“Teaching them to obey”:

A Missional Perspective on the Purpose of Obedience in Framing Discipleship as Identification with the Humanity of Jesus

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In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus sends out his disciples declaring, “Go,[[1]](#footnote-1) disciple all peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” In reflecting on this commissioning it is apparent, not only in Matthew, but also in the Johannine (20: 21-23) and Lucan (Acts 1: 4-8) commissioning accounts, that at the core of Jesus’ mission is the passing on of his mission to his disciples. For what purpose does Jesus send out his disciples? The answer seems obvious – to make disciples! However, this leaves part of the question unanswered.

When Jesus declares in John’s Gospel – “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (20:21),[[2]](#footnote-2) is Jesus sending them out only to fulfill the same missional task the Father sent him to do, or does he also intend to express the way in which he was sent – incarnationally, thereby stating he is sending them out to be human in the way he was human, in the way he demonstrated being human in relationship with God? It is clear in John’s Gospel that Jesus “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (1:14)[[3]](#footnote-3) in order to make God known to us (cf. 1:18, 14:9), to reveal to us what God is like. However, that is not all that Jesus revealed. In his incarnate humanity, he also demonstrated what human life in communion with God is like, what human life in the power of the Spirit is like, what it means to be human in faithfulness to God and submitted to the purposes of God. What is often neglected in understanding the nature of our discipleship and how it is to embrace mission, is an exploration of Christ’s humanity in relation to his fulfilling God’s mission. Christological studies often ask in what ways Jesus was aware of his divinity, however, in focusing on mission, we also need to come to understand how Jesus in his humanity participated in God’s mission. Paul makes clear in Philippians 2:6ff that though Jesus was in very nature God, he “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” Ray S. Anderson expresses that “incarnation is the embodiment of God as the true form of humanity.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Anderson further notes that in Jesus there is the revealing of real humanity, humanity in covenant relationship with God.[[5]](#footnote-5) Therefore, it seems that as important as it is to understand God’s mission in the world as a task, it is essential to understand that God’s mission embraces the re-creation or the restoration of humanity, evidenced through God taking on our humanity and dwelling among us. Since, humanity is being sent, as Jesus was sent by the Father, what needs to be considered is not only *what* Jesus came to do, but also, *how* or in what manner Jesus was sent. In doing so, we come to understand how we in our restored or being restored humanity are sent to participate with God in God’s redemptive mission in the world as missional disciples.

Thomas Finger recognizes this importance by asking, “for what does Christ save us?”[[6]](#footnote-6) He states, “In discussing how Jesus bore God’s judgment, how he bore our sins, and how he defeated the powers, we have been focusing on what he saves us *from*. . . . Yet, if the overall purpose of Christ’s work was bringing the kingdom of God, theology must focus at least as much on what he saves us *for.* How did Jesus bring us into the kingdom, the rule, and the presence of God?”[[7]](#footnote-7) In responding, Finger further notes, “theology must also perceive that Jesus saved us for communion with God, and that this can best be expressed in relational terms. Jesus bridges the alienation between God and humanity not only by breaking the dominion of those powers which separate them but by bringing humanity back to God, and by bringing God into human experience, by means of his own person.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Finger expresses the necessity of our being connected and identified with Jesus in his humanity, for us to be re-created as new human beings who live in relationship with God.

This then raises the practical and theological question whether a Christological anthropology is even possible; whether we as disciples of Jesus can even take on the humanity that Jesus demonstrated through his incarnation? Finger contends:

[M]any have argued that his “strenuous” teachings about forgiving, overflowing, nonviolent love rested on an eschatological mistake. They claim that because one could never practice Jesus’ “strenuous” ethics while earthly social institutions continued, Jesus must have expected history shortly to be abolished. And since Jesus and the earliest church were mistaken about the *eschaton’s* coming, their successors gradually filled out the picture of normative human behavior with standards from contemporary culture.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Nonetheless, Finger offers a different perspective,

Jesus nor the earliest church definitely expected sociohistorical existence to cease. The *eschaton* arrived as Jesus had said. It consisted not in the abolition of history, but in the defeat of all powers oppressing humankind and in the formation of a new community. This new community is indwelt by the Spirit, lives by agape, and proclaims the kerygma throughout creation. Nowhere does the New Testament advocate an anthropological norm for this way of life other than Jesus Christ.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Finger’s point of view is one that is deeply rooted in Anabaptist thought. Russell L. Huizing highlights the importance of imitating Jesus in the life of the disciple, stating, “the disciple of Jesus imitates him in a miraculous new birth, in death to sin, in proclamation of victory over evil, and in ruling under his authority.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Huizing, however expresses a much more deeper identification with Jesus than simply imitation – it is being in solidarity with Jesus. Citing J. Denny Weaver, Huizing relates “the disciple does not only know and act in the way that Jesus would act, but the disciple is actually present in the work of Jesus and Jesus is present in their work.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Huizing concludes emphasizing a perspective, in which disciples as new creation humanity are in solidarity with the humanity of the incarnate Jesus – “the Anabaptist tradition sought to emphasize an imitation of Christ that was of such a nature that to look at the believer was to look at an incarnation of the work and ministry of Christ himself.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

This, as is being argued, is the intent of Jesus in declaring “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20) in the Great Commission. The language of obedience is not merely a command to heed the teaching of Jesus, rather the focus on obedience expresses that we are to be obedient in the same way Jesus was obedient in his incarnational humanity in submission to his Father’s mission. Jesus expressing “teaching them to obey” is language that calls disciples to be integrally identified with him in the kind of humanity that he demonstrated through his life and ministry, because as W. A. Whitehouse has noted, “under the new covenant ‘obedient’ becomes almost a technical term for those who are joined to Christ.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The language of teaching obedience, then, is for the purpose of joining persons to Jesus in embodying new creation humanity, because it is in the new humanity we are being called to participate in God’s mission as Jesus participated in God’s mission. In essence, Jesus is expressing, “I am sending you as ones who are joined to me in mission to disciple others, so that they may embody the way I am human in relationship with God.” Jesus is sending out his disciples in the nature, not of his divinity, but that of his humanity – which, is the paradigm for our new humanity – just as Paul expresses in 2 Corinthians 5:17 – “[t]herefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.”

Learning obedience reveals that the disciples, and those who become disciples, are not just to know Jesus’ teachings, but more significantly, they are to know Jesus. In knowing Jesus they are to be in relationship with him, to be submitted to him, to be identified with him in the fullness of his humanity as he demonstrated a humanity that was fully submitted to his Father. It is in identification with Christ in his humanity that we fully participate in God’s mission in the world being “sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s reign.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Four areas emerge as significant for unpacking this meaning of *obedience* as our being integrally identified with Christ in his humanity as missional disciples. First, Jesus’ commission in Matthew is a covenantal statement connecting disciples to God and God’s purpose. Second, in light of the commission’s covenantal nature, *going*, *baptizing* and *teaching* are integral to expressing how disciples are to be identified with Jesus. Third, Jesus’ obedience to his Father as a human being sets the paradigm for our obedience to God. Finally, implications for missional discipleship are presented for shaping how we are called to live as ones who embrace a restored and re-humanized humanity in Christ in order to participate with God in God’s mission in the world.

