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AN ANALYSIS OF THE DISCIPLESHIP STRATEGY
OF ROBERT EMERSON COLEMAN

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE DISCIPLESHIP STRATEGY
OF ROBERT EMERSON COLEMAN

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To Katherine,
with all my love,
and to
Lyla, Fisher, and Ransom,
our beloved children

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PREFACE

The task of completing a dissertation would not have been possible without the help and support of many others. Dean Charles E. Lawless, Jr., my supervising professor, challenged me to become a better student and writer as I worked through the dissertation process. Professors Timothy Beougher and Gregory Wills also provided insight that proved very helpful in completing this work.

This work could not have been accomplished without the input and assistance of Robert Coleman. He made himself available to me for hours of interviews, both in his home and over the telephone. I am indebted to Coleman for his support in completing this project.

Many men whom Coleman discipled provided tremendous insight into his discipleship process. Through their personal interviews, I was able to learn much about discipleship. I thank them for their time and input into this dissertation.

I am especially indebted to my parents, Tommy and Karen Green, for their support during my studies. They not only provided financial support, but they also challenged me to work hard and finish my studies. I am thankful to God for godly parents.

I am grateful to God for my wife, Katherine, who followed me to seminary and was a constant encouragement to me as I pursued this degree. She has stood by me as a wonderful helpmate through the entire process. The challenges of post-graduate studies have been great, but her love has been unwavering.

Finally, I am thankful to God for the work that He has done in my life.
Through this project He has taught me perseverance, endurance, and patience. Thank
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Discipleship is a biblical mandate established by the teaching and the example of Jesus Christ. Christ set the priority of discipleship when he gave the Great Commission to His disciples before his ascension into heaven.¹ The record of this instruction in all four of the Gospels and the book of Acts, and the disciples' obedience to the command, reveals its priority in the minds of the first-century church. Jesus sent His disciples into the world with the charge of making more disciples. The monumental task of making disciples of the whole earth would have been impossible if Jesus had not modeled disciple-making in His ministry and had He not promised the power of the Holy Spirit to be with the disciples (Acts 1:8).

Jesus' process of training would be the template for the apostles as they made disciples of others. The apostles immediately set about fulfilling the Great Commission upon receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). Their mission was inaugurated at Pentecost with the founding of the church in Jerusalem, but it soon extended into Samaria and to the north (Acts 8-11). The church in Antioch sent Paul and his ministry partners

¹The Great Commission is given in Matt 28:18-20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:46-49, John 20:21, and Acts 1:8. I am aware that some scholars do not consider this portion of the Gospel of Mark to be original; however, the content of the Great Commission in Mark is consistent with the command given in the other undisputed accounts. For a discussion of the ending to the Gospel of Mark, see R. Alan Cole, *Mark*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 334-40.

as missionaries, who continued the advance of the gospel into the ends of the earth (Acts 13-21).

From the early ministry of the church in Jerusalem unto the present day, churches have worked to complete the Great Commission given by Jesus Christ. Churches have endeavored to make disciples in various ways. The early church used catechisms to teach her members.² Other church leaders and groups, such as John Wesley³ or the Navigators,⁴ have used rigorous programs. Some have placed an emphasis upon small groups, for example the Moravians.⁵ Still others have approached discipleship with a class structure, like the one presented by Rick Warren.⁶ Regardless of a church's chosen method of discipleship, a firm understanding of what it means to "make disciples" is paramount to accomplishing the mandate.

Definition of "Making Disciples"

In the Great Commission account in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus commanded the apostles to "make disciples." The Greek verb, μαθητεύσατε, can be literally

²For an example, see Augustine of Hippo, *The Augustine Catechism: The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999).

³John Wesley, "Rules of the Band Societies," in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 8:273. This list of rules for the society provides an example of the structure of the Methodist discipleship program.

⁴"Intentional Discipleship Church (IDC) Process" [on-line]; accessed 28 April 2009; available from <http://www.navigators.org/us/ministries/cdm/idc/>; Internet.

⁵Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 69. According to Noll, "Zinzendorf was organizing the Moravians into small groups (or bands) for their mutual spiritual encouragement."

⁶Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 144-45. Saddleback Church uses four levels of classes for discipling their members. This structure is known as "The Life Development Process" and is diagrammed in the shape of a baseball diamond.

translated “to cause one to be a pupil.”⁷ The command to make disciples is two-fold. The first aspect of making disciples is for a Christian to evangelize an unbeliever so that the person places his faith in Jesus Christ to save him. This notion is present in Christ’s command for His disciples to follow Him (Mark 2:14). As the disciples committed to follow Jesus, they were placing themselves under His authority, trusting in Him, and placing their faith in Christ to save them. Peter explicitly expressed his faith when he identified Jesus as their long-anticipated Messiah. He said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matt 16:16).⁸

The disciples modeled the evangelistic component of “making disciples” as they led the New Testament church. The Bible records many instances of the disciples evangelizing unbelievers. One such instance followed Peter’s sermon at Pentecost when the crowd asked what they should do in response to hearing the gospel. Peter answered, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). The disciples understood that the first part of their task of making disciples was to evangelize the lost.

The second part of making disciples is to teach the follower to become like Christ. This aspect of making disciples is more than teaching doctrine to which a person gives mental assent. Chuck Lawless asserts that a disciple is more than purely a learner.

⁷Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “Μαθητεω.”

⁸All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible. Peter’s decision to follow Christ as His disciple constitutes him placing his faith in Jesus. However, Peter’s confession of Christ as the Son of God was a public affirmation of that faith.

He writes, “Biblical discipleship is a *lifestyle* best described in Jesus’ words: ‘A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, *will be like his teacher.*’”⁹ A disciple is a committed follower who seeks to model his life after his teacher. The committed followers of Jesus not only listened to the teaching of Christ, but they also devoted themselves to Him as their lives were transformed by the Holy Spirit to become like Him in word and in deed.

The disciples also practiced this second arm of “making disciples.” Following the conversion of three thousand people at Pentecost, the disciples engaged the new converts by teaching them: “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Thus, making disciples is a two-step process. It includes evangelizing people so that they express faith in Jesus Christ and teaching them to become like Christ.¹⁰

These two parts of making disciples are articulated in the phrases immediately following the command to make disciples in the Great Commission in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I

⁹Chuck Lawless, *Discipled Warriors* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 45, emphasis original.

¹⁰Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955), 14-15. Donald McGavran, father of the Church Growth Movement, used a different definition for “discipling” in his work, *The Bridges of God*. He defines discipling as “the removal of distracting divisive sinful gods and spirits and ideas from the corporate life of the people and putting Christ at the centre on the Throne, this we call discipling. Discipling is the essential first stage. Much else must, however, follow.” McGavran adds, “The second stage is that of Perfecting the People. This is a bringing about of an ethical change in the disciplined group, an increasing achievement of a thoroughly Christian way of life for the community as a whole, and the conversion of the individuals making up each generation as they come to the age of decision.” McGavran is describing a two-step process for making disciples; however, he uses the designations “discipling” and “perfecting” to mean what I am terming “evangelizing” and “discipling,” respectively.

commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20). The phrase concerning baptism highlights the evangelistic component, whereas the phrase concerning teaching points out the discipleship component. Baptism is the symbol of new birth signaling the work of salvation in an individual’s life. Teaching the commands of Christ involves training converts to become like their Savior. Both evangelism and discipleship are bound up in the command to make disciples.

The command to make disciples is unambiguous in Scripture. The example of making disciples is apparent in the ministries of both Jesus and His apostles. The question that must be answered, then, is how should the church today make disciples? To ask the question in another way, how should the Great Commission be accomplished? What principles should guide the church as it strives to make disciples? This dissertation seeks to answer these questions in the context of examining the overall discipleship strategy of Robert Coleman. Coleman’s strategy is primarily articulated in the nine principles for discipleship found in his work, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, although this work does not wholly comprise his strategy.¹¹ This dissertation will approach Coleman’s discipleship strategy through an historical analysis of influences upon his strategy, a biblical analysis of the principles that inform his strategy, and a practical analysis of the outworking of his strategy in his own life.

¹¹Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2008). *The Master Plan of Evangelism* lists only eight principles; however, Coleman includes a ninth principle in his most recent lectures: incarnation. This principle will be discussed in greater detail in chap. 5. Coleman’s other works will also be used in chap. 5 to show how he has consistently communicated his discipleship strategy.

Statement of the Problem

The subject of discipleship first garnered my attention as a seminary student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS). Through evangelism courses there, I studied how to evangelize, or share the gospel with the lost. As I further considered the task of evangelism, I arrived at the logical next question: What must I do with those who have accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior? How are they to be disciplined?

This question was further emblazoned in my thinking during a chapel service at the seminary where Charles S. Kelley, president of NOBTS, cited a statistic that he shared numerous times during my tenure at the seminary: 70 percent of Southern Baptist churches are either plateaued or declining.¹² This statistic has never left me since I heard it; I was arrested by it. I could not believe that seven out of every ten Southern Baptist churches were not growing.

How could this be, I wondered, since the denomination reports thousands of baptisms each year?¹³ If the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention baptize new believers each year, should they not be growing instead of declining? As I pondered the question of why these churches were plateaued, I realized that one answer was a lack of

¹²The same statistic is shared in the following article: Michael McCormack, “Study Updates Stats on Health of Southern Baptist Churches” [on-line]; accessed 26 February 2009; available from <http://www.bpnews.asp?ID=19542>; Internet.

¹³Bob Allen, “SBC Reports Statistical Decline” [on-line]; accessed 14 January 2012; available from <http://www.abpnews.com/content/view/6478/53/>; Internet. According to the 2010 SBC Annual Church Profile, the SBC reported “5 percent fewer baptisms in 2010 than in 2009 – 332,321 compared to 349,737. Total membership was counted at 16,136,044, a drop of 0.15 percent and the fourth straight year of membership losses.”

discipleship. If Southern Baptist churches disciplined their new members more effectively, their retention rate should be much higher.¹⁴

Many churches have created a dichotomy between evangelism and discipleship. They have separated evangelism from discipleship, thus splintering the command to “make disciples,” which holds both components together under that singular purpose. Southern Baptist churches have not evangelized or disciplined well in recent years, and the growth rate of our churches reflects this fact. What is absent is obedience to the command to make disciples, which again includes both evangelism and discipleship. While the area of evangelism needs attention as well, this dissertation focuses on the need of discipleship. Donald McGavran emphasized the point:

Church growth follows where the lost are not merely found but restored to normal life in the fold—though it may be a life they have never consciously known. Faithfulness in folding and feeding—which unfortunately has come to be called such a dry, superficial term as “follow-up”—is essential to lasting church expansion. When existing Christians, marching obediently under the Lord’s command and filled with his compassion, fold in the wanderers and feed the flock, then churches multiply; but when they indolently permit men and women who have made costly decisions for Christ to drift back into the world, then indeed churches do not grow. Faithfulness in proclamation and finding is not enough. There must be faithful aftercare.¹⁵

The churches of the Southern Baptist Convention would not deny the need to disciple their members—most would whole-heartedly endorse the command—but they have practically done so by neglecting discipleship. Their words ring hollow when their actions belie them. As Kelley concluded in a chapel address, during the times of greatest

¹⁴Churches lose some members through transfer of membership letter, death, or by their falling away, but these alone would not account for plateau or decline in 70 percent of SBC churches.

¹⁵Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 6.

evangelistic growth in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention, “Aggressive evangelism was matched by aggressive discipleship. We were ‘disciple-istic’. . . . By that I mean an evangelistic discipleship that is always seeking to incorporate both evangelism and discipleship at the same time in the life of a church.”¹⁶ The “disciple-istic” aspect of Southern Baptist evangelism lost its balance and neglected discipleship. Conversion of the lost has been the chief aim, and too often new believers have been left to work out discipleship on their own. Kelley adds,

When our baptismal numbers started to weaken we intensified our focus on harvest strategies and methods. We should have paid more attention to our discipleship process. The defining characteristic of Southern Baptists at our best was being ‘disciple-istic’: having a passionate, evangelistic discipleship. We refused to let go of one in order to pursue the other.¹⁷

It should be noted that this phenomenon is not isolated to Southern Baptists. Willow Creek Community Church announced in 2007 that it too had not been discipling its members well after they had joined the church. In the foreword to *Reveal*, a book outlining their discoveries, Bill Hybels wrote,

The local church is the hope of the world. For a number of years now, I have shared this message whenever I’ve had the opportunity to serve pastors of local churches across the nation and around the world. It’s a message I believe with all my heart. So you can imagine my reaction when three people whose counsel I value told me that the local church I’ve been the pastor of for more than three decades was not doing as well as we thought when it came to spiritual growth. As if that wasn’t bad enough, they said this wasn’t just their opinion. It was based on scientific research.¹⁸

¹⁶Charles S. Kelley, “Are Southern Baptists the New Methodists?” [on-line]; accessed 12 March 2009; available from <http://www.nobts.edu/mp3s/2009/March/3.mp3>; Internet.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Bill Hybels, foreword to Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 3.

Willow Creek, along with thousands of other churches across the United States and around the world who are a part of the Willow Creek Association, began to seek answers for the question that I too had been deliberating: “How should the church disciple its members?”

I examined this question throughout my doctoral studies in the Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I studied discipleship as I wrote a paper on John Wesley’s discipleship strategy for the seminar “Christianity in Modern Britain” with David Puckett, and also as I wrote on the evangelism methods of Francis Asbury for the course “Methods and Influence: American Evangelists” with Timothy Beougher. While writing these papers, I was introduced to the writing of Robert Coleman, a Methodist minister, professor, and author.

The first title by Coleman that I read was *Nothing to Do but to Save Souls*, an account of Wesleyan evangelism.¹⁹ I then read his most popular work, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. In this book, I found Coleman’s analysis of how Jesus taught His disciples. Coleman argues that the principles drawn from the ministry of Christ are radically different than what most churches called discipleship when the book was written in 1963, and I argue that they are just as foreign to what churches call discipleship presently. He writes, “When [Christ’s] plan is reflected on, the basic philosophy is so different from that of the modern church that its implications are nothing less than revolutionary.”²⁰

¹⁹Robert Coleman, *Nothing to Do but to Save Souls* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1990).

²⁰Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 18.

Most Southern Baptist churches today attempt to disciple their members through some type of small group, whether a Sunday School class or some other small group setting.²¹ These classes are helpful as a part of the discipleship process and can be effective for teaching believers, but they seldom allow for the type of one-to-one mentoring that Coleman highlights in the ministry of Christ and advocates to his readers. The more in-depth, one-to-one mentoring aspect of discipleship is what is radically different than what most churches attempt in their discipleship programs. Coleman argues that this type of discipleship is necessary if the church is to be faithful to the example of Christ. I was already convinced that the church needed a revolutionary shift in thinking about discipleship, and I wondered whether Coleman's methodology, which he designates "the Master's plan," held the answer.

Coleman has been an important figure in the field of evangelism over the past half-century. He pastored Methodist congregations for six years and has taught at seminaries since 1955.²² Coleman was the first Professor of Evangelism for the United Methodist Church when he began teaching at Asbury Seminary in 1955.²³ He has taught at three seminaries, written twenty-four books and dozens of articles, and preached all over the world. He has worked extensively with the Billy Graham Evangelistic

²¹Allen, "SBC Reports Statistical Decline" [on-line]; accessed 14 January 2012; available from <http://www.abpnews.com/content/view/6478/53/>; Internet. "The 2010 Annual Church Profile showed dips in baptisms, total church membership, worship attendance and participation in Sunday school and other Christian education programs." This article decries the decline in attendance of Sunday School and discipleship programs, but the fact that the Southern Baptist Convention uses these criteria to measure discipleship suggests that these programs are viewed as the primary areas of discipleship in most Southern Baptist churches.

²²Robert Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

²³Ibid.

Association and is a founding member of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization.²⁴ Lyle Dorsett states, “When historians of Christianity sort out the most effective evangelists of the second half of the twentieth century, Robert E. Coleman will be on the short list. He has preached the Gospel in scores of nations, but his primary ministry has been teaching church leaders to become reproducing evangelists. Some of the world’s most influential evangelists and pastors today have been his students.”²⁵

Coleman has had a prolific writing career, penning twenty-four books and dozens of articles, but he is best known for his first book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Coleman is humble about his success, asserting that he never expected anyone to read the book except for his students for whom the manuscript was prepared.²⁶ Many more people have been impacted by the writing of Robert Coleman, however. Pastors of growing churches commend the book as a valuable tool in their own ministries.²⁷ In 2006, *Christianity Today* listed this work among the top fifty books that have shaped evangelicals as well.²⁸ His strategy has been well-received, as *The Master Plan of Evangelism* still enjoys a wide audience forty-six years after its initial

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Lyle Dorsett, foreword to *The Mind of the Master* by Robert Coleman (Wilmore, KY: Christian Outreach, 2002), 5.

²⁶Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

²⁷Thom Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 149. *The Master Plan of Evangelism* is included on the list of “Most Influential Books in Ministry Rated by Leaders of Unchurched-Reaching Churches.”

²⁸“The Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals” [on-line]; accessed 04 March 2010; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/october/23.51.html?start=1>; Internet.

publication, selling over three million copies in that time, and having been translated into over one hundred languages.²⁹

Thesis

Throughout the years, the church has offered many plans and programs of discipleship to use in training its members. Coleman's discipleship strategy deserves study because Coleman asserts that it is a biblical model for discipleship.³⁰ Concerning *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, he writes, "The plan of this study has been to trace the steps of Christ as portrayed in the Gospels without undue recourse to secondary materials."³¹ Coleman delves deeply into the Gospels to study the method of Jesus Christ as He called His disciples, taught them, trained them, and then authorized them to go out and make disciples just as He did. An evaluation of the principles outlined in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* will reveal that Coleman's strategy is rooted in Scripture, and his interpretation of the Gospels is orthodox and faithful.

Besides faithfulness to Christ's example, the discipleship methodology of Robert Coleman is worthy of review because he concludes it has been effective in his own ministry. In *The Master Plan of Evangelism* Coleman offers principles of Christ's ministry that must be understood and applied in one's own ministry setting rather than mass-produced as a program. He writes, "[This study] is an effort to see controlling

²⁹Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, front cover.

³⁰Of course, all proposed discipleship strategies deserve study to determine their biblical faithfulness and practical applicability. The point here is that Coleman claims that *The Master Plan of Evangelism* is, in fact, biblical; thus, one must evaluate that claim.

³¹*Ibid.*, 16.

principles governing the movements of the Master in the hope that our own labors might be conformed to a similar pattern.”³² Coleman adds, “The Master gives us an outline to follow, but he expects us to work out the details according to local circumstances and traditions.”³³

A local church, though, will have to work out the details of how to utilize Coleman’s strategy since most of Coleman’s discipling has been performed outside of the context of the local church. The conclusion of this dissertation will outline the positive contributions of Coleman’s strategy to discipleship in the local church along with challenges to its implementation.

If the principles outlined by Coleman are biblical, true discipleship should occur as the principles are contextualized. If the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* are biblical, then they will also be timeless, and therefore relevant. Coleman says as much concerning the principles in the book: “To regard them as true means that they must be relevant.”³⁴ This means that the methodology presented by Coleman could be applied in any ministry context around the world and found to be effective. If the principles outlined in this book are the guiding principles of Jesus Christ in making disciples, churches should use them to guide their discipleship ministry as well.

This dissertation examines the ministry and writings of Robert Coleman and analyzes his strategy for disciple-making, especially focusing on *The Master Plan of*

³²Ibid., 14.

³³Ibid., 100.

³⁴Ibid.

Evangelism, and assesses its usefulness for ministry based on its biblical fidelity and implementation in Coleman's own ministry. The lack of effective discipleship in churches has been identified; the local church needs an effectual, biblical strategy for making disciples. This dissertation uncovers whether Robert Coleman's discipleship strategy fills that need. Coleman's methodology is being used in various contexts and cultures around the world, and Coleman's own ministry of teaching, pastoring, and writing has produced numerous disciples throughout his lifetime. The biblical, yet simple and effective, principles that Robert Coleman identifies will be recommended for use in the discipleship ministries of the church.

Limitations

One obstacle to the research of this dissertation is that little has been written about Coleman. No biographies have been written about the life of Coleman, and he has not penned an autobiography. No dissertations or theses have been written about Robert Coleman, either. The lack of existing literature on Coleman requires interviewing Coleman to glean pertinent information. When asked, Coleman indicated that he was unaware of any dissertations being written about him at the time of this writing.³⁵

With a lack of literature about Coleman, I was offered a wide area for original research for this dissertation as there were no other studies that touch on any aspect of this study. The deficiency in works pertaining to Coleman leaves much to be done in documenting the life and work of Robert Coleman. Coleman has written twenty-four

³⁵Robert Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

books and dozens of articles which offer his opinions and outline his methodology of discipleship. In addition, he was willing to meet with me and answer questions. Having the opportunity to interview Robert Coleman was invaluable to this study.

One delimitation to this dissertation must also be noted. This work explores the theology of Robert Coleman as it pertains to his discipleship methodology, but it does not present a comprehensive analysis of his theology. Although a fuller treatment of Coleman's theology would be a valuable study, the constraints of this work must leave that task to another researcher.³⁶

Methodology

The following is an analysis of the available materials used in completing this study of Robert Coleman. Although there is not a wealth of literature written about Coleman, he has authored twenty-four books. The James P. Boyce Centennial Library of Southern Seminary contains most of Coleman's works, and I purchased others for my personal library. Through interlibrary loan, I was able to obtain Coleman's writings which were not located in the seminary's library or in my own.

I also met Coleman and interviewed him for several hours and listened to his lectures in a Doctor of Ministry class at Southern Seminary. Coleman now resides in Wilmore, Kentucky, and I was able to meet with him as needed to complete this dissertation. Interviews with Coleman proved to be the most helpful resource for this dissertation, and it could not have been completed without his cooperation.

³⁶Coleman has recently written a full treatment of his theology. See Robert Coleman, *The Heart of the Gospel: The Theology behind The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

A third source of information for this study was personal correspondence and interviews with men that Coleman has disciplined. Much time was required as I sent and received letters via the U.S. Postal Service and email, as well as set up times for personal interviews. I believe that the knowledge gained concerning Coleman's discipleship practices through these contacts, however, revealed the effectiveness of his personal discipleship ministry.

Chapter Summaries

This first chapter introduces the call for discipleship from the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to His disciples. Chapter 2 presents a biography of Robert Emerson Coleman. His conversion and education are included, paying particular attention to how Coleman was disciplined and to influences upon his thinking on discipleship. This chapter includes an account of Coleman's ministry as a pastor, along with his extensive ministry as a professor and as an author. It also covers his work with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and his current ministry.

An historical analysis of Coleman's strategy encompasses the contents of Chapter 3. The chapter also notes the state of the evangelical church and the Methodist church. Chapter 4 offers a practical analysis of the discipleship practice of Robert Coleman. Chapter 5 is a biblical analysis of Coleman's discipleship strategy. Each of the eight principles presented in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* is analyzed according to its faithfulness to Scripture. The chapter also includes a discussion of a ninth principle that Coleman now includes in his lectures on the book: incarnation. The conclusion to this

dissertation examines the applicability of Coleman's strategy for North American churches.

Conclusion

The command to make disciples is imperative for Christians to follow. The North American church has struggled in this endeavor. Coleman's ministry of discipleship and his work in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* offer a useful strategy that churches might utilize in developing an effective strategy for disciple-making.

CHAPTER 2
A BIOGRAPHY OF ROBERT EMERSON COLEMAN
AND BACKGROUND OF *THE MASTER PLAN*
OF EVANGELISM

Capturing the life of an individual in a few pages is a difficult charge. When a person has been as impactful within twentieth century evangelicalism as Coleman has, much could be written. Not only has Coleman personally disciplined men who have become professors, pastors, and evangelists, but he has also authored books that are regarded as the most influential Christian books for ministry.¹ Recognizing the enormity of the task of biography, this chapter will outline Coleman's life based on personal interviews with him.

No published works exist concerning the life of Robert Emerson Coleman. Thus, it is important to set down a lasting record of the life of a man of his stature and influence in the evangelical world.² However, the content of this chapter will be limited to information that is germane to his Christian development and the development of his strategy for discipleship.

¹For a select list of men disciplined by Robert Coleman, see Appendix 1. Coleman's book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, was named one of the most influential books among evangelicals. See "The Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals" [on-line]; accessed 04 March 2010; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/october/23.51.html?start=1>; Internet.

²The Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College contains the archives of Robert Coleman, including his personal papers, and fourteen hours of interviews of his oral history on CD.

This chapter will examine the life of Coleman, including his conversion and call to ministry, his education, and his ministry, noting his personal discipleship and influences upon his thinking concerning discipleship. Coleman says, “If we look at our experience and can learn from our failures, there is no end to what you can do.”³ This statement rings true in the life of Robert Coleman, as the lack of follow-up after his conversion impacted his ministry and spurred him to become a better discipler of others.

Biography of Robert Coleman

Robert Emerson Coleman was born April 4, 1928 in Dallas, Texas, to James Henry Coleman and Helen Hood Coleman. Coleman was raised by loving parents who brought him to the Methodist church as a child. He sat with his mother each Sunday because his father did not attend until after Coleman returned from college. Coleman speaks with great affection for his family, and he says that they set before him an appreciation for God, though he never understood the gospel.⁴

According to Coleman, the Methodist church that he grew up attending did not have much vitality. He recalls one Sunday School teacher who left a deep spiritual impression on him as a boy, but he received no further intentional discipling from his local church. He added, “I am not blaming the church, for I was interested in other things, but somehow it did not get to me that salvation comes by faith alone in Jesus Christ.”⁵

³Robert Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

The early part of Robert Coleman’s life could be described as good and moral. He attended church, and he was not a trouble for his schoolteachers. Coleman says, “I never rebelled against the church or my parents growing up. And I never rebelled against the Bible. I just always assumed the Bible was true. When I learned later that there were people who didn’t believe Jesus was the Son of God who would preach, I was flabbergasted.”⁶

Coleman was exposed to church and would have even considered himself to be a Christian, but he did not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. He was living a lifestyle of cultural Christianity. Coleman’s upbringing would lay a foundation upon which he would make a personal decision to follow Christ as a university student.

His Conversion and Call to Ministry

As a student at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, Coleman was asked by a football teammate what he intended to do once he finished school. Coleman remembers, “I had never been asked that question before and had never really thought too much about it. I said, ‘I don’t know. . . . I might be a lawyer, or I might be a preacher.’”⁷ This offhand remark proved to be prophetic, but first God would save Robert Coleman’s soul.

Following this encounter, word circulated that Coleman was a preacher, and he was invited to preach at a city-wide youth revival in Temple, Texas. Coleman quips that

⁶Ibid.

⁷Robert Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

the organizers had difficulty finding a speaker who was not a Baptist, so he was the lone Methodist representative in a “city-wide” revival.⁸

Coleman’s sermon preparation revealed his lack of training at that point in his life. His early sermons were crafted by his starting with a text of Scripture and perusing a *Reader’s Digest* for an illustration or story. Coleman’s first sermon was from Matthew 6:33.⁹ The young Baptist preacher that Coleman partnered with for the revival was Milton DuPriest, and their interaction proved to be providential in Coleman’s life.¹⁰

As Coleman and DuPriest were preparing to preach at the city-wide revival services, DuPriest hitchhiked to Southwestern University’s campus from Waco, Texas where he was a student at Baylor University. He met Coleman to pray with him concerning the revival. Coleman says,

He just prayed aloud. He got down on his knees in my dormitory. You could have heard him all up and down the halls he prayed so loud. I wasn’t accustomed to praying like that, and I’m sure the other people in the dormitory had never heard anyone pray like that before! Some of them began to beat on the wall next door. It was the summer time, and all of the windows were open.¹¹

The relationship forged between Coleman and DuPriest would have an effect on Coleman. Coleman had never heard someone pray earnestly as DuPriest did. The faith and Christian walk of DuPriest were more genuine and heartfelt than Coleman had ever experienced. The next week when DuPriest came back to pray for the revival

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Milton DuPriest, telephone interview by author, 05 August 2010. DuPriest corroborated the details of the events related to the revival services in Temple, TX. DuPriest was a youth revival speaker for much of the 1940s before becoming a full-time evangelist. He traveled with Billy Graham during the late 1940s and early 1950s. DuPriest later became a pastor and served in several churches, including Tokyo Baptist Church, Tokyo, Japan and Beech St. First Baptist Church, Texarkana, Arkansas. For the last fifteen years, he has been involved in prison ministry in Tyler, TX, where he has retired.

services, Coleman suggested that they go to an empty administration building to pray where they would not disturb his fellow classmates. Coleman recalls that the revival planning was not going as well as was hoped. Some of the churches backed out of supporting the meeting. DuPriest was concerned and prayed passionately for a movement of God to occur at these services.

Coleman recalls, “Milton got convicted of his pride. He was also an athlete, and he had a silver track shoe that hung on his watch chain. That was the way that college boys dressed in that day.”¹² Coleman remarks that DuPriest had called to his attention what an honor it was to have received this medal. While he was praying Coleman heard a screeching sound, like the screeching of metal, and opened his eyes to find DuPriest pulling on his watch chain to take off the silver track shoe. Then he leaned back and threw it out the window.

