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MISSIONAL DISCIPLESHIP AFTER CHRISTENDOM

AFTER CHRISTENDOM

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Missional Discipleship After Christendom

Andrew Hardy & Dan Yarnell



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Table of Contents

Title Page

Introduction

Section 1: Backgrounds to Discipleship

Chapter 1: Exploring Discipleship During Christendom

Section 2: A Biblical Basis for Missional Discipleship

Chapter 2: Following Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels

Chapter 3: John's Gospel and Discipleship

Chapter 4: Imitation of Christ and Pauline Discipleship
(Imitatio Christi)

Chapter 5: The Reign of God and Discipleship Formation

Section 3: The Qualities, Values, and Convictions of Missional
Communities of Praxis

Chapter 6: Exploring the Values of Discipleship After
Christendom

Chapter 7: Shaping Effective Disciple-Makers within
Communities of Missional Praxis

Chapter 4: The Pragmatic Life of Contextual Participation in
the Mission of God among the New Generations

Chapter 8: Discipleship of the New Tribes

Chapter 9: Missional Leaders That Equip Disciples to Discern
God's Mission

Chapter 10: Conclusions

Bibliography

AFTER CHRISTENDOM SERIES

Series Preface: After Christendom

Christendom was an historical era, a geographical region, a political arrangement, a sacral culture, and an ideology. For many centuries Europeans have lived in a society that was nominally Christian. Church and state have been the pillars of a remarkable civilization that can be traced back to the decision of the emperor Constantine I early in the fourth century to replace paganism with Christianity as the imperial religion.

Christendom, a brilliant but brutal culture, flourished in the Middle Ages, fragmented in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, but persisted despite the onslaught of modernity. While exporting its values and practices to other parts of the world, however, it has been slowly declining during the past three centuries. In the twenty-first century Christendom is unravelling.

What will emerge from the demise of Christendom is not yet clear, but we can now describe much of Western culture as “post-Christendom.”

Post-Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.

This definition, proposed and unpacked in *Post-Christendom*, the first book in the After Christendom series, has gained widespread acceptance. *Post-Christendom* investigated the Christendom legacy and raised numerous issues that are explored in the rest of the series. The authors of this series, who write from within the Anabaptist tradition, see the current challenges facing the church not as the loss of a golden age but as opportunities to recover a more biblical and more Christian way of being God’s people in God’s world.

The series addresses a wide range of issues, including theology, social and political engagement, how we read Scripture, youth work, mission, worship, relationships, and the shape and ethos of the church after Christendom.

These books are not intended to be the last word on the subjects they address, but an invitation to discussion and further exploration. Additional material, including extracts from published books and information about future volumes, can be found at www.anabaptistnetwork.com/AfterChristendom.

Stuart Murray

The series includes the following titles:¹

Stuart Murray,	<i>Post-Christendom</i>
Stuart Murray,	<i>Church after Christendom</i>
Jonathan Bartley,	<i>Faith and Politics after Christendom</i>
Jo and Nigel Pimlott,	<i>Youth Work after Christendom</i>
Alan and Eleanor Kreider,	<i>Worship and Mission after Christendom</i>
Lloyd Pietersen,	<i>Reading the Bible after Christendom</i>
Andrew Francis,	<i>Hospitality and Community after Christendom</i>
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Brian Haymes and Kyle Gingerich Hiebert,	<i>God after Christendom?</i>
Jeremy Thomson,	<i>Relationships and Emotions after Christendom</i>
Andrew Hardy and Dan Yarnell,	<i>Missional Discipleship after Christendom</i>
John Heathershaw,	<i>Security after Christendom</i> (forthcoming)
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Jeremy Thompson,	<i>Interpreting the Old Testament after Christendom</i> (forthcoming)
Lina Toth,	<i>Singleness and Marriage after Christendom</i> (forthcoming)

¹. The series was published by Paternoster from 2004–15. Consequently, not all titles are currently available from Cascade Books.

We would like to dedicate this book to families, churches and leaders who intentionally seek to shape those they care for to become authentic followers of the Lord Jesus.

Section 2

A Biblical Basis for Missional Discipleship

This section aims to provide some broad brushstrokes to the biblical basis of discipleship. It is largely based on New Testament backgrounds found in the Synoptic Gospels, John's gospel, the Pauline emphasis on the imitation of Christ, and critical reflections on the importance of a reign of God theology, which shapes the disciple's present life in the light of the future life.

Chapter 2

Following Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels

BY DAN

Introduction

Some of the earliest recorded expressions of Christian discipleship come from the writings of the Synoptic Gospels.⁶⁷ These eyewitness accounts both inform and provide a context for discipleship.⁶⁸ It is these particular “gospel” writings, likely to have first been a type of evangelistic tract,⁶⁹ provide us with some important viewpoints on how discipleship may have been encouraged, engaged in, and fostered in the emerging early Christian movement.

The Synoptics are especially important as their own theological frameworks and written perspectives provide some examples of contextual expression, suited to the needs of the communities they were produced to help. Each provides its own unique flavoring, while making use of the core sayings, miracles, and teachings of Jesus. It is these that will help to inform this chapter and hopefully provide some reflections on how their continued use can inform our own missional discipleship beliefs and practices. It is important to remember that these writings were written against the backdrop of the empire, and some of this political overtone can be seen in their composition. This is important to take careful note of, as they were composed within a pre-Christendom narrative, which can provide some useful indications of how we might engage with them in a post-Christendom narrative. The Johannine contribution will be considered in the next chapter.

Matthew’s Discipleship Framework⁷⁰

Various scholars have noted the seemingly intentional compositional nature of Matthew’s gospel.⁷¹ While not wishing to suggest a particular pattern, it has been noted by Wilkins that there may in fact be a didactic framework for developing a focus on discipleship. He notes,

Matthew has emphasized the goal of the believers’ life of faith through the discipleship stories directed to the μαθηται. Matthew’s gospel is at least in part a manual on discipleship. With all of the major discourses directed to the μαθηται, with the term arranged in such a way that most sayings directed to the term have become teachings on discipleship, with the positive yet realistic enhancement of the picture of the disciples, and with disciples called and trained and commissioned to carry out the climactic mandate to “make disciples” in the

conclusion of the gospel, Matthew has constructed a gospel that will equip the disciples in the making of disciples.⁷²

Of prime importance in formulating a focus on discipleship is the collection of Jesus' sayings in chapters 5–7, which we identify as the Sermon on the Mount. It is not possible in this book to go into any significant detail on the Sermon on the Mount. Readers should consult appropriate commentaries and studies.⁷³ Instead, it is worth noting two things which relate to discipleship.

The first is the structure of these various statements and teachings within these chapters. It seems that Matthew may have provided his readers with a type of discipleship manual.⁷⁴ As Luz notes,

When in 28:20—again on a mountain—Jesus charges the eleven disciples to teach the nations to keep everything “I have commanded you,” the thought is probably of the Sermon on the Mount. Thus it is also the central content of the Christian missionary preaching.⁷⁵

One of the noteworthy elements of Matthew's focus on discipleship is that what is required is a sense of perfection of character and maturity (5:48). The kind of righteous and just living needs to surpass that on display of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (5:17). This, it seems, is why Jesus goes beyond the letter of the law, seeking to transcend the kind of life style that focuses on the outer elements and gets to the heart of the matter. This is foundational to an understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. As Mohrlang notes,

Though both learning and teaching are involved, it is this element of obedience which is most central to Matthew's understanding of discipleship and which he is most concerned to emphasize; and it is this that lies at the heart of the demand for “deeper righteousness” in the Sermon.⁷⁶

An interesting aspect of the mixture of sayings and mini parables in the sermon is the continued focus on the motives that generate the behaviors of Christ's followers. Obedience comes from these motives as much as other behaviors that do not live up to the beliefs, values, and qualities that underpin what believers may or may not do well. An important parable focuses on the need to build the disciple's life on sure foundations. Clearly the sure foundation is allegiance to Christ as master and Lord. This is clearly referenced at the end of this sermon with the three examples of choice: the two gates, the two trees with fruit, and the two foundations for houses. In each of these a choice is presented and obedience is required in order to live well.

Even more interesting may be its relationship of Christ as the one that the gates of Hades cannot prevail against in Matthew 16, in the declaration of Jesus' messiahship at Caesarea Philippi. In this passage, the powers of evil cannot prevail against Christ's ekklesia

(community). An interesting correlation may be considered to exist here between the qualities, values, and beliefs that motivate Christ's disciples, and Christ himself who embodies the source of influence and power in the disciple's life. The church as the Christian community (*ekklesia*) can only be sustained and maintained by lives rightly motivated to be obedient to Christ. In other words, the church does not make disciples as part of its programs, as one aspect of many other functions it carries out, but it is actually the disciples who make the church true to its real calling, to become Christ to the world.

We might argue here that the God of mission shapes disciples to be a missional community to the world rather than the church and its structures making disciples and sending them out to make other disciples. The house built on the rock is constructed based on a vital connection to Christ the model disciple. It is much more than a simple foundation, it is also a real motivating power and influence that comes from a living connection with Christ. The church does not own mission and neither does it manufacture disciples, but faithful followers motivated by the God of mission by his Spirit create a church that can vibrantly participate with the Spirit of Christ in his mission. Motivation of the disciple's life is the foundation to the missional church's effective participation in God's mission to reconcile the whole world to the reign of God.

*Come, Follow, Go*⁷⁷

Here we have another kind of framing of this gospel. These three commands seem to form a kind of paradigmatic expression of key statements of Jesus which the early disciples may have been aware of.

Come

The calling of the first disciples were those who responded to the invitation to come. Throughout this gospel this word *come* becomes an important statement to the life of a disciple: come all who are weary and need rest (11:28); the invitation to Peter to come out of the boat and step onto the water (14:29); inviting the little children to come (19:14); *come* follows after possessions have been sold (19:21) and the invitation to the faithful and obedient during the final retribution (25:34). As noted in chapter 1, a normal rabbi would have been more likely to have a would-be disciple go to them without a specific invitation. The idea of a rabbi initiating an invitation to new disciples seems countercultural and unique. Yet this invitation from Jesus calls us into the journey of discipleship.

This is part of what is at the heart of what motivates the disciple to faithful service in the *missio Dei*, to make yet other disciples. It is based on a continued invitation of the Spirit of the Lord beckoning both the disciple and new followers to "come follow me" as Jesus beckons and leads the way. This is why the church, in its pioneering phases of growth, is not really in control of mission through its ecclesiastical structures, but rather it is based on gatherings of people who share a common identity who gather together, to encourage one another and to care for each others' needs. When churches become institutions they then

often lose a sense of the pioneering Spirit's call—"come follow me." Instead the "come" quite often becomes "come to our services and do things our way."

Follow

This second focal point follows on from the first. It is clearly seen as part of the original invitation of Jesus to the first disciples, "Follow me" (4:19), and throughout Matthew we see summaries of both the disciples (4:20, 22) and the crowds following him (4:25; 8:1; 12:15; 14:13; 19:2; 20:29). However, following carries much more weight than this, as these references are more than just the physical movements of people. The heart of authentic discipleship for Matthew is about following Jesus, in facing up to the demands of discipleship that Jesus presents. An example of this is found in chapter 8, where the would-be followers all have their excuses, but Jesus takes no notice and informs them that following means facing up to the challenges of change and letting go. The following chapter then introduces the reader to the tax collector Matthew, who immediately leaves his work in order to adhere to his new master, Jesus.

Chapter 10 takes this further, as the returning disciples who had been sent out by Jesus, upon returning, find some very challenging statements about the future and their allegiance. Here Jesus informs them that the one worthy is the one who takes up his cross and follows. Chapter 16 picks this up again in more precision, just after Peter's confession and subsequent rebuttal.

It seems that for Jesus, as Matthew portrays him, following is more than just a physical movement, but involves the deeper commitment to embrace the kingdom values and live them fully, whatever the cost. This seems to reinforce much of the teaching found in the Sermon on the Mount.

Go

This final imperative is especially noted as the ending of Jesus' ministry in Matthew's gospel, as well as the foundational understanding of Matthew's view of discipleship.⁷⁸ The so-called great commission begins with this statement for the disciples to fully enter into the continuing ministry of Jesus, by going into the whole world, much further than Jesus was able to achieve in his short ministry. Scholars have been quick to point out that this imperative is supported by the two further phrases, so in going, baptize, and in going, make disciples. This seems especially appropriate in the light of recent theological conversation around *missio Dei* theology, where the apostolic nature of Christian mission is being reimagined, especially for the church in the West.

Go, however, is not merely limited to this passage; as with *come* and *follow*, we find other key statements from Jesus that indicate the important contribution to our understanding of participatory discipleship within Matthew. These include: going the second mile (5:41); the command to the centurion that in going his faith was enough for the healing of his servant (8:13); and the first commission of the Twelve to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom (10:6–7).

Throughout Matthew's gospel, then, we see this pattern of come, follow and go. This may be another kind of framing that would support the idea of an approach to this gospel as a tool to develop and train new disciples in their ongoing contextual mission.

The Relational Values of Discipleship

Another key focus of discipleship that we find in Matthew is the high value of relationships that is expressed in various sayings and miracle stories. This may be highly relevant if the audience are those who have recently converted from Judaism and need to know that they are part of a new community. Of the various statements throughout this gospel, including the important section on caring for the little ones, chapter 18 is the most pronounced.

Inevitably in his own ministry, the disciples of Jesus would have faced times of relational challenge. Jesus' physical presence would have been the catalyst in dealing with needed reconciliation. When he was no longer present among them, then some guidelines that were both familiar and focused on maintaining the high value of relational accountability would have been required. It is here that the word "church" (ἐκκλησία) is found on the lips of Jesus in this gospel. Aside from any debate about the originality of this coming from Jesus, the issue of this text seems to be in seeking to maintain a healthy community and ways of dealing with the challenges when things go wrong. This seems to make the best sense of the only occurrence of this word on the lips of Jesus. For Matthew, then, it seems that discipleship finds its best expression in a disciplined Christian community.⁷⁹

The Test of Discipleship

Chapter 25 has been seen to be a controversial text and produced various viewpoints, including a universalist approach (doing good to everyone), a particularist (these are Christians who are suffering).⁸⁰ Some of this may relate to the hermeneutical approach in seeing this focusing mainly as a text on the Parousia and within a primary eschatological framework. Within Matthew's framework, this seems highly unlikely. It can be read as a prophetic encouragement and challenge to the emerging community of disciples and how they relate to those among them who, perhaps due to persecution or isolation from their former faith community, now find themselves. The challenge here is that the sheep are the true disciples who will intentionally engage and support those within the community in their time of need, much as had their master, Jesus. The goats will avoid and disengage in this process, perhaps out of fear, or at least out of neglect, and therefore will not express the disciplined life of Jesus within their community.

Making Future Disciples

The final chapter of Matthew's gospel provides the clarion call of actively participating in the *missio Dei* by going out to make new disciples. As noted above, the imperative to "go" is in relation to baptizing and teaching them to obey. It is here we begin to see the continuation

and expansion of Jesus' ministry. Being sent out into the whole world (εθνη) expands the horizon of the kingdom mandate that Jesus began with his focus to the house of Israel. Baptism and obedience is the way in which Jesus accomplished this in his life and ministry, it is the way the disciples expressed their journey with Jesus, and it is the continuing expression for the entire Christian community.

This is in fact what it means to follow: to express the new life that Jesus offers from a *missio Trinitatis* framework.⁸¹ The Father, Son, and Spirit working in partnership and helping this new emerging "church" made up of these new disciples to grow into such maturity that this becomes the hallmark of their life and witness.

Herein is the heart of our study. Making disciples is foundational to the future of the kingdom, but in the West, it has been a bit hit or miss. Matthew's contribution is a challenging reminder that discipleship is both essential and normal.

Mark's Focus

In the minds of most scholars, Mark is central to the entire understanding of the Synoptics, not only by being succinct in his approach, but as the likely foundations to the creation of both Matthew and Luke. In addition, the implied audience is considered to be new believers and an emerging church with a Roman setting. More recent studies have reminded us that while Mark does indeed present his own editorial theology, he is writing narrative, and this reading must not be overlooked. In particular, according to Williams,

Mark's Gospel is a call to discipleship. A true interpretation of Mark must not ignore or obscure its rhetorical purpose, but instead must convey its message in such a way that the call to follow Jesus will be heard again.⁸²

Scholarship has often noted how central discipleship is for Mark. While this gospel is short and to the point, there are some paradigms that inform the reader about the way in which discipleship should be manifest in their lives and communities.

The Twelve as a Paradigm for Discipleship?

Hurtado is one of many scholars who has noted that for Mark, the Twelve are portrayed as having both a positive and a negative paradigm for discipleship.⁸³ For much of the gospel, however, there is a way in which they are presented to the reader that indicates that their response is not the way to follow Jesus. A couple of examples should suffice.

The first miracle at sea (4:35-41) is one of the indications that all is not well with the disciples. After the onslaught of a squall, which brings about the rapid filling of the boat with water, the disciples are both afraid (v. 38) and untrusting of Jesus' ability as well as the results of his actions (v. 41). Fear of the circumstance as well as fear of Jesus does not present a very enduring picture of what discipleship is all about.

A second example (8:14-21) demonstrates in a didactic example where the disciples

misunderstand the warning of Jesus about the “leaven of the Pharisees and Herod,” thereby demonstrating in the words of Jesus their “hardness of heart.” Once again, not a promising example for the readers.

However, while in overall agreement, Donahue suggests that the place of the Twelve in Mark’s thought equally implies a positive model for mission and discipleship.

The twelve who will respond immediately to Jesus’ command function as models of faith and at the same time form a new family around Jesus which is a substitute for the natural family.⁸⁴

He further notes,

The Jesus who speaks through the gospel to the Markan church is not a Jesus who lived in isolation. The first public act of his ministry was to summon disciples who were to follow him and to participate in his mission. Those first called are soon joined by others who form around Jesus a community which he empowers and instructs. In the call of the disciples the radically communitarian dimension of Christianity is vividly affirmed. Discipleship involves not simply hearing the summons of Jesus, but engagement with others who heed that same summons and embody a response to it in their lives. To “be with” Jesus is to be with others in community.⁸⁵

This apparent dichotomy is part of the real tension that Mark demonstrates in indicating the challenges of being a disciple. At times, they are positive examples of the life of mission and community, whereas other parts of Mark suggest they are not to be copied in their approach. This seems to ring true in most of our own discipleship, as we can find this kind of dualism in our own experiences.

Greatness and Servanthood in Discipleship (10:35–45)

The center of Mark’s gospel can be found in this important and distinct experience which Jesus shares and at the same time is at odds with his disciples. In a similar way to the framing of Matthew’s gospel, Mark has a noticeable rhythm of moving toward this key event, and then focusing the remainder of his gospel to Jerusalem and the final hours of the life of the Master. In this third passion prediction, Jesus states and then embraces the calling to become the ransom who will sacrifice his life for all.⁸⁶ While there should be no confusion as to the implications of what Jesus is saying, sadly, in the midst of this is the vying for position by the two brothers James and John.

The core issue here seems to be about favor and identity. This is quite a fundamental issue within discipleship. Knowing who we are, how we belong, and therefore being recognized is quite a human need. The countercultural value that Jesus brings is noting that the position of who is greatest in the kingdom is that of being a servant.⁸⁷ It is this that Mark’s gospel notes

as being central and core to discipleship, first being modeled by Jesus himself, and then by implication for all disciples.

There is then in this text an invitation and a confrontation for the disciples. The invitation is to express servanthood as the appropriate framework for discipleship. This is the heart of the ministry of Jesus, and the invitation is addressing the Twelve in how they will respond to their own discipleship. But here is the rub, it is only Jesus who can ultimately express servanthood as the divinely appointed sacrifice who can give his life for many. As Lane notes,

The parallel themes of Jesus' suffering in fulfilment of the will of God, misunderstanding, and the call to true discipleship exhibit emphases which Mark regarded as so essential for his community to understand that he made them the heart of his Gospel.⁸⁸

Pax Romana or Pax Deo?

Central to the Hellenization process⁸⁹ begun by Alexander was the importance of the *Pax Romana*—the Peace of Rome. This controlling narrative enabled all citizens and conquered peoples to enjoy a sense of potential coexistence, as well as a sense of toleration. This is clearly seen in the way the Jews were treated by the Romans. Overall, they had restricted freedom, but in this restriction, they were able to express their life and faith and to flourish. This did, of course, present its own set of challenges as second, third, and subsequent generations were enticed to become Roman citizens, often throwing off much of their cultural and indeed spiritual heritage, or at least reinterpreting it. The strong resistance of Zealots for a more radical and revolutionary approach as well as the complete withdrawal of the Essenes, focusing on a more apocalyptic interpretation and experience, were the two competing extremes of response. However, the core challenges lay within the more centralized approaches of the Sadducees and Pharisees. In both instances, disciples were produced, but none were considered by Jesus to fully express what authentic discipleship looked like. “For I say unto you that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20).

The coming of Jesus and the fostering of the early church in the writings of the Apostle Paul indicated a different paradigm, the *Pax Deo* (Peace of God).⁹⁰ Jesus, as the giver of peace (John 14:27), and Paul, in declaring the peace of God (Phil 4:7) and the God of peace (Phil 4:9), provide a different focal point. This would have been liberating as well as challenging for Mark's readers. The centrality of the cross noted above would have been incredibly challenging in itself, and would not likely be seen to be the way of peace. Yet this gospel in particular notes the centrality of the cross as core to the journey of discipleship.

Luke's Focus—the Gospel (and Acts)

Like a great symphony, the contribution of Luke to our understanding of discipleship is greatly enhanced as we have his second movement found in the book of Acts. It therefore seems sensible to consider their contribution together as one furthers the other in a kind of synergetic relationship.

