was the Messiah, would no doubt be eager to join the community for the sake of the information that would give them safety and security from the approaching disaster, without giving heed to the ethical requirements for membership in the community. For, while the absorbing interest had become messianic, the ethical nature of the society had not been lost.

The resurrection of Jesus and the events that led up to his ascension deepened the conviction of the disciples that he was the Messiah. With this burning conviction in their hearts they were all together in one place on the day of Pentecost awaiting the promise of the Spirit. The unusual phenomena attending this meeting drew together a crowd of people curious to witness the strange occurrence and hear what was said. Peter made this concourse of people an occasion for explaining the true nature and meaning of the peculiar frenzy of the disciples. It was, so Peter declared, a fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel concerning the outpouring of the Spirit in the last days, and an immediate realization of the promise of Jesus of Nazareth, a man whom God had approved as the Messiah by signs and wonders, and in raising him from the dead. He closed his address by saying: "Let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified." Before the speaker were, doubtless, many who had witnessed and consented to the death of Jesus; but whether that was true or not of any individual, it was certainly true of the nation as a whole, that they had killed God's Son and their Messiah. Conviction of this awful sin seized upon many in the audience, and they asked what they must do to be saved from the impending consequences of this rejection of the Messiah, and Peter replied, "Repent ye, and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, unto the remission of your sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

The form of Peter's response embodies a history—the history of the development through which the society of Jesus had passed in the process of its integration and therefore segregation in the world.
With Pentecost the terms of membership in the messianic community are fairly well defined, and in the New Testament church are never added to.

It is sometimes said that Pentecost was the birthday of the church. A church was born in the sense that a group of persons became fully conscious of their separation from the world-society around them, and could definitely name the marks of distinction in terms of entrance to their fellowship. Those marks were repentance and messianic baptism.