

Reflections on Mike Breen’s “Why the Missional Movement Will Fail”

Original article and link to second article: <http://www.vergenetwork.org/2011/09/14/mike-breen-why-the-missional-movement-will-fail/>

Link to this post at The Enabled Life: <https://theenabledlife.wordpress.com/2015/09/16/reflections-on-mike-breens-article-why-the-missional-movement-will-fail/>

I’d like the opportunity to share some observations after reading through Mike Breen’s two articles. I don’t have any visibility about an ongoing conversation among this group; I am blindly jumping in hoping to bring some food for thought. I think the article is a good reference point around which to focus our discussion.

Preliminaries

In a conversation like this where there are consequential issues at stake, I like to keep two things in mind which are at tension with each other. The first is to extend brotherly kindness and respect to the other parties who are expressing their ideas and opinions. The second consideration is taking the freedom to clearly evaluate and assess those ideas and opinions. In a written statement like I am undertaking here, the tone might be mistaken as accusatory and judgmental because it’s direct and analytical. One way to compare what I am getting at is that you don’t think a dentist is accusatory when he looks in your mouth and says “You have a cavity in that tooth. We need to do something about that.” He’s not being unkind or condemning. He is making an assessment and plainly stating the facts as he sees them. I seek to exercise that same freedom of expression coupled with genuine respect. Enough on the preliminaries?

Mike Breen’s Article

Ryan McKee sent me the link to Breen’s article because it has been the source of some recent discussions among your group. I read through Mike Breen’s two articles several times seeking to understand his emphasis and what he is suggesting. What I observed is his use of some common terms and phrases in a manner that I think deserve some further definition.

Here’s my opening statement of what I see as a major problem: Mike is using common terms and phrases that are not clearly defined. The terms I want to discuss:

- Disciple
- Discipleship
- gospel

and phrases such as:

- “learn to do what Jesus could do”
- “To be a disciple is to be a missionary”
- The “fruit of our lives”
- “we need to be reflective about whether we’re good at the things Jesus could do”

Same Words, Different Meanings

I just stated the problem: using words and phrases in conversation that can have different meanings. Let me take the next step and express what I see as a result of unclear definition. We may be conversing together thinking we are in agreement because we are using the same words. I contend that unless we dig down a bit, behind the meaning of the words, and forge an agreement on the meaning of terms, we can't think clearly about how to take action together.

Opening Statement of Concerns

With that preamble, let me lay on the table my main concern with Mike Breen's perspective and why I think that using his ideas as a basis for consideration of how to make meaningful progress for our church body are flawed. I'll do this by quoting Mike from his articles and offering my comments. Time to put on our big boy pants!

Attempting to Summarize Breen's Vision

He states "...the God of mission sent his Son as the great rescuer and we are to imitate him." This particular grid envisions Jesus as one sent on a mission to rescue men. When Breen says that we are to imitate him, I think this idea gets at what I see as Mike's basic premise for forming his strategy for discipleship. It's the grid that underlies the concepts Mike shares in his two articles. It's the grid that influences and drives his definition of the Gospel. Or maybe, it's his flawed idea about the Gospel that has influenced his strategy, grid, and definition of discipleship. I think it's the latter.

The first tip off to me was Mike's early statement on page one of his first post: "So what is the engine of the church? Discipleship." I think something is more fundamentally "the engine" of the church: the message that is preached (and there's a LOT to say about that!).

A Weak Idea of Disciples and Discipleship from a flawed vision of the Gospel

Mike Breen offers some clear assessments of the challenges of making disciples. I have issue with how he shapes his vision for where we would end up if we follow his suggestions. I believe (strongly) that using his grid as the map for pursuing the Great Commission will result in a journey that takes us far from what Jesus had in mind when he told us to "go, and in the going, make disciples".

On page three of Mike's article in the section "Missions Devoid of Discipleship", he presents these questions to be asked by church leadership:

- Do I know how to disciple people who can then disciple people who then disciple people, etc? (i.e. does my discipleship plan work?)
- Does our discipleship plan naturally lead all disciples to become missionaries? (not just the elite, Delta-seal missional experts)

This section gets after the main mis-direction I see from Breen. He is focusing his definition of disciple on the replication process and not upon the apprenticeship-to-Jesus. Mike's emphasis here is on the "outward" part of apprenticeship, indicated by the choice of his words. We don't "disciple people who can then disciple people", we disciple people who then becomes disciples of Jesus as their teacher and HE puts His plan to work in their lives. Our plan isn't to create missionaries, it's to lead people into easy obedience to Jesus as their master, learning how to live life in the Kingdom as His apprentices.

