

THE EXPLOSIVE POTENTIAL OF DISCIPLEMAKING

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This message was delivered at the (for Navigators) famous Whing Ding held in Estes Park, Colorado USA in the winter of 1968. This was one of the largest such gatherings in Nav history. The weather was bitterly cold. There were breakdowns in camp logistics. But the conferees – college students and military personnel, for the most part – endured hardships gladly and many, to this day, recall the conference with awe. I have revised the talk minimally, omitting one redundant illustration and making the language a bit more gender inclusive.

Introduction

Consider with me this parable of Jesus: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field.” Later, his disciples came to him, saying, “Explain to us the parable.” Jesus answered, “He who sows the good seed is the son of man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom” (Matthew 13:24, 36-38).

THE FIELD IS THE WORLD

A parable usually contains a great deal of figurative speech. Sometimes the meaning is not very clear. But in this particular parable the words are plain and the statements are unambiguous. One such statement is “The field is the world.”

The whole world. Not just the six percent who live in the United States, mind you, but the other 94% as well. Jesus once challenged his disciples to “life up your eyes and look on the fields.” He speaks to us today: Look out at the world; get to know the world. Someone has observed that the world is God’s “first love, his eternal fiancée.” The best known verse in the Bible begins with “For God so loved the world...” Consider now this text:

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for all men...This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (I Timothy 2: 1-4).

Notice that twice in this short passage the apostle Paul draws our attention to *all men*, just as Jesus, in his Great Commission, speaks of *all nations*.

We live in an alluring world. It was Socrates, I believe, who said, “When looms weave themselves, man’s slavery will end.” Here we are today, at the beginning of the final third of the 20th century, and we not only have looms that weave themselves, but looms that tell other looms what to weave!

But it is also a very troubled world. Think of the world you know, the world you watch on TV, the world you experience daily on your campus or military base. TIME magazine recently editorialized, “There is a vague anxiety that the machine of the 20th century is beginning to run out of control.”

Do you ever feel that things are getting out of hand? Some of the world’s wealthiest nations today are faced with the prospect of devaluing their currencies. Nobody seems to know why, or what to do about it. Those who think they know can’t mobilize the machinery to get it done.

The very processes that brought America unprecedented luxury and leisure have also brought a crisis of identification to most of the Now Generation. I feel with you in this. It is difficult amidst an automated, computerized, impersonal, materialistic and – let’s face it – hypocritical society for a fellow or girl to discover who he or she really is and what the meaning of life is. It’s hard to assert manhood or womanhood and individuality in the midst of the mass. It’s nearly impossible to cling to idealism.

Yet let me speak frankly with you. Your frustrations are real. But they pale in comparison with the problems faced by the other 94% of the world. Your problems are real, but only in relative terms.

In absolute terms, as Dr. Tom Dooley has pointed out, we have to recognize that most people today in Asia, where I now live, will go to bed hungry tonight. Most people in Asia believe that free enterprise means the right of Western nations to exploit them. Most people in Asia distrust anyone (under 30 or older!) with white skin. Most people in Asia believe that *anything* would be better than what they now have.

Yet according to the Scriptures, our world has a glorious future. God has promised a world without hate, hypocrisy and hunger. A world without tears. God is committed to this. God has pledged this to his fiancée. Listen to the prophet Isaiah:

“He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth... Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness quietness and trust forever...The Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things...He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces...For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 42:4, 32:16-17, 25:6-8, 11:9).

Twenty-seven centuries after these promises were proclaimed, this glorious destiny remains elusive. The reason is that God has decided that *we* must share in the fulfillment of it. You and I have a role to play in bringing into being a new heaven and a new earth wherein righteousness dwells.

How all this happens – what part belongs only to God and what part is given to us – would require another sermon to expound. But let me point out one element. Jesus said, “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

By “the end” is not meant the end of the world. It means the end of this present mixed-up, burdened, oppressive world. The end of this age. The end of this age will come and a new age will be ushered in. But not until the gospel has been preached to all nations for a testimony. Do you begin to sense what your role might be in ministering to a sin-sick world?

