

## **Christian Education as a Catalyst for Developmental Discipleship in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to reexamine the traditional conceptualization of discipleship to accommodate developmental discipleship and other significant views. This paper seeks to clarify the need for developmental discipleship in light of contrasting opinions of growing disciples in Nigeria. The report also addresses the challenge of spiritual immaturity and proffer how Christian education can promote Christians' spiritual growth. The study is necessitated by the need to raise strong and committed Christians among the younger generation who are being misled to equate materialism with spirituality and growth without minding the sources of their wealth. The present reality is that the church is filled with immature Christians whose walk with God is devoid of knowledge and who easily fall prey to 'gospel ministers' who are wolves in sheep's clothing, who, unfortunately, are taking advantage of these immature Christians' ignorance. Bibliographical and observation through personal involvement in disciple-making are the methodologies employed for the paper. It is discovered that the church in Nigeria is faced with the challenge of immature and unskilled Christians in the knowledge of their expected walk with the Lord. The paper concludes with the need for church leaders to strengthen their educational ministries and be intentional in disciplining believers.

**Key Words:** Christian Education, Catalyst, Developmental Discipleship, Nigeria

## Introduction

Gospel ministers, especially Christian educators, are struggling with the magnitude of the mission of raising believers from infancy to adulthood. As created by the Creator, the natural law asks for development from infancy through adulthood. This idea should also be applied to spiritual topics; young Christians should mature from being infantile in their comprehension of spiritual things and their relationship with God. The decision of the believer to live in obedience to God's word marks the beginning of the life-changing process known as biblical discipleship. The primary task of the church is to carry out Jesus' commission to go and make disciples of all nations. According to Jesus' command, people have to follow him wholeheartedly as he makes decisions for them.

In addition to changing from their previous evil ways, Christ expects individuals to "follow him, committing themselves to him as the Master and Lord."<sup>156</sup> During His earthly ministry, Jesus invited people to follow Him, and they did so by physically following Him on His schedule. How do modern-day Christians anticipate following Jesus? Why is it getting harder and harder for Christians to forsake everything and follow Jesus? Finding the answers to the questions reveals that discipleship requires more than just literal following, as the Gospels claim that it also entails "a μετάνοια (a radical turning around) of lifestyle, worldview, and spiritual direction, a complete self-transformation."<sup>157</sup>

As the source of the power for transformation to living for Him, following Jesus necessitates complete dedication to his life and

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<sup>156</sup> Kayode Oyedemi, "Discipleship" in Emiola Nihinlola, Samuel O. Akintola and Adelokoji O. Ijaola (Eds.) *The Minister's Manual: Biblical, Practical, Contemporary and Comprehensive* Ibadan: Baptist Press Nigeria Ltd. 2019), 192.

<sup>157</sup> John and Mark Kafwanka (Eds.), *Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making: An Anglican Guide for Christian Life and Formation* (London: The Anglican Consultative Council, 2016), 4.

teachings. The phrase "if anyone is in Christ, the old has gone, and the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17) corroborates this assertion. Faith comes by listening to the word of God (the message) and the hearing of the message by Christ's word (Rom 10:17 NIV). Christian education's discipleship activities foster the growth of faith. The teaching ministries of Christian education have, at various times, been crucial in leading believers into maturity through discipleship initiatives.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

Focus on discipleship has become both familiar and relevant among many Christian traditions in light of the unprecedented contemporary challenges, raising the question of the role of the Christian faith in a postmodern world. Some challenges include the constant threat of conflict among nations and peoples, including religious and ethnically motivated violence, increase in economic deprivation among communities, erosion of integrity and widespread corruption in many countries, and the challenge of climate change and environmental degradation, among many others,<sup>158</sup> which demand responses from Christians through the demonstration of their faith in God.

Discipleship means different things to different people, depending on the context in which it is defined. To some, it is a curriculum taught to trainees who want to know more about Jesus, others view it as just one of the church programmes, and others who have a deeper understanding of the concept related to living the life of Jesus Christ in the believer. Kayode Oyedemi delineates between discipleship, discipleship training, and discipleship training programmes in ways akin to the Nigerian Baptist Convention.<sup>159</sup>

Discipleship as a Concept implies living a lifestyle of the Kingdom of God after fully surrendering to Jesus Christ. It is a

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid, xi-xii.

