

RESPONSE TO DEIRDRE BROWER LATZ AND RUBEN FERNANDEZ
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Deirdre Brower Latz and Rubén Fernández raise many crucial issues which are shared in common as each one engages the subject. Not wanting to overlook the fact that the writer of each paper represents vastly different contexts and socio-religious landscapes, it will be the aim of this response to identify positive commonalities under captions which I find helpful for conversation. Deirdre Brower Latz (2018, p.1) asks: *“What might we agree together about following more faithfully? What does it mean to hear the call ‘take up the cross and follow’?”*

Contending for a renewed vision of the cross

Rubén Fernández and Deirdre Latz both argue for a renewed vision of the cross. The cross means different things to different people. To some it is simply a trinket, an expression devoid of any spiritual significance. To others it is a mandate to oppress in the name of God. To others yet, it is hope. *“...the cross then, and what this means, isn’t as simple as it seems.”* (Deirdre Latz, 2018, p.2)

At the very least, the contentions rest in a corporate and personal ownership of the cross. On the other end of the spectrum, the call is for a life shaping identity drawn from the cross. Taking up the cross proposes a permanency of posture. Fernández expresses it as rescuing the call of Jesus: *“The call of Jesus is a call to a commitment with him for life and that includes all aspects of the individual's life...a call to conversion, It is good to rescue the seriousness of Jesus' call in these times...”* (2018, p.10). Fernández asks again: *“How much do we teach people what it would be like to take up the cross today”* (p. 15).

Deirdre Latz emphasises that the greater the obedience in following, the truer is the embeddedness of the cruciform faith upon the disciples’ identity. The significance of the cross is

by no means a light consequence for a Christ follower. The deeper point of contention is that there must be significant themes which are pivotal and vital for our personal and corporate identity as Christ's followers in the world. And still there must be a clear grasp of what it means to "take up the cross and follow" Christ in the generations and nations in to which we are given our existence.

Constituted by the culture and context?

This is where the conversation intensifies. Context and culture tend to catapult the conversation in helpful directions. Latz (2018) presents the simple statement about the convictions of those who violate and oppress others with the sincere intent of being faithful to the cross. Reflection upon this constraint to be sincere, honest disciples of Jesus calls me to centre my thoughts around the African continent. Apart from the intense Arabic oppression and opportunistic slave trades in Africa, the Christian, Western world approached Africa from the earliest times with equal vigour and violence. Colonialism! According to Fernández (2018), who references the colonisation of the Americas, suggests that colonisers came in the guise of Christianising the continent and her inhabitants. It was no different for Africa- as witnessed in Fernández' opening quote by Archbishop Bishop Tutu.

Questions arise centring on the convictions and faithfulness to Christ's mission of oppressive regimes in Africa. Were these Christians convinced that oppression and violence were the ways of expressing faithfulness to Christ? An example of this is the South African, Verwoerdian regime and its precision crafted beast- Apartheid. Were the Christians in this movement, under the conviction that their actions (even though violating the indigenous "native" inhabitants) were a faithful display of taking up one's cross? Was this what it meant to those faithful Anglo- Boer disciples of Christ in South Africa to be on the battle field "denying

themselves”? Was this Christianity influencing a culture of Afrikaner nationalism or was it a culture of nationalism bearing upon their hermeneutic of discipleship? Is there a possibility of a reprisal in South Africa of black nationalism and will it be justified in all of its outworking by the exogenous impact of the blended early Anglo-Boer portrayal of what it meant to be faithful as a follower of Christ? (Graybill, 1990). What part of the context and culture constrained these South African disciples to be this way? Is it the culture and context which determine the hermeneutic which gives rise to the catechesis which confirms such disciples as being faithful? How much of this was supported by the Church in general? How may we avoid the dangers of such influences on the way we are cruciformed?

Courageously counter-cultural

Reflections on the idea of the church remaining the voice in community, sometimes a voice of the voiceless, is a prophetic role unifying those who seek to be more faithful to being Christ to the broken and bruised. Africa remains a sterling example of the ways the Church may be and the ways we ought not to be. Again, using apartheid as an example, some considered that choosing to remain silent against atrocities was a way of being “more faithful” to their current mission of the Church. Not wanting to upset national or ecclesial status quos. On the other hand, some sought to be more faithful to the image of the table flipping, whip crafting Christ. This tension of being faithful to the mission of the Church versus faithfulness to the mission of Christ, presents a challenge to the understanding of what it means to “deny self” and “take up the cross.” Is it not that in seeking to be more faithful to the ways of a ‘drastic-measures’ Christ, is the best guarantee of earning a cross? By doing just that- flipping tables, Jesus earned Himself a cross. Maintaining a status quo does not furnish one with a cross. Is it not true then, that anyone who is denied a cross cannot truly be identified as being “more faithful”? Fernández (2018, p.16)

observes: “My observation in Mesoamerica is that the leadership of the evangelical church in general terms is of conformist type. What we do well is to preserve the status quo. We do not develop true discipleship on the road to the cross. We do not carry out real transformational leadership, like that of Jesus; we only put bandages on the wounds (and not that that's wrong, but is it enough?).”

Implicit in both Latz and Fernández’ writings are the tensions held between the *Church as a moralizing agent* (used to shape **belief** to guarantee a desired complicit **behaviour** in **becoming** by appearance ‘more faithful to Christ’ and by doing so to **belong** to one another in common culture and practice) and the *Church as an agency of divine power*, controlled by love, challenging the status quo, causing those who are motivated by love for the people of God along with God-self. (Love here is a controlling element in power not a replacement for power). (Maginizer, 2007).

