

CULTURAL DISCIPLESHIP AND THE TOTAL CLAIMS OF CHRIST

Joseph Boot

APOLOGIST AND PHILOSOPHER JOSEPH BOOT EXPLAINS THE INESCAPABLE NATURE OF DISCIPLESHIP, AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE FORMATION OF CULTURE.

THE INEVITABILITY OF DISCIPLESHIP

Discipleship is a common theme in evangelicalism. The word itself certainly has a biblical provenance, with Christ himself endorsing and participating in the discipling relationship with twelve close followers. Discipleship was entrusted to the church in our Lord's last incarnate words of the Great Commission, to 'make disciples of all the nations' (Matthew 28:19). Many believers throughout history have discerned a multiplicity of truths and implications from the biblical references to discipleship. And while discipleship is typically depicted as a positive practice or relationship, we also recognize the importance of doing it well - we want to be disciplined in a certain direction, by a person whose life, character, and worldview align with what we want for ourselves. And when we speak of doing

anything well, we are acknowledging the possibility of doing it poorly. Another way to put this is that discipleship is an inescapable concept. All of us are being actively disciplined at every moment by someone; it only remains to be established whether that discipleship process is inclined in a God-honouring, or a God-dishonouring direction.

For nearly two decades, I've been privileged to serve as President of the Ezra Institute, an evangelical think-tank and worldview training organization I founded based on the observation that opposition and objection against the Christian faith were increasingly being framed in cultural, civilizational, and political terms. The Ezra Institute was envisioned as a biblical response to a deep crisis in Western culture that had decisively impacted the church; a crisis rooted in the widespread loss of a comprehensive gospel, a distinctly scriptural worldview, and ultimately a failure to recognize the religious root of all human life and thought - from education and law, to politics, medicine, art and science. In short, godless discipleship has been doing its work for several generations, and such a loss requires the constructive recovery

of a full-orbed gospel and cultural apologetic capable of confronting systematic unbelief with systematic belief in every sphere of life.

GRASSROOTS REFORMATION

Consequently, from its founding, the Ezra Institute has operated from the foundational assertion that Christ-centred cultural reformation, beginning with God's own people, is an urgent necessity in our age, because the organs and institutions of Western cultural life have been thoroughly saturated by humanistic and increasingly pagan assumptions. These assumptions lie at the roots of all human actions and institutions, and like roots they are often hidden underground, unspoken and sometimes even unconsciously held, yet they nourish and shape all of our outward activities. In our time, a resurgence of pagan and humanistic religious presuppositions has steadily brought about efforts to redefine the norms of our cultural institutions, unleashing real evils, and enchaining Western society in a radical opposition to Christ and the freedom and hope brought by the gospel.

As just one ready example, consider the increasingly prominent question of human sexuality. Our perspective on this question stems from the way that we answer more basic questions, such as 'what is a human being?' If we believe that human beings are the result of billions of years of random mutation, adaptation and evolutionary processes, then that belief will find expression in the way that we understand ourselves, our desires, and our responsibilities towards our fellow man. If, on the other hand, human beings are a unique creation of a loving and personal God, made in his image and intended to be in a covenantal relationship with him, then we will answer those same questions about ethics, responsibilities, and sexual relationships in a very different way from the evolutionist.

FOR THE CHURCH

The story of the Ezra Institute's founding and ongoing activity must include the unpleasant reality that the Christian church herself has not escaped the influence of resurgent humanism and paganism in our secularized society and has often been complicit in advancing, by silence or surrender, slavery to sin - enabling unrighteous laws, corrupted education, sinful political practices, evil social behaviour, debased art and a moribund cultural direction to persist. The theologically compromised urge to synthesize Christianity with other

worldviews has led to a pervasive privatization and truncation of the gospel so that the witness of the church to the world-renewing reign of Christ and his kingdom has been largely eclipsed. The result has been a radical de-Christianization of culture and the predictable decline of our civilization. This has brought the Western world to a widely acknowledged point of existential confusion, spiritual rootlessness and socio-political inanity.

We should not be surprised by this state of affairs. From the standpoint of scriptural revelation, truly Christian thinking must be concerned first and foremost with Jesus Christ, following him, and having his Word dwell and abide in us by his Spirit. But submitting oneself to being a humble follower doesn't come easily to anyone - especially professional thinkers. The human inclination is always toward autonomy, preferring to live the illusion that we can legislate for ourselves. We are an age living in rebellion, and to be a king without a country in the rootless despair of defiance seems preferable than submission to a sovereign Lord. Being a professing Christian in the church does not entirely remove the temptation or inclination to strike out alone and follow our own desires, living by our own priorities and setting to one side the awesome and all-consuming

call to be a disciple of Christ; to come and die in order to truly live. Yet this is precisely what Christ calls us to. Being a 'living sacrifice' sounds excruciating and involves a transformation of the mind, which implies the pain and suffering of rejection by a world conformed, in the final analysis, to a very different spirit. But the divine midwife insists this is the only way. We must be reborn, transformed and given a new heart, a new mind.

