

Making Disciples the Way Jesus Did:

René Girard and the Future of Baptismal Catechesis

by John W. B. Hill

What can be learned about the ministry of ‘making disciples’ from the way Jesus did it? Surprisingly, in all the work that has been done to date in restoring the ministry of catechumenal formation in the church, remarkably little account has been taken of Jesus’ way of making disciples.¹

What follows is an attempt to apply some of the insights of René Girard in reading the Gospels² to unlock the question: How did Jesus make disciples, and – more to the point – what is the purpose of discipleship?

The four Gospels are not eye-witness accounts of the matter, nor may they be harmonized to form an aggregate account. Nevertheless, each of them informs the reading of the others; and even in their use of mythological forms of storytelling and culturally adapted detail, they serve as our primary witnesses to the nature of the gospel revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. What follows, then, is an attempt to explore the witness of the Gospels to Jesus’ work with his disciples, using Girardian insights.

The Gospel Portrait of the Disciples

Jesus gathered disciples from the beginning of his public work; and all four Gospels imply that ‘the twelve’ played some special role. Although there were apparently many more, yet ‘the twelve’ were symbolically essential to work of Jesus. They were

¹Although Paul in his letters referred to his Christian friends as ‘the saints’, or ‘the church(es) of God’, the Acts of Apostles implies that *individually* the followers of Jesus thought of themselves as ‘disciples’ (cf 11: 26). The importance of the disciples in the four Gospels, then, is not to serve as a foil for Jesus, but as prototypes of what subsequent followers of Jesus would be and become. This assumption about the significance of the first disciples lies behind the mandate of the risen Christ in Matthew 28: 18 - 20.

²The Gospel insights of René Girard are spelled out in his many writings, such as: **Violence and the Sacred** (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1977); **The Scapegoat** (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986); **Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World** (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1987); **I See Satan Fall Like Lightning** (Novalis, Toronto, 2001).

'apostles'³; they anticipated the renewal of the twelve tribes of Israel.⁴ The twelve by their very calling signaled Jesus' conviction that God's original calling of Israel to be his people was still God's unwavering agenda. Israel of old had been constituted to stand in the greatest possible contrast to all other nations – a people formed *from* victims rather than being formed by *eliminating* victims.⁵ So, a renewed Israel would once again be grounded in God's unbounded love – the revelation of a different kind of peace and social order than the prevailing peace and order of the Roman Empire, grounded in violence.⁶

Yet the disciples completely failed to understand what Jesus was up to. For example, although Peter is reported to have recognized Jesus as the Messiah, he immediately demonstrated that his concept of what this would mean was completely at odds with Jesus' concept.⁷ They all heard Jesus predict his Passion, but they refused to take this seriously and were afraid to ask.⁸ They assumed that Jesus was about to launch a new political regime, and argued about which of them would get cabinet positions.⁹ When they learned of Jesus' growing anxiety, they all swore they would stand by him¹⁰; but when he was arrested, they all deserted him and ran away.¹¹ Are we then to believe that, whatever Jesus was doing to make disciples, it wasn't very effective?

³Mark 3: 14

⁴19: 28

⁵A fundamental claim of Girard is that victimization – scapegoating – is at the foundation of all archaic (and most subsequent) social order.

⁶Girard proposes that the conflict arising from competing desires which could have prevented the very emergence of stable human society has invariably been overcome by diverting the violence of all-against-all into a violence of all-against-one. Such scapegoating has such a remarkable power to create social unanimity that people consider it a sacred phenomenon; thus is born the category of 'the sacred', providing the very foundation of all human social order (the cult at the root of culture).

⁷Mark 8: 32

⁸Mark 9: 32

⁹Mark 10: 35 - 45

¹⁰Mark 14: 18 - 19, 27 - 31

¹¹Mark 14: 46 - 50

Jesus attempted to show the disciples how to live a life free of scandal or stumbling¹², that is to say, a life without envy or rivalry, a life of gratitude without anxiety because it was the Father's good pleasure to give them the kingdom; nevertheless his own death proved to be for them the greatest scandal of all, the thing over which they did stumble.

