
To Disciple – the Priority of the Great Commission

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Part 1

Declarations

I want to begin with two declarations. The first is that I am a convinced evangelical. The National Association of Evangelicals describes evangelicals as those who focus “on the core convictions of the triune God, the Bible, faith, Jesus, salvation, evangelism, and discipleship.” Webster includes in its definition, “emphasizing salvation by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ through personal conversion, the authority of Scripture ...”. If this is what “evangelical” means, I am an evangelical.

The second is that I love the Church of Jesus Christ and believe God has given me a specific call to serve the local church. The Church is His Bride – the bride for whom He gave His life. I write this paper with more than 30 years of passionately helping local churches prepare their people to be the bride John describes in Revelation 19:7-8 – “and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)”

I am writing because I feel compelled to address two serious errors I see within our tradition that have had significant negative consequences for the role God has given the Church. These errors are clearly being used by our Enemy in his war against Christ’s Kingdom. I find that my brothers and sisters within the evangelical tradition are often prisoners of the paradigms of traditional evangelicalism. As a result they either don’t see the errors or else ignore them.

Let me briefly explain what I mean by paradigm. A paradigm is the filter through which we see reality. It is shaped by our beliefs and experiences. Sometimes our paradigms can blind us from recognizing what is visible and real. For example, a brilliant scientist like Richard Dawkins operates with a paradigm that prevents him from seeing the overwhelming evidence in creation for the existence of God. Similarly, our evangelical

experience and perception of truth can keep us from seeing what Scripture makes abundantly clear.

Now, back to the two errors. The first is an unbiblical misappropriation which assigns a priority to evangelism, as opposed to discipleship, as the main task of the Church. The second is the working assumption that if we teach people biblical truth they will automatically follow Jesus.

Some of the things I say in this article sound harsh. But I say them because I care so much for the Church and the Kingdom Jesus established to demonstrate His “manifold wisdom and power” (Eph. 3:10).

H.A. Williams says, “Our doctrines are not photographs of Reality. They are the attempted descriptions of heavenly things by means of hints and guesses which earthly things provide.” (from *Tensions*). That captures my attitude as I write this article. I am very aware that my perspective is not a “photograph of Reality” but rather is my attempt, based on my reading of Scripture and experience, to articulate my concerns “by means of hints and guesses.” Please remember that as you read.

The Problem

In short: the evangelical/Pentecostal church from the period of its origin with the Great Awakenings has often, in practice if not by intention, misplaced the emphasis of Jesus’ Great Commission. We have emphasized evangelism rather than discipleship.

Here are seven principles that support my belief that Jesus’ emphasis was discipleship.

Principle A: Jesus identified the priority task as making disciples

Scripture is clear. A person’s soul is the most valuable thing they possess. “What shall a man give in exchange for his soul” (Mt. 16:26)? Heaven rejoices when one soul repents (Luke 15:7). Jesus calls us to repentance so that we might take advantage of the reconciliation, provided at the cross, between a holy God and sinful man (Luke 5:32).

The call to sinners for repentance and subsequent salvation was Jesus’ passion. When Christians reflect this passion of Jesus, we use a word that is not in the Bible: evangelism. *Evangelism* is defined as *the preaching of the Christian Gospel or the practice of relaying information about a particular set of beliefs to others with the object of conversion* (Wikipedia). It is easy to see why many Christians regard evangelism as the priority calling/task that Scripture gives to the Church. It is interesting that Jesus doesn’t. Instead He identifies the priority task of his followers as the making of disciples. Most often Jesus doesn’t connect the “gospel” to salvation but to the good news of the Kingdom which He defined as the will of God being done - Matt 6:10. Why is this important? Because we are saved to flourish – to live now and in eternity as God originally

designed. Throughout Scripture our flourishing is a consequence of doing God's will – Deut. 28 and 30; 2 Chron. 7; Isa. 58, etc. To teach people to obey (not just know about) God's will is to do discipleship. More on this below.

The perspective of evangelism as the priority task of the church is famously articulated in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974: "... in the church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary." This portion of the covenant was written to clarify the distinction and interface between evangelism and social service. The liberal wing of the Protestant church sometimes proclaims that the Kingdom of God comes as Christians simply do good works; a personal, saving encounter with the living Christ is often considered optional. In response we, the Evangelical wing of the church, protested that the Kingdom will not come without a personal experience of being born again. I understand the history and sentiment of this statement in the Lausanne covenant but see it as an expression of a long-standing, overly zealous correction that goes beyond Scripture with tragic consequences.

This priority has led to evangelistic enterprises that lack the kind of follow-up that leads to discipleship. We now have seeker-sensitive services that sometimes adapt even to pagan aspects of the prevailing culture in order to draw people in "so they can hear the Gospel." This has often replaced a focus on equipping members to live the kind of lives that draw those outside the church to the person of Jesus.

Let me clarify that I do not minimize the importance of evangelism – including the critical element of proclamation. Sharing the content of the Good News of salvation – our sinfulness, our hopeless condition without the redemption of sin unconditionally paid for by the blood of Jesus sacrificially shed on the cross, our need to confess our sin and accept the promise and assurance of forgiveness of our sin, the glorious hope of eternal life with God, etc. – is an essential part of obedience to Jesus' commission to his followers. But being born from above is only the initial step in the life-long process of discipleship. The Great Commission's purpose is clearly stated as discipleship – teaching people to obey all the things that He taught. That obedience begins – but only begins – with being born again.

Principle B: In the Bible, service has the same priority as proclamation.

I understand and affirm the priority issue addressed in the Lausanne Covenant if social service is seen only as good works. But the very language of the covenant implies sacrificial service (the demonstration of God's love) by those who have been born again. If this is what the covenant refers to, then I believe that evangelism (understood in the covenant as necessarily including the communication of content) is not the principal priority. If it is not the priority, what is it? First, according to the Greek verbs in the Great Commission it is at least an assumption if not an implied command. We are to "go" and "preach" the gospel. In short, proclamation/preaching is not optional. Second

proclamation is a part of what it means to be a witness (Luke 24:44). Third, proclamation is an ally and partner of the demonstration of the Kingdom (James 1:27; I John 4:20-21).

However, sacrificial service done in the power of the Spirit is just as much a priority as the proclamation or verbal aspect of evangelism. When I look at the testimony of Jesus' life, I don't see a priority of one or the other. There are many times when He sacrificially serves with no record of His delivering "evangelistic" content. Several examples include the following:

- The healing of a dying boy from Cana in John 4:43-54,
- The casting out of a demon in Mark 1:21-28 and Luke 4:31-37,
- A man cured of leprosy in Mt. 8:2-4, Mark 1:40-45, and Luke 5:12-16,
- A blind man given sight in Mt. 8:22-26,
- The raising to life of the widow's son in Luke 7:11-17.

On other occasions Jesus proclaims without physically serving, such as his encounter with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21). Apparently, the manner in which Jesus calls people depends on how his Father directed him which appears to be based on context rather than on a priority of proclamation versus meeting a physical or social need.

Though that primacy was no longer highlighted as "priority" in the most recent Lausanne congress (South Africa 2010), it has been the priority of many Western evangelical churches, especially since the first two Great Awakenings (1730s-1740s, and 1790s-1840s) and the revivals of the nineteenth century. I have increasingly wondered if the current and growing demise of the church's influence on Western culture is one of the consequences of this priority. Personally, I affirm the Lausanne Covenant of 1974, except for this one statement which I believe is not scriptural. As a matter of fact, I think this emphasis is the opposite of Jesus' intentions.

