

“Why The Missional Movement Will Fail”

– Mike Breen

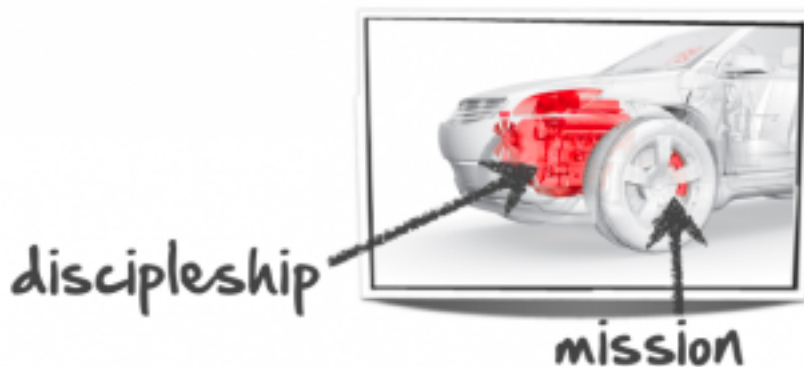


It’s time we start being brutally honest about the missional movement that has emerged in the last 10-15 years: Chances are better than not it’s going to fail.

That may seem cynical, but I’m being realistic. There is a reason so many movements in the Western church have failed in the past century: They are a car without an engine. A missional church or a missional community or a missional small group is the new car that everyone is talking about right now, but no matter how beautiful or shiny the vehicle, without an engine, it won’t go anywhere.

The Engine of the Church

So what is the engine of the church? Discipleship. I’ve said it many times: If you make disciples, you will always get the church. But if you try to build the church, you will rarely get disciples.



If you're good at making disciples, you'll get more leaders than you'll know what to do with. If you make disciples like Jesus made them, you'll see people come to faith who didn't know Him. If you disciple people well, you will always get the missional thing.

Always.

We took 30 days and examined the Twitter conversations happening. We discovered there are between 100-150 times as many people talking about mission as there are discipleship (to be clear, that's a 100:1). We are a group of people addicted to and obsessed with the work of the Kingdom, with little to no idea how to be with the King.

As Skye Jethani wrote in his Out of Ur post a little while back "Has Mission become an Idol?"

"Many church leaders unknowingly replace the transcendent vitality of a life with God for the ego satisfaction they derive from a life for God."

Look, I'm not criticizing the people who are passionate about missional – I am one of those people. I was one of the people pioneering Missional Communities in the 1980's and have been doing it ever since. This is my camp, my tribe, my people. **But it has to be said: God did not design us to do Kingdom mission outside of the scope of intentional, biblical discipleship and if we don't see that, we're fooling ourselves.**

Mission Is The Umbrella of Discipleship

Mission is under the umbrella of discipleship as it is one of the many things that Jesus taught his disciples to do well. But it wasn't done in a vacuum outside of knowing God and being shaped by that relationship, where a constant refinement of their character was happening alongside of their continued skill development (which included mission).

The truth about discipleship is that it's never hip and it's never in style – it's the call to come and die; a long obedience in the same direction. While the “missional” conversation is imbued with the energy and vitality that comes with kingdom work, it seems to be missing some of the hallmark reality that those of us who have lived it over time have come to expect: Mission is messy. It's humbling. There's often no glory in it. It's for the long haul. And it's completely unsustainable without discipleship.

This is the crux of it: **The reason the missional movement may fail is because most people/communities in the Western church are pretty bad at making disciples.** Without a plan for making disciples (and a plan that works), any missional thing you launch will be completely unsustainable.

Mission Is A War Zone

Think about it this way: Sending people out to do mission is to send them out to a war zone. Discipleship is not only the boot camp to train them for the front lines, but the hospital when they get wounded and the off-duty time they need to rest and recuperate. When we don't disciple people the way Jesus and the New Testament talked about, we are sending them out without armor, weapons or training. This is mass carnage waiting to happen. How can we be surprised that people burn out, quit and never want to return to the missional life (or the church)? How can we not expect people will feel used and abused?

There's a story from World War II where The Red (Russian) Army sent wave after wave of untrained, practically weaponless soldiers into the thick of the German front. They were slaughtered in droves. Why did they do this? Because they knew that eventually the German soldiers would run out of ammunition, creating an opportunity for the Red Army to send in their best soldiers to finish them off. The first wave of untrained soldiers were the best way of exhausting ammunition, leaving their enemy vulnerable.

While this isn't a perfect analogy, I sense this is a bit like the missional movement right now. We are sending bright-eyed civilians into the battle where the fighting is fiercest without the equipping they need, not just to survive, but to fight well and advance the Kingdom of their dad, the King.

Mission Devoid of Discipleship = Failure

The missional movement will fail because, by-and-large, we are having a discussion about mission devoid of discipleship. Unless we start having more discussion about discipleship and how we make missionaries out of disciples, this movement will stall and fade. Any discussion about mission must begin with discipleship. **If your church community is not yet competent at making disciples who can make disciples, please don't send your members out on mission until you have a growing sense of confidence in your ability to train, equip and disciple them.**

Here are some questions I have leaders I'm working with ask regularly:

Am I a disciple?