Coleman states,

I had never seen anyone pray like that in all of my life. I knew he was in earnest. He was getting down to anything that he felt would be a hindrance to the Holy Spirit taking over his life. When you are praying with someone like that, it will rub off on you. It’s hard to be phony when you are in the presence of someone who is that much in earnest with God, and he was in touch with heaven. When he finished praying, I began to confess my own pride, my own pretense. Until then I had not really, clearly made a sincere confession of my need for a Savior as a sinner.¹³

Midnight passed before they were finished praying, so Coleman and DuPriest walked down to the truck stop on the main highway—the only place open at that hour of the night. As they walked, DuPriest sang gospel songs at the top of his voice. According

¹¹Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

to Coleman, the manager of the truck stop, who saw some college boys come into his restaurant still singing as loudly as they could, probably thought they were intoxicated. Coleman remembers that the manager filled the jukebox with coins so as to drown them out, but they were not discouraged. Coleman says, “I sat down at the counter next to a trucker and told him what had happened that night. Tears began to roll down [the trucker’s] face. He pulled out his billfold and showed me pictures of his family, and before it was over with we both were just crying there at the counter . . . with joy.”¹⁴

Following his conversion, Coleman was bold in his witness for Christ. Even the next morning, Coleman awoke and began to witness to his classmates about his faith. He states, “I had no knowledge of soul-winning. I had no training. But I had zeal, and I began to give my witness on that campus.”¹⁵ He prodded professors to begin class with prayer. He urged William Carrington Finch, the vice-president of the university, to have revival services on campus, but without success.¹⁶

During the revival in Temple, Texas, Coleman and his friends were asked by the police to stop preaching at the courthouse square because of noise complaints. They loaded their PA equipment in the back of a pick-up truck and rode around town preaching and decrying the illegal open-slot casinos found in different establishments.¹⁷ Coleman

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶“Former VU Divinity School dean, William Carrington Finch, dead at 97” [on-line]; accessed 21 May 2010; available from <http://nashvillecitypaper.com/content/city-news/former-vu-divinity-school-dean-william-carrington-finch-dead-97>; Internet. Finch later left Southwestern University to become the dean of the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University.

¹⁷Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009. The city fathers, who were upset with Coleman and the others because of their preaching from the pick-up truck, revoked their permit for the fairground. A Baptist preacher invited the group to continue on the church lawn for a second week, and 200 people made decisions for Christ. After the revival, the Baptist preacher went to the state capital at

admits that he was probably abrasive and needed to develop skills at witnessing more effectively. But he adds, “If I had to choose between the two, I would rather have zeal with no knowledge than knowledge without zeal.”¹⁸

The religious people on campus did not welcome Coleman’s zeal for evangelism. He states, “They thought that I had gone off the deep end . . . that I had walked over the cliff.”¹⁹ Coleman acknowledges that he was overly critical of their lack of zeal. He describes the state of the churches in the area at that time as “cold,” adding, “There was nothing really going on that attracted me. There was no life.”²⁰ The Methodist churches near the school did not provide a community for growth and nurture. As a result, Coleman received no intentional discipleship following his conversion. Coleman’s lack of discipleship after his conversion convinced him of the importance of discipleship in the life of a Christian which greatly influenced his future focus on discipleship.

His Education

Robert Coleman earned the Doctor of Philosophy degree in religion through his hard work and dedication. His education prepared him for his calling, which was to preach and to teach. He received degrees from Southwestern University, Asbury Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, and the University of Iowa.

Austin and shared what happened in Temple with the Texas Rangers, the state police, and they came and destroyed all of the slot machines.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid. Coleman shares that the Baptist church across town might have provided some help, but the two Methodist churches near campus did little to encourage spiritual growth in him.

Southwestern University. Robert Coleman earned a bachelor's degree from Southwestern University, located in Georgetown, Texas, in 1948. He learned to be a hard-working student, for study did not come naturally. Following his first semester, Coleman was on academic probation, yet he soon became serious concerning his studies and finished his degree in only three years. His major area of study was history. While a student at Southwestern, Coleman was on the debate team. He was also an athlete, playing football and running track, lettering all three years that he was on campus.²¹

As Coleman was finishing his college education, he learned that if he wanted to be a preacher, he needed to go to seminary. At the time, Coleman did not even know what a seminary was.²² The president of the college helped Coleman to apply to some Methodist schools, and he suggested Southern Methodist University or Duke University, to which Coleman was accepted. The one Methodist preacher in Temple, Texas who supported the revival suggested another school for Coleman: Asbury Theological Seminary.²³

Asbury Theological Seminary. At Asbury Theological Seminary, an independent Wesleyan school, Coleman earned a Master of Divinity degree. He also found like-minded peers. He said, "From the beginning I felt like I had found a place

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid. Asbury Theological Seminary, though Wesleyan in its heritage, is a free-standing seminary, not supported by the United Methodist Church. Though accredited at the time Coleman was a student, in 1952 the school lost its Association of Theological Schools (ATS) accreditation over the firing of a professor who did not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible. The school regained ATS accreditation in 1957.

where I was not looked upon as a fanatic.”²⁴ He became active in the student ministry outreach at the seminary, the missions fellowship, and a student prayer group. He was elected president of his senior class. Coleman developed many friendships while at seminary, but of all of the relationships forged there, the most important was the one with his future wife, Marietta, who was also a student at the college. Both graduated from Asbury Theological Seminary in 1951, and they were married the same week.

Coleman’s education produced growth in his evangelism and discipleship as well. Coleman’s growth brought clarity to his spiritual development. He comments, “As I got into evangelism more and more, I began to realize what I had missed—when I came to faith in Christ there really was no follow-up. That is why I have studied discipleship.”²⁵ His self-discovery, through personal devotion and the influence of friends in his prayer group, led him to greater maturity in his own discipleship and prompted him to help others overcome the challenges to discipleship that were a part of his own life.

Princeton Theological Seminary. Coleman did not originally plan to attend Princeton Theological Seminary. While pastoring the churches in Indiana and finishing his degree at Asbury, he intended to go to the Biblical Seminary of New York to continue his post-graduate education. However, while at the Methodist conference in Indiana, when he went before the board to discuss his ministry track toward ordination, the board members did not look favorably upon Coleman’s education at Asbury because it was

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

independent. They did not approve of his going to the unaccredited Biblical Seminary of New York either. They told Coleman that either he must go to a Methodist seminary, or they would discontinue his ordination process.

The meeting adjourned for lunch, during which Coleman was admonished to think over his decision and return with an answer. Following lunch, after he and Marietta discussed their options, Coleman shared with the board that he had not changed his mind about attending a Methodist seminary. The board had not changed their minds either, and Coleman was told that his ordination process would cease and he was dismissed.²⁶

Coleman and his wife left the building. As they were getting into their car to leave and preach revival services throughout the summer on their way to New York, one of the board members stopped them. He pitched to them a new proposal—if Coleman would apply to any three accredited seminaries, even if they were not Methodist, then the committee would proceed with his ordination process. The offer seemed reasonable to Coleman, who applied to Vanderbilt, Harvard, and Princeton.

A week later he received a rejection letter from Vanderbilt. The next week he received an acceptance letter from Harvard. No word from Princeton reached Coleman, so on their way from New York for revival services to South Carolina, the couple stopped in New Jersey and inquired about his acceptance at Princeton. The administrator noted that all was in order except for a medical evaluation, which Coleman could not afford to have performed. However, in God's providence, a medical doctor was a member of the church in South Carolina where Coleman went to preach, and he provided a physical

²⁶Ibid.

examination free of charge. Coleman and Marietta continued revival services for the rest of the summer and settled in at Princeton that fall.²⁷

In only nine months, Coleman earned his Master of Theology in Biblical Studies from Princeton under the supervision of Bruce Metzger, graduating in 1952. At that point Coleman sensed that he was being directed to where most of his life's ministry would be spent: the classroom. He says, "By that time it was occurring to me that they needed to have evangelism somewhere in the curriculum of the seminaries. I had never had a class; I had never had any formal training. I was just doing the best I knew. I knew that if I ever was to teach, though, I would have to get a Ph.D."²⁸

University of Iowa. Coleman enrolled in the University of Iowa, where he finished his Doctor of Philosophy degree in two years, graduating in 1954. Coleman's area of study was religion. His doctoral dissertation studied the growth of the early Methodist church in the United States of America.²⁹ According to Coleman, the joy of his doctoral work was reading the primary sources from circuit riders and bishops as they told the story of the fastest growing church in America at the time.³⁰ In his research, Coleman delved into the statistical data from the records of the early Methodist churches and easily identified the growth. His proposal for his dissertation was to find the reasons for the growth. He states, "That put me right into the area where my heart was already

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Robert Coleman, "Factors in the Expansion of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1784 to 1812" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1954).

³⁰Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 56.

centered. It further confirmed what I believed” concerning the need for evangelism and discipleship.³¹

His Pastoral Ministry

Robert Coleman served as pastor of several Methodist churches over a span of six years. During that short tenure, he grew in knowledge and experience in evangelism and discipleship. He may not have received formal training in evangelism while at seminary, but the years that he spent on the church field provided an invaluable education.

Indiana. While a student at Asbury Theological Seminary, Coleman simultaneously pastored a circuit of Methodist churches in Indiana. For two years Coleman drove northwest through the Kentucky countryside surrounding Wilmore, Kentucky to southern Indiana. He spent the weekend in the homes of his parishioners and worked in the church. He drove back to school after the weekend was finished and started the routine again. He served in three churches on his Harrison County, Indiana, circuit. The largest was in Lanesville, a town with a population of 632 people in 2009.³² His second church was Perseverance Chapel, located in an area not even considered a town. The third church was in New Middletown, boasting a population of 79 people in 2009.³³ It was a humble beginning.

³¹Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

³²“Lanesville, IN” [on-line]; accessed 30 July 2010; available from <http://www.city-data.com/city/Lanesville-Indiana.html>; Internet.

³³“New Middletown, IN” [on-line]; accessed 30 July 2010; available from <http://www.city-data.com/city/New-Middletown-Indiana.html>; Internet.

When Coleman began his pastoral ministry, his discipleship strategy was yet unformed. He admits that he did not have an intentional plan for discipleship while serving in the churches, and states, “I wish I could have known [the concepts] clearer when I started my ministry.”³⁴ When asked what he was doing with regard to discipleship, Coleman responded, “I preached the gospel and lots of people were saved. We used the old Methodist catechism with new converts for a few weeks.”³⁵ At that time, the United Methodist Church did not offer a program for discipleship. Coleman states that the Methodist Youth Fellowship could have been a youth discipleship class, but they came together merely for fellowship. To sum up Coleman’s work in his own words,

The churches did grow, but I did not reproduce leadership in the churches to any marked degree. I didn’t have any other plan for reproduction than the program of the church. I was reproducing the program of the church which was not centered in discipleship at all. If I had known then what I know now, I could have been a much more effective pastor.³⁶

This admission does not mean that he was failing in his pastoral ministry. While Coleman was ministering to his congregations, many of the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* were forged in his heart. When he traveled to the church field for the weekend, he stayed with his parishioners, spending time in their homes, eating meals and fellowshiping with them, and completing chores on the farm beside them. Unknowingly, he was practicing the principle of association with his church members.³⁷

³⁴Robert Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

³⁵Ibid. Coleman used *The Catechism of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1855).

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Spire, 1993), 33-34.

Many of those people were converted and became leaders in the church. The congregation, comprised mostly of farmers and carpenters, constructed a new church building following Coleman's tenure at Perseverance Chapel because of the growth experienced during a time of revival during his ministry.³⁸

New Jersey. Coleman's work in New Jersey was brief because he earned his degree at Princeton in a short amount of time. Coleman spent one year as pastor in the town of Bridgeboro, a suburb between Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Trenton, New Jersey, while a student at Princeton. He also led Asbury Church, a small historic chapel.³⁹ Despite a short tenure, Coleman saw the church grow under his leadership. According to a history of the Asbury Church, "A building boom and influx of people into Cinnaminson during the 1950-1960 decade presented this small church with a challenge that can be likened to, but not equaled to, its founders."⁴⁰ Although Coleman served only from 1951-52, the church experienced growth during this population boom in the community.

The discipleship strategy for Coleman during this time was similar to the one he employed in Indiana. The strategy consisted mostly of teaching and spending time with his church members. He says, "I was preaching good, theologically sound sermons,

³⁸Margaret Chaffin, telephone interview by author, 02 September 2011. Margaret Chaffin has been a member of Perseverance Chapel since she was a girl, and she was a teenager when Coleman served as pastor there. Coleman stayed in her family's home often when he came to the church for the weekend.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰"Asbury History—The Story" [on-line]; accessed 30 July 2010; available from <http://myasburyumc.com/templates/System/details.asp?id=35036&PID=354952>; Internet.

and giving invitations to the altar. During that time, there was some discipleship, but it happened by accident.”⁴¹

Iowa. After Coleman completed his Master of Theology at Princeton, he and his wife, moved to Iowa where he served for two years near Iowa City while working on his Ph. D. in religion at the University of Iowa. Coleman pastored three Methodist churches in Iowa: Franklin, Mt. Pleasant, and Pleasant Grove.⁴² These churches all prospered under Coleman’s direction, so much so that he was asked to fill in at the United Methodist Church of Wilton, Iowa, a large church with around 1000 members, for a time prior to returning to Indiana.

Coleman began to implement more of the principles that would be stated in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* while serving in Iowa. He recalls that he had a large youth group in one of the churches. He spent time in association with the students, all the while demonstrating a vibrant Christian walk before them. He delegated some responsibility to the students, and they grew in their ministry capacities. Some of these responsibilities included sharing testimonies in the services, leading the singing, and organizing an orchestra. Leaders were developed from that group, and out of that group came several missionaries.⁴³

Indiana. In 1954, Coleman returned to the place that his pastoral ministry began: Indiana. During this stint in Indiana, he served at the Royal Center United

⁴¹Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009

⁴²Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

⁴³Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

Methodist Church located in Royal Center in northwest Indiana, near Lafayette. He was there for one year before he was invited to come to Asbury Theological Seminary to become the first Professor of Evangelism appointed by the United Methodist Church.⁴⁴ Coleman humbly remarks, “The churches that I pastored did well. They were small churches, but they grew and prospered to the point that the people at Asbury thought that I knew something about evangelism. They did not know how ignorant I was of the subject.”⁴⁵ Coleman’s return to Asbury Theological Seminary marked the end of his pastoral ministry and the beginning of his ministry’s greatest focus: teaching.

His Teaching Ministry

Robert Coleman has spent the greater part of his ministry teaching and discipling students who are preparing for ministry. He taught at Asbury Theological Seminary and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and is currently on the faculty of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Asbury Theological Seminary. In 1955, Coleman moved back to Kentucky to teach at Asbury Theological Seminary. He taught at the seminary for twenty-seven years and was given the charge of building the first department of evangelism at a seminary in the Wesleyan tradition anywhere in the world.⁴⁶

The task of creating an evangelism department was somewhat overwhelming, considering that Coleman had never had formal training in evangelism. He says, “The

⁴⁴Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

⁴⁵Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

⁴⁶Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

irony was I have never had any training, at least no formal training, even to this day. I was just trying to practice what I had seen others do.”⁴⁷ Coleman directed his students to the authority on evangelism: Jesus Christ.

The first class Coleman established was “The Evangelism of Jesus.” He assigned A. T. Robertson’s *A Harmony of the Gospels* as the primary textbook.⁴⁸ He instructed his students to study the Gospels, looking to Jesus as a model to determine how His example applied to their lives. Through constant reading and re-reading of the Gospels, Coleman began to see the concepts which he eventually called *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. During his tenure at Asbury, the young professor developed nearly a dozen other classes on evangelism.⁴⁹

At Asbury, Coleman began practicing discipleship with his students. He met regularly with groups of students for prayer and for Bible study. These meetings were informal, as opposed to the classroom structure required in Coleman’s courses. In these discipleship groups, he challenged the participants to grow in their faith in Christ, and he helped them to apply in their own lives what they were learning about Christ’s method of evangelism in the classroom. He led them to visit in homes, sharing their faith, and frequently, on Friday night he took students with him to participate in street evangelism in Lexington.⁵⁰

⁴⁷Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

⁴⁸A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950).

⁴⁹Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009. Coleman also created “Theology of Evangelism,” “History of Revivalism in America,” and “Evangelism in the Early Church,” among others.

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Coleman moved to Deerfield, Illinois in 1982 to teach at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He was director of the School of World Mission and Evangelism and professor of evangelism at Trinity for eighteen years. He also directed the Institute of Evangelism at the Billy Graham Center of Wheaton College and served as dean of the International Schools of Evangelism for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association during much of this time.

In 1989, Billy Graham called Coleman and asked him to become the director for the Institute of Evangelism at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, a mere 35 miles from Trinity.⁵¹ He declined at first because he was satisfied with his position at Trinity. He recommended that Graham hire Arthur Johnston, who was founder and president of Tyndale Theological Seminary in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.⁵² Little did Coleman know that Johnston had already turned Graham down, and he had recommended that Graham ask Coleman. Graham asked Coleman if he would consider being a consultant for a year to make recommendations about how to organize the institute, to which Coleman agreed. After a year, Graham convinced Coleman to become the Director of the Billy Graham Institute of Evangelism and dean of his International Schools for Pastors, and agreed that he could continue teaching at Trinity.⁵³

Coleman's first major task as director of the Institute of Evangelism was to hire a teaching staff. Lyle Dorsett was hired as the first professor of evangelism at

⁵⁰A detailed description and analysis of Coleman's discipleship groups will be given in Chapter Four.

⁵¹Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

⁵²"In Memory of Dr. Arthur P. Johnston" [on-line]; accessed 05 August 2010; available from <http://www.billygraham.org/assets/media/pdfs/development/annualreports/BGEA2008AnnualReport.pdf>; Internet.

Wheaton College.⁵⁴ He sat in with Coleman during his classes for the first semester of teaching, and then assumed teaching responsibilities after that. Coleman's method for preparing Dorsett to take over teaching at Wheaton illustrates the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. For ten years they prayed together every week in their offices. Coleman demonstrated to Dorsett what was expected and then delegated responsibility to him. He supervised Dorsett as he took over the task of teaching and then allowed Dorsett to reproduce the principles in his own ministry.

Timothy Beougher, who had been Coleman's teaching assistant at Trinity, was hired after completing his Ph. D. as Assistant Professor of Evangelism at the Wheaton College Graduate School and was the second member of the evangelism teaching faculty.⁵⁵ Four other persons were added to the staff, all of whom were committed to discipleship. To set an example before them all, every week Coleman met with a group of students in his office for prayer.

Coleman oversaw the Billy Graham Institute for ten years until he left in 2000. However, he stayed an extra year to help Lonnie Allison take over the position.⁵⁶ Just as Coleman practiced the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* in handing off the

⁵³Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

⁵⁴“Lyle Dorsett” [on-line]; accessed 05 August 2009; available from <http://www.beesondivinity.com/lylewdorsett>; Internet. Lyle Dorsett currently is Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, AL.

⁵⁵“Timothy Beougher” [on-line]; accessed 05 August 2010; available from <http://www.sbts.edu/bgs/faculty/tim-beougher/>; Internet. Tim Beougher is currently Associate Dean of Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

⁵⁶“Lonnie Allison” [on-line]; accessed 05 August 2010; available from <http://www.billygrahamcenter.com/ise/staff.html>; Internet. Lonnie Allison still serves as Executive Director of the Institute of Strategic Evangelism in the Billy Graham Center.

mantle of teaching, he also applied them to his successor for the director position. In 2001, Coleman completed his work at Wheaton and also retired from Trinity.⁵⁷

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Robert Coleman began teaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in 2001 and was designated a Distinguished Professor of Discipleship and Evangelism.⁵⁸ He and his wife asked to live in the married students' dormitory, where they enjoyed a happy relationship with the students for eight years.

In 2009, Coleman and Marietta returned to Wilmore, Kentucky, home of Asbury Theological Seminary, though he continues to be on the Gordon-Conwell faculty. He travels to Massachusetts for seminars and other similarly formatted courses in the summer. Coleman indicated that he needs to stay home more with Marietta to care for her and, as a result, he has reduced teaching and speaking engagements, especially overseas.⁵⁹

Robert Coleman has spent fifty-six years teaching and preparing men and women to be ministers of the gospel. According to Coleman, “The reason I have stayed with the seminary, in the providence of God, is because that has been the weakest link in the chain. I think our seminaries are the place where we are losing the battle.”⁶⁰ With

⁵⁷Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

⁵⁸“Robert Coleman” [on-line]; accessed 05 August 2010; available from http://www.gordonconwell.edu/prospective_students/faculty; Internet. Coleman currently teaches a Doctor of Ministry track entitled “Outreach and Discipleship.”

⁵⁹Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

⁶⁰Ibid. By this statement, Coleman indicates his struggle with his own denomination and what has been characteristic of other mainline denominations—a drift into liberal theology. He believes that the seminary is the training ground of the pastors who will in turn influence the churches all across the country.

the lifelong commitment of Coleman to discipling his students, he has been engaged in that battle.

His Writing Ministry

Throughout his career as a professor, Coleman has been a prolific author. He has personally disciplined many men through his ministry as a professor, but he has indirectly disciplined millions of others through his writings. Coleman has authored twenty-four books and dozens of articles during his ministry. His writings can be categorized into three subject areas: discipleship, evangelism, and revival.

Discipleship. The subject area of discipleship has been a focal point for Robert Coleman from early in his Christian walk and ministry. As noted earlier, Coleman did not receive formal discipling following his conversion, a lack that sparked in him a desire to learn about discipleship and to teach what it means. The largest grouping of Coleman's works deals with this subject.

His first work, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, written in 1963, outlines the methods that Jesus utilized in training His disciples to take over His ministry following His ascension to heaven as recorded in the Gospels.⁶¹ The principles of Christ's strategy are identified, and each principle is explained in a chapter of the book. The principles are applied to a modern context, but individual application is left to the reader to contextualize.

As long as the seminaries teach liberal theology, they have a direct negative influence upon the churches. He feels that part of his calling as a professor is to stand firm against this theological drift.

⁶¹Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Spire, 1993).

The eight principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* are selection, association, consecration, impartation, demonstration, delegation, supervision, and reproduction. The principle of selection reveals how Jesus called men to follow Him. The principle of association discusses how Jesus allowed the men to be with Him. The principle of consecration shows how Jesus required obedience from His followers. The principle of impartation tells how Jesus gave of Himself to His disciples. The principle of demonstration shares how Jesus showed the disciples how to live. The principle of delegation uncovers how Jesus assigned ministry responsibility to the disciples. The principle of supervision notes how Jesus provided accountability to His disciples. And the principle of reproduction describes how Jesus expected His disciples to emulate His strategy in their own ministries.

The Master Plan of Discipleship, written in 1987, flows naturally from the first *Master Plan* book.⁶² This book studies the book of Acts and examines how the disciples applied the principles that Jesus taught them in their own ministries in first-century churches. In *The Mind of the Master*, written in 1977, Coleman studies the inner life of Christ to which Christians are to conform through the process of discipleship.⁶³ In 1992, Coleman penned *The Great Commission Lifestyle*, which helps Christians to understand the desire of Christ for His followers to make growing in faith a part of their everyday life.⁶⁴ Each of these works describes discipleship, observing the ministry of Jesus and

⁶²Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987).

⁶³Robert Coleman, *The Mind of the Master* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1977).

⁶⁴Robert Coleman, *The Great Commission Lifestyle* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1992).

His disciples, and applying the principles discovered to the daily life of modern Christians.

Coleman has also authored several books that are designed to be used for discipling Christians. He wrote *Established by the Word of God: Bible Lessons for New Christians* in 1959, wherein he offers training in basic doctrinal truths that are important for new Christians to understand.⁶⁵ Coleman wrote *Introducing the Prayer Cell* in 1960, and it describes the way in which Coleman always began his discipleship groups: prayer bands.⁶⁶ This book was followed in 1961 by *Life in the Living Word: Bible Lessons for Growing Christians* which challenges Christians to continue to grow in discipleship by learning doctrines related to soteriology and ecclesiology.⁶⁷ Coleman also wrote *The Spirit and the Word: Bible Lessons for Spirit-Filled Christians* in 1965.⁶⁸ This third work continues the discipling process started in the prior two *Bible Lessons* books for more mature Christians. *Growing in the Word*, written in 1982, instructs Christians on spiritual development through Bible study.⁶⁹ Coleman wrote *Disciple Making: Training Leaders to Make Disciples* in 1994 with co-authors Timothy Beougher, Tom Phillips, and William

⁶⁵Robert Coleman, *Established by the Word of God: Bible Lessons for New Christians* (Wilmore, KY: Christian Outreach, 2001). These doctrinal truths include understanding the gospel, new birth, assurance of salvation, victory over sin, Christian growth, spiritual disciplines, and evangelism.

⁶⁶Robert Coleman, *Introducing the Prayer Cell* (Wilmore, KY: Christian Outreach, 1984). Coleman states that he began a group for prayer following his conversion in college and did the same while a student at Asbury. Praying together has always been a part of Coleman's discipleship groups. This commitment began as a result of his times of prayer with Milton DuPriest during the revival services in Temple, TX, while in college.

⁶⁷Robert Coleman, *Life in the Living Word: Bible Lessons for Growing Christians* (Wilmore, KY: Christian Outreach, 1998).

⁶⁸Robert Coleman, *The Spirit and the Word: Bible Lessons for Spirit-Filled Christians* (Wilmore, KY: Christian Outreach, 1988).

⁶⁹Robert Coleman, *Growing in the Word* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1982).

Shell.⁷⁰ This work is a study manual in which the authors develop a plan for training new believers in the faith, helping them to grow in Christian discipline, and equipping them for service in the church.

Coleman has also written full-length books that delve into specific theological teachings intended to be used in discipleship as well. In 1972, Coleman wrote *Written in Blood*, which was republished as *The New Covenant: A Devotional Study of the Blood of Christ* in 1984.⁷¹ These books offer teaching on Christ's role as the sacrificial Lamb of God and the new covenant written in His blood. He wrote *Songs of Heaven* in 1980 and republished it in 1998 under the title, *Singing with the Angels*.⁷² These books study the songs of Revelation and teach on the worship of the Lamb of God in the heavenly courts.

Evangelism. Coleman has also written several books on the subject of evangelism. *They Meet the Master: A Study Manual on the Personal Evangelism of Jesus* was published in 1973 and republished as *The Master's Way of Personal Evangelism* in 1997.⁷³ These books study the evangelistic approach of Jesus, using several examples from Scripture as their basis. *Evangelism in Perspective*, written in 1975, examines the method of sharing the gospel highlighted in the ministry of Jesus and calling the reader to

⁷⁰Robert Coleman et al., *Disciple Making: Training Leaders to Make Disciples* (Wheaton, IL: Billy Graham Center Institute of Evangelism, 1994).

⁷¹Robert Coleman, *Written in Blood* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1972). Idem, *The New Covenant: A Devotional Study of the Blood of Christ* (Deerfield, IL: Christian Outreach, 1984).

⁷²Robert Coleman, *Singing with the Angels*(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). Idem, *Songs of Heaven* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1980).

⁷³Robert Coleman, *The Master's Way of Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997). Idem, *They Meet the Master: A Study Manual on the Personal Evangelism of Jesus* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1973).

a reproducing lifestyle.⁷⁴ Coleman edited *Evangelism on the Cutting Edge* in 1986. This book addresses contemporary issues in evangelism, including Coleman's chapter on making discipleship a daily practice of a Christian.⁷⁵

Coleman next published *Nothing to Do but to Save Souls: John Wesley's Charge to His Preachers* in 1990, and it studies the evangelistic ministry of Methodist founder, John Wesley, and the evangelistic message that he entrusted to his Methodist preachers.⁷⁶ Coleman's most recent book, *The Heartbeat of the Gospel: The Theology behind the Master Plan of Evangelism*, is his longest work.⁷⁷ With a strong biblical context, this work shows how evangelism is the heartbeat of all theology. Each of these books helps the reader to understand evangelism more thoroughly and encourages him to become more evangelistic himself.

Revival. A third area of interest for Robert Coleman has been revivals. Coleman was involved in the youth revival movement that was prevalent in the 1940s and 1950s and preached his first sermon at a revival in Temple, Texas.⁷⁸ Throughout his ministry he has been a revival speaker. In addition to leading revival meetings, he also

⁷⁴Robert Coleman, *Evangelism in Perspective* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 1975). This book differs from *The Master Plan of Evangelism* in that it focuses more on the call to evangelize the lost.

⁷⁵Robert Coleman, *Evangelism on the Cutting Edge* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1986).

⁷⁶Robert Coleman, *Nothing to Do but to Save Souls: John Wesley's Charge to His Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Francis & Taylor, 1990).

⁷⁷Robert Coleman, *The Heartbeat of the Gospel: The Theology behind the Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

⁷⁸Bruce McIver, *Riding the Wind of God: A Personal History of the Youth Revival Movement* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2002). This book relates the history of this movement among college students in Texas during Coleman's college years.

experienced revival movements on the campuses of Asbury College in 1950 and 1970 and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Wheaton College in 1995.⁷⁹

These experiences have resulted in Coleman's writing several books on revival. Coleman wrote *Dry Bones Can Live Again: A Study Manual on Revival in the Local Church* in 1969.⁸⁰ This book illustrates conditions for revival and sets a strategy for revival in the local church. *The Spark That Ignites* was published in 1989, and Coleman republished the work in 1995 under the title, *The Coming World Revival*.⁸¹ These books study the pattern of spiritual renewal in the Bible and offer insight into preparing for spiritual renewal today. Coleman also edited *One Divine Moment*, which describes the Asbury Revival of 1970.⁸²

His Work with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

Robert Coleman worked with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association [BGEA] while serving as Director of the Billy Graham Institute at Wheaton College and teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He enjoyed working as director of the Billy Graham Institute because it afforded him the opportunity to work with Graham's International Schools, which trained pastors overseas. Coleman states, "The thing that

⁷⁹Timothy Beougher and Lyle Dorsett, eds., *Accounts of a Campus Revival: Wheaton College 1995* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1995). This book records the events of the Wheaton College revival from the perspectives of its participants.

