From radical to missional discipleship

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In 1950 Dean H. S. Bender offered his first seminar on discipleship for the advanced students in Bible at Goshen (Indiana) College. The basic text was Bonheoffer's *Cost of Discipleship*, which had recently been published in an English edition. I chose to write a paper for presentation to the class on E. Stanley Jones, the famous Methodist missionary to India. The word was already in common parlance among the Methodists. None of us at the time had any idea how central to Mennonite identity the term *discipleship* would become, and what twists and turns it would take.

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Discipleship renewal in the 1960s

The concept of discipleship was strongly suggested at the time by the renewed interest in Anabaptism. Anabaptism gave us the precedents of radical protest against the accommodating reforms of the state churches. It took some of its inspiration from the monastic tradition, but it cast the monastic ideals in a lay and secular—that is, sociopolitical, nonviolent—movement. Its most radical form was the Hutterite community, which raised the question of radical equality and sharing of wealth.

Because of rejection and social exclusion, Anabaptism after the sixteenth century retreated into a separatist, more monastic and increasingly moralistic pattern. Its nonviolent challenge to society became nonresistance, spelled out in separatist terms, using the categories of church and world and the language of nonconformity. In the twentieth century in North America—with the recovery of an Anabaptist vision and in the context of social upheaval, new biblical insights, the Vietnam War, and political

protests—the challenge of radical response was aroused from its somnolent past.

The Mennonite denominations in North America were in the final stages of their institutional development, which had begun a century earlier. Change was in the air! But what kinds of changes were compatible with their nonconformist past? Evangelistic crusades patterned after Billy Graham had been introduced. The pastoral ministry was beginning to be professionalized, and Mennonite seminaries were talking of cooperative association. In the United States, Mennonite Central Committee was pushing for a more vigorous witness to Washington. Protests against the Vietnam War dragged on. The civil rights movement, which crossed the line between civil society and the church, was in full swing. The charismatic renewal movement, which was invading Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, was at its height. In the middle of a social revolution, the national Mennonite bodies were understandably cautious.

Fifty years ago, restless, visionary Mennonites challenged what seemed to them a denominational accommodation to the economic and military establishment. Now we need to reassess the nature and relevance of that movement.

This in a far too sketchy manner describes the setting for the radical discipleship movement pushed by restless, visionary small groups among Mennonites in North America. They challenged what seemed to them a lack of social witness and a denominational accommodation to the economic and military establishment. By political and social protest and the formation of intensive communal groups they radically challenged the moralistic, separatist, and fundamentalist spirit that threatened to overtake the Anabaptist vision. In this sense one might argue that theirs was a populist updating of Bender's Anabaptist vision. At the time the wave of "small group" intensive communities and social protest threatened denominational leaders. Now some fifty years later, in light of denominational developments and new discipleship slogans, we need to reassess the nature and relevance of the movement.

Discipleship ferment today

In the intervening years we have not, of course, dropped the concept of discipleship. Quite the opposite: it has become an

identifying slogan for progressive Mennonites, and has been espoused in diluted (less radical) form in evangelical circles. Among the more right-wing, fundamentalist evangelicals, "evangelism and discipleship" is now a catchphrase. In what is now referred to as Neoevangelicalism there is more emphasis on the significance of the life and example of Jesus, especially in the emerging church movement.

Does the concept of radical communal discipleship still hold a challenge for traditional churches? Are attempts at radical discipleship calling traditional churches to renewal and some modified form of Christian mutuality and radical justice?

In several megachurch settings, calls for a more robust expression of Christian values against racism, war, and individualistic extremes of affluent display have carried the label of discipleship. There are instances in liberal Protestantism of renewed emphasis (at least theologically) on significant inclusive racial, sexual, and cultural relationships, in the social gospel tradition. But little has been done to implement a prophetic alternative to our present culture, as explained by Walter Brueggemann or the more progressive biblical social vision of leaders like Ron Sider and Jim Wallis. And as we shall see, the latest attempt to adapt and embody it in the established congregations carries the moniker *missional*.

Alongside the established churches, individual pastors of note—including Brian McLaren of the emergent church movement, Greg Boyd and more recently Rick Warren, both from megachurches—have offered models of more radical discipleship. Still more radical patterns, such as Shane Claiborne's New Monasticism and Seth McCoy's Third Way Community, are seeking to follow a radical pattern of genuine mutuality and sharing, but their impact on traditional denominations thus far has been peripheral. Ron Copeland's Early Church and Our Community Place in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and Rachel Twigg Boyce's House Blend Ministries, located in Winnipeg (of which more later), may present new possibilities for collaboration with established congregations. And of course, the earlier established groups such as Reba Place in Evanston, Illinois, and Church of the Savior in Washington, DC, have continued their significant witness to a more radical way.

