

**Rediscovering Discipleship as a Pathway to Ekklesial Reformation - Wesley did!**

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**PREAMBLE:** I have been asked to send along the lecture notes; consequently, I have had to revisit my notes in order to include all the references that were cited in this seminar. Since this paper is little more than a summary of my thesis work, it was not reasonable to include all the resources I have drawn from, therefore I include only the most relevant or practical for this particular presentation.

I am not a scholar or academic – this is not humility or self-abasement - I am a practitioner. I love my calling and have served as a pastor in the Free Methodist Church for over twenty years. The doctoral work that I fell into really is the work of a pastor who was and still is asking about the state of the Church.

How does one evaluate church? Well here are snapshots of what the Canadian church looks like right now – here’s a sample of what I was reading, experiencing and hearing from other leaders<sup>1</sup>:

- 85% of the churches who participate in the Natural Church Development survey are not healthy according to the NCD criteria;
- There are 112 million churchless Christians in the US according to Reggie McNeal.<sup>2</sup>;
- Popular authors and leaders seem to have romanticized anti-institution, even encouraging EXILES (Frost) and REVOLUTIONARIES (Barna) from pursuing reconciliation with the Body and create new ways of exploring faith; Denominations and membership are understood or framed as sectarian and tribal;
- 87% of those who identify themselves as Christian are “casual” and only 13% are “captive” according to a recent Barna survey (which parallels the NCD statistics);
- Regular church goers presently attend an average of 1 in every 3 Sundays per month according to the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada;

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<sup>1</sup> For further study from a Christian perspective about Canada, church and culture see Reginald Bibby, Sarah Russel & Ron Rolheiser, *The Emerging Millennials: How Canada’s Newest Generation is Responding to Change and Choice* (Alberta: Wood Lake Books Inc, 2009). See also Don Posterski, Marv Penner & Chris Tompkins, *What’s Happening? The State of Youth Ministry in Canada*, <http://www.whatshappeningcanada.com/index.html>, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 4-5.

- And about discipleship I made these observations: Picture a Christian bookstore: C section has “church growth/health”, E section has “Evangelism” books, and D has “discipleship”. A small part of my thesis work was to survey discipleship materials (Navs, Campus Crusade, Willow Creek, evangelical, Catholic - volumes). I observed that discipleship is generally understood as a 12 week class. We “go thru” discipleship. And church involvement is somewhere around chapter 4. Discipleship at some point became little more than a category in our bookstores or a 12 week class at church.
- The language of discipleship in Christendom is “have you been disciplined?” as if it is a process that ends; “take a discipleship class”<sup>3</sup>;

The data I collected for my thesis includes:

- ✓ Exegetical work (church, discipleship & as a result of my reading in Wesley’s methodology I did some work with communion);
- ✓ a series of written surveys of Wesleyan pastors (most but not all of them Free Methodist) about discipleship and communion;
- ✓ I conducted three focus group sessions with pastors about discipleship and communion over a 8 month period;
- ✓ I conducted a series of interviews with a number denominational leaders about the state of their denomination, and discipleship;
- ✓ and I conducted interviews with seminary staff. One of my questions for a director of discipleship was “why does a seminary need a director of discipleship?” The answer, “our students tell us that discipleship is not going on in their churches.”

So we will first define church, then culture (so to be able to discuss reforming church-culture) and finally offer a working definition of discipleship. At that point we can have a discussion about Wesley and discipleship.

**Let’s begin with a definition for church:** Matthew 16:18

Apparently there is some debate as to whether this particular periscope is a part of the original text because it “betrays an ecclesiastical interest that would be impossible during Jesus’ ministry” (quoted in R.T. France<sup>4</sup>). The debate is interesting because it assumes that Christ’s

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<sup>3</sup>Dallas Willard, *The Great Sin of Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> France, R.T. *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989.

mandate and the context from which He was fulfilling the Messiah-ship was not ecclesial in nature.

I disagree. The whole story of the Bible is about community: starting with Genesis and the revelation of a Godhead (Trinity) community, and immediately “not good” being alone idea, leading to a family becoming a nation – the people of God; then the Messiah creating a discipleship community which naturally became the community called the Body of Christ welcoming us in John 17 into His Trinity complete – a perfect unity that to Jesus was not just an idea but already His reality.

France rightly asserts that at Jesus’ time the word ecclesia would not have had the baggage that it has today! Ecclesia was not a religiously charged word. Jesus would have the freedom to define His terms (like He did by using the phrase “Son of Man”)! He could have used a couple of other words to describe a religious gathering (i.e. heranos, thiasos) instead He used this word to describe “the assembly of full citizens functionally rooted in the constitution of the democracy, an assembly wherein fundamental political and judicial decisions were taken” (Brown)<sup>5</sup>.

