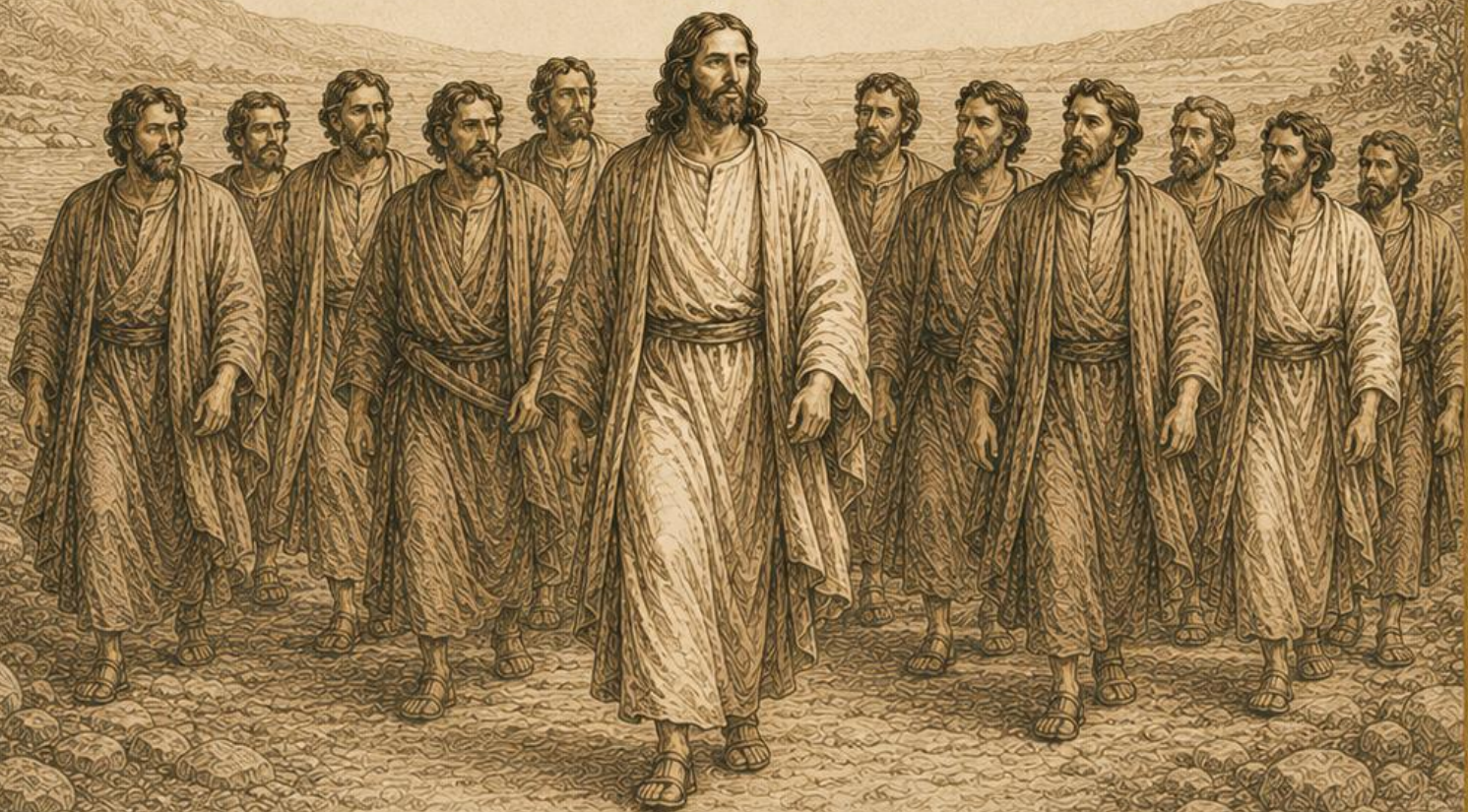




REASON TOGETHER
— CHURCH —

THE AGE — OF THE — DISCIPLES

Matthew 4:18–22; Matthew 17:24–27



— Sermon & Pastor's Commentary —

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—
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Aloha, and welcome everyone to Reason Together Church.

It is a beautiful day to be together.

It is a beautiful day to open the Word of God.

And it is a beautiful day to ask a question that may sound simple at first, but may cause us to look at some very familiar people in an entirely different way.

Before we begin, I want you to picture the twelve disciples.

Do not open your Bible yet.

Just picture them.

What does Peter look like in your mind?

How old is Andrew?

What kind of face do you imagine when you hear the name Matthew?

What about James?

What about John?

Most of us picture a group of mature men.

We picture weathered faces.

We picture full beards.

We picture men who look as though they have already lived quite a bit of life.

Peter may look nearly as old as Jesus.

John may look a little younger than the others, but probably not very young.

That is the picture many of us have carried for years.

But let me ask you something.

Where did that picture come from?

Which verse told us how old Peter was?

Which verse told us that John was the youngest?

Which verse told us that Matthew was thirty, or Andrew was twenty-five, or James was somewhere in between?

The truth is that most of the faces we see when we picture the disciples did not come from Scripture.

They came from paintings.

They came from movies.

They came from illustrated Bibles.

They came from actors who portrayed the disciples on a screen.

Without realizing it, many of us have allowed artwork to fill in information the Bible never supplied.

That brings us to today's question.

What was the age of Jesus' disciples?

In recent years, a very interesting theory has become increasingly popular.

The theory says that Peter was the only disciple over twenty years old.

According to this idea, the other eleven may all have been teenagers.

Some people have even described the Twelve as Jesus' teenage disciples.

Now that is a very different picture.

Instead of twelve mature men walking behind Jesus, imagine Peter as the only man over twenty and the others as young men still in their teens.

Imagine Jesus calming the storm while a boat full of frightened teenagers looks on.

Imagine teenagers arguing about which one of them will be the greatest.

Imagine Jesus teaching a group of young men who have energy, questions, strong opinions and a great deal of growing left to do.

It is an intriguing idea.

It may even help explain certain things.

But is it Biblical?

That is the question we must ask.

At Reason Together Church, we do not reject an idea simply because it is unfamiliar.

