

Discipleship: A Global Awakening Needing a Local Action

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In May 2015, the writer and Dr. Joseph Shao represented BSOP at the OCI (Overseas Council Institute) seminar in Hong Kong. The theme of the seminar was *Leadership in Theological Education*. The 3-day lecture series coupled with a workshop left a lingering issue in the hearts and minds of the 35 participants from about 16 seminaries/institutions. The issue is: how to integrate ‘discipleship’ into our theological education so that our curriculum reflects the teaching and training of our Lord Jesus Christ; since it appears that the Lord’s master plan of discipling the nations was to focus on a few faithful followers who were empowered as His witnesses to change their world through their transformed lives.

The term ‘discipleship’ has become a viral topic, especially these past 2 to 3 years, in the Philippines and even in overseas conferences, causing one faculty to throw a skeptical question: *Is this some kind of a trend, that would soon phase out?!* The answer is seen in the burgeoning of ‘discipleship’ congress here and there. The phenomenon challenges us to take another serious look at what the Spirit of God could be pointing us to see and hear in this fast-paced, information-fatigued generation!

Back to the Basics

It is said that one could only go farther as one is willing to look back to one’s origin. Thus, when we go back to the very Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ, we hear Him, saying: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28: 19-20) Some theologians argue that in the past, many church leaders and planters have focused on *going*; others point out that today, the *making of disciples* has become the new emphasis. Many preachers, pastors and parishioners have caught the missionary vision from our Lord’s powerful Great Commission. There is no doubt that God has accomplished great things through many Christian leaders and followers who have passionately fulfilled this Commission as God’s vision for their lives and organizations. The Haggai Institute is founded on this verse too, with the slogan: His last command, our first concern.

Many seminarians are challenged to dedicate their lives in serving our Lord as they heed God’s call to go to mission fields near and far. Once there, be it same culture or cross-cultural, they put to use their evangelistic skills and tools in sharing the Gospel, reaching the lost souls for Jesus. All kinds of outreach programs are scheduled and carried out to harvest souls for Jesus. Nonetheless, it is not easy to gather in these new crops, and even harder to keep the crops growing abundantly.

Discipleship is not a new word. It is familiar to churches all over the world where efforts are engaged to keep the believers nurtured and mature in church life. Indeed, God has used many godly people to train leaders, who in turn, would train others, following the principle in II Tim 2:2, “and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men.”

Bridging the Gap

Following the Great Commission mandate, many local and foreign churches have exhausted every effort and energy to fulfill the task of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. As of July 2014 the global population of mankind has hit the mark of 7.244 billion, and is projected to reach 7.325 billion in July 2015.¹ When we look into the statistics of world religions, taking into consideration the distribution of major religions in the world, it is noted that Christianity seems to occupy the highest

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percentage of believers (31% of world population, of which 50% are Catholic, 37% Protestant, 12% Orthodox, and 1% other). Nonetheless, when the percentage of Muslims (23%), Hindus (15%), and Buddhists (7%) are added, the alarming total figure of 45% surpasses the Christian population!

Dr. Carver Yu, President Emeritus of China Graduate School of Theology (the venue for the 2015 OCI meeting), quoted the sad statement of John Stott, “the church today is three thousand miles wide but one inch deep. Many are babes in Christ.” With heavy words Dr. Yu continued to share his own gloomy observation, “Despite the impressive growth in number, I see the evangelical church as going downhill in regard to the influence of the gospel in personal life, in public values, in social orientations... We have lots of religious consumers but few disciples of Christ. I am not sure we are training people who can go out and make disciples!” Hearing these heart-breaking words gave me a fresh awakening of perspective. Could ‘discipleship’ be the missing puzzle piece in our theological education?

