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FOLLOW TO LEAD

THE JOURNEY OF A DISCIPLE MAKER



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CHAPTER 1

GO MAKE DISCIPLES: THEOLOGY PRODUCES BIOGRAPHY

Thinking precipitates behavior. Proverbs 23:7 says, “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.” It has been said that “when we sow a thought we reap a behavior. When we sow a behavior we reap a character. And when we sow a character we reap a destiny.” A blessed destiny begins with a biblically correct thought.

If reaching the world is the destiny of the church, then we must think the right thoughts about how to fulfill that purpose. What is our theological approach to reaching the world? Should we all just do whatever comes to mind to reach others with the gospel, or perhaps copy what other churches or organizations are doing that seems to be working to reach the world? If a vehicle is not operated according to the specification of the owner’s manual, then the performance of that vehicle will be something less than what the designer intended. Notwithstanding Paul’s admonition to by all means save some (I Corinthians 9:22), surely the Founder of the church not only gave us power to reach the world but also equipped us with His strategy to do so.

Much has been done to reach lost people through the invention and inspiration of humans and with some measure of success. Everyone is interested in something that is working. I have had countless conversations with pastors about what they are doing to make an impact in their communities. It is human nature to emulate successful mentors or models that have resulted in great growth. Sometimes God inspires certain individuals in unique ways to reach the lost, but He may not intend for that method to become a theological track to perpetually follow. Moses first met God at a burning bush, but he did not keep looking for God behind every bush he saw.

Brilliant people with great hearts for God have devised means to reach lost people and marketed their ideas with great success. Countless congregations have jumped on the bandwagon of a local church's success, purchased its materials, hit the streets, and enjoyed some results, but eventually the enthusiasm waned and it was back to business as usual. I have had people recommend books to me that I was eager to sit down and read. On more than one occasion my high expectations were not met and I was severely disappointed in the material. My frustration taught me that a book is only as good as where you are in life when you read it. If a book that someone recommended to me is not talking to me, I have learned to place it on the shelf and wait for that season of my life to unfold before I pick it back up. Someone else's inspiration can easily become your frustration as you attempt to duplicate his or her success. God may have spoken to that person about a particular plan, program, or initiative, but He did not speak to you. No one is guaranteed success simply by following someone else's model.

God inspires pastors on how to make an impact in their communities. He places a congregation in a community with unique gifts, qualities, vision, skills, talent, resources, and leadership specifically equipped to become fruitful in that area. Each message to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2 and 3 was individually suited to that particular congregation. One method of outreach may work in a certain community but has absolutely no impact in another. Rather than borrow from successful church models or read books about how to be effective in reaching particular demographics and cultures, doesn't it stand to reason that God would have given us a method that would work in any century, on any continent, in any local church, and in any culture? Well, the good news is He has!

Before we can have the right practice in our local congregation concerning fulfilling the Great Commission, we must first have the right theology. Having the wrong theology is sort of like not getting the first button of a shirt pushed through the corresponding buttonhole. If the first button is not inserted into the right place, then the entire garment will appear disheveled and will not look like what the designer envisioned. Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." If theology is right, then everything else in Scripture fits and life will fall into place. If our theology is wrong, then a multiplicity of problems will follow. A correct theology in our minds should produce the appropriate biography in our lives.

If we, as the church, are to engage the most effective practice in making an impact on the world around us, then we must first have the right understanding of Scripture. In His command, "Go make disciples of all nations," Jesus gave us the right theology. If His

idea of reaching the world with the gospel is correctly interpreted theologically and then biographically enacted, we will be successful in doing what God has called us to do. If we do not understand, or have somehow missed the full meaning of His instructions concerning how we are to reach the world, then we will not be equipped with the full power available to us. Consequently, the results will not be as fruitful as Christ intended.

It is my belief that Christ's commission to go make disciples has not been completely understood by Christianity as a whole and among some Oneness Pentecostals in particular. That is not to say that many of our efforts in reaching lost people have not been useful or effective. But as we stand on the cusp of the soon return of Christ and are overwhelmed with the urgency of all the work yet to be done, it would be expedient to reexamine all that is enfolded into the command, "Go make disciples."

Perhaps we still have much to learn concerning the method that Jesus modeled and made sustainable within His disciple-making culture. We have so many more advantages to reach this world with the gospel that were not afforded to our apostolic ancestors. Their travel was difficult and their communication was slow. But contained in the command, "Go make disciples," was a timeless method that, when employed, provided a strategy to reach the world within one generation of time.

