Mission is Discipleship: Discipleship is Mission

By Miriam Swaffield

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Introduction

4 I give thanks to my God for you always when I mention you in my prayers,
5 Because I continue to hear of your love and of your loyal faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and [which you show] toward all the saints (God's consecrated people).
6 [And I pray] that the participation in and sharing of your faith may produce and promote full recognition and appreciation and understanding and precise knowledge of every good [thing] that is ours in [our identification with] Christ Jesus [and unto His glory].
7 For I have derived great joy and comfort and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints [who are your fellow Christians] have been cheered and refreshed through you, [my] brother.

Philemon 1:4-7. Amplified Translation.

We know that running the race of faith is all about discipleship. We are all disciples (students, learners, followers) of Jesus Christ. We are all seeking to grow more and more Christ-like as we live our lives following the Way, Truth and Life on this earth. We also know we can’t do this alone. Our connection to the body of Christ, the local church, our family of fellow believers, is crucial for our discipleship journey. We need others to teach us what they have learnt of Jesus, we need challenging, refining, encouraging and loving into the child of God we were created to be.

However, during the various processes, schemes, techniques and trends for effective discipleship, how often does sharing our faith in Jesus, the one whom we are being discipled for and by, feature? In amongst all the internal analysis and exploration of God and God in us, did anyone ever mention the often feared, avoided or stigmatised words ‘evangelism’ and ‘mission’ as key components to a healthy discipleship journey?

How would our discipleship change if we believed that a key ingredient to maturing in faith was through sharing our faith? What if understanding more of Jesus came as a product of
sharing him and generously loving others? What if we saw every person as someone who could be walked with towards Jesus, a journey that would lead them into being Jesus’ disciple?

If ‘discipleship’ is our umbrella term for helping people discover and follow Jesus, then ‘mission’ is always a vital presence under this discipleship umbrella. ‘Mission’ is the term we use when, as disciples of Jesus, we are loving and building relationship with people who are yet to give their lives to him. In this we are seeking to ‘make DISCIPLES’ just as Jesus commanded in his ‘Great ComMISSION’! So, maybe mission and discipleship are more intertwined than we thought. What if discipleship was mission and mission was discipleship?

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**Jesus is mission: be like Jesus**

Jesus entered the world as God’s mission to humanity. He embodied the plan of action to save the world by moving into the neighbourhood as a man. ‘God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life’ as John 3:16 so helpfully summarises.

Jesus didn’t come to the earth and wait until he was thirty to then begin an activity-based outreach event for the next three years. God was already on a mission, in centuries of prophecy about the coming Messiah, in Gabriel letting Mary partner with God in the plan, right through to his entrance into the world in a stable as a baby. Jesus was the mission before he ever said or did anything. Mission has always been at the heart of humanity’s story with their creator.

Upon entering his public years of ministry, Jesus doesn’t just embody mission, he constantly includes it in his daily discipleship with others. We see Jesus’ walk with those in his company characterised by mission; the very act of traveling through towns and villages meant healings, miracles, life-changing conversations and divine appointments were the norm, let alone all the preaching Jesus did. Jesus sent his followers off on adventures to share their faith, the good news, like the sending out of the seventy who basically went door-knocking to find the people of peace in Luke 10. We also know that Jesus commissioned his disciples to “therefore go and make disciples of all nations” as his parting words to them before his ascension in Matthew 28, and we know that this commission was for us too.

If you could pick your last words on earth, you would probably say something incredibly important, you would probably want to express the greatest desire of your heart, the most urgent message people needed to hear. Jesus calls his followers to the mission of making disciples. That’s the last words he chose to leave us with.

Maybe to follow Jesus, to be his disciple, is to embody the mission of God too?

**Disciples don’t start as believers**

Even the calling of the very first disciples was mission. Jesus didn’t start discipling young men who already believed he was their saviour. He didn’t just help them grow their gifts and
work out their callings as perhaps we tend to focus on in the discipleship of our students. He walked alongside a bunch of unrefined individuals who had differing opinions of Jesus and were at a variety of faith-stages, despite an initial moment of response in following after him to find out more.

We gradually see the first disciples recognise Jesus as the Messiah during the years they were with him, and profess their faith in him along the road. In Matthew 16 upon Jesus asking his disciples "who do you say that I am?", Peter confesses his faith in Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God". At this response, Jesus exclaims that Peter has been revealed this truth by God the Father and then goes on to prophesy over him. Before this point, Peter had never told Jesus to his face that he believed him to be the Messiah they’d all been waiting for, but upon this step of faith in their discipleship journey, Jesus was then able to encourage and solidify God’s work in Peter’s life. Perhaps Jesus didn’t start by discipling believers...

If we are called to make disciples of Jesus, regardless of any existing faith-status people may or may not have, the scope and possibility for what this could look like is blown wide open. Rather than just aiming to link up our Christian students who join the church with a “more mature” Christian to encourage their journey with Jesus, often one of the main ways churches currently go about discipleship, what if it was an equal priority of ours to be meeting and linking up with students who would never have set foot in our churches? What would happen to your student work if you led by example, and the example you set was to intentionally make friends with students yet to know Jesus too, and invest as much time in their discipleship as in those already following Jesus?

