

## “Discipleship”: Clarifying Terms in the New Testament and Secondary Literature

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**Abstract:** *Contemporary discussions about the mission of the church and the activity of Christians center on the concept of “discipleship,” but the term proves confusing if not defined and deployed with clarity. Authors use “discipleship” to describe a variety of activities ranging from personally following Jesus to helping others follow Jesus; moreover, some take “discipleship” to be synonymous with terms like “disciple-making” or “discipling” while others seek to distinguish the terms. Further complicating the issue, “discipleship” does not correspond to a particular word in the NT. Consequently, it is deployed by authors to encompass a diverse group of NT words, often with no criteria stated for how those terms relate to the concept of discipleship. There is no single category, much less a single term, under which these concepts can be subsumed. And perhaps that is one of the reasons that the term “discipleship” has taken on the function of being the overarching term for Christians helping other Christians grow, even if the term itself is not prominent in the NT. This article describes the terminological problem, demonstrates the breadth of NT terms describing the activity of helping others follow Jesus, and finally proposes a way forward in the use of these key terms.*

**Key Words:** *disciple, disciple-making, discipleship, Great Commission, preaching, teaching*

The term, “discipleship,” holds a prominent place in most discussions of the church’s mission. Every year Christian publishers roll out new discipleship resources. Conferences and journals use “discipleship” in their titles, and churches include staff who are given the title “Pastor of/for Discipleship.” While most churchgoers would readily recognize “discipleship” as a common term, we are concerned that its use as an all-encompassing and often-undefined term for all things related to Christian growth has the potential to create confusion and sideline other significant NT terms.

One challenge with this popular Christian terminology is that

“discipleship” is a term that is not lexically connected to a particular word in the NT.<sup>1</sup> There is no Greek word that corresponds directly to “discipleship” nor does “discipleship” appear in modern English translations. But that observation, in itself, does not invalidate the term. It does, however, demand that we give special attention to how the term is used so that we can ensure that it is used in a “biblical” manner, accurately describing and summarizing biblical texts. The challenges are compounded by the variegated uses of “discipleship” in English writing. In contemporary Christian literature, “discipleship” can refer to faithfully living the Christian life, making converts, and what Christians do to help other Christians live the Christian life.<sup>2</sup> The various definitions are drawing on concepts in the NT, specifically the terms for being a “disciple” of Jesus and “making disciples” of others, both of which have corresponding words in the Greek NT: *μαθητής* and *μαθητεύω*. To muddy the waters further, some authors use the terms “discipling,” “discipleship,” or “disciple-making” for the very same actions of Christians helping other Christians live the Christian life.<sup>3</sup> Some authors have noted the challenges created by ill-defined terms. Mark Dever, for example, seeks to clarify this

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<sup>1</sup> The term discipleship is derived from the common Latin word, *discipulus* meaning student or follower. The English suffix “-ship” typically refers to the state or quality of something. So if etymology were determinative, and it rarely is, “discipleship” would refer to the state of being a student.

<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Wilkins seeks to clarify terminology, “In common parlance, *discipleship* and *discipling* today relate to the ongoing life of the disciple. *Discipleship* is the ongoing process of growth as a disciple. *Discipling* implies the responsibility of disciples helping one another grow as disciples.... Thus, when we speak of Christian discipleship and discipling we are speaking of what it means to grow as a Christian in every area of life. Since *disciple* is a common referent for *Christian*, discipleship and discipling imply the process of becoming like Jesus Christ. Discipleship and discipling mean living a full human life in this world in union with Jesus Christ and growing in conformity to his image” (*Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 41).

<sup>3</sup> The titles of a few popular books illustrate these variegated uses. The writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, although being translated from the German, demand mention because of the immense influence they have on contemporary English usage. His work, entitled *Nachfolge*, has been translated into English initially as *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1959) and more recently as *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 4, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003). The German word communicates the general concept of “following” Jesus, and it has come into English as “discipleship.” Mark Dever clarifies the scope of his work with the title, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016). Discipling, for Dever, is the activity of Christians in helping others grow spiritually.

terminological issue:

That’s the working definition of *discipling* for this book: helping others to follow Jesus. You can see it in the subtitle. Another way we could define discipling might be: discipling is deliberately doing spiritual good to someone so that he or she will be more like Christ. *Disciple-ship* is the term I use to describe our own following Christ. *Discipling* is the subset of that, which is helping someone else follow Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Dever’s book is quite helpful, but his approach illustrates another challenge with this topic. He makes a distinction between discipleship (which he defines as following Christ) and discipling (which he defines as helping others follow Christ). When he begins to discuss discipling, Matthew 28 (which uses the term “to disciple” or “to make disciples”) is the launching point, but the discussion of discipling is substantiated through the NT Epistles without lexical reference to the term “discipling.” This is unavoidable, but it is important to note that even among authors who are very careful with their terms, there are not always clean ties to particular NT words.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Dever, *Discipling*, 13 (emphasis original). Fernando F. Segovia provides further insight into how the term was defined at a symposium dedicated to the NT topic: “First of all, the term ‘discipleship’ quite clearly admits of a narrow as well as a broader definition. In the former sense, it is to be understood technically and exclusively in terms of the ‘teacher’ / ‘disciple’ relationship with all its accompanying and derivative terminology (for example, ‘following’ or ‘on the way’). Such a restricted usage would have limited the symposium of necessity to a re-examination of the evidence in the Gospels and Acts as well as the pre-Gospel tradition. In the latter sense, discipleship would be understood more generally in terms of Christian existence—that is, the self-understanding of the early Christian believers as believers: what such a way of life requires, implies, and entails. Such a wider usage would then apply across the entire spectrum of the New Testament writings” (“Introduction: Call and Discipleship—Toward a Re-examination of the Shape and Character of Christian Existence in the New Testament,” in *Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 2). See also the clarifying comments by Richard N. Longnecker, “Introduction,” in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longnecker, McMaster New Testament Studies (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 1–7.

<sup>5</sup> Wilkins claims, “The consensus in the history of the church—ancient and modern—is that the concept of discipleship is apparent everywhere in the New Testament, from Matthew to Revelation. While methods of inquiry vary, virtually all scholars agree that the concept of discipleship is present everywhere in the New Testament in related terminology, teachings, and metaphors” (*Following the Master*, 293). The question, of course, becomes how one determines what concepts constitute “discipleship” apart from the lexical connection.

