

Can the West Be Converted? The Call to Authentic Christian Discipleship

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Introduction: Niche Discipleship and Mercenaries of the Church

When I served as a missionary in “world missions” I was a hero of the church by crossing a body of salt water and reaching a foreign people for the Gospel. Missionary service was often heralded as the epitome of the greatest sacrifice one could make as a disciple of Jesus Christ. I cut my teeth on biographies of mission pioneers, some of them who were martyred in the cause of Christ. The great exploits of missionaries (and me by following their example) accomplished, and the costs paid in commitment to the cause--like leaving home and family, crossing borders and immersion in a new culture for the Gospel--put us all in the “exceptional” category of Christianity. It is not my objective to denigrate what missionaries do or have done. I was one of them. However, I have come to conclude, the result of this whole system has made the mission of the church an adjunct activity and clearly extra-curricular in Christian discipleship. Along with this approach to world missions, the journey of discipleship in the broader church of

modern Christianity, endorsed acceptable tiers of commitment and faithfulness. There were the radical disciples¹ and all the rest—mostly standard church goers.

This endeavor of crossing boundaries in mission was a unique calling, exotic and romantic to my supporters. It also encouraged a system that accepted the bifurcation of engagement in this kind of work from standard Christian discipleship. There is another consequence that I see at this juncture. Discipleship has become extremely watered down and Christian identity, especially of the evangelical brand, has become fused with certain ideological tenets of conservatism that rarely align with Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God. The task of calling people today, for instance, to the important work of the Kingdom or the ethics of Jesus, like racial reconciliation, peacemaking, advocacy for Black and Brown lives, and an array of many other social justice issues is often met with a blind stare, or direct opposition. There may be some mental ascent in some churches to these activities, the stuff that radicals engage in, but you do not necessarily have to sign-up to do anything about it. Efforts to try and make a difference in the world outside the four walls of the church, especially in suburbia, are behaviors taken up by a select few, or they find expression by supporting a very narrow agenda in the culture wars and voting for the right candidate. Supporting a World Vision child or giving to the World Relief offering every Thanksgiving are the high bar in expectations but even optional.²

There is another consequence of this way of thinking and behaving. Besides objectifying the people who are carriers of the "mission endeavor" (missionaries), those on the other side of

¹ And we even have our specialized devotionals like "*Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*" by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove and Enuma Okoro. Zondervan. 2010.

² Many of these premises derive from the juxtaposition of serving as a missionary to Mexico for 10 years, followed immediately by serving as a Pastor of Missions and Outreach in a suburban church for 5 years. The tragedy of 9-11 occurred 2 years into the second season of ministry and formed some of my sense of the conclusions I have drawn in this paper, or at least observations that give me pause and force me to dig deeper.

the mission-sending and mission-receiving enterprise become opaque, at best pictures we hang on our refrigerator, images of people in need of our benevolence and financial contributions. When I was a missionary for over many years, we would often talk about people, or regions we serve on the field as targets and we developed strategies for reaching them. Sadly, in this construct, I served as a mercenary for the church. I was the designated specialist who trained for years, learned a foreign language, raised money for the mission work God had called me to, and went out for sequential “terms of service.” This all subverted the mission of the church under the banner of missions.

The Building of Walls & Muslim Bans: The Syncretism of the Church

In these odd and awkward times of Muslim bans and the building of walls,³ we are quickly making the people who were previous targets of mission into our enemies.⁴ These are people to be feared and clearly, we should keep them out of our neighborhoods and communities. It may be OK to send missionaries or soldiers and special forces over there or down there, to either convert them or kill them, but we must resist allowing them to come close to us, our communities, and God forbid, our children. Maybe this is why the Christian school movement finds eager adoption within many evangelical circles. We have almost come to accept outright the notion that in this big bad world in which we live, and breathe, and have our being, there will always be enemies. But it does not appear we go to scripture or the teachings of Jesus Christ to inform how we should respond? Sadly, for the most part this is not my experience in

³ Along our southern border but also in Israel/Palestine.

⁴ Khaled A. Beydoun in *American Islamophobia* argues that the Muslim and Latinx communities have been disproportionately targeted by the Trump administration with his policies and I make the connection in a paper for “Religion, Peace and Conflict” how Evangelicals have aligned almost in lockstep with these ideas.

the church. Instead we have decided it is not strange to send soldiers and missionaries over there, so we do not have to confront those people here. To know and love them as Christ would have us do seems out of place and viewed as part of a liberal agenda. I argue at length elsewhere, how “white evangelicals” have caught this virus, especially with regard to Islamophobia offered in our current political climate.⁵

Much like we did when we hopped on the “white flight” train to the suburbs in the 60’s, we are once again separating ourselves from the diverse and different peoples of the world whom God loves just as much as he loves us. Our “purity” codes, or theirs (like the idea that “Sharia law is incompatible with American democracy”), and efforts to keep ourselves safe and looking the same in our cultural enclaves have evolved and become legitimized in our homogeneous Christian communities.⁶ Fighting inclusive immigration policies, supporting Muslim bans, and many other conservative ideas trump Biblical teaching to love our neighbors as ourselves. We can now support a worldview and politics which are racist in tone and underwrite our fears of the “other” as legitimate. All of this has crept into our ways of thinking, even in the church, and thereby sabotages our discipleship without the batting of an eye. This is our greatest syncretism in the white, evangelical church, a clear corruption of Christianity.