**The Covenantal Nature of Jesus’ Missional Commission in Matthew’s Gospel**

The Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20 has often been expressed as a summary of Matthew’s Gospel or a key to its interpretation.[[16]](#footnote-16) Yet, David C. Sim presents an understanding that is more missional in character. Sim argues that the Great Commission “looks forward to the time of the Church much more than it looks back to the earlier parts of the Gospel. The all- powerful and all-authoritative risen Christ sends the disciples on a worldwide mission until the end of the age; that is the major point of this pericope.”[[17]](#footnote-17) He further iterates that “whatever elements are recalled from earlier parts of the Gospel, the emphasis in this final passage is clearly on their future activity as missionaries . . .”[[18]](#footnote-18) with the understanding that this sending embraces the Church, which was first promised in Matthew 16:17-19 – revealing that the Church has a mandate from Jesus to disciple, that it is a mission to all peoples, and that it places an emphasis on baptism and teaching the words of Jesus.[[19]](#footnote-19) Sim concludes,

The Great Commission in Matthew thus serves as a bridge between two significant eras, the time of the historical Jesus and the period of the risen Christ and his Church. It concludes in dramatic fashion one story and it also stands as an introduction to another story, which, for unknown reasons, the evangelist never records in detail. That second story concerns the work of the Christian church that in some ways continues the work initiated by the ‘historical Jesus’, but which in other ways involves new directives and directions by the risen Christ.[[20]](#footnote-20)

 This focus of the Great Commission being forward looking is further supported by the reflections of Christopher J. H. Wright in connecting this commission with God’s missional covenant throughout Scripture. He identifies that Jesus’ mandate to his disciples “sets the church also under the authority of the Abrahamic mission.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Wright expresses that the Great Commission “could be seen as a Christological mutation of the original Abrahamic commission – ‘Go . . . and be a blessing . . . and all the nations on earth will be blessed through you.’”[[22]](#footnote-22) What is of further significance is that this commissioning by Jesus expresses key similarities with covenant language between God and God’s people, and that now Jesus, as the risen Lord, is inaugurating a new covenant. This covenant language includes the self-introduction of God, imperative language and a promise of blessing, which is repeated in Jesus’ commissioning, in which he identifies himself as having all authority, commands them to make disciples, and promises to be with them always.[[23]](#footnote-23) By this understanding

[m]ission then, as articulated in the Great Commission, is the reflex of the new covenant. Mission is an unavoidable imperative founded on the *covenantal lordship* of Christ our King. Its task is to produce self-replicating communities of *covenantal obedience* to Christ among the nations. And it is sustained by the *covenantal promise* of the perduring presence of Christ among his followers.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The significance of covenant language is that it expresses identification. Scott J. Hafemann notes that the nature of covenant language reveals an integral connection, an integral relationship between God and his people.[[25]](#footnote-25) As Wright expounded, in Matthew 28:18, Jesus, “identifies himself as the one who now possesses all divine authority – he is the covenant Lord.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Furthermore, in focusing upon the bond or relationship that exists between God and his people, Hafemann clarifies that the consistent pattern expressed in covenantal understanding in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ commissioning, is being attributed to Jesus in relation with his disciples.

[T]he covenantal relationship in the Bible translates the divine concept of kingship in terms of fatherhood, the category of vassal subjects in terms of sonship, the exercise of sovereignty in terms of love, and the call for obedience in terms of faithfulness within a family. With no diminution of God’s absolute sovereignty, the biblical covenant thus becomes not only a political arrangement, but also a familial experience of belonging. Once again, this is the import of the covenant formula. Indeed, this same relationship can be expressed in terms of the relationship between a husband (God) and his wife (Israel), or between Christ and his bride, the church (Jer. 31:32; Hos. 2:16-20; Eph. 5:32).[[27]](#footnote-27)

Hafemann, further expresses the mutuality of relationship that is embraced by covenantal language between God and humanity. God’s actions in covenant express a “mutual faithfulness between the King/Father and his people/children.”[[28]](#footnote-28) This relationship of mutual faithfulness wherein “the covenant formula itself reveals that the primary provision and promise of the covenant relationship is knowing God himself. Knowing God is not a means to something else, but all of God’s other gifts are intended to bring his people into an ever-growing relationship with God himself.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

Therefore, this is significant for understanding the language of obedience, which Jesus expresses in the Great Commission. It is more than Jesus commanding disciples to heed his teaching; it is in using the language of obedience, in the context of covenant, which relates to something fundamentally more important – discipleship is to entail covenant relationship with Jesus. To be in covenant with Jesus is expressed as living in obedient submission to Jesus. It reveals that the disciples, and those who become disciples, are not just to know Jesus’ teachings, but rather, and more significantly, they are to know Jesus, to be in relationship with him, to be identified with him, as the one who has established the new covenant through his incarnate humanity. As David J. Bosch affirms, since “Jesus’ teaching . . . is a call for a concrete decision to follow him and to submit to God’s will”[[30]](#footnote-30) “what the disciples should ‘teach’ the new disciples . . . is to submit to the will of God as revealed in Jesus’ ministry and teaching.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

This identification with and dependence on Jesus is also expressed through a missional and covenantal understanding of election, for which Lesslie Newbigin has given fresh focus. He iterates that “those who are chosen to be bearers of a blessing are chosen for the sake of *all*”[[32]](#footnote-32) with the understanding that “election is for responsibility, not for privilege”[[33]](#footnote-33) having the calling of making known to all humanity, what God has revealed to them, God’s purpose for restoring all creation. Ultimately, this election through the people of Israel, culminates in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the embodiment and beginning of the good news of God’s reign for all peoples. Newbigin relates that Christ Jesus is the “one who bears the whole purpose of cosmic salvation in his own person and who is hailed as the beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased. He, the beloved Son, the chosen one, comes forth to announce the long-awaited reign of God is at hand.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

The significance of Christ’s election for God’s mission is also significant for discipleship and Christ’s missional commissioning. Expressed through the covenant language of Matthew 28:16-20 is the focus that God’s election is centered in Jesus Christ. Newbigin in drawing on the first chapter of Ephesians asserts that election is solely to be understood in relation to Christ Jesus – “[t]he choosing is ‘in Christ’ and not otherwise. There is no election apart from Christ. Christ is himself the chosen one, the beloved who was acclaimed as such at his baptism, but was in truth the beloved Son of the Father from the foundation of the world.”[[35]](#footnote-35) And so, Newbigin asserts that in Christ the early disciples, the early church, have been chosen.

It is all the action of the Father, who has freely chosen them in his beloved Son and assured them of the completion of what he has begun by giving them the Spirit – “the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it” (1:14). The whole action has its origin in the eternal being of the Triune God before the creation; it has its goal in the final unity of the whole creation in Christ; and meanwhile the secret of this cosmic plan, the foretaste of its completion, has been entrusted to these little communities of marginal people scattered through the towns and cities of Asia Minor.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Therefore, in the covenantal language of election, the whole mission of God is rooted and centered *in Christ Jesus*, who now in this post-Resurrection context, commissions his disciples to continue his mission of being sign, foretaste, and instrument of God’s present and coming reign. There is no election outside of Christ and there is no mission of God outside of Christ. For the disciples to be about discipling by *going, baptizing* and *teaching to obey*, they can only participate in God’s mission by being in Christ, by being in covenant relationship with Christ, being inextricably joined to Christ in his humanity.