At the heart of the contribution of Luke is the realization that discipleship is the journey of a costly venture.⁹¹ Building on the work of Mark, Luke brings this emphasis to the story of Jesus and life of the disciples. Unlike Mark, the disciples in Luke are seen in a much more positive light. As Longenecker notes,

For Luke views the disciples as modeling the essential characteristics of Christian discipleship. It is not their failures he highlights. Rather, what he emphasizes are the new commitments, orientation, and lifestyle that they reflected in their lives by association with Jesus their Master.⁹²

Fitzmeyer notes that whereas Mark seemed to focus his understanding of discipleship in light of a seemingly imminent eschaton, Luke develops his focus more in the present. How do we live as followers of Jesus today seems to be implied by Luke in both his gospel and in Acts.⁹³

We can see the use of this imminent focus when we consider the following key texts:

4:21	" <i>Today</i> this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." This beginning of Jesus' ministry in his home town of Nazareth indicates that something is presently taking place.
13:32–33	When speaking to Herod's servants, Jesus notes that his casting out of demons and performing cures happens <i>today</i> and tomorrow, but on the third day this work will finish and be completed.
19:5	Jesus calling to Zacchaeus to come from the tree, thereby expressing a welcome to him, which is then reciprocated as Jesus indicates he must stay in your house <i>today</i> . Within this imminent experience of Jesus, Zacchaeus demonstrates generosity by giving away half to the poor. It is this action which causes Jesus to then say to him, <i>today</i> salvation has come.
22:61	For Peter, before cock crows <i>today</i> , he will deny Jesus three times.
23:43	To the thief on the cross, Jesus indicates that salvation is not just a future eschatological event but will take place immediately, as he states, " <i>Today</i> you will be with me in paradise."

All of these indicate the importance of the immediate experience. However, the most significant of the statements is Luke's editing of the simple invitation from Mark on discipleship. "He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'" (Mark 8:34). It is here that Luke brings the addition of "daily" to this condition of discipleship. It seems then for Luke, that the need for the day-to-day experience of following is a necessary requirement of discipleship.

Discipleship for the Rich and the Poor

Various scholars over the past few decades have noted the focus in Luke's writing on the marginalized and subsequent empowerment.⁹⁴ These include the important role and contribution of women, the welcome and embracing of children, but one of the most poignant seems to be the focus on the poor. Luke has a greater usage of the word "poor" (πτωχος) and its derivatives, but there are particular frameworks in Luke that seem to indicate how vital this is for his own theological contribution about Jesus.

Luke 4:16–30 and the Mission of Jesus

Drawing on the prophetic writing of Isaiah 61:1–2a, Jesus begins his ministry by indicating his Nazareth Manifesto by indicating that his own reading of the Isaiah scroll, which was read in his own local context, was to be the *raison d'être* of his entire ministry. Here we see the emphasis on those who are poor, marginalized and broken as a primary focus on his ministry.

Prophetically Challenging the Status Quo

Luke suggests that the coming of Jesus is in itself a prophetic and subversive act. In chapter 1, the songs of Mary and Zechariah each indicate a sense of reversal of fortunes in the activity of God in the coming of this child. In his birth, the good news is not presented to the rich and powerful but to lowly shepherds (2:8–20). Rome, the political center of the empire, is not the place of arrival of this king, but rather Bethlehem. Could this be a kind of typology of the shepherd of Israel promised by Zechariah 11?

Along with the manifesto noted above, within this gospel there are direct challenges to the rich. One such example comes from the beatitudes as found in the Sermon on the Plain (6:20–22). "Woe to the rich" echoes repeatedly, as a contrast is set up between those who are poor, and therefore by implication authentic disciples, and those who are rich, and therefore must face this prophetic challenge to their discipleship being called into question. For Luke, discipleship is a costly journey. Could this be part of the reason for Luke's gospel, to help those who were coming to faith to confront the challenges that might prevent an expression of authentic discipleship?

The Need to Care for the Marginalized as Part of the New Community

The contrast to this prophetic viewpoint can be found in the birth of the church as a new kind of community. Luke does not use the word church in his gospel, but the forming of the discipleship around Jesus, which includes the multicultural mix of peoples and viewpoints, predicated a fuller demonstration in the birthing of the church at Pentecost. The inclusion of women and men, rich and poor, fostered the development of forming disciples across social, ethnic, political, and religious boundaries. The two Lukan summaries (2:41–47 and 4:32–39) indicate an intentional sharing of life and goods, creating a unity of purpose.⁹⁵ It is noteworthy that these descriptions indicate the shared life of discipleship that would sustain

them (even sharing their goods) as well as release them in mission and prophetically challenge the powers of empire and religion. Perhaps this is why Acts has become a paradigm for centuries of followers of Jesus as what church is meant to be.

The inherent dangers of wealth, power, success, acceptance, and identity are regularly indicated by Luke as potential obstacles to authentic discipleship. That being said, it is important to note that there is an important contribution for the rich in Luke's understanding of discipleship. In the parable of the unjust steward (16:1–13), we see something of Luke's concern for the right use of possessions, thereby demonstrating Luke's attitude to wealth. "Making friends with unrighteous mammon" seems to indicate that for Luke, wealth in and of itself is not evil; rather, as Pilgrim notes,

that the disciples are exhorted to make friends with mammon seems to imply a matter of right or wrong use, not total rejection. Mammon is unrighteous then, either because it is so often acquired wrongly or because it represents such a grave seduction for humanity . . . the way to make friends with mammon is to use one's wealth in the service of love.⁹⁶

These issues of compassion and care while making good use of wealth continue to present challenges for the would-be disciple today, both in the post-Christian West, with our numerous resources and Christendom heritage, as well as within the developing world, in the fostering of a prosperity gospel and in the challenges of covertness. As migratory movements of people bring many more Christians to the West, these challenges are hard to avoid. Some important partnerships around theological understandings, strategic development, and openness to humility and learning from each other may be able to help us all steer through this turbulent environment.

Spirit-Led Mission

A second focus which is often noted is the importance of the role of the Spirit within the Lukan corpus. At its heart, we are confronted by the vitality and uncertainty that this creates. The spirit who empowers Jesus at the beginning of his ministry in his baptism also leads him into the wilderness to face his own demons. Empowerment and risk could be seen to be the hallmarks of the work of the Spirit in Luke.

This is especially so in the books of Acts, where we see the Holy Spirit shaping, pushing, confronting, empowering, welcoming, and blessing this newly formed emerging community. Discipleship becomes more than merely believing, being baptized, and then learning to be together. Confrontation, becoming uncomfortable, challenges to inherited theologies, being forced into persecution, and embracing change are all hallmarks of his work. This is to help facilitate the development of the ongoing mission of Jesus by these disciples into the world.

A watershed moment is indicated in Acts chapter 10. This kind of second conversion of Peter on the rooftop demonstrates many of these kinds of workings of the Spirit; to bring the infant church into a new manifestation of life and hope. For Peter, to consider acting on the

vision he received was quite a risky step. This is a seemingly direct challenge to his inherited theology. What Jew would even consider rising and killing unclean animals, when these are directly forbidden? The appearance of Cornelius's servant, the subsequent coming of the Spirit on the Gentiles, the response of baptism, all confirm that it is the Spirit who is in charge of the mission of the church and therefore ultimately of discipleship.

Conclusion

How might this brief, selective overview of contributions from the authors of the Synoptics inform our journey of discipleship after Christendom? We would like to make a few observations:

Intentional and Informed Values

At the heart of the ministry of Jesus is not only a clear sense of identity and purpose for his mission, but the underlying values that shaped his life and work. These values are clearly expressed in his various approaches to people and situations. Generosity, kindness, trust, compassion, honesty, vulnerability, and transparency are some of the obvious examples. These enabled him to handle the varying challenges to his leadership, to his relationships, and to his focus on his mission. He could demonstrate welcome to children and broken people, to outcasts and enemies, but he would equally confront hypocrisy, wrong forms of power and abuse, especially from those who were meant to be setting a good example. This seems to be behind the statement in Matthew about our righteousness surpassing that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:20). These leaders seem to have been blind to how their actions and responses were informed by the underlying values they had consciously or unconsciously adopted.

In considering our own discipleship, we need to give consideration to the importance of our own values which inform and ultimately transform our expressions of ministry. Some of the most difficult ones will have been shaped by our culture and history. This is where cultural blindness may create havoc in our attempts in expressing authentic discipleship. We need our sisters and brothers from other cultures, traditions, and experiences to aid us in this journey. We may never be fully aware of how limited we are, but with the help of an intentional formative community, we certainly stand a better chance of meeting our intended aim—to be like Jesus.

Contextual Awareness

We have noted that each of the gospels has its own specific context, the authors shaping and forming the stories, miracles, and teachings of Jesus for their own audience and theological framing. Understanding that each of the Synoptic writers had a focused approach to discipleship helps us to engage with these texts in an informed and honest way. This is not only for hermeneutical transparency, but to aid us in our own theological reflections and our active participation and expression of the life of Jesus.

Intentionally giving more consideration to our own local, national, and global/global contexts should help us frame a more appropriate discipleship response. Just as the gospels do not clearly present a program of activities for would-be disciples, we must also take seriously what discipleship means within the cultures where we are expressing God's mission. We do need good examples of modeling and noting good practices to learn from, but our multicultural, pluralistic framework should warn us not to think there is a one-size-fits-all approach. Authentic discipleship will be formed and expressed in its own context while equally being shaped by Scripture, traditions, and the leading of the Spirit.

Endurance and Perseverance

At the heart of discipleship is a journey, from death to life, from darkness to light, from slaves to free, from being alienated to being in relationship. This sense of movement and growth is foundational to a mature discipleship that will express itself and actively and intentionally encourage others. The journey for Jesus was one of total surrender and obedience as he lived his life each day with all the challenges to his leadership, his values and ethics, his sense of identity and purpose. This was also the journey of his followers. Matthew illustrates the importance of teaching and obedience, notably in the Sermon on the Mount and in the commissioning of the Twelve who would continue the ministry of Jesus, Mark indicates that often the disciples were not very good at understanding and seemingly missed the point, but they did find a way through their brokenness to keep going. Luke then notes the particular issues that faced the expansion of the kingdom as disciples from new cultures were added, along with the challenges of riches and wealth.

In all these particular ways, the heart of discipleship was being expressed. What is somewhat amazing is that with all the challenges that faced these disciples, there was that sense of persevering and enduring until the end. There was an awareness that theirs was a journey, not just a simple decision. Authentic faith is faith that endures. Maturity comes from staying the course, not just in the sense of being faithful, but also in being fruitful. Perhaps we need to reconsider this for those of us in the West who often want quick results.

Supporting the Weak, Different, and Marginalized as an Inclusive Community

It may be obvious, but the development of Jesus' discipleship community was quite unique by any standard. An apostolic team of twelve chosen men, various supportive women, and various other followers expressed a type of open community. It seems that most of the disciples were not well educated, the place of women in that society was highly limited, yet Jesus forms a safe place of hope and belonging with a clear sense of vision and mission. This is also echoed in the book of Acts, where we see the forming of new intentional communities across cultures and ethnicities. Here is a model of the kingdom on earth.

In addition, it is a place of healing. Brokenness and failure is not rejected, but finds within this new community a healing of body and spirit, sometimes physical, often spiritual and relational, and thereby it aims to bring new life. The poor, widows, and orphans, the elderly,

the unloved and rejected all find a place at the table and in each others' lives. It of course is not a utopia, for any human society has its serious challenges, which may be why there is so much of Jesus' teaching around right kinds of leadership, support, and encouragement for the marginalized.

We have noted the importance of this in a previous work,⁹⁷ but it is worth noting that one of the most missional expressions in our divided world can be a community of various peoples, ages, cultures, and ethnicities who are expressing a life together, being formed and transformed by the story of Jesus in their discipleship. This kind of unity, which we see with the followers of Jesus and in the continuing life and work of the early church is something we could intentionally seek to express in becoming a disciplined, cohesive community.

Are There Limits in Discipleship?

Does discipleship have any limits? Clearly in the Synoptic gospels Jesus called people to himself and then to his missional journey of following. There were those who found the call too difficult, others who were distracted, discouraged, and dissuaded. The ending of the Sermon on the Mount indicates there are two sets of choices and the way of the disciple is not an easy one. To deny self, take up our own cross, and to follow is foundational in all the gospels. These are clear limits if we are to take the sense of Jesus as Lord at all seriously.

Although with a few clear exceptions, Western Christians during Christendom have regularly known various forms of cultural Christianity without clear intentional discipleship. This has led to a kind of non-discipleship, to forms of nominality and little transformation or radical challenge of the status quo. In our post-Christian environment, this legacy has found us in a time when the Christian story is either widely unknown or highly distrusted. Finding new ways of expressing discipleship urgently needs to be found. We cannot go back to some golden age in the past. That doorway is decisively closed. We might learn from the Synoptic authors, who each found ways to communicate the story of Jesus to their audiences in order to develop discipleship. In doing so, we may find we can be brave and honest enough to take the risks of subverting the cultural narratives and learning to express God's mission in and for our generation.

⁶⁷. There are of course important materials within the noncanonical gospels, especially the *Gospel of Thomas*, but exploring this goes beyond the scope of this work.

⁶⁸. See especially Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, for a recent contribution in exploring this viewpoint.

⁶⁹. So suggests Moule, *Birth of the New Testament*, 122.

⁷⁰. Morhlang notes, "One of the evangelist's prime concerns in writing the gospel is to spell out what it means to be a μαθητης of Jesus" (*Matthew and Paul*, 74).

⁷¹. These varying literary viewpoints are helpfully summarized by France (*Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, 142–52). The most famous, often noted in more popular writings, is the work of Bacon, who saw a framing of five sections, which would then act as an aide-memoire to the five books of the Torah. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew*.

⁷². Wilkins, *Concept of Disciple*, 221.

- [73.](#) These include Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*; Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*; Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*; as well as commentaries on Matthew.
- [74.](#) Famously noted by Bonhoeffer in his *Cost of Discipleship*.
- [75.](#) Luz, *Matthew 1–7*.
- [76.](#) Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul*, 75.
- [77.](#) I am grateful to Tim Herbert for pointing this out to me.
- [78.](#) So France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, 261.
- [79.](#) Donaldson, “Guiding Readers—Making Disciples,” 46.
- [80.](#) France, *Commentary on Matthew*, 354–58, provides a good summary of the variety of positions by various scholars who support both views, but comes to the conclusion that this is not primarily about the response to human need in general, but to the need of the disciples in particular. He notes in support of this view the earlier language of Matthew which spoke of the little ones as members of the disciple community (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14).
- [81.](#) Hirsch and Hirsch, *Untamed*, 88–89.
- [82.](#) Williams, “Discipleship and Minor Characters in Mark’s Gospel,” 336.
- [83.](#) Hurtado “Following Jesus,” 17–25; Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 89–117; France, *Gospel of Mark*, 27–29.
- [84.](#) Donahue, *Theology and Setting*, 18.
- [85.](#) Ibid., 19.
- [86.](#) Moloney, *Mark*, 85–86.
- [87.](#) This value not only challenges the disciples’ understanding of power, but the Roman cultural framework, as well. Christal notes, “Mark’s Gospel informs his community, who lives under the power of the Roman Empire, about the unexpected and astonishing way of Christian discipleship within the realm of God’s reign” (*Disciples and Discipleship*, 62).
- [88.](#) Lane, *Gospel of Mark*, 293.
- [89.](#) See especially Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*.
- [90.](#) This is in contrast to the observation by Vallée that the traditional Roman worship was a means of maintaining the *pax deorum* (peace of the gods). *Shaping of Christianity*, 101.
- [91.](#) Sweetland, “Following Jesus,” 109–10.
- [92.](#) Longenecker, “Taking Up the Cross Daily,” 57.
- [93.](#) Fitzmeyer, *Gospel according to Luke (I–IX)*, 235. See the further discussion in du Plessis, “Discipleship according to Luke,” 58–71.
- [94.](#) The literature is quite voluminous on this issue. A good, clear overview can be found in May, “Rich and Poor,” 800–810. Also Seccombe, *Possessions and the Poor*, and Green, “Good News to Whom?,” 59–74.
- [95.](#) Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 147–59. Barrett, *Acts*, 33–36, 65–68.
- [96.](#) Ibid., 128. Bailey helpfully denotes the importance of understanding the Middle Eastern cultural perspective in interpreting these verses (*Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 332–42).
- [97.](#) Hardy and Yarnell, *Forming Multicultural Partnerships*.

Chapter 3

John's Gospel and Discipleship

BY ANDREW R.

Introduction

There are many notable scholarly works on John's gospel that have advanced our understanding of its literature, history, theology, and interpretation. In this chapter we will focus on the topic of discipleship. John shares about 8 percent of its contents with the other three gospels. The question has been copiously raised, "Why is it so different from the other three?" Is it based on a real historic deposit of Jesus' teaching, given that the style of its presentation and language is so different compared to the other gospels?⁹⁸ Brown has argued that it is based on the testimony of the so-called beloved disciple who was probably one of Jesus' early followers.⁹⁹ Does it function as more of an interpretation of the meaning of Christ's life and mission?¹⁰⁰ The way that this question is addressed has varied between key Johannine scholars like Brown, Cullmann, Martyn, and Richter.¹⁰¹ Dodd paid great attention to its historical literary and cultural backgrounds.¹⁰² Does it represent a different kind of Christianity than that reflected in the Synoptic Gospels?¹⁰³ Does its focus on knowledge rather than simple faith in Christ, representing some kind of Gnostic Christianity, or a Christian response to Gnosticism—some scholars seem uncertain.¹⁰⁴ Could it perhaps be the case that similarities in language and symbols between John and some of the Essene community's writings mean that John's church was founded by Essenes who converted to faith in Jesus the Messiah?¹⁰⁵ Some of these ideas are more controversial than others.

Hurtado suggests the church behind the community was recovering from a breach in their fellowship that entailed some of their members leaving the Johannine church/es.¹⁰⁶ He also suggests that part of the split occurred between Jewish members who believed that Jesus was divine and those who did not.¹⁰⁷ He notes that the Johannine church seems to have had a vibrant experiential faith, in which they enjoyed charismatic communion with God.¹⁰⁸ It is interesting that Hurtado suggests a rift in the Johannine church due to a difference of interpretation regarding the nature of Christ.¹⁰⁹ A difference of interpretation regarding Christ's nature as divine, or human, would have made a difference in the way that his first or later disciples regarded him.

Brown, Martyn, Richter, and Cullmann were interested particularly in the prehistory of the gospel's formation and the groups behind its architecture. Given that Brown et al. suggest that the gospel came to be written based on a Jewish community that made up its church or

churches,¹¹⁰ it is important to also consider other groups it sought to define itself over against. Brown suggests the following about the situation at the time of the final redaction of the gospel:

When the Gospel was written, at least a quadrilateral situation existed:

The synagogue of “the Jews”;

Crypto-Christians (Christian Jews) within the synagogue;

Other communities of Jewish Christians who had been expelled from the synagogue;

The Johannine community of Jewish Christians.¹¹¹

It would seem that each of these groups had a part to play in the church/es to differing extents, even if to critique or challenge their beliefs and practices. Brown also suggests that there was a Samaritan group of Christians in the church/es.¹¹² It seems that the church/es was/were seeking to define themselves over against four groups:

Mosaic-Prophet-Christians. Rejecting the idea of a Davidic Messiah, a group of Jews, resembling the Ebionites, proclaimed Jesus as a prophet-like-Moses.

Son-of-God-Christians. Part of this Jewish Christian community developed a higher Christology of Jesus as the préexistent, divine Son of God, a figure who came down from heaven bringing salvation.

Docetist-Christians. Some of the Son-of-God Christians interpreted the Evangelist’s high Christology in a docetic way: Jesus’ divine origins were so stressed that he became a totally divine being whose earthly appearance was only an illusion.

Revisionist-Christians. A redactor who was decidedly anti-docetic rewrote the *Grundchrift*¹¹³ by making additions (1:14–18; 19:34–35) and composed First John as an apologetic defense of a theology of Jesus as the Son of God come in the flesh.¹¹⁴

These were the probable background communities that were likely addressed, corrected, or whose beliefs were accepted into what might be called the Johannine tradition. It would seem that the “beloved disciple’s” testimony was preserved as a kind of guiding narrative to help the so-called Johannine church or church/es to define their Christology. It was deemed to be a high Christology that posited Jesus Christ to be the divine Son of God. As we will discuss in brief below, Hurtado has done much to demonstrate an early devotion to Jesus as one to be given worship similar to that offered to Israel’s God.

Implied Types of Disciples

Each of the four groups would have represented a different view of what a disciple should

base their beliefs and practices upon. In the case of the Mosaic Prophetic Christians, the view of Christ may have been of a new Moses-like figure, who was sent to prepare for the final realization of Israel's hopes, which included the kingdom of Israel being restored and the demise of Roman power and governance. The Son of God Christians seemed to hold to a similar divine-man Christology like that found in Philippians 2:1-10 and Colossians 1:14-15, et al. In this case the preexistent eternal Son of God had come to reveal what the Father of Israel and the created world was like. The goal of discipleship here could have been to model the Johannine churches on a similar intimacy of relationship with the Father as the God-man himself modeled. The intimacy also probably included a grounded belief that God wanted his people to live out their spiritual lives honoring the material world as the place of divine interest, mission, and action. The Docetic kind of Christians probably disdained the material concentration on God's works in the world and wanted to spiritualize their faith so as not to include the material world, or life in it. Theirs may have been a very otherworldly focus including an ascetic spirituality. The revisionist group may have overreacted to the challenge posed by the Docetic element. As a result, they may have become rather inward looking and defensive. In turn this may have meant that the love and fellowship of the group was somewhat stilted and paranoid toward outsiders. This chapter assumes that the Son of God Christians and the Revisionist group were the ones who made up the membership of the Johannine church/es.

The scholarly assessments that posited these groups is likely to have been somewhat accurate. They come from an earlier period in gospel studies that focused attention on literary-historical criticism, form criticism, and in Brown's case a preference for redaction criticism. In this chapter a reader-response method will be used that in some ways works quite well alongside a redaction critical methodology. It will be left to the interested reader to define these terms for themselves.

This chapter will focus on three matters. First, a brief survey of the differences in interpretative horizons of Jesus and those Jews who were hostile to him will be considered—as they are displayed in the text of the gospel itself. In this instance, John's account of who Jesus was, his words, and the questions raised by disbelieving Jews in this gospel's narrative will provide some interesting insights. Second, a consideration of the gospel's account of the disciples' views of Christ will be considered, with a goal being to understand how early disciples were shaped as a community of followers. It is to be noted that individual women and men play an important part in the gospel's narratives and discourses. It is probable that the members of the Johannine church/es gave prominence to both sexes in leadership. Third, the relevance of the gospel to contemporary disciples will be considered.