⁸⁰Robert Coleman, *Dry Bones Can Live Again: A Study Manual on Revival in the Local Church* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1969).

⁸¹Robert Coleman, *The Coming World Revival* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1995). Also Robert Coleman, *The Spark That Ignites* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1989).

⁸²Robert Coleman, *One Divine Moment* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1970).

was to me the greatest joy was the International Schools. I was the dean of those schools for ten years, and we had schools all over the world.”⁸³

In 1956 after he came to teach at Asbury Theological Seminary, Coleman met Billy Graham through his brother, Lyman Coleman, who was working in the BGEA.⁸⁴ Lyman Coleman introduced his brother as the new evangelism professor at Asbury, and Billy Graham asked Robert Coleman to sit on stage with him during crusade services in Oklahoma City. Coleman remarks, “That is characteristic of Billy Graham. If you know Billy, you will soon learn that he knows how to make a nobody feel like they are somebody.”⁸⁵

Charlie Riggs, a long-time member of the BGEA team, asked Coleman to join them the next day in Tulsa, where a one-night rally was scheduled. He was in a hotel room with Lorne Sanny, assistant to Dawson Trotman, when he received word that Trotman drowned in New York.⁸⁶ These two days marked the beginning of Coleman’s friendship with Billy Graham.

As dean of the International Schools, Coleman was responsible to train indigenous pastors to serve in their own country. He traveled to South America, Africa,

⁸³Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

⁸⁴“Lyman Coleman” [on-line]; accessed 06 August 2010; available from http://www.lifeway.com/ev/ev_occ_details/0,2223,0%3D2285,00.html; Internet. Lyman Coleman is considered an expert in the area of small groups. He founded the Serendipity small-group series which is now a part of Lifeway Christian Resources.

⁸⁵Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

⁸⁶Betty Lee Skinner, *Daws: The Story of Dawson Trotman, the Founder of the Navigators* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 378. Dawson Trotman drowned in New York while trying to save a girl from drowning on June 16, 1956. Trotman’s wife, Lila Mae, sent the message to Sanny and instructed the messenger to tell him, “Psalm 115:3”—it was customary for Navigators to close each conversation with Scripture. This verse reads, “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.”

Europe, India, Asia, and the South Pacific to teach local pastors how to disciple their congregations. At each school, the local pastors were to indicate to the BGEA leaders where they needed help or instruction, ranging from media ministry to children's ministry. However, two courses were always required in the conferences for international schools: a Christian witnessing training course taught by Charlie Riggs and *The Master Plan of Evangelism* taught by Robert Coleman. Schools were held in six or seven different countries each year, with 1,000 to 2,500 church leaders usually in attendance. This opportunity meant that *The Master Plan of Evangelism* has been used to instruct thousands of pastors all over the world on how to disciple Christians.

His Present Ministry

Robert Coleman is eighty-two years old and currently resides in Wilmore, Kentucky with his wife, Marietta. One might expect an octogenarian to reflect on a lifetime of ministry more than look forward to what his future ministry may hold. This is not the case with Coleman. He is as excited about ministry as he has ever been. He believes that his future ministry will be concentrated in speaking at pastor's conferences, seminars, and with mission groups.⁸⁷

He will also remain involved in some capacity with the Lausanne Committee, or Mission America, which is the American wing of the committee. In 1974, Coleman attended the first Lausanne Conference and served as secretary for the section on theology.⁸⁸ The conference was comprised of leaders of denominations, parachurch

⁸⁷Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

⁸⁸Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

groups, evangelists, college and seminary presidents, and others creating a broad spectrum of influence. This conference produced the Lausanne Covenant, which is a declaration “intended to define the necessity, responsibilities, and goals of spreading the Gospel.”⁸⁹

The second Lausanne Conference was held in Manila, Philippines in 1989. Coleman served on the declarations committee in Manila, out of which came the Manila Manifesto.⁹⁰ At the 1995 Global Consultation on World Evangelization in Seoul, Korea, he was Chairman of the Declaration Committee. He also participated in the 2010 Congress at Capetown, South Africa.

Coleman believes the contribution of the Lausanne Conference is that “initially they pulled together the strength of the evangelical church around the world.”⁹¹ However, Coleman believes that Lausanne has lost some of its original focus. He served on the continuation committee following the first Lausanne Conference, which was intended to carry on the spirit of Lausanne following the conclusion of the meetings. Divisions in the purpose of Lausanne began to surface over whether Lausanne should direct its attention to evangelism or social action. By the time of the Manila conference,

⁸⁹“Lausanne Covenant” [on-line]; accessed 06 August 2010; available from <http://www.lausanne.org/lausanne-1974/lausanne-1974.html>; Internet.

⁹⁰“Manila Manifesto” [on-line]; accessed 06 August 2010; available from <http://www.lausanne.org/all-documents/manila-manifesto.html>; Internet. The “Manila Manifesto” is a declaration of shared beliefs among participants in the Lausanne Conference. The document includes statements on the gospel, the Scriptures, and social responsibility.

⁹¹Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

Coleman asserts that the focus had broadened. “Evangelism was still there,” he states, “but social action has become more and more involved.”⁹²

Part of his present ministry includes continuing to disciple Christians, both directly and indirectly. Upon leaving Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary to return to Kentucky, Coleman gave one-third of his library to The Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia.⁹³ Now young seminarians in eastern Europe have a professional library on evangelism and discipleship.

Coleman still conducts discipleship groups with men as well. Over the past two years, he has met with different groups. One group was comprised of students from the University of Kentucky who traveled to Wilmore each week to meet with Coleman. Currently, he is meeting with a group of men who live in Wilmore. Coleman insists that the men be serious about their commitment to discipleship. He spends time in prayer with them and holds them accountable in their walk with God. He also leads the men in Bible study, teaching them to delve into the Scriptures. He trains them so that they will be able to lead a group themselves. While spending time with them, he uses the same principles that he described almost fifty years ago in *The Master Plan of Evangelism*.

Conclusion

The ministry focus of Robert Coleman has largely been shaped by his early life experiences. As an unconverted, churchgoing child he was offered an introduction to the Bible but not an invitation to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though he believed the Bible,

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Ibid.

he later realized that he was missing a personal relationship with Jesus. The lack of follow-up after Coleman's conversion taught him the importance of discipleship in the life of a Christian. This realization produced a desire in him to disciple others.

As a pastor, Coleman realized some of the principles of discipleship, but they were yet to be fully developed in his mind. As a professor, after looking to the example of Christ in Scripture, he conceptualized *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. His book not only outlines the principles of Christ for discipleship, but it has also been Coleman's guide for discipling others throughout his ministry.

CHAPTER 3

AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS: INFLUENCES ON THE DISCIPLESHIP STRATEGY OF ROBERT COLEMAN

John Donne wrote, “No man is an island; entire of itself.”¹ Every man is affected, either for good or ill, by his circumstances and surroundings in some way. This fact is true of Robert Coleman as well. Coleman was influenced by the Methodist church in which he was raised. He was impacted by the religious environment in which he participated as a student, pastor, and professor.

This chapter seeks to demonstrate how contextual factors influenced Coleman in the development of his discipleship strategy. In particular, this chapter will examine the influence of the writings of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and his discipleship strategy upon the thinking of Coleman. It will also note historical influences during Coleman’s ministry, such as the state of the American evangelical church and the state of the Methodist church. Each of these influences helped to shape the discipleship strategy of Robert Coleman.

Influence of John Wesley on Robert Coleman

John Wesley is one of the most influential Christians since the Protestant Reformation. After Wesley survived a house fire as a young boy, his mother, Susanna,

¹John Donne, “XVII. Meditation,” in *The Broadview Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Verse and Prose*, ed. Alan Rudrum, Joseph Black, and Holly Faith Nelson (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2000), 130-31.

instilled in him a sense of God’s provident care over his life, calling him “a brand plucked out of the burning”—a reference to Zechariah 3:2.² God certainly had a plan for John Wesley, and his ministry was prolific. During his lifetime, “John Wesley traveled up and down the United Kingdom for fifty years, covering six thousand miles a year on horseback or by coach, holding conferences, forming societies, and preaching in all some forty thousand sermons” meanwhile establishing the Methodist church as an Anglican minister.³ Charles Hodge grouped Wesley with Martin Luther and Ignatius Loyola as men who are “world controllers,” influencing the “faith and character of coming generations.”⁴ C.H. Spurgeon said “that his own ministry compared with that of Wesley was like a ‘farthing candle’ beside the sun.”⁵ George Whitefield called Wesley “my spiritual father in Christ.”⁶

John Wesley is not particularly noted as a systematic theologian, although his ministry was informed by a developed theological framework. His theology was largely shaped by his mother, Susanna Wesley, who urged her son to make theology practical. One author writes, “From her John and Charles got their methodical discipline, by correspondence when they were at the University, she molded John's theology and urged

²Kenneth Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 14.

³Philip Watson, *Anatomy of a Conversion* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1990), 23.

⁴Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Scriber’s, 1872-73; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 3:485.

⁵“John Wesley’ (a lecture given in 1861),” *Banner of Truth* (July/August 1969): 58, quoted in Iain Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust), 4.

⁶George Whitefield, *George Whitefield’s Letters: 1734-1742* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 484.

on him the study of 'practical divinity'."⁷ Wesley's practical divinity resulted in the contributions to Christian organization and discipleship for which John Wesley is most remembered.

Wesley desired to establish a flourishing Christian community wherever he ministered. He was not satisfied with preaching at a location and never returning; instead, he consistently created organizations that fostered Christian discipleship long after his departure. Wesley wrote in his journal, "I am more and more convinced, that the devil himself desires nothing more than this, that the people of any place should be half-awakened, and then left to themselves to fall asleep again. Therefore, I determine, by the grace of God, not to strike one stroke in any place where I cannot follow the blow."⁸

Wesley was true to his word. On at least one occasion he refused to preach at a place because he would be unable to follow up his preaching with effective discipleship. John Telford records, "At Mullingar, in Ireland, on July 10th, 1750, for instance, he declined an invitation to preach made by the sovereign of the town (the Irish title for mayor). 'I had little hopes,' he says, 'of doing good by preaching in a place where I could preach but once, and where none but me could be suffered to preach at all.'"⁹

Wesley's method for discipleship included an organizational structure which created a community of faith that established accountability and growth among its members. Wesley divided his followers into societies, which were, in turn, divided into

⁷Richard Cameron, *The Rise of Methodism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 17.

⁸John Wesley, *Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 1:416.

⁹John Telford, *The Life of John Wesley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1886), 153.

smaller classes, bands, select societies, and penitent bands. These groups are the legacy of John Wesley and the testament to his genius as a discipler.

Development of Wesley's Methods

John Wesley did not create an entirely new form of discipleship. He was influenced by several factors as he formulated the methods of his movement. Three of the most influential events in Wesley's development of his discipleship strategy were his upbringing in his childhood home, his time at Oxford University, and his journey to Herrnhut to visit the Moravians.

The Wesley home. For John Wesley, his upbringing was a positive influence on his Christian development. Although Wesley would not become a Christian later, his time at home instilled practices of discipline that would be used in his methods as a leader.¹⁰ Richard Heitzenrater views the home at Epworth to be one of the major influences upon Wesley as well. He writes, "Although the story of Methodism is much more than the biography of John Wesley, the influence upon him of the Wesley household was certainly a formative factor in the rise of the movement that later bore his name."¹¹

¹⁰There is debate over the exact time of Wesley's conversion. Wesley wrote that the time of his conversion was at Aldersgate Street on May 24, 1738 (John Wesley, *Works*, 1:103). However, he seemed to be unsure of this statement later in life (Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed*, 52). Whether Wesley was converted at Aldersgate Street or before, the experience of Aldersgate Street gave Wesley an assurance of his salvation that had been lacking.

¹¹Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 25.

John Wesley was raised by his father, Samuel, and his mother, Susanna. Samuel and Susanna were both children of dissenting ministers.¹² This family was religious and sought to raise young John and Charles Wesley in a Christian environment.

Important to the formation of his methodology was the example that Wesley's father set in holding a society in their home.¹³ In 1700, Samuel Wesley created a society in their Epworth home that was modeled after the societies of London.¹⁴ In a letter to the London society, Samuel Wesley stated that his intentions in creating a society in his home were, "First to pray to God; secondly, to read the Holy Scriptures and discourse upon religious matters for their mutual edification; and thirdly, to deliberate about the edification of our neighbor and the promoting of it."¹⁵

The patriarch of the family also was adamant that the group remain under the authority of the Church of England. He chastised his wife for holding Sunday evening prayers in their home because the gatherings might appear as a "conventicle, strictly forbidden by the Act of Toleration and subsequent legislation."¹⁶ Samuel's attachment to the Church of England certainly influenced John, who refused to allow the later Methodist meetings to break away from the established church during his lifetime.

The society held in the Wesley home was an example of the methodology that Wesley incorporated into his own paradigm. The example of prayer, Bible study, and

¹²Ibid., 27. Dissenters were those who separated from the Church of England during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries as part of the English Reformation movement.

¹³A society was a Christian meeting, usually held in a home or rented space, for the purpose of prayer, singing, preaching, and fellowship.

¹⁴Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 27.

¹⁵Ibid., 27-28.

¹⁶Ibid., 29.

mutual edification that Wesley experienced in his home would be emulated at later points in his adult life.

Oxford. John Wesley enrolled in Christ Church College at Oxford University in 1720.¹⁷ He was ordained as a deacon in 1725 and a priest in 1728.¹⁸ In 1727, John Wesley left Oxford to assist his father at Wroote, where he remained until 1729.¹⁹ Upon his return to Oxford in 1729, John Wesley joined a group begun by his brother, Charles. The group consisted of Charles Wesley, Robert Kirkham, and William Morgan.²⁰ John became the leader of the group, which later included George Whitefield. The group was known as the “Holy Club,” which was used with derision.²¹ According to Richard Heitzenrater, “It was to be two years before the term ‘Methodist’ would be applied to them, but the small group of students was beginning to display many of the characteristics that would identify the movement throughout the rest of the century.”²²

Indeed, Wesley begins his *Short History of the People Called Methodists* with an account of the Oxford group, thus showing that Wesley viewed the Holy Club as at least a forerunner to the Methodist movement if not the beginning thereof. He records,

[The group] agreed to spend three or four evening in a week together. On Sunday evening we read something in divinity; on other nights, the Greek or Latin classics. In the following summer, we were desired to visit the prisoners in the Castle; and

¹⁷John Fletcher Hurst, *The History of Methodism* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1902), 156.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 176-77.

¹⁹Telford, *The Life of John Wesley*, 51-52.

²⁰Maldwyn Edwards, “John Wesley,” in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, ed. Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 43.

²¹*Ibid.*, 44.

²²Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 42.

we were so well satisfied with our conversation there, that we agreed to visit them once or twice a week. Soon after, we were desired to call upon a poor woman in the town that was sick; and in this employment too, we believed it would be worth while to spend an hour or two in every week.²³

The group took up the cause of the poor, which was a major aspect of the work of future Methodist societies.

The Oxford Methodists were mocked by their fellow students for their strict allegiance to the Bible and their obedience exhibited in holy living. In *A Short History of Methodism*, Wesley states, “But they [Methodists] observed neither these nor anything else any further than they conceived it was upon them by their one book, the Bible; it being their one desire and design to be downright Bible-Christians; taking the Bible, as interpreted by the primitive Church and our own, for their whole and sole rule.”²⁴

Wesley’s undying devotion to the Scriptures would also be transmitted to future Methodist groups.

Another development in Wesley’s methodology also occurred in the Oxford era—the multiplication of groups. According to Heitzenrater, “Individual members of John’s group formed other cells of persons interested in pursuing serious study and holy living Before the next year was out, there would be other groups around the University, so that in all, over forty persons were associated with Oxford Methodism in the five years of the Wesleys’ involvement at the University.”²⁵

The multiplication of groups was initially started by others in the group, but Wesley followed this pattern himself. The groups continued to multiply, and Wesley

²³Wesley, *Works*, 13:303-04.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 8:348.

²⁵Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 49.

began his own group at Queen's.²⁶ However, the guidelines for each of the groups originated out of Wesley's group. Heitzenrater writes that he "learned from Charles the method of keeping a diary, the general resolutions, the resolutions for Lent, the lists of questions for self-examination, and a variety of other practices, which he then passed on to members of his own group at Queen's."²⁷ This development in methodology would be crucial to the success of Methodism later in Wesley's ministry.

Herrnhut. A third period of development for Wesley's methodology was his time spent at Herrnhut, a Moravian settlement in Germany. John Wesley left in 1735 for Georgia, a new British colony, in order to convert the Indians.²⁸ During his boat trip to the colony, Wesley had his first encounter with the Moravians, a group that would greatly influence him. A great storm arose on the Atlantic that frightened many of the passengers, but Wesley noticed that the Moravians were calm during the entire episode. He asked one of the Moravians, "'Were you not afraid?' He answered, 'I thank God, no.' I asked, 'But were not your women and children afraid?' He replied mildly, 'No; our women and children are not afraid to die.'"²⁹

While in Georgia, Wesley had further contact with the Moravians, notably August Spangenberg. Through his time with the Moravians, he learned of Herrnhut. According to Heitzenrater, Wesley thought the Moravians "manifested in their faith and

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 52.

²⁸William Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley* (New York: University Press of America, 1974), 72.

²⁹Wesley, *Works*, 1:22.

discipline the vestiges of primitive Christianity.”³⁰ After returning to England, and his subsequent conversion, Wesley became involved with another Moravian, Peter Bohler, who led the Fetter Lane Society.³¹

In the Fetter Lane Society, Wesley learned more of the Moravians’ organizational structure, namely the society and the bands which Bohler also started at Fetter Lane.³² Wesley then decided to visit the Moravians at Herrnhut to learn more of their work. There, Wesley met Nicholas von Zinzendorf, the leader of the community. While in Germany, Wesley recorded his findings in his journal:

The people of Herrnhuth are divided, 1. Into five male classes, viz., the little children, the middle children, the big children, the young men, and the married. The females are divided in the same manner. 2. Into eleven classes, according to the houses where they live: And in each class is an Helper, an Overseer, a Monitor, and Almoner, and a Servant. 3. Into about ninety bands, each of which meets twice at least, but most them three times a week, to 'confess their faults one to another, and pray for one another, that they may be healed.³³

Wesley borrowed heavily from the Moravian organizational structure when implementing his own Methodist societies. The lessons he learned while at Herrnhut were directly applied to his own structure in England.

Description of Wesley’s Methods

The discipleship methods of John Wesley were a distinguishing component of the Methodist movement. Wesley was a master of organization in his own life (through

³⁰Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 60.

³¹The Fetter Lane Society was a Moravian group that met for prayer and accountability and was a model for Wesley in developing his Methodist societies.

³²Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 79.

³³Wesley, *Works*, 1:140-41.

keeping journals), but also in his ministry. The Methodist movement in England benefited greatly from the constant oversight of Wesley over his societies and his preachers. The discipleship methods Wesley employed for growth among his followers were societies, classes, bands, select societies, and penitent bands.

Societies. It must be noted that John Wesley's intention was never to form a separate denomination. The societies that he created were to function within the Church of England to foster greater communion with God and vitality within the Church. The societies that he formed would become the Methodist churches only after his death.³⁴

The first society that Wesley established was in London on May 1, 1737. In *A Short History of the People Called Methodists*, Wesley records,

On Monday, May 1, our little society began in London. But it may be observed, the first rise of Methodism, so called, was in November, 1729, when four of us met together at Oxford; the second was at Savannah, in April, 1736, when twenty or thirty persons met at my house; the last was at London, on this day, when forty or fifty of us agreed to meet together every Wednesday evening, in order to a free conversation, begun and ended with singing and prayer.³⁵

People who showed interest in their salvation were gathered into the societies. According to the *General Rules of the United Societies*, the only condition for admission to the group was “a desire ‘to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.’ But, wherever this is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation.”³⁶ Wesley described the societies as “a company of men having the form and

³⁴Kenneth Cracknell and Susan White, *An Introduction to World Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 32-34.

³⁵Wesley, *Works*, 13:307.

³⁶Wesley, *Works*, 8:270.

seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.”³⁷

Wesley viewed the societies as a return to primitive Christianity. By gathering the people into societies for spiritual accountability and growth, he would be emulating the model of the early church and strengthening the Church of England. He writes in *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*:

Upon reflection, I could not but observe, this is the very thing which was from the beginning of Christianity. In the earliest times, those whom God had sent forth 'preached the gospel to every creature.' And the *oi akroatai*, 'the body of hearers,' were mostly either Jews or Heathens. But as soon as any of these were so convinced of the truth, as to forsake sin and seek the gospel salvation, they immediately joined them together, took an account of their names, advised them to watch over each other, and met these *kataxoumenoi*, 'catechumens,' (as they were then called,) apart from the great congregation, that they might instruct, rebuke, exhort, and pray with them, and for them, according to their several necessities.³⁸

The meetings of the societies began and closed with singing and prayer, and Wesley or one of his assistants gave a word of exhortation. According to Michael Henderson, “The primary function of the society was cognitive instruction; it was the educational channel by which the tenets of Methodism were presented to the target population.”³⁹ In these larger society meetings, the congregation was involved in worship and edification, and they were also challenged with a word of exhortation to spur them on to greater devotion to Christ. The societies did not, however, allow for the

³⁷Ibid., 269.

³⁸Ibid., 250-51.

³⁹Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 1997), 84.

intimacy required for discipleship that Wesley advocated, and as soon as the societies were created they were divided into smaller groups called classes that would facilitate such soul-searching.

Classes. The creation of the first classes happened by chance. The society in Bristol was having difficulty paying the debt for their meeting house when a solution was given—“Let every member of the society give a penny a week till all are paid.”⁴⁰ In order to facilitate the collection of funds, the society was divided into smaller classes with a leader over each class to collect the offerings. Wesley used this opportunity to further promote accountability in the group. He writes, “It struck me immediately, ‘This is the thing; the very thing we have wanted so long.’ I called together all the Leaders of the classes, (so we used to term them and their companies,) and desired, that each would make a particular inquiry into the behavior of those whom he saw weekly.”⁴¹ He soon employed this structure in all of his societies.

At the beginning of the classes, the leaders visited all members in their homes to collect the offering and inquire about their faith, but this was too time-consuming. It was more expedient for the classes to meet face to face, which they did. Wesley writes that “advice or reproof was given as need required, quarrels made up, misunderstandings removed: And after an hour or two spent in this labour of love, they concluded with prayer and thanksgiving.”⁴² The class meetings offered the members of societies a time where they were held accountable for their behavior, and each person was to speak

⁴⁰Wesley, *Works*, 8:252.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 252-53.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 253-54.

openly at each meeting. Abel Stevens writes, “In those days, every Methodist, who could command language for ordinary conversation, was expected to pray and bear his ‘testimony’ in his class.”⁴³

The honest reflection of the class meetings and the account of behavior expected therein promoted behavioral change among the members of Methodism. One author notes,

Whereas the society was an instrument for cognitive acquisition, almost to the exclusion of any interpersonal dynamics, the class meeting was a tool for the alteration of behavior, to the virtual exclusion of any data-gathering function.... There was no room here for lecturing or preaching; the emphasis was clearly on present and personal growth, presided over, not by a professional trainer, but by a fellow seeker.⁴⁴

The class leaders were not professionals; however, they were assigned by Wesley and had to follow the rules of class leaders. Leaders were to meet regularly with the assistants over the societies, and assistants examined each leader concerning his effectiveness. Improper leaders were dismissed from their duties.⁴⁵ The classes were organized geographically, following the example of the Moravians. David Watson writes, “The society lists indicate that the division into classes was made solely on the basis of where the members lived, in order to facilitate the weekly meetings.”⁴⁶

Admission into the classes was allowed only through the use of a class ticket. Watson writes, “Attendance was regulated by the issue of a quarterly class ticket,

⁴³Abel Stevens, *Methodism* (London: Wesleyan Conference Centre, 1878), 3:103-04, quoted in Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed*, 93.

⁴⁴Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 96.

⁴⁵Wesley, *Works*, 8:301.

⁴⁶David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985), 94.

obtainable only after an examination by the preacher, and without which one was not in good standing.”⁴⁷ Wesley stated,

To each of those of whose seriousness and good conversation I found no reason to doubt, I gave a testimony under my own hand, by writing their name on a ticket prepared for that purpose; every ticket implying as strong a recommendation of the person to whom it was given as if I had wrote at length, 'I believe the bearer hereof to be one that fears God and works righteousness.'⁴⁸

The tickets helped the classes remain focused on their purpose. By issuing tickets to the classes, Wesley ensured that those attending the classes were growing in their faith and bearing fruit of the Spirit in their lives based on the examination of others.

Bands. The bands were a further division of the societies. Members of bands were also members of class meetings; therefore, the bands were not a competing group, but a group devoted to further growth. The bands were comprised of those who evidenced a deeper communion with Christ and who were willing to participate in more frank soul-searching. In his *Rules of the Band-Societies*, Wesley states, “The design of our meeting is, to obey that command of God, ‘Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed.’”⁴⁹

The bands were similar to the classes, but significant differences defined the two. Watson writes, “The bands had been structured for mutual fellowship and spiritual oversight, with the leader chosen from the members; whereas the classes were formed

⁴⁷David Lowes Watson, *Class Leaders: Recovering a Tradition* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1995), 26-27.

⁴⁸Wesley, *Works*, 8:256-57.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 272.

around appointed leaders.”⁵⁰ Also, the bands were not organized by location as the classes, but “were structured according to age, sex, and marital status.”⁵¹ Wesley describes the bands, saying, “These, therefore, wanted some means of closer union; they wanted to pour out their hearts without reserve, particularly with regard to the sin which did still easily beset them. . . . In compliance with their desire, I divided them into smaller companies; putting the married or single men, and married or single women, together.”⁵² A third distinction between bands and classes was that classes were required whereas bands were voluntary but strongly encouraged.⁵³

The purpose of the bands was not so much behavioral change, as was the intent of the classes, but an examination of the heart and of motives. The bands were intended to be a group where Christians who were more serious about growing in their faith could receive greater teaching and accountability. Henderson writes, "The central function of the band methodology was what Wesley termed 'close conversation,' by which he meant soul-searching examination, not so much of behavior and ideas, but of motives and heartfelt impressions."⁵⁴ For this reason, Henderson outlines the function of the three groups as follows: "It could be said metaphorically that the society aimed for the head, the class meeting for the hands, and the band for the heart."⁵⁵

⁵⁰Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 95.

⁵¹Ibid., 94.

⁵²Wesley, *Works*, 8:258.

⁵³Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 116.

⁵⁴Ibid., 112-13.

⁵⁵Ibid., 112.

Select societies and penitent bands. The final two aspects of Wesley's methodology for discipleship were the select societies and penitent bands. The select societies consisted of the most faithful members of the groups, as the name implies. Henderson writes, "The purpose of this group was to model or exemplify what Methodism was all about, especially the perfecting of the human spirit, and it was to provide a training experience in the doctrines and methods of Methodism."⁵⁶ Those who were moving on toward Christian perfection, according to Wesley's doctrine, met together for mutual edification in the most intimate setting of the organizational structure.⁵⁷ Wesley writes,

So I desired a small number of such as appeared to be in this state, to spend an hour with me every Monday morning. My design was, not only to direct them how to press after perfection; to exercise their every grace, and improve every talent they had received; and to incite them to love one another more, and to watch more carefully over each other; but also to have a select company, to whom I might unbosom myself on all occasions, without reserve; and whom I could propose to all their brethren as a pattern of love, of holiness, and of good works.⁵⁸

The select society was different from the other classes and bands because those present were the most serious about their walk and had the greatest contact with Wesley himself. Also, "It had no rules, it had no leader, and it had no prescribed format. It was a much more democratic group, with no person officially in charge."⁵⁹

⁵⁶Ibid., 121.

⁵⁷Wesley defines Christian perfection as "loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies, that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions, are governed by pure love." For a full explanation of Wesley's view, see "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," Wesley, *Works*, 11:366-446.

⁵⁸Ibid., 8:260.

⁵⁹Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 123.

The penitent bands can be grouped with the select societies because the penitent bands often fed the select societies. In his *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, Wesley mentions the groups successively, showing how the effectiveness of the penitent bands usually prompted a more serious faith in the members that showed them to be ready for the select societies. He writes, “Some fell from the faith, either all at once, by falling into known, willful sin; or gradually, and almost insensibly, by giving way in what they called little things. . . . I separated them from the rest, and desired them to meet me apart on Saturday evenings.”⁶⁰ In the penitent bands, Wesley provided reproof and correction for members who were beginning to stray in order that they might repent and return to the Lord.

Wesley’s penitent bands had some success in leading wayward members to restoration. He continues,

Many of these soon recovered the ground they had lost. Yea, they rose higher than before; being more watchful than ever, and more meek and lowly, as well as stronger in the faith that worketh by love. They now outran the greater part of their brethren, continually walking in the light of God, and having fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.⁶¹

After their reproof and correction, many in the penitent bands were deeper in their faith than before they had fallen into sin and were serious enough to be included in select societies. Not all members of select societies were, however, from penitent bands. Some members who proved to be serious in their faith were chosen out of classes to be involved in the group.

⁶⁰Wesley, *Works*, 8:259-60.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 260.