<sup>159</sup> Kayode Oyedemi, "Discipleship" in Emiola Nihinlola, Samuel O. Akintola and Adelokoji O. Ijaola (Eds.), 193

life-long journey that begins at conversion and terminates at physical death on earth, which ushers the believer to an endless eternity with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Discipleship Training is “all the activities directed towards helping a disciple of Christ exhibit Christ-like character.”<sup>160</sup> Different denominations have different training programmes to equip their members for Christ-like living. Roberto Carlos Carmona believes that discipleship is a classroom where new believers will learn institutionalised principles of living.<sup>161</sup> Knowing and understanding God's standards through His word is essential for believers because knowledge is power. This could provide a risk that believers following a curriculum could mistakenly think that following a particular curriculum is the same as being a disciple. After they complete the programme, it is thought that they are already followers of Christ, and it does not matter how they live their lives.

Discipleship Training Programme, according to Oyedemi, is a formal, organised

educational activity designed to help Christians share in the ministry and lifestyle of Jesus.<sup>162</sup> These three activities should go hand-in-hand to help grow disciples in the church.

### **Christian Spiritual Development**

Christian education plays a significant role at the time of conversion of the learner, it is equally important in the post-conversion experience of the learner. The church frequently experiences the need for member conversion without emphasizing the necessity for young believers' spiritual development. Leon Marsh notes that “perhaps this neglect is due to an unconscious assumption that new converts will grow

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup>

<sup>162</sup> Kayode Oyedemi, 193

automatically in the Christian life, or perhaps the neglect is due to the belief that conversion means the learner is born again full grown and matured in Christian behaviour despite the biblical admonitions that new Christians are babes in the Lord.”<sup>163</sup> Conversion and growth are different entities, though one lays the foundation for the other. Many profess to be converted (born again) Christians, yet there is little indication of a transformed life in them. This presents a problem for most churches and Christian communities. Regenerated churchgoers have given their lives to the Lord Jesus and have a heaven-focused perspective. They are sincere followers of Jesus Christ and can be used by God to build up His church.<sup>164</sup> A newly born-again life submits to and is joined to Christ. It is a style of life that is governed by the will of the power of the cross, a life of total conversion from the old ways of sin and self to living in accordance with Christ's teachings.<sup>165</sup>

Discipleship is an experience that should be reflected in every aspect of believers' lives. John Kafwanka and Mark noted that "Being a disciple is never about focusing on just one area of our lives, or behaviour, or religious expression. It is about the whole of the life of a Christian and the Christian community.”<sup>166</sup> The quantity of discipleship lessons read is one way some Christians gauge their spiritual growth. The indicators of developmental discipleship cannot be based on books or discipleship curricula (although these promote growth if the learner implements the lesson) but rather on how well a believer

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<sup>163</sup> Leon Mash, *Educational Psychology for Christian Educator* (Forth Worth, Texas: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982), 8

<sup>164</sup> Olaleye Z. A. K. (2012). *Strategy for Church Growth* (Lagos: Life and Ministry Publications, 2012), 76

<sup>165</sup> Olayinka Bamidele, *At the Master's Feet* (Lagos: Israel Abbey & Co. Ltd. 2022), 99–100.

<sup>166</sup> John and Mark Kafwanka (Eds.), *Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making: An Anglican Guide for Christian Life* and Roberto Carlos Carmona, "Create a Vibrant Church Body" in Philip W. Barnes et. al (Eds.). *The Abandoned Gospel: Confronting Neo-Pentecostalism and the Prosperity Gospel in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Npp: AB316 2021), 243 *Formation*, 6

applies God's word to their daily lives. Young Christians are led through many experiences to establish a strong foundation to spread their fruits throughout the world. They are "deep" individuals whose lives revolve around Christ's teachings. "Deep people are those whose lives are organised around Jesus, his character, his call to a serving life, and his death on the cross for their sins."<sup>167</sup> Jesus used the following three strategies to broaden and deepen his disciples' understanding during his earthly ministry:

**Emulation:** This is a situation where the disciple tries to mimic

everything that his master does his thoughts, speech, eating habits, and flawless living due to their unwavering belief in their rabbi.<sup>168</sup> Paul's statement in Philippians 3:10-11 that "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (NIV) is an affirmation of imitating Christ. For people to understand the Christ that contemporary followers are living for, they should be instructed to imitate Christ in everything.

