

Joy Equipping

“As each part does its work.”
Ephesians 4:16-18



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What Should We Do About Those Lost Sheep, Lord?

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There are churches around the world where people are coming to Christ literally by the hundreds—over 800 baptisms per year.

I thought I was doing okay having led a few people to Christ in my lifetime. But hundreds, Lord?

Those churches must be doing something right. Most growth in North America is from people changing churches.

Of course, we are always happy when someone does accept Christ. Only...we don't seem to plan for it very well.

My mind drifts back twenty years to a tiny church plant. The pastor decided we should use Evangelism Explosion. So we memorized verses and wrote out our testimonies (which felt kind of weird), and learned a plan for presenting Christ to people.

It was scary, and some people thought it was too much by rote, but it worked. Our baby church had people coming to Christ right, left, and center.

Exciting things happened. For example, one night our trainer, my partner Ken, and I knocked on the door of a house. We had no idea who lived there. A couple in their early forties came to the door. When they discovered we were from a church, they said they already had company, but would we please come back the next night?

Our trainer became ill, but Ken and I decided to go anyway. We learned the couple had been watching religious shows on TV, all the time praying for someone who could answer their questions.

I shared my testimony and then prayed silently while Ken went through the Gospel presentation (his first time). At the end, Ken asked if they would like to accept Christ. They both said yes. We prayed with them, made arrangements for follow-up, and left. Once outside, Ken and I smiled at each other. Hey, this evangelizing stuff is a breeze!

What makes the story doubly poignant is that only six months before, another team had knocked on Ken's door

and led Ken and his wife to Christ. Ken was in around thirty at the time, manager of a successful retail business. Today he is a pastor and leader of a major ministry—because a few people decided that, scary or not, God wanted them to go out and tell others about him.

Funny. I haven't done that for a long time—knocked on doors and waited to see what God would do. Different churches. Different pastors. Different me, I guess. Older. But not, it seems, wiser. Because as I muse about my past and future, I realize that I have strayed. And that is loss, not just for me, but also for the people behind all those doors. Where did I go wrong?

I think I know. I think I became too caught up with the values of this world. Hey, it's prestigious to be chairman of a committee, even a church committee! It gives you a good feeling to know you can make things happen, even if the things only involve church people. You are somebody. And we look up to somebodies.

I might still be that way, busy in the church, not even having time to get to know people who don't go to church—except something happened to me as I started spending more time with God.

In the presence of God there is much joy. But the more I have sought to know the mind of God, to understand how he thinks and feels, the more I have realized how much sorrow he feels, and how much he loves us.

Take today, for instance. I don't normally come rushing into the living room, sit down, picture God relaxing in the empty chair across from me, and blurt out, “Hi, Lord. How's your day going?” But today I did.

I'm not sure quite what I expected him to say. “Fine,” perhaps. Like we tend to do. I should have known better. His response is sometimes humorous, but never light. This time, it was heavy.

Almost before the words were out of my mouth, pictures began flashing in a steady stream as if a high tech

video camera was viewing various parts of the world and shooting the images back at me, enveloping me with not only the figures on the screen, but the sounds, and smell, and even the feelings. Children weeping, blood spilling from unquenchable wounds; old women sobbing as they knelt beside the bodies of their sons and daughters. Skeletons who were once human beings, dying of malnutrition and disease and lack of hope. And above all, anger. The anger of soldiers bearing weapons that tear lives and dreams into jagged pieces of flesh. The anger of helpless victims.

But there are pictures, too, of well-dressed men, women, and children sitting at ease. People with all that money can buy. But their eyes are vacant, unhappy, hostile. And lost.

As I reel under the impact of this unexpected reply to my flippant question, I am overwhelmed, not by the images themselves, for I've seen similar ones in newspapers and on television sets, but by something else. Intertwining with the pictures, pervading them, overwhelming my senses, is an incredible feeling of sorrow. The sorrow of a God who is love looking at the hatred and anger and evil of the world he created. For those few brief moments, I am in awe of the immeasurable sadness God feels for those who are lost.

My mind suddenly goes winging back to when I was a young girl visiting my aunt and uncle. There was a piano, and on the piano an old hymn book. Surrounded by adults, I would often creep into a corner by myself and read the hymns. One of my favorites was Ira Sankey's, "The Ninety and Nine." I loved the words, which so beautifully portray the shepherd, with all his sheep in the sheepfold warm and safe—except one. That one has strayed far away, across wild country, with storms and rough water barring the path. But the shepherd refuses to ignore it. He goes searching for the wandering one, risking his own life, tearing his hands, shedding his blood. And when at last he finds the helpless, almost-dead sheep, his cry of joy reaches even to the gate of heaven.

The song is, of course, taken from the parable Jesus told, alluding to the fact that he is the shepherd and we are the sheep. It's a well-known parable, but I have never felt it's emotion as I do now.

Oh, yes, I have been concerned for people I have known. I've prayed for them sometimes, helped out now and then, even had the privilege of leading a few to Jesus.



But as I sit pondering this aura of sadness, I realize that I have never felt the kind of concern God feels. Never felt agony over a soul that is lost.

But the good shepherd is no longer here in the flesh. He has chosen to work through us. Through me.

Lord, help me to feel, not only your sadness, but also your love—that John 3:16 love: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

I think of the many people in my neighborhood who don't know you. I was once like them.

The difference is that I met you one day through the eyes of a young man who was a member of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. We spoke a few times over the course of a weekend retreat, and he told me about you in every word he spoke and in all the ways he showed his care for me. I realized that while he knew you, I only knew about you. He introduced me to you.

And now it's my turn.

I have to get out of my house and my church building and go into the streets of my city, into the lonely places and the noisy places, the dark alleys and the community centers and all the places where your people are. I have to look beyond the colour of their skin, the quality of their clothes, the look in their eyes, their intelligence, customs, habits...and see what you see: lost sheep in need of the good Shepherd.

I cannot hide in the sheepfold any longer.

Scary? Yes. But I suddenly realize that those days 20 years ago with new believers all over the place were the most exciting, meaningful times I've ever known.

Lord, where do I begin? I know that simply going out and knocking on doors isn't the answer. For starters, I can't do it alone. Secondly, there needs to be a plan, Lord, beginning with prayer. Then there has to be follow-up, development of nurturing relationships, support for families, training...And Lord, the situation is more complicated than it was 20 years ago. There are so many who don't even know who you are.

I am overwhelmed. The task is too great for me.

Lord, Elijah thought he was alone when he really wasn't. Do you have 5,000 other believers out there who feel the same way I do? If so, maybe we could form a team.