Fernández (2018) argues for a costlier discipleship which shapes the life of a follower of Christ. A call to discipleship in which “preachers must offer salvation” with more requirements (p.10). While this is in the making for courageous following, caution must be applied. The Church as a whole, especially those of a holiness bias, must be careful not to speak as though there is more to salvation than the work of Jesus. This may be construed as a Jesus plus something that is required for life as a “more faithful follower of Christ.” Jesus + denominational regulations = salvation. OR, Jesus + the catechesis and confirmation = salvation. This is a dangerous implication.

Called to be the Church

The implications of contending for the collective and singular identity of a ‘more-faithful’ disciple, the courage to be counter-cultural or to be constrained by culture will

ultimately shape the church which we borrow from tomorrow's people. The church does not belong to the generation who currently live in its shade and enjoy her fruit. The Church always belongs to the future and her prophetic voice seems more acceptable in hindsight. In Africa, the Church loses the individual prophetic voices in the likes of Steven Bantu Biko and Robert Sobukwe, when the priority is about serving a Christ of our minds in the here and now rather than embracing a Christ who resembles a more biblical, eschatological image. There is a tendency for Nazarenes in Africa to embrace a *relocation eschatology* ("I am on my way to Canaan's land") as opposed to a *restoration eschatology* (God making all things new through His Church on earth). Perhaps, a reason for many Africans embracing a relocation eschatology was embedded in the hope of escaping pain and suffering. The idea therefore of becoming more faithful disciples of Jesus may not fully accept the idea of the Church being environmental activists or seeing the responsibility of the disciple of Jesus ecological warrior. Being more faithful to the mission of the Bible's Christ ensures that the Church we hand over is cutting edge and geared for the end goal.

Every disciple who desires to deny themselves and take up the cross seeks not only to leave an individualistic imprint. It must also be a collective, unified identity. Rubén Fernández (2018, p.14) argues for this when he states: "Young people are waiting for a militant, dissenting, reactive church. We are losing the new generations that reject a church interested in keeping things as they are...Rather, we should ask ourselves, how can we help young people to see their careers as means to transform society?"

The way to achieving this form of being more faithful as disciples of Christ, is to reject a one size fits all approach. We have to allow the corporate look of disciples to suit their context without falling foul of our cohesiveness. An example of this will have to be the absence of

conversation concerning corporate worship. Liturgical styles differ vastly. As Africans dancing and a deep expectation of transcending in worship through extemporaneous prayer is not unusual. This may not necessarily be the case with others who read their corporate prayers. Our identity as a global, corporate whole must continue to exist as a unity of unique offerings of voice, and solution to contextual troubles. Deirdre Latz (2018, p.10) says: “This kind of corporate discipleship should probably not look the same everywhere.”

Some Concluding Thoughts

How do we release our people from the bondage of hypocrisy and self-contradictions in the quest for being more faithful disciples? During the apartheid era, many of the more ethnically privileged South African Nazarenes took offence when their fellow marginalized Nazarenes suggested that being more faithful to Jesus would mean standing up against oppression and marginalization of the indigenous people. The then, advantaged and privileged few in our denomination often quoted scripture on honoring governments and obeying the laws of the country. Now under a new regime with equitably shared privileges, some of the previously advantaged members take to social-media slandering of the “kings” and “rulers” of their country. There is a rising tension and frustration because the shoe is on the other foot. How does one seek to be a more faithful disciple of Christ without creating future opportunities for self-contradiction and hypocrisy? How do we individually and corporately address social issues with a call for righteousness and Holy living without falling for the trap of perceived neutrality? Would it not be possible for followers of Christ to see God in Christ being a liberator challenging the oppressive systems and to see God as a God of law and order maintaining systems of governance and their kingdoms while being united in love and fellowship?

Is there any room for a faithful follower of Christ to simply tolerate others when the call to faithful followers is a call to authentic, holy love? The answer may be found in presenting a lifestyle of love as true liturgy- an expression of faithful following.

Three Basic Characteristics

This authentic discipleship lifestyle must address the following basic characteristics of Jesus our Lord corporately and individually as identified by St Paul in Philippians. Firstly, disciples who truly emulate Jesus, possess a deep sense of forgiveness even unto death. This is by no means an artificial or self-induced amnesia. It is a recognition by those who are sinned against that to be authentically Christ-like is to be a forgiver even in death (“...being conformed to Him even in His dying... Philippians 3:10)

Secondly, recognising sin for the sake of repentance is part of the call. It is also imperative to find ways of restitution. Those who have lost for the cause of Christ may consider this a loss, as embraced by St Paul in his text on “taking hold of Christ”- Philippians 3:8-10, yet it would be blatant theft to take land and property, homes and families without recognising God’s intention of restoring the same to those who lost these things. Being like Christ must seek to be repentant and restorative by ways of restitution.

Thirdly, I recognise in Paul’s statement (3:12) that to truly take a hold of that for which we are taken a hold of by Christ, we must seek His righteousness. This calls for a common corporate identity recognizable in any context. We are a people pursuing holiness. But what exactly does this look like when we campaign under different political camps? Is it not that our righteousness must be exemplified more highly than our rights? And that our rights really must see the restoration of all people to the singular image of Christ?

References

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