

The Way of Discipleship

The Way of Discipleship
Women, Men, and Today's Call to Mission

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LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gittins, Anthony J., 1943– author.

Title: The way of discipleship : women, men, and today's call to mission / Anthony J. Gittins.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016007163 (print) | LCCN 2016015433 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814647158 (pbk.) | ISBN 9780814647394 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Spiritual formation—Catholic Church. | Christian life—Catholic authors. | Spiritual life—Catholic Church. | Bible. Gospels—Criticism, interpretation, etc.

Classification: LCC BX2350.3 .G56 2016 (print) | LCC BX2350.3 (ebook) | DDC 248.4/82—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016007163>

Dedicated, with love
and deep gratitude,
to my family of origin in Manchester, England:

John Gittins (1914–1968),

Teresa Hartley Gittins (1916–2006)

and sisters and brothers

Joan,

Peter,

Stephen,

Angela,

Martin,

and Julie

“The family,

that dear octopus from whose tentacles

we never quite escape,

nor, in our inmost hearts

ever quite wish to.”

—Dodie Smith, *Dear Octopus* (1938)

(Born in Whitefield, Manchester)

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Introduction

Who Is a Disciple?

Many years ago a graduate student from Indonesia knocked on my office door in Chicago. A Muslim woman with a doctorate in Islamic mysticism, she was studying Muslim–Christian relations, and she would turn out to be one of the most gifted and personally integrated people I ever met. On this particular day—our first encounter—she had come with one apparently disarmingly simple question: “Are there any Christian disciples in the world today?” Immediately intrigued, I invited her in and asked why the question was significant to her, and she explained. During the course of his life, the prophet Mohammed (570–ca. 632) gathered many disciples around him, and to them he transmitted his revelations and insights. After the prophet’s death, however, no more disciples could be added, and when the last of his contemporary disciples died, there would thus be no Muslim disciples left in the world. For Muslims, a disciple is understood to be someone who actually encountered Mohammed and learned directly from him. And this young woman simply wanted to know whether the same criteria applied to the disciples of Jesus.

Very briefly, I explained that, for Christians, anyone at any time could, in principle, become a disciple, whereupon she immediately asked if I would direct her in an independent study of Christian discipleship. She was evidently serious in this request, and I was both intrigued by her original premise and full of expectation that I could gain some further insights into Christian discipleship from

her perspective. We sat down there and then and sketched an initial scheme for meetings and readings. Several months later, she wrote a paper—some thirty-five pages in length—on Christian discipleship. It was unquestionably the best-researched, best-written, and most *sympathetic* treatment of the nature of Christian discipleship that I had ever encountered.

It still seems particularly sad to me that even today, some (perhaps many) very committed Christians seem never to have considered that they might be called, personally, to discipleship—simply because nobody ever proposed the idea or encouraged them to do so. Brought up in a community and educated in a church that tended to identify vocation very narrowly as a call to priesthood or religious life, they simply accepted that they were like foot soldiers, rank and file, with no particular distinction or responsibility beyond loyal obedience and quiet faithfulness. “Just a layperson” was a phrase that, sadly, said it all.

Furthermore, there are certainly some women religious who have never considered their own individual call to discipleship and who appear surprised at the suggestion that every vocation is particular and individual. They may have spent decades of dutiful service to God and the community but without focusing on the development of their own personal relationship with God. And more widely among people who may indeed be seriously attracted to the call to discipleship, many look at figures like the rich young man in the New Testament (Mark 10:17-22), and are “shocked” by the “one thing” that overwhelms them—that Jesus looks at them and declares: “go, sell what you have and give the money to the poor . . . and come, follow me.” No one has ever helped them to see discipleship—in the New Testament itself, let alone in our contemporary world—as consisting of particular calls to a wide variety of individuals to follow Jesus, but from where they themselves stand and not from where the rich young man stood.

