The necessity of understanding and re-imagining the practice of discipleship. Towards a 21st Century holistic model of transmission, nurture and maturing - lived experience of faith.
Abstract:

The current practice of faith formation - that is discipleship, in the Western mainstream church is one that flows from a theology strongly influenced by Modernity. The practice and understanding therefore is heavily propositional, and prioritises the understanding of orthodoxy above the lived enabling of orthopraxy. These claims are explored and illustrated in order to highlight the weakness and assumptions of the general state of current practice. Based upon this analysis, a case is made for the re-imagining of discipleship. This re-imagining looks at (1) the Biblical narrative in an attempt to glean what Jesus was embodying and engendering in the work (and understanding) of discipleship; and (2) an understanding drawn from historic practice and contemporary therapeutic and spiritual practice models.

The dissertation then explores potential changes that need to be considered, suggesting a model of discipleship to illustrate the work needed. Finally, some recommendations are made for the contemporary church.
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PART 1: UNDERSTANDING

1. Introduction

With weekly attendance (weekday and Sunday) figures from the Church of England putting church attendance at less than 2% of the population\(^1\) the church is demonstrably in need of significant re-evaluation and re-imagining. Furthermore, the church growth strategies and initiatives of the last few years are far more interesting for what they reveal than what they achieved.

What is coming into sharper relief however is an emerging theme or focus away from the strategies of the church and into the lived experience of those who attend. The church values teaching and ‘correct understanding’ (orthodoxy) as a priority of what it does via its academically highly trained clergy, but it has become increasingly clear that this has not fully equipped congregants well for their everyday lives, witness and activity. Thus the theme that is increasingly dominating conversation, resources, research and conferences is that of ‘discipleship’, and the question of ‘orthopraxy’ in the sense of what it means for Christians to live out the call of Jesus in their everyday lives, and the challenge of how this is enabled. The Church of England for example, recently signalling its intention,

“…..to begin a more intentional conversation across the Church about discipleship, not to offer a final word. The conversation will continue in a number of ways over the next five years.”\(^2\)

This developing narrative though is all too often being shaped by or limited by a seemingly faulty hermeneutic, one rooted in a flawed ecclesiology. The intention of this dissertation is

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\(^1\) The Guardian January 12\(^{th}\) 2016.
to acknowledge the vital importance of this conversational narrative, but to explore the
theme more fully. This will be done by bringing the tools of Practical Theology to bear, and
by using an alternative perspective to see how much of the ecclesiological underpinning is in
fact deeply mired in the previously dominant worldview of Modernity. The dissertation will
critique current theory and practice, re-examine the Biblical text and shaping narratives
from church history, and then finally make recommendations for a renewed theology, and a
re-imagined understanding and practice of discipleship.

The methodology will involve using the four questions posed by Osmer for Practical
Theology. Osmer’s first two questions, ‘What is going on?’ and, ‘Why is this going on?’ will
frame the analysis of current practice and thinking. This will form Part 1 of the dissertation
under the heading of ‘Understanding,’ alongside a broad look at discipleship and its
importance. Part 2 ‘Re-imagining,’ considers ‘What ought to be going on?’ which will be in
part explored by exposition of the Gospels, as well as drawing on experience from Church
History. It concludes by looking at discipleship in the contemporary (‘Post Modern’) context
by posing Osmer’s fourth question, ‘How might we respond?’

At times the methodology will involve juxtaposition in order to contrast conflicting views
that in reality will be at various points on a notional continuum - given the range of thinking
and practice that exists. However, this work is not intended to create binary opposites or to
suggest that something must always be determinately either this or if not, it’s polar
opposite. However, it is a central claim of this dissertation that a distinction (not a rigid
dichotomy) can be drawn between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and that the Orthodoxy of
the Christian Faith has become the dominant story, and that Orthopraxy has been less
obviously a priority in contemporary Christian approaches to discipleship.

2. Context

The church in the West at least appears to be in decline; decline in terms of its numbers,
influence and relevance. The last English Church census was in 2005, and that showed that
the number of 15-19 year olds in English churches dropped by 68% in the years from 1979

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4 Across all denominations.
to 2005,\textsuperscript{5} and that during the same time period the percentage of the population attending church dropped from 11.7% to 6.3%,\textsuperscript{6} and four thousand churches in the UK closed.\textsuperscript{7} These figures are now somewhat dated but the trend downwards on attendance figures, and upwards for average age of attendee, seems to have continued. \textit{The Daily Telegraph} and the \textit{Guardian} in January 2016 both covered the fact that Church of England attendance has dropped to below a million each week for the first time, with Sunday services only attracting 760,000 people.\textsuperscript{8} \textit{The Guardian}, reporting on the Bullivant Report (“Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales: A statistical report based on recent British Social Attitudes survey data”), pointed to the significant failure of the church in equipping congregants with an ongoing faith. It noted that, \textit{“Four out of ten adults who were raised as Anglicans define themselves as having no religion, and almost as many “cradle Catholics” have abandoned their family faith to become “nones”.”}\textsuperscript{9} This suggests that the inadequacy of the faith induction and transmission model is not just a failure of the church to connect with the surrounding cultures, but a limited ability to pass on a living and owned faith to many who have been part of the church.

The dissertation will focus on the UK context, but a similar decline exists in other Western contexts, including the United States which has the largest Christian population in the world. Work by the Pew Research Centre looking at ‘religion and public life’ surveyed 35,000 Americans and discovered in the 7 years leading up to 2014, the number of adults who described themselves as ‘Christian’ dropped by 8 percentage points,\textsuperscript{10} a very steep decline indeed.

The health of the Christian faith itself is not perhaps as bleak as the statistics above paint. There are ‘green shoots’ of renewed Christian life, mission and spirituality, but in the West these are primarily at the margins or outside of the mainstream denominational Churches. In America the phenomena of \textit{‘Emergent’}\textsuperscript{11} is a significant conversation and activity that has

\textsuperscript{5} Brierley, P. \textit{Pulling out of the Nose Dive} (London: Christian Research 2006).
\textsuperscript{7} Brierely (2006) p11.
\textsuperscript{8} Church of England Attendance figures quoted by Daily Telegraph and The Guardian Jan 12th 2016.
\textsuperscript{9} Guardian Article on the Bullivant Report on Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales May 24th 2016.
\textsuperscript{10} Pew Research Centre findings May 12th 2015.
\textsuperscript{11} Kimbell, D. ‘The Emerging Church’ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2003)
sparked missional experimentation and communities, whilst in the UK a similar movement exists through a correspondingly eclectic range of experiments and a conversation loosely defined by the term, ‘Fresh Expressions.’ Of note is that orthopraxy arguably appears to be a more dominant theme of these groups as they explore and enact approaches to mission, rule of life and spiritual practice.

This decline and ageing membership profile in the mainstream church(es) though is the context of the dissertation pointing as it does to a failure to retain or induct effectively into the Christian Faith, and that the considerable energy that goes into defending, defining and explaining the Christian faith is not effectively equipping members of church congregations, or transmitting the lived life of Christianity.

3. Why discipleship is significant

It is the contention of this dissertation that there operates a defining theology (and within that, an ecclesiology) that is overly dominated by the propositional and epistemic dimensions of Christianity. This approach is failing to engender effective lived discipleship. Furthermore, this intellectualist framework of the Christian Faith has kept the church from being able to re-imagine individual and corporate Christian formation.

Whilst western culture has changed significantly in the second half on the 20th century and on in to present day, the mainstream church in the West (and specifically within the UK context that is the focus of the dissertation) has changed relatively little. Changes that have occurred have been related largely to style rather than the substance of how it operates and what it prioritises. For example, the missional conversation has in many cases produced new forms of outreach that are still based largely upon an ‘attractional’ model rather than mission in and with unreached communities. For example, in 2014 the Church Army Research Unit published a report on ‘Fresh Expressions’ in the Guildford Diocese. It shows a wide interpretation of what churches understand ‘fresh expression’ to be and in keeping with the argument presented above notes that,

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‘We do also see some signs that indicate undue reliance on traditional church practice which in turn affects choices in starting and running fxC\textsuperscript{13}. 82\% meet on church premises and 48\% on a Sunday; 47\% of the fxC are variants on Sunday worship (the All age, multiple congregation and traditional church plant examples). In addition, we do not know whether the preponderance of Messy Churches imply franchise thinking or a wise choice in context.’\textsuperscript{14}

One way of looking at how the church has sought to operate in the evolving cultural context is to present a brief narrative of themes that have come to the fore in its ecclesiology, discussion and practice. For the 1970’s and 1980’s, worship was a key theme. A desire to present a more contemporary church that in its worship had relevance and passion. Significant energy (through internal battles) went into the Church being less staid and more exciting, conscious as it was of its diminishing impact among young people and young adults, given the vibrant culture in which they now lived. (Symptomatically, we may think of more modern musical inclusions within otherwise traditional services.) Sincere as the desire was it revealed an ecclesiology deeply embedded in an attractional model (and assuming it was still operating in a broadly Christian culture), that believed people would attend if the Church could feel and act in a more contemporary way. With the mainstream church in continued decline, the prominent theme for the 1990’s was Evangelism. The ten years leading up to the millennium were designated by the Church of England to be the ‘decade of evangelism,’ with this theme and focus also being evident in other denominations and independent churches. With the exception of a nurture course called ‘Alpha’\textsuperscript{15} that began at Holy Trinity Brompton (but was then taken up by many other churches) that did see people coming to faith, the decade of evangelism was not a success given that the decline continued.