The essence or root meaning of the word “ecclesia” includes “assembly” or “together”. Obviously Jesus had proximity in mind or **better “relationship” in mind** for this new dynamic called ecclesia. In the contemporary. Hellenistic usage, ecclesia was not the word to describe merely a metaphorical assembly, or a nebulous idea. It was the word to describe a **physical assembly** of citizens who were called together for a purpose. Ecclesia then in Jesus’ mind was also a physical assembly or relationship of His disciples.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that “assembly simply equals Sunday mornings”. In my opinion Sunday mornings should be understood as one of the most accessible opportunities we have as local churches to assemble. Period. However ecclesia is obviously more, make note of the words: citizenship, democracy, decisions (these words speak of ownership, involvement, relationship) – which smack in the face of a contemporary ecclesiology that might sound like this: “I don’t have to go to church to be a Christian”; or “I’m a member of the universal body of Christ”. Or whatever ecclesiology that is championed by 112 churchless Christians.

Jesus said “I will build my ecclesia” – this is His initiative, His genius, and “what God has joined together let no man separate.”

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<sup>5</sup> Brown, Colin, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology: A-F*, vol.1. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986.

He says that He will build it ON this Peter. Most understand two truths at work here: Peter's confession as foundational for this ecclesia **and** Peter, Jesus' discipleship relationship with this man. The foundation for ecclesia is doctrine ("you are the Christ") and relationship (you are my disciple).

Compare this to other world faiths where the foundation of their faith includes "pillars" steps, and doctrinal truths. **But Jesus points to a person.** In that moment Peter becomes a TYPE or FORM. He represents discipleship – the discipleship relationship Jesus had with him.

**This is brilliant because the ecclesia is now intimately connected to discipleship. In fact I do not think they are separable!**

Discipleship is not merely an element of ecclesia, it is clearly more – perhaps the method of ecclesia! Simply, discipleship is how we should do church – i.e. how the Kingdom will be advanced.

**NOW how was Jesus introducing His Kingdom to the prevailing culture?** Through His disciples. They would become the conduit thru which the world will experience and know Kingdom ethics.

Ephesians 3:10-11, the church here is the portal thru which the Kingdom culture enters the prevailing culture's value systems and discipleship is the means.

Jesus preached about the Kingdom of God – the culture of God. There is a wealth of good work about Christ and culture (Richard Niebuhr<sup>6</sup>, Leslie Newbiggin<sup>7</sup>, Walter Wink<sup>8</sup>)<sup>9</sup>. A helpful definition of culture (we've defined church, and we're working on defining discipleship, so what is culture? It's an "integrated system of beliefs, values, and customs that bind a society (or community) together and give it a sense of identity, dignity and continuity" (Dan Sheffield)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Niebuhr, Richard H. *Christ And Culture*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2001.

<sup>7</sup>Lesslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Wink, Walter. *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, vol.1. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

<sup>9</sup>Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2003).

Question now is how would one go about changing (or reforming) a culture? Thinkers and practitioners (John Kotter) who write about leading organizational change argue that in order to transform a culture one would have to contend with beliefs, norms, customs, myths and meanings. Edgar Schein describes this list as a community's "basic assumptions"<sup>11</sup>.

Furthermore Walter Wink argues that Jesus was establishing His own symbolism, imagery, customs, language, story, norms, ethics – new basic assumptions – in order to replace the patterns, or basic assumptions of the world. Jesus was contending with basic assumptions of the world while at the same time developing a new culture – the culture of God - in order to transform a culture. One author says it this way:

"Discipleship is impossible without a practice of deculturation if we are not to conform to the pattern of this world" (Niebhur)

Alan Kreider "The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom" describes the early church's process of conversion as "resocialization". "Deculturation" and "resocialization" are excellent process words: they describe God's culture, or the Kingdom of God, infiltrating our prevailing culture. Conversion is not merely to be understood as a belief but the process of deculturation and resocialization. **Discipleship is Jesus' method of deculturation and resocialization.**<sup>12</sup>

Two final notes before I offer a working definition of discipleship. The word *mathetes* is used 269X in the NT. It was used to describe a pupil, an apprentice, or the relationship of a master and his follower. Jesus would define discipleship with words like friend, brothers, servants, and follower.

Paul used the words Body, Army, Family, and Building to describe ecclesia – all of these are community words, and separation in each case is negative (the integrity of the whole is fundamental): Body = amputation or sever; army = awol, or lost; family = dysfunction; building

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<sup>10</sup> Sheffield, Dan. *The Multicultural Leader: Developing a Catholic Personality*. Toronto:Clements Publishing, 2005.

