

A Vision for Congregational Discipleship

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Bill Mullet

To begin, let me ask a question. What is the goal of congregational discipleship?

Recently, I was traveling with a man who told me he no longer tells people, "I'm a Christian." Rather he says, "I'm a follower of Jesus." Many call themselves Christians, but that is very broad in its interpretation.

I believe the primary goal in congregational discipleship should be to make true followers of Jesus. By maintaining wholly committed lives, we enable each person to become more useful as a servant in the kingdom of Jesus.

Ultimately we want to hear Jesus say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." However, I don't want to overemphasize what we desire to hear at the end of our lives. Rather, we are called to focus on following and serving Jesus as His disciples today.

Matthew 28:19-20 says, *"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen."* The primary point Jesus was making in these verses was that we are to make disciples. Sometimes we emphasize the word *go* rather than the word *disciple*. Again, what is a disciple? A follower of Jesus.

I also want to look at John 8:31-32. *"Jesus said to the Jews that believed on Him: If you continue in my word, then are you my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."*

I don't believe there is a person alive that doesn't want to be free. As a believer, if you want true freedom, you have to become a disciple of His. To become a disciple of His, you follow Him.

First, you believe on Him; second, you continue in His Word. The third step is found in John 13:34-35.

Here Jesus said, *"A new commandment I give unto you, That you love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."* These two verses give the vision for congregational discipleship. We love one another, then the world will see that we're His disciples.

Why a Vision for Congregational Discipleship?

I would like to discuss three areas of this vision:

- Challenges in a Post-Christian Era
- Three Congregational Models
- Elements of the Third Model

Challenges in a Post-Christian Era

There are challenges we are facing today which affect us in ways we may not have been affected in the past. We are living in a time when I believe we could class society in America as post-Christian. For this reason, we the church need to focus more diligently on discipleship. We should attempt to clearly face these challenges in this post-Christian era.

First, I think we are we are challenged by an intolerant and violent society. The society in which we live has become more anti-Christian.

If you believe in scriptural principles, things that are fundamentally Christian, in this post-Christian era you may often be labeled a bigot.

You may also be considered intolerant. But true Christianity does not force its views on anyone. I believe that Christians may too often portray intolerance. Therefore we should be very careful to demonstrate love. Since we are living in an intolerant and violent society, we should not permit ourselves to give occasion for others to blame us for intolerance.

I believe that we're called to confront evil in society, but to do so without being combative or obnoxious. We are called to love even our enemies. The world is a different kingdom, so we cannot expect them to do as we do without a transformation of heart and mind.

We can expect the world to oppose us. This gives even more incentive for us to show love one to another, so it can see that we are disciples of Jesus. So, the first big challenge is living in a society that is intolerant and violent, especially to Christian views and ideas.

The second challenge is that of information and technology. Our time is one of constant change.

For example, information is available to us as never before. Last night, there were 56 cruise missiles launched into Syria. How do we know that? Technology. What is taking place in Columbus, Ohio, right now can be known around the world in the next couple of minutes.

Information, ideas, or agendas, whether true or false, can be promoted and spread around the world in a moment's time. This means as Christians we need more discernment than ever before. We also need each other more than ever before.

In fact, technology may be separating us from personal interaction and discipleship because of the way information flows so freely. As stated, communication is virtually instantaneous. We have mobile phones, Facebook, Twitter, news,

videos, music, movies, and games. And there is pornography anywhere, anytime.

The heart needs to be changed and protected. And we must be in close contact and connection with Jesus, our Rabbi! Without that connection, we will fail. We must stay connected to each other and the Rabbi.

The third challenge is in our jobs and businesses. Our Anabaptist communities have shifted from agriculture to trades and professions. These often require a greater level of education. This exposes us and especially our youth to more influence from the world and its ideology. The more that we become interconnected with unbelieving educators, employers, and employees, the more our faith will be challenged. We and our congregations need to be grounded in truth, faith, and apologetics.

One of my concerns is that we are weak in apologetics. Apologetics is simply the discipline of defending our faith and proving the truth of doctrines through a systematic argument and discourse of the Scriptures.

I was recently challenged with how the Anabaptists, using Scripture to make their defense, frustrated both the Catholics and the Protestants alike who were fighting against them.

We need to be grounded and rooted in the Word, in the doctrines of Christ in order to have solid apologetics as we face the world. As the world around us changes and the next generation shifts into these professions, we must be prepared to defend the Christian faith.

Finally, we have the challenge of legalization of iniquity. The word "iniquity" means moral decay or sinfulness. We have come to the place where society has accepted and even codified into law, issues that are in fundamental opposition to Biblical principles.

As a young child, my father came home one day and told us of a prominent businessman in town who had divorced his wife and was getting married to another lady from the town. It was shocking. Divorces were rare.