In December 2013, Perry Shaw’s Objective-Based Teaching Learning (OBTL) came to enrich our faculty. The professors were challenged to take a hard look at themselves to change for the better. In fact, the phrase *less is more* is a constant reminder that we each design our own syllabus, following what the course demands with the Head-Hands-Heart triple goal in mind. With input from seasoned theological educators to jumpstart the assessment of our curricula from all angles, BSOP has been chosen (among 10 seminaries) to undergo stringent appraisal of how theological education in the classroom is translated into the household, church, market place and community. Interestingly, the input from our constituents such as pastors, alumni, and students, point to ‘discipleship’ as one of the top three needed courses and skills that every seminarian should learn and be equipped with for effective ministry in our present generation. Intriguingly, ‘discipleship’ is now a global awakening, yet it needs a local action to make real life application.

Becoming a Disciple-maker

After the OCI meeting, all the theologians are still wrestling with the issue of how to see ‘discipleship’ as part of theological training that would bring about friendship and ministry between teacher and student. Building comradeship could be a reciprocal stirring asset for both the learner and the learned one. Dr. Billie Hanks of Operation Multiplication differentiates between ‘discipleship’ and ‘disciple-making’ currently being used in church life as: *Discipleship* generally refers to traditional *Christian education*. *Disciple-Making* refers to the process of spiritual multiplication through one-to-one, life-to-life equipping relationships like Paul experienced with Timothy, Titus, and other growing believers.²

In God’s perfect time, the course Discipleship I & II is now incorporated into the curriculum at BSOP SY 2014-2015, as a reflection of humble submission to timely divine direction. Dr.

Hanks knows that for *disciple-making* to come alive once again in this chaotic time around the world, he needs to work with the seminaries hand-in-hand. God provided a small window for Dr. Hanks and Dr. Shao to meet between 2012 and 2013. Meanwhile, the discipleship congress has begun sounding out in the mega-churches as well as in some small gathering of leaders’ training camps. Seeing the urgency of bringing the churches in the Philippines toward Jesus’ model of disciple-making, Dr. Shao got in touch with Bishop Efraim Tendero to meet with Dr. Hanks. Bishop Tendero almost wanted to cancel the meeting as he had a plane to catch, but Dr. Shao insisted they must meet even for a cup of coffee. Bishop Tendero obliged and this ‘promised’ short meeting found Bishop Tendero embracing Dr. Hanks and his Operation Multiplication! Today, Bishop Tendero is officially the Director for Operation Multiplication (OM) throughout Asia alongside his responsibility as the General Secretary of World’s Evangelical Alliance (WEA) in New York. More significantly, BSOP has been tasked to translation all OM books into the Chinese. It takes courage and humble determination for the BSOP translation team to complete this strenuous yet serious task that is now in its final editing. Furthermore, it takes patient persuasion and a responsive organization for discipleship courses to be taught in class with practical application outside class. Nevertheless, there is no magic formula for integrating discipleship in theological training. Dr. Hanks keeps reiterating that all the materials could only account for 10% of disciple-making outcome. The main factor is maintaining one’s relationship with the Lord as one continues to pray for souls to share His Good News through those who exemplify an authentic walk alongside the new believers.

Personally, I would equate discipleship as living out Jesus’ likeness in our walk and talk with people around us. Our lips’ serving and teaching should be in line with our lives’ setting and showing. It is a timely reflection that “many teachers of theology encounter a deep separation between the practice of faith and life in the academy.”³ As teaching requires a high degree of consciousness, intentionality, and discernment, it is a high calling with big demands, amid an accelerated paced of life. However, the teaching profession does afford the luxury of introspective time that most jobs do not. Let us work together in bringing discipleship back into the core of theological training. Most of us are still groping and juggling to apply this global awakening of discipleship in our classroom. How can we produce pastors/theologians, who can preach, teach and train believers to be disciple-makers? Maybe the answer simply lies in the theologian himself—becoming a disciple-maker for Jesus too!

ENDNOTES:

¹ Accessed June 7, 2015, <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/#header>.

² Billie Hanks, Jr. with Randy Craig, *Becoming a Disciple-Maker: Leader’s Guide* (Salado, TX: International Evangelism Association, 2014), 3.

³ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Contemplation in the Midst of Chaos: Contesting the Maceration of the Theological Teacher,” in *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, eds. L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 52.