

# Discipleship: The priority of the 'Kingdom and his righteousness'

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Discipleship has almost vanished from normal church conversations. I will argue in this article that this is for more than one reason, but may be, because we have for some or other illogical reason, equated confrontational evangelism with disciple making. Or maybe even closer to the Afrikaans-speaking home: It is just too radical for denominations that, even more than 20 years into a democratic society, still prefer the 'convenience' of a culturally constituted and dominated local church. This article will dare to move even further by not only taking the rediscovery of this costly concept and ministry as happening, but also searching for what it means for disciples to 'seek the Kingdom and his righteousness' (Mt 6:33). The background to my research problem and question is that 'we' can just not afford that people, because of the church, not being serious about herself, turn away from the church – but turn to God: 'Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God' (Lenny Bruce †1966). This is just not normal.

## Introduction

I do not take the invitation to contribute in a *Festschrift* for Prof. Yolanda Dreyer as for granted. I consider this a special privilege and, in that spirit, humbly accepted the invitation. I know Yolanda Dreyer for many years already and only have good memories of friendship, academic and professional cooperation. We could work together in the Department of Practical Theology, University of Pretoria, for the best part of 23 years. She took over teaching in two of my subject fields before I retired from graduate teaching, namely, Faith Development and Youth Ministry. We are still working together in a research group for Faith Development and Youth Ministry. At the time of writing, we co-lead the PhD work of a student in Kenya. We also served in the Executive of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa for many years. As recently as 2015 and 2016, she was part of a local steering committee, organising the biennial conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology and, in 2016, the Third Joint Conference of all Academic Societies for Religion and Theology in Southern Africa, a cooperation that I deeply appreciated. We also served in the Editorial Committee for the 2017 publication of the International Academy of Practical Theology.

Whenever I had the opportunity to listen to her as academic I was impressed by how well prepared she was and how 'well-worded' her presentations were. She is indeed a good academic and an articulate and coherent communicator.

My reason for writing this contribution in English is because it is, in a sense, a follow-up on two articles already published (in English) as part of my current research interest, namely, discipleship and the importance thereof in developing a missional congregation, and, as such, important in youth ministry – youth being an integral part of such a developing missional congregation.

The research questions I am challenged with are the following:

- My observation whether within the missional conversation, discipleship and especially discipling (as often referred to) are comprehensively dealt with?
- My deep conviction that we are struggling to be a blessing to the world because we have confused (and even equated) confrontational evangelism and (with) discipling? And now we are not doing anyone of the two!
- Whether we have shallowed the concept, and with it membership of congregations, to become a culturally safe and comfortable belonging to a community of the 'same'?
- Whether we are willing to be serious enough about the cost of discipleship, so much so that we do what the priority for disciples is – seeking the 'kingdom and his righteousness' (Mt 6:33) (NIV)?

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In this first article of two, I will focus on what disciples seek, exploring the meaning of the 'Kingdom and his righteousness', while in the second one the focus will be on the church seeking this and what 'seeking' might entail. I have tried to argue a case in seeking some answers as to the first two research questions in two previous articles – with a specific emphasis within youth ministry (cf. Nel 2009b; 2015a). In my book (2015b:186–201), I offered a congregational development perspective and these two articles will do so too, never losing sight of the fact that youth are an integral part of the faith community. As it is to be expected when continuing with research on a specific theme, some material, previously explored, applies here too.

## Discipleship as a challenge

My purpose in this section is to briefly show something of the complexity of this research problem and question(s). Several readings and situations played in on my deep awareness of the problem(s).

A remark by Volf (2015:26) reminded me again of the serious nature of the situation when it comes to the calling of the church – and as referred to in the Abstract:

As it travels in time and space, the Christian faith needs regular realignments with its own deeper truth; such realignments are termed reformations. Christians, too, and not just their convictions, will need to keep realigning themselves to the authentic versions of their faith; these realignments are termed renewals. I exhort us as Christians to reform and renew our faith so as to lead lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called. If we don't, the Christian faith may well turn out to be a curse to the world rather than a source of blessing – an embodiment of the fall into the temptation to live by bread alone rather than a means of resisting it, a faith insufferably self-righteous and arrogantly imposing itself on others to control and subdue them, a source of strife over worldly goods rather than a wellspring of confident humility, creative generosity, and just peace. (Eph 4:1)

A second impetus for this article comes from my time, for 5 months in the US on a study tour and for 4 months as a visiting scholar at the Princeton Theological Seminary. It so happened that I was in the US before, during and for some 4 months after the 2016 presidential election. I could cry with Christians who could not and still cannot understand what happened. And I could be surprised by how some other Christians rejoiced, deeply convinced that 'this was and is from the Lord'. What then is right and how do we Christians, followers, disciples of Christ discern and seek the Kingdom and his righteousness?