**Information:** Jesus did not teach in a formal setting. He was a mobile

teacher, using real-world scenarios as his lesson plan. Everything he taught had a practical application; whether they were proverbs, allegories, or examples, they served a certain function. For his master and friends, an ignorant pupil will be a catastrophe. Although the planned curriculum cannot be used to substitute Christ's life, it is necessary to teach the disciples how to carry out the life of the Kingdom if they are to do so. To be applied to one's activities, the lessons must be

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<sup>167</sup> Gordon MacDonald "Going Deep: Cultivating People of Spiritual Depth is a Pastor's Priority" in *Leadership Journal*, 2011), 73.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. 75

connected to what is happening in the disciple's workplace and society.

**Examination: as Rabbis provided testing times,<sup>169</sup> Jesus also tested and**

examined his disciples' degree of growth by presenting them with various challenges and inquiries. For instance, he questioned their level of trust when they encountered the sea storm. He questioned the disciples, "What do you have to feed the multitude?" before feeding 5000 men. He reprimanded the disciples' doubt and reminded them of the feeding of 5000 men when they complained about not having any bread with them. When Peter objected to Jesus being killed, Jesus scolded him by saying, "Satan, get behind me" (Matt. 16:23).

The disciples were instructed on how to carry out their mission to preach the gospel. When they came back and reported on their adventures, Jesus did not congratulate them to stroke their egos; instead, he realized that God's plan had been fulfilled through their obedience and that Satan had been vanquished; Jesus then said to them, "Let's go to the other side to rest." Jesus informed the disciples that they were now his friends and that he could tell them the deeper truths of the Kingdom since they were reliable friends. He committed the assignment of extending the Kingdom of God into their hands. Unless the disciples are examined and found worthy, they cannot move to the next level of assignment. It takes disciples who are "deep" in their relationship with the Lord to pass the test whenever they are examined through different life's challenges.

**Marks of Developmental Discipleship**

The goal of spiritual development is enunciated by apostle Paul in one of his discourses on the grace of spiritual gifts in the

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 76

church, when he states, "... until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and becomes mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph 4: 13-14).

Spirituality in God's measurement of men is completely different from that of humans. God taught Prophet Samuel this lesson in his misconceived judgment about the elderly sons of Jesse when he was instructed by God to anoint a new king in replacement of King Saul. 1 Samuel 16:6-7 states that:

When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (NIV).

Believers' behaviour, whether in private or public, will be influenced by the condition of their hearts. God places high value on a person's heart condition in their daily walk; if a Christian lacks spiritual maturity, they will always be considered infants as long as they are still in an immature stage of development.

The first indicator of developmental discipleship is the extent to which a believer yields to the Holy Spirit's direction, instruction, and revelation of God's Word. Conn Joann and Walter noted that spiritual growth requires having a self in order to sacrifice its interests. In other words, it is the criterion of the authentic sacrifice of having the possibility of genuine self-transcendence. If one has developed to the stage of adult independence for the sake of deeper relationships, one can freely sacrifice self-

interest for the sake of more inclusive love.<sup>170</sup> Disobedience is a clog in the wheel of spiritual growth of any believer.

The second indicator of developmental discipleship is the degree to which a believer matures into living a consecrated lifestyle, a life of holiness and sanctification in the midst of a perverse and morally bankrupt generation, with or without supervision. This says a lot about the believer's spiritual maturity.

The third mark of spiritual development is the extent to which the believer firmly holds to their conviction about the teachings of the Lord Jesus without compromise anywhere. Tyson laments the statistics that indicate that believers and non-believers live almost identical lives: similar sexual ethics, spending patterns, and lifestyle choices.<sup>171</sup> The culture around believers is constantly at war with the teachings of the word of God and convictions about God's standards. Post-modernism, with all its perversions, is taking a toll on humanity. The expectation of a mature Christian is that he or she will take a strong stance against the society that prevents them from the Lord Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, shaping people into a "worldly mold is regarded as the normalisation of the individual."<sup>172</sup> The forces of education, media, marketing, economics, sexuality, religion, etc., are welding their influence powerfully that people's thoughts, and actions, are contributing to the normalisation of humans, including the church, weakening Christians' resistance against worldly standards, as stated by Jesus in John 17:16.

