

ROBERT E. COLEMAN

Foreword by **BILLY GRAHAM**

The
MASTER PLAN
— of —
EVANGELISM

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I

SELECTION

He chose from them twelve.

Luke 6:13

Men Were His Method

It all started by Jesus calling a few men to follow him. This revealed immediately the direction his evangelistic strategy would take. His concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow. Remarkable as it may seem, Jesus started to gather these men before he ever organized an evangelistic campaign or even preached a sermon in public. Men were to be his method of winning the world to God.

The initial objective of Jesus' plan was to enlist men who could bear witness to his life and carry on his work after he returned to the Father. John and Andrew were the first to be invited as Jesus left the scene of the great revival of the Baptist at Bethany beyond the Jordan (John 1:35–40). Andrew in turn brought his brother Peter (John 1:41–42).

The next day Jesus found Philip on his way to Galilee, and Philip found Nathanael (John 1:43–51). There is no evidence of haste in the selection of these disciples, just determination. James, the brother of John, is not mentioned as one of the group until the four fishermen are recalled several months later by the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:19; Matt. 4:21). Shortly afterward Matthew is called to follow the Master as Jesus passed through Capernaum (Mark 2:13–14; Matt. 9:9; Luke 5:27–28). The particulars surrounding the call of the other disciples are not recorded in the Gospels, but it is believed that they all occurred in the first year of the Lord's ministry.¹

As one might expect, these early efforts of soul winning had little or no immediate effect upon the religious life of his day, but that did not matter greatly. For as it turned out, these few early converts of the Lord were destined to become the leaders of his church that was to go with the gospel to the whole world, and from the standpoint of his ultimate purpose, the significance of their lives would be felt throughout eternity. That's the only thing that counts.

Men Willing to Learn

What is more revealing about these men is that at first they do not impress us as being key men. None of them occupied prominent places in the synagogue, nor did any of them belong to the Levitical priesthood. For the most part they were common laboring men, probably having no professional training beyond the rudiments of knowledge necessary for their vocation. Perhaps a few of them came from families of some considerable means, such as the sons of Zebedee, but none of them could have been considered wealthy. They had no academic degrees in the arts and philosophies of their day. Like their Master, their formal education likely consisted only of the synagogue schools. Most of them were raised in the poor section of the country around

Galilee. Apparently the only one of the Twelve who came from the more refined region of Judea was Judas Iscariot. By any standard of sophisticated culture then and now they would surely be considered as a rather ragged collection of souls. One might wonder how Jesus could ever use them. They were impulsive, temperamental, easily offended, and had all the prejudices of their environment. In short, these men selected by the Lord to be his assistants represented an average cross section of society in their day.² Not the kind of group one would expect to win the world for Christ.

Yet Jesus saw in these simple men the potential of leadership for the Kingdom. They were indeed "unlearned and ignorant" according to the world's standard (Acts 4:13), but they were teachable. Though often mistaken in their judgments and slow to comprehend spiritual things, they were honest men, willing to confess their need. Their mannerisms may have been awkward and their abilities limited, but with the exception of the traitor, their hearts were big. What is perhaps most significant about them was their sincere yearning for God and the realities of his life. The superficiality of the religious life about them had not obsessed their hope for the Messiah (John 1:41, 45, 49; 6:69). They were fed up with the hypocrisy of the ruling aristocracy. Some of them had already joined the revival movement of John the Baptist (John 1:35). These men were looking for someone to lead them in the way of salvation. Such men, pliable in the hands of the Master, could be molded into a new image—Jesus can use anyone who wants to be used.

Concentrated on a Few

In noting this fact, however, one does not want to miss the practical truth of how Jesus did it. Here is the wisdom of his method, and in observing it, we return again to the fundamental principle of concentration on those he intended to use. One cannot transform a world except as individu-

als in the world are transformed, and individuals cannot be changed except as they are molded in the hands of the Master. The necessity is apparent not only to select a few helpers but also to keep the group small enough to be able to work effectively with them.

