

How Jesus ACTed In Mission

Three different strategies?

Jesus ministered to huge crowds and had vast number of people following Him and attending His events. We know of the crowds of 5000 and 4000 fed by Jesus. We also know those numbers record only the men, so the crowds were undoubtedly much larger. We read of people from all of the region flocking to hear Jesus and of the time when the crush of the crowd meant that Jesus got into a boat and floated on the lake so as to talk to them.

He also travelled a lot so as to engage with many people. While not all of His interactions were with large crowds, over time, His travelling meant that many had the opportunity to hear Him or be ministered to by Him.

But, at the same time, we know that Jesus invested heavily in a few men. They were with Him full-time whereas the crowds saw Him only at those big events and individuals saw Him only when He was in their town (unless they joined the crowds that followed Him.) Much more of Jesus' time was given to the few than was given to the crowds and that was increasingly true as His ministry progressed. The crowds characterised the earlier ministry but the few received His focus later.

So, what was Jesus' strategy? Was His modus operandus to reach large crowds or to work more intensively with a few?

We need to factor in a third aspect: periodically Jesus challenged the crowds and many deserted Him. What was that all about?

Turning people away

John 6 – Hard teaching

John 6 is perhaps the classic example of the crowds walking away from Jesus. It begins with a great crowd following Him (even to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee) because of the signs He had performed by healing the sick (6:1-2). There is again a reference to the great crowd in verse 3, which leads to Jesus testing Philip by asking how they were going to feed the people. Philip failed the test but the feeding happened anyway courtesy of a small boy's five loaves and two fish.

When the people saw this miracle, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world". Indeed, they were so impressed, they planned to make Him king by force (6:15).

That evening, returning across the lake in a storm, the disciples were approached by Jesus walking on the water. When He boarded the boat they instantly reached Capernaum. In the morning the crowd realised that Jesus had gone and they got into their boats, heading for Capernaum in search of Him. Clearly, Jesus was enormously popular.

When they found Him, the crowd asked what sounds like an innocent question: Rabbi, when did you get here?

But Jesus brushed that question aside and spoke directly to them about their motives. They were looking for Him, not because they recognised the signs He had performed but because he had fed them. Undoubtedly they had seen the miracles but the miracles were signs; they pointed to something else. They did not see them as signs and conclude that He was the Messiah. Note that in v.14 they had concluded that He was a Prophet, but not the Messiah. Their motivation was not to follow the Messiah but to enjoy the physical blessings. They were attracted by the miracles, the spectacle and the personal benefits. Jesus challenged them to recognise who He

was, referring to Himself as the Son of Man and saying that God had placed His seal of approval on Him (v.27).

They questioned what they had to do. Jesus said they had to believe (v.28-29). They asked for a sign, citing the provision of manna in the wilderness. They had just seen many signs including a parallel miraculous feeding!

When Jesus talked about bread of God that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (v.33) they asked for that bread. At that point Jesus said that He was the Bread of Life. Whoever came to Him would never go hungry and whoever believed in Him would never be thirsty (v.35).

But they had seen Him and not believed (v.36). They had seen Him and the signs He performed, they had followed Him, they had been ministered to by Him and still they did not believe in Him.

Likewise, in Matthew 11:20-24, Jesus condemned the people of the towns in which most of His miracles had been performed. They had seen, and enjoyed and been blessed by, the miracles but had not repented and so they faced judgement.

But there are some (presumably even some in that John 6 crowd) whom the Father had given to Jesus. They would come to Him and He would never drive them away (v.37). Jesus had come to do God's will, that is, to lose none of those the Father had given Him but to raise them up at the last day. Everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life and Jesus will raise them up at the last day (vv.38-40).

But, clearly, there is a distinction between the crowds motivated by self-interest and those the Father had given Jesus. No one could come to Jesus unless the Father had drawn them (v.44). But all those who do learn from God, do come to Jesus (v.45). Whoever believes has eternal life (v.47).

Jesus then spoke again of Himself as being the bread of life. Whoever eats this bread will live forever (vv.50-51). And this bread was His flesh (v.51).

The idea of eating His flesh troubled the Jews (v.52) but Jesus took it further. Those, and only those, who eat His flesh and drink His blood will have eternal life (vv.53-58).

Even to modern ears that sounds strange and even offensive. It requires a fuller explanation but we can assume that speaking of flesh and blood is a reference to the Cross. Being the life-giving bread of life is an image which is easy to understand. We eat to live. We need spiritual food to have eternal, spiritual life. The difficulty comes with the talk of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking His blood but maybe that is lessened if we think in terms of depending on the sacrifice made on the Cross. In this passage, the eating and drinking of verses 50 to 58 parallels "believing" in verses 28 to 40 (and indeed again in verses 60 to 69). It is challenging language but Jesus called these people to believe in Him and depend on His sacrifice.

Many of His disciples complained that this was hard teaching that could not be accepted. "Disciples" is used to describe the crowd, not simply the Twelve. On one level, they were the "school" following this rabbi but it is becoming apparent that that is true only on a very superficial level.

Jesus, aware of their grumbling, questioned how they would react if they saw Him ascending again to heaven (v.62). He was not just a man. He was the Son of God who had come from God. If they were offended by Him, what would be their reaction if they saw very clear evidence of His divinity? They were focused on the physical (which counts for nothing, v.63); Jesus offered them real life (spiritual life) but they did not believe. Only those enabled by the Father could come to Him (v.65).

