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Disciplism

> Reimagining Evangelism

>> Through The Lens

>>> of Discipleship

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Introduction

Given that I have previously written about the strategic need for discipleship and disciple making in *The Forgotten Ways* and written specifically on the spiritual dynamics of discipleship in *Untamed* (with my wife, Deb), I tend to get asked a few questions about it along the way.

Mostly, the questions reflect a fair bit of ignorance of the meaning and significance of disciple making, as well as a loss of ability to even articulate what is involved (context); what the end game is (agenda); as well as how to actually *do* it (practice). I have to admit that I find this ignorance pretty alarming given that from any fair reading of the New Testament itself, discipleship and disciple making lay at the very heart of the church's gospel mandate in the world.

Of all the things we have chosen to remember over 2,000 years—all those little doctrinal quirks, the inexplicable religious rituals, and those pesky marginal traditions that we perpetuate in the church—we have somehow managed to all but forget the essential gospel mandate to make disciples of the nations! How is this possible? How have we effectively managed to purge from church practice all but the faintest traces of one of the most central purposes and practices of the original church? It's a fair bet to assume that the overwhelming majority of Christians are not even aware of a call to discipleship and what it entails—let alone what it means to submit themselves to its joys and demands.

But this issue is important for a whole host of reasons: Because discipleship is intrinsic to the life of the Church and a central aspect of the Church's mission in the world (Matt. 28: 19-20), then its effective removal in our church's ministry must surely be a cause of much of the problems we now face. How can we possibly be the Church that Jesus intended us to be if we don't follow one of the central aspects of His practice, let alone obey His explicit commands? How indeed?

Over the years, I have found myself having to talk about a distinctly *missional* understanding of discipleship. I actually find this a bit odd. The very fact that we now have to put qualifications on the word "discipleship" again signals how far we have veered from a biblical understanding of discipleship. As if we could compartmentalize aspects of our lives and calling. The word "discipleship" ought to be a stand-alone term that can carry the full weight of biblical spirituality as defined in Jesus' version of the *shema* (Mark 12:28-31). The *shema* sets the agenda for all aspects of Christian life lived as worship towards God. When Jesus says, "there are no greater commandments than these!" we must take Him at His word.

If we really understood the kingdom dynamics and the concentrated theology/worldview that the *shema* conveys, then we would not have to use the

term “missional” at all. Mission is implied in what it means to love God with all that we are and love our neighbor as ourselves. True and authentic worship of the One God *requires* that I offer my world back to Him in response to His grace and lordship. But when you think about it, *mission* is also about offering my world back to God. As a result, discipleship, too, involves me “offering my world back to God”; they (worship, mission, discipleship) are simply dimensionally different aspects of the same phenomenon. We should not have to qualify it with adjectives to somehow make sense of different types of discipleship. To recover discipleship means to recover true worship and mission as well. Much is involved, as we shall soon see.

If many of our deepest problems can be traced from a lack of discipleship—what Dallas Willard called the “*non-discipleship of the church*”—then is it also equally likely that a recovery of discipleship can signal significant renewal in the life of God’s people? I have come to believe that almost all of the problems of the Church we now face can be linked—at least in part—to the lack of a clear idea and practice of discipleship. This also means that it can, and must, be corrected precisely at this point. We need to get back to basics. Discipleship must take us beyond our need for privatized worship services and an otherworldly spirituality of “quiet times in quiet places” to help transform the many “churchly” *admirers* of Jesus into true *followers* of Jesus. Admirers of Jesus are hard to motivate and need to be constantly entertained; only real followers of Jesus will go the distance and make a lasting impact on the world.

Chapter 1

The End Game?

While I do believe that a comprehensive understanding of what authentic discipleship is has been all but extinguished, we can still observe some residual aspects of discipleship in our churches. And even though these “vestiges” are reductions of the kind of discipleship we see in the pages of the New Testament and at certain times in church history, nonetheless they still have some residual transformative capacities in them.

The most basic way the contemporary Church has thought of discipleship is to see it as an introduction to the theology and culture of the local church, perhaps along with some of its denominational distinctives. This introduction normally happens through something like a 12-week group study (with other new Christians) where they are taught the heads of doctrine—and are introduced to the theology of God, salvation, church, eschatology, etc. At this level, which is all that most of us can expect to get, discipleship is more like a church membership class or a kind of fast-tracked catechism for unchurched new believers. It’s not difficult to see that this process is utterly inadequate to help form people who can impact the world. But it is what it is.