Therefore, in virtue of Jesus using covenant language in declaring how the Church is sent to disciple, the actions of going, baptizing and teaching, as aspects of this missional covenant cannot be divided into separate stages or actions, as some do.[[37]](#footnote-37) Rather, these actions must be understood as an interconnected whole for living within the new covenant. In Jesus’ covenantal and missional commissioning, he is giving structure to this sending, as a sending that is in relationship with the Abrahamic covenant (looking back to the historic foundations of the beginning of God’s mission), and is now a new covenant (looking forward to God’s ongoing mission in the world through the church) that is grounded in the person and in the humanity of the risen Christ.

**The Interconnectedness of Going, Baptizing, and Teaching to Obey as a Call to be Integrally Identified with Jesus in His Incarnational Mission**

In understanding the Great Commission as the new missional covenant established by Jesus, the interconnected relationship between the participles of *going, baptizing* and *teaching* express key aspects of discipleship as covenantal identification with Jesus in his humanity.

***Going***

Jesus is not merely telling his disciples to go, or be about going, but to go in the manner in which he was sent. There is no going, in relation to our being sent, separate from Jesus, only a going that is in covenant with Jesus’ who was sent by the Father. How Jesus was sent by his Father is clearly expressed in John’s Gospel. John declares that the purpose for which God sent his Son Jesus into the world was not to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (cf. John 3:17). This sending motif is expressed throughout John’s Gospel. Jesus self identifies as having been sent (cf. John 8:42, 11:42), and John describes the nature of Jesus’ ministry as not being a matter of his own agenda, but that of his Father’s[[38]](#footnote-38) – and so, he fulfills the mission for which his Father sent him. Jesus’ sent-ness is finally expressed in Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples in John’s Gospel, wherein Jesus voices, “As the Father has sent me, so send I you” (John 20:21).

Calvin Mercer exploring this motif in John states “the primary thrust of the motif is that God sends Jesus into the world with a special commission.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Mercer points out that

[w]hen the act of sending includes a special commission, often the task to be performed is of a religious nature. The Baptist is sent to bear witness to the true light (1:6-7), Jesus is sent to bear witness to the true light (1:6-7), and the disciples and Paraclete are sent to perform tasks that continue the mission of Jesus (17:18; 15:26). These missions are often related to the revelation of the sender (3:34; 8:26) and the redemption of the ones to whom the agent is sent (3:17).[[40]](#footnote-40)

Mercer further explains that these emphases on sending, “accent the importance of God in his role as sender and the nature of Jesus as the one who is close to his Father and whose commission is to actualize God's purposes.”[[41]](#footnote-41) As such Jesus is the agent of his Father. Mercer expresses that “[t]he principle of agency . . . taught that the agent or deputy is a separate person who acts and speaks with the authority of the one who sent him.”[[42]](#footnote-42) As agent, Jesus does the will of his Father, not in an obedience which is coerced, rather, he aligns his will with his Father’s will so that it becomes his own will as he speaks and acts with the authority of his Father who sent him. What is demonstrated in this alignment of will between Father and Son is that in Jesus’ humanity he is expressing the eschatological reality that Jeremiah describes, as God’s word being written upon the hearts of God’s people (cf. Jeremiah 31:33).

In essence, Jesus demonstrates through his incarnational “going” a two-fold purpose – of making God known (John 1:18), and as Savior (cf. John 3:16-17) is the one through whom new creation takes place. The whole focus of John’s Gospel is that Jesus is the new Creator, as is evident from the structure of his Gospel. John’s correlation of the beginning of his gospel with Genesis 1 and the connecting at the end of his gospel in John 20:22 of the breathing of the Spirit upon his disciples with God breathing life into Adam in Genesis 2:7, clearly is meant to describe Jesus’ mission as bringing about the new creation. Jeanine K. Brown further describes that John depicts that re-creation has begun in Jesus, and adds that “John highlights Jesus himself and the community of his believers as the locus of re-creation in the time following Jesus’ death and resurrection” noting specifically that Jesus completes creation’s purpose (cf. John 4:34) and brings about creation’s renewal (cf. John 20:20-23).[[43]](#footnote-43)

 What is significant is that in Jesus we have both the embodiment and the fulfillment of new creation. Through his life and ministry Jesus embodied new humanity, revealing what being a human in relationship with God looks like – a new humanity that does not succumb to temptation, nor is complicit in sin (cf. Hebrews 4:15). Of fundamental importance, Jesus is the fulfillment of new creation, and that through his death and resurrection, in which he conquered sin and death, he became the creator of a new humanity.

 Therefore, understanding Jesus as the new creator is critical for comprehending what discipleship entails. Dallas Willard, in asking what it means to become a disciple of the incarnate Lord, states that Jesus “lives in the kingdom of God, and he applies that kingdom for the good of others and even makes it possible for them to enter it for themselves.”[[44]](#footnote-44) The import of this is pivotal for framing how discipleship is to be understood in light of Jesus’ incarnation. So, Willard writes,

as a disciple of Jesus I am with him, by choice and by grace, learning from him how to live in the kingdom of God. This is the crucial idea. That means . . . how to live within the range of God’s effective will, his life flowing through mine. Another important way of putting this is to say that I am learning from Jesus to live my life as he would live my life if he were I. I am not necessarily learning to do everything he did, but I am learning how to do everything I do in the manner that he did all that he did.[[45]](#footnote-45)

 Therefore, the purpose of Jesus’ being sent for the salvation and re-creation of humanity sheds fresh light for understanding Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples in Matthew 28:19-20, especially in correlation with Jesus’ invitation in Matthew 11:29 “take my yoke upon you and learn from me.” Jesus’ intent, as Matthew expresses, is more than sending the disciples to disciple others, rather, Jesus is commissioning his disciples – to be sent – to continue in God’s mission in identification with him – to participate in the same going with which he was sent, demonstrating God’s mission through a re-created humanity.

***Baptizing***

Jesus further expresses this identification with himself through the language of baptism. Cynthia Campbell conveys the significance of baptism by focusing on what it means to take on God’s Triune name as our baptismal identity, which uniquely expresses a diverse communitarian relationship among Father, Son and Spirit. The baptismal focus of the Great Commission is not simply an act initiating persons into the body of Christ as a step in the process of discipling, it is more than that. Baptism is an expression of our taking on a new identity which is integrally connected with the Trinitarian God. As we live in the world in this new identity, we are reframed as ones who are new creation human beings.[[46]](#footnote-46)

 George Beasley-Murray further accentuates the interconnectedness of *baptizing* in relation to *going* and *teaching* in Jesus’ missional commissioning. Beasley-Murray in exploring, both Greek and Semitic perspectives, notes the significance of the phrase, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” as conveying “the idea of appropriation, dedication, submission, [and] belonging.”[[47]](#footnote-47) He further iterates that baptism is for the sake of identifying a person for the role or the state of being in which they are to perform. For example in rabbinical literature, “heathen slaves on their entry into a Jewish house were compelled to receive a baptism . . . ‘in the name of slavery,’ i.e. to become slaves; similarly on their being set free they were to be immersed . . . ‘in the name of freedom.’”[[48]](#footnote-48) Likewise, then, being baptized in the name of the triune God “sets the baptized in a definite relation to God; the Father, Son and Holy Spirit become to the baptized what their name signifies”[[49]](#footnote-49) – meaning they become integrally identified with the Trinitarian community. Baptism then becomes the expression of the nature of new creation humanity as demonstrated by Jesus, so that baptism becomes “virtually entering into a relationship of belonging to the triune God.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

This interrelationship of baptism with new humanity and identification with God is in full alignment with Paul’s understanding of baptism, as expressed in Romans 6:3-14. The implication is clear – baptism identifies us with the reign of God,[[51]](#footnote-51) the resurrection life of Jesus, and the new humanity that Jesus demonstrated is aligned with the purposes of God. And in Christ, because we are identified with him in baptism, we live under the new covenant of grace that he established through the victory of his death and resurrection. Our obedience is no longer to sin, but instead we offer ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness, which we have received through Christ Jesus – “we are the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus” (2 Cor. 5:21).

