

Discipleship: Seeking the 'Kingdom and his righteousness'

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When membership of the faith community gets separated from Biblical concepts for us Christians the church is gradually and slowly getting into trouble. This is especially true when membership and discipleship are separated. In the first article, I have mentioned that discipleship may have become unpopular because of mainly two reasons: the wrong association with confrontational evangelism and secondly for the inconvenience of the radical nature of discipleship, especially in a situation where churches are still monocultural and still prefer the 'convenience' of a culturally constituted and dominated church. In this article, the focus will be on the role of the church in seeking the 'Kingdom and his righteousness' (Mt 6:33) and on what seeking might entail, with special reference to continuing formation of the membership on this journey of following the Christ. The background to my research problem and question is that the 'we' can just not afford that people, because of the church, not being serious about herself, turn away from the church – but turn to God: 'Everyday people are straying away from the church and going back to God' (Lenny Bruce †1966). This is just not normal.

Prayer of confession

Lord God, we have given more weight to our successes

And our happiness than to your will.

We have eaten without a thought for the hungry.

We have spoken without an effort to understand others.

We have kept silent instead of telling the truth.

We have judged others, forgetful that you alone are judge and redeemer.

We have acted in accordance with our opinions

rather than according to your commands.

We have not been your faithful servants.

Forgive us. Have mercy on us. Redeem us.

Help us to live as disciples of Jesus Christ,
your Son, our Savior. Amen.

(Nassau Presbyterian Church, Princeton, NJ., Bulletin, Sunday January 22, 2017)

Introduction

In the previous article, I have stated the research problems or questions at stake:

- Whether, according to my observation, within the missional conversation, discipleship and especially discipling (as often referred to) are comprehensively dealt with?
- My deep conviction that we are struggling to be a blessing to the world. Is this because we have confused (and even equated) confrontational evangelism and (with) discipling? And now we are not doing anyone of the two!
- Whether we have shallowed the concept, and with its membership of congregations, to become a culturally safe and comfortable belonging to a community of the 'same'?
- Whether we are willing to be serious enough about the cost of discipleship, so much so that we do what the priority for disciples is – seeking the 'kingdom and His righteousness' (Mt 6:33) (NIV)?

In this series of two articles, I am focusing on the last two: in this one even more so on the role of the church and discipleship in seeking the Kingdom and its righteousness.

I was asked to lead a worship service in September 2016 on the Radio. I opted to preach on Philippians 1:27–31, focusing on the public behaviour of Christians. A behaviour, according to the

text, means to 'conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (NIV). Trying to be as faithful as possible to what Paul could have meant and what his first readers probably heard him communicate when using *axios* and the *euangelion tou Xristou* in the same sentence, I was convinced that Volf (2015:26) is probably right: We may have become a 'curse to the world rather than a source of blessing ... insufferably self-righteous ... a source of strife over worldly goods rather than a wellspring of confident humility, creative generosity, and just peace'. The verb used in Phil 1:27 connects our 'conduct' to public and political life. Barclay (1975:29) dared to translate as: '*One thing you must see to whatever happens – live a life that is worthy of a citizen of the Kingdom and of the gospel of Christ ...*'.

Moltmann (1983) once reminded us that:

'political theology has arisen out of a deep dissatisfaction with [the] restoration of antiquated conditions in Germany.' This after explaining how, after World War II, churches found new safety and stability in new agreements with government. Political Theology 'began with criticism and a new definition of the social and political functions of the church under the conditions of the modern age.' He then links up with '*polituein*' and explains that 'political theology is not a new dogmatic, it wants to awaken the political consciousness of every Christian theology; it wants to be fundamental theology.' There always was 'politically unconscious theology. But there is no apolitical theology... It does not want to 'politicize' the church but it does want to 'Christianize' the political involvement of Christians. It therefore takes up the modern functional criticism of religion and urges movement from the orthodoxy of faith to the orthopraxis of discipleship of Christ'. (pp. 62–64)

There is yet another reason for this article. As recently as some weeks ago a good pastor said to me, again, that the concept *discipleship* is so negatively loaded that it may be better to find another concept to convey the meaning of the concept. He meant it very well. I have tried to reflect on this way of thinking already in the articles referred to. It is true, for many reasons, that 'discipleship' has become loaded and often more negatively so than positively. One reason for this is, to my mind, the confusion between confrontational evangelism with its decision-making approach and the 'making of disciples' (cf. also Van Aarde 2006:103–122). If this is 'discipling' then we should oppose it, and with good right. Another reason, which to my understanding lies closer to the skin of the South African Afrikaans churches, is our addiction to the 'the church being a community of culture' rather than a community of faith under the Lordship of the Christ. I have argued earlier (1994:9–13; 2015:23ff.) how the '*Volkskirchliche*' mentality led to the beginning of the *Gemeindeaufbau* movement in Germany (cf. also Schwarz & Schwarz 1984). I also reflected on how difficult, some would say impossible, it is to facilitate transformation in such 'culturally determined' congregations. Two further arguments are relevant here.

