

Function, Form, Evaluation and their Implications for Western Christianity

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Introduction

The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded us to “make disciples of all nations,” and has promised that in doing so He “...will be with us always” (Mat 28.19-20). As we seek to obey this command and realize this promise, it is easy to get confused or distracted. It can be even more difficult to evaluate whether what we are doing is working to actually make disciples. What should we do to practically make disciples? Is what we’re doing actually making disciples? To answer these questions, disciplemakers and church leaders must doggedly cling to the functions commanded in scripture, and then carefully choose forms to implement the functions and evaluate their efficacy.

Necessarily, this quest for faithfulness and obedience propels committed disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ to scour the scriptures to identify exactly what He does, and what He does not command. They desire to neither ignore an express command, nor to add a command of their own. We call adding a command to His teaching, *legalism*¹, or the practicing of making laws that are not in the scriptures. Equally disastrous is *licentiousness*: creating a false freedom to disobey or ignore God.

The negative commands of scripture are clear. For example, God commands in Colossians 3.9: “do not lie to one another.” Disciples who hear this command

¹ We often also define legalism as human attempts to earn salvation. In this discussion we will limit the term to the definition used in the body.

know immediately whether they have obeyed or disobeyed Jesus. The command may be difficult to obey, but disciples know immediately whether they have ever broken it. In fact, if a disciple of Jesus has all the evidence, he or she also knows whether his brother has obeyed or disobeyed God.

By contrast, the positive commands are impossible to definitively say you have obeyed. For example, in the same chapter of Colossians, God commands: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (v.16). As I seek to apply that command, I must have the Holy Spirit of God help me and teach me how I should apply it. What’s more, I cannot know whether my brother has applied it correctly. I can give my opinion, but only God will truly know whether he has applied the scripture correctly.

Some of the most important and meaningful commands of scripture are the positive commands, such as: “love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Mat 22.37), “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mat 22.39), and “make disciples of all nations” (Mat 28.19). In our efforts to make sense of the positive commands, we often describe them as *functions*, or the general group of actions that individuals and churches must biblically obey. The myriad of specific actions that disciples might use to put the function into practice we call *forms*.

Using the example function of “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,” we can say definitively that all disciples of Jesus Christ must intake the word of Christ. If a disciple told us that he refused to spend time intaking the word of Christ, which we find in the Holy Scriptures, we would tell him unhesitatingly that we do not believe him to be a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ. Disciples and churches must

practice the functions. However, if we were to go further and say that you must practice the function of dwelling in the word of Christ by reading the bible daily when you wake up, we would, at that point, become legalists. No such specifics are commanded in the bible.

The implications of biblical functions and forms are many. What follows is a explanation of seven of the most significant implications of form and function for western Christianity. Following these implications is a discussion of how the Church evaluates the effectiveness of functions. Finally, some suggested evaluation criteria for western church leaders conclude the document. Gaining a deeper understanding of the implications of form and function and how to evaluate functions is essential for the western Church to continue to grow and see the gospel advance.

Implication One: Realize the Propensity to Confuse Form and Function

The first mistake that many well-meaning disciples make is to confuse the form with the function. It's easy to begin to think that reading the bible in the morning is *synonymous with* letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly. In fact, the more effective a form becomes at accomplishing the function, the more likely the form is to replace the function. Reading the bible first thing in the morning has been a staple practice for disciples of Jesus Christ in all denominations since the bible became available to men and women in print. Because it has been so effective at accomplishing the function, it is easy to confuse the form for the function. As disciples of Jesus we must avoid this at all costs. Insisting on forms as functions is a

subtle form of legalism. Typically, if the church forbids what the bible allows, pretty soon the church will allow what the bible forbids.²

Implication Two: Function without Form is Disobedience

A second reaction to the discussion about forms, usually in an effort to avoid legalism, is to exalt the function and neglect the importance of the form. In the example of “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,” the disciple will not read the bible in the morning to avoid legalism. Instead, the disciple will read the bible as they feel led, as it suits them, waiting for their heart to be right and their motives pure. The disciple will find that his heart is frequently not right and his motives are not pure. Even though the disciple will never reject the function in theory, the difficult process of applying the function may erode. Slowly, the function may fail to happen at all. Jesus warns us sternly: “everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the wind blew and beat against that house and it fell with a great crash!” (Mat 7.27). Yes, every form accomplishes the functions imperfectly, but without a form the function cannot be accomplished at all. Function without any form is disobedience.