***Teaching Them to Obey***

Jesus, then, in expressing “*teaching* them to obey” is to be understood in the same frame as *going* and *baptizing*.Bosch notes that in the missional covenant of Matthew 28 Jesus sends the disciples to be teaching, rather than preaching, as he did in Matthew 10. From Matthew’s Gospel it is clear that Jesus never preaches to disciples, he only teaches them; preaching is reserved for inviting people into the kingdom of God.[[52]](#footnote-52) So why does Jesus not commission his disciples to preach in order to disciple the nations, but rather states, *teaching them to obey*? As Bosch, relates, it seems to have to do with embodying the presence of God’s reign in the world, to recognize that disciples are not merely to heed Jesus’ teaching, but that Jesus, as the content of his teaching, is to embody each of his disciples. “Discipleship is determined by the relation to Christ himself, not by conformity to an impersonal ordinance. The context of this is not the classroom (where ‘teaching’ usually takes place for us), nor even in the church, but the world.”[[53]](#footnote-53) To be a disciple of Jesus is to be as missional as Jesus, is to be submitted to God’s will as Jesus, is to embody the kingdom as Jesus did, all in the same manner as he did – through his humanity.

This then reframes, Jesus command to *teach them to obey* – living in obedience is not something *we* do. It becomes the nature of how we live in the manner of Jesus, not independently of him, but in utter reliance upon him, in yielding to his Lordship – for he is with us “to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). It is in identification with Christ that “teaching to obey” is reflective of the fulfillment of God’s vision for God’s covenant with humanity in which YHWH expresses, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). The significance of “teaching them to obey” in relation to *going* and *baptizing*, expresses that being a missional disciple requires living in identification with Jesus, more so than merely emulating him. We emulate Jesus by heeding his teachings, but to be involved in mission as Jesus is involved in mission, requires our being re-humanized, our being re-created in the kind of humanity Jesus demonstrated and re-created. Such a humanity is one in which God’s word is written upon our hearts, which shapes our living to be in alignment with God’s missional purpose in bringing about this covenant reality to all humanity.[[54]](#footnote-54) It is in such humanity, that we only participate in through being identified with Jesus in his going, in being baptized into the name of the Triune God, in being joined to him through obedience, that we are ontologically in the same mission, which brings about the peace and hope that Christ brings (cf. Ephesians 2:14ff). Without our being joined to the humanity of Christ as missional disciples, our life and ministry can never be identified with God’s mission in the world.

**The Nature of Jesus’ Obedience in Fulfilling God’s Mission as the Basis for Understanding “Teaching them to obey”**

Since Jesus’ humanity is to be our humanity, we need to further understand the nature of Jesus’ obedience; how he himself learned obedience; the obedience he displayed in his humanity in relation to the Father; in order to give context to Jesus covenantal statement, “teaching them to obey.” The texts of Hebrews 5:8 and Philippians 2:5ff, as well as Jesus’ description of his participation in God’s mission throughout John’s Gospel shed light on the nature of Jesus’ obedience.

***Hebrews 5:8***

The author of Hebrews writes concerning Jesus: “although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (5:8). It would seem that God the Son would have no problem with obedience, yet being human, having set aside the right to his divine power (cf. Philippians 2:5ff), it seems that obedience is something that God, in his incarnational presence, needed to learn.

 The key for understanding Jesus’ learning of obedience is to realize that Jesus’ experience was that of being a human being in human history – he was a Jewish man, living in first century Palestine under Roman rule. This is not to diminish his divinity as the second person of the Trinity, yet in terms of his ministry, those who encountered him met a man under the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1: 9-13; Luke 4: 18-19). As Luke recounts in 2:52, as a human being Jesus grew, developed, and gained awareness and wisdom. Donald Guthrie relates, “when Luke says that Jesus advanced in learning . . ., he means that by a progressive process he showed by his obedience to the Father’s will a continuous making of God’s will his own, reaching its climax in his approach to death.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Leon Morris adds that “although he was a son” is not the best translation, rather, he argues that the writer of Hebrews expresses, “son though he was.” The significance of this is “the quality of sonship that is [being] emphasized.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

Jesus’ stature was such that one would not have expected him to suffer. But he did suffer and in the process learned obedience. This, startling though it is, does not mean that Jesus passed from disobedience to obedience. Rather, he learned obedience by actually obeying. There is a certain quality involved when one has performed the required action – a quality that is lacking when there is only a readiness to act.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Thomas Finger connects Jesus’ obedience in giving shape to how we are to be human. Finger notes that the writer of Hebrews, “uses *obedience* to summarize Jesus’ faithful human attitude. Like everyone else, Jesus had to learn this obedience.”[[58]](#footnote-58) In highlighting that Jesus is the pioneer of our salvation (cf. Heb. 2:10, 12:2), Finger conveys that Jesus provides the example of our new humanity in that he “passed through each stage of life in unbroken communion with God, as all humans are meant to.”[[59]](#footnote-59) When the readers of Hebrews encountered struggles in their lives, they were to look to Jesus who is the pioneer and perfecter of their faith (cf. Heb. 12:1-4), and in this way, Finger concludes, “Jesus provides the supreme model of human faithfulness.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

Therefore, as a human being, “son though he was,” Jesus learned obedience. So, in our identification with Jesus in discipling conveyed through “teaching them to obey” what is suggested is that more is required than knowing Jesus’ teachings, rather there is an emphasis on learning obedience in the same way he learned obedience. We see in Matthew this relationship between obedience and suffering in Jesus’ call to discipleship in Matthew 16, wherein he relates that discipleship involves denying self, taking up the cross, and following him (cf. v. 24) – exemplary of his own humanity in embodying the reign of God. As George Eldon Ladd has expressed, denial of self is not practicing self-denial, rather “it means the renunciation of one’s own will that the Kingdom of God may become the all-important concern of life.”[[61]](#footnote-61) Ladd further expresses regarding taking up the cross in following Jesus – “[t]aking up one’s cross does not mean assuming burdens. The cross is not a burden but an instrument of death. The taking of the cross means the death of self, of personal ambition and self-centered purpose. In the place of selfish attainment, however altruistic and noble, one is to desire alone the rule of God.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Jesus demonstrated in his humanity such a manner of submitting to God and God’s reign as he calls for those who would follow him to do as well. In light of covenant, Jesus through his learned obedience lived fully into God’s covenant promise to humanity – and so Jesus fully demonstrated the nature of new creation humanity in relationship with God.