None of us is—or is called to mimic—the rich young man, or Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene, or Mary of Bethany, and none of us

lives in first-century Galilee. And although Christian discipleship is built on a particular foundation—and therefore all manifestations of discipleship share some common features—there is no such thing as a generic discipleship, no “one-size-fits-all” discipleship. Each person is called to respond to the call of Jesus as it touches one in one’s own existential circumstances: that is, one’s specific geographical, historical, cultural, and personal context. The call to conversion begins wherever we are at a particular point in time and space, and it does not entail the precondition that we literally “sell everything” (Mark 10:21) any more than that we “leave our nets” (Matt 4:20, 22) or “tax booth” (Matt 9:9). Many would-be disciples today have balked at the idea that they must somehow become who they are not. The call of Jesus is not a call for us to become who we are not, but to become profoundly converted by discovering who we really are, who we are called to be, and who we can still become. And since, for Jesus, all disciples are radically equal, no particular example or incarnation of discipleship is in principle superior to any other—something the Twelve would take a long, long time to understand (Mark 10:28-31, 35-44). None of us should have an inferiority complex when we consider our own call to discipleship, but each of us should strive to continuously convert to Jesus himself, and to “the Way”¹ of discipleship.

Pastor, theologian, and disciple Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it like this:

If Christianity means following Christ, is it not . . . for a small minority, a spiritual élite? . . . Yet surely such an attitude is the exact opposite of the gracious mercy of Jesus Christ, who came to the publicans and sinners, the weak and the poor, the erring and the hopeless. . . . And if we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? To answer this question we shall have to go to him, for only he knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows the journey’s end. But we do know that it will be a road [a *Way*] of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy.²

The Context for Discipleship

In order to appreciate the nature of discipleship as it applies to each of us today, we really need to place it in its own natural context. Where does it flourish? How does it fit into the great scheme of things? What is its true purpose? And how is it designed to draw us closer to Jesus himself and his own *modus operandi*? Unless we achieve some clarity in these matters, there will be an abiding danger that discipleship becomes either very self-centered or just a matter of guesswork, and therefore not quite what Jesus had (and has) in mind. This requires not only that we explore and take seriously the wide variety of examples of discipleship in the New Testament, but that we understand what Jesus himself was looking for in disciples—and why. And since Jesus himself explained that he came not to do his own will but the will of the one who sent him (John 6:38; 15:8, 16), we must dig a little deeper and uncover the roots of Jesus' own *raison d'être*. If indeed he came because he was sent by his *Abba*, what was his mission and how does his invitation to discipleship, then and throughout history, relate to that mission?

The exploration of the nature and purpose of discipleship will take us back to the beginning of time—and even before that. It will require us to contemplate the mystery that is the Trinity itself. But since we simply cannot grasp the ungraspable or understand infinite mystery with our finite minds, we must “stand under” what we cannot understand, be enlightened by the Light itself, and be embraced by the one whom we can never fully embrace. We begin (in part 1) by attempting to bring three concepts—mission, evangelization, and discipleship—into a single frame of reference, to show that discipleship simply cannot be properly understood in isolation from the other two. If we succeed in this, it should leave us all with a profound respect for our own call to discipleship. And then we can look (in part 2) at some examples of discipleship in the New Testament in order to create a profile of discipleship itself, against which we can match our own attempts to be the kinds of disciples Jesus spent his public life seeking, calling, training, and sending.

Discipleship and Faith Formation

This is not intended as a technical or scholarly book, nor is it a book of exegesis that mines the text for precise but sometimes hidden meanings. By no means a biblical scholar, I am a seeker for a more authentic and life-giving following of Jesus. Although there is a degree of exegesis involved, the primary purpose of this book is to assist in some way with adult faith formation. Many of us have not had an opportunity to deepen and develop our faith—specifically our relationship with the Jesus of the gospels and the risen Christ in whom we place our Christian faith and by whose grace we hope it will increase. There are unnecessarily many people who grew up to know their catechism and the religious rules and regulations, but who have not made much progress beyond remembering those rules and the gentle (or perhaps not) Jesus of their own childhood. In these pages, having explored the nature and shape of discipleship in the New Testament, we hope to encounter Jesus through his encounters with others. We then hope to move beyond a simple awareness of some of the dynamics between Jesus and would-be disciples of two thousand years ago, and to apply the lessons to our own contemporary lives in their uniqueness and specificity in terms of our geographical, cultural, and personal circumstances. Without such a reapplication, we risk becoming merely a little better informed perhaps, but no nearer to an ongoing, developing, and sustaining relationship with Jesus, such as would support, animate, and inspire our own daily adult lives.

