

HABITUATING RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP

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Discipleship demands countercultural thinking. Honed by Wesleyan thought-patterns as biblically formed but taking seriously sources from the world around us, what does discipleship mean in the complex 21st century?

I argue discipleship is both personal and communal and requires elements of countercultural being and living *as well as* elements affirming cultural contexts. To distinguish what should be embraced or rejected, discipling churches must teach congregations to understand their context, both culturally and politically ('discern the signs of the times'). Drawing on Brueggemann's understanding of cycles of history I consider how holiness churches and her people should respond as upside-down Kingdom disciples. A corollary of my argument is that discipleship is inherently political and controversial and churches must not shy away from this. These ideas will be explored offering some pastoral and practical ideas for engagement, development and practice.

Discipleship and Countercultural Formation

Most Christians are nice. In fact, they are virtually indistinguishable from other kind-hearted, just-minded people. In their tone of voice, manners, habitual responses and behaviours (including moral behaviour etc) they are almost seamlessly integrated into the world around them. For those who are **not** mirroring our culture, their views are often individually very strong, strident, judgemental, traditionally faithful to moral codes of conduct but not seemingly grace-centred and often inhospitable to the Other.¹

In a Wesleyan framework 'the world' is simultaneously a tempting place for the Christian, and one that reveals God's image-making, breath, nudging and life. We can learn from social movements, the progress of the sciences, technology, and be thankful for the progress in the healing and sanitation arts, they are good. There are also dire places where these same goods create fractures in relationships and competition, depravity find ways into lives in unprecedented forms, people's lives urgent and overwhelmed. In a world of growing populism, individualism, consumerism, violence, and division, the power to discern where we as faithful disciples are able to agree with our 'world' and where we need to be prophetic, distinctive and countercultural is imperative.

What does it mean to be a disciple? It is to be profoundly radical – a reshaping of a person so that in key moments and situations a *Christian* disciple is reflexively different from the disciples of other sources of being. Thoughtfully embodied, countercultural discipleship emerges as a person is formed by their community and its texts into an alternative way of life.

Discipleship

The call to be a disciple is woven into the Scriptures by command (Matthew 16: 24-26) and story (John 4; Mark 1, 2, 4). It is simple – follow – and profound – cross-shaped following is costly. When a person follows on the way of discipleship it is deeply

¹ I know that's a caricature – but for the sake of argument...

transformative: internal transformation and external witness joined together in the life of love for God, others and oneself. Rightly, we emphasise that there is an essential ‘alongsideness’ to discipleship – we are disciples in community.

The immediacy of discipleship is significant. As soon as a person becomes a Christ-follower, in that moment, they **are** a disciple and as their life in Christ continues they **become** a disciple in a continuing way. The whole ministry of the church is ushered from the place of discipleship.

Discipleship is not a task, programme, or category of action, but, **a way of being**. It is a response to God’s prevenient grace which nudges and calls people towards Godself, **and** a cooperative entering into full relationship with that same Godself, who pours the Spirit upon women and men in extravagant ordinary grace. The marks of discipleship are then attached to increasing conformity to Christ. So, discipleship is inevitably nuanced: personal, communal and contextual. The life of someone converted from a vibrant pagan background, or a convinced atheistic framework, a wealthy Muslim, or a caste-based Dalit, will inevitably now have a central commonality – Jesus is Lord – but a vastly different effect on other dynamics of life is clearly to be expected. Discipleship of a person with some form of mental ill-health, or special needs, a child or a person with dementia will be worked out uniquely, but with shared hope that Jesus is alive and His life makes a difference in the now and their future being. A new creation existence, shaped in the soil and landscape of the person’s own world is how Jesus appears to encounter people, sending them home to their families to tell the good news on more than one occasion (Mark 8: 22-32 John 4: 4-26).

Discipleship, then, can never be reduced to a formula. Instead, the church needs to have the courage to echo Christ’s on-going call to people, demonstrating Jesus’ good news for all, and to believe that God’s presence is enabling. When God’s call in Christ is responded to, it is matched by the Spirit’s transformative work. This is not, however, passive, easy, or individual. Instead, the church, as a community of disciples, has a sacred trust to form account for, and equip disciples: building up the body. The church’s role of teaching/learning/training in godliness fulfils a ‘virtue shaping’ function (Charry, 19), and the virtues the church shapes will sometimes be different than the church’s cultural contexts. Discipleship is then a theological and ethical life practice. Disciples learn about God and God’s ways *and* how to live rightly in deep, holy wisdom.