So then, what do I say about the millions who have come to faith in Christ through the evangelistic efforts of generations of evangelical missionaries? Or through Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade for Christ (now CRU) and Billy Graham crusades and other similar groups? With the angels of heaven I shout with joy! But at the same time I deeply grieve for the lack of emphasis on discipling those who truly are born again to follow or to be like Jesus.

Also, I want to be clear that I reject the idea that social service is the main priority. Some current movements speak of "mission as transformation." I think this way of speaking risks giving the impression that transformation is something people do rather than something God does. The effects of the fall are so profound that even redeemed humans are incapable of understanding, much less healing, their brokenness. In 2 Chronicles God makes it clear to Solomon that our healing is something He does in response to our living in obedience to His commands. That doesn't mean that God won't use the gifts He gave us in that process. He clearly does. We see that multiple times in the lives of Old

Testament heroes and in the Church. But what Scripture does imply is that the best human efforts that are not infused with His supernatural power will fail to bring healing/transformation to our broken lives and/or communities. Biblical transformation is the result of God's supernatural intervention in human affairs. (See also Deuteronomy 28 and 30 and Isaiah 58.) Even the best efforts of men do not result in transformation. Our role in transformation is simply obedience (read "discipleship"). God's role is healing the brokenness that results from sin.

It strikes me that our healing/transformation is relatively straightforward – for us. His people are to live the way He instructs. When they do, God does the heavy lifting.

Principle C: Evangelism without discipleship produces hypocrisy.

Most of us have revulsion toward hypocrisy. When we evangelize without discipling we are at risk of producing hypocrites – people who profess one thing and do another. After 70 plus years of life and many interactions with multiple cultures, I believe hypocrisy in Christianity is a major reason, if not the primary reason, that societies have rejected the only path toward true and sustainable human flourishing.

When someone realizes he is about to leave those he loves, he shares with his loved ones what is most important. Jesus knew He was about to leave his closest friends. He wanted to be sure they clearly understood his intentions for how He, their Lord, wanted them to carry out the task for which He had come into the world. What was that task? Making disciples of nations. Nations, of course, are disciplined beginning with individuals. So yes, we must disciple individuals, but with the goal of discipling nations.

Here's the big question: Why is discipleship the priority? In his final instructions to his disciples, why didn't Jesus make evangelism the priority? Though Scripture doesn't explicitly say, the reason is clear in both testaments. God is interested in obedience rather than the appearance of obedience. Consider, for example, one of the most poignant references to His concern for living out obedience, i.e. the instructions and intentions in Isaiah 58. In the first five verses God tells Isaiah that the people of Israel are so deaf to His intentions for how they are to live as His people that Isaiah will have to shout the message like a trumpet blast in the ears of his listeners to get their attention. (Every time I read this passage I am reminded of an experience I had counseling a group of junior-high boys at summer camp. One of them delighted in waking me every morning by blowing his trumpet directly in my ear. He got my attention!) What was the message God wanted Isaiah to shout like a trumpet? Very simply, that the appearance of piety in their worship, prayer meetings, and study of Scripture wasn't sufficient to please God. In addition to the appearance of religion, Israel needed to demonstrate God's character of compassion and justice in their response to those in need. Acts of spiritual piety were appropriate but not without the demonstration of God's love.

I've attended many "worship" services in evangelical churches that remind me of God's message to Israel through Isaiah. Worship services can be impressive, entertaining and emotional. In the bulletins distributed during these services I've seen offerings of Bible studies, prayer ministries, and other "discipleship-related" programs. In Isaiah 58 God is speaking to His people who were apparently impressed with their own liturgy, prayer and study of Scriptures. He tells them that these things, by themselves, are not sufficient to qualify as worship. "If you want these things to count, you must also demonstrate my character of justice and compassion to the disenfranchised in your world ... what you actually do with your time outside the cloistered service must match the spiritual pietism of your religious gatherings."

Principle D: Scripture commands that we are to live in a way that attracts others to Jesus.

True worship attracts the lost. Deuteronomy 4:1-8 shows that a lifestyle of obedience positively attracts the attention of those who are outside the community of faith. I Peter 2:12 tells us that we should live in such a way that those outside the community of faith will praise God, even though they don't like our "religion." In Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus tells us that we should live in such a way that people see and praise the goodness of God. In other words, we are to live in such a way that outsiders are attracted to the Author of Life.

There is no more powerful witness to God's love for lost sinners than that of a people who live the ways of God (Deut. 4:5-8). America was largely founded on biblical principles. Much of that has eroded, but the mere legacy has made America a "promised land" in the eyes of many people of the economically developing nations where I work.

Principle E: Disciple making, not evangelism, is the end-goal – the ultimate purpose - of the Great Commission.

Evangelism is a necessary part of the process of disciple making but it is not the goal. The goal is not converts but imitators of Jesus. Evangelism is one of the first steps in the process of making disciples. In terms of emphasis, In general, the evangelical church has put the cart before the horse. As a consequence we have a church of immature believers who often discredit God's name and neglect His intentions for the world. We have churches which do not nor cannot create the conditions for biblical transformation in our cultures (2 Chron. 7:14). Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest* says in his April 24 entry says, "One life wholly devoted to God is of more value to God than one hundred lives simply awakened by His Spirit." Treating evangelism as the goal rather than the first step of our task leads to the sin of disobedience. It keeps us from accomplishing the primary task Jesus gave us, i.e., discipleship. The Great Commandment and the Great Commission and are not in conflict!

To some people, reversing the priority of evangelism and discipleship may seem like a small matter. But I believe this reversal has had huge and disastrous consequences in delaying His Kingdom coming. Conversion should be preceded by and/or immediately followed by teaching Jesus' followers to obey what Jesus taught. At its irreducible minimum, Jesus' teaching is to show one's love for God by loving one's neighbour (Mat. 22:36-40; 7:12; 1 John 4:20-21).

A pastor friend I love and respect includes discipleship under the category of evangelism. I believe I understand why. But to my thinking, including discipleship under the category of evangelism weakens Jesus' call to "Follow Me" and the primary task of that following to make disciples.

It is not that the evangelical church doesn't believe in discipleship (or at least what it understands as discipleship). Mostly, it does. But, in today's church I see several problems that mitigate against making disciples. Here are three.

The first problem is the often unspoken feeling that biblical discipleship requires salvation as a first step in the process. (Above I said that "being born from above is only the initial step in the life-long process of discipleship." My contention here is that salvation is not the necessary first step. Many people begin a discipleship process before they are actually regenerated. More on this below.)

Here's a second problem: focusing on evangelism as a first step leaves less energy for equipping believers to be witnesses to the glorious transforming work of the Spirit. This is especially true in light of the sheer number of people who need to be saved.

