



*“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times” (Mark 4:3-8, NIV).*

As you know, Jesus’ parable of the seed and soils is one of the most often preached passages in Scripture. Yet beyond its deep spiritual meaning, it serves as a powerful metaphor for why our preaching often yields little fruit. For the savvy pastor, this parable provides more than anesthesia, easing our pain by explaining why we have a lean preaching harvest. It also can serve as insight to stewardship that propels us to focus more on soil preparation in order for the seeds we sow to bear significant fruit.

I grew up on a farm in Iowa and remember my dad making “oat dolls.” He’d wrap seeds of oats in a cloth, tie it off in a 2- 3-inch ball so they didn’t fall out, which gave it the “doll” look. Dad put it in a pan with a little water and placed it on the windowsill for sunlight and warmth. After a number of days, he’d untie the doll and count the seeds that had germinated. By tabulating the percent of sprouts, he could determine how productive this seed would be and whether it was suitable for planting.

Most of Dad’s effort wasn’t invested in better seed development. The majority of his time and energy went into preparing the soil. He sent samples to the Federal Department of Agriculture at Iowa State University to determine the chemical makeup of the soil and what it needed for a certain crop. Then he’d plow, disc,

add chemicals and fertilize the soil so when the seeds were planted at the right time, they’d stand the best chance of producing a good harvest.

Pastors invest a lot of time and energy into seed preparation, only to wonder why they see such little outcome after years of planting. The typical pastor spends more than 20 hours a week preparing and delivering a message. Multiply this by 300,000 congregations in the United States. Factor in an average salary of \$40,000 per year. The result is a weekly investment of about \$15,000,000 for sermon production in America. How’s our return on investment?

Forget the economics. Anyone serving in ministry more than a decade understands the frustration of wondering whether our people are getting it. Board members gone wild, staff implosions, betrayals, bickering, mediocre stewardship, church hopping and the pettiness we see in our congregations make us wonder how effective preaching and teaching really are. While Bible conservatives may cite watered-down content as the cause, lukewarm spirituality is also rampant in our tribes, disguised by pious utterances and camouflaged in doctrinal parroting.

The bottom line is that most Christians, in spite of great preaching and teaching, merely transition from spiritual Pampers to Depends. They never grow up. They confuse longevity in church (*chronos*) with maturity (*kairos*). Is crux of the problem the overwhelming power of sin, the underwhelming umph of how we preach the gospel; or could there be another factor we’re overlooking? While I’m all for better preaching, more effective communication and continual honing of expository skills, most of us would do well to assess how we’re doing in soil preparation.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

A few years ago, Daniel Goleman and his colleagues popularized the concept of emotional intelligence (EI), the study of

how people succeed and fail in their ability to read others socially and self-awareness as to how they are being perceived. After *Emotional Intelligence*, they authored *Primal Leadership*, which explains how a leader’s emotional intelligence impacts his or her effectiveness. Although emotional intelligence is related to a Christian’s ability to communicate spiritual fruit, there’s a factor beyond EI that I’ve termed *spiritual intelligence* (SI).

After 50 years of attending church and 25 years serving in a leadership role, what amazes me most is how few people mature despite decades of listening to sermons, studying the Bible and being involved in ministry. I now realize the main reason we don’t see greater maturity in people is not flawed doctrine, mediocre preaching, teaching quality, sin or an unwillingness in them. Lack of maturity is primarily a result of flawed ministry methods.

By that, I do not mean musical style, visual software or programming tweaks that evolve every few years. Rather *how* we do church does not mirror the methods Jesus used to disciple the Twelve. There are similarities, but for the most part we never experience the synergy of the combined strategies Jesus employed. In fact, we rarely take time to unpack and examine His approach to growing people.

We’re fond of expounding upon Jesus’ teachings, miracles and journeys; but we typically overlook *how* He did ministry. In contrast to the modern church, Jesus implemented different methods in the way He grew souls. Because Jesus was God and knew His time was limited, certainly He would have employed methods most apt to produce real results. It was a conscious stewardship decision. We would be wise to analyze and replicate His means.

So what did Jesus do? If you study His methods, you’ll find something different than what is scheduled during a given week in the typical local church and certainly not what most of us do as pastors. Yet it has

everything to do with growing spiritually intelligent people who authentically mature, not just put in time storing more Bible studies or sermons. I'll leave it up to you to compare and contrast what you do with Jesus' means, but spiritual intelligence methodology is key to seeing greater results from our preaching.

