

# The Master's Plan

Robert E. Coleman



Robert E. Coleman is Director of the School of World Missions and Evangelism

and Professor of Evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He serves as Director of the Billy Graham Institute of Evangelism at Wheaton, Illinois. He is a founding member of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. Coleman is the author of 20 books, including *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, which has sold over two million copies.

Excerpts from *The Master Plan of Evangelism* by Robert E. Coleman. Copyright 1972, 1993 by Fleming H. Revell Company. Used by permission.

**T**he plan of this study has been to trace the steps of Christ as portrayed in the Gospels to discern a motivating reason for the way He went about His mission. His tactics have been analyzed from the standpoint of His ministry as a whole, hoping thereby to see the larger meaning of His methods with men.

## His Objective Was Clear

The days of His flesh were but the unfolding in time of the plan of God from the beginning. It was always before His mind. He intended to save out of the world a people for Himself and to build a church of the Spirit which would never perish. He had His sights on the day His Kingdom would come in glory and in power. This world was His by creation, but He did not seek to make it His permanent abiding place.

No one was excluded from His gracious purpose. His love was universal. Make no mistake about it. He was the "Savior of the world" (John 4:42). God wanted all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. To that end Jesus gave Himself to provide a salvation from all sin for all men. In that He died for one, He died for all. Contrary to our superficial thinking, there never was a distinction in His mind between home and foreign missions. To Jesus it was all world evangelism.

## He Planned to Win

His life was ordered by His objective. Everything He did and said was a part of the whole pattern. It had significance because it contributed to the ultimate purpose of His life in redeeming the world for God. This was the motivating vision governing His behavior. His steps were ordered by it. Mark it well. Not for one moment did Jesus lose sight of His goal.

That is why it is so important to observe the way Jesus maneuvered to achieve His objective. The Master disclosed God's strategy of world conquest. He had confidence in the future precisely because He lived according to that plan in the present. There was nothing haphazard about His life—no wasted energy, not an idle word. He was on business for God (Luke 2:49). He lived, He died, and He rose again according to schedule. Like a general plotting his course of battle, the Son of God calculated to win. He could not afford to take a chance. Weighing every alternative and variable factor in human experience, He conceived a plan that would not fail.

## Men Were His Method

It all started by Jesus calling a few men to follow Him. This revealed immediately the direction His evangelistic strategy would take. His concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow. Remarkable as it may seem, Jesus started to gather these men before He ever organized an evangelistic campaign or even preached a sermon in public. Men were to be His method of winning the world to God.

**Jesus was not trying to impress the crowd, but to usher in a kingdom. This meant that He needed men who could lead the multitudes.**

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. Having called His men, Jesus made it a practice to be with them. This was the essence of His training program—just letting His disciples follow Him.

Jesus expected the men He was with to obey Him. They were not required to be smart, but they had to be loyal. This became the distinguishing mark by which they were known. They were called His "disciples" meaning that they were "learners" or "pupils" of the Master. It was not until much later that they started to be called "Christians" (Acts 11:26), although it was inevitable, for in time obedient followers invariably take on the character of their leader.

Jesus was always building up in His ministry to the time when His disciples would have to take over His work, and go out into the world with the redeeming gospel. This plan was progressively made clear as they followed Him.

## His Strategy

Why? Why did Jesus deliberately concentrate His life upon comparatively so few people? Had he not come to save the world? With the glowing announcement of John the Baptist ringing in the ears of multitudes, the Master easily could have had an immediate following of thousands if He wanted them. Why did He not then capitalize upon His

opportunities to enlist a mighty army of believers to take the world by storm? Surely the Son of God could have adopted a more enticing program of mass recruitment. Is it not rather disappointing that one with all the powers of the universe at His command would live and die to save the world, yet in the end have only a few ragged disciples to show for His labors?

The answer to this question focuses at once the real purpose of His plan for evangelism. Jesus was not trying to impress the crowd, but to usher in a kingdom. This meant that He needed men who could lead the multitudes. What good would it have been for His ultimate ob-

jective to arouse the masses to follow Him if these people had no subsequent supervision nor instruction in the Way? It had been demonstrated on numerous occasions that the crowd was an easy prey to false gods when left without proper care. The masses were like helpless sheep wandering aimlessly without a shepherd (Matt 9:36; 14:14; Mark 6:34). They were willing to follow almost anyone that came along with some promise for their welfare, be it friend or foe. That was the tragedy of the hour—the noble aspirations of the people were easily excited by Jesus, but just as quickly thwarted by the deceitful religious authorities who controlled them. The spiritually blind leaders of Israel (cf., Matt 23:1-39; John 8:44; 9:39-41; 12:40), though comparatively few in number, completely dominated the affairs of the people. For this reason, 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, men would have to be raised up who could lead the multitudes in the things of God.