Third, in practice if not necessarily in theory, discipleship is understood as learning a set of spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study rather than the discipline of obedience to the rule of Christ in every area of life. Leslie Newbigin said, "A preaching of the gospel that calls men and women to accept Jesus as their Savior but does not make it clear that discipleship means a commitment to a vision of society radically different from that which controls our public life today must be condemned as false." (*Foolishness to the Greeks*, p. 132)

I attended a Lausanne congress on evangelism in Manila in 1989. One speaker was tasked with the subject of effective evangelistic strategy. Before listing the strategies being highlighted at the congress—crusades, tracts, street preaching, radio, TV, et al—he asked participants to stand (and remain standing) when he mentioned the method through which they had come to Christ. When he finished listing these strategies, about 15 to 20 percent of the audience was standing. The rest remained seated. Then he asked about a strategy that was barely highlighted at that congress: "How many of you came to Christ through a relationship?" At that point most of the remaining audience of several thousand global evangelical leaders stood to their feet. Point made!

Most people agree that evangelism outside relationship tends to be unfruitful. My wife and I receive uninvited sales calls, both door-to-door or telephone. We resent these as intrusions, and they are an apt metaphor for the kind of evangelism that proclaims the good news of the Kingdom outside of relationships. Yes, a small percentage of cold calls score a “sale.” But, such repeated intrusions are resented by most people. Many Americans become reluctant to answer the phone or the door fearing it is a salesman instead of a friend.

I recently received a letter from my son, an executive with a major music company.

You ... suggest (the churches') inability to distinguish itself or its message from that of its contemporary's messages and voices. ... I was in Vegas at a corporate convention a few weeks ago and ... was reminded of a distinct feeling I had during the main presentation in Las Vegas of all places - I felt distinctly like I was in church!!! And I was being sold a product with the best of what contemporary entertainment and crowd psychology had to offer. I don't think the enemy could have thought of a more brilliant distortion if he was seeking to disempower the Church than to teach it to "sell."

Another metaphor is inoculation against disease. To prevent polio, we inoculate a person with a dead virus which keeps them from getting the real thing. Evangelism outside of relationships can be problematic. It can inoculate unbelievers with what appears to be “dead” Christianity and keep the unevangelized from receiving the real thing. Gandhi is reported to have said, “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

In the West, we have a counting culture. Donors want to know how many “came to Christ” as a result of their donation. Those involved in this task, of course, report numbers as high as possible. There is a joke in mission circles that more people have come to Christ in Argentina than the population of Argentina. How? Many attending crusade meetings raise their hands to indicate they want to follow Christ. Those same people go to multiple crusades and are counted multiple times. Evangelicals have become addicted to numbers in both evangelism and church planting. Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest* says in his October 27 entry, “There is a passion for souls that does not spring from God but from the desire to make converts to our point of view.” I would paraphrase this to say, “There is a passion for souls that does not spring from God but from a desire for numbers that make the preacher look good in the eyes of donors.”

A friend from Romania just wrote about the same thing. At a recent conference statistics were reported that the number of Romanians who had received Christ in the last 2000 years was about 47 million, notwithstanding that the current population of Romanians is only 22 million. He concluded with the observation, “Those who do not chase numbers lose their support!!”

A young evangelist/pastor I am mentoring in eastern India asked to spend time with me when I was in Malaysia a few years ago. As he shared his story, he told me how Americans were funding his evangelistic crusades at which thousands of people attended and hundreds put up their hands to indicate an interest in following Christ. He said he began to recognize many of the same people attending meetings held in different venues and repeatedly raising their hands. But he saw little if any long-term change. At the conclusion of his sharing he said, “Bob, India will never be reached for Christ this way.” He withdrew from this kind of evangelism at substantial cost because he told the American donors that he couldn’t continue this strategy. He is now engaged in a wholistic approach to evangelism and discipleship.

The Pastor Emeritus of my home church told me the following story when I approached him about my concern about evangelism without discipleship.

He was serving as interim pastor of a significant church in a university town on the west coast of California. Each spring break a beach-evangelism program was conducted by a well-known organization. Many of the young people working with this organization attended his church. He heard their testimonies of the number of college kids who “came to Christ.” But, he told me, he almost never saw any of these new believers in church. So he decided to find out why.

The pastor put on a bathing suit, took a sun umbrella and a book, and sat down on the beach to see what would happen. Before long a young man came by, said “Hello” and started a conversation. My pastor friend recognized this young man as one of the college students in his church who was involved in this evangelistic program, but the young man didn’t recognize the pastor out of context. The pastor showed interest in talking and the young man quickly moved toward sharing the Gospel. At the conclusion of his presentation he asked if the pastor would be interested in giving his life to Christ. The pastor told the young man that he already had and that he had been a follower of Jesus for many years. The college student was surprised and embarrassed and asked why his new friend didn’t tell him earlier. The pastor introduced himself and told the young man that he recognized him from church, and that he was there to observe the evangelism that this young man and his friends were giving testimonies about at the church. The pastor then asked the young man if he could ask him a question. He agreed. It went something like this:

Pastor: “Tell me how you do your evangelism.”

Student: “Well, I share the Gospel with any one I can like I did with you.”

P: “If they are interested and make a decision for Christ, what do you do then?”

S: “I give them some literature, find out where they live and give them a church contact in their home area. And then I encourage them to go there and ask to be discipled.”

P: "Could I ask you a personal question?"

S: "Sure."

P: "As we have been sitting here I notice a lot of attractive young women looking in our direction. It's clear that they are not looking at me but you. You're a handsome guy. Do you think you could get one of these girls pregnant?"

S: "Oh, sir, I would never do that."

P: "I didn't ask if you would. I asked if you think you could?"

S: (Blushing) "I guess so."

P: "If you did, what would you do?"

S: "I would get out of town as quickly as I could!"

P: "Would you really!? Isn't there a parallel between what you are doing here and that scenario? You bring people to faith. They are baby believers and then you give them a list of orphanages where they could get their diapers changed and a bottle of milk."

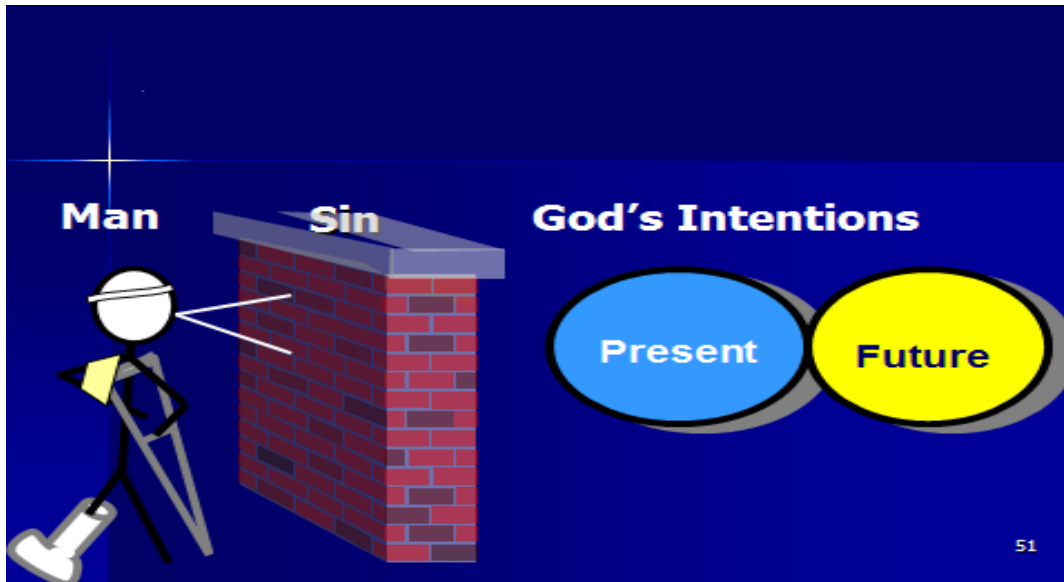
A high percentage of those who appear to come to Christ through non-relational means seem to disappear. Two years after a major evangelistic crusade in his city, a friend of mine decided to contact the churches in his community to find out how many people the pastors of those churches knew of members who had come to their church as a result of the crusade. He contacted many churches. Not one pastor could identify one person who fit this category.

