



CFI Study Notes – Bukuru, Jos

# A Question of Discipleship

A look at discipleship and the early church, the scripture, the atonement, killing, simplicity, missions, love, friendship and suffering.

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# THE FIRST CENTURY

Life isn't much different today as it was in Jesus' day. The kinds of things we see happening in the Gospels help us in our discussion about discipleship.

## **Personal Holiness**

First, we see the Pharisees. They were the orthodox. They cared strenuously about the scripture and the doctrines of their faith. They keenly felt the importance of personal holiness. In many ways, they were very like Jesus. They looked to the scripture as God's word. They held to many of the same doctrines of the faith, including the resurrection.

But they weren't disciples of God. This means they weren't followers of God. It may have been difficult for them to have known what God is like. You must know what God is like, before you can follow him. God revealed himself in Jesus. But even before Jesus, they had the law and the prophets. They could have learnt about God's character from these.

Today, we can replace the Pharisees' orthodoxy with Christian orthodoxy, but still be in the same position as they were. We can add to their belief about the coming messiah, to say we now know that this is Jesus. But if all we are doing is ticking orthodox boxes, then our faith is no different.

Jesus wasn't asking the Pharisees to fine tune their orthodoxy. He was asking them to follow him.

When Jesus told them to believe on him, he meant believe in the first century sense of the word. This meant to follow. It meant to become his disciples, to walk like him. It didn't mean to shift their orthodoxy to include a faith about Jesus Christ.

## **Against Ungodly Society**

Then there was the faith of the Zealots. These were the nationalists. They believed fervently in the faith of Israel. They had no toleration for compromise. For them, faith was to be expressed through zeal for the main teachings of the Torah. They were like the Pharisees, in the importance they placed on the word of God. But they expressed this importance differently. Where the Pharisees expressed their zeal in extreme moral applications, the Zealots expressed their devotion in more violent ways.

They believed the kingdom of God needed violence to be secured.

But the Zealots also were not followers of Christ. They met the requirements in doctrinal orthodoxy and zeal, but not in emulating the character of God. They didn't know who God was. They used the tools God gave them, like the scripture, but not for the purpose God gave it. God's purpose is that we learn what he is like and become his followers in this world.

## **Do We Serve the Suffering?**

A common issue, whether we are thinking about the Pharisees or the Zealots, is their relationship to suffering. The Pharisees detached themselves from the suffering of others. They claimed that others suffered because they shifted away from orthodoxy. Therefore, anyone who was suffering was being judged by God. The Pharisees could then condemn them.

On the other hand, the Zealots directly caused suffering in others by their violence. They added to the overall suffering of the world. They no doubt believed that the suffering they caused was a necessary evil, for a future good. It was a means to an end and therefore justified in their eyes.

But the question for us is, is God like this? What is his response to human suffering? We see our answer in his calling of Israel. They were unrighteousness and stubborn, yet God had compassion on them. This was supposed to show them what he was like, so they could follow him in how they treated others. This was God's goal in calling them from Egypt.

And for the Zealots, the question is, does God use violence as a means to an end? It's an important question, because if he does, then can we do the same and be his disciples, his followers? In scripture, we see God opens the door of judgement, so he can deliver others from oppression and suffering. But the judgement is never God's violence. In fact, God judges those, like Babylon, who perpetrate violence in judgment, because they do it in covetousness.

God is seen in Christ. He does no violence against his enemies. He overcomes evil with good. He has compassion upon the sinners, even upon zealots, and serves them so they can change. He lays down his life for them, so their hearts may see the kingdom of God and that they may repent.

### **Are we Detached from the Suffering of Others?**

God cares about the suffering and he comes to serve those who suffer. This is what distinguished him from the Pharisees and from the Zealots.

Today, we may not be morally legalistic like the Pharisees, or not personally violent like the Zealots, but still be detached from the sufferings of others in the world.

A kind of gnostic faith is common in hedonist societies. This means we have a personal faith that is detached from this world. It's strong on personal devotions, and uses the scripture as a sourcebook for personal spirituality. But it does not see the God of scripture, who in zealous compassion, gives himself to rescue those who suffer.

### **Jesus Rebukes Those Detached from the Suffering of Others**

We might say that Jesus had zeal against sinners. He cleansed the temple and had strong words for the Pharisees. These words were directed at those who were the custodians of the faith or commercial means. They were the ones with the power in the day. They should have been using this power to serve the sinners and draw them into healing and restoration. But instead, they were using their power to establish their private interests.

We can misinterpret the actions of Jesus. They weren't a cold, detached rebuke of the sin of his society. He called us all, powerful and sinner, to repentance, from the place of his own sufferings. In his sufferings, we see his compassionate call to us, to lay aside our own selfishness. He was never harsh against people caught up in the normal sins we see, especially among the poor, who had passed through many struggles. He never quenched their wick.

### **What Discipleship Isn't**

We can quickly see from the above what discipleship isn't. It isn't a pharisaic zeal for orthodoxy. When the book of Acts says the early disciples continued in the apostles' doctrine, I think this was more about their way of life and form of fellowship than it was about orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is important, but it is expressed through life style. It is shown through the lives we live.

### **Discipleship Is Self-Giving**

We may speak on this more later in these notes. Orthodoxy meant this: God had come down to us through the incarnation, to condescend to us and rescue us from our darkness and death. To do this, he gave himself on the cross in love. Orthodoxy means to follow this in our relationships with each

other, including with our enemies. This is what the breaking of bread from house to house symbolised. It wasn't just about the bread, but sharing our lives as fully as Christ shared his with us.

Orthodoxy means, if the one who is God, can come to our rescue in this way, if he wasn't too big to come to our aid, then we aren't too big to lower ourselves and serve the weak and outcast of our world. This just about covers what is required in orthodoxy. All the rest is mostly our opinions on the details, about which we are to exercise tolerance, as we learn together.

This is what the baptismal creed was about in the early church. We identify with Christ in his death and in his resurrection. This has instead changed to become a formula, like a legal contract for salvation. This wasn't how it was intended. Rather, it is about what Jesus was saying, "No greater love has anyone than this, that he lay his life down for his friend. You are my friends if you do whatever I say." And the communion, "This is my body, given for you, share it among yourselves. This is my blood shed for you, do this in remembrance of me." This was like the foot washing. These things were done for our example, so that we might do the same for each other.

Baptism meant, that as Christ gave his life for the church, so we give ours for each other. We are raised up in a new life of service to his body. The baptism is about our fellowship, as followers of Christ, who went ahead of us and showed us the way. This is righteousness, coming out of Egypt, from a system of oppression, living together in a community of Jubilee.

### **Discipleship Isn't Ticking Doctrinal Boxes**

We can see that orthodoxy isn't about ticking a lot of doctrinal boxes. That can be counter to orthodoxy, because box-ticking can separate believers into camps. In fact, this is what box-ticking does. It divides the body. Then we aren't giving our lives for each other, as Christ did for us. This isn't orthodox.

Discipleship isn't the ticking of our theological boxes. However, this is often how we have seen discipleship. We may have discipleship classes, to learn the doctrines of orthodoxy, especially in the view our own group. We have often turned discipleship into learning about what we should and should not believe, in terms of doctrines.

### **Doctrine and Politics**

I think this shift in our view of discipleship gained strength in the Constantinian period of church history. Then, faith became a matter of politics. Constantine wanted a uniform faith expression, as opposed to unity. The church before that held unity within diversity. The unity was in our love: "By this, all people shall know you are my disciples, by your love for each other."

But Constantine wanted a political uniformity. We see this at the Nicaean Council. The church had different biblical views on how they expressed the trinity, all within an orthodox expression of love and fellowship. But at the council they couldn't arrive at one view which all would accept. Constantine insisted that all sign one uniform view, and the majority view was forced upon all.

This was appended by an anathema. That meant, that all who didn't adhere to this "orthodox" view were enemies of the church and of the state, and this would be punishable by the law of the state, which could include death. This gave the state "divine permission" to pursue its wars against its enemies, and dispossess evil people of their land and riches.

From that time "discipleship" became a matter of signing the creeds of the church, which were also creeds of state power. This is entirely unorthodox. For the church to invest its power in the state, and not in the lamb of God, who entered Jerusalem on a donkey, is as unorthodox as we can get.

Even today, the creeds are sometimes held as the basis for our fellowship. Some of these creeds still divide the body on a somewhat national and political level. And they still divide us politically from other faiths even more so. When I say politically, I mean we may not agree with other faiths, but we are still called to lay our lives down for them in service. This is to be the only division we adhere to. A division whereby we refuse to join the sword.