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<sup>170</sup> Conn, Joann Wolski and Walter E. Conn, *Christian Spiritual Growth and Developmental Psychology*  
[https://www.theway.org.uk/Back/s069WolskiConn.pdf/Christian Spiritual Growth and Developmental Psychology](https://www.theway.org.uk/Back/s069WolskiConn.pdf/Christian%20Spiritual%20Growth%20and%20Developmental%20Psychology) (theway.org.uk) Date Accessed: 19<sup>th</sup> January 2022.

<sup>171</sup> Jon Tyson, "Breaking the Mold: Christian Formation Means not Letting the World Press Us into Its Mold" in *Leadership Journal*, (2011), 47

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid*, 48

The fourth mark of developmental discipleship is the extent of the disciple's reproduction, that is, their evangelistic life that brings others into the kingdom of God. A productive disciple is committed to service in the Lord's vineyard within and outside the confines of the church auditorium. Ruth Oyeniyi opines that as believers grow in their faith, they need to share their faith with other people.<sup>173</sup> The command to go into the world and preach the gospel should be heeded by every growing disciple of Jesus Christ.

The fifth mark of developmental discipleship is the extent of the believer's perseverance in trials and persecution without backing out from following the Lord. Despite a warning through prophecy that Apostle Paul would be arrested and severely persecuted in Jerusalem, it did not change his mind from going to Jerusalem to fulfil his vow at the temple. Persecution of Christians is growing at an alarming rate in some countries where followers of Christ are denied their rights, and some have been martyred. It takes a courageous, determined, and mature believer to take their ground for Christ without wavering.

The level of the disciple's conformity to Christ's image and rejection of worldliness in all its manifestations is the sixth indicator of developmental discipleship. The world and everything in it should not be loved more than God by believers. Jesus states that "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world, the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does come not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:15-17). The world's standard rebels against the lifestyle of God's kingdom in all ramifications;

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<sup>173</sup> Ruth M. Oyeniyi, *Shepherding the Shepherd: A Discipleship Manual for Gospel Ministers* (Ibadan: Baptist Press, Nig. Limited. 2019), 101.

hence, growing disciples are expected to abide by the standard of God's Kingdom.

### **Purposeful Discipline for Developmental Discipleship**

Apostle Paul's letter to Roman believers is an admonition to exercise discipline if they would enjoy healthy spiritual growth. He states: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is- his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:2). Taylor describes this admonition as a process that involves both a disciplined action (do not conform") and an inner point of change ("be transformed" in your mind). These lead to a relational insight with God, knowing his good, perfect, and pleasing will.<sup>174</sup>

Spiritual disciplines are activities that propel believers into spiritual maturity. Spiritual disciplines are habits believers cultivate over time that aid their spiritual development. According to Whitney, Spiritual disciplines are those scriptural activities that encourage believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ to grow spiritually. These are the devotional practices and hands-on Christian experiences that have been practised by the people of God since biblical times.<sup>175</sup> The biblical impetus for discipline is in 1 Timothy 4:7, where Paul instructed Timothy to "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (NASB). The desire to be godly or like Christ in all things is present in a developing disciple and is made feasible through discipline.

Spiritual disciplines can be regarded as a set of activities to be engaged in order to fuel the believer's intimacy with the Lord Jesus Christ. "Disciplines are practices, not character

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<sup>174</sup> Nick Taylor, "Spiritual Formation: Nurturing Spiritual Vitality" in Michael J. Anthony (Ed.) *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-first Century*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.2000, 92.

<sup>175</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Discipline for the Christian Life*, Revised and Updated. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 4

qualities, graces, or “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22-23). Disciplines are things the believer does such as reading, meditating, praying, fasting, worshipping, serving, learning, et cetera<sup>176</sup> Richard Foster identified thirteen areas of disciplines which are grouped into three: the inward disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting study), the outward disciplines (simplicity, solitude, submission, service), and corporate disciplines (confession, worship, guidance, celebration).<sup>177</sup> Though these disciplines may appear tough for some believers, it is a worthwhile venture for those who are serious about their spiritual development. Nick Taylor opines that reviving the spiritual disciplines in the lives of disciples will be a life-changing process.<sup>178</sup> It provides the opportunity to grow intimately vertically and horizontally. Vertically, disciples will overcome sin through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, gain insight into the word of God and grow in their love toward others.

