

Building Bridges:
From winning people's confidence to inviting them to follow Jesus
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Increasingly believers feel compelled to return to the methods of evangelism and disciple making that Jesus used. He is the message, and he also modeled and taught the method. Ellen White observed –

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with (people) as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow Me." Ellen White, *Ministry of Healing* p 143.

While we may use other methods, we sense his approach should be the most effective today. It is natural and connects. It develops in ways that are experiential, relational, and participatory. However, while we engage in social work, meet community and personal needs, win trust – few seem interested or ready, even after years, in our invitation to follow Jesus. Why is this? What are we missing? How can we go from winning confidence to inviting people to follow Jesus?

Some observations

These are questions often explored by disciple makers, church planters, pastors and movement leaders. Important issues raised in these discussions are –

- It is a fallacy to think that our job is to sow the seed – with God doing the rest. In the kingdom parable of 'four fields' (Mark 4:26-29) the farmer sows, God grows, and then the farmer is involved again – gathering the harvest for multiplication.
- It is 'confidence' or trust in Jesus that precedes the invitation: 'follow me' – not simply confidence in us as friends. In the Gospels the invitation to *follow* was preceded by the invite to *come and see* – to experience Jesus.
- It is an integrated method. Social work, meeting needs, and relationships are not simply precursors to evangelism; they are part of an integrated process. There can be no dichotomy: disinterested kindness then, at the right time, the gospel.

- It is a proactive journey of making disciples – not relationships. From the very first, and throughout his ministry, Jesus made disciples. Yes, he cultivated relationships, but he was calling and making disciples – and this is our commission. (Matt 28:19)
- It is the end-vision that we work toward: disciples who are making disciples. With his end-vision of a disciple-making movement in mind, Jesus built relationships in ways that those he engaged with became disciple makers at the earliest stage.

Practical suggestions

- **Develop a harvest mind-set.** There are a greater number of people interested in spiritual things in every community than we perceive and these are to be gathered. Jesus had to keep saying to his disciples: the 'harvest is great'! He said to do two things: pray and go into what appears to be the empty field. Praying the 10.02AM prayer each day raises our awareness: 'Lord, the harvest is greater than we have seen, send more workers into this harvest field'. (Luke 10:2) Be specific, and be persistent. Then go as a farmer, asking: (1) how do we enter the *empty* field, (2) how and what will we sow to, (3) facilitate *growth* 'all by itself', (4) who and how will we *gather* (*church*), and (5) how will this *multiply*?
- **Identify and work with key people.** Jesus called them people of *peace*. (Luke 10:5, 6) Don't try to do mission all by yourself – nor even just with the team from the church. Look for those who are open to the Spirit, hospitable people of reputation (good or bad!) and influence. When the *woman at the well*, the *demoniac of Gadara*, or *the tax collector Levi Matthew*, met Jesus, they called their friends, the whole town or city: *come and see!* This is what Jesus did, what he said to do, and what the early apostles did. With some Jesus spent just a short time – mingling, sympathizing, meeting needs, gaining trust. For the woman of Samaria and the demoniac it was a matter of hours at the most! For others, like Levi Matthew, it took longer.
- **Mostly we take too long!** Because we see Jesus' method as a process – which it is – we assume it needs week, months, or even years. But, not so – as the

illustrations from the ministry of Jesus demonstrate. When we look at Paul's ministry – Sergius Paulus, Lydia, and the jailer responded quickly; others over time. In conversation with experienced disciple makers the observation is made: if we spend too long building relationships before speaking of Jesus people will not be convinced of either the importance or urgency of our message. If we wait, building relationships but not speaking of Jesus, when we do seek to share faith people wonder: why did you wait so long before you told me? Also, as time passes, we find it more awkward introducing faith – and, it is not often that people will ask about our faith in any situation. We must find ways to initiate faith discussions – and that can be more natural early in our experiences of mingling.

- **Follow Jesus' 3-step process.** Jesus gave specific instruction and it is the process he invariably followed: (1) eat with people – their food; (2) as you eat, heal; and (3) as you heal say: 'the kingdom is near'. (Luke 10:8, 9) This is the most natural and simplest way. Look at the example of Jesus. Most mingling involved eating or drinking with people. This is the beginning point of relationships. Clearly –
 - (1) **Eating** involves listening, for if you do not listen to **their story** – you cannot sympathize for you will be unaware of their experiences.
 - (2) **Healing** or meeting their needs takes your involvement – telling **your story**, sharing a brief 'testimony' of your trust in Jesus. In this you gain trust in yourself as a sympathizing friend as well as trust in Jesus.
 - (3) Jesus said: as you heal, **say: the kingdom of God is near you**. Here you introduce **God's story** – his interest, care, love for them, and his closeness.

With this, the bridge is being built for the invitation: follow Jesus. Not that the person has made a total commitment to God, but more like the initial responses of the woman at the well or the healed demoniac. At this point the person is most likely ready to explore more about God – at the *come and see* stage. A person cannot follow if they have not experienced him and know nothing of him.

It takes courage. Personally pray each day for each person you are connecting with by name and ask the Holy Spirit to give your courage to set aside time to eat with people, to listen to their stories, to bring healing and encouragement, and while doing that to

introduce Jesus. With the early believers, pray: 'Lord, ... enable your servants to speak your word with boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal ... through the name of your holy servant Jesus'. (Acts 4:29, 30)

It is personal work. This doesn't happen through a program. Whether we are working with small groups, through a *centre of influence*, a food program, a language program, or another needs-oriented ministry, if we are not engaging with people personally we cannot expect to see people walk across the bridge from winning confidence to following Jesus. Jesus told us how to do it: eat with them and listen (to *their story*), heal (share *your story*), and the opportunity will be there to share God's love (*God's story*).