How challenging discipleship and disciple making are is described in a very unique way by Willimon (1999:91–103), concerning youth ministry in a postmodern world and making young disciples today. He tells a story on how he preached one Sunday morning in the chapel on the campus of Duke University on the so-called rich young man. He prayed by himself for himself, as he was preaching, not to try and make this 'tragedy, that ends in sadness' acceptable: 'please

preserve me from trying to smooth this thing out for them'. He just told the story and ended by Jesus saying something to the effect: 'It just cannot be done. You cannot save rich people. But then, you know, with God anything is possible'. The next morning in the cafeteria, the Dean of the Divinity School and the Chair of the Department of Religion all commented and on how the whole service was 'just down', blaming it on the choir and music. Until a student came by and shared how the sermon touched him and helped him, saved his life – Willimon realising: he got it. Discipleship is not having all the answers. It is to be called into a relationship with the Christ. It is to *know* him, not necessarily *understand* him (yet). 'What he said was, "Follow Me." Get on board with it. It is a movement, people. Join up ... Christian faith is depicted as a journey, and you are dumb at the beginning of the journey. A lot of times you are even dumber at the end of the journey' (Willimon 1999:94; cf. also Jones 1986:45–59). This is not to ignore that missiologists over the years have stressed the notion of disciple making too. In 1999 already the well-known missiologist, Roger Greenway, published his 'Introduction to Christian Missions' under the title *Go and Make Disciples*. This is indeed an obvious emphasis in the literature within the missional conversation. In a book on five views in [this] conversation, Stetzer (2016:91–116) wrote on a view he calls 'An Evangelical Kingdom Community Approach'. He summarises this view as 'God's people are to participate in the divine mission to manifest and advance God's kingdom on earth through the means of sharing and showing that gospel of the kingdom in Jesus Christ' (Stetzer 2016:92).

Discipleship is learning from the One who called us to join Him on this journey; called us to learn, on this journey, how to live life in the Kingdom and seek 'his righteousness' (Mt 6:33) as the priority in life. In a book edited by Dorothy Bass (2010, 2nd ed.), the subtitle captures this notion so well: 'A way of life for a searching people'.

## Seeking the Kingdom of God or Heaven and his righteousness

According to the gospel of Matthew, 'seeking the Kingdom and his righteousness' is a priority for disciples. The direct context of the well-known verse (Mt 6:19–34) is an interesting one. The meaning is carried by two messages: 'Treasures in Heaven' (6:19–24) and 'Do not worry' (6:25–34) as the pericope headings in the NIV suggest. The context of the sermon on the Mount, as well as the micro-context of the verse at stake, points to a relaxing life, while prioritising the right life purpose. Would not seeking the Kingdom and his righteousness be our only reason to be deeply worried? And would seeking righteousness be God's way to provide for food, clothing and the other beauties of life? What are disciples seeking when they seek the *Kingdom*?

In the classical work by Ridderbos ([1962] 1978), he claims that:

It may be rightly said that the whole of the preaching of Jesus Christ and his apostles is concerned with the Kingdom of God,

and that in Jesus Christ's proclamation of the kingdom we face face to face with the specific form of expression of the whole of the revelation of God ... for insight into the meaning and the character of the New Testament revelation of God, it is hardly possible to mention any other theme equal in importance to that of the kingdom of heaven. (p. ix)

Later in the book ([1962] 1978:285–287), he wrote: '[Mt] 6:33 summarizes what is needed above everything else in the words, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his (i.e. God's) righteousness"'. Arguing against any 'idealistic conception' of the kingdom of God either in an individualistic sense or as a whole (the kingdom as 'ideal form of human society') he argues for:

the *theocentric* character of the kingdom which determines the content of Jesus' commandments. Especially in their radical demands they are intended to govern the whole of life from this theocentric standpoint and put everything in the balance for this single goal. (Ridderbos [1962] 1978)

This line of thought is still prevalent in more recent works on the Kingdom. After quoting Romans 14:17:

17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, 18 because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. (NIV)

Fuellenbach (1995) remarks:

The kingdom, defined in a brief formula, is nothing other than justice, peace, and joy in the Holy spirit. These are not just feelings or sentiments but realities to be implemented in the world. We might rightly call these three characteristics the fundamental values of the Kingdom, 'Striving for the Kingdom' or 'taking on the yoke', in the words of Paul means, therefore, nothing else than to commit oneself daily to the values of the Kingdom. Just as the pious in the Old Testament would commit themselves daily to the great Shema and in doing so would 'take upon themselves the yoke of the Kingdom' so the disciple of Jesus is asked to commit himself or herself to the same Kingdom by living the values of justice, peace, and joy. (pp. 155–157)

Legg (2004:123) relates his understanding of the 'gospel of the Kingdom', like many others, to spreading 'his reign in practice here on earth'. This 'reign' is directly related to the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Mullins (2007:133) states that 'The evangelists make it clear that Jesus sees the inauguration of the kingdom in his own person and ministry'.

