

GASPAR F. COLÓN

INCARNATIONAL COMMUNITY-BASED MINISTRY: A LEADERSHIP MODEL FOR COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION

Incarnational Ministry

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to Him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed Him. (Matt. 4:23–25, NIV)

As we look at the life and ministry of Jesus, and get caught up in His intensity and focus on bringing the influence of the kingdom of heaven to whomever He met, we must ask ourselves to what extent the Christian church reflects the transformational traits palpable in the ministry of Jesus. Is the church, as the body of Christ, content to live on the sidelines as passive victims of the entropy of humanism and its resulting post-Christianity? Does the church even perceive itself as an incarnational entity through which Christ showers His blessings to a world filled with self-centeredness, suffering, and pain? Does the church strive to earn social capital and trust by reflecting the ministry of Jesus?

In Luke 4 we find Jesus visiting His hometown of Nazareth. As He entered the synagogue He was greeted graciously, because word had spread that all those He touched with word and deed praised Him. Unrolling the Isaiah scroll, Jesus read from chapter 61: “The Spirit of

the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18, 19, NIV). Then Jesus added, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). In contrast to this messianic passage, God calls His people away from self-centered religion in Isaiah 58. The fast that God chooses must not focus His people on their own hunger, but rather on the needs of others. The result? "Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings" (Is. 58:12, NIV).

Foundational to Christian teaching and preaching is the message that (1) God loves us (Jn. 3:16); (2) all have sinned and miss the mark of God's righteousness (Rom. 3:23); (3) the wage of sin is death (Rom. 6:23); (4) the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus, who paid the penalty of sin on our behalf (Rom. 6:23; Col. 2:13, 14); (5) we are saved by God's grace, through faith in Jesus (Eph. 2:4-10); and (6) we are judged by how that faith works in mirroring the ministry of Jesus in the world around us (Matt. 25:31-46). If point number six is vague, missed, or ignored, we wind up with what Richard Stearns (2010) calls "the hole in our gospel":

The gospel Jesus described in Luke 4 is indeed something solid. If there is a hole in our gospel, in our understanding of the nature of God's call upon us, His followers, it is not because Scripture is unclear about these issues. Rather, it is because we have chosen . . . to pay little attention to God's unmistakable message to bring the whole gospel to the whole world. (p. 24)

Linthicum's Three Churches

Urban ministry expert Robert Linthicum (1991) proposes that there are three kinds of churches. Which church is yours?

The Church in the City (Community)

This refers only to location, because the church members are not from the community. The church has little or no involvement in the community; it is "in" but not "of" its community. If we were to consider the church as the "salt" in a banana bread recipe, this model would probably look like Figure 1.

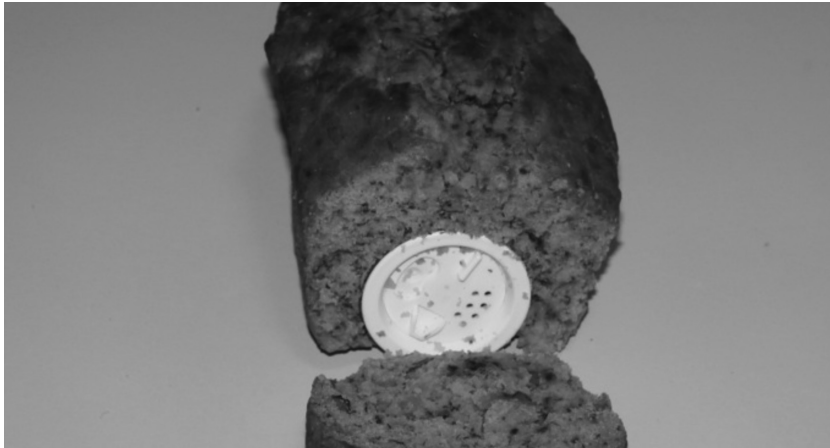


Figure 1. The Church in the City (Community) is like a salt shaker in a loaf of banana bread.