We also do not accept an idea simply because it is interesting.

We open the Bible.

We examine the evidence.

We ask what Scripture establishes.

We ask what Scripture suggests.

We ask what Scripture permits.

And we are careful not to claim that Scripture proves something when it does not.

That is how we are going to approach this question today.

Before we do, I want to take just a moment for a few items concerning our church family.

If this is your first time with us, we are truly glad you are here.

We will never ask you to stand or do anything that would single you out.

There is a guest card available for you if you would like to share your first name and email address with us.

That is all we ask for.

We would simply like the opportunity to thank you for being here and keep you informed about what is happening at Reason Together Church.

If you have keiki with you, our Keiki Kids Center is available during the service.

We also do not pass an offering plate.

If you are visiting, we encourage you to support your home church.

Giving here is for the members and regular participants of Reason Together Church who consider this their church home.

And after the service, I hope you will join us in the Reason Together Café.

Pick up a Reason Together mug and enjoy a cup of locally grown coffee.

The coffee is free.

The refills are free.

And as we like to say, there are free refills on conversations too.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for bringing us together today.

Thank You for giving us Your Word.

As we study, help us to be honest with the evidence You have provided.

Protect us from dismissing possibilities simply because they are unfamiliar.

Protect us also from turning possibilities into certainties simply because they are exciting.

Give us wisdom.

Give us humility.

Give us teachable hearts.

Help us to see Jesus more clearly.

And help us to become better disciples because we have spent this time in Your Word.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

Our opening Scripture is found in Matthew chapter 4, beginning with verse 18.

Matthew 4:18 says,

“And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers.”

Verse 19,

“And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

Verse 20,

“And they straightway left their nets, and followed him.”

Verse 21,

“And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them.”

And verse 22,

“And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him.”

That is the Word of God.

Now let us begin with a very simple observation.

How old were Peter and Andrew?

The passage does not say.

How old were James and John?

The passage does not say.

Were they teenagers?

The passage allows that possibility.

Were they in their twenties?

The passage allows that possibility too.

Were one or more of them older?

Nothing in the passage makes that impossible.

What does the passage actually establish?

Peter and Andrew were brothers.

They were fishermen.

They were working when Jesus called them.

James and John were brothers.

They were working with their father.

Mark's account tells us that hired servants were also involved in the fishing operation.

Jesus called them.

And they followed Him.

Those are the facts the passage gives us.

Their occupations are stated.

Their family relationships are stated.

Their response to Jesus is stated.

Their ages are not.

That gives us our first important principle for today.

We must learn to distinguish between what we see in a passage and what we bring into a passage.

Sometimes the picture in our mind is so familiar that we forget the Bible never painted it.

There is one person in the Gospel story whose approximate age is stated.

Luke 3:23 says,

“And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age.”

The Bible tells us that Jesus was about thirty when He began His public ministry.

That is not an estimate based on artwork.

That is not a conclusion based on tradition.

That is a statement from Scripture.

Jesus was about thirty.

But Scripture never gives us a similar statement about Peter.

It never says Andrew was twenty-two.

It never says Matthew was twenty-eight.

It never says John was sixteen.

The exact age of every member of the Twelve remains unstated.

That does not mean we cannot look for clues.

It means we must handle the clues honestly.

So let us begin with Peter.

Peter was a working fisherman.

He and Andrew were casting a net into the sea when Jesus called them.

Peter also had a wife.

In Matthew chapter 8, Jesus entered Peter's house and saw Peter's wife's mother lying sick with a fever.

You cannot have a mother-in-law without having a wife.

Peter was married.

Peter was also the person whom the collectors approached concerning the temple payment.

This payment was expected from Jewish males twenty years old and above, which will become important when we examine the passage more carefully.

Taken together, those facts present Peter as an adult man carrying adult responsibilities.

Could Peter have been considerably younger than the gray-bearded man in some paintings?

Certainly.

Could he have been in his twenties?

Yes.

Could he have been close to Jesus' age?

Yes.

But can we place an exact number beside his name?

No.

Peter was clearly an adult.

His exact age is unknown.

What about Andrew?

Andrew was Peter's brother.

He was a working fisherman.

He left his nets to follow Jesus.

But the Bible does not tell us whether Andrew was older or younger than Peter.

It does not tell us whether he was married.

It does not give us a single number from which to calculate his age.

Andrew's age is unknown.

What about James and John?

They were working in the family fishing operation.

They were in the boat with Zebedee their father.

They were mending their nets.

Mark tells us that hired servants were present.

This was not simply two little boys playing beside the water.

They were participating in productive work.

But young men could work in a family business.

Adult sons could also work beside their father.

The fact that Zebedee was present does not make James and John children.

It also does not require them to be older men.

Their work tells us something about responsibility.

It does not give us their birthdays.

What about Matthew?

Matthew was sitting at the receipt of custom, which means he was working at the tax collection booth, when Jesus called him.

He was functioning as a tax collector.

That was a serious occupation.

It involved money.

It involved records.

It involved Roman authority.

It made Matthew deeply unpopular with many of his own people.

It is reasonable to believe that Matthew was an adult.

But once again, the text does not provide a minimum hiring age for tax collectors.

We cannot look at his occupation and confidently announce that he was twenty-four, twenty-seven or thirty-two.

We know what he was doing.

We do not know how old he was when Jesus said, "Follow me."

Philip's age is not given.

Bartholomew's age is not given.

Thomas' age is not given.

James the son of Alphaeus has no age attached to his name.

Thaddaeus has no age attached to his name.

Simon the Zealot has no age attached to his name.

Judas Iscariot carried the common money bag, but even that responsibility does not tell us how old he was.

When we go disciple by disciple, we discover how little chronological information the Gospels provide.

We know far more about some of their personalities than we know about their birthdays.

Now we come to the strongest argument for the teenage-disciple theory.

It is found in Matthew chapter 17.

Beginning with verse 24, the Bible says,

“And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received tribute money came to Peter, and said, Doth not your master pay tribute?”

Verse 25,

“He saith, Yes. And when he was come into the house, Jesus prevented him, saying, What thinkest thou, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own children, or of strangers?”