***Philippians 2:8***

The nature of Jesus’ obedience is further clarified in understanding the statement that Jesus was “obedient unto death” as expressed in the Carmen Christi of Philippians 2. Ralph P. Martin, in his seminal work on Philippians 2: 5-11, remarks that Jesus’ obedience to death expresses that “there is no more exemplary obedience than the acceptance of the Father’s will in the receiving of the cup of suffering and death.”[[63]](#footnote-63) What is revealed in Jesus’ obedience “is an utter submission to God’s redemptive purpose [which] marks Him out as the true God-become-Man; for . . . only a divine being can accept death as *obedience*; for ordinary men it is a necessity, to which they are appointed by their humanity (Heb. ix. 27).”[[64]](#footnote-64) Yet, what Martin fails to note is that this obedience does not come through Jesus’ divinity, rather it is an expression of the demonstration of his incarnate humanity. Jesus’ divine obedience was in becoming human, in which he relinquished the right to the power of his divinity “and did not consider equality with God something to be grasped [or held onto], but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2: 6-7). Also, his obedience unto death, is an obedience he expressed in the fullness of his humanity. Finger argues this as well stating that Jesus “humbled himself from the beginnings of his earthly existence. This same servant activity persisted ‘unto death, even death on a cross’ (Phil. 2:8). Here and in his central Christological discussion of Romans 5:12-21, Paul uses the word *obedience* to summarize Jesus’ human work.”[[65]](#footnote-65) As Finger concludes, “obedience is central to that faith, or faithfulness, which is the fundamental attitude undergirding Christian life.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

In addition, Ray S. Anderson, theologizes that Christ’s obedience to death in the context of his incarnational and kenotic human life is the foundation for the re-creation of humanity in the world. He relates that humanity must first of all be re-created or re-formed into the human existence of Jesus Christ.[[67]](#footnote-67) Anderson brings to the forefront that the church’s involvement in the mission of God expresses identification with the humanity of Jesus through his incarnation in the world in order to be in the world the way Jesus was in the world, expressing grace and the transforming power and life of Christ.[[68]](#footnote-68) The theological ground for the church’s existence in the world is in being identified with the human existence of Christ – being in the world, but yet not of it (John 17:16).[[69]](#footnote-69) Therefore, in this passage, Christ’s obedience is the basis for the salvation and re-creation of humanity and all the world.

***The Nature of Obedience in the Life and Ministry of Jesus in John’s Gospel***

As stated above, the incarnation of Christ, not only revealed what God is like, but also reveals the nature of new creation humanity. In taking on our humanity, Jesus also shifted the nature of obedience from being an external practice being governed by adherence to the Law, to obedience becoming a practice that is internalized in the lives of those who live as the people of God in fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:33. This is most fully seen in Jesus’ engaging in his Father’s mission.

Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus voices that he only does what he sees his Father doing and speaks what he hears his Father saying.[[70]](#footnote-70) The mission that Jesus carries out is not a mission he initiates, but is a discerning of what his Father is doing. Jesus continually seeks in every context, in submission to God, to become aware of what the Father is doing and saying. This posture of discerning his Father’s will expresses an obedience that he willingly takes upon himself, as an inner manifestation of being in communion with his heavenly Father.

The nature of Jesus’ ministry expresses that his obedience to his Father is not an external onus upon his life, but an obedience that is deeply internalized within himself, within his humanity, as he seeks to follow the leading of the Spirit. Jesus clearly identifies with God the Father and expresses the mission as being integral to his character. In John 8:55, Jesus’ obedience or keeping God’s word is linked integrally with his knowing the Father in his state of being human – though he also declares his divinity in this same pericope. Keeping God’s word is to do what God does, to say what God is saying to humanity. Jesus’ obedience marks him as one who was sent by the Father, who loves the world, in order to save the world (cf. John 3:16-17), and as John’s theology expresses, to re-create the world.

So, in Jesus sending his disciples to disciple, they are to *teach them to obey.* They are not merely to teach, nor even merely to teach obedience to his commands. Rather, they are to teach obedience. They teach obedience in order for those who become disciples might become obedient as Jesus was obedient to God in his humanity in joining God in God’s mission in the world. In identifying with Jesus in the way he was obedient to his Father, they are to be identified with God and God’s missional action in the world as new creation humanity living in this same obedience. Discipleship is not about making our lives holy and good (though that is a key consequence of following Jesus), it is primarily for joining God, participating with God in God’s mission in the world, in the way that Jesus did as a human being.

**Toward a Practice of Identifying with Jesus in “Teaching them to obey**

Obedience in discipleship, then, seems to be much more than giving adherence to a set of teachings which Jesus expressed – it has to do with living a life of allegiance to Christ, of identifying with Jesus in his humanity and how he was human – integrally connected to the Spirit, in communion with the Father, incarnating the purpose of the mission of the Trinitarian community in the world. The call to obedience is a call to a way of life, to live humanly and humanely as Jesus did – a way of being human in relationship with God as expressed through his teachings and actions.

Jesus’ understanding of obedience is rooted in a covenantal missional understanding of what God is doing in the world in order to make all things new. Jesus in his incarnational humanity, submitted to his Father’s purpose, reveals the biblical and missional purpose of *teaching them to obey* – for we as human beings to be identified with the humanity of Christ, so that we as Jesus’ disciples may indwell a re-humanized and re-created humanity. How this manifests itself in our contemporary discipleship and mission can be displayed by engaging in three practices: (1) Submitting ourselves to Jesus, through an understanding of the Anabaptist practice of *Gelassenheit,* articulated through the discipleship theology of David Augsburger in *Dissident Discipleship*, (2) Learning from Jesus – not just from his words, but also his actions, for which Thomas Groome’s *Shared Christian Praxis* offers some helpful insights, and (3) Discerning how God is at work in the world by participating in *Christopraxis*, explained through the practical theology of Ray S. Anderson in *The Shape of Practical Theology*.

***Submitting Ourselves to Jesus:***

***Gelassenheit in the Discipleship Theology of David Augsburger***

The first essential practice of being and making disciples is submitting ourselves to God in the way Jesus submitted himself to God in his humanity. The Anabaptists have an expression for this – *Gelassenheit*. *Gelassenheit* has the sense of “releasing oneself into the presence of God. It has the connotations of “self-surrender, . . . , yieldedness to God's will, self-abandonment, . . . , including the readiness to suffer for the sake of God, also peace and calmness of mind”[[71]](#footnote-71) or in short – *a willing obedience*. In significant ways, *Gelassenheit* is an outworking of the biblical realities and theological significance of obedience in identification with Jesus in being the people of God in the world.

In examining God’s call of Abraham in Genesis 12, we discover that Abraham was not coerced to obey, but rather, Abraham obeyed on his own volition in response to a new thing, a new direction to which God was calling him. Obedience was not something demanded of him, but in Abraham’s desire to participate in that which God was inviting him, he responded by saying “yes” and placed his trust in God in stepping out where God was asking him to go – this is Gelassenheit. Likewise, Jesus wrestling in the Garden of Gethsemane struggling with going to the cross, yields himself and confesses, “*Abba*, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36) – this is an expression of Gelassenheit. Obedience in Abraham’s and Jesus’ lives, was not an act of cowering submission, but instead an expression of worshipful response to the moving of the living God in their lives.

David Augsburger expresses that such Gelassenheit – willing obedience, as exemplified in the incarnational life of Jesus, has an inseparable connection with “essential serenity and existential tenacity.”[[72]](#footnote-72) He further notes that this embraces a radical and active self-surrender, in which obedience moves from an external imposed set of values, perhaps as expressed through a passive acquiescence of “not my will but yours” to a character of obedience which is internalized and expressed in an active resoluteness embodied in the statement of, “your will be done on earth.”[[73]](#footnote-73) Augsburger describes this internalized expression of obedience as the spiritual expression of serenity. He states:

Serenity is the essential relinquishment of one’s rights as sacred; it is the essential renunciation of one’s claims to survival as divine right; it is the essential release from self-preoccupation that keeps one centered in the self. It is essential in both meanings of the word – essential as necessity, essential as essence. It is necessary to authentic spirituality, and it is the soul of genuine spirituality and therefore its essence.[[74]](#footnote-74)

“Serenity is a core calmness, a deep confidence running down to – or up from – the substrata where we make our most intimate contact with God.”[[75]](#footnote-75) This is descriptive of Jesus’ obedience to his Father – doing and saying what he saw and heard his Father expressing. It is also descriptive of the call he placed upon his disciples as he sent them out to disciple – that they might be obedient in the same way in living out God’s vision for new humanity in partnering with God in God’s mission. Augsburger notes that such an internalization of obedience is the expression of serenity in which one “can let go, let be, let come what may, and ultimately, let God.”[[76]](#footnote-76) He states that such serenity, such internalized radical obedience, brings freedom for the one who responds to Jesus through discipleship.