Regarding the development of the missional conversation since 1998, when the first book in the series put out by the Gospel and Culture Network was published (Guder 1998), the point was made over and over that the time of

'Christendom' has passed – it has 'disintegrated' (cf. Guder 2015:15). They mean by that very much the same as I did with my remark to the '*Volkskirche*', a time when church was still the 'in-thing' and a society at large was influenced and led by the church, even to the point of having power in the government and several institutions like schools, city councils, universities, etc. This issue was argued long before the Gospel and Culture Network already. Kraemer (1958) and Hoekendijk (1966) argued against a Christendom mentality. Hoekendijk (1966) wrote for example:

the call to evangelism is often little else than a call to restore 'Christendom', the Corpus Christianum, as solid, well-integrated cultural complex, directed and dominated by the church. And the sense of urgency is often nothing but a nervous feeling of insecurity, with the established church endangered; a flurried activity to save the remnants of a time now irrevocably past ... Evangelism and *churchification* are not identical, and very often they are each other's bitterest enemies. (pp. 15, 25, 29)

The 'church' a:

Christian community ... this fellowship of the partakers of the same salvation, a company of strangers and pilgrims, *paroikia*, or a group of sojourners in the world, fully detached and therefore free to relate itself to every form of existence ... The *koinonia* is the place where the shalom is already lived. (p. 29)

A second example of how this reality might have led to the devaluation of and negative overtone to the concept of discipleship can be found in the story of the well-known emerging church theologian Brian McLaren. I tried to develop his argument and my own choice (against his) somewhere else (Nel 2009). What is important here is his acknowledgement of how difficult it is when 'culture' took over a church, may be so difficult that reformational thinking about discipleship is in vain and some choose to start all over again. McIntosh (2012:169–177) reflects on this too and how it is a 'common statement among church planters that it is easier to give birth than to raise the dead'.

McLaren (2004) wrote:

I want to welcome them in, to help them become part of our life and mission. But often I have felt like an ambulance driver bringing injured people to a hospital where there's an epidemic spreading among the patients and doctors and nurses ... You try to help the hospital get the epidemic under control again, so they can get back to helping people heal ... The hospital can be a pretty sick place sometimes. (p. 21)

Many would agree that this may be a rationalised and contextual choice, but whatever the explanation, in the long run, the course of discipleship is not really served. I repeat a sentence from a book by Osmer – because it is crucial to my own plea for a willingness for a long-term reformational choice in 'dead-end' congregations. Osmer (1990) remarked as to the teaching office of the church:

Rediscovery is the activity of discerning once again the meaning and power of tradition that has been repressed or forgotten. Recovery goes further. It involves the positive evaluation and appropriation of that tradition, using what has been rediscovered to structure present patterns of thought and action. (p. 141)

In the sense that I refer to this – ‘rediscovery’ and ‘recovery’ might take longer, but I, for one, am not willing to give up on what we have inherited in the rich concept of discipleship. We need to move from ‘the club or clan, the charismatic-leader-and-followers, the company or corporation’ understanding of congregations to becoming a more ‘incarnational community’ where discipleship is coming into its own right (cf. for the terms I used here, Hadaway 2001:35–44). And, in the words of Rainer and Geiger (2006:3) ‘the simple revolution has begun’. It may involve, in their words again ‘an extreme makeover’ (2006:57) but we need to rediscover and recover what we may have lost.

Approaches like this, especially in Youth Ministry, gives one hope. The book by three prominent scholars in Youth Ministry, Mahan, Warren and White (2008) is another sign of hope. In the above-mentioned books, as in others (cf. Cannister 2013; Malphurs 2009; Yaconelli 2007), there is a growing consensus that especially emerging adults are ready for a more authentic way of being Christian – what I have called and still would call, a life of discipleship. Warren’s (2008:61–73) contribution ‘Youth Ministry in an Inconvenient Church’ reflects exactly on how challenging the call to discipleship is. He compares life where consumerism is ruling and ‘looking to the behaviors of Gospel practice’ as faithfulness to the call of Christ and to recognise ‘seeing others as the proxies of Jesus and as the locus of God’s presence’ (Warren 2008:65, 71).

What then are disciples seeking as to the Matthean gospel of Jesus, where we find the core words behind this article: disciples seek the ‘Kingdom and His righteousness’ (Mt 6:33).

The Church and the Kingdom

To think of the church as a sign of the Kingdom of God has been emphasised anew since Bosch (1991:374ff.; cf. also Nel 2015:90–98) has done so and called it a sign that cannot be challenged. Within the missional conversation, I sometimes sense an emphasis on the Kingdom that may even look like, to my mind, an underestimation of the role and place of the church. Almost as if one should not expect much of the church anyway. I explain this as a reaction towards what we have allowed the church to become (as a culturally captured unit) and because of the many mistakes that were made within the church. A recent Facebook post, quoted in the Abstract above, reminded me of such a possibility again. I am not saying that the post itself carries a negative evaluation of the church. I may only have stated (and maybe even with the sadness I experienced when reading it) a state of affairs: ‘Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God’ (Lenny Bruce).

