

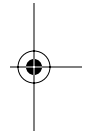
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Don't Bother Me. I'm Teaching on Compassion!

It was dusk in the Devil's Triangle, the neighborhood with the highest crime and poverty rates in Fresno, California. Several months earlier my family and I had relocated to the Triangle (its formal name: The Lowell Community). Fresno has been called the Appalachia of the West and is the number-one city in the nation for concentrated poverty.¹

We were full of fresh passages from the Bible of God's concern for the city and his love for the poor, full of good intentions for the community and full of hope that we could be part of the solution to its problems. That night, a small group of college students were gathered in our large living room to learn about ministry among those on the margins of society and get some training for the inner-city tutoring program they would be serving in. Some of the students lived with us in that large, ninety-year-old house.

Right in the middle of our in-depth Bible study on Isaiah 58, the classic passage that in so many ways defines discipleship as compassionate action on behalf of the poor, the pounding began. I ignored it at first, wanting to continue the study. After all, the "fasting" God had chosen—welcoming the homeless into your house, supplying food from your pantry, clothing the naked—were all serious commands. But the pounding persisted. I rolled my eyes and told everybody to hold on for a moment.



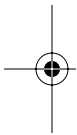


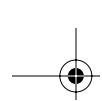
I opened the front door to a man who looked like a cast member for a zombie movie. He was disheveled and filthy, had glassy eyes and smelled. I was instantly on guard. When I said, “Yes?” he simply handed me a note stating he was deaf, his car had just broken down three blocks up the road, and he needed three dollars for gas.

I rolled my eyes again. Since moving in we had been targeted by a steady stream of transient men who appeared on our doorstep, many of them with similar stories. I had naively wondered what it was about that section of road that caused such car problems. It didn’t take long to get wise. The part about being deaf was a nice touch, but this guy looked familiar, and I suspected it was a fabrication. Without hesitation, I handed him back his note and said, “Sorry, I can’t help you,” and closed the door to his bewildered face.

I walked straight back to the Bible study and resumed teaching about compassionate action on behalf of the poor. But the expressions on the students’ faces made it clear that they wanted to talk about what had just happened and about how my actions fit—actually, didn’t fit—with what we were studying. The rest of the evening was dedicated to debriefing the experience, trying to come up with how I might have responded better. They asked, “Could you have acted with an intelligent compassion that demonstrated the love of Christ without enabling the man’s problems?” They asked, “Should you have at least taken more time with him?” In other words, I became the study, and the hypocrisy of *talking* compassion without *practicing* it was the focus of God’s lesson plan by way of the city that night. My extreme overhaul was well underway.

My family and I knew when we moved into the Lowell neighborhood that we would be on a huge learning curve. But we weren’t prepared for the urban “chemical peel” that the next several years would bring through our experiences there. Much of what was being

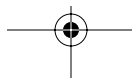


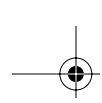


stripped away by this Spirit-led overhaul process was ugly, like layers of rust on an ancient city bridge, which has to come off in order to restore the structural integrity and original design. The act of living incarnationally, that is, leaving our “safe” and controlled environment for an unpredictable urban neighborhood, activated for us the mechanisms of repentance. More than a decade later, the experiences in this urban neighborhood are still being leveraged into life changes; the rusty layers of self-protection, of convenience, of materialism and a host of other corrosive qualities are still coming off in our lives.

Transformation happens most powerfully for those who would follow Christ when the *word* of God and the *work* of God are experienced in close proximity to each other. That juxtaposition can be leveraged through *reflection and response* to make the effect of word and work more powerful and permanent. This coupling of experience and biblical reflection, followed by whole-life application and action in a context that includes conflict or tension, has profound effects. These effects have been shown to provide a new dissonance with our prior experiences or assumptions.² The result of that dissonance is the construction of a new onramp to our growth in Christ.

Scott Bessenecker, director of InterVarsity's Global Projects and Global Urban Trek, calls this *dissonance learning* leading to an *experiential discipleship*. Discipleship is the process of learning from Jesus. In fact, the very word *disciple* literally means “learner.” According to the authors of *Developing Leaders for Urban Ministries*, “A disciple is a follower who learns to be like the one he/she follows (Luke 6:40).”³ As author Brian McLaren points out, disciples are like apprentices,⁴ walking alongside their teachers, absorbing every aspect of who they are, what they know and how they do what they do. The learning of the first disciples was different from what is often acquired in Western settings, where the mere transfer of information seems to be the





goal and the storage and retrieval of data is the proof of success. Educational researcher Jack Mezirow has demonstrated that learning is a series of transformations in the way we make meaning in our lives.⁵ It is a transformation of the cues in our lives that tell us what is important. The learning of the disciples included following, a life posture that led to transformation. They were transformed to become more like Christ in his values, purposes and methods. Obviously such learning influences the disciple, but it also influences the circumstances and people around him or her. The role of *experience* in this process, and in particular, experience that is uniquely generated by participation in transformational ministry in the city, is the focus of this book.