Faith formation requires the use of our imagination; and faith-sharing evidently requires a community within which to share. Sadly, many of us privatize our faith rather than share it, largely because we are not sure how to share authentically and respectfully without becoming officious or interfering. But the Christian faith is intended to spread by contagion—though never by coercion. Perhaps our reluctance is due to the fact that we are not quite sure who are the appropriate friends or what are the appropriate circumstances in which to share our faith, or how faith formation might

best be undertaken. Perhaps even among those we consider to be friends there is not a sufficiently strong basis of mutual trust for us to disclose our own vulnerability, uncertainty, doubts, or “little faith.” Obviously we can share faith by the witness of our lives, but sometimes we need to try to put it into words, if only in order to check whether we are as alone as we sometimes feel or whether many other people are also looking for ways to share, just as we are. One of the most saddening realities, for me at least, is to note that many people who actually live in a faith community such as a religious order or congregation, still do not know how, when, or where to share their faith appropriately. Some do, of course; but there are religious sisters, brothers, and clerics who may have lived under the same roof for decades but know less about what sustains or challenges each other’s faith than they know of the superficial habits and scandals of “celebrities”—who they are never likely to meet. I believe that there is an urgent need—both in parochial groups of like-minded people and in religious communities—to create opportunities for faith-sharing, whether around the gospel reading for the upcoming Sunday or on a more systematic basis.

Faith Formation Groups

If a half dozen people were to gather as an intentional faith-sharing group, for between half and three quarters of an hour, each with their own copy of the New Testament (but perhaps in several translations) the procedure might be as follows.³ First, one person would read the gospel passage slowly. Then a short period of silence would follow, during which people visualize and imagine the scene in their own minds, noting the place, the circumstances, the people involved, and the nature of the challenge, rebuke, or encouragement contained in the passage. Then a second person, perhaps with a different translation, would read the same passage again. After another short moment of silence, people would be invited to identify briefly one thing that strikes them, here and now, about the passage.

The first speaker, having finished, would now invite one other specific individual to add another personal reflection or insight that relates to their own current understanding of Jesus' call to faithful discipleship. If that person defers, he or she would then invite another specific individual to share. As each person either speaks or defers, everyone in the group is given an invitation to speak. Then each person who had previously deferred will again be invited and remains free to decline. But when everyone in the group has had an invitation and each person has either spoken or chosen to remain silent, the invitation to speak is again offered to anyone in the group, at which time individuals are free to speak a second time.

But faith-sharing is not a discussion, much less an argument. Each person's contribution stands alone. There is no competitiveness and no attempt at persuasion or changing another person's mind. At the end of an allotted time, the passage may be read for a third time. After another moment of silence, the faith-sharing is concluded. People have shared their own faith and heard other people sharing theirs. Everyone should be enlightened or edified, no one should feel manipulated or browbeaten. And some having now thought of things previously unconsidered, might continue the process by consulting the work of biblical scholars or simply pondering these things in their hearts and hoping to grow in wisdom and grace.

PART I
THEOLOGY, MISSION, AND
CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

Mission

Discerning God's Grand Design

Mission: God's Eternal Activity

The word “mission” is often difficult to pin down. It has been and can be applied to a great variety of subjects—from the “mission” of a multinational corporation or that of a covert operation by US Marines or US Special Forces to the “mission” of the church or the “mission” undertaken by missionary communities. Its use is certainly not limited to a theological context. Today, when so many corporations—from McDonald's or Microsoft to the military—and even individuals claim to have a mission or a mission statement, the currency has become seriously devalued. To help our understanding of this word in the pages that follow, we can start by saying simply that we are looking to understand its *theological* application: how the word throws some light on God (*theos*). Our starting point is both simple and profound: theologically speaking, the subject of mission is, first and foremost, God. We are talking about *God's* mission, long before we begin to talk about the *church's* mission or the mission of any ecclesial institution—and certainly long before we presume to talk personally about “my mission.” The Latin phrase for God's mission is *missio Dei*: “the (eternal) mission of God.” And that is where our reflections will begin. However, we immediately

encounter a problem. How can we possibly say anything enlightening about God? God is eternal and a mystery—and mystery, by definition, is incomprehensible.

