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MISSIONAL DISCIPLESHIP

Mark A. Maddix

Northwest Nazarene University

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES talk about discipleship in a variety of ways. Some view discipleship primarily as catechesis, or what takes place through a local church's educational ministries like Sunday school and Bible studies. Others see discipleship including aspects of spiritual formation such as prayer, Scripture reading, and fasting. While others believe that discipleship is primarily concerned with mentoring others and investing one's life in another. Discipleship includes all of these aspects: catechesis, spiritual formation, Christian nurturing, and mentoring, but it also includes compassionate service and missional engagement, particularly since many of these acts shape and form people as they grow in grace.¹

Historically the church has embraced all of these approaches as valid forms of discipleship. But Christians often struggle with how discipleship is related to evangelism. Evangelism is viewed as a process of getting someone converted, and discipleship is the process of educating and equipping new believers into becoming faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Those who emphasize evangelism are often concerned primarily about a person's decision of faith. The focus is on ensuring that person is saved. What sometimes suffers, however, is the longer-term growth that takes place through the process of discipleship. Likewise, Christian educators often focus on aspects of nurture and education without giving emphasis to mission and service. Both approaches to discipleship are limited and call for a more holistic approach to discipleship.

This book is written to address discipleship more holistically by including aspects of evangelism and God's mission in the world. In this book, we use the term *missional discipleship* to reflect on the role of a disciple as someone who is engaged in God's mission in the world. Missional disciples are on a journey, becoming more like Christ, investing their lives in others, and embodying lives of love for others. This view puts the church in a new light and sparks a movement dedicated to engaging every context, particularly local cultures, with a mission-shaped heart.² A missional disciple is a follower of the life and teachings of Jesus and is committed to being a witness. Too often, this missional language has

been divorced from the local church because it was seen as something only missionaries did—not what Christian disciples do.³ The focus of this chapter, and this book, is to reconnect the relationship of the church to mission and to provide a theological and practical approach to missional discipleship.

MISSIONAL DISCIPLESHIP

Followers of Jesus Christ are called to be disciples. If we take seriously the missional agenda of the church, we simply cannot be disciples without being missionaries, or *sent ones*. As Alan Hurst states, “For way too long discipleship has been limited to issues relating to our own personal morality and worked out in the context of the four walls of the church with its privatized religion. In doing this, we have severely neglected the mandate to go and make disciples.”⁴ Christians are called to follow Jesus’ mandate to “go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19). Missional discipleship includes both engaging in mission and being intentional about faithful discipleship. Given this reality, many congregations are refocusing to embed the gospel through acts of compassion, justice, and love of both neighbor and community. This missional church movement is deeply connected to a theology of the church that is expressed in the very nature of God as mission. The very heart of the triune God is mission. In fact, *Missio Dei* simply means the mission of God. The missional pattern of the triune God is captured in the words of Jesus who told his disciples: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). God the Father sent Jesus Christ to redeem all of humanity and creation; Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to empower and guide us; and the triune God sent the church into the world to participate in the new creation. God’s mission in the world calls, gathers, and sends the church into the world to participate in God’s mission. The nature of the church remains to seek and follow wherever God continues to be active in the world.

This missional character of God is expressed in the love that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share toward creation, including us. The church

is a sent people, responding to the call of Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to go into all nations. The church witnesses to the lordship of Christ and participates with God in the building of the kingdom of God (Matt. 28:19-20). The church is an instrument of God's mission for the redemption of all creation. Christians are instruments of God's mission as redemptive agents in the world. Through our participation in God's mission, God is seeking to restore and redeem all of creation.

It is difficult to develop a definition of missional discipleship given the wide range of ways the term is used. However, for the purpose of this chapter and this book, missional discipleship can be defined in this way: *Missional discipleship represents the missionary nature of the triune God with the purpose of forming congregations to embody the gospel and to equip Christians to participate in the restorative and redemptive mission of God in the world.* This definition gives focus to the nature of God as mission, the role of the church as forming disciples, and the focus of engaging in missional practices that usher in the kingdom of God.

