

WHY “HOW WE ENTER?” MATTERS

by Wilson Geisler¹

Jesus commanded us to make disciples of all nations, to baptize those disciples, and to teach them to obey everything He commanded (Mt 28:18-20). This command is at the heart of the missionary task. Through this disciple-making process, Jesus is building His church and expanding His Kingdom. While evangelism is one of the crucial initial steps in the chain of disciple-making, it is not the only component. A major mission agency problem, which is rarely publicly discussed, is the worrisome difficulty of follow-up for discipleship after evangelism. While it is difficult to determine exact percentages (due to a lack of available public data), a common issue we are hearing regularly among evangelical organizations (including IMB) is the inability to follow up on the vast number of lost individuals globally who have heard some form of the gospel through social media, volunteer trips, direct evangelism, etc., and want to know more. This issue is often attributed to either a lack of available personnel or lack of a plan in place to effectively follow up. So why do we evangelicals have this gulf between those who’ve heard and those who are being discipled? The primary reason is that we have not always critically considered how we enter.

In the Gospels, the book of Acts, and the Epistles, we see Jesus, the Apostles, and the disciples engaged in six primary Kingdom tasks: Entry, Evangelism, Discipleship (short-, mid-, and long-term), Healthy Church Formation, Leadership Development and Multiplication, and Entrusting Kingdom Tasks to Faithful Others. Consider the following diagram:

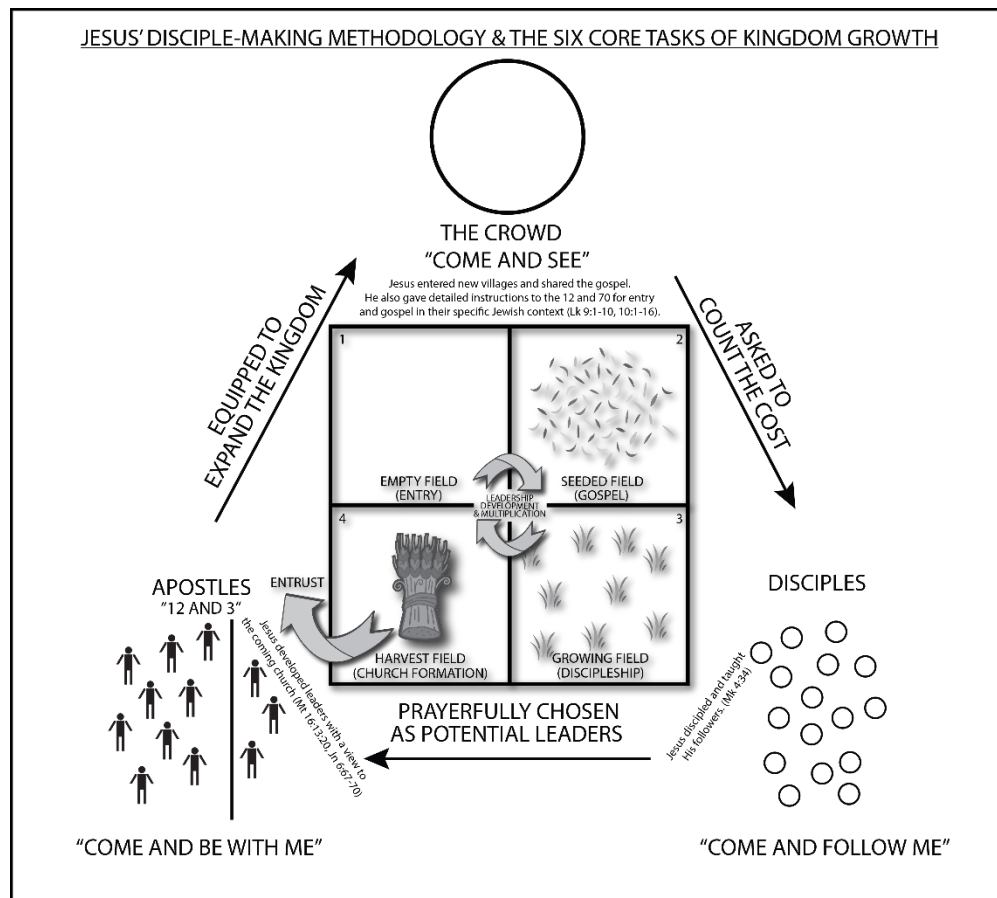


Figure 1 - From the “Architekt Leadership Development Process Manual” by Wilson Geisler & Jacob Boss