⁵ *Loathing or Loving our Religious Other: Reconciling with Theological Parochialism* by Rev. Dr. Andrew E. Larsen. Class paper for Religion, Peace and Conflict with IRPJ.

⁶ One of the fundamental principles of effective church growth, which I studied in Seminary, was developing churches along the “Homogenous Unit Principle.” From the Pasadena consultation on the HUP we read: “Dr. Donald McGavran’s definition of a HU is “a section of society in which all members have some characteristic in common.” Used in this way, the term is broad and elastic. To be more precise, the common bond may be geographical, ethnic, linguistic, social, educational, vocational, or economic, or a combination of several of these and other factors. Whether or not members of the group can readily articulate it, the common characteristic makes them feel at home with each other and aware of their identity as “we” in distinction to “they.”
<https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-1>

Missing the Jesus of the Bible in Western Hermeneutics

One of the hardest things for any student of the Bible to grasp is the degree to which his or her own worldview influences the reading of Scripture and its interpretation in daily life. It is hard for anyone to see their own assumptions and understand how they read Scripture through their own lenses of mostly white, Western values and worldview. This influences the interpreter of Scripture in two ways. They simply do not see certain aspects of the Bible's story, and they tend to re-interpret what they do see in the light of their own culture. The biggest danger is that this process happens, in most cases, without even detecting what is happening. It is a process which is mostly invisible. Missionaries call this problem "syncretism," and Western Christians often attach this dilemma to the communication of the gospel in native cultures and traditional missionary contexts. It is the issue in which a receptor context excessively shapes the way the message is articulated and received. The problem seems more blatant generally, in conventional mission contexts. This problem, however, is universal. We Western Christians are naïve, believing our sense of biblical interpretation is the plumb line for all other interpretation. We equate our maps, our grasp of biblical revelation, which are at best an approximation of the landscape of the text, and story revealed in Scripture, with the entire scope of biblical revelation.⁷

At a surface level, this can be seen in the portraits of Christ hung on the walls in any God-fearing home around the world. In the United States, a white, Anglo-Saxon, blue eyed Jesus

⁷ This is the danger: one person's vision of biblical revelation, which is partial because of human limitations of context, history and worldview (little "r") equals, in his or her mind, the totality of biblical revelation (big "R").

is often found.⁸ In Mexico, where I lived for ten years, one will more often see Jesus or Mary with dark skin and brown eyes. It is the same in Spain where I lived several years ago. At the monastery in Monserrat, I saw the black virgin (La Moreneta, “the dark little one”) in the main chapel. It is estimated that a million pilgrims pass by this statue each year, many looking for a miracle.⁹ As an outsider, I saw the magical powers believed to be present in the statue as syncretistic, as going outside the bounds of correct biblical interpretation and practice. This is perhaps the surface stuff which is self-evident to most observers. Deeper, and perhaps more important aspects of syncretism, however, often go undetected.

Lesslie Newbigin has perhaps best identified this problem. When he went to India as a young missionary, he found elements of syncretism in Indian Christianity. Meanings of key theological concepts, words for God, sin, and salvation were taken from the immediate context of the Hindu religious tradition. He naively thought he was able to correct the syncretism he found in Indian Christianity. Only slowly did he come to realize, however, that his own Christianity was also profoundly syncretistic.¹⁰ He eventually came to the conclusion, through a long process of moving back and forth between his own culture and his missionary context, that his Western, English culture had fallen prey to an “advanced case of syncretism,” where its dominant culture and worldview had, in major ways, eclipsed a biblical worldview and the clear and unambiguous teachings of Jesus Christ. At one point he laments, “Can the West be converted?” He notes a telling paradox and essential theological and missionary frontier:

⁸ The White, European Jesus of Western imagination is fiction by Michael Gerson. Washington Post. August 3, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-white-european-jesus-of-western-imagination-is-fiction/2020/08/03/e495f5de-d5cb-11ea-aff6-220dd3a14741_story.html

⁹ Michael P. Duricy, “Black Madonnas: Our Lady of Montserrat” [article on-line] (Dayton, OH: The Marian Library/International Marian Research Institute, 13 December 2002, accessed 29 November 2006); available from <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary//meditations/olmont.html>; Internet.