Who Is Jesus?

The question is as old as the Christian faith itself. Each gospel seeks to address it in their own inimitable way. Hurtado has not been slow to recognize the divine Logos Christology presented in the gospel.¹¹⁵ Neither has Dunn.¹¹⁶ The classic opening passage found in John

1:1–18 has been recognized as a kind of wisdom literature, which probably formed a kind of creed for the Johannine church/es.¹¹⁷ This creed clearly draws on common themes that can be traced back to Old Testament sapiential literature, like that found in Proverbs 8:22–31.

In Proverbs, wisdom is metaphorically personified as a feminine exemplification who stands at Yahweh's side during the creation of the world. It is common to call this personified companion "Lady Wisdom." In John it is the "Word" (Greek *Logos*) who is the one through whom God creates the cosmos.¹¹⁸ The sapient nature of the Logos, the Son of God in John's theology, has he/she stand at God's side. This Logos is said to be God in nature. The Logos became "flesh."¹¹⁹ Indeed the Word (Logos) is identified as Jesus Christ,¹²⁰ who is said to have come from the very heart (side or bosom) of the Father.¹²¹

Feminist scholars have reflected on the feminine aspect in relation to the creed of John's opening passage compared to the wisdom literature. They have argued that the creative and generative aspects of God's nature have important things to say about women made in God's image, as the bearers of new life created in a female's womb.¹²² Given that John's gospel has been a rich source mined from the earliest period of Christianity to theologically reflect on the nature of God, this is important to consider seriously. Trinitarian doctrine has most readily been deduced from this gospel. In terms of feminist theology, the Trinity finds the feminine and masculine represented in the Creator, based on John's clear reliance on wisdom literature.¹²³ This kind of theological reflection is also supported by Genesis 1:26, as mankind is made in God's image as female and male. This recognition was not lost sight of in the sapient Logos tradition of Johannine memory. This theological recognition is important, as we might argue that disciples after Christendom are shaped in the *imago Trinitatis* (image of the Trinity).¹²⁴ Female and male disciples are equal in the Trinitarian family—as sons and daughters of God. Edwards comments:

Some female characters . . . have been of special interest to feminist scholars. These often consider John especially sympathetic to women . . . , sometimes arguing that he depicts an "alternative" Christian community in which women share fully in leadership.¹²⁵

This is important to consider, given that much of human history has been dominated by patriarchal power structures that have often abused the rights of the female sex. Patriarchies of this type have rightly been challenged and overcome increasingly in the late modern period—among native Western women particularly. In some of the multicultural diaspora communities, made up of migrant women from around the world now living in the West, the struggle often begins as they see the freedoms that Western women enjoy. The Jesus presented in John's gospel honors individual women and men in dignified communication, which is an aspect of the gospel that has not had much attention drawn to it in the male dominated theological literature.

A message of John's gospel seems to be that Jesus values female and male disciples equally, as does the Father. This recognition of mankind as female and male is important to how Logos theology in John is to be understood, in its literary and historical context.

An interesting angle is that the Logos is said to have become a human in the person of Jesus Christ. Against the backdrop of a Jewish or Gnostic Docetic understanding of the gospel, there seems to have been the denial by a group that contested God could not have really become a human creature.

In other words, Christ could not be a divine-human being, because otherwise how could an infinite God be contained in such a vessel made of corrupt matter? The gospel clearly does not fudge the issue on this matter. There are several instances when Christ's identity is merged with that of God. It is nowhere better to be located than in John 8:58, where Jesus identifies himself with the "I Am," who met Moses at the burning bush in Horeb.¹²⁶ John's Christ predates Abraham, as well as being the agent through whom the original cause of creation (God) effected its action.¹²⁷

The God-man embraces the male and female aspects of their creation in the *imago Trinitatis*. The creative aspects of what it means to be men and women made in God's image is to be redefined by the God-man, who has become human. In the gospel, the meetings that Jesus has with individual women and men represents how he seeks to transform them to become children of his Father. What are the implications of this nascent divine-man Christology?

Once more the gospel leaves the reader in no doubt. Jesus declares to Philip that to have known him is to know the Father.¹²⁸ This christological insight has profound implications for how "Logos" might be understood etymologically. Logos may be identified with the divine artificer Wisdom, who was at Yahweh's side at creation. It is Lady Wisdom, who as it were, speaks creation into being. It is She-He that is used to imply the language of thoughtful design that constructs and brings creation to birth. The masculine and feminine aspects of the *imago Trinitatis* are to be reconstructed in the human soul and the community of the church. Disciples share a creative capacity to help shape new disciples to become like Christ. Just like in the Genesis creation story,¹²⁹ God speaks and the words form a world that can be understood by those made in Trinity's image.¹³⁰

In like manner believers have a part to play in helping to shape new followers as new creations to be made in Christ's image. Psalm 19 is a creation psalm that declares the created order itself communicates knowledge of the Creator who made it. Romans 1:20, coming in a passage that speaks of pagan distortions and misunderstandings of who God is, declares that the world provides clear evidence of its Creator. Logos Christology probably links Lady Wisdom to the intelligent design of the world and mankind and its birth at creation, as well as its ongoing birth as a recreation in Christ. Christ comes to restore men and women to the creational image of God. Indeed, the language is plain enough:

The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was

in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.^{[131](#)}

It may be claimed that John's Logos Christology, coming with this heritage of intelligent creative design associated with it, powerfully implies that Logos needs to take its definition from this background. The following definition is therefore suggested by the writers:

John's Logos Christology presents Jesus the God-man as the one who provides the interpretation of what God is like. He provides a living relatable picture of God to those he interacted with on a personal and communal level. Logos Christology implies that Christ the disciple-maker came to transform women and men into what they were originally designed to be, image bearers of the Trinity family's likeness. The Christian community that lives as a family based on God's love is a missional model for society to interact with in order to obtain an interpretation of what God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are like. The people of God are a shopping window that puts the invitation to become part of God's window on display.

John's gospel does not ever use the term Trinity. However, it attests to the tri-personal nature of God. The Son of God is personified in Christ the God-man.^{[132](#)} The Father^{[133](#)} and the Spirit are also included in the Johannine Godhead.^{[134](#)} Each of the persons are given an identity, although the Spirit's identity is somewhat subsumed into that of Christ.^{[135](#)}

The Logos Hermeneutic of John

The divine Logos is said to have come from the Father's "breast," or "bosom," (John 1:18). The breast is the location of the heart, which to the ancient Near Eastern biblical mind-set represented the seat of human emotions and life. It is the conscious part of the human psyche. It is as if John were saying, "the God-man knows God on a deep intimate heart level." In biblical terms the heart represents the place of the deepest life of the soul. It is the seat of all that motivates a person, or in this case the Father of the universe—God himself. Jesus comes from the heart of a compassionate Father, to provide the deepest possible interpretation of what God is like in his nature of love and forgiveness. Jesus and the Father are one in their relationship and intimacy according to John 17. John's Christ provides a window into the meaning of God's heart.

With Christ's appearance, no fuller revelation of what God is like can be given. This is vital to the theology of discipleship in John's gospel. Disciples after Christendom can look to Christ to find the ultimate meaning of life in him. No fuller revelation of what God is like can be exposed beyond it. These are bold claims indeed, but the gospel seems clear enough to be understood in this way. The Logos hermeneutic is that Christ interprets what the Father is like—in terms of his nature and purposes for humankind and the cosmos.^{[136](#)}

Nowhere better is the heart of Christ revealed, and therefore that of the Father's, than in John chapter 17. Christ is about to depart from his disciples. His priestly prayer sets out the goal of the mission of God to be the sharing in the oneness of the Father's, Son's, and Spirit's union. This union is also for his disciples to enjoy (in some mysterious manner). Newbigin captures an important insight from this chapter, which disciples after Christendom would do well to reflect on:

The sending of the disciples into the world is not an empty gesture. They are chosen and sent in order to "go and bear fruit" (15:16). And so the prayer of Jesus extends beyond the first disciples to include all who will come to believe "through their word." The disciples are to be present in the world, not withdrawn from it. But presence is not enough; they must also speak, for faith comes by hearing. There can be no believing that Jesus is the messenger of God unless the name of Jesus is spoken.¹³⁷

Newbigin offered a particular critique to the way discipleship may be conceived related to John's vision of it. As a missiologist and contextual theologian he understood that it was not enough for the church to have a presence in a neighborhood based in its own church building. It required that the people of Christ intentionally make themselves present to the people of the communities they lived in. Moreover, Newbigin's vision of contextually based discipleship required that there be a realistic compassionate Christian presence, that on the one hand acted as if believers were Christ himself to the people, serving them, praying for them and seeking to help them in every good way possible. On the other hand, this also meant offering a compassionate critique of the prevailing culture which would call people to repent and turn to the Lord for salvation and renewal. Bevans calls this the countercultural model of contextual theology,¹³⁸ in the sense that the gospel of Christ seeks to transform the ungodly structures of society to become subject to the reign of God.¹³⁹ This is vital to Newbigin's theology as well,¹⁴⁰ and it must be too the missional disciple's.

Four Views of God and Christ in John

The speaking of Jesus' name is a speaking into the very nature of Jesus as the revealer of the Father's heart, in terms of John's portrayal of it. The name of Jesus means Yahweh saves. It also takes on the special sense of being a revelation of what Yahweh the Father of Israel is like. There are four visions of what the Father is like in the gospel. The first is the one the writer of the gospel provides, in his well-known theological narrative theology. The second is based on what Jesus reports about himself and the Father. The third is based on what his contemporaries that did not believe in him had to say. The fourth is what the disciples discovered about him. In this latter instance, their discoveries tell us much about how we might understand the claims of Christ on us as his followers.

1. John's Vision of Jesus

The law was given by Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.¹⁴¹

There seems to be a deliberate dichotomy intended by John regarding the difference between the Christ event and the giving of the law through Moses. It might be called a dialectical tension. Moses' law does not give access to the interpretation of the Father's heart. It provides a legal and ritual definition of what is required to follow Yahweh. Until the appearance of the Logos, who gave the law to Moses,¹⁴² there is only a partial revelation of what God is like. The legal and ritual definitions have become highly traditionalized by the time of Jesus. This may have also been true of the Jewish community that moved from Judea to Galilee after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. There seems to have been a rift in fellowship between a more traditionalized Jewish group, and the charismatic, grace-focused community of the Johannine churches, that saw Jesus as a revelation of the Father's heart. The law described here may be particularly focused on the Shema, as a main creedal statement of the Hebrew faith.¹⁴³

It forbade the worship of more than one God. The Shema is still considered today by Orthodox Jews to be the central creedal statement of the Torah. It could be that John intended to draw a distinction between how Shema-focused Jews that had left the church, and those who embraced Jesus as divine, interpreted what Christ had revealed about the Father and his special relationship with him. Those that left the church may have done so in protest over the divine Logos Christology of the Johannine church. A strong legalistic adherence to the Shema, as the creed of the Deuteronomic Torah, may have caused a group to align themselves against the view of Christ—the divine Son sent by his Father.

Hence the term AntiChrist¹⁴⁴ may apply to those who deny the divine Logos Christology of the Johannine church. This view may be further established as credible, as directly following verses 16–17, John completes the Johannine churches' creed, declaring:

No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.¹⁴⁵

Christ provides “grace” and “truth” as a message directly from the “Father's heart.” Antichrist sets another view instead of the divine Logos Christology in place, i.e., that Christ is some kind of embodiment of a knowledge sent from the Father about God, but he himself is not divine. It is possible an Angel Christology may be implied here. We know that there was speculation in Jewish apocalyptic of this type. The book of Hebrews in chapter 1 addresses this kind of view probably held by some early Jewish messianic believers. This would fit well with an adoptionist view of Christ that scholars like James Dunn has averred—and in some similar sense was formulated by Arius in the early fourth century. In these schemes of thought Jesus is somehow adopted by God, as his special agent before he entered the world, or by the divine voice at his baptism in the Jordan. In contrast John declares Christ to be divine.

Christ the bringer of grace and truth replaces the law and its rituals and festivals, indeed its temple and its cultus—by virtue of Christ being the center of God’s revelation, the temple is no longer to be the focal point of God’s presence.¹⁴⁶ We find this brought to the foreground in John chapter 2. Christ is the grand telos of the temple and its cultus.

God is now to be interpreted in the light of Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and presence at the Father’s side in heaven. Of particular significance is John chapter 8, in which Jesus reveals his true identity to the religious authorities. Christ is none other than the “I Am” that Moses met at the burning bush.¹⁴⁷ According to Blomberg this has been challenged in recent studies that have demonstrated that after 70 CE, angels and exalted humans could be associated in this manner, not just God. However, this is a contemporary scholarly assessment rather than a historic one, in terms of other opinion.¹⁴⁸ Christ is the Lord that gave the law to Moses their forebear. Yet the Jewish authorities do not know him. They interpret the Hebrew Scriptures wrongly. Jesus shockingly declares that their interpretation of the words of Moses come from “their father the devil.”¹⁴⁹ He declares that Moses wrote about him, but this has been missed by adopting a wrong hermeneutic, that does not recognize Christ as the Son of Yahweh in Israel’s ancient Scriptures. This claim is considered blasphemous. The Jews pick up stones to kill him.¹⁵⁰ Their Shema theology has failed to embrace the revelation of the Father’s heart provided for them—through Christ the hermeneutic of it.

Christ interprets what God is like as a communion between himself and the Father. It includes the Spirit as the one who advocates on behalf of Christ, so that Jesus might be universally present with all who believe after his departure back to the Father.¹⁵¹ The community that Jesus founds is based on his followers knowing the truth about what God is like, as well as receiving his free gift of grace—providing them with eternal access to live with the Father and as part of his family.¹⁵²

2. Jesus’ Self-Consciousness

We have related what Jesus says about himself in the passage in John chapter 8. There is more yet to be disclosed. Jesus only does what he sees his Father doing.¹⁵³ He provides a model for his followers to do what he as their Lord does.¹⁵⁴ Nowhere more clearly do we see a startling picture of what Christ and his Father are like than in John chapter 13. The Lord washes his disciple’s feet. He then tells them that they are to follow his example. The correspondence between what this passage reveals about the nature of the Father and Son and chapter 14 is vital to grasp.

Christ informs Philip that to have seen him is to know what the Father is like.¹⁵⁵ It requires that we correlate this insight with the picture of God provided by Christ as he performs the task of the servant in John chapter 13. Christ may be claimed to portray the Father as the one that serves creation. God’s power is not based on the exercise of totalitarian

dictatorship but on the act of sacrificial humility and love. This quality of God's self-giving nature may be considered a definition of how the Father, Son, and Spirit live in relationship together and toward their creation. Gift-love and sacrifice define how they live in union as persons joined in the one being of God.

The disciples are called to become "one" even as Father and Son live in such a union. It may be termed a model of the experience that Christ wants his followers to share. This seems to be suggested by what Christ is reported to have said at the end of chapter 13. It would be by the examples of the disciple's mutual love for one another that the world would know they were his followers.¹⁵⁶ Jesus is conscious of who he is and what his Father is like. He self-consciously models his union with the Father to his disciples in the act of foot-washing. The blessing of the paschal meal is part of the blessing of salvation and eternal life, that will be derived from the sacrifice of the God of the cross.

Jesus invites his followers to model their community on the same kind of sacrificial gift-love that defines God's loves for creation—as an active process of sacrificial service that gifts creation with abundance of life.

Jesus' self-conscious knowledge of the Father is important to understand. The Greek word for "to know" (*ginosko*)¹⁵⁷ relates to experiential knowledge. It does not relate to rational knowledge. Jesus has an ongoing intimate experience with his Father with whom he is in constant communion. His Father does not rest on the Sabbath and neither does the Son.¹⁵⁸ Jesus does all the Father is doing. He also communicates all that the Father has sent him to do to those who will listen.¹⁵⁹ The disciples are also to experience a knowledge of God that comes from an intimate open connection with God through his Spirit. The Spirit is to be Christ's representative after his departure.¹⁶⁰

Just as the Father and Son are one, so are the disciples to become one in them.¹⁶¹ That is, they are to become intimately connected as children of God in the Trinitarian family through the Spirit.¹⁶² The Spirit will provide them with ongoing access to revelations of the Father's will for them to participate in.¹⁶³ The Spirit is sent to be the helper at their sides, as well as their intimate inner friend and connection to Father and Son.¹⁶⁴ This speaks to the deep intimacy that Christ has called for his followers to enjoy. We are to have a close bond with God, something like that enjoyed by Christ with the Father and Spirit. Christ the God-man connects humanity to God and God to humanity. It is portrayed in John as a deep mysterious connection which Jesus likens to his own relationship with the Father.¹⁶⁵

Without this close experiential bond of revelation knowledge, the Christian missional community will be unable to really shape any disciples to become like Christ. We can only follow a Jesus who is pneumatologically present. The church cannot manufacture that for itself. John's churches did not manufacture it. The gospel seems to have been written for churches that enjoyed a deep intimate oneness through the agency of the Spirit with the risen Lord.¹⁶⁶ First John informs us that they had a spiritual charism that taught them all

things.¹⁶⁷ We too need that charism. Jesus promises he will continue to communicate with his followers through the Spirit as need arises.¹⁶⁸ Jesus self-consciousness as the Son of God was based on an intimate experiential connection with his Father.¹⁶⁹ His contemporary disciples may too experience a similar knowledge which includes assurance that they belong to the Father's family.

In John 17, Jesus' own close relationship with his Father is brought to particular focus. This important chapter helps us to understand the deep intimate bond that exists between the persons of the Trinity.¹⁷⁰ Even more amazingly, it seems this chapter was provided by John to help followers to appreciate that they are to be a deep, meaningful part of the divine family. We are to experience the oneness of a similar intimacy that Jesus the God-man has with his Father. This may be considered part of the intimate self-understanding that the Johannine churches enjoyed as part of the horizon of their Christian communal life experiences.

3. The View of the Ruling Religious Dynasty

Clearly the divinity of Christ, although assumed in the gospel, was not accepted by Jewish leaders nor probably realized by the disciples during Jesus' ministry. It is highly unlikely that the "beloved disciple," as a key source and witness for the later gospel redaction, would have considered Jesus divine in the time of his earthly ministry. John weaves this fact into his narrative in the light of those Jews who have probably left his churches, due to rejecting a divine Logos Christology. In other words, contents in the gospel were included to meet the needs of believers in the Johannine churches. It has been claimed, quite understandably by Jewish people, that John's gospel seems to be anti-Semitic in nature. It may have been used historically at times to favor a hostile view of Jewish people. However, it is not accurate to suggest that all Jews in John's gospel are treated with hostility, nor that the gospel is anti-Semitic. To begin with, Jesus and his disciples are clearly identified as Jews.¹⁷¹ Jesus is called Rabbi.¹⁷² The Baptist declares Jesus to be the Lamb of God, who will "take away the sins of the world."¹⁷³ This is a Jewish symbolism. So who are the Jews that resist Jesus and his ministry?

It seems they are quite often identified with the Pharisees (e.g., John 9). In John the Pharisees seem to be taking over Judaism, which is quite unlike their portrayal in the Synoptic tradition. Pharisees are powerful and influential enough to exercise authority over other Jews in John's gospel. They are called "rulers" or "officials" of the synagogues. They are able to cast out the blind man healed by Christ from the synagogue and to intimidate his parents to deny knowledge of his healing or original condition as a blind man.¹⁷⁴ Once more this is not the picture provided of them in the other gospels. They have the authority to expel those who profess Jesus from the synagogues. To some large extent it seems that John's gospel does not mean to vilify the Jewish nation, but rather to demonstrate a failing on the

part of the leaders in Judea to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. This speaks volumes related to the historical situation of the Johannine church as well. They had been probably expelled from the synagogues in Galilee by a strict Pharisaic party following the Council of Jamnia. The appellation of “Jew” does not always equate with a negative image of the Jewish people, or the followers of Christ in John. However, it is important to note that John is careful not to call Galileans or Samaritans “Jews.”¹⁷⁵ Not all Pharisees were treated with the same negativity in the gospel. Smith comments:

Thus Jesus, his followers, Galileans, and perhaps Samaritans are Jewish, but they are not “the Jews.” There are also people explicitly called “Jews” who are not enemies of Jesus. Prominent among them is Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (3:1), who keeps coming back to Jesus, speaks for him (7:50), and helps bury him (19:39). . . . The people who mourn Lazarus with Mary and Martha are said to be Jews, although they also are not hostile to Jesus. Moreover, throughout John’s Gospel “Israel” and “Israelite” are used in a positive sense. Thus Nathanael can be called “truly an Israelite in whom there is no guile” (1:47) and Jesus is hailed as “king of Israel” (1:49), a title whose entirely positive connotations contrast with “king of the Jews,” which has a negative and sarcastic ring on the lips of Romans (e.g., 19:3).¹⁷⁶

What is it that the resistant rulers do not believe regarding Jesus? First, they do not believe in Jesus’ messianic claims, that figure prominently in the gospel.¹⁷⁷ Jesus is cautious and unwilling to declare his identity in the Synoptic Gospels, but in John he often defends it in roundabout ways. Second, the rulers recognize his claims of a seeming equality with God, which they resist and accuse him of blasphemy for. We never find Jesus making such bold claims in the Synoptic Gospels. Third, they do not accept that he is the prophet to come predicted by Moses. In this case the question is raised with John the Baptist regarding his own identity. He clearly states he is not the Messiah or the prophet like Moses who is expected to come.¹⁷⁸ Fourth, and similarly to the second point, the Jewish rulers and importantly chief priests, insist that Jesus must be crucified because he claimed to be the “Son of God.”¹⁷⁹ The fact that the “chief priests” who represent the temple cultus call for Jesus’ execution is important. It is they that perform the rites of the temple that Jesus is about to surpass as the Lamb of God.