Looking to the radicality of Jesus

One can appropriately raise the question whether—and if so, in what sense—the concept of radical communal discipleship still holds a challenge for traditional churches. Are these attempts at radical discipleship the "true church" calling the traditional churches to renewal and some modified form of Christian mutuality and radical justice? But before we speak to these questions, we need to look at the qualities we see in Jesus, which we as his disciples are attempting to imitate and initiate in our society. It is not obvious how we should adapt the message of Jesus to an individualistic, free market, and politically democratic society where socialism is seen as a dirty word.

The character of Jesus' message and example in its own sociopolitical setting has been explored and debated ad infinitum. We do not have room to review all these, but the following seem to be generally recognized as the essential characteristics of his life and ministry:

Jesus was not a Levitical missionary reaching out to the poor through a charitable temple program. He was one of the "accursed" multitudes among whom he lived and ministered without an independent source of wealth and economic security.

His ministry was based on agape (the New Testament word translated "love") in contrast to power or economic advantage. Agape may best be translated as compassionate respect for other persons without regard to their condition and situation. Love of neighbor as oneself was at the core of his ministry. Such respect called for genuine mutuality and sharing that is more than charity. It is the mutual respect and treatment of others that requires justice. This respect is also the tolerance we afford ourselves when we make mistakes. The other, even if she be opponent or enemy, is to be considered neighbor.

Such agapeic respect for the other as neighbor implies a radical inclusivism. Jesus' attention and compassionate respect was extended to people regardless of religious conviction, cultural identity, sexual identity, economic or political status, gender, social standing, and physical condition. In this regard he operated outside the boundaries of temple Judaism. He was not a Levitical missionary reaching out to the poor through a charitable temple program. He was one of the "accursed" multitudes among whom

he lived and ministered without an independent source of wealth and economic security.

His community was the people he taught and ministered to. His answer to the rhetorical question he posed about who his mother and brothers were identified the crowd who listened as his extended family (Luke 8:19–21). One of the major criticisms leveled against him was that he not only associated but also identified with the wrong crowd—tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners.

Why is it so difficult to be a radical disciple of Jesus within the confines of the institutional church? Sociologically, the church has been organized as a voluntary institution focused on the family and for the preservation of values of the middle class.

The boundaries of his concern and ministry were permeable! He explicitly ignored differences of religious identity when the ministry of others showed a genuine god-like character like the one he represented (Luke 9:49–50). He was not promoting a religious or a self-serving project. His concern was for the full realization of the image of God in human community, not in planting a religious community.

When one considers these characteristics, it becomes more clear why it is so difficult to be a radical disciple of Jesus in the world within the confines of the institutional church. Sociologically the church has been organized as a voluntary religious charitable institution focused on the family and for the preservation and dissemination of spiritual and moral values of the middle class. Christ's call to discipleship beckons us beyond the boundary of charity and requires compassionate social justice (agape).

Proclaiming the reign of God or organizing congregations?

Jesus spoke of the reign of God; he did not establish the religious organization we know as the church. That was the work of Paul and other leaders (soon to be called bishops) in the following decades. Jesus' followers were recognized as those who accepted him as messiah and followed his way of life in their Judaic culture. They were not called Christians until the Gentile churches were established several generations later.

This distinction between the reign of God and the organization of congregations following the pattern of the Jewish synagogue is

important to understanding the relation of radical communities of disciples to the organized congregations we call church. God's reign is not an ethical construct, a moral program, a religious institution, or a political movement. It is God's stirring, enabling presence as displayed in Jesus Christ moving among us to establish shalom in the human community. God's reign is recognized where the healing, transforming effects of God's presence are embodied in human response. This may, of course, also happen within the boundaries of the organized congregation, which we call church, but it is not limited to or necessarily dependent on such organizations.

Transformation of individuals and restoration of relationships are the signs of the kingdom of God. Where the creative, restoring word of God finds embodiment, there is the radical body of Christ.

If we think of God's reign in terms of its characterization in the Beatitudes; of God's power as God's energy enabling shalom; of God's authority as example and impulse rather than command; of God's rule as influence and enablement, not control and enforcement of commandments; of Jesus' presence as the spirit of Jesus in personal healing, reconciling dynamic; then we can begin to evaluate the authentic radicality of religious institutions—denominations, sects, congregations, societies. Re-creation and transformation of individuals and restoration of social relationships that have been destroyed by violence and death are the signs of the kingdom of God. In short where the creative, restoring word of God finds embodiment, there is the radical (going to the root) body of Christ.

Radical discipleship and the traditional congregation

We have found from experience that it is extremely difficult to transform a traditional Protestant congregation into a radical community. Radical disciples almost always break away from the structures of the established congregation to begin their communities. So what is it about the institutional church that makes it so difficult for it to become the broker for social change?

