

Asking the Wrong Question

In *Christ the Center*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer laid out with force the folly of asking "How?" in the pursuit of Christology. All manner of ills follow from improper asking and speculation on answers to that question in place of the only legitimate one, "Who?"

A proper discussion of "Christian mentoring" is fundamentally a discussion of "discipleship." Our natural/fallen human tendency is to seek methods, techniques, tools, strategies, resources, forms to facilitate "growth" and discipleship. We naturally look for "how's." But the situation here is no different from (nor unrelated to) that in the central subject of Christology. (It is not accidental that Bonhoeffer was passionately concerned with both.) The right (and indeed only safe) questions to address are not "how's" of mentoring/discipleship, but basic "who's." Who is the Christ, and in light of who He is, who are we?

What Really Is

Jesus is the sovereign God, the lord of the universe. At His pleasure, He passes by and issues an authoritative call. Those who will be His, who are called to be His disciples, drop all pretense of self-possession, self-importance and self-justification, and run after Him. "As he passed by, he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him." (Mark 2:14, ESV)

Those Jesus calls and who obey Him, who have life from Him, who are His disciples are "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." They are "a city set on a hill that cannot be hid." That is what they are in all truth. That is what they are, whether by vocation they are laborers, craftsmen, professionals, or academics. That is the sum total of what they are as "mentors." Their light and salt and evident witness has absolutely nothing to do with "how" they might potentially think and plan to express their discipleship, but only to do with "who" they are ... ones who themselves have heard the call of Jesus and have responded in faith and obedience.

True "Christian mentoring" is nothing more and nothing less than real Christian discipleship/obedience/faith lived out in daily and unashamed dependence upon the One who has called us. If it is authentic, it is every bit as evident and relevant to the custodial staff that cleans the disciple's building as it is to the secretary that types the disciple's exams, as it is to the students and junior colleagues learning the disciple's academic discipline from him or her. The central matter is not forms, resources, theories, methods and the like, but reality. And it has the potential to affect those who come behind us not because we are professional about mentoring them, but because we are genuine in our love for Him and them, and all for whom He died.

What is Wrong With "How's"?

This may all sound to the reader like sanctimonious spiritual one-upmanship. After all, surely we are all in favor of discipleship and obedience to the Lord. What then

is wrong with talking strategies and tools and methods in the pursuit of making effective academic disciples? Is such discussion not part of obedience to the Master?

It is my contention that concentration on form and method is ultimately an attack on substance, no matter how unintentional that assault may be. The balance of this piece attempts to provide explanation and support for this thesis in the realm of discipleship.

Dulling the Sharp Edge

The call of Christ and corresponding appropriate obedience are radical and absolute. They fly in the face of ordinary human conventions and patterns. They are, quite literally, a "stumbling block," an "offense" to the natural man.

In contrast, conferences, resources, strategies, discussions are "what we academics do." They are "reasonable" and respected, inoffensive. Anything that can be reduced to "how's" and handled in a way that nods to Biblical authority as only one of many potentially helpful sources of wisdom, is not a stumbling block. It is not in any clear way opposed to the enterprises of fallen humanity.

But there are always those outside the faith who are looking for salt and light. Talk of discipleship in terms of "how's," as if knowing and bearing witness to Christ were somehow equivalent to teaching a young colleague grantsmanship dulls the sharp edge of Christ's demands and offense for the unbeliever. It hides the light. And if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?

Reassertion of Self-Consciousness

One of the points that Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes eloquently in *The Cost of Discipleship* is that a spirituality or discipleship that can step back and watch itself and take stock of how it is doing and progressing, is a dead work and no real Christian discipleship at all. One who has truly heard the call of Christ and responded in obedience and faith cannot be calculating in his or her devotion. The call of Christ is to drop everything and simply unconditionally follow.

To strategize, concern oneself with tools and methods and forms, of necessity draws one into the trap of self-consciousness. If the focus is "how?" there are of necessity implicit measures of desirability and success being generated and applied to self-consciously choose between various options. One evaluates one's efforts against those of others, and judges oneself "effective" or "ineffective," thereby establishing a "righteousness" that is independent of the fundamental "Did I obey?"

This is something different from an appropriate self-examination that *is* part of a living faith. Our obedience is not perfect, and we are to regularly pause and confess our sin, to bring our disobedience to the cross. But in this, our regret is absolute and the issues are genuinely moral, not ones of suboptimal technique.

