

## Adult Learning in God's Kingdom

### Following Jesus

From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus called people to 'follow' him. He rarely if ever referred to himself as a 'leader', perhaps because he was extremely critical of the models of leadership on offer in his culture, whether that of the Jewish religious leaders or the Roman occupiers; but he did call 'followers', and the presence of these followers or 'disciples' is a prominent feature of his life and ministry as recorded in all four Gospels.

It is important to remember that the Gospel narratives are not intended simply as records of the things Jesus did and said but as theologically structured accounts in which the principles of arrangement and in many cases the very words chosen are intended to convey profound reflections on Jesus' life and ministry. So it is significant that in both Matthew and Mark the story of the call of the first disciples immediately follows the commencement of Jesus' ministry and his announcement that the 'kingdom of God has come near' (Matthew 4.17; Mark 1.14). The call of a group of disciples who would eventually 'fish for people' is clearly a key part of what we are probably justified in calling Jesus' long-term strategy.<sup>1</sup> John, who structures his Gospel entirely differently, nevertheless conveys the same point: immediately after the prologue of chapter 1, the Fourth Gospel focuses on Jesus' relationship with John the Baptist and then on the call of the first disciples. The account of his call of Peter and Andrew, Philip and Nathaniel leads into that of the first sign at the wedding at Cana, where Jesus 'revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him' (John 2.11).

*Learning from Jesus*

From the very beginning Jesus is accompanied in his ministry by a group of followers he has called to be with him. And there are indications that although the twelve named as apostles were all men, the wider discipleship group also included women (Matthew 27.55–56; Mark 15.40–41; Luke 8.1–3). The context in which their call to follow took place was Jesus' mission. Jesus was proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God and inviting people to respond in repentance and faith. The miracles he performed were signs of the kingdom's approach, in which sickness and disability were healed, sins were declared forgiven, evil cast out and outcasts restored to their community. The ministry of Jesus marked the inauguration of a new age in which the kingdom of God was present in the person of the King himself. But the presence of the kingdom was discerned only by faith, which typically meant that those who trusted in their own wisdom or righteousness missed the signs while the poor, needy and simple-hearted responded with gratitude.

The disciples' role was to accompany and assist Jesus in this mission: to 'be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message' (Mark 3.14). In the course of their life together as an informal band of helpers they were to learn from Jesus about the nature of the kingdom he had come to announce and the mission they were to undertake. Their 'sending out' was an integral part of their discipleship, their serving and learning from him a preparation for mission. Discipleship and ministry overlapped and reinforced one another in the context of a shared mission.

As Sylvia Wilkey Collinson has shown, we can learn a great deal by observing the methods Jesus used to help the disciples to learn what he expected of them.<sup>2</sup> The context in which they learned was a common life centred on Jesus as leader and teacher with the shared purpose of assisting him in his God-given mission. Within this context it is clear that Jesus' teaching methods consisted of a balance of formal instruction and informal learning. The Gospels record a number of memorable and pithy sayings that sum up aspects of Jesus' teaching (Matthew 6.19–24; 7.7–8; 16.24–26). We are shown Jesus giving them instruction about specific areas of life, such as prayer (Luke 11.1–13), money

(Matthew 6.24–34) and sexual ethics (Matthew 5.27–32; 19.1–12). We are told that after speaking to the crowd in parables he took his disciples aside and explained everything to them (Mark 4.33–34). And we are particularly told that after his resurrection he spent a considerable period with them teaching them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1.3).

