



Slide #1

We must keep in mind that the term *disciple* means a *follower or learner* who in New Testament times would associate themselves with a particular teacher. In the Scriptures, disciples can be distinguished by association, intimacy and commitment.

Distinctions in Disciples

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Slide #2

Distinction by Association

There are four different teacher-follower associations mentioned in the New Testament (slide 2). The Pharisees claimed to be disciples of Moses (John 9:28) and sent their own disciples to test Christ with a question (Matt 22:15-16; cf, Mark 2:18). Andrew and Peter who were disciples or followers of John the Baptist (John 1:35) began to follow Jesus (John 1:37; 2:2).

In every association, to be a disciple was to be a follower:

- Moses' Disciples = Moses' Followers
- Pharisees' Disciples = Pharisees' Followers
- Baptist's Disciples = Baptist's Followers
- Jesus' Disciples = Jesus' Followers

DISTINCTIONS IN DISCIPLES ASSOCIATIONS

John the Baptist
(Jn 1:35)

Moses
(John 9:28)

Pharisees
(Matt 22:16)

Jesus
(John 2:2)

2

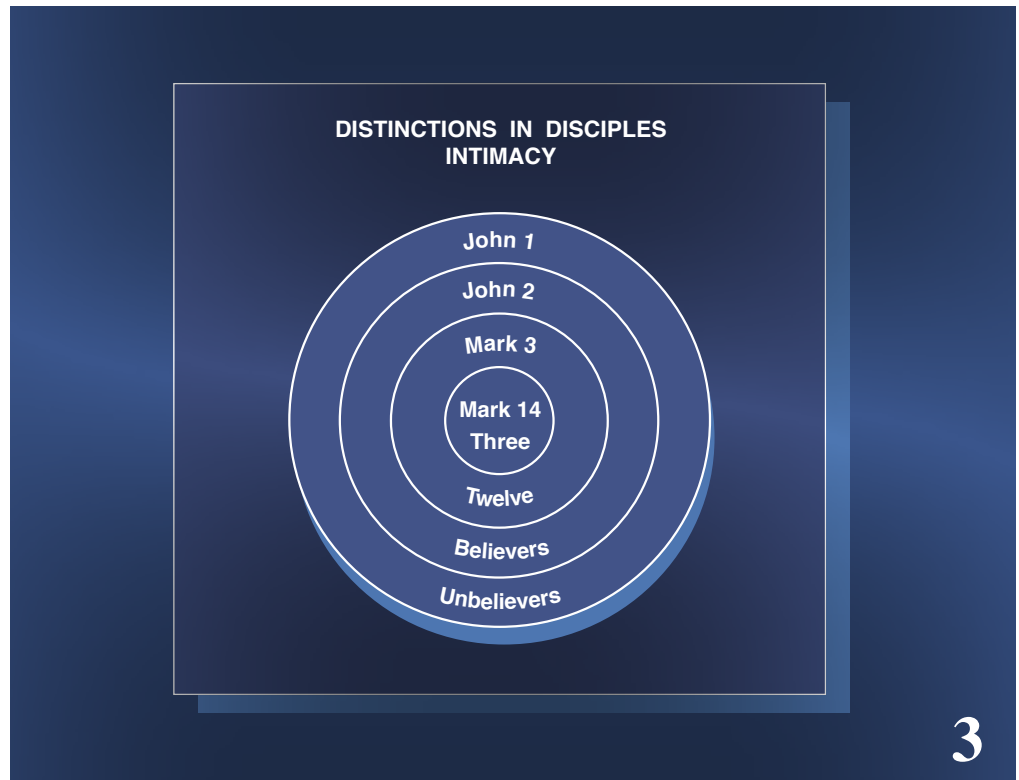
Slide #3

Distinction by Intimacy

When referring to the Pharisees, their disciples were most likely not believers in Christ. The crowds following Jesus were interested in both what He taught and the miracles He performed (e.g., Mark 3:7-8) and included both believers and non-believers (slide 3). In fact, Andrew and Peter who began to follow Christ (John 1:37;2:2) only became believing followers a few days later when Jesus turned water to wine (John 2:11).

Intimacy with Christ moved from non-believing individuals who came only to see the miracles to those who were receptive to His teaching and believed in Him for eternal life. Then there were the Twelve disciples, Christ's close companions (Mark 3:14), who spent two-and-a-half years with Him in training. Even from within the Twelve, Jesus' closer intimacy with Peter, James and John (Matt 26:37; Mark 14:33) was evident.

While each category of followers were called disciples in the New Testament, each varied depending on their intimacy with Jesus.