There is a strong post-temple theology in the gospel, as Christ is now considered the advocate at the Father’s side in the heavenly temple. The gospel is clearly written after 70 CE. This makes the advocacy role of the Spirit of immense importance to disciples, as it is the Spirit who mediates and communicates between the disciples on earth and the heavenly Christ at the Father’s side. Hence guidance on the mission of Jesus is to be obtained by disciples discerning what the Spirit mediates to them, to inform their understanding of their mission in participation with Jesus. Ironically the plaque placed over Christ’s head on the

cross declares the culmination of the mission Christ has been sent to complete, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”¹⁸⁰

Christ has redefined the concept of Messiah to make him the divine-man. He is, therefore, the fulfillment of God’s plan to save the whole world through the Jewish nation, and with this culminated view in mind, the Jews will no longer be the agency, the nation, for global salvation. Now missional disciples will be the new Israel. This is confirmed earlier in John’s gospel to be part of the Johannine theology, as Jesus declares to the Samaritan woman that salvation “is through the Jews.”¹⁸¹ In Jesus’ death the temple is no longer the focal point of God’s soteriological and atoning activity—from now on people can worship God in “Spirit and truth” anywhere and at any time based on Jesus the Messiah’s provision of access to the Father’s heart of love and compassion.¹⁸²

The negative appraisal that John associated with Jewish religious leaders distinguishes Jews in general from Jewish authorities. It is interesting that the Pharisees are most commonly associated with resistance to Jesus in the gospel.¹⁸³ It is likely that those who left the Johannine church were Pharisees and those influenced by them.

Hurtado goes further, suggesting that at one point the Johannine Christians were accepted by Jewish leaders of synagogues resident in Galilee after the destruction of the temple. However, as Johannine Jewish Christians became more convinced about Jesus’ divinity, they had probably been painfully expelled from the synagogues.¹⁸⁴ Hence those followers who embraced the divine Logos Christology paid a heavy price by being expelled from among those who did not share the same kind of high Christology that they did. It may be said that disciples after Christendom find themselves on the margins of a society that does not believe in the divine Christ. Such claims will often be greeted with skepticism. However, the Gospel of John passionately avows the divine God-man, and in the light of his claims on the disciple’s lives there is much to be learned in the contemporary situation.

4. Individual Disciples

A whole book in its own right could be produced to do justice to all the individual encounters of persons with Jesus in John’s gospel. Each of the narrative accounts bring to existential consciousness something about the nature of discipleship and what it asks of us. John’s gospel seeks to drill deep into our consciousness. It beckons us to reflect on how Christ seeks to transform different aspects of our psyches. It would be to do an injustice to the gospel to try to simply take a shallow look at each instance where Jesus communicated something of importance to individual disciples. Hence two instances will be considered. That of Jesus’ mother and the story of the woman at the well. We will get much more out of deeper reflection on these two stories than shorter consideration of more. However, here in brief, are the individual snapshots John provides us with of individuals who met with Jesus:

- Andrew and Peter: John 1:35–42;
- Philip and Nathanael: John 1:43–51;

- Jesus' Mother: John 2:1–11;
- Nicodemus: John 3:1–15;
- A woman at a well: John 4:1–26;
- An official: John 4:46–54;
- Peter: John 6:60–65;
- An adulterous woman: John 8:1–11;
- A blind man: John 9;
- Mary and Martha: John 11:1–37;
- Pilate: John 19:9–11;
- Mary Magdalene: John 20:1–18;
- Thomas: John 20:24–29; and
- Peter: John 21:15–23.

4a. Jesus' Mother

John 2:1–12 represents the first instance where a woman comes into the gospel story. Mary and Jesus are at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Mary has probably kept high hopes in her heart that Jesus would soon embrace his destiny (my assumption). The story assumes that she knows that her son has the ability to do remarkable things. She would not have drawn his attention to the lack of wine at the feast otherwise. Jesus' response that his “hour” has not yet come also presupposes that there has been more than a limited self-consciousness of his special life purpose, assumed at least in the narrative world of the gospel. The story seems to suggest that mother and son have communicated about his mission previously. Of course this is a narrative construction, but it is not without plausibility to have been historically factual.

The way Jesus addresses his mother is rather strange. He calls her “woman”¹⁸⁵ as he did the woman at the well.¹⁸⁶ This is unusual in terms of the customs of the period. A good son would normally address his parent with the respectful title “mother” or “father.” Perhaps John is suggesting a turning point in Mary's and Jesus' self-consciousness here. Perhaps Christ now wishes to help his mother make the conscious transition from being his mother and guardian, toward helping her to see herself afresh as one of his disciples.

There is an important angle to the transition that Mary has to make in terms of how she regards Jesus, which as a narrative artifact is interesting to observe. John is potentially addressing a similar transition that occurred in the Johannine church, where some regarded Jesus as fully divine, whereas others had not reached that conclusion. There was a change in perspective in the community that is probably mirrored in Mary's change in outlook. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about a similar change in perspective that he had experienced (and that all of us may experience):

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus

no longer.¹⁸⁷

The hermeneutical horizon for how Mary regarded her son was being transformed. She was to go through a process of moving from seeing herself as his mother to coming to consider herself to be one of his followers. This would be a journey for her, no doubt. He was to become for her the divine Son of the heavenly Father. She needed to transition from seeing him as a man of the earth to being God's one and only Son. The Johannine church had likewise been through this sort of transition.

In terms of disciples after Christendom, we must do more than simply see Jesus as a man that lived a good, if not perfect, life. He is the Son of God. He has ultimate claims on our lives. A challenge faced post-Christendom is that we live in a secular culture that has a focus on the individual, i.e., "me first." This is a very anthropocentric view of human nature. The danger of this kind of individual humanism is that we estimate Christ to be our equal, a man like us rather than God and therefore our Lord.

Contemporary disciples may be encouraged to have a change in the ways they interpret the meaning of Christ to their lives. Like Mary, his earthly mother, we need to come to see him from a divine perspective rather than an earthly one. The Johannine churches also needed to make this transition. Mary had probably long meditated on what it meant that she would give birth to one who was to be called "the Son of God" (my view).¹⁸⁸ Mary's faith was being heightened and transformed in readiness to embrace the son born of her as her God. Mary clearly had faith in her son's abilities (my view).

In John's narrative framework she instructs the attendants at the wedding banquet to do whatever he "tells you."¹⁸⁹ The miracle of the water turned into wine represents the transition where Jesus enters into his ministry. This is the first sign he performs that causes his disciples to believe in him.¹⁹⁰ It also helps his mother to model what those close to Jesus, that is his followers, will do. They, like Mary, put their faith in him to do what needs to be done in order to intervene in the human situation—so as to transform it. Mary's instructions to the attendants were an act of faith. Mary models faith in the divine Son of the heavenly Father, beginning to make her own psychological adjustment (my view) to now see herself as one of his faithful followers. It is Mary's faith that triggers Jesus to exercise his divine power to perform this first miracle of transformation.

This miracle has sacramental significance. The miracle of wine may represent the blood of the covenant which Christ is to spill on Calvary. This is reinforced by the blood and water which pours from his side pierced by a soldier when Jesus was on the cross.¹⁹¹ It is interesting how his mother appears again at the cross to witness these things, as another narrative construction.¹⁹² The wedding banquet may also more broadly represent the bride of Christ and his people, who will drink this new wine and declare it better than any served or experienced before. Each of these narrative artifacts may be deliberate attempts by the writer of the gospel to make theological inferences.

Such is the quality of the God-man's sacrifice. In symbolic terms, John may be making a

play on the wedding feast as a representation of the messianic banquet, which popular Jewish apocalyptic represented would take place when the Messiah restored the kingdom to Israel.¹⁹³

Jesus declared to Mary, at the wedding feast, that his hour had not yet come and for the messianic banquet to begin. Later in the gospel she reappears with him at the cross. The cross is considered pivotal in John's theology. It reveals the love of Father and Son in action as the Son completes the divine mission he has been sent to achieve.¹⁹⁴ John comments that Jesus knew all things were now finished. The plan of God to save the world was ready to be resoundingly completed.¹⁹⁵ Mary stands with her mother's sister, Mary wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, as well as the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross.¹⁹⁶ She is present to witness the far larger miracle of the death of Christ that completes the work given to him by his Father.

The miracle of water transformed into wine is contrasted with the miracle of the atonement. Blood (symbolized by wine at the wedding) pours from his side, with water, when the Roman soldier pierces his side. His blood transforms ordinary human life (water) into refreshing and life-giving wine. Those who stand with the crucified God-man are these women and this one man, who the gospel writer claims Jesus loved.¹⁹⁷ Indeed the source for the witness of the gospel is that beloved disciple, we are told at the end of the gospel narratives.¹⁹⁸

The cross is the most intimate moment of life. It envisions the departure of the one brought to life from the womb of Mary. She stands at the cross to witness the end of the power of death, by virtue of the life-giving grace of the Son of God. He must die in order to rise again and bring to birth new life. Soon Christ will emerge from the womb of the tomb in resurrection life, bringing to birth eternal hope and eternal life for his followers. One of the Marys, Mary Magdalene, witnesses the resurrected God-man, who has emerged from the womb of the tomb (Mary Magdalene is reminiscent of Jesus' mother in name), to bring to birth the new future he has won for all of his followers.¹⁹⁹ Birth is an intimate experience that means pain. Pain and suffering for the Son leads to joy. Jesus declared to his disciples that they would experience pain and sorrow at his departure. They would later find joy with his resurrection and the coming of his Spirit—making him a deep, intimate part of their lives.²⁰⁰

Christ has an intimate relationship with his followers. It was three women and one male who were closest to his heart during the last hours of his existence. They did not abandon him in his darkest hour. Jesus gave his earthly mother, now one of his disciples, into the care of his beloved disciple—John.²⁰¹ Jesus loved to the last, but in order to complete his mission he must now return to the Father in heaven, leaving his earthly mother in the care of John. In essence she represents all followers who Jesus gives into the caring hands of each other in the Christian faith community.

He came from the Father's heart and made it known. Now he returns to that intimacy, so

that his followers might receive another helper who will be with them and will dwell in each of them “forever” and will be at the center of the Trinity-shaped community of followers on earth.²⁰² It is as if John means us to understand that intimacy with the Father is to be obtained by being close to the sacrificial heart of Jesus. Only by Jesus returning to the Father may that intimate connection be made by the coming of the universal Spirit of God into each heart and as the binding force of love in the Christian missional community.²⁰³

Hence all may be one with the risen Lord. Jesus informs Mary Magdalene, as she clings onto his ankles after his resurrection, that it was imperative she let him go so that he might return to his Father.²⁰⁴ Disciples after Christendom are called to have deep intimacy with the God of the cross and with one another as they model that same love as togetherness in a community shaped by the Triune family’s love. It is on the cross that the heart of God is revealed for all to behold. It is in the resurrection that they are transformed to become heirs of eternal life.²⁰⁵

The Father is in Jesus, revealing his passionate love for the world for which he has given his only Son as a gift.²⁰⁶ He means that every reader should reflect long and hard on what the sacrifice of the God of the cross means to the way his followers should live as a community and in terms of how they share that love with those who they seek to disciple. Those closest to Jesus gather around the cross. How do we evaluate our relationship with Christ? How well do we know him? What is the level of our intimacy with him? We do not find the other disciples at the cross. However, we find Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, secretly for fear of the authorities, requesting to take his body in the darkness of the night to a tomb.²⁰⁷ The love of the women, and the beloved disciple for Jesus, makes them fearless as they stand alongside him for all passing by to behold.

Another contrast to be found in the crucifixion narrative is between the Jews who require Pilate to crucify Jesus and the love of Mary and the others. The Jewish authorities declare to Pilate, “We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God.”²⁰⁸

The Shema declares God to be one God. The law of Moses demands that those who worship idols be put to death.²⁰⁹ Has not this man Jesus made himself more than an idol, by claiming to be the divine Son of God? John possibly draws a contrast here between the Shema hermeneutic of the authorities, who have rejected the divine Christ based on their interpretation of it, and the women and man at the cross who embrace his act of love and grace.

The contrast may be between legalistic adherence to a way of life, compared to the revelation of Christ’s intimate relationship with the Father. Once more, John may be replaying the difference between the hermeneutical horizons of those who seek to keep the law of Moses compared to those inspired by the grace and truth that comes through Christ. Perhaps John seeks to declare that the community of authentic disciples is to be shaped around the vulnerability of the God of the cross, who gives up all in his self-sacrifice to save

a fallen humanity. Jesus declared to the disciples after the Paschal meal:

A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.²¹⁰

Missional churches that shape disciples need to share an intimate love with Christ and one another, based on the vision of the heart of Christ's sacrificial love for the Father and them. It is a Trinitarian love, that is shared by Father, Son, and Spirit—brought to life and sustained in a community that shapes itself based on the presence of that love in their midst through the Spirit of Christ.²¹¹ Missional disciples must no longer regard Christ from a human point of view. He is their Lord and the source of their mission. It is Christ's reign that they live under, and to which they point people to embrace. It will be the quality of the love inspired by the presence of the Spirit between people, in the missional church, that will cause contemporary disciples to care for each other deeply. It will inevitably have a magnetic effect. Jesus declared:

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” He said this to show by what death he was to die.²¹²

One important way others see Christ lifted up is in his followers living sacrificially and graciously together. The missional church that disciples people effectively is one where the love dance of the Trinity family²¹³ is acted out by the Christian community. Christ informed his disciples that this can only happen if he was present among them through the Holy Spirit as his representative.²¹⁴ This will be evident when it happens. It will cause people to seek to consider becoming part of this alternative society, modeled by God's people.

Late modern youth, and young adults, are highly attracted to small, genuinely caring communities, where people authentically care about each other (see chapter 8 for more background). They need to belong to a group for a long time before they believe its truths. People need to really feel they genuinely belong and are authentically cared for, often for quite a while, before they start to experiment with putting their trust in Christ. The strength of a missional community that is small is that it will be possible to invest in small numbers of those who want to explore the presence of God. John's gospel invests not so much in crowds as in an emphasis on Jesus' teaching ministry; it highlights the importance of the few and the individuals Jesus interacted with. There is much to be gained from reflecting on his mother and what she can reveal about her Lord. The small band gathered at the foot of the cross represents those who come closest to the heart of the Father revealed through Jesus.

4b. A Woman at a Well

The longest recorded interaction in John with an individual is to be found in John 4:1–26. This

is important to recognize, as it is a Samaritan woman who had a triple injunction on her life—when it came to Jewish men interacting with her. She was a woman that no self-respecting Jewish male would be seen alone with in public. She was a Samaritan that Jews considered outcast from Israel's covenant promises. She was also associated with loose morals, having had five previous relationships with men and now living with one who was not her husband.²¹⁵ Jesus crosses three boundaries in this story, meeting this woman who was on the extreme margins of Jewish toleration. She would not have been permitted any kind of approach to a devoted Jewish male in this period. She is outcast in terms of the culture of the period. Yet Jesus offers her respect and acceptance by talking to her.

There is yet another angle to this narrative. Some notable marriage arrangements in biblical literature begin with a meeting by a well. This is the case with Isaac and Rebekah,²¹⁶ Jacob and Rachel,²¹⁷ and Moses and Zipporah.²¹⁸ There is the possibility that John is making an important theological statement about Jesus here. He may be portrayed as the bridegroom of the new Israel that includes the Samaritans and the Gentile world in the messianic banquet mentioned earlier. This is further strengthened because Jesus tells the woman that the temple on Mount Zion, and the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerazim will from now on not be the location of worship of Yahweh.²¹⁹ A new event horizon has occurred. The new horizon of human encounter with God will be possible at any time and in any place, without the need to go to a temple or a priest to represent human interactions with God. The Spirit of Christ is from now on to be at work among all nations, tongues, and peoples—by implication. The argument has been made that the Samaritan woman is actually a metaphorical representation of Samaria's historic flirtation with numerous gods.²²⁰ In this case, it is as if John is saying that from now on the Samaritans have been redeemed and included to be God's one true people. This is further reinforced by the fact that this woman is the only person in the gospel narratives who is directly told by the Lord that he is the Messiah.²²¹ Jesus honors her above any other disciple, except Peter, who in the Synoptic tradition at Caesarea Philippi recognized that Jesus is the Christ.²²²

There is an interesting contrast in this story to that of contemporary disciples. The woman is publicly known by her peers to be a person of loose morals. She has not been able to hide it from them. She certainly cannot hide from the all-seeing eye of the Lord. In order for her to be refreshed by the living water on offer, she must first recognize her situation and change her life. In terms of our present Western secular situation, people are able to privately pursue their lives for the most part without public knowledge or censure for their sins. It is possible to hide them from our peers because of our private lives. Late modern Christians enjoy the privacy and secrecy of their private homes. The challenge of this story is that the God who calls us to follow him reaches into these private spaces and calls us to leave behind those things that have become replacements for the Lord. Jesus declares to the woman:

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship

him.²²³

How might we understand this saying? It could be interpreted to mean that in order for God's Spirit really to transform us, we have to be willing to allow him access to all the inner rooms of our souls, shining his light into each nook and cranny.

The goal is to remove all that is not holy or pure. In other words, we need to honestly seek the Lord, asking him to reveal those things that need to be brought to wholeness in us, which will include disposing of the detritus of our sins. Worship has to do with the things we attach worth to. The question is, do we attach more worth to things, friends, lovers, or our jobs than we do to Christ? The story of this woman demonstrates Christ's intentional respect for her and her situation. He is not there to judge but to heal and restore her and the Samaritan people, who follow in her footsteps. In this story, based on her personal testimony, the Samaritans come to meet the Lord:

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."²²⁴

The narrative of Jesus' mission to Samaria also has much to add to the theology of the universal presence of God's Spirit, true of the post-Pentecost church. Sheldrake makes some essential observations about the Trinitarian and incarnational importance of how Jesus called his disciples to fresh places, to find and bring the catholic (universal) presence of God there:

Our reflection on catholicity moves from God as Trinity to the Church and world through the medium of Christology. The catholic "space" that is shaped by God-as-Trinity finds expression in our time and space through the incarnation. Thus, the focus of catholicity in space and time, without which it remains insubstantial and diffuse, is the person of Jesus Christ as the living fullness of God. In Christ, "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority" (Col. 2:9-10). And "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16).

In so far as the catholicity of God is mediated through Jesus Christ, it is important to note in reference to the New Testament that an important feature of Jesus' practice was to push people, not least those closest to him, away from familiar places into locations they found disturbing. To put it another way, the actions of Jesus redefined the nature of what was "centre." He regularly moved beyond exclusiveness of the traditional Jewish land to reach Gentiles in outlying areas. So, for example, there is a suggestion of tough words being needed to force reluctant disciples into the boat to cross to Gentile Bethsaida in Mark 6:45. It is in places on the edge, and among those

considered God-forsaken by many of his contemporaries, that Jesus knew his identity as Messiah must be revealed. He healed the demoniac on the East Coast of the Sea of Galilee in the land of the Gerasenes (Luke 8:26–39). He crossed into Tyre and Sidon to heal the daughter of a Syro-Phoenician woman and to commend her faith (Matt. 15:21–28). He healed in the Decapolis. In Mark 8:1–10 he fed a multitude on the eastern or non-Jewish side of the lake. “Ever dragging his disciples away from the familiarity of home, he declares present the power of the kingdom in the alien landscapes of another land.”²²⁵

The interaction with the Samaritan woman, and the response of her peers to Christ, demonstrates how Jesus treats those on the margins with great respect. He enters incarnationally into their territory as the universal reign of God begins to break in. The woman is an unlikely gatekeeper for this Samaritan community. Her testimony leads to a mass response by her peers. Disciples after Christendom need to keep on pushing the boundaries of the places they seek to incarnate in, as the mobile missional body of Christ in fresh places and spaces.

Conclusions

The Gospel of John aligns women and men as equals in the body of Christ. In terms of Free Church Ecclesiology, we would suggest that the Christian community, like that of John, is built on the intimacy of Father, Son, and Spirit with their children. Individuals were shaped by the Lord on an intimate level personally and in communion in Christian communities. It was also to be through their relationships with each other that disciples were to be shaped by one another. The Spirit of the Trinity shaped this ancient Johannine community of women and men to live united in their diversity. They each shared mysteriously in the love dance of a similar perichoresis of the Godhead in some way.²²⁶ It may be suggested that in the Johannine churches, there was a positive expectation of intimacy of believers with their God and one another. There was a breathing in and out of the fresh breath of the divine fellowship, modeled by Christ’s relationship with his Father in this gospel’s narratives. In a similar way believers in the Johannine churches were potentially encouraged to treat each other with a mutual love—based on their experience of communion with their God. Jenson has helped develop what is known as *communio ecclesiology*. It is important to understand what it is, as it relates well to the Johannine theology of discipleship formation as a communal activity. Cary explains it:

Communio ecclesiology asserts that the foundation, model, and goal of the church’s communion (*koinonia*) is the *koinonia* of the triune life. Since participation in the Trinitarian life is at the root of *communio ecclesiology*.²²⁷

This type of “*communio ecclesiology*” is interestingly implied in Niemandt’s missional ecclesiology:

Mission begins in the heart of the Triune God. . . . Mission is an extension and amplification of God's very being. Missional theology builds on the understanding that God is Trinity and missional. Mission is participation in the life of God. It is to be caught up within the dynamic sending and being sent that God the Holy Trinity has done and continues to do.²²⁸

Missional disciples after Christendom may encourage each other to be shaped in churches somewhat like those of the Johannine churches. "Communio ecclesiology" is a form of missional ecclesiology that links every disciple of the kingdom to the Trinitarian family and its reign in their lives. Missional churches should clearly engage in the Trinitarian communion in order to be able to be inspired, motivated, and guided by the heartthrob of God's love for the world. Missional churches need to view themselves as agencies that send out every believer to participate in the Triune mission in what they do in their everyday lives.

⁹⁸. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 126–29.

⁹⁹. Brown, "Johannine Ecclesiology," 388.

¹⁰⁰. Cooke, *New Testament*, 362.

¹⁰¹. Brown, "Johannine Ecclesiology"; Cullmann, *Johannine Circle*; Mattili, "Johannine Communities," 294–315. Martyn's work is not readily available in English.

¹⁰². Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*.

¹⁰³. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 274.

