

6. Equipping the Saints to Share Their Story.

Becoming a Disciple Series

I want to begin this study by sharing my early experience in the church. In 1977, when I became a Christian at 23, my hometown of Harwich, Essex, England, had only around 16,000 people, with many pubs (bars) and few Christians. I did not grow up in the church and had little knowledge about Christianity. As a new Christian, I was encouraged to join a church in my hometown, but I found that churches were primarily filled with older adults who rarely ventured outside the church walls to share the gospel. I made friends with a married couple about my age who led a youth group. The three of us threw ourselves into trying to change the spiritual climate in the town. I helped them lead a youth group, and later on, we started meeting as a small group. After I married Sandy, along with the other couple, our small house church plant became three and eventually became a church.

Sandy and I began sharing the gospel with many of my old friends, primarily through sharing my story of how God had changed my life, and I wanted to let everyone know how they could also experience God's love. I am sure I made many mistakes, as I was still a young Christian. Sandy and I shared Christ on the streets, in pubs, and on trains, anywhere we could find people open to hearing about Jesus. Several years later, one of my friends whom I had known in the youth group and who had been a church member for many years wanted to confess that he thought I was a little bit crazy in those early years after I became a Christian because all I wanted to do was talk about Jesus! Of course, I laughed. Due to my enthusiasm for my faith, I may have appeared over the top to some of my friends at the time, but I was still learning how to communicate. Despite my lack of experience, God used those encounters. Today, I still love to talk about Jesus, but what gives me greater joy than that is to equip others to know what they believe and help them to share it with others. Indeed, the church can multiply when we share what God has done and is doing. The Lord Jesus calls His church to be the Body of Christ at work in the world and desires us to depend on the power of the Holy Spirit to work through us.

My stumbling about in my early years leads me to the first thing I want to encourage you with as we explore "how to tell your story." That is, do not wait until you feel ready before starting to share your faith. You will learn as you go. Do you have a reason for the hope that is in you? Then you are qualified. A preacher named R. C. Sproul once said, "Christians have nothing to be smug about; we are not righteous people trying to correct the unrighteousness. Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. The chief difference between the believer and unbeliever is forgiveness." It is a strategy and tool of the enemy to make us feel inadequate. If this is you, throw off every condemnation of the enemy and remind yourself that you stand in the righteousness of Christ. The world needs *your* story!

We Are All Ministers

One of the most important things to learn as a disciple is that all disciples are called to ministry. The early church grew up with this concept and multiplied exceedingly. In the early days of the church, the Lord added to them daily (Acts 2:47). The enemy countered the church's multiplication by introducing heresy into the church, that some were to be the professionals while others were to watch. We call it today the division of the clergy from the laity (Laity means ordinary people as

distinct from professionals). This separation of people is like the modern football game (soccer), where 22 men run ragged doing all the work while all the rest watch and are substantially in need of exercise. Let us not believe that only professionals can do ministry, break the bread of communion, preach the gospel, and baptize individuals.

Ignorance of the Scriptures allowed authoritative leaders to take advantage of the people, increase their power, and keep the everyday believer in Christ in the dark. Printing of the Bible didn't take place until 1456. Before that, the Scriptures were hand-copied and chained to the pulpits under lock and key. This period in Europe was called the Dark Ages. These religious leaders fought hard to keep the Bible from ordinary people. Many godly men were killed for translating and printing the Scriptures into different languages. In the Middle Ages, even those translating the Bible couldn't believe the Scripture text because the culture of the day had ingrained into the people this separation of the clergy and laity, something not found in the Bible. For instance, did you know that our English translations of the Book of Ephesians contained a misplaced comma that was not changed until 1903?¹The error was in Ephesians 4:11-12. Here is how it read *before* the mistake was discovered and rectified:

¹¹And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; ¹²For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-12 KJV).

The original Greek manuscripts have no comma after the word *saints* and before the word "*for*." The addition of the one comma makes it sound as if the various gifted individuals mentioned are solely responsible for carrying out the work of the ministry. All modern translations have corrected the error. However, this misguided assumption is rampant in the church today in most of the Western world. Many professional ministers are trained in a non-biblical philosophy of ministry that puts the responsibility of serving in ministry on a few and perpetuates the idea that just a few are called to do the work. That is why our churches today have a majority of spectators. Let's now read a modern translation of Ephesians and see who is called to minister (serve) and what gifted leaders are responsible for doing:

¹¹So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:11-16 NIV).

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p.166.

We can see in this passage that God has given specific individuals gifts to equip the church. The fruit of an evangelist's ministry is to lead people to Christ and model, teach, and train others to do the same. I believe this is the 100-fold return on the seed sown instead of the 30-fold or 60-fold return spoken of in Mark 4:8. The church is to grow exponentially as each part does its work.

Looking at the Scripture we just read (Ephesians 4:11-16), what things stand out about the Body of Christ when the believers are equipped? Why do you think God prompted Paul the apostle's picture of a human body to show us how the Body of Christ is to function?