The Language of Analogy

The fact that God is mystery has certainly not prevented people from writing innumerable words in the attempt to say something comprehensible about God. But a moment's reflection should remind us that although we imagine that it makes perfect sense to say declaratively, "God is truth/beauty/love," and so on, we don't fully comprehend what we are saying. Whatever we know or learn about truth, love, or beauty is obviously limited by our own personal limitations and finiteness. But God is without any limits at all; God is infinite. So when I say "God is love," what I am really saying, implicitly, is something like this: "God is what *I experience* love to be, or what *I understand, imagine, or believe* love to be—except that God's love is so much greater than that! In fact, it is so much greater than what I know or even imagine as to be utterly different from anything I actually do know or imagine." Saint John simply says that "God *is* love"; and since God is utterly beyond my comprehension, so is the quality of God's love. God's love is inseparable from God's self.

The consequence of the limitations of experience and language is that we must acknowledge that all theological language is no more than an approximation. So God may be somewhat *like* my own poor understanding of mercy, justice, or compassion, but God is so much more as to be *qualitatively* different from my limited perspective. To say "God is like," rather than "God is," is to be transported into the realm of analogy, metaphor, and simile. So can we create some useful *analogies* that would help us to imagine the truly unimaginable God? Can we, specifically, probe more deeply into what God's mission, the *missio Dei* might entail? Fortunately, the answer is a distinctly positive one.

Saint Bonaventure attempted to describe God's activity as *bonum diffusivum sui*, which we might translate as "self-diffusive goodness." Of critical importance, however, this word "diffusive" has a dynamic quality. For example, imagine waking one winter's morning to see the ground covered with snow: the snow is "diffused" right across the countryside. However, this is only part of a dynamic meteorological event—namely, the snowstorm that preceded and caused this widespread diffusion. When we imagine God's "self-diffusive goodness," then, we need to inject into our image the dynamic element: God is the *active agent* causing divine goodness to fill creation and reach into every hidden place—in a similar way to the nocturnal storm that generated the following morning's still and snow-white landscape.

From St. Bonaventure then, we can take the very simple and basic notion that God's activity, God's mission—the *missio Dei*—is dynamic in nature, not static, but also a continuous, never-ending process rather than a single historic event. God's goodness can be understood (by analogy) as God's eternal, dynamic, and sustaining interaction with the whole of creation. And this never-ending aspect of God's mission will become profoundly important to our own attempts to participate in that mission. Nevertheless, Latin tags or aphorisms are not our usual way of thinking or imagining, so it is particularly fortunate for us that in recent decades another analogy—and this time one that is intimately familiar to each of us—has been invoked. Like all analogies, it is less than perfect; but better than most, it does offer us some insight into God's mission. It is usually referred to as the "organic analogy," and it is simply a description of breathing. By analogy then, we suggest that God's mission can be understood rather as we might understand or imagine God's breathing.

A God Who Breathes

We can approach and unpack this analogy rather easily by reminding ourselves that breathing consists of two reciprocal movements:

breathing *out* and breathing *in*. From the first moments of life outside the womb until the final moment of death, both of these activities are required to sustain life itself. It would be ridiculous to instruct one person to breathe out and another to breathe in: each activity is essential and both are necessary as a continuous organic process. The cessation of one marks the end of life. If, then, we can visualize God's mission as rather akin to God's breathing (understanding, however, the rather obvious fact that the divine Creator does not have lungs), how will we distinguish and contrast the characteristic functions associated with breathing out and breathing in, and how will we further describe the dynamic organic activity that together they constitute?

God's "breathing out" can be rather aptly imagined as the dynamic activity expressed in the prayer that begins: "Come, Holy Spirit." It continues, asking God to "Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created, and you will renew the face of the earth." The word mission itself derives from the Latin verb "to send," and is thus related to words like "sending forth." We might then visualize God's dynamic, self-diffusive goodness as God's breathing out, by which God continuously sends forth God's own Spirit of creation. Thus, everything that exists owes its existence to God's creative breath, and nothing continues in existence without God's continuous infusion of God's life-giving Spirit: this is one aspect of God's mission—the *missio Dei*.