SIX GREAT THRUSTS

Of course, Christians have had this commission for nearly two thousand years. Precisely what has the Christian community done about it? During the past 20 centuries there have been six concerted efforts on the part of the Christian community to take the gospel to every creature.

The *first* began at Jerusalem and Antioch. The general direction of its thrust was westward, out across the Mediterranean basin. And after 300 years of grand effort on the part of those early Christian pioneers, the Roman Empire was effectively evangelized.

Decades passed. The primitive Christians involved themselves in doctrinal debates. Perhaps it was the urgency of the debates that distracted them from the Great Commission. In any case, it wasn't until the 5th and 6th centuries that a *second* group of Christians – Nestorian “heretics” they were – began to get on their hearts what God has always had on his heart: the world.

With headquarters in what today is eastern Turkey, they thrust eastward, all the way into China. By the year 850 (as we know from unearthed inscriptions) there were at least 3,000 Christian monks in China. Then the Chinese emperor reacted strongly. The monks were expelled, Christianity virtually disappeared from China, and once again the Church allowed the Great Commission to lapse.

The *third* effort was centered in Rome. The general thrust of this movement was northward. And the result was that by the ninth century a great part of northern and western

Europe was Christianized. St. Patrick had something to do with this, as did Charlemagne and other Christian kings.

The *fourth* thrust had its headquarters in Constantinople – modern Istanbul. Again, the general direction was to the north. The agents involved were not the primitive believers of the first century, not the heretical Nestorians of the 5th, not the Latin Catholics. This time the missionaries were Greek Orthodox. And by the year 1000 they had converted Sweden, Russia and most of the eastern European countries to Christ.

But again, as in every previous case I have described, centuries passed before another group of Christians began to realize that God loves the whole world. This *fifth* movement was two-pronged. Protestants migrated from northern Europe to North America and Roman Catholics from Spain and Portugal migrated to Latin America. By the year 1700 or thereabout, Christian societies were established on both continents. The native inhabitants of both continents were converted or decimated or both. Meanwhile, during this same period, Catholic missionaries such as Francis Xavier were making not very successful attempts to evangelize the Orient.

Finally, the *sixth* and most recent movement emerged. It began toward the end of the 18th century, in England. An ordinary shoemaker became burdened for the world. So burdened, in fact, that he hung a self-made leather map of the world over his cobbler's bench. As he pounded and cut and dyed, William Carey prayed for the world.

At last he could stand it no longer. He went to the Christian leaders of his community and declared, "We have to do something about this!" Those leaders squelched him with the response, "Young man, when God wants to save the heathen, he can do it without your help or ours."

Carey would not accept this as an answer. He went back and gathered around him several friends. "If you will hold the ropes," he urged, "I will go down into the pit." They held the ropes – that is, they supported him financially and with prayers – while he went off to Calcutta in India and unwittingly launched the modern missionary movement.

WHERE WE ARE TODAY

After 175 years this last, great effort on the part of our immediate forebears has resulted in the greatest expansion of the gospel ever seen. Today the Christian flag, so to speak, has been hoisted in almost every country of the world.

Virtually all of Africa south of the Sahara has been effectively evangelized. By that I mean the gospel has been preached and churches have been planted as extensively as it was at one time in Europe, at another time in North America, and so on. Africa in the 21st century is almost certain to emerge as the new "Christian" area of the world.

Nevertheless, we have a lot left to do. Check it out on a map of the world. Europe, North America, Latin America and Africa south of the Sahara. That's it. After 2,000 years. True, we have carried the Word to every nation. But note, I said "to" every nation. We are just barely there in many places. We have established toeholds, beachheads. Let me illustrate:

I was in Saigon during the recent TET offensive. A young Viet Cong officer, Nguyen Van Sam, was captured at that time. Americans interrogated him. I was told this story by one of the interrogators. One of the questions they asked him was, "have you ever been religious?" He answered,

"Yes, when I was a child my parents taught me about Buddhism. I also heard about Confucianism and Christianity. Once I even attended a Christian celebration. There I heard about the God, the God with the blond beard whose name is Jesus, the one who has wings and flies over the clouds. He died in a cruel way, I am told, like a Viet Cong partisan.