¹⁰⁴. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 185.

¹⁰⁵. Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, 203.

¹⁰⁶. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 402–7.

¹⁰⁷. Ibid., 404–6.

¹⁰⁸. Ibid., 400.

¹⁰⁹. Ibid., 404–6.

¹¹⁰. Brown, "Johannine Ecclesiology."

¹¹¹. Ibid., 382–83.

¹¹². Ibid., 390.

¹¹³. German word meaning "Ground Script."

¹¹⁴. Ibid., 383.

¹¹⁵. Ibid., 349–426.

¹¹⁶. Dunn argues for an adoptionist Christology in the New Testament, but he also recognizes that John's gospel assumes a divine Christ. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 20, 48, 233, 236, 240, 243, 249, 260, 262, 278–81.

¹¹⁷. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 338.

¹¹⁸. Ibid.

¹¹⁹. John 1:14.

¹²⁰. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 353.

- [121.](#) John 1:18.
- [122.](#) Fulkerson et al., *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, 33.
- [123.](#) Ibid., 32, 33.
- [124.](#) Hardy, *Pictures of God*, chs. 3, 4, 8.
- [125.](#) Edwards, *Discovering John*, 106.
- [126.](#) Exod 3:1–12.
- [127.](#) John 1:1–4.
- [128.](#) John 14:9.
- [129.](#) Gen 1 and 2.
- [130.](#) Gen 1:1–5.
- [131.](#) John 1:9–10 NIV.
- [132.](#) John 1:14–18.
- [133.](#) John 1:18.
- [134.](#) John 4:24.
- [135.](#) John 16:13.
- [136.](#) John 3:16–17.
- [137.](#) Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 234.
- [138.](#) Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 117–38.
- [139.](#) Ibid.
- [140.](#) Ibid., 117.
- [141.](#) John 1:17 NIV.
- [142.](#) John 8:58.
- [143.](#) Deut 6:4.
- [144.](#) 1 John 2:18.
- [145.](#) John 1:18 NIV.
- [146.](#) The book of Hebrews testifies to this trajectory in New Testament thought, which arguably John's gospel also resonates with. See on Heb 9:23–26.
- [147.](#) Exod 3:1–8.
- [148.](#) Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, 149; Barrett considers there is no relationship here to Exod 3:14 (*Gospel according to St. John*, 352); Brown clearly agrees with more contemporary assessments of John's divine name appellation of Jesus in John to himself (*Gospel according to John I–XII*, 366–67). Both authors agree that a postmodern assessment has to be open to the authenticity of this testimony.
- [149.](#) John 8:44.
- [150.](#) John 8:59.
- [151.](#) John 14:18–27; Smith, *New Testament Theology*, 139–46.
- [152.](#) John 17:3; Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 719–20.
- [153.](#) John 5:19.
- [154.](#) John 13:12–15.
- [155.](#) John 14:7–9.
- [156.](#) John 13:34, 35; Ryle, *John*, 263–66.

[157.](#) Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “ginosko” (689–714).

[158.](#) John 5:17.

[159.](#) John 17:1–5.

[160.](#) John 16:12–15.

[161.](#) John 17:21.

[162.](#) John 14:25–31.

[163.](#) John 16:12–15.

[164.](#) John 14:25.

[165.](#) John 17:1–5.

[166.](#) I make this suggestion based on the theological expectations set out in the words of Jesus in John 17 where oneness like that between Father and Son is to be enjoyed by the disciples. Moreover, this is to be correlated to the promise of the Spirit and Father and Son coming to make their home in the hearts of disciples and in their discipleship formation communities—see John 14:23.

[167.](#) It is likely that the First Epistle of John was sent to the church close to the time that the gospel was written. First John 2:27 has this to say about the Spirit’s work in the believer’s life practices in the Johannine churches.

[168.](#) John 16:12–14.

[169.](#) John 5:19, 20.

[170.](#) A critique that some theologians make of John’s gospel is that it does not have a fully developed Trinitarian theology. Some argue that it is rather based on a binatarian theology. It is true that the relationship between Christ and the Father are most clearly brought to light in the gospel, but the Spirit is also given its own personal identity, described in John 4:20–26 where it is said “God is Spirit.” Moreover, the Spirit is described as Counselor in John 14. There is a tri-personal language in the gospel but it is not developed in a systematic way such as one might find in the later church councils.

[171.](#) The fact that John the Baptist a Jew points to Jesus as the Lamb of God is testament enough to this thesis. And Jesus’ response to Nathanael that he is a true son of Israel is yet another. See John 1.

[172.](#) John 20:16.

[173.](#) John 1:29–34.

[174.](#) John 9:13.

[175.](#) See ch. 6 in John’s gospel.

[176.](#) Smith, “Judaism and the Gospel of John,” in Charlesworth, *Jews and Christians*, 76–96.

[177.](#) John 8:48.

[178.](#) John 1:19–28.

[179.](#) John 19:7.

[180.](#) John 19:19 NIV.

[181.](#) John 4:22.

[182.](#) John 4:21–25.

[183.](#) See on John 6, 7, and 8.

[184.](#) Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 402–7.

[185.](#) John 2:4.

[186.](#) John 4:21.

[187.](#) 2 Cor 5:16 RSV.

[188.](#) Luke 2:19.

- [189.](#) John 2:5.
- [190.](#) John 2:11.
- [191.](#) John 19:34.
- [192.](#) John 19:27.
- [193.](#) See the summary of Pope Francis's general audience, June 8, 2016, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/06/08/160608c.html>; in this summary bulletin the Vatican press discusses the relationship of John's use of the wedding feast in Cana as a typology for the messianic banquet.
- [194.](#) John 17:1–5.
- [195.](#) John 19:28.
- [196.](#) John 19:25–27.
- [197.](#) John 19:26.
- [198.](#) John 21:20–24.
- [199.](#) John 20:11–18.
- [200.](#) John 16:16–24.
- [201.](#) John 19:25–27.
- [202.](#) John 16:7.
- [203.](#) John 16:7.
- [204.](#) John 20:17.
- [205.](#) John 5:24.
- [206.](#) John 3:16.
- [207.](#) John 19:38–41.
- [208.](#) John 19:7 RSV.
- [209.](#) Lev 20:1–5.
- [210.](#) John 13:34, 35 RSV.
- [211.](#) Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church*, 293–306.
- [212.](#) John 12:32–33 RSV.
- [213.](#) Hardy, *Pictures of God*, 178–83.
- [214.](#) John 17:20–26; *ibid.*, 190–218; 268–92.
- [215.](#) John 4:16–18.
- [216.](#) Gen 24:10–51.
- [217.](#) Gen 29:1–14.
- [218.](#) Exod 2:15–22.
- [219.](#) John 4:19–26.
- [220.](#) 2 Kgs 17:29–34.
- [221.](#) John 4:26.
- [222.](#) Matt 16:16.
- [223.](#) John 4:23 NRSV.
- [224.](#) John 4:39–42 NRSV.
- [225.](#) Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 68–69.

- [226.](#) Hardy, *Pictures of God*, 184–207.
- [227.](#) Cary, *Free Churches and the Body of Christ*, 41.
- [228.](#) Niemandt, “Trends in Missional Ecclesiology.”

Chapter 4

Imitation of Christ and Pauline Discipleship (Imitatio Christi)

BY DAN

In the history of the church the imitation of Christ has become both a very important matter and a very controversial one. Hence, it is not surprising that commentators and interpreters center much attention on this phrase and seek to derive its very last implication from it.^{[229](#)}

Thus writes De Boer in his significant exegetical study on the key Pauline texts. From the models of saints and martyrs, to the publication of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*, to the more recent WWJD movement, the importance of the person of Christ as a model exemplar in the lives of ordinary believers and communities is writ large. This is not really surprising, as we are not like the early disciples who were able to share their lives and the missional journey of Jesus on a daily basis. Our challenge is to engage with our own understanding of Jesus and express how this may impact our own discipleship today. This does bring some important contextual challenges, which we will consider below.

The recent publication by Will Gompertz, the BBC arts editor, suggests that in the world of art, as well as other creative environs, imitation is essential. He notes,

Anyone involved in any creative pursuit starts off by copying, be it a ballet dancer or a structural engineer. It is how we learn. Children listen to music and try to play it back note-perfect. Would-be-authors read their favourite novels in an attempt to learn a particular style. Painters spend their early years sitting in chilly museums copying masterpieces. It is a form of apprenticeship. You have to imitate before you can emulate.^{[230](#)}

Background

It seems quite appropriate therefore to ask the vital question, “What is the power of imitation?” Are we really influenced by the examples of others, for good or ill? Does an example or model adversely affect our own understanding and life choices? Can a historical figure or spiritual leader from the past have any effect on contemporary postmodern people?

The immediate answer seems to be “yes, of course.” There are seemingly numerous examples of how the influence of a significant person has developed and aided the actions and reactions of humanity over generations for good. Equally, cultural expressions of being seen to be a public spectacle presents an example of the negative reinforcement of imitation—what not to be like. Various forms of punitive punishments have helped to reinforce this,

from the medieval practice of being placed in the stocks, or being tarred and feathered, to one's name representing a form of ridicule or mistrust, thereby becoming a scapegoat. Some historical examples include Leon Trotsky, blamed by Stalin for the problems in Russia; Andrés Escobar for the 1994 World Cup defeat from his own goal, leading to him being shot, and Gaëtan Dugas, the young flight attendant for the spread of AIDS.

Imitation and Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura is considered to be the father of modern social learning theory. This was developed from the now famous Bobo doll experiment, in which young children mimicked destructive behavior in beating up a doll, not through reinforcement or reward, but in imitating the behavior they had observed. Bandura called this observational learning. In his primary work (1977) he posits the suggestion that children are exposed to a variety of examples of behavior that may influence them. These behavioral models offer stimuli to influence and provide a framework that, under certain conditions, can be explored and tested to see whether the child wishes to follow this suggested pattern.

Some of the strength of Bandura's work is related to his methodological approach. He set clearly measurable frameworks to consider how certain stimuli could affect children in a particular environment. This enabled him to empirically measure findings with a degree of certainty to see whether there were any discernible patterns.

Critiques of this approach have noted that observation is not exclusively about behavior, but must equally be cognizant of the place of genetics in determining overall influence. This includes individual biological states, variations of learning abilities, and physiological responses.²³¹ More recently, observational learning theories have been strengthened by the discovery of mirror neurons and their capacity to help reinforce certain behavioral tendencies.²³²

After various ongoing critiques of this approach, as well as his own maturation of thought, he subsequently modified his theory in 1986. He renamed it Social Cognitive Learning Theory, even though continuing critics note that it is not a unified theory overall and does not consider the importance of maturation of an individual over time. What is important for our purposes is the instructive nature of Bandura's focus on imitation. He notes,

The people with whom one regularly associates, either through preference or imposition, delimit the behavioral patterns that will be repeatedly observed, and hence learned most thoroughly. . . . People can acquire abstract principles but remain in a quandary about how to implement them if they have not had the benefit of illustrative exemplars.²³³

This would seem to indicate that while imitation as a process is inherent throughout life, it is especially among the developmental cycles of children and youth that the potential of influence is the greatest. It is during this period of human development when youth often

look to others as role models, be they historical, mythical, or contemporary. This is often why significant others in positions of authority are suggested as examples of how one should emulate key characteristics of their life.

As suggestive as this is, surprisingly it is not always clearly the case. A recent study by Bricheno and Taylor focused on the popular assumption that male teachers are highly influential role models among primary and secondary male pupils. While there were some notable elements of influence, the study found that the role of a male teacher was less influential than that of a family member.²³⁴ This is in contrast to the UK government's partnership with the Premier League FA project entitled "Playing for Success," an after-school scheme run since 2007 in hundreds of local centers, demonstrating that this scheme of influential football players as role models on young boys has had significant and demonstrable effects on their educational performance.²³⁵

While this study may raise a note of caution, it does not remove the importance of the moral life of another as someone that can express what it means to live a "good and therefore exemplary life." It is here, when we consider the ethical value bases that inform the models of morality, that we find the importance and use of imitation.

Greco-Roman Models of Exemplar

The concept of imitation was clearly known within the ancient world.²³⁶ The seminal idea of a "great man," who is to be revered and emulated, can readily be found.²³⁷ Whitmarsh, in commenting on the role of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and its influence for imitation, notes,

The theory that *mimēsis* might be of positive benefit to the state is enacted in Plutarch's biographical works . . . [his] interest is thus not so much in referential description as in the construction of an ethical subjectivity that is designed to improve and educate the reader.²³⁸

This idea is not just found within the poetic and philosophical writings. The important and thorough study by Judge details how, in the city of Ephesus, the use of statues of influential men sought to inform and instruct the normal civic populace as examples of virtue and ethical choice that should be followed. If the image became forgetful, there was appropriate textual commentary to remind them, thus continuing the influence that these exemplars could offer future generations. This visual illustration of the use of statues of great leaders can still be found today in most major cities of the world, as, for example, in Trafalgar Square in London.²³⁹ This seems to reinforce the value of "honor culture" that was so prominent in the Greek East and Latin West, and fostered the role of civic ethical behavior.²⁴⁰

It seems highly likely that this would also be influential for the writings of the Apostle Paul, as he may have recalled these examples, which would be well known practices, and how this kind of "power" image might be part of his own thinking as he explored the

imitation paradigm.

Rabbinic Expressions

As noted briefly in chapter 1, many of the rabbinic disciples sought to emulate their masters in very thorough and precise ways. A disciple would not only seek to master the wisdom of the rabbi, but would almost entirely emulate their life so as to not pollute the core teaching that they had received.²⁴¹ This may be the reason why a disciple would often be known by the name of their master. A kind of symbiotic apprenticeship would develop and keep alive the living tradition of that rabbi's teaching of the Torah through the written and oral experiences of the disciple.²⁴²

Ladd, however, notes the differences between Jesus and the rabbinic practices of discipleship wherein he states,

Discipleship to Jesus was not like discipleship to a Jewish rabbi. The rabbis bound their disciples not to themselves but to the Torah; Jesus bound his disciples to himself. The rabbis offered something outside of themselves; Jesus offered himself alone. Jesus required his disciples to surrender without reservation to his authority. They thereby became not only disciples but also *douloi*, “slaves” (Mt. 10:24f.; 24:45ff.; Lk. 12:35ff., 42ff.). This relationship had no parallel in Judaism.

He goes on to note why this was likely the case,

Discipleship to Jesus involved far more than following in his retinue; it meant nothing less than complete personal commitment to him and his message. The reason for this is the presence of the kingdom of God in Jesus' person and message. In him, people were confronted by God himself.²⁴³

Following Jesus

What is somewhat surprising is that there is quite limited evidence found within the gospels that Jesus suggests an imitation approach from his own disciples. Hengel notes how little the idea of imitation or example actually plays within the gospel tradition. For Hengel, the focus for Jesus is not so much mimicking his everyday behavior as it is to the inauguration of the kingdom of God and the will of God.²⁴⁴

This is of course not to say that some of Jesus' sayings do not either imply or suggest such an approach. While there are some expectations that are implied in the ministry and teaching of Jesus, we do not find him regularly stating we should imitate him. Instead, what he does do is offer the imperative invitation to follow him. He invites us to journey with him in our following, and what is implied is that this engagement will enable transformation as our community is sharing life with our Master. This is quite a unique approach, as it is not the

disciple who takes the initiative, as would be the case with rabbinic disciples, but rather Jesus who speaks forth the word of invitation and welcome.²⁴⁵

There is one place, however, where there is a specific command of Jesus that encourages the practice of imitation, namely foot-washing. In the Gospel of John we find the following specific command:

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants[d] are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” (John 13:12–17 NRSV)

During the time of Jesus, when guests would arrive, the host was expected to make provision for the washing of their feet. Often it would be a servant who would engage in this activity. In this practice, there is no specific religious meaning, but rather a practical expression of hospitality and welcome. This quite common occurrence is, in John’s account, given new meaning with the advent of Jesus taking the towel and washing his own disciple’s feet. Quite surprising, after the initial shock of these events, Jesus then commands these followers to continue this example within their own discipleship.

Regardless of the particular interpretation of the meaning of this experience,²⁴⁶ the act of foot-washing has been a more occasional expression of the ancient liturgical practices of both the Western and Eastern churches as a dominical institution. The Reformers seemed to have mostly bypassed this as have some of the Pentecostal churches. It is primarily the Anabaptists and Seventh-Day Adventists who have intentionally engaged in this ancient practice of foot-washing as an expression of worship and discipleship. The practice has never been fully uniform, but did provide, at least initially, a sense of difference from the other Reformers and the Roman Church, thereby creating a boundary set and creating an identity-conferring practice, seeing themselves as the “true church.”²⁴⁷ The continuing expression of foot-washing among Anabaptists et al. is now less about identity (either in imitating Christ or in being set apart from other Christian denominations) and more about expressing Christian humility.²⁴⁸

Paul’s Imitatio Christi²⁴⁹

This then leads us to consider the importance of the post-Jesus writings of the Apostle Paul. The prominence in considering this development is that it is here we encounter and engage with the key terminology that informs an “imitation” approach to discipleship.²⁵⁰ The

epistles of Paul clearly raise the matter of ongoing discipleship with faith communities he writes to.

Thessalonians

The phrase “to become an imitator” (μιμητὴς γίνεσθαι) is first found within the Thessalonian correspondence, perhaps the earliest of the recognized writings of Paul. In the first of his two letters, we find two occurrences of the phrase (1:6 and 2:14). Paul, as a pioneer and key figure, expresses his desire for this new infant missional community to become imitators. This is, first of all, an imitation of the apostolic team (*you became imitators of us*), and then becoming an example to the other churches (*you . . . became imitators of God’s churches in Judea*) and thereby, an example for others to follow.

What is less clear is what Paul is alluding to when he indicates the need for imitation. Is it their faith that Paul is requiring them to emulate? Perhaps it is their commitment to the mission? Is it imitation of their suffering, as noted in 2:14?

This seems to be what is being suggested, as Fowl notes,

In both of these references the imitation that is commended is seen in terms of faithfulness in the midst of suffering and distress. This faithfulness is the cruciform life which Paul saw in Christ and took on for himself.²⁵¹

Bruce additionally supports this conclusion. He notes that what made the early Christians an apostolic fellowship was this commitment to following both the teaching of the apostles, as well as their commitment to suffering for the sake of the gospel, thereby multiplying the growth of the kingdom through their own engagement in being good news communities.²⁵²

Postmodern feminist critiques have rightly noted that there is a strong sense of power and authority that is inherent in the language and approach of imitation theology,²⁵³ though this has been recently challenged.²⁵⁴ In some ways this seems quite appropriate. Those who have been involved in pioneering mission recognize that being involved in the founding of a new work does indeed carry a sense of ownership and authority. This sense of being a mother or father in God is also noted by the apostle (2:7–10). As the founding planter and apostle, Paul would be seen to have an authority which may go deeper than simply a sense of copying or mimicking. As Ehrensperger notes.

That Paul did claim authority and status as an apostle over the congregations he founded is beyond doubt. This is an important issue in the assessment of his imitation language . . . as the founder of a community of Christ-followers his status cannot be identical with that of his converts. His role and function are different from the role and function of any of the Christ followers in the *ἐκκλησία* he founded.²⁵⁵

There are, in addition, two further examples in the second part of the Thessalonian correspondence. Here we find the phrase “to imitate,” μιμεσθαι (3:7, 9). The first occurrence focuses on how this missional community should follow the example of the apostolic team, which is centered on the lifestyle of providing for themselves, thereby not being codependent on others as they expressed their life and ministry. This is then followed two verses later, where this practice of laboring and toiling is indicative of the expression of being a model for others.

It seems, therefore, that this early engagement with the notion of imitation is more than just a cursory experience but is integral to the life and witness of this early apostolic community. The experiences of the early apostolic team provide Paul with a living testimony of what it means to follow Jesus in their own context, and it is this that he seeks to offer the Thessalonians as an example to imitate.

Corinthians

The Corinthian correspondence moves the discussion on a bit further, where we find Paul’s injunction more explicit as he invites these believers to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1). This first use by Paul of imitation language once again brings into our discussion the importance of his paternal relationship with this young church. As with the Thessalonian correspondence, he appeals to his role as a father figure, which then serves as the basis of the need for imitation.

The picture is one of a father who has instructed his children in proper behavior by his own example. They are to be “like father, like children. . . . It therefore functions as one more item in the long argument of 1:10—4:13 that appeals to the servant nature of discipleship over against their “boasting” and worldly wisdom.²⁵⁶

This, then, seems to be a different kind of approach than merely an objective moral exemplar,²⁵⁷ for there is the highly relational aspect of the language that Paul is using. Of course, this might be seen as more of the stoic teacher/pupil kind true of the first-century culture. One may recall the statement by Seneca, the great Stoic teacher, who encouraged pupils to seek out

men [*sic*] who teach us by their lives, who tell us what we ought to do and then prove it by practice, who show us what we should avoid, and then are never caught doing that which they have ordered us to avoid (Ep. 52).²⁵⁸

The emphasis here, however, which seems to be similar to its use in the Thessalonian correspondence, is less about learning doctrine and more about the living example of a community that is modeling itself on what has been seen and learned from the apostolic team. While this will be more fully developed throughout this work, it is important to

observe that far too often our own Western hermeneutical horizon has limited us in our engagement with these texts, with an individualistic reading being preferred, which then overlooks the importance of the community itself as an exemplar of the *missio Christi*.²⁵⁹

The second usage occurs in chapter 11. It is here we find the most direct statement of imitation, where Paul uses his own life and journey as a discipleship model for the church. “Be imitators of me as I imitate Christ.”

This call to imitate comes after the lengthy discussion about Christian freedom and cultural engagement found in chapter 10. In many ways, verse 1 seems to be better placed at the end of chapter 10, as a means of summing up the ethos that Paul is seeking to advance.²⁶⁰

Kim brings a helpful corrective in the widening debate of whether we interpret the language of imitation in Corinthians from either a stoic and therefore authoritarian approach, much like the teacher and the pupil, or whether, following postcolonial and feminist interpreters, we see and question the sense of control and domination of seeking to mimic ultimately the imperial voice. He helpfully posits a third alternative, seeking an understanding of imitation as a type of embodiment, which reads these texts much more communally. He states,

It should be understood as a way of life rooted in the image of Christ crucified, which plays a central role in the letter, deconstructing abusive, destructive powers in a community and society and reconstructing a beloved community for all.²⁶¹

What seems to be implied here is the sense of servanthood, sacrifice, and the humility of Christ as the overall ethos that forms and informs the apostle, and therefore becomes a paradigmatic expression of what a Christ-like community can become. This suggests a cohesive approach to what discipleship might look like for this young missional community.