Emerging from the experiences of this time, two other key arenas of focus began to gain prominence, these being ‘Leadership’ and ‘Mission.’ The narratives around these two are symbiotic so should be considered in parallel with each other.

In the decade of evangelism the ecclesiology that consciously or unconsciously underpinned

\textsuperscript{13} Shorthand in the report for ‘Fresh Expressions of Church.’
\textsuperscript{14} \url{http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=152370} p9.
\textsuperscript{15} Alpha courses continue to be a central evangelism approach for a huge number of churches, more information can be found at their web site, \url{http://uk.alpha.org/about}. 
evangelism was broadly - and in simplified generalised terms, the sending out of the people from the Church (the good place) into the world (the dark place) to proclaim in persuasive terms ‘The Gospel’ in order that people would receive The Good News of Jesus, and hence salvation, and be brought back into the church. An approach influenced by the belief that the faith was in decline because people had not heard or understood the story of Jesus and the salvation message. (Here we may draw parallels with political parties whose decline is initially attributed to ‘a failure to get our message across’, a diagnosis that often seems to give way to a reluctant acceptance that the message as well as its packaging is itself part of the problem.) Although the decade of evangelism was not broadly a success, some new Christian communities did begin to emerge (in gatherings outside of the mainstream) through the ‘alternative worship’ movement. These small groupings led to conversations and experiments in mission that led to a re-discovery or, or re-engagement with ‘Missio Dei’ as a mission theology. A common text for inspiration for these groups being ‘Christianity Rediscovered’ by Vincent J. Donovan. Missio Dei being a corrective to the ‘taking God out into the world’ approach broadly outlined previously. Missio Dei acknowledged that God is active in his world, and that Mission involved discerning the spaces and places where God’s activity was evident and joining in. Thus the concept of ‘mission’ became an influencer in ecclesiological thinking and flowed from and into holistic mission rather than the narrow ‘bandwidth’ of evangelism with its emphasis on proclamation, future salvation and recruitment. Missional activity though was for the most part the preserve of groups at the fringe or distant from mainstream church. Denominational church however recognised that something significant was happening and sought to engender the mission conversation. The Church though had long recruited and trained ‘Pastoral’ Priests attuned to the needs of Christendom ecclesiology, thus an emphasis on ‘leadership’ and the sort of leaders the church saw it needed ensued. The 2004 publication of ‘Mission Shaped Church’ brought the mission and the leadership conversations to the fore. The traditional ecclesiology does, however, seem to have been so deeply embedded in these conversations that it exerted a powerful gravitational pull back to its norms and assumptions. That is to say, some of the

16 A useful guide to the history and understanding of the ‘alternative worship’ movement: http://www.alternativeworship.org/definitions_definition.html.

17 A Catholic missionary among the Maasai who sought to find God in the lived life of the tribe rather than exporting culture and dogma to them.
language and rhetoric changed but in practical theological terms, the changes were to the espoused theology rather than the operant theology. These leadership and mission initiatives have also (perhaps as a result of this limitation) struggled to change denominational congregations and indeed denominational priorities. Whilst new ecclesial communities have formed under the banner ‘Fresh Expressions’\(^\text{18}\) outside of, or at the fringes of mainstream church, the majority of mainstream Church projects self-identifying as ‘Fresh Expression’ look suspiciously like re-branded or ‘more attractive’ forms of the existing ecclesiology with the norms and practices linked to and bearing the DNA of the institutional church. That is to say they are outreach models working from (and back towards) the attractional model, partly as a way of tackling the problem of numerical decline.

The emerging discipleship conversation is of great significance because, although it is strategically oriented, it attempts to move the conversation away from the inward looking debate on the nature and practice of church, away from conversation about the nature and priorities of leadership and looks instead at the experience and needs of people; both those outside of the faith, and those whose lives are already connected to it.

A closer look at discipleship is also of great importance as it offers a lens through which underlying assumptions and theologies within ecclesiology might be observed and critiqued, and so the aim is (at least in part) to avoid the problem of reversion to type identified above. That is to say, there is a somewhat set sense of ecclesiology which exerts a strong gravitational pull back on any idea or practice that doesn’t conform to its norms. Hence much of the ‘emergent’ practice in the States, and the genuine ‘Fresh Expression’ communities in the UK break free from institutional church in order to foster different modes of being ‘church’ and to actively engender a lived conversation in Practical Theology. (Note here that the emphasis is upon ontology, on the being of the Church and the Christian agent, rather than upon epistemology and upon what the latter may be said to know. Although, again, being and knowing are not rigidly separated, being can embody a way of knowing that is not propositional.) Whilst within the church structures, much of the new life and interesting questioning of issues concerning mission and discipleship tends to be

brought back into alignment with the attractional, propositional, Christendom dominated ecclesiology.

The ‘discipleship’ conversation is particularly interesting in the sense that it discloses the extent to which the idea of ‘disciple’ inherent with current ecclesiology owes much to the shaping of theology by Christendom and by a post Enlightenment rationality, and is at significant variance with the narrative and lived example within the four Gospels, and with the orthopraxy and mission imperative of the early church. And while the suggestion here is not that we can return to some idealised point of pre-modern origin as a guide to discipleship, the thought is that an examination of these sources helps to show that the church as constituted and enacted does not naturally engender and enable a maturing conception or practice of discipleship.

4. The meaning of discipleship.

There is a danger of attempting prematurely to define discipleship at this juncture, preceding as it does reflection on the shape of discipleship now and a conception of things with which discipleship ought properly to be contrasted. In other words, I am not so much attempting to set out some necessary and sufficient conditions account of discipleship, but rather to suggest that discipleship is this rather than that. And what I take that to be (i.e. the current practice and thinking) is an individual post-induction or post-conversion practice that is optional and is essentially the acquisition of increased Christian knowledge and understanding and some embedding thereof, with particular reference to being able to give a reasoned presentation and defence of the Christian Faith. The criteria for discipleship are then thought of in terms which are narrowly epistemic and behaviouristic. (Knowing and showing that one knows.)

Without wishing to be pre-emptive it seems that much has been lost in such an approach. But what else might a conception of discipleship involve? What else might the this which is not that be? The proposition is (and the Biblical precedent argued from) for a broader lived and modelled faith journey and encounter, which is simultaneously a form of (or the form
of) evangelism that draws people into the lived experience of Christianity and the encounter with the divine. That encounter opening the possibility of a maturing journey of faith that is a way of living more deeply as part of a transformative missional community. (As before, the emphasis is upon the ontological dimension of faith, discipleship as a way of being, rather than its epistemology.)

Perhaps a good way of illustrating the difference is through an observation about translation of the word ‘mathétés’ (the word translated as ‘disciple’ in the New Testament). The post enlightenment theology has concentrated (via the Latin ‘discipulus’, with its strongly cognitive connotations) far more on the word as ‘learner’ which then quickly gives credence to the primacy and priority of formal teaching and acquisition of propositional knowledge, rather than the equally valid translation of ‘apprentice,’ (the usual translation of ‘mathétés’ in other contexts according to Kittel19) which fits far more completely with the model observed in the life and ministry of Jesus in the New Testament. These comments form a promisary note rather than an alternative formal definition, with the promise being one of elucidation through an account of what discipleship is, problematically, now understood to involve.

5. Contemporary models and understanding of Discipleship

5.1 Osmer Question 1: What is going on?

In the early life of the church (and indeed in descriptors used by Christ, and later by Paul) the early ‘Christians’ were known as followers of ‘The Way’.20 This points strongly to the defining understanding of what these followers of Jesus were about, that is a mode of living. The emphasis in the description, ‘The Way,’ places the prime value on activity rather than beliefs. Contrast that with 21st Century Western Christianity as understood above. A reversal

of priority would seem to have happened whereby instead of orthopraxy being the driver with an underlying or foundational orthodoxy supporting it, the mode now sees orthodoxy as of prime concern, whilst orthopraxy is assumed to follow on by way of obedience to that which is known. This emphasis on correct knowledge can be observed through the lived examples of the primacy of the teaching sermon delivered by the theological expert, by the practice of Sunday Schools, or by confirmation preparation being referred to as ‘classes’ (with a curriculum that is geared to what Christians should know). A further example might be in what Churches communicate in order to promote engagement with the Christian faith, for example a poster advertising the ‘Alpha’ Course, “Explore the meaning of Life Get your questions answered.”