Then there is the complementary or reciprocal action: the breathing in. How might we visualize this as God's activity? The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, is one long story of God's breathing out and subsequent breathing in of all humanity and, indeed, all creation. After God has breathed into existence all creation and sent humanity—"co-missioned," we might say—to fill the earth, exercise responsible stewardship, and maintain the covenant relationship with God, things begin to go terribly wrong. Expulsion from Paradise is followed by fratricide (Cain's killing of Abel), the Flood, the tower of Babel, and the interminable warrings and wanderings that

mark the human story. But through it all, God continues to breathe, not only exhaling or breathing out, but “in-spiring” or breathing *in* humanity (and creation), drawing all things together. If we focus on humanity through the ages, then, we can imagine God’s breathing-in as God’s never-ending act of inviting, gathering, including, reconciling, healing, unifying, restoring, and so on. In other words, the whole saga of creation itself and of salvation history unfolds through God’s creative and sustaining breath, the *ru’ach* of God, hinted at in the very beginning of the Bible: “The *ru’ach* of God brooded over the waters,” or “hovered”—that is, invigilated, as a hen patiently and persistently broods her eggs until they crack open and the new life bursts out. God’s Spirit, then, would be like the mother hen remaining on her clutch of eggs and then with her brood until and after they hatch.

God is in perpetual covenant with all of God’s creation—and very explicitly with humanity—and analogies help us visualize the eternal activity of the Trinity, that is, the *missio Dei*. In summary, then, we might say that the word “mission” can serve as a simple, provisional, and easily remembered one-word “job description” for the triunal God acting from all eternity.

Becoming Immersed in the Infinite Mystery of God

We must never forget that God is mystery, and as such is incomprehensible and impenetrable. Nor must we ever forget that ours is a language of metaphor, simile, and analogy only. So we ask whether that is as far as we can go in our understanding of God and God’s eternal mission. There are two possible answers, but both amount to a resounding “No!” We can do much better than simply *imagine* God’s breathing.

The first answer requires that we remember that when we are talking about or studying matters of God (theology = “study of God”), we are in the realm of faith rather than simple empirical fact. Whenever we attempt to say “God is . . .,” we are asserting or

affirming our faith that God exists and that God can in some sense be known. Millions of people in today's secularized world simply do not believe this because they do not find enough empirical evidence, enough brute facts, to support the assertion. But as people of faith, we commit ourselves to the unseen God. Furthermore, we accept the circumstantial evidence of a cloud of witnesses and of what they accept as the revealed word of God written in the Bible or emblazoned on the canvas of the cosmos.

Chicago lies on the edge of Lake Michigan, which is up to 100 miles wide and more than three hundred miles in length. It is possible to stand at a place appropriately called Promontory Point a few miles south of the city, and to look out at this vast lake, which extends across a more-than-two-hundred-degree field of view. So vast is it that it would be literally impossible to drink the lake—to “take it in” or “comprehend” it, so to speak. Having suddenly become aware of that one day many years ago, I returned to my office, contemplating the immensity of the lake and the relative insignificance of myself. But several months later, in high summer I was at the same spot, thinking the same thoughts, when I realized that all around me people were jumping and diving into the lake. Although none of them was able to “take in” Lake Michigan, that immense body was more than able to take in each one of *them*, so that they were immersed and sometimes submerged (but not swallowed up or drowned) within it. It was then that I realized that God can be seen somewhat like the lake and that we are like the swimmers. None of us can, individually or collectively, “take in,” “grasp,” or “comprehend” the Godhead, but each and all of us can become immersed in God without drowning or being absorbed or engulfed. So the first answer would be simply that we can come to a closer experience of God if only we take the risk, or undertake the adventure, of throwing ourselves into God's unfathomable depths, trusting that God will give us buoyancy and life. When we cannot “understand,” we can “stand under”—or in this case take the plunge, in faith, into the immensity of God.

From Analogy to Embodiment

But there is a second (and much, much more satisfying) answer for people of faith. To the question of how best we can come to know God, the answer is quite simple but profound: we do so in and through Jesus. We believe that Jesus is Emmanuel, which means “God is with us”; the Incarnate One of God; God made human, flesh and blood, like each one of us; God who is no longer distant but very close; God come down to earth, down to my level, down to eye level. So the God, Creator and Spirit, whom we cannot comprehend, is “translated” for us into our language and our world and our level of understanding, in the person of Jesus. Jesus is, in other words, the eternal mission of God, but now on earth, among us, one of us—in fact, actually comprehensible. This is the stupendous truth of the incarnation for people of faith. And because of it we can now begin to say that we indeed understand something of the mission of God, because Jesus is it—in the flesh, in human history, in a specific physical and cultural form.