### **Growth Metaphor in Developmental Discipleship**

The faith that the believer receives is a growing faith because God is a God of growth. In order to achieve this, 2 Peter 1:5-11 illustrates the progressive walk of whoever wants to be the disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, stating that the believer is expected to add to his or her faith:

Goodness: literally, “virtue,” or moral excellence; knowledge - as understanding drawn from God’s revelation. Self-control: the ability to “hold yourself in.” Perseverance: as steadfastness in the face of opposition. Godliness: as conduct that shows we are aware of God's presence. Brotherly kindness is a real

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<sup>176</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Discipline for the Christian Life*, 4

<sup>177</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 97.

<sup>178</sup> Nick Taylor, 97.

affection for our fellow Christians, and love: is a real commitment to do good to others<sup>179</sup>

The goal of possessing these qualities is to “keep believers from being ineffective and unproductive in their knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 1:8). It is unlikely that someone who is fully dedicated to living for Jesus will be persuaded to follow false teachers or false teaching. Instead, the more susceptible is an ambivalent and indifferent Christian. The author encountered a young convert while working as a missionary in Ijebu, Ogun State, Nigeria. He had constantly “laid the foundation” of his Christian life for several years but refused to develop. Alcohol, cigarettes, and other bad habits that endangered his spiritual growth were the only things that were built on this basis. When Christians neglect to consciously practice spiritual disciplines, their spiritual growth becomes stagnant. Tony Evans defines discipleship as a developmental process that progressively brings Christians from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity so that they can reproduce the process with someone else.<sup>180</sup> Christian living requires growth in all facets of one's life rather than being static or endlessly laying a foundation. Jesus “understood discipleship as a multidimensional phenomenon” because he anticipated growth and output from his disciples.<sup>181</sup> Growth is expected in the following areas of believers:

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<sup>179</sup> Roger E. Dickson, *Dickson's Teacher's Bible: International King James Version with Commentary and Encyclopedic Study Guide*. Cape Town: Africa International Mission, 2011), 1694.

<sup>180</sup> Tony Evans, *Discipleship*, (<https://go.tonyevans.org/hs/fs/hub/151312/file-274270735-pdf/ebooks/discipleshipbook-tonyevans.pdf>) Date Accessed: 7th January, 2022.

<sup>181</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 135.

## Spiritual Life

A conversion experience that results in a personal encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ serves as the cornerstone of spiritual development. In their conversation, Jesus informed Nicodemus that "a man cannot see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). Wilkins corroborates that growth as a disciple is dependent upon regeneration through the Spirit. The Spirit will also produce continual, spontaneous growth from within.<sup>182</sup> The idea of being religious is not in agreement with Jesus' position on spirituality. Unfortunately, what some churchgoers consider to be spiritual is simply being religious without any discernible development in one's spiritual life. The disciple's change comes from within, as the Holy Spirit works on the believer's heart to bring about transformation. The cultivation and growth of spiritual disciplines are made possible by the Holy Spirit as the believer yields to Him. The thirst for and hunger after righteous living, reading, studying, and meditation in the word of God, praying, solitude, fasting, "worship, celebration, service, fellowship, confession and submission"<sup>183</sup> are made possible by the Holy Spirit.

A developing disciple will carry his cross daily as he weighs the price of following the Master. Without denying oneself, one cannot follow Jesus and please God. The growth that is stunted will reveal immaturity, a lack of knowledge of spiritual matters, and a tangible propensity to fall for false teachers' ideas. Anyone who chooses to follow God is expected to be fully committed, even to the point of death. Michael J. Wilkins asserts that if someone was accused of being a Christian during a time of persecution, they might repudiate the name of Jesus and be freed. The people who persisted in claiming to be followers of Jesus showed that their faith was genuine. Their vindication of loyalty to the Name, the reality of the Christian life, and

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<sup>182</sup> Tony Evans, *Discipleship*, 135

<sup>183</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes* (San Francisco, California: HarperOne, 1988), 158.