MISSIO DEI: A WESLEYAN APPROACH

Wesleyan-Holiness theology roots the *Missio Dei* in an understanding of grace. God's commitment to love creation and God's gracious identification in the incarnation are central to what has been called John Wesley's "optimism of grace." Because grace entails God's loving and noncoercive presence, it cannot be forced upon us: depriving human beings of freedom is not the nature of God's grace. Instead, grace makes possible the human response, as the Spirit works in us both to communicate love and to begin the process of renewal and character formation in the image of God.

The optimism of grace rests on God acting first. The theological term for this is "prevenience." As Wesley put it, "The Holy Spirit is active in our lives even before we are aware of this activity, drawing us to God." Wesley links together divine initiative and human responsibility, which has been called "co-operant grace" or "responsible grace." Divine-human synergism—in which God acts first and human beings freely respond—is

central to Wesleyan theology and practice. First, it reminds us that we are called to cooperate with God in the redemption of humanity and all creation. God is already working, seeking to redeem all of creation, including us. Regardless of a person's religious background or heritage, God is at work, drawing and calling each person to truth and goodness.

Second, a Wesleyan view of prevenient grace has implications for missional discipleship. Because God's Spirit is at work everywhere in the world, we can be assured that the Spirit is already present. Moreover, God's presence in every human life gives each person infinite value as the object of God's caring. Prevenient grace initiates the possibility of crossing borders and knowing others on their terms. God's gracious initiatives provoke us into shouldering the responsibility to engage others where they live, to understand their worldview, and to engage others much like the Creator entered creation through the incarnation with all of its inherent risk and expectant hope.

Third, prevenient grace reminds us that those outside the Christian faith may also have the ability to pursue and engage knowledge, truth, beauty, and goodness. Missional discipleship recognizes that the Holy Spirit is operative in the world. It is not limited only to those who are following Jesus. Human existence is not separated between the sacred and the secular. This robust approach reflects a Wesleyan perspective that is Trinitarian rather than exclusively christological. The Spirit is wider-ranging than the human being's explicit knowledge of God through Christ and goes where Christ is yet to be known. But the Spirit is not independent of the Son. The God who acts through the Spirit is the God who Christ reveals as loving and who seeks out human beings wherever they are. This reality poses a responsibility to translate and interpret spiritual truths for those not yet aware of their presence or power.

Many Christians view the church and the world in opposition. Some Christians believe the primary role of discipleship is only to combat societal evils. Others believe God could not be at work outside the Christian community. However, one of the marks of missional disciples is that

they recognize the world is good because God made it that way, and that Christians are called to live “in the world but not of the world.” Given that there are destructive evils in the world, Christians must recognize their role to be salt and light in the midst of this darkness. But the call to missional discipleship recognizes that God is at work in the world. Because those from other faiths can know what is good, true, and beautiful, we can all see how God is active through all aspects of life, including films, art, music, business, and technology.

God sent the church into the world to continue the ministry Jesus began. Just as Jesus gave his life for the world, so the church, as the body of Christ, is to be broken and spilled out in love before the world. We are sent out into the world as an embodiment of our calling to be the body of Christ. As the church is being sent out into the world, we recognize that this world is sacred, created good by God. The call to missional discipleship requires a rejection of the sacred-secular dualisms that some Christians embrace. God calls the church into the world so that God can restore and redeem the world. This is God’s primary mission: the restoration and renewal of all things.

MISSIONAL DISCIPLESHIP PRACTICES

Often, the call to discipleship has been equated with what we believe about the gospel. In this approach, discipleship is more concerned with defending matters of belief or doctrine. This doesn’t mean that these things are not important. On the contrary: they are. But missional discipleship hinges on practice more than upholding a particular body of ideas or propositions. People share meals, serve others, discuss issues of culture in relation to their Christian convictions, and pray without beginning with specific invitations to accept the gospel. In practical terms, evangelism in many circles has stressed belief before belonging: one must accept the gospel before becoming assimilated into the church. Missional engagement reverses the trend, stressing belonging first (often tempered by Christian practices), trusting that belief will follow. The life of mis-

sional disciples is marked by their engagement in practicing discipleship in their everyday lives. Discipleship is a lifestyle that is deeply embedded in practicing faith. Missional discipleship often begins with simple acts of hospitality, inviting people to gather and engage in service as well as discussing broader social and cultural concerns. In order to be effective in reaching one's neighbors and engaging the culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ, missional Christians understand our essential need to engage in missional practices that are a witness of the good news of the gospel.

