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Discipleship and Character Transformation in Rural Cameroon: Lessons from Jesus and Paul

Le Discipulat et la Transformation de la Personnalité dans les Zones Rurales du Cameroun: Les Enseignements de Jésus et de Paul

Elias Ngomediage[1]

Abstract

The formation of disciples who consistently embody the character of Jesus Christ remains a significant challenge within many rural and semi-rural Christian communities in Cameroon. Although church participation and religious activities are often widespread, evidence from pastoral ministry and field observations suggests that spiritual maturity and ethical transformation do not always correspond with levels of ecclesial involvement. This apparent disconnect raises important questions concerning the nature and effectiveness of contemporary discipleship practices. This study examines the relationship between Christian discipleship and character formation through a biblical-theological analysis of selected New Testament texts, with particular attention to the discipling ministries of Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul. Drawing on documentary research, and contextual observations from rural Cameroon, the paper explores the extent to which authentic discipleship is intended to produce moral, spiritual, and relational transformation in believers. Special attention is given to Paul's mentoring relationship with Timothy as a model of intentional disciple-making and leadership development. The study argues that Christian discipleship involves more than doctrinal instruction or participation in religious activities; it is a transformative process through which believers are progressively conformed to the character of Christ. Furthermore, it contends that sustainable discipleship in rural Cameroon requires intentional mentoring, biblical formation, and community-based practices that cultivate Christlike virtues. The paper concludes that renewed commitment to character-centered discipleship is essential for strengthening the witness, effectiveness, and spiritual vitality of rural churches in Cameroon.

Keywords: Discipleship, Character Formation, Christlikeness, Rural Churches, Cameroon, Spiritual Transformation

Résumé

La formation de disciples qui incarnent constamment le caractère de Jésus-Christ demeure un défi majeur dans de nombreuses communautés chrétiennes rurales et semi-rurales au Cameroun. Bien que la participation aux activités ecclésiales et religieuses soit souvent importante, les données issues du ministère pastoral et des observations de terrain suggèrent que la maturité spirituelle et la transformation éthique ne correspondent pas toujours au degré d'implication dans l'Église. Ce décalage apparent soulève d'importantes questions quant à la nature et à l'efficacité des pratiques contemporaines de discipulat. Cette étude examine la relation entre le discipulat chrétien et la formation du caractère à travers une analyse biblique et théologique de certains textes du Nouveau

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Testament, en accordant une attention particulière aux ministères de formation de disciples exercés par Jésus-Christ et l'apôtre Paul. S'appuyant sur une recherche documentaire, et des observations contextuelles en milieu rural camerounais, l'article explore dans quelle mesure le discipulat authentique vise à produire une transformation morale, spirituelle et relationnelle chez les croyants. Une attention particulière est accordée à la relation de mentorat entre Paul et Timothée comme modèle de formation intentionnelle de disciples et de développement du leadership. L'étude soutient que le discipulat chrétien va au-delà de l'instruction doctrinale ou de la participation aux activités religieuses ; il constitue un processus de transformation par lequel les croyants sont progressivement rendus conformes au caractère du Christ. Elle affirme en outre qu'un discipulat durable dans les zones rurales du Cameroun exige un mentorat intentionnel, une formation biblique et des pratiques communautaires qui cultivent des vertus semblables à celles du Christ. L'article conclut qu'un engagement renouvelé en faveur d'un discipulat centré sur la formation du caractère est essentiel pour renforcer le témoignage, l'efficacité et la vitalité spirituelle des Églises rurales au Cameroun.

Mots-clés : Discipulat, Formation du Caractère, Ressemblance au Christ, Églises Rurales, Cameroun, Transformation spirituelle

Introduction

Christian discipleship occupies a central place in the mission and life of the Church. Throughout the New Testament, discipleship is presented not merely as adherence to a body of doctrinal beliefs but as a transformative process through which believers are progressively conformed to the character and likeness of Jesus Christ. Consequently, authentic Christian maturity is measured not only by participation in religious activities but also by the visible manifestation of Christlike virtues in everyday life.