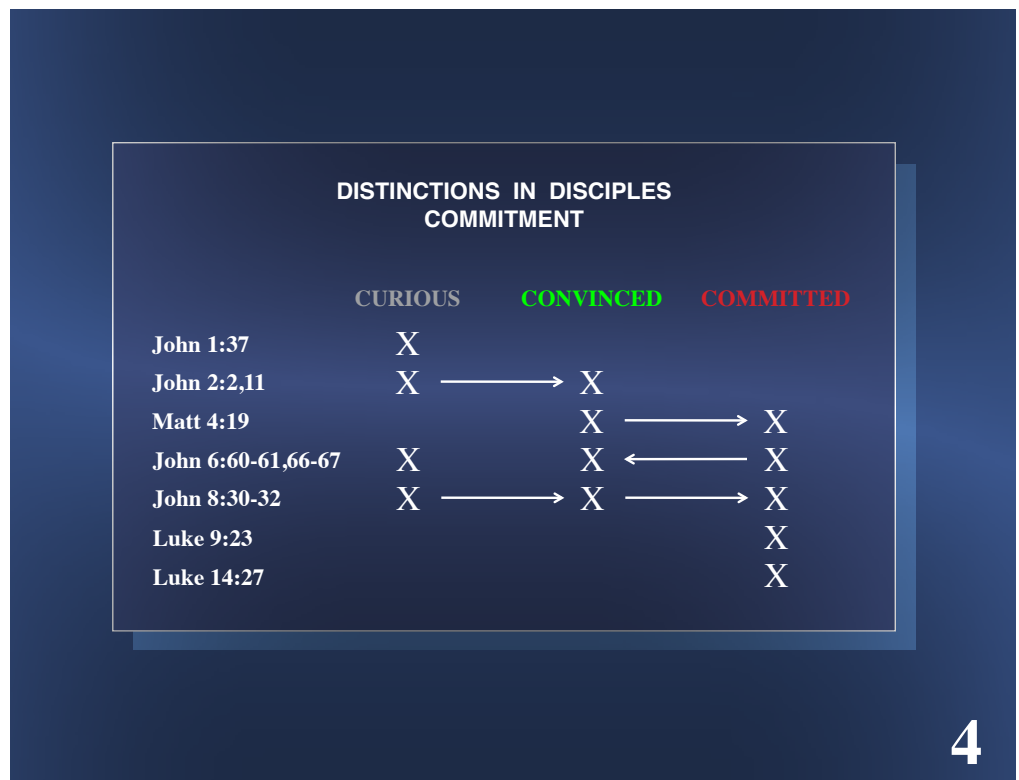
Slide #4

Distinction by Commitment (Texts)

The New Testament tells us that there are distinct differences in the disciples that followed Jesus. The texts in slide 4 are in chronological order and show the progression in being a disciple of Christ, moving from *curious*, those who are non-believers yet are interested in knowing more about Christ's teaching, to *convinced*, those who are persuaded and believed in Christ for eternal life, and finally to those *committed*, who desired to experience intimate fellowship with Him.¹

John 1:37 informs us that Andrew and Peter, disciples of John the Baptist (v 35), began to follow Christ as curious disciples. Two days later, "Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding" in Cana (2:2). On that occasion Jesus turned water into wine, the first of seven signs/miracles in the Gospel

of John written "so that you may believe in Jesus...and that believing you may have life in His name" (20:30-31). As a result of that miracle, "His disciples believe in Him" (2:11), indicating a movement from being only curious to convinced followers (see



arrow direction on slide 4). Notice next that when Jesus called Andrew and Peter to “Follow Him” (Matt 4:19), they had already been following (John 1:37) and were already believers (2:11). They responded to Christ’s call by leaving their boats and following Christ as committed disciples in a more intimate form of discipleship.

Jesus’ difficult teaching in John 6 gives insight to the statement that He is “the bread of life.” Teaching the necessity of eating His flesh, “many” of His disciples were stunned (v 60). Evidently “some,” within the “many,” were not believers or convinced disciples (v 64). As a result of His teaching, verse 66 tells us that “many” of His disciples withdrew and no longer followed Him, meaning that both non-believers and also some believers departed and no longer followed Him from that point. The assumption is validated, since Jesus immediately turned to the Twelve in verse 67 and inquired, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” That was the choice He set before the them. [Note: the backwards arrow indicates the potential movement for committed disciples back toward being only convinced disciples.]

Beginning in John 8:12 Jesus gives His “light-of-the-world” teaching.

John 8:30 states that “As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him.” The next verse tells us that He then spoke “to those Jews who had believed Him” (v 31). With not a hint of a time lag, immediately He continues to speak in verses 31 and 32 to those who had just believed. He said, “If you continue [abide] in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” Jesus gives a condition with a promise. The condition is to abide in His word. Since a condition may or may not be kept, the promise of being a *true* disciple is only assured if one abides in Christ’s teachings. On the other hand, if a believer does not abide in Christ’s teachings, that one remains a believer and a disciple, but he is not a truly, abiding disciple. That one will *not come to know* the truth of Christ’s teachings, which would make him truly free.