The sermon is considered a key constituent of the service by a significant proportion of churches, and even the more Catholic churches who would centre on the Eucharist as the heart of the service would still include a sermon where the theologically trained priest can teach, and can explain the Scripture readings that have taken place. This models the expert as the centre of faith leadership. Hirsch and Frost point to the fact that Ephesians 4:11 presents a list of five gifting’s for ministry: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers of which they point out that the two valued above all else for Church leadership or priesthood are pastor and teacher.22 The training of clergy, in turn, is focussed around a degree programme that seeks to instil intellectual rigour. Should a priest qualify for a Sabbatical after a number of years in service they will often be strongly encouraged (arguably pressured) to produce an academic paper during their sojourn away from the parish or church. This is not to suggest that theological training is not important but to highlight that in terms of what it prioritises and then what is modelled in and through the Church, it is that the propositional that is more evident than the centrality of spiritual practice and its outworking, or outward engaging mission. This intellectualism is illustrated by a comment by the Bishop of Burnley in, “The Church of the Poor Report” from Church Action on Poverty.

‘When talking to ordination candidates I often find myself asking not, “Is this person called

to the priesthood?” But, “Can I really put this person forward for a selection process which basically comprises three days in public school, a system which rewards eloquence and educational attainment rather than call, faithfulness and experience?”

What is modelled is that learning flows from knowledge dispensed by the expert. Curtis and Eldridge even suggest that contemporary faith is little more than fact telling,

‘We have lived for so long with a propositional approach to Christianity, we have nearly lost its true meaning ... Our rationalistic approach to life, which has dominated Western Culture for hundreds of years has [left us with] a faith that is barely more than fact telling.’

At any juncture of this dissertation exceptions to the norms being explored may be readily cited by the reader. This however is an attempt to take a broad view of the ecclesial landscape, not an exceptionless one. It will involve generalizations about what pervades enough church practice to warrant being examined regardless of whether counter examples can also be described.

Similarly, we may cite ‘The Creed’ which whilst it takes many forms is the declaration and definition of what is believed and therefore what should be known. Whilst the Creed is an important doctrinal statement it does mean that in the week by week corporate liturgy, what is believed is given greater prominence than what Christians are called to. This emphasis is evident too in the various ‘Statements of Faith’ (particularly within Evangelical Churches) which not only highlight the importance of the tenets held to be true but points to there being a ‘correct’ statement of faith held within the denomination or churchmanship.

Thus the Christianity that is encountered by those inside or outside of the church is often an intellectual and propositional one. Whilst the church itself believes itself to be spiritual and

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25 For example, the statement from the Federation of Independent Evangelical Churches. https://fiec.org.uk/about-us/beliefs
indeed it would be hard to argue that a worship service is not a spiritual act, the church does not easily invite or induct into spiritual practice by contrast with doctrine. But what, besides doctrinal transmission might induction look like? Consider the following, by way of illustration: A teacher reflecting on the experience of R.E visits to places of worship and religious practice. She reflected that on the visit to the Buddhist room in Oxford the students had been invited to take their shoes off and come and participate in meditation. The visit to a local church though had been a tour of the building and a talk on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The former being inductive into practice, the latter being more informational.

One upshot of this difference of emphasis is that the Christian church though has been better at communicating the Christian faith than it has realised. In spite of declining attendance figures, there is a remarkable resilience of Christian doctrine and understanding. This knowing does not equate to believing and encounter though. The ‘Talking Jesus’ report that presents the data from a piece of research conducted by Barna Group and ComRes in 2015 uncovered that 43% of people in England believe in the resurrection of Jesus. This figure was a significant surprise to the denominational and Para-church organisations that sponsored the research. It suggests that the ‘what’ of Christianity is still surprisingly prevalent, but arguably not the ‘how’ or the ‘why?’ But, arguably, it also points to the information about Christianity not automatically providing impetus for those outside to move towards spiritual enquiry and journey.

Spiritual journeys are, of course, undertaken by whole persons and not disembodied intellects. For this reason, among others, an over-emphasis on the deliberative intellect as the centre of faith is at variance with the whole person narrative evident in Jewish understandings as well as readings with the gospel and the epistles alluded to previously. In addition, the emphasis on knowledge can lead to an unexamined assessment of Christian maturity based on ‘sound’ or ‘correct’ doctrine and knowledge, rather than on Godliness, Love, or the embodied attributes of Biblical markers such as the ‘Fruit of the Spirit’.

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27 Galatians 5:22.
This limiting of spiritual discipline and thus how to live a centred life marked by humility and imbued with love, grace and forgiveness is problematic even in terms of doctrine alone. Churches may well consider that they have taught what it is that Christians should live and embody but knowing something does not translate easily to doing it, were this the case then New Year’s resolutions would work, and there would, for example be considerably fewer smokers.

This investment in the Orthodoxy and Biblical understanding at the expense of spiritual journeying relegates evangelism to the conveying of religious information and to giving answers, rather more than equipping followers to be as comfortable with questions as much as answers, to connect with the spiritual journeys of others, or to humbly share (from lived experience) how being a follower of Jesus transforms the way that they live in the world. The side effect of this being Christians who are more comfortable being Christian in the Church setting where the language, norms and practices of faith are simpler to live out. This then has the effect of the Christian being less confident in how their faith intersects with the world, and thus does not bring the experience of the culture, and the stories and experiences of others into meaningful theological debate and challenge with the believer. Thus the lack of intentional discipleship practice and opportunity validates further an inward epistemological emphasis of the Christian Faith and understanding.

There is, of course, some idealisation of a predicament here. An argument may, reasonably, be made that the rhetoric of the church is in fact different from some of the practices highlighted, and that is true. What can easily be missed though is not the value of the narrative, but the fact that human beings are imitative and mimetic, that is to say that learning and formation flows primarily from observing and copying. The Ordinary theology assembled by the congregation is assembled and made sense of from what is seen far more from what is said. What is observed in the mainstream church as constituted and practiced, is the primacy of Christian knowledge and understanding.

5.2 Osmer question 2: Why is this going on?
Why this over-emphasis upon the epistemic has emerged is a matter of debate. However, some sense of the causal reasons for its emergence may be grasped by reflection upon a narrative of descent. Christianity is shaped by the environment and culture in which it lives and serves. The theologian A. Walls points to six major ages of Christianity, each of which he says has, ‘developed features that could only have originated in that culture whose impress it has taken.’ 28 Thus to understand why so much of the energy of Christianity goes into the communication and defence of the propositional (and intellectually reasonable) dimension of the faith, and hence why this is the focus and understanding of what discipleship is, there are two major genealogical influencers of the host theology must be considered: Christendom and Post Enlightenment Rationality.

1. Christendom

As a broad generalisation, the need to defend, define and proclaim what Christians believe became a greater focus and emphasis in Christianity from the time when persecution was outlawed and Constantine brought Empire and Christianity together. This momentous change in 313AD transformed Christianity from a persecuted missional movement into a form of institutional establishment. This broadly changed the focus from wrestling with questions of Orthopraxy to the more institutional focus of what is correct belief, that is to say Orthodoxy. Once Christianity was safe, the missional energy and subversive orthopraxy took more of a back seat. Thus in 325AD the council at Nicaea was able to agree a Creed that attempted to define and stabilise the Orthodoxy of the Christian faith, thereby setting a pattern of focus that has preoccupied the Church(es) ever since, in the UK as elsewhere in the West.

2. Post Enlightenment Rationality

The Enlightenment moved human reason to the fore and sought to free it from religious dogma and dominance, thereby it moved the Church from the centre of thinking to the margins, its place at the learning table questioned and even objected to.

The church through thinkers and theologians such as Schleiermacher though fought for recognition of theology and of Christian thinking. However, this need to co-exist within Enlightenment rationality and present coherent and logical truth claims and intellectually palpable theology moved Christianity into the sphere of the propositional, and to a teaching and defending mode.

The outworking of the age of enlightenment was the period known as ‘Modernity’, the thinking and the rapid technical advances working together to produce an optimism that human thinking and technological advancement would lead to a better future thereby allowing an evolving theology and intellectual rigour of the Church to powerfully bond with Modernity by sections of the Victorian Church setting it to social care and social reform with great energy.

