

Missional Discipleship

(Adapted from *The Missional Church in Perspective* by Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile)

Discipleship is following Christ into participation in God's mission in the world in the power of the Spirit. This means that it lies at the heart of the missional turn. Since missional church is fundamentally about identity – about *being* the church – developing and deepening the Christian identity of every disciple must be at the forefront of the church's focus. The church cannot witness credibly to or participate effectively in God's mission without faithful discipleship. Christian identity in Christendom was assumed to be transmitted primarily through the broader culture. One learned how to be a good Christian by being a good citizen as well as a faithful family member. Today the culture can no longer be assumed to contribute constructively to Christian formation, and few families are equipped to do so. Thus Christian identity must be cultivated intentionally, patiently, and comprehensively by congregations and other Christian communities. Practices of discipleship are primarily a communal reality, given the Trinitarian understanding of the *image dei*. Unfortunately, late-modern culture has tended to de-emphasize the communal dimension of discipleship in favor of focusing on the individual.

One of the more fruitful developments in contemporary theology is the renewed attention to practices that shape Christian life, imagination, and discipleship. Most of the literature that is focused on practices, however, has not assumed a specific missional theological perspective. The impulse reflected in these writings is nevertheless a helpful one to holistically engage Christian formation and mission. This impulse recognizes that the Christian faith is expressed not only in doctrinal formulations but also in concrete acts. It understands that our beliefs and imaginations are shaped through patterns of behavior over time and that these patterns are grounded in and passed down by communities into which we are apprenticed. Practices of peacemaking, worship, healing, hospitality, and discernment are integral to the church's participation in God's mission.

It is important to resist the common tendency to reduce missional church to a set of rules to follow, discrete characteristics, or summary principles. There is no model for what a missional church looks like. Rather, missional church needs to be defined by the church's dynamic participation in the Triune God's movement in the world. There is thus no how-to list or set of defining characteristics for the missional church, an approach often pursued in some of the current literature. It takes on different expressions at different times and places. Missional church is a habit of mind and heart, a posture of openness and discernment and a faithful attentiveness both to the Spirit's presence and to the world that God so loves. Recognizing and seeking the leadership of the Spirit in the church's communal life and practice is the key.

Missional theology, understood through the framework of the church's participation in the Triune God's creative, redemptive, and reconciling movement in the world, invites us to recognize the missionary character of Christian practices. Practices must be understood not simply as things we do to grow spiritually but rather as concrete ways in which our participation in God's mission is embodied in relation to our neighbor. For instance, the Christian practice of prayer – a central one, as most would agree – can take on a powerful missionary dimension when done with attentiveness to the world. Reggie McNeal offers an example of how one congregation attempted this:

“Each member of the staff at one church was instructed to go to a coffee shop, sit on a park bench, or stand in a mall parking lot and pray a simple prayer: ‘Lord, help me to see what you see.’ They were to listen for an hour to the voice of God and then reconvene to share what they had heard. This simple outing radically changed their outlook as they realized that what was in the heart of God was much bigger than typical church concerns. They began to see broken families, homeless people, at-risk children, stressed teenagers – all people they were not engaging with their church ministry.”

When this attentiveness is grounded in an imagination for God’s presence and movement in the world, our eyes are opened with compassion. We connect with God’s passionate care for all creation.

The missionary dimension of practices such as service and hospitality might seem more obvious, but a robust Trinitarian missional theology opens up their reciprocal, mutually transformative potential. When we enter into participation in the ministry of Christ with our neighbor, we expect to meet Christ in the stranger and to experience the Spirit’s movement between us and those whom we serve or welcome. We are sharing in a bigger movement that may lead us into surprising and unexpected places. Mother Teresa of Calcutta would sometimes ask those serving alongside her as she cared for the poor and dying, "Do you see Christ in them yet?" This was not a pious platitude but rather a profound spiritual insight into what happens when we follow Christ into identification with the poor. God is there, the passionate God Who suffers with the lost and downtrodden, whose Spirit breaks down walls of division and creates new community where one might least expect it.

For this reason, spiritual formation or Christian discipleship, from a missional view, cannot be merely an in-house affair. We must engage the curriculum of the world as we expect to encounter God’s presence in the neighbor or stranger. Congregations must make space for deep engagement with the biblical narrative in direct relationship to an engagement with the world. We are formed spiritually as faithful disciples through immersion not only in a vibrant practicing community where we learn from mature mentors in the faith, but also through coming to recognize the signs of the Triune God’s movement in the lives of our neighbors and our world.