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RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP IN LATIN AMERICA

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Introduction

“Discipleship is commitment to Christ. Because Christ exists, he must be followed. An idea about Christ, a doctrinal system, a general religious recognition of grace or forgiveness of sins does not require discipleship. In truth, it even excludes discipleship; it is inimical to it. One enters into a relationship with an idea by way of knowledge, enthusiasm, perhaps even by carrying it out, but never by personal obedient discipleship. Christianity without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship; and a Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without Jesus Christ. It is an idea, a myth”. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, [Cost of] *Discipleship*, 2003:59)

Discipleship is one of the most discussed themes in churches and missions today. Expressions like “one mile wide and one inch deep” have been used to describe the situation of the church in Africa but could probably be used for most of the churches around the globe. If we mean knowledge of the Bible and of traditional doctrines perhaps we will have some differences between churches and even regions in the world, but if we mean real commitment to Jesus and to the principles of the Kingdom, I doubt that there is much difference.

There are some aspects that I believe we should have in mind when talking about discipleship:

- True Discipleship is always radical
- It has to do with the whole person
- It relates to all areas of life
- It is both individual and collective

John Stott says that “there are different levels of commitment in the Christian community”. And that “our common way of avoiding radical discipleship is to be selective: choosing those areas in which commitment suits us and staying away from those areas in which it will be costly” (John Stott, *The Radical Disciple*, 2010:15).

Do we see radical discipleship in Latin America today? Yes and No. Generally not. We do not lack books, programmes, and solemn declarations of discipleship, but we lack people who are committed to Christ-like living, influencing their own context and society. However, there are positive examples and I will mention some of those.

Let us quickly mention some of the biblical foundation for radical discipleship. The Great Commission, as we read it in Matthew 28:18, says “go and make disciples of all nations”. What do we understand by discipleship?

I. Biblical foundation

Matthew 4:18-22; 9:9 – “Just follow me”

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me”, Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men”. At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me”, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

- The primary example of making disciples is of course Jesus himself
- Without questioning, they accepted the invitation and followed Jesus
- There is a purpose with the calling “make you fishers of men”
- The question could be whether Jesus’ disciples are good examples or not of true discipleship – Jesus had to work with them as in...

Matthew 16:15-28 – “Welcome to the cross”

13. When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

15. “But what about you?”, he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”.

Jesus replied: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, the gates of Hades will not overcome it”.

21. From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord”, he said. “This shall never happen to you”.

23. Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men”. Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life, will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it”.

- Discipleship based on the recognition of who Jesus is

- The purpose of being part of Jesus' building of His church
- A path to follow: From revelation – to transfiguration – to crucifixion – to resurrection (understanding, fascination, reality, and reward and glory)

Matthew 28:18-20

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age".

- The Great Commission is based on a relationship of a Master to his disciples.
- They could only fulfil the task if they were under the authority and power of their Lord Jesus, committed to obey and to be loyal to Him.
- They could only make other disciples if they were disciples. Leaders, apostles, pastors, priests, bishops, doctors and theologians do not make disciples, if they are not disciples to Jesus themselves.
- As we know, "make disciples" is the key expression here and the only verb that is imperative. Go, baptise and teach are the ways in which we make disciples.
- Go – has to do with our Christian pilgrimage and our willingness to reach out to people where they are, not expecting them to come to us, to our church buildings and so on.
- Baptise – is related to the radical identification with Jesus in His death and resurrection, but also to the integration into the body of Christ – the Church.
- Teach them to obey everything – not just theory but practice, giving a living example of what it means to be a radical disciple of Jesus.

Rm 12:1-2; Fp 2:5-11 – "The mind of Christ"

- The whole being – all dimensions of life in holiness
- To think differently from the world
- Transformed by a renewed mind
- The high standards of a disciple
- The same attitude as that of Christ Jesus

2 Tim 2:2 – "Success in discipleship means successors - new disciples of Christ"

- Lessons heard from older generation – living examples
- Confirmed by witnesses – a collective discipleship
- Entrusted to others – screening and selection
- The chain of discipleship – criteria for good discipleship

What characterises radical discipleship?

