



Preparing Transformational Leadership The Jesus Way

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Discipling the Nations

Jesus defines in His life and work the meaning of transformational leadership—leadership that shows not only the nature of the Kingdom of God, but also how it comes into the world as His followers go forth in the power of His Spirit to emulate His lifestyle. What He exemplified becomes the guiding mandate of His church in the Great Commission: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28: 19-20).

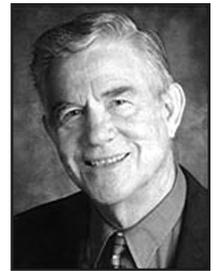
The word “disciple” describes a learner, as in the sense of apprentice or student. Herein is the key to His plan to reach the world, for disciples will continue to learn of Christ as they follow Him, and in so doing, not only grow in His character but also get involved in what He is doing. Invariably, then, His disciples become leaders of world transformation.¹

Jesus taught His disciples to live in anticipation of the completed mission, when the Gospel of the Kingdom would finally be proclaimed across the earth (Matt. 24:14), and the blood-washed redeemed gathered from every tongue and tribe and nation to praise Him. Though knowing He was sent first to die for the sins of the world, on His way to the cross, He lived in the joy of His return in the clouds of heaven when He would reign with glory and power over His kingdom forever.²

What was certain in the future also had a present dimension. Since Christ is the King, when He is loved and served (Luke 17:20-21), the Kingdom is at hand (Matt 4:17; Mark 1:15); the “not yet” is here now.³ Of course, we must be spiritually reborn to enter this realm of eternal life (John 2:3-7). Only those who are completely in earnest will get

in (Matt 11:12). This calls for radical obedience in discipleship. Still, the kingdom life does not come by human striving; it is a gift of God (Luke 12:32).

Personal transformation inevitably impacts society. Love for Christ overflows in expressions of evangelism and social compassion. So as the Gospel goes forth in word and deed, worldlings begin to take note that men and women have been with Jesus. Sinners are moved to seek the Savior. Restitutions are made. Broken homes are reunited with a new sense of responsibility. People reach out to help the poor and oppressed. Public moral standards improve. Integrity makes its way into business and government. Every aspect of life is affected—politics, economics, the arts, sexuality, the environment—and to the degree the holistic Gospel of the Kingdom takes hold, the world is transformed.



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Revival Times

This can be seen especially in times of revival, when large numbers of people come alive to God. Such seasons of refreshing occur again and again through the Old Testament.⁴ They are the high peaks of corporate worship in Israel, bringing hope and salvation to the nation. Tragically, however, these awakenings usually fail to root out the perversities in society, and soon subside with the death or compromise of their leaders.⁵ Without reproducing visionary leadership, no great spiritual movement can endure.

Interestingly, the ministry of Jesus begins with His participation in the emerging revival

of John the Baptist—the greatest religious awakening Israel had known in over 400 years. There He is baptized and identified by the prophet as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29; cf. 1:36). With this introduction, Jesus could immediately enlist the following of the Baptist, who is willing to step aside so that Jesus could take over. If He chooses at this point to exercise His supernatural power (remember He could raise the dead), He could easily gather a mighty army, sweep down on Rome, and take the world by storm. Certainly the opportunity is ripe for a great popular revolution. Indeed, that is the kind of Messiah the people are expecting.

Yet, that is not the kind of kingdom Jesus has come to establish. He walks away, and is no longer actively involved in John’s revival. The movement that begins to form around Him takes a different course. Contrary to the pattern seen so often before, the Son of God does not seek the immediate following of the masses. Rather, in His infinite understanding of the human problem, He concentrates His attention upon a few men destined to be the leadership nucleus of a multiplying Spirit-filled church. We can see why His plan to reach the world required making disciples who would learn to impart His way of life to others.

Becoming a Servant

It behooves us, then, to look closely at the way Jesus made disciples, for therein is the example by which transformational leaders are developed.⁶ Of course, some of His practices 2,000 years ago likely would not be the same today. Methods are variable, conditioned by the time and situation. But the *principles* underlying His ministry are unchanging, and offer guidelines for His disciples in every generation.

The place to begin is with the Incarnation, when Jesus “humbled Himself” and, for the sake of the world, took “the very nature of a servant,” a mission that inevitably would lead to Calvary (Philippians 2:6-8). “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). What this self-renunciation means for us has implications we will never cease to learn, but as we can understand, the principle of servanthood is inherent in taking up the cross and following Christ. Here is the foundation of all Christian leadership.