<sup>11</sup>Schein defined culture as a "pattern of shared assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems." Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership: Second Edition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 12.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon T. Smith's Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation (Baker Academic: 2010) is a thoughtful discussion about rethinking the process of conversion. He offers 12 ways that "Revivalism's language of conversion permeates evangelicalism" and is not necessarily theologically true. It's worth the read.

= incomplete. In Paul's mind ecclesia is relationship and necessarily requires proximity! Shared life.

Let's try to summarize where we are landing by offering a working definition:

Discipleship is an intentional and organic formative relationship. The purposes of discipleship include: 1. **To create community**<sup>13</sup>; 2. To learn God's Word; 3. To nurture worship<sup>14</sup>; and 4. To participate in God's mission in the world<sup>15 16</sup>.

Let's break this down. Intentional: Was Christ intentional? Or more simply, was Jesus grooming His disciples for the mission? Obviously He was!

By organic I mean only that it was His lifestyle, and the lifestyle of the disciples as opposed to a program or a rite of passage that they needed to graduate from. He cursed a tree, He blessed a gentile, He healed a bleeding woman, He forgave an adulteress... Every walk He took, or break, or place they slept or boat trip they took as a discipleship-community was opportunity to be intentional. Discipleship flowed out of the growing relationship which made discipleship organic. Jesus called His disciples friends, and brothers which is organic language.

"Formative" could easily be "re-formative" here: by formative I mean deculturation and resocialization.

I think the purposes listed are self-evident: He was creating community or ecclesia as He lived with them, sent them out together, taught them about conflict as it arose, even invited them into the Trinity community – "that they'd be one with each other as we are one, and they'd be one with God". He was creating, teaching, nurturing, commissioning His church/disciples into truth, worship, and mission.

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<sup>13</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1954), 13. Most everything by Bonhoeffer about community is worth reading!

<sup>14</sup>Donald Goertz, "Toward A Missional Theology of Worship," *Theology of Mission*, class notes (Toronto: Tyndale University and Seminary, 2009).

<sup>15</sup>Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup>There is a good introduction to the idea of missio dei and its focus being in the redemptive work of Christ. Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2007), 18.

## WESLEY

Did Wesley do discipleship? Of course I mean discipleship according to this working definition?

Perhaps! In 1742 in Bristol a particular meeting house had a large debt on it. Wesley had the idea that each member of that society would contribute one penny per week towards the debt repayment. He then devised a plan where leaders would agree to contact 11 members per week to take the collection. He himself would be assigned the 11 poorest so that if they could not pay he would pay for them. What began to happen in these weekly visits was that life was being shared, but 11 separate visits weekly were hardly manageable for these leaders.

"It was done," says Wesley. "In a while, some of these informed me, they found such and such an one did not live as he ought. It struck me immediately, 'This is the thing; the very thing we have wanted so long.'"

The next step was to invite the group of 11 to meet in one place weekly, they would pay their penny and proceed to discuss Scripture and pray. Wesley saw what was happening and wrote:

Wesley writes: "It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped by this little prudential regulation. Many experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to bear one another's burdens, and naturally to care for each other's welfare. And as they had daily a more intimate acquaintance, so they had a more endeared affection for each other."

Quite organically (or "naturally") and intentionally his system of class meetings formed. Rules would follow:

1. To meet once a week, at the least
2. To come punctually at the hour appointed, without some extraordinary reason
3. To begin (those of us who are present) exactly at the hour with singing or prayer
4. To speak, each of us in order, freely and plainly the true state of our souls...
5. To end every meeting with prayer, suited to the state of each person present.

And as you know there were levels: class meetings and band meetings for those desiring further study and accountability. Meeting in homes was less formal than Sunday liturgy and ceremony. And still Wesley encouraged constant communion and ongoing support of their local place of worship. My thesis work was entitled: "Sacramental discipleship as a pathway to ecclesial reformation in the FMCIC". I was interested in the development and use of communion as a

means of discovering and nurturing discipleship. I am suggesting that Wesley had inadvertently perhaps married connecting in class meetings and communion and together they form discipleship!<sup>17</sup> (A little bit like the old Reese Peanut Butter Cup commercial, where a guy eating chocolate ran into a guy eating peanut butter and something wonderful came of it! Perhaps God ordained that Wesley's class meetings and Wesley's theological bent towards constant communion would come together to form something wonderful!)

Constant communion<sup>18</sup> is a powerful community building opportunity! Communion facilitates the following opportunity: TO REMEMBER (because we have an amazing capacity to forget):

1. The believer **remembers** her identity in Christ (God's grace) – the believer's story with God is told;
2. **Remembering** nurtures [reconciled] community;
3. **Remembering** leads the believer into worship;
4. **Remembering** matures a believer in his faith as he considers the implications of Christ's sacrifice on his own life, which will lead to living sacrificially - missionally.

