

## **Discipleship Pathways – Vision (Gathering 2017)**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the Gathering is to inspire our churches in their discipleship, in their relationship with God – we recognise that we give out a lot in ministry. What does it mean for us to give back to one another? The Gathering is a chance to give back – to encourage one another and to leave with a fresh sense of our relationship with God. This year our focus on discipleship is not just because of that but because of our wider vision as a national church and the strategic plan we are implementing. And that means that our focus on some key parts of our discipleship strategy need some attention. Because you and I am more than what we know or what we do.

The apostle Paul was constantly dealing with this in the early churches. This false idea that discipleship is largely about what we know and what we do. We're going to talk about some of these churches a little tonight and challenge our own hearts on this issue.

Our Vision is that Wesleyan Methodist churches would be Vibrant, Contextual Churches that are fruitful in making Life-Long Disciples.

We believe our churches must identify and establish a Discipleship Pathway that encourages the making of disciples in each local church context. But we must ensure that our starting points for discipleship are well formed – that we understand the relationship between head, heart, hands and habits...that you and I are more than what we know or what we do.

### **Inform – Romans 12**

The church at Rome was caught up in a debate, a war of ideas if you like, on how best to honour Christ. And it was important for Paul that they lay this internal debate to rest and get on with it because he needed their help as he planned a significant missionary trip to Spain - and whatever else Romans is about one of Paul's goals was that at the end of it the Christians in Rome would be unified rather than divided over what he ultimately defines as matters of conscience and opinion rather than essential belief. He needed a united church to be his launching pad into Spain.

But that wasn't going to happen while the church was divided into 2 camps each convinced that they knew the right way. On the one side, those who had come to Christ from a Jewish background bringing with them a commitment to honouring God in the strict terms of the Torah and those who had come from a pagan background having been converted from another religion altogether. And the debates were coming to a head around some really mundane issues – like where do you get your meat from? Is it OK to eat meat that has ultimately come from a pagan temple sacrifice because after all it is all God's? Or would that be dishonouring to God? Ultimately, Paul says yes – yes to both perspectives and if

you want to know the answer you can read Romans 14 - but that's possibly the least important part of the long discussion he has about this in Romans.

The primary issue for Paul is not whether the meat you eat has been sacrificed properly but have you? Have you been sacrificed properly? Who are you?

In Romans 12 Paul is calling people to a life of sacrificial discipleship where the mind is renewed but he is not primarily talking about the mind being educated. He is not primarily talking about us thinking the right way - read the same way - about everything.

*12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. **Then** you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

It's the renewing of the mind, not the educating of the mind that leads to transformation. Now before all the ministry students here start ripping up their coursework notes and ministers start cancelling their Stream registrations, I am not suggesting that education and right belief is not important. I am not suggesting that we should not honour God with our intellect and seeking after the truth.

I'm just saying it's not how we define our relationship with God. The answer to the question: who are you? Is not answered by how much you know. And in our discipleship, particularly in the Western mind and world, we decide all too often that what we know is more important than who we are. The temptation to educate ourselves into Christ-likeness. We cry for more meat in our sermons and small groups. Feed us we cry. But it doesn't matter how much meat is on the plate if we won't chew it for ourselves. The truth is being informed is about forming robust Christian worldviews and not falling into error. It does not in and of itself transform me and my relationship with Christ and if that is you and me - then we need to stop it. We'll come to the "perform" question in a moment but for now let's take a moment to reflect on the inform question.

***As you reflect on your Discipleship activities how do you assess your emphasis on the "informing" aspect of discipleship? What do you value about your approach? What might you question?***

## **Perform - Galatians 4**

When Paul wrote to the Christians of Galatia he was deeply concerned over slavery. Not the kind of slavery which Wilberforce "ended" or which the American Civil War "ended" or that which continues today in even greater numbers as people are trafficked across the world. But a slavery of the heart; a slavery of the spirit. He was deeply concerned that the Galatians were missing the point of what Jesus had done for them. That they were exchanging their freedom for slavery. And he was so concerned for them so much that at one point he described them as foolish and

bewitched as he searched for reasons as to why they might put themselves back in chains. Part of it was that some new teachers on the block were giving the Galatians some bad information on what it looked like to perform as a Christian – they wanted them to act more like Jews and to obey the various requirements that the Old Testament had required of Jews – little things like not eating snails and or passing a child through the fire to the God Molech which make good sense to me...to larger things like exterminating the tribes of Canaan from Israel or circumcising male children which I struggle to understand. The simple truth that Paul wanted them to grasp was that Jesus really had done everything that was required for human beings to be restored to relationship with God and that nothing more was required by us, other than surrendering to that ourselves. And yet, the Galatians, like us, were in danger of finding all sorts of ways to make themselves seem right before God...to be slaves again to rules and regulations. To exchange transformation for performance.

