

## **DISCIPLESHIP: BEING AND MAKING DISCIPLES**

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The purpose of this paper is to reflect on some of the challenges that are before us in this new century in Latin America in how to live as authentic disciples of Christ and to actively participate with the Holy Spirit in the task of attracting and training others “making disciples of the Lord.”

Our theological and historical inheritance is very rich in these aspects and challenges us to live a life of holiness that is notable, winsome and contagious; and to develop contemporary methods and strategies to win and disciple that greatest number possible of people.

### **THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY DEMANDS DISCIPLES WHOSE LIFE OF HOLINESS IS NOTABLE, WINSOME AND CONTAGIOUS.**

How imperative is Christian perfection as an experience in the life of a disciple of Christ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The Christian church in Latin America has placed the biggest part of its energy in insisting that people “believe in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior”, but have not dedicated the same effort to teach them to live under the lordship of Christ. This “incomplete” gospel has taught “...justification disconnected from sanctification...”; it cannot be accepted as authentic evangelization because “...a gospel without sanctification is a truncated gospel...that...is lacking the necessary instruments to confront the challenges that the twenty-first century presents us”, affirms Justo González.<sup>1</sup>

An authentic Christian should also be a person “born of God”, and is also one who has given up his own rights in his life and possessions to the Creator.

#### **1. Holy disciples serve their community.**

This love of God which dwells in Christians is what gives them the impulse to serve in the world for which Jesus Christ gave His life. Authentic disciples do not see service to the world as a “Christian” duty or obligation, but as a privilege for which their Lord has called and trained them personally. Trying to serve in the world without the fullness of this perfect love in the hearts of those serving is waste of energy without much gain. On the other hand, trying to live in holiness without being involved in service to the community is totally incoherent with Wesleyan thinking given that the gospel does not recognize “...any other holiness that is not social holiness.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Justo González, *Juan Wesley: Herencia y promesa* (Puerto Rico: Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico, 1998), 108-109.

<sup>2</sup> Jackson, cited in Justo González, op. cit., 88.

The purpose of Biblical holiness is never, as affirms Randall M. Wittig, to produce “...personal satisfaction.”<sup>3</sup> A recent survey by Dr. Duane Anderson in 1999 among evangelicals in Costa Rica<sup>4</sup> reflects how extensive this tendency towards self-satisfaction is among Christians, who concluded the following:

...the majority of Christians do not go to church out of a genuine desire to know God or to look for the Holy Spirit, and much less do they want to become involved in the programs of the church, since the main interest is that their personal problems be solved and, in passing, “spend a good time” with praise choruses and worship near other people.”<sup>5</sup>

To what degree has this selfish humanistic tendency been propagated among the members of our churches? We must remove selfish indifference by the drawing strength of compassionate love as Michael Green sees: “Love is the most attractive quality to the world, and constitutes the essence of Christianity. It is the most notable *trademark* of the great Lover. Without love the church is nothing.”<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Holy disciples “witness”.**

The power of witness in the primitive church went far beyond just verbal testimony. Their transformed lives and selfless service that satisfied the needs of the people in the community was a continual strategy for evangelism.<sup>7</sup> Christ’s disciples have been saved to be “witnesses” in and also outside of the doors of their homes and the churches, as Darrell L. Guder comments:

We must receive and understand the benefits of salvation as the blessing God has provided for us, so that we can be the witnesses to whom He has entrusted the continual ministry of reconciliation. The gospel is not simply “my salvation”, but the great work of God for the salvation of His entire creation, and my part in it is one of the first fruits of salvation.<sup>8</sup>

We have a debt to the present generations that find themselves tired and worn out by sin. We know that God wants to flood all the structures in the society with Christians that live and serve in holiness their fellow man. How needy this generation is for models of this “perfect love” that holiness churches believe in!

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<sup>3</sup> Randall Wittig, “Santificación-¿Por milagro o por vida que fluye?” (*Apuntes Pastorales*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, July September 2001), 6.

<sup>4</sup> In 1999 there was a Christian [Protestant] population of 760,000 persons in Costa Rica.