Jesus was a realist. He fully realized the fickleness of depraved human nature as well as the satanic forces of this world amassed against humanity, and in this knowledge He based His evangelism on a plan that would meet the need. 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 men imbued with His life who would do it for Him. Hence, He concentrated Himself upon 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 to the masses, in order that the masses could at last be saved. This was the genius of His strategy.

It all comes back to His disciples. They were the vanguard of His enveloping movement. "Through their word" He expected others to believe on Him (John 17:20), and these in turn to pass the word along to others, until in time the world might know who He was and what He came to do (John 17:21,23). 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 upon 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 Saviour so well that His Spirit and method constrained them to tell others.

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 some 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.

Jesus had built into His disciples the structure of a church that would challenge and triumph over all the powers of death and hell. It had started small like a grain of mustard seed, but it would grow in size and strength until it became a tree "greater than all the herbs" (Matt 13:32; cf. Mark 4:32; Luke 13:18,19). Jesus did not expect that everyone would be saved (He recognized realistically

the rebellion of men in spite of grace), but He did foresee the day when the Gospel of salvation in His Name would be proclaimed convincingly to every creature. Through that testimony His Church militant would someday be the Church universal even as it would become the Church triumphant.

It was not going to be an easy conquest. Many would suffer persecution and martyrdom in the battle. Yet no matter how great the trials through which His people would pass, and how many temporal skirmishes were lost in the struggle, the ultimate victory was certain. His Church would win in the end. Nothing could permanently prevail against it "or be strong to its detriment, or hold out against it" (Matt 16:18, *Amplified New Testament*).

The principle of giving evangelistic work assignments to His disciples was conclusively demonstrated just before He returned to heaven after His crucifixion and resurrection. On at least four occasions as He met with His disciples He told them to go out and do His work. It was first mentioned to the disciples, with the exception of Thomas, on the first Easter evening as they were assembled in the Upper Room. After Jesus had showed the astonished disciples His nail-scarred hands and feet (Luke 24:38-40), and had partaken of the meal with them (41-43), He then said, "Peace be unto you: as the Father hath sent Me, even so I send you" (John 20:21). Whereupon Jesus assured them again of the promise and authority of the Holy Spirit to do the work.

A little later as Jesus had breakfast with His disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, He told Peter three times to feed His sheep (John 21:15,16,17). This admonition was interpreted to the fisherman as the proof of his love to the Master.

On a mountain in Galilee He gave His Great Commission to, not only the eleven disciples (Matt 28:16), but also to the whole church, numbering then about 500 brethren (1 Cor 15:6). It was a clear proclamation of His strategy of world conquest. "All authority hath been given unto Me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy



Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matt 28:18-20; cf., Mark 16:15-18).

Finally, before He ascended back to the Father, Jesus went over the whole thing again with His disciples for the last time, showing them how things had to be fulfilled while He was with them (Luke 24:44-45). His suffering and death, as well as His resurrection on the third day, was all according to schedule (v. 46). Jesus went on to show His disciples "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name unto all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (v. 47). And for the fulfillment of this divine purpose, the disciples were no less a part than their Master. They were to be the human instruments announcing the good tidings, and the Holy Spirit was to be God's personal empowerment for their mission. "Ye shall receive power, when the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea

and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8; cf. Luke 24:48,49).

Clearly Jesus did not leave the work of evangelism subject to human impression or convenience. To His disciples it was a definite command, perceived by impulse at the beginning of their discipleship, but progressively clarified in their thinking as they followed Him, and finally spelled out in no uncertain terms. No one who followed Jesus very far could escape this conclusion. It was so then; it is so today.

Christian disciples are sent men and women—sent out in the same work of world evangelism to which the Lord was sent, and for which He gave His life. Evangelism is not an optional accessory to our life. It is the heartbeat of all that we are called to be and do. It is the commission of the Church which gives meaning to all else that is undertaken in the name of Christ. With this purpose clearly in focus, everything which is done and said has the glorious fulfillment in God's redemptive purpose.

## Study Questions

1. Why did Jesus not use His reputation, power, and influence to enlist a mighty army of believers to take the world by storm?
2. What was the genius of Jesus' strategy? Do you think this should be followed today? Why or why not?
3. How do evangelistic strategies today compare with Jesus' strategy?