The upshot of all this was that many “followers” no longer followed Him. The huge crowds at the beginning of the chapter dwindled to the point that Jesus asked even the Twelve if they also wanted to leave (v.67).

Simon Peter questioned who else they would follow if they turned away from Jesus. He had the words of eternal life. They believed and knew that He was the Holy One of God (vv.68-69). Jesus’ call for people to believe bore fruit in them even if it hadn’t in so many others. He had chosen them. They were amongst those given to Him by the Father (v.70) yet even amongst them, one was a devil (v.71).

The signs and the miracles were part of Jesus’ mission strategy. Jesus performed these for the crowds. He had a large crowd strategy that included the very things they found appealing. As a consequence of that part of His strategy, thousands were attracted to Him.

But that was not the end of His strategy. Jesus’ desire was not for large crowds; it was for people who would believe in Him. And so some filtering was required. In this instance, the filtering took the form of “hard teaching” which focused on the need for people not to simply enjoy the spectacle but to believe in Him. When the filter was applied, the crowds melted away and Jesus was left with only a few.

Other instances

Luke 14 – The cost of discipleship

This was a strategy Jesus used on more than one occasion. When the crowds were large, Jesus applied a filter. Luke 14:25-35 starts with the comment that large crowds were following Jesus. Jesus turned to them and, in no uncertain terms, spelled out the cost of discipleship.

Luke 14:26-27 *26 ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple. 27 And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

There is no alternative. Unless a person loves Jesus so much that his/her love for his/her own family looks like hatred in comparison and, indeed, hates his/her own life; and unless he/she takes up his/her cross and follows Jesus, he/she cannot be a disciple. That is hugely demanding. That is quite some filter.

Jesus then told the crowd to count the cost first. They should not assume to follow Him without knowing and agreeing to the cost.

As if that wasn’t enough, He then added another requirement. A person who does not give up everything he/she has cannot be a disciple of Jesus (v.33). Salt that loses its saltiness is thrown out (vv.34-35).

This passage does not say that some in those large crowds turned back as a result but it is hard to imagine that they all accepted that price and continued. What are the options?

- a. They didn’t understand and kept following anyway – but clearly not as true disciples.
- b. They did understand but thought that Jesus did not mean it, and kept following. That is true of many today.
- c. They did understand the significance of costly discipleship and chose not to continue.
- d. They did understand and agreed to pay that price because they believed in Jesus.

Only option d represents discipleship as Jesus defined it but crowds do not choose option d; only a few will.

There are other instances.

Luke 9 – Putting Jesus first

Luke 9:57-62 records instances of two people who came offering to follow Jesus and one whom Jesus invited to follow Him. The first offered but Jesus responded by spelling out the cost. Even animals have somewhere to sleep but Jesus didn't. Was this man up for that?

The man who was invited said he first wanted to go and bury his father. Jesus told him to let the dead bury the dead.

The third offered but wanted, first, to go and say good bye to his family. Jesus' response was, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

At first glance, Jesus' requirements seem tough to the point of being unreasonable. But maybe that reinforces for us that His filtering was demanding. People had to be willing to put Jesus ahead of everything else. These people wanted to be able to follow on their own terms and Jesus did not allow that. He specified the requirements.

We are not told but the presumption is that these men chose not to pay the price and so walked away from Jesus.

The rich young ruler - riches

The rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-25) was presumably quite sincere in wanting to know what he had to do to receive eternal life. He had been a diligent observer of the law since he had been a child.

But Jesus knew that it was only part of the law. He had obeyed the instructions about relating to other people but Jesus tellingly left out the commands about His relationship with God. To highlight that though, Jesus challenged the young man to give up his wealthy. Jesus apparently knew that he had a god that came before God. That proved to be the case. The young man walked away because he was very wealthy. And Jesus let Him walk away. That is the point of the filter.

His response prompted Jesus to make a much more general statement about the difficulty rich people have getting into the Kingdom. The eye of a needle acts as a filter.

The early church, the same strategy

Pentecost – repentance and baptism

On the day of Pentecost, the miraculous manifestations drew a large crowd. We do not know how many. What is apparent is that Peter, when preaching, did not pander to them. He was direct in accusing them of having killed God's Messiah.

Acts 2:23 This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

Acts 2:36 "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

This was not the recommended way to make friends and influence people! When they were "cut to the heart" and asked what they should do, Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." Adding, "And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38).

Forgiveness and the reception of the Holy Spirit. Clearly, this was good news. And Peter used many more words to warn them and to plead with them to save themselves from this corrupt generation. Peter wanted them to be saved but there was a requirement.

That was the filter. Would they repent and submit to baptism? Would they acknowledge they had killed the Son of God? Would they now choose to follow Him instead? Would they link themselves with this outlaw who had recently been executed? Not all did. We know about the three thousand who were baptised but the text makes it clear that only those who accepted his message were baptised. Obviously, others did not accept it.

Significantly, we next see those people in Christian community devoted to the Apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42). They were being disciplined.

The strategy that Jesus modelled was employed by the Apostles. Of course! They were followers of the Master.