Christian service were the ultimate proof that they were sincere followers.<sup>184</sup> The Holy Spirit's work within a believer makes it easy to live a life of discipleship although it comes with a high price that may include martyrdom if the situation calls for it. A disciple is "one who in every area of his life determines from the Scripture what is right and lives it consistently rather than allowing circumstances to shape his conduct."<sup>185</sup> Disciples can grow in their faith through nurture and prayer.

### **Ethical Life**

Making moral choices is pertinent to every disciple. Living an ethical life implies following God's standard of loving God and neighbours without any reservations. "Christian discipleship involves actively pursuing justice, mercy, and compassion in the world."<sup>186</sup> Believers are called to be salt and light in the world. Stott notes that "the ethical life of Christian discipleship challenges us to live in radical obedience to God's commands, even when it goes against the cultural norms."<sup>187</sup> Through yielding to the Holy Spirit, each disciple is able to live out moral convictions in a world that is full of darkness.

### **Community Life**

According to the proverb, nobody is an island. The encouragement to stay in the church body is for Christian fellowship. The Bible records that the early church treasured community life and that they were present, shared interests, travelled from home to home, fellowshiped, and shared meals. Growth occurs as believers gather in fellowship; sharing ideas,

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<sup>184</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus*, 325.

<sup>185</sup> Walter A. Henrichsen, *Disciples are Made, not Born*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books. 1989), 32.

<sup>186</sup> Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2006), 127.

<sup>187</sup> Stott, John, *The Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2010), 23).

the anointing, and the direction of more experienced believers will assist the younger believers in maturing. “When learners who are being taught practice new attitudes and actions and share each other’s experiences, there’s a mysterious bond that is naturally developed.”<sup>188</sup> This bond is regarded as a community of shared life, history, and experiences. It is vital for disciples’ spiritual growth even though it is not imposed on them.

### **Developmental Discipleship through Christian Education**

Christian education significantly contributes to the promotion of discipleship by offering an organized setting for learning, spiritual development, and the cultivation of Christian character. Christian education is Christ-centered, Bible-based, pupil-related, a process of communicating God’s written word through the power of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of leading pupils to Christ and building them up in Christ.<sup>189</sup> Christian education is saddled with the responsibility of providing educational activities in the church. The educational ministry of the church belongs to the very nature of the church. Removal of educational ministry will jeopardize the existence of the church.

After the gathering of the converts at Pentecost, the church devoted themselves to the instruction given by the apostles, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. Discipleship is a learning process that combines faith and knowledge. The intellectual objective of structuring the mind so a person may see things as they truly are and building the belief framework that should underpin both the individual and corporate life of discipleship to Jesus is the spiritual goal of integration. Without proper discipleship training, the Christian becomes

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<sup>188</sup> Nick Taylor, “Spiritual Formation: Nurturing Spiritual Vitality, 97

<sup>189</sup> Stan Carder, *A Committed Mercy: You and Your Church Can Serve the Disabled*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 79.

immature in thought, understanding, and relationships and lacks sufficient knowledge of God through His word.

Christian education involves discipleship training with new “member orientation” to enable them to live and serve effectively as church members. Christian education deals with the growth and development of individual believers, equipping them to function as Christians in all aspects of life.<sup>190</sup> Without this training, many will be immature and lack an understanding of the call of God to salvation.

Christian education equips church members with knowledge through discipleship training on doctrinal issues such as “Christian theology and church doctrines, Christian ethics and Christian history, and church polity and organization.”<sup>191</sup> Such studies will deepen the disciple’s knowledge of biblical teachings, God’s ideals for living, the revelation of God in Christ, and the organization of church members. The systematic curriculum of Christian education ensures that both new and old believers have a full grasp of the contents of their faith and are able to defend it whenever the occasion demands it.