¹⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions*, 68.

The Christian gospel continues to find new victories among the non-Western, pre-modern cultures of the world, but in the face of this modern Western culture the Church is everywhere in retreat. Can there be a more challenging frontier for the Church than this?¹¹

I would like to put the challenge in other words. The recovery of vital Christianity and an embrace of a legitimate theology of peace and justice, which are so clear in scripture, depends on discerning ways the gospel has been domesticated and compromised at both the macro and micro level. The church in the West needs to take an honest look at whether we have lost our understanding of Scripture and the soul of Christianity. Whether we really know and follow Jesus. The general malaise found in our Western churches requires that Christian believers unshackle the gospel from the encrustations of our culture and recover a vital spirituality that also impacts the world. Justo Gonzales believes that this current problem has to do with the very meaning of the gospel and how it is applied to individual lives as well as to the community and structural life of the Church. “Spirituality” needs to live in the gospel—making faith the foundation for life. In turn, it also must be lived out—making that faith the basis for action. Christian spirituality needs to be both deeply grounded in Scripture and radically relevant to today’s world,¹² without being syncretistic.

One of the root problems in this loss of Christian vitality is the evasion of the teachings of Jesus which has “seriously malformed Christian moral practices, moral beliefs, and moral witness,” according to Glen Stassen.¹³ When discipleship, according to Jesus, is compartmentalized, left as an extracurricular activity for only the super Christians, or when it is

¹¹ Ibid., 67.

¹² Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 157.

¹³ Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 11.

merely diluted down to one's personal devotional life with Jesus but has nothing to do with our communities or issues of injustice in our world and brokenness in our systems of governing, the common witness of the church in our society is lost. In describing the Sermon on the Mount, and especially the properties of salt and light, Eberhard Arnold describes it well. "The change extends to all areas. It is a lost cause to try to follow Christ in only one sphere of life."¹⁴ We need to move from a sloganized devotional approach to Christianity with our focus on 10 steps to a successful quiet time, to a robust and faithful model of full discipleship and apprenticeship to Jesus Christ.

What Do Bonhoeffer and a Muslim Cleric Share?

Several years ago, I was in deep discussion in a mosque with a very good Muslim friend who was also the Imam (the spiritual leader) of this particular mosque.¹⁵ He had preached a sermon about a Christianity that I liked very much. He was delving into some of the intersections between Christianity and Islam. Quoting a Persian cleric of the Shia tradition my friend was making a comparison with a perceived deficit in Christianity. The critique was this--the Christian emphasis on heaven and the afterlife seems to undercut how we practice our faith on earth? We had plenty of trust between us and were totally comfortable in this shared conversation. We did not have to pitch our best against the other's worst but could look critically at both of our communities and faith traditions. As we engaged in a hearty conversation, we were able to clarify that we were fairly close to one another in our respective faiths. I found myself reflecting on my early reading of Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship*. Correct "Christian belief," or

¹⁴ Arnold, Eberhard. *Salt and Light: Living the Sermon on the Mount* (p. 17). Plough Publishing House. Kindle Edition

¹⁵ This is a rough paraphrase of the sermon from my journal notes and our ensuing conversation on what I called "costly Discipleship" and the Imam probably would have referred to simply as orthopraxy.

mere words, without the cross, and without a discipleship that cost something in terms of living out one's faith, was worthless, or like salt that had lost its flavor.

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion, without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”¹⁶

Jim Wallis, in his new book, *Christ in Crisis*, discusses a similar challenge in his own journey where the church of his childhood was more concerned about a system of beliefs and did not teach or suggest that Christianity entailed following Christ as a way of life. The teachings of Christ in the *Sermon on the Mount*, and other important passages of scripture were marginalized. Wallis goes so far as to describe Matthew 25¹⁷ as Jesus' final discipleship test.¹⁸ For me this is the Achilles' heel of Christian faith today where concern for orthodoxy, and mental assent to tightly defined doctrinal positions, or very narrow conservative social issues has become primary. But little thought is given to orthopraxy, especially as it relates to society at large and systemic sins that we have not examined in our common life. We may have become effective at closing the front door to contamination from “worldly influences,” donning the team jersey once inside the structure of organized Christianity, but the back door is wide open to ways of thinking and behaving that, in effect, neutralize the savory nature of being true followers of Christ. Our times beckon for a true conversion of those who adopt the name Christian.

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller, rev. ed. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1960), p. 36.

¹⁷ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’” (Matthew 25:34-36).

¹⁸ Wallis, *Christ in Crisis*, 212.

An Invitation to Real Transformation

Dallas Willard talks about an invitation to conversion in his important book on the *Sermon on the Mount*. The problem in the American church, however, is that we think we have heard the message when in fact we have not. Willard makes the point, rather poignantly— "Familiarity breeds unfamiliarity—unsuspected unfamiliarity, and then contempt. People think they have heard the invitation. They think they have accepted it—or rejected it. But they have not."¹⁹ As a child of the church I am susceptible to this danger every day of my life.