Hooker seems to capture the essence of Paul’s injunction of imitation most fully wherein she states,

The whole Christian community should reflect the love and compassion of Christ: there was no distinction here between apostle and community, except that the role of the apostle was to be a subsidiary model. The Gospel was to be proclaimed both by Paul and by the community, not simply through the preaching of the word, but in every believer’s life.²⁶²

Philippians

While not a specific example or statement by Paul of imitation, the so-called hymn found in chapter 2 presents a kind of model that is presented as an aid memoir of the movements of Jesus: beginning from a position of ultimate authority, moving to servanthood and crucifixion, then climaxing in the redeeming work of resurrection and exultation.

Hawthorne helpfully notes,

There is in this hymn, which sings the praises of the divine who became human, a grand transvaluation of values. For the attitude and actions of Christ outlined here clearly show God's ideal pattern for discipleship.²⁶³

The structural movements of the hymn therefore demonstrate the way in which subversive values are expressed in the life of Jesus, who then becomes the model life for the Philippians, and for all readers of this text.

This, then, seems to be presented by Paul as an attitudinal model for the Christians in Philippi to follow and therefore to emulate. "Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus" (NRSV). It is not only the life of Jesus that is set before this Christian community, but the deeper attitudinal aspect that caused him to express his obedience in such a sacrificial manner. This is therefore more about enabling the mind-set to affect them more than the specific actions, which in the end are not easily reproducible.

In chapter 3 this becomes even more explicit, as we find the unusual phrase "be imitators together" (συμμιμηταὶ γίνεσθαι). This unique compound moves the focus clearly back onto the community and its life together as a disciplined people. Paul, once again, is clearly calling them to imitate him, but this is now more noticeably expressed in partnership. The continuing theme of unity, which seems to dominate the letter, is seen here once again. Fee notes that in each context in this letter where the *imitatio* is expressed, the setting is around the cruciform life, suggesting active engagement in suffering on behalf of the one who suffered for us.²⁶⁴ While this is very aspirational, it does raise some important missional questions. How does an entire community imitate the life of Christ? Does this imply that it is not possible to imitate Christ without active suffering?

Oakes notes the importance of this section of Philippians wherein he states,

Philippians is remarkable for the numbers of links that are made between Paul's way of life and that of his hearers. The most pointed call to take Paul's behavior as a model is in 3.17:

Συμμιμηται μου γίνεσθε, αδελφοι, και σκοπειτε τους ουτω περιπατουντας καθως εχετε τυπον ημας.

The focus is on way of life: περιπατεω. The aspects of his life to which he has just drawn attention are surrender of privileges (3.7-9), willingness to suffer (verse 10), and determination to press on to the goal (verses 12-14).²⁶⁵

These key aspects are what enabled Paul in his own personal discipleship to emulate his master, Jesus, and it is to these that he points as the elements of what the life of Jesus should be like for the Philippian believers as they sought to imitate him. The hymn of chapter 2 finds authentic expression in the missional life of Paul, and he now provides this as the litmus test for what a Christian community would experience.

The reality of this kind of community is never far from the conflict of the ideal. In chapter 4, we find the conflict between two sisters expressed as an example of the wrong kind of attitude, highlighting its effect on the overall community. This kind of naming and shaming is quite striking in our postmodern age, but it is good to recall that these are letters to genuine missional communities, and the appeal is meant to bring about reconciliation and healing, rather than be seen as a kind of accusatory statement. If imitation is meant to be genuine, then it must affect at the very least these two sisters in faith, who could do well to find in the imitation of Paul the life of Christ being expressed in his own discipleship, which thereby means for them that they need to consider their own struggles and the importance of intentional reconciliation between them.

Ephesians

While sometimes considered by scholars to not be an authentic Pauline text, it is included here to complete the New Testament usage of these phrases on imitation. This final treatment of this phrase is found in this letter. In chapter 5 there is a clarion call for the entire people of God to become imitators of God as beloved children (μιμητης γινεσθαι).

Lincoln notes the implication of such a call wherein he states,

It would be incongruous to be God's dearly loved child and not want to become like one's loving Father. In fact, the new child-Father relationship not only requires but also enables imitation to take place, as the children live their lives out of the love they have already experienced from their Father.²⁶⁶

This call is, in fact, the only occurrence anywhere in the canonical Scripture where the injunction to imitate God occurs.²⁶⁷ Barth, among other scholars, noted that there are other types of parallel analogies with Scripture, including “following Yahweh,” “walking in His ways,” and to “be holy as I am holy.”²⁶⁸

While this phrase is unique in the biblical writings, O'Brien notes that the concept can be readily found within the writings of Hellenistic Judaism, especially Philo.²⁶⁹ This suggests that for the author of Ephesians it is a known concept and therefore is likely being drawn upon in its development in this passage.

The “therefore” (οὖν) notes the transition of this section. There continues to be ongoing critical debate as to whether this indicates a marker for a new section, a link to the previous admonitions, or a summing up of the key issues that the author has been developing.²⁷⁰ The important point for our purposes is how this language of imitating God is being promoted by the author for intentional expression by his readers.

There seems to be some similarity of this with 1 Corinthians 4:14–16, which is framed around the life and ministry of Jesus. But whereas, there the father image was the apostle, here it is God himself who is the exemplar and model. In the context of 4:32–5:2, we now find the admonition to this community to express the Christ-like actions of love and forgiveness,

which enable them to imitate God.²⁷¹

Imitation, and therefore discipleship, for Paul is not primarily about one's own private experience. This call to imitate God ensures that the whole community are being intentionally drawn into the paradigmatic shift of becoming a Father-like expression of the new humanity.²⁷² Becoming god-like is therefore not primarily a kind of esoteric spiritual experience, but rather finds concrete expression from the cosmic dimensions of the lordship of Christ to the reconciling of differing people groups into a new humanity. This then informs practical expressions of living daily life in various social settings and contexts, where being good news is being fully expressed. This must be more than merely aspirational. Like the earliest Christians, the need for patient endurance and patient ferment is often the normative experience in becoming this disciplined community.²⁷³

Limitations of Imitation

At the heart of these various Pauline admonitions is the need for intentional expressions of discipleship. Having said that, seeking to exactly mirror or clone the person we are seeking to model does not seem to be what is being anticipated. Might this imply that there may be some kind of limitation on imitation?

Within some cultural manifestations, expressions of imitation might be challenging. The WWJD movement is a recent example of how one might easily ignore historical and cultural settings and assume that if we just consider what Jesus would do, then we can also emulate this in our own context. An earlier expression of this approach can be found in the popular Christian classic text *In His Steps*, by Sheldon. Both of these approaches leave it up to the imagination of the participant what in fact might be an appropriate response in imitation of Jesus.

Earlier generations were greatly influenced by the seminal classic text *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis. This continues to be an instrumental and formative piece of literature that posits some similar ideas about reflecting on Jesus, his life, ministry, ethics, values, practices, attitudes, and then seeking to find appropriate expression in one's own life.

What neither of these texts seem to do well is to consider the hermeneutical challenges of expressing a view of what Jesus would do. For example, neither text examines the example of Jesus' confrontational approaches in the gospels and suggests these as imitation models. Other admonitions and examples such as turning the other cheek (Matt 5:39 / Luke 6:29), loving one's enemy (Matt 5:44 / Luke 6:27), or selling our possessions and giving them to the poor (Luke 12:33) are not easily considered. This seems to imply that while the spirit of seeking to express our lives as Jesus would is honorable and perhaps even desirable, what this actually looks like will often depend upon our own cultural choices, actions, and preferences of texts to inform these expressions. As the Latin American theologian Jon Sobrino clearly notes,

The following of Jesus does not come down to the mere imitation of Jesus. First of all, it is in fact impossible to do exactly what he himself did. Second and even

more important, the Christian should not “imitate” Jesus precisely because an intrinsic and essential feature of Jesus’ own moral course is its localization in history. Precisely because of this historical localization, a person’s moral life is unrepeatable. . . . Discipleship is not imitation, therefore; and neither is it a reproduction of certain historical traits of Jesus.²⁷⁴

The knotty problem of hermeneutics is briefly noted in the above comments. The complex issues that surround interpretation, as well as being an interpreter, is an ongoing challenge for all peoples of faith. If we are to maintain a sense of solidarity and authenticity we will need to discern the imitation of Christ within our own culture and times.

Suggestive Missional Engagement Issues from Paul’s *Imitatio Christi*

Following on from the above, what, therefore, is the overall significance of Paul’s rallying cry to be an imitator of Christ. What might this mean for twenty-first-century missional disciples?

I would like to suggest the following as some key issues that need to be considered and engaged with:

- Developing a greater awareness of the mind of Christ. This should involve expressing a pattern of life, death, and resurrection as core elements of the discipleship formation process. This may mean a renewed form of catechesis;
- Intentionally becoming countercultural kingdom people, thereby expressing church not essentially as empire building and organizationally, but church as the formation of a community of people, who are then built up and released into their giftings and ministries within the world;
- Reconstructing the Pauline community of “you” (in the plural, so for the entire community rather than an individualistic interpretation) as togetherness and participation in the new kingdom of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is highly important as the new paradigms of society are being transformed by intercultural experiences.²⁷⁵ The Christian community could be seen to take a lead in finding good expressions of sharing life together;
- Following on from this, finding ways of expressing “imitating Christ” in others as a means of being transformed into Christ’s likeness;
- Ultimately this may find a new expression of missional holiness as the sacramental, whole life practice of being disciples both in the church and in society.

This is not an easy task, and it will likely take that special gift of the Spirit, “desperation,” to enable the kind of transformative change that enables the imitation of Christ to find new and fresh expressions. As Dunn highlights,

For any understanding of what discipleship of Jesus is and involves must surely take its lead from the discipleship to which he actually called followers during his life and ministry. Of course, discipleship in the twentieth century cannot be a

mere imitation of discipleship in first-century Galilee. That would be playacting at discipleship, motivated by a morbid fascination with first-century trappings rather than by a sincere desire to share the spirit which motivated the first disciples. But discipleship of Jesus must nonetheless draw its understanding of that discipleship from the record of those who literally followed him, otherwise such claims to discipleship can easily become fanciful and subject to distorting pressures from tradition and ecclesiastical vested interest.²⁷⁶

²²⁹. De Boer, *Imitation of Paul*, 161.

²³⁰. Gompertz, *Think like an Artist*, 86.

²³¹. Ross, in *Praeger Handbook of Education and Psychology*, 55.

²³². Mazur, *Learning and Behavior*, 291.

²³³. Bandura, quoted in Chung, “Paul’s Understanding,” 306.

²³⁴. Bricheno and Thornton, “Role Model, Hero, or Champion?,” 383–96.

²³⁵. Sharp et al., *Playing for Success*.

²³⁶. Samra, “Biblical View of Discipleship,” 5n14; Wilkins, *Discipleship in the Ancient World*, 11.

²³⁷. Harrison, “Imitation of the ‘Great Man,’” 213–15, who offers numerous examples.

²³⁸. Whitmarsh, *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire*, 54.

²³⁹. I.e., Nelson’s Column.

²⁴⁰. Harrison, “Imitation of the ‘Great Man,’” 214, notes that this aspect has not been widely discussed by classicists and New Testament scholars.

²⁴¹. Hengel, *Charismatic Leader*, notes the observable tendency for the pupil to learn the *halakhah* from the everyday behavior of the teacher (53, with various references).

²⁴². So Ab 5.21 suggests the regular course of training: “with five years on scripture, ten on the Mishna, thirteen of fulfilling the Commandments, and fifteen on teaching” (Hengel, *Charismatic Leader*, 53n56).

²⁴³. Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 105–6.

²⁴⁴. Ibid., 53.

²⁴⁵. Nepper-Christensen, “μαθητης, ου, ο, μαθητευω,” 373.

²⁴⁶. Thomas, “Footwashing in John 13,” notes that within scholarship there have been various interpretations of the meaning of this practice, including: an example of humility, a symbol for the Eucharist or of baptism, for forgiveness of sins and cleansing, as a soteriological sign, and as a polemic.

²⁴⁷. Graber-Miller, “Mennonite Footwashing,” 151.

²⁴⁸. Bender, *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 347–51, for a good overview of the history and practice with the Anabaptist tradition. Graber-Miller, “Mennonite Footwashing,” 151–54.

²⁴⁹. For an extensive list of studies on imitation and the Pauline writings, see Harrison, “Imitation of the ‘Great Man,’” 219–20n31.

²⁵⁰. Bauder notes that all of these usages carry an ethical imperatival aim that is directed to specific expressions of conduct. *NIDNTT*, 1:491.

²⁵¹. Fowl, “Imitation of Paul / of Christ,” 430.

²⁵². Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 15, 45; see also Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 72, 251.

- [253](#). In particular, Castelli, *Imitating Paul*, who seeks to follow Derrida and Foucault in providing a critique on the abusiveness of power.
- [254](#). Harrison, *Christian Origins and Graeco-Roman Culture*, 218, expresses an important note of caution: “Castelli’s stimulating monograph on imitation is, in my opinion, too ideologically driven. She comes to the ancient texts and the epistles of Paul with a priori suppositions about the nature of power, overlooking how the subtleties of the honour system shaped power relations in antiquity.”
- [255](#). Ehrensperger, *Paul and the Dynamics of Power*, 144.
- [256](#). Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 186.
- [257](#). Horsley, *1 Corinthians*, 43, notes that while Paul makes use of standard Hellenistic-Roman oratory in suggesting imitating himself as a model of appropriate moral character, Paul is demonstrating something much more subversive, as he argues that his own character is in utter disrepute and the rubbish of the world.
- [258](#). Wanamaker, *Epistle to the Thessalonians*, 355.
- [259](#). Newbigin famously observes: “the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it” (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227).
- [260](#). Belleville, “Imitate Me,” 126.
- [261](#). Kim, *Theological Introduction*, 112. A complimentary view is held by Gorman (2001, 2015), who sees the role of cruciformity as the *essential* narrative spirituality of Paul. Gorman suggests that this has been Paul’s own experience and therefore he now invites others to participate in following him and thereby engaging in this reality.
- [262](#). Hooker, “Partner in the Gospel,” 100.
- [263](#). Hawthorne, “Imitation of Christ,” 169.
- [264](#). Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 1179–80; also see Fowl, *Dictionary of Paul*, 429.
- [265](#). Oakes, *Philippians*, 105.
- [266](#). Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 310.
- [267](#). Michaelis, “MIMEOMAI, MIMHTHΣ, SYMMIMHTHΣ,” in Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4:666–73.
- [268](#). Barth, *Ephesians 4–6*, 555–56; O’Brien, *Letters to the Ephesians*, 310; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 310–11.
- [269](#). O’Brien, *Letters to the Ephesians*, who follows the more detailed study of Wild, “Be Imitators,” 128–33.
- [270](#). A good summary can be found in Thielman, *Ephesians*, 320.
- [271](#). Clarke, “Be Imitators of Me,” 351.
- [272](#). Stott, *Ephesians*, notes in his commentary that Ephesians expresses the call to become a new society, thereby implying a shift away from a more purely privatized experience of faith.
- [273](#). Kreider, *Patient Ferment of the Early Church*.
- [274](#). Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 130–31.
- [275](#). Hardy and Yarnell, *Forming Multicultural Partnerships*.
- [276](#). Dunn, *Jesus’ Call to Discipleship*, 2

Chapter 5

The Reign of God and Discipleship Formation

Disciples Shaped by the Prophetic Prolepsis of the Future Age[277](#)

BY ANDREW R.

Introduction

Where is the reign of God? Is the reign of God something we can see portrayed in any physical or institutional form that makes up our present experience of life? Is the reign of God something we experience in our churches, in the worship services or in the way church governance is practiced? What is the location of the reign of God in your life experiences? What are the plausibility structures you look to, to inform your understanding of the reign of God? Is the reign of God the influence of your leaders on you or of God on you? How are your beliefs, words, and behaviors influenced so that you know how to subject your life to the reign of God? Who do you look to, to mentor you and to hold you accountable to the beliefs and practices of the Christian life of discipleship as citizens of the kingdom? God's reign is fundamental to Christian discipleship formation and it is based on our faith and confession that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The coming of the reign of God was prophesied by Old Testament prophets like Daniel, and more particularly in the intertestamental apocalyptic literature.[278](#) Paul clearly articulated that no one speaking the name of Christ by the Spirit could curse Jesus, the Lord.[279](#) The reign of Jesus as Lord is based on Christ's real presence in the human soul by his Spirit.[280](#) So where is the kingdom of God for you? How do you bring your life into harmony with the demands of following Jesus the Lord? The kingdom of God is actually an ongoing relationship with God as king who we are subject to in love to trust, obey, and to serve.

Kingdom of God and Discipleship: Plausible or Not?

In the first-century Greco-Roman period, Christianity came to birth in the midst of the plausibility structures that existed in the ancient Near Eastern culture, which made the language and practices of discipleship plausible to most societies of the period.[281](#) Moreover, the language of the kingdom of God fitted within a worldview where kings ruled kingdoms and people saw themselves as subjects of a king and his kingdom. The social location of people, either poor or rich, located them to a large degree as subjects of a king or master somewhere. The plausibility structures of the first-century period were based on accepted norms and values, where people were socially located in positions prescribed to them from

birth. Hence it was plausible to speak of the kingdom of God as God's reign over his people, meaning it was quite natural to believe that God rightly would expect his people to be his subjects to do his will.

Peter Berger discusses the meaning of plausibility structures in the context of the sociology of religions.²⁸² Plausibility structures are to be found among all cultural groups in any given society. They are built within the context of each sociocultural situation, as well as being based on accepted systems of meaning that most of those in a given culture accept as the norms and values, by which they define their lives. Hence they enable them to make sense of the world around them.

People commonly accept standardized meanings that make the structures of their society work well, so that they can live in relative harmony with one another.²⁸³ Plausibility structures include beliefs and meanings that people hold in common and use to define their lives.²⁸⁴ For example, in late modern society, the scientific method is broadly plausible. It has proven results that benefit citizens: such as technology that provides electricity to homes and devices like televisions. Hence late modern people trust that science provides some well-tested things that they can rely on.

Plausibility structures are based to some degree on realistic expectations that people in society have confidence in, because they work. But not just any old idea has plausibility. Those things that have some broadly accepted norms in law, customs, and social structures act as a kind of social glue, if they have a proven and accepted track record that works quite well.²⁸⁵ Hence in postmodern Western society, the metanarrative that the Christian faith and belief in God was normative for the people of a Christendom age, is no longer accepted as normative for the majority of late modern people.²⁸⁶ The new plausibility structure is that all claims to truth, whoever makes them, Christians, atheists, Muslims etc. are relative. No one thing can be properly called truth, but any number of things might be plausible. So are there no longer any plausibility structures?

One way of answering this is that the prevailing plausibility structure of late modernity is based on relative partial truths. Hence it is harder to convince people of a realm where God reigns supreme, based on his love for the world in a place called heaven, as an absolute setting above all lesser realms. This is because there is less room for absolutes, or absolute beings in a late modern person's plausibility structure. Moreover, a lack of belief in the creation of the world by divine fiat undermines the potential to understand the world to be created by God for a purpose that underpins its reason and purpose for existence.

Can any realm dreamt of by the imagination, artifice, or religious conviction of humankind rightly be thought of as absolute? The French philosopher Derrida deconstructed the structured world of modernity, seeking to demonstrate that structured views of the world were constructed from the perspective of the viewer, rather than by it being possible to find one singular absolute structure all could describe in the same manner.²⁸⁷ Hence late modern people who accept this view no longer accept absolute truths.

In the case of discipleship formation and the kingdom of God, postmodern people do not readily understand terms like these any more. Discipleship and the kingdom do not relate to the liberal democracies late modern people enjoy, where individuals have the right to form their own beliefs and to live as they see fit. By way of comparison, in the first-century world, discipleship was an accepted norm that was to be found throughout the antique cultures. It was accepted that there were masters who had understood the world alright. It was the role of the less experienced disciple to learn the exact arts that the masters expertly wielded.

In the Hebrew Bible we find the word *talmid* used once to refer to a pupil/learner.²⁸⁸ A disciple is the rarest of subjects in the Old Testament, in terms of actual nomenclature. *Talmid* comes from the Hebrew verb *lamad*, which means “to learn.” Hence in Isaiah 8:16; 50:4; and 54:13, *limmud* was used as a substantive participle, meaning “one who is taught.” The scarcity of the direct use of words for disciple in the Old Testament is notable. To what extent were people disciplined given the rarity of the term during the time of Israel? One answer is to recognize that for the Jewish mind, God was rightly to be thought of as king. Moving to the Jewish Talmud, *talmid* can be found more copiously in this later collection of documents, although not written in the first century. They are considered to reach back to the time of Christ in terms of preservation of a memory of discipleship practices, that are thought to have existed in Jesus’ lifetime.²⁸⁹ Scholars accept that they broadly provide an authentic nomenclature that spoke to the more common rabbi-disciple relationship attested to in the gospels.²⁹⁰

When we consider the gospels, we find the word “disciple” (Greek *mathetes*) used sixty-eight times in Matthew, forty-four times in Mark, seventy-four times in Luke, seventy-three times in John, and twenty-eight times in Acts. Taken in the context of the broader Greco-Roman culture, that Christianity found itself winning Gentile converts among, the term “disciple” was particularly relevant to the common practices used to apprentice younger adults to take on responsibilities in civil society. The copious use of discipleship, where a master-teacher would have followers who were subject to him until they had mastered his teaching, was intrinsic to the plausibility structures that helped Greco-Roman society function.