The First Thrust in Jesus' Work

According to the synoptic Gospels, Jesus' preeminent theme in his teaching of the disciples was the dawning of the Kingdom of God, the establishment of God's Culture of Life. And the very possibility of this culture lay in the imaging of God's ways that Jesus himself modeled.¹³ He demonstrated a passion to imitate his Father in heaven and do his Father's will. It was a passion grounded in the spiritual consciousness portrayed in the remarkable story of Jesus' baptism ("You are my Son, my beloved; in you I am well pleased"). Even the fourth Gospel, which cunningly skirts the actual event, agrees with the others in making this episode foundational in the ministry of Jesus. Doing the will of his Father, desiring only to please the Father, Jesus became the model for the disciples of non-acquisitive imitation.

And so he taught the disciples what a life centred on imitation of God is like. It is a life formed by prayer and immune to scandal. It is a life free to welcome the Kingdom of God. He taught them to recognize the subtle ways in which they could be lured back into the old life of rivalry – through the temptation to retaliate, through love of money, through passing judgement on others. And he also taught them to expect persecution by the Culture of Death.¹⁴

None of this is exceptional in a biblical context except for the astonishing way Jesus identified the Culture of Death, the alternative to the Kingdom of God. The devil, or Satan, who is rarely mentioned in Hebrew scripture, is suddenly a major player in all

¹²In Girard's reading of the Gospels, 'scandal' refers to the way rivals become stumbling-blocks to one another, each constituting the obstacle to the other's acquisition of the object they both desire. 'Scandal' is the envy, rivalry, jealousy and resentment that lead to escalating conflict and violence.

¹³In Girard's anthropology, our every desire – except for natural appetites which we sometimes confuse with 'desires' – arises through 'mimesis': my desire is an imitation of the desire of someone else who has become my model. Jesus teaches that our true model (who does not incite rivalry) is 'your Father in heaven': "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6: 36).

¹⁴Matt. 5 - 7

four Gospels. Satan is the Accuser, the personification of that social process of justifying ourselves by blaming someone else. Satan is the organizing principle of conventional culture; and Jesus undertook to expose the Reign of Satan, the Culture of Death.

The synoptic Gospels, in telling of the temptations that immediately followed Jesus' baptism, invite us to recognize that this awareness of the Reign of Satan shaped Jesus' consciousness from the beginning of his ministry. When the devil is portrayed as having power over all the kingdoms of the world¹⁵, we are invited to recognize that this is the power that Jesus would have to break if the Kingdom of God were to be established.

The Second Thrust in Jesus' Work

How could Satan's reign be dismantled? Only by subverting it from within, continuing the strategy already glimpsed in the Hebrew scriptures, the strategy of entering the world of mythology in order to demythologize it.¹⁶ Jesus would become Satan's victim, Satan's scapegoat; Caiaphas spoke for Satan when he said, "It is better that one man die for the nation than that the whole people should perish".¹⁷ But Satan's power would not thereby be solidified one more time because Jesus would expose the mechanism of scapegoating and the innocence of the victim.

This is the basis of the final lesson Jesus gave the disciples, according to the synoptic Gospels. The lesson did not sink in at the time, though it hinted at the purpose of all the rest of their training. On the night he knew he would be betrayed, Jesus carefully arranged a secret rendezvous with them to celebrate the Passover Seder, uninterrupted by Judas' plot. And what he did was to recast the traditional Passover ritual to become a definitive and lasting interpretation of his death. Just as he was soon going to give himself into the hands of his enemies, into the power of Satan, so now he gave himself

¹⁵Matt. 4: 8 - 10; Luke 4: 5 - 8

¹⁶Girard observes that the stories of the Hebrew scriptures, even when they most closely resemble the world's classical mythology, subvert that mythology by exposing the one thing that mythology always conceals: the villains of mythology are not actually responsible for the crises which their deaths or expulsions resolve. The story of Cain and Abel, for example, strikingly resembles the story of Romulus and Remus (each is a story about the founding of a great city); yet the story of Romulus and Remus is told to explain why Romulus was right to kill his brother, whereas the biblical story is about the innocence of Abel.

¹⁷John 11: 49 - 52

into the hands of his friends, saying, "This is my body given for you; this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, poured out for many."

The Passover ritual, of course, included a sacrifice: the lamb was a substitute for the ancient sacrifice of the first-born.¹⁸ But Jesus was going to expose the primal sin of founding a society on sacred violence; for the life of God's people can only be grounded in the unbounded love of the Creator. Nevertheless, this people was about to try, once again, to reconstitute itself through violence: the murder of Jesus himself. What was to be done? He would freely give himself into their clutches as an act unbounded love, providing a new grounding for their new existence and liberating them from the old existence founded in victimization.