This brief introduction has highlighted four challenges with the term “discipleship.” (1) “Discipleship” is used in various ways in English. (2) “Discipleship” (like most every word with a semantic range) overlaps with other English terms, such as “discipling” and “disciple-making.” (3) “Discipleship” does not correspond to any particular Greek term. (4) “Discipleship,” as it appears in popular writing, encompasses a diverse group of Greek words, often with no criteria stated for how those terms relate to “discipleship.” The approach of this article is to answer the following questions: How are “discipleship” and cognate terms used in the secondary literature? What are the NT terms describing the concept of “discipleship”? What are the implications?

### How Are “Discipleship” and Cognate Terms Used in the Secondary Literature?

An oft-repeated observation about preaching is that a mist in the pulpit produces a fog in the pew. Similarly, lack of clarity in writing about discipleship affects the pulpit and thus confuses the pew. A brief, selective survey of recent literature intended to clarify the church’s task of discipleship illustrates various and sometimes confusing usage of the word “discipleship.” We are not claiming that these works are unhelpful (on the contrary, these are some of the most helpful and influential works in the field) or that every author is unclear. We merely intend to illustrate the tension and ambiguity with how “discipleship” is often deployed. As an illustrative overview, this is not exhaustive, so we have chosen some of the most influential and trajectory-setting works.

#### Robert Coleman

Robert Coleman greatly influenced the course of modern discussions about discipleship, particularly through his seminal work, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*.<sup>6</sup> Even the title of that work raises questions concerning how it became so influential in conversations about discipleship. Coleman’s

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<sup>6</sup> Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1963). Coleman’s work is in the line of A. B. Bruce’s class work, *The Training of the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971). The original subtitle captures Bruce’s thesis: “Passages out of the Gospels Exhibiting the Twelve Disciples of Jesus Under Discipline for the Apostleship.” Bruce painstakingly traces Jesus’s work with the twelve apostles from “occasional companions” to those chosen “to be witnesses in the world after He Himself had left it” (13–14). Most interestingly, Bruce avoids proscribing a detailed, lockstep training strategy on Jesus’s part, but rather one of “unsystematic” and “occasional” lessons drawn from “the simple fact of being . . . with such a one as Jesus” (299).

basic approach is to apply Jesus’s ministry strategies to the work of the church today. Yet, there persists within Coleman’s work confusion concerning the relationship between evangelism and discipleship.<sup>7</sup> Coleman declares a goal of correcting problems in “evangelistic methods” by looking at the four Gospels for the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. Note Coleman’s explicit emphasis on evangelism while using phrases (e.g., “follow the way”) that are more commonly associated with discipleship: these patterns “teach us how to follow the way of the Master” which in turn becomes a “textbook on evangelism.”<sup>8</sup>

Some twenty-five years later, Coleman penned a follow-up book entitled *The Master Plan of Discipleship*.<sup>9</sup> In *The Master Plan of Discipleship*, he describes his former work: “Years ago I sought to trace the underlying strategy of Jesus’s personal ministry.... That study in the four Gospels deduced some basic principles of *discipleship* by observing how our Lord ordered his life, my conviction being that his way established guidelines for his disciples to follow.”<sup>10</sup> Ironically, Coleman describes a book he titled *The Master Plan of Evangelism* as “basic principles of discipleship” in his introduction to a second book he has titled *The Master Plan of Discipleship*. So what accounts for the difference in titles? While he does not treat evangelism and discipleship as synonymous, Coleman does emphasize their interconnectedness: “it follows that whatever form our evangelism takes, winning and training disciples to disciple others must have preeminence.”<sup>11</sup> Coleman’s two “Master” works also begin to introduce us to the implications of selecting a particular subset of the NT. Other than the titles, the major difference between Coleman’s two books is the first’s use of Jesus’s personal discipleship training, whereas the second uses the early church in the book of Acts as a pattern for Great Commission ministry.

### Bill Hull

Bill Hull’s influence on the discussions about discipleship is evident in

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<sup>7</sup> Reverend Paul Rees, writing the introduction to *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, distinguishes between “evangelistic specialists” like Moody, Sunday, or Graham and what he refers to as “disciple making” carried out by church and para-church ministries. Making an even sharper distinction between the two concepts, Rees differentiates “between the gospel to which we bear testimony and the life which the gospel enables us to live.” Rees’s introduction begs the question whether the book is focused on the former or the latter.

<sup>8</sup> Coleman, *Master Plan of Evangelism*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship*, 14–15 (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship*, 107.

the number of books he has published on the topic: *The Disciple-Making Pastor* (1988), *The Disciple-Making Church* (1990), *Jesus Christ Disciplemaker* (2004), *The Complete Book of Discipleship* (2006), *Conversion and Discipleship* (2016), *The Cost of Cheap Grace: Reclaiming the Value of Discipleship* (2020), and with Ben Sobels, *The Discipleship Gospel* (2018).<sup>12</sup> What is immediately clear even from Hull’s titles is that he is seeking to define his terms. For example, the longer titles of both his 1988 and 1990 works describe disciple-making as leading others in the journey of faith. For the sake of clarity in his earlier works, Hull uses the terms “discipling” or “disciple-making” instead of “discipleship,” which is the more flexible and thus vaguer term. When Hull does use the term “discipleship,” he tends to use it as a more inclusive term.<sup>13</sup> The fuller title of his 2006 book illustrates this more inclusive use: *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ*. There are several definitions of terms implied in that title that he makes explicit in the book. “A disciple, then, is the normal Christian who follows Christ.”<sup>14</sup> “Simply, discipleship means learning from and following a teacher.”<sup>15</sup> He goes on to clarify, “*Discipleship*, the widely accepted term that describes the ongoing life of the disciple, also describes the broader Christian experience.”<sup>16</sup> Hull uses the term “disciple-making” to describe the activity of creating and forming disciples in three primary dimensions: deliverance (i.e., evangelism), development (i.e., “teaching them to obey”), and deployment (sending the disciple on mission).<sup>17</sup> One of Hull’s contributions to the field is to push for clarity in definitions.

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<sup>12</sup> Bill Hull, *The Disciple-Making Pastor: Leading Others on the Journey of Faith* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1988); *The Disciple-Making Church: Leading a Body of Believers on the Journey of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1990); *Jesus Christ Disciplemaker* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006); *Conversion and Discipleship: You Can’t Have One Without the Other* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016); *The Cost of Cheap Grace: Reclaiming the Value of Discipleship* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2020); Bill Hull and Ben Sobels, *The Discipleship Gospel: What Jesus Preached—We Must Follow* (HIM Publications, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> This trajectory is observable in his earlier works as well. For example, in his description of his approach to the issue, Hull notes the connection among being a disciple, observing Jesus’s pattern of ministry, and doing the ministry of discipling: “We’ll look at the biblical description of a disciple, the biblical model of a disciple maker—Jesus—and how disciple making became a part of the early church” (*The Disciple-Making Church*, 15).