There are various other accounts in Acts of the Apostles attracting a crowd but also explaining the cost of discipleship. Only some (and, in many cases, not many) chose faith in Jesus. For example, Paul often went first to the synagogue where he could guarantee an audience of Jews and proselytes. There, he would proclaim that Jesus was the promised Messiah. That was the filter. Many Jews could not accept that. Only some came to believe in Jesus. Frequently, Paul then turned his back on the synagogue, preaching instead to the Gentiles.

In Ephesus, for example, (Acts 19:8-10) Paul preached in the synagogue for three months, arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God. Some were obstinate, refused to believe and publicly maligned Paul. The synagogue was the crowd; the message was the filter. But note Paul's next step. He left them, taking the disciples with him. The next phase was daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus which lasted for about two years. The result was that all of the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

That is a clear indication of the impact of Paul's discipling of the believers. All of the Jews and Greeks in the province of Asia did not hear the gospel from Paul's mouth. On the contrary, at the very time that he stayed in one place for an extended period, the gospel spread widely. It would seem that it was those trained by these daily discussions who then travelled, preaching the message they had heard. The disciples were trained to be disciple-makers.

Recall Jesus strategy stated in Mark 3:14: Jesus called the disciples to be with Him that he might send them out. Paul used exactly the same method.

Discipleship is costly

These passages say a lot about the nature of Christian discipleship. Jesus set the bar very high and we should not water down what discipleship means, especially so as to attract crowds. If we seek a more popular message, we simply show that we have a different understanding than Jesus does. And we show ourselves to be part of the self-interested crowd rather than disciples.

John Stott has commented:

Jesus never concealed the fact that his religion included a demand as well as an offer. Indeed, the demand was as total as the offer was free. His offer of salvation always brings with it the requirement that we obey him. He gave no encouragement at all to those who applied to become his disciples without thinking it through. He brought no pressure to bear on any enquirer. He sent irresponsible enthusiasts away with nothing. Luke tells us of three people who either volunteered, or were invited, to follow Jesus; but not one of them passed the Lord's tests. There was also the rich young ruler—an individual who was good, earnest and attractive in many ways, but who wanted eternal life on his own terms. He went away sad, with his wealth intact, but possessing neither eternal life nor Christ.

On another occasion, great crowds were following Jesus. Perhaps they were shouting out slogans of allegiance and giving an impressive outward display of their loyalty. But Jesus knew how superficial it all was. So he stopped and turned to speak to them, telling them a pointed parable in the form of a question:

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'

The Christian landscape is strewn with the wreckage of derelict, half-built towers—the ruins of those who began to build and were unable to finish. All too many people still ignore Christ's warning and undertake to follow him without first pausing to reflect on the cost of doing so. The result is the great scandal of so-called 'nominal Christianity'. In countries to which Christian civilization has spread, large numbers of people have covered themselves with a decent, but thin, veneer of Christianity. They have allowed themselves to become a little bit involved; enough to be respectable, but not enough to be uncomfortable. Their religion is a great, soft cushion. It protects them from the hard unpleasantness of life, while changing its place and shape to suit their convenience. No wonder cynics complain of hypocrites in the church and dismiss religion as escapism.

The message of Jesus was very different. He never lowered his standards or changed his conditions to make his call easier to accept. He asked his first disciples, and he has asked every disciple since, to give him their thoughtful and total commitment. Nothing less than this will do.¹

Disciple-making

Understanding discipleship is fundamentally important but our interest here is disciple-making. What was Jesus' strategy? Was it a large crowd strategy or an individual investment strategy? Now, clearly, disciple-making is utterly dependent on a proper understanding of discipleship. We cannot successfully make disciples if we do not know what disciples look like and do. The questions raised by Jesus, about discipleship, must be answered by every disciple and every disciple-maker.

Nevertheless, let us address disciple-making.

Jesus' three-fold strategy – many filtered to few

Jesus' ministry to the many

Jesus ministered to large crowds. That is undeniable. But it is equally undeniable that those large crowds consisted of many who did not believe and had not repented. They followed more for the spectacle and the personal benefits. Their motivations were largely selfish. Jesus had not come to lead a crowd that had not repented and did not believe. He came to make disciples, whom he defined in very different terms. Disciples believe; disciples die to themselves; disciples love Jesus more than themselves and their possessions and well-being. Those who lose their lives find life.

Hence the filters.

¹ John Stott, *Basic Christianity*, New edition. (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 140–141.

But why then even spend this time with crowds when they were not what Jesus wanted? The crowds gave many people access to Jesus and His teaching. Some would respond. Without that initial exposure, how would they even know that a response was called for? And how would they know what they were responding to? The crowds contained the potential disciples and so gave Jesus access to those potential disciples. Without the crowds, Jesus would not (or, certainly, not so easily) have found those who would believe. The trick then was to discover those people within the crowds.

Hence the filters. Many are called but few are chosen (Matthew 22:14). The purpose of the many was to discover the few.

Jesus' focus on the few

Once they had been identified, Jesus could then invest in them in a much more personal and intensive way. The Twelve are the obvious example. Initially, Jesus invited them to "come and see" (John 1:39). They witnessed the early miracles (e.g. the turning of water into wine in John 2) and heard the teaching. Only later did Jesus challenge them to leave their boats or tax-collection tables, or whatever, and follow Him. They were challenged to move from observers to followers. That was a filter. Would they?