Schnelle (2009:87) states the same truth: 'For Jesus of Nazareth, the central religious symbol is the kingdom/rule of God; he proclaims the coming of the one God in his royal power':

The coming of the kingdom of God does mean the coming of a new, real world. At the same time, the kingdom of God reveals and makes available a new ethical energy hitherto undreamed of, which opens humanity to a new way of life. Because the kingdom of God stands for *Gods'* Lordship in the present and future – God's nearness, God's taking the side of the poor and oppressed, God's justice, God's will, God's victory over evil, and God's own goodness – it determines all aspects of the

proclamation and activity of Jesus and his followers. (Schnelle 2009:110)

Where Jesus is, the Kingdom not only comes, but *is* present. Schreiner (2016:4, 18–38), with reference to Ladd (1962), argues for the Kingdom as 'God's dynamic rule'. Ladd refers to how *malkuth* is used in the OT:

*Malkuth* can be either a monarch's kingship, his reign, or it can be the realm over which he reigns. It is our thesis that both meanings are to be recognized in the teachings of Jesus, and that the primary meaning is the abstract or dynamic one, for it is God's kingly act establishing his rule in the world which brings into being the realm in which his rule is enjoyed. (p. 236)

Schreiner then argues a case for the spatial dimension of the Kingdom and that the Kingdom is where Jesus is present (cf. also Schnelle [2009:93] for his understanding of the spatial dimension of the Kingdom).

Gushee and Stassen (2016:3–20) also argue for the understanding of the Kingdom as the reign of God. After dealing with fundamental understandings of love, justice and moral norms, they eventually cover, in their book on the ethics of the Kingdom, moral and justice issues involved when God's reign is taken seriously by kingdom people: gender (234–251), sexual ethics (252–269), racism (396–416), to name but a few.

One brief note about the 'of heavens' instead of 'of God'. Wainwright, Myles and Olivares (2014:7) sum it up as follows:

At the heart of the Matthean story of Jesus, therefor is the proclamation of an alternative *basileia*, one that will be characterized by justice and right ordering in accordance with the desires of the God of Jesus. This right ordering includes the Earth and not only the human community, as the language of the Gospel indicates ... The use of 'the heavens' functions in a twofold way: first it points to this alternative *basileia* being shaped according to the desires of God, who is associated with the realm of the heavens; second, the *ouranos* or 'heaven' can refer to the sky and is intimately linked with 'earth' in repeated phrases like 'heaven/sky and earth' in the Matthean storytelling (5:18; 6:10:11:25; 16:19; 18:18–19:23:9;28:18). Montagu (2010:39) wrote: 'of heaven' [*is a*] Jewish way of avoiding direct mention of God.

In the so-called missional conversation, it is an obvious trend to re-emphasise the 'Trinitarian foundations for missional congregations' (Van Gelder 2007a:28–38). With it goes the emphasis on the Kingdom. Many examples can be named, but I refer just to Osmer (2005:222–232) and Van Gelder (2007b:52–87) in another book on the church as a community led by the Spirit (cf. also Nel 2015b:90–98). In my language above, this is another 'rediscovery' of a diamond-like jewel in the development of missional congregations – or within the context of this article, within the main calling of disciples. It was refreshing to recently read words by a well-known pastor of a megachurch in the US stating:

God invites you to participate in the greatest, largest, most diverse, and most significant cause in history: his Kingdom. History is his story. He's building his family for eternity. Nothing matters more, and nothing will last as long. (Warren 2017)

The above-mentioned understanding of the Kingdom can and should be related to the understanding of 'public church'. Fowler, whose name became synonymous with the concepts 'public church' (a concept coined by Marty 1981) and 'public faith' (cf. Fowler 1991; Osmer & Schweitzer 2003), wrote his PhD thesis under the title: *To see the Kingdom. The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (1974). It is not difficult to follow this line of thought right throughout his life – as the essay in his honour is a testimony. I specifically refer to two contributions in this issue: one by Klappenecker (2003:43–59) and the other by Kim (2003:157–173).

Had space permitted to write, I would have loved to go deeper into Fowler's interpretation of the 'responsible self' (a concept very important in and for a church seeking the Kingdom) by Niebuhr and how 'for Niebuhr there is no selfhood apart from community' (Fowler 1974:154; Niebuhr [1963] 1999:63–65):

The self is never alone as a knower, valuer, initiator, or responder. Man's relations to objects, other persons, to ideas, are always qualified by his relations to companions – co-knowers, co-valuers, and co-interpreters in communities of interpretation. (Niebuhr 1999:63)

In this relational setting: 'To be a self is to be responsible' (Fowler 1974:154, 155). Equally important is Niebuhr's understanding of 'relational value'. Fowler (1974:173–174) quoted Niebuhr (1960:107) as having written:

Relational value theory is based on the understanding that being and value are inseparably connected. But it also understands that value cannot be identified with a certain mode of being or any being considered in isolation, whether it be ideal or actual ... Value is the *good-for-ness* of being for being in their reciprocity, their animosity, and their mutual aid. Value cannot be defined or intuited in itself for it has no existence in itself; and nothing is valuable in itself, but everything has value, positive or negative, in its relations. Thus, *value is not a relation but arises in relations of being to being.* (Italics Fowler)

What Fowler understands under 'public church'

[even in his work on becoming Adult, becoming Christian (2000)] relates to the public realities of the Kingdom. In his own words (1991:151): 'Public Church' points to a vision of ecclesial *praxis*, a proposal in practical theology. It seeks to be faithful to a biblical grounding in its claim that ecclesial community, formed by the presence and fellowship of Christ, points beyond itself to the *praxis* of God in the processes of history. It tries to point to and embody a transforming presence in human relations, in societies, and in care for embattled nature. That God's *praxis* transforms toward wholeness, justice and peace finds witness in ecclesial community as congregations practice their principles of equality, partnership, and inclusiveness, as they welcome and extend hospitality to the stranger, and as they give their lives for transformed human community in particular contexts.