But alongside the formal teaching, occasions for learning occurred spontaneously through questions, disputes, misunderstandings and demonstration. Even the practical task of organizing the crowds who flocked to Jesus had a learning dimension, as we see at the feeding of the 5,000 (Mark 6.35–36; 8.14–21) and when Jesus rebukes the disciples for turning away children and their carers (Mark 10.13–16). In Luke's account the formal teaching that includes the Lord's Prayer arises from a question provoked by Jesus' own example. An important lesson on attitudes to wealth arises from observing the contrast between people giving to the Temple treasury (Mark 12.41–44). New insights on exorcism arise from an instance of failure after previous successes (Mark 9.28–29). Opportunities for teaching might arise when one or more disciples asked advice about tricky situations (Mark 9.38–41; Matthew 17.24–27). The countercultural nature of the life Jesus invited them to share exposed them to frequent questioning, in particular from the guardians of the religious status quo, which required Jesus to explain the nature of their calling (Matthew 8.18–22; 9.10–17). And their common life threw up tensions whose resolution involved important lessons in the attitudes required by the kingdom (Mark 10.35–45).

Moreover, as Collinson suggests, it is likely that Jesus deliberately set out to prepare the disciples for their role in announcing the kingdom by arranging some important learning opportunities. The parable of the sower and those that follow prepare them for a mixed reception (Mark 4.1–32); the action of taking them to sea with a storm imminent and then calming the storm assures them of his power to protect them in danger (4.35–41); three major miracles demonstrate his power to heal and cast out evil spirits (5.1–43); and finally his rejection at Nazareth is an example of the rejection they are to expect in some places (6.1–6). 'Each of these lessons was imperative for the Twelve to learn if they were

to fulfil his mission and realistically be prepared to face the variety of responses to their message.<sup>3</sup> At a later stage, in the context of the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus is teaching them about the nature of life together in the kingdom of God, challenging their desire to direct the course of their own lives (Mark 8.31–38); their competitiveness (9.33–41); their social attitudes (10.2–16); their attitudes to wealth (10.17–31); their desire for power and position (10.35–45). All this learning took place in the course of discussion, question and answer, challenges from outsiders, comments and correction.

In summary, the Gospels reveal Jesus to have been a master of the action-reflection approach to learning. It is often remarked that his choice of his disciples defies the kind of rationale that makes sense in our contemporary culture. The men and women he gathered around him do not seem to have been particularly intelligent or gifted. Rather, the Gospels draw attention to the variety of their social backgrounds, their hesitancy and frequent failure to understand. They appear to be united only by their ‘ordinariness’, their response to Jesus’ call and their willingness to share the conditions of his mission. Together they formed a learning community, learning from Jesus in the context of a shared life in which formal instruction took place in the midst of shared experience, action and reflection. Collinson draws attention to this as the heart of Jesus’ approach, the key method by which he was able to facilitate the development of a genuine learning community among this mixed group of people: ‘The action-reflection method . . . provides a solution to every caring teacher’s problem, that of encouraging those not gifted academically to learn and operate successfully at their own level of giftedness.’<sup>4</sup>

### *Learning in the early church*

At the end of Matthew’s Gospel the evangelist records that Jesus instructed his followers to ‘make disciples’ of all nations, ‘baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you’, remembering that he promises to be with them at all times ‘to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28.19–20). Clearly Matthew

implies that the disciples’ pattern of life as a learning community gathered around Jesus is to continue as the Christian community grows by the addition of men and women who will themselves become disciples. This is precisely what we observe in Luke’s account of the earliest church in the book of Acts. The major difference is that Jesus is no longer present in person, so the task of discipling others and of discerning the direction for his discipleship community falls on those who are now usually called the ‘apostles’. Even so, the word ‘disciples’, which occurs 28 times in the book, continues to be the standard term for Christian believers. Significantly, the word is nearly always plural: ‘disciples’ are members of a community who learn together. Most significant of all, believers continue to be disciples of Jesus, not of the apostles: the risen Lord continues to be present as the focus of their devotion, even though the work of teaching devolves to others.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of their community life it is clear that formal teaching occupied an important place. The earliest believers ‘devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching’ (Acts 2.42). Paul frequently uses his letters to remind the members of his churches of the instructions he has given them (1 Corinthians 11.23–26; 15.1–7; 1 Thessalonians 4.1–2). The presence of the ‘household tables’, those instructions as to how Christian faith applies to believers in their roles as masters and slaves, husbands and wives, parents and children, as well as to their attitude to civil authorities (Colossians 3.18–4.1; Ephesians 5.21–6.9; 1 Peter 2.11–3.12), suggests that a commonly accepted pattern of Christian teaching soon developed. So too do fragments of what appear to be baptismal instruction (Romans 6.1–11; Colossians 3.5–11; 1 Peter 3.18–22). To strengthen the faithful through teaching, especially the instruction of recent converts, was an important element in the life of the churches, and one to which some were specifically called (Romans 12.7; Ephesians 4.11; Hebrews 5.12; 13.7; James 3.1).