<sup>14</sup> Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 34.

## Greg Ogden

While some of the influential writings in the mid to late twentieth century (e.g., Wilkins and Coleman) emphasized the Gospels to the near exclusion of the Epistles, the pendulum has begun to swing in the other direction; thus, there is a need for a wider canonical narrative as it relates to discipleship.<sup>18</sup> In *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*, Greg Ogden carefully differentiates the discipleship language used by Jesus with the terminology found in Paul’s letters. “Language running throughout the Gospels and Acts is absent in Paul’s letters.”<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, Ogden contrasts Jesus’s discipleship rhetoric with Paul’s spiritual formation language. Yet, on the other hand, Ogden resists creating discord or disagreement between stated goals and processes. “I see discipleship and spiritual formation as two sides of the same coin. Discipleship is about following Jesus. Spiritual formation is about the life of Jesus emerging from the inside out.”<sup>20</sup> That observation and his explanation are helpful. In his subsequent work, *Discipleship Essentials*, Ogden moves from Jesus’s approach of disciple-making to Paul’s without noting the change in terminology between the two: “We see that the Apostle Paul adopted the same goal and methodology in his ministry that Jesus modeled. Paul’s version of the Great Commission is his personal mission statement ... [citation of Col 1:28–29] ... Paul is so passionate about making disciples that he compares his agony over the maturity of the flock to the labor pains of a woman giving birth ... [citation of Gal 4:19].”<sup>21</sup> He proceeds to describe Paul’s approach to disciple-making as the multiplication strategy described in 2 Tim 2:2. It is important to note that Ogden has taken the shared concept of building into others who in turn build into others and borrowed the “disciple-making” term from the Great Commission to describe Paul’s activity. While Ogden does at times seem

<sup>18</sup> Ironically, Michael Bird has noted the reverse emphasis with Reformed Theology’s overemphasis on the Epistles to the exclusion of the Gospels. He argues for the need for “canonical equity” by which he means that we need to read the entirety of the canon and not focus exclusively on a particular subset. (“Not by Paul Alone: The Importance of the Gospels for Reformed Theology and Discipleship,” *Presbyterian* 39.2 [2013]: 98–112).

<sup>19</sup> Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 95. From the title, it is evident that Ogden understands discipleship as Christians helping others to follow Christ.

<sup>20</sup> Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 218.

<sup>21</sup> Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ*, exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 20–21.

to use discipling interchangeably with discipleship, he is to be commended for clearly defining his terms and noting different terminological preferences among NT authors.<sup>22</sup>

## Kevin Vanhoozer

Kevin Vanhoozer’s more popular-level writing includes work on the pastoral task in the local church. His most recent work, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples Through Scripture and Doctrine*, clarifies both the task and means of pastoral ministry.<sup>23</sup> Vanhoozer describes “disciple-making” as the task of forming Christians, particularly through Scripture and doctrine, so that they are fit for purpose. Vanhoozer’s work is rich with metaphors for the Christian life drawing on the realms of fitness, nutrition, medicine, theater, etc. Drawing on the metaphor of physical fitness, he states “it is important to remember that, while pastors may ‘make’ (that is, train) disciples, only God can ‘wake’ (that is, create) them. Discipleship is about becoming who we are in Christ, and this is entirely a work of God.”<sup>24</sup> Vanhoozer continues, “Discipleship is essentially a matter of hearing (authority), believing (trust), and doing the truth (freedom) that is in Jesus Christ.”<sup>25</sup> And more directly, he states, “Discipleship is a call, a vocation, to follow Jesus everywhere, before everyone, at every time.”<sup>26</sup> So it seems that Vanhoozer defines “making disciples” as training Christians and “discipleship” as Christians following in the outworking of God’s grace. But, at times, Vanhoozer’s terms get confusing: “We might describe discipleship as the project of helping people to become fully awake and to stay awake, by which I mean alert to the opportunities and dangers of the Christian life.”<sup>27</sup> In this quote, discipleship

<sup>22</sup> In *Discipleship Essentials*, Ogden begins new chapters with definitions. “Discipling is an intentional relationship in which we walk alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ. The includes equipping the disciple to teach as well” (17).

<sup>23</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples Through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 44.

<sup>25</sup> Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 49–50.

<sup>26</sup> Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 65 (cf. 85).

<sup>27</sup> Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 54. The subsequent pages involve some terminological unclarity. “Making disciples is a step-by-step process of helping men and women to walk in the Way of Jesus Christ” (60). This definition is clear: “discipleship” is helping other to walk rightly. But the next sentence states, “It involves waking up to the Way, then setting out on it” (60). What is the “it” in the phrase “It involves”? If the “it” is to be understood as “discipleship,” then

is the Christian task of helping others.

An additional challenge emerges in the connection between disciple-making and the tasks by which one makes disciples. One of Vanhoozer’s central concerns is rightly understanding what a pastor is and does: “A pastor does many things, but I have argued that most of these things are forms of ministering God’s word: either by speaking (preaching, teaching, counseling, praying) or enacting it (celebrating the Lord’s Supper, visitation). The particular focus of the present work has been on the pastor as disciple-maker, or what I have described elsewhere as ‘public theologian’—one who does theology with and for *people*.”<sup>28</sup> In this quote, we might ask what is the biblical connection between the idea of “disciple-making” and the activities that he lists? There is a connection in Matt 28:19–20 between making disciples and the activities of teaching and baptizing, but ironically Vanhoozer opts for the other ordinance, the Lord’s Supper. Vanhoozer has made this conceptual connection between disciple-making and the listed activities not strictly based on a tight textual connections.

### Observations

The purpose of this brief survey has been to illustrate that some confusion of terms exists in the secondary literature about “discipleship,” “discipling,” and “disciple-making.” These representative authors use the terms differently, and at times, some of them deploy them in different ways within the same book. Additionally, it is not always clear how the authors move from the concept of “discipleship” or “disciple-making” to the various tasks associated with it. Often the connection between the term and activity (for example, preaching) is assumed but not made explicit.