Hence, as the company of followers around Jesus increased, it became necessary by the middle of his second year of ministry to narrow the select company to a more manageable number. Accordingly Jesus “called his disciples, and he chose from them twelve, whom also he named apostles” (Luke 6:13–17; see Mark 3:13–19). Regardless of the symbolical meaning one prefers to put on the number twelve,³ it is clear that Jesus intended these men to have unique privileges and responsibilities in the Kingdom work.

This does not mean that Jesus’ decision to have twelve apostles excluded others from following him, for as we know, many more were numbered among his associates, and some of these became very effective workers in the church. The seventy (Luke 10:1); Mark, the Gospel writer; James, his own brother (1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 2:9, 12; see John 2:12; 7:2–10), are notable examples of this. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that there was a rapidly diminishing priority given to those outside the Twelve.

The same rule could be applied in reverse, for within the select apostolic group Peter, James, and John seemed to enjoy a more special relationship to the Master than did the other nine. Only these privileged few are invited into the sick room of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51); they alone go up with the Master and behold his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:2; Matt. 17:1; Luke 9:28); and amid the olive trees of Gethsemane casting their ominous shadows in the light of the full Passover moon, these members of the inner circle waited nearest to their Lord while he prayed (Mark 14:33; Matt. 26:37). So noticeable is the preference given to these three that had it not been for the incarnation of selflessness in the person of Christ, it

could well have precipitated feelings of resentment on the part of the other apostles. The fact that there is no record of the disciples complaining about the preeminence of the three, though they did murmur about other things, is proof that where preference is shown in the right spirit and for the right reason offense need not arise.⁴

The Principle Observed

All of this certainly impresses one with the deliberate way that Jesus proportioned his life to those he wanted to train. It also graphically illustrates a fundamental principle of teaching: that other things being equal, the more concentrated the size of the group being taught, the greater the opportunity for effective instruction.⁵

Jesus devoted most of his remaining life on earth to these few disciples. He literally staked his whole ministry on them. The world could be indifferent toward him and still not defeat his strategy. It even caused him no great concern when his followers on the fringes of things gave up their allegiance when confronted with the true meaning of the Kingdom (John 6:66). But he could not bear to have his close disciples miss his purpose. They had to understand the truth and be sanctified by it (John 17:17), else all would be lost. Thus he prayed "not for the world," but for the few God gave him "out of the world" (John 17:6, 9).⁶ Everything depended on their faithfulness if the world would believe in him "through their word" (John 17:20).

Not Neglecting the Masses

It would be wrong, however, to assume on the basis of what has here been emphasized that Jesus neglected the masses. Such was not the case. Jesus did all that any man could be asked to do and more to reach the multitudes. The first thing he did when he started his ministry was to identify

himself boldly with the great mass revival movement of his day by baptism at the hands of John (Mark 1:9–11; Matt. 3:13–17; Luke 3:21–22), and he later went out of his way to praise this work of the great prophet (Matt. 11:7–15; Luke 7:24–28). He continuously preached to the crowds that followed his miracle-working ministry. He taught them. He fed them when they were hungry. He healed their sick and cast out demons among them. He blessed their children. Sometimes the whole day would be spent ministering to their needs, even to the extent that he had “no leisure so much as to eat” (Mark 6:31). In every way possible Jesus manifested to the masses of humanity a genuine concern. These were the people whom he came to save—he loved them, wept over them, and finally died to save them from their sin. No one could think that Jesus shirked mass evangelism.

Multitudes Aroused

In fact, the ability of Jesus to impress the multitudes created a serious problem in his ministry. He was so successful in expressing to them his compassion and power that they once wanted “to take him by force, to make him king” (John 6:15). One report by the followers of John the Baptist said that “all men” were clamoring for his attention (John 3:26). Even the Pharisees admitted among themselves that the world had gone after him (John 12:19), and bitter as the admission must have been, the chief priests concurred in this opinion (John 11:47–48). However one looks at it, the Gospel record certainly does not indicate that Jesus lacked any popular following among the masses, despite their hesitating loyalty, and this condition lasted to the end. Indeed, it was the fear of this friendly mass feeling for Jesus that prompted his accusers to capture him in the absence of the people (Mark 12:12; Matt. 21:26; Luke 20:19).