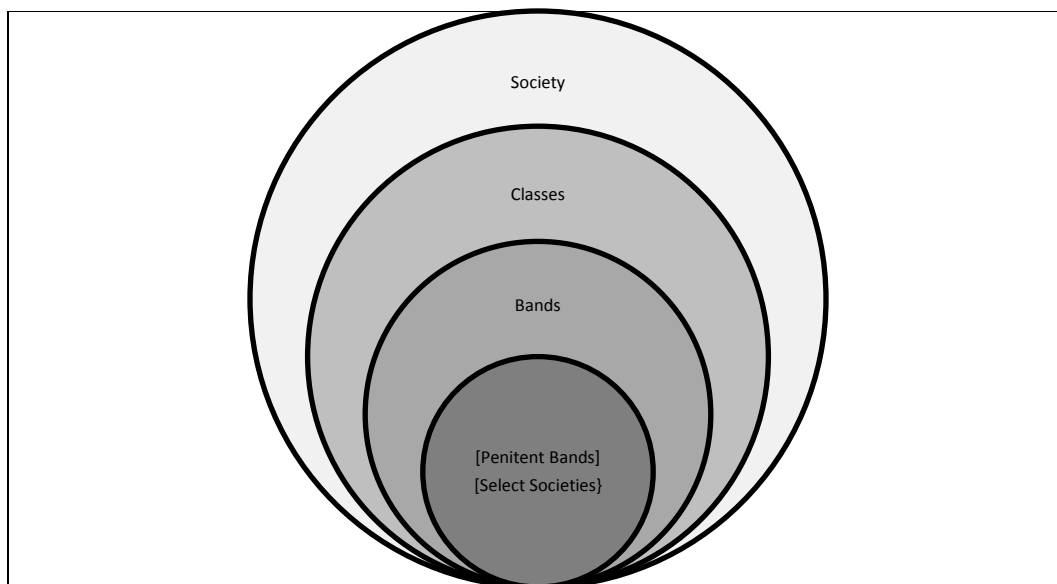


Figure 1. Wesley's Discipleship Structure

Assessment of Wesley's Methods

Many scholars have studied Wesley's methods in great detail and have found them to be biblically based, effective in reaching the population, and practical and holistic in structure. Wesley's structure allowed for effective evangelism and discipleship in his day.

Biblical. An essential point of assessment for any program of discipleship is its faithfulness to Scripture. If a program is seemingly effective, yet unbiblical, then the program should be rejected.

In his societies, Wesley promoted the preaching of the Word, prayer, worship through singing, confession, and fellowship. The societies promoted Christian faithfulness (John 14:15), virtue (1 Pet 1:15-16), and service (Mark 12:31). All of these

components are scripturally based. In his *The Character of a Methodist*, Wesley thus writes,

If any man say, “Why, these are only the common fundamental principles of Christianity!” thou has said; so I mean; this is the very truth; I know they are no other; and I would to God both thou and all men knew, that I, and all who follow my judgment, do vehemently refuse to be distinguished from other men, by any but the common principles of Christianity.⁶²

From the beginning at Oxford, Wesley and his followers were not condemned for being unbiblical, but for taking religion too seriously. Wesley’s small groups allowed teachers to provide Christian instruction in the same pattern that Jesus provided with His disciples. The level of devotion and seriousness that Wesley required of his members is similar to the commitment that Jesus demanded from the Twelve (Luke 9:23-27).

Wesley’s program for discipleship was biblical.

Effective. As one reviews Wesley’s discipleship methodology, he cannot but see that Wesley’s organization was effective. The sheer number of people who were attending Wesley’s open air sermons and who were involved in the Methodist societies was unlike anything that had occurred in England. Murray writes, “Numbers are in themselves no proof of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. . . . Yet what is certain is that the year 1739 saw crowds gathering to hear preaching in numbers that had no comparison in living memory.”⁶³ He adds, “In London one open-air congregation was estimated at fifty

⁶²Ibid., 346.

⁶³Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed*, 25.

thousand. At Blackheath, it was said that Wesley preached to twelve or thirteen thousand people.”⁶⁴

Enormous crowds gathered with interest to hear the preaching of John Wesley, and many of those hearers later became involved in his societies. Wesley’s assistants were designated circuits to preach to several societies in a region. The growth of the circuits during Wesley’s lifetime testifies to the growth of Methodism in England and the effectiveness of his program. Murray writes,

From the nine circuits of 1748, there were fifty in Britain and Ireland by 1770. In 1767, when national figures of his society members were first kept, there were 25,911 in England, and 2,801 in Ireland. In 1770 the figures stood at 29,406 members. Ten years later fourteen more circuits had been added, with membership at 43,830, an increase of 14,424. By 1790, the year before Wesley's death, the number of circuits had risen to 115 and there were 71,568 members.⁶⁵

These statistics show that between 1767 and 1790, a span of 23 years, the number of members involved in Wesley’s societies increased by 42,856 souls. This group began with around 20 people at the first society in London. Murray notes that the structure of the societies promoted the evangelistic fervor of the Methodists. He writes, "It was from this fellowship within that there came the one-to-one evangelism without. In a true sense, in Methodism the outreach pattern of the Jerusalem church was seen again."⁶⁶

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid., 83.

⁶⁶Ibid., 93. I realize that large numbers do not automatically equate with effectiveness. In 2 Tim 4:3, Paul warns of a time that people will gather around teachers that share what they want to hear. However, Wesley’s teaching was no “easy-believism.” Rather, Wesley placed great demands upon his followers.

Practical. Not only were Wesley's designs effective, but they were also practical. As has been stated above, Wesley's mother urged him to make his divinity practical, and that he did. The development of Wesley's methodology was an outgrowth of his own experience. He did not set out to create a new method. As one author states, "At no time in his life did he show any special inventiveness of method. He was not the originator of the 'Holy Club,' and in life he originated little or nothing. But what he gripped he made effective."⁶⁷

Wesley emulated what he witnessed in his own home and what he learned from his relationship with the Moravians. One example of the practicality of Wesley's methods was how he organized societies geographically. This structure provided a convenient meeting place for the members which afforded a natural outgrowth among the community. He took another sensible measure to guarantee the accountability of his members through requiring quarterly examinations and issuing class tickets.

Holistic. Wesley's organizational structure also provided for holistic growth among its members. As Henderson stated, the societies, classes, and bands served different purposes. As a member was involved in all three groups, he learned the basics of theology, the behavior of a Christian, and the heart of a Christian. One author writes, "[Wesley] was concerned not only that children and adults be brought into his societies but that young and old be taught and nurtured. His educational background, in his home

⁶⁷Ernest Rattenbury, *Wesley's Legacy to the World* (London: Epworth Press, 1928), 23.

and in the university, helped him to understand that both the head and the heart were involved in the process of salvation."⁶⁸

Goals of Wesley's Methodology

Part of the success of Wesley's program was that the structures facilitated the purposes for which they were created. Wesley's discipleship strategy created a structure that promoted Christian growth, accountability, and community.

Christian growth. Wesley understood that growth was a process, and he made provision for growth to occur. Members began in classes and societies, and as they became more serious, they were placed in bands and select societies to further their Christian journey of faith. David Watson writes,

The critical question for Christian discipleship, therefore, was how to permit God's grace to foster a maturity of constant obedience, so that sanctifying grace might work with an unimpeded love. It was Wesley's theological understanding of this question which led him to adopt what at first seemed an unbelievably simple solution: a weekly meeting of like-minded persons who would exercise a mutual accountability for their discipleship.⁶⁹

The prerequisite for membership was a "desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins," and the classes and societies moved a repentant soul toward Christian maturation.⁷⁰

Accountability. The classes, bands, and select societies promoted accountability within the membership of the Methodist movement. In these meetings,

⁶⁸John Schisler, *Christian Education in Local Methodist Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 20.

⁶⁹Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 64-65.

⁷⁰Wesley, *Works*, 8:270.

participants confessed sin and were exhorted to examine themselves to provide accountability for growth in their faith. In *The Rules of the Band-Societies*, Wesley wrote that each person must speak freely of “the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting.”⁷¹ Examples of questions used in the bands included:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?⁷²

Community. A third aim of Wesley’s program was community. Henderson writes,

It could be generalized that the continental reformers of the sixteenth century had emphasized two great dimensions of church life: the Bible and the sacraments. The next generation of Protestants (seventeenth century) added the dimension of church order and ecclesiastical polity. In the eighteenth century, through the Pietists, the Moravians, and the Methodists, the dimension of Christian community comes into the developmental stream.⁷³

The Methodist movement provided community that was not found in the Anglican Church. Methodism provided a place for the poor to be heard and their voice to be valued. Henderson adds, "Looking back from the perspective of the twentieth century, the Wesleyan class meeting seems to have been the first and probably the most powerful leveling agent which helped to break up the rigid British caste system and provide

⁷¹Ibid., 272.

⁷²Ibid., 273.

⁷³Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 103.

upward social mobility."⁷⁴ The community of the Methodist groups cultivated deep fellowship and Christian love among its members.

Comparison of the Strategies of Wesley and Coleman

As will be shown, Robert Coleman was influenced by the discipleship strategy of John Wesley. As he wrote his dissertation on the growth of the Methodist church in the United States, Coleman reviewed how Francis Asbury and others implemented Wesley's strategy in an American context. He thus became familiar with the organization and structure of Wesley's methods.

Coleman looked to Wesley and the early years of the Methodist church as a golden era of faithfulness and effectiveness to which the Methodist church should aspire once again.⁷⁵ Coleman wrote of Wesley's evangelistic preaching,

When have you last heard preaching like this? It may run counter to the prevailing universalism of our culture, but it is our Wesleyan heritage. And if we want to see the fruits of evangelism in our day as did the early disciples of Wesley, we would do well to emulate their example.⁷⁶

Coleman's discipleship strategy is heavily influenced by Wesley's example.

Similarities between Strategies

Coleman's strategy of discipleship is similar to Wesley's with regard to the goals of his methodology and the content of his discipleship groups. Just as Wesley's groups fostered community, accountability, Christian growth and maturity, Coleman

⁷⁴Ibid., 98.

⁷⁵Robert Coleman, *Nothing to Do but to Save Souls* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1990), 100.

⁷⁶Ibid., 55.

seeks to achieve these same ends through his own groups. Both men also advocate(d) multiplication of the groups.

Creating community is a desired aim in Coleman's groups. Coleman's groups are intentionally small as were Wesley's classes and bands. The average size of Coleman's groups is three to six participants, but some have had as many as eight to twelve people.⁷⁷ Groups smaller than twelve people are ideal for creating more intimate relationships among the members. In a smaller group, each person is given more opportunity and is often more willing to share because of the natural fellowship that develops between the men. Camaraderie is established between the men as they pray for one another and study together. In his work, *Introducing the Prayer Cell*, Coleman describes the community that comes through his groups:

Let your prayer cell share your work and calling. Tell them about your doubts and burdens, as well as your dreams and aspirations. Be willing to face yourself before group introspection. The closer you come to one another in love and understanding, the clearer your faults will be seen. Some of these close friends will know things about you eventually that no one else knows.⁷⁸

This type of fellowship was important to Wesley as he strove to recreate the authentic community of primitive Christianity. Coleman finds it to be important to the success of his groups as well.

A second similarity between the discipleship strategies of the two men is the emphasis placed upon accountability. Wesley adjured participants in his bands to confess sin to one another and give a testimony of God's work in their lives. If members did not

⁷⁷Robert Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

⁷⁸Robert Coleman, *Introducing the Prayer Cell* (Wilmore, KY: Christian Outreach, Inc., 1984), 22.

show evidence of a spiritual desire for growth in their relationship with God, they were either ushered into penitent bands or dismissed altogether. As discerned previously, Wesley used a series of questions in all of his bands that ensured this accountability.⁷⁹

Coleman maintains accountability in his groups as well. He places high expectations upon the members of his groups. If the men miss meetings without reason or fail to show a hunger for spiritual growth, then Coleman ceases to meet with them.⁸⁰ Coleman also uses questions to probe the spiritual condition of his groups. He does not use the same list of questions Wesley utilized. In fact, he does not use a particular list of questions. However, he does query the members about their life and their spiritual walk.

The chief aim of Wesley's groups was to create an environment that produced disciples of Jesus Christ. He cultivated Christian growth and maturity among his followers. He saw in the Church of England a dead form of religion, and his societies were created to promote vitality within the church. The society meetings included Bible study and prayer in which the members were called to greater obedience to the commands of Christ.

Coleman's groups also promote Christian growth and maturity. He leads his groups in Bible study and prayer at each meeting, calling the members to greater discipleship in their relationship to God. Some of his works, such as *Songs of Heaven* and *The New Covenant*, were born out of these Bible studies that he taught to his groups.⁸¹ Coleman writes that the members of the groups should, "Lift up for your

⁷⁹Wesley, *Works*, 8:273. Wesley's accountability questions are found in this chapter on page 72.

⁸⁰Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

⁸¹*Ibid.*

friends the highest possibilities of Christian experience which you have known. Your prayer cell is an instrument of tremendous power and blessing only when each member is laboring for the good of the others, and all together are striving for perfection.”⁸² His desire is to teach men to develop maturing Christian men who will, in turn, teach others to do the same.

As the men in Coleman’s groups grow in Christian maturity, he expects them to reproduce his example of discipleship in the lives of others. He writes,

It does not matter how small the group is at the beginning, provided that they implant their vision in men and women who will in turn pass the word along to others, and that they also reproduce. The early church gave eloquent witness to the dynamic in the hearts of people who take God at His Word and believe that with Him nothing is impossible.⁸³

Wesley shared this desire for multiplication. Within Wesley’s organizational structure, he was constantly training others to become leaders of new groups. Coleman writes about Wesley’s approach, “Persons with special gifts would be recognized, and some, appropriately endowed, made class and band leaders. . . . Significantly, the pastoral functions of ministry, including visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, and looking after the destitute, were carried on largely by the local people themselves.”⁸⁴

Differences between Strategies

There are many similarities between the strategies of Coleman and Wesley, but Coleman’s strategy is not a carbon copy of Wesley’s methods. Coleman’s strategy is not

⁸²Coleman, *Introducing the Prayer Cell*, 23.

⁸³Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1998), 30-31.

⁸⁴Coleman, *Nothing to Do but to Save Souls*, 37.

as organized and structured as was Wesley's strategy. Coleman has never used anything comparable to a society. Wesley's societies were large—functioning like congregations unto themselves. A society meeting was similar to a congregational worship service, including exhortation, singing, and prayer. Coleman's groups function more like a small group meeting, which lacks the exhortation and singing program of Wesley's societies.

Wesley oversaw 71,568 members in his societies the year before he died.⁸⁵

Coleman's groups do not even approach those numbers, though Coleman has never been a leader of a movement as Wesley was. Wesley also directed circuit riders who led each of these societies. Coleman has never employed this kind of hierarchical structure in his groups. In fact, he has never overseen the groups of others, merely his own. Wesley's strategy was thus far more expansive and intricate than Coleman's strategy.

Coleman works on the more intimate level. Coleman's strategy can properly be compared only to Wesley's bands and select societies, but even that comparison is not an exact equivalent. Wesley's bands were organized geographically and according to gender and marital status.⁸⁶ Coleman's groups have no geographical or marital organization. His groups are almost always comprised of his students or fellow professors in his departments who may or may not be married or live in proximity to one another. Women were involved in some of Coleman's groups, but his personal discipling was always restricted to men. Coleman leads only one group at a time, whereas Wesley led multiple groups simultaneously.

⁸⁵Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed*, 83.

⁸⁶Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 94.

The differences between the strategies of Wesley and Coleman are mostly found in the scope of the strategy. Despite these differences, real similarities can be drawn that emphasize the influence of Wesley's discipleship strategy on Coleman. Indeed, Wesley's strategy has wielded a great influence upon Coleman.

The Historical Context of Coleman's Discipleship Strategy

Not only was Robert Coleman influenced by the founder of the Methodist church, but he has also been impacted by historical influences during his own lifetime. Coleman has been touched by developments in the American evangelical church and within the Methodist church.

The State of the Evangelical Church in America

During the 1950s, the decade of Coleman's post-graduate study and work as a pastor, the evangelical church in the United States saw tremendous growth. According to Gaustad and Schmidt,

For two decades following World War II, mainstream religion prospered. Church membership rose to nearly 65 percent of the national population, its highest proportion ever. . . . And in 1957 the U.S. Bureau of the Census conducted a poll that discovered that an astounding 96 percent of the nation's citizens identified themselves with some religious tradition, whether or not they were members or contributors or attendees.⁸⁷

⁸⁷Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt, *The Religious History of America* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 341.

Many Americans were flocking to churches, resulting in some of the greatest growth that the church had witnessed since the Second Great Awakening.⁸⁸

Crusades and revivals were popular during this period, and many people made professions of faith at these events. Follow-up with those who made decisions was sporadic.⁸⁹ Churches struggled with discipleship, and parachurch organizations which focused on discipleship rose in popularity during this time, such as the Navigators, Campus Crusade for Christ, and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.⁹⁰

Coleman was himself involved with a regional movement during his college days. The Youth Revival Movement was prevalent in Texas during the late 1940s and

⁸⁸Charles S. Kelley, *How Did They Do It? The Story of Southern Baptist Evangelism* (Covington, LA: Insight Press, 1993), 35. Referring specifically to Southern Baptists, Chuck Kelley writes, "Virtually every statistical category measured by Southern Baptists increased during the decade of 1945-1955. It was a great time of growth for the United States in the aftermath of World War II, but the progress of the SBC was even greater." C. E. Matthews, the secretary of evangelism for the Southern Baptist Convention, led the SBC to adopt a specific program of evangelism for the first time in its history. Under his leadership, "The size of the Southern Baptist Convention grew five times faster than the population of the United States at a time when the nation's population was exploding."

⁸⁹John Mark Terry, *Evangelism: A Concise History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 170. Terry writes, "In 1956 [Billy] Graham preached a crusade in Glasgow, Scotland and the team announced 52,253 decisions for Christ. However, only 3,802 (7 percent) actually joined a local church as a result. After the Toronto crusade, the Evangelistic Association reported that 902 out of 8,161 inquirers had joined a church or intended to do so. . . . They attribute the dismaying results to poor follow-up by local churches." Although these were international crusades, the statistics do not differ for US crusades.

⁹⁰The Navigators were founded by Dawson Trotman in 1933. According to their website, "In the early 1950s, Billy Graham, then a young, up and coming evangelist, pleaded with Dawson Trotman to help him follow up on the thousands who were committing their lives to Christ at his crusades. Dawson assigned key men to help Graham develop materials and train workers. Daws and Graham became close friends in the process, and Graham preached at Daws' funeral in 1956." "History" [on-line]; accessed 07 April 2012; available from <http://www.navigators.org/us/aboutus/history>; Internet.

Campus Crusade for Christ was founded by Bill Bright in 1951. "About Us" [on-line]; accessed 30 December 2010; available from <http://campuscrusadeforchrist.com/about-us>; Internet.

According to the InterVarsity website, "InterVarsity traces its roots to a movement of British university students in the 1870s. The first InterVarsity chapter in the United States began in 1938 at the University of Michigan. Since InterVarsity was incorporated in 1941, thousands of students have become thoughtful representatives of God's kingdom and have moved into leadership roles in churches, organizations, corporations and agencies around the world." "About Us" [on-line]; accessed 07 April 2012; available from <http://www.intervarsity.org/about/our/ministry-overview>; Internet.

early 1950s. The Youth Revival Movement was heavily infused with college students, mostly from Baylor University, who were training to be ministers and who were leading citywide revivals across the South.⁹¹ Although Coleman did not attend Baylor University, he was included in some of the revivals led by this group of young people. Many of these young preachers found receptive partners in local churches who worked alongside them in their efforts. Bruce McIver writes,

The support of the pastors in churches across the land was overwhelming. This was new territory for them. Their confidence in opening their churches and their pulpits to “acne-faced 19-year-old kids” (as Jess Moody describes us) was amazing. They greeted us when we arrived, prayed with us before each service, shared with us their own needs, sat on the front rows and nodded their heads in approval, and cheered us on to the next revival! What encouragement! What respect.⁹²

He preached in citywide revivals of the Youth Revival Movement and witnessed firsthand the tremendous outpouring of the Spirit of God.

During the 1950s, much of the urban population was moving out of the cities, creating suburban areas where many churches thrived. Justo Gonzalez writes,

Churches in suburbia grew rapidly. The 1950s and early 1960s were the great age of church architecture, with local and affluent congregations financing the building of vast and beautiful sanctuaries, educational buildings, and other facilities. . . . All, however, was not well. By and large, the mainline churches had abandoned the inner cities, now populated by the poor and by racial minorities. In spite of valiant efforts on the part of some, mainline Christianity had become so acculturated to the ethos of the newly affluent suburban areas, that it lost contact with the masses in the cities and with its rural roots and constituency.⁹³

⁹¹“Youth Revival Movement” [on-line]; accessed 31 August 2011; available from http://www.txbc.org/BaptistBriefs/Archives/Topic/BB_YouthRev.htm; Internet.

⁹²Bruce McIver, *Riding the Wind of God: A Personal History of the Youth Revival Movement* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2002), 85.

⁹³Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 2:380.

Despite these signs of growth, Gonzalez identifies problems that were beginning to surface in many evangelical denominations, such as losing their connection with their roots. As denominations lost the connection Gonzalez describes, growth in the churches waned, and they searched for the solution to maintain their recent growth trends.

Charles S. Kelley states that churches in the Southern Baptist Convention in particular lost their focus on discipleship. He remarks,

When our baptismal numbers started to weaken we intensified our focus on harvest strategies and methods. We should have paid more attention to our discipleship process. The defining characteristic of Southern Baptists at our best was being 'disciple-istic': having a passionate, evangelistic discipleship. We refused to let go of one in order to pursue the other.⁹⁴

Coleman also began to realize that discipleship was neglected in the American evangelical church. From his childhood experience, Coleman felt the effects of neglect in discipleship in the church of his upbringing. After conversion, Coleman further understood that discipleship was neglected at least by the churches with which he was in contact. Through his seminary studies, he realized that training in discipleship was not being taught to ministers of the future. Coleman's experience corresponds with evidence cited by historians which shows a broader neglect of discipleship among evangelical churches.

⁹⁴Charles S. Kelley, "Are Southern Baptists the New Methodists?" [on-line]; accessed 12 March 2009; available from <http://www.nobts.edu/mp3s/2009/March/3.mp3>; Internet.

The State of the Methodist Church

The Methodist church struggled during this time as well. Leading up to the 1950s and 1960s, the Methodist Church was on a trajectory away from orthodox Christian doctrine and toward liberalism. This progression began in the Methodist seminaries and schools and eventually made its way to the Methodist churches by this time period.

Historian Glenn Miller describes this shift that occurred in Methodist schools as follows:

Both [classical and liberal Methodism] emphasized religious experience over creedal formulations and both stressed the importance of the active, moral life as the supreme mark of grace. Both were also temperamentally predisposed to an ecumenical outlook that saw religious truth in a variety of perspectives. . . . Methodism eased into the new liberalism, often with individual Methodists hardly aware that a change had been made. In short, American Methodism was ready to take some new directions in schooling.⁹⁵

The Robert Kelly and O. D. Foster report on theological education in the United States, released in 1920, found a shift in theological education occurring among Methodists, noting that these schools placed more emphasis upon more recent liberal theological developments than the historical teaching of theological education. Gary Dorrien concludes, “In many ways these [Methodist] schools illustrated the modern trends that were influencing even more conservative institutions The Methodists

⁹⁵Glenn T. Miller, *Piety and Profession* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 251.

were in fact the vanguard of the changes that were taking place in Protestant theological education.”⁹⁶

Albert Knudson was one of the most influential Methodist theologians of the early 20th century. Knudson served as dean of Boston University’s School of Theology and was a disciple of Borden Parker Bowne, who was instrumental in propagating liberal theology in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Dorrien writes,

Knudson’s Methodism was formative, deeply felt, and ironic. He spent his life in Methodist institutions and published his books exclusively with Methodist houses, yet his writing was pitched to a trans-denominational liberal audience. Most of his books rarely quoted or even referred to Wesley, and he dismissed the major theologians of the Methodist tradition.⁹⁷

Methodist schools were moving away from their heritage in the teachings of John Wesley and were embracing a new, modern liberal movement. As these schools trained ministers according to these ideals, it was not long before the Methodist churches felt the influence as well.

Part of the liberal shift in Methodist theology was a move away from Wesley’s call to evangelism and discipleship and toward the social gospel instead. According to Dorrien,

The social gospel movement was launched in the late nineteenth century by Congregationalists, Baptists, and Episcopalians, but at the turn of the twentieth century liberal Methodists converted to it, and quickly became the movement’s leading denominational force.⁹⁸

⁹⁶Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 330-31.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 531.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 293-94.

Methodists' neglect of evangelism and discipleship for social causes contributed to their precipitous fall in church membership over the twentieth century. According to Finke and Stark, the Methodist Episcopal Church fell from 79 adherents per 1,000 population in 1951 to 55 adherents per 1,000 population in 1971. That number fell again to 47 adherents per 1,000 in 1986. Finke and Stark reveal the severity of the problem by stating, "In 1985 a third of the nation's Methodist churches had performed no baptisms, infant or adult; nearly two thirds had no membership training or confirmation classes; and nearly half had no list of potential new members."⁹⁹

It was in this context that Robert Coleman was educated and served as a pastor and professor. It was to this denomination that he would issue a clarion call to return to biblical evangelism and discipleship.

His Methodist Background

In writing to the church at Philippi, the apostle Paul revealed that his pedigree as a Jew was unquestionable: "Circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee" (Phil 3:5). Robert Coleman could say the same regarding his pedigree as a Methodist. He grew up attending the Methodist church and graduated from a Methodist college (Southwestern University). Saved as a college student, Coleman attempted to find fellowship in the local Methodist churches, but found them unwelcoming. Undeterred, upon graduating from Southwestern University, Coleman enrolled in a Wesleyan seminary (Asbury

⁹⁹Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 167.

Theological Seminary). He is ordained in the Methodist church as a minister of the gospel. The churches he pastored were all Methodist churches, and he taught in a Wesleyan seminary for twenty-seven years (Asbury Theological Seminary).

Coleman's concern for the state of his church is that much greater because of his background as a Methodist. Coleman was deeply impacted by the lack of discipleship in the modern Methodist church. His love for God and for the Methodist church compels him to stand firmly against the tide of liberalism in his church and to call her back to her heritage of evangelism and discipleship. He writes, "I have grown up and ministered within the Methodist connection, and I understand its strengths and weaknesses better than those of other communions."¹⁰⁰

His Dissertation Topic

When choosing a dissertation topic for his doctoral degree, Coleman chose to write on the growth of the Methodist church in America from 1784-1812. This period of growth in the Methodist church has been unparalleled in American church history. The era was a high-water mark for the Methodist church in America, and it was to this era in Methodist history that Coleman turned for closer examination. In this period, the Methodist church was reaching thousands of Americans, and Coleman wanted to know what factors led to this growth.

In his studies, Coleman became familiar with the work of Francis Asbury and early Methodist circuit riders and their strategy for evangelism and discipleship. The circuit riders were sent out to the American frontier and wherever they found communities of settlers, they preached and formed classes. Asbury and the American

¹⁰⁰Coleman, *Nothing to Do but to Save Souls*, 21.

Methodists duplicated the strategy that Wesley used so effectively in England.

Concerning the Methodist structure Coleman comments, “In that was the greatest discipleship program . . . that has ever been devised in American church history.”¹⁰¹ This strategy informed and influenced Coleman in his practice of discipleship. When asked about the connection between Wesley’s discipleship strategy and his own, Coleman remarks, “The principles are the same.” He adds, “[Wesley’s] influence would be inevitable because years ago when I did my doctoral work I was so engrossed in what he had written.”¹⁰²

His Theological Concerns

Coleman is an anachronism in the modern Methodist church. He would have found many like-minded peers among Wesley’s societies or Asbury’s churches, but he is a voice crying in the wilderness today. As Dennis Kinlaw opines,

It is seldom that a prophet is popular. His point of view is so contradictory to the common wisdom. Worse, his influence often becomes disruptive to established procedures. He can be seen as a threat to the structures. His only allies are time, the quickened conscience, the Spirit-touched understanding, and history. Little wonder that he is seen as “a troubler of Israel” and must be, for comfort’s sake, neutralized. Robert Coleman in this little volume [*Nothing to Do but to Save Souls*] is a prophet. He sees the obvious and that takes some doing. The reality is that it takes the divine touch. Coleman knows his Bible. He knows the history of his church. He loves both. His concern is the obvious malaise in the church, which he owns.¹⁰³

In particular, two areas of concern for Coleman were the denial of the authority of Scripture espoused in the Methodist church as well as their drift away from evangelism and discipleship.

¹⁰¹Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Dennis Kinlaw, foreword to Robert Coleman, *Nothing to Do but to Save Souls*, 11-12.