### What Are the NT Terms Describing the Concept of Discipleship?

Having described the flexibility of the term “discipleship” in secondary literature and the challenge of its connection to a particular Greek lexeme, we will explore the various NT words that could be contained within the *concept* of “discipleship” as it is popularly used. The popular use of “discipleship” is “to help others follow Christ.”<sup>29</sup> One

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the first sentence defines discipleship as helping others while the second sentence defines discipleship as one personally following Jesus.

<sup>28</sup> Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 241.

<sup>29</sup> In this section, we will use the noun “a disciple” to correspond to the Greek

challenge is that the common use of the term “to disciple” is often disconnected from the particular NT lexeme *μαθητεύω*. Two data points will illustrate the tension between contemporary and NT usage. First, for such a sweeping term in contemporary literature, “to disciple,” only occurs four times in the NT (Matt 13:52; 27:57; 28:19; Acts 14:21). Only Matt 28:19 and Acts 14:21 use *μαθητεύω* in the active voice, and the occurrence in Acts is participial. Second, both the verbal form “to disciple” (*μαθητεύω*, 4 times) and the noun form “disciple” (*μαθητής*, 261 times) are limited to the Gospels and Acts.<sup>30</sup> That calls into question if the contemporary term “discipleship / to disciple” accurately represents the NT data.<sup>31</sup>

This tension between NT and contemporary usage leaves us with the question, “What NT terms or concepts describe the activity of helping others follow Christ (i.e., ‘discipleship’)?” In answering this question, we are adopting the most common definition for “discipleship” in the secondary literature and then describing which Greek terms could be subsumed under that overarching concept. We must make a few qualifiers before the analysis. First, because there is such variation in the translation of some of these words, the analysis of these NT terms has been done in

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noun *μαθητής*. We will use “to disciple” and the participial form “discipling” to correspond to the Greek verb *μαθητεύω*. This term has the advantage of being verbal and having the ability to be transitive (i.e., take a direct object) in English. And we will use the term “discipleship” to encompass the diverse terms relating to helping someone grow in Christ.

<sup>30</sup> Longnecker comments, “The most common designation in our canonical Gospels and Acts for one committed to Jesus—that is, for one who accepted his teaching and sought to be identified with him—is ‘disciple’ (*mathētēs*, literally ‘pupil’/‘learner,’ from the verb *manthanein*, ‘to learn’). Jesus’s associates are called disciples in the Gospels; the (eleven) disciples are commanded to ‘make disciples of all nations’ in Matt 28:19; and believers generally are called disciples throughout Acts” (“Introduction,” 2).

<sup>31</sup> Longnecker understands discipleship primarily in terms of following Christ and explains the absence of the term *μαθητής* in the rest of the NT, “Outside of the four Gospels, the Acts, and the one or two instances in the Apocalypse, however, ‘disciple’ and ‘follower’ are conspicuously absent in the rest of the New Testament. Rather, what we have elsewhere in the New Testament are (1) statements regarding the nature of authentic Christian existence, (2) exhortations urging that the truths of these statements be put into practice (often in Paul’s letters, though also in 1 and 2 John, using the verb *peripatein*, ‘to walk about’ or ‘to conduct one’s life’), and (3) calls (either explicit or implied) for believers to be imitators (*mimētes*, or with the verb *mimēomai*) and/or to reflect in their lives the ‘example’ or ‘pattern’ (*typos*, *hypotyposis*) of the apostle Paul, of Jesus Christ, or even of God himself” (“Introduction,” 5).

Greek, but we have made an effort not to make reference to Greek burdensome.<sup>32</sup> Second, space constraints have prevented us from providing a detailed analysis of any one text or lexeme. In some cases, a representative text is used to exemplify a more pervasive pattern. Third, we have not attempted to answer the question, “What is the author doing when he writes (encourage, exhort, etc.)?” other than when the author has explicitly stated his purpose. Our goal in the following sections is to illustrate the breadth and nuance of the various terms and ideas associated with discipleship (i.e., helping others to follow Jesus).

### Use of μαθητεύω

Due to the understandable influence of the Great Commission, μαθητεύω has become a key term in discussions about discipleship, despite its infrequent occurrence. In contrast, the cognate noun, μαθητής, occurs over 250 times, exclusively in the Gospels and Acts. In Matt 28, Jesus uses an imperatival form of the verb transitively: μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (“make disciples of / disciple all nations”).<sup>33</sup> For our study, the transitive use is significant because it denotes a difference between “being a disciple” and “making a disciple” with the latter being transitive. The act of making disciples is clarified to involve baptizing (βαπτίζω) and teaching (διδάσκω). Although lacking the imperatival force of Matt 28, Acts 14:21 also uses μαθητεύω actively: Εὐαγγελισάμενοί τε τὴν πόλιν ἐκείνην καὶ μαθητεύσαντες ἱκανοὺς ὑπέστρεψαν εἰς τὴν Λύστραν (“After they preached the gospel in that city and disciplined many, they returned to Lystra”). This verse demonstrates the connection between preaching the gospel (sometimes translated “evangelize”) and making disciples.<sup>34</sup> John 4:1 uses a different construction employing an indicative verb with a direct object (μαθητὰς ποιεῖ) to communicate a similar transitive idea. The Great Commission, as the final words of Jesus, has such significance in the minds of Christians, so that the absence of μαθητεύω from the Epistles seems surprising. But the term itself is not pervasive even in the Gospels. Are we to conclude that the rest of the NT writings make little of the concept of μαθητεύω because the term is absent from their

<sup>32</sup> All English Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>33</sup> All references from the Greek text are taken from NA28.

<sup>34</sup> Both preaching the gospel and making disciples are aorist temporal participles communicating that they are antecedent to the return to Lystra, but it is not possible to state definitively if the participles themselves are understood to be contemporaneous or sequential. Some might have the impulse to claim that evangelism precedes discipleship, but that argument could not be sustained from the grammar alone.

writings? Or are there terms that describe what it means to disciple or make disciples? In order to discuss how Christians live out the command to make disciples, we must look at other word groups to explain the manner of making disciples. The absence of the term μαθητεύω does not mean that the actions entailed in that term are absent.<sup>35</sup> As Jesus indicates, discipling will involve at least teaching and incorporating new believers into the church (baptism).