Some churches take a different approach, usually understood as various pathways to Christian maturity. I believe most pastors sincerely want their members to mature in their growth as believers and do encourage (while certainly not requiring) believers to learn and practice what have traditionally been called the spiritual disciplines. Normally, these disciplines are comprised of a smorgasbord of distinct practices that (1) develop personal prayer (mainly in quiet times and quiet places); (2) encourage regular church attendance and hopefully a regular small group; (3) foster regular reading and study of the Bible; and (4) promote various forms of voluntary service, usually within the church community itself. But even when rightly emphasized, these practices always seem to have a feel of being an optional extra—seen as an assortment of options for those who have prayed the sinner’s prayer but now wish to go deeper in Christ. It’s hard to find any average church in America offering much more than these.

If the mission of God is to sum up all things in Himself in Christ Jesus (Eph. 1:10), then we will have to go beyond church attendance, quiet times and random voluntarism to help align the church around that purpose. Now, I strongly believe that the spiritual disciplines—as they are understood and practiced in our churches—are necessary and must not be abandoned but rather strengthened. But surely an adequate understanding of discipleship for our time must go beyond erratic prayer and devotional Bible study. In other words, the Church tends to lack a theology and practice of discipleship, as well as a vital sense of what the end game is all about. What’s the point of it all?

Chapter 2

A Church Equal to the Task

Now I need to give you some context for what I'm about to say in this chapter. You should know that I have spent most of my adult life being reasonably obsessed with trying to unlock the codes of what makes for highly transformative missional movements—those kinds of movements that really get it done, exhibit explosive growth, achieve high transformation, and have societal impact.¹

Examples of some of these movements are the Early Church (prior to Constantine), the Celtic missions, the Moravians, the Early Methodists, the Early Pentecostal movement, the Chinese House Church movements, the Church in India, etc. I've really tried to understand what *exactly* makes these movements tick—the specific factors that have come together to create such catalytic growth and impact. And not just for the sake of academic interest. I am deeply committed to understanding how exactly we can learn from these profoundly significant high points. What can they teach us about ourselves? How can their story interpret ours? What do they tell us about Jesus' original design and intention for His Church?

So what I am about to say is weighted with lots of personal reflection: I can say categorically that *one of the most demonstrably identifiable aspects, and therefore one of the irreplaceable keys to catalytic movements is that they are obsessed with discipleship and disciple making!* Discipleship is factored in from the beginning to the end, and at every level of the organization. In other words, if you took discipleship and disciple making out of the equation, these movements would have never been what they were. In fact, it is highly unlikely that they would have existed at all without a strategic commitment to discipleship. Discipleship is so critical because it is the means by which Jesus works through His people.

A while ago, my friend [and 3DM leader] Mike Breen wrote a very provocative article cheekily suggesting reasons why the missional church will fail.² His conclusion: *If we failed to do discipleship, the missional church would fail.* I have to agree with him here. And as far the contemporary missional church movement is concerned, whatever else we hope to achieve in the kingdom is never going to happen if we fail to integrate discipleship and disciple making into the heart of our practices. If we fail in discipleship, the whole thing fails. There is no doubt; discipleship is a critical/strategic issue. And while it is not a short-term solution for a systemwide problem, discipleship is the appropriate medium to a long-term solution that will heal much of the malaise in our churches.

Reframing Evangelism Within the Context of Discipleship ...

So hopefully you see our strategic need for discipleship and disciple making in our churches. Now, I want to look at how discipleship applies to and makes a difference

to *evangelism*—just one of the irreplaceable aspects of the witness of the church. I hope to show you how discipleship thinking can make a wholesale difference to our practices and our impact in the world.

I want to start with a rather provocative statement that's going to make many of you readers want to take me down. All I ask is that you give me a few minutes of understanding before you dismiss what I say. Try your best to just hear what I am really saying. Here goes ...

I believe that the key to the health, the maintenance, the extension and the renewal of the Church is NOT more evangelism, but more discipleship.