Hence being a disciple of the messianic king, made Jesus followers disciples of the kingdom. Once disciples had mastered the teaching of their master, they would then take on disciples of their own. These disciples would learn in the same manner as their new masters once had with theirs. Jesus the Master passed on to his disciples the principles of how to equip followers, to be able to make yet new followers under the reign of God. The Pauline and other epistles use the term less copiously, however, the language of discipleship is implied in other ways.²⁹¹

How can we use the terminology “disciple” and “discipleship” in the context of late modern individualistic society, when it is not a commonly accepted social norm? How can the language of Lord as God, one worthy of worship, be grasped in a society where each individual has their own perceived right to determine their destinies?

The question of the relevance of the terms disciple and discipleship (and kingdom and kingship) raises important concerns for the authors of this book, given that it is quite possible that the use of the terminology of “discipleship” is simply not valid in a late modern liberal society. Liberal democracy values individualism, niche market economic forces, and relativity, where free market forces to some extent are permitted to reign. Davison Hunter discusses Berger’s critique of the value of any one given plausibility structure and its jargon in the late modern context:

The first dynamic has to do with the transformation of what Peter Berger calls “plausibility structures.” In Berger’s view, ideas and beliefs are not merely the province of intellect and will. There is, rather, a dialectic between consciousness and social structure. In his formulation, strong and consistent belief, therefore, presupposes strong and stable social support. Yet the intensive form of pluralism generated by modernity not only means that any shared culture thinned out by virtue of the sustained presence of multiple cultures, it also means that the plausibility structures that provide the social support are also fragmented and weakened. In the end, strong belief and conviction cannot be sustained by fragile plausibility structures. Uncertainty is imposed upon us because no belief is protected from the claims of alternative beliefs; no conviction is left unchallenged by other equally held convictions.²⁹²

Berger’s critique of plausibility structures, no longer being stable units in civil society, is suggestive of a solution to the view that says there is now only one plausibility structure left, i.e., individualism that determines the destiny of each person. It is all down to personal choice and taste. Late modern youth and young adults hold many different beliefs in tension in the melting pot of a multicultural pluralistic Western society. They do this under the rubric of democratic liberalism. The thinly disguised veil of democratic stability in Western society is itself a plausibility structure, which only functions by virtue of it sustaining the many and variable outlooks on life held by people in its pluralistic society. It will continue to function as long as the sovereign God and public opinion welcomes this sense of relativistic outlooks on life, which are considered a stable part of late modern social norms and values.

As long as late modern people approve of each other having the freedom to define their lives and beliefs for themselves, it would seem that this approved relativistic culture is actually a kind of plausibility structure, which is accepted as part of postmodern culture. This freedom to choose one’s identity means that a variety of subcategories of plausibility structures exist in Western society, of which not all will be just as strong or weak (for that matter) as other structures.

This in turn means that not all structures offer the same level of plausibility compared to other options on the table. Berger seems overly pessimistic in his assessment that people will therefore no longer affirm beliefs that make more sense to them than other competing claims to plausibility. In actuality there seems to be a highly suggestive interest in spiritual matters

among young adults.²⁹³

It is not a given that Berger is correct that because “no conviction is left unchallenged by other equally held convictions,” that it follows that people will not choose to embrace a plausibility structure that provides a metanarrative that can offer structure and accountability to their lives. After all, many Christians do, as do many Muslims and those from other world religions. It does not need to follow that Berger is correct to assert that, “in the end, strong belief and conviction cannot be sustained by fragile plausibility structures.”

A structure that offers certainty, in the midst of such a disintegration of “convictions” could itself be plausible, if it offers a credible, sustainable, and realistic hermeneutic for life, which can also be confirmed through phenomenological experiences, such as an experience of the real presence of Jesus might offer. It is not the task of this book to discuss what went wrong during Christendom, as other books in this series trace that well for us.²⁹⁴ Christendom’s plausibility structure was considered too confining to an emerging liquid modernity.²⁹⁵ The solidity of Christendom modernity was that it had become static, not open to the future prolepsis of the coming kingdom, or a powerful experience of the real presence of Jesus’ Spirit.

Cray has argued strongly that in the context of the pluralistic unravelling of certainty, found in late modernity, that the church can offer a strong, rich, and stable community for people to find plausibility within. However, it has to be far more open to creativity and the ongoing creation of the future kingdom of God. It needs to be based on a very different kind of plausibility structure than that found during Christendom. This difference is not necessarily perceived by those in traditional churches, which still try to live as if the church still held a central role in society and culture. Cray subversively comments:

The church is not for church. It does not exist for itself. It exists to embody God’s purposes for his creation. That may involve actions and statements which can be seen as negative, but they will always have a positive purpose. The most pathological condition a church can reach is when all its energies are taken up with its own maintenance and survival. “Churches are occupied with an obsessive struggle just to repeat the past, to survive or to offer shelter from the storm. . . . Nevertheless, God’s intention for the fulfilment of the whole creation is always the church’s horizon.” This is a pathological condition, because it is precisely the opposite to our calling. “The church does more than merely point to a reality beyond itself. By virtue of its participation in the life of God, it is not only a sign and instrument, but also a genuine foretaste of God’s Kingdom, called to show forth visibly, in the midst of history, God’s final purposes for humankind.”

That is very scary. It is far from most Christians’ understanding of the church. It is a long way from the reality of many churches I know. But that is the most biblical statement about the purpose of the church that I have found. “The church is called to show forth visibly, in the midst of history, God’s final purposes for humankind.”²⁹⁶

The key is to participate in the experienced life of the Trinity that is the life and energy of the missional church. To some extent during Christendom the Western church considered its mission finished in the West, and locked away the power of the Spirit of Christ, confining it in its power structures, which among other things disempowered the laity to often become mere liturgical observers. However, it is not to be taken that there were not strong movements within Western society that acted in missional ways.

The Wesleyan Methodist movement had a strong focus on the laboring class and the poor, as well as among some of the aristocracy.²⁹⁷ Their schools and societies are well known to have had a strong discipleship ethos and values.²⁹⁸ The evangelical zeal of this movement not only brought some degree of revival to the people in the time of the Wesleys,²⁹⁹ but also in the generations that followed with the world missions movement of the nineteenth century. Other examples could be provided. When the Christian community functions by participating in God's mission, to reconcile a fragmented society made up of disparate communities, every ordinary member can reconnect with the phenomenological life force of the Spirit of Jesus. In terms of this present late modern period it is hoped people will start to look to the real presence of Jesus to transform their lives.

Not a Return to Christendom

The goal of shaping late modern disciples will not be to seek to return to a restrictive Christendom culture, where control of the faithful by a professional clergy might disempower them from exercising their missional priesthood. The priesthood of all believers may also be articulated to include every member ministry, where every believer can act as ministers of Christ in their everyday life contexts. This will also mean that the diverse cultural groups of Western society will need to be disciplined. Disciples who come from the rich tapestry of our multicultural society could help to model what the future kingdom will look like to their peers, where all peoples will be gathered to worship around God's throne.³⁰⁰ A diverse multicultural expression of God's rich and diverse reality is a more fitting goal for people made in his creative image. A diverse world of intercultural expressions in the Christian community is to be found on our doorsteps in the West.³⁰¹ Newbigin pointed the missional church toward God's goal,³⁰² which is well expressed in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians:

He [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.³⁰³

The church is really an outpost of the continuing in-breaking of the reign of God, where people are Christ's hands and feet sent to serve the world.³⁰⁴ This is a powerful kind of sacramental theology. Christians should have no difficulty in recognizing that the vision of the reign of God over a renewed earth is the goal of human history.³⁰⁵ Therefore, central to

any faith-based plausibility structure we might embrace, is the love of God that calls each of us to seek to partner together to enrich the world, based on the creative diversity of our numerous cultures working together, in participation with the Spirit of Jesus.

The Christian community needs to provide an alternative vision of what it looks like when multicultural believers seek to participate in creative harmony together.³⁰⁶ The ancient approach of discipleship formation may not be plausible to a late modern society that distrusts subjection of one individual to another, but it can inform our lives as we learn to trust each other enough, to be open to the perspectives of others. In this case our perspectives on life may be transformed, if we allow ourselves to converse with others who are not from our preferred subculture.

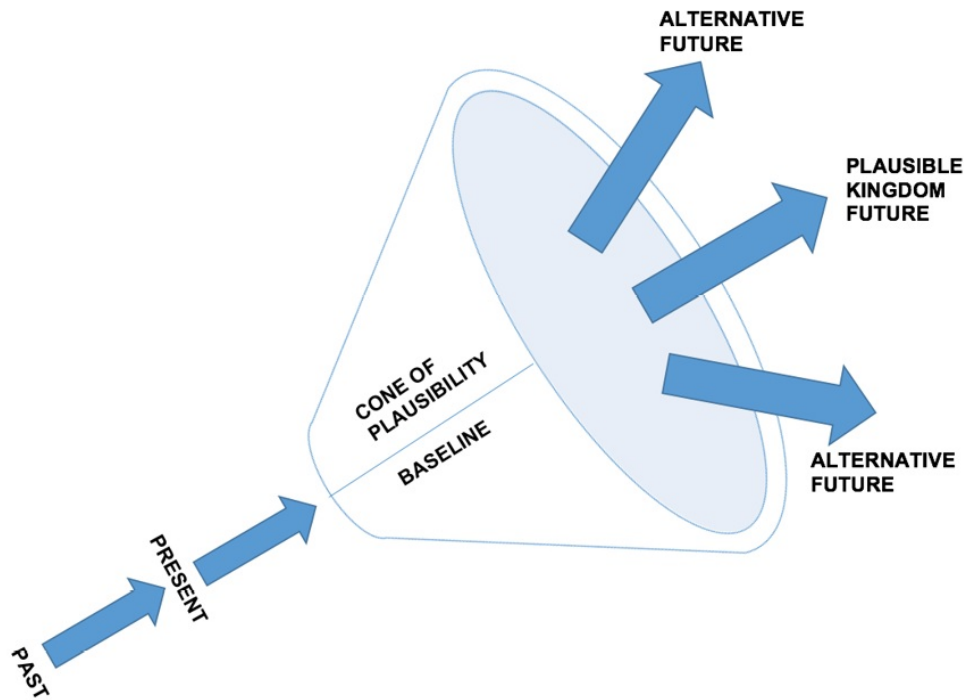
Authentic Discipleship Based on Reciprocal Mentoring

We must be careful not to assume that subjection is only in one direction, i.e., of the less developed disciple (or mentee) becoming subject to a more developed mentor, or discipler. A reciprocal mentoring approach can be very effective to help develop the capacities of parties engaged in equal-power mentoring relationships.

These are mutual mentoring approaches, where two or three people agree to help hold each other accountable. Mentoring may be one way of contextualizing discipleship to the people of late modernity. It is quite plausible for young professionals, or potential future leaders, academics, social activists etc. to take on mentors.³⁰⁷

A Plausibility Structure for Mentoring

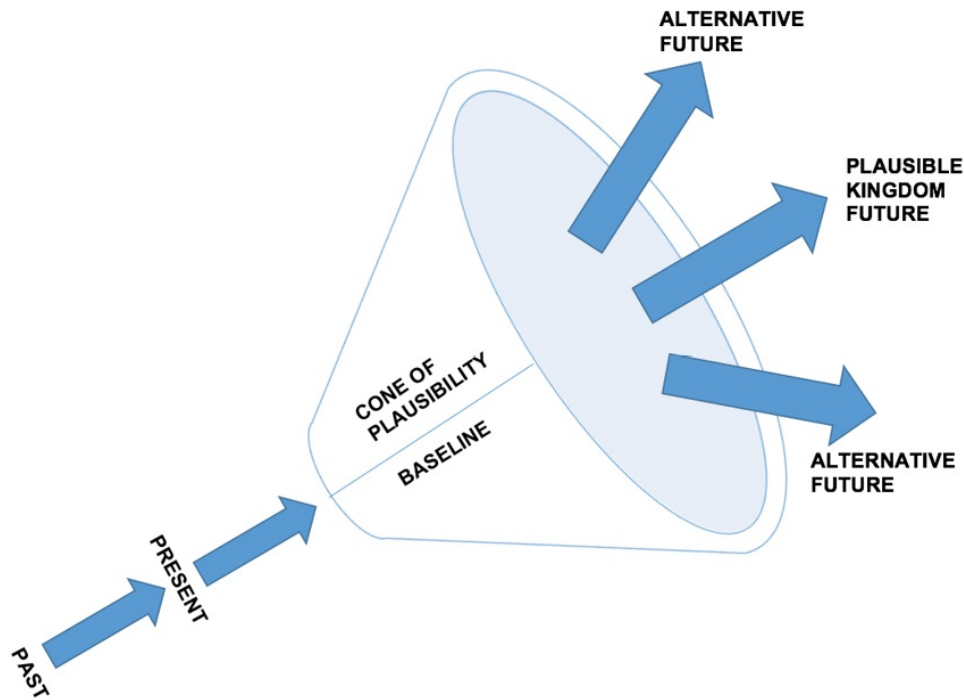
In the diagram below we may seek to understand the basis to any disciple-making strategy, whatever nomenclature we choose to articulate it. This can be done by considering some core components of the Christian plausibility structure (of course different church traditions represent variances in such a structure).



The “cone of plausibility” locates the mentor and mentee (mentee / the reciprocal mentoring relationship) in the *present*. People construct what is plausible to them in terms of their life experiences that largely unconsciously shape their outlooks on the world. Good experiences have become a buzzword category in late modernity. Did you enjoy it? Was it a good experience? Do you think I would enjoy it? The real presence of Jesus may be termed the basis to an abundant Christian life. It is thought of as a powerful presence according to Acts 1:8. The experience of Christ’s reality as a deeply felt presence in the human psyche is often fundamental to many Christian accounts of what convicts them to continue in their faith journeys. To come to know God must be part of an abundant life and good experience.

Any account of a person’s present plausibility structure has to start in the context of present experiences, even if at times our present experiences cause us to struggle. People still base their assessments of what to try out next, based on *past* memories and how these might inform *present* life decisions. For example, our convictions help motivate our decisions to act. If someone has no experience of a *past* spiritual experience with Christ that feels normative, then it goes without saying they need to experience him in the present, in order to make any kind of assessment of whether he is real and plausible.

It is hard to imagine someone wanting to be mentored to help them explore the Christian life, if they do not have an experience of the reality of the living Christ. The starting point has to begin much further back. The question is how might people encounter Christ? The argument of a later chapter will be that Christians need to incarnate alongside people in their social and personal zones. Friendship will be the starting point to any opportunity to introduce someone to Christ. Assuming that such friendships move on to someone having a personal encounter with the living Christ leading to their conversion, then there will still be the challenge of helping them to construct their own plausibility structure.



Any consideration where we see ourselves as having a plausible *future* as a follower of Christ, needs to be constructed on the basis of the Christian story. The Christian story aims to shape our identities and outlooks on life based on a history (a *past*) that we accept as a foundation. There first needs to be an acceptance of the historical *past* revelation of the foundations to the story of Christ, as our eternal savior.

This comes from Scripture and a belief in its value as testimony deserving of trust. Hence the revelation from the past is the first *baseline* of a Christian discipleship formation approach. The second *baseline* for discipleship, must be an authentic continuing encounter with the real presence of Christ. This encounter will have a young *past* memory for a new believer, but fragile, or powerful, that it might feel, it is the foundation for a new kind of *past* memory, that will form the basis of the *present* experience and a vision for the *future*. The *future* will need to be prepared for based on the learning of sustainable spiritual practices, that keep the disciple in intimate communion with God. Moreover, it will need to be based on the historic deposit of the Christian faith, of the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming of Jesus Christ. The foundations to Christian belief need to be built on the person of the living Lord, who is still actively *present* with his followers.

The historic deposit of the Christian faith becomes part of the experience of new believers' faith, as they continue to experience the real presence of Christ as a firm foundation for a sustainable *future* life journey. Why all this emphasis on experience and real presence? It is because postmodern people seek genuine experiences that make a difference to their lives. The church after Christendom fails them if it does not mentor them, helping them to develop these. Of course this requires Christian mentors who have these experiences and know how to maintain them in an intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus.

The *cone of plausibility* is important. The continuing presence of Christ with his followers, and his historic reality, are set against a *baseline* that includes three things. First, it casts a

vision of the *future*, for the convert to now see themselves as a part of God's eternal reign, as an ongoing experience of life from now into the future. Second, it sets out the *implications* of living in an obedient trust-based relationship, modeling one's life on that of the example of Christ. Third, it needs to be realistic about *alternative futures* that a life in Christ calls a person to embrace, compared to a life that might be shaped by a materialistic and individualistic outlook. Christ remains the only sure way for an eternal *future* with God. People seem to have eternity in their hearts and want a meaningful future. The gospels depict how Jesus called his first followers to count the cost of following him.³⁰⁸ Part of this evaluation was to consider which *future* they wanted. Would it be one where they followed Christ as the sole arbiter of their destinies or some other route. This counting of cost will always be an important criterion of discipleship formation, which cannot be minimized.³⁰⁹

Any discipleship formation strategy that is prudent in its approach needs to challenge the person with the claims of Christ on their lives. This includes helping them to count the cost of following him. Being clear about these three loci in the cone of plausibility is essential to help a disciple to be clear about the boundaries of their Christian *plausibility* structure. Life outside of some important defining Christian beliefs and practices, however well they might be contextualized, would not represent a Christian life. It is important to be clear what these are.

It is when we are not clear about a vision of the future, where God's reign will become the one reality to define the plausible, that we may lose the sense of purpose needed to prepare for the life of that *future*. The concept of realized eschatology suggests that Jesus inaugurated the reign of God in the present world, and that believers are part of it already, although it is still to be fully consummated at the eschaton.³¹⁰ The final establishment of the kingdom will end all other contender claims to plausibility.³¹¹ Disciples after Christendom are best shaped and formed by a vision of the *future and how it calls them to be shaped in readiness for it*.³¹² If it is not part of discipleship formation, then we will not really develop disciples who are preparing to become citizens of the eternal kingdom, by living subject to God's reign now. In other words, we need to teach them to live the life of the future in the present.³¹³

Prophetic Shaping of the Eschatological Community of Disciples

Jesus acted as a prophet during his earthly existence. This recognition has been substantiated by a number of New Testament scholars.³¹⁴ His ministry may be said to have encompassed more than the prophetic, as he was a rabbi and healer, too. With particular reference to Jesus prophetic ministry, attention needs to be given to the vital role that prophetic parables played in his discipleship formation practices, as a means to help disciples consider what made it important to follow him. The parables about the *future* final establishment of the kingdom of God aimed to create a vision of a plausible *future*, that was meant to inform the disciple's *present* plausibility structure.³¹⁵ A good example is the eschatological parable of the Sheep

and the Goats found in Matthew 25:31–40:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”³¹⁶

This parable has often been taken to refer to the final judgment of the nations.³¹⁷ The criteria for a positive or negative outcome to the judgment for the participants in the parable’s narrative world will be based on whether they have been engaged in the mission of Christ among the marginalized.³¹⁸ The implication of the parable is that the Son of Man is, in a mystical spiritual sense, present with the outcasts of society during the present age.³¹⁹ The failure of his people to discern the work of God’s Spirit on the margins of society in the present age, counts as not being where Christ is at work. If we have the Spirit of Christ, an implication might be we will be where Christ’s Spirit is at work. Hence spiritual discernment of the mission of God is vital.³²⁰ There is indeed much more that we could discuss related to this parable on an ethical and missiological level, which will not be possible to fully address in what follows. The real point is to understand the role of parables as proleptic prophecy in Jesus’ disciple-making strategy.

This parable of the *future* is projected back into the *present*, not only for the disciples who were being addressed by the story, or for the Christian community who later received Matthew’s gospel, in the first-century period. It is also projected *back* into the *present* for each of us to reflect on. The role of this parable was not to manipulate God’s people into doing their duty among the poor, but it was rather a means to help them reflect on the depth of their love for God, which could be expressed as love for the marginalized. How might God’s love create capacities in the believer’s heart to have God’s love for the marginalized and outcasts? In other words, it is asking us to make an ontological assessment of our own heart condition.

Ontology calls us to think carefully about the ground principles to human being at the

deepest level. What does it mean for us to be conscious of our own existence as disciple's of Christ? What is the nature of our Christian consciousness? Without digging into the depths of philosophical ontology at this stage, it would seem fair to say that Jesus calls us to consider the level of our consciousness of his love, compassion, and presence among the marginalized in our societies.³²¹ This parable of the *future* sets a benchmark standard to measure our *present* heart condition with reference to it. The ethos and values of the *future* eternal kingdom, brought by the divine time machine into the present, needs to help us to develop a deeper consciousness and awareness of God's love for the weak and vulnerable in our *present* contexts, where believers might engage in missional ministry to outcasts.³²² This deep kind of love is needed as part of what it means for a disciple to become like Christ.

It helps to shape present-day followers of Christ to take on the ethos and values of the kingdom of God, projected from the *future* into the present. It shapes the disciple's plausibility structure of what it means to be an authentic follower of Christ, who is challenged to engage in similar practices of love and compassion, which the Spirit of the Lord is already ahead of the church doing in a tragically fallen world.³²³

The very nature of Christ's love, defined for us in this parable, is that we make ourselves vulnerable and open to each new person's situation that we are confronted by. We might ask ourselves often, "How can I see the compassionate face of Christ in this person in this situation?" To develop this capacity, we need to learn how to give compassion in a dignified way to those in need,³²⁴ by learning how to receive help from our peers as they help us in our vulnerabilities in a dignified manner. We ourselves need to be able to identify our need for rescue from our own self-made prisons, so that we might learn how to help those we meet who are imprisoned by situations beyond their control or fathoming.

The foundation to the eternal kingdom is the recognition that we are all poor and vulnerable in Christ's sight.³²⁵ Enrichment comes from serving others and allowing ourselves to be open to being served.³²⁶ We ourselves are wounded healers,³²⁷ who can learn to know how to offer help that leads to healing because we have had our own wounds healed. If we know what it feels like to be helped in our weakness, then we may become more sensitized to helping others in theirs. This parable of the *future* was provided by Jesus to help disciples deeply evaluate the quality of their relationship with God, and with those that God continues to suffer alongside. Like Christ, the wounded healer, we might help others in their time of need just as we have been humble enough to call for aid ourselves. This parable is based on a prolepsis (anticipation) of the future age. It places value on genuine sacrificial activist love, that authentically seeks to help the outcasts of society.