### **Discipleship of Service**

Likewise, discipleship today doesn't consist of learning what is wrong and then pointing that out everywhere we see it in our society. Discipleship isn't learning right from wrong and becoming commentators on the degradation around us. It isn't condemning abortion, homosexuality, Islam, politicians, and those who hold to false Christian teachings.

Discipleship is laying down our lives for others in service, to give us all, ourselves included, a better vision of who God is, and of the kingdom he is building in our world. This is how the early church stopped infanticide. Not by a patriarchal condemning of women who deserted their babies, but by taking women and children into their homes in love and care. This is the light of the church.

### **Early Discipleship**

James, the Lord's brother, was an apostle in Jerusalem. His letter in the New Testament has been controversial, because of its lack of our usual evangelical formulas of faith and creed. It hardly mentions the gospel in our more traditional forms. James has sometimes been neglected, or even rejected, rather than allowing him to educate the way we interpret other authors, like Paul.

James was speaking about the coming judgment upon Jerusalem in AD 70. James was an elder of the Jews. There wasn't a clear distinction between Jesus followers and other Jews then. They all went to the synagogue and the temple. James spoke of synagogue meetings in his letter. Today, our division from synagogue and mosque is largely politically driven. The letter of James addresses the whole Jewish community. It is evangelical in describing Jesus's Lordship in the Sermon on the Mount, not a formulaic faith.

The letter speaks about not discriminating between social classes. It says a lot about caring for others and sharing our wealth with the suffering. James calls this the royal law, loving our neighbour. This issue is the most prevalent one in the letter. James talks of war, and puts it down entirely to an offshoot of our human greed.

The letter of James aligns with the kind of social life we see of the church in the book of Acts. James described faith, as the early church lived it. It was about the Jesus way of giving ourselves for others. James made no use of doctrine as a way of dividing the people in Jerusalem. It was all about life style, expressed through the incarnation of God in Christ. This shows us a lot about the early church.

Orthodoxy was more about incarnational living, than about pharisaic positions of faith.

### **Followers of the Way**

This is what Acts meant by calling the early church those who followed the way (Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23, 24:14, 22). The way they were talking about wasn't a doctrinal way. It meant a way of living. It was a way of fellowship and sharing, across all the divisions of the empire. It was referring to a way of living, that wasn't seen anywhere else in the Jewish or Roman world.

This is the way we see in Acts, in house to house fellowship, that was open to people of all backgrounds, races and economic groups. Women were equal. This was revolutionary. The way

treated all people as made in the image of God. The people worshiped God, by following his way as revealed through Jesus Christ, repairing the injuries of brutal commercial and militaristic empire. Jesus was God's incarnational revelation to humanity of this way.

Therefore, the church was persecuted. They weren't persecuted because of their doctrines. It was because they threatened the social structures of Jerusalem and of Rome. The powers killed Jesus because he condemned their injustice, just as they killed the prophets before him. Now they had whole communities threatening the social structures that made them rich.

The civilizations of Rome and Jerusalem depended on social divisions. The riches of power depended on the misfortune of others. Slavery was an essential. In Philemon, Paul called a slave a brother. People who followed this way would have to be stopped. Allowing their ideas to spread would very quickly threaten all that the powerful had.

In Ephesus, both the synagogue and the worshippers of Artemis rejected Paul's message about the way. The Jews rejected the kingdom of God, about the way of fellowship and care. The craftsmen of Artemis also rejected the way, because of the prospect of monetary loss.

Paul was in trouble everywhere he went, because of the financial interest of both the pagans and the Jews. Jews profited hugely as custodians of Yahweh's faith and pilgrimages. This made Jerusalem extremely rich. Paul was sharing God's faith equally with gentiles. This break down of the Jew's national advantage had to be stopped.

### **Paul's Doctrine**

So why did Paul write so much doctrine? Misunderstanding this is the reason we base our faith on doctrine, not on the way of life of the early church. Paul's view of the faith was the same as James', and of Jesus', who taught about the kingdom of God community.

When we look at Romans, Galatians, Philippians, Ephesians and Colossians, we see that Paul wasn't writing about our personalised faith. He wasn't forsaking the focus of James and Acts, about self-giving that resembled the nature of God in his incarnation in Jesus. Paul wasn't substituting for this true faith, a legally contracted individualistic faith, a credal faith.

In each one of these letters, Paul was writing because of those Jews who had rejected the way. They had rejected the joint table fellowship with the gentiles. The reason Paul brought doctrine in to each of these letters, was to explain why these Jews must receive the gentile believers in Christ. Paul's purpose wasn't the doctrine, but the community way he was insisting upon.

The early church was a counter-cultural movement of enormous impact in the Roman world. It was the only group that offered justice through mercy and true brother/ sisterhood, that prevailed over all social, nationalist and racial interests. This justice wasn't a socialist movement. It was a divine faith movement. It was a movement of the Holy Spirit. It was God breaking into our old hearts with his self-revelation through the gospel, replacing our self-centredness with his love.

Being a disciple doesn't mean using Paul to divide from others, but following his life of inclusion and service, through faith and grace, in a radical and revolutionary new way. Orthodoxy means that we present Jesus, his cross and resurrection to the world, through our new lives, in which we give ourselves to serve those we previously made outcasts.

## **Our First Love**

When we come to the book of Revelation and its comment on the church of Ephesus, we see the same shift in discipleship, as is common in church history. When Paul left the elders of Ephesus, he pleaded with them to watch out for wolves who will eat the flock, and to care for the weak. In Revelation, the church had held on to their doctrinal fidelity, but not to their first love, the way of the early church in Acts. They were adopting a discipleship of doctrines, rather than resembling the true God, who gives himself to bring in the outcast.

## **DISCIPLESHIP AND SCRIPTURE**

Scripture is important to our discipleship. We read the scripture to find God's view. But how do we read scripture, and is all scripture equal? We quote from all over the bible, both Old and New Testaments. And we use these quotations to justify all kinds of attitudes we have towards other people, and then all kinds of behaviour. We often use all scripture equally to show what God is like, and then claim we are following God.

It's important to narrow down our revelation of God, before we broaden it out. That is, the exact revelation of God came to us through his Son, who is God's exact image. When Jesus was baptised, God said, "Listen to him." Jesus said, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." and, "I and the Father are one." Jesus is the word of God, which means the exact revelation of God.

When it comes to how we understand scripture, we must start with Jesus. What does Jesus reveal about God, both in his teachings and in his actions? This is the central part of scripture. This is the foundation of the church. As the church we are called Christians, which means we are followers of Christ. Our central revelation must be our Lord Jesus, his life and his teachings.

### **Christian Identity**

This narrows down even further. The central part of Jesus' teachings is the Sermon on the Mount. All his teachings are equal. His parables show us what God is like. We see God's true fatherhood in the Prodigal Son. We see his atonement in the Good Samaritan. But in the Sermon on the Mount we see in condensed form what it means to be a follower of Jesus. This is where Jesus outlines discipleship in his kingdom, where he rules, where he is Lord.

The central text for the church, for disciples of Jesus, is the Sermon on the Mount. From here, we are to take our lessons on discipleship and use them to understand all other parts of scripture. All scripture is not equal. We interpret all the rest of scripture, from the Sermon on the Mount. God sent Christ, for us to listen to him, to show us exactly what he is like. Christ's primary text to his followers is the Sermon on the Mount. This is where we start.

For several reasons, we often don't agree with this. Sometimes we say this sermon was in the Old Covenant, or the church hadn't yet begun. More often, we say the teachings of the church are really found in Paul. But if we interpret Paul without starting at Jesus, we get Paul wrong. For a whole lot of reasons, the Sermon on the Mount is often relegated, reduced in significance, reinterpreted, flatly ignored or even rejected by many of us who claim to be Christ's disciples.

Instead of using other parts of scripture to reinterpret the Sermon on the Mount, use the Sermon on the Mount to correctly understand the rest of scripture. If we desire to be disciples of Christ, then certainly the teachings of Christ where he spoke of discipleship will be our first focus. Jesus is our Lord, our guide and our example. We start with him.

### **The Image of God**

We are talking here about our need to bring the Gospels back to our centre as the church, so we can get our "image of God" right as his followers. And as we bring the Gospels back to our centre, then the centre of those Gospels is the Sermon on the Mount. Someone says, "No, the cross and resurrection are the centre of our faith." That is true, but the cross and resurrection are explained in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is our theology of the cross.

