

JESUS THEN AND NOW: HIS COMMISSION

By Andrew Wilson
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2 Corinthians 2:14-17
Luke 10:1-12

Every summer we send large groups of SPARKS, junior highs and senior highs off to camp, and every year many of them fall in love with Jesus and give their lives to him. If there's anything we're doing as a church that's more important than sending youth to those camps, I can't think what it would be.

The experience this year was a little different for our senior highs. The group we sent to Ponderosa Pines included mostly students that are already believers. They headed north, most of them, with high expectations of growing closer to each other and to the Lord.

They weren't disappointed, yet the work that God did in their lives took them by surprise. Towards the end of the week, many of the other campers were wrestling with whether or not they wanted to begin the journey with the Christ. But most of our students were in a very different place. They were already Christ-followers, and God spoke to them as a father speaks to his children. As individuals, and as a group, they sensed that he was challenging them to become more authentic, more passionate and more devoted in their walk with Jesus.

As Cam Hackett tells the story, the group asked him to go with them to an isolated place in a redwood forest. Soon they were tearfully laying their hearts bare. They confessed that their faith was lukewarm and that their efforts to obey the Lord were half-hearted. They admitted that they were stagnating spiritually, and that they weren't motivated to talk about faith with their friends at school. And after seeking Cam's counsel, they formed a prayer circle and rededicated their lives to Jesus, and to whatever ministry he called them to. They prayed that the Spirit would help them take away their fears help them to share their experience of Christ with those who don't know him.

Many of the rest of us who are part of this church family are in a similar place in our spiritual life. We're walking with Jesus, but we're always careful to keep a safe distance away from him. We're willing to help in the building of God's kingdom, but only if the work the Lord assigns to us fits into our schedule and doesn't require us to leave our comfort zone. We think of ourselves as team members, but too often we're really more like spectators.

My prayer is that God would do for our whole church family what he did for that small circle of youth. My burning desire for us as individuals and as a church family is that the Spirit would make us aware of our weaknesses, drive us to our knees in humility, and fill our hearts with a deep, deep love for the people in our lives who don't know Jesus.

Jesus' ministry is mostly dedicated to preparing a tiny band of followers to do his Father's work. As we saw last week, Jesus first invites a select few to come and see what he's up to. The men he chooses aren't influential, they aren't well educated and they don't exhibit exceptional skills.

But they have something that most people lack. They have hearts that are hungry for God. Hoping that Jesus will be able to satisfy that hunger, they give up everything that's precious to them. They leave their jobs, their friends and their families. And Jesus, in turn, dedicates himself to them.

In the beginning Jesus' followers are pretty clueless. They can't see what Jesus is trying to accomplish. They don't understand what he means when he says he has come to usher in God's kingdom. They don't

grasp the overarching plan, which is to save out of the world a people worthy of God's name, and to build a fellowship of the Spirit that will never die.

Over time their eyes and ears are opened. As they walk with the Lord, observing his actions and obeying his commandments, they begin to live into their mission. Jesus is training them to enlarge the circle of discipleship. Their job is to grow the kingdom by bringing people to him, their Master and friend.

If you and I were designing a kingdom-building strategy, we probably wouldn't adopt the Jesus plan. We wouldn't make it dependent on people of ordinary abilities. And we wouldn't let our key leader spend the majority of his time with a small band of lieutenants.

Instead, we'd insist on finding only the best and the brightest leaders. And we'd give our top guy wide exposure to as many people as possible. We'd have him tweeting and blogging. We'd get him a booking on *The Tonight Show*.

Our minds are trained to think in terms of creating buzz, and triggering a viral response. We measure success in terms of our media exposure and our market share.

Jesus turns those worldly values upside down and inside out. He devotes himself to the few and turns his back on the mob when they try to crown him as their king. His long-term plan is to reach the multitudes, but his immediate goal is to lay a foundation in the lives of a few trustworthy friends. He devotes himself to a few so that many can be saved.

Jesus' leadership strategy has a direct application in the church. We of course should aspire to fill our pews and introduce as many people as possible to the Savior. But our efforts will be ineffective, and possibly even counter-productive, if we don't concentrate, first and foremost, on growing mature disciples within our ranks. Every new believer needs a mentor who knows Christ. Every fellowship circle needs at least one leader who models what it means to live the kingdom life.

Over the past fifteen years or so we've watched the rise of mega-churches all over America. The best of them are able to plug new Christians into small groups and mission teams where they're nurtured by people who know Christ intimately. But many of them just aren't equipped to do that. They can't do it because they haven't made discipleship training a priority. They haven't structured their church life in a way that encourages the mentoring of new Christians by seasoned ones. Their best and brightest leaders spend all their time trying to figure out how to get people to church. Then when people show up, all they have to offer them is a comfortable seat, a great worship band and an entertaining message.