This approach can be particularly deceptive for those who sit under a fantastic bible teacher. They hear the teacher articulately exalt and defend the functions with poise and vigor. In his wisdom, the teacher does not want to insist on a particular form to apply the positive commands for his audience. He trusts the Holy Spirit to connect the dots for the believer. The student passionately agrees

² I first heard this comment when listening to a sermon by the late Dr. Howard Hendricks but I cannot retrieve the message now. Dr. Hendricks said it better than I.

with the functions as they are taught and concludes he or she is obedient to the Lord Jesus. The student departs the teacher, eager to hear the functions reiterated at the next teaching. However, it is impossible to actually obey a biblical function without choosing a form. No matter how convinced a disciple is by biblical principle and function, he can never be excused from employing forms. If a disciple chooses no form in his efforts to be open-minded and inclusive, he is, in fact, disobedient.

Robert Foster put it best: “We have a choice of liturgy, but we do not have a choice of whether to use liturgy.”³ By liturgy, Foster means the myriad of ways we might help disciples practically obey God.

Implication Three: Teaching Function without Form is Unjust

This brings us to the third implication of form and function. This one deals not with the choices I will personally make to live out the functions of the Christian life, but with the way I will teach function and form to other believers. In the example, the excellent bible teacher rightly emphasizes the function, but never gives any successful forms to live out the function. Unwittingly, and with the best intentions, this can breed a culture and community of disobedience because disciples may never connect the dots between function and form. They want to obey, but many will never learn a practical form. The teacher is counting on the learner to develop their own forms to apply the function. This is the ideal: each disciple listens to God and applies the function as God leads. However, it really is not fair to the new disciple. Think of the painful futility the new believer would suffer as he or she spent months to arrive at simple forms that we find so helpful.

³ Foster, Robert. *Streams of Living Water: The Essential Practices from the Six Great Traditions of Christian Faith*. Harper Collins: New York, 2001, p. 261.

We owe it to new disciples to give them time tested and culturally relevant forms to master before we ask them to invent new ones. If a new disciple rejects the form we offer, we should be quick to embrace whatever form he or she chooses. But, we owe the new disciple a strong example and prayerfully selected form. As such, it is fitting for me to share my conviction of reading the bible in the morning as a time tested and fruitful way of letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

As disciples mature and master these proven forms, we can greatly increase their understanding of functions by beginning to question them about why they choose the forms they do. At this point, it is crucial that we keep the growing disciples in the scriptures. We want them to constantly review the functions prescribed in scripture. What's more, we want them to constantly review the efficacy of forms used in the scripture and in their own lives. As disciple-makers and church leaders, if we do not make the transition from rote forms to the functions they serve, we will run the risk of generating legalistic disciples who over-emphasize their own forms. As disciples mature, we expect them to adopt, adapt, and generate new and better forms. To expect this with new disciples, however, is unfair and can lead to a spiritual growth in knowledge but never in action. "Knowledge puffs up, while love builds up" (1 Cor 8.1). In short, we start disciples with best practices and move them to best principles.

Implication Four: Form without Conviction Yields Unfaithfulness

Developing biblical *conviction* is the process disciples go through as they decide what are the best forms to employ and teach others. This is the fourth implication of function and form. Convictions are deep-held beliefs that a particular

form accomplishes a particular function well. Typically, they are so deeply held that disciples are emotionally motivated to do these forms. One disciple put it this way: “If it’s a conviction it may not be a command for everyone, but it should be a command for you.”⁴ Using the above example of dwelling in the word of Christ, my conviction is that getting up in the morning and reading the bible first thing is one of the best ways to accomplish the function to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Convictions should not stem from arrogance or narrow-mindedness, but from careful study and wise, iterative application of the scriptures. Convictions are not unhealthy overzealousness; they are essential for disciples in their quest for faithfulness in obeying the functions. One fruitful disciplemaker put it this way: “In those areas of life not addressed by the Scriptures, we must develop personal convictions to govern our behavior.”⁵ Still, each disciple must remember that a conviction is not a function in and of itself, and that grace and freedom should be extended to brothers and sisters in Christ in areas of conviction. St. Augustine might have put it best: “in the essentials unity, in the non-essentials diversity, in all things charity.” By charity, Augustine means graciousness.

If we do not develop biblical convictions, we are not legalistic or licentious. Instead, we are at best *foolish*, and at worst *unfaithful*. Without forming carefully thought out convictions a disciple might develop an indifferent attitude toward whatever form he or his brothers in Christ employ. God commands each disciple to be a good steward, or to “take care how he builds” (1 Cor 3.10-15). Stewardship

⁴ This comment came from my friend Andy Orr while we were studying the bible together with our friends.