Belief in the authority and accuracy of the Bible has never been difficult for Coleman. As already stated, Coleman “never rebelled against the Bible. I just always assumed the Bible was true. When I learned later that there were people who didn’t believe Jesus was the Son of God who would preach, I was flabbergasted.”¹⁰⁴ Coleman finds in the Methodist church preachers and teachers who do not share his view of the authority of Scripture. He attacks this approach, saying, “Personal testimony, though convincing, is not infallible. That is why ultimately all experience must be measured by the Word of God, the Holy Scripture, the only final authority for our faith. What we believe by experience must be attested by the Bible or it is not reliable.”¹⁰⁵

All Christian doctrine is affected when the authority of Scripture is questioned, including the necessity of evangelism. Without a conviction of the veracity of Scripture, the commands of Scripture are often viewed as optional. Coleman writes,

The written deposit of this “heavenly teaching” is the canon of inspired Scripture. As the Word of God, uncorrupted by human finite and defiled experience, the Bible speaks without error “in all that it affirms, the only infallible rule of faith and practice.” Herein, is the objective authority for all Christian theology. “It is impossible,” as Calvin observes, “for man to obtain even the minutest portion of light and sound doctrine without being a disciple of this Book.” Not surprisingly, then, systems of thought which circumvent or compromise scriptural verities do not produce strong evangelistic concern.¹⁰⁶

The second major concern for Coleman was the Methodist church’s drift away from its historic evangelistic fervor. The evangelism and discipleship program of early Methodists was their hallmark. At its inception, the Methodist church grew at a phenomenal rate. Coleman bemoans, though, the current state of Methodist evangelism,

¹⁰⁴Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

¹⁰⁵Robert Coleman, *The Spirit and the Word* (Wilmore, KY: Christian Outreach, Inc., 1988), 5.

¹⁰⁶Robert Coleman, “Theology of Evangelism,” *Review and Expositor* 77 (1980): 473.

saying, “As the years lengthened, however, the evangelistic momentum subsided, and by the turn of the twentieth century decline of church growth was clearly evident, a trend that has drastically accelerated in recent years.”¹⁰⁷ He adds,

Much of the Methodist membership loss has been amalgamated into other branches of the Christian family where a more hospitable evangelical environment now exists. We can be grateful for the way former Methodists have enriched the ministry of other churches, even as they have added to their numbers. But one cannot help but have a certain nostalgia for those early days when Methodism was probably the greatest soul-saving movement on the face of the earth.¹⁰⁸

His Reaction to the Methodist Church

The current state of the Methodist church has impacted Coleman. As he studied in Methodist seminaries, he recognized that no emphasis was placed upon evangelism or evangelism training for ministers. Coleman earned his doctorate degree so that he could teach fellow Methodists about evangelism and discipleship. He viewed his role as a professor in the Methodist seminary as being a stalwart conservative, promoting the authority of Scripture and the necessity of evangelism.¹⁰⁹ Concerning the neglect of evangelism, he writes, “Would that we could recover the burden for a perishing world felt so deeply by our Methodist progenitors!”¹¹⁰

Clear biblical teaching, such as the substitutionary atonement of Christ, has been subverted in the modern Methodist Church. Coleman writes,

¹⁰⁷Coleman, *Nothing to Do but to Save Souls*, 19. Coleman continues to share this disappointment in a recent interview. Robert Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 99.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 54.

Regrettably, this concept of substitution is often ignored by modern theologians. Some relate it all to myth. A more common approach, however, is to interpret Christ's death primarily as a revelation of love or self-dedication. The sacrifice is not regarded as changing the relationship of God to man, but as furnishing the basis for an appeal to the sinner. The force of the Cross is directed manward, not Godward. This moral influence idea, reminiscent of ancient Socinianism, runs through much of the teaching in Methodist churches today.¹¹¹

This prompts the question why Coleman remains a member of the Methodist church. One sees in both Wesley and Coleman a loyalty to their mother church. Wesley never left the Church of England. Only after his death did Methodism become a separate denomination. Despite the fact that the Anglican Church took issue with Wesley's program of discipleship, he never turned from the church. Coleman, likewise, is still a part of the Methodist church despite his misgivings.¹¹² He answers the question honestly in *Nothing to Do but to Save Souls*:

In view of the generally renegade position I have taken, frequently persons have asked me why I remain a Methodist. It is a valid question—one that a number of my friends with similar convictions have answered logically by joining the millions in my generation who have left the church. While their going diminishes the strength of the evangelical remnant who stay, I understand their feelings, and rejoice that so many of them have found more compatible fellowship in other communions. After all, John Wesley took much the same course with the ecclesiastical order of his day, though technically, despite the buffeting of the hierarchy, he remained a priest of the decadent Church of England until the end of his life.

In this sense, I too, still have credentials with the church of my youth, though, as with Wesley, increasingly my ministry has followed the movement of the Gospel in a much wider sphere of outreach. What difference does the name on the church door make?

As to the future of United Methodism, there is cause for concern. The loss of more than 2,000,000 members in the past two decades is the greatest loss in so short a period ever sustained by an American denomination. And though some leaders

¹¹¹Ibid., 64-65.

¹¹²Coleman's involvement with the Methodist church is marginal. Although he maintains his credentials with the church, he has not attended a Methodist church for a number of years.

have expressed alarm and called for renewal, by and large the cancer of theological apostasy that eats at the vitals of evangelism is not being addressed, least of all the Methodist colleges and seminaries. Until the issue is resolved with integrity, and the faith and commitment that gave birth to the Wesleyan revival recovered, we cannot expect a change of direction.¹¹³

While maintaining his credentials with the Methodist church, Coleman has not, however, attended a Methodist church for a number of years. He maintains his position in more recent class lectures, stating,

I do not want you to judge me as a representative of the Methodist church because I am the black sheep. I am not in step with the bishops. They don't like it because I don't recommend my kids to go to a Methodist school—none of them did. I don't recommend anyone to go to a Methodist seminary and the Board of Education doesn't like that. I don't recommend their literature or Sunday School material and the Board of Publication doesn't like that. So you can see that I'm in trouble with the bishops, but it doesn't bother me in the least.¹¹⁴

He is currently attending the Southland Church, a non-denominational church near his home in Wilmore, Kentucky, with his daughter and son-in-law and their family.

Conclusion

The discipleship strategy of Robert Coleman was not created in a vacuum. The development of his strategy was greatly impacted by his context. His upbringing in the Methodist church introduced him to the program of John Wesley, which has been the greatest influence upon Coleman's strategy. But he was also shaped by the religious environment of his day. As the American evangelical church began to lose its focus on evangelism and discipleship, especially his own Methodist Church, Coleman joined others in searching for answers.

¹¹³Coleman, *Nothing to Do but to Save Souls*, 100.

¹¹⁴Robert Coleman, "On the Evangelism of John Wesley" (classroom lecture notes, 80513: *Historical Issues in Evangelism and Church Growth*, Spring 2009), audio recording.

CHAPTER 4

A PRACTICAL ANALYSIS: A DESCRIPTION AND APPRAISAL OF COLEMAN'S MINISTRY OF DISCIPLESHIP

Robert Coleman is not merely an author on the subject of discipleship; he is also a practitioner. Coleman's writing concerning discipleship is widely read. The effectiveness of his discipleship strategy is strengthened by the fact that he has actively practiced discipleship throughout his life as a Christian.

This chapter will provide analysis of Coleman's discipleship strategy by examining how he has used his strategy for discipleship in his own life. The chapter will cover how Coleman strives for growth in his own relationship with the Lord. It will also examine how he has been a spiritual leader in his home by discipling his family. The chapter will study his discipleship as a pastor and as a professor in his ministry. Finally, it will offer a summary to Coleman's discipleship practice as a whole.

His Personal Discipleship in His Life

Coleman is a man who strives to grow in his personal relationship with God. He believes that one's personal relationship with God is "everything. It is primary. You cannot lead others from a relationship that is not up-to-date."¹ He adds, "It is always the

¹Robert Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

will of God for us to be in communion with Him and to have the lines open to heaven. That has to be settled first.”² Coleman ensures that his relationship with God is alive by paying careful attention to his own spiritual condition.

After Coleman’s conversion as a student in Georgetown, Texas, he did not find ready help to disciple him from the Methodist church that he attended. As a spiritual babe, he found fellowship with fellow classmates who provided encouragement and discipleship in his new faith. He began a prayer group with other students from his dormitory, including his roommate and two to four others. This group met nightly in the top floor of the administration building at ten o’clock in the evening. The young men prayed together as well as shared about their lives with each other.³ This group served to hold Coleman accountable in his relationship to God and provided the nourishment he needed to grow.

Once Coleman moved to Asbury Theological Seminary in 1948, he knew that he needed to find men with whom he could meet in this same fashion. He learned of a group that met nightly in the attic of one of the buildings and joined them. He states, “I put myself in an environment where I could find encouragement [to pursue my spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ].”⁴

At this point in Coleman’s life, the groups that he participated in were providing only prayer and accountability. Coleman asserts, however, that “it really wasn’t until I began to study the Bible and examine the life of Christ that I began to

²Ibid.

³Robert Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

⁴Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

understand what discipleship was all about.”⁵ As Coleman began to practice the spiritual disciplines of Bible study, prayer, and evangelism, his relationship with God progressed. He thus offers this insight to new believers: “[The Bible] is the means by which God speaks to your faith. As a child desirous of the Father’s will, you should learn as much of His Word as you can. Read it carefully, study it systematically, memorize it diligently, meditate upon it continuously and practice it faithfully.”⁶ To this admonition he adds practical advice on prayer, saying, “You commune with God through prayer. It is the air which your spirit breathes. You cannot live without it. Pray in the morning when you get up, and again before going to bed at night. Always give thanks to God before every meal. And sometime during the day, if possible, have prayer with your family.”⁷

Coleman has made Bible study and prayer a habit in his daily life. Each morning he has devotions with his wife, Marietta, over breakfast, after which they pray together for ten to twenty minutes. He prays before bed each night by himself. Prayer has become such a habit for Coleman that during a hospitalization, he even crawled out of the bed and knelt beside it for prayer because he is “unable to go to sleep without praying.”⁸ Coleman also tries to find time during the day to be alone for Bible study and prayer for thirty minutes to an hour. During this time, Coleman studies the Bible more in-depth, as opposed to a devotional reading of the Word of God.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Robert Coleman, *Established by the Word of God: Bible Lessons for New Christians* (Wilmore, KY: Christian Outreach Inc., 1969), 27.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

Coleman also takes special times throughout the year for a spiritual retreat. He admits that these retreats are not scheduled, but he gets away for a day or more for greater introspection through prayer and Bible study. He states, “I realize that I need times like these where I can truly focus.”⁹

He is also an avid reader. He reads books on Christian growth for his own benefit, and he often reads these books with the group that he is leading. Some of his favorites include the works of John Wesley, John Bunyan, and Jonathan Edwards.¹⁰ Coleman also asks his students about books that have greatly impacted and inspired them so that he can learn from these books as well. Coleman’s desire for personal growth has strengthened his own relationship with God and has made him a better discipler of others.

That is not to say, though, that Coleman recognizes no room for growth. He states, “I’ve had times that I went through valleys, when I wasn’t where I wanted to be spiritually, but I’ve never wanted to look back.”¹¹ He is disciplined in his walk with the Lord, faithfully spending time in prayer and Bible study. Yet Coleman comments, “I haven’t arrived yet. The Lord has more work to do.”¹²

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid. He enjoys Jonathan Edwards’ *The Religious Affections*, John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, and John Wesley’s *Works*. He also enjoys Charles Finney’s *Lectures to Professing Christians*, E.M. Bounds’ *Power through Prayer*, Andrew Murray’s *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, Courtney Anderson’s *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson*, and Hudson Taylor’s *Spiritual Secret* by Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor.

¹¹Robert Coleman, telephone interview by author, 30 August 2011.

¹²Ibid.

His Personal Discipleship as a Father/Husband

The first place that Coleman focuses his discipleship strategy is his own family. He takes seriously his charge as the spiritual leader of his household, and he views his role as husband and father as a discipler.

Coleman states that “the home is where discipleship really begins.”¹³ He understands the family as a place where husbands are to lead their wives and parents are to disciple their children. He opines, “I believe that God has given us the home as a place to learn what the Great Commission is all about. He made it so that when we come into the world, we come into a family. In that context, each of us has the opportunity to learn the meaning of discipleship.”¹⁴ One’s early, formative years in the home provide a training ground for the concepts of discipleship. As a person grows into an adult and begins a family, he is wise to reflect on his own upbringing. He reproduces the positive aspects of his rearing and corrects the negative ones. Coleman states, “Discipling is like raising kids.”¹⁵

The first relationship that Coleman has as a discipler is husband. As noted, he and his wife, Marietta, have devotions together each morning at breakfast. During this time, the couple studies the Bible together, prays together, and talks about their lives and

¹³Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵ Robert Coleman, “On *The Master Plan of Evangelism*” (classroom lecture notes, 80513: *Historical Issues in Evangelism and Church Growth*, Spring 2009), audio recording.

their plans for the day. Coleman recalls, “This pattern started very early” in their marriage, but it is one that they continue to the present day.¹⁶

Their relationship is one of mutual edification, as Marietta challenges Coleman and encourages him in his discipleship ministry. He shares that he was struck not only by Marietta’s physical beauty as a seminary student, but also by her spiritual beauty. When the couple met at Asbury, Marietta served as the chaplain of her class. In her, Coleman saw the woman he desired to marry. He remarks, “I was not only looking for a girl who was good looking but one who had more religion than me. I figured that a preacher who can’t out-marry himself doesn’t have enough sense to be a preacher.”¹⁷

The temperaments of the couple serve to complement one another as well. Marietta is more shy and reserved, whereas Coleman is more outgoing and boisterous. Marietta’s spiritual gifts for hospitality have been a tremendous asset to Coleman’s discipleship ministry because she opened their home to many of his students.¹⁸ Coleman concludes that “after your decision for Christ, the next greatest decision that you make is your mate.”¹⁹

Coleman was also personally involved in discipling his children. His oldest daughter, Alatheia, married a minister in the Presbyterian church, and they live in Texas. His middle daughter, Angela, married Lawson Stone, who is a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky. His youngest child, Jimmy, is an engineer who lives in Georgia and teaches the Westminster Shorter Catechism to his children and the

¹⁶Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

children at his church. Each of Coleman's children made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as his or her Lord and Savior and is actively involved in the ministry of the church.²⁰

Coleman's children are where they are now spiritually, in part, because he and Marietta intentionally disciplined them when they were young. Coleman admits that discipling a child is not always easy, but it is a vital part of being a father. He made a family devotion a part of their family's schedule. The children were not always interested or engaged, but Coleman and his wife invested in their children's spiritual life, and that investment paid dividends as the children grew. Coleman admits that he was not a perfect father and that he could have been more intentional in discipling his children, but he was earnest in trying to raise them in the admonition of the Lord.²¹

Coleman's pattern of family devotion is the same discipleship strategy that he uses in other facets of his ministry. He spent time with the children reading the Bible and praying together. He also made it a point to ask the children what they were facing in school and in their personal lives.

Discipling his children was incorporated into their everyday pattern of life. For example, as the family drove to church, he would speak with them about what they were learning. He concludes that "the home is the crucial thing in the Great Commission. It is there where you begin to learn of a vision for reaching the world through the influence of your parents, of what is important to them, of their own ministry,

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

and of giving. If the mom and dad have a missionary heart, it will overflow onto their children.”²²

His Corporate Discipleship as a Pastor

When Coleman began his ministry as a pastor, he was a young seminary student in Kentucky. For a span of six years, he served Methodist churches in the states of Indiana, New Jersey, and Iowa. Reflecting on his tenure as a pastor, Coleman acknowledges that his discipleship strategy was yet to be fully formulated. However, he was learning the principles that would later be developed into his discipleship strategy.

Coleman’s discipleship strategy as a pastor largely consisted of maintaining the programs of the Methodist church. The churches held a Sunday School, but one-to-one discipleship as a lifestyle was not part of the program. Further discipling was minimal. Coleman states, “I preached the gospel and lots of people were saved. We used the old Methodist catechism with new converts for a few weeks.”²³ Intentional discipling of new converts did not occur regularly.

During this time, the principles that Coleman would pen in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* were beginning to take shape in his ministry.²⁴ He states, “I did some things right there without realizing it because I would stay [at the homes of church members] on

²²Ibid.

²³Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

²⁴The principles from *The Master Plan of Evangelism* will be evaluated biblically in the next chapter.

the weekends and just live with the people.”²⁵ Coleman gathered church members to pray together and took them out for door-to-door visitation.²⁶ By living with the people, Coleman was able to practice the principle of association. He also displayed the principle by participating in their daily routines. He recalls that he would “do their chores with them—milking the cows, slopping the hogs, shucking the corn. Many of those people were converted and became leaders in the churches.”²⁷

The principle of consecration was evident in his pastoral ministry as well. Coleman did not merely spend time with his church members through association, but he made the time valuable in their spiritual walk. Through his preaching and through personal conversations with his church members, he taught them that obedience to the commands of God was crucial to every disciple. He comments, “We were always talking about the gospel in their homes, and we would stay up half the night talking about spiritual things. [Discipleship] is what we were doing.”²⁸

The principle of impartation could also be seen in Coleman’s ministry as a pastor. Coleman was imparting his own life into the lives of his church members by traveling to the churches, working with the people, and sharing with them what God was teaching him. His enthusiasm concerning his walk with the Lord rubbed off on his

²⁵Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

²⁶Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

²⁷Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

²⁸Ibid.

church members. As described in chapter 2, Perseverance Chapel, a small church in Harrison County, Indiana, is located in an area not even considered to be a town, yet the people experienced revival during Coleman's pastorate.²⁹ As a result, the church members, mostly comprised of carpenters and farmers, built a new sanctuary to house the growth of the church.³⁰

The principle of demonstration was developing in Coleman's ministry during his time as a pastor as well. Coleman prayed with his church members in their homes, teaching them the importance of prayer. He took his members to visit the sick and to invite prospects to church and to evangelize them. In other words, the church members participated in the ministry with him. These acts were teaching opportunities for Coleman as he demonstrated spiritual disciplines to his congregation.

The final three principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (delegation, supervision, and reproduction) were not a strong part of Coleman's pastoral ministry. While serving in Iowa, Coleman led a large youth group in one of the churches, and he did begin to delegate some ministry responsibilities to them. By following the principle of delegation, Coleman witnessed some of these students develop in ministry and several became missionaries.³¹ This example aside, delegation, supervision, and reproduction

²⁹Margaret Chaffin, telephone interview by author, 02 September 2011. After the first night of revival, Coleman and other men in the church rang the church bell for hours until late in the night. Coleman learned that in that community, the church rang the bell each time that a community member passed away. According to Chaffin, Coleman stated, "This church is dead and we are going to let the community know tonight." Eventually, neighbors called the police and the men stopped ringing the bell. Coleman's announcement garnered the church and community's attention. Chaffin recalls the church experienced growth during this time and plans were made to build a larger sanctuary. The building was completed after Coleman's departure.

³⁰Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

³¹Ibid.

were principles that Coleman had yet to consistently incorporate into his discipleship strategy.

Upon reflection, Coleman acknowledges that these components of discipleship were missing from his ministry. He confesses,

The churches did grow, but I did not reproduce leadership in the churches to any marked degree. I didn't have any other plan for reproduction than the program of the church. I was reproducing the program of the church which was not centered in discipleship at all. If I had known [the principles] then, I could have been a much more effective pastor.³²

Though Coleman was beginning to put into practice many of the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, they were yet undeveloped in his mind. He was naturally exhibiting many of the principles without yet understanding the intentional pattern of discipleship that Christ set forth with His own disciples, especially the command for them to reproduce His example in their own lives. He concludes, "I never had a very intentional sense of the Great Commission as a lifestyle until I began to see the example of Christ" in Scripture.³³

His Personal Discipleship as a Professor

Once Coleman returned to Asbury Theological Seminary as a professor in 1955, his strategy for discipleship became fully developed and his ministry of discipleship grew significantly. The principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* are most easily seen in the discipleship ministry of Coleman as a professor.

As a professor leading seminary students in the study of evangelism, Coleman set to work developing his class lectures. He had never had any formal training in

³²Ibid.

³³Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

evangelism himself, so the task of leading students in evangelism was not a simple one. He turned to the Scriptures, studying the life of Jesus to find the biblical example of evangelism and discipleship. His first class was entitled “The Evangelism of Jesus.” The required reading for this course was the Bible and A. T. Robertson’s *A Harmony of the Gospels*.³⁴ As Coleman studied the example of Jesus in training His own disciples, the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* became much more clear.

Christ’s example of discipleship made the full extent of the Great Commission evident to Coleman. The Great Commission was about more than evangelism—it was about a lifestyle in which one intentionally invests himself in the lives of others, training them to evangelize and then disciple others until all the world hears the gospel of Jesus Christ. This revelation challenged Coleman concerning his past practices in evangelism and discipleship.

When he saw the example of Christ in Scripture, he asked himself, “Are you doing it? And I said, ‘I don’t suppose I am.’ So, I immediately set about doing it.”³⁵ Coleman would later write, “Try as we may, there are no loopholes. The mandate simply underscores a lifestyle incumbent upon the whole church. There are no escape clauses, no substitute options. As we might say in the academic world, the Great Commission is not an elective course; it is part of the required curriculum.”³⁶

Creating a lifestyle of intentional discipleship became a part of the “required curriculum” for Coleman. After uncovering the pattern of Christ, Coleman put the

³⁴Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

³⁵Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

³⁶Robert Coleman, *The Great Commission Lifestyle* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1992),

principles to practice in his own ministry. He says, “I began to meet regularly with a group of guys in an intentional way where we could pray and study together. And that has been my pattern ever since.”³⁷

Coleman’s groups have consisted mostly of students. As indicated earlier, the groups usually included between three and twelve participants. Sometimes there were more than twelve students, but Coleman does not like to have that many students because the group becomes too large.³⁸ Oftentimes, he met additionally with one or two students in the group who received even more of his attention in discipling. The groups mostly met during the school year with breaks over the summer and for holidays. Some students remained in Coleman’s groups for multiple semesters, but he was always involving more students in his groups.

During his ministry as a professor, Coleman has personally and intentionally invested in the lives of hundreds of students. The fruit of his investment can be seen in members of his groups who have reproduced his principles of discipleship in their own ministries. Some of the men that Coleman disciplined are pastors, and others are evangelists and professors, and many of them have taken the example that he set before them and made it a part of their own work.³⁹

The discipleship strategy of Robert Coleman emulates Christ with His disciples in Scripture. The first principle Coleman discovered upon searching the Gospels is the principle of selection. Coleman writes, “[Jesus’] concern was not with

³⁷Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹For a selected list of men disciplined by Coleman, see Appendix 1.

programs to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow.”⁴⁰ Jesus sought a select group of men to be His disciples and called them to follow after Him.

Likewise, Coleman did not endeavor to have a discipleship relationship with every one of his students. He had many students each semester, but he had only a few who were a part of his discipleship group. He chose some of the participants, while others approached Coleman with interest in participating. The few who were a part of the group understood the importance of being involved in a group such as this because there were many others who could have been involved and perhaps desired to be involved.

Steve Wingfield, an evangelist who was a part of Coleman’s group at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School from 1983-1985, has seen the difficulty of this principle in his own discipling ministry. He states, “Some people have felt it was exclusive, others have fallen away, but I will simply say that I have had more success than failure. As I look back over the past 37 years of ministry, the lasting fruit has come from my investment in this strategy.”⁴¹

The second principle of Coleman’s discipleship strategy is the principle of association. Coleman describes the principle, saying, “Having called His men, Jesus made a practice of being with them. This was the essence of his training program—just letting His disciples follow Him.”⁴² By following Jesus, His disciples learned who He

⁴⁰Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1993), 27.

⁴¹Steve Wingfield, telephone interview by author, 30 July 2010.

⁴²Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 41.

was, what His priorities were, and how He loved His Father. Coleman writes, “Knowledge was gained by association before it was understood by explanation.”⁴³

Coleman has lived out the principle of association as well. His groups were designed so that his students spent time with Coleman. They were already spending several hours each week with him in the classroom, but the groups afforded them more time with their teacher. Coleman often met with his groups for breakfast early in the morning, spending between one to two hours with them.

John Hong, Professor of Evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary, was a member of one of Coleman’s groups while a student at Asbury from 1976-1978. He learned the principle of association from Coleman. Hong believes in the principle so greatly that he has taken it further in his own ministry of discipleship. He writes, “The most distinguished change [between my discipleship groups and Coleman’s groups] was the length of time. I spend much more time.”⁴⁴ In fact, Hong meets with his groups once a week for around five hours.⁴⁵

The principle of consecration is the third principle of Coleman’s strategy. This principle identifies the obedience Christ demanded from His disciples. If the disciples were to follow Christ, then they must obey Him. Coleman writes, “If we have learned even the most elemental truth of discipleship, we must know that we are called to be servants of our Lord and to obey His Word.”⁴⁶ The aim of discipleship is that disciples

⁴³Ibid., 42.

⁴⁴John Hong, telephone interview by author, 27 July 2010.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 59.

would learn from Christ and one day lead others to follow Him as well. “No one can ever be a leader until first he has learned to follow a leader,” Coleman adds.⁴⁷

Coleman called his groups to consecrate themselves unto the Lord. The groups were accountable to Coleman, to one another, and to the Lord as they shared their struggles and their triumphs in their spiritual walk. Coleman led the groups in prayer and in singing together to consecrate themselves in obedience through fellowship.⁴⁸ Tim Beougher, Associate Dean of the Billy Graham School of Evangelism and Missions at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was involved in Coleman’s groups while a student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School from 1986-1990. He states,

We always concluded with a time of prayer, always on our knees, and then ended by singing:

Glory, glory to the Father
Glory, glory to the Son
Glory, glory to the Spirit
Glory to the Three in One

I will praise Him!
I will praise Him!
Praise the Lamb for sinners slain
Give Him glory all ye peoples
For His blood can wash away each stain

We would then hug the others in the group (Clem’s version of a “holy kiss” is always a “holy hug”).⁴⁹

⁴⁷Ibid., 58.

⁴⁸In chap. 3, p. 76 I differentiated between Coleman and Wesley’s groups by noting that Wesley’s groups functioned more like a worship service, whereas Coleman’s groups were more akin to a small group Bible study. Although Coleman concluded his groups with song, singing was not a major part of his groups as it was in Wesley’s societies.

⁴⁹Timothy Beougher, telephone interview by author, 23 November 2010. “Glory, Glory to the Father” was written by Margaret Jenkins Harris (1865-1919). Robert Coleman is known by his nickname, “Clem,” by many of his close friends.

Lawson Stone, Professor of Old Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, was a member of one of Coleman's groups while a student at Asbury from 1979-1982. He describes the groups saying, "We met once a week, and each man shared about how their week had gone. We also reported on spiritual disciplines, and Dr. Coleman presented a Bible study followed by a time of prayer together."⁵⁰

The fourth principle included in Coleman's discipleship strategy is the principle of impartation. This principle describes how Jesus gave Himself to train His disciples. He invested most of His time in the Twelve. But Jesus imparted more than merely His time to the disciples—He gave His mind, His Spirit, and His heart to the disciples as they learned from Him. Coleman writes, "Jesus gave Himself to those about Him so that they might come to know through His life a similar commitment to the mission for which He had come into the world."⁵¹

For Coleman, impartation means offering his life to serve other men. He writes, "Here is the great paradox of life—we must die to ourselves to live in Christ, and in that renunciation of ourselves, we must give ourselves away in service and devotion to our Lord."⁵² This principle is apparent in the way that he makes himself and his home available to students. He and Marietta often invited the groups to their home for dinner as a way to serve them.⁵³

⁵⁰Lawson Stone, telephone interview by author, 19 November 2011.

⁵¹Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 63.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 69.

⁵³Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

Roy Christians, the National Director for Campus Crusade for Christ in Russia, was a member of Coleman's group and a teaching fellow to Coleman while a student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School from 1998-2002. He recalls, "As Dr. Coleman's teaching fellow we talked and worked together most working days. Also, my wife regularly met with Mrs. Coleman and we were regularly at their home."⁵⁴

Coleman also imparted his spiritual life to his groups. The studies that the groups held were often on subjects that Coleman was currently studying himself. He states that his studies "often come out of what I am doing at the time. That way it is fresh."⁵⁵ As a result, many of his groups studied subjects that Coleman wrote about. "One year the topic was revival in the Scriptures. The other year was the book of Revelation," remembers Michael Connor, Pastor of Global Strategies, Immanuel Bible Church, Springfield, Virginia, who was a member of Coleman's group while a student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in 1994-1995.⁵⁶ These studies were the subject of Coleman's books *The Spark That Ignites* and *Songs of Heaven*, respectively.

The next principle in Coleman's strategy is the principle of demonstration. When studying Christ's example in Scripture, Coleman noticed that Jesus showed the disciples exactly what He was calling them to do. He writes, "[Jesus] did not ask anyone to do or be anything which first He had not demonstrated in His own life, thereby not only proving its workability, but also its relevance to His mission in life."⁵⁷ Whether it

⁵⁴Roy Christians, telephone interview by author, 17 November 2010.

⁵⁵Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

⁵⁶Michael Connor, telephone interview by author, 11 May 2010.

⁵⁷Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 76.

be allowing the disciples to observe Him in prayer, taking them along when He taught the multitudes, or regularly using Scripture in conversation with the disciples, Jesus demonstrated the meaning of discipleship to them.

Demonstration has been an important facet of Coleman's discipleship strategy as well. He often brought members of his groups with him when he traveled to speaking and teaching engagements. Roy Christians shares that he traveled with Coleman "on numerous occasions both in the US and internationally."⁵⁸ In commenting on his own discipleship strategy, Tim Beougher adds, "I wish I could have students travel with me more than I have. Dr. Coleman has access to funds to provide for students to travel with him, and he rarely takes a trip alone."⁵⁹

Besides traveling with students, Coleman also demonstrated a vibrant, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. By praying, singing, and studying with his groups, Coleman demonstrated to them his own love for Christ. The men whom Coleman has disciplined witnessed his passion and spiritual discipline, and it impacted them greatly. Brad Waggoner is the Executive Vice President of Lifeway Christian Resources and was a student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School from 1984-1986. He states,

It was rewarding to see that [Coleman] actually lived out what he wrote about. He personified the discipleship strategy of Christ. This was not merely an academic exercise for him. Seeing his personal and heartfelt commitment to the training and discipling of men helped deepen my own commitment to the cause.⁶⁰

⁵⁸Christians, telephone interview by author, 17 November 2010.