My attempt below is not to react in any such way. I deem the church an important, non-negotiable, sign of the Kingdom (cf. also Viviano 2001). It should be the example par excellence of what it looks like where God is worshipped and served as King – or to say it in older language: Where God is known, loved and served. Heyns (1987:352) referred to the church

being a tangible revelation of the will of the King. Fuellenbach (1995) refers to the Kingdom being present in the church:

We can say that the church is an ‘initial realization’ or a ‘proleptic anticipation’ of the plan of God for humankind; or, in the words of Vatican II, ‘She becomes on earth the initial budding forth of the Kingdom (*Lumen Gentium* 5)’. (pp. 268–270)

Osmer (2012) with reference to Bosch (1991:385 and his reference to Moltmann 1993:116–132) says:

The church’s *identity* sustains its *relevance* and *involvement* ... Bosch is drawing here on the missional ecclesiology of the great German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who describes the congregation with the bipolar concepts of identity and relevance. With the *identity* pole, Moltmann portrays the congregation as a contrast society, a community of mature and committed disciples that serves as a sign of the kingdom in its fellowship of equality, mutual acceptance, and care, its worship in joy, and its struggle to live out the sermon on the Mount in a Kingdom ethic. (p. 50)

Moltmann (1977) portrays the congregation as:

acquiring a distinctive ‘way of life’ as it follows Christ’s way ... With the *relevance* pole, Moltmann portrays the congregation as a *kenotic* community, a community of openness, self-giving, and solidarity in its various relationships with the world. (p. 158)

The church lives in this tension. Osmer (2005) wrote about Moltmann’s understanding:

it grounds this ecclesiology in his social doctrine of the Trinity, which portrays the divine person perichoretically as existing in *centered openness*. They do not merely have their relationships; they *are* their relationships. They subsist in and for one another in centered openness. When the church lives as a community of centered openness, living in tension between identity and relevance, it serves as an *analogia Trinitatis* (an analogy of the Trinity). (p. 51)

I think Armstrong (1987:62) was right when he, then already, pointed out that this dynamic Biblical concept has been neglected in the teachings of many churches. I observe a link between this neglect and losing the concept of discipleship and the art of disciple-making. When the Kingdom is not a priority in our theological reasoning it is probably because it is no longer a priority for ‘disciples’, doing theology. Guder (2015:1–19) explains well how mission and theology were ‘divided’ over many years and that only recently we began to see mission as integral to all of theology – and start teaching it as such under the name ‘missional theology’.

Disciples, who are the people being met and taught in the sermon on the mount, ‘seek first’ the Kingdom. The Greek word suggests even a stronger motivation – the motivation of a priority, an insistent urge. The Afrikaans word, ‘beywer’, communicates this strong motivation for what is a priority for disciples – pointing in the direction of endeavour and campaigning for. When one thinks of the church as community of disciples, one must admit and acknowledge that this group, the church, finds their reason for existence outside of themselves: ‘it follows without a doubt: the church is the bearer of the good news of the Kingdom, God’s reign’ (Nel 2015:98).

Brennan's remark (2007:19) as to this seeking of the *Reign of God* is of importance here. As a Roman Catholic, he responded to the frozenness of the structures in his denomination and the implications for renewal. He then claims that he is in line with Küng, Johnson, Groome and others (without referring to any sources) that all 'who have given the Reign of God serious thought believe that Jesus' experience of *Abba* is foundational to what he meant by God's Reign'. And that:

- Living the Reign of God is to live a God-centred life, in close, intentional relationship with *Abba*.
- Living the Reign of God is not a reactive life. It strives to discern God's will in all situations.
- Living the Reign of God is characterised by unconditional love of all people, service, servant leadership, stewardship of one's resources, mercy and justice.

The work done by Wright (2010) is another good example of how an understanding is growing that a changed or transformed church and mission helps the church continue finding its God given place (again). Answering the question who and what are we here for? Wright wrote (2010:24):

It is not so much the case that God has a mission for the church in the world, as that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission – God's mission ... Mission arises from the heart of God himself, and is communicated from his heart to ours. Mission is the global outreach of the global people of a global God. (a quote from Stott 1992:335)

He continues:

So when I speak of *mission*, I am thinking of all that God is doing in his great purpose for the whole of creation and all that he calls us to do in cooperation with that purpose ... But when I speak of *missions* I am thinking of the multitude of activities that God's people can engage in, by means of which they participate in God's mission. (cf. also Newbigin 1953:xi as quoted by Wright 2010:28)

Of particular relevance to this article is his remark (2010:28–30) that 'God's people' (his preference for referring to the church) are like a postman where who he is does not matter at all, as long as the job gets done. What matters for God's people are integrity, justice, unity and inclusion and Christlikeness. He later refers to the Biblical word 'holy': 'There is no Biblical Mission without biblical ethics' (Wright 2010:149).