Despite the remarkable growth of Christianity across Africa, concerns have increasingly been raised regarding the relationship between church participation and spiritual transformation. In many contexts, numerical expansion has not always been accompanied by corresponding growth in Christian character, ethical conduct, and discipleship maturity. This concern is particularly relevant in rural and semi-rural communities where churches often function as important centers of social and religious life, yet may face significant challenges in cultivating sustained spiritual formation among believers.

The present study emerges from pastoral engagement and contextual observations within selected rural communities in Cameroon, where the relationship between church involvement and character transformation warrants further reflection. While many believers faithfully participate in worship services, church programs, and other religious activities, such participation does not necessarily result in the consistent embodiment of Christlike virtues such as humility, integrity, self-control, forgiveness, and sacrificial love. This apparent gap raises important questions concerning the nature, content, and practice of discipleship within these communities.

Theologically, Christian character formation lies at the heart of discipleship. As Roger Dickson (2014) observes, Christianity is not merely a system of doctrines but a way of life shaped by the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. The goal of discipleship, therefore, extends beyond the acquisition of religious knowledge to the transformation of the whole person. Genuine disciples are called to internalize Christ's teachings and demonstrate them through their relationships, conduct, and service to others.

This study argues that the New Testament presents discipleship as an intentional process of spiritual formation aimed at producing Christlike character. Through a biblical-theological

examination of selected passages and relevant scholarly literature, the paper investigates how Jesus and the Apostle Paul modeled disciple-making as a transformative relationship rather than merely a transfer of information. Particular attention is given to the mentoring relationship between Paul and Timothy as an example of intentional discipleship and leadership development.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, it examines the biblical understanding of discipleship as presented in the teachings and practices of Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul. Second, it explores the relationship between discipleship and character formation within the New Testament. Third, it considers the implications of these biblical principles for strengthening discipleship practices in rural churches in Cameroon.

By situating the discussion within both biblical and contextual perspectives, this paper seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations regarding spiritual formation, disciple-making, and Christian leadership in Africa. It proposes that the renewal of intentional, character-centered discipleship is essential for the development of mature believers who authentically reflect the character of Christ and effectively participate in God's mission within their communities.

Definition of Discipleship

The English word "disciple" translates the Greek *mathētēs* (*μαθητής*), meaning "learner" or "pupil." In the Greco-Roman world, the term referred to a student who followed a master in a relationship of personal commitment and rigorous formation. This background illuminates the New Testament use of the term. According to Michael Wilkins (1991), the Gospel writers use "disciple" primarily for the followers of Jesus. Early Christians were also called believers, Christians, saints, brothers and sisters, and followers of the Way, but each designation highlights a particular dimension of their relationship to Jesus and the community of faith. The term "disciple" appears approximately 230 times in the Gospels and another 28 times in Acts (p. 40).

Acts indicates that the earliest believers were commonly known as "disciples." Luke reports that they were first called "Christians" in Antioch (Acts 11:26). The earlier and more frequent designation underscores discipleship as a fundamental Christian identity: believers are people committed to learning from and following Jesus.

Exploring the relationship between salvation and discipleship, Bill Hull (2016) offers a concise working definition: discipleship occurs when a person answers the call to learn from Jesus and others how to live as Jesus would live. As a result, the disciple increasingly becomes the kind of person who naturally does what Jesus did (p. 20). Walter Elwell (1984) provides a fuller description:

> The characteristic name for those who gathered around Jesus during his ministry was "disciple." He was the teacher or master; they were his disciples (mathétai), a term involving too much personal attachment and commitment to be rendered adequately by "pupil." The name was carried over into Acts, where it frequently has the general sense of Christian (Acts 14:21). The use of the term in Acts for those who had no acquaintance with Jesus during the days of his flesh serves as a reminder that the relationship of subsequent generations of Christians to the exalted Christ is not essentially different from that enjoyed by those who walked with him on the earth. It further indicates that the Lord's solemn sayings regarding the nature and cost of discipleship must be given their full weight in the construction of a doctrine of the Christian life (Luke 6:40; 14:25 – 33). (pp. 216-217)

