

November, 2018

David E Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines that Shape the Church for Mission*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016

There are a lot of disillusioned evangelicals out there in North America. They're questioning the certainties they've been fed, the doctrines that have been proof-texted at them, the moral imperatives that have been imposed upon them, the authoritarianism with which they have been led. Many simply leave the church, thinking they are rejecting the only way to imagine participating in Jesus' Commonwealth of God. But some engage in a journey of faith beyond the confines of the dogmas and the rules. They move on to an exploration of other ways of participating humbly in God's mission of justice and kindness. Many are planting new churches, experiments in being together in community following Jesus Christ for the neighbourhood.

David Fitch is among them. He is reforming his Christian and Missionary Alliance tradition from within as a church planter, professor, writer, and speaker. His critiques of many of the churches and their leaders in his own tradition apply to others as well. The community is too compliant, the leaders are too individualistic and authoritarian, the doctrines are too narrow, and the morality is too hypocritical.

He remains committed to what might be called a 'generous evangelicalism.' Here's how he describes it:

... the gospel is the announcement that God has fulfilled the promise of Scriptures to make the world right in Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:1-11). Christ has died for our sins. By his death and resurrection (and ascension), he has defeated the effects of our sins, including death itself. He now sits at the right hand of the Father ruling over the world. In Christ the new creation has begun. Old things are passing away. Behold, the new has begun (2 Cor 5:17). All who respond to this good news repent of old ways, and make Jesus their Lord and Savior, enter in and become part of what God is doing to reconcile the whole world to himself (2 Cor 5:18-19), and receive power to become the children of God (Jn 1:12). (97)

In this summary, he sees himself following the lead of N T Wright, an English New Testament scholar and Anglican bishop, and Scot McKnight, an American Anabaptist who became Anglican in 2014. Wright has been widely influential through his book, *Simply Christian* (2010) and McKnight through his book, *The Jesus Creed* (2004). Both have written much more widely and are influential speakers and bloggers, but these are their best-selling books.

Fitch is convinced, and for the most part convincing, that following Jesus Christ requires a disciplined life, a life in which we pay attention together to key practices that have nourished the Christian community to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ for generations. All of these practices make us aware of and invite us into participation in God's faithful presence in and for the world. Fitch finds this reality most powerfully expressed in Psalm 46 which ends with "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold."

I like his list of disciplines and how he describes them. Here's a very quick and suggestive summary:

1. The discipline of the Lord's Table is where God as host and provider shapes a people for a revolutionary presence in the world rooted in God's forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal.

2. The discipline of reconciliation is a radical intervention in a world that runs on antagonism. Christians are ambassadors of God's reconciliation, offering a space for mutual understanding and the blessing of each other's uniqueness, gifts, and cultural heritages. One of his key insights here that deserve to have a transformative impact on the church is that leaders foreclose the process of reconciliation too often by their need to take control, act from the top, and impose a policy that they think will solve the problem.
3. The discipline of proclaiming the gospel has to do with cultivating the imagination and opening up the space so we can see and act with God in Christ's power to nourish hope to a world trapped in denial and/or despair. It involves gaining a hearing by being a warm presence that welcomes people into conversation. In the conversation, we listen with respect, then humbly ask, "May I offer a perspective and some possibilities?"
4. The discipline of being with the "least of these" means developing positive kinship support with people at all places on their pilgrimage to their home with God. It's more than social justice. It's seeking the welfare of all in the city in all ways imaginable and keeping open the possibility that new ways will emerge from the collaboration.
5. The discipline of being with children involves including children in every dimension of the life of the church, cultivating a posture of welcoming generosity, filled with patience, embrace, openness, and genuineness. It means opening a path for children to know the presence of God and be formed for his purposes, not preventing them in any way from being nourished by God's grace in Jesus Christ.
6. The discipline of fivefold gifting involves a mutuality and collaboration in leadership in the church. It challenges hierarchy of any kind and focuses on participation and contribution and replaces leaders with a community of gifted leadership. The giftedness, as Paul identifies them in the letter to the Ephesians, is being apostolic (initiating, gathering, and pioneering for new works), prophetic (speaking truth and pointing to God's presence in justice and peace), pastoral (tending to and sustaining people's souls), evangelical (bringing good news and hope to those who are hurting), and teaching (helping explain and deepen the relationships of faith). It is the intermingling of all these gifts in and through the community in mission, in submission to Christ and in cooperation with each other, that the leadership of the church in mission happens most faithfully, wisely, and effectively.
7. The discipline of the Lord's Prayer, what Fitch calls the 'Kingdom Prayer,' though last in the book, is the most important. It is prayer that takes us out of the pressure to strive and opens up space to be with God's presence. It orders our living with God's mission here on its earth as it's central dynamic.

Fitch is good at recognizing that churches can get distracted into maintenance, or despair into exhaustion. But he reminds us that God can do more with twelve disciples than with a thousand religious consumers. His disciplines are nourishing as we flourish into that energized and energizing mission.