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TRANSFORMING DISCIPLESHIP

FOLLOWING
JESUS,
LED BY THE
HOLY SPIRIT

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1. EVANGELICALS MOVE INTO A DECADE OF DISCIPLE-MAKING

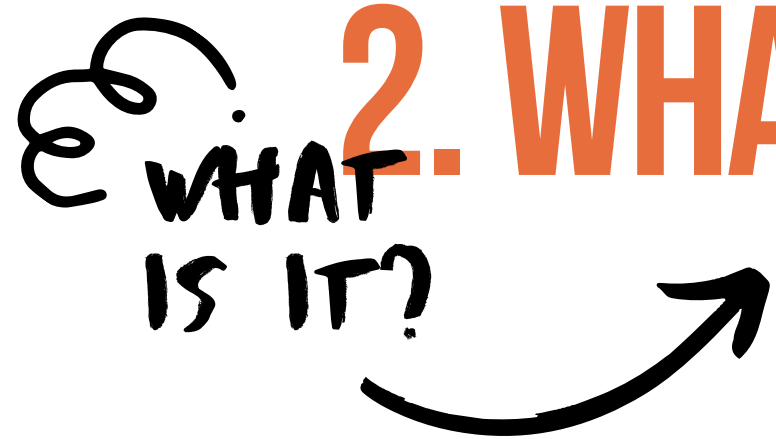


The General Assembly of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) in November 2019 in Jakarta, Indonesia declared the next ten years to be a decade of holistic disciple-making. Without a doubt this is a very timely decision, especially for Western churches, since discipleship for many Christians and also Evangelical churches seems to have assumed secondary importance. The American expert on church matters Dallas Willard rightly claims, "So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, discipleship is clearly optional." He laments the great omission in Western churches when it relates to discipleship. No wonder churches lose their attraction in a society in search for spirituality. A spiritually attractive Christian life is an expression of spiritual maturity, a result of discipleship understood as a process, that takes place within accountable relationships over a period of time for the purpose of bringing believers to spiritual maturity in Christ.

This said, we must yet acknowledge the fact that there is a growing awareness of the ongoing importance of discipleship all around the world, including the Evangelicals. Quite a number of Christian conferences on the theme have recently been conducted. The WCC organized a World Mission Conference in Arusha, Tanzania in 2018 under the heading "Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship." A number of national initiatives have grown out of this conference.

Researching various publications, it becomes obvious that the term discipleship is used in many, at times even contradictory, ways. One author speaks of "spiritual", another of "messianic", "organic", "life-style", "sacramental", "community", "collaborative", "outreach", or also "transforming" discipleship. Thus, an urgent call for a clear definition of what discipleship and more specific transforming discipleship really means is needed.

2. WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?



What is discipleship and how do the different definitions relate to the term as presented in the New Testament? The direct comparison of definitions given, reveals the different perspectives and consequently the focus of the particular author. Consequently, I would categorize them as follows: (a) internal, (b) external and (c) integrative focus.

The internally focused discipleship models concentrate on the personal spiritual maturity of the believer as the basic foundation for their engagement in and for the church, while the externally-focused models discuss discipleship as a missionary category. And finally, integrative approaches relate discipleship to the whole of a believer's life. John R.W. Stott described his approach as "radical discipleship" implying "wholehearted Christian living" while others call it "missional discipleship".

Transforming discipleship belongs to this third category. In this article we will concentrate on the latter, seeking to understand the meaning, task and practical means of doing integrated, holistic discipleship.



2.1 TRANSFORMING DISCIPLESHIP

BACKGROUND, THEOLOGICAL GROUNDING AND MEANING

Most of the integrative approaches point to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his famous book on discipleship.[1] According to Bonhoeffer, Christian discipleship is marked by (a) a decision to follow the call of Jesus Christ, (b) a decision to live life as Jesus was living His life, and (c) a decision to transform into His image. Bonhoeffer's concept of discipleship is in every regard wholistic and integral and Christological in nature.

- * a. ● Discipleship follows the call of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who calls his followers. They are His workmanship (Eph. 2:10), elected and called by him (Rom. 8:28-30) and incorporated by the Holy Spirit into His Body (1Cor. 12:13).
- * b. ● Discipleship is marked by a decision to live a life in the footsteps of Jesus. Apostle Peter writes: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." And Jesus himself says to his disciples: "As the father as sent me, I am sending you" (Joh. 20:21). And His mission included the whole of life (Luke. 4:18).
- * c. ● Discipleship is a way to transform the individual follower of Jesus into the fullness of Christ in order that he or she may fulfil the ministry the Spirit of God gifted them to and Jesus calls them to do, while the Father provides all the energy needed (1Cor. 12:4-6). This ministry is done in the community of believers (Eph. 4:12-16) and expands to discipling all nations of the world by transforming the socio-cultural space the peoples live in into a space where God reigns (Matt. 28:19) for the good of all (1Cor. 12:7).



