

Practical Spiritual Theology of Discipleship: Forming Followers of the Missionary Spirit of Christ

In this short discussion document for a UK-Australia mission dialogue I will simply bullet point some thoughts on the spiritual formation of disciples who can learn to prophetically discern the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus.

What I share below will come across as rather dogmatic and probably one-sided. Please be assured this is not my intention. I have simply put together some thoughts and questions to provoke reaction and discussion for our meetings. My conviction is that the most pressing question for engaging in the mission of God is that the whole people of God be themselves fully committed disciples who are being shaped into the likeness of Christ. I suggest we need to develop discipleship formation strategies that enable people to follow the voice of the missionary Spirit of Jesus. When I speak of hearing the voice of God I do not have one way in mind to do so – I rather use it as a metaphor for the various ways Christians connect with the living and communicative Trinity. My conviction is that God Speaks to those who have intimacy with him. I believe with Newbigin that we cannot engage in God's mission if we do not seek to follow the sovereign Spirit of God to lead it. I believe that all mission strategy and planning should be based on spiritual detection of what God is doing ahead of the church, so we can engage in his mission rather than our own ideas about it. I wonder if we have been too modernistic in our approach to mission strategizing, seeking just to use the tools of missiology to reach people with the gospel, when actually postmodern people have turned away from churches, seeking to find spiritual answers by experimenting with more experiential kinds of spirituality. It seems to me that the early church paid far more attention to seeking to listen to the God who speaks through the prophetic voice. Have we marginalised the prophetic voice from the fivefold ministries whilst giving lip service to it?

1. The Spirit of Jesus and the mission of the Trinity

- Acts 16:6-10 outlines how Paul's mission team were spiritually aware of the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus
- Acts 1:1-5; 2:1-39 portrays that the Christian missional community of the early church continued to follow the communicative Spirit of Jesus continuing the words and works of Jesus as the Spirit worked through their ministries
- Missional disciples need to learn how to hear the Spirit's voice so they can engage in God's mission – this may be termed prophetic discipleship formation
- The Trinity's mission may be thought of as all of the people of God learning how to spiritually discern God's mission through their own lives

Key Questions:

- a) What practical training approaches to developing spiritual sensitivity to hearing God's voice can we develop?
- b) What measures would we need to protect people from abuses of this kind of training?

2. Developing intimacy with the Spirit of Jesus

- Spiritual practices like Lectio Divina, Ignatian Examen, the four steps to hear God's voice etc. could become more fully part of discipleship formation in Christian communities
- Creating space and time for people to retreat away from the stress and demands of life could be more intentionally experimented with, so that people can develop rhythms in their lives where they take time to have conversations with God in their own home contexts as well

Key Questions:

- a) What are the essential practices and approaches that help people to develop more intimate friendships with others in the church, so that they can hear what God is doing in other's lives, as well as telling others their own stories as well?
- b) In what ways can we help people to practically develop intimacy with God?
- c) How can we encourage people to experiment with spiritual practices that develop intimacy with God?
- d) What resources do we know of that have helped to shape disciples who can discern God's Spirit's guidance?

3. What are the key steps in discipleship formation?

- Win – bring people to an intimate faith with the God who speaks
- Build – help new followers to follow Christ by developing their understanding of Christian beliefs and intimacy with Jesus
- Equip – enable new disciples to minister to others by following the ministering Spirit of Jesus at work in those who are seeking to know God
- Multiply – Those who go through this practical missional spiritual formation process may then apprentice others to disciple others by helping them to hear God' voice and to become more like Jesus the representative man

Key Questions

- a) What approaches to discipleship formation do we already use? Are they effective? Are we seeing that many new disciples are coming to Christ through them? In other words, how missionally effective are they?
- b) Do church networks have a discipleship strategy in place that works? How can we introduce new approaches to enhance existing ones?

4. Intentional strategic approaches to spiritual discipleship

I suggest that:

- church network leaders intentionally formulate strategies for discipleship formation approaches, to be implemented across the network
- strategies for discerning God's mission ahead of a church network be based on discerning the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus
- the largest strategic question facing the missional church in the west today is forming disciples who are passionate about following Jesus, and having intimacy of relationship with him: this is because it is at the heart of Biblical spiritual theology in my view. I am convicted that God wants to penetrate into our hearts, and it is our hearts that he wants to dialogue with and shape so they are motivated by the living speaking Christ

Key Questions:

- a) In what ways do our networks seek to equip churches to form disciples who follow Jesus in all of life's various contexts?
- b) In what ways do we seek to listen to the people in our churches who bring the prophetic voice regarding God's mission for us?
- c) If discipleship formation of spiritually discerning followers is the biggest issue in mission today, then how much time, effort and resource should we put into training leaders who can make disciples who can make other disciples who can discern God's mission through the voice?