"However, when people are bad, he makes them die and sends them to hell where they boil in large pots full of very hot oil. If instead they are good, he sends them to paradise where they sit on clouds and sing. So the priest said. But I know that isn't true. I know there is nothing after death, that all tears are wasted here on earth. It's childish to believe in another life or to be afraid of what might happen here."

Now let me ask you: Has this man heard the gospel? We Christians – Catholic and Protestant - have reached Viet Nam. This young officer has attended a Christian service. He heard the story of Jesus. Or did he?

A Seventh Movement

Do you see what I mean when I say we have established mere footholds? Much remains to be done. In fact, it seems to me we can safely predict that God plans a *seventh*, mighty movement, a final thrust, the one that will finish the job. Now that we have gone *to* every country, the time has come, has it not, to go *through* every country? To actually penetrate down to every level, down to the cities...down to the villages...down to the neighborhoods...down to the place where men like Nguyen Van Sam can hear the gospel intelligently and know the claims of Christ as they really are.

Isn't this what is lacking? Isn't this what God wants done? Isn't this what God has been waiting for, for 2,000 years? Isn't this the great challenge to Christians of our generation – to initiate this Seventh Movement?

Of course there are many obstacles. I admit it. We have lost ground even in this century in Russia and China. Nationalism resists the gospel. Secularism smothers it. Yes, we face formidable enemies.

But our side also has many advantages. We have advantages the apostle Paul never dreamed of. They tell us that by the end of this century each of us will have individual flying platforms to soar about on! Yet I believe that of all the advantages we have, one stands out as the greatest. And this is: all over the world young people are terribly *hungry for good news*. An openness exists that has not been present for centuries. And on a scale so massive you have to see it, as I have, to believe it.

Dr. Donald McGavran, an authority on world mission, recently stated that there are more winnable people in the world today, both absolutely and proportionately, than there has ever been in history. Think of it! More winnable people than ever before!

You don't believe me? Let me tell you another story. I was in Singapore not long ago, walking down the street on a Saturday evening. The sound of music attracted me. I crossed the street and found a giant jazz emporium, three stories high. Crowded inside were hundreds of young people. So I paid a Singapore dollar and went inside. I'm over thirty, but Singaporean youth are hospitable.

It took me a while to get used to the haze and swirl within. I soon discovered that about a third of the young people were dancing to any one of nine different combos! Another third were sitting around, drinking 7-Up and beer and talking with their friends. (Maybe I should say "shouting" to their friends.) And about a third were just sitting around waiting for something to happen.

So I "happened" over to one of the fellows, asked him his name, what he did for a living, where he was from, and so on. Then, as I anticipated, he turned the tables on me and asked me the same questions. I replied, "I'm a Christian missionary and I'm spending the summer going up and down the Orient telling people about Jesus Christ."

There was silence for about 30 seconds (though it seemed longer to me) before he gestured toward the crowd and declared, "Well, there are two thousand of us here tonight and we would all like to hear about Jesus Christ!"

If this is true, if the need is so great and the opportunities so ripe, do we, The Navigators, have a strategy? Are we deliberately, systematically figuring out how to make disciples in every nation in our generation? The answer is Yes, we do.

THE NAVIGATORS' APPROACH

Our strategy is based on a concept – the concept of multiplication. Multiplication as opposed to simple addition. Our plan is based on the conviction that the “good seed” Jesus spoke about in the parable with which I began this little talk, has within it, as all seeds do, the inherent capacity to reproduce itself, thousands of times over. So we Navigators often speak of multiplication as “producing reproducers.”

Right after World War II, a Frenchman named Pierre Meilland cultivated a special rose in his nursery. He called it the Peace Rose. After perfecting it, he distributed it. Less than ten years later the Peace Rose was blossoming on more than 30 million bushes around the world! (Yes, I said *million*.) “How strange it is,” he wrote in his diary, “that all these millions of bushes sprang from a tiny seed no bigger than the head of a pin.”