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Throughout the Gospels, Jesus modeled the six primary Kingdom tasks and even taught His disciples to do them as well. With the crowds, Jesus consistently entered new fields (Lk 4:43), which were white for harvest (Jn 4:35-38) and proclaimed the gospel of the Kingdom (Mk 1:14-16). He also developed plans for entry into villages in Judea and Samaria and instructed His disciples to implement them (Mark 6:7-13; 30, Luke 9:1-10, Luke 10:1-16). Because God desires “all men to be saved” (1 Tim 2:4) and that “none should perish” (2 Peter 3:9), the entry and gospel tasks and their associated plans are clearly at the heart of what it means to “seek and save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). After having access to and hearing the gospel, those who believed in Jesus and counted the cost became His disciples. Jesus taught them to obey and to pass on to others to obey everything He commanded (Mt 28:18-20). He explained His parables privately (Mk 4:34) stating that “blessed are the eyes that see” what the disciples saw (Lk 10:22-24). He also clearly showed that the discipleship process, beginning with receiving the good news with joy (Mark 4:14-20), requires a regular counting of the cost and the laying down of one’s claim to direct one’s life (Luke 9:23-26). Disciple-making and the discipleship task are clearly at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus. Finally, the formation and multiplication of His church and the development of leaders with a view to His church was, in many ways, one of His key goals during His three-and-half-year ministry (Mt 16:18-19). Jesus invested heavily in those who would continue His mission, going deep with a few during His earthly ministry with a vision to see it multiplied beyond Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)². His return to the Father and subsequent sending of the Holy Spirit was for the Apostles’ advantage (Jn 16:7-11), ultimately linking the purpose of glorifying the Father by the bearing of much fruit (Jn 15:8). As Jesus began His final journey to Jerusalem, He set the stage for entrusting His disciples with the mission, task, and message by declaring His upcoming death. One might even argue that one of the primary points of Jesus’ final discourse (Jn 13:31-16:33) was to entrust the mission to the Apostles, and although their hearts were filled with sorrow at the time (Jn 16:6), Jesus chose and appointed them to go and bear fruit that remains (Jn 15:16). Therefore, we clearly see that during the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, He modeled, empowered, and ultimately entrusted the six core tasks to His disciples, and especially to His Apostles, who would become His witnesses and the initial leaders of His church.

So, given this brief overview of the six core Kingdom tasks, why does the question of “How we enter?” so greatly affect the outcome of Kingdom endeavors? The simple answer is that how we begin something can drastically impact where we end up or even if we end up. Over the years at IMB, there has been much confusion over the term “Entry.” Often, our organization has confused “Access” with “Entry.” A missionary might learn language to gain access to his or her people group. A missionary might also open a business or other enterprise to provide a visa for access into a country or location. While these might be a part of successfully entering a location, they are not unto themselves an entry plan for Kingdom tasks, as one can gain access to a location and yet never actually do any Kingdom ministry. So what then is entry? As we look across the entry models found in Scripture, a common thread emerges. A biblical entry plan will attempt to successfully answer the “Where?” and the “When?” questions for each of the remaining five core missionary tasks. For example, a solid entry plan should attempt to answer: Where and when the gospel will be shared? But more than that, it should also be forward-looking: Where and when those who decide to follow Christ will be discipled? Where and when those who are being discipled will meet (i.e. where and when church will form)? And where and when leaders will be developed? Because Jesus’ goal is healthy indigenous churches composed of maturing disciples, we must carefully consider how we enter for Kingdom purposes.

² For a more detailed look at the Scripture and principles behind the use of this biblically modeled process, see Robert Coleman's *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, A.B. Bruce's *The Training of the Twelve*, and Greg Ogden's *Transforming Discipleship*.