At table, then, he substituted a human sacrifice – himself – for the animal sacrifice – the lamb. Except that this time it would not be a sacrifice in the old sense; rather, it would be the end of sacrifice in that sense, for it would not be another triumph of victimization but the undoing of victimization by the divine generosity of self-offering love.¹⁹

Even if his disciples could not take it in at that moment, the memorial meal would become for them and for all later disciples a potential revelation of the way Jesus had unraveled the sacrificial mechanism.

Another astonishing note in the synoptic gospels is the prominence of demon-possession – something else we never heard about before in the Bible. Today we tend to down-play this, suggesting that ancient people didn't have the medical categories available to us, so they resorted to the mythical diagnosis of demon possession to account for things like mental illness or personality disorder. That may be true; but that also misses the point. When someone has a condition we find disturbing, we try to avoid that person; and when everyone avoids you, you are being locked out, excluded. We maintain our 'sanity' by projecting our fears on you, calling you 'insane' and forcing you to live on the streets. We demonize you. We cast you out. And you are truly demonized when you start to believe it yourself, when your sense of yourself is displaced by the 'demon' that we have projected onto you. But Jesus reached out to such people and drew them back in. And, according to the synoptics, when Jesus sent the apostles on their mission to the towns and villages of Galilee, their commission included a ministry of exorcism.

¹⁸According to Girard, social order is founded upon sacred violence, and ritual sacrifice has its origins in the need to revisit that violence to sustain the social order.

¹⁹Matt. 14 - 29; Mark 14: 10 - 25; Luke 22: 3 - 22; 1 Cor. 11: 23 - 27

There is a certain irony, of course, in the notion of ‘casting out demons’; those who have been demonized, or written off as demon-possessed, have already been cast out! So when you are exorcized, you are ‘un-cast-out’. Demon possession may be a myth; but it is a myth of the Master of Myths, the Father of Lies. Demonizing is an essential feature of any society founded upon violence, to this very day.

It is striking, therefore, that the fourth Gospel never once mentions a ministry of exorcism. What apparently replaces this element of the tradition is the more developed teaching about the exorcism of the *world*: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” Jesus says to the crowd of disciples. “Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”.²⁰

Thus, in very different ways, the Gospels represent Jesus as calling his disciples into a new awareness of the false nature of the world’s peace and order. When he sent them out on their mission, he told them to expect both welcome and rejection; this was important not merely because they had to learn to recognize the difference between the world’s peace and the peace of God’s kingdom; Jesus was also showing them “things hidden from the foundation of the world”²¹ – the phenomenon of Satan’s reign which is sustained by suppressing those who see the world from the perspective of its victims.

Why the Disciples Didn’t Get It

Yet the Gospels all tell us that the disciples were unable to recognize what Jesus was doing. The only ones who could see it were those who were already the victims of a social order founded on violence and exclusion, especially those who had been demonized: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God”.²²

So it is to this day: wherever the church passively coexists with oppressive regimes, the Gospel is split in two. There is a gospel for the rich, which typically recasts the suffering of Jesus as a myth of sacred violence – a founding sacrifice that sustains a privileged social order. And there is a gospel for the poor, who alone are able to recognize what Jesus was up to but who are taught to imitate him only in his patient suffering. The

²⁰John 12: 31 - 32; cf. Luke 10: 18 (“I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.”)

²¹Matt. 13: 35

²²Mark 1: 24

question now as then is this: how are those who are the *victimizers* to recognize what Jesus was up to?

It is true that in the resurrection God swept aside our verdict upon Jesus, exposing the innocence of the victim and the evil phenomenon of scapegoating; but in itself, this did not constitute the revelation of the “things hidden from the foundation of the world,” for it was only his disciples who saw the risen Christ. We are therefore compelled to look more closely at the role of the disciples, to discover what was the significance of their witness to the resurrection. All the Gospels point to the paradigmatic role of Peter in the telling of the Gospel story.

Peter is often misrepresented by preachers as a boisterous and fickle disciple who proved himself a coward when Jesus was facing his crisis. This is not the picture the Gospels paint. Peter is portrayed there as someone who was prepared to stand up to Jesus. He was also brave enough that when all the other disciples had forsaken their master and fled, he at least followed at a distance to see what would happen. But he soon found himself drawn into the vortex of the crowd’s angry fascination with the hapless prisoner.