Further, Augsburger addresses the other side of serenity as tenacity, in which “the two are one. In yieldedness, I surrender self-will, committing myself to live out a higher will, praying ‘Thy will be done.’”[[77]](#footnote-77) He relates:

This yieldedness of the will . . . is not the *will-less* resignation characteristic of classic pietism – of the ‘Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way. Thou art the potter, I am the clay; mold me and make me after Thy will, while I am waiting yielded and still’ variety; nor is it the *willful* ‘sin boldly’ freedom of Luther’s trust in all-inclusive grace. It is the *willing* yieldedness of the stubbornly faithful yet incorrigibly nonconformist radical disciple.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Augsburger further elucidates this understanding,

A neither will-less nor willful, but willing commitment to seek, to serve, and to surrender to the will of God in life requires an existential tenacity and temerity that risks all, that is willing to die, that accepts the harsh penalty of martyrdom if necessary to hold true to the way of Jesus. . . . The willing disciple recognizes that these words [‘Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven’] express a radical political, economic, social, relational commitment of the heart, not just a personal, internal spiritual aspiration. We seek to will what God wills, dangerous and presumptive though that may be, and rigorously seek to match our vision of God’s will to the clear way of Jesus.[[79]](#footnote-79)

This changes the nature of how obedience is to be understood in our humanity, which in Christ has been radically transformed. In our being conformed to Christ, there is a new center, a new personhood, in which the core of our humanity has been changed. It is a personhood that no longer is controlled and dominated by rebellion against God, but in Christ selfishness and self-fullness are forsaken so that God’s covenant, God’s purpose, God’s mission is embedded within us. Rather than obedience being the will of another being imposed upon us, this kind of obedience, understood through serenity and tenacity, in essence becomes “our will” because our will has been integrated with God’s will, God’s purpose, God’s intention for the world. It is the living out of Paul’s statement to the churches in Galatia – “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me . . .” (Galatians 2:20). With Christ being internalized in us, and we in Christ, God’s will is not external to us, but has become fundamentally integrated into us – so that our choosing to do what we want to do is aligned with the missional reign and purpose of God. In essence, we do not regard our acting in alignment with God’s purpose as being an imposing of God’s mandates upon us, but rather, all who we are in our humanity, has been so joined to Christ in his humanity, that we have the same attitude towards the purpose and mission of God as Christ does. In essence, we are free act in the world because what we seek to do is being aligned with the missional will of God.

This is how we are to understand obedience in missional perspective; this is how we are to understand what Jesus meant when he called his disciples to disciple others by *teaching them* *to obey* all that he commanded. To teach them to obey is to come alongside others in order to disciple them so that in yielding themselves to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, an internal transformation takes place, where disciples willingly grow in submission to the purposes of God without external coercion. This becomes reality for us only as we become integrally connected with Jesus in his humanity. Obedience becomes an internal spiritual reality giving shape to how we live our lives in the world as Jesus’ disciples aligned with God’s missional purpose in the world.

***Learning from Jesus: Engaging in Thomas Groome’s Shared Christian Praxis to Live in the Way of Jesus***

 Numerous New Testaments print Jesus’ words in red so as to mark which words are “the revelation of God.” However, that is not to read Scripture fully. It is not only what Jesus said that is revelation; it is also what Jesus did. We read in Luke 4:18f that what Jesus came to do, was yes, “to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for prisoners, and to proclaim the years of the Lord’s favor.” However, he also came to do, to enact God’s will on earth, as it is in heaven, by bringing “recovery of sight to the blind [and] to release the oppressed.” When John the Baptist was in prison wondering if Jesus was indeed the expected Messiah, Jesus response to his disciples was this: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matthew 11: 4-6). Indeed, what we learn from Jesus from his life and ministry, is more than his words, it is also what he did – which we learn to do by being yoked together with him – “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matthew 11:20). How we go about learning from Jesus involves more than having the right content and methodology, because educating disciples in the way of Jesus involves engaging the whole person in challenging their worldviews in order to consciously seek to live in different ways.[[80]](#footnote-80) The educational approach of Thomas Groome through his model of *Shared Christian Praxis[[81]](#footnote-81)* offers a meaningful approach in learning from Jesus. The purpose of his approach is to bring about a dialectical change in our actions, our praxis, bringing our lives and actions into alignment with the purposes of God’s reign for lived Christian faith – in essence in alignment with the way Jesus lived out his life in his humanity embodying the reign of God.

Groome’s *Shared Christian Praxis* involves five movements in which participants engage with others in a group context (*shared*) critically reflecting on beliefs and actions in order to develop new understandings and new ways of living (*praxis*) for a lived Christian faith that is aligned with the purposes of God’s reign (*Christian*). The first movement focuses on naming present action regarding one’s present beliefs and actions concerning a spiritual practice or a social issue. Naming may involve reactions, feelings, overt activity, valuing, meaning, understanding, beliefs, and relationships in relation to the area of focus being considered.[[82]](#footnote-82) The second movement engages in critical reflection asking primarily two questions: where will continuing in this present action lead them and is this what they hope their present action will result in? This reflection brings about a critical awareness of the possible disconnection between their present actions and their hopes for their acting in a particular way.[[83]](#footnote-83) The third movement engages God’s Story and Vision by engaging Scripture, theology, church traditions, in order to learn and become aware of the ways of God’s actions in the world. This encompasses numerous ways for imaginative learning in order to learn from Jesus the ways of living in light of God’s reign and God’s purposes.[[84]](#footnote-84) The fourth movement focuses on the tension between what has been discovered through encountering God’s Story and Vision in dialectic with the stories and visions the participants have expressed through their own present actions and their understandings and hopes. What is encountered is the similarity or differences between the participants’ understandings of God’s ways as that as encountered in the life and ministry of Jesus, for example. The reflection in this movement highlights the difference between one’s present action and that of God’s Story and Vision calling for a change of belief and action in order to be aligned with the purposes of God’s reign in the world.[[85]](#footnote-85) It highlights what change needs to take place in order for the disciple to learn from and live in the way of Christ Jesus. The final movement calls for a decision regarding how one is to live Christianly in the world,[[86]](#footnote-86) to submit our beliefs and actions to live in the way of Jesus, in being identified with him in his humanity, relying on the grace of God, the presence of Jesus within our lives in the presence and power of the Spirit to shape our living in the way of Jesus.

 Approaches such as Groome’s engage the disciple in educational processes in which they are yoked together with Christ in order to learn from him. The disciple learns to live in the way of Jesus in relation to all that is encountered in life – as Paul, expresses, “ ... the life I now live, I live by the Son of God, who loved me and delivered himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). To be identified with Jesus is more than heeding his teachings, it indeed involves being yoked together with him, to walk with him, identifying our humanity with his, being open for his humanity to become ours, so that we grow in being disciples sent out in mission together with him in the power of the Spirit to be sign, foretaste, and instrument of God’s present and coming reign in the world.

