

## A Brief History of Discipleship: The Apostolic Fathers

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### Abstract

The Church Fathers' writings are a valuable resource for grasping the development of discipleship in the early centuries of the Christian Church. The Apostolic Fathers understood discipleship differently from the way we understand it today. They understood the word discipleship to mean not merely lip service, but rather living the truth. They believed that suffering and martyrdom were basic ingredients of Christian discipleship. They further perceived discipleship to mean an imitation of Christ in the life of the believer, and they stressed this with regard to humility, persecution, and suffering. The Apostolic Fathers spoke frequently of disciples and the life of discipleship, and they revealed the earliest attitudes about the concept of discipleship in the Church following the passing of the apostles. This paper delves into first-century AD discipleship, tracing it from Clement of Rome to Papias of Hierapolis (AD 35–163).

**Keywords:** *Discipleship, follower, imitation, martyrdom, witness, sacrifice*

### Introduction

Discipleship is a multi-dimensional concept. The Greek term *mathetes* (μαθητής) is the origin of the word disciple, denoting a committed learner who seeks guidance from a mentor, exemplified by the followers of Jesus Christ. In the Gospels, discipleship involves following Jesus and learning from His teachings and example. While the ultimate goal of discipleship is to emulate Jesus (cf. Luke 6:40), the Apostle Paul emphasizes diverse roles in God's family (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:1). Despite role distinctions, humility, self-sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit are vital for genuine discipleship. The concept of following Jesus had varied interpretations among the Apostolic Fathers.

### Apostolic Fathers

The Apostolic Fathers are important sources of Christian understanding because they were direct disciples of the apostles who featured in the New Testament, hence their designation as apostolic. There were four of them as follows: Clement of Rome (AD 35–101); Ignatius of Antioch (AD 30–110), Polycarp Bishop of Smyrna (AD 69–156), and Papias of Hierapolis (AD 70–163). They not only played an important role in influencing many people to follow in their footsteps, but they enable us to understand how they interpreted the concept of discipleship. This article will discuss their perception of the terms discipleship, disciple, and related terminologies.

#### **Clement of Rome (AD 35–101)**

Clement of Rome was born in the city of Rome and his life was characterized by chastity from an early age. He lived at the end of the first century AD, was a co-laborer with Peter, and became the bishop of Rome in AD 91 (Lightfoot, 1873, p. 167). He is renowned for his letter to the Corinthian church, in which he advised the Corinthian believers on the “practice of the spiritual disciplines and stressed the need for unity” (Hull, 2006, p. 45).

The one extant letter of Clement to the Corinthians addresses issues of disorder and division within the church. Clement emphasizes the importance of unity, humility, and submission to proper authority. He advocates for orderly conduct and upholding the teachings of Christ. While not explicitly focusing on discipleship, Clement's emphasis on unity and adherence to Christ's teachings reflects his view that discipleship involves following Christ's example and maintaining a cohesive community.

For Clement, to be a true disciple was to die the way Christ died. The death of Peter by crucifixion had apparently made a great impression upon his mind. He recorded how the apostle Peter was crucified head downwards (Smith, 1868, p. 542.). Clement seems to have used the word follow (*ἀκολουθέω* “*akolouthēō*”) to refer to disciple or discipleship, which was a word rarely used by the Apostolic Fathers. In the First Letter of Clement 35:5, he says, a true Christian should “follow the way of truth.” Hence, Clement used the word follow to express the concept of obeying. To Clement, a true follower of Christ becomes a disciple of the truth, a Christian (Bakke, 2001, p. 36). Clement meant that a genuine follower of Christ becomes a learner of fundamental truths, embodying the teachings and virtues of Christ.