Over the past decade, the mega-church phenomenon in America has been researched extensively. The most important studies compare people who attend such churches and people who don't attend any church. Incredibly, most of those studies indicate that there's not much difference between the two groups. Those results hold up whether the focus is on ethics, lifestyle choices, the spending of money, or attitudes towards sexuality, marriage and family.

One of the lessons we should draw from that disturbing body of data, it seems to me, is that it isn't enough to attract people to church. And it isn't enough to get people to pray the sinner's prayer, attend a picnic and fill out a pledge card. New Christians need to form meaningful relationships with mature believers. It's mostly in the context of those relationships that real growth takes place. And those relationships happen in the church only when we make discipleship training an on-going priority.

Some of you know the book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, by Robert Coleman. If you have any interest in this subject I would highly recommend it to you. Writing in the late 1980s, Coleman says that

most churches provide poor support for new converts and therefore are doing a mediocre-to-poor job of growing God's kingdom. Coleman writes:

With... haphazard follow-up of believers, it is no wonder that about half of those who make professions and join the church eventually fall away or lose the glow of a Christian experience, and fewer still grow in sufficient knowledge and grace to be of any real service to the Kingdom. If Sunday services and membership training classes are all that a church has to develop young converts into mature disciples, then they are defeating their own purpose by contributing to a false sense of security, and if the person follows some lazy example, it may ultimately do more harm than good. There is simply no substitute for getting with people, and it is ridiculous to imagine that anything less, short of a miracle, can develop strong Christian leadership.

- *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, page 48

If you're a long-time Christian and you've stopped growing, maybe you need to find your way to a discipleship class or a small group where mature believers will challenge and motivate you?

And if you're new to faith in Jesus and you don't have a mentor, would you please contact me, or Lee, or Cam, or Ashley, or one of our elders? We'll try to connect you with someone who loves the Lord and can help realize your amazing potential.

From the very start of his ministry, Jesus attracts many followers but few disciples. In fact, the number of people he manages to convert seems modest when we compare the Lord's work to that of the church's great evangelists. His training program is shockingly simple. It amounts to being with his disciples and allowing them to observe and sometimes take part in his encounters with others. Now and then Jesus does explain a particular point to his disciples. But he doesn't have a curriculum to present. The disciples learn mostly by watching Jesus, and by mulling over his stories and tuning into his conversations.

Jesus expects his disciples to obey him. Their loyalty to him must be the thing that defines and distinguishes them. And Jesus sets the bar high. He demands that they submit to his authority and surrender their lives to him. "No one can serve two masters," he tells them in the sixteenth chapter of Luke. "Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

Devotion to Jesus also means giving up corrosive habits and pleasures, and conforming to the new ways of thinking and acting that are appropriate to God's kingdom. The disciples must follow Jesus' example, and love people as he loves them. Like Jesus, they must be servants who deny themselves for the sake of others.

Many are offended or scared off by these strong teachings. And the surprising thing is the Jesus doesn't run after them or try to convince them to stick around. To the contrary, he consistently emphasizes the high cost of following him. One day a disciple asks to be excused for a few days because his father has died and he wants to bury him. "Follow me," Jesus says in Luke chapter 9. "Let the dead bury their own dead."

Another disciple says he wants to join Jesus' team, but then asks for permission to go and say goodbye to his family. Jesus doesn't show him an ounce of sympathy. He says: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

That's the set-up for today's gospel reading in Luke, chapter 10, where Jesus sends seventy-two of his followers two by two into the towns and villages that he will soon be visiting. The story is powerful because it isn't just about Jesus' very first evangelists. It reveals a great deal about Jesus' commission to

us, and his plan and program for his church today. There are six themes that are struck in the story that can be found in other stories and teaching in the gospels.

The first theme is that the harvest is plentiful and the workers are few. Jesus has to spell it out because that's rarely how things look to us. The world we see, especially as it's presented to us in the media, mostly seems to be indifferent to the Gospel, and unaffected by the Spirit. Besides that, it's easy to think there are plenty of people bearing witness to the gospel. Every city in every state in America is full of churches. There seems to be no lack of Christians or professional preachers in our society. And the way some of them talk about their faith, we want to tell them just to sit down and be quiet.

But Jesus is describing a reality that's invisible to the rest of us. He can see what's going on deep inside us. He can see the millions of restless hearts searching for God. He also knows there are also millions of lukewarm believers on his team who would never dream of telling another person about their relationship with him.

So Jesus commissions the few who will listen to him – the few who truly love as he loves – to go into the fields and harvest the fruit. And the question for us is: Are we going to be workers or bystanders? Do we love our friends and co-workers enough to share our Lord with them?

The second theme that Jesus sounds is that kingdom work is dangerous. “I'm sending you out like lambs among wolves,” he says. In our society we risk our reputations when we talk about our faith in Jesus and our association with the church. Many people don't want to hear about it. They're quick to label us as fanatics, or bigots, or credulous fools.