In fact, I will go one step further and say that the way we are doing the work of evangelism right now is actually blocking our capacity to get on with the real job of the Church, namely disciple making. In other words, more evangelism the way we do it now will not solve our problems but actually might exacerbate them. If we persist at aiming at evangelism (in the prevailing understanding of it), we seldom, if ever, get to discipleship. History provides more than ample proof of this outcome. But at no time has this been more evident than in this age of mass consumption.³ Making more disciples is the real solution. I suggest that we need to refocus our efforts on discipleship and do whatever evangelism we can in that context. We need to reframe evangelism within the context of discipleship.

Thousands of years ago, the Greek philosopher Epictetus noted that, “it is impossible to teach a man what he *thinks* he already knows.” In other words, if we think we have really got it locked down pretty tight, then we’ll never feel the need to learn anything new about it. Of course, we know what it means! Who doesn’t? So for example, when Western evangelicals tend to use the word “evangelism,” we *think we know* what it is. For us, it is a settled formula embedded into a set of practices that are simply taken for granted

And here lies the rub. Because what has got us *here* is not going to get us *there*, we are going to have to think very differently about our problems if we are going to resolve them. There is some *unlearning* we need to do here if we are to advance the cause of Christ in our time. We need to think differently about many things—and perhaps especially evangelism because we take the inherited approach as settled. And as shocking as all this sounds, I want us to really reconsider the meaning and significance of the Great Commission.

Now let me be clear. I’m a card-carrying evangelical deeply committed to the proclamation of the *evangel* (gospel). I speak from *within* the movement—as an insider—so please put what I am saying here in that context.

I suggest that when we use the phrase “the Great Commission,” we tend to use it as a kind of synonym for the term “evangelism.” In other words, to be a Great Commission church is understood to be *coda* for being a really evangelistic church—

one that is committed to regular outreach and evangelism and encourages all their members to do the same. In fact, this understanding became popular from the time of the tent crusades and was adopted and embedded deep into the theological and methodological consciousness of what is called the “church growth movement.” But I suggest that using the Great Commission as a synonym for evangelism is a huge category error that simply proves Epictetus’ point about not knowing what we think we already know.

Chapter 3

Hear O Israel

So in this chapter, let's go back to the Great Commission itself, let's look at it with fresh eyes, and see if these verses are actually talking about evangelism:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20 RSV).

As this passage is clearly a pivotal text in defining the mission of the Church, it is vital to taking a fresh look at what is taking place as well as what is being said here.

First, Jesus—now resurrected and effectively Lord of the universe ("all authority is given to me")—appears to His apostles (His "sent ones") and binds them to His mission with the authoritative command, "Go therefore!" This substantive command to the mission carries within it the redemptive purposes of God through His Church. To use a contemporary metaphor, this is the start of a pay-it-forward movement.

Second, the 12 apostles are representatives of the future Church that was to rise up directly out of their ministry. They are the seed of the Church that was to come from their ministry. The Jesus movement that emerged from this moment is not only included in this commission but exists to extend it in every way possible in and throughout its contemporary life and practice. In other words, the Great Commission applies to all Christians in any time and place. The Church always stands under its authority until all of God's kingdom purposes are fulfilled on the earth.

Third, they are told to "...go make disciples of the nations." This commandment implies that the apostles are themselves disciples who were shown the Way by the Lord Jesus Himself. We have to understand this command, then, as a command for disciples to reproduce themselves through the discipling of others who in turn do the same. It commits Jesus' people to continue in the Way of Jesus.

Fourth, the apostles are called to baptize people into the name of the Triune God. This is a radically inclusive call to the nations to join God's covenant family.

They are then told, "... Teach them to *observe* all that I have *commanded* you." Obedience is the only appropriate response to the reign of Jesus. Clearly, teaching people what it means to obey is not the same as getting decisions for Christ at an altar call or praying the sinner's prayer. This is another indisputable disciple-making motif.

And finally, disciples everywhere and at all times in history are promised Jesus' personal presence in all that they do in His cause. He is with them, and they are His empowered agents.

So now let me ask again: *Where exactly do we see "evangelism" mentioned here?* There is no overt mention of it at all. In fact, the text *explicitly* binds us to the practices of discipleship and disciple making. It turns out that the Great Commission is not actually about evangelism but rather disciple making.

Now it can be said that evangelism is implied in this scripture. That is precisely the point I wish to make here. Evangelism is *implied* in the process of disciple making and not the other way around. Discipleship is evangelism's true context.