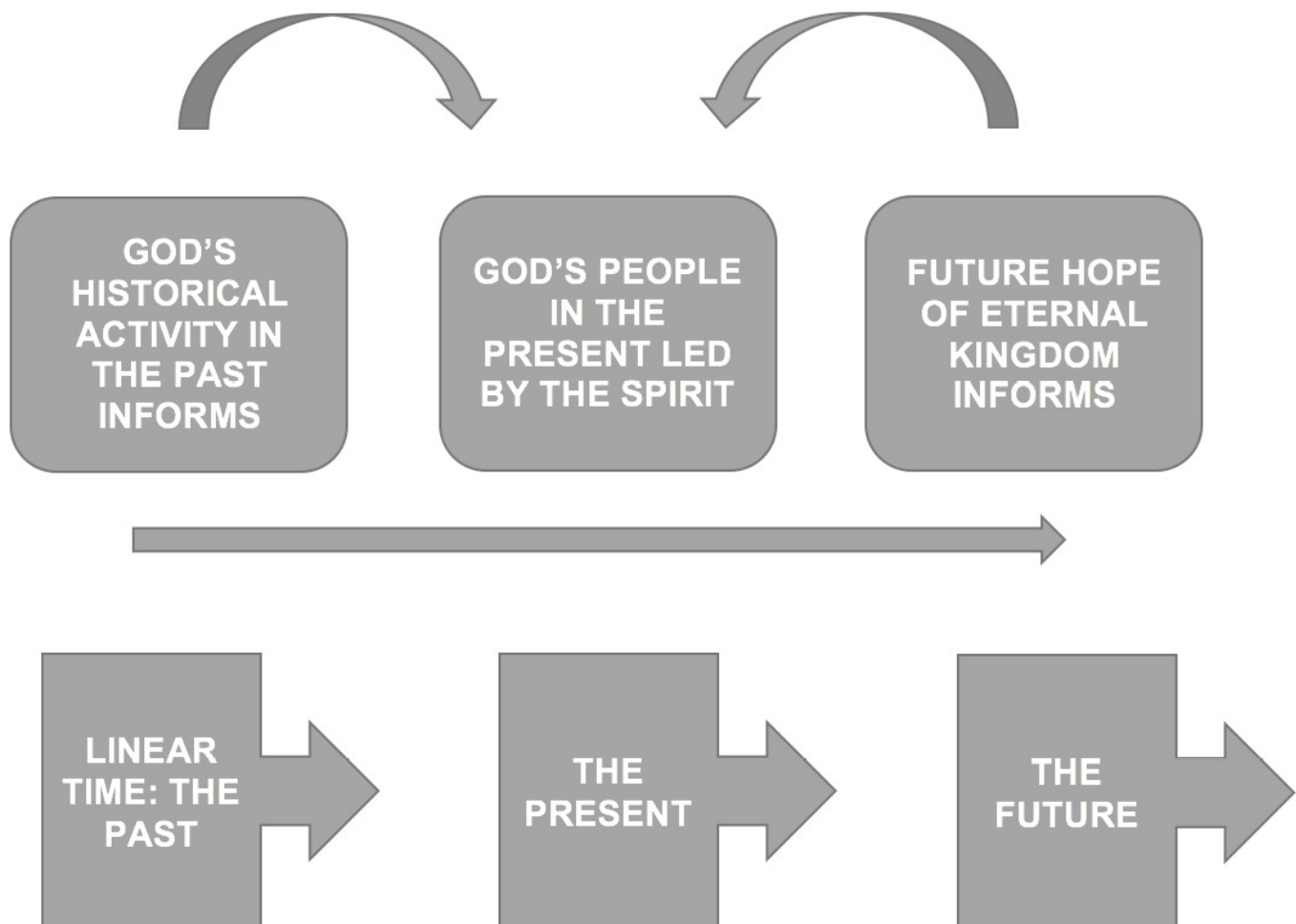
The Nature of Prophetic Prolepsis

Prophetic prolepsis was a common device used in the context of first-century Judaism.³²⁸ Prophecies of the future, like those of Matthew 25, were told to project the *future* back into the *present*. We might attempt to use a contemporary popular analogy by referring to Dr. Who's

Tardis. When Christ uttered his parables of the *future* it is as if he transported the disciples into the *future*, so that this *future* might inform their *present* and their preparation for the *future* age.

Prolepsis has to do with an anticipation of the *future* in the light of which a person evaluates their *present* moral or spiritual condition.³²⁹ It constructs the follower of Christ's plausibility structure. It aims to propel the disciple to participate with the Spirit of Christ in establishing his reign of liberation in the present world. We pray, "Your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."³³⁰ Wright has argued that God is already king of the earth and his reign is in a process of ongoing in-breaking.³³¹ The goal is not to create a negative future vision where people fear that they become part of a lost category of goats (the damned).³³² To emphasize this would be to miss the real matter under consideration in the parable, which is positive, in that it calls us to become people of compassion following the Spirit of Christ to work among the marginalized.

It is the aim of this parable to transform people of faith in the *present*, to take on positive qualities desirable for the *future* age, as they are inspired to discern the pre-ecclesial work of the Spirit of Christ ahead of the church.³³³ The diagram below depicts prophetic prolepsis for us.



More Examples of Parables of Prolepsis

It may prove helpful for the reader to spend a few minutes reflecting on two other parables found in Matthew ²⁵, to consider some of the challenges they might raise for us, for our churches, or for our approaches to missional ministry in our neighborhoods. One thing worth deep reflection is that the Holy Spirit may be said to be at work ahead of the church, preparing people on the margins of society in our neighborhoods to hear the gospel message. But they will need real help at every level. Christian conversion requires us to dig deeply into our pockets, to often pay a high price to shape people. Conversion is the work of a lifetime. We will need to invest deeply in the lives of those God calls us to walk alongside. They must not become dependent on us, but we need to help to empower them to find the resources on offer to them in Christ to provide for all their needs.³³⁴

A Tale of Ten Young Women

The parable of the ten young women found in Matthew ^{25:1–13} has been speculated on from numerous angles. One angle is what does it have to say about the real motives and values of these young women. It is of course important not to interpret a parable to mean something not part of its original context. However, in the culture of the period there were certain expectations of family and friends who attended a wedding. In the culture of the period, being prepared was a sign of honor and respect to the groom and his family.³³⁵ The bridegroom, probably a representation of Christ, informs those who were not ready for his arrival. The closure of the door to the feast implied they were not acceptable for admittance. The words “I do not know you” to five of the young women are indeed troubling. What is going on here? What does this parable project back to us about how we should prepare for the messianic wedding banquet?

Overall the parable repeats other calls in Matthew ²⁴ for the believer to watch and to be ready.³³⁶ This seems to represent the need for an expectant attitude in the context of the coming final establishment of the kingdom of God.³³⁷ It could be argued that the real issue of this parable is not the lack of practical preparation of the “foolish” young women, but their lack of relational preparation. The kind of not knowing of the five foolish young women (by the groom) involved in this parable, could relate to a relational lack of intimacy and active interest in those matters most important to the Lord’s heart, i.e., the preparation for the wedding banquet of the kingdom.

The bridegroom is the Messiah.³³⁸ The messianic banquet is related to Christ’s marriage to the people of his church.³³⁹ In the apocalyptic language of Revelation ^{19:6–9}, those who are part of the eschatological wedding feast of the “Lamb” are those who have “made” themselves “ready.”³⁴⁰ The language of apocalyptic is being used in Matthew chapters ²⁴ and ²⁵.³⁴¹ It is therefore appropriate to mine this story from the hermeneutical perspective of the apocalyptic genre. In other words, related to the parable of the ten young women, we

might challenge ourselves to evaluate our lives in the context of becoming ready to be part of Christ's eternal people.

We may also learn more by considering Revelation 14:1–6. It presents a group that have prepared themselves by becoming pure and chaste as they follow Christ (the Lamb). In terms of biblical symbolism, this means putting Christ before all others and having an ongoing committed relationship with him.³⁴² Hence the prolepsis of this passage may pose questions something like this, in anticipation of the coming wedding: “Is planning for the eternal wedding day of Christ the most important thing I am focused on?” “Do I share in his love and passion to prepare others as well?” At the heart of this anticipated wedding invitation is another simple question, “Do I really know Christ in such a way that he is everything to me?” Those who do not enter are those he does not “know.” It may be suggested they do not enter because they really did not want to know him. This is of course a contextualization and theologization of a parable that may not have had this background meaning to it.

Three Investors

According to Matthew 25:14–30, three persons were given the wealth of their master to invest. They were advised to invest it wisely through active participation in pursuing their master's business. When the master returns, he rewards each according to their work. The servant who is rebuked for not investing is also not retained in the master's affairs. This is because he did not trust his master's reputation, by actively investing on his behalf in his name. In other words, the main point of this parable is one of lack of trust and commitment to the master, as well as a lack of trust in the master's reputation.³⁴³ However, what is the investment that each of them make?

Chenoweth argues that it does not have to do with how believers use their abilities for the Lord, but rather it is how they invest the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.³⁴⁴ It has to do with them faithfully increasing the knowledge of the open secret of the reign of God to all those who will listen and accept it. In this sense, it may be argued that the investment has to do with the degree of conscious personal investment by being faithful to God and by putting the values of his love for the world into active missional practices, among those who do not as yet know the secret. In a sense, as I have suggested in the case of all three of the proleptic parables of Matthew 25, the fundamental issue is, do disciples follow the Lord based on a passionate love for him, as well as a passionate love for those that he cares for? The parables are calling for us to assess ourselves in the light of our love for God and our love for those he loves.

In the case of the parable of the sheep and the goats, do we really love the marginalized enough to sacrifice our need for comfort and an easy life to rather be where the Lord is by his Spirit among them? In the case of the parable of the ten young women, do we love Christ the Groom and his bride, i.e., his people, including lost and found alike? In the case of the parable of the talents, do we love the open secret of the reign of God enough to faithfully share it with the world? None of these are meant to be moral judgments, but rather to act as

ways to evaluate what we value. This is the value of proleptic prophecy of this type. It helps us to keep sharp and focused in our love and faithful service to the Lord, one another, and the world he has called us to make other missional disciples within.

A disciple is called to invest, not based on their own reputation or ability to obtain results,³⁴⁵ but rather to trust the master's unseen, but real, power to obtain the results he wants through his servants.³⁴⁶ In terms of the prolepsis of the parable of the three investors, the question we may want to ask ourselves is, "Do I really trust what the Lord has called me to do for him by the way I focus on my life's work?" We may also query, "How am I investing my life's resources, talents, and gifts to serve the Lord?" "In what ways are they focused on Christ's mission rather than on other agendas not related to the matters of God's kingdom?" Once more, this parable is one that calls for us to evaluate ourselves in the light of the anticipated future.

Are we really in love with the Lord so much that we trust his ability to help us to participate in his mission? Are we intentionally focused on getting results that he will recognize as a real desire on our part to be part of his household and its business? This is not as such a theology of works, but rather an ontological assessment of what we really believe and value. Actually it is an ontological assessment of the love we have for Christ and his interests. This is the most important point. God's household and business affairs are based on valuing and loving God first, and our neighbors as ourselves.³⁴⁷ Valuing the business of God will be evident to us as much as it will to the Lord.³⁴⁸

The Missional Prophetic Voice

The Old Testament people of God found the earliest expression of their theological formation and identity in the stories of the patriarchs.³⁴⁹ Indeed specific reference begins with Abraham.³⁵⁰ It is interesting that God's call to Abraham was one that required a journey to a land prophetically promised to his ancestors,³⁵¹ which required that he follow the guidance of the Lord to reach it.³⁵² In an important way Abraham's life story of trust and active response to the Lord's prophetically delivered vision for his people, is informative to how we might discern the pre-ecclesial work of the Spirit ahead of the church in broader society. He is a kind of prototype disciple, who Paul quite rightly calls attention to in Romans 4 to model Christian life on.³⁵³ His kind of faith is to be similar to the faith of those who faithfully seek to follow God.³⁵⁴

Abraham does not himself possess the so-called promised land he is directed to by the Lord. His journey is one based on a prolepsis of the prophetic future promise. He lives in anticipation of that future.³⁵⁵ It is not Abraham but rather his offspring who will inhabit it. This future land is now in the process of forming, as we seek to join with the Spirit in reclaiming secular space for the reign of God in the present. Reclaiming secular space does not imply that God is not sovereign. He is even Lord there, if we are to take the Old

Testament prophetic focus of the Lord's sovereign rule over nations seriously.³⁵⁶ However, in the in-between-times period, between the arrival of the eschaton and now, Newbigin reminds us that we are to seek to participate with the Spirit, at work ahead of the church, in bringing about the reign of God.³⁵⁷ Temporary that secular structures might be, God seeks to transform them in participation with his people.³⁵⁸ The ultimate goal is for heaven to be on earth.³⁵⁹ Missional disciples need to inform themselves that despite appearances that might indicate something different, the Lord is sovereign and he reigns even in secular society. The proleptic nature of missional prophecy here reminds us, as the book of Daniel does (2:40–45), that the Lord ultimately will remove all other contenders to power and he will instead reign. However the Lord does not simply act in judgment, he is patient, wishing to give all a chance to repent.³⁶⁰

God's way is to win hearts and minds by his love and mercy, lived out by those of us who seek to prophetically discern what the Spirit of Christ is doing ahead of the church among the people of secular society. Missional disciples are called to be prophets of mercy, who will need to live with the hope of the proleptically revealed future age of the kingdom of God, as the vision that inspires them to action.

It is part of our cone of plausibility that needs to inform our present participation in God's mission, to reclaim all spaces, places, and peoples to live under that reign.³⁶¹ Inge discusses the great importance of place and space to the missional work of the Lord.³⁶² God called his people to live with the consciousness that they have a special eternal destiny. He has a place, a space, his coming kingdom, which will mean his visible reign over the whole earth at the eschaton.³⁶³ This is the basic triangulation of God's tripartite mission which underpins all of Scripture and the whole mission of God.

We are called to remind secular society that the Creator owns all places and spaces, and that mankind has been called to steward it and to serve it, rather than to abuse it and to oppress it and its peoples and creatures. Abraham's story informs us that we need to trust and be obedient as faithful disciples awaiting the arrival of the promised but not yet realized future. This future will include the transformation of all unjust structures and domination systems.³⁶⁴

It required Abraham to leave the comfortable inheritance of his earthly father's homeland, so that he might receive an inheritance that is ultimately to be for all of God's people.³⁶⁵ This also meant leaving behind old ways of doing things, and rather embracing a God who did things in fresh creative new ways in order to restore his creation. Of course there is provision on the way, but the inheritance is always calling Christ's followers to keep on seeking the reign of God, in each new place where they participate with his Spirit in reclaiming it for God. This so that it might be based on God's values system, love, and power to recreate and renew it.³⁶⁶ We are called by the proleptic future kingdom forward, already anticipated in the life of Christ, to participate with the Spirit to call it forth in each place and

space we incarnate in, as the mobile missional body of Christ the liberator. Christ is a liberator and so are his followers, as they call yet others to embrace the Spirit of Christ the liberator at work among them. The world is heading toward the goal of the mission of God. The local missional church and its disciples are the hermeneutic of the gospel as Newbigin claimed.³⁶⁷

In terms of Jesus' disciples, they followed the incarnate Lord, who was physically present to guide them on their journey. In the case of Abraham, there was a revelation and manifestation of God's prophetic guidance as a direct communication with Abraham at important junctures in his journey.³⁶⁸ In the case of the disciples, they had the incredible privilege of regularized contact with the incarnate Lord. He was present in a physical way, which compared to Abraham, God was not. In the case of contemporary disciples, we need to prophetically and proleptically discern where God is calling us to participate in mission alongside him. Newbigin suggested that we need to prophetically and proleptically gesture through our communities, a foretaste of the future life of love, grace, forgiveness, and mutual service to those around us.³⁶⁹ Missional communities like this will inevitably be countercultural and subversive, as we cannot live with the same kind of values that drive late modern individualistic human society in the West. This indeed calls for a radical reassessment of our values as missional disciples after Christendom.

²⁷⁷. *Prolepsis* means "anticipation."

²⁷⁸. Davies, "Apocalyptic," in Rogerson and Lieu, *Oxford Handbook*, 397–419.

²⁷⁹. 1 Cor 12:3.

²⁸⁰. 2 Cor 14:1–5.

²⁸¹. Vaage, "An Other Home," 741–61; Longenecker, *Patterns of Discipleship*, chs. 1–3.

²⁸². Davison, "Fundamentalism and Relativism Together," in Berger, *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism*, 25.

²⁸³. Feddes, *Missional Apologetics*.

²⁸⁴. Ibid.

²⁸⁵. Sim, *Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, 80–84.

²⁸⁶. Ibid.

²⁸⁷. Barker, *Cultural Studies*, 84.

²⁸⁸. 1 Chr 28:8.

²⁸⁹. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, chs. 1–3, develops this line of thinking.

²⁹⁰. Ibid.

²⁹¹. Ibid.

²⁹². Davison Hunter, "Fundamentalism and Relativism Together," in Berger, *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism*, 25.

²⁹³. Drane, *Do Christians Know*.

²⁹⁴. Murray, *Church After Christendom*.

²⁹⁵. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

- [296.](#) Cray, *Disciples & Citizens*, 140.
- [297.](#) Maddow, "Visit the Poor," 37–50.
- [298.](#) Hunsicker, "John Wesley," 192–211.
- [299.](#) Ibid.
- [300.](#) Hardy and Yarnell, *Forming Multicultural Partnerships*.
- [301.](#) Ibid.
- [302.](#) Newbigin, *Open Secret*.
- [303.](#) Eph 1:9–10 NRSV.
- [304.](#) Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church*, 305–6.
- [305.](#) Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 284–302.
- [306.](#) Hardy and Yarnell, *Forming Multicultural Partnerships*, ch. 3.
- [307.](#) Lewis, *Mentoring Matters*.
- [308.](#) Luke 14:26–33.
- [309.](#) Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*.
- [310.](#) Phan, "Roman Catholic Theology," in Walls, *Oxford Handbook*, 221.
- [311.](#) Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 313–37.
- [312.](#) Ibid., 210.
- [313.](#) Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*.
- [314.](#) Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 277.
- [315.](#) Keating, "Idiom of 'Prolepsis.'"
- [316.](#) Matt 25:31–40 NRSV.
- [317.](#) Grindheim, "Ignorance Is Bliss," 313–31.
- [318.](#) Ibid.
- [319.](#) Via, "Ethical Responsibility," 79–100.
- [320.](#) Hardy, *Pictures of God*, 211–32.
- [321.](#) Via, "Ethical Responsibility," 79–100.
- [322.](#) Roldan-Roman, "Reclaiming the Reign of God," 465–71.
- [323.](#) Ibid.
- [324.](#) Palacios, *Catholic Social Imagination*, 36, 48; Palacios's Catholic social teaching is well worth considering for its robust interaction with the issues of social justice and in the light of his understanding of social teaching related to the poor and marginalized.
- [325.](#) Ibid., 175.
- [326.](#) "Giving and Receiving" (editorial), *Christian Century* 129 (2012) 7; Gray, "Incarnation," 1–13.
- [327.](#) Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*.
- [328.](#) Aune, "Understanding Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic."
- [329.](#) Currie, *About Time*, 39.
- [330.](#) Matt 6:10 RSV.
- [331.](#) Wright, *How God Became King*, 38.
- [332.](#) Although I think we must take it seriously that not all who consider themselves authentic believers will be welcomed

into the kingdom.

[333](#). Newbigin built some of his theology of the Spirit on the concept that the Spirit was at work ahead of the church preparing the ground for the gospel to be communicated and received. See Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 54–58.

[334](#). Blevins and Maddix, *Discovering Discipleship*, 295; Blevins discusses the importance of empowering different ethnic groups to be able to sustain themselves.

[335](#). Walvoord, “Christ’s Olivet Discourse,” 99–105.

[336](#). See Matt 24:44.

[337](#). Walvoord, “Christ’s Olivet Discourse,” 99–105.

[338](#). Ibid.

[339](#). Deterding, “Eschatological and Eucharistic Motifs,” 35–94; although this article focuses on a pericope in Luke, it seems that this pericope resonates with the parables of the ten young women probably coming from an earlier stage in the transmission of the gospel tradition.

[340](#). Rev 19:7 RSV.

[341](#). Walvoord, “Christ’s Olivet Discourse,” 99–105.

[342](#). Ibid.

[343](#). Chenoweth, “Identifying the Talents,” 61–72.

[344](#). Ibid.

[345](#). Brisson, “Matthew 25:14–30,” 307–10.

[346](#). Ibid.

[347](#). Luke 10:27.

[348](#). Ibid.

[349](#). Cohn, “Negotiating (with) the Natives,” 147–66.

[350](#). Gen 12:1–3.

[351](#). Ben-Gurion, “Bible,” 213–20.

[352](#). Gen 12:1–3.

[353](#). Rom 4:9–16.

[354](#). Ibid.

[355](#). Rom 4:16–25.

[356](#). Dan 2:40–45; there is a clear theology in the book of Daniel, as is also found in Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc., that the Lord is sovereign of history and that he raises up kings and kingdoms and overthrows them. This is important to consider, as any claim that we, missional Christians and our churches, can reclaim secular space from the powers opposed to God must realize that God in Christ is Lord of history and he already reigns.

[357](#). Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 54–58.

[358](#). Heb 12:18–28.

[359](#). Rev 21:1–5.

[360](#). 2 Pet 3:9.

[361](#). Col 1:15–21; Eph 1:9–10; Rom 8:30–38.

[362](#). Inge, *Christian Theology of Place*.

[363](#). Ibid.

[364](#). Rev 21:1–9.

[365](#). Gen 12:1–3.

[366](#). 2 Cor 5:16–21.

[367](#). Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, ch. 18.

[368](#). Gen 15:1–8.

[369](#). Goheen, “Missional Calling,” in Foust et al., *Scandalous Prophet*, 37–54.