We may then say that, two symbiotic cultural formers, of Rationality and Christendom, produced a theology that fitted perfectly with the host culture of Modernity, placing the church at the centre of an optimistic evolving worldview that held huge promise for a better world.

The Church as a bastion of thinking and reasonable belief, to which people came as a matter of course (or at least in significant enough numbers for little concern to be expressed) was a model that worked well enough. However, the Second World War and the rapidly changing cultural context thereafter, particularly from the 1960’s onwards rendered the Late Modernity theology of the church increasingly adrift from any notion of an indispensable social role.

5.3 The view from the emerging Post Modern context

William Ralph Inge is credited with the observation, ‘Whoever marries the spirit of this age will find himself a widower in the next.’29 And this is what increasingly became the case in the second half of the twentieth century when a mistrust of meta-narratives emerged. The church though was so located and invested in Modernity that it saw the cultural changes as

29 Original source unclear, most popular Inge quotes listed at [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/inge](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/inge)
threats, understandable given that its outlook and theology were so closely tied to Modernity. As such it had little to offer to the Post Modern seeker disillusioned, bemused or repelled by Modernity’s ideals.

‘It can hardly be coincidental that the eclipsing of Modernity (more accurately, the surfacing of significant disquiet about and within it) has been accompanied by a corresponding decline in the influence and credibility of the Churches, for there has been a symbiotic relationship between the two for centuries’

5.4 Implications of Late Modernity ecclesiology

The unrealised dominance of the ecclesiology formed by Christendom thinking and Post Enlightenment rationality are so deeply ingrained that they dominate the perception of the problem of church decline. So, the church often cites the changes in culture, for example Sunday trading and sports at a time which was once set aside for worship which erode a sense of Christian literacy. Thus more energy goes into arenas such as demands that schools teach the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer and the true meaning of Christmas.

Whatever we make of such narratives, the broader impact of a late or post-modern context does seem to have had a significant detrimental effect on the numbers and vitality of those connecting to the life of the Church. The reduction in numbers is clearly shown by the statistics but an evaluation of vitality is harder to quantify. Evidence of this though comes from work in the United States that points to a diluted form of Christianity which the researchers named ‘Moral Therapeutic Deism\textsuperscript{31}.’ In effect a faith that is useful for a moral code and for emergencies. Although this research comes out of the States it is consonant with observable phenomena within the UK context and consistent with an uncertainty as to what is the offer of Christianity, other than a moral code and salvation from a possible future judgement. (Rather akin to Pascale’s Wager writ large.) This is a predictable result based on a religion imbued more with propositional framework than spiritual practice and


missional endeavour. An interesting side-effect is that church congregations (and hence the leaders) are (arguably) disproportionately made up of those for whom words, logic and auditory teaching are valued and replicated.

However, it seems reasonable to say that emotional growth and health is related to the connecting together all the dimensions of the human being. Jung refers to this process as ‘Individuation’ and in his work talks about the ‘Persona’ that is the presenting self that is a combination of the presenting and protected self. The realisation that the conscious thinking of the brain is not the totality of what we are is a theme that emerges in much psychology writing in exploration of well-being. Winnicott though perhaps has a model that best illustrates the danger of religious practice that lacks an integrative approach with the tools and courage to look at the whole self. He draws a distinction between the false self (that is the presenting and protected self) and the real self which is hidden from others and in fact may well be hidden from self. It is not the easily accessible ego.

More recent commentators mining the contemplative tradition as well as contemporary understanding have, however, explored the danger of Religion bolstering the Ego self. In this vein then there is little capacity for self-knowledge and humble spirituality. Richard Rohr pointing out that, “If we try and change our ego with our ego, we only have a better-disguised ego.”

Thus if Christianity is largely cognitive and propositional it is in danger of reinforcing a false (ego) self that protects the real (and rather more complex) self with a layer of firmly held beliefs and perceptions of the world. Perhaps why Jesus reserved his most scathing criticism for the Pharisees of whom he said, “You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.” This being a stark illustration of a Religiously enhanced presenting self, masking or even denying the ‘real self.’

Running through the spiritual and contemplative tradition is the need for a spiritual journey of honesty, this is evident through the writings of the desert Mothers and Fathers and on through the Monastic tradition. This practice of encountering the real self, akin to Jesus experience in the desert being the key to spiritual wholeness. Spiritual disciplines then being

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34 Matthew 23:25.
not only an encounter with God but an opening up to self and to God the totality of one’s humanity, experience and being. This wisdom begins to make much sense of the seemingly limited ability of contemporary Christianity to help re-order self, perhaps why it is so future orientated rather than deeply connected with the now, why it is easier to preach on the ‘what’ rather than the ‘how.’ It also sheds light on what Paul talked of when he spoke of the detraction from faith caused ‘the flesh’.\(^\text{35}\) (that being the ego-self, a better understanding than the sometime confused application of the physical body as the problem). By way of illustration, the Eight Thoughts, or ‘the seven deadly sins’ as they have become known represents the difference between the Spiritual and Integrative approach to be explored later, and the propositional approach of current Late Modernity ecclesiology. The seven deadly sins being a series of behaviours that are understood as needing to be avoided, the knowledge leading to modified behaviour. In origin though the seven deadly sins flow from deep spiritual wisdom and were known as the ‘eight thoughts’. In the integrative approach if a disciple was to journey in encounter with God and self it was noted that these ‘sins’ were the reality of what was present and needed to be faced within self. In the former model the ego can find reward in its moral superiority as it distances itself from the presence and evidence of these behaviours. Whilst in the latter, the honest non-protected self must honestly journey with the reality of these sins being a tangled part of the human being. Thus Jesus teaching of the danger of spotting the speck of sawdust in a brother’s eye whilst neglecting the plank in one’s own\(^\text{36}\).

The suggestion here is that cognitive re-ordering intention aligned closely with the ego is relatively ineffective in moving a disciple forward in love, humility and grace. Conversely the neglected spiritual practices and integrative approach being the practical tools that enable a journey of maturing Christian Faith imbued with the radical practices that Jesus taught in the Beatitudes, and embodied in his life.

Thus the following critique illustrates the ‘fruit’ of the propositional approach,

\("Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control power, money, pleasure, and security. Then they tend to be pretty much like..."

\(^{35}\) In Romans 8:5 for example.
\(^{36}\) Matthew 7:3.
everybody else. We often given a bogus version of the Gospel, some fast-food religion, without any deep transformation of the self; and the result has been the spiritual disaster of "Christian" countries that tend to be as consumer-oriented, proud, warlike, racist, class conscious, and addictive as everybody else—and often more so, I'm afraid." 37

This quote from Richard Rohr also highlights the problem that the proposition dominated approach more readily produces a believer indistinct from the wider culture.

There is, admittedly, a danger that an overly stark picture is being painted here, especially in light of the claim that the juxtaposition of conceptions of discipleship is not itself a rigid binary dichotomy. A corrective needs to be offered. The critique is of the dominant modality at work in and through the contemporary church and is not the entire picture of what is happening. The life and presence of Jesus continues to impact and transform people. Not all churches are tied to the propositional and cognitive approach. God is active by his Spirit regardless of theology or ecclesial practice. It is however worth noting that spiritual growth is often driven by internal and external factors that may not necessarily be the church as such; suffering, practices such as Mindfulness, participation in the Arts and influences such as Life Coaches. It is also evident in the practice of spiritual or religious bilingualism which will be explored in the following section.

5.5 Evidence

Much of the claims have been evidenced in the body of the text on ‘late Modernity Ecclesiology’ with particular emphasis on the decline statistics. It is perhaps helpful at this stage to add weight to the argument with evidence of the dominant loci of Orthodoxy and of attractional models of Church.

The strategies and narratives of ‘Church Growth’ offer significant insight, focusing on how church is grown and thus revealing that church is the assumptive starting point. A harsher criticism levelled is that

37 Rohr, R. Breathing Underwater (2011) pXXI.
'Church growth strategies are the death rattle of a church that has lost its way.'

A significant amount of spiritual engagement and growth is happening outside of Christianity as currently mediated in the mainstream church. Of particular interest is ‘Mindfulness’ which is helping large numbers of people to journey spiritually, and to bring the whole self into balance via its technique of breathing, centring and awareness.

As has been mentioned, therapeutic techniques are often resonant with the historic contemplative and prayer practices of the Christian faith are helping people in journeys of self-discovery and well-being. It is of course of great importance that these practices and therapies exist but of note is that at times Christians are engaging with the historic wisdom and practice of the church but these may be separate from and disconnected from their faith life and experience.