Do I know how to disciple people who can then disciple people who then disciple people, etc? (i.e. does my discipleship plan work?)

Does our discipleship plan naturally lead all disciples to become missionaries? (not just the elite, Delta-seal missional ninjas)

Why The Missional Movement Will Fail – Mike Breen (Pt 2)

There were a few questions that emerged in online conversation because of this article:

1. How am I defining disciple/discipleship?
2. Am I separating mission from discipleship? Aren't they part and parcel the same thing?
3. Why am I making this complicated? Can't we just do what Jesus says and stop talking about this stuff?
4. What should we do about it?

We've moved the goal posts

Defining a disciple is fairly easy, in my view. The Greek word *mathetes* is the word that scripture uses for “disciple” and it means learner. In other words, disciples are people who LEARN to be like Jesus and learn to do what Jesus could do. One great writer on discipleship put it this way: Discipleship is the process of becoming who Jesus would be if he were you.

A disciple is someone who, with increased intentionality and passing time, has a life and ministry that looks more and more like the life and ministry of Jesus. They increasingly have his heart and character and are able to do the types of things we see Jesus doing. We don't have to look far in the New Testament to see this happening. Just look at the life of the disciples/ apostles and the communities they led over time, they looked more and more like Jesus!

How did the church go from 120 people in an upper room to more than 50% of the Roman Empire in about 250 years? Simple. They had a way of reproducing the life of Jesus in disciples (in real, flesh-and-blood people) who were able to do the things we read Jesus doing in the Gospels.

Is that still the way we see Christians or have we moved the goal post? I have to wonder if we've changed our criteria to match the kind of fruit our communities are now producing. Many are now fine with Christians who show up to our churches, are generally nice people, do some quiet times, tithe and volunteer. Maybe they even have a little missional bent to them. These are all good things, but I don't think this is the kind of “fruit” Jesus was referring to when he talked about fruitfulness in John 15. **Would those kinds of people change the world like the early church did?**

Probably not.

In truth, I think we are pretty bad at making disciples in the Western church. Why? Because I look at the life of Jesus, the life of the disciples, the life of the early church and what they were able to produce with their fruit – and then I look at ours. When we read scripture and the texture of their lives and ministry, do we think that ours holds up to it? Even if we have a growing church, do the lives of the people we lead look like the lives of people we see in scripture? That's the goal post we should be going after.

I've heard Dallas Willard say that every church should be able to answer two questions: First, what is our plan for making disciples? Second, does our plan work? I believe most communities have a plan for discipleship. I'm not convinced many plans are working the way Jesus is hoping they will – and that's why we're in trouble.

I think the fruit of our lives will reveal the root of our lives. So if we are creating disciples who are far from the people we see in scripture as the rule and not the exception, we must ask ourselves why this is the case and how we can change that reality.

“I'll have a cheeseburger with no cheese, please.”

Undoubtedly, one of the key components to being a disciple is to care deeply about mission. In Christendom, it seemed that people thought of discipleship as only an “inner” reality that sought the transformation of the individual and mission was left on the sideline. As we have come to re-embrace the Missio Dei – the reality that the God of mission sent his Son as the great rescuer and we are to imitate him – I wonder if some within the “missional movement” are far more concerned with being missionaries/reformers than also seeking the transformation and wholeness that Christ is offering them personally.

What concerns me is that we have gone ditch to ditch. The reality is that both things are at work in being a disciple. The reality of living more fully in the Kingdom of God is that we are being back put together through God's grace, conforming more to the image of Jesus, having his heart and mind, and the overflow leads to Kingdom activity. That is why Jesus says, “Apart from me, you can do nothing.” **Apart from the active work of Jesus in our life we cannot produce Kingdom fruit.**

To engage in Kingdom mission without being equally attentive to our own personal transformation (through relationship with the King) is like asking for a cheeseburger with no cheese. It stops being the very thing we're asking for! By the same token, to be a “disciple” while not actively engaging in mission is asking for a cheeseburger with no burger. Both are necessary. To be a disciple is to be a missionary. Jesus made disciples and he sent them out as missionaries while discipling them.

If we look at it objectively, we see churches with discipling cultures (that focus mainly on the transformation of individual self) and churches with missional cultures (which focus on the transformation of the world/people around us) and we often see tensions between these two camps.

One has a clue, but no cause. The other has a cause, but no clue. High mission/low discipleship church cultures have issues with Biblical literacy, theological reflection and deficiencies in character and Creed that, in the end, sabotage the very mission they're about. Critics are rightly concerned that these kinds of churches are a hair's breath away from heresy, with people largely not experiencing the depth and transformation of heart and mind Jesus invites us into.

High discipleship/low mission church cultures have strength in the previous issues, but lack the adventurous spirit/ heart of compassion and Kingdom compulsion that so stirred the Father into action that he sent his only Son to a world he so loved. Their transformation isn't leading to the place God is taking them. Critics are rightly concerned that these kinds of churches will turn into Christian ghettos, creating people who lob "truth bombs" over their high, secure walls, creating an "us vs. them" mentality. In both, something is disastrously off.