Verse 26,

“Peter saith unto him, Of strangers. Jesus saith unto him, Then are the children free.”

And verse 27,

“Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for me and thee.”

This was not the Roman tax that people often have in mind when they hear the word tribute.

This was the payment associated with the Temple.

The background is often connected to Exodus chapter 30.

There, Moses was instructed to collect a half-shekel from those who were numbered from twenty years old and above.

In Matthew 17, the coin Jesus described was sufficient for two payments.

One payment for Jesus.

One payment for Peter.

And this is where the theory becomes very interesting.

Jesus was about thirty.

Peter was married.

Peter and Jesus paid.

No payment for the other disciples is mentioned.

Could that mean Peter was the only disciple over twenty?

Could the others have been exempt because they were still teenagers?

Yes.

It could mean that.

Let us be fair.

That is not a foolish argument.

It is not something we should laugh away.

It is a genuine clue.

It creates a legitimate possibility.

But now we must ask the next question.

Does Matthew 17 prove that the other eleven disciples were under twenty?

Look carefully at what happens.

The collectors came to Peter.

They did not ask Peter, “Do you and all the other disciples pay?”

They asked, “Doth not your master pay tribute?”

Their question was about Jesus.

Peter answered concerning Jesus.

Then Peter went into the house.

Jesus spoke to Peter.

Jesus sent Peter to fish.

And Jesus supplied a payment for Himself and Peter.

The passage never tells us that all twelve disciples were standing there.

It never tells us that the collectors asked for payments from every disciple.

It never says the others were exempt.

It never says they had already paid.

It never says they paid somewhere else.

It simply does not address them.

The passage is centered upon Jesus, Peter and the meaning of the payment.

Jesus is the Son.

The children of the king are free.

Yet Jesus chose to pay so that He would not create an unnecessary offense.

That is the purpose of the conversation.

Matthew was teaching us something about Jesus.

He was not quietly inserting the ages of the other eleven disciples.

So how should we place this clue on our evidence board?

Does it establish that Jesus and Peter were the only two over twenty?

No.

Does it permit that possibility?

Yes.

Does it make the teenage theory worth considering?

Absolutely.

But a possibility is not the same as a conclusion.

Those two words are very important in Bible study.

Possible.

Proven.

Many misunderstandings begin when we move from the first word to the second without enough evidence.

Someone says, "This could explain the passage."

Before long, the explanation becomes, "This is what happened."

Then the next person repeats it as though the Bible stated it directly.

We must be more careful than that.

The temple payment is the strongest clue for young disciples.

But it remains a clue.

It does not become a birth certificate for eleven men.

Another argument is that Jesus sometimes called His disciples children.

In John 13:33, Jesus said,

"Little children, yet a little while I am with you."

Some have reasoned that this expression must mean they were physically young.

But John later used the same tender language when writing to believers.

In 1 John, he repeatedly addressed his readers as little children.

He was not writing only to a children's ministry.

He was speaking as a spiritual father.

The expression communicated affection.

It communicated relationship.

It communicated spiritual dependence.

It did not tell us the age of each person receiving the words.

A pastor may look across a congregation filled with adults and say, "My dear children in the faith."

That does not mean everyone in the congregation is twelve.

It tells us something about the relationship.

It does not tell us their chronological ages.

Matthew 11 and Luke 10 also speak about truth being revealed to babes.

Those passages contrast humble receivers with those who consider themselves wise and prudent.

They are teaching us about receptiveness to God.

They are not teaching us that the disciples were biologically little children.

So does the language of children establish that the Twelve were teenagers?

No.

Could some of them still have been young?

Yes.

But the form of address does not prove it.

Another argument says that Peter must have been the only married disciple because Peter is the only one whose wife appears in the Gospel narratives.

If the others were unmarried, perhaps that supports the idea that they were under eighteen.

At first, that may sound reasonable.

But we must be careful with arguments built from silence.

The Gospels mention Peter's mother-in-law because Jesus healed her.

If she had not been sick, we might not have received that detail about Peter's family.

The Gospel writers were not providing a marriage registry for the Twelve.

They were telling us about Jesus.

Paul gives us another important piece of evidence in 1 Corinthians 9:5.

He says,

“Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas?”

Cephas is Peter.

Paul refers not only to Peter but also to other apostles traveling with believing wives.

That does not tell us which of the Twelve were married during Jesus’ earthly ministry.

It does tell us that we should not treat Peter as though he were necessarily the only married apostle.

Silence concerning a wife is not proof that a wife did not exist.

That is another important Bible study principle.

The Bible does not tell us everything that was true.

It tells us everything God chose to give us for the purpose of the passage and the message of Scripture.

Another major part of the teenage theory concerns Jewish education.

The idea is often presented something like this.

A Jewish boy began studying Scripture when he was very young.

As he grew, the best students continued into more advanced levels.

Around the middle teenage years, a gifted student might seek a rabbi under whom he could study.

Those who were not selected entered a trade.

Since Peter, Andrew, James and John were already working, it is sometimes said that other rabbis must have rejected them.

Then Jesus came along and chose the students whom everyone else had passed over.

That makes a powerful story.

It preaches well.

It makes us feel the grace in Jesus’ call.

But is that what the Bible says happened?

No.

The Bible never says Peter applied to study under another rabbi.

It never says John was rejected from advanced education.

It never says Andrew returned to fishing because a religious teacher decided he was not good enough.

Those details belong to a reconstruction.

They do not belong to the Gospel text.

There is a genuine Jewish writing called Pirkei Avot.

It contains a familiar progression of ages.

Five for the study of Scripture.

Ten for the study of the Mishnah.

Thirteen for the commandments.

Fifteen for further study.

Eighteen for marriage.

Twenty for pursuing one's occupation.

Thirty for strength.

That is an interesting source.

It helps us understand later Jewish thought about stages of life and learning.

But it was preserved after the time of Jesus.

We cannot assume that every boy in every Galilean village moved through one identical school system.

We cannot take a later educational ideal and use it as a calendar for the Twelve.

Historical background can illuminate Scripture.

Historical background must never be permitted to replace Scripture.