The root of the problem seems to lie in the traditional congregation's accommodation to the economic disparity in society as it organizes its life and ministry around the family unit. And this is not just a modern problem. First Timothy 5:8—"And

whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever"—may reflect the early church's experience of this tension. We are willing to share wealth so long as it does not threaten our own and the family's security. We assume the virtue of self-preservation, and we see taking responsibility for the welfare of the family as a given, as primary. Radical community challenges these basic assumptions underlying the Protestant congregation. To share poverty as well as wealth seems counterintuitive! And yet this is precisely what Jesus challenges us to do, and it is this radical challenge that motivates the radical community.

Missional discipleship focuses on organized churches and asks how they can operate authentically as congregations of Christians. Communities of radical disciples begin with radical sharing, inclusivity, justice, and nonviolence, and let organizational patterns develop pragmatically.

How then might we deal with this tension and define an authentic, if not "radical" discipleship for local congregations that are focused on the Sunday morning programmed worship, pastoral inspiration, nurture of children, and social fellowship among its own members, along with a set of charitable projects? In an attempt to avoid the separatism that has been implicit in the church's social and evangelistic outreach programs in the past, the most recent denominational attempt has been dubbed "missional." Its thesis is that the church does not have a mission but is a mission participating in the missio Dei. The challenge is to be a part of God's mission in the local civil community. The congregation is not to be missionary focused (mission to) but missional. The obvious danger of such an approach without a commitment to radical discipleship is that the congregation will simply become the religious arm of the civic and political networks based on power politics and self-interest.

Missional discipleship focuses on the modern organized churches and asks how they can operate authentically as congregations of Christians. It is programmed for existing congregations that already have their own character and purposes. It does not call for a radical transformation in the organization and life of the congregation. It continues to rely on professional pastoral leadership with representative congregational decision making. This set

of characteristics may be understandable given the spiritual temperature of many congregations, but it avoids basic discipleship issues with which the radical communities wrestle. The missional model, as I understand it, has little emphasis on or structure for the development of deep spiritual relationships or local congregational discernment. It attempts to bridge the divide between church as worshiping congregation and programmed social action, and seeks to combine evangelism and social witness into an organic whole. In its evangelism ("missions") outreach it attempts to be sensitive to local cultures and to plant culturally appropriate "missional" expressions of Christianity. These are authentic goals, but the radicality of its local expression depends entirely on the spiritual temperature and vision of the individual congregation and its leadership.

It is unlikely that traditional congregations will morph into radical communities, or that such communities will cease their implied criticism and challenge to more seriously follow a Jesus model.

By contrast, communities of radical disciples begin with mutuality and egalitarian relationships, radical sharing in community, inclusivity, social justice, and nonviolence as the essential spiritual characteristics of discipleship, and they let the organizational patterns and community action develop pragmatically. Their goal is praxis, not theory. These are radical values, which simply cannot be imposed on existing congregations. They require intensive discernment and experimentation, and experience suggests that trying to introduce them in traditional congregations without careful study and discernment frequently causes schism. Little wonder then that intensive communities tend to break away from the mothering group.

It is unlikely that traditional congregations will morph into radical communities, or that such communities will cease their implied criticism and challenge to more seriously follow a Jesus model in church life. In light of this reality, we must ask in conclusion how such communities can be fruitfully related to traditional congregations in church strategy. While their impulses are not in conflict, and should not be competitive, the temptation of established congregations will be to depreciate the challenge of the radical community. Especially if the community is service ori-

ented, it may simply be considered a radical project essentially unrelated to the life of the congregation. Rachel Twigg Boyce states a real danger when in an e-mail message she confesses that "when I first started House Blend, I was concerned about either becoming a fringe movement in the denomination and/or letting others off the hook by giving the mistaken impression that they did not have a role to play because we were taking care of the poor."[1]

The New Testament goal is a complementary collaborative relationship in which the community can be an extension of the missional congregation, and the congregation can be a supportive encouragement to the intentional community.

On the other hand, if the radical community stresses a stricter ethic of equality and communal sharing, the implied criticism may threaten the mothering congregation, with the result that the authentic challenge of Jesus' life and teaching is depreciated. This has been the response to many earlier intentional groups that made communal sharing their goal. By contrast, the New Testament goal is a complementary collaborative relationship in which the community can be an extension of the missional congregation, and the congregation can be a supportive encouragement to the intentional community. The ultimate challenge for both is to find more authentic ways to fulfill their apprenticeship to Jesus as God's example of reconciliation and witness.

Note

[1] For more information about House Blend, see the article by Rachel Twigg Boyce, "Crazy. And Christ-like?" in this issue of *Vision*.

About the author

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