In this chosen way of life, Jesus went about doing good, demonstrating in works of compassion how much people mattered to God. He fed the hungry. He healed the sick. He delivered the demon possessed. He opened the eyes of the blind. He blessed the children. He continually ministered to the needs of people, even to the extent that sometimes He had “no leisure so much as to eat” (Mark 6:31). Little wonder that multitudes were drawn to Him. On occasion the crowds numbered into the thousands (John 3:26, 6:15; 11:47-48; 12:19; cf. Mark 12:12; Matt. 21:26; Luke 20:19).

There is a lesson in this for us. If our ministry does not attract people, could it be that they do not see in our life genuine concern where they hurt? Let us not imagine that our witness has greater vitality when only a handful of people seem impressed.

Yet Jesus realized the superficiality of popular recognition. As long as He satisfied people’s temporal interests, they were with Him. But when the true meaning of His Kingdom became apparent, the multitudes soon changed their allegiance: the “hosannas” changed to “crucify Him” (Matt. 21:9; 27:22).

This was the heartbreak of His ministry. The lovable people were easily excited by the works of Jesus, but just as quickly thwarted in their aspirations by their spiritually blind leaders. Like sheep without a shepherd, they had no one who could lead them in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus was doing all He could to help them, but in the Incarnation He accepted the limitation of a physical body. Unless men and women were raised up to multiply His leadership, the potential evangelization of the world could not be realized. He told His disciples to get under the burden, and *pray* to “the Lord of the harvest” to send workers to meet this compelling need—workers with a shepherd’s heart who could effectively *lead* the sheep (Matt. 9:36-38).

His Unfolding Strategy

Our Lord’s own ministry seems to unfold around this need. Before attempting to trace that pattern, however, let me emphasize again that any human activity that does not flow out of communion with God is an exercise in futility. With this truth in mind, I believe we can discern in the Gospels how such prayer is answered.

1. *Look for Learners*

While ministering to people Jesus looked for some disciples in whom He could invest His life most productively. In time He selected twelve especially to be with Him. Peter, James, and John had an even closer relationship. It was not that He loved the multitudes any less; indeed, it was for the sake of the world that He concentrated on persons who would learn to lead them.

Doubtless those early disciples were not the most astute students, perhaps not the most religious, but with the exception of the traitor, their hearts were big and they were willing to lay other things aside to follow Jesus.

2. *Stay With Them*

Jesus' disciples learned by being with Him. For the better part of three years they were together. They walked the streets together; they ate together; they attended the temple and synagogue together; they went on retreats together. Even when He ministered to others, whether preaching in the marketplace or talking with lonely beggars along the road, His budding leaders were usually at hand to observe and listen.

3. *Show Them How the Kingdom Comes*

In this ongoing fellowship, the disciples of Jesus were always learning. Every aspect of His life was opened to them—prayer, use of Scripture, public worship, stewardship, caring for the needs of the sick and the poor, always seeking their ultimate welfare in the Gospel. What is also obvious, without realizing it, the disciples were being mentored in the way disciples are made.

4. *Teach Them Obedience*

From the beginning Jesus asked his disciples to follow Him, and this expectation was reinforced in different ways throughout their training. That was how their faith was expressed. It was also the way they would keep learning.

5. *Involve Them in Ministry*

Jesus gave His leaders-in-training something to do. First assignments were small, common tasks where they were already capable, like providing hospitality. But as they developed in their confidence and skill, He began to use them to confirm others in the faith. Later He sent them out in new

areas two by two to reproduce what they had watched Him do. All the while, He was projecting His vision of the Kingdom, culminating in His post-resurrection commands to win the world.

6. *Keep Them Growing and Going*

To see how the disciples were coming along, Jesus would check on them, asking them questions, responding to their queries, building in them a sense of accountability. It was “on-the-job-training” all the way. Their encounters with life situations enabled Him to deal with issues when they came up, giving His teaching the ring of authenticity. Though their progress was painfully slow, especially in comprehending the cross, Jesus patiently kept moving them on toward the goal of discipling the nations for the glory of God.

7. *Expect Them to Reproduce*

The day came when Jesus turned His work over to His followers. They were commissioned to go to the world and replicate what He had done with them. The believers around Him were but the vanguard of a movement that would continually expand until finally the whole world had the opportunity to confront the Gospel.

It is not difficult to see why Jesus prayed so earnestly for these men that the Father had given to Him (John 17:1-26). For in a real sense, everything He had done on earth now depended upon their faithfulness. Would they “go and make disciples of all nations?”

8. *Trust Them to the Holy Spirit*

As observed in His command to pray, workers for the harvest do not come by human ingenuity. Jesus made it abundantly clear that His life and work is possible only through the Holy Spirit. As He had glorified the Father on earth, now the Spirit would glorify Christ. He would take the same place with the disciples in the unseen realm of life that Jesus had filled in His visible experience with them. The Spirit was a real compensation for the loss they were to sustain—“another Counselor” just like Jesus—who would fill them with His presence (John 14:16).