And there is another theological problem with the rejected-student story.

Jesus did not choose the Twelve because He discovered academic potential that other rabbis had missed.

He chose them according to His own purpose.

He called fishermen.

He called a tax collector.

He called men with different personalities and backgrounds.

His choice did not depend upon a report card from another teacher.

Jesus said,

“Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.”

That is the center of their calling.

Not their educational rank.

Not their ability to impress a rabbi.

Not their age.

Christ chose them.

Another argument says their behavior sounds like the behavior of teenagers.

They argued over which one would be greatest.

They spoke before they thought.

They misunderstood what Jesus plainly told them.

They panicked during the storm.

They fell asleep when Jesus asked them to watch.

They fled when He was arrested.

Peter made bold promises and then denied Jesus.

James and John wanted positions of honor.

At one point, they wanted to call down fire from heaven.

People look at those actions and say, “Surely these must have been teenagers.”

But let us be honest.

Have you ever known an adult who wanted to be first?

Have you ever known an adult who spoke before thinking?

Have you ever known an adult who panicked?

Have you ever known an adult who misunderstood something even after it was explained?

Have you ever known an adult who made a promise in a moment of confidence and failed to keep it in a moment of fear?

We do not have to search very far.

Sometimes that adult is the person in the mirror.

Pride is not limited to teenagers.

Fear is not limited to teenagers.

Spiritual dullness is not limited to teenagers.

Adults can be immature.

Older adults can be immature.

People can possess decades of life experience and still have a great deal of spiritual growing to do.

The failures of the disciples tell us that they needed transformation.

They do not tell us the year in which they were born.

And we should be careful about speaking of them with contempt.

It is easy to sit on this side of the resurrection and wonder how they could have missed what Jesus was telling them.

But we have the completed Gospel story.

We know about the cross.

We know about the empty tomb.

We know what happened on the Day of Pentecost.

They were living through events they did not yet understand.

Their failures were real.

Jesus corrected them.

The Gospel writers did not hide their weaknesses.

But those men also left their nets.

They followed Jesus.

They traveled where He led.

They listened.

They asked questions.

They served.

They carried the Gospel into a hostile world.

Most of them eventually suffered greatly because they would not deny the Lord whom they had once struggled to understand.

We can acknowledge their immaturity without calling them foolish children who were not paying attention.

We can tell the truth about their failures while also recognizing what Christ made of them.

What about John?

Tradition commonly presents John as the youngest disciple.

That may be true.

John appears to have lived longer than the others.

If he lived to an advanced age near the end of the first century, it is reasonable to think he may have been younger than Peter.

But even that does not give us a number.

Youngest is a comparative word.

If a group ranges from twenty-two to thirty, the youngest member is still the youngest.

If a group ranges from sixteen to thirty, the youngest member is the youngest.

The word does not tell us which range is correct.

At the cross, Jesus entrusted the care of Mary to the disciple whom He loved.

Some people argue that John could not have been young because Jesus would not have given him such a responsibility.

Others argue that young people in the ancient world often carried serious responsibilities.

Both observations may be discussed.

Neither one calculates John's age.

What the scene tells us is that Jesus trusted John.

It tells us about relationship and responsibility.

It still does not tell us whether John was seventeen, twenty-two or twenty-eight.

So now we have examined the principal clues.

We have looked at occupations.

We have looked at Peter's marriage.

We have looked at the temple payment.

We have looked at the language of little children.

We have looked at the wives of apostles.

We have looked at the proposed educational system.

We have looked at the disciples' behavior.

We have considered the tradition concerning John.

It is time to answer the question.

What was the age of Jesus' disciples?

The most honest answer is this.

We do not know their exact ages.

Peter was clearly an adult.

He was married.

He worked.

He carried responsibility.

And he was included in the temple payment with Jesus.

Several other disciples were also working men with meaningful responsibilities.

Some members of the Twelve may have been in their twenties.

One or more may have been older teenagers.

John may have been among the youngest.

The group may have included a range of ages.

But the Bible does not give us enough information to assign an age to each disciple.

And it does not give us enough information to declare confidently that Peter was over twenty while all eleven others were teenagers.

Is that a disappointing answer?

I do not believe it is.

Sometimes the most faithful answer to a Biblical question is, “The Bible does not tell us.”

That is not a failure of study.

That is the result of honest study.

Faith does not require us to pretend we know what God did not reveal.

Confidence is not the same as faithfulness.

A person can speak very confidently and still go beyond the text.

A faithful student of Scripture learns when to say,

“This is certain.”

“This is likely.”

“This is possible.”

And,

“This remains unknown.”

The teenage-disciple theory is possible.

Some of the disciples may indeed have been much younger than traditional paintings suggest.

The theory can help us question assumptions that came from art rather than Scripture.

But possibility must remain possibility.

We should not print birth dates on the disciples’ biographies when the Bible left the spaces blank.

Now let us ask a different question.

Why did the Holy Spirit leave their ages unstated?

The Bible tells us where some of them worked.

It tells us what they said.

It tells us where they failed.

It tells us how Jesus corrected them.

It tells us what they witnessed.

It tells us about the authority Jesus gave them.

It tells us about the mission He placed before them.

It tells us about the Holy Spirit empowering them.

But it does not tell us how many candles would have been on Peter's birthday cake.

Perhaps that is because the source of their usefulness was never their age.

Their authority did not come from being young.

Their authority did not come from being old.

Their authority came from Jesus Christ.

Their message did not come from youthful imagination.

Their message did not come from accumulated human experience.

Their message came from the Lord.

Their courage did not come from the natural fearlessness of youth.

Their courage did not come from the calm confidence of age.

Their courage came from the Holy Spirit.

The most important words in our opening passage were not the words describing their nets.

The most important words were spoken by Jesus.

"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Listen to the order.

"Follow me."

"I will make you."

Jesus did not say,

"Make yourself into everything you need to be, and then you may follow Me."

He did not say,

"Wait until you reach the perfect age."

He did not say,

"Return when you have accumulated enough experience."

He did not say,

"Become spiritually mature on your own, and then I will consider using you."

He called them.

They followed.

And He began making them.