This formal teaching took place in the context of a shared life in which mutual exhortation and correction were important elements (2 Corinthians 2.5–8; 1 Thessalonians 5.12–13; Hebrews 3.12–13). The book of Acts shows the early church learning

through action and reflection the demands of shared community: how to respond to persecution (Acts 4.23–31), divergences of wealth among themselves (4.32–37), deceit within the community (5.1–11) and division along ethnic lines (6.1–7). Just as Paul’s letters provide evidence of the formal teaching he gave his churches, so they show him responding to particular problems and providing guidance for the churches in specific situations. As Collinson summarizes, ‘The life of the community itself and its members became agents for discipling to take place.’<sup>6</sup>

There was, moreover, ‘no attempt to set up a school to carry on the task of teaching those who came into the faith or to train future leaders’. Partly this was due to circumstances: the early church quickly began to experience persecution and consequent dislocation; it was also growing at a rate that would have outstripped any possibility of forming an institution. In such a situation, the methods pioneered by Jesus were sufficient: the formation of small, family-like groups of believers committed to Jesus, capable of growing in love for one another and supporting one another in the face of opposition and persecution. In these groups, each learned to contribute their various gifts for the benefit of all, and teaching and learning took place in both formal and informal ways. As Collinson comments:

A schooling model would have severely limited the potential for growth within the faith communities. The discipling model had a capacity for encompassing a wide variety of people from different ethnic, cultural and educational backgrounds. It was not confined to buildings, curriculum or specific methods of teaching. It was ideally suited to the rapidly changing experience of those early communities.<sup>7</sup>

### *Transformation*

But what was the goal of discipleship now that the immediate purpose of participation in Jesus’ Galilean ministry no longer applied? What was to be the aspiration of those whose conversion did not mean leaving their homes or abandoning their jobs and families? On this point the New Testament epistles, especially those of Paul,

are clear: the goal is personal and corporate transformation into the image of Jesus. In the words of Jesus himself, disciples are to become ‘like the teacher’ (Matthew 10.24–25; Luke 6.40).

As I noted in the Introduction, it is remarkable that Paul, who was consumed by a zeal for the gospel and convinced of his own call to travel the Mediterranean world establishing churches in places not yet evangelized, should nowhere in his correspondence exhort the members of those churches to engage in personal evangelism. Instead his message is clear in every one of his letters: ‘be transformed’ (Romans 12.2). The pattern for that transformation was to be the character of Christ himself. To the Romans he writes that all who are called are ‘predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son’ (Romans 8.29). To the Galatians he writes of his deep concern, like the pain of childbirth, ‘until Christ is formed in you’ (Galatians 4.19). The power by which such a transformation is to be accomplished is that of the Holy Spirit at work within them. To the Galatians he writes that the qualities to which they should aspire are the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ (Galatians 5.22–23); and in Romans 8 he demonstrates that the Spirit is the means through which we are enabled to overcome the power of sin and so fulfil the righteous demands of the Law.

