

## Discipleship in a Broken World – Part 2

Len Hjalmarson

In my last article I noted that the first challenge we face as missionaries is to genuinely trust that the Spirit goes before us in the world. Jesus really does “love the world,” (John 3:16), and he sends the Spirit to prepare the way before his disciples.

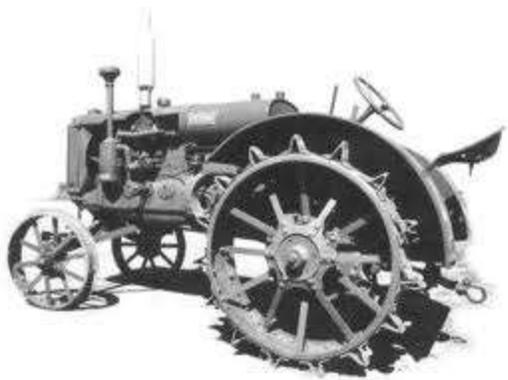
At Metro in Kelowna we discovered that God was at work before we got there. Our task was first one of discernment – to figure out what God was doing and learn to be his partners in his work. In John 17:13-19 Jesus tells us that we are to do TWO things well, and to hold them in tension. He calls us to be IN the world, and he calls us to be not OF the world. We considered two ways of seeing the relation of the church to the world: one that is helpful, and one that is not.

Then we reflected on the nature of the cultural shift we are in, particularly the movement from Christendom to post-Christendom. This reality is especially clear in urban contexts, and the mission field in Canada is largely urban. The un-churched are the largest group in Canada, with the de-churched group growing rapidly and church attendance declining. It is critical, if we want to communicate the Gospel, that we learn the language of our culture.

In this article I want to examine the lingering divorce between matter and spirit in our way of seeing the world. Even though Mennonites have remained close to the land, we still tend to see the world, or matter, as bad, and the spirit, or heaven, as good. But no such division exists in the eye of God. As John 3:16 put it, God really does “love the world.” That He sent His son into the world, taking flesh and becoming one of us, and then promised a fully physical resurrection, tells us that matter is good. God loves it because God made it!

Related to this third challenge, we need to see the city as another place the Lord is redeeming. We need to hear the admonition in Jeremiah 29 to “seek the shalom of the city in which the Lord has placed you as exiles.”

### Ministry and Method



In one of the many Pew Surveys pastors and church leaders were asked about their ministry priorities. At the top of the list in every answer was “discipleship.” Discipleship has been a huge priority in ministry in churches in Canada for most of the last generation, but the results of all this focus is too few disciples.

The second problem, and it’s closely related, is that even after discovering that the results are pretty bad, methods have not changed much.

Imagine you have a broken tractor. Along comes a Tractor Repair Expert (TRE), to help you to fix it. Better yet, they give you a guarantee! If you just use this method, your tractor will be running tomorrow! So you try the method – and your tractor is still broken. You get someone else to fix it. The next year when it breaks down again, which method will you use: the TRE method or the one that worked? But even when we see that discipleship is broken, we are still using the methods that failed to produce results.

The old adage says, “If it hurts to bang your head against the wall – stop.”

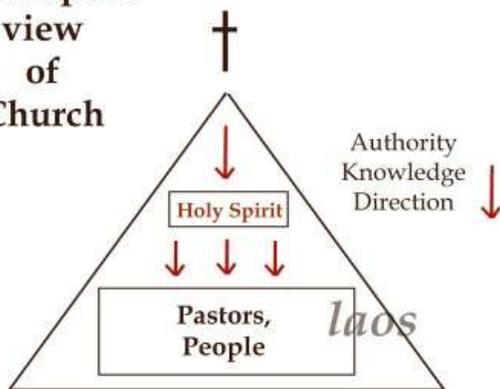
We need to be asking some new questions. Why aren't we producing disciples? What are we currently doing that is working against our discipleship goals? Why are we so good at producing religious consumers, who expect to hire pastors to feed them and run religious programs? What is it about the soil we grow in (our culture) that makes discipleship so difficult?

A lot of good thinkers have given a lot of energy and prayer to this problem, and they have also looked at churches around the world that have learned by trial and error. People like Greg Ogden have written "Discipleship Essentials," and others like Mike Breen have written, "Building a Discipling Culture." These are helpful books because they are built on real-world experience. These brothers have fixed a lot of tractors!