Our friend Nicky Spence has a lot more on the line. She gave up a promising career as a professional musician to become Christ's witness in East Asia where she lives on less than \$15,000 per year. Not long ago she and her co-workers were targeted by the government. They had to relocate their ministry to another city to avoid getting arrested. Nicky truly is a lamb living among the wolves. The Spirit continues to protect her, and she continues every day to introduce people to Jesus and connect them with his church.

Billy Graham tells of at time early in his career when he arrived in a small town to preach a sermon.

Wanting to mail a letter, he asked a young boy where the post office was. When the boy told him, Dr. Graham thanked him and said, "If you'll come to the Baptist church this evening, I'll tell you how you can get to Heaven."

"I don't think I'll be there," the boy said. "You don't even know your way to the post office."

The third theme is that we shouldn't allow ourselves to become distracted from the work Christ gives us. “Don't take a purse or bag or sandals,” he says, “and don't greet anyone on the road.” Jesus isn't laying down a dress code. He's warning us that the comforts and pleasures of this world can easily captivate us and cause us to lose our focus.

It seems like a throw-away line, like the advice you give your kid as she's heading off to school. “Don't stop at 7-Eleven for candy.” Or more likely: “Don't stop at Starbuck's for your Venti, double shot, decaf, extra hot, Peppermint White Chocolate Mocha with light whip and extra syrup.”

But it's not a throw-away line. Jesus is nailing the problem for a huge number of us. We've allowed ourselves to veer off course. We've taken our eyes off the ball. We've got so many good things going on in our lives that we don't have room for the most important thing. We've all but forgotten that our main task in life is to represent Jesus to the people around us, and bring others with us into God's kingdom.

The fourth theme points to a kingdom-building strategy that's simple and effective. Jesus urges the seventy-two to stay in the houses where they're welcomed. He instructs them not to move around from house to house. Instead of wandering the streets looking for potential converts, they are to concentrate our efforts in the place they know, and where they're known.

Most of us aren't called to go to East Asia. We're called instead to be witnesses in our circles of influence. That's the place where we can have the biggest impact. The sad reality about today's church is that most Christians aren't making any effort to introduce others to the Lord. Studies indicate, for example, that approximately 90 per cent of Christians never speak about their faith to people who aren't Christians. That statistic goes a long way towards explaining why 80 percent of churches in America are losing members.

I recently heard a pastor of a large church tell a story about a man who has embraced the calling to share his faith with others. The pastor was talking to a man in his church that he didn't know. He said to him, "What do you do?" And the man replied, "I'm a disciple of Christ cleverly disguised as a machine operator."

Who is the best person to reach a machine operator for Christ? Another machine operator. Who's the best person to reach a sophomore at Crescenta Valley High School for Christ? Another CV sophomore. Who's the best person to reach the woman in your car pool, or the man who works in the cubicle next to you for Christ? Most likely, you are.

The fifth theme offers a physics lesson. Jesus warns us not to waste time and energy trying to move an immovable object. "When you enter a town and are not welcome," he says, "go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you.'"

The sad truth in the church is that we often allow ourselves to be get sidetracked by people who don't love Christ and are trying to undermine the kingdom. Jesus tells us to be respectful of all people, but to spend as little of our time and energy as possible trying to win people who have dug in their heels.

The final theme really summarizes the main message of the story. It's that our obedience will be rewarded.

The seventy-two return from their short mission trips. They're ecstatic. They're floating on air. "Lord," they say, "even the demons submit to us in your name!"

It's a teachable moment, and Jesus takes full advantage of it. Just to make sure they understand where their power comes from, he says: "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy."

In the crazy, mixed-up world we live in, no one expects people to hear about Jesus and say, "Hey that sounds good. How can I become his disciple?" Remember that Monty Python line?: "No one expects the Spanish Inquisition!" The same thing is true when we tell people about the Father's love for them, and about Christ's offer of new life. No one expects Satan to fall like lightning from heaven. But he does.

When we're walking in obedience, and stepping out in faith, amazing things happen. Eyes and ears are opened. Hearts are changed. And in that field that once looked so bleak and barren, the kingdom of God suddenly appears.

Will you step out today in obedience? Will you join the senior highs of this church in confessing your weaknesses and failures? Will you pray with them for the strength to swim against the tide and be Christ's witness in the place where you live?

Holy God, we confess that we haven't always shown your grace and mercy to those who don't know you. Instead of sharing your love with them, we've judged them caused them to run from us.

Teach us, Lord Jesus, to love the people around us as much as we love ourselves. Give us the courage to tell others what you have done for us, and to risk being rejected because of our love for you.

Holy Spirit, fill us, and fill this church. Remind us, when we're timid, that your word, when spoken in obedience, will not return to you empty.

Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit: we pray always in your name. Amen.