

MAKING NEW DISCIPLES - REACHING OUT TO OTHERS FOR CHRIST

A. Witnessing through Relationships - Reaching the Disciple's World

A Moment in the Life of a Disciple (7)

As you look back over the earthly ministry of Jesus, you realize that His resurrection and ascension were the climax of it all. You had thought the crucifixion was “the end”, but you were wrong. Three days after being taken down from the cross, Jesus rose from the dead. Simply awesome! The grave could not hold Him. This led to renewed speculation He would declare Himself King? There was a growing sense of excitement. But it was all short-lived. Just as you were assessing the new game plan, it was time for Him to go away again. Taking His band of disciples (back together, for the most part, and not a little embarrassed about forsaking him when He was arrested) He led them out of the city and up the side of the Mount of Olives. From the top of the mountain, looking back, the walls and the temple were visible. What a sight: the invincible City of David. (Little did you realize that, in just a few decades, during the lifetime of many in the group, it would all be torn down by a vengeful Roman army; not one stone would be left standing on another. Life is tenuous and mighty monuments are perishable.) As you listened carefully, Jesus explained that the mission of the band was now to split up and to go into all the world and tell people they should believe in Him. Over recent days there had been a new sense of urgency and clarity in His teaching. What next? As you talked together, suddenly he rose from the ground. A cloud obscured Him from your vision. He was returning to Heaven. Before you gathered your thoughts He was gone. Two angels had then appeared, telling the startled group that He would come again. Everything happened far too quickly. You returned to the city with the other disciples. Everyone was happy, but what to do next was a bit of a mystery. For the next seven weeks the group hung out together. Friends arrived and the total swelled to more than a hundred. Some were wondering what the waiting was all about. Then the Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost and set off a chain reaction that turned the world upside down. There was a phenomenal sound of wind and flames of fire above the group. People who only spoke Hebrew started to praise God and talk about Him in languages they had never learned. A crowd gathered quickly. This thing was not going to be done in a corner. The inward-looking group who had followed Jesus started to look outwards, with a power and perspective that unnerved the “system”. (The great Herodian temple; the religious framework of the Pharisees; the Roman administration; the ancient deities; would all turn to dust.) A new breed of disciple of Christ emerged. As you watched curious crowds gathering near the Upper Room you heard the words of Jesus, ringing over and over again. “Go into all the world...”. “Make disciples, disciples, disciples.” “Baptize them...” I am with you.....”

The Great Commission (or, as some prefer, Great Command) of Jesus Christ to His disciples was to go into all the world and make disciples, men and women who would likewise embrace the cross and follow in His footsteps.

The expanding world of the first disciples

The world of the first disciples was a small cluster of villages in Northern Galilee. Most of the neighbours were simple fishermen, farmers and tradesmen. Roman soldiers and their functionaries who lived among them were alien to their community. They were the “enemy”, representatives of an oppressive regime, like so many others who had criss-crossed Galilee over the centuries.

Slowly but surely Jesus began to amplify the disciples’ understanding of the nature of Father God and the extent of *His* world. Tax collectors, camp followers, those who served the regime were just as much in need of God’s love and forgiveness as the small band who gathered around Jesus by the water’s edge listening to His stories. The disciples’ world grew to include Samaritans, Syro-Phoenicians, Syrians and Jews from Judea to the south (though this shift was initially not greeted with much enthusiasm).

The inner circle remained guarded, but there was now a distinct possibility God might love those who were outside of the “promise”. Long ago He had told Abraham that through his descendants (meaning Jesus) all the nations of the earth would experience His blessing (Genesis 26:4, cf Galatians 3). That sounded fine in practice, but there was little love lost between orthodox Jews and the rest of the world. They believed God had his favourites, the “chosen race”; the rest would always remain out in the cold.

