

Beyond Coffeeshop Discipleship: The Significance of Mission in Spiritual Formation

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I grew up in a home where coffee was an “adult beverage.” As children we were warned against it with the dire consequence that “it will stunt your growth.” My grandmother was living proof: as a young man I could rest my chin atop her head. While I am still not convinced that coffee compromises a person’s growth, I am certain that discipleship over coffee creates stunted disciples.

Discipleship over an americano is as misguided as it is ubiquitous. Walk into any coffee shop and you will find disciples pouring over Scripture and engaged in conversations meant to further spiritual growth. I invite you to picture yourself there right now, latte in hand, with those you mentor. How do you feel about their progress as a Jesus follower? How do you measure their growing conformity to the image of Christ? What questions would you ask to determine their spiritual growth?

Since Scripture’s focus is on God and God’s mission, I would urge you to ask a missional question. That’s right: raise a topic not covered in the early sections of virtually any discipleship resource, if at all. Remind your mentee of God’s missional calling for disciples and the intercultural DNA of that commission. Note the celebrations described in Revelations involving people of every culture. Then ask this question: “Why do we do mission?” I am willing to wager a cappuccino that the subject of any response you hear centers on the needs of others. This is why I urge you to put down your mug and walk out the door. Let me explain.

Integral Discipleship

Mission or maturity, which matters most? Is this even a fair question? God's passion for the salvation of the world is inextricably linked to God's passion for the sanctification of his church. We must recognize that God's two great concerns are inseparable.

Scripture describes salvation as God's generous gift of new life in Christ. It is a gift offered to all who believe, since it is God's will that none should perish but that all should come to repentance (cf. 1 Peter 3:9). The result of God's reconciling work is a life of abundance. When embraced, salvation transforms people, communities, and the places they live. The Bible takes us beyond gratitude for our own salvation. We live for God's namesake and are thus called to bear witness to his good news. Salvation calls us to live missionally in our own communities and to commit to mission around the world. Our God-given commission to go into the whole world is articulated in the first chapters of Genesis and celebrated in the last chapters of Revelation. Mission claims a central place in God's purposes for his children on earth: the church bears witness to our good and sovereign God and brings joy to the world.

Scripture also reveals God's imperative that his children and Christ's church grow in spiritual maturity. Sanctification is the Holy Spirit's work of making Christians holy, also described as progression toward Christ-likeness and maturity in Christ. This transformation was Jesus's intention when he gathered disciples and called them to make disciples. Discipleship describes an individual's journey toward spiritual maturity. Progress is marked by a conscious commitment to follow Christ, to learn from Christ, and to be transformed by Christ with the purpose of "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). Jesus modeled discipleship in bringing his followers to greater maturity. For Jesus, mission and maturity were never separate endeavors. The church would be wise to follow his practices. God's missional calling takes us beyond the familiarity of our own communities into intercultural settings where we bear witness to the gospel. Robust missional living is intercultural. Robust discipleship is also intercultural.

Torn Asunder: Practical Dualism

Mission and maturity are not two distinct priorities. Each is essential to the other, and neither can be accomplished without the other. When it comes to the salvation of all peoples and the sanctification of his church, God chooses both. God's twin intentions—that all people come to faith and that all people of faith grow in Christ—lead directly to the essential

elements of the church's work.

While this is readily affirmed, it is often poorly modeled. Regrettably, as congregational leaders, theological affirmations are often overruled by pragmatic complexities. Over twenty-seven years of ministry, I have seen myself and other leaders wrestle with what I call “practical dualism” in response to the push and pull between mission and maturity. The Evangelical Covenant Church has embraced the phrase “deeper in Christ, further in mission” as an expression of Christ’s calling for his church.¹ Yet too often, “deeper in Christ” and “further in mission” are considered distinct endeavors, and we feel obligated to decide which matters more. Moreover, we tend to be naturally inclined toward one or the other. Our passions and life experiences—and at times congregational “squeaky wheels”—cause our ministries to tilt one way or the other.

The prevalence of this dualism within the church is evidenced in the way we describe congregations. Some churches are identified as missional, while others proudly note their deep discipleship focus. Few leaders explicitly claim that mission or discipleship is more important than the other, but many of us reveal implicit distinctions through what we choose to invest in. We make strategic choices that confirm mission and discipleship as discrete endeavors, and we construct ministry frameworks in which one matters more than the other. We have defined mission and discipleship with such precision that we have inserted space between them. Each is given unique leadership, objectives, budgets, space, time, and organizational value so that “deeper in Christ and further in mission” is no longer a single pursuit.

This dualism is also evident when mission and discipleship are approached as sequential steps, one following the other. This sequentialism is apparent in the planning, programming, and teaching of many churches, as mission and maturity are treated as distinct steps of faith that should be taken in order rather than two intertwined aspects of Christian calling to be embraced simultaneously. With good intentions, we as church leaders guide new Christians to enter a discipleship framework that is focused on the development of basic Christian maturity. Then later, when we think a person has developed a deeper faith, we introduce mission into the framework. The content of many discipleship resources assume sequentialism as they include a chapter on mission toward the

¹ This phrase is commonly used in ECC materials. The title of the ECC church membership resource, for example, is *The Meaning of Membership: Deeper in Christ, Further in Mission, Together*.

end of the curriculum, suggesting that mission is only for the advanced disciple.² Sequential dualism, although common, is not inevitable. Jesus did not even present it as an option.