That is discipleship.

A disciple is not someone who has already arrived.

A disciple is someone who is following the One who is able to lead, teach, correct and transform.

Peter did not understand everything when he left his nets.

John did not understand everything when he left the boat.

Matthew did not understand everything when he rose from the receipt of custom.

Thomas would still have questions.

James and John would still have ambition that needed correction.

Peter would still speak too quickly.

All of them would still face fear.

Jesus called people whose formation was not complete.

And that should encourage every one of us.

Some young person may be listening today and thinking,

“I am too young for God to use me.”

You may be too young for certain responsibilities.

You may need more instruction.

You may need the protection and guidance of mature believers.

You may have much to learn.

But you are not too young to follow Jesus seriously.

You are not too young to pray.

You are not too young to study God’s Word.

You are not too young to tell the truth.

You are not too young to serve.

You are not too young to begin becoming the person Christ is calling you to be.

Paul later told Timothy,

“Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers.”

Youth is not permission to be careless.

It is an opportunity to begin faithfulness early.

Someone else may be listening in the middle years of life.

You have responsibilities.

You have work.

You have bills.

You have family demands.

Life may feel too crowded for discipleship.

Peter had responsibilities.

Matthew had an occupation.

James and John were part of a family business.

Jesus called people in the middle of real life.

Following Christ is not something we postpone until life becomes empty.

It is how we live while life is full.

And someone else may be listening who believes the useful years have already passed.

You may think,

“If I were younger, I could serve.”

“If I still had the energy I once possessed, perhaps God could use me.”

“If I had started earlier, my life might have mattered more.”

But there is no retirement age from discipleship.

Older believers possess testimony.

They possess memory.

They have witnessed God’s faithfulness through seasons younger believers have not yet faced.

They can pray.

They can encourage.

They can teach.

They can listen.

They can warn.

They can demonstrate what it looks like to keep following Jesus when the road has been long.

You are not too old to grow.

You are not too old to serve.

You are not too old to encourage someone who is walking behind you.

And no matter how old we are, none of us graduates from being a disciple.

Pastors are still disciples.

Teachers are still disciples.

Grandparents are still disciples.

People who have known the Lord for fifty years are still disciples.

We still need Christ to teach us.

We still need Scripture to correct us.

We still need the Holy Spirit to empower us.

We still have assumptions that must be examined.

We still have pride that must be humbled.

We still have fears that must be surrendered.

We still have growing to do.

Chronological age and spiritual maturity are not the same thing.

A person can grow older without growing wiser.

A person can spend years around the things of God without becoming more like Christ.

The goal is not merely that more birthdays pass.

The goal is that, as the years pass, the disciple increasingly resembles the Teacher.

Think about Peter.

The Peter who first left the nets was not yet the Peter who preached on the Day of Pentecost.

The Peter who argued about greatness was not yet the Peter who would tell suffering believers to humble themselves under the mighty hand of God.

The Peter who denied Jesus was not yet the Peter who would stand publicly and proclaim the resurrection.

What happened?

Peter followed.

Peter failed.

Peter was corrected.

Peter was restored.

Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Christ continued making him.

That is the hope of discipleship.

We are not celebrating who we are without Jesus.

We are trusting what Jesus can make of a life that follows Him.
The disciples were not powerful because they were teenagers.
They were not powerful because they were mature adults.
They were not powerful because they were fishermen.
They were not powerful because one of them understood taxation.
They were powerful witnesses because they had been with Jesus.
They had seen the risen Christ.
They had received His commission.
And they were empowered by the Holy Spirit.
Their age did not create the Gospel.
The Gospel created their mission.
And that Gospel remains the center of our invitation today.
Jesus is not merely inviting us to admire the Twelve.
He is not merely asking us to become more religious.
He is not offering us a collection of better habits.
He calls us to Himself.
The same disciples who struggled to understand eventually saw Jesus arrested.
They saw Him crucified.
They knew He was buried.
And then they encountered the risen Lord.
Jesus Christ died for our sins.
He was buried.
He rose again.
Salvation is not earned by reaching the right age.
It is not earned by accumulating religious knowledge.
It is not earned by performing enough good works.
It is received through faith in Jesus Christ.
Perhaps you have spent years around Christianity without ever personally trusting Christ.
Perhaps you know stories about Peter and John, but you do not know the Savior whom Peter and John followed.
Today, Jesus calls you to trust Him.

Turn from sin.

Believe the Gospel.

Place your faith in the One who died and rose again.

And if you already belong to Christ, stop using age as an excuse.

Do not say,

“I am too young.”

Do not say,

“I am too busy.”

Do not say,

“I have already wasted too many years.”

Do not say,

“I am too old.”

Do not say,

“Jesus could never use someone like me.”

The One who called the disciples knew every weakness they possessed.

He knew Peter would deny Him.

He knew Thomas would question.

He knew James and John would struggle with ambition.

He knew the Twelve would scatter.

Their failures did not surprise Him.

He called them with full knowledge of the work that remained to be done in them.

And Jesus knows you.

He knows your age.

He knows your history.

He knows your regrets.

He knows your fears.

He knows your unfinished places.

And His call remains,

“Follow me.”

We began today by asking,

“What was the age of Jesus’ disciples?”

We discovered that Peter was clearly an adult.

We discovered that some of the others may have been young men.

We discovered that one or more could possibly have been teenagers.

We discovered that the familiar picture of twelve middle-aged men comes largely from tradition and art.

But we also discovered that the Bible does not give us enough evidence to assign ages or declare that eleven disciples were under twenty.

Their exact ages remain unknown.

But when we close our Bibles today, the most important discovery is not how old they were when Jesus called them.

It is what they became because they followed Him.

The question is not whether you are the same age Peter was.

The question is not whether you are younger than John.

The question is not whether you have reached some ideal season of life.

The question is whether you will follow Jesus from the season in which He has found you.

Whatever your age may be,

Jesus is still saying,

“Follow me.”

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for Your Word.

Thank You for the truth it reveals.

And thank You for the humility it teaches us when it does not answer every question we might ask.

Forgive us when we turn possibilities into certainties.