⁵⁹Beougher, telephone interview by author, 23 November 2010.

⁶⁰Brad Waggoner, telephone interview by author, 19 November 2011.

Bob Stamps, recently named Dean of Chapel at Asbury Theological Seminary, adds, “[Coleman’s influence] is probably as strong as any single thing in my life.”⁶¹ He states, “I am seventy years old and I still meet with ten students every Saturday morning.”⁶²

Following demonstration is the sixth principle: delegation. Jesus knew that He would soon depart from the earth, leaving the disciples behind to carry on His ministry after His resurrection and ascension into heaven. This fact meant that He had to delegate the responsibilities of ministry to them and allow them to put into practice what they had learned from Him. In *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, Coleman highlights how Christ sent out the disciples to perform ministry. He writes,

The point Jesus made in all these instructions was that the mission of His disciples was not different in principle or method from His own. He began by giving them His own authority and power to do His work (Mark 6:7; Matt. 10:1; Luke 9:1), and He closed by assuring them that what they were doing was as though He were doing it Himself.⁶³

Delegation was not a great part of Coleman’s discipleship strategy while serving as a pastor, but as he learned this principle from the example of Christ, he made it a part of his strategy as a professor. Coleman delegated by giving men responsibilities within the group. He often charged his teaching fellow with contacting the members of the group and arranging the details of the meetings.⁶⁴ He also asked students to lead the group in Bible study and prayer in his absence.⁶⁵

⁶¹Bob Stamps, telephone interview by author, 26 January 2011.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 84.

⁶⁴Connor, telephone interview by author, 11 May 2010.

⁶⁵Beougher, telephone interview by author, 23 November 2010.

The seventh principle of Coleman’s discipleship strategy is the principle of supervision. As Christ sent out His disciples to perform ministry, He observed them and praised and or corrected them upon their return. The principle of supervision provided oversight to the disciples to successfully follow the pattern that Jesus set for them in ministry. Coleman writes,

The important thing about all this supervisory work of Jesus was that He kept the disciples going on toward the goal He had set for them. He did not expect more from His disciples than they could do, but He did expect their best, and this He expected always to be improved as they grew in knowledge and grace. His plan of teaching, by example, assignment, and constant checkup, was calculated to bring out the best that was in them.⁶⁶

A clear example of this principle in Coleman’s discipleship ministry is the way he trained his successors in the Billy Graham Center of Wheaton College. Upon starting the Billy Graham Center, Coleman hired Lyle Dorsett as the first Professor of Evangelism at the school. For the first semester, Coleman taught the class while Dorsett observed. Then Coleman delegated the teaching responsibilities to Dorsett while he supervised the transition. Dorsett, the Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism in the Beeson Divinity School at Samford University, states, “Then Coleman helped me launch a Master of Arts degree in Evangelism.”⁶⁷

The principle is also evident in the handing off of the directorship of the Billy Graham Center. Lonnie Allison was hired to replace Coleman as director in 2000, yet

⁶⁶Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 94.

⁶⁷Lyle Dorsett, telephone interview by author, 19 June 2010.

Coleman remained with the school until 2001 to help supervise Allison as he began the duties of leading the center.⁶⁸

The final principle in Coleman's discipleship strategy is the principle of reproduction. After Jesus returned to His Father in heaven, the ministry that He began was left for His disciples to continue. Coleman explains,

Jesus intended for the disciples to produce His likeness in and through the church being gathered out of the world. Thus His ministry in the Spirit would be duplicated many-fold by His ministry in the lives of His disciples. Through them and others like them it would continue to expand in an ever-enlarging circumference until the multitudes might know in a similar way the opportunity which they had known with the Master. By this strategy the conquest of the world was only a matter of time and their faithfulness to His plan.⁶⁹

The faithfulness of the disciples to the plan of Christ is revealed in the growth of the New Testament church described in the book of Acts. The disciples learned the principles of discipleship from Jesus and reproduced the pattern in their own ministries (Acts 2:41-42; 11:25-26; 19:8-10; 20:31).

Coleman promoted the principle of reproduction in his discipleship strategy; however, it is largely up to the participants themselves to fulfill it. The proof of how effective Coleman's discipleship strategy truly is can be seen in how his students have reproduced the pattern of discipleship in their own ministries.

All of the men interviewed for this dissertation shared that they have taken the example of discipleship provided by Coleman in his groups and in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* and have reproduced it in their own ministries to some extent. Wingfield

⁶⁸Coleman, interview by author, Wilmore, KY, 13 April 2009.

⁶⁹Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 97.

states, “I have used *The Master Plan* in every phase of my ministry with very little change.”⁷⁰ Hong has led “quite a number of groups at different times.”⁷¹ Connor concurs, saying, “I have both practiced this and taught literally thousands of others *The Master Plan* principles.”⁷² Christians adds, “I have regularly led discipleship groups. I contextualized the ministry to a Russian context, but kept the same general strategy. The beauty of Clem’s books and discipleship strategy is that it is so simply biblical. It is not complicated, but follows the models of Scripture.”⁷³ Beougher shares, “I have led groups over the years—some with students, some with deacons in my church, some with laymen from the church. While I have not done it nearly as well as Dr. Coleman, I have basically followed the pattern that I learned from him.”⁷⁴ Waggoner states that he has led many groups over the years along with his wife.⁷⁵ Bob Stamps adds,

I pastored churches for forty years and have done it everywhere I went. That ministry has multiplied itself many times over. It has been replicated in northern Virginia, England, and Richmond, VA. While serving as campus chaplain at Oral Roberts University, I most closely replicated his example by setting up small groups with hall leaders, and it is still going on.⁷⁶

These men have tweaked Coleman’s example in different ways, but each of them has embraced the principles that he laid out. Dorsett says, “I am not his clone. He

⁷⁰Wingfield, telephone interview by author, 30 July 2010.

⁷¹Hong, telephone interview by author, 27 July 2010.

⁷²Connor, telephone interview by author, 11 May 2010.

⁷³Christians, telephone interview by author, 17 November 2010.

⁷⁴Beougher, telephone interview by author, 23 November 2010.

⁷⁵Waggoner, telephone interview by author, 19 November 2011.

⁷⁶Stamps, telephone interview by author, 26 January 2011.

would not like that and neither would the Lord Jesus. But Coleman has been instrumental in shaping my ministry of preaching and teaching and writing.”⁷⁷

Summary and Conclusions about Coleman’s Approach to Discipleship

The apostle James commands, “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (Jas 1:22). Robert Coleman is a doer of the Word. Upon realizing the discipleship pattern of Jesus in Scripture, he has reproduced it faithfully in his own life and ministry.

He has maintained a continuous walk with the Lord as a Christian by not neglecting his personal discipleship. He has modeled a life of discipleship in his home with his wife, Marietta, and his three children. As a pastor, he practiced much of his discipleship strategy though it was still unformed. He fully developed his strategy as a professor and has consistently utilized it with groups ever since.

The result of Coleman’s lifestyle of discipleship is that he has left a lasting influence on the men that he has discipled. Wingfield shares, “I am who I am today in large part because of his investment in my life and ministry. I do not have words to express my heartfelt love and appreciation for him professionally, as a friend, partner in ministry and spiritual mentor.”⁷⁸ Dorsett says, “I can say that the class I teach, the discipleship groups I have, and the reasons I have written each book I have published since 1983 have been influenced by Coleman.”⁷⁹ Beougher states,

⁷⁷Dorsett, telephone interview by author, 19 June 2010.

⁷⁸Wingfield, telephone interview by author, 30 July 2010.

⁷⁹Dorsett, telephone interview by author, 19 June 2010.

Clem has graciously poured his life into me, giving me numerous opportunities to travel with him, teach with him, and learn from him. His influence has been incalculable in my life. I have often said that if I had to be in a “spiritual foxhole” with one other man in an intense spiritual firefight, I would want that other man to be Robert Coleman.⁸⁰

The testimonies of the men whom Coleman has discipled reveals that he is leaving a lasting legacy with his discipleship strategy. To Coleman, the men who continue in discipleship are his greatest achievement. He concludes,

That’s what really counts. When you get older, to my stage in life, those are the things about your ministry that you really dwell on—not how many big meetings you’ve had or how many books you’ve written, but the men whom you feel that you’ve left a print on who are out there doing a better job than you’ve done.⁸¹

⁸⁰Beougher, telephone interview by author, 23 November 2010.

⁸¹Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

CHAPTER 5

A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS: A CRITIQUE OF COLEMAN’S STRATEGY AS PRESENTED IN HIS WRITINGS

Robert Coleman describes his approach to writing *The Master Plan of Evangelism* as follows: “The plan of this study has been to trace the steps of Christ as portrayed in the Gospels without undue recourse to secondary materials.”¹ Thus, Coleman posits that he relied chiefly on the biblical accounts of the Gospels. He asserts that the principles in his book are the guiding principles of Jesus’ plan of discipleship and should be emulated and contextualized to each ministry setting.²

The bold claim that *The Master Plan of Evangelism* reflects the biblical principles of Christ for discipleship requires inspection. This chapter will examine the background of the book, discovering how Coleman wrote the book and why he wrote it. It will also note how the book was received. The chapter will then examine each of the eight principles outlined in the book as well as a ninth principle included in Coleman’s lectures to discern whether he accurately reflects biblical interpretation of the Scriptures. Finally, selected other works will be included to show how Coleman has consistently communicated his discipleship strategy.

¹Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Spire, 1993), 22.

²Ibid., 25.

Background of *The Master Plan of Evangelism*

The Master Plan of Evangelism has sold over three million copies worldwide and has been used in a variety of settings, including seminaries, churches, and the mission field.³ However, this book had humble beginnings.

Reasons for Writing the Book

Coleman returned to Asbury in 1955, after several years serving as a pastor. For the next twenty-seven years he led the evangelism department at the seminary. Upon his arrival, he was tasked with building a program for evangelism. Coleman had no formal training in evangelism, although he practiced witnessing regularly in his own life. In order to teach others in evangelism, he studied the method of Christ in the Gospels. The first class that Coleman created was “The Evangelism of Jesus.” In the class, Coleman taught his students to study the life of Jesus and His approach to reaching others. This intense inquiry into the evangelistic approach of Jesus in the Gospels led Coleman to write *The Master Plan of Evangelism*.

Coleman’s personal study developed into class lectures. Coleman states, “By the time of my second year [of teaching], I felt that we were doing well in [understanding Jesus’] personal evangelism, but what is His strategy? He came to redeem the world, but at the rate He is going how is He ever going to do it?”⁴

The answer to Coleman’s question about Jesus’ methodology would begin a lifelong study of discipleship. He states,

³Ibid., front cover.

⁴Robert Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

I saw that the Great Commission is the explanation of what He had concentrated on. It does not diminish at all His preaching, teaching, healing, and all of that. But in the process, He is training men, giving them a vision to replicate what He had been doing in their lives, and teaching them in turn to do the same. In this process of reproduction there would be a force of men and women to reach the world.⁵

The discovery of Jesus' strategy energized Coleman. He worked on his teaching material, developing the strategy in the lectures. His lectures grew into a working manuscript that he mimeographed for his students. The copying was expensive, yet Coleman was convinced of the validity of the principles he had uncovered. He learned of an inexpensive publisher in Indiana called Economy Press, but in order to print his work, he needed 7,500 copies printed. The cost of such an endeavor was steep for Coleman, but he gathered a few other men to invest with him to pay for these copies.⁶

Coleman remarks that when he had the 7,500 original copies of the book, "I never thought that I would get all of them used."⁷ The original copies of the book were sold, along with many others after those. In 2009, the 101st English printing of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* was published.⁸

Reception of the Book

The Master Plan of Evangelism was intended as a classroom resource for Coleman's students, and Coleman never imagined that it would be used much further. However, audiences around the world have received *The Master Plan of Evangelism* as a helpful resource for understanding biblical discipleship. Pastors of growing churches

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

commend the book as a valuable tool in their own ministries.⁹ This work is listed among the top fifty books that have shaped evangelicals.¹⁰ *The Master Plan of Evangelism* still enjoys a large audience forty-eight years after its initial publication, selling over three million copies in that time, and having been translated into over one hundred languages.¹¹

Billy Graham recommends the book, saying, “Few books have had as great an impact on the cause of world evangelization in our generation as this book.”¹² In fact, The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association’s International School for Pastors used *The Master Plan of Evangelism* to train indigenous leaders overseas. Coleman’s connection with Graham’s ministry greatly broadened the audience for his work.

As Coleman has taught the principles of his book around the world, remarkable stories about the work have surfaced. The first translation of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* into Russian was copied by hand. An American medical doctor who was in Russia for a convention met another doctor from Russia who was a Christian. They studied *The Master Plan of Evangelism* together, and the Russian doctor copied the work by hand and was passing the notes around for others behind the Iron Curtain.¹³

⁹Thom Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 149. *The Master Plan of Evangelism* is included on the list of “Most Influential Books in Ministry Rated by Leaders of Unchurched-Reaching Churches.”

¹⁰“The Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals” [on-line]; accessed 04 March 2010; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/october/23.51.html?start=1>; Internet.

¹¹Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, front cover.

¹²Billy Graham, foreword to *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 15.

¹³Coleman, interview by author, Louisville, KY, 10 February 2009.

Prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, Coleman and his wife, Marietta, traveled to Eastern Europe and met with groups in secret who were part of an underground seminary. Coleman taught groups the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and other places. While in Slovakia, he met the man who translated the book into the native language, and photocopied the work in a janitor's closet in the top of an apartment building, and distributed it illegally behind the Iron Curtain in the former Soviet Union.¹⁴

In Italy, a Roman Catholic priest in Rome received a copy of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* through the influence of Campus Crusade for Christ, and he worked to translate the book into Italian. He was urged to teach the concepts to ministers in other parishes and traveled to Uganda to teach there as well. The bishops brought the priest before them on a few occasions because they felt that he was becoming too Protestant. The priest asked Coleman for permission to publish *The Master Plan of Evangelism* in Italian, but to include one of Pope John Paul II's encyclicals in the front matter. Coleman consented, and the principles of the book spread into yet another country.¹⁵

Coleman has granted permission for *The Master Plan of Evangelism* to be translated into over one hundred languages.¹⁶ However, the book has been translated into even more languages than that. When he traveled to Egypt, Coleman learned that most Presbyterian pastors there already had a copy of his book before he ever granted permission for the book to be printed. In Lebanon, the Baptist seminary translated the

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid. Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, was included with the printing.

¹⁶Ibid.

book into Lebanese prior to Coleman's permission. The Colemans traveled to Jerusalem where the Christian Missionary Alliance Church had translated *The Master Plan of Evangelism* into Arabic. A former student of Coleman translated the book in Kazakhstan, and it is used by some of the handful of churches in this predominantly Muslim nation.¹⁷ What is evident is that the book has been useful for discipling people all over the world to the extent that Christians have gone to great lengths, even risking imprisonment in some cases, to ensure that the book could be found in the language of the people with whom they are working.

Biblical Analysis of the Eight Principles

Coleman asserts that the principles that he explains in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* are biblical and are the principles that guided the ministry of Christ. He finds company among others who have been looking to the ministry of Jesus for guidance on how to disciple others. Coleman comments,

I think that it was an attempt to put on paper the thoughts that I was discovering in the life of Christ without any crutches at all. After I saw these concepts, then I began to recognize that there were lots of people who had come up with these same [principles]. Others had many of the same ideas though they may not have put them together in the same way. I still find people who are working on these same principles that have never heard of *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. I think the principles are valid.¹⁸

Following is an analysis to determine whether these principles are, in fact, biblical and valid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

Selection

The first principle Coleman identified is the principle of selection. According to Coleman, Jesus chose the men that He wanted to disciple to continue His ministry. He cites John 1:35-51 as an example of this principle at work.¹⁹ Coleman writes, “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.”²⁰

In this passage, two disciples were following John the Baptist, but when they saw Jesus they wanted to know more of Him. Jesus responded by asking, “What do you seek?” (John 1:38). F.F. Bruce writes, “Jesus knew very well what they wanted: his question was intended simply to give them an opportunity to say what was in their minds. What they wanted was to get to know *him*, but this might have sounded presumptuous; they contented themselves with asking where he was staying.”²¹

Jesus answered their query about his lodging by saying, “Come and you will see” (John 1:39). Christ’s selection of the disciples is found in His invitation to come with Him. He essentially stated, “You come and follow Me, and you will see.” R.V.G. Tasker comments, “So when He answers the question, *Where dwellest thou?*, by saying *Come and see*, He is in fact bidding these men do something more than discover where

¹⁹Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 27. Coleman neglects to mention an important component of Jesus’ selection of the disciples found in Luke 6:12-16. Verses 12-13 record, “He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God. And when day came, He called His disciples to Him and chose twelve of them, who He also named as apostles.” Christ prayed diligently about whom He would invest His life into in a greater way. Coleman does pray about selection as well, but fails to address it when discussing this principle.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 56.

He is staying for the night; He is inviting them to come and gain from Him an insight into the mind and purpose of God Himself.”²² Jesus’ selection of the disciples was an invitation to come to Him and learn from Him.

Coleman writes,

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 Nathaniel (John 1:43-51). There is no evidence of haste in the selection of these disciples, just determination.²³

As noted, this invitation was extended to Philip (John 1:43). Bruce asserts, “‘Follow me’ or ‘Come after me’ occurs here for the first time in this Gospel; we should probably recognize a note of authority in the command: the hand on the shoulder and the words to match the action—‘You come along with me’.”²⁴

Jesus was intentional in choosing who would spend time in a discipling relationship with Him. He did not urge all of the crowds to follow Him around in His band of apostles. Large crowds gathered to hear Him teach on many occasions, such as at the feeding of the 5,000. The people searched for Him and surrounded Him after this miracle (John 6:22-25). Jesus did not neglect the masses, but if one examines the ministry of Jesus in detail through the Gospels, there is an intentional pattern to spend more time with a few men that He had selected.

Jesus’ method was to disciple men who would, in turn, reach the masses.

Coleman writes,

²²R. V. G. Tasker, *John*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 52.

²³Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 27.

²⁴Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John*, 59.

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.²⁵

This principle required that Jesus look for followers who showed willingness to follow and potential to lead.

The principle is evident in Jesus' conversation with Peter in John 1:41-42. The Bible reads, "Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)" (John 1:42). Jesus selected Peter, and this man would become one of the three closest friends of Jesus, along with the brothers, James and John.

Jesus' short exchange with Peter reveals the potential for leadership that Jesus saw in him. He said to him, "Now, Simon, you are a fisherman, the son of John. But you *will be called* Peter." Simon's new name means "rock."²⁶ Jesus told Peter, "You will be a rock in the future; you will be a leader." Gerald Borchert comments, "Jesus here and at Matt 16:18 seems to have used the term as a kind of nickname, like our contemporary 'Rocky,' to identify this one who was to have an important role in the early church."²⁷ In Matthew 16:17-18, Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ. That confession marks when Simon had really become Peter. Jesus saw this potential in Peter when everyone else saw

²⁵Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 35-36.

²⁶Merrill C. Tenney, *John*, in vol. 9 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 40.

²⁷Gerald Borchert, *John 1-11*, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 25a (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 143-44.

only Simon, John's son. By selecting a few men into whom He would intentionally invest most of His time, Jesus established the leadership who would carry out His mission after His departure.

Association

The second principle of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* is the principle of association. According to this principle, Jesus spent the majority of His time in ministry with His disciples so that they would understand Him—His life, His work, and His mission. Coleman writes, “Having called his men, Jesus made a practice of being with them. This was the essence of his training program—just letting his disciples follow him.”²⁸ Coleman highlights Mark 3:13-19 as evidence of this principle.²⁹

Jesus first selected the disciples to follow Him. Mark recorded in his Gospel, “And He went up on the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him” (Mark 3:13). According to Vincent Taylor, “The initiative is taken by Jesus; He calls to Him whom He wills to call.”³⁰ After Jesus' selection of the disciples came their association with Christ. The passage continues, “And He appointed twelve, so that they would be with Him and that He could send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out the demons” (Mark 3:14-15).

Mark identified the purpose in the selection of the Twelve. He appointed the Twelve so that they would be *with* Him. Taylor adds, “The narrative embodies the belief

²⁸Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 41.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 43.

³⁰Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 2nd ed., Thornapple Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 229.

that Jesus separated twelve disciples for close association with Himself and in order to commission them for the work of heralds and evangelists.”³¹ James Brooks notes, “The last part of v. 14 and the first part of v. 15 indicate the two purposes of Jesus’ summons: that they might be with Jesus (one of the most important elements in being a disciple) and that they might be sent on a mission to proclaim the advent of the kingdom of God and demonstrate it by exorcising demons.”³²

This principle was part of Jesus’ strategy of discipleship. By intentionally spending time with His disciples, Jesus allowed them to learn from Him. A. B. Bruce describes the principle as following:

They were to be, in the mean time, students of Christian doctrine, and occasional fellow-laborers in the work of the kingdom, and eventually Christ’s chosen trained agents for propagating the faith after He Himself had left the earth. From the time of their being chosen, indeed, the twelve entered on a regular apprenticeship for the great office of apostleship, in the course of which they were to learn, in the privacy of an intimate daily fellowship with their Master, what they should be, do, believe, and teach, as His witnesses and ambassadors to the world. Henceforth the training of these men was to be a constant and prominent part of Christ’s personal work.³³

As Jesus spent time in association with the Twelve, they learned His ways. Mark understood that they would do so as evidenced in his comments in Mark 3:14-15. He wrote, “They would be with Him and that He could send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out demons.” Through their association with Christ, the disciples learned His methods of ministry. They likely did not display any great ability before they came to follow Christ that made one think that they could preach or have authority to cast

³¹Ibid.

³²James Brooks, *Mark*, The New American Commentary, vol. 23 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 71-72.

³³A. B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1988), 30.

out demons. It was through their time with Christ and their association with Him that they were empowered for ministry.³⁴

The disciples became known as Jesus' followers. Their association with Him ultimately defined them as individuals. In Acts, Peter and John were released from imprisonment for preaching about Christ. Acts 4:13 records, "Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus." F.F. Bruce comments, "How could untrained laymen like these so ably sustain a theological disputation with members of the supreme court? The answer was not far to seek: the judges took cognizance of the fact that they had been companions of Jesus."³⁵ Although the disciples were not trained under the great Jewish teachers of the day, the people recognized something special about them. The disciples' association with Christ is identified in Acts as the cause of their confidence in ministry.

Consecration

Coleman's third principle of discipleship is consecration. When Jesus called the disciples to follow Him, He called them to a life of obedience. As the disciples accepted the call to follow Jesus, they subjected themselves to His authority in their lives.

³⁴Walter W. Wessel, *Mark*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 642-43. Wessel writes, "The Twelve were to be brought into the closest association possible with the life of the Son of God. They were to live with Jesus, travel with him, converse with him, and learn from him. Mark's Gospel indicates that much of Jesus' time was occupied with their training. The training was not an end in itself. They were to be sent out (in Mark's Gospel not until 6:7). And their ministry was to consist of preaching the Good News and driving out demons (v15). The two are closely associated. The salvation Jesus brings involves the defeat of Satan and his demons."

³⁵F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 95.

Coleman writes, “Following Jesus seemed easy enough at first, but that was because they had not followed him very far. It soon became apparent that being a disciple of Christ involved far more than a joyful acceptance of the Messianic promise: it meant the surrender of one’s whole life to the Master in absolute submission to his sovereignty.”³⁶ Coleman illustrates the principle using Luke 9:57-62.³⁷

In Luke’s account, three would-be disciples determine whether or not to follow Jesus. Jesus’ response to the men revealed His call for His followers to consecrate themselves to Him. The first man said to Christ, “I will follow You wherever You go” (Luke 9:57). The man’s pledged allegiance was the commitment that Jesus asked of His disciples. However, Jesus tested whether the man was willing to follow and obey Him no matter the circumstance. Malcolm Tolbert comments, “The call to discipleship is a call to share Jesus’ commitment and the suffering inherent in it. The lot of the disciple can be no different from the lot of the one whom he follows.”³⁸ Seemingly this commitment was the commitment that the man was willing to make to Jesus. Jesus’ response, however, revealed that the man had likely not thought through what that might mean.

Jesus made it clear that following Him demanded sacrifice. The decision to follow Jesus is not a decision to be made lightly. “The three sayings [to the would-be disciples] remind Luke’s Christian readers of the stringent nature of discipleship. They are absolute in nature, for Jesus demands unqualified commitment, far beyond what a

³⁶Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 52.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 53.

³⁸Malcolm Tolbert, *Luke*, in vol. 9 of *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 89.

rabbi might require of his disciples,” writes Robert Stein.³⁹ Jesus answered the man, “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Luke 9:58). Jesus signified to the man that it would not always be easy to follow Him. Coleman writes, “Jesus did not have the time nor the desire to scatter himself on those who wanted to make their own terms of discipleship.”⁴⁰ Later in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus asked, “Which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?” (Luke 14:28). Jesus was always concerned with the commitment of His followers.

Jesus approached the second man in the passage and gave him the call to discipleship—“Follow Me” (Luke 9:59). The man responded to Jesus’ call with a request to go and bury his father first (Luke 9:59). Morris explains that he was really asking to go home and take care of his father until his death.⁴¹ His request, then, meant that following Jesus would be put off indefinitely until his father actually died.

Jesus responded, “Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:60). This response may seem insensitive, but Jesus called His disciples to put the kingdom of God first. The obedience of the disciple required that he make following Christ the number one priority of his life. Coleman writes, “Another disciple wanted to be excused from his immediate obligation

³⁹Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary, vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 300.

⁴⁰Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 53.

⁴¹Leon Morris, *Luke*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentary, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 197.

of obedience so that he might go and care for his aged father, but Jesus would allow no delay.”⁴²

The final man in the passage approached Jesus to follow Him. However, he had a request before he followed. He asked, “First permit me to say good-bye to those at home” (Luke 9:61). His request sounds reasonable, but Jesus answered him in a way that readers may find to be harsh. Jesus stated, “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). This man’s request was a symptom of a greater problem. The third man was unwilling to let go of his former life to follow and obey Jesus. William Hendriksen writes,

Christ’s firm determination to go to Jerusalem, there to die for all those who would place their trust in him, is here contrasted with the weak, conditional commitment (?) of three would-be followers. It is as if Jesus were saying, ‘My own determination to accomplish the task assigned to me, whatever the cost, must be an example to all my followers.’⁴³

Christ explicitly explained His expectation of those who follow Him. He stated, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). According to Borchert, “The impact of the verse really means that obedience is a test or indication of loving Jesus.”⁴⁴ The consecration of the disciples to Christ was a sign of their love for Him. He expected nothing less from them than their obedience. Coleman sums up the principle of consecration, writing, “If we have learned even the most elemental truth of

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 559. The question mark is in original.

⁴⁴Gerald Borchert, *John 12-21*, The New American Commentary, vol. 25b (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 121.

discipleship, we must know that we are called to be servants of our Lord and to obey his Word.”⁴⁵

Impartation

The fourth principle is the principle of impartation. In this principle, Coleman recognizes that part of Jesus’ strategy of discipleship included pouring His life into the disciples. More than mere time spent with the Twelve, Jesus shared His life with them emotionally and spiritually. Coleman writes, “His was a life of giving—giving away what the Father had given him.”⁴⁶ Coleman cites the teachings in the Upper Room as evidence of this principle in Jesus’ ministry (John 15-17).⁴⁷

As Jesus comforted His disciples prior to His departure, He verbalized to them what they had experienced throughout their time with Him. He continually gave Himself away to them, preparing them for that day. He said to them, “All things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). Jesus poured Himself out to His disciples by teaching them the commands of the Father.

The time of teaching concluded with the High Priestly Prayer (John 17). In this prayer, Jesus stated that He gave the disciples life and salvation through His life. He prayed, “To all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:2-3). In verse four, Jesus prayed, “I glorified You on the earth, having

⁴⁵Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 59.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 61-62.

accomplished the work which You have given Me to do.” He did everything that the Father asked of Him, pouring His life into the Twelve, and He would soon pay the ultimate price by dying on the cross as a sacrifice for the sin of mankind. Coleman writes,

That is why he lost no opportunity to impress on his followers the deep compulsion of his own soul aflame with the love of God for a lost world. Everything he did and said was motivated by this consuming passion. His life was simply the revelation in time of God’s eternal purpose to save for himself a people. Supremely this is what the disciples needed to learn, not in theory, but in practice.⁴⁸

By imparting His life to His disciples, Jesus conveyed His passions and priorities to the disciples, and they were to replicate these priorities in their own lives. One of these priorities was the Word of God. Jesus prayed, “The words which You gave Me I have given to them” (John 17:8). Borchert adds, “Jesus had been transferring (the perfect of ‘give’) to the disciples the ‘words’ he was given by God. The implication is clearly that the words of Jesus were revealed words from the Father.”⁴⁹

Another priority that Jesus imparted to the disciples was His mission. Jesus prayed, “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (John 17:17). Coleman writes,

Jesus gave Himself to those about him so that they might come to know through his life a similar commitment to the mission for which he had come into the world. His whole evangelistic plan hinged on this dedication, and in turn, the faithfulness with which his disciples gave themselves in love to the world about them.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Ibid., 62.

⁴⁹Borchert, *John 12-21*, 194.