Had Jesus given any encouragement to this popular sentiment among the masses, he easily could have had all the

kingdoms of the world at his feet. All he had to do was satisfy the temporal appetites and curiosities of the people by his supernatural power. Such was the temptation presented by Satan in the wilderness when Jesus was urged to turn stones into bread and to cast himself down from a pinnacle of the temple that God might bear him up (Matt. 4:1-7; Luke 4:1-4, 9-13). These spectacular things would surely have excited the applause of the crowd. Satan was not offering Jesus anything when he promised him all the kingdoms of the world if the Master would only worship him (Matt. 4:8-10). The arch-deceiver of men knew full well that Jesus automatically would have this if he just turned his concentration from the things that mattered in the eternal Kingdom.⁷

But Jesus would not play to the galleries. Quite the contrary. Repeatedly he took special pains to allay the superficial popular support of the multitudes which had been occasioned by his extraordinary power (e.g., John 2:23-3:3; 6:26-27). Frequently he would even ask those who were the recipients of his healing to say nothing about it to prevent mass demonstrations by the easily aroused multitudes.⁸ Likewise, with the disciples following his transfiguration on the Mount, "He charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen" until after his resurrection (Mark 9:9; Matt. 17:9). On other occasions when applauded by the crowd, Jesus would slip away with his disciples and go elsewhere to continue his ministry.⁹

His practice in this respect sometimes rather annoyed his followers who did not understand his strategy. Even his own brothers and sisters, who yet did not believe in him, urged him to abandon this policy and make an open show of himself to the world, but he refused to take their advice (John 7:2-9).

Few Seemed to Understand

In view of this policy, it is not surprising to note that few people were actually converted during the ministry of Christ, that is, in any clearcut way. Of course, many of the multitudes

believed in Christ in the sense that his divine ministry was acceptable,¹⁰ but comparatively few seemed to have grasped the meaning of the gospel. Perhaps his total number of devoted followers at the end of his earthly ministry numbered little more than the five hundred brethren to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:6), and only about 120 tarried in Jerusalem to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:15). This number is not small considering that his active ministry extended only over a period of three years, yet if at this point one were to measure the effectiveness of his evangelism by the number of his converts, Jesus doubtless would not be considered among the most productive mass evangelists of the church.

His Strategy

Why? Why did Jesus deliberately concentrate his life on comparatively so few people? Had he not come to save the world? With the glowing announcement of John the Baptist ringing in the ears of multitudes, the Master easily could have had an immediate following of thousands if he wanted them. Why did he not then capitalize on his opportunities to enlist a mighty army of believers to take the world by storm? Surely the Son of God could have adopted a more enticing program of mass recruitment. Is it not rather disappointing that one with all the powers of the universe at his command would live and die to save the world, yet in the end have only a few ragged disciples to show for his labors?

The answer to this question focuses at once on the real purpose of his plan for evangelism. Jesus was not trying to impress the crowd, but to usher in a kingdom. This meant that he needed people who could lead the multitudes. What good would it have been for his ultimate objective to arouse the masses to follow him if these people had no subsequent supervision or instruction in the Way? It had been demonstrated on numerous

occasions that the crowd was an easy prey to false gods when left without proper care. The masses were like helpless sheep wandering aimlessly without a shepherd (Mark 6:34; Matt. 9:36; 14:14). They were willing to follow almost anyone who came along with some promise for their welfare, be it friend or foe. That was the tragedy of the hour—the noble aspirations of the people were easily excited by Jesus, but just as quickly thwarted by the deceitful religious authorities who controlled them. The spiritually blind leaders of Israel (John 8:44; 9:39–41; 12:40; see Matt. 23:1–39), though comparatively few in number,¹¹ completely dominated the affairs of the people. For this reason, unless Jesus' converts were given competent men of God to lead them on and protect them in the truth they would soon fall into confusion and despair, and the last state would be worse than the first. Thus, before the world could ever be permanently helped, people would have to be raised up who could lead the multitudes in the things of God.

Jesus was a realist. He fully realized the fickleness of depraved human nature as well as the satanic forces of this world amassed against humanity, and in this knowledge he based his evangelism on a plan that would meet the need. The multitudes of discordant and bewildered souls were potentially ready to follow him, but Jesus individually could not possibly give them the personal care they needed. His only hope was to get leaders inspired by his life who would do it for him. Hence, he concentrated on those who were to be the beginning of this leadership. Though he did what he could to help the multitudes, he had to devote himself primarily to a few men, rather than the masses, so that the masses could at last be saved. This was the genius of his strategy.