Notice the progression in John 8:30-32. Out of a large group of followers, including curious non-believers, the text tells us “many came to believe in Him.” A relationship between those who believed and God was established. They had become convinced that Christ is indeed the light of the world. To these convinced followers, “who had believed Him,” Jesus appeals to them to abide in His word. If these convinced followers would abide in His teachings, it would reveal their devotion to Him and they would be known as true disciples—committed followers. These curious followers had become convinced followers, and if they abide in Christ’s teachings, they could become increasingly committed. Is this not the concept Jesus taught in Matthew 28:20, “*teaching them* [convinced disciples] *to observe* [obey] *all that I have commanded you?*” Convinced disciples are to grow in commitment to Christ. However, they must abide in His teaching to know and then to obey, thereby giving evidence that they are committed disciples.²

The remaining texts, Luke 9:23 and 14:27, relate to Christ’s teaching on discipleship and the demands expected of those convinced followers who desired to become committed disciples.

Slide #5

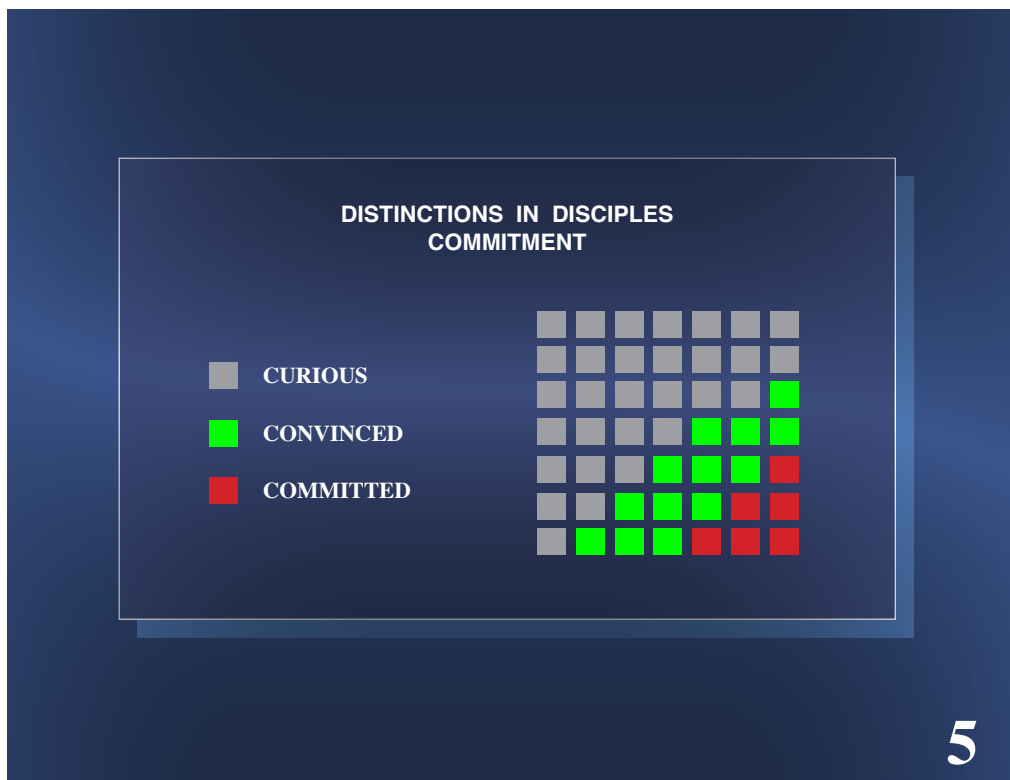
Distinction by Commitment (Visual)

As explained above, the term *disciple* can refer to a variety of followers: curious, convinced or committed.

Slide 5 gives the visual perspective of these different types of disciples in the New Testament. Each box graphically pictures all of Christ’s followers. While all disciples at some point have been curious disciples, only some come to faith in Christ and thus are convinced followers (indicated in green). Even a smaller group choose to “follow Christ” in intimacy and committed discipleship (indicated in red).

Blurring the Distinction between Disciples

Some have blurred the biblical differences between various types of disciples. In so doing, they erroneously misunderstand Christ’s



call to “Follow Me” in committed discipleship (Matt 4:19) to be an evangelistic message, a salvation appeal.³ We must remember that Jesus’ call to “Follow Me” in discipleship had absolutely nothing to do with becoming a believer in Christ (see article *Followership in the Gospels*). Rather, His call to “Follow Me” was to commitment by convinced believers to close, personal fellowship with and obedience to Christ.



Endnotes:

1. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Design for Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 13-21.
Pentecost indicated the distinction between *curious*, *convinced*, and *committed* followers of Christ.
2. Ken Neff, *Escape* (Jacksonville Beach, FL: LeaderQuest, 2018), 315-16.
3. John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 30.
MacArthur writes, “The *call to Calvary* must be recognized for what it is: a *call to discipleship* under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. To respond to that call is to become a believer.”