Failing to see the Sermon on the Mount at the centre of our theology, even of Paul's atonement theory, means the sermon is superseded by other sections of scripture. Atonement perspective in the Sermon on the Mount is to both instruct our Christian walk and our perspective in Paul's teaching. The sermon is central, not just to our practice, but to our whole theological view.

This is where Jesus secured for understanding who God is and how he acts.

The Sermon on the Mount tells us about God's view of violence. It tells us not to resist violence with violence. It tells us God's view of human law, saying he rejects our concept of eye for an eye. This challenges our understanding of the law of Moses, of sacrifice and atonement theory. He tells us to love our enemies, not just in attitude, but in action. This challenges our view of how God judges the world. If we don't get Jesus' teachings in this sermon, we cannot be followers of God.

The Sermon on the Mount succinctly unveils to us what God is like. Jesus teaches us to be disciples in this way, because this is what our heavenly Father is like. This is how God acts in his relationships, towards his enemies, the way he judges, and the way he redeems the world. This is the of section of scripture that authoritatively - spoken by God in Christ himself - tells us about the nature of God and how he acts. Our Christian calling is to follow him, as he is presented in this sermon.

### **Click and Drag**

This is where our reading of the bible begins. Now that we know what God is like, we "click and drag" this sermon into other sections of scripture. I mean like you do with a computer mouse. Drag the Sermon on the Mount into all other parts of the bible and interpret those parts through the Sermon on the Mount.

It's the same with Jesus' other teachings. Take the parable of the Prodigal Son. It was given because the Pharisees didn't know what God was like. They developed a whole theology about God punishing evil directly through his own violence. The cross disproves this view. All Jesus did and taught disproved their view. They perceived God wrongly throughout the rest of scripture.

What happens if we click and drag the parable of the Prodigal Son into the rest of scripture? This is clearly what Jesus intends us to do. What happens when we drag the parable into Genesis 1-3, where God created the world and where Adam and Eve fell. Was God angry? How did he respond? Did God introduce law into creation, or was it the Satan who did that? Was God legalistic towards Adam and Eve's fall? Did he punish them? The Prodigal's father changes our perspective of Genesis.

The story of Genesis shifts, from a Western legal view of personal salvation, to a story about creation, Satan's invention to destroy the creation project, God's unoffended love for the project, and his restoration of the human priesthood, to restore his world. Instead of it being a legal story, it is a story of a family. Read Genesis with the voice of the Prodigal's father.

### **Sacrifice**

What about our atonement theology? How does this parable of the Prodigal Son inform our understanding of God's love and forgiveness? What does it show us about the character of God and what we say about him being personally or legally offended? How does our understanding of God as the Prodigal's father help us see what God is like in other parts of the bible? Is his zeal about sin, and his personal compassion for those caught up in, because of its destructive power?

What does the parable of the Good Samaritan tell us about sacrifice? The priest and the Levite were rushing to Jerusalem to perform sacrifice, to punish Israel's sin by substitution. Did this have any value for the salvation of Israel, or of Jerusalem in AD 70? Did their actions bring atonement to the

suffering on the road to Jericho, to our streets and cities? Click and drag this parable into sections in the Old Testament that speak of blood sacrifice? Did these sacrifices reflect God's character?

Jesus gives us the answer to these questions. He said God desires mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus' teachings challenged the Pharisees to their core, because they often had a false view of God and of the Old Testament law and of the rest of scripture. Therefore, they were so shocked at Jesus, at the way he seemed to contradict the law and their temple faith. "How could Jesus be of God?"

They were like Jonah, delighting in the punishment of sinners, while God gives himself for their healing.

Jesus spoke about the law accommodating the hardness of the human heart. God accommodated much of our cultural practice, to eventually bring us to a revelation of himself in Christ. Now, we see it is man who demands blood. Man demands to treat others by law. The Sermon on the Mount prescribes mercy, not punishment. It prescribes forgiveness, to triumph over the law.

### **Who is God in Scripture?**

What about the violence of God in the Old Testament? What did Jesus say about that? What about the law, calling us to stone violators? What did Jesus say about that? What about calling down fire on enemies. What did Jesus say about that? If God hasn't changed, and is revealed in Christ, then how does this inform our reading of the Old Testament?

We cannot take any passage in scripture and say that it reveals in its face value what God is like. Jesus has put a stop to that. The love of the cross show us God and changes how we must view him. What about the Old Testament Prophets, who spoke of the kingdom of Christ coming in a violent way? We see these also in the book of Revelation. How do we understand these? Our view of Christ's humiliation entirely reshapes the fulfillment of such passages.

What, also, about the heavy use of poetry, metaphor and hyperbole in scripture? Revelation is almost entirely symbolic, as well as substantial portions throughout scripture. They are filled with all kinds of rhetorical devices. The prophets were inspired poets, commenting on human culture. Like the Psalm of Babylon, when the corrupt elders of Israel said, "Blessed is he who shall dash the little ones against the rocks." This shows the danger of our nationalist nostalgia, not the nature of God.

What about people who claim Christ was lowly in his life, but now in his glory he is a lion? When John turned to see the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" in Revelation 5, he saw instead a lamb, as though it had been slain. This is Christ after his ascension. He still rules the same way, through his disciples. God doesn't change. God wars by the fruit of the Spirit, not by the arm of flesh.

### **Disciples of the True God**

Therefore, we cannot use passages throughout the bible to justify non-Christlike discipleship towards our enemy. This is falsely interpreting scripture. It is misunderstanding the word of God. We must first bring Christ to those passages, and the knowledge of the true God.

Why did God instruct violence in the Old Testament? This involves a look at the violent cultures of man, the law entrenched in human vengeful thinking, which led to genocide. This was the culture in which God was working. His measures brought a radical limitation to violence, by introducing pre-emptive lawful killings, reducing vengeance to "eye for an eye", and introducing animal sacrifice, or fines, in substitution. God limited violence as far as our cultures would permit.

In Hebrew culture, and this carries over into Paul's letters, God's wrath was seen, not as his own violent acts, but the interplay of the satan, the accuser and destroyer, in human life... of the consequences of our sin, which a loving God eventually permits.

There is much more in my book *Violence in Scripture*. Please get that free on our website, in the Resources section. It's best to read that to see a more complete explanation. The point is, that violence is entirely human. When Christ came, we saw in him something entirely different, for the first time.

### **Following God to His New World**

The above points are just the beginning. They show that the correct way to read the bible is through the Jesus of the Gospels, and this is most clearly understood in his discipleship teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. This is where he shows the nature of our heavenly Father. This is to inform our understanding of God's character in all other passages of scripture. This is where our discipleship begins and ends: in the Sermon on the Mount.

This is how the early church insisted on reading the bible.

They too started with the Sermon on the Mount. They started with their Lord. They claimed that Jesus transforms the image of God in the Old Testament, by bringing to those passages Jesus' true revelation of God and humanity. This new opening of our eyes, bringing us out of darkness, reveals the true God, moving us to a new world through his Son. This is the reason the Sermon on the Mount was given.

# CHRIST'S ATONEMENT THEOLOGY

It's amazing that we have said that the Gospels do not contain a coherent atonement theology. In evangelicalism, we have typically assigned such theology to Paul. This has left us with a rather technical and legal construct on atonement, largely impoverished, without the inclusion of the much richer Gospel accounts. The resultant atonement theory seems almost disconnected to our real life, irrelevant to the human condition, and unable to inform genuine living in our world.

Scouring through the Gospels for "Paul's atonement teaching," we don't see much. There is the statement of Jesus, that he "didn't come to be served, but to serve and to give himself as a ransom for many." But this isn't a rescue from an angry God, as we have said Paul teaches. This is a rescue from satan, the kidnapper, the law in our conscience, who demands the ransom.

## Christ's Cross Self Explained

There is also the Lord's Supper in Luke, where Jesus shares the bread and the wine, his body and blood. If we interpret this backwards from our view of Paul, we take this as the satisfaction of God's own legal demands, rather than Jesus calling us into his self-giving, to share life with the world. The new covenant is one of grace, which we are called to share, replacing the law of retribution in our hearts. A legal view of the atonement truncates it significantly, almost deleting its entire meaning.

The drama continues to unfold in John. Here, the model of the cross begins with foot washing. This counter culture of service is set in the developing background of worldly politics and the rise of the satan, of accusation, treachery and scapegoating. The final piece in this drama is the injustice of both the religious and political worlds, failing to stand with Jesus as the innocent outcast.