Yet the very night before he dies, it is quite clear that his essential message has not been grasped, when Philip says—astonishingly, given the lateness of the hour—“Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied. And Jesus surely with equal astonishment at Philip’s incomprehension, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:8-9). And in the course of his final instruction Jesus puts his whole life’s work into context: “I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15). But this should not have been news to his disciples; long before, he had intimated and expressed his relationship with the one he called *Abba*, the one whom he identified as having sent or “missioned” him. “My father has been working until now and I am now working” (John 5:17, my translation). “I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of [the One] who sent [missioned] me” (John 6:38). “I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and

what to speak” (John 12:49). He could hardly have been clearer in showing his identification with his *Abba’s* will. And of course, when he taught his disciples to pray, he had explicitly told them to pray that “[God’s] will [may] be done, / on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10), indicating that the eternal mission of the Trinity and the mission of Jesus were essentially one, and that it broke through eternity and entered historical time.

Evangelization: The Earthly Ministry of Jesus

The easiest way to distinguish the mission of the eternal Trinity and that of the historical Jesus (although there is no radical break or opposition between them) is to understand that the former exists throughout eternity while the latter unfolded in historic time, in and around Palestine, approximately two thousand years ago. In essence it extended over no more than three years, and many contemporary scholars suggest an even shorter period. But Jesus was now making explicit God’s eternal mission for a culturally, religiously, and intellectually specific (and limited) audience, in such a way that ordinary people could now understand—assuming, of course, their attentiveness and willingness to be converted. Matthew’s gospel quotes Isaiah and applies his words to the ministry of Jesus: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; / I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world” (Matt 13:35). Nevertheless, many people proved to be hard of hearing and slow to accept—or positively resistant to—his message, including the Twelve on numerous occasions. But sometimes other people—“God-fearers,” that is, Gentiles who worshiped the God of Israel—would astonish Jesus himself with their reactions and the depth of their faith in him and his message, putting some of the Twelve to shame and at the same time demonstrating the comprehensibility and accessibility of his message.

If the word “mission” can serve as a kind of shorthand description for the eternal and dynamic activity of the holy Trinity, the very subject of mission, then the word “evangelization” can do similar

duty as a one-word “job description” of the historical and dynamic activity of the Incarnate One of God: Jesus of Nazareth. It embraces his whole life’s work, and we will explore the details in the next chapter. But before we do that, we ought at least to identify the nature of discipleship and indicate its relationship to mission and evangelization, since discipleship is not only the focus of these pages but must be rooted in something beyond itself—the eternal mission of the Trinity.

Discipleship: Our Life’s Commitment

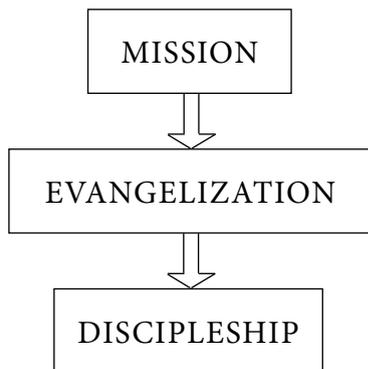
When the ragtag group of disciples finally reconvened after the resurrection, having moved (not for the first time) from astonishment and shock at the sight of the risen Jesus to acceptance of the fact that he would leave them yet again as he ascended to his *Abba*, they would finally grow up rapidly as a result of the Pentecost experience. At that time, as promised, Jesus re-sent the Spirit to be companion, advocate, guide and inspiration to all of them throughout a future without his own physical presence as the historical Jesus.