### SI Methods

Four methods stand out as you analyze the way Jesus developed His followers' souls. They are not necessarily sequential or effective when standing alone. Therefore, if you emphasize any one of the four aspects of Jesus' SI methodology, you lose the impact. They work synergistically. After a mere three years, 11 of the 12 changed the world dramatically.

**Travel Team:** The first method involved handpicking a group of 12. We'll call them His Travel Team because they went with Him from village to village, setting up camp, assisting in events and interacting with Him along with observing how He dealt with others. Two things stand in stark contrast to the way we typically do ministry in the American church. We avoid hand-choosing our Travel Team, preferring to take anyone interested; and we do not really travel with them. We set up shop—if at all possible a physical location with chairs, offices and sound system—then invite everyone to come visit us. Jesus strategically selected a decentralized approach to ministry. In essence, He did life with them. Most of us pull people *out* of their lives for training and spiritual interaction.

While we can't know for sure what was going on in Jesus' mind when He chose this method, but we can see that building a facility in a single location and inviting people to come hear Him preach was not a priority to Him. Ironically, we see Him leaving people, dismissing crowds and operating incognito at various times. Why did He select these twelve? We don't know, but perhaps it had to do with knowing who was wired to lead, who would make the commitment, and even in Judas'

case, who might serve the bigger objective as a betrayer.

Jesus invested a majority of His time with a few who eventually would multiply His work. By going shallow with many, people never escape velocity. They must be in a covenantal relationship with a few who will look them in the eyes and hold them accountable; otherwise the challenge of moving out of spiritual status quo will not happen. Despite wonderful preaching, most biblical truths roll off listeners by the time they reach the parking lot. Unless we intentionally create a culture of connecting people for intentional spiritual growth, maturity rarely happens.

The typical small group is inept at this, primarily because it is non-covenantal. I'm a big fan of small groups, but most are not suitably structured to create the level of accountability needed to implement spiritual truths in our lives. There are five basic levels of accountability:

**Level 1.** Politely friendly: Ultra light accountability, such as people who know each other at the coffee shop: "Hey, didn't see you last couple of weeks." "Yeah, been out on vacation."

**Level 2.** Socially affirming: Light accountability; members intentionally pursue friendships but not at a level that changes their lives significantly; commitment is voluntary and lapses with pressure; typical of small groups and Sunday Schools.

**Level 3.** Mutually earned: Strong but generally positive accountability; people in the group commit to grow together, experiencing life together so they get to know each other in various settings beyond pretense and know when people are and are not being authentic and can lovingly confront them because we've also affirmed them sufficiently and earned the right to raise issues if/when they arise.

**Level 4.** Voluntarily surrendered: one person becomes the subject of more intense scrutiny and higher accountability, similar to a therapist and client, personal

trainer or a recovery group sponsorship. Accountability tends to be one way.

**Level 5.** Involuntarily coerced: Behavior is changed due to the highly controlled environment and/or the direct threat of punishment; very high accountability; one-way. Incarceration, garnishing of wages, forced hospitalization; physical and/or legal restraints.

The Travel Team typically incorporates Level 3 accountability that is earned mutually. Chances are slim that Jesus could have gotten away with a follower "Satan" in a typical church or small group and have him or her stick around. Because the Twelve made a commitment to each other and experienced love, affirmation, and life, they stuck together through the difficult times. People fail to mature because they have not intentionally developed a formal or informal covenantal relationship with others who have earned the right to confront them or hold them accountable to grow through the difficult phases. They inevitably bump up against issues in their lives that need changing, whether personal addictions, attitudes, decisions or behaviors.

Alone or in low accountability settings, (i.e., congregations), people rarely push through the pain associated with growth. That is why churches are filled with Bible-smart people who never experience the abundant fruit bearing that characterizes maturity. Great preaching without a Travel Team yields biblical experts who are prone to spiritual pride, Pharisaical and been-there-heard-that attitudes, lacking genuine depth and humility that are indicative of spiritual intelligence.

**Directions** pertains to biblical truths and complementary content. I have met many pastors who choose a verse-by-verse expositional style and condemn those who do not. They believe their analysis of certain passages or doctrines is superior to others, creating an atmosphere of criticism and contention among preachers, churches and doctrinal camps.