This is the drama in which our atonement theology is set. Atonement, the substitution of Christ into our violent worldly systems, to become the guilty scapegoat in our place, reveals the world's false claim to justice, and exposes its satanic base. It exposes our violent hearts and cultures, at the root of our religious and political practices, that bring injustice to the weak and death to the world.

True atonement theology exposes us today. It shows that our religions and nations still often fail to come to the aid of the outcasts of our world. We still excuse this with the same rational we see in the Gospels, that of self-preservation. But seeing atonement theology as it really is, exposing the scapegoating satan in our relationships, opens us to the possibility of reconciliation to the true God, of real discipleship, and even the possibility of world transformation.

The history in which the cross of Christ played out, in the politics of religion and state power, explains its meaning. Ignoring this history, and seeking its meaning in some other theology, misses the point. By becoming our substitute, Christ opens us to see a new king, a new way of kingdom, of service instead of injustice.

## Atonement in the Gospels

The best way to understand the atonement is to look at the history in which it is set. This history explains it. The history isn't one of God visiting his wrath on Jesus, but one of God coming among his people in Christ and being rejected. The wrath and rejection was entirely by us humans. God's part was to forgive, to show patient endurance, rather than retaliation.

The atonement we see in the Gospels is one where Christ puts himself in our place. Not in the place of the rich and powerful, but in the place of the rejected and outcast, in the place of sinners. This starts with his conception out of wedlock.

Already, he is identifying with the rejected sinner, the woman cast aside by the religious society. He bares the prostitute's sin, by being identified with her and suffering her rejection from the community, as if it were a covenant exile. This represents Israel's exile under the Old Covenant for their sin. Jesus identifies with Israel's covenant rejection, demanded by the accuser.

"He was despised and rejected... surely he took our pain and bore our suffering. Yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgression and crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed."

Likewise, with the woman caught in adultery. Jesus identified with her in her sin. In the face of the Pharisees, he took her shame upon himself. He bore her reproach. It was the same with the man born blind, and the leper. By identifying with these people, Jesus bore their estrangement from the community. He put himself in their place. He bore their sin, by which the law and the community had cursed them.

### **Free Forgiveness**

And in doing this, he gave to these same people the free love and forgiveness of God. This isn't a love that leaves the sinner the same, as the Pharisees charged, as we also often charge. Jesus answered, "He that is forgiven much, loves much." They saw in Jesus the acceptance of God coming to them. This is how his atonement, his coming into our place and taking our sin, changes our hearts.

Think of the prostitute who washed his feet with her tears, or the woman who poured perfume on his head. Their reproach from the accuser fell upon Jesus, and the authorities, those who controlled the classes and wealth, wanted to kill him. Think how this has sometimes enlightened leadership in our time, drawing leaders towards the poor. This was done at the cost of the incarnation, in which God bore our sin, became our substitute, to bring us relief.

He went to sinners' homes, sharing their shame. He said to the outcast, "Your sins are forgiven you, take up your bed and walk." He was rejected for identifying with the sick, but the sick received forgiveness and new life. The forgiveness was free. As for the Prodigal son, no offering was made. God forgave without any compensation for the law or for his honour.

### **Atonement on the Cross**

Eventually the hostile crowd could stand it no more. They turned on Jesus, who loved the common person. All their wrath against sin, all the wrath of the law in their hearts, was vented against Jesus in our place. All their hatred for us landed on him. And it was our own hatred too. It is in all our hearts. And what did Jesus do? He forgave it instantly and freely on the cross. God, in Christ, bore our sin and forgave it.

So, if there is any Prodigal Son's brother, who feels God isn't righteous and must execute the law against sinners, God can say to that satan, that he has borne it for us all. He has delivered us from the law, from the wrath of God, which satan, seated in our own conscience, demands. God forgives us. He takes the law out of our hearts, and puts grace in its place.

### **Discipleship and Atonement**

It wasn't just Jesus who bore the reproach meant for sinners. It was also Mary and Joseph, with child before marriage. It was also his disciples, who identified with God's free forgiveness and began to take the estranged and rejected into their homes. It happens to us today, when we take in the enemies of our nation and show them freely the love of God, no matter the propaganda or theology

against them. We take in the rejected and often suffer for it. This is genuine atonement theory, working in our own daily lives.

### **Atonement in the Sermon on the Mount**

It's amazing that we could attempt to establish a theory of the atonement without Christ's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Here, Christ gives the rationale for his work, his redeeming way of life. Everything we understand about his atoning life is explained in this sermon. Whether we look forward to Paul, or back to the Old Testament, it is in this sermon that atonement comes to light.

His teaching is set within the Jewish context of the Passover, the Exodus from Egypt. This is what the Jews were hoping for again, this time from Rome and their other enemies. The Passover was achieved by a substitute, coming between them and the destroying angel. The substitute took the wrath of the enemy in himself, which is what Jesus did throughout his entire ministry and death.

### **Our Exodus into Love**

The sermon begins with what we call the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the merciful, those who mourn, who thirst for justice and work for peace. These are the ones who look for another way of life, different to the self-centeredness of the Egyptian and Roman system. These are the ones Jesus makes atonement for.

But for those who are full, who cling to the present conditions, whose investments are too committed, who aren't looking for the Exodus, the atonement means nothing. They don't recognize it. Their hope is not in looking for a kingdom of justice in community, but in clinging to the advantage they have. Their certitude is in the world's system of economics, which brings division to humanity.

Into this world of brutal justice, Jesus steps as our Passover. It takes the lamb of God, the spotless lamb, to open our eyes. By siding with the outcasts of the world, the foreigner, the sick, the poor, the women and the sinners, Jesus draws against himself the wrath of the self-centred powers. This substitution, this putting of himself in the place of the outcast, opens our eyes to the injustice of our world.

And it announces that the new Exodus has begun.

### **Reconciled with God**

We leave our Egypt, to embrace the *shema*, to love God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves (Deut 6:4-5, Mark 12:29-31). The resurrection of Christ brings this movement to its zenith. It shows that God rejects the injustice of our world, by overturning its verdict of crucifixion. This reveals the new world God is building, on a new justice of mercy. There is a new rule, "freely you have received, freely give."

The perfect lamb, without spot, takes the judgement of the world, showing the world's bankruptcy. This atonement, this standing in our place to take the wrath of the world, brings us back to God. It strikes at our heart, sets us free from the world's blinding selfishness, and the death it brings, and calls us almost irresistibly to follow Christ out of Egypt to our neighbour.

Every time we cast aside the weak, fail to care for the homeless, re-establish our world divisions, neglect those suffering injustice, we are repeating what we did to Christ. Our hearts respond to his Spirit, we are called out of this system, to embrace a new way of living, a new vision, a new way of looking at our world. We are now reconciled with God, because this is who he is.

## **Redemptive Discipleship**

The rationale of atonement is seen throughout the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus calls his disciples to his form of redemptive living. He insists on us taking up our cross. This is where the cross/atonement theology of Christ is laid open. When we turn our cheek, go the second mile, forgive and serve our enemies, we are drawing them into a renewed relationship. Whether this works or not, it is the nature of God. This is how God responds to his enemies, whether they receive him or not.

This way of living is reconciling. This is what Jesus did on the cross. He reconciled us to God by taking our punishment against him, and forgiving it. Instead of retaliating, he opened the possibility of new relationship. In forgiving us, he drew us back into the presence of God. The cross was the place where the wrath of the law, the wrath of God in our own hearts, was expunged. We acted in wrath and instead of getting law and wrath in return, we received grace.

This is the reconciling life God calls his disciples to follow. When the world acts against us, instead of countering wrath with wrath, we counter it with grace. This disarms the wrath. It brings down the principalities and powers of wrath in our hearts and systems. It pours coals of fire upon them. God's form of redemption and reconciliation is outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon explains the cross of Christ and calls us to follow him as his disciples.

## **Legal Demand Overturned**

Rather than the cross being God's demand for wrath against sin, the Sermon on the Mount teaches the opposite. We certainly must read this before we go to Paul's teaching on the atonement. The cross isn't the wrath of God, but God's answer to our wrath. Jesus taught, "It has been said, 'an eye for an eye,' but I say to you, turn the other cheek. If anyone sues you for your shirt, give him your coat as well."

Jesus threw out our human demand for justice. He set up a new world. Not the knowledge of good and evil, where we accuse each other, but free forgiveness, where we seek to restore and justify each other. If Jesus taught us not to demand legal justice, compensation for the law, why would God demand legal payment for sin on the cross?