Having decided that they would, they entered a personal and intimate time of being with Jesus so as to be trained to become "fishers of people" (e.g. Matthew 4:19).

Mark 3:14-15 He appointed twelve that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.

The training method was being with Him. The objective was that they would become preachers of the gospel, setting people free from demonic oppression.

There are multiple biblical passages showing Jesus alone with the twelve, teaching them. Often they reveal Jesus reflecting with the twelve on what had been taught or seen that day.

But their being with Jesus was not limited to times alone. They were there while Jesus ministered and they saw how He did that. Furthermore, they were included in the ministry team and had opportunities to imitate Jesus. Jesus told them to feed the hungry crowd (Matthew 14:16; Mark 6:37; Luke 9:13) and when they failed He handed the bread and fish to them to distribute so that they would be crucial to this miracle. God brought to them a father with a demon-possessed son. The challenge was for them to drive out this demon just as they had seen Jesus do (Matthew 17:14-21). Again, they failed but failing was all part of the training. Jesus sent them out in pairs (Matthew 10; Luke 9:1-6) and their ministry was not trivial. They were to "proclaim this message: "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Heal those who are ill, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons" (Matthew 10:7-8).

This was intensive training.

Not just the Twelve

The Twelve are the obvious example but Jesus' training was not limited to them. In Luke 10 He sent out 72 (or 70?) in a very similar way. And they were successful (Luke 10:17)! They must have previously experienced enough of Jesus' example and teaching to know how to preach the Kingdom and drive out demons.

One strategy, three phases

All this to say that Jesus' method involved three phases. He:

1. **Attracted**
2. **Challenged**
3. **Trained**

He attracted thousands. He filtered them to find the few and He trained those few.

To use a fishing analogy:

1. Jesus cast the net wide, drawing in many fish.
2. He sorted those fish, keeping only the good ones.
3. He worked on the good fish, turning them into something even better.

At the risk of stretching it too far, phase one was about the bait; phase two was about the bite and phase three was about the betterment.

The attractiveness of the Kingdom

It may be worth noting too that the attracting was not simply entertainment. Certainly people found it entertaining. They loved it and they flocked after Him. But Jesus never wavered from revealing who He was, through His actions and words. The attracting was not disconnected from the purpose. He did not simply do magic tricks to draw a crowd and then twist the conversation to make it something spiritual. Everything Jesus did was a revelation of the Kingdom of God – God’s in-breaking, liberating power, God’s requirements of holiness, God’s love, etc.

In a broken world, the coming of the Kingdom is very appealing. Jesus demonstrated what God’s world should (and, one day, will again) look like. People responded to the healing and the deliverances and the love and the resonating truth that Jesus spoke. Even phase one was utterly Kingdom-focused. It was not as if the process got more spiritual. It simply got more personal. The question was whether those attracted to the Kingdom would believe in the King.

What does this mean for us?

So what does all this mean for us and our disciple-making? Was Jesus modelling something He expected His followers to imitate?

Should churches follow this model?

In our churches, we might question how closely we follow this example. Do we implement all three phases? And, if we do, do we do it like Jesus?

It is often stated that one of the major challenges the church faces is consumerism – the fact that many members see themselves as consumers who are looking to receive and expect to be able to pick and choose what suits them, just as they do in the supermarket. Consumerism reflects the attitude of the crowd who want to receive the blessings with few demands being put on them. In contrast, disciples are called to pass on all that they receive. Having received freely, disciples are to give freely. Indeed, there are many demands put on disciples.

Much of church life (rightly or wrongly) centres on Sunday worship. That is a large group activity. Admittedly, many churches are not large but Sunday morning worship tends to not include individualised training. The teaching is broadcast rather than being a person-to-person conversation. There is little opportunity for the exercise of individual’s ministries (beyond perhaps making music, reading the scriptures or arranging flowers). There is no accountability.

That is fine. Jesus also had a “crowd” strategy. The question is: Do we implement the other phases?

How do we filter by applying a challenge? Are there times, in our worship, when the demands are explicit and people are called to choose? Are we comfortable with people choosing to no longer be involved? Indeed, do we hope that some will walk away because we really want to work a lot more with those who want to go deeper and further?

If this sounds harsh, does that reveal how far we have drifted from Jesus' example? Jesus was not satisfied with unbelieving, unrepentant crowds. Indeed, He was critical of them, to their faces (Matthew 11:20-24).

It would seem obvious that many churches are so concerned to maintain, or grow, number that they would completely reject the idea of any filtering that would reduce those numbers. The idea of challenging people or calling them to repentance and faith would be seen as unloving and unchristian, which is ironic in the extreme if we remember who the founder of Christianity was.

Even if we agree that Jesus' way is worth following, how can we filter? Some churches do have highly developed filtering methods that must surely horrify Jesus. You can be considered a Christian only if you confirm to a tight set of rules. You must use only the King James Version of the Bible or you must believe in a literal 6-day creation or you must wear a certain style of clothing or have a certain haircut. Alternatively, you must be committed to environmental issues or, if you hold conservative moral and social views, you are not a Christian but a Pharisee. The list could go on. We are good at defining the boundaries.