### ***Ignatius of Antioch (AD 30–110)***

Ignatius of Antioch was a bishop at Antioch, and was called the bishop of bishops. He became the second bishop of Antioch (modern-day Antakya, Turkey), succeeding Euodias, a female co-worker of Paul in the gospel ministry who is mentioned in Philippians (4:2–3), probably around AD 70 (Blunt, 1856, p. 232). “Byzantine writings see him as the child that Christ carried, giving him an example of humility (Matt 18:2–4)” (Guirguis, 2020, p. 122). He was born in Syria about AD 30. His character is not known to many people, but he is known by the seven letters he wrote to the church in Antioch. His letters were the most extensively studied among the four Apostolic Fathers (Guirguis, 2020, p. 122), and from these writings we learn that he was an advocate of discipleship.

Ignatius used discipleship terminology more frequently than any Apostolic Father. In the words of Virginia Corwin, “the Ignatian letters have more reference to imitation and discipleship than all the other Apostolic Fathers together” (Corwin, 2009, p. 228). While scholars perceive him as a person who had low personal self-esteem, he demonstrated a “remarkable attitude toward his impending martyrdom,” which in turn puzzled readers and scholars (Wilkins, 2010, p. 316). It is in this very unique attitude towards martyrdom that we encounter Ignatius’ unparalleled understanding of discipleship.

Ignatius’ courage to face his martyrdom as a disciple of Christ was remarkable. He said:

I am fighting with wild beasts the whole way from Syria to Rome. Yet the cruelty of my guards is a wholesome discipline to me. I trust and pray that the beasts will devour me at once; that they will be eager, as I am eager. Let no power in heaven or on earth envy me my crown. I am ready for any torture (8:5). All the kingdoms of the earth are nothing to me. I desire Christ; I desire light and life. Let me imitate the passion of my God (8:6). Satan would seize on me as his prey; do not abet him. Obey me in these words which I write now. My earthly passions are crucified. I desire not the food of corruption. I crave the bread and the cup of God (8:7). Once again; do not thwart me. I write briefly, but Christ will interpret. It is God’s own will that I declare (8:8). (Ignatius, 1889, pp.187–188)

Today, Christians are impressed by Ignatius’ deep commitment, shedding light on his concept of discipleship. This imitation of Christ emphasizes the spiritual significance of a discipleship centered around various roles like disciple, follower, brother, sister, saint, and Christian, highlighting the relationship between God and His people, as well as the notions of martyrdom, and discipleship within the Christian life.

*Disciple.* Ignatius’ used the words disciple and discipleship concepts (related terms that are found in the New Testament) more than any of the Apostolic Fathers. His extensive use of these concepts has caused him to stand out prominently. However, Ignatius used the term disciple (Greek *mathetes*) in three different ways. First, he used it to refer to Christians in general; second, he used it to designate an individual who was a more committed Christian than other Christians. Finally, he used the word to mean a martyr (Wilkins, 2010, p. 317).

McNamara proposed that Ignatius had a dual concern regarding death. First, martyrdom was a means to become a true disciple, and further, Ignatius understood suffering to be the beginning of discipleship that was completed at martyrdom (McNamara, 1977, p. 22). Martyrdom for Ignatius meant a crucial part of the life of the true followers of Jesus. For him, discipleship begins and “depends on a successfully completed martyrdom for its perfection” (Schoedel, 1986, p. 28).

*Follower.* Ignatius used the word follower “μυμητής” (*mimetes*) as an equivalent metaphorical expression for discipleship (Mutie, 2015, p. 67). This term emphasizes the committed relationship between the disciple and Christ, reflecting discipleship as a transformative journey of learning, emulation, and devotion. In many contexts, the expression, a follower, corresponds with that of a disciple. In Greek culture, the word disciple can mean a learner and a follower. In fact, the word follower became a synonym for disciple (Heck, 1996, p. 57).

*Brother, Sister, Saint, and Christian.* Ignatius used the words brother, sister, saint, and Christian to refer to a disciple. He used the word “Χριστιανοί” (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16), meaning Christians to refer to those who followed Christ (Witherington, 1998, p. 371). The term “Χριστιανός” (*Christianos*), initially coined by non-believers (Gentiles), was a form of mockery towards followers of Jesus. The term Christianos “was first given to the worshippers of Jesus by the Gentiles, but “from the second century onward [it was] accepted by them as a title of honor” (Grimm, 1893, p. 672).