Elwell highlights two essential dimensions of discipleship: attachment and commitment. In acknowledging Jesus as Savior and Lord, disciples enter a personal relationship that matures

into intentional obedience to his teaching. Such obedience also bears witness: a life shaped by Christ can awaken interest in the gospel and create opportunities to lead others to him.

Jesus and Paul as Biblical Models of Disciple-Making

The Great Commission is Christ's mandate that his followers make disciples as they themselves had been discipled (Matthew 28:19–20). Jesus' earthly ministry therefore provides the primary model for Christian disciple-making. By investing intentionally in the Twelve, He prepared witnesses who could continue His mission after His ascension and transmit His teaching and way of life to subsequent generations.

Jesus' choice of disciples was striking: rather than selecting members of the religious elite, He called ordinary men. Although they lacked formal religious education, sustained fellowship with Jesus and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit transformed them into courageous witnesses. Acts 4:13 captures this transformation: observers were astonished by Peter and John and recognized that these unschooled men had been with Jesus. Spiritual apprenticeship, therefore, is not limited by social or academic standing.

Jesus required prospective disciples to count the cost and reorder their prior commitments. For the first disciples, this sometimes involved leaving family and occupation in order to accompany Jesus and witness the inbreaking reign of God. As James Dunn (2009) emphasizes, Jesus' call permits neither a half-hearted response nor divided allegiance.

C. S. Lewis (2001) describes the Christian mission as bringing people to Christ so that they become "little Christs." This claim helps explain why the Great Commission centers on making disciples rather than merely securing professions of faith (Matthew 28:19–20). The pressing question for rural and semi-rural Cameroon is whether this mission is being fulfilled. Willard (2006) argues that the Church's central task is to form lifelong apprentices of Jesus who, in turn, mentor others. Yet some Christian communities appear to produce nominal believers who give little sustained attention to growth in Christlikeness. Where intentional formation is absent, congregations may fail to embody Christ's character or exercise a credible influence on their social environment. As Willard observes, "Not having made converts disciples, it is impossible to teach them how to live as Christ lived and taught us to live" (2006, p. 12).

Many Christians and church leaders concentrate their efforts primarily on Sunday worship. Yet, as Arnold and Nouwen (2007) warn, Christianity confined to Sunday morning remains "shallow and empty." Congregational size, financial resources, and buildings may have practical importance, but they cannot measure transformation into Christlike character and conduct. John S. Mbiti's well-known account of African communal identity— "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (1969, p. 106)—provides a fruitful starting point for rural disciple-making. In Cameroonian villages, church members and nonmembers share a dense web of relationships; discipleship therefore cannot be reduced to an individual or merely intellectual exercise. Read alongside Matthew 28:19–20, this communal vision suggests that becoming like Christ is a shared journey in which the life of an entire community is gradually transformed. Kwame Bediako (1995) likewise warns against a surface-level Christianity that leaves traditional worldviews untouched. In contexts of divided allegiance, some churchgoers worship Christ on Sunday yet turn to ancestral systems during agricultural or domestic crises. Contextual discipleship must therefore proclaim Christ not as an imported European deity but as the living Lord whose authority encompasses every spiritual, cultural, relational, and social dimension of village life. Disciple-makers in rural Cameroon must ground their ministry in this comprehensive vision of Christ's saving lordship.