Objectifying Relationships Between Humans

If Scripture provides anything resembling a "case study" in Christian mentoring, the relationship between Paul and Timothy is it. But what are we given to know about that case? We surely read Paul's affection for Timothy and his confidence in the young man. We get a glimpse of "who" these people are in Christ, but (not accidentally) know next to nothing about "how" their relationship developed, about ways (?methods?) that Paul was led by Christ to teach and encourage Timothy and give responsibility to him.

Relationships between Christian people are not to be objectified, managed, subjected to psychological technique, treated like things to be acted on. They exist exactly because those people have a common Master. It is only through Christ that they properly know or relate to each other, and it is only His will and obedience to that will for those people moment by moment that properly guides their interaction.

Discussions of general "how's" in discipleship work to objectify and treat as a "thing" that which is really a property of two vital unions with Christ. (How else can business process language like "best practices" and "networking" come to be found on web sites proffering advice on the "how's"?) That effects a sad and improper reduction of substance to form, an assault on what is both real and precious.

Diminishing the Immediacy of Christ

There is a fraternal twin of the depersonalization worked by "how's" on human relationships in what they tend to do between a Christian and Christ. Genuine Christian discipleship is a matter of constant immediate dependence upon the Master. It *can* to some extent be observed and imitated by a third party. It *does* grow naturally in the context of a Biblical local church, where the truth is preached and life is lived in Christian community. But it cannot be reduced to "how's."

Discussion of and emphasis on methods and techniques and tools is inherently antagonistic to a clear understanding of the real nature of Christian faith and the immediacy of Christ. Every false world religion concerns itself with what to do and how to do it in order to gain the favor of a supposed deity. Christianity boldly declares this to be foolishness, shows us the merciful risen Christ, and bids us throw ourselves at His feet in grateful adoration. To be preoccupied with the details of how that should or could be done most skillfully amounts to a practical retreat from the bold Bible message.

I am sure that at this point I am cutting too close to the bone for some readers of good heart and intent. Christians surely do not mean their "how's" of discipleship for ill, nor in a carefully reasoned academic argument would they agree that they present an alternative to the doctrine of grace. But I am here concerned with real ultimate effect. We human beings are not simply rational beings. Things that we might at some level "know" are not matters of the Christian faith and would like to think of as "helps" can and do become impediments to real faith and vital dependence upon the Master. (The

protestant reformation's distaste for icons can be seen as at least in part motivated by this reality.)

Related to the persistent tendency of humans to substitute religious "how's" for relationship is the matter of the finiteness of our time and (physical and mental) energy. Where these go is a far more reliable indicator of who we are and are becoming (and to whom are related) than is our theory or intentions. Time and energy spent contemplating, discussing, following, and promoting "how's" is time and energy not spent otherwise. Before we allocate the resources we have on loan from the Master to our "how's" we ought to very carefully consider both the explicit Scriptural commands of the Christ and the daily present proddings of His Holy Spirit.

Essential Unreality in Actions

There is nothing about genuine Christian discipleship that is contrived or artificial. It is the very essence of real human life. When Christian people live and labor together, humbly accepting and doing "the next thing" that comes to them in the providence of their great God and king, they naturally grow up into the likeness of Christ in a completely authentic and winsome way.

But an emphasis on "how's" and forms of necessity introduces artificiality into what Christ's people *do* in His name. Basic human finiteness and ignorance of what is to come guarantee that our plans and strategies and methods become increasingly unreal as they become increasingly specific. A set of specific "how's" constructed in advance of actions is of necessity constructed around fantasies.

By nature, standard "how's" of acts of discipleship are the stuff of day planners and regular discussions over cappuccinos at Starbuck's, not the stuff of cleaning toilets, cutting grass or teaching a kid's Sunday School class as the need arises at church, sitting with an old saint dying in a hospital bed, rejoicing with a childless couple over the birth of a long-prayed-for baby, or trying to help a believing colleague make sense of a seemingly unjust and devastating career reversal. These latter things are the real material and test of faith, and must be faced as they come, in humble dependence on and obedience to Christ. And if we recognize this and decide to "incorporate good works" as a "how" of discipleship, as a means to an end, we destroy them, making them synthetic, unreal, and dead.

"How's" of discipleship are by nature either artificial trappings of a comfortable Christian fiction, or synthetic versions of real actions that have been robbed of their meaning by the choice to treat them as objects/exercises rather than as unrehearsed responses of obedience to the Master's call.