Today divorce and common law marriage are common. Abortion is common. Same sex marriage is common. Transgender issues have become a crisis. A male can get up in the morning and say, "You know what, I think I feel like a lady this morning. I think I'll use **that** restroom."

My point is, the further forward we move in time, the less these things will seem strange. Therefore, we need to recognize the need to clearly understand the Scripture and what the Bible teaches about these issues, so that we can defend truth. Just because something is legal does not mean that it's moral, that it's right, or that it's not sinful.

We must put forth effort to clearly understand God's Word and why He says what He says. Living in ignorance and isolation is not going to work. These things show us the need for discipleship.

Three Congregational Models

This brings us to the next point, congregational models.

I want to discuss some concepts that were developed over thirty years ago by missiologist and anthropologist Paul Herbert in his book, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*.

His ideas were then popularized by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch in their book, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, and in the book edited by Darrell Guder, *Missional Church*. He developed ideas he called "The Bounded Set" and "The Center Set."

Primarily what I want to discuss in these models is **focus**, because what we focus on is what eventually makes us. These models may not be

perfect and there may be some generalization in what I would like for us to understand. We need to understand that there can be good in all three of these models.

But first let me present two photos.



In the first photo we have a herd of cows.

What keeps that herd together?

Do you see any differences among the cows?

The cows have uniformity; they are same breed. And the fence in the foreground is what keeps the cows together.

Now, let's look at the next photo.

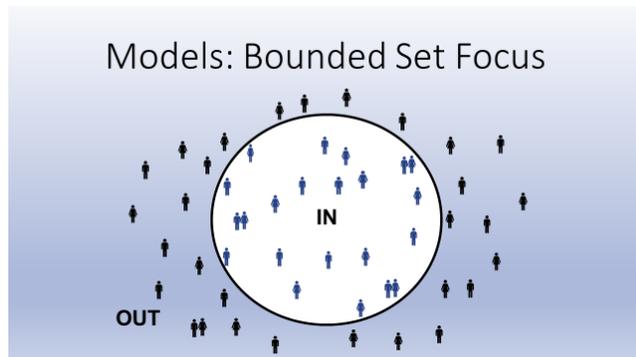


Here we see diversity. How many different animals are there? Some of them can fly. Some of them may not like each other. Some are tall while others are short. There is one common need that keeps this group of animals together — it's the water.

Why is water important? Water is life! There is a major focus point that keeps them together. There is no fence. It's the dry season in Africa, and they come to water. Somehow they know that without the water they will die! There is very little uniformity but because of their united focus, at the moment, they have unity. The question is: What happens when the lion comes?

Now let's look at the Congregational Models

So let's take a look at the first model called the **Bounded Set**. What is it that holds this group together? Or perhaps the question here is, where is the focus of this bonded set? In bounded sets, there are boundaries and regulations. That is what makes it the bounded set. In many such groups the boundaries often become the focus of the group.

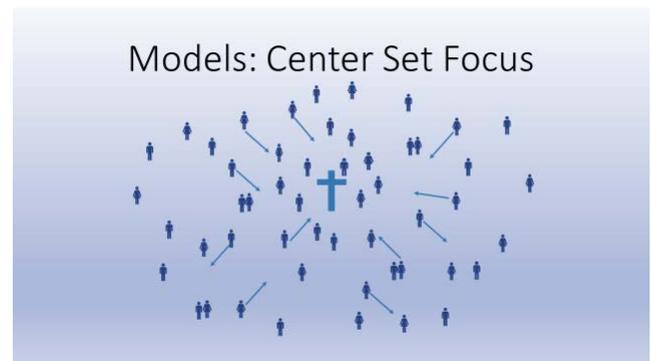


You are either inside the circle or outside the circle. The bounded set is empowered by the rules, and whenever there are rules, there are rulers. Pastors, elders, and leaders of the church often serve as the gatekeepers or rulers. They welcome those who belong, and admonish those who do not, enforcing change in order for them to make it inside.

These concepts may not always carry through completely. But let me ask this question. Is it possible that the very things that we set up to keep us on the straight and narrow path could hinder us from being and making followers of Jesus?

Next let's discuss the **Center Set** Model. In the center set, there is no boundary. There are no

walls; there is no fence. There is no dividing line between *us* and *them*, no rules and no guidelines to determine who is in and who is out.



Everyone is welcomed and accepted no matter what, and they automatically belong. While the center sets are not the most common way of doing church today, they are becoming so, and I believe they will be a predominant model in the future. People of all backgrounds and beliefs will be welcomed at the table to join the conversation.

The idea is to move closer to the center, to be closer to where Jesus is. However, in the center set, very little doctrine is being taught. It is believed that doctrine divides, but that's not true. The true doctrine of Christ unites.