Finally, and perhaps most important, this transformation is corporate: it is not as individuals but as disciples together that we grow in our likeness to Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul contrasts the working of God’s Holy Spirit with the spirits they had encountered in their pagan past. The characteristic of the Holy Spirit is first that he acknowledges Jesus as Lord, and then that he leads us to unity in diversity, a common life in which all are valued, all contribute their gifts in service to one another and, ‘If one member suffers, all suffer together . . . ; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together’ (1 Corinthians 12.26). And in Ephesians, which if not written by Paul was written by someone close to him who knew his mind, the goal of discipleship is accomplished when ‘all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ . . . from whom the whole body . . . as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love’ (Ephesians 4.13,16).

Delving more deeply into Paul's writing, it is possible to discern something of the learning process through which he expected this transformation to take place. The letter to the Colossians is especially instructive. It opens with Paul's prayer for the Colossians' growth in the Christian life:

For this reason, since the day we heard of it [the response of the Christians at Colossae to the preaching of the gospel], we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1.9-10)

Reading Colossians is rather like listening to one side of a telephone call: it is generally agreed that Paul is responding to a group of false teachers, who had introduced at Colossae something they called a 'philosophy' (Colossians 2.8). It is far from clear what this 'philosophy' consisted of, since the only evidence we have is the arguments Paul uses to refute it in the letter itself.<sup>8</sup> But it appears that it offered an esoteric 'wisdom' capable of raising believers to a new level of Christian maturity. It was therefore important for Paul to remind the church of the true nature of such terms as 'knowledge' (in Greek *epignosis*), 'wisdom' (*sophia*) and 'understanding' (*synesis*).

As a student of the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul would have been well aware that the Hebrew word for 'to know', *yada*, is a relational concept. According to Rabbi Abraham Heschel:

In Hebrew *yada* means more than the possession of abstract concepts . . . It involves both an intellectual and an emotional act. An analysis of the usage of the verb in biblical Hebrew leads to the conclusion that it often, though not always, denotes an act involving concern, inner engagement, dedication or attachment to a person.<sup>9</sup>

In the next section I will explore the importance of our relationships with God and one another as a vital element in all human

life. The point to be made here is that in the Bible, 'knowing' takes place in the context of relationships. It is not abstract and objective but related to valuing and loving.

Accordingly, in the passage above, Paul rebukes the Colossians for their erroneous understanding of what it means to 'know' God. First, he reminds them that 'knowledge', 'wisdom' and 'understanding' are centred on and derived from God himself. Knowledge is knowledge of God's will, and understanding is 'spiritual' (*pneumatikos*), derived from the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> Second, these qualities are practical: knowledge, wisdom and understanding issue in lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work. The words 'so that' express an outcome: genuine knowledge of God's will is bound to result in lives of a certain quality. But they also express a purpose: the point of knowing God's will is obedience and changed lives.

Third, it is possible to discern a cycle at work in these verses. Paul assumes that by responding to what they know of God's will in lives worthy of him, his readers will thereby gain further knowledge. Not only does right knowledge lead to right action, right action leads to deeper knowledge.<sup>11</sup> It would be anachronistic to claim that Paul is pointing to what has become known as the 'learning cycle' or making a claim for the importance of praxis, or reflected action, but it would appear that, like Jesus, he expected his converts to learn through a process of action and reflection; at the very least he expects knowledge of God to be acted upon if we wish to grow in wisdom and understanding.

At the centre of Christian learning lies 'Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2.2-3). This is because of Jesus' place in God's plan for his creation. As 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation' (1.15), Jesus is the one through whom the true nature not only of God but also of humanity is revealed.

He is the very centre and crown of the creation, because he is man as God from the beginning designed man to be . . . He is the embodiment of that purpose of God which underlies the

whole creation, and so he supplies the principle of coherence and meaning in the universe.<sup>12</sup>

Today we are so used to living in a pluralist society, in which claims to ultimate truth are treated with suspicion and even ridicule, that it is perhaps necessary to remind ourselves of this important element of both Jewish and Christian tradition. At least 500 years before the birth of Christ, and in the view of many scholars considerably earlier, the Jewish people were claiming that the tribal god of their relatively insignificant state was the creator and ruler of the entire universe, the one to whom every people and their gods would have to give account. The early Christians aroused the hostility of the Roman Empire by claiming that Jesus and not the Emperor was 'Lord'. And towards the end of the first century the writer of John's Gospel made perhaps the most astonishing claim of all. In the Stoic philosophy dominant in his time, the *logos* or 'Word' was the rational principle through which the world had been made and by which human beings were enabled to understand it. John's prologue insists that the pre-existent and incarnate Jesus *is* that rational principle, the ultimate source of all truth (John 1.1-18).

