

Chapter 3

Activism

Activist – one who vigorously advocates for a cause or issue.

I'm an activist. I'm guessing you are, too. In fact, most of our friends, neighbors, peers, and co-workers are activists for something. We live in a time when everyone seems to passionately champion a cause. However, if we're not careful, our activism can simply become a form of idolatry. As we embark on the journey to become Multipliers, we must insist that our activism is properly rooted and placed.

I find myself asking if it's possible that the rise in our activist culture is also a contributing cause of the historic levels of division in our nation? If you're like me, your gut tells you we've gone off track. Too often, our activism is rooted in the wrong motives, using language and strategies inconsistent with the One in whose name we come. As Christians, it's vital that we have a solid biblical foundation for our activism. Otherwise, our activism becomes idolatry. Multipliers are activists, so we must be sure to champion the right cause with the right motives.

I love the phrase that Level 5 Multiplier Ralph Moore uses to describe activists in chapter 1 of his Exponential book (with Jeff Christopherson), *New to Five: Starting a Level 5 Multiplying Church*. Ralph calls himself a “monomaniac with a mission.”¹ Monomaniacs are laser-focused with a relentless drive to pursue and accomplish their deeply held burden or conviction. Being a monomaniac with a mission can be profoundly good or profoundly bad. For example, the apostle Paul was a monomaniac, but so was Hitler.

While most of us activists are sincere in our passions and burdens, today's plethora of causes and voices creates a whole lot of unproductive noise. We're fragmented; our individual causes are like planes without an airport. The current context of our activism often seems disconnected from the One we seek to honor.

Multipliers: Leading Beyond Addition

What if our activism, while rooted in good intentions, is fueled more by our own narcissism than by our faith in God? Is our passion more about our own message than Jesus' gospel? Are we focused more on our voice being heard than proclaiming His Word? Are we more about our scorecard and success than accomplishing Jesus' mission? These are tough questions, but important ones to ask as you start the journey toward becoming a Level 5 Multiplier.

Jesus, an Activist for _____

Recently, I've been studying and reflecting on the activism of Jesus. I challenge you to read all the red-letter words in the four Gospels through the lens of Jesus as an activist. You'll get a fresh perspective. Be careful not to single out individual verses that support your particular cause; look for the underlying thread that runs through His ministry.

What do you find? If you were writing His epitaph—"Jesus, an activist for [fill in the blank]"—what word would you fill in? You only get to pick one or two words. What would they be?

Let's start with the words that would *not* be on the list. Let me make it personal. I'm an activist for church planting and multiplication. I'm willing to give the rest of my life to seeing the percentage of U.S. churches that ever reproduce increase from less than 4 percent to greater than 10 percent. So, it makes sense that I'd like for Jesus' epitaph to end with "church planting and multiplication." In fact, I often act as if it does. My passion would seem to indicate it. So would my impatience with accumulation-focused leaders and churches. But no matter how passionate I am about my cause, Jesus was not primarily an activist for church planting and multiplication. He cares about it, but He knows that if we faithfully and obediently focus on making healthy biblical disciples, we'll get church planting and multiplication as one byproduct of that fruit.

Multipliers: Leading Beyond Addition

It's sobering to realize that if I elevate my cause to be above His—even if my cause is multiplying His Church—I'm practicing a form of idolatry.

So what about social justice? Racial reconciliation? Urban revitalization and community development? Leadership development? Multiethnic churches? Refugees and immigrants? Environmentalism? LGBTQ rights? Equality? Political ideology? Missional? Church growth?

Nope. They aren't Jesus' core cause either, though He cares deeply about these and other issues. Again, focusing on healthy disciple making as His primary goal and cause will bring much more vibrant results in the other areas we seek to champion.

Tied to a Bigger Cause

At last year's national Multiethnic Church Conference, I had the privilege of spending time with Dr. John Perkins, a former Civil Rights activist and now a stalwart voice in the Church. Our meeting came at a time when I was working on Exponential's 2017 anchor book, *Dream Big, Plan Smart: Finding Your Pathway to Level 5 Multiplication*, and was feeling deeply convicted to learn about the activism of Jesus. I went to the gathering with a listening posture to discern some direction from God.

Dr. Perkins asked me what I thought about the event. I told him that I absolutely loved the passion of the people attending. It was electrifying! These passionate activists could change the world in any area they set their hearts and minds to (I'd actually like to see this kind of passion in the church-planting and multiplication space). I noted that there were five different tribes represented: urban, racial reconciliation, community development, social justice, and multiethnic churches.

Dr. Perkins asked me for critical feedback on the overall progress being made. I didn't want to answer. He insisted.