There might be a parallel between the term μαθητής in the Gospels and Acts and the term δοῦλος in the rest of the New Testament. In the Gospels and Acts, μαθητής is generally understood to be a term describing devotion to Christ and his teaching. The Gospels and Acts also use δοῦλος to describe complete devotion to Christ (e.g., Matt 10:24–25; Luke 2:29; John 13:16; 15:20; Acts 4:29; 16:17; in addition to the common theme in the parables).<sup>36</sup> While the rest of the NT does not use μαθητής, these writers describe Christians, and sometimes themselves, with the parallel concept of δοῦλος (Rom 1:1; 6:19; 2 Cor 4:5; Gal 1:10; Eph 6:6; Phil 1:1; Col 4:12; 2 Tim 2:24; Jas 1:1; 1 Pet 2:16; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1; Rev 1:1; 2:20; 7:3; 10:7; 11:18; 15:3; 19:2, 5; 22:3, 6).<sup>37</sup> Additional terms like, “brother,” “believer,” and “saint” also seem to replace “disciple.”<sup>38</sup>

### Discipleship in the Gospels

When contemporary discipleship literature examines the Gospels, it tends toward one of two directions. Either Jesus is taken to be the disciple-maker *par excellence*, or the disciples are models (both positively and negatively) of following Jesus. Compared with the Epistles, there are

<sup>35</sup> Bill Hull provides his reasoning for the legitimacy of the terms “disciple” and “disciple-making” even though they do not appear after Acts 21 (*The Disciple-Making Church*, 17–19).

<sup>36</sup> For more on the metaphor of δοῦλος in the NT, see Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ*, NSBT 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> Peter H. Davids hints at this possibility in James: “The letter of James is another New Testament writing that never uses the terms ‘disciple’ or ‘discipleship.’ Yet ‘to ask about discipleship in James,’ as Luke Johnson points out, ‘is really to ask about the shape of Christian existence’ or an appropriate lifestyle for a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, it should then be seen that James has much to say on the topic. What follows, here, therefore, is a presentation of the pattern of an authentic Christian existence as portrayed in the letter attributed to ‘James, servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:1a)” (“Controlling the Tongue and the Wallet: Discipleship in James,” in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, 225).

<sup>38</sup> See Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 294–301.

relatively few things that believers do in the Gospels to help others follow Christ. For this reason, much of the secondary literature about discipleship in the Gospels defines “discipleship” as following Jesus or becoming like him.<sup>39</sup> The lack of active discipling ministry in the Gospels on the part of the believers is due largely to the spotlight being on Jesus and his ministry. The active discipleship ministry by believers is concentrated in the beginning of the Gospels, the sending out of the 12 and 72, and the post-resurrection scenes. The functions of discipleship are carried out primarily by the Gospel writers, John the Baptist, the commissioned 12 and 72, Mary Magdalene, and Peter.<sup>40</sup>

Luke and John both describe their writing as forms of discipleship. Luke writes (γράφω: Luke 1:3) in order to instruct (κατηχέω) believers about Christ. Luke also references others who have passed down the message about Jesus as ministers of the word (ὑπηρέται τοῦ λόγου: Luke 1:2). And John writes (γράφω: John 20:31; 21:24) as a witness (21:24) so that the readers might believe (20:31).

Aside from Jesus in the Gospels, John the Baptist has the clearest role of helping others to follow Jesus. The focus of his ministry is verbal proclamation as well as the act of baptizing (βαπτίζω). It is rare in the Gospels that someone other than Jesus teaches, but in Luke 11:1 the disciples want Jesus to teach about prayer as John the Baptist had taught (διδάσκω) about prayer.<sup>41</sup> John’s ministry can also be described as preaching the good news (εὐαγγελίζω: Luke 3:18), exhorting (παρακαλέω: Luke 3:18), bearing witness (μαρτυρέω: John 1:8, 32), speaking (λέγω: John 1:36), and proclaiming (κηρύσσω: Matt 3:1; Mark 1:4, 7; Luke 3:3). The disciples baptize (John 4:2), and they also teach (διδάσκω: Mark 6:30);

<sup>39</sup> For example, Jonathan Lunde begins his book, “Follow me.’ With these words, Jesus summarizes his call to discipleship” (*Following Jesus, the Servant King: A Biblical Theology of Covenantal Discipleship*, Biblical Theology for Life [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010], 25). Lunde develops the concept of discipleship further, but his starting point is to define discipleship in terms of following. See also Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, JSNTSupp 4 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981); *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel According to Mark* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986). Although not the main focus of his study, when Michael J. Wilkins uses “discipleship” it is in terms of following Jesus (*The Concept of Disciple in Matthew’s Gospel: As Reflected in the Use of the Term Μαθητής*, NovTSuppl LIX [Leiden: Brill, 1988]).

<sup>40</sup> There are some others who act in ways that help others follow Jesus. In Luke 2:38, Anna speaks about Jesus to those in the temple. The Samaritan woman speaks (λέγω: John 4:28). The formerly demon-possessed man proclaims (κηρύσσω: Luke 8:39).

<sup>41</sup> There are references to Pharisees, for example, teaching incorrectly. And there is the command to teach in the Great Commission.

Mark 11:30). Jesus sends out the twelve to preach (κηρύσσω: Matt 10:7, 27; Mark 6:12; Luke 9:2) and to heal (ιάομαι: Luke 9:2), and they in turn preach (εὐαγγελίζω: Luke 9:6) and heal (θεραπεύω: Luke 9:6). Similarly, Jesus sends out the 72 to heal (θεραπεύω: Luke 10:9) and speak (λέγω: Luke 10:5, 9).

Mary Magdalene has a discipleship function in reporting or announcing (ἀγγέλλω: John 20:18; ἀπαγγέλλω: Matt 28:8; Luke 24:9; εἶπον: Matt 28:7; Mark 16:7; λέγω: John 20:2) the message about Jesus to the disciples. Similar to Mary Magdalene’s report, the two believers on the road to Emmaus then report (ἐξηγέομαι: Luke 24:35) to the others. In his post-resurrection appearance to Peter, Jesus instructs him to feed (βόσκω: John 21:15, 17) and shepherd (ποιμαίνω: John 21:16) his sheep. These terms are not defined at more length, but the pastoral terms are probably to be understood as a continuation of Jesus’s ministry as the Good Shepherd. The Gospels focus on the activity of Jesus. While there is some verbal proclamation by others (particularly John the Baptist, the 12, and 72), their role is very much in the background.

### Discipleship in Acts

In the absence of Jesus’s earthly activity, Christians in Acts take an active role in discipleship. As noted above, the only occurrence of the term “to disciple” (μαθητεύω) occurs in Acts 14:21 and is connected with “preaching the gospel” (εὐαγγελίζω). Other terms become associated with how Christians help one another follow Jesus. Even as early as Acts 2, certain activities become characteristic of Christians: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). And the apostles’ self-understanding of their role is to commit “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). The most consistent discipleship activities are speaking, assembling for fellowship and the Lord’s Supper, and serving one another.