Let us be committed to learning from our Teacher. Study of Jesus filtering reveals that He applied three main criteria: belief, repentance and obedience. In other words, essentially, Jesus was looking for conversion. Followers need to have repented of their sin and put their faith in Jesus as the Saviour, submitting to Him as their Lord. Those who would be trained, must have been born again.

The case of the original disciples illustrates this. We might question whether they were actually Christians. They were slow to understand and repeatedly let Jesus down. But maybe that is the point. The filtering wasn't designed to identify mature disciples but babies. The Twelve were not glowing examples but they had committed to following Jesus. They had turned their backs on their old lives and aligned themselves with Jesus, recognising Him, very early in the piece, to be the Messiah (e.g. John 1:41, 46).

In John 6, Jesus contrasted the crowd's fascination with the miracles and being fed, with their recognition of what those signs pointed to. He spoke repeatedly about belief – specifically belief in who He was: the bread of life, the Son of God who had come down from heaven, sent by the Father.

And He spoke forcefully of our need to “eat” that bread, which we have taken to mean our need to rely on Him and His sacrifice of Himself on the cross, if we are to have spiritual and eternal life.

In other words, one criterion is faith in Jesus as the God-sent Saviour of the world. The “crowd” in our worship services needs to be challenged to put their faith in Jesus without whom they are lost. Church membership is about more than enjoying the benefits of the community or the thrill of the worship event. Our people need to be challenged to look beyond the worship to the Christ Who is being worshipped, and beyond the loving community to the One who modelled love and commands that we love each other. And not only to see Who the signs are pointing to but to cast themselves on Him for their salvation.

Did the crowds that followed Jesus belong before they believed? No doubt they had a sense of being included. They were part of the crowd; Jesus spoke to them; they were healed and befriended. Yes, they belonged – in one sense.

But Jesus also made it very clear that, in another, and much more significant sense, they did not belong. There was a clear distinction, in John 6, between the crowd and “those the Father had given Jesus”, those who “come to Him”, those who believe and eat His flesh and blood, those who would receive eternal life. The crowd saw the miracles but only some saw what those signs pointed to.

While the crowd “belonged” at a rather superficial level (i.e. they were the crowd), someone belongs to Jesus and His church only when he/she believes. That is what Jesus made clear. That was the filtering. And that needs to be equally clear in our churches.

It is arguable that, if people experience the benefits of Christian community without being Christians, there is little motivation to become a Christian. What they see in our churches should lead them to crave the relationship with Jesus that they see others have. But crowd benefits with no filtering gives the illusion that no personal faith is required.

In Matthew 11:20-24, Jesus again distinguished those who saw the miracles from those who repented. The people of the towns in which Jesus had ministered (represented here by Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (Jesus’ own town)) had seen many miracles yet they had not repented. As a consequence, they would experience God’s judgement. In fact, their judgement would be worse than what Sodom (the epitome of sinfulness) would experience. Even pagan cities like Tyre and Sidon would have responded better if they had seen these miracles. Responding better is, specifically, repenting.

The call to repentance is another filter.

Actually, it is virtually the same filter. It makes no logical sense to claim belief in Jesus as one’s King but refuse to serve Him as King. Belief and repentance are inseparably linked. Anyone who puts his/her faith in Jesus as Saviour recognises his/her need of a Saviour, that is, his/her own sinfulness. And that person cannot claim love for Jesus but continue to defy Jesus’ teaching.

Romans 6:1-2 *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?*

Romans 6:15-16 *¹⁵ What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?*

There is no justification for ongoing sin. We will be either slaves to sin or slaves to Jesus. We must choose which. Belief requires repentance. They are two facets of the same thing.

Unfortunately, many in our churches, who claim to be Christians, live lives that are indistinguishable from the lives of non-Christians, except perhaps for a veneer of morality – a veneer that might actually hide some dark secrets.

Morality, of course, is good but repentance goes much deeper. The Christian does not simply avoid key sins. He/she lives for Jesus. It is a radically reoriented and transformed life. It is a lifestyle that has changed by 180 degrees. Instead of living for oneself, the disciple abandons self and lives for Jesus.

Romans 6:13 *Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.*

Church leaders need to have an expectation of repentance among believers. Faith is always revealed through changed lives. Attending worship as part of the crowd is not enough. Disciples lead those radically reoriented lives – reoriented towards serving Jesus. Those who claim to be Christians may need to be challenged about sin in their lives. Jesus demanded repentance.

The toughest filter, however, would seem to be Jesus’ insistence that there is no discipleship without dying to self, taking up one’s cross and following Him (Matthew 16:24-26; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 9:23-26). All three speak of utter submission to Jesus. Dying to self means forgetting our

oneself and one's own desires, ambitions, lusts etc. Taking up one's cross means voluntarily being willing to die – either literally or figuratively. Following Jesus means yielding one's own autonomy and giving Jesus sovereignty in our lives.

If Jesus required this, so must we. We cannot redefine discipleship eliminating its radical nature. Doing so tells the crowd that they are Christians because not much more is required of them. In other words, it is a refusal to follow Jesus in filtering.

Jesus defined disciples using only two concepts. In Matthew's version of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) Jesus commanded the disciples to make disciple by baptising them and by teaching them to obey all that He had commanded. Baptism speaks of having come to faith. The other concept that defines discipleship is obedience.

Obedience is a key aspect of submission to the lordship of Jesus.

Matthew 12:46-50 ⁴⁶ While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.'