One last piece of evidence is a growing conversation around people being bilingual in their approach to religion or spirituality, that is to be drawing on or from more than one faith identity or practice. For example, York Minster have recently started running courses in Zen Buddhism. In some circumstances it seems to have been a process of having developed Christianity as the foundational (Church-interpreted) story and belief system, but requiring an additional non-Church religion to enable spiritual exercises and spiritual practice more generally. The report ‘Buddhist-Christians and the Process of Dual Religious Belonging’ provides an illustrative case study,

“Rachel has been a nun for 50 years and a practicing Zen Buddhist for 30, ten of those years living and working in a Zen monastery in the mountains of California. She described feeling an emptiness in her faith, a lack of practical knowledge of how to attain the spiritual goals that her Catholic tradition had for her.”

5.6 Summary
This critique by Alan Hirsch acts as an excellent summary of the current state of discipleship flowing as it does from an ecclesiology deeply influenced and shaped by Modernity values and priorities,

"The Church in the West has largely forgotten the art of disciple making and has largely reduced it to an intellectual assimilation of theological ideas. As a result, we have a rather anemic cultural Christianity highly susceptible to the lures of consumerism." 41 (Hirsch perhaps hinting that consumerism more effectively discipiles into its orthopraxy, than Christianity does into the way of Jesus)

The dominant (and largely unconsciously held) model might be represented thus:

![Diagram of discipleship model]

The Church teaches those present as well as seeking to attract others in by way of courses in which Christianity can be taught, explained, argued, and defended. This teaching is the gateway to a faith life as a follower of Jesus, one where Spiritual Practice, Faith in Action (mission, justice, love) and transforming encounters will, it is assumed, flow from the understanding that has been received. As Mike Breen expresses it,

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“Would you trust a doctor to perform open heart surgery on you who has only had classroom experience and no residency? Yet that is how we have structured discipleship process.”\(^{42}\)

A position he summarises as, “\textit{Right Information = right behaviour = disciple.}”\(^{43}\)

The chart below is an attempt to further summarise dimensions of the discipleship focus and practice derived from the theology of late Modernity. These dimensions also providing themes which will be used by way of contrast in summary of the Biblical exposition, and finally in the proposed shaping of a 21\textsuperscript{st} Century approach to discipleship.

\textbf{Dimensions of Late Modernity Discipleship Focus and Practice}

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\(^{42}\) Breen, M. \textit{Building a discipleship culture} (Pawleys Island USA: 3DM 2009) p26.

\(^{43}\) Breen, M p26.
PART 2: RE-IMAGINING

6. Discipleship in the Biblical Narrative and the developing experience of the Church

6.1 Osmer question 3: what ought to be going on?

It has been argued that contemporary ecclesiology and theology is heavily shaped by a conception of rationality that is (in part) derived from Modernity and prioritizes the propositional with the Christian Faith. This affects not only what is communicated, and how it is communicated; it effects too where the greatest investment of study, focus and preaching time is appropriately located. For the church in this Modernity mindset, the Epistles have proven to be fertile ground. This is firstly because Paul and the other Epistle writers focussed on the nature and practice of church (a key focus for the Church pre-occupied with itself in its Christendom mode) and because of their interest in intellectually rigorous exposition. The gospels may provide one of the set readings but have at times inadvertently been seen as simplistic and secondary, learned back in Sunday school and belonging to that setting. The irony of course being that Jesus on more than one occasion had pointed to the centrality of the child in faith and of intellect as a potential barrier. For example,

“I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children”44

The Kingdom could in fact be hidden from the ‘wise and learned’45

44 Matthew 11:25.
In order to venture towards the third of Osmer’s questions, ‘What ought to be going on?’ it is vital to re-visit the Gospels given that Jesus called disciples to follow him and we have reference to the 12 then 70(72) disciples. Furthermore, Jesus indicated that the work of those who came after was to be modelled on his own approach, given that his commission was to “make disciples” with an additional sending statement in John 20:21, “as the Father sent me, so I send you”

Jesus actively draws the disciples into a new mode of living and serving. Disciple is not just the designation, it is also both the mode and the methodology.

There is a challenge though in an attempt to look afresh at the gospel in that any examination of the text is likely to be a dialogic encounter, affected by the worldview of the reader and not simply a reading-off of some given. There is no way to have an unbiased neutral interpretative lens but nevertheless a fresh examination trying to be aware of assumption is vital. It is here that the lived experience in a Post Modern context helps to see arenas where Modernity thinking extracts Modernity from the text thus failing to see some of the communal rather than individual dimensions, the spiritual rather than informational, and the formative rather than educational. It also highlights that greater emphasis has been given to examining what Jesus supposedly taught than what his actions and life embodied.

6.2 The Gospels in overview

As has been mentioned, the name for the early Christians was followers of the Way. This descriptor indicating an active lived notion of the ‘discipleship’ that the followers were inducted into and lived from as an apprenticeship.

Looking at the Gospels it becomes evident where this understanding came from. Jesus called the disciples, already a different mode from the Rabbinic culture of the time where the disciple would apply to the master. (A further significant divergence with the Rabbinic tradition being that rather than the increased status of being aligned with a great teacher, Jesus’ call was for a person to, ‘deny himself, take up his cross and follow’\(^{46}\)). Thus Jesus calls into discipleship a diverse group of revolutionaries, tax collectors, and fishermen. They

\(^{46}\) Mark 8:34.
respond to a call to follow although it is unclear to what extent it is a response based on miracles observed, the character of Jesus, reputation, or a conviction or calling. The Johannine account covers details of additional disciples responding to Jesus’ call, including ‘Nathaniel’ who is urged by his brother to ‘come and see!’47 This theme ‘come and see’ being indicative of the experience of the disciples as they lived and travelled with Jesus seeing at first hand the ministry that he lived. In resonance with the contemporary emphasis on teaching it can be seen clearly that Jesus taught. This teaching though was so often accompanied by signs, or in reference to events unfolding within the view of those who sought the learning. There was no pulpit in a venue separate from the lived mission and ministry. Thus, discipleship involved a process of being inducted into a radically different mode of service, to a different set of values, and for a greater purpose. To be a disciple of Jesus was not just the designation of the role, it was the specific mode by which the apprenticeship was to be undertaken. Furthermore, the end of Matthew’s Gospel includes the ‘Great Commission’48 which sets the task ahead as one of ‘making disciples!’ Aligning this commission with instructions from John 20:21 where Jesus indicates, ‘as the father sent me, so I send you’, it appears that discipleship is not only designation and mode, it is also the mandate and methodology for the ongoing ministry and spread of the Kingdom. This understanding of discipleship is as Alison Morgan defines ‘mathétés,’ ‘a form of apprenticeship undertaken in community’49 which is a fuller picture of the input, but discipleship extends, as has been shown into a methodology for the output too.

The call to follow Jesus in a discipleship journey of Kingdom Living was a radical one. It called for a ‘denying of self,’ a taking up of a cross, it was in direct contravention of at least some of the religious norms of the day and demanded a life of radical love, unlikely forgiveness and intentionally embraced poverty. The call to Love your neighbour was a radical one especially when that love was practical and extended to those who would not otherwise be seen as ‘neighbour.’ This call to love extended to the necessity of loving one’s enemies, a calling for which religious piety alone cannot suffice.

47 John 1:46.
The seemingly impossibly tasks, ‘do not worry’, ‘love your enemy’, and ‘turn the other cheek’ are, of course, demanding. However, the theological significance of the incarnation for discipleship is that if Jesus was fully man, and lived and modelled the grace, love and centeredness he did then this mode of living becomes the human possibility too. Not however through an intellectual assent and desire to emulate his teaching, but through the spiritual practice that he lived, modelled and inducted the disciples into. What is, possible for the human is then necessary for the disciple, an actually lived way of being rather than mere propositional acquiescence.

6.3 The four gospels in greater focus

Having attempted a broad overview of discipleship in the Gospels a more detailed look is required to gain a fuller composite picture of what the narrative reveals about the nature and practice of discipleship. A composite picture that is not limited to what Jesus taught but vitally, an exegesis too of what was modelled, and inducted into. The word ‘disciple’ appears over two hundred times in the four Gospels referring at times to the twelve, at times to wider groupings, and also encompasses reference to John’s disciples. As has been noted, ‘disciple’ is not just the designation of the follower, it is the mandate ... and it is the mode of the ongoing work of the Kingdom (Matt 28:19). To fill out that picture we will look at the Gospels then in their New Testament order.