John Polhill in his book, *Paul and His Letters*, says that “elsewhere in the New Testament other names are regularly used for Christians—disciples, believers, brothers and sisters, the ‘Way,’ Nazarenes, saints, and the like.” Remarkably, the first to use the aforementioned terminologies was Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, around the turn of the second century (Polhill, 1999, p. 72).

The terms brother, sister, and saint were eventually used in a very limited way to refer to the priests and nuns in the Christian Church. However, long before the establishment of such offices, Ignatius used these expressions frequently in the first century AD to refer to those who were called followers or disciples of Christ (Klassen, 2009, pp. 101–102). Hence, for Ignatius, the aforementioned terms are common referents for believers or Christians.

*Imitate/Example.* The concept of “imitation” was closely related to the word discipleship. While this idea is found in the New Testament (Philippians 2:5-11; see 1 Corinthians 11:1; 2 Corinthians 8:9; 1 Peter 2:21-25), it is also found in the writings of the Ignatius. He instructed believers during his time to be “imitators of God” (Ephesians 5:1 New King James Version Bible). According to Ignatius, in order for one to imitate Christ, it is necessary to emulate the righteous behavior of Jesus the Greatest Example. For Ignatius, “inner love for Christ is evident in the attempt to be his true disciple” (Tarvainen, 2016, p. 175).

When one decides to follow the example of Christ, it means that one does not need to retaliate under persecution (Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians, chap. 10). Corwin said, “discipleship implies both devotion to the leader and the following of the pattern; imitation emphasizes the pattern but assumes the devotion” (Corwin, 2009, p. 227; Wilkins, 1992, pp. 294–315). For Ignatius, following Christ represented a general call for Christians.

To imitate Christ is to follow him as a disciple. The Christian grows by copying deeds not by hearing about them. The most valuable lessons arise not from knowledge, sermons, or lectures, but from firsthand experience. In the same way, a disciple matures by mirroring and emulating the actions of their mentor. The greatest of them all is Jesus Christ. Ignatius said to the Philadelphians, “imitate Jesus Christ as he imitated the Father” (Guinness, 2003, p. 81). This seems to confirm what Fyodor Dostoevsky thought when he stated, “what is Christ’s word without an example?” (Dostoevsky, 2008, p. 368). Corwin clarified the meaning intended when she said:

The key to Ignatius’ view of the Christian life is an understanding of the twin conceptions of imitation and discipleship, for they are central to his thinking. They give content to the choice that he urges, and in following the path that they indicate the Christian life is grounded securely, for it is provided both with an effective motive, in devotion to the Lord, and a pattern for life, in a general sense at least. (Corwin, 2009, p. 227)

For Ignatius, to be a true disciple means to imitate Christ to the point of dying like Him. Ignatius would say, “allow me to be an imitator of the suffering of my God. If anyone has Him within himself, let him understand what I long for and sympathize with me knowing what constrains me” (Ignatius, 2011, p. 181). The call of Jesus to discipleship, as conveyed by His followers, is an imperative that urges individuals to model their lives after His (cf. Mark 1:16). Again, Ignatius would state that the imitation of God is encapsulated in the core virtues of faith and love. Faith is the beginning of the

journey and love is the end of it; both are intertwined and would result in unity, that is, with God. Your faith acts as your windlass, and love serves as the path that leads to God (Quasten & Plumpe, 1946, p. 64; Weddle, 2017, pp. 122–125).

*Discipleship—A Relationship Between God and His People.* Ignatius used the word *discipleship* in a restricted manner. To him, discipleship technically implies a strong relationship with Christ, particularly in becoming like Him. Ignatius seemed to have succeeded by the end of the first century AD to make the term discipleship part and parcel of a relationship between Jesus and His followers/disciples (Renan, 2017, pp. 106–110). It seems that he was the first person to coin the term “relationship with Jesus” in regards to discipleship. Discipleship was perceived to involve a development process observed in the Christian’s life.

