

Are Radical Welcome and Radical Discipleship Compatible?
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Radical welcome is part of the Biblical Story - whether it is Jesus dining with “tax collectors and sinners,” or caring for the resident aliens in our midst as Exodus 23:9 instructs us to. Welcome is also a part of who our church desires to be. As our church explores our gift of hospitality, we face the questions of how to welcome new and different people.

Discipleship is also part of the story of God’s people. Jesus tells us that our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and pharisees. He promises that when we follow him faithfully we will be persecuted. Christian discipleship will be challenging, uncomfortable and even costly.

Between these two truths about God and the Church (welcome and discipleship), there is a struggle: how do we reconcile Jesus’ welcome and embrace of all people with his strong statements that following him will be difficult and transformative? If we welcome everyone into our church who wants to follow Jesus, does discipleship lose its meaning?

What is the Good News? The way I understand the Good News that Jesus comes here to share, it has two parts. First: God loves us exactly as we are. We don’t have to change one bit for God to love us, and we can not do anything to earn that love. Secondly: God desires wholeness, love and relationship between us and God, and us and neighbor and all of God’s creation. If we are going to foster, encourage and create this wholeness, love and relationship - we have a lot of work to do. We must work to get sin out from in between us and others. God wants us to love God and love neighbor. Part of that work is making sure other people know that God loves them exactly as they are, and helping them join in God’s recreation of the Earth.

One part of discipleship as it exists in our church is that often sin is weighed and measured, ignored or lifted up. We pick and choose which sins are something to worry about, and which can be ignored or tolerated. One example is the “works of the flesh” from Galatians (5:19-21). Churches lift up “sexual immorality”, “witchcraft” or “orgies” from this list, and preach about how horrible they are. However, Paul mentions many other “works of the flesh” in this same scripture: hatred, discord, jealousy, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions or envy. These sins are not approached with the same repulsion. Why? I would suggest it is because these sins are common in our churches. If the church we were offended by envy and selfish ambition, we would need to change our lives. It is much more comfortable to ignore the sins that are rampant in our churches, and complain about how bad sexual immorality is. We may not ignore these sins, we may just rank them - as less serious than the ones we do not struggle with. So we would tolerate envy, but not witchcraft. Even though Paul shows no preference to any of these sins when he present them to us, we judge that some are worse than others.

By ranking sins, we are setting up boundaries around our faith, around our churches. If you are struggling with these sins, you can be part of us, if you are struggling with those others sins, you need to find another church family. When we set up boundaries to define faith, they can start to function like a high-jump which dictates full participation in the church. It says: you must meet these moral requirements (jump this high) in order to be part of the church. Notice: the bar is set by those inside, and everyone inside meets the requirements. It is just human nature, we always think our sins are less serious than someone else's. We can now say everyone outside is rebelling against God, while the ones who clear the high-jump are faithful members of the body.

So, if the church ignores or tolerates some sins, should we ignore all of them and give up discipling each other and ourselves? By no means! This issue should not encourage apathy, instead it should make room to call the sins of the "faithful" out. This is where radical welcome and radical discipleship actually begin to walk the same path. I am suggesting that we might be well served in our own faith walk by making room for people with struggles that are not our own. It may mean welcoming those who have struggled *and continue to struggle* with drugs, alcohol, sexual immorality, greed, lust, and anger as part of our community. Their struggles may be like ours, or they may be different. Naming sin as sin, even though it still creeps into our lives and our churches allows us to create a space where we can all journey towards Jesus together - instead of pretending that some of us have arrived.

I believe that setting up boundaries and high-jumps actually erodes the effectiveness and reach of discipleship. The reality is that in many churches your discipleship journey is complete if you are married and do not abuse drugs or alcohol. Churches do not offer meaningful or challenging discipleship for those within the boundaries, helping to reinforce the common image of Christians as hypocrites. If you have cleared the high-jump, you have completed your faith journey. We also ignore sin by including those who admit that they are struggling with a sin and feel guilty about it. It may be a pastor who struggles with pornography or a lay leader whose business practices are exploitative. Somehow guilt for actions replaces meaningful discipleship and transformation. In some situations, acknowledging that the high-jump is appropriate is as good as clearing the high-jump.

Doing church in this way leads to communities where one would rather lie about their struggles than be honest about their life. Fear of rejection stands in the way of honest community. We replace discipleship with rejection.

God is patient and faithful and steadfast and keeps coming back to help us. That is our God. The one in the Old Testament who returns to Israel, no matter how many times they turn away. The God who keeps coming back, even when people do not realize that they made a mistake - God comes back to clueless, sinful, unrepentant people. We are called to be the Body of the Son of this God, the hands and feet of Christ. Even though we try, somehow we lose patience for the children

of God because they cannot meet the standards which we have raised up as essential to discipleship.

When we get down to the nitty gritty - the problem is that our current models for discipleship are overly simplified and look more like this high-jump than a journey with God. We draw lines in the sand that exclude people with certain struggles from being full participants in our churches. These lines may come from our *Confession of Faith*, or certain scripture (like Gal. 5:19-21), and more times than not, this high-jump is set so those who set the bar can clear it with ease. We are upset about drugs, but we do not worry as much about gossip. We get mad about unmarried people living together, but turn a blind eye to the marriage that is full of anger and spite.

I had a powerful conversation for a long term pastor. The pastor stressed the importance of welcoming people as they are, loving them without any conditions. When we share the love of God, we cannot take people into our spiritual care only as a project. We cannot give conditional love based on some future transformation. God's love isn't conditional on making a high-jump, even if we were able to clear that high-jump easily.

We wouldn't expect a person with a physical disability to be able to jump as high as someone who is able bodied. At some point we must acknowledge that many people in the world have spiritual and mental disabilities that may prevent them from clearing the same high-jump that we have cleared. I heard a story of a woman who has been homeless for most of her adult life. She has struggled with drugs and prostitution, and spent years in jail over her life. When she was four years old, she watched her mother drown her sister. She has never been the same since. In this world, horrible things happen. Brokenness over takes people. How do we work for redemption when this woman may never function emotionally at a level that we would consider normal? We will learn much about God's powerful work of redemption if we are willing to embrace her instead of thinking we need to protect the church from her.

When we use a high-jump understanding of discipleship, we diminish both discipleship and welcome. We cannot welcome fully those whose sin is "worse" than ours, and we no longer require Jesus to shape and mold our minds - our discipleship journey is over. The high-jump confirms our worthiness, but this high-jump also denies the worth of those who are not able to clear it. Giving pride to those inside, and shame to those outside. That is exactly the opposite of the work Jesus came to do.

These boundaries allow us to say who is in and who is out and reinforce the idea that once you clear the jump and accept Jesus as Lord and Savior the journey is complete. I believe we are called to share the good news that God loves everyone as they are, and as we step into that love, we work harder to show and cultivate God's love in all parts of our lives. If we have cleared the high-jump, have we arrived? Or is baptism the beginning of a lifelong journey to get closer to

God? I believe we are all on a journey together, and we must not leave anyone behind simply because they cannot jump as high as we can.