Mission and Maturity in Scripture

Does the New Testament depict the Holy Spirit engaged in missional acts or discipleship acts? Were the earliest Christians concerned with reaching the lost or with building the church? It is nearly impossible to untangle these threads—and surely irresponsible to try. The book of Acts establishes the identity of the fledgling church in a few sentences: “the Holy Spirit will come upon you and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth” (cf. Acts 1:8). This is an account of people in motion, Christ’s church “on the way.” God’s intention is that none perish, and his church embodies that missional passion as it carries the good news forward.

As the story unfolds, the church’s missionary calling becomes the very means by which it matures. Acts 10–15 describes a pivotal period in the disciples’ growth in understanding. The Holy Spirit has pushed them beyond the once-safe confines of their Jewish community. Unexpectedly, the gospel is embraced as good news by Gentiles. A crisis erupts, and the church faces the first threat of division. Peter steps into the fray with a surprised exclamation: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism” (Acts 10:34). Moreover, he notes, this truth was in Scripture all along! This was a stunning acknowledgement. What had happened? The church stepped out into mission, the Holy Spirit acted, and the first generation of disciples finally began to grasp the difference between their standards and God’s heart.

I am convinced that the early church did not accurately understand

² I have made a hobby of examining introductory discipleship materials. In *Discipleshift* Jim Putnam’s “Discipleshift Wheel” includes “release to do ministry” as the ninth of twelve steps toward maturity (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013). Ogden’s *Discipleship Essentials covered* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018) address the importance of surrender, disciplines, quiet time, Bible study, and worship as essential tools for spiritual growth maturity; missional activity is not covered. Even Bruce’s remarkably thorough volume, *The Training of the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000), fails to consider the instructional power of mission often used by Jesus. In his book *Dedication and Leadership* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), Douglas Hyde notes a stark contrast between his training in communism and later training in the Christian faith. He describes a process of training recruits by not instructing them straight away. Instead, “quite consciously and deliberately, they are sent into some sort of activity which will commit them publicly to communism.” A recruit then “discovers his own inadequacy” and longs to understand more (p. 44).

Scripture until it began its mission. And the disciples were not theological lightweights! Their shortcoming was not lack of knowledge of Scripture; their problem was naïveté. Misconceptions are not always corrected by more study. The antidote to the disciples' ignorance was a willingness to respond to God's call to go. Their assumptions and biases remained in place until they were challenged by mission. The Spirit led the disciples on a missional journey, turning the wider world into a learning lab where they could gain deeper spiritual understandings and maturity. If there is any sequentialism at all (and I do not believe there is), then mission came *before* maturity. Going "further in mission" caused the disciples to grow "deeper in Christ."

The concomitant nature of mission and spiritual maturity is evidenced elsewhere in Scripture. Take the story of Jonah. If this were just a story about the repentance and salvation of Nineveh, the fourth chapter would never have been recorded. Yet chapter 4 is actually the culmination of the story. Only here do we discover God's agenda for Jonah, the timid, self-righteous, and rabidly nationalistic prophet. The possible transformation of Jonah's heart completes the story of the Nineveh mission. Certain critical discipleship lessons cannot be learned in one's hometown. The story of Jonah highlights the difference between missional living in one's own community and that which takes us beyond our own culture.

The term parochial describes a limited or even miniaturized perspective of life. The term aptly describes Jonah's pre-Nineveh faith. I believe it is also a fitting description for much of what passes for discipleship today. Jonah's view of God and God's mission was myopic before his reluctant trip to Nineveh. His faith was small and incomplete, shaped by a single culture and easily aligned with his patriotism. He was quick to pronounce God's judgment and bitter about God's forgiveness. It took leaving his hometown and his native culture to bring Jonah's parochial faith crashing into contact with the wider world of big fish, hostile governments, and unsettling grace.

Intercultural Disorientation and Reorientation

One of the most common elements in God's approach to discipleship is most uncommon in ours. It was intercultural. Webster defines *intercultural* as "occurring between or involving two or more cultures." Intercultural engagement is disorientating, but we see again and again in Scripture and church history how God uses this disorientation as a powerful tool for spiritual formation. Crossing cultural divides changes people. It affords great opportunity to bring deeper maturity to dis-

ciplcs. We all hold convictions that are alien to gospel truth but enjoy unwarranted support in our hometowns. Our faith remains dangerously entangled with nationalism, ethnocentrism, and selfish attempts to justify the unjustifiable. Our self-chosen circles of belonging protect rather than challenge distorted beliefs.