*Discipleship and the Christian Life.* Entering into a strong relationship with God and discipleship occurs through conversion and Christian growth. Ignatius associated conversion with discipleship, which in turn leads to discipline and commitment—following God’s example. Ignatius emphasized that it was necessary for disciples to learn and to live in accordance with the principles of Christianity. It is beholden on church members to embrace the Christian principles as an indication of true discipleship. He emphasized that true discipleship hinges on faith in Christ’s death and resurrection (Ferguson, 2011, p. 67). Referring to Old Testament prophets as “disciples in the Spirit” (Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians, chap. 9), Ignatius highlights their patient anticipation of Christ as their Teacher.

In his book, *The Letter and the Spirit*, Robert M. Grant, held that Ignatius “regards the prophets as pre-Christian Christians” (Grant, 2009, p. 59). This understanding comes from Ignatius’ exhortation to the Magnesians. He said in his Epistle to the Magnesians (chap. 8):

The divinest prophets lived according to Christ Jesus. On this account also they were persecuted, being inspired by His grace to fully convince the unbelieving that there is one God, who has manifested Himself by Jesus Christ His Son, who is His eternal Word, not proceeding forth from silence [5], and who in all things pleased Him that sent Him.

This concept can be held only on the premise that the Old Testament prophets were inspired by the Spirit of Christ and that only in Christ Jesus can they be comprehended (cf. 2 Peter 1:20–21, Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians, chap. 8).

According to Ignatius, in order to be a true disciple, one has to believe that Christ is the Only True Teacher and Shepherd, and in Him can be found the Only Perfect Example (Ignatius, 2017, p. 11). Discipleship demands endurance. Hence, patience is essential in the life of a disciple (cf. Magnesians chap. 1 & 9). Discipleship is an advanced stage in the life of the follower of Christ. It involves growing in Christ or being sanctified.

*Discipleship as Martyrdom.* For Ignatius, to be a true disciple meant to suffer for your faith. To suffer as Christ suffered is the essence of what it means to be a disciple. Ignatius was in harmony with the apostle Peter when he said, “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps” (1 Peter 2:21). When Christ submitted Himself to God the Father, He suffered to save mankind. Likewise, the Christian today ought to submit and be willing to suffer the way Christ suffered. Christ endured suffering and early believers, such as the apostles, suffered. This means that Christians today must expect to suffer, even becoming martyrs. James S. Exparza, in his book, *The Diaconate: A Challenge from the Past*, stated that Ignatius’ call to discipleship meant that the pathway “will not be complete until he [the Christian] dies a martyr’s death” (Exparza, 2009, p. 12).

Ignatius said that to die as a martyr means to attain true freedom and true perfection, which leads to true discipleship. John Kenneth Riches, in his book, *Paul, Grace and Freedom: Essays in Honour of John K. Riches*, said that Paul presented himself as a model of suffering discipleship (Riches, 2011, p. 84). As Paul imitated Christ, so Christians ought to imitate him (1 Corinthians 11:1; 4:14; cf. Romans 5:3–5). Like Paul, Ignatius viewed discipleship as a call to suffer and eventually to die for their faith. A true disciple is urged to view death as life and life as death.

Ignatius saw spiritual blessings in martyrdom. He exhorted the Romans saying:

May I enjoy the wild beasts that are prepared for me; and I pray they may be found eager to rush upon me, which also I will entice to devour me speedily, and not deal with me as with some, whom, out of fear, they have not touched. But if they be unwilling to assail me, I will compel them to do so. Pardon me [in this]: I know what is for my benefit. Now I begin to be a disciple. And let no one, of things visible or invisible, envy me that I should attain to Jesus Christ. Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of wild beasts; let tearings, breakings, and dislocations of bones; let cutting off of members; let shatterings of the whole body; and let all the dreadful torments of the devil come upon me: only let me attain to Jesus Christ (Rom 5.3.1-13).