If this is true, then much of what goes by the name of the church growth movement was largely built on a faulty and reductionist interpretation of one single verse! As disturbing as it seems, almost all of the theology related to the church growth movement was built on the Great Commission interpreted as evangelism! I don't mean any disrespect here—I actually believe the church growth movement was a good correction to a Church that had forgotten how to even evangelize. The movement recovered the evangelistic task for the local church and as a result brought millions in contact with the gospel. It was undoubtedly a genuine move of God.

However, the movement hung most of its agenda on a profoundly abridged theology of mission—substituting disciple making (the church's primary commission) with largely event-based proclamation and altar calls. Make no mistake; this is a serious reduction of our function as God's missionary people. Everything gets boiled down to this singular aspect of the church's witness—evangelism narrowly defined and understood. It's a huge narrowing both of theological vision and a sense of our mission. Through this reduction, the unavoidable command of the resurrected Lord of the Church in Matthew 28 has been fundamentally altered. That's plain scary, and it should disturb all concerned with kingdom extension!

Chapter 4

Go Make Consumers of All the Nations?

Thankfully, the church growth movement is now undergoing a serious self-assessment. It started with Willow Creek's REVEAL study when the church began to look at themselves and said, "Wow, we're good at getting decisions for Christ, but not so great at making disciples." As far as I am concerned, I say "hats off everyone!" This kind of honesty demands our respect. Willow Creek has been willing to take a good, long, hard look inside and make fundamental changes. Amazing and inspiring!

I commend this unlearning and repentance because by and large, the evangelism of the church growth movement catered to the very thing we need to work against in our time: consumerism! The method involved a direct appeal to the well-developed consumerism of all people living in Western contexts. Anyone coming to Jesus in America comes as an already well-formed consumer and needs to be confronted with the religious implications of what it means to follow and be conformed to Him.

And let's face it, for the vast majority of middle-class Americans, consumerism is not just about shopping for basic goods and services anymore. Consumerism is more like the overwhelmingly predominant religious alternative to biblical faithfulness in our time! In other words, consumerism takes all the forms of an idolatrous religion. When people go to shopping malls, they are not just buying things to fulfill basic needs. No, they are looking for purpose, meaning, significance and belonging. But aren't these the very things that religion ought to offer and confer? And so the tragic irony is that the average shopping mall trip turns into a serious exercise in spirituality, and the average trip to the church turns into an intense exercise in religious consumerism. Increasingly, they look like the same thing!

So we discover that the prevailing method of evangelism has been seriously co-opted to consumerism. It has rightly been said that what you win them *with*, you win them *to*. In other words, if you use entertainment to win people to faith, then you have to keep entertaining them to keep them on the journey. This is a huge burden for the local church that now has to compete for attention of consumers with the Internet, big budget movies, 3D animation and other big experiences.

When we narrow down our proclamation to large, entertainment-based events; offers of salvation-on-demand-style altar calls; or tracts with variations of the four spiritual laws, we need to remind ourselves that we're offering these to people who already are very well-formed (religious) consumers. In other words, consumptive methods fail to challenge the primary religion of most seekers and in fact end up exacerbating it! The problem is that we patently cannot produce obedient followers of Jesus by using consumerist methods of evangelism.

I believe the only way to challenge the insidiously idolatrous nature of consumerism is through becoming more and more like Jesus—in other words through discipleship. Discipleship, because it is about our loyalty to our covenant King, must always be done over-against the competing claims of the prevailing idolatry of the age. For us that is consumerism. We have learned the hard way that one cannot consume one's way into the kingdom. It doesn't work like that.

The way to salvation in the kingdom of God leads through the cross and through our ongoing willingness to surrender our own agendas. The cross must define our relationship to God from the very beginning to the very end. It's not some optional extra, something we can simply take out of the equation and still expect to be the kind of Church that Jesus intended us to be. If Jesus says that we come to salvation through the cross—up front, right at the beginning of our following of Him—then who are to try to factor that out of our evangelism? If our Lord says discipleship is core to our mission (Matt. 28:16-20), then we have no right to try to remove it. Besides, if we try to factor discipleship and obedience into the spiritual equation *after* the altar call, it all ends up looking awfully like a fraudulent religious bait-and-switch strategy.