In scriptural accounts like those discussed above, we discover that experiences of disorientation can become rich and necessary opportunities for spiritual maturity. What we might call “disorientation discipleship” becomes the antidote to parochialism. We see this throughout Jesus’s ministry. Some of the best discipleship stories in the Gospels involve intercultural elements (cf. Matthew 15:21–28; Luke 8:26–39; 10:25–37). It makes me wonder if Jesus purposely led his followers into encounters with Samaritans, Greeks, and Syrians in order to protect them from the same sort of parochial discipleship that plagued Jonah.

Coffeshop discipleship creates parochial disciples. It is a method as common as it is easy. Even if there had been a Starbucks in the vicinity, I cannot picture Jesus and his disciples enjoying a comfortable conversation over lattes. Jesus often led his disciples into places of discomfort. He frequently confused, challenged, and disoriented them. Consider the desperately disorienting situations the disciples faced. Thousands of people needing dinner and expecting them to help (Matthew 14:16). A command to eat Jesus’s flesh (John 6:53). Waves about to sink a fishing business (Mark 4:39). Crowds demanding crucifixion (Luke 22:61). Jesus unsettles—he generates disorientation—in order to accomplish gospel reorientation. God cultivates that kind of maturity in the unsettled terrain of mission.

Intercultural space can be liminal space—unsettling, unfamiliar, and immensely valuable for discipleship. Jay Moon observes that “exposure to other cultures reveals disciples’ own worldview assumptions, perhaps for the first time.”³ Moon quotes Paul Hiebert’s statement that a powerful way to transform a worldview is to “step outside our culture and look at it from the outside, and to have outsiders tell us what they perceive as our worldview.”⁴ Moon and Hiebert both recognize the mind-changing impact of intercultural discipleship. Profound spiritual maturity can grow out of intercultural and liminal space. This approach to discipleship is not as neat and organized as a methodical progression through

³ W. Jay Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship: Learning from Global Approaches to Spiritual Formation; Encountering Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 241.

⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*

books that invite us to fill in blanks, highlight sentences, and discuss study questions. Indeed, intercultural mission is messy. Disorientation unsettles settled matters. False certainties are replaced by gospel truths. Mission creates dissonance and forces us to recalibrate long-held convictions. This allows our narrow, static, and familiar views to be replaced by gospel perspectives that foster spiritual maturity.

Toward the Inculturation of Missional Discipleship

God's passion for the whole world to be saved is inextricably linked to God's passion for his church to be sanctified. What steps can leaders take to foster missional discipleship? Consider the following four practices, with corresponding reflection questions and related ECC resources.

1. Strengthen pedagogy around missional discipleship. Does what we teach reflect the indivisible connection of mission and maturity? Does our discipleship approach involve missional activity and disorientation? How can God's twin passions be taught in uniquely relevant ways in every ministry area? Serve Globally, the international ministries of the Evangelical Covenant Church, continues to create resources that bridge both of these areas. A study of the book of Jonah highlighting themes mentioned above is a Serve Globally resource available for small groups. Serve Globally's Global Engagements program creates specifically designed avenues through which groups and individuals who are seeking direct intercultural opportunities can experience intercultural ministry firsthand.⁵

2. Regularly evaluate and selectively deepen the church's intercultural partnerships. Does this ministry with which we partner exemplify whole gospel ministry and other values that we celebrate and invest in as a congregation? Does this relationship provide opportunities for the church to be challenged and strengthened?

3. Travel interculturally. How do congregational trips strengthen our global relationships and congregational discipleship? Are we guided by recent research and best practices (rather than existing relationships and travel expenses) as we plan our trips? Are our trips part of a larger ministry objective and integrated with local congregational ministry? There are stories of churches doing this poorly, but it is possible to do better. MERGE is an ECC resource for short-term trip and is intentionally developed to strengthen global partnerships as well as congregational

⁵ For more information on Global Engagements through the ECC's Serve Globally mission priority, see <https://covchurch.org/global-engagements/>.

discipleship. Recent research continues to inform our objectives, staff leadership, and strategies.⁶

4. Assess current leadership priorities, organizational structures, and discipleship paradigms. Is mission integrated into our other ministries, or is it a stand-alone ministry? If we consider the geography of Acts 1:8 as a portfolio of missional endeavors, where are we invested? Do we want to make some changes? How do we remain aware of global factors that impact the effectiveness of our current strategies? Is our missional leadership and involvement intergenerational? Part of Serve Globally's investment as a ministry priority of the ECC is to consult with and coach leadership teams to help optimize the unique Great Commission impact of each local church.

Deeper in Christ, Further in Mission

If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, then sanity is a willingness to try something new—or in this case, something ancient. “Deeper in Christ, further in mission” describes God's two purposes knit together as the hope of the world and the maturity of the church. It is neither a choice between two paths, nor a choice of which path to take first. The simple and sane choice is to embrace the integrity of our gospel calling and again experience the missional and maturational acts of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This is why God sends his church out on mission. God is preparing for a celebration where his children from every tribe and nation wholly reflect the character of Christ in the new heavens and the new earth. This is where mission leads.

⁶ For more information on MERGE ministries, see <https://covchurch.org/merge/>.