God's will for Ignatius included martyrdom; however, God's will may not be the same for all. This sentence could be seen as suggesting that God's will is not uniform for everyone, which might contradict the idea of God's universal plan. A more nuanced approach could be taken by acknowledging that God's will can have different expressions for individuals while still being guided by His greater purpose. It was H. H. Drake Williams who said, "the model for Ignatius as the martyr disciple is the pattern of the crucified Christ" (Williams, 2019, p. 135). It is through death that Ignatius considered that he had attained Christ. To die meant, for him, to commune with Christ. According to him, martyrdom is the highest form of discipleship. He offered a further explanation when he said "a man is a true disciple of Christ only if he dies for Christ's sake; anyone who does not accept death willingly with eyes fixed on Christ's passion, does not have the life of Christ within him" (cf. Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians, chap. 5; Romans 6:3; Baus, 1982, p. 292). Johan Leemans and Anthony Dupont indicated that "the Ignatian corpus adds to the imitation idea that of discipleship: true discipleship and martyrdom go hand in hand" (Leemans & Dupont, 2019, p. 419).

*Discipleship and Justification.* Ignatius seems to equate discipleship with justification when he said, commenting on Romans 5:1-4: "I am the more instructed by their injuries [to act as a disciple of Christ]; yet am I not thereby justified." Ignatius drew this principle from Paul when he said to the Corinthians, "for I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord" (1 Corinthians 4:4). Justification for Ignatius was still in the future, a time when his perfection would be realized.

### ***Polycarp Bishop of Smyrna (AD 69–156)***

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was born about AD 69. He was a younger friend of Ignatius of Antioch. The apostle John was his instructor and, in turn, he tutored Irenaeus of Lyon (AD 130–202; Strobel, 2008, pp. 125–131). Polycarp, whose name in Greek means "much-fruit" or "fruitful," was characterized by being venerable in character, given to simplicity, sacrifice, and patriarchal piety. He was the Christian bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp was eighty-six years of age when he was martyred at the stake in the persecution carried out under Antonius Pius AD 155/166 (Reyes, 2018, p. 35). As a staunch believer in the connection between discipleship and martyrdom, Polycarp emphasized that a genuine disciple should be prepared to undergo martyrdom.

*Discipleship as Martyrdom.* Polycarp was a strong advocate of the fact that a true disciple should experience martyrdom. To him, martyrdom helps an individual to focus not on one's own self, not on one's righteousness, not even one's own salvation, but rather on God's love. A true Christian sees martyrdom as a vehicle that leads people to Christ, and not to his own heroic act of being martyred. In the words of Mujahid El Masih and David Witt (2013, p. 45):

Christ wants his martyrs to be lovers who sacrifice and risk for others. The spirit of martyrdom is Christ's Holy Spirit of love indwelling in his children. It is a love so great that fear dissipates and joy abounds in doing the right thing, even when the cost is great.

Polycarp, like his friend Ignatius, was seen as an advocate of discipleship. According to Maria Cecilia Holt, Polycarp was "by no means the first martyr since apostolic times, but his is the first martyrdom to be thus described and recorded" (Holt, 2008, p. 492). When Emperor Marcus Aurelius (AD 121–180) embarked on persecuting Christians, the believers urged Polycarp to flee. He disappeared for several days in a house outside the city, and he always prayed for the sake of Christ's flock. Before his arrest, the Lord told him in a vision or a dream the nature of his martyrdom.

He saw the pillow on which he was lying burning with fire, so he got up from sleep and gathered his friends and told them that he would be burnt alive for the sake of Christ, and that he would enjoy the gift of martyrdom (Papandrea, 2012, p. 34).

Polycarp was martyred when he was an old man, a fact that was recognized by the emperor who retorted saying, "Have pity upon your white hairs. Just curse Christ and you can go back to your cottage" (Pawson, 2012, p. 45). Polycarp answered and said, "eighty-and-six years have I served Him, and He hath never wronged me; and how can I blaspheme my King, who hath saved me?" (Milner, 1794, p. 237; Daniels, 2009, pp. 57–59). During his martyrdom, a Roman soldier, out of sympathy for the old man, shoved a spear into his heart through the flame. Polycarp demonstrated the true cost of discipleship by being martyred. He sealed his fate before the Roman proconsul (Hartog, 2013, pp. 237–240; McMahon, 2013, pp. 20–55; Gansky, 2014, pp. 20–30).