Osmer (2005) wrote about the last-mentioned dimension of being church ('holy') in public too. Referring to how difficult it is to even talk about sanctification today because 'it has come to be associated with a narrow and rigid piety that crushes the vitality and spontaneity out of life'. He then rightly asks whether this is really what sanctification means? He argues:

Moltmann, I believe, gets to the heart of the matter: 'Sanctification today' means first of all rediscovering the sanctity of life and the divine mystery of creation, and defending them from life's manipulation, the secularization of nature, and the destruction of the world through human violence. (p. 235)

There is thus a moral dimension of sanctification, slow and steady growth in practising a discipleship ethic that takes seriously the sanctity of life, love of neighbour, Christian nonviolence and other aspects of the Christian moral life that make congregations 'contrast societies' in our contemporary world. Sanctification also encompasses growth towards maturity in spiritual discernment. It takes maturity of judgement to determine the right course of action in circumstances that are confusing and complex. It takes a disciplined imagination to discern new possibilities for the present in the light of God's promised future. (cf. Moltmann 1992:171; cf. also Brueggemann 2016:26–27 for his reflection on 'fidelity [being] grounded in unmocked holiness'). In another section of his work Osmer (2005:43–56) points to how corporate discernment involves 'learning to interpret everyday life eschatologically' (cf. Van Aarde 2017: 2 of 10) for how one should read the Gospel of Matthew as a whole within the perspective of eschatology).

Osmer got to the above description within the broader picture, at stake in this article: what kind of disciples are into Kingdom-seeking practices. Osmer (2005) uses this concept as describing:

Religious practices as socially shared, tradition bearing activities that embody an interpretation of the ultimate context of existence and have sufficient depth to forge a common sense of identity among the members of a community and to shape the character of individual participants... The most important characteristic of a religious practice in the way it teaches its participants to construe their everyday lives in terms of an interpretation of the ultimate context of existence and to align their lives accordingly. (pp. 91–92)

In one of his seven 'characterisations' of the public church Fowler (1991) wrote:

Public Church fosters a clear sense of Christian Identity and Commitment

For a congregation to be deeply and particularly Christian means that its identity derives from a relation with Jesus Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote: 'The church is nothing else but a sector of humanity where Christ is really taking form.' Identity in Christ means participating in the story opened up by God's self-offering in the Christ event. It means being grafted into the mission of Jesus to point to and help bring the commonwealth of love and justice that Jesus announced and embodied. To form this public church helps prospective members to find linkages between the motives, hungers, and life experiences that draw them toward church and the healing and empowering movement of God's grace. (p. 155)

In this regard, Volf's (2011) contribution on 'A public faith: how followers of Christ should serve the common good' is worth adding to the reading list on the public church – seeking the Kingdom.

Words by Scot McKnight (2015) might help me make this point even stronger:

Everything I learned about the Christian life I learned from my church. I will make this a bigger principle: a local church determines what the Christian life looks like for people in that church. Now I'll make it even bigger still: we all learn the Christian life from how our local church shapes us. These three principles are a way of saying that local churches matter far more than we often know. (p. 11)

What are disciples, in the above sense, the church, seeking when they seek the Kingdom? Many books have been published on this topic. A simple search in the Library of the Princeton Theological Seminary called up some 1730 sources. Since 2006 alone 540 publications are in this Library alone. I mention this to make my point that this article will only, and only just, scratch the surface of any research of the meaning of the Kingdom, sought by disciples.

We are involved in, what Van Aarde (2017:3/10) referred to as, cleaning up the 'mess of the world'. He wrote:

Sonder oë van geloof manifesteer die wêreldmagte *in realiter* in onregverdige boosheid en onderdrukking. God het egter met 'n 'clean up' begin om die 'mess of the world' op te ruim (in Crossan se woorde), want die *oikoumenē* behoort aan God en nie aan die keiser of enige ander bese mag nie (Crossan, in Stewart 2006:24–25). In hierdie opruimingswerk is die *ekklesia* God se instrument. Omdat die geloofswerklikheid die realiteite van die wêreld kontrasteer, is anti-samelewingstaal nodig, sodat die gemors in die wêreld opgeruim kan word. (cf. also McDonald 2004 for what he calls *The Disciple Making Church*)

Seeking the Kingdom and His righteousness

In this section, I will focus on what I have done elsewhere (Nel 2015) but from a slightly different angle: what do disciples have to understand, deal with and *be*, to prioritise the 'kingdom and his righteousness'? And secondly, what does *seeking* imply – however uncomfortable it may be (come)? Or to say it differently: who seeks and what is seeking about?

To start this conversation the following remark by Spurgeon ([1983] 2015:40) in his commentary on Matthew 6:33, in more than one way, captures my hope and passion for the Christian Church: 'To promote the reign of Christ, and to practice righteousness, are but one object; and may that be the aim of our lives! Let us spend life on the one thing, and it will be well spent'.

Who Seeks?

Disciples are compelled to seek. The church seeks. No one argues that. What is often neglected when we admit this is an understanding of how the gospel of Matthew connects 'disciples' as blessed and to having inherited the kingdom of heavens – Matthew's preferred way of naming it. Mullins (2007:149) wrote: 'For Matthew "blessedness" is inherent in the kingdom, which is already here but not yet fully, so there is both a "here and now" and an eschatological dimension to the beatitudes'. In two of the beatitudes this 'blessedness' is directly related to 'the kingdom'. Who the blessed people are, become characteristic of the disciples who at the same time inherit the kingdom and seek the kingdom.