The Church to the City (Community)

This is a church with a keen sense of responsibility to do something for the community. Its fatal flaw is in its perception that the church knows what is best for the community. The church decides unilaterally what the community needs and invites the community to participate. Eventually, church member burnout occurs because, regardless of how much the members work to promote the programs, the community does not trust the diagnosis the church has made. For example, suppose you go to a medical doctor, walk into the examination room, and the doctor glances at you. He pulls out a prescription pad, writes a prescription, signs it, hands it to you and sends you to the cashier. Would you trust him with your diagnosis?

The Church with the City (Community)

This church sees mission to the community as a partnership. It incarnates itself in that community, discovers from the community the burning issues, brings the ministry of the church out into the community, and nurtures personal relationships with individuals in the community. This third kind of church sees the value of connecting with the local leadership of the community surrounding the church. The unique needs of the community help mold the avenues through which this church will conduct its heaven-sent mission.

Christ's Method Alone

As we look at the person of Jesus through the eyes of the inspired writers of the New Testament, we see One who is the “radiance of God’s

glory and the exact representation of His being” (Heb. 1:3, NIV). Peter testifies that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and [that] he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:38, NIV). The apostle Paul identifies Jesus as the “head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18, NIV), and reminds us that “God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27, NIV). This indwelling of Christ, through the mediation of the Holy Spirit, calls for importunate action: “Whoever claims to live in Him must live as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6, NIV).

This indwelling walk with Christ requires that the members of this body, the church, take the proclamation of the gospel to a new level, which follows the pattern of ministry and discipleship that is evident in the life and ministry of Jesus. Ellen G. White (1909) offers a meaningful description of how Jesus ministered:

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, “Follow Me.” (p. 143)

It almost feels constraining to even consider that, when we look at Christ’s method, it would be a singular pattern. By nature leadership prefers a variety of options. Why would we limit ourselves to one method alone?

Yet good leadership also prefers specificity. True leadership is going to want to define the success. What does it constitute? What will it look like? How will we know that it is true success? Maybe the answer comes when we take this statement and place it in the form of a formula.

The “Christ’s Method Alone” Formula

Dr. Caleb Rosado¹ has created such a formula, on which the following discussion is built (see Figure 2). When we look at Christ’s ministry, we see Him mingling (socializing) with the crowds. This opened networks to those who needed Him most, even the unlovely—perhaps especially the unlovely. He was even criticized for welcoming sinners and eating with them (Luke 15:1, 2). This mingling was not self-serving in nature. He mingled with a purpose, desiring their good.

Christ’s method also included sympathizing. Christ’s sympathy

¹Ideas and diagrams in this article that are attributed to Caleb Rosado come either from lectures given by Rosado or from the author’s personal conversations with Rosado. Used with Dr. Rosado’s permission.

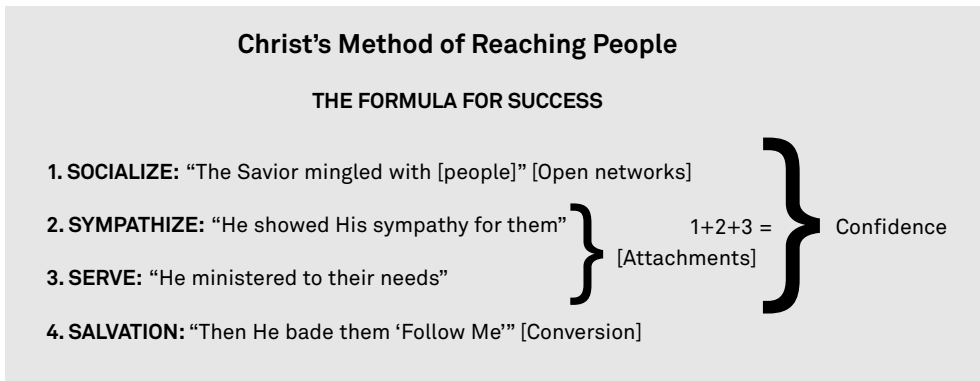


Figure 2. Christ's Method of Reaching People as conceived by Dr. Caleb Rosado.

sought to understand the circumstance, the joy, the pain, and the challenges of those who came in contact with Him. He wept with those who wept and rejoiced with those who rejoiced. He laughed at jokes and even told them to help relieve tension and create openness to more serious life and death conversations. Even Jesus' graciousness in reframing what could have been taken as rebuke to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:16–18) was part of the sensitivity and sympathy that attracted the multitudes. Sympathizing creates social *attachments* that keep people wanting to continue the contact and the fellowship.