Fourie and Meyer-Magister (2017:36–63) offer good insights on the public involvement of the church in its many different public forms (2017:40). They discussed their perspectives without any reference to the work done by Fowler on the public church. In their own words:

we base our working definitions of, and the connections between, the concepts of 'church' and 'public' on the work of, and connections between, a prominent German public theologian and public intellectual, Wolfgang Huber, and a South African systematic and public theologian, Dirk Smit. (p. 39)

## Seeking 'the Kingdom and his righteousness'

Seeking what is right on a personal level is easier than seeking righteousness or justice in public life. The *torah* helps and plays a vital role in the Old Testament understanding of discipleship (cf. Nel 2009a). Firet (1986:53–67) covered this dimension as part of his discussion on the *didache* in the Old Testament. He refers to the function of the *torah* as 'guidance on the way', and to the function of the *chokma* as 'instruction in the way of wisdom'.

Seeking righteousness is of course connected to this, but has a public dimension that makes it more challenging. Maybe because of this public challenge churches sometime (often?) withdraw from seeking righteousness in public. For many years, many theologians in this country fought a lonely fight because they were deeply convinced that the policy of 'apartheid' was wrong. Many examples can be named here and one (I for one) almost feels somewhat ashamed that your own name is not more publicly connected to this group. A struggle within the Ned. Hervormde Kerk about apartheid, as recently as 2015, proved again how difficult seeking righteousness can become. The current debate within the Dutch Reformed Church concerning same-sex relationships may serve, to my mind, is another example. It is this public character of seeking righteousness that is a priority for disciples of Christ. I am not even going to argue the point that this brings into play the unity within the body of believers involved in this public endeavour for justice and righteousness. Even though a disciple may be the initial 'daring' prophet, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer was, eventually 'we' as a community of disciples seek 'the Kingdom and his righteousness' – or in the words of Mcknight (2015:105), the 'We is bigger than Me'. How the obvious disunity among Christians makes this search for justice problematic is common knowledge. It often makes us the laugh of the town when three, four or more local faith communities differ so obviously that everybody knows it – and often without, what would have been a sign of our *common* struggle, a public willingness to seek and continue to search together. It boils down to how deep we have diverted from *searching together* as a common hermeneutical departure point. Seeking unity, in this sense, is also a case of seeking righteousness.

And all of this while *righteousness* is such a central concept and theme in the Book of the Christians, the Bible. Gräbe (2006:451–453) wrote: 'In our study of the new covenant concept in Paul's letters we observed that covenant (*diathyky*) and righteousness/justification (*dikaioou*, *dikaiousis*, *dikaiousuny*) belong to the same semantic domain "establish or confirm a relation"' (cf. Louw & Nida 1988:451–453). Gräbe (2006:214) refers to how God in 'his faithfulness

and grace allowed Israel to participate' in his 'own divine righteousness' by:

establishing a covenant, that is a community of justice between himself and the people of God. And as the God who justifies he includes the whole of humanity in this community of justice by taking the sin of the whole world on himself as the founder of the new covenant. (the quote from Jüngel 2001:274)

Wilson (2005:156–177) wrote a chapter on the Gospel of Luke and the covenant, using Zechariah's prophecy as a test case in a book about Biblical, theological and contemporary perspective on God and the Covenant. As Ridderbos ([1962] 1978:288, 315–318, 329) has written then already:

But I mean that God's kingdom represents something higher than a hierarchy of human values and interests, and that the 'righteousness of the kingdom' teaches us to subject everything to this ... To put it in one statement, we can therefore say that the fulfillment of the law by Jesus consists in his setting in the light in a matchless way the character of love of the obedience demanded by the law. In this statement love is conceived of as the totalitarian all-embracing self-surrender ... From such pronouncements, it appears (with ref. to Mt 6:24, the God and Mammon text MN) that the 'love' which Jesus demands in the gospel is based on a radical *choice*. On this level, Jesus' commandments are meaningful and obligatory as concrete applications of the one great principle of love. This also implies that love is not a law unto itself. Love is the prerequisite and the root of the fulfillment of the law. But it is directed and guided by the divine law as the expression of God's will. And it is also guided by Jesus' commandments as applications of this revealed divine law. (Italics by Ridderbos)

Fuellenbach (1995:157) wrote:

Justice as a Biblical concept could best be translated as *right relations*. These relations extend in four directions: to God, to oneself, to one's neighbor both as individual and as part of society, and to creation as a whole. To be just means first to respect all of one's relationships with others; namely, in the family, in the clan, in the land, in the world, and in nature. There is justice when everyone respects his or her commitment to others and when everyone is respected and treated fairly in society. Justice in the Bible is therefore primarily a matter of relationship. (cf. also Drew [2000:90–94] for the basic notion of respect when doing righteousness)

When I, as a practical theologian, dare to make a short Biblical excursion, I do so 'with great fear and trembling', as Paul did in his 'coming' to the Corinthians (1 Cor 2:3). Very much aware of the hermeneutical realities involved, I am however embarking on a short journey, searching for guidance in a 'discipleship search' for 'his righteousness' – the righteousness of the King. I will do so by focussing on two well-known texts on righteousness, namely, Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25.