Begin With the End in Mind; End With the Beginning in Mind

This inconsistency with our prevailing method and Jesus' explicit commands highlights a major flaw in our mission strategy. I believe that significant corrections at this point will change the shape and trajectory of the Church's mission in this time. It will also deliver more integrity with our primary calling. We must begin with the end in mind, but we must also end with the beginning in mind. If the Great Commission is about discipleship, then discipleship should *always* be a major aspect in our thinking and approach to church vitality and mission. How can it not be? Just obey the Great Commission, and it will go well. It's all about discipleship from beginning to end.

Now this does not mean that we stop sharing the Good News, far from it! But here's the deal: Evangelism gets done along the way *as you go* about disciple making. As you disciple the nations, evangelism takes place because it's done in its proper context: discipleship. And so once again we arrive at the central idea of this little eBook—the only faithful way forward in our time is *to reframe evangelism within the context of discipleship*. Time's up ... no more stonewalling.

Pre-Conversion Discipleship?

Here's one (not the only) of the simplest ways to go about recalibrating our thinking and doing in this regard. By simply following the Great Commission *literally*, we begin to see that conversion is a process that begins *right at the start* of the journey towards Jesus! Listen to what I'm saying here: Discipleship should start even before people become regenerated (“born-again”) converts and continue right till the end. Evangelism is “done” along the way. We can simply focus on discipling people,

weave our narratives into theirs, live the Kingdom life, and make space for God to do His thing in giving them new life in Him.

I propose that we take this approach with the utmost seriousness: Put aside your prevailing understandings of event-based proclamation along with its easy spiritual formulas and simply adopt the Great Commission (taken quite literally) as your guide. Go and make disciples of the nations! Just start discipling people everywhere, and the gospel of the kingdom will be shared along the way in a far more natural, personal, loving and life-oriented way.

Just Follow Jesus

Now before you dismiss this as a tad suspect for your liking, if you look at the ministry of Jesus you'll find that this is *precisely* what He did.

Ask yourself this question: When were the disciples of Jesus born again (regenerated by the Spirit)? Was it at the beginning of the Gospels? The middle? Or the end? I have never heard anyone suggest the beginning. And they are likely right not to. Some scholars would say it was towards the end in John 20:22 (where Jesus breathes the Spirit on them), and others say that it was likely at Pentecost (Acts 2). But I am not aware of any scholars who would assert that it all likely happened at the beginning or even in the middle! So, putting aside the so-called disciples that leave Jesus every time He offends them (e.g., John 6), even the hardcore “twelve,” as well as the “seventy,” were all what we would call *pre-conversion disciples*! Take a scriptural inventory yourself. Just look around at Jesus in the Gospels. The New Testament Church was a pretty mixed bag of folk, incorporating the most unlikely candidates to start a movement—prostitutes, fishermen, tax collectors, moms, farmers and some religious nuts.

So here's the thing. If you look at what Jesus is doing, He's got a whole lot of “pre-conversion disciples” tagging along with Him. All the while, He's just discipling them along the way until the gospel narrative finally weaves its way into their hearts and they come alive to God in new birth. They're certainly not mature, born-again Christians. What is even more surprising is that they are actually involved in His ministry even before they are fully converted to Jesus and His mission. They certainly have a long way to go. For instance, the lead disciple (Peter) doesn't even understand the meaning and significance of Jesus' death after hanging out for three years with Jesus. He rebukes Jesus for even thinking about any ideas of atoning for others and dying on a cross (Matt. 16:21-23). In prevailing evangelical idiom, this means Peter cannot possibly be “saved” as he does not understand the meaning of the cross! Go figure. It turns out that even Peter is not yet a full convert even after three years of journeying with the Lord. Consider this illustration:



But it didn't stop with Jesus' own methodology; pre- and post-conversion discipleship approaches were standard practice in the Church in its first three centuries. In the Church from around 100 A.D. to 300 A.D., seekers had to prove their adherence to Jesus and commitments to His Way before they were allowed to actually become part of the Church! No kidding, this was the original purpose of the catechisms:

Catechumens (the seekers) were thoroughly assessed for their spiritual condition and then put through a rigorous discipleship process by a sponsor who would take them under his wing. Under the guidance of their sponsor (discipler), they had to learn to live out the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, no less. These catechisms could go up to four years before the seeker was allowed to even hear and respond to the gospel, be baptized and join the community! It turns out that that seekers were already disciples by the time they joined the church community as contributing members.