***Discerning the Activity of God in the World: Discerning Christopraxis as Expressed in the Practical Theology of Ray S. Anderson***

As has already demonstrated through John’s Gospel, Jesus discerned his Father’s words and actions for shaping his own life and ministry. In the same way, disciples are called to learn the practice of discernment in the way Jesus discerned his Father’s missional action in the world. The practical theological approach of Ray S. Anderson presents a discernment practice, which he names *Christopraxis*, for participating in the continuing action of Jesus in the world (cf. John 14:12). Christopraxis focuses discipleship as “the continuing ministry of Christ through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.”[[87]](#footnote-87)

The continued presence and work of the Holy Spirit constitute the praxis of Christ’ resurrection. This means that the truth of resurrection is not only the fact of an historical event but the presence and power of a resurrected person, Jesus Christ. The means by which Christ’s work of making peace between humans and God does not take place through the application of methods, ideologies or even theories derived from Scripture. It is Christ himself who “makes peace” through the praxis of his Spirit in a dialogical relationship with our truth and methods.

 The praxis of Christ’s ministry in the first century was completed (telos) in his resurrection and continued through the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Following Pentecost the early church interpreted the praxis of the Holy Spirit as the continued ministry of the risen Christ, thrusting the community into the world as a mission community and preparing the church to be the church for the last century – the century when Christ returns. With Scripture as its authority, the church engages in the hermeneutical task of interpreting the Word of Christ in the context of the work of Christ.[[88]](#footnote-88)

Anderson’s hermeneutical model for discerning how disciples are to be active in the world in alignment with the missional purpose of God, is an adaptation of Don Browning’s model for guiding practical reason. Anderson expresses that “Browning’s model is worth exploring as an attempt to integrate theory and practice in an ongoing process of action and reflection.”[[89]](#footnote-89) Anderson relates that for Browning, “the concept of practical reason . . . places the theological task at the center of the social context, where the theologian stands with and alongside the church mediating the gospel of Christ from the center.”[[90]](#footnote-90) Where Anderson adapts Browning’s model is that he replaces what lies at the *inner core*. Browning places experience at the center, which seeks to ask questions of the gospel of Christ responds to human experience or social situations in answering questions about what we ought to do and how we ought to live. From the center of experience, Browning’s model moves outward to an *outer core*, which embraces “interpretive paradigms, experimental probes, historical consciousness and communities of memory.”[[91]](#footnote-91)

Anderson, on the other hand, replaces experience with Christopraxis, because it is based on his theological and missional understanding that we are not simply to be engaged theologically in the world, but we are called to continue the ministry and mission of Christ Jesus in partnership and identification with him – it is not our ministry in which we are engaged, we are called, as disciples to be engaged in the ongoing ministry of Christ.[[92]](#footnote-92) The discerning of this Christopraxis is an inward and outward movement discerning the mission of God, which has a reciprocal relationship with the four interpretative and forming categories that Browning has in the *outer core* of his model.

Anderson expresses in this model of discerning God’s present action in the world that Scripture is primary and foundational for shaping our present missional action as disciples – “the role of Scripture as a normative, apostolic of truth remains critical for a hermeneutic of Christopraxis.”[[93]](#footnote-93) As Scripture, rooted in and through a Christological perspective, encounters the categories of the outer core, in the context of Christopraxis, Anderson expresses that through this theological reflection we discern the activity of God in the world and it gives shape to our missional activity in partnership with Christ. Anderson notes that this is indeed a deep integral identification with Jesus that gives shape to our missional discerning and missional engagement.

Theological reflection does not ask the question “What would Jesus do in this situation?” because this question would imply his absence. Rather, it asks the question “Where is Jesus in this situation and what am I to do as a minister?” When the Scripture is interpreted in such a way that direction is sought for lives who need to be conformed to the true and healing power of God’s Word, we must remember that Jesus is not only the “author” of Scripture through the power of the Spirit, but he himself is a “reader” and interpreter of Scripture in every contemporary moment.[[94]](#footnote-94)

Therefore, being obedient to Jesus’ teachings is not enough to mark someone as a disciple who discerns where and how God is active in mission in the world, because such an obedience does not necessarily require being integrally connected to Christ. Rather, as Christ calls disciples to himself, to be joined together with him as he is joined to the Father in mission, then as disciples we engage in missional discernment and participate with God in mission through our being identified with the continuing Christopraxis of Jesus, by being joined to Jesus Christ. This is an embodying of Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17: 20-26 in which our life and mission are rooted in Christ, whose life and mission is rooted in the Father, as we discern our participation in God’s mission in the world in identification with the life and humanity of Jesus as missional disciples.

**Joined with Christ: Being Human in the Way Jesus was Human in the World**

 “Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” is a calling to live missionally as a disciple – to be a missional disciple. Jesus’ calling to obedience is a calling to live as he did, not merely imitating him, but living into the fullness of our humanity in integral connection with him. It is a call to live in the fullness of humanity that Jesus demonstrated through his incarnation in participating with God in God’s mission.

Our heeding Jesus’ command to obey all that he commanded, is not just an adherence to a new set of rules. Rather, we are called to be identified with Jesus, in all that we are and do. In our living out this obedience, we submit ourselves to him and to God in an attitude of Gelassenheit, we learn from Jesus so that lived Christian faith is an expression of our living in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and we discern God’s action in the world in order to engage in the continuing ministry of Jesus in the world. Engaging in Christopraxis, we join in with Christ Jesus in discerning the ongoing missional activity of God in bringing about new creation. We are participators with God in God’s mission through our being identified as human beings with the new humanity Christ demonstrated and re-created.

Such a humanity, which Anderson expressed, is not a different kind of humanity, but is rather a re-humanized humanity, which Jesus demonstrated in the way he lived and ministered. In our becoming disciples and making disciples, we are to be human in the way Jesus was human in full submission to the Father, and we are to lead others into the new creation Christ has brought about through his death and resurrection, because he is the creator of a new humanity, which John’s Gospel so aptly reveals. Jesus in passing on of his mission to his disciples using covenant language declares that participating in God’s mission can only occur as we are integrally joined to Christ, as we live fully in identification with him – exemplified through *going, baptizing*, and *teaching them to obey*. We are active participants in God’s mission because we are joined to the one who enacts God’s mission, the one who has been given all authority and will be with us unto the end of the age.