In my case here, I will only attend to the two blessings directly related (in the wording of the text) to the kingdom of heavens (Mt 5:3, 10). Because it was relevant then, I discussed the importance of Matthew 5:3 in the introduction to the section

on Matthew 25:31–46. According to a word from Montagu (2010), in his commentary on Matthew 5:3 to recap what was argued there:

At Qumran 'the poor' was a title for members of the community. Thus, at this second level, the Beatitude means, 'Blessed are they who know they need God ... those who feel their emptiness, even though they may not even know they need God to fill it, have experienced the first and foundational movement of grace'. (p. 59)

What I want to emphasise is that this attitude (*us* understanding basic identity) is a requirement for the involvement of disciples in seeking the kingdom. There is just no place for arrogance among *us* disciples of the Christ. If so, we would lose our 'blessedness' and our inheritance of the kingdom. This no disciple community or church or faith community can afford. We would then not only lose our very identity, but also the way we are who we are.

The second blessing related directly to inheriting the kingdom, is: 'Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 5:10 [NIV]). The verse implies a commitment to righteousness for those who make it a priority to seek righteousness. To my mind, it is at this point that the 'seekers' often drop out of the race. The price for seeking becomes too high. It is often the case when membership is developed into being faithful discipleship – like in bidding for something valuable where one may stay in the bidding race, and at a point you just give up: this is too high. In church systems where membership was culturally affordable, members often bid out at a very low price or quality of discipleship already.

To admit our dependence and to be willing to be persecuted is a high price for self-assured, convenience-seeking people like us. In a previous article (2015) I have tried to interpret the work of Van Aarde (2006) and the Stoppels (2013) for readers who do not read Afrikaans and Dutch, respectively. I argued for the realisation of this brokenness or dependence in our understanding of ourselves. There is just not room for arrogance in being church, when we take our discipleship seriously.

Osmer (2005:222–225) and several others, like Root (2011:98–118; 2014a) and Jacober (2011:25), have referred to this kind of valuable faithfulness as Christopraxis and Christocentric. Root (2014a:101) argues even against calling ministry a 'Trinitarian-praxis': 'It is Christopraxis because Jesus is the *hermeneutic of God's ministry*, and as the *hermeneutic of God's ministry* Jesus is the *hermeneutic of God's very being*'. My reason for referring to this is the validity of the argument that disciples are indeed Jesus' people and as such people for suffering and willing to take the brunt of the cross. Being 'in Christ' is kind of a package deal as many New Testament passages remind us (cf. for one Mt 16:24–26). Root's argument (2014a:104–113) for a *theologiacrucis* is worth a read. He argues that we, in Christ, only know God as giving 'Godself to humanity so humanity might be with God' (Root 2014a:94). This brings him to his 'death-to-life paradigm: The *THEOLOGICA CRUCIS* in Christopraxis' arguing that this

paradigm is ‘simultaneously an epistemological structure embedded in an ontological reality’ (2014a:104). To take somewhat of a short cut: This leads him to say that ‘to participate in this ministry and therefore know God is to die; if to encounter God’s being is to encounter God in the practical, then this practicality comes forcefully in death itself ...’ (2014a:105–106). Later he adds that ‘*Grace is the human experience of God’s being as becoming in the ministry of bringing life out of death*’ (2014a:107). It would be unfair towards Root not to refer to his 2014b book on *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker*, too. According to Botman (2000:211), Arens (1995:121) already used the concept in the title of his book and for ‘concrete forms in which Christian praxis is carried out’.

What seeking might entail

Osmer argued for this from a Trinitarian departure point and with reference to many of the writings of Moltmann (cf. Osmer 2005:205, 222–225). In his own words: ‘A Trinitarian understanding of God is basic to Christian belief and practice’ (Osmer 2005:204).

According to Osmer:

In *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, Moltmann develops his ecclesiology in conjunction with a highly creative reworking of the traditional Reformed doctrine of the *munus triplex*, a way of looking at the ‘work’ or ‘mission’ of Christ in terms of the three fold office as prophet, priest, and king. Looking at Moltmann’s reworking of the *munus triplex* will provide a helpful link between his Christology in *The Way of Jesus Christ* and his fuller description of the church in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. An important part of Moltmann’s reappropriation of the *munus triplex* is his addition of two new dimensions to his description of Christ’s mission: Christ as transfigured humanity and Christ as friend. Thus we find correspondence between Christ’s work of redemption and congregations’ participation in this work. (p. 204)

Osmer continues by explaining how he wants to provide ‘(1) a christologically grounded, normative perspective on the Christopraxis of congregations; and (2) to offer an account of the core practices of congregations that embodies this Christopraxis’. In doing so he took up ‘each aspect of Christ’s mission of redemption, [and] I relate it to a corresponding dimension of congregational Christopraxis and the core practices associated with this dimension’. See Table 1.

Osmer (2005:225) describes each of the practices and comes up with the following (Table 2 summarises the preceding discussion):

The point of our participation in who God is and what God does, this participation is always open to being persecuted for

righteousness, because we are following the way in which God did it is Christ. In the next section I will argue for a continuing teaching and learning community where we accept this as a given and also learn to live with it as we seek ‘the kingdom and his righteousness’.