So Paul warns the Colossians against 'human tradition', which he characterizes as 'empty deceit', whose source is the 'elemental spirits of the universe' (Colossians 2.8). Christ is the measure of all truth and wisdom; the riches we have in him are not to be measured by any earthly system of philosophy. Our goal is to understand the truth as we have it in Jesus himself, something that can only come about as we obediently live it out. He likens this process to a stripping off of the 'old self' and a putting on of the 'new self', 'which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator' (3.9-10). Christian discipleship, in other words, involves a transformation of identity, which comes about as we live from a centre in Christ rather than in our old self.

### *Practical wisdom*

Paul's vision of discipleship is further filled out in the letter to the Philippians. Here again Paul is looking for transformed lives with love at the centre:

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1.9-11)

Once again, love and knowledge, intellectual understanding and quality of life are held together. Neither will grow without the other: understanding is an outcome of love and love requires insight in order to determine what is best. The measure of both love and knowledge is Jesus himself. In chapter 2, Paul draws on what was perhaps an early hymn describing the way Jesus 'emptied himself' out of obedience to God the Father in order to become a slave to all (2.6-8). His purpose is to exhort the Philippians to serve each other in the same way, looking not to their own interests but to the interests of others. The 'mind' they should have is the same as that of Christ himself (2.4-5).

One of the distinctive characteristics of Philippians is the frequent use of the Greek verb *phronein*, the verb form linked with the noun *phronesis* or 'practical wisdom'. As Marianne Meye Thompson points out, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle had spoken of *sophia*, *synesis* and *phronesis* as the three highest virtues.<sup>13</sup> For Aristotle, *phronesis* was a wisdom that goes beyond the purely intellectual. According to Gordon Fee, 'it has to do with having or developing a certain "mind-set", including attitudes and dispositions.'<sup>14</sup> Stephen Fowl explains it as a form of practical moral judgement in which thinking, feeling and acting are united.<sup>15</sup> In 4.10, Paul rejoices that the Philippians' 'disposition' of concern for him and partnership in the gospel had taken the form of the financial gift he had received through their messenger Epaphroditus. By way of reply he assures them of his own 'disposition' of love and affection towards them (1.7) and then goes on to place this relationship in the context of the disposition all should hold in common (2.2), exemplified in Jesus Christ's sacrificial suffering for us (2.5-11). 'Let this be your pattern of thinking, acting and feeling, which was also displayed in Christ Jesus' is Fowl's translation of 2.5, leading into the hymn of Jesus' humiliation and exaltation.<sup>16</sup>

And yet there is more to *phronesis* than this uniting of intellect, feeling and action. Moral judgement requires right valuing. To be 'of one mind' involves agreement on what is good and what is best. So in 1.7, Paul writes to the Philippians about the value he places on them; in 1 Corinthians 4.6 he urges his readers not to value himself or Apollos more highly than each other; in Romans 12.3 he urges them not to value themselves more highly than they should; in 1 Corinthians 13 the idea that as a child he 'thought' like a child carries the overtones of childish values; and in Mark 8.33 and its parallel in Matthew 16.23 the Gospel writers have Jesus rebuking Peter because his values, and with them his thoughts and desires, are not in tune with God's. Outlining his response to Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection, Paul expresses his desire 'to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death' (Philippians 3.10). He may not yet have attained this, and others may disagree, but, he affirms, to set one's affections on this state of mind and heart is true Christian maturity (3.15).