Do we have the right theology? We claim that we do, and it is certainly so regarding the essential doctrines of the Godhead, new birth, and Apostolic identity. Oneness Pentecostals (also referred to as "Apostolics" in this book) typically contend that they lay no claim to embracing any religious tradition, but

the truth is, we can be as traditional as any other denomination. For example, don't we usually sit in our "assigned" seats every Sunday? Paul wrote, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (II Thessalonians 2:15). Not all tradition is bad.

Tradition that is rooted in Scripture will always be right although it may need to be refreshed and personally owned by each succeeding generation. Heritage is what our ancestors leave us, but an inheritance is the living faith of our forebears abiding within us. Tradition may become counterproductive when ineffective programs and methods are protected by local church stockholders who believe that some things are too sacred to change. Never mind that the church atmosphere is stagnant and these ineffective programs and methods aren't helping anyone, changing lives, or influencing the community.

One tradition Pentecostals adopted years ago was the use of hymnals. I remember when some in the church were worried that we would become charismatic if we threw our hymnals away, not considering the fact that we got them from the Methodists. One out-of-town visitor who came to our church from another Apostolic church was convinced we were backslid because we did not use hymnals, but projected the words to the worship choruses on a screen. Where did we get the idea for kneeling and tarrying at the altar (mourners' benches)? Did the apostles use these, or did they receive the Holy Spirit "where they were sitting" (Acts 2:2)? Is it apostolic that 100 percent of religious activity happens behind the closed doors of the worship facility, and only the professional staff does the work of the ministry?

We have historically prided ourselves in bringing nothing into our Pentecostal worship experience from the older denominations. However this simply is not true: we borrowed hymnals and mourners' benches from the Methodists, Sunday school from the Baptists, and worship facility architectural design from the historic church (i.e., long narrow sanctuaries with rows of pews and high, ornate lecterns). Most of our worship songs come from Charismatic and Evangelical artists, not to mention that some hymn tunes were adapted from worldly songs. We may not be as free from tradition as we would suppose.

Fellowship was a critical component to the success of the early church, but there does not seem to be much fellowship that occurs on any given Sunday in a Pentecostal church. And yet the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, our model and standard, clearly says that the first-century believers faithfully ascribed to the apostles' doctrine and fellowship (Acts 2:42, 46). True biblical fellowship is more than meeting at Pizza Hut after church and just having a good time. Fellowship in Scripture is the Greek word *koinonia*, which infers a mutual and common exchange of hearts, faith, and experience. This simply does not happen on Sundays in America. Most worship experiences (including some Pentecostal churches) are one-dimensional with the professional clergy going through the motions behind elaborate pulpits while the audience mindlessly stares at the hairdos in front of them as they nod their heads in approval.

In the first-century church, the expectation and the experience was that all born-again believers did ministry. Originally, the word *minister* was a verb and not a noun. Somewhere Christianity turned an action word into a title. The fivefold ministry (see Ephesians 4:11)

provided leadership for the church, but ministry was shared by all. Saints were trusted to serve, and they were highly esteemed by their leaders. The apostles equipped, empowered (i.e., laid on hands and shared their authority), and released saints for ministry. One example is the development of deacons in Acts 6. Notice what happened when the seven were identified, ordained, and commissioned: “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). When the ministry was decentralized and the saints were equipped, empowered, and released to do ministry, the results were explosive.

It is a wonderful thing when the saints believe in the pastor, but it is even more wonderful when the pastor believes in the saints. The historic church does not have a legacy of leadership that believed in and empowered church members for ministry. For most of church history, there was a gap between ministerial professionals (educated clergy) and parishioners (mostly theologically uneducated laity). Peter and John would have never been respected spiritual leaders, much less apostles, in the historic church. Their trained antagonists referred to them as unlearned and ignorant men (Acts 4:13).

The clergy were the interpreters of Scripture. They told the laity what the Scripture said, what it meant, and what they should think about it. Some churches today may not specifically use these terms but they function somewhat similarly. The church members do not think for themselves, neither are they allowed to make simple decisions without consulting their pastor. The pastor may tell members if and when they can take vacations, how they should spend their money

(beyond biblical stewardship), and what color of carpet to install in their homes. This style of pastoring does not trust the laity to do any ministry except to clean the church or cut the grass. This kind of leadership will stunt spiritual and numerical growth.