When Chairman Mao of the Communist Party came to power in China in 1949, he executed many church leaders, kicked out all foreign church leaders, and closed down all churches. He thought this would shut down Christianity. Instead, the church multiplied and grew exponentially. When Mao took power, most mission experts agreed that there were 750,000 Christians in China. Today, the best estimates of the size of the church are over 100 million people, with the population of China at 1,400 million. Some experts say that approximately 20,000 Chinese are coming to Christ every day.

The persecution caused non-professionals to carry out the ministry of teaching and evangelism. Many relatively untrained people had to depend on the Spirit instead of their intellect, and many beautiful signs and wonders happened in the Chinese church that multiplied the church. We tend to rely on our intellect and learning in the Western church, but the Lord significantly used those with simple faith in God and a willing heart to grow the church in China. Out of necessity, believers were forced to trust God and step out in faith.

In the book *The Coming Chinese Church*, written by Paul Golf and Pastor Lee, there is recorded a conversation between a house church leader and a high-up official in the Chinese government charged with hindering the growth of the Christian Church in China:

One day, the PSB [Public Security Bureau] found me in a region where we had seen high levels of growth within the Chinese Gospel Fellowship. They brought me in for a meeting and asked if I would explain why the church grew so fast in their area. My reply was pretty tongue-in-cheek: "Really, we owe it all to you guys! Look at it like this: Over these last ten years, your persecution of the church has failed to destroy it. On the contrary, we moved from the countryside to the villages when you began to oppose us. We ended up in the towns when you came against us in the villages. We spread through the whole province when you persecuted us in the towns. If you keep persecuting us, we will even get into the provincial capital city sooner or later. If you persecute us there, there is nowhere to go except home to heaven! Our job will be finished!"²

In China, the Lord has used untrained ordinary people like us; He is not looking for super-saints. When Jesus walked this Earth, He didn't go to Israel's Yeshivas (Seminaries) to find leaders to start a worldwide mission. He went to familiar places and called upon ordinary people like us. The calling of ordinary people is what baffled the religious professionals in the days when the Book of Acts was written: "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were

² Paul Golf with Pastor Lee, *The Coming Chinese Church*, Published by Monarch Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. Page 44-45.

unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). The fact that Christ can make ordinary people like you and me into fishers of men brings glory to the Father.

“They took note that these men had been with Jesus.” What do you imagine they observed about “these men” that led them to conclude that they had been with Jesus? Think of how this relates to your relationship with Christ and how it spills out to others. Discuss.

The World Needs Your Story.

So far, this study aims to help us all acknowledge that we share this ministry. With this in mind, let's talk about some practical help that will encourage you to be ready to tell *your* story of faith!

- 1) **Prepare** with prayer and have Scriptures you can share when there is an opportunity; being so armed will give you confidence. In our previous study, we went through key Scriptures helpful in leading others to a knowledge of Christ and His work of redemption. If you seek to share your faith with a friend, a family member, or a work colleague, ask the Holy Spirit to pave the way for the conversation by praying for the person. God knows how to open their heart. Be still and listen to any impressions that God may give you. The Holy Spirit may show you how to start a conversation or guide you concerning a particular need.
- 2) **Be Yourself**, be authentic. Whatever your story is, we all share similar needs, and God meets us where we are. Focus on Jesus Himself and how He has met your needs. “Think of Before and After.” How has faith in God helped you?
- 3) **Be Intentional**. Seek an opportunity to share. You may want to invite the person to meet with you if you already have a relationship with them. Making yourself available to God is simple: be a listener. When we are intentional, God will allow us to reach them and sow a seed of faith. If you sense they are open to the message, ask them if you can share your story of how you came to faith in God.
- 4) **Be Concise**. You don't need to tell your whole life story, but share what you feel applies to them. You may have a particular part of your faith journey that you choose to share, depending on how receptive the individual is. Focus on Jesus as the answer. Notice the other person's cues telling you when they are done listening. Go as far as you can in the conversation and leave the results to God.
- 5) **Write Your Story**. Take the time to write out your story. You can break it up into parts and share the details that seem relevant to the person. You may not tell your story the same way every time. God will show you what to highlight to the person. Ask them what they think of what you shared. They may have questions. Do not be discouraged if the person does not respond. Sometimes, the seed needs time to germinate! If the Holy Spirit brings conviction to someone's heart, you may witness a struggle before they accept the gospel's truth. People often struggle if they are not ready and may be wrestling with God in their thought life.

Crafting Your Story

Here are some tips that you may find helpful when you write your story.

In Acts 26, we have Paul, the apostle, sharing his faith with King Agrippa. To keep this study short, we won't go into the whole story now; you can do that later. What I do want to focus on is how he shared his faith going through three separate stages as he shared:

- 1) Paul shared his life before his conversion to Christ (Acts 26:1-11).
- 2) He shared what happened to him that changed his direction in life (Acts 26:12-18).
- 3) He shared about his life since he came to Christ, showing forth the changes and direction (Acts 26:19-31).

We can learn from Paul by sharing what struggles you experienced or are still experiencing. Share about the inner struggles, anger toward others, dark thoughts, fear of death, disharmony, etc. (Remember, you don't have to have your life all figured out before you witness for Christ. You may be in the middle of learning an important lesson; that's okay). Think about how you felt before you came into a relationship with Christ, comparing "before and after."