By means of 'practical wisdom' Christians are enabled to emulate those qualities of Christ not through slavish imitation but as a guide to discerning the way Jesus calls them to live in any given situation. In Philippians, Paul gives four examples of the 'mind' or 'disposition' of Christ, two from his own life and one each from the life of Timothy and Epaphroditus. The Philippians should not be alarmed or upset by Paul's imprisonment or the possibility of his condemnation and death. In fact, he writes, his imprisonment is serving the gospel and, like Jesus, he is content to die if need be in God's service (1.12-14, 21-26). Timothy is 'genuinely concerned for your welfare' (2.20), while Epaphroditus was willing to risk his life in order to serve Paul (2.29). Finally, Paul sees all his earthly advantages and qualifications as mere rubbish beside the surpassing worth of knowing Christ in his suffering and resurrection (3.7-11).

And yet at the end of the day we do not achieve this conformity to Christ in our own power and strength or even our own wisdom: 'it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Philippians 2.13). The power

and discernment is that of God's Holy Spirit. This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer can write:

To be conformed to Christ is not an image to be striven after. It is not as though we had to imitate him as well as we could. We cannot transform ourselves into his image; it is rather the form of Christ which seeks to be formed in us, and to be manifested in us. We must be assimilated to the form of Christ in its entirety, the form of Christ incarnate, crucified and glorified.<sup>17</sup>

### *Discipleship in the New Testament*

What may we conclude from this brief exploration of the example of Jesus and the early church? First, that the goal of Christian discipleship was transformation. Far more than a change of religious allegiance, commitment to Christ involved a change of personal orientation: a step on the journey of *metanoia*, a change of mind and heart resulting in outwardly changed behaviour. Second, the knowledge that resources Christian growth was more than intellectual: it was rooted in right desiring or right valuing, which united thought, feeling and action. And it was intended to produce a practical outcome in the shape of lives dedicated to the worship of God, bearing good fruit and bringing glory to God. Moreover, such kingdom learning was self-reinforcing: knowledge acted upon led to further growth in knowledge. Conversely, to approach Christian learning as merely speculative, treating the knowledge gained from it as neutral and divorcing it from action, was to introduce a block to further learning.

The journey of discipleship was a shared journey, which took place in small groups, united by commitment to Christ, meeting together in homes and sharing a common life. Although formal instruction played an important role, the context was of informal learning. The ideal presented in the New Testament is of a community in which all contribute their gifts and experience; all seek to encourage one another and share the care of one another; all submit to the discipline of a shared life and the need for occasional admonition, rebuke and repentance. Moreover, all share in

discernment about the challenges of maintaining the community's well-being and corporate life together in the face of persecution or hostility, the attraction of other ways of life and the subtle influence of worldly ways of thinking inherited from the surrounding culture. This transformation, which is the goal of discipleship, is corporate rather than individual, visible in relationships within the community and between the community and those outside. The choice of such informal communities and the method of action and reflection appear to be the most advantageous context for the kind of growth in character and commitment that is the aim of Christian learning.

Finally, despite the lack of emphasis on personal evangelism, the context for discipleship in the early church, just as for the original disciples, was mission. As Graham Tomlin remarks, 'The true location of Christian behaviour is not in the doctrine of salvation but in the doctrine of mission.'<sup>18</sup> A few Christians were members of teams like Paul's, enduring for short or longer periods the hardships of mission, developing qualities of Christlikeness, as did Timothy and Epaphroditus, through responding to the challenges of missionary service.<sup>19</sup> The majority were members of local churches for whom inward growth in the fruits of the Holy Spirit were reflected in transformed relationships, creating communities of wholeness and healing through which rich and poor, women and men, slave and free were called and enabled to relate as brothers and sisters. In theological terms the purpose of these transformed communities was to make known the wisdom of God to the 'rulers and authorities in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 3.10). In practical terms it was to have an impact on the society of which they were a part through the transformation of family, working and civic life, in the process drawing others to the acknowledgement of Christ as Lord and the journey of discipleship.