Jesus taught us to forgive freely, without payment, because this is what our heavenly Father does.

Throughout the sermon, Jesus teaches his disciples his own redemptive practices. Retribution, from our personal views of legal justice, produces a world of hurt, where violence and injustice go on in a vicious cycle. So, we abandon that form of justice, and take up the form we see on the cross of Christ. Self-giving for others, forgiveness, without one word of plea for self.

## **Birthing a New World**

We correct others, by instead correcting ourselves. We see the log in our eye, and this is an example, a calling for others to follow. This is like Rene Girard's memetic desire teaching. People mimic the violence and self-righteousness of others. So, we set up a new life to mimic, one of self-correction. If people follow this, we don't have to correct others. This takes our self-righteousness and violence out of the system. If people don't follow it, we still follow it, because God does.

Jesus teaches us how to draw enemies into a reconciled living, instead of fighting against them. The way of fighting, which Israel followed all through the Old Testament, didn't help. It sowed injustice, which always brought up a new round of enemies in the future. We tried the way of law, the way we wanted, and it didn't work. So now, this is God's way, shown us through his incarnation.

The teachings of Jesus bring out the teachings of the Prophets, about justice through restoring the weak, rebuilding a reconciled community. In this community, healing takes over from war. "The fruit of justice shall be peace." This is the core of Torah. It is the kingdom of God. The principle of it is the cross. As disciples, we copy and mimic Christ, taking up our cross to reconcile our local and global communities.

This is the cross Paul speaks about, which he calls us to follow in our relationships. If we start our atonement theology with Paul, without understanding his source in the Gospels, we get confused in our discipleship. We get confused about our image of God. Is God demanding legal compensation, or not? Does he demand the legal punishment of sin, or not? Is he calling us to accept a doctrine of atonement, or to radical atonement living as disciples, bringing healing to our world?

The point of the cross is to show us what our discipleship and new world look like. Christ substituted himself into our place, to take the violence of the world against the sinner and outcast, to forgive us all for what we did to him, to take law and judgement from our hearts, which we have used unjustly against the weak. He delivers us from the law, to live a new life of forgiveness, rejecting the divisions of our world powers, instead bringing mercy to the outcast, and hope to the world.

### **Non-pagan God**

I think the problem with our theology, is that we think God's justice involves his direct punishment of sin. "I am angry, but if I have a substitute to die in your place, I will forgive you." This is the way of the gods, not the way of God. Christ came to reveal this pagan scapegoating, as nothing more than human injustice.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, God's justice was that he forgave Israel, even when Israel turned against him. He came and took freely the sin of the world and our sin against the law in himself. His justice is that he isn't like man. He doesn't repay us as we have treated him. He shows mercy, he forgives. This is God's justice and this is the justice he calls us to follow.

God's just punishment against sin, is to allow sin to run its own course, that leads to death. But he does all he can to turn man from this course. He calls the church to be like him.

## DISCIPLESHIP AND KILLING

Ronald J. Sider published, *The Early Church on Killing, A Comprehensive Sourcebook on War, Abortion, and Capital Punishment* (Baker Academic, 2012). It is a compilation of all sources documenting the views of the early church, from the first to the fourth centuries. Sider's book is an exceptionally valuable resource for understanding discipleship in the early church.

The thing that strikes you when looking through early church sources on the issue of killing is the consistency. The consistency in their view on any kind of killing, and the consistency among all sources from the early church period.

### **Consistent Pro-Life**

Today we are often inconsistent on this subject. For example, we are generally against abortion. We call this being pro-life. But the same people who are against abortion, are often, not always, in favour of capital punishment for some crimes, and in favour of war. A common dichotomy today, is to be against abortion and euthanasia, and in favour of killing in wars or capital punishment.

This brings us into the discussion about war theory. For centuries, the church has debated this topic about pacifism, just war, or holy war theory. Probably, just war theory is the most common one held in Christianity today. Sometimes, people hold a blend of views, on a scale between pacifism and just war.

The early church had an aversion to violence of any kind, which meant a consistent value on human rights, and even animal rights. They claimed all humanity are made in God's image, to be treated as sacrosanct. Until recent times, the church was at the forefront on standing for human and animal rights, and for the environment. Such matters are now largely left to secular institutions, as the church has taken on a much more individualistic flavour.

### **Capital Punishment**

Our point here is that, people ask why the church is against abortion and euthanasia, but also for capital punishment and war. Capital punishment is difficult to justify from a Christian perspective. People claim God universally mandated it with Noah, but that is not the case. He instructed capital punishment then, as he did in Moses, due to our widespread practice of genocidal vengeance. God's mandate was to limit killing. Christ's teachings clearly eradicated capital punishment.

A problem with capital punishment is that it is difficult to be sure the person is guilty. Innocent people are sentenced to death. Another problem is that capital punishment isn't restorative. There are many stories of people being restored to faith and love, even with the victim's family. The bible shows us that our view as the church in the world should be restorative. This is what we learn from the cross and from God's new creation program. He restores.

This is what the gospel is about. Its purpose is to move the creation from punitive to restorative justice, from law to love.

### **Just War**

But our topic here is about discipleship. Our aim is to show the early church's views on discipleship. Today, Christians can support wars, that are said to be just, but in hindsight end up being highly unjust. They kill large numbers of civilians, ruin nations, promote terrorism as a response, and are

often carried out for purely hidden economic purposes. They are simply baptised in faith, to divide us against each other, while the powers carry away the profit.

So, the question for us today is, if we are pro-life, which I am, why aren't we consistent about it? Why aren't we pro-life for all life? Just war theory says pro-life means killing some today, to stop more killing tomorrow. But as disciples of Christ, is this what Jesus taught us?

### **Consistent Witness Against Killing**

Let's get back to the early church. Ronald Sider, looking through every available early source on the church, found that without exception, all church sources reveal that the church was pacifist. This is true from the times of the first apostles, till towards the end of the third century, for about the first 200 – 250 years of the church.

Every source on early church views in this matter condemns killing by Christians. This includes abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment and in war. The early church was entirely consistent on its view of Christians killing. They all taught openly that a disciple of Christ must not kill. If it came to it, a disciple would prefer to be killed, than to kill.

### **Following Christ**

Authors in the early church gave their reasons for teaching this. They said this was the way Christ lived. He did not kill, but gave his life for his enemies. Then they quoted the teaching of Jesus. They said that Jesus commanded plainly, that we must love our enemies. All early church leaders said that this means we must not kill them. They said, we cannot love our enemies and kill them.

We can debate this, whether this is the right thing or not. But the point here is to look at the early church from the apostles' day for the first 200 years following. What was their view? Our answer to this question, leaves us without question. We know their view, without any uncertainty, and we know their view was entirely consistent. They were all consistently against any form of killing.

### **Eschatology**

Their second reason for claiming a Christian can't kill, was because of their view of eschatology. Eschatology comes from the Latin, meaning last things, or, the end. Today, we call it the last-days. Eschaton really means the end, as in the goal, the mature state, the fulfilment. The early church believed that they were living in the fulfilment of prophecy about the kingdom of God. The end was a new beginning, a new creation, which had already dawned in the resurrection of Christ, and in the heart of every true believer.

So, when they read prophecies, like in Isaiah 2, which said, in the last-days, it shall come to pass that all nations shall come to the mount of the house of the Lord, they believed they were living in that time. They didn't see the last-days as something that would come in the future, after Christ returned, but something that had already begun in the church. The final transformation comes at Christ's return, but the change that will renew all things, had already begun in the world through the church community.

"In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." (Isaiah 2:2-3)

## **A New Beginning**

The mountain of the house of the Lord refers to God's kingdom and reign. The temple was on the mountain in Jerusalem. Heaven, or God's reign, came through the temple to Israel and the nations around them. Isaiah said, the day was coming when all nations will come to God's kingdom. This didn't mean a literal coming to Jerusalem, but to the God who then dwelt in their temple. The world will come to God and have their hearts renewed.

This is the same view we see in Ezekiel, where waters come from the temple, which in Christ is the church, and go throughout all the nations of the world, bringing life. Also, in Zechariah, it was said that a fountain would open in Jerusalem, and issue living waters to all the nations of the world. We see the new covenant beginning in Jerusalem, and going out to renew the entire world. The early church saw themselves, as the fulfillment of this eschaton, this promise of the Prophets.

