

## Joining Mission and Discipleship: The Rhythms of Grace

Len Hjalmarson



*What is the relationship between discipleship and mission? Under Christendom our lenses became inward lenses, distorting the connection or reducing it to “evangelism.” As we recover the practices of shalom, we discover that discipleship gets its traction from mission, and mission receives its telos from discipleship. The bicycle becomes a metaphor for the rhythms of grace.*

Way back in the mid 90’s I heard an excellent speaker by the name of James Ryle. He was talking about the great commission, and he had a wonderful interplay of words. His frame was this: “If we are in sub-mission to Jesus, we will get per-mission to go on co-mission with him.” Looking back, James was connecting discipleship and mission. But it’s not really a common connection.

What is the relationship between discipleship and mission? In the last generation we didn’t make the connection very well, not in theory or in practice. There are some historical reasons for this, but the biggest reason may simply be that in Christendom our lenses for thinking about church became inward lenses. We thought a lot about programs and services for members, kind of a “Christian club” way of seeing the church. And when we did think about mission, we tended to see it either as something for foreign service or as a program of the church: one spoke on a wheel, and not the hub – not the reason for our existence as a people, and not an expression of our identity as a sent people.

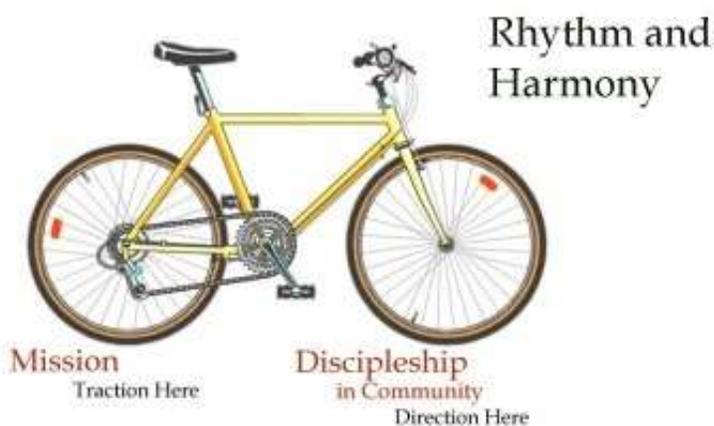
But nothing has changed since Abraham. *We are blessed to be a blessing.* The Church is an organization that exists for the sake of its non-members. In this we reflect the very inner life of the Trinity, our God who has always been a loving community, and where the overflow of that love is expressed in creation and redemption. In theological terms we side with David Bosch who wrote: “It is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world; it is the God of mission who has a Church in the world.”

Another way that mission was sidelined in favor of discipleship was an emphasis on evangelism. Evangelism became separated from a broader view of the gospel because of our tendency to see the world in compartments. We divided the world into social, physical, and spiritual compartments, and salvation itself became something solely spiritual – divorced from life in this world. As a result, evangelism became all about saving souls for eternity. Evangelism has sometimes been reduced to saving souls for eternity: let’s just get as many as we can through that door! And mission reduced to evangelism was a narrow and unbiblical way of seeing God’s work in the world.

It's true in a narrow sense only: decisions are the door, but discipleship and following Jesus are the pathway. As we recover a more *shalom* oriented view – that God really does love this world (John 3:16-17) – and that we really mean it when we pray, “Your kingdom come... on earth...” – we are also recovering a broader view of the Gospel. The Gospel Jesus preached is the Gospel of the kingdom, the Gospel of God's just reign. There are no limits to God's reign: it is social, physical and spiritual. It is here, and yet to come. And God cares about all aspects of life in this world: his intention is to renew all things! (Eph. 1:10; Col.1:19-20).

With this broader, more inclusive, view of the Gospel – the purposes of God in creation and redemption – we are also recovering the connection between mission and discipleship. Mission is not a program of the Church - it is the reason we exist. And discipleship does not exist apart from mission. Rather, discipleship gets its traction from mission.