For example one year we ran a student weekend away during first term and we experimented with the idea of the weekend being a mini-break that students could bring their friends to. A space to hear the gospel and ask the big questions of life if they wanted, or just hang out in community, escape uni, get a change of scene. Although in practice using a weekend away as an opportunity to invite friends is still something we aren’t sure works for us broadly speaking¹, myself and our student worker at the time Gav, did invite one of our uni house mates to come along. Gav’s exact words were “How can I encourage my students to bring their friends along unless I am living it too?”. So Gav led by example, bringing his close friend who doesn't follow Jesus, into the church community. It spoke volumes to his students. Just meeting our friend and seeing everyone hanging out together so naturally, taught our students more about mission and discipleship than any conversation or teaching resource we could have given them.

Perhaps our students were discipled by being drawn into and experiencing mission?

It’s all relationship

Mission is really about relationship. Relationship with God and others. Loving Him and so loving others with that love of God that is arrestingly different to the love of the world, covered in the aroma of Christ. Mission isn’t an event, it’s a person.

Discipleship is really about relationship. Relationship with God and others. Loving Him and so loving others as we all walk in his ways and help each other keep in-step with the Holy Spirit. Including those who are yet to live in obedience to the Holy Spirit themselves. That's
where we can bring life, and life in all its fullness, because that is where it is needed. Discipleship isn't an event, it's people.

If discipleship and mission are all about relationship between God, his people, and all of humanity, then the whole thing is inseparable. Both discipleship and mission are about sharing and knowing more of Jesus with each other in community with God. I want my mates who don't yet know and love Jesus to grow up more and more like him, getting closer and closer to him. I also want my mates who do know Jesus to grow up more and more like him, getting closer and closer to him. The difference is one group have met him and deliberately follow Jesus, they've had their Peter moment of proclaiming “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”. The other group are maybe still on the beach, mending their nets, wondering who this person is who catches their attention with a “come follow me” call they are yet to respond to. One is in the ‘disciple of Jesus’ process, a commitment moment has happened whatever that looked like, one is in the ‘making’ process, yet to say “yes” to following Jesus.

**What this looks like today and tomorrow**

Today, I am on a discipleship journey with many people from many walks of life. If discipleship is the journey towards knowing more of Jesus and being more like him, I have a lot of traveling companions who affect my strides. Of course it is the people who know and love Jesus who point me towards Jesus overtly and challenge my life and character with the Holy Spirit and the Bible slicing through our exchanges. But we can't keep the truth-speaking, the life-giving, the prayer and the challenge, within the family.

I meet up with many students who attend my church. Some are on the very fringes, some have only met Jesus in the last three months, some have been raised in the church family since birth. All of them are disciples.

I meet up with a girl I took into my house when I found her drunk on my street, lost and in pieces. We have become friends. But of course, because I love her, I point her life towards Jesus when we hang out. I guess if anyone were to ever label it, I am discipling her. I’d never say that to her or refer to our relationship like that to my friends, but I see meeting up with her as a regular commitment I have been given, where I get to speak truth and share how God is deeply interested in her life. She had never set foot into a church before we started hanging out, now she is coming along to our student gatherings. She hasn't met Jesus personally. Yet. She isn't his disciple, but she is being discipled towards him.

The more I share Jesus with people who don't know him, the more I am aware of the amazing truth and living presence of Jesus in my life. The more I hang out with people who have never encountered God, the more I realise how indispensable knowing our creator is. I am growing up. I am maturing in mission. I am being discipled by the Holy Spirit as I scrabble for the words to say to those friends who don’t follow Jesus and question the core of my existence. Quite simply, my communication of the gospel is sharpened through communicating the gospel.

From my experience in my own life today, I can testify that mission, engaging in sharing Jesus with those yet to know him, has discipled my own walk. And, by sharing Jesus with those friends, they have entered a discipleship journey of walking towards Jesus too, even if they don’t see him ahead of them yet.
Today we look at what is. Tomorrow we begin to ask ‘what could be?’ What if we saw discipleship as mission and mission as discipleship? What if the next person you hang out with, you see as being somewhere along the discipleship road with Jesus and you get to walk with them one step forwards towards him? Would your behavior change? Would you do anything differently?

What if you asked every Christian you disciple: “Who are you sharing Jesus with?” Who are they discipling who doesn't yet know God? Are you leading this by example yourself? Suddenly our focus sharpens, and our remembrance of Jesus embodying mission and calling us to do the same is grounded in tangible action.

6 [And I pray] that the participation in and sharing of your faith may produce and promote full recognition and appreciation and understanding and precise knowledge of every good [thing] that is ours in [our identification with] Christ Jesus [and unto His glory].


Discipleship is mission and mission is discipleship. Enjoy the adventure.
Notes & Further Reading

1. As a student work, we have experimented with using our weekend away for different purposes. We try and make everything we do welcoming to students yet to know Jesus or on the fringes, but we found that gearing the whole weekend away around inviting friends along did not work for the majority of our students. In principle everyone wanted to invite friends. In practice, people not in the church community were reluctant to commit to a whole weekend away with a load of people they didn’t know, at a cost. We have since tried the weekend away as more of a retreat time together as community to go deeper with God, with a view to doing a much more localised gathering to bring mates to, one weekend in the city. Every year we are changing and sharpening the purpose and focus of the weekend away but there is no doubt that getting away as a community builds relationship and solidifies commitment to the church family incredibly well.

2. Amplified Bible translation used for main Philemon reference.