Polycarp admonished Christians to become fellow disciples and to seek to be martyrs. To him, martyrdom makes Jesus' path clear; it is the only way that believers should follow when facing comparable circumstances of opposition. Martyrdom and suffering, then, "is the badge of the true discipleship" (Duvall, 2014, p. 54).

Commenting on the martyrdom of Polycarp as a hall-mark of discipleship, Servais Pinckaers, in his book, *The Spirituality of Martyrdom to the Limits of Love*, remarked:

One could say, then, that martyrdom is the testimony of a disciple's allegiance to Christ as King, which prohibits obedience to any human authority, even the supreme authority, if it orders an act of disowning [that allegiance]. Thus, the external dimension of martyrdom, just like the internal dimension, is ordered to the Passion of Jesus. (Pinckaers, 2016, pp. 61–62)

Polycarp modeled his life, suffering, and death on that of Christ. Jesus was the core model for him, and in his martyrdom, a pattern to follow. By dying for his faith, Polycarp was *Christou koinonos genomenos* ("be made a partaker of Christ").

*Imitation.* The theme of imitation also occurs in the writings and life of Polycarp. He mentions imitation of Christ in his Epistle to the Philippians, when he spoke of the suffering of Christ on the Cross. He said: "Let us therefore become imitators of His endurance; and if we should suffer for His name's sake, let us glorify Him. For He gave this example to us in His own person, and we believed this" (Epistle of Polycarp 8:2; Lightfoot, 1990). To be imitators of Christ means to follow the example of Christ in endurance behavior.

For Polycarp, the Lord Jesus Christ was a model of discipleship, and any person who desired to follow Him must imitate Him almost in every aspect of life. Alfred Plummer, in his book, *The Church of the Early Fathers: External History*, wrote:

For he [Polycarp] waited to be delivered up, even as the Lord had done, that we also might become imitators of him, while we look not merely at what concerns ourselves but have regard also to our neighbours. For it is the part of a true and well-founded love, not only to wish one's self to be saved, but also all the brothers (Plummer, 1887, p. 42).

To Polycarp, a true disciple of Jesus ought to be ready to imitate "Christ's patient endurance 'to the limit,' and sacrifice his life in His service" (Kleist, 1948, p. 73). Following Christ is not only understood in relation to missionary work or ascetic life, but in the work of discipleship. This may entail imitation of Jesus even unto experiencing torture and death for one's own faith.

*Witness.* Polycarp used the word witness to mean discipleship. The verb witness comes from the Greek word, *martureo*, and means "to testify, to give testimony, to speak well of, or to vouch for" (MacArthur, 2007, p. 66). From that nuance, we get the English word for martyr today. To Polycarp, to witness meant to bear a testimony, which meant to be a disciple for Christ. A true disciple should witness for his faith. He was one of the greatest people to bear witness, that is, to be a disciple committed to share the truth regardless of the cost (Grant, 2006, p. 126). To this effect, Irenaeus (Bishop of Lyon) wrote:

To these things all the Asiatic Churches testify, as do also those men who have succeeded Polycarp down to the present time, a man who was of much greater weight, and a more steadfast witness of truth, than Valentinus, and Marcion, and the rest of the heretics. (Irenaeus, 2019, p. 209)

To Polycarp, to witness was to tell your own story of Christ and what He has done for you. Others should see how Jesus transformed your life. A disciple is called to witness; the word witness is the language of the courtroom. It suggests that someone who is on trial is called to witness, which means to be called to defend. In other words, witnesses are defendants of the faith (Berkowitz, 2006, pp. 50–60; Piper, 1880, pp. 14–21).