Breen mentions Dallas Willard's two questions, 'What is our plan for making disciples?' and, 'Does our plan work?' Nowhere does Breen mention Dallas's consistent emphasis on the *gospel we preach* as being an even more fundamental question. This point is a fundamental issue because our definition of the Gospel directs our imaginations for what discipleship to that gospel practically looks like. Willard has written extensively on this topic for decades and produced a body of work that has received widespread recognition, including Christianity Today's 'Book of the Year' award in 1999 for his Divine Conspiracy. A few years later he wrote The Great Omission from the Great Commission, which focused upon just the kinds of issues we are discussing here.

Here's specifically the questions that Willard asks, quoted from Divine Conspiracy on page 58:

- Does the gospel I preach and teach have a natural tendency to cause people who hear it to become full-time students of Jesus?
- Would those who believe it become his apprentices as a natural "next step"?
- What can we reasonably expect would result from people actually believing the substance of my message?

You might note here that Breen's questions are focused upon the "plan". Willard's questions are focused upon the message of the gospel. I contend that the gospel message is the source of the plan for discipleship. We need to start there to get the plan.

A mis-statement of discipleship - On page four Mike writes "Discipleship is the process of becoming who Jesus would be if he were you." This is so close to Dallas Willard's definition as to be easy to mistake the mis-emphasis of this statement. We aren't seeking to "become who Jesus would be if he were me" in some kind of transcendent imputation of His being (a hypostatic union?). We are seeking to "live our lives as Jesus would live it if he were I" to accurately quote Willard. It's OUR life that WE are leading. When you put the emphasis on "becoming who Jesus would be", the sanctity of my life and the dignity that God gives to each of us is marginalized in an effort to pursue a misshapen vision of transformation. This difference of emphasis by Breen is significant because it plays out in the substance of our daily lives and points to a different vision of discipleship as its fulfillment.

Page 5 – "To be a disciple is to be a missionary. Jesus made disciples and he sent them out as missionaries while discipling them". This is a narrow definition of a disciple that seems to me to focus on outward activity (more on this below). This statement correlates closely with the explanation that Dallas Willard presented in the opening paragraphs of his Discipleship article

for the Oxford Dictionary of Theology (which I posted and outlined in an earlier blog entry). The Navigators identified three categories of Christians: ordinary Christians, Disciples who were training and seeking to make converts, and Workers who were training disciples. The Navigator organization has made changes in the past decade away from using those categories. What this statement by Mike Breen clearly displays is his vision for what a disciple looks like – someone who is doing missionary activities and being trained by Jesus to do those activities. He does not attempt to balance his statement here with any mention of relationship to Jesus as our master and teacher in the process of learning to participate in life in the Kingdom.

A pause here for recognition that Breen includes some statements in his article that seem to indicate his awareness of “discipling cultures” and “missional cultures” and the character/competency polarity that he describes. I think his descriptions of the tensions are helpful. The point I am making here by recounting his statements is that when he moves to making suggestions for direction and vision, he appears to me to default to an emphasis that does NOT represent a balance of the tensions that he describes. Even though Breen mentions the tension elsewhere in his article, I think he falls short of offering a well-balanced vision. In summary, he may have a helpful description of parts of the problem but the solution he offers is flawed.

In counterpoint to Breen’s statement that “Discipleship is the process of becoming who Jesus would be if he were you”, Dallas has this vision to offer:

“The apprentices of Jesus are primarily occupied with the positive good that can be done during their days “under the sun” and the positive strengths and virtues that they develop in themselves as they grow toward “the kingdom prepared for them from the foundations of the world” (Matt. 25:34). What they, and God, get out of their lifetime is chiefly the person they become. And that is why their real life is so important.

The cultivation of oneself, one’s family, one’s workplace and community – especially the community of believers – thus becomes the center of focus for the apprentice’s joint life with his or her teacher. It is with this entire context in view that we most richly and accurately speak of “learning from him how to lead my life as he would lead my life if he were I.” page 285, Divine Conspiracy

I don’t pick up from Mike’s two articles this depth of vision for the inner transformation as an apprentice to Jesus. Mike’s over-emphasis on the doing leads us into the second major area of concern I have with his vision. The next section seeks to pull statements from the article that belie Mike’s underlying view of discipleship.

Balancing the Tension of the Inward and Outward Journeys

“Fruit” – Inward or Outward? (or both?)