[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Nachfolge. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2008). In English this book was published as Cost of Discipleship. (New York, NY: Touchstone 1995).

FOLLOWING THE PATTERN OF JESUS' LIFE DISCIPLESHIP EMBRACES THE HOLE OF THE BELIEVER'S LIFE AND IS EMBEDDED INTO THE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS, AIMED TOWARDS A REALIZATION OF GOD'S MISSION IN THE WORLD. AND THE REALIZATION OF GOD VISION OF A JUST WORLD THROUGH HIS SOVEREIGN MISSION IS TRANSFORMATION, MARKED BY SEVEN BENCHMARKS:

07 THE SEVEN BENCHMARKS

- 1 GOD'S MISSION IN THE WORLD AIMS TO RECONCILE THE WORLD HE CREATED WITH HIMSELF (1COR. 5:18), LIBERATING ALL CREATION FROM THE BONDAGE OF SIN (1JOHN 3: 4-10; ROM 8: 18-21).
- 2 WHEREVER GOD'S LIBERATING MISSION REACHES PEOPLE, IT DELIVERS THEM FROM SIN THROUGH GRACE (EPH. 2:9-10), ESTABLISHES PEACE (EPH. 2:14), FORMS A NEW LIFE (2COR. 5:17) AND CONSTITUTES A NEW COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS (EPH. 1:3-23).
- 3 GOD'S LIBERATING MISSION IS ALWAYS HOLISTIC. EVANGELISM AND SOCIAL ACTION BELONG TOGETHER AS POWERFUL WITNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (ACTS 1:8) AND OBEDIENCE TO THE MISSION OF JESUS CHRIST (LUKE 4:18).
- 4 GOD'S LIBERATING MISSION IN THE WORLD SEEKS TO ESTABLISH THE KINGDOM OF GOD. THE GOSPEL JESUS PREACHED, AND THE HIS FOLLOWERS ARE COMMITTED TO, IS THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM (LUKE 4:43).
- 5 GOD'S MISSION IS GLOBAL, BUT IT ACTS LOCALLY. IT MEANS ALL THE NATIONS BUT ESTABLISHES THE PRESENCE OF THE KINGDOM ACCORDING TO THE CONTEXT, INCARNATING INTO THE CULTURES OF THE WORLD, AS JESUS DID (JOHN 1:1.14). IT APPROACHES THE JEW AS A JEW AND A GREEK AS A GREEK. IT BECOMES ALL TO ALL IN ORDER TO WIN SOME (1COR. 9:19-22).
- 6 GOD'S MISSION IS PRACTICE-CENTERED. IT ENGAGES WITH THE DAY-TO-DAY LIFE OF THE PEOPLE AND SEEKS GOOD LIFE FOR THEM PROVIDING SALT (MINERALS FOR HEALTHY GROWTH) AND LIGHT (PROPER ORIENTATION) AND SERVING THROUGH GOOD DEEDS REVEALING TO THE PEOPLE HIS FATHERLY NATURE (MATT. 5:13-16).
- 7 GOD'S LIBERATING MISSION TO THE WORLD ESTABLISHES THE CHURCH AS EKKLESIA, AN ASSEMBLY CALLED OUT OF THE WORLD IN ORDER TO ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WORLD, IN A CONCRETE COMMUNITY (MATT. 16:18), BRINGING FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE TO THE PEOPLE.

Mission as transformation presupposes, therefore, that a church engaging in this kind of mission is prepared to be involved in and engage with the culture in which she exists. The American theologian Richard Niebuhr, who classified the co-relation between Christ and culture in five categories, would have pointed to his fifth category, "Christ as transformer of culture" as a theological frame for such an understanding of mission. The church, as Christ's body in the world, is viewed here as an agent of transformation in a given community. Such a mission is characterized as

- a. mission aiming to transform community;
- b. mission in accordance with God's mission in the world, joining hands with all those who work towards achieving God's plan;
- c. mission aiming to transform the social space and create a community involved in continuing transformation; and
- d. mission inviting people to join the transforming presence of Christ.

And the great South-African missiologist David J. Bosch describes this as a true communication of the gospel: "good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of the community, for the sake of the world." Mission as transformation embraces the world in order to change the world into a place where the triune God reigns.

Such a mission presupposes an agent of transformation with highly qualified members. And the process of qualification is called discipleship, holistic, transformative discipleship!