Christian practices are a dynamic union with God's mission in the world. They carry an evangelistic weight as a witness to the reality of the reign of God. Missional discipleship is not something that is an add-on or byproduct of the Christian life. Mission is the essence of discipleship. As Kenda Creasy Dean states, "To be little Christs means allowing God to become incarnate in our lives as we smuggle divine grace in the world. Mission simply means translating God's love in human form, putting every cultural tool—stories, symbols, attitudes, language, practices, and patterns of life—at the gospel's disposal."⁵ Christian practices are signs of the kingdom of God. They point beyond themselves to the living Jesus, who is the kingdom personified. These practices are a "means of grace" that provide healing and restoration.

A variety of missional practices help bring about a faithful witness to the reign of God. These are more than evangelistic outreach and include acts of compassion, creation care, community development, social justice, and acts of mercy. At times missional disciples challenge larger social concerns, taking on projects that merge both global and local domains. These so-called glocal concerns can include such things as child abuse, modern slavery, ethnic reconciliation, advocacy for the homeless, and creation care. Such activities, often associated with the terms "peace" and "justice," reflect a mind-set that engagement against social ills follows after a God who seeks to redeem all of creation—from the social policies that shape human communities to the very fabric of the environment. Missional discipleship invites different people into these struggles, recognizing that

both followers of Jesus and those outside the church can be changed as they see Christlikeness borne out through their efforts.⁶

The chapters that follow will provide examples of pastors and local congregations who are engaged in these kinds of missional practices as a witness to what God is doing in their congregations and their communities.

MISSIONAL DISCIPLESHIP PRINCIPLES

As local congregations repurpose themselves to be more missionally engaged, and as faithful followers of Christ gain knowledge and skills in how to be engaged in missional practices, the following provides some missional discipleship principles that can help guide and inform Christians as they engage in missional practices. This is a representative list of principles that are foundational for missional engagement and discipleship.

Missional Contextualization

As we explore how to implement a variety of missional practices, we must first recognize that every context is different. Missional discipleship is always contextualized in a particular environment. Missional practices that work in one context may not thrive in another. Therefore, it is important to remember that missional engagement is to include local engagement where we live. Jesus' Great Commission to "go and make disciples of all nations" is a command to make disciples *in* all nations, not take them *from* all nations. The Great Commission is not about removing disciples from their contexts but about making disciples *within* their contexts. Missional disciples are missionaries wherever God places them. Our mission fields are located in local communities, workplaces, neighborhoods, and particular church communities. By the Spirit's leading, our task is to discern how to make the gospel of Jesus contextual wherever we are. We need to explore how God is working in our communities, and then invest in a dynamic partnership with God in these places.

All Creation Is Redeemed

One of the central missional discipleship principles is the theological view that Christ came to redeem all of humanity and creation. In Mark 16:15 Jesus states, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (ESV). Mark’s Gospel stresses the importance of redeeming all of creation. Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God and calls on us to participate in the redemption of our world. But we often are so concerned with people getting to heaven that we forget about our responsibility to redeem creation. The kingdom of God is both present and future. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus came to usher in the kingdom of God. When we participate in God’s mission in the world, we engage in redeeming all things. Sometimes we are so concerned about making it to heaven that we miss the importance of living out God’s mission in the world. Many missional disciples are learning to find ways to restore and renew creation through recycling, renewable energies, community gardens, and land regeneration. If we are going to reach our communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ, we have to show that we care about the world in which all of us live. Through our care for everyone and everything around us, perhaps others will recognize God’s love for them. In the end, missional disciples hope they will care more about our faith.