*Sacrifice.* The word sacrifice was used in the early Christian literature to refer to the martyrdom of Polycarp. Church history records:

And he appeared within not like flesh which is burnt, but as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace. Moreover, we perceived such a sweet odour [coming from the pile], as if frankincense or some such precious spices had been smoking there. (Roberts & Donaldson, 1885, p. 42)

The words *sweet odour* come from the Greek *euōdia* meaning pleasing sacrifice. The term was used by Paul in the New Testament (cf. Philippians 4:18; Ephesians 5:2) and by Moses in the Old Testament (cf. Genesis 8:21). The idea of “self-sacrifice, is evoked by the word [*euōdia*]” (Bock, 2006, p. 333.3). Sacrifice is involved in the Christian life, as illustrated by Polycarp.

Clayton N. Jefford in his book *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament* testifies that to “understand the personal sacrifice of Polycarp, offers a unique faith vision of personal discipleship for those who would follow in the path of the bishop” (Jefford, 2006, p. 45). In this respect, Polycarp has drawn upon additional New Testament imagery, that of self-sacrificing. He sacrificed his life for the sake of Christ. Polycarp melded together such terminologies to convey the idea of true discipleship, which is costly grace. When Christ calls, the disciple ought to follow.

### ***Papias of Hierapolis (AD 70–163)***

Papias of Hierapolis was born to Christian parents (AD 69), and he later became a Bishop of Hierapolis (AD 110–140) in Phrygia, that is, the west central part of Anatolia in modern day Turkey (Byron, 2019, p. 36). Irenaeus of Lyons described Papias as “an ancient man who was a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp” (Irenaeus 1872, p. 528). He was a prolific writer who was held as the oldest Christian author concerning matters of exegesis. Papias lost no opportunity to meet and dialogue with elders who came to him, and, in turn, this enhanced his knowledge.

In summary, Papias of Hierapolis, an individual of antiquity who had the privilege of hearing John and had connections to Polycarp, significantly enriched early Christian literature and exegesis through his valuable contributions. His engagements with seasoned leaders enhanced his understanding and solidified his status as an early Christian writer.

*Disciple.* The historian and Christian polemicist, Eusebius of Caesarea (AD 265–339), indicated that Papias was a disciple of the apostle John (Eusebius, 2019, pp. 50–55) and Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons had simply said that Papias was a hearer of John the apostle (Lightfoot, 1893, pp. 213–214; Shanks, 2013, pp. 246–247). Papias was a strong believer in discipleship, to the extent that he was nicknamed the “disciple of the Lord.” However, such a name obviously is meaningless without the historical Jesus (Holding, 2008, p. 81). The phrase “disciples of the Lord” in its plural form is found two times in Papias’ writings. One reference is to the apostles, and second was used to describe Ariston and the Elder John (Culpepper, 1994, p. 111). This means that the term disciples was used in reference to indicate those who had been personal disciples of Christ or members of the Twelve Apostles (Bauckham, 2007, p. 61). To Papias, a disciple should be committed to Christ and His cause.

*Discipleship as Martyrdom.* Papias suffered martyrdom at Pergamum (AD 156; Hein, 2015, p. 212). The Syriac Epitome of the Chronicle of Eusebius tells of the fact that Papias and Polycarp were martyred during the same period; both heroes died to defend their faith (Shanks, 2013, pp. 55–65). The martyrdom of Papias tells of the cost of discipleship. Following Christ may mean participation in His suffering. For “Christ demands nothing of His followers that He has not first exemplified” (Hummel, 2007, p. 101).

## Implications for Mission

The existential worldview of discipleship has been considered from the perspective of the Apostolic Fathers. Their spiritual impact and attitude towards dying like Christ did has been examined.

Ignatius of Antioch extensively used the term disciple or discipleship. By this he meant Christians in general, to allude to people who were highly committed. He used the word follower as synonymous with discipleship, but also used a cluster of nouns to mean a disciple, such as brother, sister, saint, and a Christian. His focus was to urge followers to imitate Christ as He imitated the Father, and to form a relationship with Him as the duty of disciples. Ultimately, he regarded martyrdom as the destiny of a true disciple.

Like, Ignatius, Polycarp Bishop of Smyrna understood discipleship in terms of martyrdom. For Polycarp, martyrdom functioned to aid a person to focus on Christ and His love rather than on self, and enabled the disciple to be an imitator of Christ's suffering. Witnessing, according to Polycarp, meant being a defender of the faith; this involves sacrifice.