### The Bicycle View



Sometimes when we talk about this kind of thing, we work with components as if they exist separately. It distorts our view of reality: like watching a 2D image versus 3D. So when I talk about the unity of discipleship and mission I'm talking about a dynamic, living expression of the life of Christ among us. There is a natural rhythm in that life, just as there is a natural rhythm in riding a bicycle. Cycle riders know that there is more than direction and velocity in keeping a cycle moving: it requires balance, and

balance is a dynamic reality. Stop moving, and the bicycle and rider end up on the pavement. It's the same with discipleship and mission: they exist in a dynamic relationship of motion and energy.

And it's very different on paper than in reality! The knowledge that comes from riding is experiential knowledge – physical and personal. It's the kind of knowledge that exists in the body before it exists in the mind. Too often in our culture we rely on a strange kind of knowing that is divorced from practice. The other kind of knowledge, personal knowledge, is the kind that God designed for us to live in, and it's why the Great Commandment appeals to all parts of the person.

Cycle riders know that riding requires that level of integration. You won't last long unless your head and hands work together. It's a centering movement growing out of a dynamic relationship between balance and forward motion. Lose the center, and get out of balance, and the bicycle falls. It's the same with discipleship and mission: they exist in an integrated motion, a rhythm of life.

The traction for a bicycle rider comes from the rear wheel. The chain drives the rear wheel, and the contact between the wheel and the surface move the bicycle forward. Mission works the same way. Mission powers discipleship. If the wheel of mission stops turning, discipleship becomes distorted into an internal “self-improvement” reality. Every expression of discipleship eventually feeds back

into God's mission of redemption. But remember, this is mission much more broadly seen than merely evangelism and conversion. God is concerned with all of life, and mission includes justice. "He has shown you, O man, what is good...."

Direction for the bicycle comes from the front wheel. Discipleship gives mission a *telos* – a purpose and end goal. We share the good news so that people can know Christ, and have life in his name. This is much more than membership in a local church. Jesus did not say, "I came that they might have church, and that more abundantly!" Rather, the goal of mission is to bring healing and redemption to all creation. Discipleship, then, imparts the attitudes, relationships, and skills necessary to live a life of wholeness in the world. Connected to Christ and in harmony with one another, we are a new social reality: a sign and a foretaste of the kingdom of God.

The wheels are not swappable on a bicycle. Steering from the back is not a good idea. Trying to get power from the front won't work. The whole bicycle in action is a picture of interdependence in dynamic rhythm – like life in the Trinity. The Trinity is a picture of integration between inner and outer life, community and mission: God desires to see the world reconnected to God's life and so healed.

Finally, in these days it's helpful to hear the wisdom that comes from diverse followers of Jesus. Mission is not an attribute of a healthy church: it is an *attribute of God*. It is our task to faithfully partner with Him. In an interview with Andy Crouch in 2006, Bishop David Niringiye comments:

"We need to begin to read the Bible differently. Americans have been preoccupied with the end of the Gospel of Matthew, the Great Commission: "Go and make." I call them go-and-make missionaries. These are the go-and-fix-it people. The go-and-make people are those who act like it's all in our power, and all we have to do is "finish the task." They love that passage! But when read from the center of power, that passage simply reinforces the illusion that it's about us, that we are in charge.

"I would like to suggest a new favorite passage, the Great Invitation. It's what we find if we read from the beginning of the Gospels rather than the end. Jesus says, "Come, follow me. I will make you fishers of men." Not "Go and make," but "I will make you." It's all about Jesus. And do you know the last words of Jesus to Peter, in John 21? "Follow me." The last words of Simon Peter's encounter are the same as the first words..." (Andy Crouch, "Experiencing Life at the Margins." *Christianity Today*. July 2006, Vol. 50, No. 7, Page 32 )



#### BIO

Len lives with his wife Betty on the shores of Lake Superior in N Ontario.

Len is co-author of *Missional Spirituality* (IVP: 2011), author of *The Missional Church Fieldbook* (LULU: 2010), and editor of *Text & Context* (2013). His next book, *No Home Like Place: A Christian Theology of Place* will appear with *The Loft Studio* in 2014. Len is an adjunct professor of ministry at Northern Seminary in Chicago, and an adjunct at Tyndale Seminary, Toronto and George Fox Evangelical Seminary in Portland.