In line with what Jesus did in the Gospels, Acts often describes Christians as teaching (διδάσκω, 12 times) or devoting themselves to the teaching (διδασκία, 3 times). The public proclamation of the word takes various forms, including to proclaim Jesus or the word (καταγγέλλω, 11 times); evangelizing or preaching the gospel (εὐαγγελίζω, 15 times), testifying (διαμαρτύρομαι, 9 times), and preaching (κηρύσσω, 8 times). The act of public speaking involves a number of verbs, each offering a slight nuance: “And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned (διαλέγομαι) with them from the Scriptures, explaining (διανοίγω) and proving (παρατίθεμαι) that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I

proclaim (καταγγέλλω) to you, is the Christ” (Acts 17:2–3). Acts 28:23 also employs a variety of verbs to describe this public speaking ministry while also clarifying that this is public speaking of the Bible: “From morning till evening he expounded (ἐκτίθεμαι) to them, testifying (διαμαρτύρομαι) to the kingdom of God and trying to convince (πείθω) them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.”

Another characteristic of Christians helping one another follow Jesus is their commitment to meet together, and meeting together serves as another context for teaching (e.g., Acts 11:26). One characteristic of Christians gathering together is the activity of prayer (in the various cognates of εὔχομαι): “many were gathered together and were praying” (Acts 12:12; cf. Acts 1:14; 1:24; 4:31; 6:6; 13:3; 20:36; 21:5). Connected to prayer is also the sending out of Christians on mission: “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:2–3). Finally, Christians are characterized by giving to and serving one another. In Acts 4:32–37, the believers willingly sell their possessions in order to care for one another. In Acts 6, believers are so concerned about caring for one another that they appoint a group to serve tables (διακονεῖν τραπέζαις; Acts 6:2) and care for the needs of the church. Their care for physical needs is described also as a support of the ministry of the word (Acts 6:3–4).

### Discipleship in Paul

Much of the discussion in secondary literature regarding discipleship draws heavily from the Pauline Epistles, with some Epistles figuring more prominently into the discussion than others. The number of references to acts of discipleship is overwhelming, so we will categorize these ideas into a few key categories.

The most consistently recurring theme is the use of speech to help others faithfully follow Jesus. There are a number of verses in which several of these key concepts about the ministry of the word come together. In Col 1:28, Paul describes his manner and purpose in discipleship: “Him we proclaim (καταγγέλλω), warning (νουθετέω; which could be translated with the less-negative “instructing”) everyone and teaching (διδάσκω) everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”<sup>42</sup> This verse illustrates the connection between

<sup>42</sup> This verse is often cited as a key verse about discipleship. Greg Ogden goes so far as to call it “Paul’s version of the Great Commission in his personal mission statement” (*Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007], 20).

proclaiming, instructing, and teaching is how Paul understands his ministry of the word of God (Col 1:25). For Paul, the task of pastoral ministry is the ministry of the word of God in its various expressions with the goal of moving Christians into spiritual maturity: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching (διδασκαλία), for reproof (ἐλεγμός), for correction (ἐπανάρθωσις), and for training (παιδεία) in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17). This ministry of the word involves both positive expressions of teaching and negative expressions of correction. Similarly, Paul commands Timothy to “preach (κηρύσσω) the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove (ἐλέγχω), rebuke (ἐπιτιμᾶω), and exhort (παρακαλέω), with complete patience and teaching (διδαχή)” (2 Tim 4:2). Each of these concepts recurs in the Pauline Epistles, but the most prominent are the tasks of preaching and teaching.

Faith in Christ comes through hearing, understanding, and learning the gospel, the word of truth (Col 1:5–9). To this end, Christians preach (κηρύσσω: Rom 10:14–15; cf. 1 Cor 1:23–24; 15:11; Col 1:23; 1 Tim 3:16) and proclaim the gospel (εὐαγγελίζω: Rom 10:15). Κηρύσσω, a word regularly used to describe the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels, recurs throughout the Pauline Epistles (about 20 times) to describe the task of Christian ministry. Εὐαγγελίζω, common in Acts to describe the apostolic work, has a similar frequency and semantic range to κηρύσσω in Paul, but εὐαγγελίζω tends to have the nuance of preaching in new areas. Connected with the idea of public proclamation is the ἀγγέλλω word group with its various prefixed forms. The word group of παραγγέλλω (12x) and its noun cognate παραγγελία (3x) refer to instructions or commands of Paul to other Christians, and it is a concept that is particularly concentrated in Paul’s description of Timothy’s ministry (1 Tim 1:3; 4:11; 5:7; 6:17). Διδάσκω and its various cognate words (e.g., διδακτικόν, διδασκαλία, διδάσκαλος, διδαχή) pervade the Pauline Epistles. The church is structured around this task of teaching as elders must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2; 2 Tim 2:24), and the pastoral task is a ministry of teaching (1 Tim 4:11, 13, 16; Titus 2:1). Correspondingly, the church must hold to faithful teaching (e.g., Rom 6:17) and reject false teaching. In Gal 6:6, Paul describes the church as those who are taught / instructed (κατηγέω) and commands them to financially support (κοινωνέω) those who instruct them (κατηγέω). Teaching is not limited to the pastoral office, as older women, for example, are to teach younger

so far as to call it “Paul’s version of the Great Commission in his personal mission statement” (*Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007], 20).



women (Titus 2:3; cf. 2 Tim 2:2) and the church, as a whole, is to teach one another (Col 3:16).

Another significant discipleship theme in Paul is the group of terms related to building up, edifying, and strengthening other believers. In three passages, Christians are called to use their spiritual gifts (Rom 12:3–8; 1 Cor 12:4–11, 28–31; Eph 4:16) for the common good (*συμφέρω*: 1 Cor 12:7) and building up the church (*οικοδομέω*: 1 Cor 14:4, 17; *οικοδομή*: 1 Cor 14:5, 12, 26; Eph 4:12; cf. Rom 15:2; 1 Thess 5:11). The giftings from the Spirit are diverse, but there is still a primacy given to (intelligible, contra tongues in 1 Cor 12–14) speech. In Eph 4, these gifts serve the purposes of equipping for ministry, edification, unity, maturity, and orthodoxy. The means of growing is by speaking the truth in a loving manner (*ἀληθεύοντες δὲ ἐν ἀγάπῃ*: Eph 4:15). The concept of building up and strengthening is connected to encouragement (e.g., Rom 1:11–12; 1 Thess 5:11, although different terms are used). Another way that Christians strengthen one another is by refreshing one another (*ἀναπαύω*: 1 Cor 16:18; 2 Cor 7:13; Phlm 7, 20), which includes a variety of actions of care.