Writing about Western Christianity, Bill Hull (20100 warns that a reduced gospel can permit believers simply to affirm basic Christian claims, receive assurance of forgiveness and heaven, and perform a few religious duties while awaiting Christ's return (p. 35). Many Cameroonian and other African churches may be vulnerable to the same error. Bonhoeffer (1963) describes its result as "cheap grace":

> That is what we mean by cheap grace, the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs. Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. Grace without the cross and grace without Jesus Christ living incarnate. (p. 47)

Comparable patterns are evident among some Christians and clergy in rural Cameroon. During this writer's doctoral research in the Mbam and Inoubou Division, he observed baptized congregants who regularly participated in the Lord's Supper while persisting in serious wrongdoing without evident remorse or repentance. Such patterns illustrate the need to recover what Bonhoeffer (1963) calls costly grace:

> Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all it is costly because it cost God the life of his son. (p. 47)

What was infinitely costly to God cannot be treated as spiritually inconsequential. Discipleship entails self-denial and the progressive replacement of the old way of life with the character of Christ. Christ's death not only addresses the guilt of sin; through union with the crucified and risen Lord, believers are empowered to turn from sin and grow in Christlikeness.

Although Jesus preached widely, He gave sustained attention to the formation of the Twelve. They were neither prominent clerics nor scholars, but ordinary people whose life with Jesus profoundly transformed them. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they became witnesses through whom the gospel spread across the ancient world. Willard (2006) emphasizes the experiential simplicity of this apprenticeship: the disciples accompanied Jesus in order to observe, obey, and imitate his way of life. This commitment had a recognized cost, expressed in Peter's declaration that they had left everything to follow him (Mark 10:28).

The disciples learned through close association and direct observation. Although Jesus addressed crowds, He devoted particular attention to the Twelve and, at significant moments, to Peter, James, and John. These three witnessed the raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37), the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28), and Jesus' anguish in Gethsemane (Mark 14:33). Their formation involved not only hearing his teaching but also sharing His ministry and witnessing His response to suffering.

Jesus' incarnational approach concentrated sustained formation on a few people for the sake of many. Rather than isolating Himself behind religious status or relying on public performance, He remained present to His disciples and formed them through shared life. His ministry demonstrates that durable transformation requires relational proximity, example, instruction, and the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul likewise discipled others by offering his own life as a pattern to imitate. He could urge believers to follow his example because his ministry was oriented toward conformity to Christ (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1). His care combined authority with parental affection: he compared himself

to a nursing mother who tenderly cares for her children and shares not only the gospel but also her own life (1 Thessalonians 2:7–8).

Parental love was foundational to Paul's mentoring ministry and pastoral instruction. He urged his spiritual children to reproduce the same relational quality in their service. Thus, he instructed Timothy that the aim of Christian teaching is love issuing from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith (1 Timothy 1:5), and he prayed that the Philippians' love would abound (Philippians 1:9). Paul's missionary vocation sought not merely initial conversion but maturity in Christ (Colossians 1:28–29). He revisited churches in Syria, Cilicia, Galatia, and Phrygia to strengthen the disciples (Acts 15:41; 18:23), even amid persecution and hardship. Ngaruiya (2019) applies this relational vision to African ministry, arguing that formation flourishes through authentic relationships rather than impersonal institutional structures. In rural Cameroon, where life is already organized through interconnected households and councils of elders, an intergenerational model is particularly fitting: mature leaders invest in younger believers and embody integrity, humility, and sacrificial service within everyday village life.

Paul desired his disciples' sanctification, expressed in the fruit of the Spirit and in lives marked by faith, hope, truth, purity, goodness, and righteousness. His final exhortation to the Philippians therefore calls them to dwell on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8).

Brown (2010) identifies the loss of visible distinction between believers and unbelievers as a central challenge facing the contemporary Church:

> The major problem facing the church today is that the lives of believers are virtually indistinguishable from unbelievers. As a result, Christians have lost credibility and their testimony has been discredited. If the church hopes to reverse this trend, and impact the lives of individuals, as well as, influence the culture, it must address two major deficiencies. First, it must root out spiritual lethargies and evoke a renewed hunger for spiritual growth in the hearts of congregants. (p. 72)

Brown's argument is especially relevant in rural Cameroon: when Christian conduct is indistinguishable from surrounding patterns, the Church's credibility suffers. Addressing this problem requires both confronting spiritual lethargy and cultivating a renewed desire for growth among congregants.

