

“At this moment there was a violent knock on the door.

‘Come in!’ said the bishop.”

~Les Misérables by Victor Hugo (Part I, Book 2, ch.2).

On a Simple Approach to Ministry During “These Uncertain Times”

By Todd Milton

The contemporary day and time in which the church finds herself in 2022 is, in many ways, not unlike other periods of history. It even bears many similarities to the first years as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles. However, in other ways, it has gone from bad to worse, from crudely simple to bewilderingly complex, and swiftly towards an even darker shade of gloom and doom. How is the church to respond with a faithful witness to truth and remain a positive influence for good during “these uncertain times”? The intent of this essay is to highlight the importance of the church’s basic understanding of the gospel and especially how that understanding is translated into the daily lives of the disciples through the simple, but powerful qualities of discipline, generosity, and hospitality. These qualities, more than any programs, will position the people of God to be influencers for good in the modern world, even with all its woes.

What are the most pressing issues in our modern world that the church must deal with? One hardly knows where to start when considering this question. Perhaps, beyond the headlines, some of the most concerning and rudimentary conditions might include: the breakdown of the traditional family strongly supported by enduring marriages, addictions of all sorts (including to noise, busyness and technologies), and an increasingly widespread crisis of mental health that is fueled by our stressful world, our anxiety-provoking technologies and entertainments, and our burden of being “in the know”.¹

The church attempts to reach out to this lost world in many loving and valiant ways. While many western churches seem to be largely program and event oriented, there are other methods (such as those described herein), simpler in their approach, which tend to be underemphasized, perhaps because they don’t yield as much applause and notoriety. It is the argument of this essay that these simpler ways are, in the long run, more effective.

The Church’s Basic Understanding of the Gospel

It will be helpful to briefly clarify which “version of the gospel” most strongly supports such an outlook. Like a goldfish trying to discern whether the water in its bowl has become cloudy, it is very difficult for the church to have clear insight into whether the gospel it preaches has veered off course. The slow drift of history is difficult to notice without assistance.

The late philosopher, Dallas Willard, explains that there are three common gospels heard today, and a fourth that Jesus preached.² Briefly, the first is the gospel of the theological right which is summarized as “your sins will be forgiven, and you will be in heaven in the afterlife”. A second, the gospel of the theological left, holds that “Jesus died to liberate the oppressed”. The third, familiar to both “sides”, is “take care of your church and it will take care of you.” Each of these contains elements of truth and they are not all bad through and through. But they fail to provide an adequate motivation for life and for mission.

What then is the “fourth gospel”, the correct version that Jesus himself preached? This, Willard claims, is an invitation to “put your confidence in Jesus for *everything* and live with him as his disciple *now* in the present Kingdom of God”. He further defines salvation as “participating *now* in the life which Jesus is *now* living on the earth.” This view of the gospel does not eliminate the focus of the “other gospels heard today”, but rather places them in a richer context which is exactly where Jesus himself placed them.

The three versions of the gospel most commonly preached tend to lead the church to be like Martha, “distracted with much serving”³, while the fourth gospel seats us along with Mary, “at the Lord’s feet and listening to his teaching.”⁴ This can seem an oversimplification of a complex historical reality of the slow transition of the church’s understanding of the gospel and its mission. But one has to seriously reflect on whether or not the gospel preached leads to guilt and burnout or to: “out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”⁵

A church that is “distracted with much serving” seeks to burden it’s members with numerous events and programs while overlooking more fundamental and life-giving practices. This can perhaps be illustrated by looking at the interpretation and application of the Great Commission (Matthew 28.18-20):

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Is this a passage about world evangelization and missions? In many ways, yes. But what is to be the outcome? Clearly, disciples. Are these disciples to be immersed in water while a certain Trinitarian phrase is pronounced over them? Only if they are truly immersed in the reality of that Trinity and are introduced to that spiritual reality. Are these disciples plugged into church programs and told to read their bibles, give money, stay busy in attendance, and share their faith? Or is the command to “teach them to observe all that I have commanded you”? Are there seminars on how to love your enemies, bless those who persecute you, or love one another with the same love that I have loved you? Or does the church live with a low-lying black cloud of guilt for not doing more evangelism? Martha or Mary?