Think of the relationships you have. Some are people you know and trust. Others are people you know and don't trust, or people you don't know well enough to trust. To which of these are you most likely to listen? What would happen if every member of every church were discipled – not to hand out tracts – but to live in such a way that those they talked to about Jesus wanted to listen, and then were taught how to appropriately share what Jesus has done for them in their own lives?

My Romanian friend concluded his note with this observation about the young people he pastors: "My youth have few to no models in the discipleship process. They have been exposed to very good teaching but it was not combined with models to follow. Sad! Obedience, serving, and living a Christ-like life paves the road to evangelism. As God the Father moves people's hearts toward Jesus, they see what it means to be born again as they watch us and desire Him! Then, evangelism takes place."

Principle F: It is primarily our sin that keeps broken people from seeing God's glory.

One of the lessons I teach is called “The Church as a Window.” See the diagram below.



We see broken man standing in front of a wall of sin that keeps him from seeing God's intentions either in the future or in the present. Instead of seeing this sin as the corruption, violence, etc. of the world, I explain that the first sin that keeps people of the world from seeing God is the disobedience of God's people. I do that by looking at how we live in relationship to God's clear instructions in the following areas:

In our personal lives

- Acts 14:22 – Endure hardship
- Eph. 5:17-20 – Be sober, Spirit-filled, singing and thankful
- 1 Thes. 4:3,11 – Live holy, pure, and productive lives

With our families,

- Eph. 5:22 to 6:2 – Be submissive, honor and give respect
- Eph. 6:4 – Train children in holy living

With our brothers and sisters in Christ,

- Jn. 13:34 – Love each other
- Jn. 17:20-23 – Live in unity

With our neighbors,

- Rom. 13:9 – Love our neighbors
- Jas. 1:27 – Care for widows and orphans

- Jer. 22:3, 15-16 – Advocate for those in need

With our government, employers/employees,

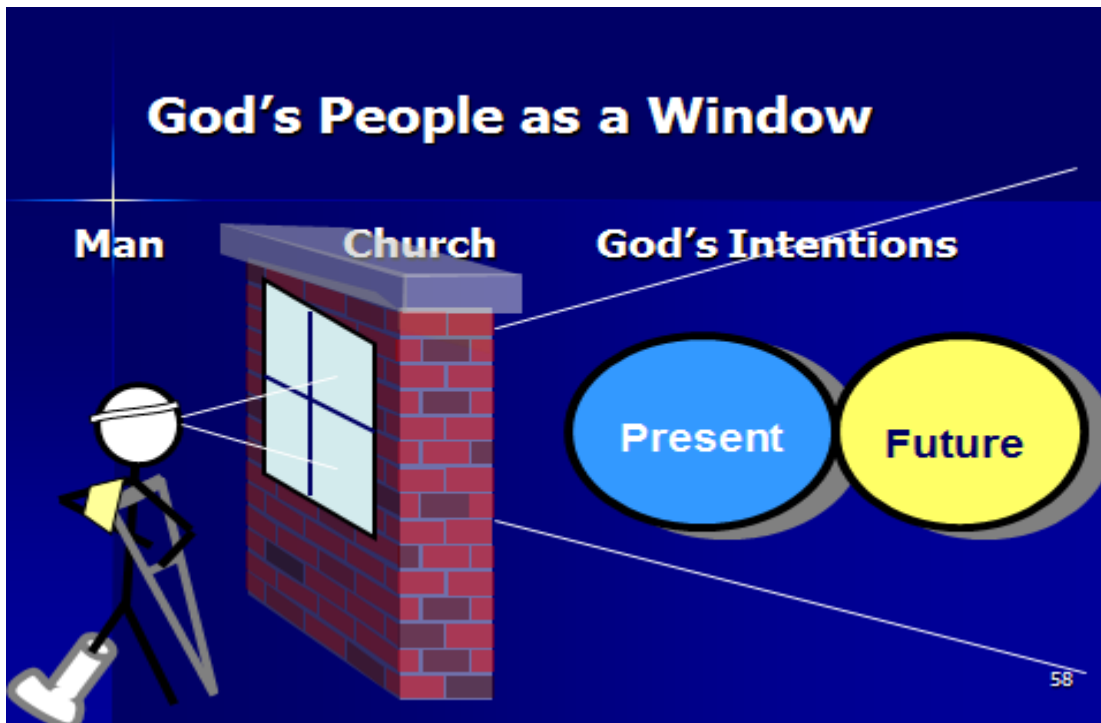
- Col. 4:1 – Be fair to those under our authority
- 1 Pet. 2:13-15 – Respect those in authority

- Rom. 13:1 – Submit to those in authority

With our enemies,

- Luke 6:27, 35-36

As my students explore these areas of God's intentions, it is abundantly and embarrassingly clear that the sin that keeps broken people from seeing God's great love and plan for them is primarily our disobedience – not the corruption of government or society. I then explain that God has put something in the wall of the sin which will be there until Christ returns. Jesus has put a window in the wall. That window is the Church. See the diagram below. But for the church to be a window through which a broken world can see God's intentions in all areas, the church must demonstrate God's concern for brokenness - not only in the spiritual domain but in the domains of wisdom, physical, spiritual and social need.



What is the antidote? I think it begins by recapturing a biblical understanding of discipleship – living in obedience to Jesus' instructions. Second, discipleship should be the primary mission of the local church. Third, discipleship requires an intentional strategy that sees the goal of discipleship as developing people who increasingly look like Jesus.

In my opinion, an emphasis on the non-biblical priority of evangelism versus discipling actually leads to sin. "What?!" you say, "Never!" Here's why I say that.

Suppose you ask your child to clean his room – make his bed, put his clothes and toys away. He understands your instructions but only hangs up a few clothes. What would you call that? Disobedience! Disobedience may be either unintentional – in the case of misunderstanding, or intentional – in the case of not fulfilling what is understood. What does God call it when we carry out the first step of his Commission (evangelism) but omit the priority of his instruction for how we should live (making disciples)? It is disobedience, whether intentional or unintentional. Our culpability may be less in the second than in the first, but according to Leviticus 4-5 we are still culpable. Whether intentional or unintentional, God requires repentance for not fulfilling his intentions followed by a change in behavior that reflects obedience.

Not only can the priority of evangelism lead to sin, it can encourage irrelevance. Church planting often follows evangelism. Church planting should be a good thing. But when it is disconnected from discipleship – equipping people to serve in their world like Jesus served in his – such churches often turn people away from the very God these churches supposedly worship. Outsiders look at this kind of church as irrelevant to the brokenness of their community. They see a local church that seems to be concerned only about spiritual things and in a future by-and-by. If we believe the Gospel is not only the power to save souls but to transform – to bring healing to individuals, families, communities and whole societies – something must be wrong.