Communion, especially constant communion (daily or several times weekly) is a Kingdom story, cultural opportunity that nurtures community! Rodney Clapp writes:

Our regular practice of the Eucharist is a practice in accepting God's forgiveness and in forgiving one another. We should remember that not every culture has this resource.... Forgiveness is a communal resource, perhaps the keystone of Christian politics, a resource and keystone that can enable us to face failure and conflict without destroying ourselves in the process. Because we have this resource, we should not cower before the prospect of failure or try to deny and hide our conflict.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Much can and should be said about the opportunity / means of grace in the Lord's Table. I spent considerable time in my work highlighting the Wesleyan view that communion was not the actual transformation of the elements into body and blood, but neither is it merely symbol. There is a wonderful "mystery" to embrace ("This is My body") and as such will only deepen the remembering theme. I include only one of the many helpful writers that I used: Noll, Ray R. *Sacraments: A New Understanding for a New Generation*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Wesley, *Sermon One Hundred One: "The Duty of Constant Communion"*.

<sup>19</sup> Clapp, Rodney, *A Peculiar People*, 110.



It would appear that Wesley happened on to the formal structure of class meetings. However methodical they were, they were still in people's homes and this allowed for fellowship. He also strongly encouraged the discipline of constant communion. Does Wesley's method and teachings including constant communion, satisfy our working definition? It does.

Discipleship is an intentional and organic formative relationship. The purposes of discipleship include: 1. To nurture community; 2. To learn God's Word; 3. To nurture worship; and 4. To participate in God's mission in the world.

I think so. Now small groups and communion are not unique to Methodism. However, Wesley's intentionally was very effective: "Wesley's system was a massive transformation, even civilization of the whole bottom level of England's population."<sup>20</sup>

Wesley's methodology was not merely about sustaining a revival, but clearly it was about discipleship.

One last question: if it worked, Methodism, then where is it today? Fair question. When you compare the Methodist revival to other great revivals, because of Wesley's use of fellowship and accountability (discipleship) the Methodist revival grew into a movement. Furthermore, allow me to answer with another question: If Jesus established discipleship then where did church and discipleship part ways? This is the stuff of another paper: Constantine would factor in here as would an interesting discussion about how and why movements become institutions (i.e. Methodism, Pentecostalism, etc).

## **CONCLUSION**

Wesley did rediscover discipleship.

What can it look like in our churches today? Am I simply making an argument for small groups or more communion times? No. I'm thinking though that like Wesley we should be keenly aware of our culture and consider our opportunities:

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<sup>20</sup>D. Michael Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley's Class Meetings* (Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 1997), 158.

Here are steps I am taking:

1. Discipleship the word is not used as a program for new believers;
2. I applaud churches that would say that small groups is not a ministry of our church rather it is how we do church – they are unto Jesus’ model. My caution about simply equating discipleship to small groups is that we could lose the organic nature of Jesus’ method (i.e. leader, apprentice, host, one year together and then multiply. Jesus was three years with the same group and He added no new members!). He moved them from followers to friends. Small groups are very important – but to help people get into gear we have created two kinds of small groups: traditional and 4-6 week groups; we’ve changed the definition to be 2 or more; we will ask our people to do Bases 2 and 3 in “small group”.
3. I am intentionally focused on the board I serve with (we meet individually and I ask a Wesley type question) – I believe that my job is to virus this congregation with discipleship relationships (thereby challenging basic assumptions);
4. I have challenged each of our leaders to begin to meet with one or two others the same way I meet with them;
5. On the front page of our website is a question we change up twice monthly – Wesley type questions about our present spiritual journey. We are careful to tell our congregation to ask these of someone – these are not to be read and answered alone! Questions are one way we are equipping our leaders to form discipleship relationships;
6. This is our Ministry Map;
7. Explore creative ways of celebrating the Eucharist.

I think Wesley did re-discover the power of a community that grew in “affection” to one another. The converts became full participants(or “citizens”) in a community by simply meeting regularly with one another – life on life. The added encouragement to take the Eucharist regularly should only have strengthened the community of faith by remembering (or participating) in God’s new ethic. I do believe this was a re-discovery of Jesus’ model of discipleship. I also believe it is ours to re-discover today. It is not as sexy as a new building, new pastor, new evangelistic campaign because it requires the tough work of an anthropologist and missionary and even spouse: learn each other’s culture and introduce God’s culture and this process all founded in love. Discipleship takes relational time – time Jesus decided was the best investment of His earthly ministry.