Matthew

Chapter ten of Matthew is a good starting point for a focussed picture of discipleship. The chapter is a clear illustration of the missional nature of discipleship, with Jesus sending out the twelve to heal, preach and drive out demons. The chapter also details that there is a

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50 Matthew 6:25.
51 Matthew 5:44.
53 233 times in the Gospels.
significant risk and cost to discipleship, a pivotal verse to the warnings and challenges is in verse 38, ‘and anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.’ This theme and phraseology is mirrored also in Mark 8.34. Call and cost being themes that Matthew is keen to stress, for example the story of the Teacher of the Law in 8:18. As is seen in the calling of the first disciples, it is an invitation to follow; it is however an invitation that comes at a price. Interestingly, Matthew is perhaps the gospel most resonant with the teaching modality of the contemporary church given that, as Collinson points out, over half the Gospel is given over to the formal teaching delivered by Jesus. This teaching though contains much on the practice of the Kingdom, and is not delivered from a pulpit in a building - but in the midst of the mission as it is lived, practiced and participated in by the disciples. Reading ‘The Beatitudes’ it appears that the costly call is to a radically different way of living. This calling to a radically different agenda of living and being within chapters 5 – 7 is a demanding one that seems to go way beyond a new set of rules to live by, rules which might be complied with by self-effort and determination. Thus a careful consideration of the life and practice of Jesus becomes key to making sense of what is being called to, and how there can be both rest for the soul and the difficult embracing of a radically difficult practice of Loving, forgiving, not judging and not worrying. It is here perhaps that the ‘temptation of Jesus’ in chapter 4 becomes of great significance, what Jesus models is the need to courageously face temptations and the deluding power of the ego in order to experience the possibilities of a transformed life imbued with the receiving and giving of love.

A practice that we first observe in Matthew but is evident in the other gospels too, is the encounter with those outside of the traditional Jewish assumptions or geographical locations of faith. This encounter with the ‘other’ of Judaism is a key factor in Jesus ministry and what these encounters reveal of the Kingdom, and what of it they embody. In Matthew 8 there is the healing of a Leper (in contravention of the place they held in society). Later in the same Chapter a Centurion is commended for his faith, whilst in verse 28 there is contact with two ‘demon possessed men’ but of significant note is that Jesus has taken the disciples outside of Jewish territory. In the active discipleship of the 12, Jesus intentionally involves

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55 Matthew 11:29.
56 Matthew 8:28.
the encounter of other, revealing not only their importance but at times, too the insight or experience they bring.

Pivotal for a look at Discipleship is the ‘Great Commission’ in Matthew 28 where it is revealed not just that discipleship is to be the designation of ‘apprentice’ for those that follow Jesus but also that the disciple’s task is to ‘Make Disciples’ (28:19). Matthew notes, as part of his narrative concerning faith, that some still doubted.

Matthew thus reveals Discipleship as being:

An invitation to follow
A process of apprenticeship
An induction into a Godly faith life (involving Mission and Spiritual Practice)
A costly endeavour
A different and difficult mode of living
The outworking of spiritual encounter and journeying
A missional and learning encounter with ‘other’
A missional activity
To make disciples
Dependent on faith (but with the acknowledged presence of doubt)
A learning activity with includes being the recipient of teaching

Mark

The sending narrative in Mark is in the latter section of chapter 16 which is not present in the earliest manuscripts so will not be added to the emerging picture. What is present though in Mark 8:34 is again a stark reminder from Jesus that discipleship is a call to follow, at a cost.

“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”57

57 Mark 8:34.
Mark covers the calling of three of the disciples, Simon, Andrew and Levi. The calling of Simon and Andrew is notable as discipleship comes with the missional focus of being ‘fishers of men’ (1:17). The calling of Levi adds to the discipleship picture in that he is not separated from his previous life, which can be observed from the criticism Jesus receives as he eats with Levi and his friends. Discipleship is perhaps shown here to be a calling but not a separation, a view that receives additional credence when Jesus states that he has not come to ‘call the righteous, but sinners’ (2:17).

There is considerably less formal teaching recorded in Mark than in Matthew but again the evidence of learning by observing and then enacting the learning as the disciples themselves are then sent out to minister. In chapter 6 they report back on ‘all they had done and taught’ (6.30). Other dominant themes that add to the composite picture are the strong emphasis on the servant nature of discipleship and that it stands diametrically opposite to leadership that is about power or prestige. Chapter 10 emphasises this in the most explicit terms in verses 43 – 45, as part of a chapter that also is critical of wealth and points to simplicity and faith, using a little child as an example of how to enter the kingdom of heaven (10:15).

Mark also records a number of conversations where the disciples question Jesus in order to explore what had been taught or had happened, and that Jesus too questioned them. This reminder that learning was not only experiential but discursive is important.

**Thus Mark adds to the themes noted in Matthew, additionally marking discipleship as being:**

*Not a separation from previous relationships and community*

*A servant role*

*A participative activity*

*Aware of the danger of wealth*

*Questioning and being questioned*

*Luke*
Luke continues the themes explored by Mark and Matthew building on the importance of obedience, ‘My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put them into practice.’ Suggesting activity of faith as opposed to mere knowledge about faith. Yet he also uses the word ‘disciples’ to encompass a larger group of people ‘a large crowd of disciples’ (6:17).

Thus Luke broadly reinforces discipleship themes already explored but, with some ambiguity about its spread, adds emphasis on discipleship being:

*An experience of journeying and maturing faith*

**John**

John refers to disciple (mathétés) most of all, a total of seventy eight times. The designation ‘disciple’ is, however, complicated by John though as not all who have a connection with the ministry of Jesus are called disciple. Ambiguity about extend recurs. The sending narrative in John though is of considerable interest not only building on Matthew 28:16-20 and Mark 8:34 but by perhaps alluding to the discipleship practice modelled by Jesus as the mandate and methodology for the subsequent work of the church. ‘As the Father sent me so I send you’ (John 20:21).

In John, the lived life of Christianity is clearly dependent on Jesus, a call to remain in him to which he adds, ‘apart from me you can do nothing.’ Jesus refers to himself as ‘the life,’ he states he does nothing without the Father and his call to discipleship (John 20:21) reflects that dependency, but rooted this time in him, ‘as the Father sent me, so I send you’. The narrative in John 3 also becomes of relevant when he says to Nicodemus, ‘You must be born again’ (3:3). There is a danger of reading too much into this text, however it seems that Jesus is conveying to Nicodemus that rank, tribe and knowledge are not the keys to the Kingdom, participation therein is reliant on the Spirit, and thus the spiritual life.

Interestingly, however, John does not include any actual example of the disciples being sent

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59 John 15:5.
60 John 11:25.
61 John 5.19.
out to minister by Jesus in order to practice what they had observed. There is, instead, more emphasis on obedience and the learning relationship.

‘So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples”’.

What John’s gospel adds to the picture is a reminder that discipleship is rooted in obedience but enabled by the presence of Jesus and of his Spirit.

Thus the discipleship modalities across the gospels are:

An invitation to follow
A process of apprenticeship
An induction into a Godly faith life (involving Mission and Spiritual Practice)
A costly endeavour
A different (and difficult) mode of living
The outworking of spiritual encounter and journeying
A missional and learning encounter with ‘other’
A missional activity
To make disciples
Dependent on faith (but with the acknowledged presence of doubt)
A learning activity with includes being the recipient of teaching
Not a separation from previous relationships and community
A servant role
A participative activity
Aware of the danger of wealth
Questioning and being questioned
An experience of journeying and maturing faith
Rooted in obedience but enabled by the presence of Jesus and of his Spirit

6.4 The dominant themes (summary)

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What is evident from the Gospels is that they are alive with Spiritual practice and the lived example of a humble openness to the presence of Jesus and the work of the Spirit. The Gospels, thought of in these terms, are not a manual on what should be believed (as the Propositional approach can lead to) but an integrative model and example of not only what being a disciples of Jesus living in light of the Kingdom is, but how that life is enabled and journeyed in and with. Discipleship in the Gospels may be summed up as an apprenticeship into a radically different mode of living involving a changed life, a changed purpose, and participation in spiritual practice that enables this to be possible.

As a way of specifying this a little more clearly, through exploration of the comparative themes again, the Biblical focus (including the New Testament Churches within the Epistles) and practice dimension might be represented thus:

**Dimensions of Biblical Discipleship Focus and Practice**

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<th>Participant</th>
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<td>Orthopraxy</td>
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<td>Dominant modality</td>
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<td>Scriptural Priority</td>
<td>The Old Testament (and the life of Jesus)</td>
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<td>Radical community of sharing and giving</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inherent divisions</td>
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**7. Discipleship for the Twenty First Century**

It would be over simplistic to believe that our exposition of the Gospels could or should
simply be the answer to the question, ‘What ought to be going on?’ The re-examination of these themes however provide valuable tools in order to re-imagine the practice of discipleship. Ultimately, in response to ‘What ought to be going on?’, I want to suggest a re-discovery of the lived life of the Jesus-followers, a mode of radical living that can only be re-captured by a re-emphasis upon the practice of Christianity rather than belief structure. Yet to arrive at this in a plausible manner it is necessary to look at the cultural context the Western mainstream church finds itself in, taking seriously some of the correctives needed to the norms and assumptions that the church has lived and modelled in recent times.