Over more than 30 years of global travel I have visited many countries where tens of thousands of churches have been planted in the last 50 years. Instead of being agents that actively work to bring God's present intentions for shalom in those communities, many of these churches are seen by their communities as isolated, irrelevant and defensive conclaves. In light of this reality I think that the triumphalism often connected to the reported numbers of people saved, baptized, and churches planted in many of our agencies' publications and public pronouncements is dishonoring to our Lord.

Again I ask, it is possible that the consequence of this misunderstood priority between evangelism and discipleship, and the way this misunderstanding is carried out in much of evangelicalism is a key – perhaps the key - reason that the Church of the last few generations is losing the battle for the soul of Western and other cultures?

Is it possible that a major reason the church in the West is losing the “culture wars” is the

Church itself? The church is supposed to be comprised of people who hold themselves to a higher standard of integrity, love, and service, etc., yet many studies show that there is little difference between the lives of the people in the church and in the wider culture. Though I love the Bridegroom and His Church, and though I have passionately given my vocational and avocational life to serve it, my own kids who love and serve the Lord in their private lives tend to avoid it because they are so turned off by the discrepancy between what the church says it is and what it is in reality. I know many readers of this paper will identify with my experience.

Principle G: Discipleship is simply equipping people to be like Jesus

Jesus taught his disciples to so abide in Him that they naturally obey what He commanded and do so in His supernatural strength. When others see them, they see Jesus. What does it mean to be like Jesus? It means to be a servant who humbly and sacrificially places others’ real needs above their own (Phil. 2). It is important to note that this is something different than many evangelicals practice. Rather than something that one assents to but doesn’t practice, biblical discipleship is an obligation to conform to the truth of how God calls his people to live in every area of life. In biblical discipleship, obedience is not optional.

At the macro level, [Ken Myers defines discipleship this way](#): “Discipleship is not engaging with another culture to present a small set of new propositions. Rather, discipleship is a work of alternative enculturation - to present a new way to understand life and the world in which we live, that is, a new way to understand ‘what is real.’ And this new way of understanding life is incarnated in alternative cultural forms that are sustained across generations and, when possible, shared with our neighbors.”

I believe that the Bible teaches that discipleship, not evangelism/conversion, is the primary mission of disciples. It is teaching others to obey – to be like – Jesus. When discipleship is our passion, evangelism will largely be a by-product of God’s people living the way he calls them to live. This is not conversion first which is then followed by learning to be a disciple. It is learning to follow Jesus from the beginning. I think it is possible to argue that Jesus disciples were “converted” in the process of being disciplined rather than the other way around.

I think the strategy for discipling has two major components. First, it is to help those being disciplined learn to abide in Christ. Oswald Chambers (June 19, *My Utmost for His Highest*) reminds us that Jesus’ strength came from obedience to His Father – dwelling in Him, and that our strength comes from abiding in Jesus. If we don’t have this supernatural strength we will soon be exhausted in our attempts to be like Jesus.

Second and simultaneously, discipling is equipping God's people as servants to their generation. God has gifted every church leader (Eph. 4:11-13) for the purpose of equipping God's people to serve. You don't have to be a Bible whiz to be a servant. Yes, it is important to have sound and thorough Biblical teaching. It is my observation that, by itself, teaching biblical content doesn't produce many disciples. Evangelism that is real, that lasts, mostly comes from serving others in the strength that comes from abiding in Jesus.

I don't mean to discount the importance of learning what the Bible teaches. It is essential! But, many local churches I know teach biblical content as though it automatically leads to obedience. In my seventh decade of living in and observing evangelical churches, I can say that this assumption is faulty. Yes, ideas have consequences. But only if they are acted on.

God promised Solomon *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land*, (2 Chron. 7:14). The abiding principle of that specific promise remains: when we equip God's people to live as He calls them, His blessing follows. It is then that the church can fulfill Paul's prophetic vision of the Church being the fullness of Christ which is love (Eph. 1:23; Eph. 4:17-19; Eph. 4:13), and the administration of His "manifold wisdom" of reconciliation and restoration displayed to the observing principalities and powers (Eph. 3:9-10).

The bottom line is that disciple making is not rocket science. It is simply the equipping of Jesus-followers to obey Him, i.e., to give verbal witness to what He has done in their lives, and to demonstrate God's love, mercy, justice, and holiness as a lifestyle. This doesn't require formal teaching as much as modeling, encouragement and joyful accountability. The beauty and winsomeness of a (biblical) disciple's practice attracts unbelievers to the Kingdom. Rodney Stark, a respected historical sociologist, describes "witness" primarily in terms of lifestyle. His study of the early church brought him to the conclusion that it was early Christian's lifestyle more than their message that was the major factor in the transformation of a pagan Roman Empire to one that named Christianity as its reigning cultural paradigm.

If the mandate for biblical discipleship is so clear in Scripture, why is discipleship such a conundrum - a logical postulation that evades us? We have already discussed what I think are two of the three principal reasons: 1) A faulty understanding of Jesus' priority in the Great Commission (evangelism rather than discipleship); and 2) The practice of teaching discipleship as the knowledge of Jesus' instructions rather than teaching a lifestyle of humble, sacrificial servanthood.

A third reason can be a fear of legalism. Accountability is essential in true discipleship but how do you hold someone accountable to "doing" without being legalistic. We deal

with this in the second section of this paper, but in short, legalism is not an issue when those discipling and those being disciplined come together for accountability for the right reason. What is that reason? It is joyfully wanting to share and be helped in knowing how to better reflect the love of our lives – Jesus.

I believe the fourth reason for the conundrum is not a lack of desire to equip disciples, but a lack of knowing how. So much of the “how” that is practiced today focuses on the first two misperceptions above.

A) When you think discipleship is equivalent to evangelism, you train people to evangelize for the purpose of conversion. Sound familiar? The long-term intent may be to disciple but so much effort and focus is on evangelism that the “disciplers” seldom move beyond evangelism. If you understand that the priority of the Great Commission is evangelism, discipleship will mean equipping the new converts to evangelize. This is like equipping teenagers to have babies and training those babies to have more babies, who have more babies - without much thought and energy invested in the much more difficult and long-range task of helping those babies to grow to mature, responsible adulthood.

B) If you think discipleship is the knowledge and practice of traditional spiritual disciplines you will equip the new converts in Bible knowledge, prayer, fasting, tithing, meditation, etc. without equipping them to love others through humble and sacrificial service.

How do we know when discipleship is or has happened? Scripture helps us answer the question.

A passion for restoration of the broken: *“Go and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor”* (Matthew 11:4-5).

Jesus said that He came to do the will of His Father (John 6:38). What did that mean? We see one answer in Jesus’ reply to John’s disciples, above. I also find it helpful to read the topic headings in the gospel of Mark in my NIV Bible. Examples include: “Jesus Drives out an Evil Spirit,” “Jesus Heals Many,” “Jesus Heals a Paralytic,” “Jesus Calms the Storm,” “The Healing of a Demon-possessed Man.” “Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand,” “The Healing of a Deaf and Mute Man,” “The Healing of a Blind Man at Bethsaida,” “Blind Bartimaeus Receives His Sight,” and “Jesus Clears the Temple.” There are implications for us, as followers of Jesus:

1. God seems passionate to heal brokenness. *Question:* What are we doing individually and corporately to heal the brokenness of those around us?