Timothy as an Example of Paul's Discipleship Model

Paul's relationship with Timothy offers a clear example of his disciple-making ministry. Conscious that his own ministry would end (2 Timothy 4:6–7) and convinced of the urgency of the gospel, Paul equipped trustworthy people to carry the work forward. His formation of Timothy exemplifies this commitment to multiplication.

Acts 16:1–3 recounts Paul's encounter with Timothy during his second missionary journey. Timothy, the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father, was well regarded by believers in Lystra and Iconium. Paul invited him to join the missionary team and circumcised him to avoid an unnecessary obstacle among the Jews whom they hoped to reach.

Paul's circumcision of Timothy, while seemingly in tension with his argument in Galatians 3:3–4, reflects a pragmatic missionary accommodation rather than a condition of salvation. The decision is consistent with Paul's willingness to adapt culturally for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19–23).

Timothy's development combined contextual wisdom, shared ministry, delegated responsibility, and affirmation. After preparing him for service, Paul entrusted him with demanding assignments; when Paul left Berea, for example, Timothy and Silas remained with the congregation (Acts 17:14). Paul also affirmed Timothy's calling and competence, describing him as God's coworker in the gospel and commending his proven character and genuine concern for the churches (1 Thessalonians 3:2; Philippians 2:19–23). Such affirmation helped Timothy grow from an apprentice into a trusted minister. Paul's example suggests that effective empowerment gives emerging leaders meaningful responsibility while continuing to offer guidance and encouragement.

Paul did more than clarify Timothy's calling; he embodied the life Timothy was to emulate. Their companionship enabled Timothy to observe Paul's devotion to preaching, teaching, and testifying about Christ (Acts 18:5). Paul then urged Timothy to pursue the goals of faithful ministry: to fight the good fight of faith, endure hardship, hold fast to his confession, and fulfill his calling as a servant of God (1 Timothy 6:11–12; 2 Timothy 2:3). Timothy's formation therefore joined personal example, theological instruction, practical responsibility, perseverance, and an eschatological hope.

In the final phase of their relationship, Paul charged Timothy to fulfill his ministry and expressed confidence in his competence. Timothy served in Ephesus, a difficult setting marked by false teaching and a plural religious environment. First and Second Timothy instructed him to guard the gospel, lead the church faithfully, and entrust what he had received to reliable people who would teach others in turn (2 Timothy 2:1–2; 4:5). This reproducible pattern remains highly relevant for leaders in rural and semi-rural Cameroon.

Character Formation

In Romans 12:1–2, Paul urges believers not to conform to the patterns of the present age but to be transformed through the renewal of their minds. Christian worship therefore extends beyond Sunday services: it includes the presentation of one's whole life to God and the reformation of perception, desire, and conduct.

Field research conducted in the Mbam and Inoubou Division for a 2019 doctoral study used semi-structured interviews and focus groups with congregants and pastors from several denominations (Ngomediage, 2019). The findings suggest that some professing Christians continue to adopt patterns inconsistent with the gospel rather than experiencing the transformation of mind described in Romans 12. Reported examples included syncretistic practices, consultation of traditional diviners, and sexual misconduct. These observations should not be generalized to all rural Christians; they do, however, reveal a serious gap between Christian profession and practice in the communities studied.

Such patterns suggest that some professing believers are not fully living from their identity as disciples of Christ. Their understanding of themselves and their world has not yet been conformed to the mind of Christ. The goal of discipleship is precisely such conformity, expressed through meekness, self-control, humility, holiness, and self-giving love. Wright (2010) argues that rule-keeping alone cannot produce mature Christians when Christ's character is not being formed within them. Authentic discipleship therefore requires the intentional cultivation of Christlike character.