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2.2 THE EVANGELICAL DISCOURSE ON TRANSFORMATIVE DISCIPLESHIP

The Evangelical missiological discussion on transformative discipleship is relatively new and started in the United States with the growing concern of church member attrition in nearly every US denomination. The euphoria of the Church Growth movement, triggered by the Institute of Church Growth/Fuller Theological Seminary and its famous promoters Donald McGavran (1897-1990), C. Peter Wagner (1930-2016) and others, turned into a constant lament about members leaving the church and intrigued academic research on the issue which proved that the main reason why people withdraw from the church is the growing disability of individuals to live up to the proclaimed standards of a gospel-centered life. In particular, a study on the spiritual wellbeing of American Evangelical churches published in 2010 that examined thousands of churches across the country underlined the fact of a growing gap between belief and life praxis of their members. The search for a solution for the shrinking church in North America revealed the urgent need of a wholistic, integral and transformational discipleship model.

A number of creative suggestions, how such discipleship training might be practically implemented in a given church, were proposed. Eric Geiger and Team conducted a study on "transformational discipleship" models in American churches across the country which looked at the principles applied in those churches and provides a core understanding of what transformative discipleship is or can be. The study revealed 8 areas of importance characterizing the lives of transformative disciples:

8 AREAS OF IMPORTANCE CHARACTERIZING THE LIVES OF TRANSFORMATIVE DISCIPLES

- ▶ Bible Engagement
- ▶ Obeying God and Denying Self
- ▶ Serving God and others
- ▶ Sharing Christ
- ▶ Exercising Faith
- ▶ Seeking God
- ▶ Building relationships
- ▶ Unashamed Transparency

It is obvious how close these benchmarks of transformative discipleship follow the example of the historic Jesus who radically integrated faith in his daily life, following His mission in the world.

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A whole number of publications followed the study, underlining the same principles and rooting them in Scripture. We summarize the publications in describing the central task of transformational discipleship as (a) rooting the followers of Jesus in their personal relationship to the triune God and His revelation in the Bible; (b) enabling them to live a faithful everyday life led by the Holy Spirit and (c) engage in God's transformational mission in the power of the Holy Spirit in the world.

This in turn will require the disciple-making Church to open wide spaces for Bible teaching and practical experience of the triune God by engaging in wholistic mission in the world and by witnessing to Christ in life, deed and word. Such a Church is missional in nature. She determines her *raison d'être* (reason of being) through her relationship to God (*coram Deo*) and the world (*coram mundo*).

And missional churches should make transformed disciples for transforming the world. Thus the transformation of the disciples for the task of transforming the world is in principle a spirit-led process. Such transformation will end in God's realized kingdom. As long as we live on earth the church will be, in the words of Lesslie Newbigin, "a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God". The kingdom of God is still to come. Transformative discipleship must, therefore, be transforming in nature. In other words, the transformed disciples engage in transformation by which they are again transformed transforming the world around them.

3. NO SUCCESSFUL MISSION WITHOUT DISCIPLESHIP


Evangelicals are strong in evangelism. But proclamation, as important as it is, is not enough. None other than one of the greatest evangelists ever, George Whitefield, wrote to his associate John Pool at the end of his life, assessing the impact of his own ministry: "My brother Wesley acted wisely—the souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in the class, and thus preserved the fruits of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand." Wesley's Christian discipleship was practically done through interactive groups: the class meeting, the band, the select band, the penitent band, and the society. Each group within the system was designed to accomplish a specific developmental purpose, and each group had its own carefully defined roles and procedures to ensure that the central objectives were accomplished. The heart of this revolutionary system was a cell group of six to eight people, which Wesley named the class meeting. They met weekly to give an account of their personal spiritual growth. A well-structured discipleship program in Wesleyan churches established a long-lasting success of John Wesley's ministry over centuries. Even today many follow his approach.

John Wesley lead his fellow citizens to faith, pleading for a restored relationship between God and men. This was and is the meaning of evangelism. But restoring our relationship with God implies a restored relationship with oneself, our neighbor and community and even more - the whole of creation. John McKnight puts it well: "For Jesus, love of God and love of others is the core. Love, a term that prompts and shapes behaviors to help that person become what God desires. Love, when working properly, is both emotion and will, affection and action."

A restored relationship with God leads to discipleship, to an obedient following of Christ led by the Holy Spirit in every aspect of life. Without discipleship, God's grace becomes cheap grace as Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly states: "Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. ... Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift that must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. ... Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life ...".


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John McKnight





The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) in all her departments plans to assist Evangelical churches worldwide in becoming transforming churches amidst a world in need of transformation. This will be done by the Theological Commission offering biblical and theologically based training materials, the Church in Community department and the Mission Commission with their various commissions and taskforces, offering practical models and approaches and the Peace and Reconciliation Network, assisting churches in their reconciliatory work. In fact, one could view reconciliation as a vital part of discipleship: There can be no reconciliation without discipleship and vice versa - no discipleship without reconciliation.

Transforming discipleship is, in fact, an offer to reconcile life in all its aspects and fulness. It is leading Christians to maturity in the context of God's mission in the world.



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