Practical Examples

Moving on from the abstract, let's examine a few concrete examples of common entry plans to show clearly how these questions have or have not been answered. Consider this first common scenario:

Let's say that you are a gifted evangelist. You have a plan to go to a large city, rent out an arena, and deliver an impassioned gospel message. Large crowds gather and hear the gospel, and many decide to follow Jesus.

The answer to where and when the gospel is shared is obvious – in the arena. The answers, however, to where and when those who decide to follow Jesus will be disciplined and where and when they might gather for church are considerably more difficult. My understanding is that in the early days of Billy Graham's ministry, he wrestled with these same questions, as many who made decisions had no further access to discipleship. His solution for this problem (essentially answering the where and when discipleship and church attendance happen questions) was to work with local churches prior to any large evangelistic crusade to train existing believers and churches in follow-up. In addition, the push was made for church members to come to the crusade and invite their lost friends. This provided a natural conduit for discipleship as a lost person now coming to faith was seated next to his friend who was a believer trained to be a disciple-maker. In addition, the saved friend was able to then invite his newly believing friend to join him at church the following Sunday. This modified entry plan became the norm for large evangelistic crusades as an attempt to make disciples while delivering the first part of a process toward that discipleship goal.

Second, let's consider another common scenario:

Let's say that you are working as a church planter in rural India. You develop an entry plan built around showing a film about the life of Jesus. You, an outsider, along with a translator, go to a village with no known believers located approximately 50 km away. You bring a generator, a projector, and a copy of the film in the local language. A hundred villagers gather to watch the film. When the film is finished, you, with the help of your translator, share the gospel to all present. 25 of the 100 villagers decide to follow Jesus.

The answer to where and when the gospel is shared is, once again, obvious – in the village and after the film. Unfortunately, the answers to where and when those who decide to follow Jesus will be disciplined and form church are also quite difficult. Whose home does the church planter use to disciple the new believers? What if the 25 who decided to follow Christ are from different castes? They have not yet been disciplined at all and do not yet realize they are one in Christ. Will they meet all together, or will the church planter need to disciple each of the 25 individually? Will church form in the high caste or the low caste person's home? Which caste will lead the church? Can the church planter realistically return regularly to disciple them without knowing the language? Will the translator always be available to return with the church planter? Far too often, the failure to think through such questions in advance and/or the difficulty this scenario has of answering these questions has led to decisions for Christ without the necessary follow-up discipleship.

Third, let's consider a slightly modified version of the previous scenario:

Let's say that you are working as a church planter in rural India. You develop an entry plan where you go and prayerwalk a village, asking the Lord to open access to a local house that you might share the gospel with the household. You, an outsider, along with a translator, go to a

village with no known believers located approximately 50 km away. You meet a man, who invites you into his home. You, with the help of your translator, share the gospel with him and his household. They decide to follow Jesus, and you begin to come weekly to disciple this man and his household. This man, an insider, after you show him the film about Jesus, decides that everyone in the village needs to see this and makes plans to show the film about the life of Jesus. You loan this man a generator, a projector, and a copy of the film in the local language. A hundred villagers gather to watch the film. When the film is finished this man shares the gospel to all present. 25 of the 100 villagers decide to follow Jesus.

In this scenario, the gospel is shared twice. The first time by the outsider to a household, and the second time by an insider to the village. Therefore, the where and when of the first gospel share is in the house of the villager and at the point in the conversation that the Holy Spirit prompts. The where and when of the second gospel share is the same as the previous scenario – in the village and after the film. The answers, however, to the where and when discipleship and church formation happen questions are quite different. In this scenario, discipleship of both the family and any subsequent villagers can happen in the home of the first believing family. This means that church can also happen in this same home. Both scenarios included the showing of a film about the life of Jesus, but by simply changing when the film is shown (not on the first village visit by the outsider but later by the insider) the probability of discipling these new believers and forming a local church has increased tremendously. In addition, the church planter can focus on discipling the initial believers and a few others with the understanding that as they mature in Christ, the expectation will be for them to share with and disciple others. This scenario, then, also has a measure of leadership development and an entrusting the work to others' component built in.

Fourth, let's consider another common urban scenario:

A mission agency plans a large summer outreach for Northern Africa and Middle Eastern peoples in 3 major cities in Europe where PGs from NAME countries vacation. Over 6 weeks, trained volunteers and missionaries distribute tracts, bibles, and share the gospel to over 400 people. 2 decide to follow Christ and over 150 want to know more.