In case you hadn't noticed dear reader, this is not exactly what we would call "seeker-sensitive" practice! In other words, discipleship started long before a person became a formal convert and member of the Jesus community.⁴ And just before we dismiss that as seeker-insensitive practice, we need to remind ourselves that these early followers really did change their world. They transformed whole societies precisely because they were committed disciples. They took disciple making (and therefore evangelism) seriously, and would not tolerate religious consumerism.

Chapter 5

Reimagining Evangelism

Reimagining evangelism through the lens of discipleship requires that we let go of seeing salvation as something we can deliver on demand, or when a person says a certain formulaic prayer. Rather, we need to reconceive discipleship as a process that includes pre-conversion discipleship and post-conversion discipleship. A person's salvation really is God's business, isn't it? Our part in it is to simply devote meaningful time and commitment to making disciples of whoever wants to share the journey with us—as we go. We don't need to rush to share the standard formulas in an unnatural, non-relational, forceful way. Surely, if we love our Lord Jesus and love the people we are investing in, we will get to share the Good News of His saving impact on our lives in a less forced manner. And surely we believe that it is the Holy Spirit who awakens interest in those that He is calling into God's kingdom?

Too conceptual? Then imagine that you know your neighbor Jack at least enough to be chummy with him. Taking this discipleship-oriented approach, at one point you might simply say, “You know Jack, we get on just fine, but I have been thinking. I believe that part of the reason for my life is to make yours a whole lot better. I do have some skills in developing people. How about I invest some time into helping you achieve your greatest dreams?”

If Jack says, “Sure, let's give it a go”—and why wouldn't he? (people like Jack can pay up to a thousand dollars an hour for good life coaching), then we will inevitably start sharing the events, people, stories and dreams that have come together to make Jack what he is today. Eventually, the conversation will get beyond stereotypical male desire for the red Ferrari, the hot babes and the freewheeling lifestyle. Just give it a bit of time. If we are doing our job properly, meaningful material will be shared at a deeper level as Jack begins to communicate his deepest longings, hurts, fears and hopes. All things going well, God will do “His thing” on Jack, and Jack will give his life to Jesus and be saved. But I suggest that we don't stop discipling at that point. We will continue to help him follow in the Way.

Over time, emphasis might move from more generic forms of mentoring Jack towards more Christ-centered discipleship. The early stages will likely emphasize the evangelistic and invitational aspects of the gospel narrative, but it will do this always within the context of the discipleship journey. And so the process does not change even though the content surely will. Consider this illustration:



The wonderful people of Soma Communities based in Tacoma, Wash., have adopted this process as a consistent practice.⁵ Vision Leader Jeff Vanderstelt rightly emphasizes that the integration of the gospel is a lifelong process. For Soma, in the pre-conversion stage of discipleship, emphasis falls on the evangelism dimension, but is still seen as part of discipleship. Once someone gives her life to Christ, the emphasis shifts from evangelism to discipleship, but in a real sense she is always being evangelized.

Actually reframing evangelism within the context of discipleship squares pretty nicely with what missiologists call the Engels Scale. With this Scale, we can observe definite stages that people undergo in coming to faith and growing in discipleship. It will look something like the following continuum, ranging from -6 to +6

- 6 Awareness of supreme being
- 5 Initial awareness of Gospel
- 4 Positive attitude towards Gospel
- 3 Personal problem recognition
- 2 Decision to act
- 1 Repentance and faith in Christ
- NEW BIRTH IN CHRIST
- +1 Post-decision evaluation
- +2 Incorporation into Body
- +3 Growth in Jesus
- +4 Communion with God
- +5 Stewardship
- +6 Reproduction

Reframing mission and evangelism around discipleship really does make space for long-term, authentic, loving relationships with people in our lives. This in turn gives credibility to our message and cultivates meaningful friendships—virtues we can certainly use in greater quantities at any time. And the really intriguing thing for me as a movement guy is that if every follower of Jesus simply did this with just two or

three people in their lifetime and asked those people to do the same—disciples-making-disciples-making-disciples in a “pay-it-forward”-style movement—we would actually get the job done in one or two generations! That’s Great Commission ministry as Jesus intended it!