The Principle Applied Today

Yet, strangely enough, it is scarcely comprehended in practice today. Most of the evangelistic efforts of the church begin

with the multitudes under the assumption that the church is qualified to preserve what good is done. The result is our spectacular emphasis on numbers of converts, candidates for baptism, and more members for the church, with little or no genuine concern manifested toward the establishment of these souls in the love and power of God, let alone the preservation and continuation of the work.

Surely if the pattern of Jesus at this point means anything at all, it teaches that the first duty of a church leadership is to see to it that a foundation is laid in the beginning on which can be built an effective and continuing evangelistic ministry to the multitudes. This will require more concentration of time and talents on fewer people in the church while not neglecting the passion for the world. It will mean raising up trained disciples "for the work of ministering" with the pastor and church staff (Eph. 4:12).¹² A few people so dedicated in time will shake the world for God. Victory is never won by the multitudes.

Some might object to this principle when practiced by the Christian worker on the ground that favoritism is shown toward a select group in the church. But be that as it may, it is still the way that Jesus concentrated his life, and it is necessary if any lasting leadership is to be trained. Where it is practiced out of a genuine love for the whole church, and due concern is manifested toward the needs of the people, objections can at least be reconciled to the mission being accomplished. However, the ultimate goal must be clear to the worker, and there can be no hint of selfish partiality displayed in relationships to all. Everything that is done with the few is for the salvation of the multitudes.

Modern Demonstrations

This principle of selectivity and concentration is engraved in the universe, and will bring results no matter who prac-

tices it, whether or not the church believes it. Look at any successful leadership training program in business, industry, government, or the military.

On a global scale, it is surely not without significance that the early leaders of communism, always alert to what works, adopted in a large measure this method of the Lord as their own.¹³ Using it to their own devious end they have multiplied from a handful of zealots to a vast conspiracy of followers that until recently enslaved nearly half the people of the world. They are a modern-day example of what Jesus demonstrated so clearly in his day that the multitudes can be won easily if they are just given leaders to follow.¹⁴

Time for Action

It is time that the church realistically face the situation. Our days of trifling are running out. The evangelistic program of the church has bogged down on nearly every front, especially across the affluent Western world. In many lands the enfeebled church is not even keeping up with the exploding population. All the while the satanic forces of this world are becoming more relentless and brazen in their attack. It is ironic when one stops to think about it. In an age when facilities for rapid communication of the gospel are available to the church as never before, there are actually more unevangelized people on the earth today than before the invention of the horseless carriage.¹⁵

Yet in appraising the tragic condition of affairs today, we must not become frantic in trying to reverse the trend overnight. Perhaps that has been our problem. In our concern to stem the tide, we have launched one crash program after another to reach the multitudes with the saving Word of God. But what we have failed to comprehend in our frustration is that the real problem is not with the masses—what they believe, how they are governed, whether they are fed a

wholesome diet or not. All these things considered so vital are ultimately manipulated by others, and for this reason, before we can resolve the exploitation of the people we must get to those whom the people follow.

This, of course, puts a priority on winning and training those already in responsible positions of leadership. But if we can't begin at the top, then let us begin where we are and train a few of the lowly to become the great. And let us remember, too, that one does not have to have the prestige of the world to be greatly used in the Kingdom of God. Anyone who is willing to follow Christ can become a mighty influence on the world providing, of course, this person has the proper training.

Here is where we must begin just like Jesus. It will be slow, tedious, painful, and probably unnoticed by people at first, but the end result will be glorious, even if we don't live to see it. Seen this way, though, it becomes a big decision in the ministry. We must decide where we want our ministry to count—in the momentary applause of popular recognition or in the reproduction of our lives in a few chosen people who will carry on our work after we have gone. Really it is a question of which generation we are living for.

But we must go on. It is necessary now to see how Jesus trained his men to carry on his work. The whole pattern is part of the same method, and we cannot separate one phase from the other without destroying its effectiveness.