Secondly, share about what happened to you. What led up to the actual event when you met Christ? Speak about what was shared with you and your thoughts at the time. Remember that people are looking for common ground, and how they can follow in your footsteps to find what they are looking for. Focus on the "How" you received Christ. Was a Scripture used to significant effect in your experience? If you don't have a phone or Bible to read the Scripture, share what you remember even though you don't remember it exactly. Just be genuine.

Lastly, in the third stage, share how your life has changed. What is different? How has your relationship with God helped you? What did you begin to do differently as the Holy Spirit led you and corrected old habits? Share how God has answered prayer for you, or maybe how he has given you peace. As Christians, we do not have a life free of problems and struggles, but we have someone who is ever present in our time of trouble and can give us His peace that passes understanding. Focus on Christ and the changes He has brought into your life.

I encourage you all to take time within the next week to write out your story of faith. Our story's confused threads often unravel as we write our thoughts down. Try to write concisely and keep to the three main parts in one page Word document of around 800-900 words (Paul's testimony in Acts 26 of the English New International Version is 820 words). If you find this difficult, it can be helpful to begin by writing a letter to God. Thank Him for His work in your life, and be specific. This can help you start and "prime the pump" to begin writing. Your story does not have to follow any particular formula, for everyone's story is unique. If you do not recall a specific time when you decided for Christ, then focus on how God has always been there for you and how your faith helps you in difficult times. Some of us have grown up in the church and may not remember a specific point when we crossed over from death to life.

One of my close friends I knew in England, Tony, moved to Holland for a time. He became a Christian, but in his younger years, he struggled with alcohol. One day, he fell asleep on the train.

He meant to get off the train at Rotterdam, but when he woke up, he realized he was in Paris! He had crossed over a border without even realizing it!

I share that story to illustrate that some of us may not recognize the exact point when we passed from the authority of the enemy's kingdom to God's kingdom. If you have grown up in a home where truth was spoken, and believers surrounded you, you may not recall a specific day when you gave your life to Christ, you just know you have crossed the border and are in a different kingdom now. You have a story that is steeped in experiencing God. We all need to answer as to what we have done with the gift of God and Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. Even if you have grown up in the church, there is a need for a personal response, for each of us will give an account before God for the truth we have received. You have a rich heritage from which to share.

John Wimber, founder of the national group of churches we call Vineyard, once coined the phrase, "Everybody gets to play." He meant that the whole church is called to do the work of the ministry, which he referred to as "doing the stuff." We are blessed to be part of a church where there are many opportunities to get involved in the work of the ministry. Be aware of opportunities that come across your path because people around you are hungry for reality and peace. As this world gets darker and darker, we are told that God's people will shine brighter: **"But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day"** (Proverbs 4:18).

The World Needs to See Your Light

Some could respond to the call of discipleship, saying, "I'm not a great man or woman of God," but we are only called to be men or women of a great God. He can take us into the land! **"Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power"** (Psalm 110:3). Don't be satisfied with anything less than all Christ has won for you! The time to rest is the other side of eternity! The fields are ripe for harvesting, but the laborers are few (John 4:35). Being available to God is simply obedience when you sense that the Holy Spirit wants to use you somehow. You may not feel adequate, but it is about His will and work, not your ability. If we are available and flexible, we can trust Him to give us wisdom and provide what we need to give to others. It is His work.

Finally, let me close by saying that once we hold out the word of life to others, the work of the Holy Spirit will draw an individual to the Father. Isn't it good to know that it is not your job to make "God look good?" He does not need our help there. He IS good, and He will show Himself to those who seek Him.

Let's use our imagination and think of what it was like back when Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead. Imagine one of the angels meeting Jesus after His ascension back to heaven. The angel frowned when he saw the marks of Jesus' scars of His tortuous years on earth, especially the scars of His crucifixion. The angel said to Jesus, "Master, you suffered terribly for those down on earth." "Yes, I did," was Jesus' reply. The angel continued, "Do they all know now about your life and forgiveness? Have they all heard about your death and resurrection?" "No, not yet," said Jesus. "Right now, only a handful of people in Israel know about my death and resurrection."

The angel looked perplexed. "Then," he asked, "Well... How will everyone learn about your

wonderful life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection?" "I have asked Peter, James, John, and a handful of friends and followers to tell others about it. And when other people hear and believe, they, in turn, will tell others. And, by and by, the earth will hear the message." Still frowning, the angel responded, "But, hmmm, you know how people are on earth. What if they... What if Peter, James, and John get tired? What if they tell the story, and the next generation gets involved in other pursuits? What if, way down in the 18th or 21st century, people aren't committed any longer to your commission? Have you made other plans?" The Lamb of God looked directly at the angel of God and said, "I have no other plan. I am counting on them" (Author Unknown). He is counting on all of the body of Christ to serve and share the gospel message.

Prayer: Father, we ask that all those who are believers will see that each of us is called to reach beyond ourselves to those who are without Christ. Grant us the power to live for You and testify to all You have done. Please help us to be flexible, available, and teachable. Amen!

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