⁵ Henrichsen, Walt and Gayle Jackson. *Studying, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*. Zondervan Press: Grand Rapids, MI, 1990, p. 276.

implies evaluating how well I build, as I do it. What’s more, 1 Corinthians 3 teaches us that in the end that God will evaluate how we did at investing our lives in His

Choice	Consequence
Insist on a Form	Legalism
No Form	Disobedience
Any Old Form	Unfaithful

Chart 1

Kingdom. The wise master builder evaluates now. So, if insisting on a form is *legalism*, and having no form is

disobedience, then choosing any old form is *unfaithfulness*. See chart 1.

As an example of this truth, take the parable of the talents (Mat 24.14-30). The man who hid his one talent in the ground chose a form of how to invest his master’s talent. He does not steal the talent. That would be rote disobedience. Instead, he makes an intentional decision about how to invest the talent. Now, it may seem like he does not invest the talent because it has no hope of returning any interest buried in the ground. However, burying it is a way to invest. It guarantees no return, but also guarantees no loss. Still the master judges him “wicked and lazy” (Mat 25.26), not because he has directly disobeyed the positive command to invest, but because he chose a poor form of investment. He was *unfaithful* with what he was given. We may wish that do not have to evaluate the functions, but the biblical function of stewardship demands that we evaluate (Mat 6.19-20, Lk 12.47-48, 1 Cor 3.10-15). Like the man with one talent, even our best attempts to avoid stewardship leave us making some decision about how to invest. Therefore, all disciples and churches of Jesus Christ must faithfully choose forms to discharge the functions commanded by Him. This is the essence of biblical stewardship. Forms are to be carefully analyzed and developed to get the biggest Kingdom return we can. We can

therefore summarize the interplay between function and form by saying: it's not all about the function; it's all about the form in light of the function.

This truth compels us on a constant search for the best forms. Even though we have strong convictions that we have good forms, we constantly drive ourselves back to the functions. In spite of our human nature to prefer routine, we stare at the functions prescribed in the scripture and remain teachable.

Implication Five: Any Chosen Form Affects Multiple Functions

The fifth implication of form and function deals with the interplay not

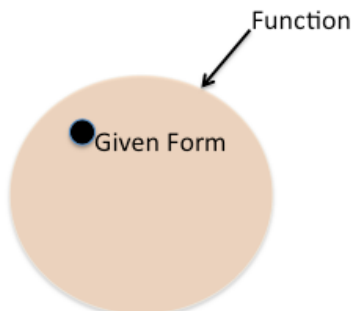


Figure 1

between form and function, but between functions. In its simplest expression, we might visualize the relationship between form and function by figure 1. The function is the outer circle. It is large and broad. Inside the circle are many possible forms, which will

accomplish the function. One legitimate form is illustrated by the small black dot. The wise disciple maker is on a search for the black dot inside the circle that best accomplishes the function. He is not satisfied to just get a dot in the circle. He is

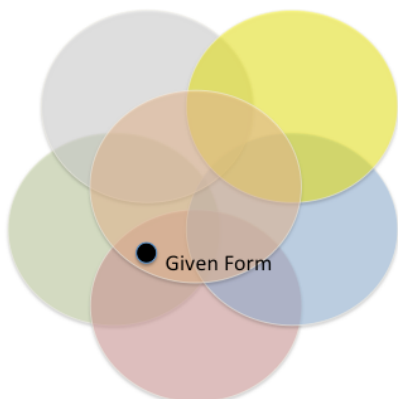


Figure 2

looking for the best placement for the dot inside the circle. That search is congruent with his faithfulness. However, there are many functions that the bible prescribes. So, in reality, the situation in choosing forms by which to obey Jesus looks more like figure 2. There are many functions which overlap. Choosing a

form is never just as simple as asking the question, which form will best accomplish

this function? Rather, each form accomplishes some functions very well, others partially well, and still others it does not address at all. Complicate matters further by choosing several different forms, or black dots, and placing them all over the various functions. This is the reality that each individual disciplemaker and each church must face as it moves forward to advance the Gospel of the Kingdom in its particular context.