In this scenario, the gospel is shared in the heart of the cities and over the 6 weeks. Like some of the other scenarios, where and when discipleship or even gospel follow-up occurs is considerably more difficult. Those who heard were on vacation and even though their responses and contact information were collected by the volunteers, there is usually no relational connection for follow-up with these people back in their countries of origin. In addition, in the case of the two who decided to follow Christ, there is often no connection to other potential believers back in their countries of origin and, therefore, a minimal possibility of finding a church to attend or someone to disciple them in their new faith. Often even if those who heard and wanted to know more were from one of these three European cities, follow-up is still difficult, as hand-off for continued conversation or discipleship from short-term volunteers to local missionaries has been notoriously tricky.

Some missionaries have tried to tackle this problem by building out a multi-agency underground team of disciple-makers back in the origin countries of those who may have heard. An app was developed to assist with hand off and contact information to help connect seeker or new follower with disciple-maker. In many Muslim contexts however, trust and hand off from those who initially shared to those who could continue to share locally has been difficult.

Finally, let's look at an urban entry strategy that involves the use of business professionals:

A missionary team in a large urban center is a mixture of career missionaries and business professionals. The professionals came to the city specifically to join the church planting team. The business professionals begin to pray for and share the gospel at their places of employment. In the first few months of sharing at the workplace, two co-workers decide to follow Christ. In one case, the co-worker lives on the other side of the city which is over an hour away by metro. In the other case, the co-worker is single and lives in a shared apartment with 5 strangers from different countries. The business professionals try to disciple their co-workers weekly during the lunch hour or after hours.

In this scenario, the where and when of the gospel is straightforward (at least initially). The gospel sharing is taking place at work, and whenever the Holy Spirit opens a door for spiritual conversation. Often, at least with many of the professionals working with missionary teams, they will quickly run through their gospel sharing opportunities with co-workers within 6 months and then wonder how to enter other fields for sharing. Assuming however that's not an issue, the answer to the where and when of discipleship and church formation can still be problematic. Getting together after hours for discipleship or to begin to meet as a church can be difficult (especially in large urban centers where co-workers work long hours and can live long travel time distances from one another). Also, in the case of the young single who came to faith but lived with 5 strangers in a shared apartment, he couldn't meet in his home for either discipleship or to start a church there as the common space was to remain quiet at all hours, since some of those in the apartment slept days and worked nights. In addition, the 6 in the apartment each spoke a different mother-tongue language and had to communicate at a basic level in English. The reality is that mission agencies have not yet seen a good working model of discipleship and church formation among least reached, non-English-speaking mother-tongue peoples in urban centers. Many missionaries want to bring them to church, which is often a contextualized Western (or local majority) church that doesn't resonate to them in heart language, or to disciple them themselves (which also usually doesn't result in church). How can we get groups or families evangelized who will share with their own people groups and who will initially open their homes in urban centers to start churches? In urban centers, we've got to be thinking strategically about the what's next – about the where and the when of discipleship and church formation. When thinking about entry in the urban context, saturating urban areas with the gospel will take more than just a few folks doing evangelism. It will take multiplied laborers who are developing as disciples, sharing in mother tongues, and starting groups that lead to healthy churches in those mother tongues.

Why This Matters?

Jesus has not given us the option to stop at evangelism. The command is to make disciples of all nations and to teach them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. Ideally, this happens most healthily when surrounded by other disciples in the context of indigenous maturing churches. In order to see the vision of a multitude of disciples knowing and worshiping our Lord Jesus Christ, mission agencies and church planters must critically evaluate the impact of singular component strategies against the entirety of the missionary task. To continue to fail to examine the interwoven nature of the six core missionary tasks will only serve to widen the gap between those who want to know more about Christ and those being discipled, especially in today's world of instant digital communication. Holistic plans, carefully crafted to move from gospel to disciple to healthy autonomous churches with strong leadership, must be considered for the sake of the lost and the sake of the Kingdom. May His church seek His will, His Word, and His wisdom as we plan to make disciples of all nations! To Him alone be all glory! - WSG