In such an atmosphere, there is room for all people in all theologies, all backgrounds, all races (with which I do agree), and perhaps all creeds. Some move toward the center and some move away. The main focus is to be closer to Jesus Christ.

It's all about my relationship with Jesus. It's about my connection to Jesus. Believing what I do has no consequences for the body. Mostly this results in individualism.

The more I studied these models, the more I realized that both of them have flaws. They have some great concepts, but both of them seem to be a bit flawed.

This brings me to a third model. I have called this the **Center Community Set** model. This set is harder to illustrate in a graphic.



In Mathew 22:37-40 it says, *Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*

In this passage Jesus taught two major principles. Here I call it the center community set. Love the Lord Jesus first, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the center. Then the community—love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. Can any of us really do that?

The vision for congregational discipleship begins with these two principles: To love Jesus with all of our heart, soul, and mind, and each other as we love ourselves. Did Jesus make it a rule that you have to love Him with all your heart, soul, and mind?

Should we all go home and put into the doctrinal position of our churches that we require that you HAVE TO love Jesus with all your soul, all your mind, all your heart? Will that change anything? Not a thing. And while you're at it, we can also write that we are going to require you to love your neighbor as yourself.

These rules will not change our attitudes, who we are, or what we have. There's only one way

this can happen, and that is if the love of Christ so floods our hearts, our souls, and our minds, and we become empowered by his Spirit to love others as we love ourselves.

Elements of the Third Model

I would like to point to five practical elements (by no means all-inclusive) that help make up the center community set model that enables congregational discipleship.

I believe that these elements help to create the right kind of culture in a congregation. The bounded set creates a culture. The center set creates a culture as well. If we say our church doesn't have a culture, we are fooling ourselves. A culture will create itself even if we don't intend to create one. A culture can be developed through discipleship, and discipleship can be cultivated through the culture.

Peter got up at Pentecost and preached a powerful message. As an affiliation, is there a better place to look for direction than the very first day that the church was birthed? The following is a small portion of the message that Peter preached that day.

Acts 2:36-47 says, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call. And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

The next verses are the responses of the people, or the church, to that message. Here we will find five elements that enable discipleship and create the center community set model.

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

Element One:

They were Christ-centered.

They understood what Peter was saying in verse 36, "that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." If Jesus is Lord, then He is the center!

If we preach salvation by any other means than through Jesus Christ, we're on the wrong path. Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation; so also we must have our focus centered on Jesus Christ.

John 8:31-32 says, "*Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*"

Remember that Jesus is the only gospel; He's the only means of salvation. When you make a commitment to him and to his Word, that means He becomes the central focus of the Christian's life and of the church.

Element Two:

They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine.

Jesus is the central focus, then the apostles' doctrine. Where did the apostles get their doctrine? Today we have the Bible, especially the New Testament. I would venture to say that is the apostles' doctrine.

The Gospels are the teachings and doctrines of Jesus Himself. From that point on, the New Testament is the apostles' doctrine. I love the New Testament, which is the New Covenant. The Old Testament is great and was given for us as an example, but it is not salvation. It does, however, point to Jesus. The way we need to live is in the New Testament, in the grace of Jesus, in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and continuing in the apostles' doctrine, including the Pauline Epistles.

These people were committed. It says that they continued steadfastly, which I would interpret as being committed. They learned and taught from the teachings of the apostles. Now we have the New Testament, the Gospel teachings of Jesus, and the Epistles, which are the apostles' doctrine. Doctrine is sometimes considered divisive, but the apostles' doctrine does not divide; it unites. These men and women were united in obedience to the Lord Jesus and these doctrines.

Element Three:

They had economic community.

Acts 2:44-45 says, "*And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.*"

You may wonder if I am going to say we should start a Hutterite-like community.

No, I am not. It says they sold their possessions. It doesn't say they sold *all* their possessions.

Ananias and Sapphira sold their possessions. Ananias came to Peter who asked, "Did you sell your possessions for a given amount?" Ananias affirmed that they had and fell over dead. The same thing happened to Sapphira.

Peter responds in Acts 5:4, "*While it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.*"

The sin wasn't holding back the money; the sin was lying. They lied to the Holy Spirit and to Peter.

The point here in Acts seems to be sharing when there is a need. As Anabaptists we have a good heritage of this, of sharing with others who have needs. We don't want to lose that. This is something that shows our love for one another. The principle they tried to instill into the church that day was taken directly from the teachings of Jesus. As a church today, living in modern society, we must guard ourselves as congregations so we do not lose this element, the element of caring for each other. It's so easy to be critical of others and say things such as, "that person just wasn't very careful" or "he should have had better insurance," etc. We have all gotten it wrong at times.