Jesus did not intend for His command to “go make disciples of all nations” to be fulfilled only by the fivefold ministry or the so-called professional clergy. This was a commission for every believer to embrace. In fact, Acts 8 presents a paradigm shift in fulfilling Christ’s vision. Following the death of Stephen, intense persecution came against the church. The last phrase of verse 1 says, “And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” It appears that this persecution served as the catalyst to launch the gospel beyond the city limits of Jerusalem.

The narrative states that the apostles remained in Jerusalem while other believers suddenly became refugees and were randomly dispersed throughout many communities of the region. One might say this effort was launched through the tyranny of the urgent (like the WWII fighter pilot who said he made his first parachute jump when his plane was shot down). Saul continued to persecute the Christians, which further dispersed them to far-reaching areas. Then verse 4 makes a startling statement that perhaps would upset the theological applecart of some today: “Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.” So if the apostles remained in Jerusalem, and it was the church members who were scattered during this persecution, then it appears that the ones who went everywhere preaching the Word were the saints. Apparently these non-licensed but obedient saints were qualified and empowered by the apostles

to take what they had been taught and repeat it to everyone who would listen.

The privilege and responsibility of preaching (communicating) the Word does not belong to the fivefold ministry alone. Saints may not be called preachers, but they may take in what they hear on Sunday and from pastoral Bible studies and carry it outside of the four walls of the worship center, rehearsing it to anyone who will listen. I would venture an educated guess that the overwhelming majority of ministry that takes place in most of our churches occurs within the walls of the worship center or on campus. Yet the model we have been presented with is for the saints to go everywhere throughout the week preaching the Word.

Too much ministry is being done by the church for the church. We continually carry the water to the river instead of to the desert. In the beginning it was not so. Most of the ministry in the first century was done beyond the walls. In fact, the first dedicated Christian edifice was not built until the third century. However, the lack of a regular worship space did not seem to hinder the spread of Christianity. What would happen in the Apostolic church today if everyone did the work of the ministry and the majority of ministry occurred beyond the walls of the worship center? It is no mystery why a local congregation will grow proportionally to the percentage of ministry that is done by the saints beyond the walls of the sanctuary.

Those early believers did not have buildings to focus their lifestyle around. They did not see themselves as people who went to church; they believed they were the church everywhere they went. For them, church was not a destination but a journey. For them, church was not a facility but an action. They did more church in streets and in homes than they did in sanctuaries.

Where did they get this model? Clearly their example was Jesus. They had watched Him work far more miracles and do more ministry in the streets, in the fields, at the lake, and in homes than He did in the synagogue or Temple.

We must not put all of our ministry eggs in one basket called Sunday. According to Acts 2:47, “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” There is only one possible explanation for why they were able to enjoy daily conversions. A few verses earlier it says, “So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house.” The Lord could add daily to the church because the first-century church was a daily church. Not very many of our local churches have reached the activity level of being a daily church, but when we do, the Lord will begin adding daily to the church.

I constantly remind our local church that what happens Monday through Saturday is more important than what happens on Sunday. If we are not doing what we have been called and commissioned to do the other days of the week, then Sunday has a different purpose. When Sunday is the only ministry day of the week it becomes a pep rally or motivational meeting where everyone gets propped up so they can go back out into the world and do nothing purposeful to build the kingdom of God. In a way, it’s like ordering at the counter of a fast food restaurant. Before you place your order they want to know, “Is this for here or to go?” When we come to church most people order for “here” and don’t get it “to go.” But Jesus’ vision was, “Get it to go!”

If we are doing the work of the ministry and are making disciples Monday through Saturday, then Sunday will not be a therapy session for codependent

saints. Sunday will become a celebration of thanksgiving for all the great things that God is doing through His people to fulfill His mission. Nothing will excite a congregation like sharing real-life stories about making disciples and seeing lives dramatically changed. If we get our theology right and do what we should be doing Monday through Saturday, then Sunday will be an important part of an entire life of worship.

Questions for discussion:

- What are some nonessential traditions we observe? How can they be a hindrance and not a help?
- Can you think of an example of a ministry that happens outside the walls of the local church building?
- What are some things that stop us from taking ministry outside of the church walls?