Forgive us when we allow traditions, pictures or interesting theories to speak more loudly than Scripture.

Teach us to handle Your Word honestly.

Thank You that Jesus calls people who are still growing.

Thank You that He called Peter knowing Peter would need correction.

Thank You that He called Thomas knowing Thomas would have questions.

Thank You that He called James and John knowing their ambition would need to be transformed.

Thank You that our weaknesses do not surprise You.

Help the young people among us to follow Christ faithfully now.

Give them wisdom, protection and godly examples.

Help those carrying the responsibilities of adult life to follow Christ in the middle of work, family and daily demands.

Help older believers to know that their testimony, prayers, wisdom and faithfulness still matter.

And remind all of us that we never graduate from being disciples.

Continue teaching us.

Continue correcting us.

Continue forming us into the likeness of Christ.

For anyone who has never trusted Jesus as Savior, let today be the day of salvation.

Help that person to turn from sin, believe the Gospel and place complete faith in the crucified and risen Christ.

And for every believer, help us hear His invitation again.

“Follow me.”

May we answer that call with faith, obedience and humility.

In Jesus’ name,

Amen.

If you would like to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior today, if you have questions about today’s study or if you simply need someone to pray with you, I will be available after the service.

I also hope you will join us upstairs in the Reason Together Café.

The coffee is waiting.

The conversation is waiting.

And your questions are always welcome.

May the Lord bless you.

May He continue to teach you.

May He continue to form you.

And may each of us faithfully follow wherever Jesus leads.

To our first-time guests, Aloha Nui Loa.

And to everyone, have a blessed and wonderful week.

REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

THE AGE OF THE DISCIPLES

Matthew 4:18–22; Matthew 17:24–27

And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. Matthew 4:19

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

Commentary in Brief

CENTRAL CONCLUSION The Gospels do not state the exact ages of Jesus' disciples. Peter was clearly an adult. Some members of the Twelve may have been young men and one or more could have been older teenagers, but Scripture does not prove that all except Peter were under twenty.

The age of the disciples is a useful question because it exposes how easily a familiar picture can become an assumed fact. Traditional Christian art usually portrays the Twelve as mature men. A popular modern reconstruction portrays Peter as the only adult in a group otherwise composed of teenagers. Neither picture is directly supplied by the Gospel writers.

The Biblical evidence is uneven. Luke tells us that Jesus was about thirty when His public ministry began. Peter was married, worked as a fisherman and was included with Jesus in the Temple payment of Matthew 17. James and John worked in a family fishing enterprise that included hired servants. Matthew occupied a tax collection booth. These details suggest responsibility and, in some cases, adulthood. They still do not provide birthdays.

This commentary expands the Biblical reasoning behind the sermon. It examines the call narratives, the Temple-payment argument, affectionate language such as “little children,” the silence concerning other wives, later Jewish educational traditions and the tradition that John was youngest. Its purpose is not merely to leave the reader with uncertainty. It is to show why Scripture's silence directs attention toward the One who called the disciples and promised to form them.

1. Begin with What Scripture Says

A Picture Is Not a Verse

Most readers bring a mental portrait to the Gospel story. Peter may appear broad-shouldered and gray. John may look somewhat younger. The remaining disciples often seem close to Jesus in age. Paintings, films, illustrated Bibles and dramatic productions have reinforced that portrait for centuries. Those works may communicate dignity and devotion, but they also make visual decisions where Scripture remains silent.

A modern reaction has moved in the opposite direction. Because some historical reconstructions describe young Jewish students following rabbis, and because only Jesus and Peter receive payment in Matthew 17, it is sometimes claimed that the other eleven disciples were all teenagers. The newer picture can feel fresh enough to be mistaken for discovery. It still must be tested by the text.

Four Levels of Confidence

Faithful study benefits from four categories. A passage may establish a fact directly. A collection of details may strongly suggest a conclusion. A passage may permit a possibility without favoring it. Finally, an explanation may remain unproven because the necessary information is absent. These distinctions prevent both traditional familiarity and modern novelty from speaking with more authority than Scripture.

READING PRINCIPLE Receive what the passage establishes. Weigh what it suggests. Allow what it permits. Do not announce that Scripture proves what the inspired writer chose not to state.

2. Jesus Was About Thirty

The One Approximate Age

Luke 3:23 says, “And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age.” Luke does not present a modern birth certificate. He gives an approximate age that locates the beginning of Jesus’ ministry within His life. That direct statement provides a firm point in the discussion.

The significance of Luke’s statement is partly found in contrast. The evangelists could state an age when it served their purpose. They never give a corresponding number for Peter, Andrew, James, John, Matthew or the other members of the Twelve. Jesus being about thirty does not imply that His disciples were all close to thirty, nor does it imply that they were substantially younger.

Why the Omission Matters

The Gospels tell us what the disciples did for work, who some of their relatives were, what they misunderstood and how they responded to Jesus. The omission of their ages should govern the confidence of our answer. We may examine clues, but every clue remains subordinate to the absence of direct chronological statements.

3. Four Fishermen at Work

Matthew’s Calling Narrative

Matthew 4:18–22 identifies Peter and Andrew as brothers and fishermen. James and John are also brothers, sons of Zebedee, working in a boat with their father. When Jesus calls,

both pairs leave their work and follow Him. The passage is vivid in action but silent in chronology.

Fishing was not childhood play. Nets had to be cast, repaired and managed. Boats and catch belonged to an economic network involving family labor, sale and transport. Mark adds that hired servants were present with Zebedee. James and John were participating in a functioning household enterprise.

Responsibility Does Not Equal a Number

Work provides a reasonable floor beneath some possibilities. The men were not small children. Yet young men could contribute substantially to a family trade, and adult sons could continue working beside their father. The presence of Zebedee neither proves that James and John were minors nor requires that they were mature men.

EVIDENCE RULE An occupation can establish responsibility and make some ages less likely. Unless a legal or textual threshold is stated, it cannot calculate an exact age.

4. Peter and Matthew

Peter Was Married

Matthew 8 records Jesus entering Peter's house and healing Peter's wife's mother. The relationship is explicit: Peter had a wife and a mother-in-law. Together with his work and household setting, the evidence presents Peter as an adult man carrying adult responsibilities.