He warmed himself at the fire in the courtyard – the fire where all are drawn together (Peter almost found himself excluded when someone picked up on his accent – just the thing that might get you unwanted attention from an angry mob looking for a scapegoat.) The fire evokes old memories of the immolated victim around whom the crowd gathers as if drawn by a magnet. Peter of course could not see what was happening to him – his experience was only the most dramatic instance of the blindness of all the disciples. If Jesus had not actually predicted Peter’s denial, Peter might never have realized what had happened that night; he might have disappeared for ever into the safety of the unanimous crowd.

But then the cock crowed, and Peter remembered; and he began to awaken from the anesthesia of social unanimity, from the sacred culture which is grounded in sacred violence. His shock, regret, and contrition were the moment of conception, if you like, leading to a new birth into a new way of being in the world for those who, like Peter, had always before been the beneficiaries of such a sacred social order.²³

In this we begin to see what is most important about Jesus’ way of making disciples. It is of the greatest significance that the risen Jesus did not appear to the crowd. In a world that knows itself through its mythology, the risen god always appears to the crowd, for it is the god of the crowd. The god of myth is the mind of the crowd in a projected form. But the risen Jesus only appeared to those who were no longer part of the crowd. For

²³Mark 14: 54 - 72

example, Mary Magdalene and Jesus' other women friends from Galilee – those invisible people who had nothing to lose by their association with someone the world had abandoned – they were at the cross, and followed the body to the tomb, and they were the first to see the risen Jesus, according to the Gospels. Peter was the next to see the risen Jesus. The rest of the disciples had tried melting into the crowd, but clearly it wasn't working, for they were still afraid for their own lives and hiding in an upper room; there, they too saw the risen Christ.²⁴ The story of Jesus differs from all the world's other myths of a dying and rising god in these two important ways, Girard observes: the dying victim is clearly represented as innocent; and the rising victim appears only to those who have broken with the crowd.

Jesus' Purpose in Making Disciples

And so, one way of describing Jesus' agenda with his disciples is to say that he needed to prepare them to surmount the scandal of his own violent death. The reason his death was so scandalous to them was that their consciousness, like ours, had already been formed by the very system that Jesus' death and resurrection would begin to deconstruct. They had to learn something about themselves that they could never have discovered in any other way: namely, that they were just as enmeshed in the rule of scandal, just as powerless before the force of collective delusion, as the people they were sent to liberate.

Jesus also needed them as witnesses to his passion, so that by their witness they would undermine the attempt of Jesus' persecutors to make of his death the instrument of a new social unanimity.²⁵ By their solidarity with the Crucified they would constitute the ever-present revelation of a different kind of peace. Their painful formation through the experience of Jesus' passion would enable them to recognize what a transformation of the world Jesus' death and rising would cause, what a tectonic shift in human consciousness it would set in motion. They would come to play something like the role of mid-wives to this new creation that was being born from the womb of the dying Christ.

It is from this perspective that we can make sense of the teaching of the fourth Gospel about the Paraclete. This was not something cooked up as an afterthought, but a theological account of this very process through which the consciousness of the disciples had been reshaped by their experience of the passion of Jesus. It is the work of the Spirit of Jesus: as Advocate, contradicting the insinuations of the Accuser (Satan), bringing to

²⁴Matt. 28; Luke 24; John 20, 21; 1 Cor. 15: 5 - 8; etc.

²⁵The narrative of Acts 2 - 5 illustrates this function.

mind all that Jesus had taught which the disciples had been unable at first to hear, teaching the world through their testimony to the dead and risen Jesus what is the real meaning of sin, righteousness, and judgement.²⁶

And so the upshot of all this work of Jesus, in calling disciples and forming them through sharing with them his life and his death, is the emergence at last of a reconstituted Israel: an Israel which knew itself called out of a life of imitating others – which always leads to rivalry, conflict and a plague of violence, and ultimately to the sacrifice of a victim – and called into a life imitating God by imitating Jesus, even by taking up a cross to follow him as victims. And now the disciples were free to do this, for in Jesus' resurrection God had revealed that it is not violence that provides the foundation of our world, but God's own indestructible faithfulness and unfathomable mercy. In this people, the world would see the sign of a God who is related to the world not in a reciprocity of revenge but in a reciprocity of forgiveness. In this people, the world would see the risen Christ whose Passion continues both to scandalize and liberate the world.

Implications for Catechesis

What this implies about catechesis in our time is clear: catechesis must not be an attempt to cultivate conformity to an ecclesial sub-culture, to draw people into an in-group where they can have a new sense of pride in learning an insider language and a secret knowledge, where they can content themselves with the assurance of personal salvation. That is not what the gospel is about. It is an introduction to the double thrust of Jesus' work in liberating the world from the Culture of Death.