2. We see evidence of God’s sovereignty over the cosmos. *Question:* What are we doing individually and corporately to reflect God’s concern for the brokenness of our physical environment?
3. We see evidence of God’s concern for the desecration of sacred places. *Question:* What are we doing individually and corporately to heal the brokenness in our families, in our churches, in our communities?
4. We see overwhelming evidence of supernatural intervention to heal human and cosmic brokenness. *“When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and took note that they had been with Jesus (Acts 4:12). Question:* Is the observing world astonished to see evidence of God’s supernatural intervention in our lives and in our service to others?

When we began our ministry in Haiti, a group of Christian young people in the worst slum in Port-au-Prince were challenged to *do* God’s will. As they prayed, the Spirit drew their attention to an sick elderly man who barely survived in a filthy shack. They went to this man’s shack. They bathed him, put him in clean clothes, fed him, and cleaned up the filth in his tiny room. Slum residents passing by were *astonished* and said, “These could only be Christians!”

Suffering: *“But we behold him who hath been made a little lower than the angels, (even) Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God he should taste of death for every (man). For it became him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings” (Hebrews 2:9-10 ASV).*

There is a way in which suffering can reflect the glory of God. Jesus suffered sacrificially—not for himself, but for others. When we suffer for others, we reflect what Jesus did for us.

Questions: When we look at the individual followers of Jesus in our churches, do we see God’s glory as they suffer for others? When the people in our communities look at our church, do they see followers of Jesus who “give until it hurts” to heal the brokenness in their community?

One of the cell groups of an African church saw the needs of the Muslim children in their community for food, clothing and school. They sacrificially gave of their own meager resources to bathe, feed and teach the children in their own homes. The initially suspicious parents were touched when they saw this demonstration of God’s glory. Some of those neighbors are now becoming people who reflect the same Glory that astonished them.

Love for one another: *“And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they,*

continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:44-47, KJV).

Another evidence of God’s glory is illustrated by the loving care that the first believers had for one another.

Question: What do the people of our respective communities see and hear in terms of our care for one another?

Generosity toward those we don’t know: *“Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own” (2 Corinthians 8:2-3 NIV)*

Scripture celebrates this reflection of the glory of God. For example, in 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, Paul commends the Macedonians for giving beyond their ability to needy believers in Jerusalem—believers they had never met.

Three years ago in my own country we suffered one of the greatest natural tragedies in our history, Hurricane Katrina. It was God’s people—far more than our government with its billions of dollars—who responded with immediacy, love, aid, compassion and manpower for cleanup and rebuilding. (Heralding Unheard Voices, Homeland Security Institute, US Government, December 2006). Now, several years later, many churches continue their involvement.

An extension of this service is hospitality—an expected characteristic of those who are named in Christ. (See Romans 12:13; I Timothy 3:2 and 5:10; Titus 1:8; and 1 Peter 4:9.)

Questions: Do the people whom we have never met see God’s glory in our generosity? Are the people of our respective neighborhoods touched by God’s glory through our hospitality?

If Jesus were mayor ... if the will of God were done in our families and neighborhoods ... if there were no corruption in government ... if businesses were honest ... if there were peace between classes and ethnic groups ... if the disenfranchised were treated with dignity and justice ... any or all of these would be what we would expect to see if we are being God’s glory.

These are not goals that we can accomplish in human strength, however. They are the consequence of supernatural intervention in our broken world. We will see them ... if. The “if” is dependent on our meeting the conditions God has set out, in humble obedience to Him.

We long to see the above “ifs” become reality, but they are primarily a by-product of living as God intends. If we work toward these results as our target without teaching God’s people to *live* the Gospel in their daily lives and worlds, our communities will not be transformed. The Body of Christ should engage both in personal reflections of God’s glory and in corporate efforts to advance justice and mercy. But corporate efforts and programs—without the obedience of individual followers of Jesus to live as He taught—will not produce transformation.

Question: Do we believe transformation is dependent on obedience?

I have met many, many church leaders who say something like, “We are discipling our people to serve others!” Then I ask them where the time, funds and energy of their leaders is spent in that kind of equipping. The response almost always reflects things like Bible study, small groups, Sunday School, and projects that involve a small percentage of the congregation in an occasional few hours of community service, etc. These activities are assumed to lead people to live out a lifestyle of being Jesus hands and feet. Such typical church activities seldom lead to producing vigorous disciples who look like Jesus. What is absent is a strategy that systematically takes these “trainees” by the hand as observers to see the how of serving by coaching, mentoring and cheerleading them to be servants, and then holding them joyfully accountable for that service.

In conclusion I’d like to suggest that the passion of Jesus – to see people come to faith in Him – will be accomplished best by going back to the evangelistic strategy of the early church.

In Chapter 1 of his important book, *Ancient Future Faith*, theologian Robert Webber presents a chronology of Christianity as follows:

CHRONOLOGY

Classical – 100 to 600 AD

Medieval – 600 to 1500 AD

Reformation - 1500 to 1750 AD

Modern – 1750 to 1980 AD

Postmodern – 1980 to Present

Aided by Weber’s work, I asked, “What was the missiology of the church in each of these eras?” First, I needed to reflect on the nature of the church in each era, and compare that with what I understood from Church history how that nature was

reflected in the church's missiology. At the risk of overgeneralization, I classified the nature/emphasis of each of these eras as follows:

NATURE/EMPHASIS

Classical – Kingdom

Medieval – Institutionalization

Reformation – Scripture and Faith

Modern – Rationality

Postmodern – Relativity

The next task was to try to articulate a general description of the missiology of the Western Church at least. What I listed is:

MISSIOLOGY

Classical – Incarnation

Medieval – Institutional membership

Reformation – Faith in Scripture and Jesus

Modern – Numbers-driven evangelism and church planting

Postmodern (proposed) – Authentic living/Incarnation

A summary of the above in graphic form could look like this:

Christianity		
EMPHASIS	PERIODS	MISSIOLOGY
Kingdom	Classical 100 - 600 AD	Incarnation
Institutions	Medieval 600 – 1500 AD	Join the Institution
Scripture Only Faith Only	Reformation 1500 – 1750 AD	Faith in Jesus
Rationality	Modern 1750 – 1980 AD	#s Driven, Evan. & Church Plant.
Relativism	Postmodern 1980 - Present	Authentic living - Incarnation

As related above, Rodney Stark’s study of the early church convinced him that the primary cause of the growth of Christianity during the early part of what Weber calls the Classical period was the lifestyle of the early Christians. In other words, they were the incarnation of Jesus. It was the beauty of this “new kind of humanity” that drew others to the become citizens of the Kingdom of God and of His Christ.

What is needed today? With Weber, I believe it is a return to missiology of the early church – an Ancient - Future Faith. What is that? It is allowing the Christ who indwells those who are truly born again to allow their hands to be the hands of Jesus. Their feet, minds, eyes, ears, mouth to become His feet, mind, eyes, ears, mouth, etc. It is to be who we say we are and who God intends us to be – the Body of Christ in practice as well as in theology.