The ‘fruit’ for him is the ‘doing’ of making converts. This is a common notion among evangelicals. The categories I mentioned earlier used by the Navigator organization are a clear example. Mike Breen does mention the inward movement (his helpful use of the high/low

categories in the diagram on page seven), but then he defaults back to the perspective that 'mission' is focused upon doing to the almost exclusion of being. He might defend his position if he were involved in the discussion; but it's clear from the flow of his two articles and the repeated mention that his focus is upon 'fruit' as being the production of converts, not the inner growth in grace and interactive relationship with the Holy Spirit as our teacher. His telos is on outward productivity, not inner transformation. These two concerns are hard to hold in tension without the underlying concept that Jesus can function as our individual personal teacher and manage the joint process of the inward and outward journeys into Christlikeness.

On page 4 Breen defines disciples as "people who LEARN to be like Jesus and learn to *do what Jesus could do*." (and that phrase, "what Jesus could do", is repeated three times!) This is plain enough on the face but there are parts of this statement that beg further inquiry. What does "like Jesus" and "*do what Jesus could do*" mean here? Mike seems to be moving toward an answer that points to "Jesus being missional". I think he's missing the deeper issues.

Simply, Breen is focused on "activities that produce converts who go on to produce other converts" with very little notion about the inner transformation that is necessary to be able to effectively share the reality of Kingdom living in our daily lives.

His further explanations on page four illuminate what he means: "...people who were able to do the things we read Jesus doing in the Gospels." What things? He introduces "fruit" here by stating "I don't think this is the kind of 'fruit' Jesus was referring to when he talked about fruitfulness in John 15. Would those kinds of people change the world like the early church did?" He is making comparison with current church people who are 'nice' but aren't displaying missional activities that would change the world. It appears clear to me that Breen is using missional activities with the term 'fruit' and with "the things we read Jesus doing", along with "changing the world like the early church did".

Here a clear alternative vision from Dallas Willard:

"If you don't have the people who are living naturally and easily in the things that Jesus taught both positive and negative, (because you know it isn't about just not doing the wrong thing, it's basically about doing the right thing) and easily living in a world in which honesty and love for neighbor and where you care for other people effectively, you are able to witness to others in a way that is natural and effective because it comes out of a life that is real. That is outreach. And if that's not there, all of the other efforts at outreach may do some good, may get some people into heaven (and that's not small) but it won't get heaven into many people because the reality is lacking." Section begins at 16:25 on the sermon "Planning for Spiritual Formation in the Local Church." (this recording is posted along with a description in the next post).

"There are all kinds of details. But if you have spiritual formation of disciples into the likeness of the inner life of Christ, if that is your center, everything else will take care of itself. If you don't have that as your center, nothing else will take care of itself. It really won't matter that much what your arrangements are if you don't have that as the center." 19:21 on the sermon "Planning for Spiritual Formation in the Local Church."

“The great omission from the Great Commission is not having a plan to teach disciples in a way that they naturally obey. They have been changed in their will, they have been changed in the other parts of their character so when they think of dealing with their enemy their natural response is love. You become a person who would love your enemy. That’s an evening’s discourse in itself. You can learn to love your enemies by going through a process of change in your thoughts and your bodily habits and so on. And if you don’t learn and you try to use will power you won’t succeed. And it will make a Pharisee of you because you now believe it’s very important. Remember what Jesus said in Luke “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” You know, you’ve got to be fair to the Pharisee. They’re concerned about a good thing but they believe in will power and they can’t do it, so they retreat to hypocrisy.”

34:48 on the sermon “Planning for Spiritual Formation in the Local Church.”

“You have to remember that the most effective form of outreach has always been transformed people. That has always been true in every age of the church, that it’s transformed people that touch other lives and understand the goodness of being Christ-like and the availability of that. And they say “I must have this.” They may not even say it consciously but they are drawn to it. As a result, transformed lives occur.”

55:37 on the sermon “Planning for Spiritual Formation in the Local Church.”

This is clearly a vision for discipleship that’s on a different trajectory from what Mike Breen is describing. When Dallas Willard is using the phrase “into the likeness of the inner life of Christ” he is pointing toward something much different than what Mike Breen seems to indicate from his “learn to be like Jesus” language.

The challenge for our discussion here is that participants can refer easily to Breen’s article and locate his ideas. They may not be familiar with Willard’s perspectives and definitions. I hope to bring some of those ideas into our discussion. Stay tuned!