## Isaiah 58

There are many Biblical texts that are so clear that one is almost afraid that interpretation will cloud the obvious message. Isaiah 58 is such a chapter. My brief attempt below is only to underline, by referring to a few whose subject field it is, how important this chapter is in our understanding of

religious life and for doing justice. I lean heavily on the work of Lessing (2014:13–15, 151–157) in my underlining of the meaning.

Lessing (2014:13) refers to the tension between Chapters 1–39 and 40–55 regarding the interpretation of righteousness. 'In 1:21 Zion is called to be righteous and act in righteousness, but fails miserably throughout Isaiah's first thirty-nine chapters. The nation's abandonment of its calling is a recurring theme (e.g., 5:1–7; 6–9–13, 8:11–22; 28:1–4; 39:1–8). In spite of it all, though, 1:26–27 affirms that the days are coming when Zion will be called 'the city of righteousness' and that those within her who turn from their rebellion will be remembered by 'righteousness'. How will this happen? Israel will be restored by God's righteous act and salvation, as explicated throughout Isaiah 40–55, where Yahweh gives grace, salvation, and 'righteousness' (54:17) through his 'righteous (53:11) Suffering Servant, who will 'declare righteous, justify'".

According to Lessing, this tension is resolved in Isaiah 56–66, 'showing it to be a tightly connected unit within the larger theological framework of Isaiah and his theme of righteousness. The programmatic text of 56:1–8 unifies the third part of Isaiah (Chapters 56–66) with the first two parts (Chapters 1–39 and 40–55)'. Lessing's reference in a footnote (Lessing 2014:13 note 63) to Oswalt (1998:453) is worth repeating here for the sake of the argument of this article:

Thus chs. 56–66 are a synthesis of what seem to be conflicting points of view in chs. 7–39 and 40–55. Chs. 7–39 call people to live righteous lives in obedience to the covenant, with the threat of destruction if they fail. Chs. 40–55 seem to speak of grace that is available to the chosen people and depends on nothing but receiving it. These two ideas seem irreconcilable. This final division of the book [chapters 56–66] shows that is not the case. It is as people, any people, choose to live the life of God as he graciously empowers them that they come to know the true meaning of being the servants of God.

According to Lessing (2014:13), Isaiah 56:1 is not a 'new note' in the book: 'it is a culmination of the theological thrust of chapters 1–39 and 40–55.' It is a key to the formation of the book of Isaiah. The verse being [*I use Lessing's translation. He also uses the Hebrew words to show the relationships (pairing) of concepts within the verse*]: Thus says Yahweh:

Keep *justice* and do *righteousness*  
 For my *salvation* is near in coming,  
 and my *righteousness* [is near] in being revealed.

He continues to point to how *Yahweh* brings about salvation/righteousness for the unrighteous and how '1–39 detail an active righteousness commanded by Yahweh for Israel to do, while Isaiah 40–55 offers a passive righteousness as Yahweh's gift, received by faith' (Lessing 2014:14). Both these themes are 'equally prevalent' in 56–66. Lessing (2014:15) offers as answer that 56:1 'functions as the hinge for chapters 1–39 and 40–55, allowing for both sides of righteousness to stand side by side' (cf. also Goldingay 2014). Lessing (2014:15) refers to a sermon by Luther, saying:

For our sins are not forgiven with the design that we should continue to commit sin, but that we should cease from it. Otherwise it would more justly be called, not forgiveness (*Vergebung*) of sin but permission (*Erleubung*) of sin. (Luther in Lenker 2000:168–169)

When it comes to Isaiah 58, it is so obviously clear that what Israel did here by fasting and praying is not within Yahweh's expected and required 'active righteousness'. Lessing's (2014) introduction to verse 1 is worth mentioning:

Imagine a world that is cold and silent toward pain and human suffering. Try to envision a place where everything is driven by self-indulgence and life is all about financial profit, business transactions, and the bottom line. Countless people are being dehumanized. In this world there are no prayers, liturgies, hymns, sermons, or Sacraments. And so love and compassion are rare commodities. This is Isaiah's world; often it is also ours. (p. 147)

No charges are laid as to the fasting itself, although there are scholars who say that fasting is nowhere required in the Laws and Commandments of Israel (cf. Tarazi 2013:200–201). Or as Goldingay (2014:172) says in his commentary on verse 5:

Yet the sharp antithesis indicated by the questions that follow in vv. 6–7 implies that the prophet is not concerned to make a balanced or nuanced theoretical statement about when fasting is acceptable and when it is not. Whatever might in theory be said in other contexts, this prophet is simply dismissing fasting in favour of the actions that will be described in the following verses.