The World – Culture Shaping Lives²

Biblical scholar Brueggemann is a helpful source in discerning tensions in being distinctively, Christian and the practices at play in societies.³ He outlines a cycle of history discerned in the text of Exodus and repeated through Scriptures and history. Cultures led by ‘Pharaohs’ (‘the power of the day’) pursue a path that includes the following: A sense of **scarcity** (there is not enough), **fear** (I, my line/tribe/nation will die), **accumulation** (I, my line/tribe/nation must gather in), **acquisition** (I, my line, trade, people/nation will take),

² Authors such as Snyder, Hauerwas, Brueggemann and James K A Smith offer insights into the ‘liturgical’ practices of the secular, consumer environment. Although from a range of theological starting places, these theologians offer commentary on the inherent tensions in seeking to be distinctively, thinkingly Christian and the practices at play in societies.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Food Fight, Word & World Volume 33, Number 4 Fall 2013*.

monopoly (I will keep, own, control, dole out), and **violence** (I will protect what I/we have, with force if necessary). Within this framework people become commodities, bartering their children, bodies, land, or rights, and the fear of the Other who does not share my value (for myself, my God, my rights) creates a narrowing of protective boundaries. This pattern appears true when we consider many global political scenarios or local civic engagements.⁴ Additionally, corporate stories of these elements create anxiety for the ‘bottom’ for whom powerlessness is the norm. When the pattern is interrupted it is because a countercultural understanding combats it. This is where discipleship within a Christian framework -which lives in a different world of virtue- can offer life. The Christian stance, for example, towards the Other, is shaped by a radical discipleship that exists **for the sake of the Other** – even at great cost. The theological stance that sees the Other is of infinite value, beloved of God, tilts discipleships towards hospitality and porous boundaries.

Such discipleship is patterned on the oldest frameworks we have. The Scriptures, creeds and earliest church activity actively sought to inculcate a new way of life in converts to Christianity. Theologically framed, “the coming of the word in the flesh of Jesus took place precisely in order to transform human beings into vessels of righteousness and holiness, whose image conforms to that of God himself.”(Radner, 1998, 16-17) Such conformity to the image of God was ethically shaped, lived out in ordinary life and dynamic in its witness, drawing together people from disparate walks of life and forming them into Christians. ‘It was rooted in the habitus of the communities – their reflexive behaviour. It was embodied knowledge rooted in predispositions that guided the Christians’ common life and expressed themselves in practices.’ (Krieder, 134).

Rooted in an understanding of God this entails an alternative vision of the source of our being (God) and therefore a new pattern of our life. The catechism of disciples therefore becomes of paramount importance. Immersion into our cultures is so normal that to have ‘the eyes of our hearts enlightened’ is a clear task of teaching and re-teaching.

Identifying the strongholds of the empire.

One of the oldest steps for catechumens was to learn to see and renounce sin. Sin must be understood widely to include any area captive to principalities and powers. The church must therefore actively identify places of captivity to the empire that stand in place of God.⁵ The discernment of the ‘old’ and the counterclaim of the gospel on Christ-followers meant that shedding the old flesh-life in exchange for the new life in Christ was taught, practised and taken seriously.

⁴ An objection that emerges is ‘it’s not fair to compare political realities between empires/nations with the life of a small community (especially when the latter can survive and live their virtues only because the former provide the security, infrastructure, etc., to do so)’. This bears thinking about, but if a community survives *because* of violence I also think there are challenges in relation to the trauma and blood it bears regardless of the legitimacy of that violence.

⁵ See, for example Justin Martyr AD150, the empire’s ethic described as “‘unfreedom’ manifest in sexual ethics, ... the occult;... wealth and possessions;... violence and xenophobia.’ (Kreider 143).

Discernment and naming the powers are critical elements of the church's discipline. As well as current preoccupations of the church's discipleship (personal sexual ethics, apologetics and conversion), the church could draw on Brueggemann's analysis: wealth, possessions, violence and xenophobia are against God. What then, are the Christian countercultural disciplines that act as anti-agents of scarcity, fear, accumulation, acquisition, monopoly and violence?

Scarcity is the sense of never having enough, an anxious mind-set. Regardless of the situational truth, scarcity shrinks the perceptions of those believing it. Living with a sense of scarcity for those *truly in scarcity* is not sinful, but in places where there is *enough*, operating from a place of scarcity stunts life. The counter to scarcity is cultivation of attitudes of gratitude and contentment. Operating from abundance creates space for joyful giving and crafts justice to future generations, satisfied with enough and no more, in order to help sacrificially the as-yet unborn.