⁴⁸ He replied to him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'

Our churches might have a very broad understanding of who is a Christian (part of the family) but Jesus' understanding was not even broad enough to include His natural family! It is those who do God's will who are Jesus family.

Love for Jesus is demonstrated by obedience (John 14:15, 21, 23-24)

Again, this is not really a third filter. Repentance is the change of lifestyle from disobedience to obedience. Faith, repentance and obedience are so closely linked that no one can be omitted. Jesus expressed these filters using different words but they all point one concept: being willing, because of faith in Jesus, to leave one's old life and serve Him.

Filtering requires that churches teach this sort of discipleship and expect it. And, where it is not present, making it clear that more is required and a person's salvation depends on it. Warm and welcoming Sunday worship is great but there must also be the calls to faith, repentance and obedience and the clarity that being part of the crowd is not sufficient.

Such filtering will require strong, biblical preaching about members' response to Jesus but it also requires practical expression. Churches need to express an expectation that disciples will be trained, and they need to provide that training. We will come to that in a moment. In terms of filtering, they need to make it clear that it is expected that people have responded in faith, repentance and submission before going too far in the training programme.

The Twelve were included in Jesus' training programme before committing their allegiance to Him but only at that "come and see" level that required no commitment. They spent time with Jesus, observing but they also went back to their fishing. It was only later that Jesus asked them to choose whether or not, on the basis of what they had seen, they would follow Him.

The reality is that only those who have been converted can grow in faith anyway. Non-Christians cannot behave like Christians. Non-Christians cannot be sanctified. "The mind set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7). That step of coming to faith and commitment to Jesus must be explicitly sought and expected in our churches.

And there still remains the third phase: the training of those who do respond to those calls. How that can happen is far too big a topic to tackle here. We must limit ourselves to saying that Jesus clearly modelled a huge commitment to the training and transformation of a handful of people. Our churches need clearly defined means of “teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you”. Or, as Paul expressed his own goal, into which he focused all his energy, “so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28-19).

We might also say that Jesus modelled a training programme that was:

1. Intentional
2. Relational
3. Focused on a few (not the crowds)
4. Systematic, leading the Twelve through various growth stages from not having faith to being mature disciples.
5. Practical. The training took place on-the-job, The disciples learned about mission and ministry in the context of mission and ministry.
6. Costly. Jesus invested heavily in these men.
7. Reproducible. By the end of the process, the disciples were ready to be commissioned to make another generation of disciples. Multiplication is the aim.

That list can act as a grid for assessing any church’s training process.

The main point is that, one way or another, all three phases need to be implemented in a church.

Churches also need to ask if their phases really mirror what Jesus did. For example, does the attractional phase reveal the Kingdom of God or is it entertainment? Is the filtering based on faith, repentance and obedience or on the culture or rules of the church? Is the training anything like what Jesus modelled?

Many practical questions arise for churches. For example, if members are asked to do more than the customary singing and praying in the worship service some will feel uncomfortable. Ask people to talk to the person next to them or get into groups for discussion or pray for each other and it is possible that many will resist it or grumble afterwards. And maybe that is reasonable. We might want our worship services to be places where outsiders can attend without feeling embarrassed. Maybe we want those on the fringe of the church to not be turned away. Worship services allow people to simply observe with no expectation of doing anything. That is appropriate for “crowd” events. In those contexts, people are served with few expectations on them.

However, it also reveals a problem: Should we not be able to expect those who claim to be Christians to act like Christians? Is it really unreasonable to ask Christians to pray for one another? Should that not be the norm? Is our job not to make disciples which will mean expecting greater and greater maturity and involvement? If we always ensure that people are comfortable are we not ignoring what Jesus modelled?

Should our worship services be “crowd” events where there are few demands on people? If that is what we decide, then we need to also accept the consequences of that.

- a. We are saying that we see these people as non-Christians
- b. Our worship services should therefore be essentially evangelistic – just as Jesus’ ministry to the crowds was. People were healed, befriended, delivered, taught in ways that revealed who Jesus was. Frequently, they were left asking “Who is this man?” The next question (either implicitly or explicitly) was their response to the invitation to follow Him.
- c. Crowd events cannot always be non-threatening. Jesus challenged the crowds. Jesus filtered the crowds.

- d. We must provide other contexts for the training of those who are converted. If there is little demand or accountability in our worship, then there must be growth opportunities where there is expectation and accountability.

Or, should our worship services be training events? Or, can they be both?

The danger of saying “both” is that we remain unsure what we are trying to achieve. On the other hand, Jesus’ crowd events were both, on two different levels. They were the low-demand type of event in which the crowds received and were blessed. But they were also training events in that the disciples were observing Jesus and learning from His example, and, sometimes were involved themselves under His supervision. For the crowds, they were low-demand; for the disciples they were ministry training.

1 Corinthians 14 (especially verses 26-40) indicate that Christian gatherings are to contain both elements. The Christians were to minister by bringing hymns, instruction, revelation, tongues, interpretation, prophecy, etc. They were not simply recipients but ministers. Through their ministry the church was to be edified (vv.3, 5, 19, 26). And there was to be some accountability in the use of their gifts: tongues require interpretation (vv.27-28), prophets must not be out of control and must submit to one another (vv.29-33).