The conclusion should remain carefully worded. Peter was clearly an adult, but the text does not say whether he was twenty-one, twenty-eight or near Jesus' age. Ancient marriage patterns may make a comparatively young adult plausible. They do not provide Peter's birthday.

Matthew at the Receipt of Custom

Matthew 9:9 says Matthew was "sitting at the receipt of custom." The KJV phrase names the customs or tax collection booth. Matthew occupied a position involving money, records and public authority under an unpopular revenue system. It is reasonable to regard him as an adult.

Once again, the occupation does not contain a hidden age. The Gospel does not state a hiring rule, minimum age or length of service. The evidence supports adulthood more

naturally than adolescence, but the commentary should not turn that judgment into a number.

5. The Temple Payment

The Strongest Argument for Young Disciples

Matthew 17:24–27 supplies the most substantial argument for the claim that Peter alone was over twenty. Collectors of the two-drachma payment approached Peter and asked, “Doth not your master pay tribute?” Jesus later instructed Peter to catch a fish and find a coin sufficient to pay “for me and thee.” One coin covered Jesus and Peter.

This was not simply an ordinary Roman civil tax. The two-drachma payment is widely understood as the annual contribution connected with the Temple. Its Biblical background reaches to Exodus 30:11–16, where each male included in the census from twenty years old and above contributed a half-shekel for the service of the sanctuary. Later Jewish sources describe annual collection practices surrounding the Temple contribution.

What the Coin Establishes

The scene establishes that Jesus and Peter are included in the payment provided by the coin. It supports Peter’s adulthood and agrees with the picture already supplied by his marriage and work. Because the contribution is connected with a twenty-year threshold, the absence of payments for the other disciples naturally raises a question.

STRONGEST CLUE Matthew 17 makes the under-twenty theory worth considering. Its strength is precisely why the passage must be read closely rather than repeated as a slogan.

6. Why Matthew 17 Does Not Prove Eleven Teenagers

The Collectors Asked About Jesus

The collectors did not ask Peter for an accounting of the Twelve. Their question was, “Doth not your master pay tribute?” Peter answered about Jesus. After Peter entered the house, Jesus spoke to him about kings, children and strangers. The theological center is the freedom of the Son and Jesus’ choice to avoid unnecessary offense.

The passage does not state that all twelve disciples were present. It does not report collectors demanding payment from each man. It does not say the others were exempt,

had already paid or would pay elsewhere. Those explanations are all possible, but Matthew does not select one.

Silence Cannot Carry the Entire Argument

The teenage-disciple theory takes a real historical threshold, combines it with a real two-person payment and then assigns a reason for every other disciple's absence. The first two steps are grounded in evidence. The final step is inference. It may be correct, but the passage does not require it.

This distinction is not excessive caution. It protects the meaning Matthew actually emphasizes. Jesus is the Son who is free, yet He pays so that He will not create an unnecessary stumbling block. When the passage becomes mainly a coded age list, its Christ-centered purpose is pushed to the edge.

7. “Little Children” and “Babes”

Affectionate Family Language

In John 13:33 Jesus addresses the disciples as “little children.” The Greek term *teknia* is affectionate and relational. John uses the same family language repeatedly in his first epistle when speaking pastorally to believers. Nothing requires every recipient to have been biologically young.

A teacher, pastor or spiritual father may speak of “my children” while addressing mature adults. The expression communicates tenderness, responsibility and the learners' dependence. It tells us about the relationship between Jesus and His disciples. It does not tell us how many years they had lived.

Revelation to Babes

Matthew 11:25 and Luke 10:21 contrast the wise and prudent with “babes.” The contrast concerns humble receptivity to divine revelation rather than physical infancy. Scripture often uses childhood language to describe dependence, immaturity, affection or spiritual relationship. Context must determine which idea is active.

LEXICAL CAUTION A word associated with children does not automatically function as an age label. Johannine family language must be interpreted by usage and context.

8. Marriage and Arguments from Silence

Peter Is Not a Marriage Registry

The Gospels mention Peter's mother-in-law because Jesus healed her. The detail establishes Peter's marriage. It does not establish that the other eleven were unmarried. Gospel narratives select details that serve their account of Jesus rather than supplying complete biographies of His followers.

Other Apostles with Wives

First Corinthians 9:5 broadens the evidence. Paul asks whether he and Barnabas have the right to travel with "a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas." Cephas is Peter. Paul distinguishes Peter from other apostles who also traveled with believing wives.

The verse does not identify each married apostle or prove when the marriages began. It does show why silence in the Gospels cannot be used to make Peter the only married apostle. The absence of a wife from a narrative is not proof that no wife existed.

The Larger Study Lesson

Arguments from silence are not always worthless. Silence can raise questions and sometimes becomes meaningful when a writer consistently supplies one kind of detail but omits it in a decisive place. Here the Gospel writers never set out to report every apostle's marriage or age. The silence is too broad to support a confident census.

9. Jewish Education and the Age Ladder

A Memorable Reconstruction

A popular teaching describes Jewish boys beginning Scripture study at five, Mishnah at ten, responsibility for commandments at thirteen and advanced study around fifteen. The best students supposedly continued with a rabbi while those not selected entered a trade. Jesus is then pictured calling young workers whom other rabbis had rejected.

The story communicates grace and makes the call narratives vivid. Its difficulty is evidential. The Gospels never say Peter applied to another rabbi, John failed an academic examination or the fishermen returned to their nets after rejection. Those details come from reconstruction rather than the text.

Pirkei Avot 5:21

The familiar sequence of ages appears in Pirkei Avot 5:21. It includes five for Scripture, ten for Mishnah, thirteen for commandments, fifteen for Talmud, eighteen for marriage and twenty for pursuit. The saying is valuable evidence for Jewish reflection on stages of life and learning.

Pirkei Avot was preserved after the time of Jesus, and the textual history of this age saying requires caution. Even if parts of the tradition reflect earlier practice, an idealized progression does not prove a universal school system operating identically in every Galilean village. Historical background illuminates a text only when its date, genre and limits remain visible.