As humans, we are creatures of overreaction, choosing polarities rather than living in tension. The truth is, a TRUE discipling culture (as Jesus envisioned it) must have both. It's not either/or, it's both/and. We mustn't choose between depth and breadth, but embrace the tension of having and shaping both in our communities.

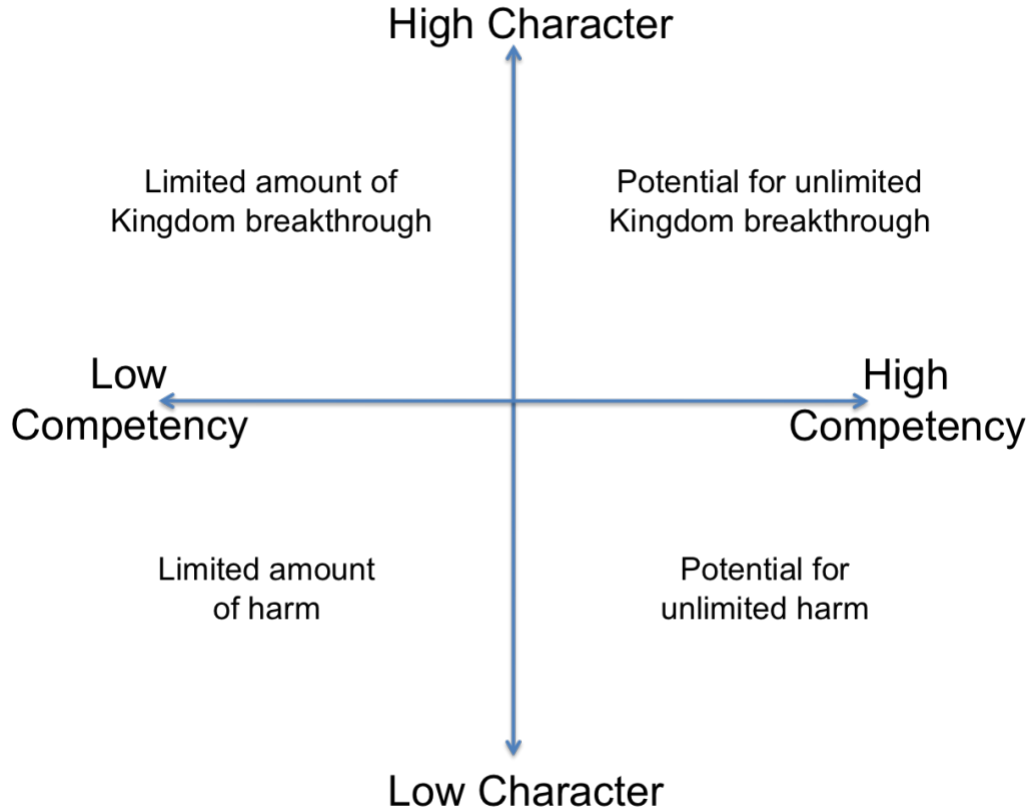
Character and Competency

At the end of the day, we can probably boil being a disciple down to two things: Character and Competency. We want the *character* that Jesus has and we want to be able to do the things that Jesus could do (*competency*). Discipleship is learning, over the course of our lives, to become people who have both.

So how we are forming/discipling the people in our communities? This is only helpful if we're truly honest.

- **Character:** Are their lives characterized by grace? Peace? Love? Transformation? Patience? Humility? A deep relationship with the Father? A love of the scriptures? Can they submit? Do they see the world through the eyes of the Kingdom and not the prevailing culture? (Obviously there's a lot more, but you get the idea.)
- **Competency:** Can they disciple people well who can then disciple others? Can they do mission well? Can they hear the voice of their Father and respond with action, with His authority and power? When they pray, do things happen as they did for Jesus? Can they read and teach scripture well? (Again, Jesus was able to do many things, this is but a short summary.)

These are Kingdom questions. These are Discipleship questions. Which is why I go back to the point that if you make disciples, you will always get the church, but if you make the church, you won't always get disciples. If the people in your community are discipling people who can answer "yes" to those questions, you're doing what Jesus asked you to do. You've sought first the Kingdom and the rest will be added. Look at it through this matrix:



Finally, discipleship is about faithfulness and reflection. We need to be faithful and obedient to the things Jesus has asked of us (when it comes to character and competency) and let him control outcomes. At the same time, we need to be reflective about whether we're good at the things Jesus could do. Jesus is calling us to be faithful, but he's also asking us to get better, in "his strength which so powerfully works through us," at the Kingdom things he could do. If we're not good at something, let's just not say, "It's OK, I'm faithful." I'd argue that faithfulness also requires us being honest and reflective about whether we're good at the things Jesus could do, seeking to become better. Faithfulness and reflection. It requires us living in tension. He wants both, and if we embrace both, we take the posture of a learner.