But listen! God had said it years ago. I quote from the first chapter of the first book of the Bible. “And God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth.’”

The seed is in itself. The power to reproduce is right there, built into the foundations of nature. This is a biblical principle. But let me illustrate it mathematically.

Imagine a checkerboard. Suppose we take a grain of wheat and plant it on the first square. Imagine that grain of wheat reproducing itself so that on the second square there are now two grains. As each grain reproduces there become four...eight...sixteen...thirty two...sixty four...and by the time we finish the first row there are one hundred twenty eight grains of wheat.

One hundred twenty eight. Very slow, it seems. But in the second row of our checkerboard the numbers get larger: 256...512...1,024, 2,048, 4,096...8,192...16,384...32,768. By the end of the third row there are now eight million grains of wheat – we need a larger checkerboard! – and by only the second square of the fourth row we have more than 30 million (recall Pierre Meilland’s rose bushes).

If we were to continue this process to the last square of the checkerboard we would have enough grains of wheat to cover the subcontinent of India 50 feet deep!

That is the power of reproduction, the power of multiplication. That is the principle we are operating on when we talk with you about becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ, then making other disciples, then helping others to become disciplinarians.

Men Are the Good Seed

Just as with seed in the physical world, so with men and women spiritually. Thus in Jesus’ parable he says, “The good seed means the sons of the kingdom.” The sower goes forth to sow. The sower is Jesus, the son of man. The field is the world. And what is the seed? The seed, Jesus says, are the men of the kingdom. And the principle of reproduction is as powerful with men and women as it is with mere plant seeds.

An outstanding illustration of this is in the Bible itself. I refer to Abraham. In Hebrews 11:12 we read, “Therefore from *one man*, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven...” Have you ever pondered the fact that every Jew who ever lived came from Abraham? And have you ever considered the possibility that you could have innumerable spiritual generations? That you could bring to birth the kind of people who in turn could reproduce to a thousand generations?

The apostle Paul thought in those terms. “And what you have heard from me,” he wrote to his disciple Timothy, “before many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (II Timothy 2:2). Do you see the process of multiplication in that verse? Men and women who reach others who reach others who reach others?

A modern example is Dawson Trotman, founder of The Navigators. God gave him about 30 years in which to live and serve. He died at the relatively early age of 50. He has been

dead for ten years now. Yet everyone here this evening has been influenced wittingly or unwittingly, in full or in part, by this one man and the women and men he helped and trained to help others.

The point is this: Every person here is a potential Daws Trotman. Or to put it in perhaps more appropriate terms, every person here is a potential disciple and disciplemaker. As Jesus himself pointed out in still another parable, your life can be multiplied 30 times, 60 times, 100 times, even a thousand times. Lorne Sanny, our president, often quotes Isaiah 60:22, "A little one shall become a thousand..."

Now *that* is a promise you can claim. There is that spiritual potential residing in you, dormant perhaps, but there. You can stay home in Podunk Center and still reach people who will reach people who will reach people who will go to the ends of the earth with the gospel. And we will find ourselves making disciples in every nation in our generation.

Are we perhaps on the verge of the Seventh Movement? What do you think? I know of no faster, no surer way of reaching the world for Christ. It is the ideal marriage of quantity with quality.

Conclusion

For 175 years our parents labored hard for the gospel. The sixth movement I described was the greatest of all Christian thrusts since the days of Jesus. Our parents deserve credit for this. But authorities on world mission today agree that the sixth movement has run out of gas. It is not making the creative contribution to world evangelization that it made one hundred years ago.

Now the question is: Will we take up the torch? Will this generation take up the torch and launch the seventh movement? Or – and please listen carefully – *will we be the first generation in nearly two centuries to drop it, in all likelihood ushering in several centuries of spiritual darkness?*

To make it more personal: if you will take up the torch and commit yourself to being a disciple, and to multiplying disciples, I believe that before the Orwellian year of 1984 we will see women and men navigating for Christ in every country of the world. And by the end of this century, well within your lifetime, there will be reproductive centers of Christian discipleship in every city, town and neighborhood on the face of the globe!

Will you join us in this great venture of faith?