1. Following the Master and Lord Jesus – close relationship, fellowship
2. Learning from the teachings of Jesus – obedience

3. Imitating the attitudes and actions of Jesus – the mind of Christ
4. Growing and maturing in Jesus and together with others in the Body of Christ – collective discipleship (Ephesians 4)
5. Resistance to the “patterns of this world” – not falling into temptation. Resistance to the Ego, to cheap grace (as described by Bonhoeffer)
6. Reproduction – making new disciples of Jesus
7. Finishing well – keeping the faith (2 Tim 4:6-8)

John Stott in his last book, *A Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling*, describes some of the characteristics of Christian discipleship. Just see the title of the chapters:

1. Nonconformity
2. Christlikeness
3. Maturity
4. Creation Care
5. Simplicity
6. Balance
7. Dependence
8. Death

And he concludes saying: “We have considered eight characteristics of those who desire to follow Jesus, and which together form my portrait of the radical disciple. Basic to all discipleship is our resolve not only to address Jesus with polite titles but to follow his teaching and obey his commands” (Stott, *A Radical Disciple*, 2010:134,135).

II. Radical Discipleship in Latin America

Discipleship has theologically and practically been interpreted

- More as a course than as a lifestyle
- More as knowledge/theory than practice
- More related to external things than to inner life
- More related to church life than to society
- More as personal achievement than God’s work
- More individual than collective

What are some of the challenges for radical discipleship in Latin America?

1. The form and way of Christianity that came first to LA
- Leonardo Boff, one of the Catholic theologians linked to the Liberation Theology says that the 500 years of evangelisation in LA have been characterised by a pseudo-evangelism that has not gone deep into the life of people and has not really influenced

societies. (Leonardo Boff, *América Latina: Da Conquista à Nova Evangelização* [Latin America: From Conquest to New Evangelisation], 1992:34). Protestants and Evangelicals have not done much better in terms of discipleship but perhaps the emphasis on personal conversion has been of some help.

2. Syncretism

The way Christianity was imposed on the LA countries created a superficial church. Many are Christians in the church on Sundays but continue following all kind of beliefs during the week. In one of the several visits I have made to the Inca city Machu Picchu, I asked the young lady who was the tourist guide about the religiosity of the Inca people. Don Richardson had affirmed that the Incas had an idea of one God, Viracocha, the creator, and that that could have been the bridge to evangelisation if the Spanish conquistadores had understood that. The tourist guide said that during her four years studying Peru's history at the University in Lima, she had never heard about a monotheistic belief in God among the Incas. Her understanding of Inca religion was that it was primarily animistic and that especially the Sun was worshipped. And then she said, "here in the mountains we are still partly Incas in our religion. On Sundays we go to the Catholic mass but the rest of the week we continue to worship the Sun".

Popular Catholicism in Brazil is another example. Combining elements of Christianity, African traditional beliefs, Spiritualism and Indigenous rites and ceremonies, almost everything is accepted and allowed. One of the most typical expressions of that is the celebration of Iemanjá on the New Year's Eve. Iemanjá is one of the incarnations of virgin Mary, she looks like an Indian woman from the Amazon, the black female leaders of candomblé or umbanda (the two main spiritualistic groupings) perform the rituals offering flowers, chicken, champagne and other things at the beaches of the Brazilian coast (the biggest ceremony on Copacabana in Rio). The belief is that Iemanjá lives in the sea.

We see syncretism also in the more extreme Pentecostal movements with all sorts of fetishes and superstition.

3. A Theology based on salvation through doing good and following tradition

There has been a strong influence from Catholic teaching of legalist participation in the sacraments and in indulgence from sin through specific actions. Salvation is guaranteed by following the orders of the priest.

4. Strong emphasis on external things such as clothing, haircut, jewels, etc.

The Protestant and Evangelical churches substituted the "payment of sins" through particular good deeds by a severe code of conduct that mainly addressed external things. The "sin catalogue" played the positive effect of giving examples of how a Christian should behave, but also the negative effect of leading people into the false security of legalism. Both (3) and (4) have led to a double standard of morality that stresses the external and visible and hides the internal and invisible.

5. The Theology of sacrifice and poverty

Based on the Jesuit ideal of chastity, poverty and sacrifice, and a somehow similar understanding of the Christian life among the pioneer Protestant and Evangelical missionaries, the teaching about discipleship has often focused on avoiding everything that could give physical, psychological or intellectual pleasure. The pilgrimage motive gave emphasis to the eternal life in heaven and not the well-being during the earthly journey. This created also a distance to the reality of the world, seen only as harbouring sin, and a lack of interest in engaging in politics or other areas of society.