## **From Destruction to Peace**

Isaiah spoke of the mountain of the Lord being exalted above all other mountains. Mountain referred then to the place of power. Paul spoke a lot about these powers. They referred to anything that controlled our lives. To Paul, this meant our selfish desires, by which we fight against one another. The mountains spoke of the temperaments, the desires, passions and behaviours that control human life and drive humanity into destructive outcomes. This is what is destroying our creation. God has come to renew the creation, by renewing us.

God's mountain, which means his power, which is Christ and his gospel, is being raised above the other powers that have controlled human desires and destruction. With the kingdom of God coming into our hearts, our temperament is being renewed, which means a new rule is coming to our hearts and nations. Paul called this, putting off the works of the flesh, and being clothed in the fruit of the Spirit. This is the new rule of God coming to our lives and relationships.

## **Beating Swords in Ploughshares**

What then is the result of this new heart? Isaiah goes on to explain it:

"The Lord will mediate between nations and will settle international disputes. They will hammer their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore." (Isaiah 2:4)

When the early church saw this, they believed they were living in this eschaton, in this fulfillment. They believed they were God's end-times people, living out this new kingdom and renewal in the world. They weren't waiting for this peace movement to come. They believed, they all believed, that they were this peace-movement. They were God's people, beating their swords into instruments of community service, and thereby bringing renewal to the warring, covetous nations of the earth.

## **Following the Lord**

They didn't see this as cheap. They knew they would suffer for this. But their Lord suffered for doing this, so, they thought, why should their case be any different? They were honoured, to be called to follow the Lord. They called it an honour to suffer as the people of peace. We may not agree with this, for our lives today. That is not the point. Here, we are describing what is, without question, the view of the church of the first 200 years.

We have looked at two reasons why the early church refused to kill. First, they saw that Jesus didn't kill his enemies, and that he commanded us to love our enemies. This meant we couldn't kill them.

Second, they saw themselves as the fulfilment of God's kingdom in the world, through which the warring, covetous nations are being transformed, to finally take on the values of heaven on earth. The church was the way heaven was coming to earth.

### **Dedicated to Life**

This reinforces the view of discipleship in the early church, that we saw in previous sections of these notes. They were a people dedicated to life, to bringing justice to their community by serving, reconciling enemies where possible through peace, coming against the war in our hearts, which breaks out in our nations. They were following James, who claimed that the reason for war was greed. Discipleship, to the early church, was to renounce this greed, either on a personal level, or on a national level.

The early Christians were under a pledge by their baptism. This baptism meant they were pledged to love their brother and sister, from all national backgrounds, at the cost of their own lives, as Christ loved them and gave himself for them. This is what baptism meant. It was the discipleship of the early church. They didn't have a doctrine of Christianity or atonement, but a life that demonstrated what God had done for the world through his condescension, his incarnation in the flesh, death and resurrection. The world could only be renewed as we follow this.

The early church saw the corruption of the world, more than we do today. Their views were not naïve. They could have taken up arms to defend themselves, just as many other local groups in trouble did. But their view of Christ and of the kingdom of God stopped them doing this.

### **Isaiah's Justice**

They had a different hope. Their hope wasn't force. Peter spoke of the hope that was in the church, which the world thought strange. This is that hope. They believed that the world would only be renewed through the restorative justice Isaiah spoke of. By this, Isaiah meant mercy to the stranger, foreigner and outcast. This kingdom had clearly begun in Christ in his love for the outcast, and would be carried on in a renewing movement to the world through the church.

"Look, a righteous king is coming! And honest princes will rule under him. Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a parched land." (Isaiah 32:1-2)

"Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert." (Isaiah 35:6)

"Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from those who need your help... Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings." (Isaiah 58:7, 12)

"Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end." (Isaiah 9:7)

"In that day, the wolf and the lamb will live together... Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the Lord." (Isaiah 11: 6, 9)

The early church saw that they were these people of Isaiah, to bring transformation to our corrupt nations, to bring a change to the corrupt powers which executed Christ. They saw that mercy was

the way of the Prophets, not the force of arms, which they saw as unjust, serving the national interests, not human interest.

### **Peace-Keeping Unit**

This isn't a debate about pacifism and just war theory. My view is that the truth lies between pacifism and a peace-keeping military constraint when necessary, but by a military that represents the community interests, not the interests of any group. That is, a genuine peace-keeping unit.

This is very rare in our current world, as all trouble spots today are centred of national or economic interest. A just peace-keeping unit is very hard to come by, unless we genuinely cooperate as a group of nations. The church is called to bare witness to this kind of selfless cooperation. That is why the United Nations carries the logo from Isaiah, of the man beating his sword into a ploughshare.

### **Genuine Justice**

But the main part of peace-keeping isn't restraint. It is genuine justice, building for the poor and those left behind. This justice is largely missing from our world, and little cared about. We depend rather on arms, just as God warned Israel not to do.

Genuine justice takes work, and courage, speaking truth to power in our world. This is the witness of the Prophets. A church that has forgotten this, has forgotten the Prophets, and the Torah, which calls us to build peace through Jubilee and Sabbath, releasing the debts of the poor. Today, most of the world lies in the grip of debt.

### **Christian Armies?**

This section isn't meant to be a debate about biblical teaching on war. The issues are discussed more in my book *Violence in Scripture*. We may say Paul claimed the armies of the world are to bring justice to our nations. This has been the claim of Christian armies down through the years.

But for Paul, it was about worldly armies, like Babylon and Rome, whom the church in diaspora should not revolt against. The church's task was to transform them peacefully. The early church forbade any Christian to kill in the Roman army, despite Paul's comment about these evil forces being instruments of order in an evil world. They forbade Christians joining the army, not primarily because of Roman idolatry, but because of Christian baptism being non-violent.

### **Early Church View**

The purpose of this section, is to show the position of the early church regarding war, killing and their role in discipleship in renewing the world, according to the promises of God in the Prophets. There is no question that the view above was the view of the church for its first 200 years.

They were to overcome war by helping their enemy. They were to overcome abortion, by serving deserted mothers. They were to overcome crime by forgiving the criminal and serving them when in state punishment. They were to overcome selfishness by living as a giving community. They were to overcome unrighteousness by suffering.

The *Apostolic Tradition* (Egyptian Church Order) of the third century, has been described as of incomparable importance as a source of information about church life. It did not permit people into baptism who were gladiators or who taught "gladiators or swordsmanship or military skills or weapons training." "A soldier in the sovereign's army should not kill, or if he is ordered to kill, he should refuse. If he stops, so be it, otherwise he should be excluded (from baptism)." If someone is

already a believer, “If they want to be soldiers, let them be excluded, because they distance themselves from God.”

This would have hindered Hitler somewhat!

It is superfluous, in this short study, to go through all the sources from the early church. The reader can see Ronald Sider for a comprehensive comparison of early sources for this topic. The *Apostolic Tradition*, on its own, shows how far the official church shifted in its character in the years following Constantine: from refusing to fight, to eventually building unjust Christian armies.

### **Conclusion**

The *Apostolic Tradition* says people should not be admitted into baptism who teach weapons training. How many lives are taken today through international arms trade? Though the early church prayed for their king in battle, their witness was, that if everyone became like them, like the Christians, then there would be no war, and there would be no killing (see Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*.)

We follow Jesus, no matter what other people do. This is what Christianity is. I guess, if we were going to debate this, it would be along the lines of realism in our current world. There is the realism of human culture and the realism of God’s gospel. One day war will end, and it will end by ending fighting, not by winning a fight. This is the hope of the church, inherited through Christ.

## **DISCIPLESHIP OF SIMPLICITY**

We have already said in these notes that a major focus of the early church was on discipleship and this discipleship was focused upon the life of Jesus and his teachings. People had speculative views on doctrine, the nature of the trinity, or other matters, but these things weren't at the centre of what faith was about. Jesus' call to the church to be his disciples, by following his example, was the centre of Christian identity in the first 200 years. This is what the term "Christian" meant, people like Christ, or Christ followers, who acted like he acted.

### **Early Church Meetings**

We don't have a lot of information on how the early church conducted their meetings. In Acts, they still met at synagogues. They also met at Solomon's Porch, at the temple. Paul spoke at meetings in houses. The concept of house church, meeting from house to house, is the most usual form of gathering in the New Testament.

This would suggest a more informal setting for their fellowship. It is likely also that the meal, what we call communion, was the centre piece of their fellowship, along with prayer and encouragement about following the Lord Jesus. The meal was the symbol of their sharing, where discipleship, caring for each other, was portrayed as the central meaning of Christ's kingdom. Their mission was to renew the world with this gospel, a gospel first lived out in love and then explained verbally.