No quick fix is available for any of these longstanding and deeply entrenched misunderstandings. The solution, at least for a disciple of Jesus Christ, is the slow process of inner transformation into his life and character. Willard’s summary cuts to the point: “The church is for discipleship and discipleship is for the world.”⁶

Discipline

This will require the church to view its members as disciples (students) of Jesus and itself as a school for eternal living. It must teach transformation through the renovation of the heart. It will require a growing familiarity and appreciation of spiritual disciplines – not as a fad to boast about on social media – but as a time-tested way to enter personal transformation into Christlikeness. The church has at its disposal a treasure of almost two thousand years of the lives of men and women who have shown the way. Perhaps a good rule would be to set aside much contemporary writing and re-discover much of these writings from the past. One of the more recent of these guides wrote:

“Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered...Most of all, perhaps we need intimate knowledge of the past. Not that the past has any magic about it, but because we cannot study the future, and yet need something to set against the present, to remind us....that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion. A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village: the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age.”⁷

While it is, in many ways, a good thing that topics like “spirituality”, “spiritual formation”, “spiritual disciplines”, and “discipleship” are trending, as is typically the case, ideas that become “trends” can quickly stray from truth and helpfulness. The concept of discipline may have suffered along these lines.

A cornerstone of Willard’s teachings⁸ about spiritual disciplines is that they are activities within an individual’s power that help them become people who are capable of a quality of character that is not within their power to produce. They work by indirection. They take time and grace. They are not for “righteousness” but for the slow, lifelong process of *becoming*. A life changing moment for a student of Jesus comes when he or she realizes that the most important thing that they will get out of life (and even that God will get out of their life) is not that they have answered the test questions correctly about sin, atonement theories, justification, etc., but simply the person that they become. Jesus Christ is the best person to lead us in this way.⁹ Willard was known to say that if there was a better way, Jesus would be the first one to tell you to take it.¹⁰

Jesus’ students are *sent* into the world, as he was, and are also to be *sanctified* as he was.¹¹ They learn the manner of life that he showed us. This life of renovation is a “long obedience in the same direction”.¹² It is one characterized by developing habits of discipline: silence, solitude, prayer, fasting, memorization of passages of Scripture, secrecy, study, worship, fellowship, etc. There is no exhaustive list and these habits if practiced in the wrong way can be damaging. The attitude of the disciple is key and an expectation of being guided by the Spirit of Jesus is indispensable. This takes time and it takes teachers (living and dead). There is no microwave for these things.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it well: “The way to patience leads through discipline (2 Peter 1.6). The freer we are from ease and indolence and personal claims, the more ready we shall be for patience.”¹³ One must seriously reflect on Bonhoeffer’s own life of discipline and how that made him “ready” to endure

his trials. The church must teach true discipleship to Jesus Christ, the disciplines that he himself practiced, and the spirit in which he practiced them. *Then the church will be ready to engage a troubled world.*

Generosity

This transformation into living by the abundant resources of God’s kingdom will naturally lead Jesus’ students to be generous people. While generosity typically leads one to consider financial giving (and certainly does not preclude that), there are many ways to be generous.¹⁴

As a tremendous example, consider John Drage, a Missouri pastor who died in 2020 from glioblastoma brain cancer. His well-documented journey illustrates a disciple who overflowed with generosity and agreeableness despite his circumstances. He encourages followers of Jesus to be people who are givers and not takers – who give away the gifts of attention, affirmation, and awkwardness.¹⁵ Again, those who knew Drage for years prior to his illness, must consider how his practice of the spiritual disciplines prepared him for living (and even dying) generously.

An immediate critique of this outlook might be that the church cannot be generous too much in this way or the sinful culture will think that their way of life is acceptable. While this is an understandable conundrum, true disciples must seek to be disciplined and to become generous people and let God, by his Spirit, take care of what only He can do.¹⁶ Generosity is the way of the Father: “he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good”, and of the Son who “came....to give”, and of the Spirit who is “manifested” for “the common good.”¹⁷ One could even argue that the entire ministry of Saint Paul, and therefore half of the New Testament, hinged on an act of generosity.¹⁸

Hospitality

As these true disciples are learning to imitate Jesus, they discover a very simple, but powerfully effective practice that Jesus made much use of – hospitality.¹⁹

Hospitality takes the church away from the church building and programs. It welcomes other disciples and the world into our homes. Practiced on a regular basis over a long period of time it can have tremendous influence for good. The epigraph at the opening of this essay from Hugo’s *Les Misérables* portrays the life changing power of the simple hospitality the bishop extends towards the convict, Jean Valjean.