Temptation to Pride of Status

It is undeniable that in our time, secular "mentoring" is almost always a matter of status for both mentor and mentee. (That is probably reason enough to eschew use of the

terminology in a Christian context, but this is not my main point here.) Academics, in particular, take great pride in letting others know about their lineage and progeny. It should go nearly without saying that this kind of attitude has no place in Christian discipleship. Paul rebuked the Corinthians for their party spirit and allegiance to particular human teachers in place of Christ.

An emphasis on "how's" of "Christian mentoring" (and in particular "how's" that assume a particular status of the parties involved) has the strong effect of pushing the discussion in the direction of the secular mindset. It formalizes, and thereby publicly announces the planned existence of a learner/learned apprenticeship fraught with all the temptation to pride of status that exists in the secular arena.

If this point is in dispute, consider the following. Why is it that we assume that a senior academic is called to "mentor" bright young academics (instead of, for example, a simple person who finds his or her way into a local congregation)? Conversely, why is it that an academic would rarely even consider the possibility that God would show him or her true faith and discipleship through the day-to-day life of a relatively uneducated humble, godly 85-year old small-time farmer who has taught Sunday School for 50 years in the same small rural church in a small town a few miles from his or her university? Before responding in terms of the unique place we academics hold in society or in terms of special needs related to our advanced training and intellectual challenges, we would be wise to consider what Christ had to say about whom he came to save, and Paul's descriptions of the humble status of Christ's church.

"How's" (and particularly specialized "academic how's") simply push us in the direction of pride of status. But, the real truth is that discipleship is completely egalitarian. There is *no difference at all* between what various of Christ's servants need to know about obedience and devotion.

Implicit Indictments

Discussion of "how's" in any realm is a fundamentally pragmatic matter brought on by perceived needs and deficiencies of a current state of affairs. The motivation is to do things "better" than they are currently being done or have been done (and the presumption is that doing so is possible).

The making and nourishing of Christ's disciples (except in very unusual cases like that of St. Paul) has for nearly 2000 years been the work of the local church. Promotion of a new emphasis on "how's" of "Christian mentoring" outside of this context is *ipso facto* a declaration that the historical work of Christ's local church is now inadequate. (This is especially obvious to the extent that "how's" are directed at individuals rather than congregations.)

But this is a most serious implicit moral indictment and should not be entered into except with the utmost care. It is *Christ's* church that is being repudiated, not man's. By what authority do we moderns presume to "have a better way"? When Luther found

himself unable to do anything *but* rebuke the church of Rome, he did so with great reluctance, and only on the sure authority of Holy Scripture. That the modern indictment is only implied and not spoken openly does not absolve anyone who would make it of the necessity of being equally cautious and reluctant, and of careful appeal to Biblical authority.

Before one ought to presume to offer any corrective, he or she needs to humbly identify the moral/Biblical failing and consider carefully whether he or she has really been given the prophetic role, and exactly what he or she would say as the present voice of Christ. Novelty, "good results," "best practices," and the like are no adequate base for this kind of very serious action.

An emphasis on "How's" not only implicitly indicts the church, but also implicitly devalues the means of grace entrusted to it. The preaching of God's Word, prayer, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper, and the fellowship of God's ordinary saints have been understood to be necessary and sufficient for the making and perfecting of Christian disciples since Christ established the church. If now specialized techniques and insights are required, there ought to be clear Biblical authority for them. And I say again, pragmatic concerns are not relevant here. What "works" is not the yardstick. What is right and true is the only safe and correct measure.

One Thing This is Not

It should probably be said as clearly as possible what this essay is not. It is *not* an attack on personal Christian discipline and order. The apostle Paul used language like "But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:27, ESV) God is completely consistent, reliable, unchangeable. His people, who are to reflect His glory, are to be like Him, the very picture of consistency.

We live in and are greatly blessed by God-ordained regularity of days and weeks and seasons that provide for us structure and sanity and a framework for knowing Christ. Scripture gives us universal patterns for life like the weekly gathering together with God's saints for worship. Real disciples of Christ are consistent disciplined individuals and do not ignore or flout these patterns.

But the consistency and discipline of a disciple is not a means to an end, nor is it formulaic. It is not technique the disciple uses to become better at the Christian faith, but rather an expression of who that person is in Christ. Its proper context is all of life, Christ's church, and an individual's relationship to his or her Savior, not a special relationship to a mentor. It is not the same person to person, but is as varied in its expression as God's people are wondrously varied.

Once More, What Really Is

I end where I began. I insist that the right question is not "How?" Rather it is "Who?" Who is the Christ, and in light of that, who are we?