The religious leaders of Jesus day had a “missions” policy. They went far and wide trying to convince outsiders to join their faith, but the results were disappointing and those recruited ended up more dogmatic and elitist than those who brought them into the community (Matthew 23:15). They even spurned Jews from the Diaspora (those who lived outside of Palestine and who spoke Greek rather than Hebrew). Every year the population of Jerusalem swelled to some two and a half million persons as the faithful flocked from around the world to celebrate the Passover, but there was always a cultural cringe associated with those who did not “belong” to Israel proper. (That sentiment has been perpetuated in the Christian community down through the millennia.)

As the popularity of Jesus spread, the disciples’ world embraced other villages and people of very different cultural backgrounds. Jesus taught them, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd”. (John 10:16). They had a taste of thinking outside of the box when He commissioned seventy of them to go through the towns and villages of Israel ahead of him. The culmination came when Jesus stood on a mountain top with his band of followers and told them to “Go into all the world and make disciples” (Matthew 28:18-20).

“All the world”. Who was up to such a task? People “over there” dressed differently, ate differently, spoke strange languages and had bad habits and ugly gods. If it were not for the unifying factor of the *Pax Romana* (the peace imposed by Roman rule) the disciples would have remained in obscurity in their Galilean hamlets. No doubt they often considered this a more comfortable alternative.

With the coming of the Holy Spirit the disciples' world burst open. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. Peter got to preach to a crowd of thousands on onlookers and more than three thousand people became believers and were baptized. Who were they? Luke records what happened.

"Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (Acts 2:5-11)

The stand-out event here was that those who came from other countries and ethnic groups heard the initial message in their own languages, spoken by people who had never learned them. Thus did the Holy Spirit bypass the biases of the disciples and speak directly to the ears and hearts of those from other nations. The encounter was a supernatural one. The church was born. Over coming days:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

The majority of the inner circle remained in Palestine. The rest went home, to the nations. It would take an outbreak of persecution and "in your face" divine intervention to force the Jerusalem group out of their comfort zones.

With a push from the Holy Spirit Peter ventured into the house of a God-fearing Roman official named Cornelius and shared Christ with them (read the account in Acts 10). By so doing he crossed the boundary of propriety and was initially accused of a significant breach of etiquette by his fellow-believers. "You went into the home of a Gentile; this is not permitted", they temporized (Acts 11:2, 3). They were all Christians, but they believed a person could only come to Christ by becoming a Jew first. Fortunately, that restrictive and ethnocentric mindset was eventually abandoned as unworkable and inconsistent with the intent of the Gospel (Acts 11:18 and Chapter 15). (How many Christians give the impression that unchurched people can only be Christians if they adhere to a preferred denomination or follow a particular leader?)

A missionary anointing

Young Christians from Cyrene (in North Africa) and Cyprus traveled up the coast preaching and teaching people about Jesus. In the process they established a church in Antioch. Others took the message back with them to Africa, Rome, Egypt, Damascus and a host of other destinations. The frontiers of Christian discipleship would gradually be pushed back until the Gospel was preached across the known world. This would not have happened if Jesus had remained with the twelve, teaching and mentoring them in a faith that would have faded to nothing within fifty years of his death, like many other Masters and guides.

“Go into all the world.” The disciple’s scope was bigger than geography, culture, history, family, personal idiosyncrasies and agendas. It was defined by God’s own standard, expressed in the coming of Jesus:

- “God so love *the world*”: the *motive*
- “that He gave His only Son”: the *means*
- “to whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life”: the universal *message* (John 3:16)

How can our standard be any different?

Pastor David Lim, Senior Pastor of Grace Assembly of God church in Singapore teaches that “The Holy Spirit’s anointing is a missionary anointing”. The purpose of His power and presence is to equip us to reach our world for Christ.

How big is your world?

As a disciple, your world (your marketplace) may be an office, a school, a family network or a factory. A Christian friend who directs an aid program administering hundreds of millions of Government and private dollars told me he has a fixed time of Bible reading and prayer with the leadership team every morning he is in the office. Jesus is always in their midst (Matthew 18:20). In other workplaces, such an approach is simply not possible (or permitted).