In his seminal work *Will This Rock in Rio*⁶, Ken Lottis addresses form and function at length as he describes the development of the ministry the Lord gave him in Rio Di Janeiro. His teammate, Jim Peterson, wrote an appendix to that book entitled *Looking through the Rearview Mirror: Six Critical Factors to a Multiplying Ministry*. While it is nearly humanly impossible to analyze every legitimate function for a given ministry or church, Jim gives us six essential functions a ministry or church must apply if it is going to multiply. His six functions are below. We might express them schematically, using figure 3:

1. Lay Foundations
2. Go to the Lost
3. . . . on to Discipleship
4. Toward Christlikeness in Community
5. Under Godly Leadership
6. Guided by a vision for Spiritual Generations



Figure 3

Peterson maintains that these critical factors are

functions, that they transcend culture, and are essential for seeing of the gospel

⁶ Lottis, Ken. *Will this Rock in Rio?* NavPress: Colorado Springs, CO, 2010.

flourish. Laying Foundations refers to building relationships with people in the context, Go to the Lost refers to engaging people with the gospel of the Kingdom, ... on to Discipleship refers to seeing individuals personally transform into the image of Christ. Toward Christlikeness in Community refers to getting disciples together for their continued growth, Under Godly Leadership refers to raising up new leaders to lead these communities, and finally Guided by a Vision for Spiritual Generations refers to reproducing the individual and the community to spread God’s Kingdom.

Recent missionaries to people groups who are unreached and unengaged with Gospel of the Kingdom have reiterated these functions with their Four Fields

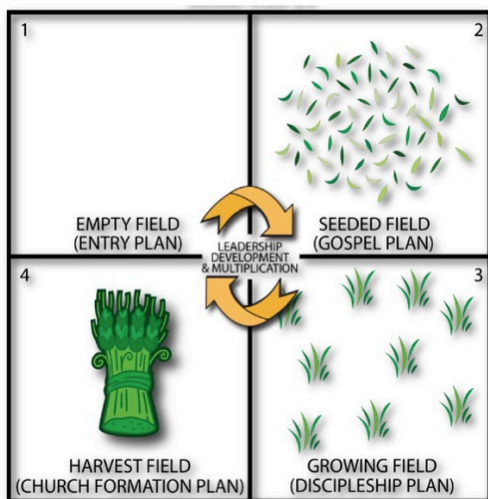


Figure 4

Illustration. See Figure 4. While the functions described in the four fields are not identical to the Six Critical Factors, they are extremely congruent. The First Field is the Empty Field. It represents the Entry Plan, or how to get into a people group. It is congruent with the Function of Laying Foundations. The second field is

the seeded field. It represents the Gospel Plan, or the plan to help others enter the Kingdom of God. It is largely congruent with “Go to the Lost,” although one could argue that the first two fields are about “Go to the Lost.” Thirdly we have the Growing Field or the Discipleship Plan. It is synonymous with “...on to Discipleship.” The fourth field is the Harvest Field, which is the Church Formation Plan. This field is almost identical with “Toward Christlikeness in Community.” Both deal with

helping the growing disciples in field three to connect into cohesive communities. At the center of the four fields is a leader who works in all four fields. The center stands for the same function as “Under Godly Leadership.” Following the four fields illustration well should generate a new leader who begins working in a new set of fields. Thus, we see “Guided by a Vision for Spiritual Generations.” Recognizing that two different groups of missionaries, from two different mission agencies, landed on practically the same essential functions, validates the criticality of these functions for all cultures and contexts. Regardless of the language you use to describe these functions, they really are the “critical” functions for seeing our Lord’s mission on earth advance.

Implication Six: Forms are Necessary to Apply *and* Evaluate Functions

Most disciples of Jesus Christ are eager to see all these functions played out in their own lives and the lives of their brothers and sisters. The difficulty lies in which forms we will use to pursue them. What’s more, it can be very difficult to *evaluate* how well each of these functions is happening in a given ministry or church. By evaluate I mean trying to determine if it is moving in the right direction, or functioning as it is designed to function. Here we see another use of forms. The previously mentioned form is a way to *apply* a function. This kind of form is a way to *evaluate* whether a function happens well or not. There is no one perfect form by which to evaluate a function, but some form is necessary. This is the sixth implication of Function and Form.

Because there is no perfect form, a church leader or disciplemaker might use no form to evaluate how effective functions are. Often this approach is accompanied

by a strong desire to trust God and let him work. However, this approach can also lead to the foolishness or unfaithfulness described above. If a disciplemaker or church applies poor forms to live out the functions and has no forms to evaluate the functions, it is easy to overlook the low fruitfulness of the applied forms. For example, in my effort to let the word of Christ dwell in me richly, I elect to read the bible daily by flipping it open to a random page and reading it. While this is a way to get the word into my life it can fail to achieve the function well because I may take passages out of context or miss certain passages altogether. Without some other evaluation criteria to think through how well the intent of the function plays out, I may continue to use this less than ideal form for years. One form we might use to evaluate how well the function of letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly is happening is: "how often do I, or the men and women I disciple, hear from God through the word and obey Him?"