If we would turn from our predominant evangelical emphasis on numbers of converts, numbers of churches planted, etc., and return to our own ancient missiology, I am convinced that we could stop trying to “draw people to Jesus.” Why? Because the world would be drawn to Him because they would be touched by him through us. Oswald Chambers says in *My Utmost for His Highest*, April 21, “We look for God to manifest Himself to His children: God only manifests Himself in His children.” Evangelism would be more a by-product of the way we live, or that God shows Himself through us, than a separate category of Christian activity. And those who came to Jesus would be

much more likely to understand what it means to be His followers because of the modeling of those whose example attracted them.

May His Kingdom come, now, in our lives. May His will be done, now, as it is in Heaven.

Part 2

In the second part of this paper, I share what I have discovered are two ways to begin the process of discipleship. What I share here are models based on the premise that becoming a disciple requires a disciplined approach to obeying what I call the “irreducible minimum” of the Great Commandment – loving our neighbors.

Love God and Neighbor

- Matthew 22:36-40
- Mark 12:28-31, 33
- Luke 10:27

Love Neighbor

- Matthew 7:12
- Romans 13:9
- Galatians 5:14

Why irreducible? In the New Testament Jesus and Paul quote the Great Commandment at least six times. In three of them both parts of the GC – loving God and loving neighbor – are included. In the other three, only one is quoted as a summary of the Law and the Prophets. This one is not the one Jesus said is the most important – loving God. Instead it is the lesser of the two – loving neighbor. John explains why. It is only in loving our neighbor that we show that our love for God is genuine (1 John 3:17).

How do we love? We love through service (Phil 2). What is biblical service? It is serving others to grow wholistically toward God’s intentions. The models below have come out of my years of experience in multiple cultures. To be effective, both must be contextualized.

In general, there are two levels of approach but both are based on the goal of helping followers of Jesus practically live out being witnesses in both word and deed. The first level is individual in the sense that living out a reflection of Jesus happens no matter what others do or don’t do. The second is enabling small groups to demonstrate God’s love together. Unfortunately, most local churches focus on group projects rather than training individuals in a lifestyle of Christ-like service. My observation is that the group approach has less power to impact the world if the people in the group have limited individual experience. By the same token, if the group’s members have learned discipleship at the individual level, their work has greater impact.

Individual Model

In our ministry at Harvest, we give this general category the name, [Discipline of Love](#). (The link will take you to a somewhat complex presentation of the concept.) It is appropriate for mentoring people who are literate, linear thinking and serious. But it works equally well as a very simple idea. For example, “Each week, make a disciplined commitment to find at least one way that is new/fresh to you to show God’s love to

someone in your world – family, church or community - and gather weekly with peers who have made the same commitment where each member will share, discuss and pray for those who have been served.” The minimum time commitment for this discipline and sharing should be several months with the goal that it begins to form new a lifestyle.

This model can be included as part of already ongoing small groups. However it will take a radical restructuring of small-group schedules to make it happen. Most small groups have about 1½ to 2 hours for their meetings which include food, fellowship, study, discussion and prayer. Most of this activity is focused inward. Very little ends up in tangible outward demonstration of Christ’s love. All this inward-focused activity leaves little time for something new. To incorporate a Discipline of Love-type activity into a group like this will require setting aside sufficient time for each person to share their experience of serving since the group last met, group debriefing, discovery and encouragement, and prayer for those who have been served. This could easily take 30 minutes to one hour.

One small group that developed a simplified version of the Discipline of Love as its main focus grew from two people to four groups of about 15 each in two years. Almost all the new people had been recipients of this group’s “love actions.” And, the new member’s discipleship was primarily learning to extend the love they had received to people in their respective worlds.

Corporate Model In our ministry we call this model [Seed Projects](#).

A planning guide can be found [here](#). Some of our groups use the term Seed Action for this kind of activity. It doesn’t matter what it is called. What matters is that the Disciplines of Love concept is extended from individuals to the group. The links above will show the more complex side and planning of corporate actions of love. They need to be contextualized to fit the context of each group and its culture. The concept is that a group begins, not by looking around for needs they can meet, but asking God to show them something they could do as a group to demonstrate His love to their community. They need to choose something small, done with resources available in the group or church, and focused on people who need to have an experience of the touch of Jesus’ love. For me, the ideal small group is one that practices the individual model as a lifestyle , and does 3-4 group activities a year.

Literally thousands of these group seed actions have been done in a broad range of cultures around the world with incredible impact for God’s Kingdom. Some of them have grown from small projects to ongoing ministries. But they should not begin with the intention of starting an ongoing ministry. They should begin as actions that are an end in themselves. If God provides for the seed to grow, that is wonderful. You can

review some of these stories of Disciplines of Love and Seed Projects at www.harvestfoundation.org.

It is important to conclude this section with a reminder that being a disciple is impossible without the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. What Jesus asks of his disciples is impossible in human strength. That strength comes from moving out into obedience from the strength that comes from abiding in Him.

I want to emphasize to pastors or other local church leaders the following: If you want to introduce the concept of discipleship we have discussed here in your context, you must model it in your own life – preferably for some time – before you introduce it to those you shepherd.

At this point, I'd like to quote extensively from one of the lessons I teach titled "Our Target, God's Glory." This part of the lesson I quote provides an overall strategy for discipleship in the local church. The full lesson can be downloaded [here](#).

If the end task of the Great Commission—the means to glorifying God—is to equip disciples to know and do the will of the Father, the question that follows is "How do we equip them?"

There are probably as many discipleship programs and strategies as there are denominations and para-church organizations. These programs most often have goals like these:

- 1. Personal piety—the vertical relationship between the disciple and God*
- 2. Knowledge of Scripture*
- 3. Training disciples to evangelize and/or to plant churches*

Each of these is a necessary step in discipleship, but they are not the full biblical goal. By themselves, these emphases cannot hit the target. The goal can only be attained as we equip God's people to do the things that Jesus commanded.

Some pastors expend great energy, encouraging their people to become doers of the Word—but they don't see results. Why? There are multiple reasons. One reason I frequently hear is that the people being disciplined really don't want to do what Christ asks. That may be partially true, but I think what is often seen as unwillingness to do the will of God is more (1) a fear of what obedience might mean; (2) a lack of practical knowledge about how to obey in the individual believer's context; and (3) the absence of a cohesive strategy for realistic and practical application. If the believers' confession of Jesus as Lord is genuine, I believe most will at times join Paul in his cry: "Oh wretched man that I am..." (Romans 7:24). At his deepest level, Paul wanted to obey.

There is another reason we don't see Christians living in obedience to Jesus' teachings—the worldviews from which we teach Scripture are often influenced by the lies of our cultures. In my culture this is reflected by the non-biblical influence of secularism, materialism, and relativism. These cultural lies are often clothed in assumptions, and often we are not even aware of them. We

need to practice the discipline of recognizing lies and helping our people distinguish lies from Truth.

Seven Principles (Note: These are another set than those listed above in this paper.)

If God's glory is the goal and if equipping our people for works of service is an essential means to that end, it is possible to hit the target. How? There are different discipleship scenarios that are effective. The purpose of this paper is not to propose strategies. I believe there is something more important than a good strategy. It is the embrace of principles on which the strategy is built. While strategy needs to be contextualized, biblical principles are non-negotiable and are essential for whatever strategy is employed. These principles could be articulated in various ways, but I will share those that, when applied, appear to work in any cultural or generational context. I will suggest seven principles.