We have to determine what “works” and ask God to give us guidance about how to go about it. In my office, the superstition and personal quirks of the predominantly Chinese team mean they are not antagonistic to spiritual things, allowing us to inject the Bible into conversations without straining relationships. I found Muslim business friends in the Middle East likewise open to discussing spiritual things. They would have considered it unusual to hear Christians separating work and church; in Islam, mosque and state are mutually inclusive.

I often find taxi drivers open to discussing spiritual things. My most recent experience involved a driver telling me he grew up a Catholic and attended cell groups in his church where they studied the Bible. He wished to understand how to deepen his walk as a disciple of Christ, so he attended Youth With A Mission training in New Zealand and has felt closer to Christ ever since. It was easy for us to talk about the Bible and Christian living.

There are people in your marketplace only you can effectively reach with the Good News. Sometimes they will not listen. At other times, their circumstances may be such that they are prepared to consider the God-factor in their lives. Consider the following email I received:

“Jenny (not her real name) has been critically injured and is in the Intensive Care Unit of the local hospital after a car accident this weekend. It's so bad that they're just hoping and praying that she'll pull through, never mind the injuries for now. However, they suspect brain damage, and there are definitely broken hip bones, pubic bones and the bones in the top of her legs. Her lungs need to be drained and she has a high temperature (which is a sign of infection somewhere). Jenny is only about 20 years old and a lovely girl. Her mother, Irene, is obviously devastated. She had to be called back from a trip to her home town, nearly a thousand kilometres away, where she was attending two funerals in the family.”

The writer of this message was able, through established personal relationships, to have an input into the lives of Jenny's family members.

I was recently visited by a senior Indian businessman. At the conclusion of our meeting he surprised me by asking, “You appear to be a very spiritual man; are you a Christian?” I had not specifically indicated as much, but told him that, yes, I believed in Jesus Christ and followed Him. This gave us an opportunity to talk about faith, the work of Jesus and His place in my life. I finished by asking him whether, as a Hindu, he had ever been to church. He replied that, as a boy some forty years previously, he attended an Assemblies of God Sunday School in his neighbourhood and was impressed by the pastor and his wife. We never know the extent of deposits we leave in peoples' lives. As disciples we can have a great impact on people's responses interest in Jesus.

Many marketplaces – many disciples

The Singapore suburb of Little India, not far from where I live at the time of writing, is the commercial and cultural enter of the country's Indian community. It is also the locus of foreign workers from the Indian sub-continent. Take a walk down Serangoon Road and you can be excused for forgetting where you are. The air is laden with the smells of spices, curries and incense. The shops offer an impressive array of gold, silverware, brassware, jewelry, jasmine garlands, silk saris, wedding dresses, wooden trinkets, vegetables, sweets and gods. The billboards portray elaborate Bollywood movies. The air is filled with loud music; there is something vaguely familiar about the style, but you can't understand the words. Tamil, Hindi, Telugu; down the street Urdu, Bengali and Sinhalese. They all blend into one. As an outsider you can't really tell the difference.

In Little India there are elaborate Hindu temples, Muslim mosques, Christian churches, and a Sikh temple. There are fortune tellers on the footpaths. No one appears surprised at the kaleidoscope of colour and cacophony of sound; this is their community. During Deepavali, the Festival of Lights, the streets are decked out with flowers, lights and bright banners, colourful outfits and more loud music.

The most spectacular Hindu festival is a three-day event called Thaipusam. Worshippers deck themselves out with portable altars, attached to their torsos and limbs with sharp hooks; their cheeks and tongues are pierced with metal skewers and weighed down with fruit or other objects. Friends accompany them as they walk through the streets, often in a trance. Some pour out offerings to the gods, starting with Murugan (sometimes known as Subramaniam), one of the paramount Hindu deities and the youngest son of Shiva. Others light holy fires on the road, footpath, shrines or vessels they carry through the streets and laneways. Seen for the first time, the rituals of Thaipusam can occasion “instant culture shock”; however the participants and the friends and families are men and women for whom Jesus died and who can only be set free by His power and love. Who can reach them with the Good News that the True God loves them?