6. Lack of mature and godly Leadership

At all levels in church and society, the lack of good examples to follow is certainly a major challenge. The tendency is to recognise and even expect an autocratic, strongly charismatic and self-sufficient leader. A servant and humble leader is for the most seen as weak and less attractive. The ideal model of leadership is often linked to power, influence and prosperity, according to the colonel model that was implanted by the conquistadores.

7. Corruption and immorality

Unfortunately corruption and immorality permeate also ecclesiastical contexts. Few Christian politicians have the strength to resist corruptive structures and systems when elected to public roles. The title "Pastor" has often a pejorative meaning in LA, owing to many cases of bad management of church funds, immoral behaviour and linkage to corrupt politicians.

8. Growing secularisation and materialism

Latin America is fast growing in terms of economy and life standard. Particularly Pentecostalism has grown among poor people with a strong focus on prayer for jobs, health, money and better living conditions. The tendency is that when people get it better, they are not as committed to the church and to follow Christ. The middle-class has grown all over LA and materialism is a clear threat to discipleship. Pluralism and secularisation, as in other parts of the world, affects also the Christian churches and religion is being seen more and more as something that is just an individual choice.

What are some of the areas that need special attention?

1. Bible teaching in the churches

It is not primarily manuals of discipleship, programmes and strategies that we need, but the teaching of God's word. For that we can use books, all sorts of materials and strategies but these can and should not replace or overshadow the content, the teachings of Jesus and his followers.

We all know this reality. People come to our churches for Gospel entertainment. They want to watch a professional show with good musicians and singers and a preaching that speaks to their favour. They are willing to pay for that and the more the churches provide that kind of show, and promise a good and healthy life, the more people will contribute. A deep reflection in the Scripture that challenges and demands of people a change in lifestyle or in particular attitudes is not what they want.

With all emotionalism and competition and with all sorts of miracle performers and healers, it is hard for a Latin American pastor to insist in a serious sharing of biblical principles. And they tend to follow the models coming from apparently successful ministries. Even if the leadership of the church wants something different, the members start comparing and desiring a similar show.

2. Leadership training in the seminaries

Often what is lacking is a confidence in the power of the word of God and the action of the Holy Spirit. My experience from 30 years of leadership training shows that many times students come without a good foundation in the Scripture and have not been disciplined by their pastor or other leader in the church. So we have to do that in the seminaries.

3. Living examples of discipleship

The single most important factor in forming new disciples is living examples of discipleship to be followed. We cannot expect to see good followers of Jesus if we do not demonstrate that it is possible to live according to what the Master demands. And that is true, of course, in any part of the world and certainly one of the most critical issues for church and mission. A good criterion for evaluating success in the churches in LA today is to look at the kind of leaders we are forming. Are they servants or colonels? Are they good examples for their people or not?

4. A Kingdom Mentality

Radical discipleship promotes the values and principles of the Kingdom of God. A deeper understanding of the discipleship must follow the expansion of the Church. The growing number of believers must signify a greater influence in society. The big churches and the mega-churches can be good, but if they do not advance the Kingdom of God and are only occupied with advancing their own private kingdoms, we have gained very little for the present age and maybe also for eternity.

The Church must defend and struggle for the issues of restoration of individuals, families and nations. The Christians must be paladins of peace and reconciliation, of release from political oppression and freedom from spiritual bondage, of social justice, of equality between races and gender, of concern about the environment and of religious liberty. I believe that we must go back to the synagogue of Nazareth and listen to the mission statement Jesus gave for his Kingdom (Luke 4:18,19).

There are ministries and organisations that have done a good job in discipling people. Examples are: The Intersity Movement (ABU/GBU) and other working with students and youth groups. In the 1980s I was part of an ecumenical movement of discipleship and we met twice a year for retreats and had a developed system of mentorship. It was very much based on personal relationships with concrete steps and goals to be achieved.