<sup>5</sup> “Así es la iglesia cristiana nacional”, *Periódico Alianza* (Costa Rican Evangelical Alliance, August 2002), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Green, *La iglesia local, agente de evangelización* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Nueva Creación, 1996), 114.

<sup>7</sup> These are the precise qualities of a healthy church that are mentioned by various contemporary authors that affirm that a healthy church grows naturally.

<sup>8</sup> Darrel L. Guder, *Ser testigo de Jesucristo: La misión de la Iglesia, su mensaje y sus mensajeros* (Buenos Aires: Kairós: 2000), 109.

### **3. Holy disciples do not fear to show their life and enthusiastically bring people to Christ.**

As Christ's disciples we have been called to live exposed. We cannot escape the reality that today people examine and analyze us. A "winsome" Christian in this new century is someone who lives in relationship with God in a natural and dynamic way; one that is characterized by an enthusiastic, contagious, service-oriented spirituality.

In our times it is easy to distinguish trustworthy people: upright; likeable; enterprising; diligent; charitable; joyful; compassionate...all of these virtues that characterize among others those Christians full of the Spirit. The 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian is the same as the one of the first century and should live "...as a light that illuminates and shows how to obey God... So shall others see and praise God, the Father" (Matt. 5:19).<sup>9</sup> In a world where the shadows of sin abound, the light of holiness is more and more visible!

## **THE CHALLENGE TO FORM MANY AND GOOD DISCIPLES TO MINISTER IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

Our mission to make disciples in this new century will demand much effort, creativity, planning and well defined intentions. We are in times in which we need to develop contemporary methods and strategies to win and disciple with purpose the greatest number possible of people.

### **1. A vocation for the entire church**

This task of making disciples must be shared as a vocation<sup>10</sup> by all members of the church. To form a spiritually mature and reproducing Christian demands time, effort and commitment, because as we know, spiritual growth is not automatic but intentional (Hebrews 5:12, Philippians 2:12, Romans 6:13).<sup>11</sup>

The lack of discipleship in the churches causes many problems such as new believers who do not stay in the church and Christians who never get past the infant stage spiritually. Juan Carlos Ortiz describes this last situation:

...We see that people come to the meetings, they sit down, listen and then leave, and almost never do you see them making new disciples, pastoring others. As the author of Hebrews says: "with time, you should already be teachers and still you need to be taught what the rudiments are of the Word of God." This is to say, in the mind of the apostles, those who are learning today, tomorrow should be teaching what they have learned. This is what a disciple is, one who is transformed into a propagator of what they have learned, that which they have received.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Biblia en lenguaje sencillo* (Sociedades Bíblicas Unidas, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> The word "vocation" in the Bible and in the Spanish [and English] language means "call".

<sup>11</sup> This is one of the six keys to growth in the church mentioned by Rick Warren, *Una iglesia con propósito*. [The Purpose-Driven Church] (Miami: Vida, 1998), 342.

<sup>12</sup> Juan Carlos Ortiz, *Discipulos y ministros. Las estructuras de hacer una escuela del discipulado* (Guadalajara, México: Publicación de Iglesias en Transformación, 1981), 105.

Another problem that you can observe is that some churches do not give priority to their discipleship programs. Their “activism” leaves them without time to invest in developing new disciples. It would be good to stop and reflect... in what way are our efforts contributing to reach more disciples and perfecting them for ministry? If we are going to reach more than 4.2 billion unbelievers that live in this world we must develop strategies to involve the whole church and not just “professional” pastors.

## **2. Make many disciples by pastoring each one.**

Christ values every person and so should the church. The value of the “individuality” is as great for the church as it is the common identity that we share as “people” and “family” of God. The particular needs of each new disciple deserve special attention. John Stott describes in this way the people that we need to make disciples:

Millions of people do not know who they are, nor do they have any meaning or value. Because of this, the urgent challenge for us consists of telling them who they are, and show them about their own identity: this is to say, teach without hesitation all the Biblical doctrine about being human: their depravation, yes, but also (and in this context above all) their dignity.<sup>13</sup>

Discipleship cannot be replaced by participation in mass activities, if it is to be continued to be called “Christian”, or that is a discipleship that follows the model of Jesus Christ. Personalized attention is one of the most powerful and effective weapons to reach the heart of the person, exactly where their will and individuality resides. One of the strategies that have been most effective throughout history for this purpose has been discipleship in small groups.<sup>14</sup> Possibly this has been one of the strategies in our tradition that needs to be rediscovered and utilized as other churches are doing with excellent results.