Believe it or not, this exotic (and, to some people, alien) world is home to disciples of Christ. Early one morning I saw a group of them praying together, making decisions about which of the hundreds of Housing Development Board (HDB) apartments in the vicinity of Little India they would visit. Their bold plan was to go from door to door, sharing the Gospel with their neighbours. They were “locals”, understood the requisite social protocols and would be accepted.

If we are to be effective in reaching others for Christ we must bridge three gaps: geographic, cultural and linguistic. Let’s unpack this a bit.

- geographic – unless disciples “go” to where those who do not know Jesus actually live and do their business, the latter will be none the wiser (Romans 10:9-15); if you haven’t “gone”, you can’t honestly say you are responsive to the Great Commission;
- cultural – put simply, culture is the way people live, how they see, hear and interpret life, their frames of reference and worldviews; if barriers created by societal expectations, family mores, modes of living, economic standards and religious concepts and values are not addressed with wisdom and understanding, people will remain closed;
- linguistic – we all know how easy it is for misunderstandings to occur because people speak different languages; if you do not know the dialect of those you seek to reach, you will remain unable to communicate and touch their lives; see to reach peoples’ minds as an avenue to their hearts.

Disciples who speak the languages of non-Christians, who empathize with how they live and what they go through, are likely to impact them more effectively than other people. That is not to say that we should limit ourselves to the “known”. After all, Jesus emptied Himself of God’s glory and came into a hostile environment to bring His message.

“Into all the world” will run us up against cultural crash barriers. Many parts of God’s world will be relatively unreceptive to us. Hasn’t the Bible already said that discipleship involves taking up our cross and following Jesus, regardless of the cost to our reputation and convenience? The call to follow Jesus is an invitation to go out on a limb. Jesus was often shunned, but He didn’t stop loving and speaking to those who did so. We should not hesitate for this reason alone.

Understanding the inhibitors

All around us are opportunities to reach people. However, there are inhibitors to reaching our goal that we need to recognize and address. Some of the same barriers encountered by the first disciples face us today.

- *Message out of context* It is important that we present the message in contexts people grasp. During a recent visit to Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand I was bemused to see female Thai employees dressed in traditional German outfits touting for business outside a European-style restaurant. While the “quaintness” factor may have had some potential to attract customers the presentation was incongruous and puzzled a lot of visitors. The people in our world will detect phoniness in our lives. Jesus always put His message into contexts His listeners understood.
- *Methods out of date* In church life I sometimes encounter operational models and styles that no longer work, Jesus never had problems communicating the message: he hit the target every time.
- *Timidity in the face of ignorance and/or opposition* No one wants to appear silly, eccentric, naive or extremist before others. The power of God can turn peoples’ lives around. Paul said: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).
- *Lack of awareness of the felt needs of people* There is an irony in Western civilization, in that many in our society pursue self-actualization through power and consumption that produce moral and spiritual bankruptcy or boredom, but cannot find their way in the dark and are afraid to ask. If we are to be effective, we need to see what people are really going through and relate to them on their level.
- *Lack of awareness of the Holy Spirit’s power* The Bible reminds us that God, “did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline”. (2 Timothy 1:7). It is not up to us, but the Spirit in us.
- *Wrong cultural assumptions about the message* When I was last in Chiang Mai, Thailand I observed tourists genuflecting in front of statues of the Buddha, even though they were not devout Buddhists. It seemed so fake, especially when the photo sessions were over and they returned to their friends. Conversely, in many parts of the world, it is believed that to be a Christian requires adoption of a Western lifestyle. We are not called to encourage people to adopt our external cultural trappings (like the taxi driver who, when we told him we wanted to find somewhere to have lunch, automatically took us to a McDonalds outlet and was surprised when we chose to go to a local restaurant; a smiling Ronald McDonald in the main street of Chiang Mai seemed completely out of place). Jesus was not Western; He was Semitic. Our mission, as Christians, is not to make people the same as us, but to help them become like Jesus Christ.