What did Jesus do? He did not simply expose the ancient scriptures, line-by-line, word-by-word. He sometimes tapped content from the prophets, sometimes created new stories for illustration and deeper meaning and frequently pulled from events of the day. "Ah, but we're not Jesus. We don't create truth by merely speaking." True, yet we do add to truth when we expose and re-present it in our sermons and books. We provide our take on the original meaning. In doing so, we change it whether we want to or not.

Jesus provided directions for His Travel Team. Without good content, a group is little more than a social club or fraternal organization. Certainly the Bible should be a strong presence in a Travel Team, but God also speaks through art, conversations, circumstances, events and music. The Bible reflects all of these so that when we believe the Bible is the only way the Holy Spirit speaks truth, we miss many messages God has for us.

The goal is to synthesize truth into our lives, not rely on lectures (i.e., sermons) or consign it to intellectual discussions. Jesus interacted with His Travel Team regarding what He taught. The members wrestled with it. He often followed up with more teaching based on their questions and taught with questions versus answers. Study the questions Jesus asked and you can see how this method alone engages people more deeply in learning than information dumping, which tends to be very Western and passive.

*Experiencing the Journey* is a third SI method. It has to do with getting out of the classroom, lecture hall and living room for preaching and Bible studies. Watch how Jesus worked. He was on the go, not idle. While a majority of His time involved interacting with His Travel Team, He also used big events as means to teach with opportunities to learn by doing. Whether feeding the 5,000, crossing a troubled lake, raising a dead man, or any number of other events, Jesus' Travel Team got to experience God at work in their lives and others'. Experiential learning is a powerful

method because it works on the heart more than the intellect.

Consider the difference in looking at a friend's pictures of his or her vacation and you walking the streets of Paris with your family. How does watching a missionary's slide presentation compare with taking a trip to Nigeria to hold a baby sick with the AIDS virus? People get excited by what they experience. Classroom, sanctuary and living room conditions for spiritual growth do not offer the ability to replicate the impact of a multi-sensory experience. Travel Teams

camping, feeding the poor and experiencing short-term mission trips together not only bond more deeply, but members learn to read and feed each other spiritually.

The weakest point of most service experiences is that we do them with people with whom we've not established a covenantal relationship for spiritual growth. Community service junkies don't acquire SI because they lack a Travel Team for knowing and being known and unpacking the shared memories together.

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## “People fail to mature because they’ve not intentionally developed a covenantal relationship with others.”

The fourth method Jesus employed was **Path Finding**. He served as the Path Finder for His Travel Team and then—at the end of three years—charged them to do the same. A Path Finder is mentor, teacher and guide, but different from each. The typical sequence is: Find a Path Finder; become someone else’s Path Finder while you have your own; then serve as a Path Finder to keep growing spiritually. You don’t have to be gifted at leading, teaching or organizing to Path Find for others; but you do need to facilitate life and spiritual discussions with a Travel Team that is doing life together around Scripture, life experiences and commitment to each other.

The reason we have so many bored-out-of-their-gourd Christians is because after a while, they have heard the majority of what there is to hear from our preaching; so they become passive pew-sitters. The reticular activators in their brains literally screen out things they’ve

heard numerous times before. They are, in a way, neurologically confined by their spiritual experience. Some hop churches looking for something new; others stay as self-appointed pastor critics. We’re not sure which we like least.

Ray Ortlund was one of my Path Finders early in my ministry. I once asked him, “Ray, why do you do this? You’re retired, and we don’t pay you to meet with us as you do.” Ray said, “Because I need it.” At the time, I chalked it up to his humility; but I later learned what he meant. He needed to serve as a Path Finder for others, not because he’d arrived, but as a means to help him continue his journey.

Most Christians pull off to the side of the road on their trip. They’re still on the road technically, but they’ve ceased to progress. They add one more sermon, one more ministry event, one more Bible study to their spiritual portfolio; but they’ll never become spiritually intelligent.

Striving to provide top-drawer preaching and teaching is an important responsibility for pastors. Thanks to new developments in technology, the finest in sermons and orators are available 24/7 via the Internet, iTunes, DVDs and cable programming.

The main purpose of the local church is to create a structure whereby parishioners can grow their souls by utilizing the methods Jesus used with His followers. If you want to see significantly improved, long-term results from your preaching, consider how you can improve the soil conditions. While it is not traditionally what pastors and churches do today, it is required for our people to become spiritually intelligent. ❖



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