⁵⁰Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 63.

His mission became their mission. Bruce concurs, “The very message which they are to proclaim in his name will exercise its sanctifying effect on them: that message is the continuation of his message, just as their mission in the world is the extension of his mission.”⁵¹

In the Upper Room, Jesus also promised to impart to them His Spirit. It would be by the power of the Holy Spirit in them that the disciples would continue the mission. Jesus stated, “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever” (John 14:16). Jesus reaffirmed this promise in Acts 1:8, stating, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.”

The disciples received the promised Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:2-4). By the power of the Holy Spirit, they were able to do all that God had called them to do.

Richard Longenecker writes,

The Christian church, according to Acts, is a missionary church that responds obediently to Jesus’ commission, acts on Jesus’ behalf in the extension of his ministry, focuses its proclamation of the kingdom of God in its witness to Jesus, *is guided and empowered by the self-same Spirit that directed and supported Jesus’ ministry*, and follows a program whose guidelines for outreach have been set by Jesus himself.⁵²

God gave them the Comforter to guide them, to strengthen them, and to encourage them.

As the disciples followed the Holy Spirit’s leading, they followed God’s will for them.

Jesus explained to the disciples that He was imparting His life to them.

Contrasting His approach of leading to that of the Gentile masters, Jesus said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”

⁵¹Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John*, 334.

⁵²Richard Longenecker, *Acts*, in vol. 9 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 256. Emphasis added.

(Matt 20:28). Craig Blomberg writes, “The word ‘ransom’ (*lytron*) would make a first-century audience think of the price paid to buy a slave’s freedom.”⁵³ Jesus imparted His very life to the disciples and purchased their freedom from sin.

Demonstration

Coleman’s fifth principle of discipleship is the principle of demonstration. Coleman examines how Jesus modeled for the disciples His way of ministry so that they would learn to minister just as He did. He writes, “He did not ask anyone to do or be anything which first he had not demonstrated in his own life, thereby not only proving its workability, but also its relevance to his mission in life.”⁵⁴ Coleman cites Luke 11:1-4 as an example of this principle at work.⁵⁵

In this passage, the disciples approached Jesus and asked Him to teach them what He had been doing. Jesus prayed in the passage, and as the disciples saw Him, they wanted Him to show them how to pray as He prayed. They asked, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). Jesus responded by teaching them, “You should pray in this way” (Luke 11:2-4).

Jesus often went away by Himself to pray (Luke 5:16; 6:12), but He also prayed in front of the disciples. This piqued their curiosity. They recognized that prayer was an essential part of the life of their Teacher. This realization prompted their question—Jesus, teach us how to do what you are doing (Luke 11:1). Jesus’

⁵³Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 308.

⁵⁴Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 76.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 72.

demonstration thereby provided a model by which the disciples would emulate His ministry of prayer. Walter Liefeld writes, “[Jesus’] exemplary practice introduces the exemplary prayer. . . . Jesus responds to the request of ‘one of the disciples’ with a model that, while not to be thoughtlessly repeated provides words disciples can use with the confidence that they express Jesus’ own teachings.”⁵⁶

Jesus constantly demonstrated to the disciples how He expected them to follow. His training of the disciples was more than instruction; it was demonstration in His own life. Jesus could easily say, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matt 20:28), but He also got down on His hands and knees and washed the disciples’ feet (John 13:5-12). He could easily say, “Greater love has no man than this; that he would lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13), but to lay down His life on the cross was much more difficult (John 19:16-30). Jesus could easily say, “I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38), but His prayer, “Yet not my will, but Yours be done,” in Gethsemane caused him to sweat drops of blood (Luke 22:42). Jesus modeled in His life the things that He taught the disciples to do.

Jesus also demonstrated how to understand and interpret the Scriptures. He used the Scriptures extensively in His ministry as He taught, thus revealing the importance of knowing and following the Word of God (Matt 11:10; Matt 11:17; Matt 12:38-42; Matt 13:14-16; Matt 15:3-9). The disciples witnessed the significance of the Word of God in Jesus’ life and its importance in their daily lives. One example is found

⁵⁶Walter Liefeld, *Luke*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 946.

when the Pharisees questioned Jesus regarding Sabbath regulations. Jesus referenced 1 Samuel 21, where David ate consecrated bread and made application to the disciples' picking grain on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1-7). Coleman writes, "The principles of Bible exhortation were practiced before them so repeatedly that they could not help but catch on to at least some of the rules for basic Scriptural interpretation and application."⁵⁷

The disciples also saw Jesus' heart for the lost demonstrated. The Pharisees ridiculed Jesus for sitting down to eat with sinners and tax collectors (Matt 9:10-13). He allowed a prostitute to wash His feet (Luke 7:36-50). He instructed the disciples, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14). He stopped and healed blind Bartimaeus by the roadside (Mark 10:46-52). Jesus ministered to many people who were shunned by the religious establishment as "sinners." Jesus' heart for the lost taught the disciples that they were to share the good news with sinners. Coleman writes, "In all types of situations and among all kinds of people, rich and poor, healthy and sick, friend and foe alike, the disciples watched the master soul-winner at work."⁵⁸

Delegation

The sixth principle of discipleship is the principle of delegation. With this principle the responsibility for ministry expands from the mentor alone to include the mentee. Coleman explains, "As Jesus was beginning his third general tour of Galilee, he doubtless realized that the time had come when his disciples could join him more directly

⁵⁷Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 72.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 74-75.

in the work. They had seen enough at least to get started. They needed now to put into practice what they had seen their Master do.”⁵⁹ Coleman cites Luke 9:1-11 as an example of this principle’s implementation in Christ’s ministry.⁶⁰

Luke 9:1 states, “And He called the twelve together, and gave them power and authority over all the demons and to heal diseases.” Up to this point, Jesus was the One who had authority and power for ministry, and the disciples learned from Him. The disciples watched Him as He healed the sick and cast demons out of the possessed. This charge was different, however. Now Jesus was saying, “It is your turn. I am giving you My authority and My power to perform ministry yourselves.” Walter Liefeld agrees, “The ‘Twelve’ receive both the ‘power’ and the ‘authority’ to do works of the sort Jesus had performed in the episodes Luke has thus far reported.”⁶¹

The narrative continues, “And He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to perform healing” (Luke 9:2). Jesus entrusted the ministry to the Twelve. They had been with Him for some time, observing Him, learning from Him, and now it was their time to perform ministry. Leon Morris writes, “Equipped in this way they were sent forth. Jesus sent them to do two things: *to preach the kingdom of God and to heal*. This is clearly an extension of his own ministry.”⁶²

Jesus explained to the disciples the importance of their involvement in His ministry. It was imperative that they learn ministry through His delegation so that they

⁵⁹Ibid., 80.

⁶⁰Ibid., 81; 85-86.

⁶¹Liefeld, *Luke*, 918.

⁶²Morris, *Luke*, 179. Italics in original.

would carry on the ministry after His departure. Prior to sending out the seventy in Luke 10, Jesus told the disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Luke 10:2).⁶³ It was if to say, “There is much work to be done, and few to do it. Join me in the work, and pray for others to join us as well.”

Delegation was the turning point in the discipleship strategy of Christ. With delegation, the disciples began to minister in the name of Christ the same way they would following His departure. Christ explained the work of the disciples in Luke’s account. Coleman writes, “Before letting them go, however, Jesus gave them some briefing instructions regarding their mission. What he said to them on this occasion is very important to this study because, in a sense, he outlined for them explicitly what he had been teaching them implicitly all the time.”⁶⁴

As the disciples obeyed the mission of Christ, they were multiplying His ministry. William Hendriksen writes, “[The disciples] did as Jesus had told them to do. They did the very kind of work Jesus too had been doing and was doing. In fact, one might say that Jesus was carrying out his ministry through them.”⁶⁵

Supervision

Coleman’s seventh principle is the principle of supervision. Jesus’ supervision kept the disciples focused on the mission He gave to them. Coleman writes,

⁶³Scholars debate whether there were 70 or 72 sent out by Christ based on manuscript evidence. For a discussion of the argument, see Morris, *Luke*, 198.

⁶⁴Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 81.

⁶⁵Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 473.

Jesus made it a point to meet with his disciples following their tours of service to hear their reports and to share with them the blessedness of his ministry in doing the same thing. In this sense, one might say that his teaching rotated between instruction and assignment. What time he was with them, he was helping them to understand the reason for some previous action or getting them ready for some new experience. His questions, illustrations, warnings, and admonitions were calculated to bring out those things that they needed to know in order to fulfill his work, which was the evangelization of the world.⁶⁶

Coleman cites Luke 9:1-10 and Luke 10:1-21 as evidence of this principle in the discipleship strategy of Christ.

In these passages, Jesus sent out the Twelve and then seventy to minister.

Luke records, “When the apostles returned, they gave an account to Him of all that they had done” (Luke 10:10). This passage reveals the supervision of Jesus over the disciples. He sent them out to perform ministry, but He did not allow them unbridled freedom. He watched over them and brought them back for a time of encouragement, reproof, and correction.

Jesus was always providing this supervision to the disciples. After He fed the four thousand, Jesus explained to them how He provided for them (Mark 8:14-21). In Mark 9:14-29, Jesus instructed the disciples after their failed attempt to cast a demon out of a young boy. He corrected them when they tried to stop others from ministering in His name (Mark 9:38-40). In Luke 9:51-54, Jesus rebuked the disciples for wanting to destroy the Samaritans.

Through all of this supervision, Jesus ensured that the disciples were ministering in His name. Coleman writes, “We dare not assume that the work will be done merely because we have shown a willing worker how to do it, and then sent him or

⁶⁶Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 89.

her out with a glowing expectation of results.”⁶⁷ Jesus did not leave the disciples alone in their first attempts at ministry, but, instead, He followed up with them. This follow-up allowed for growth in the ministry capabilities of the disciples as they learned from Jesus’ instruction.

Coleman again writes,

The important thing about all this supervisory work of Jesus was that he kept the disciples going on toward the goal he had set for them. He did not expect more from his disciples than they could do, but He did expect their best, and this he expected always to be improved as they grew in knowledge and grace. His plan of teaching, by example, assignment, and constant checkup, was calculated to bring out the best that was in them.⁶⁸

As Jesus pushed the disciples and supervised their efforts, He gave them opportunity to grow.

Their growth is observed when the seventy were sent out (Luke 10:1-21). Jesus sent them out again to minister on their own, and again, they returned to Jesus for supervision over their efforts.

When the seventy returned to Jesus, the disciples exclaimed, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name” (Luke 10:17). This return was victorious. It seems that they had better results than the initial try. Coleman writes, “On the previous mission of the Twelve, no mention is made of any spectacular success in their work, but on this occasion they had a rousing report of triumph. Perhaps the difference was the additional experience which the disciples had gained.”⁶⁹ The time that Jesus spent with

⁶⁷Ibid., 94.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid., 90. This is an argument from silence; however, the Scriptures seem to indicate that they had learned from their previous experience and were more successful in their next attempt.

the disciples correcting, encouraging, and challenging them produced greater ministers. Hendriksen echoes the sentiment, writing, “What we do know is that they returned with joy and expressed their elation over the fact that even the demons had been subject to them in Christ’s name. Evidently they had been successful in their mission.”⁷⁰

Jesus even taught the disciples through their successes. He said, “Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven” (Luke 10:20). Even when the disciples did well, Jesus taught them, kept them on the mission, and helped them to become better ministers.

It was important that the disciples become capable ministers of the gospel because Jesus would eventually hand the ministry off to them. They eventually needed to be able to perform ministry without His physical presence.

Reproduction

The final principle of discipleship identified in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* is the principle of reproduction. After years spent with the disciples, Jesus commissioned the disciples to continue His ministry after His departure. Coleman writes,

Jesus intended for the disciples to produce his likeness in and through the church being gathered out of the world. Thus his ministry in the Spirit would be duplicated many-fold by his ministry in the lives of his disciples. Through them and others like them it would continue to expand in an ever-enlarging circumference until the multitudes might know in a similar way the opportunity which they had known with the Master. By this strategy the conquest of the world was only a matter of time and their faithfulness to his plan.⁷¹

⁷⁰Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 580.

⁷¹Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 97.

Coleman cites the Great Commission of Matthew's Gospel as evidence of this principle.⁷²

Jesus made the how-to of the mission explicitly clear in the Great Commission. He commanded the disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt 28:19). His overall discipleship strategy had now unfolded. Jesus first called the disciples to follow Him. He associated Himself with them, spending time with them. He consecrated them to Himself, calling them to obedience and faithfulness. He imparted His life to them by investing Himself into them spiritually. He demonstrated to them exactly what He wanted them to do through His own example. Next, He delegated to them personal responsibility to try to minister themselves. He provided supervision to them, holding them accountable to the mission of Christ and enabling them to grow in their ministry capacities. They grew to the point that He handed off the ministry to them and told them, "Now I want you to reproduce in others what I have done with you, and I want you to teach them to do it with others still. You will continue to do this until you reach the whole world with the good news."

Coleman writes,

His whole evangelistic strategy—indeed, the fulfillment of his very purpose in coming into the world, dying on the cross, and rising from the grave—depended on the faithfulness of his chosen disciples to this task. It did not matter how small the group was to start with so long as they reproduced and taught their disciples to reproduce. This was the way his church was to win—through the dedicated lives of those who knew the Savior so well that His spirit and method constrained them to tell others. As simple as it may seem, this was the way the gospel would conquer. He had no other plan.⁷³

⁷²Ibid., 101.

⁷³Ibid., 99.

D. A. Carson adds, “The injunction is given at least to the Eleven, but to the Eleven in their role as disciples. Therefore they are paradigms for all disciples. Plausibly the command is given to a larger gathering of disciples. Either way it is binding on *all* Jesus’ disciples to make others what they themselves are—disciples of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁴

Christ also expressed the means for fulfilling this grand mission in the Great Commission. He gave the disciples the means to do what He called them to do. He stated, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18). In essence, He said, “All authority is Mine—go out in My authority. Go and make disciples.”

Then He explained again how the disciples were to do it. They were to make disciples by “baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). First, the disciples were to evangelize the lost world. Baptism is a symbolic picture of the new birth. The ordinance of baptism is a public profession of the regeneration that God has already wrought in the life of a believer. The disciples were to evangelize the lost, and upon the new believer’s conversion, baptize them as an identification with the church. R. T. France writes, “It was against the background of John’s practice that [baptism] would be understood, as an act of repentance and of identification with the purified and prepared people of God.”⁷⁵

Second, they were to disciple the saved. Jesus added, “Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt 28:20). France remarks,

⁷⁴D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 596.

⁷⁵R. T. France, *Matthew*, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 414.

There is thus a strongly ethical emphasis in this summary of Christian mission and discipleship, as there has been in Jesus' teaching throughout this Gospel. To 'make disciples' is not complete unless it leads them to a life of observing Jesus' commandments.⁷⁶

Jesus' final words to the disciples were words of encouragement in fulfilling the commission. He gave them His authority along with plain instructions on how to complete the plan. Finally, He assured the disciples of His continued presence with them as they went out. He concluded, "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). Frank Stagg writes,

The book closes with a beautiful reassurance which reaches back to the beginning of the Gospel. *I am with you* is a near equivalent to Emmauel, 'God with us.' The risen Lord gave assurance of his continuing presence *to the close of the age*. This means until the completion of history, but the emphasis is upon its consummation and not its termination. The risen Lord is with us until *the age* is brought to its consummation, i.e., until history is brought to its goal.⁷⁷

By reproducing the strategy that Christ employed in their lives, the disciples would fulfill Christ's plan for reaching the world. Coleman concludes the chapter, "This finally is the way the Master planned for his objective to be realized on the earth, and where it is carried through by his strategy, the gates of hell cannot prevail against the evangelization of the world."⁷⁸

New Principle: Incarnation

The Master Plan of Evangelism identifies eight principles of Christ's discipleship strategy. However, when Coleman now lectures on the subject, he includes a

⁷⁶Ibid., 415.

⁷⁷Frank Stagg, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 252. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁸Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 106.

ninth principle. This principle is not listed as another principle in any editions of the book, although Coleman insists that it is implicitly found throughout the work. He states, “[Incarnation] is the foundation of the book It is so obvious that I did not list it as one of the principles. Every page of the book is built on this foundation.”⁷⁹ As Coleman taught on *The Master Plan*, however, he realized that this point of incarnation needed further clarification. He says, “I’ve come to realize not to assume that people understand the obvious.”⁸⁰

Coleman remarks, “None of [the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism*] would be meaningful to us unless Jesus had come Himself, identified with us, bore our sorrows, carried our griefs, and finally took upon Himself the judgment for our sin and died in our place on the cross.”⁸¹ It is in Jesus’ act of putting on flesh and becoming a servant that all of the other principles take shape.

The defining characteristic of the principle of incarnation is the love of Christ for the lost world as expressed in His substitutionary death on the cross. In Philippians 2:8, the Bible states, “Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Coleman explains, “The cross was accepted when he came. In fact, it had been determined before the stars were fixed in place. He was the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. This, then, must be in our mind before we begin the journey.”⁸²

⁷⁹Robert Coleman, “On *The Master Plan of Evangelism*” (classroom lecture notes, 80513--*Historical Issues in Evangelism and Church Growth*, Spring 2009), audio recording.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

Disciples must accept Christ for salvation and die to themselves in order to live for Him. Coleman continues,

We begin at the cross where we turn from sin and die to our own rights. When someone dies for you, you belong to them. It is the renunciation of your rights that puts you in a position to become a minister, a servant, of Christ. That is a big decision to make, and it is one that has to be renewed every day as you live. There will be deeper dimensions of it as you grow in knowledge and grace.⁸³

Disciples emulate Christ by becoming servants to a lost world as they understand His incarnation in a greater way.

Christ's compassion for the lost was exhibited in the tears that He shed for the people of Jerusalem. Matthew records, "Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:36).

Coleman remarks, "Why would [the people] be harassed? The persons who were supposed to help them really didn't love them. Jesus called them 'hirelings.' They were in it for what they got out of it. When the hireling, as he stayed by the sheep, saw the sheep being attacked by wolves they would run away. He characterized them as 'the blind leading the blind.'"⁸⁴ In contrast to the Jewish leadership, Jesus was a loving servant who cared for the sheep.

The incarnation provided the disciples a living example of how to serve, how to love, and how to minister to the world. The incarnation of Christ is expressed in John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." Borchert states,

The meaning of the text here then should be: 'And the word became flesh and tented ['presenced' itself] in our midst.' Jesus, as did the tent of meeting, moved with his

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid.

disciples as their first Paraclete or Counselor. But he told his troubled disciples that when he would depart he would send ‘another’ Paraclete to be with them until the close of time (14:16-17). The personal reality of divine presence is a key in this Gospel to a vital Christian life.⁸⁵

Jesus’ presence with the disciples provided them with a vivid picture of what their relationship with the Father was always intended to be. Through the incarnation, Jesus modeled a true relationship with the Father and trained the disciples to emulate Him. Coleman concludes, “Each step that [Jesus] took on earth was a conscious acceptance of God’s eternal purpose for His life. That is the guiding principle upon which we will study His ministry.”⁸⁶

Analysis and Review

When examined against biblical scholarship, the principles outlined by Coleman are biblically sound. Coleman does not use eisegetical approaches, but faithful interpretation of the passages used to identify the principles in the ministry of Christ. He does not offer unusual interpretations of the Scripture passages, but, rather, he shows understanding of the passages that is corroborated by biblical scholars in evangelical commentaries on the texts. He supports his conclusions with examples from Scripture, asserting no principle without some biblical support.

Coleman’s Discipleship Strategy in His Other Works

The Master Plan of Evangelism is Coleman’s most well-known and most widely read work. The principles that he identifies in the ministry of Christ and outlines

⁸⁵Borchert, *John 1-11*, 120.

⁸⁶Coleman, “On *The Master Plan of Evangelism*” (classroom lecture notes, 80513--*Historical Issues in Evangelism and Church Growth*, Spring 2009), audio recording.

in the book can also be found in his other works. The other works communicate the same discipleship principles in different ways. As in *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, Coleman uses scriptural support for his conclusions. By examining Coleman's other writings on discipleship, a consistent view of his discipleship strategy can be attained.

About *The Master Plan of Discipleship*

The Master Plan of Discipleship was written in 1987 and is the natural extension of *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. In this work, Coleman explains how the disciples took the mantle of discipleship from Christ and continued it in the New Testament church as recorded in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Coleman writes, "By its nature, then, the mission that Christ initiated alone becomes in Acts a corporate movement. His objective and ministry are the same, only now they are diffused through all His people."⁸⁷

If the disciples truly learned the principles of discipleship from Christ, their practice in the book of Acts would reflect Christ's discipleship strategy. The contemporary church's practice of discipleship should reflect these principles as well. Coleman asserts, "While structures and methodologies may change, principles remain constant in every age and culture. If we can see these foundational truths in embryonic form, despite nineteen hundred years of cultural change, some basic guidelines can be established for the contemporary church."⁸⁸

⁸⁷Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Spire, 1998), 11.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 13.

As Coleman surveys the discipleship pattern of the early church, the principles from *The Master Plan of Evangelism* are heavy throughout the work. The disciples practiced the principle of selection. Coleman writes, “The apostolic church directs evangelism especially to persons disposed to seek truth and then concentrates energy on their development. They learned this from Jesus.”⁸⁹ He observes how the disciples began preaching to “spiritually sensitive Jews” at Pentecost, then at Samaria—“a place where Jesus had earlier laid a foundation by His witness.”⁹⁰ Paul continued this pattern by preaching in the synagogues to “persons of like religious background.”⁹¹

The disciples continued with the principle of association. Coleman writes, “This fellowship of kindred spirits became the primary means by which disciples were trained. Just as Jesus had lived closely with His followers, so now the gathered community of believers formed an ongoing communion with His Spirit.”⁹² The disciples spent time with the early church training and teaching them just as Christ did with them.

The disciples communicated the principle of consecration as well. Coleman pens, “Followers of this Way were called *disciples*. They were recognized by their devotion to the Master, evidenced by obedience to His precept and example . . . It is no accident that believers in the Book of Acts, as well as the Gospels, are often identified by

⁸⁹Ibid., 43.

⁹⁰Ibid., 44.

⁹¹Ibid., 44-45. The disciples did not limit themselves, nor did Christ. Christ preached to the masses, fed them, and ministered to them. Peter preached to a great crowd at Pentecost. The principle of selection is found in their strategy to focus on a few who would lead the masses. In *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, Coleman writes, “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” (35).

⁹²Ibid., 49.

this term.”⁹³ The early church became obedient to the commands of Christ as the disciples taught them how to follow Jesus.

The disciples practiced the principle of impartation with the New Testament church as well. Coleman writes, “Attention centers upon persons acting in such submission to the claims of Christ that their lives are permeated by His presence.”⁹⁴ He adds, “This was the norm of Christian experience in the New Testament. Not that believers all lived in the reality, but it was everyone’s privilege. Where members of the church were not abiding in the promise, they were exhorted to do so.”⁹⁵ The imparting of the Holy Spirit to the New Testament church was life to them and a sign of their belonging to Christ.

Demonstration was also replicated in the ministry of the disciples. The disciples modeled ministry for the church just as Christ demonstrated ministry to them. Coleman writes, “[The disciples] were in a unique position to equip the church for the work of ministry that they shared together.”⁹⁶ Just as Jesus taught the disciples how to minister, to pray, and to study God’s Word, so the disciples modeled for the church how to practice these disciplines. Acts 2:42 states, “[The believers] were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

⁹³Ibid., 84.

⁹⁴Ibid., 109.

⁹⁵Ibid., 108.

⁹⁶Ibid., 67.

The disciples followed demonstration by handing off the responsibility of ministry to the church as they had learned in the principle of delegation. Coleman writes, “It was not their place to do all the labor themselves, but rather to train the people for the task committed by Christ to His whole body. By so doing, the members of the church are built up to a place of strength and maturity, until all become full-grown in the Lord.”⁹⁷ By delegating ministry to the church, the impact of Christ’s continued ministry expanded greatly. In Acts 6, for example, the disciples ordained seven deacons to join them in ministry. The result was that “the Word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).

The principle of supervision was also a part of the disciples’ strategy. As the church spread into new areas, pastors were established to oversee the new flocks. The disciples provided supervision to these new churches to help keep them true to the teachings of Christ (Acts 11:19-26). Coleman writes, “It was not their duty to minister on behalf of the members, but to supervise and encourage the work belonging to them all.”⁹⁸ Also, Paul’s letters to Timothy, for example, provided supervision and further instruction on how to lead the church (1 Tim 1:3-7).

Finally, the disciples continued in the principle of reproduction. The church grew as the disciples evangelized and disciplined the lost (Acts 2:41-42; 6:7; 8:35-36). After highlighting the tremendous growth of the New Testament church, Coleman states, “Such growth cannot be sustained by merely adding the children of Christians to the

⁹⁷Ibid., 67-68.

⁹⁸Ibid., 69-70.

rolls, nor is it the result of large transfers of membership from other congregations. The early church grew by evangelistic multiplication, as witnesses of Christ reproduced their lifestyle in the lives of those about them.”⁹⁹

The Master Plan of Discipleship reveals a continuation of Christ’s discipleship strategy through the ministry of the disciples. The book reiterates the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, demonstrating their effectiveness in the early church.

About *The Master’s Way of Personal Evangelism*

Coleman authored *The Master’s Way of Personal Evangelism* in 1997, and it further illustrates the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. The book highlights several accounts of Jesus’ personal ministry with the lost, demonstrating how the disciples would learn His discipleship strategy by His example. A summary of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* can be found in the introduction:

His strategy was to prepare a nucleus of laborers for the harvest. These followers in turn would reach others and train them with the same vision. In time, through the process of reproduction, He saw the day when every person would have opportunity to intelligently respond to the Gospel of God’s redeeming love.¹⁰⁰

The principle of selection is found in Jesus’ call of the first disciples (John 1:29-51). Coleman describes how Andrew and John approached Jesus and how Jesus told them to come with Him. As the disciples went home with Jesus, Coleman remarks, “Think of what it must have meant to share Jesus’ hospitality, asking Him questions, listening to Him expound the things of God. As He makes them feel at ease and draws

⁹⁹Ibid., 30.

¹⁰⁰Robert Coleman, *The Master’s Way of Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1997), 13.

out their own aspirations, any doubts are dispelled about His claim upon their lives.”¹⁰¹

The principle is duplicated with Peter, Philip, and Nathanael.

Coleman describes the principle of association through the conversion of Matthew (Mark 2:13-22). After Matthew left the tax collector’s booth, he invited Jesus to a dinner at his house with his friends. Jesus accepted the invitation and spent time with Matthew, associating Himself with him. Coleman writes, “The scribes and Pharisees are indignant when they see Jesus eating with ‘the tax gatherers and sinners.’”¹⁰² Christ rebuked their indignation, and He continued to spend time with His followers.

Jesus demonstrated the principle of consecration in His meeting with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). The Pharisees demanded condemnation of the woman, but Jesus responded with grace. Coleman writes, “Surely she is deeply grateful. Calling Jesus ‘Lord,’ the woman affirms that she is free. Her Savior concurs. Yet very firmly He reminds her to go and ‘from now on sin no more.’”¹⁰³ The disciples observed Jesus’ call to obedience to His commands by observing this interaction.

The principle of impartation is modeled in the conversion of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-28). In dealing with this despised citizen, Jesus’ heart for the hurting was imparted to His disciples. Coleman writes,

‘The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.’ How reassuring these words must have been to Zacchaeus. The statement also must have made the disciples ponder what they have witnessed. For this was an object lesson in evangelism—a demonstration of what the ministry of Christ is all about.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹Ibid., 21-22.

¹⁰²Ibid., 59.

¹⁰³Ibid., 48.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 57.

Jesus modeled the principle of demonstration by witnessing to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42). Coleman writes, “As Jesus speaks, the disciples, laden with groceries, return from Sychar—without ever getting friendly with the Samaritans. They were amazed that their Master would be speaking with a woman. Apparently it had never occurred to them to share the Gospel while shopping in town.”¹⁰⁵ Jesus’ ministry to the Samaritan woman demonstrated to the disciples that His good news was for all peoples, a lesson they did not yet fully understand.

The principle of supervision is seen in the account of Jesus with the little children (Luke 18:15-17). Many parents brought their children to Jesus for Him to bless them. The disciples attempted to restrain the parents from bothering Jesus. Coleman writes, “When Jesus sees the behavior of His disciples, He is indignant. How can they be so insensitive? The ensuing drama demonstrates a truth they will never forget.”¹⁰⁶ Jesus rebuked the disciples and called the children to Himself. His supervision of their failure in ministry corrected their future attempts.

The principle of reproduction is described in the conversion of Saul (Acts 9:1-31). When Jesus confronted Saul on the road to Damascus, Saul was blinded by the presence of Christ. Ananias received a vision from God to speak to Saul. Coleman writes, “Ananias then tells Saul that he has been appointed to know God’s will and to experience by sight and sound the presence of His Lord. ‘For you will be a witness for

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 46. Coleman does not address the fact that Christ was speaking alone with a woman. It would not be a wise practice for a man to be alone with a woman today.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 104.

Him to all men of what you have seen and heard.”¹⁰⁷ God told Paul that he was saved to reproduce, and to tell others about Jesus.

The Master’s Way of Personal Evangelism retells the principles outlined in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* by pointing out how Jesus demonstrated the principles through His personal interactions. Not only did the disciples learn from Jesus sharing with them personally, but they also learned much of the ministry of Christ by observing His dealings with others.