As Christians we may claim to follow Christ, but the lifelong challenge in developing a truly Christian mindset requires regularly asking ourselves if we have followed him far enough. Have we been to the Jordan and seen the dove descending, but hung back from the mountain to avoid his exposition of the law and radical insistence that only those who teach that law can be great in the Kingdom? Have we fallen asleep in pious satisfaction at the gates of Gethsemane, or lingered from a safe distance at Golgotha, never making it to the slopes of Olivet or to the Upper Room in Jerusalem with the dancing flames of fire? Is it possible that we are not yet Christian enough? It is all too easy to follow Christ only as far as is convenient, till the tarrying is just too tiring. If we only follow him part-way, then we are uninvolved in key aspects of the drama and miss the significance of God's full act in history.



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In a hostile context, the temptation is to follow him just as far as culture and fine feeling permits. When the storm rises and dread grips us is precisely the time we are called to step out of the boat and walk upon the Word - despite the wind and waves of the world's antagonism. We must not suddenly become hard of hearing. And if we will not hear that Word over the inimical clamour of idolatry, we certainly cannot then speak it. If our cultural moment is allowed to determine how far we follow Christ, then we cannot follow him at all. We may perhaps hear hosannas from a distance, but we won't be found stammering with the doubter, 'My Lord and my God!' We may even be permitted by our age to stand near the wooden cross of a brave martyr or a moral teacher, but not upon the mountain of ascension with the ruler of the kings of the earth.

The entire work of Christ in all his offices must become contemporaneous with us if we would truly be transformed by the renewing of our minds. It is not sufficient to appreciate Christ washing Simon Peter's feet at the last supper as a model of service if we refuse to see him, let alone join him, where the bloodied Stephen saw him - exalted in heavenly places, standing up from his seat of total authority at God's right hand. Unambiguously, we must see him as priest on the road to Calvary, but we must also recognize him on the footpath to Emmaus as resurrected Lord, the gardener of creation among Arimathea's roses, if we are to truly follow Christ and know the renewal of our minds.

GOSPEL CULTURE

The vision of the Ezra Institute is thus a vision for cultural reformation. Through a distinctly Christian philosophy, cultural apologetic, and biblical worldview teaching, we are working to bring all human thought and action under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and his Word, re-forming a comprehensive faith that applies to all of life, recovering and exploring the scriptural framework of a Christian mind and social order.

Jesus called us to disciple the nations in everything that he had commanded: an all-encompassing, world-changing discipleship. At the Ezra Institute we refer to this as gospel culture. Culture

is properly understood as the public manifestation of the worship of a people, or externalized religion. It is the concrete outworking of what any society believes is the ultimate origin, purpose and meaning of life, expressed in laws, arts, education, medicine, economics, church, farming, and many other areas of life.

The expression 'gospel culture' is a recognition that there is a particular vision of culture implicit in the Christian gospel—indeed, the gospel is a culture, because it is centred on the worship of the living God, through Jesus Christ, and the enthronement of Christ as Lord over the heart, mind, soul and strength of every believer. That the gospel forms a new culture is thus an inescapable deduction from the meaning of both terms. If culture is the public expression of the worship of a people, and the gospel restores man to true worship (i.e. of the Creator, not the creation), then the gospel restores man to true culture.

Paul tells us in Romans 1 that in the final analysis there are only two types of worship. The worship of the creator (Christ), or the worship of the creature (something created). When a person turns to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith they are made new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17), their hearts being redirected towards true worship. This radical redirection necessarily means the re-creation of true culture, which the Bible calls the kingdom of God. Both the challenge and the joy of being a Christian is that we are inescapably part of this gospel culture and, though against stiff spiritual opposition, we have the privilege of being called by the Lord to be co-workers in the reconciliation of all things to God, '...for from him and through him and to him are all things...' (Romans 11:36).

INFORMING FAITH

To this end we work to equip current and emerging Christian cultural leaders with a biblical worldview, Christian philosophy and cultural apologetics studies through residential training programmes and print and digital resources.

Our aim is that God's kingdom people become a reservoir of strength out of which successive generations of church

and cultural leaders will emerge, able to formulate, articulate and credibly defend a truly scriptural view of life as the sole source of truth, freedom and beauty, thereby shaping the future to the glory of God (Philippians 1:7; Colossians 1:15-20).

The accommodation of the Christian mind to the ever-changing whims of society takes the bread whose flour is eternal and reduces it to play dough for children, devoid of nutritional value and molded to the petty preferences of a superficial and malnourished generation. But Christ will not be reduced to a part-time waiter, satisfied with bringing out whatever the customer demands. Neither is the baker answerable to the dough; the Bread of Life is indeed available without money, but not without cost, and only on his terms.

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JESUS, ALL FOR JESUS

Jenifer Atkinson & Robin Mark

Jesus, all for Jesus;
All I am and have and ever hope to be.
Jesus, all for Jesus;
All I am and have and ever hope to be.

All of my ambitions, hopes and plans,
I surrender these into your hands.
All of my ambitions, hopes and plans
I surrender these into your hands.

*For its only in your will that I am free
For its only in your will that I am free.*