Continuing to address Osmer’s third question, ‘What ought to be going on?’ clearly builds on the re-examination of the Gospels, the lived, modelled and taught narrative of discipleship. It also builds well given that the 21st Century Western context has large parallels with the culture the Early Church found itself in. The parallel conditions being a Pluralism of cultures and religion, as well as a dominant unifying theme; which for the 1st century it was the influence, law and norms of the Roman Empire, whilst for the present day is the economic norms and systems of consumerism. For the fledgling church, however, Christianity was a subversive sect that faced persecution. For the late Modernity church, it is an archaic institution and is perhaps viewed more with benign indifference. What had been its identity and strength within Modernity now becomes a source of its weakness, and even its anonymity.

But if we say something such as ‘It is perhaps in a different relationship to consumerism that Christianity might find its subversive identity again’ what are we appealing to other than a return to some conception of discipleship practice as key? A counter cultural life-giving, and Jesus focussed lived identity. Kenda Creasy Dean postulating on young people’s indifference to Christianity as currently constituted suggested,

‘with nothing left “to die for” in Christian teaching, it became increasingly unclear whether or not Christianity offered something worth living for63.’

‘What ought to be going on?’ is, then, in part a reaffirmation of the offer of Christianity, but as an offer of a passionate reconnection with both purpose and spiritual life. Thus, of key

importance is not only moving from an orthodoxy dominated approach to a holistic orthopraxy, it is the lived, modelled, and taught experience of spiritual journeying that is the dynamic ‘how’ of Christianity. A practice that addresses the questions of how is the presence of Christ practiced? How is it that Christians grow in love, humility and wisdom? What does it mean to live a life of love that flows more naturally from the ‘real self’ than the ‘false self’?

7.1 Osmer question 4: How might we respond?

A response then needs to be a conscious embracing of a lived experience of Christianity that involves both spiritual discipline and the lived activity of the Kingdom. An integrative lived faith which needs to recognise that the activity of faith does not on the whole flow from the receiving of teaching, instead a learning conversation may well flow from the activities of faith; that is spiritual practice, encounter and mission, from showing rather than telling. It takes seriously the spiritual life of the believer and doesn’t relegate Christianity to a set of good teachings that are to be enacted merely to the best of a person’s ability. Thus the corrective to the model in ‘Part: 1’ might look like this

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38
The locus of Christianity then moves to what Christians do (rather than what Christians know) and an encounter with the followers of Jesus is to be invited into the activity of faith, which may well lead, at some point, to dialogue with understanding (within which teaching will play a part).

Something akin to this has been happening with justice initiatives from groups of Churches involved in ‘Food Banks.’ Volunteers have been drawn into help because they want to get involved in making a difference in their communities. Through this (mission) they have encountered people different to themselves (other), experienced the faith life that fuels the initiative (spiritual practice) and have thus encountered the presence of God, and the example and presence of Jesus. Of note too is that Christians have felt more comfortable inviting people to join them in what they do, than in inviting them to events to hear what it is they believe.

A discipleship response then will be mindful of a culture suspicious of institution, expert and meta-narratives. It may well need to live in an uneasy, even subversive, relationship with consumerism in the way that the early church was counter to the norms and values of Roman governance. It will however need to be a practice based approach that is modelled on apprenticeship, seeing, imitating and participating in spiritual practice, encounter and mission. It will need to be a communal activity of faith and counter cultural living. It will focus on the life, activity and presence of Jesus. As the Gospel narratives above suggest, disciples will themselves be makers of disciples. It will require a different mode of leadership, one that embodies and enables the life of discipleship rather than being the expert in theology, more of an ‘Artist, Pilgrim or Activist’ than a CEO or theological expert.

So the themes that emerge for such a contemporary response might be captured thus:

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64 This reflection flowed from experiences shared during a ‘Learning Conversation’ day hosted by the Oxford Diocese on November 26th 2014 entitled, ‘Faith and Food Banks.’

65 Yancey postulates that these are the people trusted by people suspicious of institutional religion. They form three of the chapter headings in, Yancey, P. Vanishing Grace (London: Hodder and Stoughton 2014).
Dimensions of re-imagined Discipleship Focus and Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary discipleship model</th>
<th>Connection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Orthopraxy (Spiritual practice and mission life)</td>
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<td>Dominant modality</td>
<td>Centred Godly Life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scriptural Priority</td>
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<td>Leadership attributes</td>
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<td>Defining group</td>
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<td>Attributes separate from host culture</td>
<td>Distance from consumerism. Desire to be present rather than embracing the cultural mode that might be called, ‘busy distraction’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inherent divisions</td>
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It would, however, be an over simplistic response if the answer to Osmer’s fourth question is merely, the church ought to do as Jesus did, given the difference of social context. The relation of church to disciples also introduces various sorts of problematic. Mike Breen maintains that “if you make disciples you always get the church. But if you make the church you rarely get disciples.”\(^67\) Thus there exists a significant challenge in reconstituting church to be in the business of disciple making. Nicolas Bradbury reinforcing this challenge when he says that, “[UK Churches] accept whatever faith their members happen to have. Maturation and integration of the praxis of faith is not a vital issue for most congregations.”\(^68\)

The question then of how an institution constituted around building itself rather than lived and maturing faith practice in what Mike Breen calls ‘immersive’\(^69\) learning is a difficult one. This made more complex by the need for the guides to be themselves people who have

\(^66\) Yancey, P. (2014) as above.
\(^67\) Breen, M. p11.
\(^68\) Bradbury, N. Practical Theology and Pierre-Andre Liege (Farnham: Ashgate 2015) p185.
\(^69\) Been, M (2011) p32.
been actively discipled, drawing others into what they themselves have experienced. Given these significant challenges then a model needs to be explored that can co-exist with the prevailing ecclesiology and over time begin to change it, rather than the unrealistic aim of simply suggesting that church as is shuts down and re-opens with a new and radically different ecclesiological focus and practice. Furthermore, the church is its current propositional mindset would most likely be unwilling or unable to embrace radical change without a ‘correct’ proven methodology that shows a high (or certain) likelihood of success. There is unlikely to be a correct answer or response however given the complexity, there can only be contextualised experiments trying to more fully enact the discipleship practices and modes of growth lived in the Gospels.

The biggest driver for change though is crisis. The mainstream church may be moving towards a place where the level of falling attendance and ageing congregation could mean that change becomes possible or even inevitable. It will however be working from its late Modernity position, so change would have to be explored from that place.

It has been far simpler to describe the problem though than it is to articulate a way forward. The direction in broad terms is to enact the dimensions of discipleship lived out in the Gospels yet the absence of guarantees is closely tied to the ambiguities introduced through significant difference in social context. Now is not then. How the contemporary enacting of discipleship might be begun or experimented with though given the challenges that have been explored can only be tentative and experimental. The question ‘How might we respond?’ is though the final dimension in this practical theological exploration, and demands at least an attempt at an approach.

Perhaps a three stage approach such as will be explored below could be one such way forward. (And here the suggestion is not that it is the only such way, but rather that it is a type of way that shows promise.)

1. Culture Change
2. Experimental groups and activities
3. Experience used to fuel further culture change and experiments

So taking those in turn:
1. Culture Change

It is clear that unless the church(es) see the need to move to a culture of wanting to model and enable active discipleship then little will change. In business speak, ‘*what you celebrate is what you perpetuate*.’\(^7^0\) Also, as has been previously explored, what is modelled (consciously or unconsciously) tends to be that which is engendered. Therefore, to create a possibility of change the church must celebrate, model and communicate that a journeying-maturing discipleship that is focussed on, and enabled by ‘doing’ is central to all who would follow Jesus. That is, encounter, mission and spiritual practice are and ought to be celebrated as the focus and priority of the lived Christian life. The Church creating opportunity to participate in these things rather than teaching about them. The primacy of lived discipleship would need to intentionally be evident in the seven key shapers of the individual church, these being the: beliefs, vision, values, practices, language, structures and systems.\(^7^1\)

These arenas intentionally living out and communicating:

a. That Christianity is a call to discipleship, it is what being a follower of Jesus entails
b. That Christianity is in focus an activity of spiritual practice, encounter and mission in priority (Orthopraxy ahead of Orthodoxy).
c. That what happens outside of the Church building is of greater significance than what happens within, for example in celebrating the roles congregants occupy in their everyday lives, and hearing how they try and live out their faith in these settings.
d. That the Church no longer exists in Christendom, that to be a Christian is to be an Exile (not a natural part of the host culture), what Michael Frost refers to as ‘*dislocation, uncertainty and irrelevance*.’\(^7^2\)

2. Experimental groups and activity

Within a context where life is being given to the practice priorities and immersive learning, an intentional grouping that engenders and builds discipleship seems the most practical

\(^7^0\) Original source unclear, example of use in Web Page of Terminus Media [http://terminusmedia.com/the-10-uses-of-videoanimation-for-your-company](http://terminusmedia.com/the-10-uses-of-videoanimation-for-your-company).