In this way we reveal Christ in the world, in being human in the way he was human. As Anabaptists have expressed, in solidarity with Christ our living in identification with Jesus continues the incarnation of Christ in the world. It is in our continuing the ministry of Jesus – Christopraxis – that we not only participate with God’s mission, we are active agents as Jesus was in living out the presence of God’s mission. As missional disciples, who live in obedience to Jesus, we are joined to him, integrally connected to him in his humanity and his mission – as he was sent so are we, to embody new creation humanity and to love as he loved: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

1. There is much discussion regarding how *Go* is to be understood in Matthew 28. See for example, Donald A. Hagner, along with others, expresses that this commission by Jesus “is given by means of one main imperative verb, μαθητεύσατε, ‘make disciples,’ together with three syntactically subordinate participles that take on an imperatival force . . . because of the main verb. The first of these, πορεύθεντες, precedes the main verb. The disciples are to ‘go’ and ‘make disciples.” Donald A. Hagner, “Matthew 14-28” in *Word Biblical Commentary* Vol. 33B, Bruce M. Metzger, ed. (Dallas: Word, 1995), 886. Others, such as Edgar Krentz seek to express it more as a participle without the sense of an imperative and so translate “Go” as “going” or “as you go” meaning as you go about living your life. Edgar Krentz, “Missionary Matthew: Matthew 28:16-20 as Summary of the Gospel,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 31:1 (February 2004), 28. In the translation expressed here, it is expressed as a participle with its imperatival intent. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note all Scripture references are from the New International Version (NIV), unless otherwise specified. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Paul also expresses the humanness of Jesus writing in Romans that God sent “his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering” (8:3) and further in Philippians that in emptying himself of his divinity he took on the nature of a servant in human likeness (cf. 2:7). Further, The Gospels clearly demonstrate the humanity of Jesus in terms of his body, emotions, mind and will. In terms of his body, he grew tired (John 4:6), he became thirsty (John

19:28) and he became hungry (Matthew 4:2). Jesus wept (John 12:27) and he felt compassion (Matthew 9:36). Jesus’s mind developed and he grew in wisdom (Luke 2:52) and Jesus wrestled with his will (cf. Matthew 26:39). Yet, Jesus also demonstrated being human in a way that modeled a new covenant, new creation humanity, not in rebellion against God, but in a submissive relationship with God, in which he walked in complete communion with God. The Apostle Paul, especially notes this in identifying Jesus as the second Adam in 1 Corinthians 15:45-49. In noting that Jesus came from heaven (incarnation), Paul also notes that Jesus demonstrated a different kind of humanity through his life and ministry and also through his death and resurrection creates a new humanity. “And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man” (15:49). Further Paul expresses in Colossians 3:9ff that in Christ we “have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and in all.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ray S. Anderson. *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001). 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Anderson, 138. Anderson further clarifies the nature of the humanity that Jesus reveals. “The incarnation does not produce another form of humanity but can be understood as the ‘humanization’ of humanity . . . . The ethical content of love as a criterion for theological ethics is not just ‘Christian love,’ as distinct from non-Christian love, but it is ‘human love,’ as distinct from inhuman love” (138). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Thomas N. Finger. *Christian Theology: an eschatological approach* Vol. I (Scottdale: PA: Herald Press, 1985), 338-342. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Finger, Vol. I, 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Finger, Vol. I, 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thomas N. Finger. *Christian Theology: an eschatological approach* Vol. II (Scottdale: PA: Herald Press, 1989), 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Finger, Vol. II, 88-89. For Finger’s full argument in support of the possibility of a Christological anthropology and its implications see chapters 3 and 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Russell L. Huizing. “Leaders from Disciples: The Church’s Contribution to Leadership Development,” in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 35:4 (2011). 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Huizing, 341; citing J. Denny Weaver. “Discipleship Redefined: Four Sixteenth Century Anabaptists.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 54, no. 4 (1980). 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Huizing, 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. W. A. Whitehouse, “Obey, Obedience,” in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible,* Alan Richardson, ed. (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1950). 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Lesslie Newbigin. “Extract 2 ‘On Being the Church for the World’ (1988)” in *Lesslie Newbigin, Missionary Theologian: A Reader*, compiled by Paul Weston (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Edgar Krentz, “Missionary Matthew: Matthew 28:16-20 as Summary of the Gospel,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 31:3 (February 2004); David C. Sim, “Is Matthew 28:16-20 the Summary of the Gospel?,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70 (1), 2014; Craig S. Keener, “Matthew’s Missiology: Making Disciples of the Nations (Matthew 28:19-20)” in *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 12:1 (2009); as well as Donald A. Hagner. “Matthew 14-28” in *Word Biblical Commentary*. Vol. 33B, Bruce Metzger ed. (Dallas: Word, 1995), 881. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. David C. Sim, “Is Matthew 28:16-20 the Summary of the Gospel?”, HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 70 (1), 2014, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Sim, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sim, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Sim, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Christopher J. H. Wright. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006). 213. Cf. also Genesis 12:2-3 in which God blesses Abram (later Abraham) that through him God will bless all nations. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Wright, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Wright, 354-355. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Wright, 355. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Scott J. Hafemann, “The Covenant Relationship” in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity*, Scott J. Hafemann and Paul House, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Wright, 355. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Hafemann, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hafemann, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Hafemann, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Bosch, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Lesslie Newbigin. *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Newbigin, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Newbigin, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Newbigin, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Newbigin, 71-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See for example in the article by Craig Keener in which he unpacks the Great Commission as being done in three ways and so he states, “we might summarize these global discipleship tasks as cross-cultural ministry, evangelism and Christian education” Craig S. Keener, “Matthew’s Missiology: Making Disciples of the Nations (Matthew 28:19-20)” in *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 12:1 (2009), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Jesus repeatedly states what he does and speaks is what he sees and hears his Father doing and saying (cf. John 5:16-30; 7:16; 8:28; 10:17-18; 12:44-45, 49-50; 14:10, 24, 31; 15:10). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Calvin Mercer. Jesus the Apostle: “Sending” and the Theology of John. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35/4 (December 1992), 457. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Mercer, 458. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Mercer, 458. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Mercer, 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Jeanine K. Brown. “Creation’s Renewal in the Gospel of John,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72, (2010), 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Dallas Willard. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 282-283. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Willard, 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Cynthia Campbell. Matthew 28: 16-20 Expository Articles, *Interpretation* Vol. 46, No. 4, (October 1992), 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. George Beasley-Murray. *Baptism in the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962). 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Beasley-Murray, 90-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Beasley-Murray, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Beasley-Murray, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Keener, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Bosch, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Bosch, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Cf. Bosch, 67-79, wherein he expresses that such new covenant humanity, as expressed in Jesus’ life and ministry lives out the twofold command of loving God and loving neighbor, as Jesus expresses in Matthew 22:34-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Donald Guthrie. “Hebrews” in *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Leon Morris, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Leon Morris. “Hebrews” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* Vol. 12, Frank E. Gaebelein, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Morris, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Thomas N. Finger. Vol. II (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Finger, Vol. II, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Finger, Vol. II, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ladd, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ralph P. Martin. *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5-11 in recent interpretation and in the setting of early Christian worship.* Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Martin, 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Finger, Vol. II, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Finger, Vol. II, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Anderson, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Anderson, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Anderson, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Cf. John 5:16-30; 7:16; 8:28; 10:17-18; 12:44-45, 49-50; 14:10, 24, 31; 15:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, “Gelassenheit,” http://gameo.org/index.php?title= Gelassenheit. Downloaded May 24, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. David Augsburger. *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God and Love of Neighbor*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press. 2006), 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Augsburger, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Augsburger, 88-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Augsburger, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Augsburger, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Augsburger, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Augsburger, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Augsburger, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. For a more complete addressing of this question, see Roland G. Kuhl, *Educating Christianly: The Reign of God as a Paradigm for Christian Education* (Ann Arbor, UMI, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Groome’s model of Shared Christian Praxis is delineated through two of his seminal works: *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) and *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry – The Way of Shared Praxis* (San Franciso: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 175-186. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 187-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 215-248. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 249-265. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 266-282. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Anderson. *The Shape of Practical Theology,* 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Anderson, 51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Anderson, 26. Cf. Don S. Browning. *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Anderson, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Anderson, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Anderson, 29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Anderson, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Anderson, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)