The problem, obviously, was that Israel was not serious and genuine in their worship. Outward repetitions of the religious jargon did not do it. Yahweh sees through this. The leadership, the watchmen and shepherds (56:10–11) became blind and 'idolatrous'. They neglect the obvious (love of God and neighbour) and 'their empty religiosity results in fighting and violence (58:4), slavery (58:6, 9), accusations (58:9), and libel (58:9)' (Lessing 2014:147). At the root lies the breach between what they confess and what they live. Their 'worship' was tainted by what they want and like:

Yahweh doesn't state any specific charges against them in 58:2. Rather the issue will be defined slowly as the chapter unfolds. Employers are economically oppressing their employees, padding their own pockets, and not looking after the poor in the land. (Lessing 2014:148)

Personal pleasure is obvious and oppressing people evenly so. Lessing (2014:150) almost summarises the dilemma when he wrote:

It is easy to say all the right things and, at the same time, attempt to use God to achieve our own personal goals. Prayer, worship, and acts of service become devices, not to glorify God and serve our neighbor, but to serve our own ends: But manipulating God to supply what we want is a veiled form of idolatry. We are in the center; God is not. In this configuration, our 'unanswered prayers are not evidence of God's inattentiveness but of human sin'. (cf. for quote by Lessing, Emerson [1992:103])

The rest of the chapter then spells out in no uncertain terms what righteousness and justice 'that pleases the Lord' would

really mean and look like. I am going to quote the text from the NIV and then add a few remarks to underline the almost obvious:

6 Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

The section actually continues till 58:12. My remarks pertain to the above-mentioned verses. For a detailed commentary, I refer to Lessing (2014:151–154). The point here is that the quest for justice concerns the injustices of a specific time and within a specific culture and context. The references to what real 'worship' is are pointed out in five questions (5–7). 'Each question begins with an interrogative, and each confronts the sin of privatization, where faith is disconnected from public responsibilities' (Lessing 2014:151). Lessing (2014:152) continues by pointing out that what Yahweh requires and how He defines 'a godly fast' includes 'a community marked by fair play, that meets individual needs, and that fosters communal harmony'.

This kind of faithfulness:

- 'Loosen the chains of injustice', breaks every yoke, let the oppressed go free.
- Give bread: 'The first requisite is to share your bread with the hungry, that is, with those who fast because they have no choice' (Paul 2012:487).
- Provide for the homeless.
- Look after your next of kin.

This is the opposite of a system that grants access to food and lodging based upon qualifications like pedigree, education, or more blatantly, race. Such a structure is arranged to exclude those who don't 'fit', and it therefore denies Yahweh's plan of hospitality and hope for *all*. Preuss observes that in texts that are critical of fasting, like Isaiah 58, 'the basic criticism is that one's demeanor toward God ('fasting') should be commensurate with one's demeanor toward one's fellow human beings, and that social action constitutes an expression of true fasting. (for the quote, see Preuss 2003:300)

I believe that Lessing (2014:154) concludes correctly that we learn from this text that the so-called:

vertical dimension (the passive righteousness received from God (Lessing adds through Word and Sacrament MN) go hand in glove with the horizontal aspects of OT faith (the active righteousness of God's people in their sacrifices to him and care for their neighbour). This after all, is the gist of 56:1. (cf. also Elliot 2007:207–217; Paul 2012:480–481 for their discussions on Is 58)

Brueggemann (2008:355) refers to the 'process of divine intentionality enacted through human effort' and (2008:232) to the specific verses (58–6–7) as 'obedience includes justice for the oppressed and sustenance for the poor and the homeless'.

## Matthew, with special reference to 25:31–46

I once was asked to lead Bible studies for a well-known legal firm in Pretoria and could do so over a 20-year time span. They picked the Bible books and I had to do the home work. At a point, they opted for the gospel of Matthew. For a full year, we worked through the gospel, almost verse by verse. I never knew how important a role Matthew 5:3 plays in the make-up and message of the gospel. Van Aarde (2006:103–122) helped me understand this even better when he exegetically related the main thrust of this article, namely, the making of disciples in Matthew 28:18–20, to Matthew 5:3. In reading as much I could for this article on the section, I discovered it over and over again – being dependent upon God is critical for any understanding of Kingdom-related realities. Schnelle (2009:96) said it in no uncertain words: ‘The kingdom of God is not opened to any on the basis of what they have, their possessions, but by their sense of dependence on God’s help’.