About *The Mind of the Master*

Coleman wrote *The Mind of the Master* in 1977, and this book is important to understanding the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. The work “look[s] closely at the Saviour, trying to discern in Him those inner resources which gave direction and strength to His redeeming work among us.”¹⁰⁸ Because disciples are to imitate Christ, understanding His mind and heart is imperative.

Coleman describes the principle of selection as follows,

The Master devoted Himself to the training of these followers who formed a counterculture of righteousness in the midst of paganism. From this growing fellowship, He selected twelve of the most alert disciples for special attention, though within this group, Peter, James, and John had an even closer association. This was the nucleus around which He built a Church. While He continued His ministry to the masses, He concentrated upon these men who would someday lead the others.¹⁰⁹

Jesus selected the Twelve to join Him in beginning the Church.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 137.

¹⁰⁸Robert Coleman, *The Mind of the Master* (Wilmore, KY: Christian Outreach, 1977), 15.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 96.

The principle of association can also be found in the book. Jesus intersected His life with the lives of His disciples in order that He might train them to become like Him. Coleman writes, “Jesus sets forth Himself as the object of our faith and the pattern of our life. This is the basis of His approach in discipling men. He does not ask us to follow a theory, but to follow a Person. His life is the illustration of what He wants His disciples to become.”¹¹⁰ The disciples could not begin to understand the mind of Christ without spending time with Him.

In describing Christ’s reliance upon the Holy Spirit, Coleman outlines the principle of consecration. As the disciples of Jesus walked by the Spirit as He did, they grew in obedience to the commands of Christ. Coleman writes, “Man is still finite in all his resources, and bears the marks of a corrupted body, but he is no longer his own, and he begins to grow, however falteringly, in the likeness of another Person.”¹¹¹ The mind of Christ revealed that He was consecrated to the purposes and commands of His Father, and His disciples must be consecrated as well (John 10:18, 25, 37-38; 12:49-50; 15:10).

Christ’s promise of the Holy Spirit to His disciples also illustrates the principle of impartation. Coleman writes,

He who had been Christ’s strength all these years had to become real within them. Unless they were possessed by His living Presence, their lives would be forlorn of joy and peace, and the ministry of their Lord would never thrill their souls. Nothing less than an enduement of ‘power from on High,’ a baptism of consuming fire, would suffice for the task to which they were appointed.¹¹²

¹¹⁰Ibid., 13.

¹¹¹Ibid., 30.

¹¹²Ibid., 32-33. Coleman focuses primarily on Christ’s impartation of the Holy Spirit to His followers which is beyond the power of ordinary men to emulate. He also shares how Christ imparted His spiritual life to them through sharing His insight into the kingdom of God, however. Christians today can impart their lives to their mentees through relating their spiritual successes in the same manner.

The disciples thus received a Helper to guide them and empower them for ministry through the impartation of the Holy Spirit.

Through the example of Christ's prayer life, Coleman highlights the principle of demonstration. He writes, "[The disciples] could see the priority of prayer in His life; and knew if they were to follow Him, they would have to live by the same rule. It was this knowledge which led them to ask the Master to teach them to pray."¹¹³ Christ's life was a constant demonstration to the disciples of how they were to act and think. By observing and emulating Christ, the disciples learned from His demonstration.

Coleman depicts the principle of delegation when observing the authority of Christ. He writes,

It was to these chosen men who knew Him best that He entrusted His apostleship. Appointing them to be with Him, for three years He taught them the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. The words which He received from the Father were given unto them. They in turn were expected to pass the message on to others.¹¹⁴

As Christ delegated His authority to the Twelve, they joined Him in ministry and passed on His Word to many others.

The principle of supervision is portrayed in Coleman's description of how the disciples followed Christ. He writes, "Though [the disciples'] comprehension of His spiritual objective was painfully slow, gradually by following Him they learned what He was in the world to do and how He did it."¹¹⁵ Their growth was sluggish; however, through Jesus' constant supervision and instruction, the disciples grew into faithful ministers of the gospel.

¹¹³Ibid., 38.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 66.

Coleman explains the principle of reproduction inherent in the Great Commission given to the disciples. He writes, “Just as they had been discipled, so they were to disciple others, teaching them in turn to do the same, until through this process of multiplication, their witness reached the uttermost parts of the earth.”¹¹⁶ Thus, Christ’s strategy for world evangelization would be realized through His disciples as they reproduced His discipleship strategy in their own ministries.

The Mind of the Master illustrates how the heart and mind of Christ are perpetuated through the principles of discipleship that He taught His disciples. Understanding the mind of Christ is an integral part of discipleship in the life of a believer. As a Christian understands the heart and mind of Jesus and imitates Him, he grows in his walk with Christ.

About *The Great Commission Lifestyle*

Coleman penned *The Great Commission Lifestyle* in 1992 as a call for Christians to make the Great Commission of Christ the driving impetus of their lives. Coleman writes, “The Great Commission calls us to measure our lives now by this heavenly vision. *Whatever does not contribute to its fulfillment is an exercise in futility.*”¹¹⁷ Coleman connects the call to fulfill the Great Commission to the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* as Christians follow the pattern of Christ in making disciples.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 96.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 7-8.

¹¹⁷Robert Coleman, *The Great Commission Lifestyle* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1992), 23. Emphasis in original.

The second principle of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* is contained in this work. Concerning the principle of association, Coleman asks, “Have you noticed that He seldom did anything alone? Imagine! He came to save the nations—and finally, He died on the cross for all mankind. Yet while here He spent more time with a handful of disciples than with everybody else in the world.”¹¹⁸ Coleman asserts that Christians must practice association as well in their own discipling relationships in order to effectively train others.

The principle of consecration is also illustrated in *The Great Commission Lifestyle*. Coleman explains that based on who Christ is, He demands our obedience and consecration. Jesus demanded His disciples obey all His commands, including the Great Commission. He writes, “If, indeed, Jesus is God incarnate, with all authority in heaven and earth, should not every creature acknowledge Him and every tongue declare His praise?”¹¹⁹ Because Jesus is God, He demands our obedience to His every command as well, including the Great Commission.

Coleman explains the principle of impartation as well. Without the impartation of the Holy Spirit, the disciples would be unable to fulfill the command of Christ. He writes,

Christ had to renounce His own rights and take the form of a servant when He was sent into the world. In the same way, His disciples become an embodiment of the message they bear and live in the world as the Lord has set an example. Making this witness possible, John concludes the commission with Christ’s promise of the Holy Spirit (John 20:22).¹²⁰

¹¹⁸Ibid., 59-60.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 37.

¹²⁰Ibid., 16.

As Christ imparted His life and His Spirit to the disciples, they were able to fulfill the commission that Christ commanded to them.

Coleman also discusses the principle of demonstration in this work. By demonstration, the disciples knew what Christ commanded of them in the Great Commission. Coleman writes, “In this close association, the disciples were given a demonstration of His mission. His life was the object lesson of His doctrine. By practicing before them what He wanted them to learn, they could see its relevance and application.”¹²¹ Christians today learn the mission of Christ from His demonstration also as they follow His example from the Scriptures.

Not only did Christ demonstrate a lifestyle of discipleship, but He also delegated responsibility to the Twelve that they might practice what He had demonstrated. Coleman writes, “As they were able to assume responsibility, He got them involved in activities suited to their gifts.”¹²² He adds, “The work assignments increased with their developing self-confidence and competence.”¹²³ Through the principle of delegation, the disciples learned from experience what Christ was calling them to do in the Great Commission. Christians fulfilling the Great Commission must train their disciples and delegate responsibility to them if they are to learn how to make disciples on their own.

The Great Commission Lifestyle also includes the principle of supervision. Coleman explains, “From time to time Jesus would get back with them and see how

¹²¹Ibid., 60.

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Ibid., 61.

things were coming along. Continually checking up on their assignments, asking questions, responding to their queries, He was building in them a sense of accountability.”¹²⁴ Christ’s supervision helped the disciples to better understand His mission so that they would be prepared to fulfill the Great Commission. Christians today are wise to practice supervision with their disciples to train them well in fulfilling the Great Commission in their ministry.

Coleman also describes the principle of reproduction. He writes, “It does not matter how few their numbers are in the beginning, provided that they reproduce and teach their disciples in turn to do the same.”¹²⁵ He further explains how the disciples continued Jesus’ ministry for reaching the world through their reproduction. Coleman writes, “Our Lord did not come in His incarnate body to evangelize the world; He came to make it possible for the world to be saved through His atoning sacrifice. But on His way to Calvary, He made sure that his disciples were equipped by strategy and vision to gather the harvest.”¹²⁶ Disciples must take the mantle of responsibility entrusted to them, and Christians must communicate to those they are training that their continuation of the discipleship process is crucial for the church to make disciples of all nations.

The Great Commission Lifestyle brings a more thorough understanding to Coleman’s discipleship strategy through its explanation of how making disciples should be the defining characteristic of a follower of Christ. He applies the principles of *The*

¹²⁴Ibid., 62.

¹²⁵Ibid., 64.

¹²⁶Ibid.

Master Plan of Evangelism to today's Christians, imploring them to make discipleship the driving force of their daily lives.

Conclusion

In studying the evangelistic practice of Jesus, Coleman identified eight principles that marked the discipleship strategy of Jesus. When he recorded the principles in *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, he produced a work that has been helpful to other Christians trying to make disciples as Christ commanded them. The principles are biblical, being supported in the Scriptures. The principles are further expounded upon in Coleman's other discipleship writings, thus offering a consistent strategy for discipleship. How these principles might be applied in the North American church is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: APPLICATION OF COLEMAN'S STRATEGY FOR THE NORTH AMERICAN CHURCH

This dissertation has examined the discipleship strategy of Robert Coleman to determine whether or not his strategy is biblical, and therefore qualified to be used in the local church for discipleship, and whether or not his strategy is effective, and therefore useful for implementation in the local church. As the introduction of this dissertation notes, the North American church has not disciplined her members as well as she should, and a discipleship strategy that is both biblical and effective is needed. Coleman's strategy presents positive contributions to discipleship in the local church, yet has some challenges in implementation. Despite its challenges, Coleman's strategy for discipleship should be utilized in the local church to disciple her members.

Model Needed for Implementation in Ministry of Local Church

The local church in North America has struggled with determining how to effectively disciple her members. The call to "make disciples" given in the Great Commission of Matthew's Gospel demands that the church be evangelizing and then discipling believers if she is to be faithful to this command. Despite this clear scriptural mandate, churches have not been effective in fulfilling the command.

Evangelism is waning in the North American church according to statistical data. The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in North America, reports that baptisms have declined over the past decade.¹ In fact, Southern Baptist churches reported a five percent decline in baptisms from 2009 to 2010.² Declining numbers in mainline Protestant denominations are even more ominous.³ Many churches have not succeeded in engaging their communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship in the local church is weak as well. Many North American local churches attempt to disciple their members through a classroom setting, either in the traditional Sunday School structure or a small group.⁴ However, these settings do not offer the opportunity for intentional mentoring that Christ modeled in His ministry and Coleman describes in his writings. The classroom setting is important for teaching and training; however, more must be done in order for effective discipleship to occur. The

¹Ed Stetzer, "Point of View: Analysis of SBC Statistics" [on-line]; accessed 27 August 2011; available from <http://www.gofbw.com/blog.asp?ID=13029>; Internet. According to the article, membership statistics are on a fifty year decline.

²Russ Rankin, "Southern Baptists Decline in Baptism, Membership, Attendance" [on-line]; accessed 23 January 2012; available from <http://www.lifeway.com/ArticleView?storeId=10054&catalogId=10001&langId=-1&article=Southern-baptists-decline-in-baptisms-membership-attendance>; Internet.

³"Report Examines the State of Mainline Protestant Churches" [on-line]; accessed 27 August 2011; available from <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/17-leadership/323-report-examines-the-state-of-mainline-protestant-churches>; Internet. According to the report, mainline church membership has dropped by more than 25 percent since 1950.

⁴ According to the 2010 SBC Annual Church Profile, the SBC reported a 7,607,390 enrollment in Sunday School and a 1,604,754 enrollment for Discipleship Training. "Southern Baptist Convention Statistical Survey--2010" [on-line]; accessed 23 January 2012; available from https://s3.amazonaws.com/bhpub/edoc/corp_news_ACP2010stats_NEW.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=1FAF154W9TVZ6M3REZG2&Expires=2097923848&Signature=ekaviTkOyMBn5NgSTWCusWtoWts%3D; Internet. The fact that the SBC records statistics for these categories suggests that these are the primary outlets for discipleship in the SBC.

time required to truly disciple a person is not available in the typical Sunday School class or small group.

The North American church is in need of a model that will guide her to be more effective in evangelizing and discipling people. Without a helpful model, the local church will continue to flounder in making disciples. Coleman's discipleship strategy serves as a valuable resource that the local church can implement in her ministry in order that she would make disciples more effectively.

On the other hand, Coleman has not served as a pastor since writing *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Consequently, he has not intentionally led a local church to adopt these principles, nor has he provided an example of what the principles might look like in the local church setting. Coleman has followed the principles in discipling students as a professor, but he has not provided a working model for implementing these principles in a church. The book to fill this void remains to be written.

Positive Contributions of Coleman's Discipleship Strategy to the Local Church

In his work *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, Coleman outlines eight principles for discipleship that are beneficial to the local church for discipleship. Churches can strengthen their discipleship ministries by implementing his principles into their training programs. Positive contributions of Coleman's strategy include that it is an existing model, that it is scriptural, and that it is effective for mentoring.

Strategy Already Available

One positive contribution of Coleman's strategy is that it is now available for use. Churches do not have to discover principles of discipleship and formulate them into a working structure because Coleman has done the groundwork for them.

The challenge for churches is determining how to implement the principles in their unique setting. *The Master Plan of Evangelism* describes the concepts of the discipleship principles, but it does not take the additional step of applying them. To show in one book how to apply the principles would be difficult because the contexts of churches vary so greatly. The structure for implementing the principles in one setting may be very different in another locale.

One reminder Coleman offers in the epilogue of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* is important when planning on using the discipleship strategy in one's particular setting. Coleman writes, "Not everyone will be led to adopt the same ritual or organization of procedure, nor should we want everyone to fit in the same mold. . . The Master gives us an outline to follow, but he expects us to work out the details according to local circumstances and traditions."⁵ He reiterates the sentiment in class lectures, commenting,

You have to work out a program in light of your circumstances. That is going to be different from church to church and from town to town. That's why a program that comes down from Nashville that is in lockstep and everyone must fall in line with that program is in danger of being out of sync with the particular unique circumstances of your church.⁶

⁵Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Spire, 1993), 108.

⁶Robert Coleman, "On *The Master Plan of Evangelism*" (classroom lecture notes, 80513: *Historical Issues in Evangelism and Church Growth*, Spring 2009), audio recording.

Each church must identify the particular circumstances of its ministry setting, taking into account the unique leadership and history of the church along with the gifts and abilities of her members when considering how to implement this discipleship strategy in their own context.

Despite the challenge of applying the strategy, much of the preparation in designing a discipleship strategy has been accomplished through his book. Churches are left with only discerning how to use the strategy in their ministries.

Strategy Is Scriptural

Another contribution of Coleman’s strategy is that it is scriptural. Chapter five of this dissertation discussed each of the principles at length, examining Coleman’s scriptural support for each one. The conclusion was that Coleman provided a biblical strategy for discipleship based on the example of Jesus’ training of His disciples.

Having a high view of Scripture, Coleman believes that the Bible is inerrant and infallible. Concerning the content of the Gospels, he states, “[The content is] carefully selected and recorded in absolute integrity under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”⁷ He adds, “The scriptural accounts of Jesus constitute our best, and only inerrant, Textbook on Evangelism.”⁸ Based on that foundation, he strives to learn from the example of Christ. Coleman’s strategy is beneficial to the local church because it is based on the Bible, and churches should strive to be biblical in all of their work.

⁷Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 22.

⁸Ibid.

Strategy Is Effective

A third contribution of Coleman's strategy is its effectiveness. When executed properly, the strategy works well for mentoring relationships. The drawback of Coleman's strategy is that the discipleship strategy of many churches does not include the type of mentoring relationships that he suggests.

Effectiveness is difficult to quantify. Large gatherings of people for Bible study do not automatically equate to changed lives. Effective discipleship in the church has often been gauged on how many people participate in a program such as Sunday School. Instead, effectiveness should be determined by how many people are growing in their relationship with God and are participating in making disciples of others.

Life change is best developed in mentoring relationships, which provide greater accountability and attention to the mentee. Christ's example reveals a focus on mentoring relationships as opposed to large gatherings. Coleman writes,

The time which Jesus invested in these few disciples was so much more by comparison to that given to others that it can only be regarded as a deliberate strategy. He actually spent more time with his disciples than with everybody else in the world put together.⁹

Coleman's strategy has been effective at developing mentoring relationships in his life, and others have followed that pattern. Surveys of men that Coleman has disciplined show men who have been impacted greatly by his ministry. Chapter four of this dissertation relates the stories of how Coleman influenced his mentees. Not only did Coleman challenge them to grow in their own walk, but the men have also reproduced disciples in their own lives through the principles they learned from Coleman. Many

⁹Ibid., 45.

churches, however, do not use mentoring in their discipleship ministries. A challenge for churches is how to make mentoring a part of their discipleship ministries.¹⁰

Challenges of Implementing Coleman's Discipleship Strategy in the Local Church

Coleman's discipleship strategy offers helpful principles to the local church for discipleship, but it has challenges as well. The strategy is time consuming, and it is a slow process. Many Christians struggle with developing discipling relationships, and churches must decide how to integrate the strategy into existing discipleship programs.

Time Consuming

One challenge to Coleman's discipleship strategy is that it is time-consuming. The method that Jesus modeled with the disciples required a large amount of time with His disciples. The discipleship strategy of many churches does not provide the time for such intensive relationships to develop. Coleman likens the mentoring relationship to that of a parent and child. He writes, "The only way that a father can properly raise a family is to be with it."¹¹ Just as raising a child requires the time and devotion of a loving parent, so a mentoring relationship requires a commitment of the mentor's time.

Volunteers in the church may balk at the idea of giving more of their time to a mentoring relationship. They are already involved in the various ministries of the church. The challenge for churches is to communicate the need for such a relationship in order to truly make disciples. This task becomes more feasible when churches organize their

¹⁰This challenge will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

¹¹Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 46.

ministries around the purpose of making disciples so that volunteers are mentoring others through their ministry involvement.

Slow Process

Another challenge to Coleman's strategy is that the process of discipleship is slow. Coleman writes, "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."¹² It requires much time and energy to implement Coleman's discipleship strategy. Not only is his strategy time-consuming, but it is also slow in developing results. Christ spent three years with the disciples before they assumed responsibility for furthering His ministry. A disciple will not be developed overnight, just as a child is not reared in a short amount of time. The process of discipleship requires a long-term investment by the mentor.

One way to utilize Coleman's discipleship strategy is to remove traditional models for discipleship, such as the Sunday School class, to focus solely on mentoring relationships. Because the process is time-intensive, reducing existing times of teaching would be counterproductive. While traditional Sunday School classes do not foster one-to-one mentoring opportunities, they do provide an extra hour of instruction in the Word of God that would benefit a disciple.

Instead of removing that time of instruction, a mentor can make use of that time to further instruct a mentee during later times of one-to-one training. In fact, the Sunday School could become a natural setting to build discipling relationships. Teachers

¹²Ibid., 38.

should use the opportunity to train a member of the class to become a teacher, thereby developing the type of discipling relationship that Coleman describes in his discipleship strategy.

A second reason to advocate this approach is that not everyone in the church will be involved in a discipling relationship initially. The goal of a pastor should be that all members of his church be growing in an intentional discipling relationship, but the reality is that not all will do so. A pastor cannot neglect the members of his church who are not involved in these relationships. Because many in the church will not have such a relationship, it is important that they still receive some instruction and training in discipleship. Existing programs afford this teaching to those who have yet to receive one-to-one mentoring. By maintaining existing programs of discipleship, members of the church are not only provided with additional time for discipleship, but are also receiving some discipling while the slow process of mentoring takes root.

Difficulty Creating Discipling Relationships

A third challenge to Coleman's discipleship strategy is that many Christians lack the experience or knowledge of how to create a discipling relationship. Although Christ focused on mentoring relationships with His disciples, many churches have used group teaching sessions to accomplish discipleship in the church. This strategy has left many Christians without the experience of a mentoring relationship, and they lack the knowledge of how to begin such a relationship.

In 2009, Coleman met with South Carolina Baptist Convention staff and pastors to train them using *The Master Plan of Evangelism* as a model for disciple-

making.¹³ Ron Barker, Evangelism and Prayer Strategist for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, was trained in the principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* in the 1960s. He states, “[The book] was the basis for what I did as a college student with Campus Crusade for Christ, and I used it for much of my ministry.”¹⁴

Barker feels that many church leaders have read the book, but he does not know how many have made application of it in their ministries. Barker is unsure of the success of the training with South Carolina pastors. He believes that “the material is there, but the average know-how of a pastor to disciple someone is not there.” He adds, “The idea of pastoral ministry beyond pulpit ministry or a Sunday School is hard to grasp for many because they have never been mentored themselves.”¹⁵ According to Barker, “The principles of *The Master Plan of Evangelism* are biblical and good, but they are difficult to put into practice in the local church.”¹⁶

Indeed, a weakness in Coleman’s strategy is that it has largely been practiced in a setting where discussions of spiritual growth are natural. Coleman’s discipleship has primarily taken place in the Christian university or seminary setting. Coleman was the professor of many of the men whom he disciplined, and thus a natural respect followed. The students desired to spend time with their professor. The students were also growing Christians who felt called to ministry in many instances, resulting in a high level of commitment. Also, the university setting is unique in that students are living in close

¹³Ron Barker, telephone interview by author, 07 July 2011. Barker was mentored by Roy Fish, who wrote the Study Guide to *The Master Plan of Evangelism*.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

proximity and community develops more naturally. These phenomena will most likely not be found when mentoring local church members. For this reason, pastors may find it more difficult to develop mentoring relationships.

Nevertheless, many Christians have not been mentored, and it is imperative that the pastor and leaders of the church model mentoring in the church. The pastor is looked to as the leader in the church, and if he does not make the discipleship strategy a priority, then it will be difficult for the strategy to take root in the church. He is vital in introducing and implementing the discipleship strategy in the church. He must practice Coleman's discipleship strategy in his own ministry and communicate the strategy effectively to the congregation for the strategy to develop in the ministry of the church. Therefore, the pastor should have at least one mentoring relationship ongoing at all times. In this relationship, he invests in the life of another member of the church and teaches them to reproduce that relationship with others.

Existing Discipleship Programs

Another challenge to utilizing Coleman's discipleship strategy is that churches must discern how to integrate the strategy into existing programs of discipleship. Churches can abandon existing discipleship strategies altogether, they can add more mentoring relationships to existing programs, or they can reconfigure their programs to include Coleman's strategy into their own.

One difficulty that many pastors will face when transitioning a traditional church model to include Coleman's discipleship strategy is determining what to do with existing programs of discipleship such as the Sunday School. For congregations trying to

implement the strategy in the discipleship program of the local church, Coleman offers different ways that it can be attempted.

One way is to reorganize the existing structure of the church. Coleman states, “You can try to start over again and structure everything differently, but it doesn’t often work out that people, when they are forced into some kind of a structure, relate easily.”¹⁷ A pastor may attempt to remove existing programs, such as the Sunday School, from the discipleship program of the church, but he will probably face strong resistance in a traditional church model. If the pastor does not prepare the church for such a major shift and properly lead them through it, he will more than likely find himself facing tremendous challenges and even his dismissal from the church in some instances.

Coleman advocates a more subtle approach for implementing his discipleship strategy. He suggests, “Look for opportunities to develop smaller units to meet at different times. It can be at different times in the week. It can be in homes. Try some of these different options. You can try different combinations of people—some may be inter-generational, some may be affinity groups.”¹⁸ This way of implementing his strategy overlays new groups on top of existing programs, thereby not disturbing the training already occurring in Sunday School classes. Instead, his model enhances existing programs through additional, more personal settings. Creating more groups may be difficult for members, however, because additional groups would require additional investment of their time.

¹⁷Robert Coleman, “On *The Master Plan of Evangelism*” (classroom lecture notes, 80513: *Historical Issues in Evangelism and Church Growth*, Spring 2009), audio recording.

¹⁸Ibid.

Instead of abandoning existing programs or adding new strategies to them, churches can incorporate Coleman's discipleship strategy into existing programs of the church. Because a total reconfiguration of the discipleship program would be quite difficult in many ministry settings, a plan that incorporates Coleman's strategy into existing programs will be more feasible for most churches. Structuring the discipleship strategy into existing programs as opposed to creating new groups also places less strain on the leaders of the church who will be participating in the discipleship ministry.

Conclusion

Robert Coleman has made an indelible mark upon twentieth century evangelical Christianity and upon the lives of individuals that he has discipled. He has been faithful to develop mentoring relationships even into his eighties. It is, in fact, difficult to calculate the number of people that have been impacted and influenced by Coleman's ministry. He states, "I've had an influence on a number of people, and I would hope, in some way, all of my students. But as to how many I have discipled, I don't know. When I get to heaven, I will find that out."¹⁹

Coleman is a uniquely gifted and charismatic individual. Some of his success in discipling is due, in part, to his personality and giftedness. Timothy Beougher states that the most difficult aspect of Coleman's strategy to reproduce is Coleman.²⁰ Coleman's ability does not preclude churches and individuals from using his strategy for discipleship, however. Discipleship has been a hallmark in Coleman's life and will be his

¹⁹Coleman, telephone interview by author, 18 January 2011.

²⁰Tim Beougher, telephone interview by author, 23 November 2010.

legacy. Despite the obstacles noted in this chapter, churches can learn from his example to improve their own discipleship ministries.

APPENDIX 1

SELECT LIST OF MEN DISCIPLED¹

1. Lawson Stone
Professor of Old Testament, School of Biblical Interpretation and Proclamation,
Asbury Theological Seminary
2. Timothy Beougher
Assoc. Dean of the Billy Graham School of Evangelism and Missions, The Southern
Baptist Theological Seminary
3. Brad Waggoner
Research Director, Lifeway Christian Resources
4. Lyle Dorsett
Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University
5. Ajith Fernando
National Director of Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka
6. Roy Christians
National Director of Campus Crusade for Christ, Russia
7. John Hong
Professor of Evangelism, E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism,
Asbury Theological Seminary
8. Bob Stamps
Retired Pastor of Clarendon United Methodist Church, Arlington, VA
9. Steve Wingfield
Steve Wingfield Evangelistic Association
10. Michael Connor
Pastor of Global Strategies, Immanuel Bible Church, Springfield, VA

¹This list of men was provided to the author by Robert Coleman. A more complete historical inquiry would require interviewing lesser known men as well.

APPENDIX 2

QUESTIONS REGARDING DISCIPLESHIP STRATEGY OF ROBERT COLEMAN

1. Please give your name, along with when and where you were in one of Dr. Coleman's discipleship groups.
2. What church did you attend while being disciplined by Dr. Coleman?
3. How did the group function? [For example, how many others were in the group? How often did you meet? What happened when you met?]
4. Have you led discipleship groups in your own ministry like the one in which you participated with Dr. Coleman? [How often have you led groups? How many men would you disciple in a group? How often did you meet? What happened when you met?]
5. If you have led discipleship groups like those in Dr. Coleman's strategy, what changes have you made to Dr. Coleman's discipleship strategy to use it in your own ministry?
6. What are the most difficult aspects of Dr. Coleman's discipleship strategy to reproduce? What complications have you faced in your ministry in implementing this discipleship strategy?
7. How strong has been the influence of Dr. Coleman on your life? Please elaborate.
8. What is the greatest lesson on discipleship that you have learned from Dr. Coleman?

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ABSTRACT

AN ANALYSIS OF THE DISCIPLESHIP STRATEGY OF ROBERT EMERSON COLEMAN

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012
Chair: Dr. Charles E. Lawless, Jr.

This dissertation examines the discipleship strategy of Robert Emerson Coleman. Chapter 1 introduces the ministry and work of Robert Coleman. The chapter also discusses the call to discipleship given by Jesus Christ in the Great Commission and the need for the local church to effectively disciple its members.

Chapter 2 presents a biography of Coleman. This chapter highlights his conversion and call to ministry. It also includes details of his ministry as a pastor, professor, and author.

Chapter 3 provides an historical analysis of Coleman's discipleship strategy. This chapter notes influences upon Coleman's strategy, including the work of John Wesley. It also describes the historical context in which Coleman's strategy was developed, particularly the states of the evangelical church and the Methodist church.

Chapter 4 addresses Coleman's practice of discipleship in his ministry. The chapter includes insight into Coleman's personal discipleship, as well as, his discipleship of his family, churches that he has pastored, and students that he led while teaching.

Chapter 5 offers a biblical analysis of Coleman's discipleship strategy, dissecting Scripture used by Coleman to support his principles of discipleship outlined in

The Master Plan of Evangelism. The chapter also notes several other works by Coleman to show how he consistently communicated his discipleship strategy.

The conclusion offers application of Coleman's strategy in the North American church. Positive contributions of Coleman's work for discipleship in the local church are enumerated. Challenges to implementing his strategy are also shared.

This work contends that Coleman has provided a biblical and effective model for discipleship in *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. His strategy is faithful to the model of Christ with His disciples. Coleman's work provides helpful contributions to discipleship in the local church though it has its challenges in implementation. Although Coleman's discipleship ministry has been conducted largely outside of the local church, his strategy can and should be used in the local church for discipleship.

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