We can understand why Jesus told His disciples to tarry until this promise became a reality in them (Luke 24:49). How else could they do His work? His passion for glorifying God by

accomplishing His mission had to become a burning compulsion within them. The supernatural work to which they were called demanded supernatural help—an endowment of power from on high. They needed to come by faith into a refining experience of the Spirit's infilling, and live in that obedience day by day.

A Pattern to Follow

The way Jesus disciplined interprets the way in principle every believer can do it. Too easily we have relegated His work to various clergy vocations and to highly organized programs of human betterment. Not that these ministries are unnecessary, for without them the church cannot function as she does. But unless the Great Commission directs the daily life of the entire body of Christ, the church cannot function as she should.

Here the priesthood of all believers comes alive. Discipling is not a special calling—a gift of the Spirit to a few privileged saints; it is a lifestyle—the way that Jesus directed His life while He was among us, and now the way He commands His church to follow. From a practical perspective, it is the way the kingdom comes on earth now even as we await its consummation in the coming of our Lord.

Let us then begin where God has planted us and, taking up the cross, become a true servant of Christ. As people respond to love, we can give particular attention to those few who seem hungry to learn more—persons who are not afraid to go all out for Jesus. We can afford to invest largely in these learners—spending time with them, showing them the disciplines that sustain a holy life, helping them express their gifts of ministry, monitoring their growth, and, above all, never ceasing to pray for them. We can trust the Holy Spirit to bring forth the harvest as they go and lead others in this way. Our joy is in knowing that in generations unborn, our prayers and labor for them will still be bearing fruit, in an ever-widening circle to the ends of the earth and to the end of time.

Endnotes

1. Increasingly this expectation was spelled out by Jesus as He worked with His first disciples (Matthew 4:19; Mark: 17: 3:14-15; 6:7-13; Luke 5:10; 6:13-16; 9:1-6; 10:1-24), culminating in the post-resurrection commands (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47-48; Acts 1:8; John 20:21; cf., 17:18).

2. This assurance shines through His constant references to Himself as “the Son of Man.” The title relates to the one in human form seen by Daniel, who came to “the Ancient of Days” (God) and “there was given Him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages should serve Him.” The prophet adds that His dominion is “everlasting” and “shall not pass away” (Daniel 7:13-14). Altogether Jesus uses this self-designation about 80 times in the four Gospels. For further exposition of this title, “the Son of Man,” see Robert E. Coleman, *The Mind of the Master* (Wheaton: Shaw Publishers, 2000, pp. 104-107).

3. The present and future aspects of the Kingdom exist in tension, and are not mutually exclusive. A good treatment of this truth is by Oscar Cullman, *Salvation in History* (London: SCM Press, 1965), pp. 166-236. This subject has received considerable attention from biblical scholars, resulting in a plethora of literature. Among the best treatments are studies by John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953); and George Eldon Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964). The latter book includes a good bibliography of the pertinent writing in this field.

4. Notable revivals in varying degrees are recorded under the leadership of Jacob (Genesis 35:1-5); Moses (Exodus 12:21-28; 19:1-25; 24:1-8; 32:1-35:29); Joshua (24:1-32); Asa (1 Kings 15:9-15); Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22:41-50); Jehoiada (2 Kings 22:11:4-12:16); Hezekiel (2 Kings 18:1-8); Josiah (2 Kings 22:1-23:30); Elijah (1 Kings 18:1-46); Zerubbabel, Nehemiah, and Ezra (Ezra 1:1-4:24; 5:1-6:22; 7:1-10:44; Nehemiah 1:1-13:31). Brief treatments of many of these revivals are by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Quest for Revival* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986); C.E. Autrey, *Revivals in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960); and Ernest Baker, *Great Revivals of the Bible* (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1906). For an introduction to the pattern of these revivals in the context of this paper, see Robert E. Coleman, *The Coming World Revival* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1995), chapter 3, pp. 57-78.

5. Thankfully, despite the absence of leadership, God was never without a witness. There were always a few—the faithful remnant who never bowed their knees to Baal. Though not in prominent positions of society in the religious world, these godly men and women were discipling their children at home in the law of God (cf. Deut. 6:4-25).

6. I develop this concept in a number of my books, including *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell/Baker, 1963, 1964, 1993), *The Great Commission Lifestyle* (Grand Rapids: Revell/Baker, 1992); and *The Mind of the Master* (Wheaton: Shaw, 1977, 1989, 2000).

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