

Roger Walton : The Reflective Disciple

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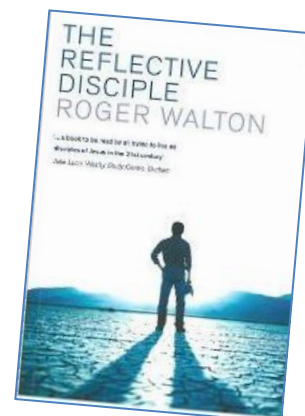
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Introduction

Four interwoven threads in discipleship:

- Discipleship is always lived in a particular context, place and time
- Discipleship is manifest through practices (attitudes and actions) in everyday life
- Discipleship is living out faith in a real human story
- Discipleship is deeply related to the view of God at its centre

The beatitudes contain an implicit call to follow Jesus and to practise Christian faith in the midst of the pain and unfinished nature of the world. They encourage reflection – discipleship is a conversation between the faith tradition and the contemporary context.



1. The Dialogue of Discipleship

James Dunn, *Jesus' Call to Discipleship*, CUP 1992 – Dunn identifies 3 elements of Jesus' call to the first disciples:

1. A call to recognise the reality of God's kingdom. 'Reign' may be a more faithful translation than 'kingdom', which is too static/territorial. This recognition requires an immediate response.
2. A call to be alongside the poor and sinners – Lk 4, Lk 6.20, Matt 5.3.)
3. A call to participate in God's kingdom community – anyone who does the will of God belongs to the community (Mk 3.32-35); it is a community open to outsiders; it is marked by suffering.

Is Christian discipleship always the same? According to Ernest Best, Mark's primary objective is pastoral – to show his readers who Jesus is and what discipleship is; the key is in the central passage 8.22-10.52, framed by 2 healings of sight, with Jesus's teaching in the middle. His teaching is a 3x repetition that he will suffer, followed each time by teaching on what it means to follow him.

Richard Longenecker suggests that Luke wanted his readers to respond to the question, what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? Luke stresses the poor and the danger of money, and tells repeatedly of the good news for all, John emphasizes loving one another. Luke talks about the kingdom, John talks about Jesus. Suppose you had only one of these gospels – if you had Luke you'd think that following Jesus was about mission and outreach; if you had John's, you'd think it hinges on a personal relationship with Jesus, and on loving others. Why the difference? It's due to the life situation of the intended hearers. The Gentile Christian readers of Luke are charged to spread the gospel through the whole world. John's Jewish Christians had been expelled from the synagogue (9.22, 12.42, 16.2) and are alienated from their roots – they needed to become a united community. Discipleship in both accounts is related to the concerns and context of the readers. Is Christian discipleship always the same? Yes and no. 'The commitment to follow Jesus who lived, died and rose again is the constant.. but the pattern of discipleship is fashioned by the setting.'

See NT Wright, *Following Jesus – biblical reflections on discipleship*, SPCK 1944.

Discipleship in the Epistle to the Hebrews – images of revelation of God, of Jesus, and the call to persevere, become pioneers and champions. Jesus as High Priest lives alongside them, enabling them to live faithful lives of discipleship that manifest holiness (eg 10.24-5, 13.1, 12,14, 12.28, 13.15-16).

So – discipleship is a *conversation*. It means different things for different groups of followers of Jesus represented in the NT.

- For the first disciples it mean being with and assisting Jesus in his proclamation of the kingdom of God
- For second-generation Christians, discipleship means a variety of beliefs, actions and practices – understanding the cost (Mark), engaging in outward mission (Luke), growing in relationship (John).
- In Hebrews, it's reading scriptures, engaging with culture and working out how to live

'It is thus not possible to extrapolate and unchanged content of discipleship. There are no uniform practices or set of values that consistently mark it out.' 25. It's certainly not a question of passing on a fixed collection of traditions and practices. The goal is not (as with the Rabbis) passing on a tradition; it's the following of a person, vibrant in the midst of life with all its joy, suffering and sorrow.' 25-26.

David Brown – *Discipleship and Imagination – Christian Tradition and Truth* – OUP 2000 : the core argument is that discipleship cannot be read off from the scriptures as a simple learning exercise. Rather discipleship is a living process that recognizes what the scriptures are saying and also how our own context is different.' 26.

2. The Context of our discipleship

A changing cultural context places new demands on our discipleship – we are now post-national, post-modern, post-Christendom. These factors mean we face new demands.