## **3. Making disciples is a process.**

Even today many remain confused about the purpose and duration of the discipleship process, considering it a baptism preparation course or for becoming a member in the church.

Another mistake is understanding “growth” as “intellectual knowledge”. We expose disciples to great dangers of conceit and pride when we impart knowledge without experiences where they put into practice what they have learned (James 2:18; Eph. 5:8; Matt. 7:16).<sup>15</sup> The primitive church had other goals for discipleship such as: provide a deep knowledge of the Scriptures; provide leaders with balanced experiences of the New Testament; equip believers for Christian ministries; help parents develop a quality family life and develop ways and structures to meet these purposes.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John Stott, *El cristiano contemporáneo*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Nueva Creación, 1995), 221.

<sup>14</sup> Christian A. Schwartz discovered in his study of more than 1000 churches in 32 countries that integrated cells are one of the characteristics of growing churches in different cultures. See *Las 8 características básicas de una iglesia saludable* (Barcelona: CLIE, 1996), 32-33. This also is one of the characteristics that Jorge Gómez observed in a study of *Crecimiento y deserción de la iglesia cristiana en Costa Rica* (San José: IINDEF, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Rick Warren, op. cit., 342.

<sup>16</sup> Gene Getz, *Refinemos la perspectiva de la iglesia* (Miami: Caribe, 1982), 304.

As Wesleyans we perceive the justified person as one that is in the process of restoration to the holy image of God as revealed in his Son, Jesus Christ. We understand this process as a relationship between the instantaneous<sup>17</sup> and the gradual<sup>18</sup> that cannot progress without adequate spiritual nourishment.

If our call as a holiness church is to make holy disciples we must ask ourselves, How transparent have we been in speaking frankly of the struggles that we will confront in the sanctification process and how we are dealing with them? Up to what point have been successful in explaining this process in contemporary language? Are we having patience with our disciples while we give them opportunities to correct conducts and attitudes that are part of their immaturity or are we branding them with a condemning legalistic attitude?

#### **4. Making holy disciples requires constant updating of strategies and methods.**

In the face of this tremendous challenge, our discipleship strategies and methods require an analysis from a pragmatic point of view. John Wesley founded his strategy of growing the church on the solidity of his discipleship program that had some characteristics that can serve as a base for this purpose:

- a. His theology or content of discipleship did not come from behind a desk unconnected with the contextual reality; but from the application of Biblical truths to the people of his time.
- b. He evaluated and got rid of those traditions that were not worthwhile.
- c. He examined and adopted some successful and innovative strategies discovered by laymen in their enthusiasm in the ministry.
- d. All of the methods and strategies adopted from other models first passed through his pragmatic analysis, and he evaluated them by the results they gave in reaching the mission.
- e. He discarded whatever method he put in danger the salvation and growth of the people.<sup>19</sup>

By His grace, today more than ever, let us be disciples that believe in holiness every day. Let us perfect ourselves and perfect others, be involved and involve every one else that we can in the restoration of lives of those God has saved and sanctified. May God make us ideal helpers to reproduce Christ in the lives of others and may this be the main principle and final objective in all we do in our churches.

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<sup>17</sup> In the theology of John Wesley the crisis of entire sanctification is instantaneous when the believer is cleansed of selfish motives, in which "purity of motives" results (1 Thes. 5:23).

<sup>18</sup> In the following process after entire sanctification these sinful habits that reside in the interior of the new disciple of Christ soon become evident under the work of the Holy Spirit, the teaching of the Word and in dealing with other people.

<sup>19</sup> Francis Gerald Ensley, *John Wesley: Evangelist Tidings* (1958), 39, cited in Hunter (1986).