### **Church Buildings**

There is little evidence of church buildings in the first 200 years. We don't know much about the reason for this either. It's possible they didn't build halls because of the persecution they were suffering, and they also may not have been granted permission. After Constantine became Emperor, church buildings became common and lavish.

The lack of emphasis on church property in the early days is to be expected, when we consider that the main point to discipleship was Christlikeness, not establishing a new religion, with its centres of worship. I don't think they saw themselves as setting up a new religion. They met in their usual contexts, in synagogues and other settings. They saw themselves as the fulfillment of Jewish and gentiles hopes, not as something separate. Their focus was in renewing the places they already belonged to, unless these places were considerably ungodly, and they had to separate.

### **Christlikeness**

I think its true that their lack of focus on property was part of what they considered to be Christlikeness. They saw in Jesus a simplicity of life, and they were determined to follow that, especially in the context of that time, of the extravagant living in the Roman and Jewish worlds. Simple living was a part of early discipleship.

This was stressed in the early tradition of the church. For example, Jesus commenting on the dress of the Pharisees, who liked to be important in the market places. They also built bigger barns for themselves, while most people around them suffered. This teaching of Jesus was etched on the minds of early disciples.

Peter spoke of this, when admonishing believers not to make their beauty outward, in their expensive clothing, but inward, in a caring life. James also, when he spoke of the centre of their faith, which was living a godly life, which meant not for themselves, as the world around them did, but instead, for the benefit of the widow and orphan.

So, I think that their lack of emphasis on church property may have had something to do with this as well. They deemphasised the sense of self-importance, sometimes later shown by the church by its properties and structures, and concentrated instead on the welfare of their community.

### **Peacemaking**

Not only was this simplicity part of their Christlikeness, but it was also part of their mission for peace in the world. Peace could only come by justice. And justice can only come by serving the poor and needy. It's only by focusing on this mission towards their wider community, that their gospel calling of renewal in the world could be fulfilled. This was the teaching of the Prophets and of Christ.

So, the early disciples saw Christ's emphasis on Lazarus, at the rich man's gate, and understood Jesus' teaching, that the failure to serve others and heal their community, brought about the self-centred destruction and fall of Jerusalem. If the disciples were to form a different life, it must be one that renounced the life styles of the Jerusalem at that time. It must focus instead, not on a legalistic simplicity, but on a joyful simplicity regarding self-importance, that reached out to lift others up.

### **Monastic Challenge**

When the church became powerful this began to change. Its ministers became rich and its centres of worship became commanding, instead of serving. Violence then returned, to protect the wealth and power. As long as the church took on the likeness of the world, and not the likeness of Christ, it lost its saltiness.

Gradually, monastic movements arose to protest this worldly church, and try to influence it back to a genuine discipleship, as it had in its earlier days. These were movements of simplicity, movements of service, and movements that stressed love for enemy, rather than force of arms. The monastic movements had a significant impact in preserving the identity of the church, protesting power, and re-establishing the church's task. Key figures included people like Francis of Assisi. They created orders that brought Christianity and mission back to millions of people all over the world.

### **Today's Solution**

We are in a similar place today. The separation between rich and poor is currently at a staggering level. This threatens global peace. Much of the church is at home with this, pursuing our own lives, not really engaged with the world and its suffering. We need a renewal, like the earlier monastic movements brought to the world. Again, I stress, these are not movements of legalism, but joyful discipleship, with a fulfilment of meaning beyond that which a decaying world offers; real life in love and sharing. This beauty of the church must return.

The church will build, because it needs centres to serve the world. But our buildings aren't to demonstrate our self-importance. They are to bring in the poor, to educate the common classes who can't afford it, to care for widows and orphans, to train the wider community in skills for life, to house the displaced and refugee, to include our enemies for peacemaking and for their own human development. Our structures are not put up to show that we are important, but to show that humanity is important, and that the poorest among them must be reached and included in our service.

If the church doesn't regain its first century discipleship, the futures of our wider communities are at serious risk, just like they were in early Jerusalem. Our nations will divide and break up and destruction will set in on a local and global level. The only answer to this is the church's witness, which is service to the poor, our neighbour, our enemy, people of other faiths, the foreigner and the

refugee. Only as the wealth of this world serves the common good, rather than divides us, can we have peace.

This is the law, the prophets and the gospel.

## **DISCIPLESHIP AND MISSIONS**

The call to discipleship was a call to missions. Mission flows out of discipleship, just as caring for others flows out of love. Discipleship and missions began with the call of Jesus, a call to faith and repentance. Faith is accepting God's reality, that in Christ he has initiated a covenant of grace, to turn us from our sins and their destructive consequences in our communities. Repentance is the positive response, leaving a self-focused life, for a new neighbourly outlook.

This call was specifically given to Israel at first. Jesus came to Israel, as any of the Old Testament prophets did, with a call to Israel to repent before the coming judgement of God. "The axe is already laid to the root of the tree," John the Baptist said, "and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." This was the judgement of God coming to Jerusalem in AD 70. The city would be burned by Rome.

### **Abraham's Promises**

The call wasn't just an evangelical call, in the modern sense of the term. It wasn't a call to be forgiven and to go to heaven. It wasn't a call of separation from the world, except from the world's sin. As Paul described in Ephesians, the mystery was our union, not separation. The mystery was God was using Israel to leave behind its distinct nationalism and become part of the world to renew it. This is a far more practical and secular project than the usual private, religious affair.

God had called Abraham to bless the entire world. The mystery was that in Christ, this permeation of the church with the world was coming to pass. All gentiles were invited to join Israel in faith and repentance. They were invited to leave behind their self-serving idols, and embrace neighbourly love and care, following God's enacted love for his creation in the gospel.

As soon as we mention things like Abraham's promises, we think of religious things. This is a wrong mindset. It is about this world, bringing change to the human condition, bringing our lives and societies into his practical, loving restoration.

### **The Holy Spirit**

First, Jesus asked his disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would empower them for witness, not just in miracles, but in discipleship living with their enemies. The use of miracles was to be God honouring. There are many examples in the New Testament of wrong motives in this area. The miracles were not for money, personal ambitions, or to divide the community. They were to be used in humility, to point to Jesus' community plan, as the multiple languages at Pentecost indicate.

The uniting of the languages at Pentecost, indicated the mission of the Holy Spirit in the church. The Holy Spirit, in our lives, is on a community project. He is on a justice to the world project, bringing us all together in love. He is breaking down the walls of division among us, so that we may care for each other and heal the world. This is what the Holy Spirit was doing in Acts. He was glorifying Christ, because this is the mission Christ started, the kingdom of God. And he was equipping the church to stand, even with opposition to this project, from those who preferred their self-interest.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit was more than the visible miracles. In Ephesians, Paul said we were sealed by the Holy Spirit, who would lead us into our full inheritance. Then Paul spoke of the saints' faith and love for each other. This is what the Holy Spirit was bringing into their lives. This faith and love, in the face of a corrupt world, even towards their enemies, was the work of the Spirit in the new community. This was the way in which God was empowering his people.

## **Discipleship is the Mission**

In the early church, discipleship was the way of missions. That is, their mission was to be lived out as disciples. Discipleship was the method of the mission.

This is the way it was with Jesus. In Christ, God lived out his mission towards the world. The message of Jesus was an explanation of this action. With God, the mission started with his way of living, his way of coming to the world in the flesh, and the preaching of Christ announced or described what this way of living is all about. It started with example, then it is secondly verbal.

Without the example, there is no message. Without the example, there is no credibility. Without the example, the message distorts into one of power over others. The world sees the message. The church's call is to show the message.

If the message is to be truly transformative, and discipleship forming, then it is far more about doing, than about speaking. Speaking only has renewing force because of the doing. It is our culture that has divided "preaching" into a single category of verbal communication. In early discipleship, preaching was holistic. The word is a person. Hearing involves all our being.

What things do we see in the way God acted in Christ?

- In the incarnation, God came to the world. He joined heaven to earth. He took the initiative to come to our place.
- In the incarnation, God pulled down walls, and built bridges, between himself and humanity, and between Israel and the Samaritans, people of different races and faiths.
- In the incarnation, God forgave the world its hostility against him. He didn't hold the wrong others committed against them.
- He took the risk of love, of rejection, and still reached out to his enemies.
- God lived a counter-cultural life in the world. He didn't follow the cultures of broken humanity, but the selflessness of heaven.
- Where there was selfishness, he brought service.
- Where there was violence, he brought self-giving.
- Where there was injustice, he cared for others, not for himself.
- Where people were rejected by the community, he included them and told them of God's love.
- In the incarnation, God suffered with us in our cultures, in our ignorance, and in our violence. He showed us that missions, to bring a new beginning to people, means compassion, which literally means "to suffer with."

