

A Long Winding Path toward Discipleship

By Bob Young

May I share with you some of what I have come to understand across 55+ years of ministry and mission? Can we talk frankly about following Jesus?

Let's begin with some word associations. Disciple: what comes to your mind? Discipleship: what comes to your mind? The same? Different? Do your word associations reflect Scripture?

I share some of my associations: learner... difficult... challenging... follower... lifelong learner... study... teacher... committed... sacrifice... service... daily... imitation...

I have been trying to follow Jesus, at times pursuing Jesus whole-heartedly, at times less so, for almost two-thirds of a century. I must admit that some of my feeble efforts would embarrass me if the details were told.

The discipleship road is a long, winding, difficult journey. The journey is ever new and requires constant learning. Staying on the path requires learning how to follow the steps of Jesus, our Lord, Master, and Savior.

Reading Scott Boren*, *Following God on the Crooked Path*, reminded me of some of what I learned during my studies of church history.

Our walk with God must always be characterized by us following Jesus, not by him following us. We want Jesus to follow us, put his stamp of approval on our plans, our projects, our dreams. We run ahead. Jesus insists on leading—in the way of the cross, the way of sacrifice.

The Examen was a spiritual exercise developed by Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) as a way to practice peaceful reflective prayer, to reflect upon God's presence in our lives. The exercise involves seeing how God has been at work in our lives, in people and events, in unexpected ways. The spiritual discipline of prayerful reflection helps take our focus away from the hurry, the haste, the hustle and bustle of our lives. "God sightings"—where can I see God? Where can I see that God has been at work? "Life savors"—where and when has God flavored my life? In such reflecting, I do not seek answers to questions, I take time, thoughts moving sometimes slowly and sometimes rapidly, with free-flow thinking moving randomly and unhurriedly, listening, meditating, allowing Jesus to take the lead. I contemplate God's presence with gratitude, I see more clearly the shape of my own life, I sharpen the focus of my prayer as I anticipate tomorrow.

My goal is to follow Jesus, to join him and follow him on my journey toward discipleship. I want to understand where God is at work and where he is inviting me to join him in his work. I grasp the truth of beginnings and endings, or perhaps better said, endings and beginnings. I see God's presence in people who seek to walk the same path of discipleship. I am drawn into the community of seekers / followers whose first priority is to share in God's mission to redeem the world. I seek a constantly resurrected life—not by my great skills in following, but by my simple commitment to follow regardless.

As I follow Jesus more closely, I call others to follow, so we walk together the unpredictable, at times difficult path of discipleship, a path that leads us to the cross, even as Jesus' journey of obedience led him to the cross. But we do not fear to follow, to walk the way of discipleship, because He has given us his Spirit to be among us reminding us of the One whom we follow. Following Jesus transforms us and empowers us to call others to the journey. May it be so in my life, and in your life!

*Scott Boren, for more on Spiritual Formation and Spiritual Leadership, visit Scott's blog: <https://thejesuscafe.wordpress.com>