The biblical call to conversion, as Newbigin reminds us, is essential to any authentic understanding of the gospel. Without this, we run the danger of a watered-down version of invitation, and demand, keeping us from true “metanoia,” leaving us, and thereby the world we are called to bless, virtually unaffected. Newbigin’s commentary on the misunderstanding, and even misinterpretation, of “repent” in the gospel is instructive:

The widespread misunderstanding of the word is illustrated in the mistranslation of this word of Jesus in the Good News Bible. There *metanoete* is translated as “turn away from your sins.” If this were the true translation, Jesus would be merely a preacher of revival. In fact, he was calling for something much more radical, a conversion of the mind which leads to a totally new view of life. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the “sinners” are the ones who understand and “righteous” are the ones who do not. The call to conversion is much more than a call to turn away from those things which society (even apart from the events of Jesus’ ministry) can recognize as sins. It involves, in fact, proving that the world’s idea of what is sin and what is righteousness is wrong [John 16:8]. The conversion for which Jesus calls, and which the Spirit now effects in those who turn to him, is a radically new way of understanding: it involves at the same time a demand for total self-surrender and the gift of utter security. It involves calling and promise, demand and gift, at the same time. And it concerns the whole of life—the public life of the world, the nation, the factory, the society, and personal life of each believer. There can be no muffling of the call to conversion, but equally there can be no limiting of

¹⁹ Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 9.

its range, no offer of a “cheap grace” which promises security without commitment to that mission for which Jesus went to the cross.²⁰

At times, we see methods and programs for “discipleship” in churches and Christian organizations that appear to have as their goal pouring the content of a curriculum into the container of students’ minds over the course of a six to ten-week period. The presumption is that they will come out at the end, now as duly formed graduates, and be able to repeat the process with new recruits as their teachers. Those who are specially gifted can memorize the twenty-four Bible verses that accompany the topics of each session and drill them into their minds so as to repeat them in their sleep. The final exam is regurgitating the contents of the program or reciting the *Apostles Creed* in front of church on confirmation Sunday. This may be a crass oversimplification, but the point is that we have lost the sense of being invited by Jesus to follow him through our whole life, of continuing in an apprentice relationship with him from the beginning until the end, of living a life that grows in perfection (maturity) and is engaged in the flow of shared humanity and human problems, doing the work of the Kingdom in his world.

Today, in large part, we have the structure and relics of Christianity in the West, but one that is largely barren, and the world somehow seems to notice our spiritual poverty. Surveys demonstrate the lack of any distinct difference, in terms of behavior and morality, between those who would call themselves Christians, and the rest.²¹ In point of fact, “evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general” states Michael Horton.²²

²⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 239.

²¹ Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 59.

²² *Ibid.*, 17-29 in the chapter about “The Depth of the Scandal.”

Team Jesus Better Follow Jesus

In closing, one last important point needs to be made. There is an aspect of “training in righteousness” that has, if you will, curricular pieces. There is a thinking process, a molding of the mind and heart. We are to seek the things above, setting “our minds on things that are above, where Christ is” (Col 3:2). The danger we run however, especially in the evangelical sub-culture, is to believe we have made the cut if we can regurgitate the data of the curriculum of discipleship as mentioned above. We are “orthodox” and can graduate if we say the right things or support the right candidate or subscribe to the narrow agenda in the culture wars. This is where Glen Stassen makes a crucial point: “According to Jesus, there is no authentic Christianity, discipleship or Christian ethics apart from doing the deeds he taught his followers to do.”²³

Leadership in the modern American church can be difficult these days. Who has not experienced an example of hypocrisy from a Christian leader? As one of those leaders I read Matthew's warnings in the seven woes on the teachers of the Law and Pharisees with trepidation (Matthew 23:1-28). But my fear today is that we can get passing grades in orthodoxy, the right words of Christianity, without commensurate godly behavior. The orthopraxy, the radical discipleship of missionaries and activists, is an extracurricular point on our religious resume, not essential to getting a job as a leader in the church. Or as a layperson in the pew.

It strikes me that this is a form of heresy. It is strange and sad how Christianity, the faith of the “Word made Flesh,” the community that claims to follow the Prince of Peace, has in some cases become so good at disembodied, well-worded expressions of faith, and aligned with

²³ Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 486.

political positions that seem against the real stuff, the real struggles of humanity, can float above the ground of this planet, with no feet, hands, or legs. Willard warns us that “we are incarnate beings in our very nature, and we live from our bodies. If we are to be transformed, the body must be transformed, and that is not accomplished by merely talking about it.”²⁴ It would be better if Team Jesus actually follow Jesus, the incarnate expression of God among us.

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²⁴ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 322.

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