Discipleship is not limited to speaking as it also involves the manner in which Christians interact with one another. Simply looking at the various “one another” commands in Paul’s epistles provides a picture of the ways that Christians are to participate in helping others faithfully follow Jesus. Part of discipleship is a commitment to the various expressions of corporate worship. Again, this worship has the word as central: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16; cf. Eph 5:18–21). Christians are also characterized by praying for one another (e.g., Rom 1:10; 2 Cor 1:11; Eph 6:18; Phil 1:4; 4:6; 1 Tim 2:1, 8). Paul especially emphasizes the need for unity. This is such a pervasive emphasis in Paul’s letters that the verbs and idioms are numerous. The recurring idiom of “having the same mind” communicates Paul’s emphasis on unity: “complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil 2:2; cf. Rom 12:16; 15:5; 1 Cor 1:10; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 4:2).<sup>43</sup> Connected to unity is the emphasis on promoting love and goodwill among the believers. There is the repeated call to love one another (e.g., Rom 13:8; 1 Cor 13; Gal 5:14; cf. Rom 12:10; Eph 5:1; 1 Thess 4:9).

Christians are called to holiness, and Christians have an active role in

<sup>43</sup> See also the various expressions of unity in these verses: Rom 15:1, 6; 1 Cor 1:10; 11:33; 2 Cor 2:7; 13:11; Gal 2:9; Eph 4:1, 3, 29; 5:21; Col 2:2; 1 Thess 4:6; 5:12, 14.

one another’s holiness; that is, there is a corporate discipling aspect of growing in holiness. The church at Corinth is to mourn and be grieved over sin (1 Cor 5:2). They are to take an active role in removing (1 Cor 5:2 [*αἶρω*], 5 [*παραδίδωμι*], 7 [*ἐκκαθαίρω*], 13 [*ἐξαίρω*]) the unrepentant sinner for the good of his soul (1 Cor 5:5; cf. 1 Thess 6:1) and the church’s purity (1 Cor 5:7–8). Christians are to be examples for one another in their discipleship (e.g., 1 Cor 4:16; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6–7; 2:14; 2 Thess 3:7; 1 Tim 4:11; 2 Tim 1:13; Titus 2:7). They are to serve one another (cf. Rom 1:9; 7:6; 12:7; Gal 5:13; Phil 2:4; Philem 13). A number of verses, employing a variety of Greek verbs, command Christians to express hospitality and care (Rom 12:13; 14:1; 15:7; 16:2, 3; 1 Cor 16:10, 18; 2 Cor 7:2; Gal 4:14; Philem 17, 22), especially financial care for one another (e.g., Rom 12:8, 13; 15:25; 1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:1; Gal 2:10; 6:6; Eph 4:28; Phil 4:15; 1 Tim 5:3, 17; Titus 2:14). Christians also participate in discipleship by sending some on mission (e.g., Rom 10:15; 2 Cor 8:22; 2 Cor 9:3; Phil 2:19; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6). The important concept of *κοινωνία* (typically translated partnership or fellowship) can combine the aspects of financial care and sending on mission: “no church entered into partnership (*κοινωνέω*) with me in giving and receiving, except you only” (Phil 4:15; cf. Rom 12:13; 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13; Gal 6:6; Phil 1:5). But *κοινωνέω* / *κοινωνία* is not limited to financial care as it can describe a deep spiritual bond (Rom 15:27; 1 Cor 10:16; 2 Cor 13:13; Phil 2:1).

### Discipleship in the General Epistles

The General Epistles are an eclectic grouping of letters with a diversity of themes and emphases. One common feature is that they are less specific than the Pauline Epistles in stating the specific church to which they are written. Nevertheless, many of the themes present in the Pauline Epistles are also present in this smaller corpus. There is an emphasis on loving and caring for one another in the church. Peter exhorts his readers to love each other (*ἀγαπάω*: 1 Pet 1:22, 2:17, 4:8; 2 Pet 1:7; *φιλαδελφία*: 2 Pet 1:7). Similarly, there are commands for brotherly affection (*φιλαδελφία*: Heb 13:12; 2 Pet 1:7), affection for strangers (i.e., hospitality: *φιλοξενία*: Heb 13:2, 1 Pet 4:9), and greeting one another (*ἀσπάζομαι*: 1 Pet 5:13, 14). A related concept is the way in which believers are to express care for one another. They are to care for physical needs by looking after the vulnerable (*ἐπισκοπέω*: Jas 1:27), sharing with those in need (*κοινωνία*: Heb 13:16; *κοινωνός*: Heb 10:33), serving (*διακονέω*: 1 Pet 4:11), having compassion (*συμπαθέω*: Heb 10:34), and remembering those in need (*μνημονεύω*: Heb 13:3).

Another discipleship concept is the instructing and speaking role that believers have in one another’s lives. Peter writes (*γράφω*: 1 Pet 5:12; 2

Pet 3:1) to give testimony (ἐπιμαρτυρέω: 1 Pet 5:12), exhort the readers (παρακαλέω: 1 Pet 5:1, 12), and stir them up (διεγείρω: 2 Pet 1:14; 3:1). The readers of Hebrews need someone to teach them (διδάσκω: Heb 5:12) and the readers of 1 Peter have had the gospel preached to them (εὐαγγελίζω: 1 Pet 1:25). God has gifted certain people to speak the sayings or oracles of God (λαλέω: 1 Pet 4:11). As an antidote to unbelief, believers are to exhort (παρακαλέω: Heb 3:13) one another so that they persevere in the faith. This idea of verbal exhortation to faith seems to be the idea in Jas 5:20 as well.