\(^7^1\) Amalgam list from various management theories of organizations.

approach. This is hardly surprising given that it is exactly that which was modelled by Jesus
(and also in the context of engendering a radically different approach to faith in a setting
where the norms, requirements and conformity of religion were the dominant influencers).
At this juncture the significance of the changed focus and practice of the church plays a key
part as although the church as is, believes that ‘home groups’ are the place where
discipleship is happening; without intentional practice however they default to a social (and
often homogenous) grouping around shared learning and discussion, broadly within the
propositional model.

Reflecting on the Biblical themes discerned, such a grouping would need to be made up of
those invited into the costly call to follow, to be in active apprenticeship as followers of
Jesus. This raises the difficult question of who would facilitate or lead such a group without
thereby subverting its purpose. If it is not the Church leader it risks modelling that this
experiment is not central to the life of the church, however they may not be the best placed
to embrace this way to lead and enable, given that it is a different skill set to that they were
most likely trained in. The leadership (and perhaps a shared model would be best) would
need to embody some of the dimensions explored or at least have a passion for ‘journeying’
with a group in practice and learning.

Such a group would need to commit to the individual and shared practices of spiritual
discipline, encounter, and mission; and learning together from the experiences, bringing
Bible, experience and the questions raised together.

The role of leader(s) is going to be key, as there is something crucial from the Biblical model
about the role being invitational and immersive. The leader(s) need to specifically invite,
hold the vision, and maintain and enable the methodology. There is a real danger though of
the leader(s) seeking to occupy the position of expert, or having that role projected onto
them by the group. For many churches the leader(s) may only have a little more experience
of journeying integrative discipleship than the group, and as we’ve seen from the Biblical
text this is not the mode modelled or alluded to. It might be that curator or facilitator might
be a better model of approach albeit that there is a clear leadership role, but within the
servant role as outlined by Jesus. Alan Roxborough sees the role as that of a ‘sculptor’

he argues for the need for leaders with ‘missional imagination.’

There is of course a danger here that such a grouping becomes elitist or takes on a status within the church that is divisive. This is why the lived dimensions of encounter, mission, and especially of spiritual discipline become so vital, that the individuals and group grow in love and humility (from the ‘real self’) not Ego and Pride (from the ‘false’ or presenting self). These are real dangers though and the role of the leader(s) in what is enabled, enacted and held accountable to is of significant importance, given that this needs to be a move away from a leadership model being driven by techniques and knowledge, to one where character and Godliness are the primary attributes. The leader needs to model the change that needs to be seen, to live the ‘enactivism’ conducive to the Kingdom model that Jesus embodied.

As well as at least one intentional group there could easily be an increase in faith activity and mission that congregants are invited into. Not only participating opportunity, but space and time given to intentionally discuss what has been experienced, felt and learnt.

3. Experience used to fuel further experiment and activity

Reflecting on the Matthew 28, ‘The Great Commission,’ a successful discipleship group would in theory result in the participants actively discipling others, either in a mentoring relationship or they themselves inviting participants into a group they subsequently form and lead. The implication of the Great Commission being that disciples are themselves called to actively disciple others.

It is not hard to imagine that the effect of a group journeying in faith life and increasingly living in a different way could have one of two effects. For some the evidence of a costly mode of Christian life could be off-putting, embodying a ‘count the cost’ lifestyle that is rather more demanding than the limited implication of turning up regularly for Church, helping with the business of church, and of learning more about Christianity. For others seeing growth a change in a person’s faith and humanity may be deeply attractive. Mark Yaconelli’s 2006 book ‘Contemplative Youth Ministry’ which is the summary of an experiment in helping young people to journey in faith by involvement with historic

75 Matthew 28:18-20.
Christian spiritual practices, revealed the impact adults had when their growing faith journey allowed them to be ‘fully present’ to young people.

“The glory of God is manifest in the person fully alive”

In an anxious culture, and an anxious church the encounter with someone ‘fully present’ and ‘fully alive’ may be a powerful pointer to something real and worth journeying in and towards. A centring that has helped a person live less from the ‘presenting self’ and more from the undefended ‘real self’ gives an impetus to an invitation to step into a discipleship call, challenge and experience.

7.2 Working Examples

Aspects of these methodologies and experiments are evident. A notable example is an initiative from ‘Christian Aid’ that foster small hubs of (primarily) students who gather to ‘Eat, Act, Pray.’ This commitment to mission and spiritual practice generating a discipleship impetus. Similarly, in Manchester, the Eden Project put small groups of young adults together in a house to live as a missional community on labelled and marginalized estates. Small monastic missional gatherings like this again though are often at the fringes of the church. A way needs to be found where these hubs are sanctioned by and honoured by a Church that is in the process of changing its culture, seeing and incorporating these groups as central to its understandings of itself and its practice priorities.

However, at the time of writing the only systematic Church based approach that seems to be effectively experimenting along multi-faceted discipleship practice is ‘Partnership for Missional Church’ (PMC). This is a three year programme (with an optional fourth year) that is a process of spiritual practice helping a group from within a church to discern and enable the missional activity the church is being called to in the community where it resides.

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77 Irenaeus of Lyon.
79 https://www.message.org.uk/category/eden/.
80 Keifert, P. We are Here Now (Minnesota: Church Innovations 2006).
The PMC work being a helpful model as it is a process not a product, and engenders a discipleship journey for those involved in the core group. This works as a helpful example of the sort of experiment needed, involving as it does; spiritual practice, mission and encounter.

7.3 Recommendations

In the light of Osmer’s fourth question ‘How might we respond?’ a set of recommendations might not be out of place as a clarifying tool, although these recommendations will deal as much with church culture as with specific actions and will be strongly aspirational. (Which is to say, rather ambitious.)

1. The Church consciously shifting it’s narrative, thinking, focus and modelled priority from orthodoxy to orthopraxy, becoming focussed on what followers of Jesus do (and how they do it) rather than what followers of Jesus believe. The Church shifting its focus outward to what faithful expressions of the kingdom can look and feel like.

2. The church wrestling with a fuller understanding and practice of discipleship that includes what it entails, how it happens and is enabled, and markers or experiences that a disciple might expect to see and experience.

3. Disciple-making needs to become the key focus of the church, such that it orientates what it does into the communal apprenticeship programme of discipleship. The focus being the lived activities of faith in action and in a way that engenders learning and a maturing faith.

4. The training of Clergy and other minsters to be primarily a discipleship process that then enables them to engender discipleship in the places where they are called to serve. Questions also need to be asked whether the church over-prioritizes the ordained minister model, and whether discipleship practice might flow more readily from the lay members of the congregation. Whether training should jointly involve a diverse range of people, not just those pursuing ordained ministry.
5. Academic input is important, but academic dominance within Christianity is counter to discipleship, what it can model and construct is control, intellect, and certainty. An engagement with simplicity, with brokenness, and with poverty is to re-connect with the radical teaching and lived-message of Jesus. This is not to say that theological learning does not have a place but rather that it should take a supporting role not be the primary focus. Leaders trained to enable communal theological practice.

6. Theology needs to become a more explicitly communal process. The lived lives of Christians need to be in theological conversation and learning. This is particularly true for those at the margins whose experience is vital to the collective learning of the faith community. Practical theology needs to become the dominant practice.

7. Christianity needs to re-discover its spiritual practice and wisdom, that the lived life of faith is a quality of life not merely a religious identity and a future focussed belief.

8. Conclusion

Jesus never said to build the church, the instruction given was to make disciples. The assumption that building Church makes disciples and makes the right kind of disciples, has been far from obviously true.

On the picture presented above, and from the outset, current discipleship practice (which requires only limited practice) is shaped by a largely propositional model shaped, in turn, in significant ways by the worldview of Modernity. More so, perhaps, than by the fuller picture and practice modelled and indeed mandated in the New Testament.

If the picture is broadly correct, a re-imaging of discipleship is urgently needed for the vitality of the Church and for a corrective to the orthodoxy dominated ecclesiological focus that the mainstream church has found itself caught up in. However, the same Western emergence from Modernity that has precipitated crisis for the church, may also have given the church the lens through which to see some of the deficiencies of its theology, and
thereby created the opportunity to re-imagine and enact what the practice of discipleship might be.

9. Word Count and Acknowledgment

**Word Count:** 14,554

**Acknowledgement:** Some of the formulations within the dissertation have been suggested in the review process by the supervisor, Dr Anthony Milligan

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