Community Christian Church in Chicago, founded by Dave and Jon Ferguson, is a megachurch that built a movement—the NewThing Network—on this idea.⁶ Dave and Jon started the movement to be “... a catalyst for a movement of reproducing churches relentlessly dedicated to helping people find their way back to God.”⁷ They fundamentally assume that everyone has a lost God-relationship and is on a journey back to God, and that the movement’s mission is to help make this happen. So they then designed the NewThing churches to suit that calling. Not surprisingly, they take discipleship very seriously. They call it “apprenticeship” because it carries within it the idea of a lifelong, practical, learning journey. They are geniuses in building apprenticing relationships throughout the communities and many church plants they start. They are demonstrating that churches can take disciple making seriously and grow as a church. NewThing Network (Community Christian’s movement arm) has around 50,000 people in the movement and is almost doubling itself every year.

However, we don’t do it simply because it works, but rather because it’s right for us to do to be authentic. This is what Jesus commissioned us to do. Yes, discipleship always works ... it has always worked in the world-changing movements I referenced earlier (the Early Church, Celts, Moravians, Methodism, Chinese underground church, etc.), but we have to be willing to recalibrate our churches around it. It’s not a quick fix, but it is a strategic decision with significant medium- to long-term consequences for the future of the Church in the West.

But lest we think of this merely in pragmatic and strategic terms, there is a much deeper reason for the recovery of Jesus-shaped discipleship in the church.

Chapter 6

It's All About Jesus.

No, Really, It Is.

Michael Frost and I wrote a book called *ReJesus*.⁸ The driving assumption of the book is that we believe most of the Church's ailments and diseases can be traced back to a deficiency in our understanding of, and engagement with, Jesus. But more hopefully therefore, a correction at that point (in what theologians called our Christology) promises us the best chance of renewal in any time and any place. Nowhere is this more true than in the critical area of discipleship and disciple making.

You just have to read Ephesians and Colossians to get a feel for the mystery of God's amazing purposes in and through Jesus—to sum up all things in Him (Col. 1:15-20). Jesus, our treasure, almighty God-in-human form, remains the rightful Lord of the Christian. The loss of an awareness and living encounter with God in Jesus inevitably leads to the loss of a sense of the unique calling of the Christian disciple. New Testament Christianity is fundamentally defined by its engagement with God-in-Christ, not just a vague or generic idea of God. Our idea of God is now always seen through the lens of the person and work of Christ. Here is where we go either right or very wrong! Christianity is all about Christ, or it is just a really bad religion! Everything depends on our adherence and connection to Jesus—more than we dare to think.

Because of the centrality of Christ to Christianity, anything that threatens the living relationship or dislodges the centrality of Jesus in His Church must in the end destroy the very fabric of the faith itself. So it's fair to say that many of our most fundamental problems in Church derive from a misconception of who He is and what He represents in the world. In fact, this constitutes the heart of heresy.

And this is exactly why discipleship is so utterly important: Discipleship is basically our lifelong and heartfelt response to my/our Jesus as Lord and Savior. It involves our deepest commitments to allow His life to infuse mine and mine to be drawn up into His—cases in point Paul's "in Christ" union, or John's "abiding with Christ" teachings. I must become more like my Lord, and He must increasingly take up residence in me. In other words, discipleship is about Christ being formed in you and you being formed in Christ. In a real sense, we are being formed after the pattern of Jesus (Rom. 8:28-30, 2 Cor. 3:12-18). His humanity provides us with the human image of what we must become because we must become like Him (1 John 2:5-6)! That is what it means to be a mature disciple.

The problem arising for Western Christians, in particular, is that our forms of Christianity have tended to emphasize one aspect of Jesus' ministry and diminish others. Evangelicals particularly have a penchant for the theology of salvation

almost exclusively based on the cross. We recognize that God’s solution to the human predicament of sin and brokenness was dealt with in Jesus’ atoning death on our behalf. But if we were really honest—while we rightfully revel in the salvation He brings—we find His words, His actions, His person and His calling on our lives *very* disturbing indeed. We fully embrace Jesus as Savior but tend to object to Jesus as Lord and as God’s prototypal model of human holiness—the kind of which He expects of us. We build much of our theology around His “works” on our behalf (redemption through the cross), but we tend to diminish His “words” along with the radical lifestyle He lived.