Fear is both rational and irrational, based on the sense that – because of scarcity – life is over. It creates mechanisms of catastrophe, disaster, gloom and pervades hearts and minds, creating a mentality of defence and offense. Its counter is rooted in assurance and confidence in God's provision, accompaniment, peace and presence. In an eschatological world, with eyes seeing differently – and for those for whom survival is not on the line – the transformation of fear into trust in God's goodness and hope for a certain future is cultivated. The power of witnesses whose lives *are on the line* in threat of persecution or death who yet have a clear and certain hope is one of the ways the church has compelled people by its truth. A mindset and practice of life that defies fear offers opportunity for godly risk and radical hospitable actions. The early church chose to operate carefully within a world of genuine threat – so the closed worship services cultivated practices that demonstrated a willingness to go beyond fear (including of death) and inculcate practices of new life. Current Western culture's fear of age and death should be countered by the church's embrace of wisdom, eldership, care for the aged and fearless, joyful approaches to death. Radical discipleship engages in discussions about death and life, and exposes locations of fear in our souls. It cultivates the ability to name fear and thereby defeat it, by active storytelling, exegesis of texts, and being alert to areas of life where fear would undermine faith.

Accumulation and acquisition are rife, from necessities, to 'fripperies'⁶ and status symbols. Countercultural discipleship takes a Wesleyan approach:

If you desire to be a faithful and a wise steward, out of that portion of your Lord's goods which he has for the present lodged in your hands, but with the right of resuming whenever it pleases him, First, provide things needful for yourself; food to eat, raiment to put on, whatever nature moderately requires for preserving the body in health and strength. Secondly, provide these for ... your household. If when this is done there be an overplus left, then "do good to them that are of the household of faith." If there be an overplus still, "as you have opportunity, do good unto all men." In so doing, you give all you can; nay, in a sound sense, all you have: For all that is laid out in this manner is really given to God. (Wesley, On Use of Money).

⁶ As Wesley called them – wants not needs.

Simplicity, distribution, generosity, are challenging. The values espoused by the early church of radical distribution ‘so that no one was hungry’ is a mark of discipleship worth recovering. Radical discipleship cares as much about financial Christian ethics and transparency and accountability in relation to them as sexual ethics. Privacy and individualism are challenged and integrity and generosity a call.

Monopoly and the power of ownership or possession is globally and personally significant (think Gates/Microsoft; Bezos/Amazon; Zuckerberg/Facebook; Deloitte/Deloitte or Walmart, Sinopec, etc.).⁷ The role of multinationals/large corporations in competitive enterprise, ethical compromise, and global exploitation is emerging as a matter of awareness and regular complicity. Discipleship means prophetic witness but also sharing and distribution, the marginal role of calling Goliaths to account and operating from a value base of faith, sufficiency and distribution for the sake of others’ well-being. On individual/personal and corporate bases the church has a role as a soul-deep voice calling for the least to be included in a social vision for the world. Where monopoly exists, the creativity to engage for the sake of the oppressed and exploited and calling ‘pharaoh’ to account is part of the call, mirroring courageous witnesses in the history of faithful church. Radical discipleship asks us to consider who we invest in (if we invest), who we advocate for (in shopping, voting, lobbying, social movements and charities), and how we join others in sharing, distributing and feeding, clothing and healing the least.

Violence and aggression are often justified as merited, sometimes accepted as reality and frequently used as entertainment. National violence (not only in war, but in violations of personhood) and personal violence (in acts of aggression from physical to verbal) as well as violence towards self (suicide, self-harm and addiction) are rife. Discipleship formation challenges violence. Jesus’ call to be peace-makers, taken literally for centuries, must be rediscovered. The peace between, and within, congregation members is a witness to the world of love. Resistance to retaliation, revenge or violence towards non-participants in community is based on an understanding of the nature of the Kingdom of God as peaceable, forgiving and ultimately God’s. Additionally, violent forms of entertainment, shaping violent attitudes and actions, needs to be challenged and valuing human life as sacred will form a countercultural disciple’s life. The radical discipleship of a Christian rejects all violence on principle, including patriotic violence, and discipling means teaching people to discern when, where and how state-sponsored violence as a last resort could be supported by Christians.

Habituating Radical Response.

This alternative vision undergirds radical discipleship, with embodied values of gratitude, contentment, trust, hope, simplicity, distribution, sharing, generosity and peace-making. How are these formed?