Ministering to people's *needs* through service also fosters *social attachments*. Jesus sought to discover the needs of those who were drawn to Him for healing, encouragement, counsel, and even rebuke (note the Pharisees could not stay away). He asked questions. When blind Bartimaeus stumbled into Jesus' presence, yelling, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me,” Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:51). When Jesus approached a man who was seeking healing at the pool of Bethesda, He asked, “Do you want to get well?” (John 5:6). Jesus, the master physician, thought it wise to clarify, to ask, and to diagnose before treating. Should the body of Christ do any less? Assessing needs before providing service is a core value of Christ's method. To do any less is to guess at the needs of our mission field and risk giving the impression that our service has little to do with their ultimate good.

The Holy Spirit uses *socializing*, *sympathizing*, and *servicing* to lead people to have *confidence*. Confidence comes from two Latin words: *con*, which means “with,” and *fide*, which means “faith.” This could be translated into the concept of developing a trust relationship with individuals. This takes time and that time cannot be accelerated by

willing it so. Confidence is something aided by the Holy Spirit when He has all the ingredients in place.

Finally, when this method had been lived out and trust established, Jesus “bade them, *Follow Me.*” This invitation goes beyond the testimony of baptism. It is a call to discipleship. It is a call to join the body of Christ in living and ministering as Jesus did. It is a call to discover spiritual gifts that new members can apply to Christ’s method.

A Paradigm Shift for Ministry

In an effort to give a visual description of the ministry of the church, many churches have produced a graph similar to Figure 3. It is an inversely proportional graph that does little to represent the “method” that we just explored. A close examination of this dualistic model will show that the closer we get to serving, sympathizing, and socializing the farther we are from bidding people to follow Jesus (salvation and discipleship).

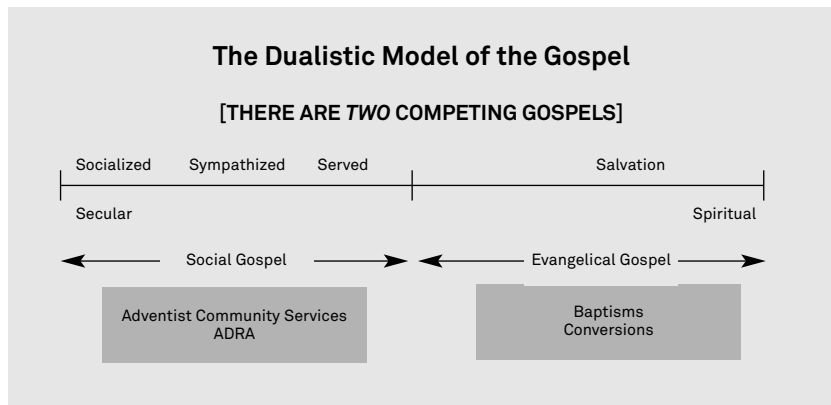


Figure 3. The Dualistic Model of the Gospel (adapted from Caleb Rosado).

Instead, the church needs a more holistic view of ministry that keeps every facet of Christ’s method centered on Jesus (see Figure 4). With this paradigm shift the church will be able to meet any individual at her particular point of need. One person may already be ready to follow Jesus and become a disciple, called to be part of Christ’s method alone in the body of Christ. Another might be cautious about letting “these people” into his circle of friends. Wherever individuals might be met, the church would then be able to meet their needs without having to abandon or disengage from the rest of the facets of “the method.”

