

# Just discipleship: what God has joined together...

**Stephen Rand**

Writing a regular column is like preaching every Sunday: occasionally you have that uneasy feeling that you might be repeating yourself! So I checked back (because, like every writer and preacher, I'm convinced that someone might remember what I said last time – a conviction that is, of course, completely based on hope rather than reality).

I found that indeed I have been repetitive: I have regularly quoted Micah 6:8: but just in case you've forgotten – here it is again: *He has showed you, O people, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* When I'm preaching on this passage, I always ask the question (rhetorical, of course – wouldn't it be terrible if someone answered back): Is this three activities –or three aspects of one activity?

The answer is key to our understanding of discipleship; the consistent adoption of the wrong answer in practice – as well, often, in theory –has crippled, almost fatally wounded, the church's mission in contemporary society. The church has been remarkably adept at sundering what God has joined together, giving the impression that there is a discipleship option that is about walking humbly with God, leaving justice and mercy as optional extras. But how can we walk with God and not share his concerns?

So here are some separations that need serious attention as church leaders model, mentor and teach discipleship – what it means to follow Jesus.

## **Justice and righteousness**

These two words exist in English; but there is only one word in Spanish and Welsh, for example. The impact of seeing '*Righteousness exalteth a nation*' in Gothic text on a Teddington station poster was in stark contrast to seeing '*justicia exalta a la nacion*' scrawled like graffiti across a shanty town shack in Lima, Peru. They both mean doing the right thing – and God expects his disciples to do the right thing in their private life and their public life; in their home, in their family, in their street, in their church, in their workplace, in their community, in their nation, in the world – God is equally concerned about all. There is not – and must not be – any suggestion that our faith is for private consumption only.

## **Church and society**

Of course church is distinct from society, and must always be wary of assimilating society's values rather than influencing and altering them, acting as salt and light in the community to edge it into line with God's kingdom values. But our model of discipleship must always be focused on equipping God's people to live effectively in society rather than become simply faithful attenders of church meetings and services.

## **Sacred and secular**

So which areas of life are outside God's sovereignty and concern? Why is it that so many African politicians were educated at mission schools, attend church on Sunday and embezzle state funds on Monday? For exactly the same reason that Christians in the UK can so easily put God in a box labelled 'to be opened only on Sundays' rather than grapple with what he has to say about medical ethics, the health service, the legal system, supermarkets, asylum-seekers and inner-city housing.

## **Worship and service**

We all know that worship is more than the songs we sing in a Sunday service. But do we make as much effort 'to prepare God's people for works of service' (Ephesians 4:12) as we do to prepare God's people for a service of worship? Why, when people ask us what our church is like, do we tell them about the Sunday service and not about the Wednesday

community action night? And where do we most want to see our disciples – in the worship group or the council chamber? How can I ‘lead worship’ that connects with God and at the same time encourage people to become ‘God-connecters’ in their street.

### **Clergy and laity**

So many people have come to me at Spring Harvest and Greenbelt to explain they are thinking of moving into ‘Christian work’. I recently received a communication informing that one of my former colleagues had been ‘called into ministry’ after 23 years with Tearfund – I suspected he had thought he was called into ministry 23 years earlier; and actually, from what I know of him, he probably thought that he had been called into ministry when he was a lawyer even before that! If the church is to be effective in fulfilling God’s mission, it has to be effective in finding new ways of fully integrating lay people into leadership within the church and releasing them to service outside the church.

### **Evangelism and social action**

Not so much even two blades of a pair of scissors as inseparable dimensions of what it means to love our neighbour. People who see the life-changing gospel in others will want to discover Jesus for themselves; if our message is only words it will struggle to be heard. Sometimes I feel we need less training in how to articulate what we believe and rather more in how to make friends and be friends – how to love people as God loves them. I’m more than ever convinced that social action without evangelism is inadequate – and evangelism without social action is ineffective. When people discover that Christians really do care, they start to care about Christianity.

### **Individual and church**

Discipleship is a corporate activity: we cannot serve God adequately by ourselves. Not every individual can take on the debt campaign, the persecuted church, the local council, global warming, prison-visiting, overseas mission, youth work and fair trade. But as a church we can make sure we affirm everyone in their specific focus and own all these issues as a body.

### **Male and female**

The church still drastically undermines its mission mandate by unbiblical practice – and still, sometimes, teaching – that marginalises women in a way that appals people outside the church and reduces the overall effectiveness of the church itself. Our discipleship of men and women must take this issue seriously, otherwise another generation will once again learn the bad habits of the past. And it is a matter of justice.

Here’s a final thought. We all need a big picture, a vision of hope to keep us going. I love this explanation of the word *hesed*, the mercy that Micah 6:8 exhorts us to love – let it inspire you to encourage discipleship that expresses the wholeness and breadth of God’s mission activity in the world:

**‘Being bound together in solidarity with both God and human beings, so that community is established between poor and rich, weak and strong, female and male, slave and free, alien and Israelite, and all care for one another in mutual respect and protection and sharing. *Hesed* binds people together as one in the bundle of life, so that God is not worshipped and obeyed apart from concern for one’s fellow human being.’ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *New International Bible Commentary***

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