Post nationalism – a global community with scattered families, communities from different nationalities living amongst us with their different religious beliefs and practices, the challenges of world poverty, loss of control over unregulated institutions and over the environment, and the threat of terrorism. These raise issues of loss of identity, anonymity, lack of control and fear of the unknown.

Post-modernity – diversity, difference, internet, Wikipedia... Leonard Sweet describes postmoderns as EPIC (experiential, participatory, image driven, connected). They are interested more in experience than in goods/services. Challenges – heightened awareness of diversity; pluralism, relativism, suspicion of authority structures and stories. Disorientation – is yoga OK?

Post-Christendom – decline in status and significance of the Church; less knowledge of Christianity; Christianity is a minority language. And yet Christendom thinking is embedded in church structures, policies and theology. Issues- is the Church racist, sexist, failing? How to be confident in the gospel?

Result – disciples are disoriented. We suffer from theological, ethical and moral uncertainty...

3. A Fresh picture of God

In the midst of this we are recovering the idea of the missionary God – *missio Dei* (goes back to Barth, first used in modern period by Hartenstein in 1933). It refers to the missionary character of God – god's loving activity in creating, sustaining and redeeming the world. It's God's activity; God's activity *now*; God's activity in and for the world.

Signs of new life – Fresh Expressions; Transform Work UK (supports Christians in the workplace); Mission Shaped Church series.

Martyn Atkins in *Resourcing Renewal* suggests the Church needs to attend to its own language – others read us differently, and we need to listen. If we don't, we: fail to catch glimpses of God; fail to nurture praise and thanksgiving; adopt an attitude of unconscious superiority (we have the answers, the world has the problems); adopt a dualistic view of the world, failing to see God's presence in it.

We need to learn to find Christ in ordinary things (Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology*). The world is not the place into which we foray to do battle, but the very place where we may be formed by Christ into the human persons we are called to be, and where we can witness God's transformative power. Mission truly is noticing what God is doing and then joining in.

4. The Rhythm of discipleship

The rules at work and at church are so very different - different values, behaviours, expectations, aspirations. There are two unacceptable ways of responding:

1. Hold everything apart and compartmentalize – which confines God to the religious part of our lives
2. Try and make everything conform to a religious world view – which turns all other life spheres into fields for evangelism or battlefields for resisting evil, with loss of openness to God's presence in the whole of life.

Better – to find a rhythm of discipleship. The kingdom is sometimes visible (a lamp) sometimes hidden (yeast); same with the Church. We are clearly visible in our buildings on Sunday – but we are also present the rest of the time, scattered. There is a pattern in our lives to which the gathering and dispersing of the church corresponds. Implications:

1. Disciples are sent – if we know we are sent, we are on the way – discovering our personal vocation within the vocation of all God's people
2. Disciples are shapers being shaped. We challenge taken for granted values by living and speaking differently; we are formed (Eph 4) by the church community and by the presence of God among the gathered people.

3. Translation – disciples are bilingual. Conversations which are normal in church can't happen at the school gate because they are spoken in a different language (grace, fellowship, incarnation??). And, more, languages are more than sets of words, they carry ideas and assumptions about the world. We can't impose our faith story on our colleagues or leisure club; we become fluent in their language, and gradually discover how to infuse the secular language with new thoughts.
4. Disciples are go-betweens. We travel and trade, taking things in and out of gathered Church into our daily worlds. We learn to see things a different way, and behave accordingly. This means living courageously, taking risks.

To do all this needs open courage, accountability, conscientious immersion in the faith tradition, and constant prayerfulness.

5. The Reflective disciple

'Many books on our theme concentrate on what one might call the 'core disciplines of discipleship': prayer, study, fellowship, witness and the nurture of Christian virtues, such as patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control or others listed in Galatians 5.2.2.. These books provide insight and advice on how to develop these practices and the fruitful qualities that issue from them. Take, for example, a book written over 50 years ago by a leading Methodist, Leslie Weatherhead, *Discipleship*, (SCM Press, 2nd ed., 1954).' Includes chapters on sharing sin, quiet times, fellowship, guidance. David Watson in the 80s also sets out a cluster of disciplines at the heart of Christian living, including engagement with the Holy Spirit. Lots of good, practical advice in both books, helpful for structuring our lives as disciples. Walton however is avoiding detailed instruction on prayer, Bible study, lifestyle – he's focussing on attitudes or orientations – because our world changes, we change, our churches change. Both Weatherhead and Watson draw on their own experience and write for their own culture; Weatherhead draws in new psychological understandings, Watson new charismatic ones. 'Every attempt to sketch out a concrete pattern of Christian discipleship will only be effective if it is appropriate for its age; but, as a result, it may not work in the next.' 113.

