

BETHANY COLLEGE: Discipleship & Context - Practicing the Kingdom Together



Speaker: David Fitch

What does it mean for the church to be missional within a post-Christian context? How can the church become a concrete and visible manifestation of the kingdom of God in the world? And what kinds of practices can empower us to do this?

These, and other questions, formed the basis for two days of invigorating conversation as Bethany College hosted its second annual Discipleship & Context Conference on Nov 21st -22nd in Hepburn, SK. This event also offered a unique opportunity for encouragement and collaboration between students, local church leaders, and partner organizations.

This year's keynote speaker was influential theologian, church planter and (notably during Grey Cup week) Hamilton Tiger-Cats fan, David Fitch. Fitch teaches at Northern Seminary in Chicago and is the author of several books, the most recent of which is *Prodigal Christianity*. Fitch has spent much of his career forging connections between his theological work and his on-the-ground experience as a church-planter and pastor.

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Student Interactions

Fitch's four plenary sessions expanded on two central points. First, we are living in the midst of significant cultural shifts that are forcing the church to re-examine its practices from a position of shrinking influence and power. Second, the church's reaction to these shifts tends to be either *defensive* or *accommodative*. We are tempted to either re-establish ourselves or concede to cultural pressures and forfeit the uniqueness and power of the Gospel.

Fitch argued that neither of these options will do. Instead, he says, we need to think of the church as the visible community that seeks to join with God who is already at work. We are not the exclusive owners of the mission of God, but neither do we serve merely to bless and affirm all the good things that are already happening within a culture. These observations took on added meaning as participants discussed how to engage missionally with issues such as social injustice, alternative sexualities, and religious pluralism.



Student/Guest Discussions

In his final session, Fitch unpacked seven "missional practices" that can help congregations to discern the presence of Jesus in the world and proclaim his lordship with boldness and clarity. Using a number of personal stories and other examples, Fitch painted a compelling picture of how practices like the Lord's Supper, a presence among the "least of these," and interpersonal reconciliation can enable the church to make the kingdom of God visible and tangible. This is accomplished as Christians enter into them with the awareness that the Spirit is among them, and is actively engaged in leading them into the mission of God.



Final Session in Hepburn MB Church sanctuary

Throughout the conference, Fitch suggested that evangelical and Anabaptist traditions have much to offer churches seeking to point people to Jesus in a context where they are not offered a place on the podium. “Evangelical Anabaptism,” he boldly argued, “holds the key to solving the theological problems that the church is facing in post-Christendom North America.”



Workshop in Bethany College Library

This conference also brought together an inspiring collection of workshop presenters who focused on church practices such as testimony, communion, storytelling, preaching, worship, art, and theology. Workshops like, “Being as Communion” by Jakob Palm and “The practice of Testimony” by Rod Schellenberg and “Worship as a Way of Life” by Rob Priestly were designed to flesh out some of Fitch’s broader observations.

Bethany’s vision for this event is rooted in its commitment to being a theological and missional leadership resource for

the wider church. We are very grateful for the opportunity to offer this conference and were encouraged by the thoughtful participation of those who joined us. We hope to see many more of you at this event next year!

Please visit our website at www.bethany.sk.ca for video and audio recordings of the plenary and workshop sessions. Look for the Discipleship and Context link to take you there.



Bethany College Students

Nurturing Disciples and Training Leaders to Serve

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