How does radical discipleship happen? Three examples

1. Jorge in Fortaleza

One of my colleagues and friends in Fortaleza, Northeast of Brazil, Jorge, could be a good example of holistic and radical discipleship in Latin America today. Born in a poor region of the country, he had a personal experience with Jesus Christ when he was a teenager and soon felt called to be a full-time minister. After theological studies he came to this small congregation in the slum area of “Dois Irmãos” (Two brothers) on the outskirts of Fortaleza. He realised soon that preaching the Gospel and making disciples of Jesus would not be successful without considering the entire situation of people in the neighbourhood. There were no schools in the area, so he first started a pre-school in the backyard of the church and literacy courses for adults. The school started to grow and today the church offers quality education from pre-school to secondary level, with support from local authorities. Being a community of poor people, many of them without permanent jobs and living in sub-human conditions, a programme was also started, with help from the south of Brazil, to build and renovate houses, provide clean water and improve the sanitary system, giving people jobs and better living standards. The former slum area Dois Irmãos is not the same anymore. There is a strong local church with missionary vision reaching out to other areas as well. But when I asked people in the neighbourhood what was the strongest and most important contribution that Jorge and the church he started had given to the community, the answer was that the most significant thing was the example of servanthood and humility of the pastor.

2. Manuel in Lima

Manuel is a Peruvian of Japanese descendant who came to faith when he was 30 years old. Known for his fighting skills as a black belt karate master, he was highly respected in the La Perla zone of Lima. His life was completely changed and from being a fighter he became one of the best evangelists in the church. A radical transformation that he described as similar to what the apostle Paul experienced. His gift was not to speak or preach but to give his testimony of transformation and to help people around him. From being feared and the worst example to his own kids and others, he became one of the leaders of that community and led many to Christ through his deeds. Hearing about the needs for mission in Japan he started praying for his father’s homeland and eventually he moved to Japan. Working in a factory in the Gunma-Ken state he and his family have planted a church among both Latin immigrants and Japanese.

3. Catholics in Bolivia

Salvatierra, a Catholic priest in Cochabamba, Bolivia, says the following regarding true discipleship:

“Missionary disciples that present an action, in service for the life and the environment in all its diversity, oriented towards the Kingdom of God; in the search for just structures, combining justice and mercy, to make the Church a sacrament of love and solidarity, promoting humanity and an authentic and integral liberation, supporting the social and economic policies, serving a sustainable development, not confining the Church to the temple, promoting an evangelisation that is not separated from solidarity.” (Presented at the Edinburgh Conference 2010)

The Catholic community/ecclesial groups are good examples of Bible reading and discussions based on the reality of people and building upon existing knowledge and understanding in order to achieve personal and collective transformation. Often these groups have used the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, going from the “known to the unknown”. The goal is to form radical disciples of Jesus who transform their context.

Conclusion

Interestingly it seems many times easier for those who are poor to be more radical in their discipleship. Perhaps that is also the case of those who are being persecuted. It is as if they do not have so much to lose or maybe they are not so attached to a lot of things. And when we talk about solidarity as one aspect of discipleship, there is no doubt that it is the poor that are more ready to sacrificially help other poor. But there are of course many affluent people who have also dedicated all they have and what they are in the hands of the Lord, serving him with their resources.

I like to quote Orlando Costas, one of the leading Latin American theologians in the 20th century, because he summarises very well the challenge we face in LA today:

“The issue seems to me to be not whether the church is growing, but whether it is authentically engaged in the mission of the triune God in its concrete socio-historical situations. It is a matter of efficacious participation in the ongoing life-struggles of society in a total witnessing engagement, which, more than a program or a method, is a lifestyle.

For when this happens, the church is turned upside-down. It becomes a living organism, a dynamic training and research center, and an effective team that is capable of leading multitudes to Jesus Christ. In such circumstances, the church is turned inside-out; its structures are put at the service of the kingdom and its missionary practice is

transformed into a comprehensive endeavor, where the gospel is shared in depth and out of the depths of human life”. (Orlando Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate*, 1982, 54).

Radical discipleship – radical means going to the root, the basics. Radical discipleship is therefore based on Jesus Christ himself – the foundation – and his teachings and example. It is also radical because it has to do with the deepest level, the inner being, the central part of the disciple of Jesus, changing his “*nous*”, his way of thinking, acting and reacting. It is a complete transformation, not just a refurbished outside. It is also radical because it deals with human, political, economic, social and spiritual unjust and sinful systems and not only with the effects of these corrupt systems.

The growing Church in LA has a lot to learn still about radical discipleship and that is probably true for the Christian Church also in other regions of the world.

***“Come and follow me”, Jesus said. –
“Go and make disciples of all nations”***

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