Jesus had spent his public life tirelessly putting the “zing” into his “evangelizing,” his dynamic presentation and incarnation of the Good News. He preached to and healed people as far and wide as his journeys and encounters took him. But in the process he hand-picked some to be more intimate companions and confidants. It would soon become apparent that these—whom he called “apostles”—were, albeit slowly and with many mistakes, learning what he wanted of them. In turn many others, both within and beyond the religious tradition of Jesus, demonstrated that they understood the nature of discipleship and some of its cost—and often better than Jesus’ inner circle. But one thing was of absolutely paramount importance to Jesus—namely, that he leave behind as many witnesses as possible: people who had absorbed or were gradually absorbing his theology, philosophy, and compassion, and would continue to live it by their words and the witness of their lives. These disciples would become his “witnesses throughout the world”

(cf. Acts 1:8) and ensure that his life-giving message of hope and salvation reached beyond the confines of his own ministry, limited as it was by time and geography. Ultimately, they would indeed reach the ends of the earth.

So what, henceforth, would be the specific “mission” of the disciples? First, to have learned from Jesus himself (or later, from those he had taught) and absorbed his inclusive and revolutionary message of love and reconciliation; and second, to go forward in his name, whether in their own neighborhoods or further afield, but always with some of his own urgency and dynamism.

Figure 1



The Integration of Mission, Evangelization, and Discipleship

Having suggested that we can appreciate God’s mission if we understand mission itself as a way of describing the eternal and dynamic activity of the Trinity, and that the best way to understand evangelization is as a description of the way Jesus embodies, incarnates, and lives out this mission on earth, we can now describe discipleship as the life’s work of all those who are baptized and then confirmed in their baptism as they are both called and sent in the name of Jesus himself. Discipleship, then, is a one-word job description—for disciples, called and sent by Jesus. And since Jesus is totally

committed to his *Abba* and the Holy Spirit who sent him, it is easy to see that “mission” and “evangelization” are intimately linked, as a root and its shoot (and indeed its fruit, as it continues to bear fruit age after age). When this happens we can say that when and if each disciple truly strives to do what Jesus did, then each disciple participates in the evangelizing mission of Jesus and, as Jesus says, continues to bear much fruit (see John 15:5). In other words, authentic discipleship is actually a participation in the ministry of Jesus and the mission of the eternal Trinity. In this way, mission, evangelization, and discipleship are intimately linked as God’s mission continues on earth, down through the years and centuries, through the commitment of all who have learned from Jesus the Teacher and who go forth in his name rather than on their own recognizance.

What we must now do is return to the mission of Jesus as expressed in his evangelizing ministry, and look more closely at exactly what it entails so that we who presume or desire to be today’s disciples will understand what we are called and committed to do. In this way may we avoid the danger of trying to create our own “mission statements” as if we were the initiators and executors of the mission. We are, each and all, *responders* to the initiative of Jesus. We are instruments of the wider mission, the *missio Dei*. As such, today’s Christians are called to be authentic disciples of Jesus and live for his kingdom, the realm of God. How, specifically, we undertake this is the topic of the next chapter.

In summary, if we begin with God the Trinity as the subject of “mission,” then we need to say that “God’s mission has a church” rather than that “the church has the mission.” After all, God’s missionary activity has existed since the beginning, and the church is only two thousand years old. God managed without the church, for aeons. The church is the *instrument* of God’s mission, not its originator or principal. Likewise, religious orders, dioceses, and parishes do not have the mission. They too are instruments. God managed somehow without Benedictines or Dominicans, Jesuits and the rest, for much of human history. And God can manage quite well without

them in the future. They are *contingently* necessary, not *absolutely* necessary, and their respective responsibility is to serve and remain faithful to God's mission. But, finally, the mission has each one of us; we do not have the mission. So we do not need to be immortal, and we can pass away in peace when the time comes, if we have tried to be faithful. God, who called each of us, does and will continue to call others to discipleship and faithfulness to the mission.

Chicago's Archbishop Blase Cupich describes the relationship I have attempted to articulate:

From the very beginning, God has been with us. . . . We have come to know that God is only fully revealed in Jesus, who is God with us to the point that he is like us. But it does not end there. God is so much a part of our lives that the Father and the Son invite us to join in their work of redemption. We do so not as hired hands but as true children, as fully adopted children of God, who through the Spirit of Jesus are able to call God "*Abba, Father*" as Jesus did. . . . God, in effect, placed history in our hands by commissioning us to continue the creation he began. In the great commission to the disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel . . . , Jesus completes what was foreshadowed in Genesis. There he sends us as disciples to be responsible for how history will unfold, completing his work of creation and redemption.¹