But this is not only found in fiction. One family from the Church of the Good Shepherd in Lynchburg, Virginia has demonstrated this quality in a way that is instructive. For many years now, they have maintained the regular discipline of generously opening their home on Friday evenings for what they refer to as a “Sabbath Dinner”. The time consists of a brief ten-to-fifteen-minute liturgy that blesses the meal along with those present. The rest of the evening is spent eating, drinking, and in conversations.

What is most impressive is both the simplicity and the effectiveness of this habit of hospitality. It is not regimented – sometimes it may be canceled due to other obligations. It is not in a church building. The

guests are both regular and new – they come and go over the months and years. But in this familiar and comfortable setting, over the course of a long time, framed within the prayers that start each meal, God is at work. Relationships are built among believers and non-believers. Young people, often from broken homes, get to see and taste a real family supported by a strong Christian marriage. Only occasionally are any clergy present. This is an example of disciples who are both “sent” and “sanctified”. Perhaps these types of folks are those whom Jesus had in mind when he instructed his disciples to “ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”²⁰

The way of life and discipleship described herein is summarized well by Lesslie Newbigin:

“A Christian congregation is thus a body of people with gratitude to spare, a gratitude that can spill over into care for the neighbor. And it is of the essence of the matter that this concern is the overflow of a great gift of grace and not, primarily, the expression of a commitment to a moral crusade. There is a big difference between these two.”²¹

The issues that the church must deal with and live in the midst of in our contemporary western world are decadent and disorienting to say the least. It has been the intent of this brief essay to suggest that although the world is increasingly complex, the church will find its way forward in the simplicity of true discipleship to Jesus and by learning his methods of ministry. As the church teaches a true understanding of the gospel, the response will be the making of these true disciples – who are progressively learning to do the things Jesus commanded – and through discipline are more and more overflowing with generosity and practicing hospitality. There has never been a better invitation undergirded by stronger promises. The controversial social issues of the day will be most sufficiently met by these simple acts of love. Truly, the fields “are white already to harvest”.²²

ENDNOTES:

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- ¹ “Most of the luxuries and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind.” (*Walden*, Henry David Thoreau, p.14)
- ² See <https://conversatio.org/gospels-heard-today/?collection=2409> for a thorough explanation of “Gospels Heard Today”.
- ³ Luke 10.40 (ESV)
- ⁴ Luke 10.39 (ESV)
- ⁵ John 7.38 (ESV)
- ⁶ This quote is one that Dallas Willard is fond of saying in many places, one of which is the lengthy series found at <https://conversatio.org/collections/spirituality-and-ministry-2012/>.
- ⁷ Excerpt from the address titled, “Learning In War Time” found in *The Weight of Glory & Other Addresses* by C.S. Lewis.
- ⁸ See especially *The Spirit of the Disciplines* but, really, most of Willard’s writings will contain this key thought. Also most helpful is Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*.
- ⁹ See 2 Corinthians 5.21 for example.
- ¹⁰ See *Living in Christ’s Presence* and *The Allure of Gentleness*.
- ¹¹ John 17.17-19
- ¹² See *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* by Eugene H. Peterson.
- ¹³ August 9th reading in *A Year with Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Daily Meditations from His Letters, Writings, and Sermons*. This particular quote is from *A Testament to Freedom*.
- ¹⁴ Interestingly, the New Revised Standard Version translates the fruit of the Spirit “goodness” in Galatians 5:22 as “generosity”.
- ¹⁵ See <https://www.johndrage.com/blog/what-do-you-have-to-give>.
- ¹⁶ For example, John 16.8-11: “And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.” (ESV)
- ¹⁷ See Matthew 5.45, 20.28; and 1 Corinthians 12.7.
- ¹⁸ “So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,” Acts 11.25.
- ¹⁹ See pages 212 - 222, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* by Eugene H. Peterson.
- ²⁰ Matthew 9.38 (ESV)
- ²¹ From *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* by Lesslie Newbigin, p. 278.
- ²² John 4.35 (KJV).