These epistles also give instruction about how believers are to relate to one another. Elders are to shepherd (ποιμαίνω: 1 Pet 5:2) and oversee (ἐπισκοπέω: 1 Pet 5:2). And those in the churches are to submit (ὑποτάσσω: 1 Pet 5:5) and obey (πείθομαι: Heb 13:7). Similarly, slaves are to submit to their masters (ὑποτάσσω: 1 Pet 2:18), wives are to submit to their husbands (ὑποτάσσω: 1 Pet 3:1). Those in the church are also to relate to one another in a way that they serve as examples of faith for one another (μιμέομαι: Heb 13:7; τύποι γινόμενοι: 1 Pet 5:3). They are to be committed to meeting together (Heb 10:25) and pursuing unity (εἰρήνην διώκετε: Heb 12:14; cf. 1 Pet 3:8). This meeting together serves to stir one another up (παροξυσμός: Heb 10:24) in their faith. These churches are also to be characterized by praying for one another in various forms. In Jas 5:14, the elders are to anoint (ἀλείφω) and pray for the sick (προσεύχομαι), and in Jas 5:16, believers are to confess (ἐξομολογέομαι) their sins and pray for one another (εὐχόμεαι).

### Discipleship in Johannine Epistles and Revelation

In each of these works, John writes (γράφω: 1 John 1:4; 2:7; 5:13; 2 John 12; 3 John 13; Rev 1:11, 19) in order to help others follow Jesus. The Johannine Epistles emphasize the mutual love of believers as a way to help others grow in Christ (ἀγαπάω: 1 John 2:10; 3:11, 14, 23; 4:7, 11, 21; 2 John 5; ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀδελφῶν τὰς ψυχὰς θεῖναι: 1 John 3:16). There is also an emphasis on the role of Christians in speaking (ἀπαγγέλλω: 1 John 1:2, 3, 5; μαρτυρέω: 1 John 1:2; Rev 1:2) and listening (ἀκούω: 1 John 4:6). In 1 John, John describes the community as having fellowship (κοινωνία: 1 John 1:3, 7) and also mentions the importance of praying for one another (αἰτέω: 1 John 5:16). Christians should financially support fellow Christians (1 John 3:17–18) and ministers in their travels (προπέμπω: 3 John 6; ὑπολαμβάνω: 3 John 8). The Johannine Epistles describe the fellowship of believers in terms of believing the right things about Jesus and in turn loving one another. Because they are shorter in length, some of these themes are not as developed. In many respects, Revelation is a unique book in the Bible. Christians are presented as overcoming and

enduring, but they do not have as active of a role in discipleship.

### Summary of Concepts

The terms used to describe how Christians help other Christians follow Jesus are diverse and certainly extend beyond the lexeme μαθητεύω (trans. “to disciple” or “to make disciples”). This survey has demonstrated that there is no single category, much less a single term, under which these concepts are subsumed in the NT. And perhaps that is one of the reasons that the term “discipleship” has taken on the function of serving as an overarching concept for Christians helping Christians grow. For this concept of helping others to follow Jesus, we have used the term “discipleship” to encompass the variety of NT terms. The most pervasive “discipleship” concept is the variety of descriptions about speaking (preaching, teaching, rebuking, exhorting, etc.). “Discipleship” also emphasizes meeting together in unity and corporate worship, again with the emphasis on teaching. “Discipleship” involves care (honor, receive, greet, send, etc.) for one another and helping others live holy lives. The actions of “discipleship” most commonly are ministries of the word expressed in the local church. There are a number of other actions that might be rightly understood as “discipleship,” but verbalizing God’s word is primary.

### What Are the Implications?

Similar to what Peterson observed with the term “sanctification” and Klink and Lockett observed with the term “biblical theology,” we are concerned that “discipleship” “has become a catchphrase, a wax nose that can mean [almost] anything.”<sup>44</sup> The first contribution of this article has been descriptive. We have described the confusing flexibility of how authors employ the term “discipleship” in secondary literature. These authors begin with a concept that they label “discipleship,” and then they proceed to include various NT terms and texts under this concept without stating their criteria for inclusion. Given the most widespread usage of the term “discipleship”—helping others follow Jesus—we have described the breadth of terms that could be included in this concept in the NT. If

<sup>44</sup> Edward W. Klink and Darian Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 13. David Peterson notes a similar problem with “sanctification”: “History shows that when the terminology of sanctification is simply used to describe everything that happens to us after conversion, the definitive emphasis of the New Testament is soon obscured” (*Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, NSBT 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 137).

we decide that “discipleship” is a helpful summary concept, then we must acknowledge that we have created a category that is not defined by particular NT lexemes. There is some sense in which Matthew 28:19 is using the verb “to disciple” as a summary term, as evidenced by the participial modifiers. But common usage of “discipleship” or “to disciple” has expanded well beyond what Jesus explicitly relates to μαθητεύω. We have also described how the conversation about “discipleship” can be shaped by authors relying more heavily on certain parts of the canon at the potential downplaying or exclusion of others (e.g., the Gospels vs. Pauline Epistles).

In addition to this descriptive task, we also suggest some prescriptive conclusions. Since we have demonstrated the lack of clarity in the use of “disciple,” “discipleship,” and “to disciple,” it is incumbent upon us to offer a proposal for how the terms might be used more clearly. Our exhortation is to reserve the noun “disciple” to describe a person who follows and learns from another. This definition corresponds to the NT use of μαθητής, and in the NT, it is primarily used in the Gospels. We also encourage authors to distinguish between the verb “to disciple” (or “to make disciples”) that corresponds to a NT word (μαθητεύω) and the noun “discipleship” that is a concept encompassing several NT words. That is, the English word “to disciple” should be governed by the NT use of μαθητεύω, and the English word “discipleship” should represent of group of words subsumed under that term. In its limited NT usage, the verb “to disciple” is focused on incorporating believers into the church (i.e., baptizing; Matt 28:19) and instructing them (i.e., teaching or preaching; Matt 28:20; Acts 14:21). If “to disciple” is reserved for this more narrow use, then the concept “discipleship” can include the larger number of ideas connected to helping someone grow in Christ. “Discipleship,” thus, is an English-language creation that serves to summarize and incorporate a diverse group of words under a single heading. There is nothing wrong with the creation of a term or category so long as an author acknowledges that he has departed from the strict correspondence to biblical language and is summarizing multiple ideas under a single term. When this is done, it is likewise helpful to explain what terms are incorporated into the concept and why.

Connected to this call for conceptual clarity is a concern not to flatten the diversity of New Testament terms. As we have shown, “discipleship”-concepts in the NT most commonly involve caring ministries and speaking the word. We caution against abandoning the diversity of NT terms for word ministry (preaching, teaching, rebuking, exhorting, etc.), for example, in favor of the overarching and less-specific concept of “discipleship.” This preference for the concept runs the risk of deadening

the lively nuances of NT terms in preference for a concept.