Acts of Compassion, Justice, and Mercy

Another principle of missional discipleship includes being concerned about societal injustices. Many missional disciples today are moved with compassion when others are oppressed or experiencing injustice. They understand the importance of reaching their communities by finding ways to end injustice. They take seriously the call of Micah 6:8, which states we are “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [our] God.” Many missional disciples are engaged in advocating for the poor, the oppressed, and the widow by responding to these tragedies through acts of compassion and mercy.

Hospitality

Missional discipleship often begins with simple acts of engagement. By inviting others to engage in service, as well as discussing broader social and cultural concerns, many missional disciples are crossing borders with those outside the church. In spite of being placed in uncomfortable situations, their willingness to engage others in conversation and dialogue is bearing fruit. Admittedly, the busyness of life today and our tendencies toward rugged individualism have made hospitality more difficult for some Christians in some contexts. By the same token, the absence of authentic hospitality in so many places today can also underscore its impact. Jesus was known for practicing hospitality. For instance, he invited the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, to join him for dinner. He engaged in conversation with the Samaritan woman at a well. Jesus crossed social cultural boundaries to engage in conversation with those that others had deemed as outcasts. Missional disciples are hospitable to others because they recognize they are created in the image and likeness of Christ. This includes crossing social and religious boundaries to engage in dialogue and discussion with the marginalized of society. If we are going to reach our communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ, it will require us to open up our lives and engage with others.

Cross-Perspectival Dialogue

Missional disciples recognize the importance of engaging in conversation with those who hold other perspectives. This includes engaging in conversations with people from other religious traditions, those who hold different political views, and those with whom we disagree. Being able to listen genuinely and respect others with differing views is essential to missional engagement. Often local churches struggle to provide safe places for dialogue and discussion about difficult cultural issues. The Christian community needs to be a safe place where we can engage in these conversations. Often people are turned off by the church because of our perceived dogmatism. David Kinnaman, president of The Barna Group, says one of the reasons many young adults have an unfavorable view of the church is because “Christians have become more famous for

what we oppose, rather than what we are for.”⁷ Missional engagement includes the willingness to enter into cross-perspectival conversations in order to understand those with differing views and perspectives. This is critical in learning from others and seeing what God is doing in the lives of our neighbors.

Freedom from Bondage and Oppression

The mission of Jesus was to preach the good news to the poor, to free the prisoner, to make the blind see, and to release the oppressed. In Luke 4:18-19, we read Jesus quoting Isaiah 61:1-2: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” The gospel is a gospel of freedom and liberation of sin and bondage. Missional disciples are called to help others experience healing and renewal through a dynamic partnership with God in helping to liberate people from poverty, to liberate those in bondage, and to release the oppressed.

CONCLUSION

As many congregations develop a broader view of discipleship that incorporates aspects of evangelism and witness, our understanding of missional discipleship provides a more holistic approach to discipleship. As Christians gather to worship the triune God, we are equipped and prepared to engage in God’s mission in the world. Missional disciples acknowledge there is no separation between the sacred and the secular; the world God created is good. As we enter into partnership with God’s mission, we engage in missional practices that restore and redeem all of creation. These missional practices provide avenues of witness to those outside the church and opportunities for cross-perspectival dialogue and conversation. Missional disciples recognize that God is active in the world and welcome opportunities to go and participate in what God is already doing.

Discussion Questions

1. Given this book's definition of missional discipleship, how are you engaged in missional discipleship? What might be some areas that need further development?
2. Who are the marginalized in your community? How can you and your congregation become more hospitable to them?
3. In what ways are you and your local church engaged in missional practices? What might be some additional ways you can engage in mission with others in your community?
4. Based on the list of missional principles, which ones do you find to be the most challenging? Why?
5. In what ways can we participate in the redeeming of God's creation? What are some specific ways in which you and your congregation can care for our world?

Recommended Readings

- Connor, Benjamin T. *Practicing Witness: A Missional Vision of Christian Practices*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.
- Helland, Roger, and Leonard Hjalmarson. *Missional Spirituality: Embodying God's Love from the Inside Out*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011.
- Hirsch, Alan, and Debra Hirsch. *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010.
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- Schwanz, Keith, and Joseph Coleson, eds. *Missio Dei: A Wesleyan Understanding*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2011.
- Van Gelder, Craig. *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007.