An educational ministry is a veritable tool for the well-rounded spiritual development of believers in the church. Through it, church members’ knowledge of the Bible increases, and they are taught how its truths can be applied to life events. The acquisition of knowledge or wisdom for its own sake is not the goal of Christian education; rather, the application of the knowledge acquired. The purpose of Christian education is to “enhance the Christian ability to live life at the highest possible level and to help those around the believer do the same.”<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Jerry M. Stubblefield, *The Effective Minister of Education: A Comprehensive Handbook* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1993), 151

<sup>191</sup> Ibid

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 168

### **The Challenge of Discipleship of Contemporary Christians**

Two types of disciples have emerged from history: those who are legalistic, that is, those struggling with perfectionism, and those who are complacent. These have influenced believers' growth over generations and have also informed how disciplers handle their disciples. Legalistic discipleship strongly emphasises rigorous conformity to rules, laws, and external actions as the main indicators of spiritual development and righteousness. Instead of fostering a close, intimate connection with God, legalistic discipleship frequently emphasises following a set of prescribed laws, rituals, or norms.

Following the norms and restrictions set forth in order to be considered God-pleasing frequently leads to hypocrisy. The Pharisees are renowned for being good legalistic groups of individuals who interpreted the Law to serve their purposes and demanded that people adhere to specific rites and traditions, many of which are challenging to uphold. A well-known Nigerian sect with a reputation for a legalistic stance once published a document on rules and regulations guiding the type and style of clothing their members are expected to wear, the manner of tying head wears by female worshippers. Rules were also made on relationships with unbelieving family members, and other characteristic features of that denomination. Even though the denomination is changing its legalistic viewpoint, some of its members continue to hold legalistic views rather than those of followers of Jesus Christ. The danger that this could provide to Christians, according to Michael J. Wilkins is the idea that one can earn God's favor by being virtuous or acting morally.<sup>193</sup>

The church today is buzzing with discipleship-related study activities. Various discipleship study resources are being released all throughout the world. Many members of the church, both Christians and non-Christians, hold the mistaken

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<sup>193</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, 1992), 351

belief that, regardless of how they live, as long as they have completed the discipleship programs, they are already followers of Jesus Christ. Some local churches in Nigeria have gone so far as to require that any member who wants to work for the church complete specific discipleship training programs. The understanding and goal of discipleship are defeated since such equates discipleship as a prerequisite for church workers. Since they want to become one, some join discipleship programs without striving to become like Jesus Christ.

Ruth M. Oyenyi notes that discipleship is being rather than doing. It is not based on rules or academic activities but rather a lifestyle of total commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.<sup>194</sup> Some denominations even went as far as to provide participants with certificates of completion, which are included in the curriculum vitae and created whenever they apply for jobs inside the religion. The church must return to the original goal of discipleship, which was to spend time with the Lord Jesus, absorb His teachings, and take on His likeness. The proper development of church members depends on discipleship. Instead, the crowds are concerned with what they can gain from God and are not engaged in living for Him; the church is meant to be populated by disciples. Sanders Oswald reiterates that the purpose of God's call to men is discipleship and service.<sup>195</sup>

Purposive discipleship is a three-pronged fork: spiritual formation, ministry, and spiritual awakening. Robert Jr. M. Mulholland relates the Christian journey to a process, a continuous process that does not stop at a point to be picked up at the other end. One may be tempted to think it is an option

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<sup>194</sup> Ruth M. Oyenyi, *Shepherding the Shepherd: A Discipleship Manual for Gospel Ministers* (Ibadan: Baptist Press Nig. Limited, 2019), 70.

<sup>195</sup> Sanders Oswald, *Spiritual Discipleship: Principles of Following Christ for Every Believer*. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1994), 7

one can take or leave.<sup>196</sup> The quest for the committed disciple, a richer life in Christ is seen as a discipline.

Purposive discipleship focuses on developing personal ministry, which is aimed at perfecting the saints for the purpose of carrying out ministry tasks and strengthening the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12). Purposive discipleship's focus is spiritual awakening. Mulholland submits that holistic spiritual awakening is a two-sided experience: an encounter with the living God and one true self.<sup>197</sup>