The meek seeks righteousness in a meek way. The ‘poor in spirit’ seeks righteousness for the ‘least’. In the spirit of dependence, we seek for the independence of the ‘least’. She who seeks in the spirit of the Christ, in a Christlike way, seeks for the reign of the King and for righteousness. In the sermon on the Mount, the Jesus of Matthew helps us understand that who we are is basic to why and how we do what we do – as the structure of the first 20 verses of Matthew 5 shows so clearly. Before any reference to the kind of fulfilment of the Law is at stake in the presence of the King, the disciples are reminded of who they are: You *are* and this new identity is basic to doing the right things in the right way and for the right reasons.

Formation for seeking

It is safe to assume that for whatever kind of ministry we need *preparation, equipping, training* – to name but a few possible translations for *katartizein* (Eph 4:12; cf. also Kok 2015 on *oikodomein*) – we need help to be able to help. This is not the time or place to explore as such our giftedness by God himself for our ministry. Within the field of Practical Theology, there is indeed a new emphasis on our dependence upon the work of the Spirit (cf. Montagu 2010:100; Osmer 2012:34; Reed, Osmer & Smucker 2015:101–150). Montagu (2010:111–112) in his commentary on Matthew 6:33 wrote: ‘Strive for (seek), the ruling desire, the ruling passion, should be hunger for God ...’. But it is not easy to put ‘God’s kingdom and his righteousness’ before all other seeking. Yet that is what Jesus teaches us in the Lord’s Prayer: ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done ... comes before anything else ... It means prioritize’. This alone is enough to make one confess: only by the help and power of the Holy Spirit! Montagu refers to a translation of the prayer that most probably relates this prayer to a baptismal liturgy and the Holy Spirit as God’s interim gift to the baptised. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Lordship of Christ is understood and adhered to. McDonald (2004:127) referred to this as a mark of discipleship: ‘A heart for Christ alone’.

Fowler (1991:157) himself wrote: ‘With a Trinitarian conception of God’s being and action that excludes no dimension of the universe, public Christians try to be alert for the signature of Spirit in the variety of publics with whom they interact’.

TABLE 1: Christopraxis and Congregational Christopraxis.

Christ’s Fivefold Office	Congregational Christopraxis
Prophetic	<i>Marturia</i>
Priestly	<i>Diakonia</i>
Transfigured	<i>Doxology</i>
Royal	<i>Didache</i>
Open fellowship	<i>Koinonia</i>

Source: Osmer, R.R., 2005, *The teaching ministry of congregations*, pp. 222. Westminster John-Knox Press, Louisville, KY

TABLE 2: Summary of Core Practices.

Congregational Christopraxis	Core Practices
<i>Marturia</i>	Preaching, testimony, evangelism
<i>Diakonia</i>	Eucharist, burden bearing, social outreach
<i>Doxology</i>	Sabbath keeping, praise, recreation
<i>Didache</i>	Catechesis, Exhortation, discernment
<i>Koinonia</i>	Baptism, affirmation of spiritual gifts, hospitality

Source: Osmer, R.R., 2005, *The teaching ministry of congregations*, pp. 225. Westminster John-Knox Press, Louisville, KY

To add one more proponent for this argument, Osmer (2012:52) in his Proposition number 5 refers to the 'Holy Spirit as primary actor'. He then notes two implications:

1. The first implication is that we should not view missional formation as a form of socialisation in which the congregation simply imposes certain habits and routines on its members ... This is because missional formation is a matter of inviting a congregation to become open to the Spirit, to enter a dynamic and creative process in which the Spirit forms the congregation Christomorphically and transforms its relationships in openness to the surrounding world.
2. A second practical implication is that missional formation is costly. It necessarily involves risk-taking, uncertainty and even failure. It is a matter of openness to the 'new thing' the Spirit is calling a congregation to do and be as it joins Christ's mission in its own time and place.

This being stated (we need the work and guidance of the Spirit), I would rather focus briefly on what we, under the influence of the Spirit, are called to do to prepare disciples for their role in public life and participation in seeking righteousness and doing justice. When we accept that getting involved in more than 'relieve programs' (which in itself is needed too) is to get involved in a public battle with forces like in capitalism, government, prejudice, racism and more – it is just common knowledge: We need help, preparation and guidance. A Facebook quote of Tillich (in a personal conversation with a friend, not documented) by a systematic theologian in the US says it well:

Everywhere, in every way possible, we as individuals must fight against the forces of destruction. First, in ourselves, then on a group level. We must work for anything that will bring people together – but in encounters where love and justice become creatively one. (Paul Tillich, 1961; Face Book Rachel Baard, March 01, 11:13 AM)

In several of his 'characterisations' of what is true of 'Public Church'-congregations, Fowler (1991) refers to this training. Number 3 of these 'characterisations' is: '*Public Church consciously prepares and supports members for vocation and witness in a pluralistic society*':

They do not believe that the only faithful way to relate to their variety of Christian and non-Christian neighbors is through proselytization, on the one hand, or the anathema of judgment, on the other. Such churches invite the stranger to life-transforming faith in Jesus Christ. They also recognize that other folk than Christians experience and recognize the presence of God in creation and history... Congregations of public church are committed to civility. Civility involves effective commitment to the kind of dialogue and engagement in public that allows persons to express deep convictions, to address controversial concerns, and to differ with others deeply, yet without having to decimate the opponent, control the arena, or withdraw from the encounter. Such civility requires confidence in the possibility of finding common ground underlying a multiplicity of discourses. (pp. 157–158)

In characteristic number 7 he rightly so refers to the fact that this training starts young. In his words (1991:161–162): '*Public*

Church shapes a pattern of Paideia for children, youth and adults that works toward the combining of Christian commitment with vocation in "Public" (author's own italics).