I refer to but one or two more of these scholars: Mullins (2007) states:

The ‘spirituality’ of the ‘poor people of God’, the *anawim*, evolved and developed over the centuries and righteous Jews who were no longer materially poor adopted it as a way of life and outlook on the world and its riches. They realised their own dependence on God and their utter spiritual poverty without God. God was their only support. Other supports were but an illusion, and so they bowed humbly before God in complete trust and were willing to await everything at God’s hands. (p. 152)

He refers to ‘E. Schweizer [*who*] states that the title “poor (in spirit)” became in the Judaism of Jesus’ time, a title of honour for the righteous, and “poor” and “righteous” became largely parallel concepts’. Mullins then quotes Schweizer:

As early as Isaiah 61:1 the terms ‘poor’ and ‘broken-hearted’ or ‘broken in spirit’ are juxtaposed (cf. Prov 16:19; 29:23; Ps 33(34):19) ... At the time of Deutero-Isaiah, ‘poor’ was still a term applied to all Israel, deprived of its own land and living among aliens; in the centuries that followed, the social class of the poor began to apply this term to themselves as distinct from the upper classes. Thus ‘poor’ and ‘righteous’ became largely parallel concepts ... Finally, at Qumran we find a formula most closely resembling the one in Matthew: ‘poor (or humble) of spirit (1QMxiv.6–7); these are people who “have knowledge of God” and he “gives firm stance to those whose knees are weak and upright posture to those whose backs are broken” so that they may “walk perfectly”’ (cf Mt 5:48). (Schweizer 1975:86)

I deem this of the outmost importance for my reflection upon and *underlining* of the issue at stake in this article. Matthew 25:31–46 is another pericope in the Bible that one feels like saying: ‘Why would you like to interpret this. Don’t you get it?’ And when one takes the importance of the so-called sermon on the mount in the Matthew gospel into account, one has to admit: this is the Jesus way of being and revealing the will of God. This is the way one understands ‘law’, ‘Torah’, ‘Commandments’. An article in which Cummins (2016:74) reflects on ‘Torah, Jesus, and the Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Mark’ makes my point as to his issue in Matthew too. He writes:

Torah ... transposed in the life and mission, and atoning death and resurrection of Jesus, who has brought about the kingdom of God. And in this way, it continues to be constitutive of life together for the Spirit empowered covenant people of God. Walking together according to the unfolding work and will of God means loving God and neighbor; and the latter encompasses the whole of humanity, not least those in the background and on the margins. It involves hearing, embodying, and enacting – not impeding – the gospel of God, its commandments, teachings, and scripture. A transformative and ethical life together needs forgiveness and cleansing, renewed hearts and minds, and faith in the face of testing. It involves invitation and hospitality; care and compassion; protection, assistance and guidance. In the midst of conflict and destruction, it requires truth over falsehood, bearing witness and watchfulness, as those fitted for the final gathering. And its ultimate end is glory.

In a section of his *Theology of the New Testament*, Schnelle (2009) argued the radical nature of Jesus’ interpretation of the Law and what he calls Jesus’ ethics: ‘Jesus’s (sometimes radical) statements on ethical issues can be integrated into his ministry as a whole. So it makes sense to continue to speak of Jesus’s ethic’ (Schnelle 2009:111). The challenges inherent in Jesus’ understanding and proclamation of the Torah are:

only understandable within the horizon of the dawning kingdom of God ... The proclamation that the kingdom of God is presently breaking into human life presents the will of God as something new, radical and ultimate ... Only life in accord with the will of God brings human beings to the life they were intended to live at the creation. They are to hold fast to this ultimate word of the creator God as the norm for their life and work. By orienting themselves entirely to God and thus being freed from themselves, they can allow their lives to be determined by love that seeks the welfare of others. (Schnelle 2009:117–118)

When reflecting on love as central in the ethic of Jesus, Schnelle (2009:118 notes 167, 168) remarks that the connection of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 may have been known in Hellenistic Judaism. It is however for Christians uniquely connected to Jesus, his own being and in his revealing God, the God of the Kingdom, a Kingdom which finds its expression in the presence of Jesus. Like Schnelle (2009:95) says: ‘The unique feature of Jesus’s proclamation is that for him the coming kingdom of God is not only very near but already present’ (cf. also Mullins 2007:133 again).

A few remarks in direct relationship to Matthew 25:31–46 are necessary. The context is part of the last days and teaching of Jesus. ‘Three parables about being prepared for the coming of the Son of Man precede the judgement scene and set the context’ (O’Grady 2007:203; cf. also Mullins 2007:510–533). The issue at stake in this final judgement scene for Matthew is about:

taking care of the least. He seems to reject all that preceded in favor of this. He wants continuity with the past but also sums up the Law by how people treat each other. This Jesus had already done in the twofold commandment of love of God and love of neighbour.