- *Life vision and priorities out of focus* It is easy to be side-tracked from the main game. Paul discovered the importance of focus and wrote to one church that, "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things". (Philippians 3:12-15) If we genuinely desire to reach those who live in our world, we must have a clear vision of the crucified and risen Christ and what brought Him to live among us and go to the cross and beyond on our behalf.
- *Lack of love and vision to reach others* During my visit to Chiang Mai I had an experience that made me wonder whether we, as the church, have lost sight of God's way of seeing the world and our role in it.

The first part that experience was an encounter outside a Buddhist temple with a monk named Pravat. Growing up in a troubled home, when the time came for Pravat to enter the temple (as do not most Thai boys, for a period), he found friends and a support structure he had never previously experienced. Thirty years later he is still living there. Each morning, clad in saffron robes, he goes out to receive gifts of food from local Buddhist worshippers. The rest of the day is spent in meditation or supervising the carving of a jade Buddha in the courtyard of the temple. I asked Pravat how he could reconcile the fact that he watched skilled workmen chip and drill the piece of jade and fashion the statue of Buddha, with the fact that he and other adherents would do homage later on in front of what was, after all, only a piece of stone. Pravat offered me a cup of coffee and we spent a long time talking. I was able to share my Christian faith with him. "When the Buddha died he told his friends that he was still searching for truth. Jesus Christ declared that He WAS the truth". Pravat and I shook hands and, laughing, took photos of one another taking photos of the other. His friendly smile remains a graphic image in my mind.

The second part of my Chiang Mai experience was dropping in on an evangelical church. Founded by missionaries, the church meets in a large hall overlooking a Sunday market. The singing could be heard from the street. It sounded welcoming, so I thought I would have a look. The lady at the door asked me what I wanted. She enquired as to whether I was a Christian; when I replied that I was she welcomed me and I entered the auditorium. As I did so I was approached by two men who told me not to take photos and watched me the whole time to ensure that I complied. No welcome here. No smiling face. When I left no one spoke to me. I felt I had been seen as an intruder on a private gathering. Granted, the service was well under way and people were focusing on the program, however I could not help but contrast the cool caution expressed regarding my presence in the church with the warm welcome at the temple. It should, I mused, be the other way around. The disciples of Christ should be the friendliest, most welcoming people in the world.

Understanding your world, and your place in it

One day Jesus and His disciples were walking through the fields. As He surveyed the acres of ripening grain he challenged the group to lift up their eyes and observe that there was another harvest, made up of men, women and children, who were ready and waiting to be reaped (John 4:35). All Jesus needed was people to help Him go and do the job. Close your eyes and let the Holy Spirit re-create the image of that mighty harvest and instill a vision to reach them before the harvest is over (cf Jeremiah 8:20).

As a disciple of Christ, what does your world look like? Rich or poor, Anglo, Chinese, Latino, or Indian, educated or developing, rural or urban, Buddhist, Catholic, rationalist or Muslim? What links to you have to ordinary people and to what extent are you able to reach out to them meaningfully with the message of Christ? Are there bridges you need to build? Or damaged ones that need to be repaired? Is your marketplace open to flesh and blood Christians, being themselves, showing by their lives what Jesus means to them, in practical terms? Do you speak a language those around you understand? And is your lifestyle one that would attract them to faith in Him, or repel them? Difficult questions, but worth asking of ourselves.

Whoever you are, whatever your background and current circumstances, you are already having an impact on your marketplace. Learn all you can about the religious faiths they follow. Make friends and let the relationships blossom into understanding, receptivity and trust. Listen to where people are coming from and have an answer that points people to Jesus. Ask the Holy Spirit to anoint your life as He did Jesus and make discipleship effective in your world? You may be the only Christian with whom they have any kind of relationship. By doing this you will earn a right to be heard and believed and the message will have a greater entry to their hearts and lives.