Looking at discipleship at the "cultural" level is important. Think back to the broken tractor. It turned out it needed new injectors. However, if we fix the injectors but don't pay attention to the worn-out tires, it will soon be back in the shop. Our focus must always be wider than the problem itself: we call this "systems thinking." To be doing effective discipleship, we have to also understand the environment – the soil the tractor must plow – the culture in which disciples must live.

The "culture" or "soil" the church grows in is both Modern and post-Modern. In rural centers it is mostly Modern, but in transition. And in Modern culture, we divided the world into compartments. We were not very good at systems thinking, but we were good at engineering.

### Anabaptist view of Church



In the Modern world, up to 1980 or so in most places, we divided the world into sacred and secular. Church was sacred and good, the world was secular and bad. In that view of the world, it's better to escape the world than to live in it.

And because world = bad, church = good, we were a little suspicious of work in the world.. Ministry – work in the church – was a higher calling than that of a farmer. In this view it's hard to know what to think of Jesus working as a carpenter all his life. This sacred/secular split meant that we also divided Christians into two classes: clergy and laity, or

"ministers" and others. It made it very difficult to agree with the Bible's view that we are ALL ministers. So we lived with a strange dualism that was not too different from a Catholic view: some are priests, and some are not. We have to cut 1 Peter 2 out of our Bibles, and also Hebrews and Ephesians.

Another effect of this split was to see heaven as good and earth as bad. We know Spirit is good. Sometimes we think matter is ok; but mostly we aren't too sure. So when Jesus says "the kingdom is among you" and when he prays "Your kingdom come," we are thinking about a future age beyond this church age. We aren't thinking about God's kingdom literally breaking into our world here and now. And then it is tough to know what to do with all the kingdom teaching in the Gospels, especially in Luke. In this view we lose any real

The kind of thinking that will solve the world's problems will be of a different order than the kind of thinking that created them in the first place. Albert Einstein

motivation for justice: to work for a better world. It's hard to make sense of the call to justice, especially the constant call of the prophets like Isaiah.

Furthermore, if heaven is good but earth is bad, then who cares how we treat the world? And what is the value of work? We can all affirm the value of "ministry," but how do we connect ministry and service? Does the school teacher also "serve?" Is the high school counselor a minister of the Gospel? What about the mechanic, or the brick-layer? If we give a New Testament answer, we say "yes!" But if we give a religious cultural answer, then no.

Finally, if the sacred/secular worldview is right, then better to just get people saved and get them out of this world as quickly as possible. We end up emphasizing decisions over discipleship, and we really find it is impossible to fix the tractor. We have no way to follow through with the Great Commission, to "make disciples of all nations." Why would we want disciples anyway? What use is life in this world?

And the other Great Commission is even a bigger problem. At the end of Mark 16 Jesus commissions his disciples to preach the Gospel to all creation. He tells them to cast out demons and to perform healing. But what is the point of healing if all this world will be burned up anyway?

But what if: *God really loves the world?* John 3:16-17

What if our God is serious when he tells us:

*Seek the SHALOM – the peace and prosperity --  
of the city to which I have carried you into exile.*

*Pray to the Lord for it. If it prospers,  
you too will prosper. Jeremiah 29:7*

City = bad, and farm = good is not a biblical idea. The Bible begins in a garden (Genesis) and ends in a city (Revelations) where God fills the city with His presence – and a lot of gardens!



In the last generation we made the church as attractive as possible, in order to draw people in. We were partly successful, but our success was also our downfall. We now have a generation of Christians who expect to be served, rather than looking for a way to serve. And we have a generation of Christians who hardly know how to have a conversation with someone who is not a believer. Furthermore, the lost in this generation are not looking for a good church – at least not in our urban centers. But they are genuinely open to friendship.

The call on this generation of Christians is really simple: to learn to love our neighbours. The Great Commandment and the Great Commission should come together for this generation.

## BIO



Len lives with his wife Betty in Kelowna, BC, in the heart of the orchards and vineyards of the beautiful Okanagan valley.

Len is co-author of *Missional Spirituality* (IVP: 2011) and author of *The Missional Church Fieldbook* (Urban Loft: 2013). He is an adjunct Professor of ministry at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Chicago, as well as at Tyndale Seminary, Toronto and George Fox Seminary in Portland. His coming book is *No Home Like Place: A Christian Theology of Place* (The House Studio, 2013).