Papias of Hierapolis perceived discipleship in relation to having a personal relationship with Christ. Commitment must be part and parcel of discipleship, and this involved possible martyrdom. This form of suffering constitutes a unique witness for Christ and indicates that the individual is a true follower of Him. Indeed, discipleship is rooted in martyrdom according to the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.

The following insights are provided from a standpoint focused on the study of mission and its implications. This will serve as a guiding path for readers, leading them from the epistemological crisis in religion and philosophy to a more unified perspective. John Cynddylan Jones said: "When the Christian life stops short in discipleship, it remains in the incipient or embryo stage, and is in danger of dying of inanition [exhaustion due to lack of nourishment]" (Jones, 1878, pp. 204–205). Hence, Christianity is not a dogma, but a life. It consists of not possessing mere knowledge, but is demonstrated belief in practice. Knowledge without practice is like faith without works—dead. Knowledge gets refined by work.

1. Discipleship includes submission to the Bible's authority, which is fundamental to all followers of Christ. "At the least, discipleship includes worship, faith, obedience and hope. Yet each of these ingredients is impossible without a reliable revelation from God" (Stott, 1992, p. 174).
2. Discipleship helps individuals recognize their mission. Believers today are admonished to provide an example of Christ-like living for non-believers to follow. The goal is to return to the Gospel instruction to invite the Spirit's presence daily into the life to provide the motivating force for personal change.
3. The Christian church is to realize its double responsibilities towards the surrounding cultures. The church in general, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church in particular, is to live, serve, and witness in the world, but without being affected by the cultures it faces. Cultural tools may be used to enhance discipleship and mission. Costly discipleship arouses personal piety— as well as corporate piety—towards evangelism in the world.
4. Discipleship is "a many-faceted lifestyle, and amalgam of several ingredients" (Stott, 1992, p. 174), that encompasses total commitment—costly grace.
5. Disciples nowadays are not failing because of lack of information about the subject, but because of lack of transformation.
6. The Apostolic Fathers' perspectives on discipleship provide valuable lessons in intercultural discipleship, prompting believers to break away from spiritual stagnation or complacency.
7. A disciple is not meant to be perfect, but rather to be intentional in missionary endeavors. I like how Mike Breen and Steve Cockram have penned it: "Discipleship is a relational endeavor depending on broken people living in the grace of God" (Breen & Cockram, 2014, p. 120). Churches may be aggressive in evangelism, but unless it is intentional and relates to the needs of the hearers, it will fail.



8. Discipleship “has an end goal: to be conformed into the image of Christ—to talk the way He talked, walk the way He walked, and respond the way He responded” (Gallaty, 2015, p. 135). That is to say, discipleship involves imitating Christ as the pattern in teaching and relating to people.
9. Discipleship terminologies and an understanding of their historical meaning helps trainees arrive at a correct appreciation of discipleship and its mission. For example, martyrdom as a terminology for discipleship infers a high level of commitment. Such levels of commitment might be encouraged among Adventist believers.
10. Mimicking or imitating as a metaphor for discipleship infers that there is a cost associated with discipleship. Metaphors of discipleship describe the strong relationship between a disciple and the Disciple Maker—Christ. Understanding such terminologies functions to assist in creating an identity as a disciple.
11. True discipleship is not found in an ascetic life; such is not a biblical idea of discipleship. True discipleship means following the example of Christ first and foremost and supplemented by the example of the apostles. Discipleship is not a convenience, for it could cost someone’s life.
12. Last but not least, the evidence of true discipleship is a growth in Christ-likeness. Thabiti M. Anyabwile said:

The growth we wish to see, the growth that is not finally external and superficial, is growth in godliness or holiness, growth in “the stature of the fullness of Christ.” A growing church member is someone who looks more and more like Jesus in attitude of heart, thought, speech, and action. That’s what we long to be and long for our churches to be. (Anyabwile, 2012, p. 148)

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