1. **In Worship:** the oldest patterns of church tradition enacted these ideas in gathered congregational times. I am arguing for an intentional explicit pattern where such elements again shape an ancient-but-new liturgical pattern for *gathered* times. Worship services intentionally forming disciples who practise in a liturgical space all of these modes of living. We deliberately and explicitly learn to express our

⁷ At time of writing amongst the top ten multinationals globally.

thankfulness, trust and hope in God. We welcome all comers because there is room at our table, and in our economy of communion together there is always sufficient. We recover food as part of our gatherings (whether it is a feast or a loaf and crushed grapes in regular Lord's suppers). We give gifts to share what we have and use them to serve the least, so a portion of our offerings and tithes are to distribute and care for those without (this might mean micro-loans, or food, or just gifts). We pass peace, practising peace-making and forgiveness, a deliberate exchange of Christ's peace. We embody table fellowship and intimacy of story-telling and, in so doing we learn about God and the world so that we can learn more about how to be ourselves. Testimony time is rehearsing speaking one's radical understanding of life in public, and sermons recover a central role as scripturally and factually informed, provoking thought, discipleship forming and teaching. Discipleship is shaped by gathering around Word (hearing, receiving, sharing it) and table (receiving, sharing and being sent out to share with others). It is a **sent** discipleship that, when 'outside,' helps us ask the right questions of the world, tell our story faithfully in the world; seeing it with new eyes, and sharing ourselves and our goods with others. The gathered community is a place to practise explicitly who we are, so we can reflexively do the same things when sent into the world.

2. **At home:** radical discipleship formed in worship is to be realised in daily existence. At home where we recreate habits and patterns, Christians enter into an existence that shapes time, habits and material life distinctly. Often participants in culturally normal ways, sometimes radically alternative options are at play. In the home this might mean anti-accumulation, or giving away, open doors or sharing space, prayers before meals or idols removed. Contextually expressed home-based radical discipleship will seek to replicate the shape of a thankful, open-handed, Scripturally formed life. An old Caribbean saying, 'see me at church; live with me,' or 'don't tell me what you believe; let me watch your life and I will tell you what you believe' (based on 1 Tim 4:16) seems relevant. Framing existence around resistance to 'the world' *and* its redemption is part of discipleship as a habituated response to God's mercy and new creation life.
3. **'In the world':** The sent-out disciples are called and enabled (by the Spirit and church) to re-tell, re-enact and re-embody the things they have habitually practised in the gathering and at home. In this way the verbal and physical material witness of the radical disciple seeps out. The ushering in of the Kingdom is lived in 'normal' and 'ordinary' ways that align with the world where it is Godly (trade justice, human life as sacred, creation care/extinction rebellion, support for the least, healing arts, food movements) and prophetic where it is anti-god (lies, hate, xenophobia, greed, sexual deviance, monopoly, human trafficking, slavery, etc.). Courage to engage these things is a matter of regular practice and prayerful obedience and small collectives of people join together to strengthen the witness of those called into a shared life of radical discipleship. The radical shape of this discipleship formation is both recognisable globally, and locally formed. The heart-land of it is Biblical, communal and personal, and the result is the character of holiness made real in the life of each disciple personally and in each congregation communally. The disciple is empowered in interdependent relationships to continue to be who they are.

This pattern for discipleship transmits into life-actions in gathered community, home and 'the world'. The integration of what we believe to be true and the pattern of life we live out is essential. In Practical Theology the espoused-operant gap is often explored: those theological beliefs and values we believe to be undergirding us and those we actually act out. The concept holds true at personal, congregational and even wider levels – and is a challenge to discipleship. Peter embodies the gap: 'you are the Christ' (Matt 16:16) and 'Where else would I go?' (John 6:68) followed by the subsequent betrayal – he at one and the same time believed one way and enacted different values. The greater the convergence the truer the witness becomes: Acts redemptively demonstrates this in the life of Peter.

What might this mean for pastors and leaders?

1. For those called vocationally to serve through ordination what integration of faith, belief and life do we exhibit? As radical disciples do we model what we believe to be true?
2. As we scrutinise our personal/corporate lives and behaviours, do we ever mirror 'Pharaoh' or the empire? If so, we repent, return to our senses and become new creations again.
3. For churches and institutions: are we intentionally crafting radical disciples? Does worship help us practise to live well? Are we cooperating with God in closing the gap between the holiness we espouse and our operant realities? Are we teaching disciples enough about politics and culture to enable them to be reflexively Christian in relation to whatever culture they are born or find themselves?
4. Finally: this is only one analysis! As we take seriously Scripture, and our text/s (our world and our lives), we should reflect on which Christ-centred countercultural practices enable us to be God's holy people. To:

Go out into the world uncorrupted, a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society. Provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God. Carry the light-giving Message into the night so I'll have good cause to be proud of you on the day that Christ returns. (Philippians 2, The Message)

The hope of the church is God displayed in us; congruence between belief and life towards each another and in the world. This critical witness is spoken, of course, and is *lived*. Christian discipleship in the shape-shifting twenty-first century remains in continuity with tradition: forming people in the way they should go. But, Christian discipleship - as well as guiding, and training Jesus-followers to look at the world closely - also gives a sense of support to disciples embarking on distinctively Christian ways of following: in the world – but not of it, radical disciples of the Jesus way.

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