Principle 1: Reliance on enabling grace

"But if you stay in me and obey my commands, you may ask any request you like, and it will be granted! My true disciples produce bountiful harvests. This brings great glory to my Father.... When you obey me you are living in my love, just as I obey my Father and live in his love. I have told you this so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your cup of joy will overflow!" (John 15:7-8; 10-12 TLB)

The first principle is helping or coaching disciples to find and maintain their relationships with Jesus. Unless disciples are abiding in Christ, other principles for equipping will not produce disciples who bring glory to God, nor will the disciples be His glory. Their efforts will be man-powered. They may look good to an outside observer, but their "service" will have little lasting and/or eternal impact.

Not only must disciples have solid connections to their Lord, they must also learn constant reliance on enabling grace—the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit—to do what they cannot do in their own strength. Consistently doing the Father's will in one's own strength is impossible. But, "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25), obedience is possible. It is in the continuous practice of obedience that service moves from obligation to joy, from legalism to freedom, from religion to grace.

Principle 2: Integrity and modeling

"Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19).

The second most important element in equipping is the integrity between the messenger and the message, the discipler and the disciple. Equippers must be modelers. Jesus demonstrated and taught that doing comes before teaching. In other words, equippers must develop the spiritual DNA of sacrificial servanthood in their own lives before they encourage their disciples or mentees to develop and practice the same.

When I was writing discipleship materials for my doctoral studies in the early 1990s, I was convicted by the Spirit that the discipleship material I was developing would have no power unless I was writing from personal experience. Thus began an intensive year of exploring the spiritual discipline of sacrificially loving others. That year shaped the rest of my life.

For example, a small discipline I regularly practice begins before I leave home for the office. I put a plastic grocery bag—sometimes two bags—in my back pocket. As I walk the two blocks to and from my parking space to the office, I pick up trash and often subconsciously hum “This is My Father’s World.” I don’t talk about it, and I don’t do it to be noticed. Actually, I’m shy about this strange-looking behavior, but I do it anyway. Whether this or my other expressions of service are noticed or not, they allow me to teach and mentor others about small and larger demonstrations of our Father’s love.

Principle 3: Ongoing teaching

“But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Heb 5:14 NIV).

“And I have been a constant example of how you can help the poor by working hard. You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ ” (Acts 20:35 NLT).

The third principle is ongoing teaching—the continuous reinforcement and coaching of the centrality of what can be called faith-praxis. What is “faith-praxis”? It is the disciplined, intentional lifestyle of allowing Christ’s spirit of sacrificial servanthood to flow through our every thought, word, and action. This principle can be introduced through curricula or a teaching series. However, faith-praxis is not sustainable in a local church unless it permeates the teaching, discipleship, and mentoring of the membership. If the teaching and modeling of sacrificial servanthood is not explicit, it must be intentionally implicit throughout the equipping process in order to maximally impact the ministry lifestyle of a local church. Why? Living our faith in a way that reflects what Jesus modeled and taught—sacrificial servanthood—is a critical vehicle for reaching the goal of glorifying God and of being His glory. In Phil 2:5 Paul reminds us that we are to have the same attitude that Jesus had—that of a servant. Isaiah reflects this same sentiment in Is. 49:5 when he recognized that being God’s servant was God’s purpose for him from his formation in the womb.

There is a large church in East Africa that integrates this kind of teaching and practice throughout the church. The themes that are developed in the sermons, the Bible studies, and the cell groups constantly remind the members that the principal call of God is to live out His Kingdom, both individually and corporately. The call to faith-praxis in this church is explicit—or intentionally implicit—in all of the church’s equipping process. As a result, this church is known—from the neighborhoods where its people live, to the halls of the national government—as a church of people who sacrificially invest to see their society healed of its brokenness.

Principle 4: Application***(see last page)*

“Little children, let us stop just saying we love people; let us really love them, and show it by our actions. Then we will know for sure, by our actions, that we are on God’s side, and our consciences will be clear, even when we stand before the Lord” (1 John 3:18-19 TLB)

The fourth principle is application. Wherever possible, discipleship must lead to present—not future—action. Obedience to God’s commands is to be done now. It is not merely a good idea to be carried out sometime later.

Unfortunately, disciplers sometimes see application as something for the mature disciple. Jesus told the rich young ruler to obey first and then follow Jesus. I wonder how the results of our evangelism and discipleship would change if we first asked seekers to do what Jesus commands as a sign that they want to follow Him?

Guiding the application process is not easy, especially for those who have not developed the needed skill. Leading a group of Christians to application is like learning to drive. In the beginning, there are jumps and stalls. After awhile, the maturing driver coordinates starting, steering, and stopping with grace—without thinking.

Unless they apply what they learn, little will change in the lives of church members and the people of their respective worlds—the people they are called to serve. Leading or facilitating lesson application requires skill, humility, patience, persistence, a deep love for Jesus, and a commitment to obey by discipling others to obey. Other than evangelism and spiritual discipleship, the skill of leading disciples to live lifestyles of “doing” what Jesus commanded is not often modeled or taught in Bible schools, seminaries, or church-based teacher trainings. Like driving, this skill is best learned through experience, but it is one of the most important arrows in the quiver of one who has a passion to hit the target.

Principle 5: Accountability

“When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them” (Acts 15:4 NIV)

The fifth principle is accountability. A well recognized management mantra is, “Regardless of written policy, employees pay attention to what the boss notices.” Our people need to see that their leaders see and acknowledge sacrificial service—that they expect service to be the principal mark of membership. Opportunities to share the joys, questions, and frustrations of application should have a regular and reserved place in worship services, small-group settings, and accountability groups. This is another way to provide structured and spontaneous opportunities for our people, giving testimony to what God has done and what people are learning as they serve. Opportunities for accountability need to be expected, positively anticipated, regular, and frequent—a part of our worship. Isaiah 58 reminds us that the demonstration of God’s sacrificial love is the essential form of true worship.

Principle 6: Encouragement

“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.” (1 Thessalonians 5:11 NIV)

“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (Philippians 2:1-2 NIV)

A sixth principle is encouragement. Encouragement is especially important for the inexperienced disciple. Sustained joy of serving comes naturally when service as a lifestyle is so practiced that it becomes unconscious. The follower of Jesus who is just learning true discipleship needs the encouragement that comes from recognition, group interaction, and coaching. Such encouragement and recognition should not lift up the disciple, but the Lord the disciple serves.

Principle 7: Celebration

“Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together” (Ps 34:3 NIV)

Finally, we come to the seventh principle—celebration. When I see what people celebrate, I have a good idea of what they value. What we celebrate reflects our values. If we value numbers over obedience, we will celebrate the number of people who have “been evangelized,” the number of people who were baptized, the number of churches planted, or the number of new church members. We can legitimately celebrate these things. But if the end goal of our efforts is to bring glory to God as our people serve in His name, our celebrations should primarily reflect that value.

When we see our people serve, let's celebrate! Let's glorify the Lord who enables us to be His glory.

How? We can tell stories. We can talk about the struggles, the surprises, and the evidence we have seen of God's supernatural intervention. Numerical growth is good, but saints who serve are a greater evidence of fruit than numbers.



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