## **Discipleship first, then Verbal Message**

It was as Jesus lived out this form of life, that he preached the message. The message was one of reconciliation, that explained the reconciling way in which God was acting through the incarnation of Christ.

This shows us how mission works. Mission is the life of the church community. It is to be lived out in the world, connected with other groups, not separated from them. We are not setting up a separate religion. We are renewing the world as it is, going to those who live in other communities and customs, and seeing God work his renewal within those communities.

## **Inclusive Cultures**

To do this, we reject the politics of division, just as Jesus rejected those divisions and demarcations. He was friends to all, on all sides. He sought out the enemies of Israel, and did not reject them. He went to them and brought them in.

Persecution tempts us to flee for safety and build our own religion, but God didn't flee back to heaven. He lived out his reconciliation in our darkness, at the centre of where we were. He came to accept and transform the Jewish faith. In the same way, he fulfils the aspirations of all communities in our world. He doesn't come to reject them, but to transform them.

The mission of the church starts with discipleship. It starts by living within the communities that others belong to. Discipleship becomes the mission in those communities. The message is then the explanation of this life. Discipleship is a reorientation of our heart and behaviour, based on Christ. It is not a shift into a new political community.

This disconnects the church from any separatist message, "You must leave your people, your customs, and embrace our political views." It forsakes the nationalism of first century Israel. This is not the gospel.

Rather, the gospel is inclusive, of the people and their identity. Their identity becomes part of the new beautiful fabric of God's church, his new creation, complete with the different reflections of God's creation in us all. We learn God's multifaceted wisdom and purpose in our reconciling relationships with others. We don't learn by separatist arrogance. God brings each human culture into his resurrection and makes it part of his beauty.

## **Peter's World Mission**

This was Peter's path of mission. Peter spent time calling the believers to follow Christ. He listed some of the aspects above, about the way Christ lived. He called the church to follow this in their relationships with each other, and in their relationships in the world.

This way of living was a complete contrast to the Roman world. In the world, people stand out for their own rights. Christ gave up his rights. Peter said, live this way. Then, when the world asks you, "What is this hope you have?", then explain, share the message of reconciliation with them. Share how the way you are living, the redemptive way, heals communities, as God showed in his incarnation.

Peter said, we are an unusual people. This is the basis for our mission. Our discipleship, our peculiarity, is to show God's praises, is our mission. Our mission is our incarnational, Christlikeness, living in the world.

This is Peter's plan for world missions. He didn't say, "Get in a special evangelist." He said, "Follow Christ and when the world asks why do you live so oppositely to us, then explain the reason, with respect." This is how the scriptures said the church is to renew the world.

## **Non-Hostile Mission of Peace**

This also shows that the mission of the church is to be carried out in a non-hostile way. Building separation into our communities is building hostility for the future. We carry out our mission amid our enemies, in service, in forgiving, respectful witness through our lives. If there is any hostility, any disrespect, it is to come from others not from us.

We have no message to the world, unless the hostility is overcome first within ourselves, within our own hearts. When we live at peace with all men and women, reaching out in care to those different to ourselves, just as God has done for us in Christ, then we have a gospel to share with others. The gospel we share must first be lived by our own community.

The mission of the church is not fighting for our place in the world, but serving to renew the world. We don't have a place in this world. We are pilgrims, not citizens. This means we don't try to carve out a place for ourselves, but God's plan is that we become part of the whole community by washing its feet. Our place is the whole community, as strangers, without any claim of our own, and yet bringing God's love to it all.

We are not calling people to make evangelical decisions for Christ. We are called by Jesus to make disciples, followers of Christ. It is the followers of Christ who transcend our self-centred sectors, filling all things and making all things new. (Eph 1:23)

Mission comes out of our discipleship, our following in the world, of how God acted in Christ.

## **A DISCIPLSHIP OF LOVE**

In one of Jesus' last talks with his disciples, before his crucifixion, he spoke extensively to them about God's love. (John 15-17) This love was to be the compelling force in both the disciples' community and in their mission to the world.

He said he had loved them to the full, in giving his life for them. This was a response of his love for his Father, who desired that the world also know God's love. The desire of God wasn't that Jesus should die, but that he should do right, and if the world hated him, then he shouldn't respond the world's way, but in forgiveness. This was the will of God. This was the Son's sacrifice, doing what was right in a dark world.

### **The Trinity**

This is a strongly trinitarian passage, which is somewhat of a mystery. My view, from what I believe was the Hebrew view of God, is that the trinity is God's manifestation to his creation. In the Old Testament, he is revealed to his creation as wisdom, as the word, light and Spirit of God, present with us, Emmanuel, and forming our lives. God is both transcendent and imminent, as one God.

In the gospel, he comes in his Son, simply a different tent, in human form, in a son born among men, to reveal his love and redemption to humanity. As a son, he becomes part of and fulfils the Hebrew covenant. He also comes in his Spirit, to be with his church, as he redemptively subjects all his enemies under him in world renewal.

This circumvents some of the more Greek ideas, with gods giving birth to gods in heaven, and otherwise behaving strangely. I can't tell how much such ideas in the culture influenced Greek church fathers, at least providing something of a framework for a trinitarian view, as they rightly sought to defend the divinity of Christ. They had lost sight of the Hebrew framework by that point. I think early Islam reacted against Greek notions in this matter. I haven't studied ideas on the trinity in various denominations, but have grown into the above view from what I see in scripture.

### **God's Intense Love**

But the point we are looking at here is the love of God. The Father wanted the Son to communicate his love to the world. Jesus had shown this love by sharing with us the whole heart of God for his creation. And the Spirit would continue to do this after Christ's ascension. He treated us as friends. We aren't told these things for the sake of knowledge, but to have friendship with God. Friendship would bring us into reflecting the character of God, which is what Christ meant by his glory.

He would continue to communicate his love to us through his Spirit. Jesus called the Spirit the paraclete, meaning helper, or comforter. This also refers to intercessor, or advocate, in the legal sense. God would love us, even though the world would accuse us. He would support us in the face of the world's accusations. His love would never leave us. There is an intensity of love communicated by Jesus here, something very important to know in a satanic, scapegoating, accusatory world.

### **Transition from Accusation to Love**

God's gospel is to move us from this world of accusation, into a new world where love defends the neighbour. Accusation began in the Garden of Eden, first against God himself, and then it filled our own hearts against each other. The Sermon on the Mount calls us to put this world away, and embrace a new world of redemptive love.

Accusation is self-asserting. Love is self-giving. In communicating God's immense love to us, Jesus is also calling us to follow him in showing that love to the world. He is inviting us into his love mission. "If the world has done this to me, hated me, they will do it to you also," Jesus said. He is calling us to share in his mission of taking the world's accusation, and answering it with love. This reveals God. We can do this because the Holy Spirit is always communicating God's love to our hearts.

This is discipleship, following Christ, because we know in our hearts we are also in his full friendship, and in his sonship of love.

### **Following Christ's Sufferings**

The early church saw their discipleship as following the sufferings of Christ. This was just another way they were called to follow their Lord. They were not to think of themselves as being greater than him.

The idea that sufferings are finished in Christ's cross is foreign to the whole mission of the church. What is finished is the law, the accusations, the old world. That was Friday, day six. Jesus rested in the grave the seventh day, and rose again the first day a new week, a new creation week.

Instead of becoming bitter against God for suffering, the early church believed it an honour to share with Christ in his mission. They were correct. It's amazing sometimes, how much God must melt our hearts, before we can see love as he sees it.

### **Following Christ's Love**

The early church didn't just follow Christ in the sense of suffering with him, but also in the sense of using that suffering as the opportunity to communicate the love of God to the world, just as Christ communicated that love through his suffering. As the church suffered, they also forgave. This stunned the world, and struck to their hearts, revealing their darkness.

The early church did not protest the world in the courts with lawyers, but as prisoners and in the Roman Colosseum. Their protest was love, to suffer for what they believed, and to forgive and share their bread with those who killed them. Jesus communicated the immense, extravagant, and never moving love of God to us, so that it might overflow from us, and move us to share that same love with the world.

Welcome to the Lord's discipleship, the hope of new creation.