What is of critical importance in this calling to prepare disciples or members for public involvement is Fowler's founding (1991) that in the three congregations that participated in his empirical exploration concerning public church is that:

in a broad sense these data support the assumption that the ethos of public church congregations will be dominantly postconventional (i.e. Individuative-Reflective or beyond) ... Churches, when they are faithful, awaken and support people in claiming their giftedness and in finding ways to put it at the disposal of God's work in the world. Hindus have a phrase, *astikya buddhi*, which means roughly, 'alertness, or attentiveness of Transcendence.' Churches, when they are faithful, call and form gifted persons to be *astikya buddhi* – to be alert and attentive to God's *praxis* and their part in it. This awakening can often bring astounding things from ordinary people. (p. 169)

Evenly critical are insights from Klappenecker (2003:43–59) on the development of public responsibility in James William Fowler's *Theology and Psychology*. His reference (1991:48) description of faith is critical here. He quotes Fowler (1986:14–42) describing faith as:

- To have 'faith' means to invest one's heart in a person or thing of utmost importance.
- Faith is the process of constitutive-knowing underlying a person's composition and maintenance of a comprehensive frame (or frames) of meaning.
- Faith is the forming of images of, and relation to, that which exerts qualitatively different initiatives in our lives than those that occur in strictly human relations. (Fowler 1981:33)

I work with a theory that not developing postconventional faith in members is one of the most obvious shortcomings in the South African society and churches. Kim (2003:157–173) helps me make this point by discerning between conventional morality and postconventionality. I quote: 'The term *postconventional* was used originally by Lawrence Kohlberg, and more recently by scholars such as Carol, Gilligan and Jürgen Habermas ... Conventional morality equated the right or good with the maintenance of existing norms and values ... Firstly, the locus of the value and duties is external ... Second, the 'social world is still embedded in the lifeworld and reinforced by its certainties' (Quote from Habermas 1995:164). In a footnote, Kim (2003:172, note 39) wrote:

Kohlberg, who coined the term *postconventional*, defined the term as a move toward autonomous moral principles that have a validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or persons. Based on the Kantian idea of the autonomous self and the concept of justice, Kohlberg uses the term to describe the higher level toward which a mature person is moving. (Kohlberg & Gilligan 1971:1066–1067)

It is probably true that many members never outgrow 'synthetic-conventional' faith. What Firet (1986:182–186) has

called 'self-reliant spiritual functioning' human beings are a rare species. And when decision-making is almost exclusively determined by 'others', seeking righteousness becomes evenly rare. Then giving money to 'relieve programmes' is the less-expensive way to go for by congregations and individual Christians. And when the group who was supposed to function as a regulatory sensor is made up of such 'synthetic conventional' thinking, the church loses its public church character. It becomes an 'in-house affair' all over again.

Formation is relational

I would like to prompt further thinking on this by calling in two scholars, Brueggemann and Osmer.

Brueggemann (2016:9–38) argues for what one may call a sensitivity and understanding of relation realities. Formation should focus on a radical inclusivity to have public relevance. This requires an openness to the point of vulnerability and a willingness to be continually disappointed. He calls the nature and mission of God 'irreducibly, inscrutably relational' (p. 9). The book has a lot to do with a call to fidelity. 'Fidelity requires face-to-face relationships in which promises are kept and the common good is pursued' (Brueggemann 2016:22–23). Brueggemann (2016:6–7) declares his approach in the book as taking 'relationality as the tag-word (hash-mark?) for neighbourly fidelity that is situated in the narrative of emancipatory covenant-making'. As the first of three themes, he describes justice:

Justice of a distributive kind is the guarantee that every member of society can live in security, dignity and well-being. Such justice precludes practices by which the powerful can prey upon the vulnerable. (p. 7)

He does so with reference to Deuteronomy 16:19–20, NS Matthew 23:23. In discussing Psalm 72, and how it summons the King to justice, he wrote how justice:

takes on concrete social possibility and social expectation that has in purview the poor, the needy, and the weak, the one who face and experience oppression and violence. The king and the royal apparatus are presented as ally and advocate for those who suffer in the economy. (2016:43)

The well-being of the neighbourhood, inspired by the biblical texts, makes possible and even insists upon an alternative to the ideology of individualism that governs our society's practice and policy. This kind of community life returns us to the arc of God's gifts, mercy, justice and law. The covenant of God in the witness of biblical faith speaks now and demands that its interpreting community resist individualism, overcome commoditisation and thwart the rule of empire through a life of radical neighbour love ...