*“I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”*

I love what the late Dallas Willard had to say on this kind of approach to living:

*The Pharisees were in many respects the very best people of Jesus’ day. But they located goodness in behavior and tried to secure themselves by careful management at the behavioral level. However, that simply cannot be done. Behavior is driven by the hidden or secret dimension of human personality, from the depths of the soul and body, and what is present there will escape. Hence they always failed at some point to do what is right, and had to redefine, redescribe or explain it away—or simply hide it. (Dallas Willard)*

However it wasn’t just new teachings that were the problem – many of the Galatian Christians were not previously Jews and it was too easy to return to the past pagan ways. And if pharisaic Judaism as we might describe the stereotype of those Jews who misunderstood the Torah was a way of controlling God’s favour through our moral performance then Pagan religions tried to control the gods through sacrifice and superstition.

Galatians 4:8

*8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. 9 But now that you know God – or rather are known by God – how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?*

It’s a great question. Because we are prone to turn our own lives back to weak and miserable forces. Our own sacrifices and superstitions.

Our life with God is not contained in our performance and by that I mean the sacrifices we make for God, the spiritual disciplines we engage in nor the moral perfection we strive. We are not able to measure favour with God based on:

- How much we do for him
- How devotedly we seek him
- How perfectly we reflect him

All of these things are important. We are called to sacrifice as Jesus sacrificed for us. We are called to seek him first. We are called to live holy lives.

But we do not measure our worth and value before God by any of these things. And when we do we have made an idol of our own performance and our gospel has moved from grace to works.

The question who am I is not the same as what do you do? And while we are good in the Western world at answering the who am I question from a what do I do perspective, it's a particular feature of pre modern or communal cultures to answer the who am I question by focusing on whether I behave in the way that the group or the family or the village...or the church require of me. Focusing on behaviour creates some very real risks for us as disciples:

- We lose touch with grace and begin to assume too much responsibility for our own transformation
- It's easy to fake it until you make it – we just never make it
- It discourages the kind of authentic sharing and confession that is a part of genuine spiritual transformation
- It leads to people being burned out on service and sacrifice

So let's ask ourselves the perform question in our own lives and contexts:

***As you reflect on your Discipleship activities how do you assess your emphasis on the "performing" aspect of discipleship? What do you value about your approach? What might you question?***

## Transform – 2 Corinthians 3

By the time Paul gets around to writing what we have as his second letter to the church at Corinth things have turned around a fair bit in the way the church is functioning. And it gives him the opportunity in the first part of his letter to encourage them as they continue to follow Jesus including through some hard times – and one of the many great things he says to them in this section comes in

2 Cor 3:17-18

*17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.  
18 And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

There is freedom. Wherever the spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. Not obligation. Or burden of performance. Freedom is the normative state for believers.

And Paul outlines just how significant the new covenant is for how followers of Jesus can relate to God in deeply personal and intimate ways – we who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory is on its own a stunning picture but when it's put in the context of Moses' practice of putting a veil over his face to protect the Israelites from being exposed to God's glory too directly...

And the outcome of this being in God's presence is that we are transformed into his image. This is the heart of discipleship that you and I would be transformed. That our unveiled experience of God in a sense leads to Jesus being unveiled in us.

Richard Foster has a great definition of this transformation or unveiling:

*A disciple of Jesus is a person who has decided to live in attentiveness to Jesus. We live in attentiveness in order to become like Jesus on the inside and, thereby, able to do what Jesus would do on the outside. As maturing disciples we progressively learn to live in attentiveness, adoration, surrender, obedience, and thankfulness to God, and all of this, without ceasing. (Richard Foster)*

Or in the words of John Ortberg

*"[A disciple is] someone who discerns when laughter, gentleness, silence, healing words, or prophetic indignation is called for and offers it promptly, effectively, and lovingly." (John Ortberg)*

Now to put some of our previous discussion in context here:

Information – will be an important part of shaping our worldviews and protecting us from living carelessly but truth without application becomes its own kind of idol

Sacrifice/performance is a part of our call but living sacrificially can become its own kind of idol as we resent being taken for granted and start to notice how little others people are doing.

But when we focus on transformation as the primary lens on discipleship, we begin to see what we know and what we do from a different perspective:

- The spiritual disciplines become a pathway to living in an unveiled way in God's presence
- Spiritual fruit becomes the unveiled evidence of living in God's presence
- Sacrificial service is motivated and resourced by living in God's presence

I love how Richard Mulholland speaks into how much God pours into this process of transformation:

Only God can liberate us from our bondage, heal our brokenness, cleanse us from our uncleanness and bring life out of our deadness. We cannot do it by ourselves. Thus spiritual formation is the experience of being shaped by God toward wholeness. But spiritual formation as "being formed" will also be seen to move against the grain of our do-it-yourself culture and our powerful need to be in control of our existence. Generally, we like to lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Self-reliance is deeply ingrained in us. To allow someone else to control our life is seen as weakness, to be avoided at all costs. (Richard Mulholland)

You and I were created to live in God's presence and we must organise our churches and our lives to do this.

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