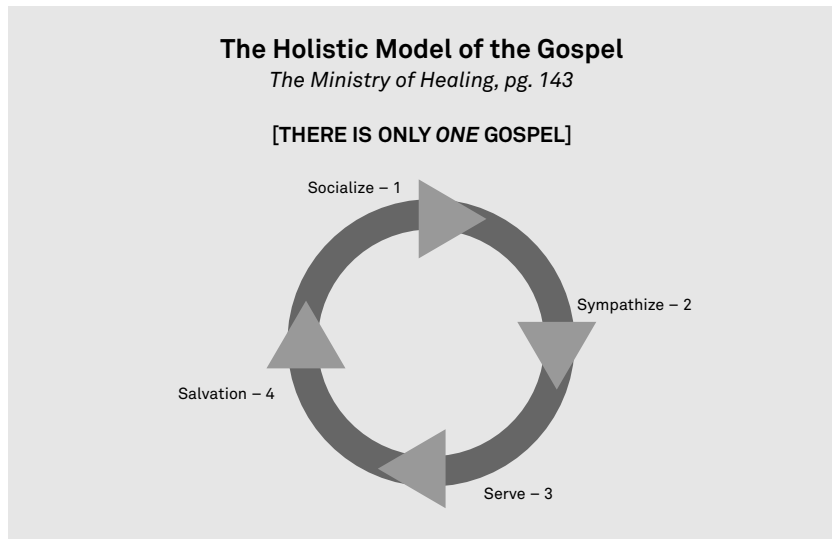


Figure 4. The Holistic Model of the Gospel (Caleb Rosado).

Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries

When we consider the rapid expansion of Christianity in the first three centuries A.D., several factors relating to incarnational ministry come into focus. According to Rodney Stark’s (2006) research, within 20 years after the crucifixion Christianity went from a faith based in rural Galilee to an urban movement in cities like Antioch, Corinth, and Athens. Population density in those cities ranged from 78.2 to 130 persons per acre (similar to Calcutta). The extremely narrow streets, the frequent fires, building collapses, and natural disasters made for very difficult living conditions. Sewers were little more than a ditch running along the middle of the street. These cities were also riddled with social chaos and crime (pp. 76-77).

You would think that the influence of the Christian message would come from promises of a better life in the hereafter. But according to Stark (2006), this is not the case:

The truly revolutionary aspect of Christianity lay in moral imperatives such as “*Love one’s neighbor as oneself,*” “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,*” “*It is more blessed to give than to receive,*” and “*When you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it unto me.*” (p. 30)

Paganism was incapable of generating the moral imperatives that Christianity espoused because many of its gods and goddesses were of dubious character. It offered nothing that could motivate humans

beyond self-interested acts of finding favor with the gods. And temples were essentially eating clubs hosted by wealthy patrons eager for display of social status as well as the appeasing of the gods (Stark, 2006, p. 31).

In A.D. 362, Emperor Julian launched a campaign to revive paganism. Ayerst and Fisher (1971) record Julian's concern in his advice to a prominent pagan priest:

I think that when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the priests, the impious Galileans [Christians] observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence. . . . [They] support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us. (Ayerst & Fisher, 1971, pp. 179-181 [quoted in Stark, 2006])

So in addition to the dramatic testimony of tenacious Christians who refused to call the emperor “god,” and were martyred for the sake of our great hope of salvation in Jesus, our Redeemer and Friend, Christ's method is evident in the shreds of historical accounts available to us today. Those who were a part of the explosion of Christian influence in the first three centuries give us hope that Christ's church today can provide leading servants—followers of Christ in His method of transforming the world one life at a time.²

References

- Ayerst, D., & Fisher, A. S. T. (1971). *Records of Christianity: Vol. 1*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Linthicum, R. C. (1991). *Empowering the poor: Community organizing among the city's “rag, tag, and bobtail.”* Monrovia, CA: MARC.
- Stark, R. (2006). *Cities of God: The real story of how Christianity became an urban movement and conquered Rome*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Stearns, R. (2010). *The hole in our Gospel: What does God expect from us? The answer that changed my life and might just change your world*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- White, E. G. (1909). *The ministry of healing*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press.

²For access to specific resource materials for equipping churches and their members in their quest to be a catalyst of transformation in the world, go to www.sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org/acs_iicm