

Spiritual Relationships

-“Circles of Ministry” in the Church

In our relationships and in our ministry we always look to Scripture for guidance and direction. This is particularly helpful when we encounter principles that seem to be in “tension” with each other. One example of this tension is in our call as shepherds and leaders in the Church. On one hand we see clearly a scriptural mandate to touch every person with the good news of reconciliation to God through the sacrifice of Jesus. On the other hand we see a drastic need for individual, specific, intimate relationships in which we pour our lives into others, sharing with them the spiritual riches that God has poured into us. The first mandate is clearly spoken in Jesus’ “Great Commission” of Matthew 28:19 *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...”* and we see the second demonstrated in Paul’s relationship with Timothy, as he exhorts him *“And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also...”* (2 Timothy 2:2)

It is interesting that even in passages such as the Great Commission which take an “all nations” perspective, a more narrow focus is clear as well- we are not merely to tell the good news, or to see people converted, rather we are to “make disciples.” Salvation is only the first step in making a disciple; someone who is not only saved but who is growing in relationship with Christ, in spiritual power, in ministry on behalf of the Kingdom, and in the practice of worshipping Him in Spirit and in truth! Conversely, the thrust of the individual transfer of spiritual riches in 2 Timothy is the growth and the spread of the gospel- from one disciple to another, from another disciple to many disciples; the student becoming the teacher of those *“who will be able to teach others also.”* How can we resolve these two ideals?

In looking at the life and ministry of Jesus, a pattern of “circles” becomes evident. He ministered to “the multitudes” –this is the **first** and largest **circle**. He taught them, (Matthew 5-7), healed them (Matthew 15:30), and fed them (Matthew 15:32-38), but at times He also sent them away (Matthew 14:22, 15:39).

When Jesus sent away the multitudes, He often did so to spend time with His disciples. Though at times there may have been a larger group following Him from place to place, “the twelve” were individually chosen by Jesus; in fact John 6:60-70 says that many who were disciples stopped following Jesus after a “difficult” teaching and the twelve remained, though they too might have had second thoughts. With these men Jesus traveled and shared His life and ministry. They were present as He taught multitudes, but they remained when He sent the multitudes away, so He could instruct them more clearly and intensively, as in Mark 4:10-12 . The disciples are the **second circle**.

Even as He taught the twelve and ministered with them, Jesus sent out disciples “two by two” (Luke 10:1). These groups were **third circles**, privileged to minister in His name. He also chose Peter, James and John as a “**third circle**” from within the twelve to be with Him for particular occasions: Mark 9:2-13 records Jesus’ transfiguration, and verse 2 says *“Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves...”* This “three” had the bewildering privilege of seeing Jesus’ glory revealed and hearing the voice of the Father speak about Him. Notably, Peter and John accompanied Jesus into the court of the high priest on the night that He was betrayed; though he denied the Lord, Peter was there. Each of these men later played very significant roles in the early church.

There is still a **fourth “circle”** – the apostle John refers to himself several times in his gospel as “the disciple who Jesus loved.” At the Last Supper it was John who was sitting very close to

Jesus- so close that he could lean back and ask Jesus the identity of His betrayer... and Jesus answered, though the other disciples remained confused (John 13:21-30).

APPLICATION

What do these “circles” of ministry mean to us? As Christians and particularly as leaders in the church, we are called to minister Jesus- the Living Word- to everyone. We do this on Sunday mornings in Celebration services and at our Men’s and Women’s nights. We also do this by letting Christ live through us, ministering under the direction of the Holy Spirit in our everyday lives. The people who we minister to in this way are the “multitudes” –the **first circle**. While we speak and live the truth openly, and even though this ministry can be radically life-changing for those who hear, most of those who hear have only a passing acquaintance with us, if we know them at all.

When we invite people into a personal relationship with us and with others in a defined group such as a Home Fellowship Group, we form a **second circle**. We can think of this type of a group as a “twelve.” This group ministers together, outwardly serving others and inwardly to each other, helping and encouraging one another, dozen by dozen going about the work of the Kingdom and seeing it grow!

Often people within our “twelves” will develop a hunger for more intensive spiritual relationships, choosing each other to gather in smaller “discipling” groups, or **third circles** of two or three people. These groups live very transparently with each other and become spiritually intimate, sharing their lives as “open books” with each other. In this context we hope to “see Jesus transfigured” and to hear the Spirit speak about Him, through our brothers and sisters, in ways that even a group of “twelve” could not appreciate or accommodate. In these circles we should be attentive for others who are gifted and called to be raised up as leaders, passing on the faith as 2 Timothy 2:2 instructs us.

The most intimate **fourth circle** is an individual one- containing just one disciple and his Lord Jesus. It is the intent of ministry in each of the other three circles that every Christian comes to know theologically, practically, and mystically that individually they are “the disciple who Jesus loves.” He has invited each of us into this kind of relationship! Personal, unique, meaningful praise and worship, from our heart to His, and His particular, personal empowerment of us for His service springs from this kind of intimate communion with our Lord!