Furthermore, claiming you have no form to evaluate can be misleading. In practice, every disciplemaker and church leader is evaluating the functions in his own life and the life of his congregation. We cannot avoid it. Often when disciplemakers claim they have no evaluation criteria, you will catch them using stories to illustrate how functions are happening. Telling stories to illustrate how well functions are happening is a way to evaluate obedience to the positive commands. In court we call this kind of evidence testimonial evidence. The problem with story telling is leaders can pick which stories to tell. Regardless, leaders do evaluate the fruitfulness of functions.

When we consider evaluating a function we do not mean that we want to measure a function. To measure something means to compare it to something else to see which is better. God reminds us: “When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise” (2 Cor 10.12). So, as we look at a church or ministry, our objective is never to evaluate success by comparing ourselves with others. Rather, our objective is to evaluate whether the function is happening correctly, and whether we are faithfully discharging our Lord’s positive commands. We want to know if we are moving in the right direction, not whether we are out performing someone else.

Implication Seven: Avoid the Propensity to Use Narrow Evaluation Criteria

A second problem when trying to evaluate how well critical functions are happening in a given ministry context is when we slavishly adhere to a narrow set of forms to evaluate a function. For example, we frequently evaluate the function “Go to the Lost” by the number of decisions people make to commit their lives to following Jesus. This is a great evaluation criteria, but if it is too emphasized, evangelists will begin pushing for a decision that might be devoid of true repentance.

To faithfully evaluate the six critical factors of a multiplying ministry we must employ definitive forms in our evaluation, but we can never forget the intention behind the function. Not all contexts should evaluate the functions the same way. Also, leaders should occasionally change the forms by which they evaluate how well the functions are going. Since no form is a perfect evaluator, swapping them tends to expose gaps in the functions. The chart below gives some

suggested forms to evaluate the six critical factors in a western context. Again, leaders must insist that functions happen, and give total freedom in the criteria used to evaluate functions. Below are some recommended evaluation criteria for ministries laboring in the West. For a detailed discussion of our *convictions* on why we recommend some of these evaluation criteria please read Part II.

Function	Recommended Evaluation Criteria	Alternate Evaluation Criteria
Laying Foundations	How many non Kingdom Citizens meet with our community to discuss spiritual things?	How many non Kingdom Citizens consider me their close friend? How many non-Kingdom Citizens are currently reading the bible? How many people who thought they were Kingdom citizens realized that they are not?
Go to the Lost	How many people have demonstrated their profession of faith through baptism in our community?	How many times did our community share the gospel this week? How many decisions to commit to Jesus Christ have we had this week?
...on to Discipleship	How many people are in one-on-one discipling relationships in our community?	How many people can articulate how they are hearing from God through the scripture weekly? How many people have made a significant life decision demonstrating their obedience to Jesus Christ?
Toward Christlikeness in Community	Has this community committed to being a local church?	Has anyone shared any failures or struggles in our community this month? Where is the first place that our community wants to hang out when it has free time?
Under Godly Leadership	Have we raised up a leader who can generate new community?	Does our leader meet the criteria to be in an elder in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1? Have we produced a leader that meet the criteria from 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 in the last year?
Spiritual Generations	Has our church reproduced another church?	Have we raised up a full time Christian worker? Have we sent a cross cultural worker to a new context? Has the gospel move beyond our context naturally?

Conclusion

Finding the right evaluation criteria for yourself and your church can be tricky and even dangerous. However, having no evaluation criteria is even more dangerous. It can lead to a deceptive and passive disobedience. Practitioners who earnestly seek to see a movement of the gospel and spiritual generations from their lives must wrestle at length with these concepts. In the beginning, it is wise to employ the forms and evaluation criteria that have been effective for others in similar contexts. Over time, through learning, developing leaders should adapt and even reject forms they learned. Through the wrestling, the persevering, and the trial and error, disciples must solidify convictions about how they will evaluate their application of the positive commands. While it is possible for evaluating functions to lead to legalism, wise stewards carefully and lovingly, evaluate the functions within the ministry that God gives them. Disciplemakers and church leaders must evaluate and evaluate wisely.