What we have sought to do is to try to domesticate Him, to cut Him down to a more manageable size. But in the process, have we not seriously damaged and domesticated the faith itself? As a result, we have (inadvertently) committed probably the most dangerous heresy of all by divorcing the work of Jesus from the person of Jesus; the religion *about* Jesus from the religion *of* Jesus by separating Jesus’ salvation from His lordship. Jesus is *the* Gospel—the whole Gospel of Jesus includes him as Lord *and* Savior—it’s both/and and not an either/or! This divorce between salvation theology (covenant) and kingdom theology (Lordship) strikes a deadly blow at the very theological epicenter of the believer’s life and faith. The role, significance and potential impact of Jesus in the life of the Church have seriously diminished our Christianity as a result. Our reductionist gospel and the associated reductionist evangelism need to be broadened out to include Jesus as Savior, as well as Jesus as Lord. His is both at the same time. He is my Redeemer for sure, but He is also my Exemplar, God’s image of the perfect human holiness. And we must become like Him!

We must reframe evangelism in the context of discipleship because Jesus is Lord and Savior, and that is our proper response. It’s not just about pragmatism; this goes to the heart of the message of the Church. When I say that we must fundamentally *reJesus* the church, I’m really saying we must submit ourselves to the gospel from beginning to end. Discipleship is the process of assimilating the gospel, done over a whole lifetime, into the whole of our lives. In a very real sense, we are all still being evangelized (Phil. 1:6, 2 Cor. 3:18, etc.). Evangelism is an aspect of discipleship, and discipleship is an aspect of evangelism—and it’s all about Jesus. As we have seen, they are in effect two sides of the same coin.



Bonhoeffer says it so well in his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*:

Discipleship means adherence to Christ and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship. An abstract theology, a doctrinal system, a general religious knowledge of the subject of grace or the forgiveness of sins, render discipleship superfluous, and in fact exclude any idea of discipleship whatsoever, and are essentially inimical to the whole conception of following Christ ... Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.⁹

The Gospel and life in Christ are all about discipleship and disciple making after all.

To Bring All Things Together in Christ

Why all this talk about Christology in a book on discipleship? Well, in the end it really is all about Jesus. And discipleship is the way we show that we take Jesus—His Incarnation, His works, His words, His person, His exemplary life, His commands and His commissions—seriously. Hear this from C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*:

It is easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objects—education, buildings, missions, holding services ... the Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose. It says in the Bible that the whole universe was made for Christ and that everything is to be gathered together in Him.¹⁰

The church that takes discipleship seriously is the church that takes Jesus and the gospel seriously, and the church that neglects this non-negotiable aspect of New Testament faith misses the point entirely—and dangerously so.

So the point of this small eBook is simply twofold: 1) To highlight the missional and theological significance of discipleship; and 2) to help you reframe your understanding and practice of evangelism in this light. Much more than what meets the eye is at stake. Our ongoing engagement with the living Jesus in our midst is probably the most important reason why we should make it an inviolable priority in the life of our churches.

Disciple making lies at the core of the Church's mission; it is not an optional extra. Discipleship is adherence to Jesus and the process by which we are formed in Him. His life ministry is embedded in and through His people. Discipleship is a lifelong encounter and the privilege of those called to follow Jesus and love God.

In light of these truths, we need to rethink so many of our inherited practices. A good place to start is in reframing our understanding of evangelism in the context of discipleship. It's not the *only* thing we should do, but it sure is strategic!

And, we do it not just because it works for every transformative movement in history, but also because it is right and because we are commanded to:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20 RSV).

END NOTES

¹ All my work has explored aspects of this. However, my centerpiece book is *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006) and it guides much of my other writings. For a logic of my own writings, see

<http://www.theforgottenways.org/alan-hirsch.aspx>

² <http://weare3dm.com/mikebreen/we-are-3dm/why-the-missional-movement-will-fail/>

³ See Alan and Debra Hirsch, *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), section two, especially chapter four on religious consumerism.

⁴ See Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2007) and Robert Webber, *Journey to Jesus*.

⁵ <http://wearesoma.com/>

⁶ <http://communitychristian.org/>

⁷ <https://www.newthing.org/>

⁸ Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959), 50.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, Simon & Schuster Touchstone, 1996), p. 171.