This perspective presents discipleship not chiefly as compliance with external boundaries but as a Spirit-enabled process of becoming. Virtue formation challenges the reduction of faith to intellectual assent or outward conformity by emphasizing the renewal of mind, desire, and habit.

Rules may restrain conduct, but they cannot by themselves heal the desires that give rise to hypocrisy or stagnation. The New Testament envisions the restoration of God's image in human beings as the character of Jesus is reproduced in them (1 Corinthians 2:16; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 4:19; Hebrews 1:3). Christian leaders should therefore evaluate formation by its fruit in persons and communities. As Wright succinctly insists, "integrity matters" (2010, p. 25).

Power (1997), citing Potter (2007), defines character as the essential nature of a person that marks and distinguishes him or her (p. 11). Character becomes visible through conduct and habitual attitudes. Davis (2003) likewise understands virtues such as honesty, perseverance, and accountability as expressions of an underlying moral disposition rather than isolated traits.

Character and reputation must therefore be distinguished. Character concerns who a person actually is; reputation concerns who others believe that person to be. Disciples of Christ are called to cultivate Christlike character rather than merely protect a religious reputation.

The concern in rural churches is not simply the presence of moral failure but the possibility that religious practice may remain detached from genuine formation. Davis (2003) warns that religiosity by itself can isolate spiritual concerns without producing Christian character and may generate little more than moral judgment (p. 35). Paul describes a comparable condition as having "a form of godliness" while denying its power (2 Timothy 3:5).

Potter (2007), drawing on Frank Fenby's Toward a Philosophy of Christian Education, describes the formative aim of Christian education:

> A concept where the learner's character, or manner of life is such that a person could easily mistake the learner as Jesus himself. It is interesting to note that when we think of Jesus we seldom focus on his excellence in the cognitive domain but rather in the affective domain. It is not so much what Jesus knew, but how he lived that amazes us. So when we work to bring a learner to full maturity in Christ, we must be heavily involved in working on affective domain objectives. Knowledge of facts and methods is important. However, the ultimate aim of the Christian Education is the development of learners' character. Christian education seeks to mold the character of each learner into the likeness of Jesus Christ. The current source of values, taught within traditional character education, is based on "culturally accepted" practices and norms. (p. 20)

This emphasis on character does not imply that redemption can be earned through moral effort, education, ordinances, or religious activity. Transformation begins with God's grace in Christ and is effected by the Holy Spirit. Jesus teaches that evil actions arise from the human heart (Matthew 15:19); the heart must therefore be renewed, not merely restrained. Those who confess Christ's lordship are called to surrender every dimension of life to his transforming work.

Christ reveals himself through Scripture, and those who surrender to his lordship become his disciples by receiving and obeying his teaching. Believers and church leaders alike must allow that teaching to transform them so that they can accompany others through the same process. Scripture exposes distorted perceptions, forms wise judgment, and equips God's people for every good work (Hebrews 4:12; 2 Timothy 3:16–17).

As the teaching of Jesus is received and practiced, the heart is prepared for enduring transformation.

Willard (2006) cautions that spiritual milestones, intense emotional experiences, and corporate worship do not automatically transform moral character. Although such experiences can be biblically meaningful, lasting change ordinarily develops as believers intentionally order daily life around Jesus and cooperate with divine grace through sustained spiritual practices (p. 81). His

argument challenges the assumption that maturity results from a succession of passive or crisis-oriented spiritual experiences.

Character transformation in rural Cameroonian communities requires strong, Christ-centered, locally led formation. Church leaders must teach believers not only what Christians affirm but how disciples of Jesus live. Wright (2010) notes that, from the Church's earliest centuries, personal and communal immersion in Scripture—through reading, study, practice, and song—has been central to the formation of Christian character (p. 398). Such practices should be embedded in relationships of mentoring, accountability, prayer, and shared service.

