Iwa Insights
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The Closed Set versus The Centered Set
Part II: Implications for Evangelism and Discipleship with a Centered Set Approach

Once we've established relationships with people--we've gotten to know them and we've brought them to the Lord--they still need to get to know Jesus better and better and more intimately. So our friendships with them need to continue on too. It can't be like a hit and run thing. "Okay, I brought you to the Lord, now you can go ahead and get to know Jesus on your own. I'm going to go and make friends with another family." The idea is that you don't develop a relationship with people just to bring them to Christ, that being your only purpose in getting to know them. We need to maintain a relationship with people even when they indicate that they don't intend to accept Christ. They need a place where they can still be skeptical and have their questions answered and still feel safe in doing that.

If we make the paradigm shift to a centered set approach, we won't drop people. We tend to drop them when we have a closed set mentality because we think that once they're in, they're in, that's all that's important, and that's all I'm responsible for. While, if we have a centered set approach where we are in this continual process of getting to know Jesus better and better and developing a closer and closer relationship with Him ourselves, and we are involved in helping others in that same process, then there's something that happens to us where we become bonded to those we are helping. The only way that we can bring others into a closer relationship to the Lord in this process is by developing closer relationships with them ourselves. And because of that, we're already actually in a discipleship relationship with them right from the very beginning of our relationship with them.

To carry the whole dating-courtship-engagement-marriage analogy a step further, we need to think about parenting, grandparenting, and so forth. Since we can only maintain close relationships with so many people at one time, we need to think in different terms as we keep the discipling process going. Multiplication is not by developing more and more relationships. But we need to set up a pattern where we model and mentor those who come into a personal relationship with the Lord through us as a result of this process, that enables them to do likewise. And so, along the way, they in turn and in like fashion introduce others to Jesus Christ and become responsible for them spiritually. Then we can go on to make other relationships. It's like a human family. As our children grow up, they become more and more independent of us. We're still their parents, but we have more time to do other things, like spoil our grandchildren. Likewise, when our spiritual children become more mature, we have more and more time to reach out and have new spiritual children.

We know a lot more about how to do what we need to do than we think we do in terms of evangelism, in light of this relational process. If we look again at this whole dating-courtship-engagement-marriage process, we might see that we can play the role of go-between. We might say, "What do I have to do to get these two together and help usher them into a relationship and move them along as I know this relationship is destined to go?" Now at any point either one can opt out of the situation on their own free will. At that point, we can say, "No, I still believe they are made for each other." That would be the case with Jesus Christ. We will never be convinced that Jesus isn't right for the person, so forget it. We can imagine evangelism as being that go-between. We need to figure out first how to get these two to meet one another. Obviously we need to talk to both parties about one another. And of course to Jesus that would be prayer. To our friend we could start sharing about how great this other person is and what great times we've had and of course highlight what the person likes and values. We

would keep talking about the person until our friend showed a little bit of interest. At some point we could say, "Hey, would you like to meet this person?" And we might get the response, "No, not yet. Maybe some day." But it's going through the same process to the point where in some cases we might even try to maneuver a chance meeting. Accidentally, we run into the person when we are with our friend, and we introduce them to each other. Then after, we say, "What did you think? That's the person I've been talking about." If we were to really think about what we would do in trying to introduce two people we think were really made for each other, and thought through the process step by step, we'd do a pretty good job at imagining what the centered set approach really is, versus this belief-doctrinal-salvation plan-kind of closed set approach.

One thing that the centered set approach does is it frees people to begin to think of successful evangelism as moving people one step closer in relationship with Christ. For some people it might be moving them from indifference to being positive toward Christ. Just one little step closer is successful and they don't have to close the deal. If people can see that there are many things they could do to be doing evangelism, they would see it less as a daunting task. Part of that is just being able to share with another person a personal experience that they've had with Christ. One of the signs of the centered set approach taking root in a church is people opening their mouths and talking about Him more. We don't see people talking about Jesus that much right now, especially who Jesus is in our lives, even in the church, but especially with non-Christians. But hopefully, as the centered set approach catches on, we'll see more who do.

By virtue of being raised in the American evangelical world, most Japanese- and Asian American evangelical Christians have more of the closed set approach to evangelism. But very few even do that, so the real extent of evangelism that is actually done is simply, "I invite someone to church." But what the centered set approach does is put words to what we already feel will work, but we haven't acknowledged as evangelism. How evangelism has been defined to them has been "closed set" so they feel really guilty about not doing it but they can't bring themselves to do it because they just feel either it won't work or it's just so against their nature, they can't do it. And so they invite people to church or they invite people to other things--events and activities--which is the best attempt they have available to them without some affirmation and encouragement that this is evangelism and it's part of the process. So one of the first things we need to do is re-define what evangelism is. They need to have a new perspective on what evangelism is.

Teaching is really important for this paradigm shift to occur. And the focus is not only on Jesus himself, but on the evangelism of Jesus. We have misunderstood the evangelism of Jesus a great deal. We usually see the evangelism of Jesus as being the first encounters that He has with people--like when Jesus talks with the woman at the well in John 4 or when He meets a blind person and enables that person to see, or when He heals a leper. But the majority of the evangelism done by Jesus was with the twelve and the seventy because when they first followed Him they really didn't know who He was. They didn't have any intimate relationship with Him. They might have had enough clues so that they thought, "I think this is the Messiah," enough to check Him out. But Jesus took them with Him and they were able to observe Him as He talked to these people and did these things, and got to the point where He was able to ask, "Who do you say that I am?"

The Sermon on the Mount was not given to a congregation of believers, but to an audience of basically seekers and unbelievers who were acquainted with the law and Jewish teaching and tradition. Jesus was doing a kind of pre-evangelism. He was starting to get them thinking and questioning. He was doing things that enabled them to move closer, to be more open to having a relationship with the Father through Him.

So we tend to think of the evangelistic ministry of Jesus as being the first-time encounters, the healings, the teaching of the multitudes. And we think of the discipleship ministry as separate, as being what He did with the disciples. But it was in fact all evangelism from the centered set approach, bringing people along. It is difficult to draw the line between discipleship and evangelism. At different points the different disciples probably came to the realization of who Jesus was and made a decision, but not all at the same time. He was bringing people through various stages all along at the same time in a centered set approach. He wasn't just saying, "Okay, I have a group that is at Stage I. Now I bring them to Stage II, then Stage III and then I don't have to deal with anybody at Stages I or II any more." He was dealing with people at all stages of the relationship.

We see Paul as the missionary, as the evangelist, and we don't think of Jesus as an evangelist. And yet, what did Jesus come primarily to do? To seek and to save those who were lost. The bottom line is that He was a driven evangelist. There's a tremendous amount of Scriptural basis for this if we look at the ministry of Jesus differently and the life of Jesus differently, as being the life of an evangelist and how He related to all these people was evangelism. That's the biblical basis for the centered set approach to evangelism.