I think it behooves us to understand that we need to be **inter**dependent, not **in**dependent. Coming back to the center set, where there is no community set included, everybody becomes more independent. When we have **inter**dependence, it fosters the concept of discipleship and of helping each other on multiple fronts.

Paul said it like this in Galatians 6:2, "*Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*" Maybe he wasn't talking about finances or economics, but I think it does apply.

But if you read just a couple of verses further to verse 5, he says, "*Every man shall bear his own burden.*" How do we reconcile the tension between these two verses? Paul is teaching a principle: If we have a brother or a sister in the congregation that has a burden, we help carry that burden for him. But he continues by saying

if you have a burden, buck up, face it, and carry your own burden.

In other words, we do not become entitled. We're not to think, "My brothers are going to take care of me." We are to look at how we can take care of our own needs and issues, while at the same time we are to look at the needs others may have, extending a helping hand. It should not be that we are the ones always looking for help. Rather we should be the ones looking at how to help the brother in need.

In Matthew 19:16-26, we have another passage that addresses this issue. Here a young man came to Jesus and said, "Master, what must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus responds by simply saying, "Keep the commandments." He said "Which ones?" And Jesus told him, "Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't bear false witness. Honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself." The young man responded by saying, "I have done all of these."

To which Jesus simply said, "Go sell what you have and give to the poor, and come and follow me." Than what happened? The young man went away very sad. Why did he leave sad? I believe Jesus told him this to show him he did **not** love his neighbor as he loved himself.

Jesus follows up by saying in Matthew 19:24, "*And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.*"

In the ancient Aramaic New Testament, it doesn't say "camel." Rather it uses the word "rope." A Jewish scholar pointed this out to me, then asked me the question, "So how do you get a rope through the eye of a needle?" He proceeded to explain that you take the rope apart thread by thread, and as you part it, one strand at a time can be put through the eye of the needle. In the same manner, a rich person must part his wealth and give to those in need.

By this you're showing that you love the Lord and your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus made it clear that the real demonstration of discipleship is found in John 13:34-35 where He said, *"A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."*

Element Four:

They had unity—unity of spirit and faith.

Acts 2:46 says, *"And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart."*

They were in one accord. They were in singleness of heart. Unity is not to be confused with uniformity. Remember the picture of the cows? They were uniform. They may have been in unity as well, but they were certainly uniform. But uniformity and unity are two distinct things.

When we read what Paul teaches in Roman 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Corinthians 12-14, what does he talk about? Not uniformity! He talks about diversity! He says we are all different. In fact he points to all of the differences, and he says if you bring all of these differences together, you can have wonderful, beautiful unity! These differences are actually needed. That is because each one brings their gift and strengths into the body which then synchronizes into beautiful harmony and unity.

If we can have what the Apostle Paul described in Scripture, that unity of faith and spirit binds us together. Where one has one gift, another has another gift, and love is present as taught in 1 Corinthians 13, that brings beauty to the congregation.

Paul uses the body as an example: the hands, the feet, the eyes, the ears, the nose, the mouth, etc. If you had to choose a body part to give up today, what would it be?

Would you sacrifice an arm? A hand, an eye, an ear, the nose, the mouth—what would you sacrifice? The body works in harmony and unity, but it's not uniform. An element of the body of Christ in the center community set is to have differences within the congregation, working together for the Center which is Jesus Christ, discipling one another in our diverse roles, which makes it beautiful.

Element Five:

They had fellowship and breaking of bread.

Acts 2:42 says, *"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart."*

They had fellowship and breaking bread and ate their food with gladness. Some may insist that this is communion. It may be included, but I believe it was more than that because they went from house to house. It also indicates they ate their meals with joy. ESV says, "They received their food with glad and generous hearts."

In order to have a vision for congregational discipleship, it's important to have opportunities to sit across the table from each other in fellowship. When we break bread, or eat and fellowship together, it's much more difficult to turn against one another.

Breaking bread together is a means of promoting good discipleship and working together to enhance the body of Christ. Partnership, participation, and social interaction are all part of fellowship. On that very first day of the church, these people realized that they were brethren; they truly loved each other. They enjoyed being together, so much that they went together from house to house and ate together. Apparently they had not all sold their houses.

In conclusion, let's be aware of the challenges we face. Let's choose the right congregational model so that we are Christ-centered. Continue steadfastly in the apostles' doctrines. Practice economic community, and enjoy fellowship and breaking of bread. By this people should see that we are disciples of Jesus Christ.

Could you agree with me that the early apostolic church demonstrated and created a beautiful pattern and vision for congregation discipleship?

John 13:35 says, *“By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”*

Bill Mullet
Sugarcreek, OH