Multipliers: Leading Beyond Addition

“There’s a disconnect for me,” I told him. “It feels like five fingers separated from the hand, each finger speaking its own language and doing its own thing. But none of the fingers are tied to a bigger common cause.”

I suggested that until the hub of the hand focuses on biblical disciple making, we were likely to spin in circles. At 86 years old, this venerable leader stumbled backward with excitement. He looked at me and said, “That’s exactly right. We must make disciple making the main thing that ties everything else together. I plan on giving the rest of my days to that.”

Without healthy, biblical disciple making that leads to true heart transformation and deeper surrender to Jesus as Lord, all of our activist causes will be rooted in worldly goodness and pursuits. We will practice a form of idolatry. Jesus gave us a clear, compelling, and *primary* cause—intended to tie together all of our worldly efforts for good.

Jesus, an activist for disciple making! The kind built around the full surrender to His Lordship. The kind that looks different than the world, and in its full maturity has no choice but to multiply and result in people mobilized to make a difference in the world’s injustices. We must, however, recognize the truth that our prevailing discipleship systems in place today just aren’t leading to multiplication the way He intended. Our causes end up consuming the first fruits of our time, talent and treasure, with disciple making taking on a lower priority.

Jesus came to proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. In doing so, He gave us a vision and picture of a preferable future. He reminded us of our sinful nature and the chasm between God and us. He proclaimed the Good News of a pathway of hope that moves us from sinners deserving of death to disciples who experience the fullness of eternity. He proclaimed His intention that we not only have life, but that we experience it to the fullest measure (John 10:10).

Multipliers: Leading Beyond Addition

All of these things were His message. But let me suggest that His method of activism relied on modeling healthy biblical disciple making and commissioning His people to make it *their* main thing! Disciple making ties together and brings to life the other truths that Jesus proclaimed.

Personal Calling, Disciple Making, and Activism

Church historians and scholars highlight that every Christian has at least two callings: a primary or common calling and a secondary or unique calling. Throughout all time, all Christians, everywhere, have shared a primary or common calling that unites us through a common cause and mission.

We are to be disciples, who make disciples, wherever we are!

Our secondary callings are unique to each of us. Ephesians 2:10 says that each of us is uniquely made with specific good works and deeds to accomplish. Jesus gives us these callings so that we can directly participate in the mission He has for us—to carry His fullness to others into every crack and cranny of society.

In my book, *More: Find Your Personal Calling and Live Life to the Fullest Measure*², I address the vital importance of keeping our unique secondary callings (including our passions and burdens that drive our personal activism) aligned to our primary calling to be disciples who make disciples.

We need to mobilize followers of Jesus on their secondary calling. But we should always keep the perspective that He gives us our secondary callings (passions, burdens, gifts, etc.) to fulfill our primary calling. If I focus on growing the fullness of Jesus in me and intentionally seek to carry that fullness to others as I make disciples, my secondary callings will uniquely position me for engaging those in my unique mission field. I have to learn to properly contextualize my unique calling and burden with His core cause and purpose.

Multipliers: Leading Beyond Addition

Our challenge is to keep His main thing (disciple making) our main thing. We can simultaneously live out our secondary callings or causes as activists for our unique calling. However, if we focus primarily on our unique activist cause —elevating it above Jesus’s primary one—we won’t get the results He intends. At that point, we lose sight of the purpose that Jesus uniquely equipped us for, as well as His purpose for giving us passions and burdens. When this happens, we live a form of idolatry. But if we focus on biblical disciple making as our primary cause, we’ll mobilize an army of Christ followers who will change the world as they champion a myriad of secondary causes and burdens.

Puritan Minister Cotton Mather used a great metaphor to describe the consequences of elevating our secondary callings (our activist pursuits) above our primary calling to be disciples who make disciples. Mather describes a rowboat propelled by two oars. One oar represents our primary calling and the other oar our secondary calling. Put no oars in the water, and you drift with the winds of culture. Put only one oar in the water, and you spin in circles. When our secondary calling takes priority over our primary calling, it’s like having one oar in the water. No matter how loud we trumpet the message of our cause, we just spin in circles. We progress forward only when we put both oars in the water.

As Multipliers, let’s commit to keeping Jesus’ main thing our main thing. Let’s leverage our unique gifts and calling to be activists for good. But let’s also position our activism so that our primary fruits produce a movement of biblical disciple makers. In doing so, we’ll unleash a movement of love and transformation on the world!

What are the keys to seeing that kind of movement? Multiplication begins and ends with obedient leaders that focus on making disciple makers AND releasing them into the world!