Philippians 2:5–8 presents the humility of Christ as the pattern for Christian life: although he existed in the form of God, he emptied himself and took the form of a servant. Followers of Christ must therefore be taught and shown how humility becomes visible in ordinary relationships. Jesus similarly identifies childlike humility as a mark of greatness in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:4). Arnold and Nouwen (2007) emphasize this summons to conversion and humility (p. 109).

Jesus' teaching on childlike humility has direct implications for contemporary Christian communities. In marriage, family, church leadership, and congregational life, disciples are called to relinquish rivalry and the pursuit of status. Humility opens believers to truth, service, reconciliation, and dependence upon God (Isaiah 66:2).

Christlike humility also produces willing mutual submission because it reflects Jesus' own obedience to the Father (John 8:28; 12:49–50). Humility becomes visible in teachability, accountability, and service rather than in self-promotion. Bjork (2015) links this virtue directly to formation in community:

> A disciple submits to a model that helps him to learn how to follow Jesus. Most people never arrive at this point. This is, in my opinion, the primary reason they either do not grow or do not continue to grow. There is nothing more foundational in spiritual growth than that the character of a person is developed in a community, and that takes place only through submission. Paul made it clear that submission must be the experience of all (see Ephesians 5:21). It is this character trait that makes Jesus so attractive (see Philippians 2:5-8). God resists the proud, but He gives grace to the humble (1Peter 5:5b). The New Testament teaches that we manifest the virtue of humility in our submission to other believers. Submission to others is the proof of humility, and it is for that reason that character is shaped within community. (pp. 67 - 68)

Prayer is another essential practice of Christlike formation. Jesus regularly withdrew to solitary places to pray (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). By cultivating dependence on God, prayer reorients disciples away from self-sufficiency and toward trust in God's power, wisdom, and goodness.

John 17 also presents unity as a defining feature of Christian witness. The pursuit of unity requires believers to practice brotherly love and to confess and renounce envy, gossip, contempt, and rivalry. Such formation is not an optional supplement to discipleship; it is part of learning to embody the reconciling life of Christ. Effective rural disciple-making should therefore create communal practices through which believers learn prayer, humility, mutual submission, reconciliation, and shared mission.

Conclusion

This study has examined the crucial role of character formation in Christian discipleship within the rural and semi-rural contexts of Cameroon. Drawing from the teachings and examples of Jesus

Christ and the Apostle Paul, it has demonstrated that authentic discipleship extends beyond religious participation to encompass the progressive transformation of believers into the likeness of Christ. The biblical models of Jesus' investment in the Twelve and Paul's intentional mentoring of Timothy underscore the centrality of relational disciple-making in the mission of the Church.

The persistent gap between Christian profession and conduct in some rural church settings points to a deficiency in intentional discipleship and character formation. Spiritual maturity cannot be measured merely by attendance, religious activity, or institutional growth, but by the extent to which believers exhibit Christlike virtues such as humility, obedience, love, self-control, integrity, and holiness.

Consequently, Christian leaders and congregations in Cameroon must recommit themselves to disciple-making ministries that prioritize biblical instruction, mentoring relationships, spiritual formation, and practical obedience to the teachings of Christ. Such an approach will not only nurture mature disciples but also strengthen the Church's witness within its communities.

Ultimately, Christ entrusts the Church with the formation of disciples who reflect His character and reproduce that life in others. Jesus' investment in the Twelve and Paul's formation of Timothy demonstrate that disciple-making joins proclamation with shared life, instruction, example, delegated responsibility, correction, encouragement, and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Renewed attention to these practices offers a pathway toward spiritual renewal in rural Cameroon and a stronger Christian witness throughout Africa.

Believers and Christian leaders share responsibility for participating in this Spirit-enabled transformation. As they submit themselves to the teaching and example of Christ, they become better equipped to accompany others toward faith and maturity. This contribution from a Cameroonian pastor and scholar therefore calls rural churches to recover disciple-making as their central vocation: forming obedient followers of Jesus whose character makes the reign and reconciling love of Christ visible in their communities.

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