The first thrust was showing disciples how their desires can be purified and protected from the allurements of the tempter. He taught them to pray, so they could set their hearts on God and imitate their Father in heaven; and he taught them to renounce the habits that would draw them back into the maelstrom of contagious rivalry: the love of money, the allure of retaliation, the passing of judgement. This is not moralism but wisdom, the wisdom of true spiritual freedom that Jesus nurtured through prayer. We need to share with new disciples the ways in which this wisdom of Jesus comes to be embodied in Christians through prayer, both liturgical and personal, in a liberated lifestyle supported by the Christian community.

The second thrust in Jesus' work with his disciples was teaching them to see the world from the perspective of the victim – not so that they could take sides against the oppressor, but so that they could recognize why the world's violence could only be ended by Jesus' compassion and ultimately by his own loving submission to that

²⁶John 14: 16 - 17, 26; 15: 26 - 27; 16: 7 - 15

violence. Those first disciples began to learn this perspective by being with Jesus and then by venturing off on their own, in pairs. What better way for sponsor and catechumen to work together than by involving the catechumen in the sponsor's own ministry to the poor, whatever that may be. The purpose of this is not to be converted to some kind of liberal optimism about how we're going to change the lot of the poor, but to learn to see from the perspective of the poor, from the perspective of the cast-offs of our society, from the perspective of the demonized of our world.

Undergirding this work must be some genuine engagement with the human dynamics of the gospel story. It is not enough that would-be disciples learn the Christological dogmas, or theories of the atonement. It is not enough to be told that "Christ died for our sins."²⁷ The gospel narrative is the soil in which discipleship is rooted and where it must grow; and those who would follow Jesus must come to terms with the 'necessity' of his Passion.²⁸

I think it is when a catechumen begins to look at the world from this new perspective that the inner conflict is likely to erupt; and he or she will have to come to terms with the scandal of following the way of Jesus. This may be the time when the support of the community is most crucial. For we know that this struggle never ends for any of us; and faithful Christians can offer understanding and encouragement in this life crisis. This is the point in a person's life when the question about 'putting one's hand to the plough' becomes uppermost; and the ultimate resolution of this crisis would properly be the decision for or against Baptism into the death of Christ. Once that decision is made, and the wounds of that struggle are laid bare, the subsequent time of preparation for baptism can truly become a time of illumination and purification – indeed, of healing.

Thus, when the moment of Baptism itself arrives, the candidate will be ready to live with the scandalous implications of Christ's Passion, ready to share his suffering for the transformation of the world, ready to participate in the embodiment of the risen victim, ready to die with Christ into a new way of being in – and for – the world.

²⁷Girard's reading of the Passion story has provoked considerable debate about the most popular doctrines of the atonement, especially those which imply that it was God who inflicted the suffering of the cross upon Jesus, scapegoating him for our sins. When such doctrines are firmly held, there is little possibility that the actual dynamics of the Passion stories of the Gospels will be recognized or appreciated. Hearers who think they already know the reason why Jesus was crucified (i.e., that God required it) will not be able to hear the reasons implied by the story.

²⁸Matt. 16: 21; 26: 54; Mark 8: 31; Luke 9: 22; 17: 25; 24: 7, 44.

Does Baptism establish an exclusive society (in spite of Jesus' own struggle against religious exclusivists)? Clearly, the answer all too often has been, Yes. But the heart of the matter is this: by calling disciples and forming them as witnesses to his life and death and rising, Jesus established a trajectory of transformation of the world which depends on the capacity of these disciples to manifest in their life the freedom of God's new creation through him. They are awakened to this new life through their initiation into his death, culminating in Baptism; and they are formed in this new life by the ritual of remembrance which he gave them. Transformation of the world continues so long as disciples refuse to veil these rituals under the old lie out of deference to the feelings of those who still live under the lie. Baptism and Eucharist are intended to enable the world's awakening through the revelation of its satanic deceits and God's undying love. Such revelation is indeed threatening to a culture based on violence, and those who are under its power will insist that the rituals of the church exclude them. But exclusion is not what they are for.

Our challenge, then, is to faithfully sustain these rituals and a process of formation that enables us to be aware and intentional as we celebrate them, proclaiming our hope for the gathering of all peoples into God's kingdom, while exposing the lie that governs Satan's kingdom.

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