Education in First-Century Galilee

Evidence for literacy and education in Roman Palestine is real but uneven. Families, synagogues, scribes and teachers could all contribute to learning. What cannot be established confidently is a universal sequence in which every boy advanced through standardized levels and every future tradesman had first been rejected by a rabbi.

HISTORICAL CAUTION A later educational ideal may help readers imagine the world around a passage. It must not replace the Gospel narrative or supply a biography the evangelists did not write.

10. Behavior Does Not Reveal Age

The Disciples Were Still Being Formed

The disciples argued about greatness, misunderstood Jesus, panicked in danger, slept when asked to watch and scattered when He was arrested. Peter promised courage and then denied the Lord. James and John sought places of honor and once wanted fire to fall upon a Samaritan village. These failures reveal pride, fear and spiritual immaturity.

They do not reveal adolescence. Adults compete for status, speak too quickly, misunderstand clear instruction and collapse under fear. Chronological age and spiritual maturity are related only imperfectly. A young person may show remarkable wisdom, and a person with decades of experience may still resist correction.

Read Their Failures with Humility

The reader stands on the far side of the cross, resurrection and Pentecost. The disciples were living through events they did not yet understand. The Gospels honestly record their

weaknesses, but those same men left their work, followed Jesus, received correction and later carried the Gospel into a hostile world.

A faithful commentary should neither romanticize the Twelve nor speak of them with contempt. Their unfinished condition is part of the testimony. Christ knew what remained to be formed and called them with full knowledge.

11. John and the Youngest-Disciple Tradition

Youngest Is a Comparative Word

Christian tradition commonly presents John as the youngest apostle. His apparent longevity makes that impression plausible. If John lived into the closing years of the first century, he may well have been younger than several companions when Jesus called him.

The conclusion remains comparative. In a group ranging from sixteen to thirty, one member is youngest. In a group ranging from twenty-two to thirty-five, one member is also youngest. Longevity can support relative youth without revealing whether John was a teenager.

Mary Entrusted to John

At the cross Jesus entrusted Mary to the disciple whom He loved. Some readers see the responsibility as evidence that John must have been an adult. Others note that serious family duties could be carried by comparatively young people in the ancient world. The scene establishes trust and relationship. It cannot calculate John's age.

Tradition can preserve memories worthy of consideration, but it must be labeled as tradition. The sermon appropriately says John may have been among the youngest while refusing to place an unsupported number beside his name.

12. Why the Unstated Ages Matter

“Follow Me, and I Will Make You”

The most important words in Matthew 4 are not the occupational descriptions. They are the command and promise of Jesus: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” The order matters. The disciples follow, and Jesus undertakes the work of making them.

Christ did not call because each man had reached an ideal age, completed a uniform education or achieved spiritual maturity. He called according to His purpose. Their later authority did not arise from youth or accumulated age. It came from the Lord who commissioned them and from the Holy Spirit who empowered their witness.

Every Generation Remains in Formation

A young believer may need protection, instruction and patient guidance, but is not too young to pray, study Scripture, tell the truth and serve. An adult carrying work and family responsibilities is not too occupied to follow Christ. An older believer is not beyond growth or useful ministry. Testimony, prayer, memory and faithfulness remain gifts to the church.

No one graduates from discipleship. Pastors, teachers, grandparents and believers of many decades still need correction and transformation. More birthdays do not automatically produce greater likeness to Christ. The goal is that, as the years pass, the disciple increasingly resembles the Teacher.

PASTORAL CENTER The decisive question is not whether a person is the age Peter or John may have been. The question is whether that person will follow Jesus from the season of life in which Christ has called.

Conclusion: An Honest Answer and a Greater Invitation

What was the age of Jesus' disciples? The most faithful answer is that their exact ages are unknown. Peter was clearly an adult. Matthew was probably an adult. Several disciples carried meaningful work responsibilities. Some members of the group may have been young adults and one or more may have been older teenagers. John may have been among the youngest.

Matthew 17 permits the theory that Peter alone among the Twelve was over twenty. It does not prove it. "Little children" is affectionate language rather than a chronological label. Silence concerning other wives does not prove singleness. Pirkei Avot does not establish a universal first-century Galilean school system. Immature behavior does not provide a birth date.

The uncertainty is not a disappointing end to the study. It teaches Biblical humility and then clears the way for the Gospel's emphasis. Jesus called people whose formation was incomplete. He knew Peter would deny Him, Thomas would question and James and John would need their ambition corrected. Their unfinished places did not surprise Him.

The same Lord calls sinners to Himself today. Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again. Salvation is not earned by reaching the right age, gaining enough experience or performing enough good works. It is received through faith in Christ. The saved person then begins a lifetime of following, correction, restoration and growth.

THE ENDURING COUNSEL Do not turn possibility into certainty. Do not use age as a credential or an excuse. Trust the crucified and risen Christ, hear His call and follow while He continues His work of making you.

Selected Sources

Primary Scripture

Exodus 30:11–16; Psalm 92:14; Matthew 4:18–22; 8:14–15; 9:9; 11:25; 17:24–27; Mark 1:16–20; Luke 3:23; 10:21; John 13:33; 19:25–27; 1 Corinthians 9:5; 1 Timothy 4:12; 1 John 2:1, 2:12, 2:28 and 3:7.

Ancient and Jewish Sources

Mishnah Shekalim 1:1–5. Pirkei Avot 5:21. Josephus, Jewish Antiquities and The Jewish War. These sources clarify later Temple-payment practice, Jewish reflection on stages of life and the wider historical setting. They do not state the ages of the Twelve.

Biblical and Historical Resources

R. T. France, The Gospel of Matthew. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew. Craig S. Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. Ulrich Luz, Matthew 8–20. Catherine Hezser, Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine. Michael W. Holmes, ed., The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition. Walter Bauer et al., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed.

Popular Interpretive Materials

Ray Vander Laan and related “Follow the Rabbi” teaching materials. K. Bonikowsky, “Jesus’ Disciples: A Teenage Posse?” These materials are included to document the popular under-twenty interpretation. Their historical reconstructions do not all represent the approved conclusion.