'The neighbor is not a detraction or an inconvenience but is the currency through which community with Yahweh is an offer' (Brueggemann 1998:194; 1999).

The role and place of prophetic preaching in the seeking of the 'Kingdom and His righteousness' can hardly be overestimated. Only two brief references to Brueggemann

(2012:136, 138–139) are done here: 'The first task of contemporary prophetic ministry is to empower and enable folk to *relinquish* a world that is passing from us'. He means that this first task meant 'to face the reality that the Jerusalem establishment, king and temple, no longer enjoyed unconditional guarantees and immunity from the vagaries of history' (with reference to Hs 1:6, 8). 'The second task of contemporary prophetic ministry is to enable and empower folk to receive a new world that is emerging before our very eyes that we confess to be a gift of God'. He refers to it as the 'ancient task of reception' (with reference to Is 65:18–22). In another publication, he proposed with reference to the world we live in: 'Our faith is not about pinning down moral certitudes. It is rather, about *openness to wonder and awe in glad praise*' (Brueggemann 2007:1). Brueggemann's (2012:5) statement concerning prophetic preaching being 'rooted in the alternative narrative of the God of Israel' just underlines the eschatological dimension of the Kingdom-seeking church. Several other authors argue for a return to a radical understanding of ourselves as disciples of Christ and an involvement in this world that might be costly (cf. McKnight 2014; Stassen 2012).

What Osmer wrote (2012:29–55) helps in our understanding of the task of formation. So much of this formation takes place within and through the attitude and character of everything that happens in the congregation and certainly not just in more formal preaching and teaching. Formation is helping a congregation to breathe well and healthy, holding on to and letting go of. This is a regular discipline on the journey of discipleship. It is an act of faith, or to live by faith (cf. Heb 10:38 with reference to LXX).

Osmer's chapter on formation in missional congregations applies to my whole argument here. Space does not permit any detail discussion of what he means. The chapter should not be read without taking his 2005 work on the Teaching Ministry of Congregations into account. His theological conceptualisation of formation is important here (2012:49):

1. God's mission – the *mission Dei* – is universal in scope, comprehending creation, redemption and the consummation of all creation.
2. God elects a particular community of people to give witness to the divine saving mission towards the whole of creation. Election is calling to service and witness, not primarily the reception of special blessings, benefits and privileges.
3. Congregations find their particular missions within God's mission. Each congregation has the task of discerning its own missional vocation, which is appropriate to its own time, place, circumstances, personnel and resources.
4. In discerning their missional vocation, congregations should pay attention to two foci: one focus is the gathering and upbuilding of the congregation; the other is the sending and self-giving of the congregation. Formation is most powerful when deep connections are created between these two foci.

5. The primary actor in spiritual formation is the Holy Spirit, as she builds up and equips the congregation for mission, and as she empowers the congregation to carry out its particular vocation.
6. Spiritual formation is the congregation's 'taking form' in the Spirit, what might be called *primary missional formation*. This includes the relationships, structures, programs and practices that emerge as a particular congregation lives into and out of its missional vocation. These, in turn, shape the spiritual lives of those who participate in this missional vocation, what might be called *secondary missional formation*.

This is what we continuously work on. I (Nel 2015:63–79; also cf. Root 2014a:87–115) have phrased it in a similar way. In whatever we do in ministry, we do so intentionally aware of the formational power of ministry. Within a spirit of discipleship (a spirit of learning how to live life faithful to the Christ), members then experience being built up for what they are called to give through to the world, not only collectively but also individually. The ministry of the ministers, however understood (cf. among others Hirsch & Catchim 2012), is to equip for ministry (cf. also Kok 2015): in the case of this article, to equip for the ministry of seeking and working for righteousness in the lives of individuals and within systems (cf. Forrester 2003:175–187 for an article on speaking truth to power).

Osmer (2012:38–41) is right when he says that leadership in developing missional churches (he often uses the concept 'upbuilding') 'is redefined around key tasks of formation for Christian discipleship':

1. Firstly, they emphasise their role in helping the congregation engage in Scripture.
2. The importance of shared leadership, allowing people to take risks, and, even to expect failure.
3. They have an important role in helping their congregation live in the tension between 'permission-giving' and congregational accountability and discernment.

He continues to say that:

An important practical implication of this point is the need to build deep connections between ministries of upbuilding and sending in formation. Perhaps the best examples of this in my interviews were mission groups and learning communities. (Osmer 2012:51–52)

Conclusion

I have given most of my life arguing for a long-term commitment to turn around unstable and declining congregations. The challenge is to develop a local faith community into a Kingdom-seeking movement of disciples, or as Van Aarde (2006:114) wrote, 'make the church one large school of Jesus followers'. Gittins (2008) is right in saying that:

it is highly unlikely that this will be a widespread or popular movement ... If true restoration is to happen (which is far from nostalgia-driven 'restorationism'), it is certainly necessary to activate the virtue of hope that characterizes true Christians

(1 Peter 3:15) ... Does the Church – as institution, as hierarchy, as patriarchal hegemony – have the will and the capacity to turn and be converted? (pp. 188–189)

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