But equally, it is assumed that there will be unbelievers and enquirers present (vv.23-25). They may well be convicted through the prophecies, recognising the presence of God. So again, as with Jesus’ ministry, the crowd events reveal the Kingdom of God. The attractiveness and power are in the Kingdom activity. They did not use non-spiritual activities to draw a crowd and then introduce the spiritual. They simply went about the business of the Kingdom, and that drew people.

That raises questions about church members who register their discomfort with any expectation that they will engage. Certainly, unbelievers and enquirers need to be able to observe without pressure but the believers should be going about the business of the Kingdom.

All of this implies a clear differentiation between Christians and non-Christians. Biblically there was real clarity about who was and who was not a Christian. We see that in this passage. We have already seen the stress Jesus put on the difference faith makes. And yet that makes many church members uncomfortable. We don’t want to talk about who is in and who is out. We seldom question whether a church member is actually a Christian. If the all-important filter of faith, repentance and obedience is not applied, we have no way of knowing who is in the crowd and who is in the few and so we blur them. We tend to assume that people are Christians but when we get little enthusiasm for further growth, we tone down any expectation of training those people for ministry.

How much different would it be if we reclaimed the language and importance of conversion? Certainly, Jesus knew the difference between a crowd and a handful of believers.

No doubt we could think of numerous other practical implications of Jesus method. It is intimately relevant to everything we do as churches.

Youth Ministry

There is often a tension in youth ministry. Should our programmes be tailored to attract non-Christians, often with a variety of games that might not appeal to Christian kids? Or should they be aimed at discipling Christian kids via more intensive Bible study and mentoring (and therefore possibly not appeal to non-Christian kids.) Or should it be something in between – primarily evangelistic – or all three?

Frequently, we suffer from not being sure what we are trying to achieve and therefore cannot know how to achieve it. We might hope to include everyone with a broad, rather than focused, programme, which raises the question of whether we do any aspect very effectively.

In New Zealand, youth programmes often centre around games, assuming that that is what is required to attract the kids. And, because we feel we ought to, we add in some Christian discussion or devotional content. This raises a number of issues:

1. Is it working?

Please do not answer that on the basis of the numbers coming and enjoying the games. Is it leading to the development of fully devoted followers of Christ?

2. Jesus didn't use games! In fact, the suggestion sounds absurd. Obviously He ministered in a different time and culture but it does remind us that Jesus used the Kingdom of God to attract people to the Kingdom of God. People saw God at work. They saw little previews of what the Kingdom will be like and were either drawn to that or repelled by it.

Games do not have that same quality. Instead, is it possible to build a Christian community of young people where it is their faith and lifestyles that are attractive? Can we grow leaders whose Christ-likeness is what draws young people to them?

Could games then become a much less important aspect of the group? Games are not evil. Christians should be able to have fun together. That in itself is a good witness but only a part of a much broader witness.

3. Is there intentional filtering? Are our young people confronted with the challenge, and the incredible blessings, of faith in Jesus and commitment to Him? There need to be intentionally evangelistic moments when a response is called for – when they make a decision.

That will not mean rejecting all who do not respond. Jesus continued ministering to crowds (although some chose to walk away from Him). There can still be the big events alongside the intentional discipling of the Christian kids that, presumably happens in a different context. In fact, the demarcation would be a constant reminder that there is a difference between being part of the crowd and one of the few.

The discipling of the Christian young people might include their leadership of the big events and their relating to the non-Christian kids, just as Jesus gave His disciples real ministry opportunities.

4. Filtering assumes that the gospel has been presented very clearly, so that the young people know what it is they are choosing or rejecting.
5. Again, real thought and prayer need to go into knowing how to develop Christian disciples. The training phase is crucial.
6. It is that training phase that will produce the godly young people who can model Kingdom values and lifestyle. In other words, the process is cyclic. There can be no attractional phase if the Kingdom is not manifest in the lives of some of the young people (or, at the very least, their leaders.)

I hope the intent of these reflections is clear. We could think about other aspects of church life using the same grid.

Small groups

What are we trying to achieve through our small groups? Do they practice each phase, or, alternatively, do different groups have a role within different phases? Are some definitely attractional while others focus on discipling? If so, is there an expectation that people will not stay in the attractional groups for ever (except perhaps as leaders)? They exist only to reach people and give them an opportunity to put their faith in Jesus. Those groups should not just hold onto people but, periodically, challenge them to greater commitment. If the group is intentionally evangelistic, it will include those filtering moments. If it is not intentionally evangelistic, why does

it exist? Jesus was not interested in crowds for the sake of crowds. The filtering revealed the people for whom He was looking.

Community Ministries and Fresh Expressions Of Church

Recent years have seen an explosion of interest in community ministries and in fresh expressions of church but it is possible that both suffer from the same weakness.

Churches have increasingly sought ways to serve their communities. Ministries have included everything from op shops, to medical centres, to serving in local schools to, to holding street parties, to providing programmes for children and families (and a thousand other ideas). The desire is for the church to engage and to build relationships in ways that are genuinely caring and costly. We have wanted to be seen to serve and, especially, to serve the vulnerable. In those ways, links have been built into communities and many people impacted by the church. Both the desire and the sacrifices made are admirable. We can easily see the similarities to Jesus' ministry of healing, deliverance, friendship, and compassion. Community ministries are ways of reaching a wide range of people, compassionately meeting real needs. It mirrors phase one of Jesus' strategy.