The second type of discipleship is complacent discipleship which is a passive or indifferent approach to spiritual or religious activity. It entails a lack of sincere adherence to, zeal for, or active participation in one's walk with Jesus Christ. A superficial or stagnant religious experience can be the outcome of complacent discipleship, which can also limit the good effects of faith on people and communities. Such Christians claim to be saved but have no time to learn from the Lord through their denominations or are not interested. Most of these Christians are situated within what Matthews A Ojo refers to as Neo-Pentecostalism denominations, though not limited to them alone. These denominations are need-driven as they address the problems of poverty, joblessness, demonic oppression, and health-related challenges, and on the other hand, stress success and accomplishments as signs of spiritual attainments.<sup>198</sup> Ojo emphatically regards this as promoting "a religion that is market-oriented, success-driven, very optimistic, imbued with a can-do mentality".<sup>199</sup> The challenge

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<sup>196</sup> Robert Jr. M. Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993, 23), 81

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Matthews A. Ojo, "An Overview of the History of Neo-Pentecostalism in Africa" in Philip W. Barnes et. al (Eds.). *The Abandoned Gospel: Confronting Neo-Pentecostalism and the Prosperity Gospel in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Npp: AB316, 2021), 13.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid. 25

this poses to the church is that materialism is equated with spiritual well-being. Since the leaders of such churches do not take their members through discipleship training, the members get involved in whatever will bring money in order to be seen as prospering, as Apostle John expressed in his epistle (3 John 2), and probably occupy important positions in the church.

A Nigerian Pastor was once tagged “Pastor of Thieves” by The *NEWS Magazine* in 2003. It was reported that:

A cashier with the Lagos Sheraton Hotels and Towers stole his employers’ ₦39 million and donated it in instalments to the church. On account of his generosity to his ministry, the church wrote the cashier a letter of commendation personally signed by the Pastor, who concluded it with “God will notice you”. But it was the police who noticed the cashier and got him arrested, to the embarrassment of the whole church. A few months later, another church member donated stolen ₦10million to the church.<sup>200</sup>

Many Christians and their leaders have fallen away from the faith as a result of equating materialism with spirituality. When church leaders are worried about the sources of wealth of their congregants, congregants will exercise caution when pursuing riches by whatever means. Sadly, many people celebrate them than look into them.

The challenge of complacency in spiritual development is linked to what Jesus Christ described as lukewarmness in Revelation 3:16: He challenged the Laodicean church that “...you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold...” To be spiritually complacent is to avoid the way of the cross, which demands self-denial and only seeks the benefits of being a Christian. Evan Dixon opines

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<sup>200</sup> *NEWS Magazine*. Nigeria’s Top 10 Church Scandals, [https://newsbreak.ng/Nigeria’s Top 10 Church Scandals - Newsbreak.ng](https://newsbreak.ng/Nigeria’s%20Top%20Church%20Scandals), Accessed Date: 8<sup>th</sup> January 2022.

that complacent disciples “take advantage of the Lord's abundant mercies without giving Him what he demands and deserves: *absolute obedience*.”<sup>201</sup> The danger this poses is the deceptive attitude that all is well and any teaching on dying to self and worldly passions or any challenge for them to grow into maturity is construed to be an extremist idea that they consider to fall short of the grace of God.

Active discipleship is the way between these two extremes of discipleship. It is a passionate and committed study of one's faith, continual education, charitable work, and a sincere desire to uphold one's spiritual discipline. The author of the classic book on *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer asserts that “Expensive grace is presented to us as a kind invitation to follow Jesus; it is a word of pardon for the remorseful and brokenhearted. Costly because it forces a man to follow Christ and submit to his yoke; gracious because Jesus says, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”<sup>202</sup> Active discipleship is Jesus' model for nurturing and training his followers.

### **Conclusion**

Developmental discipleship is a practical Christian living concept marked by consistent spiritual development. Discipleship is neither legalistic nor complacent, but rather active, a consistent exemplifying lifestyle of Christ. In things of the spirit, there is no room for wavering; either one is developing or deteriorating, which leads to death or apostasy. Immaturity deprives the believer of the advantages of the Kingdom and could turn them into puppets in the hands of the devil and his henchmen. Christian education may close the knowledge and service gap by assisting and directing Christians to advance in

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<sup>201</sup> Evan Dixon, “The Life of Discipleship”  
<https://thelifeofdiscipleship.blogspot.com/2006/06/> Date Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> January 2022.

<sup>202</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1949), 66.

their daily walk with the Lord Jesus Christ and by using obstacles they face in life as learning opportunities. Through its Christian education ministry, the church is tasked with developing channels for purposefully discipling its members.

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