The emphasis is on the criteria for judgement: ‘The traditional “corporal works of mercy” are spelled out, giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, hospitality to the

stranger, clothes to the naked, visiting the sick, and visiting the imprisoned' (Mullins 2007:535–536). Schnackenburg (2002:257) noted that:

the enumeration of six works of 'material help' (but they are not only 'material') is not intended to be exhaustive but merely illustrative. Nor is it anything new and original: there are abundant examples in Egypt and in Judaism, although with variations and suited to a given context. (Is 58:4–8; *Testament of Joseph 1*; *Slavonic Enoch 9*; 42:8–9; *Midrash on Psalm 118*, para. 12)

This is to happen to the least. Scholars differ as to who this may be. Mullins (2007:537) covers this to my mind well in writing:

who are the least of my brethren? The 'least', *elachistoi*, is the superlative of the *mikroi*, the little ones. Earlier in the gospel the prophet, the righteous, the disciple of Christ (vulnerable in their mission endeavours) are called 'these little ones. (Mt 10: 41–42) ... The vulnerable member of the community (18:6). Also find in 18:15,17,21,35;23:8, 28:10'. This has led to some understanding the text as referring to missionaries and ordinary followers of Jesus. He then quotes Meier (1980) having said: The stunning universalism of this revelation must not be blunted by restricting the 'least of my brethren' to Christians, to poor or insignificant Christians, or to Christian missionaries. The phrases used in such passages as 10:42 ('little ones' ... 'because he is a disciple') and 18:6 ('these little ones who believe in me') are different, and the context in such places is clearly ecclesiastical; they lack the sweeping universalism of this scene. (p. 304)

Schnackenburg (2002:258) also takes this approach and understands the 'least' 'to include all women and men' (cf. also Bryant 2006:109 for a similar approach).

Brown (2015:286), in covering this section of the gospel under the heading 'being faithful and merciful', quotes two authors whose contribution is important for the research problem in this article: seeking *righteousness*. Brown (2015:289) wrote that this text teaches us: 'Believers in Jesus are exhorted to practice mercy toward the needy as an expression of their covenant loyalty to Jesus himself'. In the words of Gutiérrez (1973:202), 'To offer food and drink in our day ... means the transformation of a society structured to benefit a few who appropriate to themselves the value of the work of others'. And in the words of the activist Claiborne (2010:84–85): 'Jesus is not seeking distant acts of charity. He seeks concrete acts of love'.

Schnackenburg (2002:258, 259) wrote in a closing remark in commentary on this text:

That the Son of Man and king is none other than the earthly Jesus and that the Jesus who worked on earth has practiced and demanded such mercy are presupposed. For Matthew, mercy, love in action, is a priority (cf. 5:7; 9:13; 12:7; 23:23); and for primitive Christianity, as the fulfillment of the commandment of love, it is the powerful effect of Jesus' preaching. (cf. Lk 10:37; Jh 13:34–35; Rom 12:13–21; Gal 5:14)

He refers to the understanding that part of this text comes from Hellenistic Jewish Christianity, and then added:

The core concepts go back to Jesus, but they are shifted into a post-Easter context. The primitive church has developed the

thought of Jesus' demand of love and has presented it in this impressive manner.

Mullins (2007) after his quote from Meier (see above) wrote:

Meier' assessment highlights an aspect of the gospel that makes extremely uncomfortable reading for everyone who lives a comfortable life without thought for and action of the poor and suffering of the world, locally and internationally. (p. 538)

When it comes to the injustices among youth, one experiences the same 'uncomfortable reading' when dealing with the 'wrongs' around youth in the book *Deep Justice in a broken world. Helping your kids serve others and right the wrongs around them* (Clark & Powel 2007).

## Conclusion

To be missional is to be involved in the world. The *how* of our involvement is a matter of corporate discernment of where God is at work and to humbly join him within our own context. Seeking the Kingdom in our context cannot escape of bypass issues of justice and righteousness. Something Robinson (2006:5, 21:25–26) wrote to my mind applies here. He refers to Dean who once wrote that we may be seeking at the wrong places: 'For this leader in the field of youth ministry, the issues are not limited to youth or youth ministry. The struggles of youth ministry are unavoidably related to the larger malaise of the mainline Protestant world, and that malaise cannot be blamed on a need for better technique or new tricks to entice young people. The challenge is theological. It is regaining, or gaining for the first time, theological content, integrity, and passion':

What if mainline Protestantism's disappointing track record with young people (in and beyond the church) has not been primarily a failure of models, educational strategies, historical cycles, or institutional support, but a failure of theology? (Dean 2004:25). We tend, as Dean implies, to look everywhere for an explanation or help – except what might be the most obvious place of all, namely what we believe and confess and the difference it makes ... What persons desperately need in most mainline churches today is help in gaining the kind of knowledge and skill that is necessary to allow them to make moral and religious meaning out of their everyday lives ... But something else marks the congregation that has become a club, or is tending in that direction, and is no longer fully the church: its primary purpose has been lost or forgotten. Instead of focusing on people growing in faith and discipleship and growing in the image of Christ, the club church's purpose has become satisfying the members. (cf. also Mahan, Warren & White 2008)

Osmer's (2012) words in a chapter on formation in missional congregations help me capture my conviction as to our calling:

In an ecclesiology of centered openness, this is best conceptualized as a process of missional formation: the discovery of congregational identity through relevance and, simultaneously, the sustaining of congregational relevance through identity. Missional formation takes place as a congregation lives into and out of its missional vocation. The upbuilding of the congregation takes place as it engages the surrounding world; the self-giving of the congregation is deepened and sustained as its identity is built up. Therefore,



missional formation is the process of the congregation 'taking form' as it lives into and out of its missional vocation, as it lives in the tension between *identity* and *relevance*. (p. 51)

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