But after some time of doing that, I discovered many churches asking, "Why are we doing this? Why are we putting all of these resources into doing something that could be done equally well, or maybe better, by any secular organisation?"

Sometimes the question is prompted by the realisation that the church is not seeing any new people at worship. Whether or not that is the objective is a topic for another time but, at least, the church is recognising that it maybe has a mission that is greater than just meeting needs. The better question might be whether people have become Christians as a result of the ministry, or, at least moved closer to faith. Meeting needs is hugely important but the church wants to see more than that.

Community ministries are a phase one activity but are they accompanied by phases two and three? Most often, they are not and we feel we want to serve with no strings attached; we want to serve without any spiritual component and without any challenge. We feel we want to give without asking for any response. The outcome, of course, is that we then cater to people who want to receive without anything being asked of them.

Fresh expressions of church come in a vast array of forms. However, some may be like community ministries. They are ways of serving the public, possibly with some Christian content. They can reach many people who otherwise would not enter a church door and bridging the gap between the church and the community can be hugely encouraging for the Christians.

But, in some forms of fresh expression, there can be no challenge because of the fear of losing those connections if people reject the challenge. Again, fresh expressions can be brilliant phase one activities but suffer from being only phase one activities. Where this is true, they run the risk of being entertainment that does not make disciples. Even having some of the new contacts agree to help organise the programme can seem like a massive success. These people, or families, are becoming part of the life of the church. Yay! But have they believed in Jesus, repented and chosen to live a new life of obedience? And are they being trained in Christ-likeness, not just how to organise a craft activity or tell a story?

Summary

Churches tend towards the crowd. There is a desire to reach and minister to large numbers. The health of a church is often measured in terms of the number of people attending and we seek to make sure that people do not leave. Having fewer attendees threatens our self-esteem but also our budgets and, therefore, our security.

As has been pointed out, there is nothing wrong with crowds. Jesus ministered to crowds and that was part of His strategy.

The point, of course, is that it was only part of his strategy and churches are imperilled when it is the whole of their strategy – when there is not an equal commitment to filtering and training. In fact, it could be argued that Jesus showed a much greater commitment to the latter two aspects. Phase three was His objective. Phase one was simply preparatory, or exploratory. Phase two was the necessary bridge from one to three.

It might, therefore, benefit churches to ask “How can we grow mature disciples?” and work backwards from that. Making mature disciples requires that we identify those who are committed to following Jesus and hungry to grow. Those people are out there somewhere. They are in the crowd somewhere. Starting with a focus on training mature disciples means that we need the many so as to find the few. And the few are found via some filtering.

There are great dangers in having only a crowd strategy. Crowds are present for the wrong reasons – generally for the personal benefit gained. Crowds are not interested in paying a price. And we cannot disciple crowds. Discipling is an intensive and deep work that results in life-transformation. That requires focused personal relationships. Even Jesus focused on only twelve and even more so, on three of those twelve.

Consequently, churches that have a crowd mentality remain weak.

Jesus knew what He was doing. And what He did is a model we are expected to follow. This is the way of the Master. It is Him we follow.

Not surprisingly, this strategy is apparent in Jesus’ training of the disciples for mission. Matthew 10, Luke 9 and Luke 10 record times when the disciples (or, in Luke 10, a bigger group) were sent out. There are many similarities between the passages. They were sent out. Luke 10:1 says, “to every town and place where He [Jesus] was about to go”. They cast the net wide and they drew crowds by doing Kingdom work.

Matthew 10:7-8 ⁷ As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

But Jesus also taught very significant filtering. In each village, they were to find “some worthy person” (Matthew 10:11) and they were to stay in his house. All of the passages talk about offering a greeting of peace. But, if that is not received, they were to shake the sand off their feet and move on to someone else.

Many people were to be reached and would hear the message and experience the miracles but there was a discernment process that would reveal those who were receptive.

Likewise, listen to the following words.

Matthew 10:32-33 ³² “Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

Not everyone in the crowd is a Christian. There are criteria by which people are filtered. Matthew 10 is one of the passages in which Jesus taught His expectation (in fact, unnegotiable requirements) of disciples.

Matthew 10:37-39 ³⁷ “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of

me. ³⁹ Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

These passages do not say much about phase three: training. They were short-term mission trips which did not allow a lot of time for discipling. Perhaps the only hint is the instruction to stay in the home of the receptive person. That would have allowed much more time for discussion and teaching.

Additionally, though, Jesus was going to be visiting these same towns (at least, in Luke 10). His teaching would follow the people's response.

Matthew's version of the Great Commission reflects this same strategy. The disciples were to go to all nations. The net was to be spread so wide that it embraced every person on the earth. They were then to baptise them. Obviously, Jesus did not intend them to baptise every person in every nation. Baptism assumes that the gospel has been preached and the individual has come to faith in Jesus. Baptism is a crucial statement of irrevocable faith in Jesus and commitment to Him. It is a filter.

Then the disciples were to teach their disciples to obey everything Jesus had commanded.

The prescribed strategy was:

- Attract,
- Challenge,
- Train.

This strategy is not only what Jesus modelled but also what He told His followers to do. It is radically different from the normal church culture but let's do it. Let's do what Jesus did.

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