One practice however must remain constant – reflection. It involves various stages (Jennifer Moon):

1. Noticing
2. Making sense – thinking about what we have noticed
3. Making meaning – assimilating what we have learned into our world view
4. Working with meaning – rearranging and reordering what we know and think over time
5. Transforming meaning – major shift in our world view, building a different building with the same bricks

Emotion plays a part in reflection.

In a Christian context we can call this process *faithful reflection*. Often the stimulus comes not from what happens in church but from our working lives – eg the challenge of being asked to teach for results instead of spending time with struggling children; the challenge of adult children deciding to live with their boyfriend/girlfriend; the challenge of working on a disability programme. Reflection comes out of life experience, it needs time, it works through both fact and imagination, word and image, it involves thinking and action, it works on situations and oneself. Basic exercises for nurturing reflection:

1. Practise attentiveness
2. Practise making connections
3. Practise partnered conversations – talk to someone about your faith and theirs
4. Practise prayerful expression and practical enactment – ie apply what you have discovered
5. Practise personal accountability – eg with a small group, a spiritual director. This has been part of faith for centuries, particularly in the monastic orders and among Methodists.

6. Christian communities in which disciples grow

The calling of the church is to nurture disciples. We need to form the kinds of communities where the above practices are normal

The calling of the church is to be a kingdom community, open to others – Jesus taught the disciples that a kingdom community is open, allowing children, outcasts etc to come in. Discipleship is not only a personal individual action; consider the sermon on the Mount – not addressed to individuals, for it is as individuals that we fail, but to a community, where individuals can do better.

The calling of the church is to be a missionary community. The church is a corporate missionary body.

The courses and events that we put on should be done to meet specific needs the church has identified in its own context – so Alpha doesn't work if the church's normal life and worship don't match up to the Alpha experience; home grown courses work better.

Foundations –

- the basic unit is small groups (see Steven Croft, *Transforming Communities*).
- Then you need events, where the community gathers to reflect and depend their sense of who they are called to be (eg seasonal, occasional, unexpected).
- Then you need to pay attention to your routine practices
- Audits – outsiders hold up a mirror to help you see what you are like
- Worship

Warning. A social action project needs reflection before and during to make sure that it does in fact express God's love in Christ to those involved – not just providing a cheap eating place, or some other service:

Ann Morisy has some important things to say about projects that become separated from the church community and are driven by a society agenda that only emphasizes needs-meeting. When a church or project gets caught up in a needs-meeting perspective it puts the Church and the congregation in a position of superiority. Those 'out there' are the ones in need, whilst those within the Church have the capacity to help. This may be a caricature, but nevertheless needs-meeting as an aim must imply that those who are needy are in some way in deficit, whilst competence and resourcefulness are retained in the hands of the helper. The Gospel with its capacity to overturn everyday assumptions will have none of this. The gracious processes that Jesus demonstrates make it clear that it is the needy who carry the transformational potential. The radical actions of Jesus up-end the taken-for-granted pattern of giving and receiving. Furthermore, unless we can free ourselves from the liberal mantra of needs-meeting, we may miss the real blessings and gracefulness associated with journeying out - without the expectation being able to meet people's needs. 170-71 *Journeying Out*.

Reflection helps avoid this – reflect on what you are doing, try to understand what your programme is doing and why, consider whether some things should be brought to an end and others begun.

'One of the most pressing needs for all churches is to make new disciples' – not simply as a bums on seats project to save a faltering church, but because it is of the essence of the missional calling of the church – Matt 28.19-20. Over 2m people had attended Alpha courses in this country (by 2009), and there are dozens of lookalike programmes now. But 'going for a quick fix, ready-made programme is attractive but should be cautiously avoided. Making disciples is more than getting people into a first time commitment or experience of God; experience is a common desire in our culture but translating that into long term committed discipleship may require more thought. Principles:

1. Make your own course, or at least pilot different ones – content and ethos need to match yours
2. Take a long term view – Martyn Atkins suggests restoring the catechumenate
3. Embed it in the regular life of the church – don't just run one or two Alphas and then give up
4. Aim to make reflective disciples – ones who will be willing to be sent out, to shape the world and be shaped by it.

How to start? Do an audit. Start a monthly reflection in which someone talks about their faith. Encourage people to talk about their life at work – it produces buzzing conversations about life and faith. Set up small groups based on mutual accountability. And so on....