

THE TRELLIS AND THE VINE

THE MINISTRY MIND-SHIFT THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING



COLIN MARSHALL
AND TONY PAYNE

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While we're acknowledging the friends and partners who

shaped this book, I also want to emphasize that this is Col's book more than it is mine. We talk a lot in the pages that follow about working closely with people, discipling them, helping them to grow and flourish in ministry, and sticking with them over the long haul. Col has done that with me over the past 30-odd years. And although I'm now privileged to work alongside Col as a brother and colleague (and I know he is very grateful for all the 'word-smithing' I've done), I want to make clear that most of the ideas that follow are now mine because they were first his.

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TP, August 2009.

The trellis and the vine

We have two trellises in our backyard. The one attached to the back wall of the garage is a very fine piece of latticework. I wish I could claim it as my own creation, but I cannot. It is sturdy and dependable and neatly designed, and the federation-green paintwork has been kept fresh. It lacks only one thing: a vine.

I imagine there once was a vine, unless the construction of the trellis was one of those handyman tasks that took so long that, in the end, no-one got around to planting something to grow on it. Someone certainly put a lot of time and care into building it. It's almost a work of art. But if there was ever a vine that laced itself around this beautiful trellis, there is now no trace of it.

The other trellis leans up against the side fence and is barely visible beneath a flourishing jasmine vine. With some fertilizer and an occasional watering, the jasmine keeps thrusting out new shoots, winding its way across, up and over the fence, putting out its delicate white flowers as the warmth of spring approaches. Some pruning is needed every now and then, and some weeding around the base. I've also had to spray it once or twice to stop caterpillars from feasting on the juicy green leaves. But the jasmine just keeps growing.

It's hard to tell what condition the trellis is in under the jasmine, but at the few points where it is still visible, I can see

that it hasn't been painted in a long time. At one end, it has been pried off the fence by the insistent fingers of the jasmine, and although I have tried to re-attach it more than once, it is useless. The jasmine has taken over. I know I will have to do something about this in the long term, because eventually the weight of the jasmine will pull the trellis off the fence altogether and the whole thing will collapse.

I have often thought of taking a cutting from the jasmine and seeing if it will grow on the beautiful but vacant trellis on the garage, although it almost seems a shame to cover it up.

How trellis work takes over

As I have sat on my back verandah and observed the two trellises, it has occurred to me more than once that most churches are a mixture of trellis and vine. The basic work of any Christian ministry is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of God's Spirit, and to see people converted, changed and grow to maturity in that gospel. That's the work of planting, watering, fertilizing and tending the vine.

However, just as some sort of framework is needed to help a vine grow, so Christian ministries also need some structure and support. It may not be much, but at the very least we need somewhere to meet, some Bibles to read from, and some basic structures of leadership within our group. All Christian churches, fellowships or ministries have some kind of trellis that gives shape and support to the work. As the ministry grows, the trellis also needs attention. Management, finances, infrastructure, organization, governance—these all become more important and more complex as the vine grows. In this sense, good trellis workers are invaluable, and all growing ministries need them.

What's the state of the trellis and the vine at your church?

Perhaps trellis work has taken over from vine work. There are committees, structures, programs, activities and fund-

raising efforts, and many people put lots of time into keeping them all going, but the actual work of growing the vine falls to a very few. In fact, perhaps the only time real vine-growing work happens is in the regular Sunday service, and then only by the pastor as he preaches his sermon.

If this is your church, then there's every chance the vine is looking a bit tired. The leaves are less green, the flowers are less profuse, and it has been some time since any new shoots have been seen. The pastor keeps working away manfully, feeling overworked, under-appreciated and a little discouraged that his faithful vine work each Sunday doesn't seem to bear much fruit. In fact, he often feels he would like to do more to help and encourage others to be involved in vine work, the work of watering and planting and helping people to grow in Christ. But the sad truth is that most of the trellis work also seems to fall to him to organize—rosters, property and building issues, committees, finances, budgets, overseeing the church office, planning and running events. There's just no time.

And that's the thing about trellis work: it tends to take over from vine work. Perhaps it's because trellis work is easier and less personally threatening. Vine work is personal and requires much prayer. It requires us to depend on God, and to open our mouths and speak God's word in some way to another person. By nature (by sinful nature, that is) we shy away from this. What would you rather do: go to a church working bee and sweep up some leaves, or share the gospel with your neighbour over the back fence? Which is easier: to have a business meeting about the state of the carpet, or to have a difficult personal meeting where you need to rebuke a friend about his sinful behaviour?

Trellis work also often looks more impressive than vine work. It's more visible and structural. We can point to something tangible—a committee, an event, a program, a budget, an

infrastructure—and say that we have achieved something. We can build our trellis till it reaches to the heavens, in the hope of making a name for ourselves, but there may still be very little growth in the vine.

The concentration on trellis work that is so common in many churches derives from an institutional view of Christian ministry. It is very possible for churches, Christian organizations and whole denominations to be given over totally to maintaining their institution. One church I know of has 23 different organizations and structures functioning weekly, all of which are listed on the weekly bulletin. All of these different activities started as good ideas for growth in church life at some point in the past, and they certainly result in lots of people being around the church building during the week doing lots of things. But how much actual vine work is taking place? How many people are hearing God's word and by the power of his Spirit growing in knowledge and godliness? In this particular church, the answer is very few.

Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that in many churches, maintaining and improving the trellis constantly takes over from tending the vine. We run meetings, maintain buildings, sit on committees, appoint and look after staff, do administration, raise money, and generally tick the boxes that our denomination wants ticked.

Somehow, this tends to happen particularly as we get older. We start to tire of vine work, and take on more and more organizational responsibilities. Sometimes this may even be because we are perceived to be successful vine-growers, and so we get out of vine-growing and into telling other people about vine-growing.

But it's even worse than that when we pause to consider the commission that God has given all of us as his people. The parable of the trellis and the vine is not just a picture of the

struggles of my own local church; it's also a picture of the progress of the gospel in my street and suburb and city and world.

The vine and the commission

In 1792, a young man named William Carey published a booklet entitled *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. In it, Carey argued *against* the prevailing view of the time that the Great Commission of Matthew 28 had been fulfilled by the first apostles and was not applicable to the church in succeeding generations. For Carey, this was an abdication of our responsibility. He saw the Great Commission as a duty and privilege for all generations, and thus began the modern missionary movement.

For most of us, this is no longer controversial. Of course we should be sending out missionaries to the ends of the earth and seeking to reach the whole world for Christ. But is that really what Matthew 28 is calling upon us to do? Does the commission also apply to our own church, and to each Christian disciple? These famous verses are worth a closer look.

When the slightly overwhelmed disciples saw the risen Jesus on the mountain in Galilee, they fell down before him with a mixture of awe and doubt in their hearts. And when Jesus came and spoke to them, his words would have done nothing to calm them down.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”, he tells them (Matt 28:18). This astonishing claim has overtones of Daniel 7 about it. When “one like a son of man” comes into the presence of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7, he is given “dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him” (Dan 7:13-14).

“This is who I am”, Jesus is telling his disciples. And for the past three years, the disciples have seen it for themselves. Jesus has walked among them as the powerful Son of Man, healing

the sick, raising the dead, teaching with authority, forgiving sins, and saying things like this:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” (Matt 25:31-32)

And now, in the presence of the Son of Man on the hillside in Galilee, they are seeing the fulfilment of Daniel’s vision. Here is the Man before whom all peoples, from every nation and tongue, will bow.

It is on this basis—the unique, supreme and worldwide authority of the risen Son of Man—that Jesus commissions his disciples to make disciples of all nations. Sometimes our translations may give the impression that ‘go’ is the emphasis of the command, but the main verb of the sentence is ‘make disciples’, with three subordinate participles hanging off it: going (or ‘as you go’), baptizing and teaching.

‘Baptizing’ and ‘teaching’ are the means by which the disciples are to be made. Whatever else baptism might symbolize or involve, here it refers to the initiation of disciples into repentance and submission to the authoritative Jesus, the reigning Lord of the world.

The ‘teaching’ that the disciples are to do reproduces what Jesus himself has done with them. He has been their ‘teacher’ (cf. Matt 12:38; 19:16; 22:16, 24, 36; 26:18), and as Jesus has taught them they have grown in knowledge and understanding. The disciples are now, in turn, to make new disciples by teaching them to obey everything commanded by their Master. This ‘making-disciples-by-teaching’ corresponds to preaching the gospel in the parallel mission mandate in Luke, where Jesus says “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his

name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

But what about the ‘going’? Traditionally (or at least after Carey), this has been read as a missionary mandate, a charter for sending out gospel workers to the world. However, this can lead local churches to think that they are obeying the Great Commission if they send money (and missionaries) overseas. But the emphasis of the sentence is not on ‘going’. In fact, the participle is probably better translated “when you go” or “as you go”. The commission is not fundamentally about mission out there somewhere else in another country. *It’s a commission that makes disciple-making the normal agenda and priority of every church and every Christian disciple.*

The authority of Jesus is not limited in any respect. He is the Lord and Master of my street, my neighbours, my suburb, my workmates, my family, my city, my nation—and yes, the whole world. We would not ever want to stop sending out missionaries to preach the gospel in places where it is yet to be heard, but we must also see disciple-making as our central task in our homes and neighbourhoods and churches.

Jesus’ instruction to “make disciples” in Matthew 28:19 is not just a specific word to the apostles gathered around him at the time of his final resurrection appearance. The first disciples were instructed to “make disciples” of others. And because these newly-made disciples were under the universal lordship of Christ, and were to obey everything that Jesus had taught, they fell under exactly the same obligation as the original twelve to get on with the job of announcing the lordship of Christ; as did their hearers, and so on “to the end of the age”.

Don Carson concludes that “the injunction is given at least to the Eleven, but to the Eleven in their own role as disciples (v. 16). Therefore they are paradigms for all disciples ... It is binding on *all* Jesus’ disciples to make others what they themselves are—disciples of Jesus Christ.”¹

To be a disciple is to be called to make new disciples. Of course, Christians will receive and exercise differing gifts and ministries (more on this in the chapters that follow). But because all are disciples of Christ, standing in relation to him as teacher and pupil, master and follower, all are disciple-makers.

Thus the goal of Christian ministry is quite simple, and in a sense measurable: are we making and nurturing genuine disciples of Christ? The church always tends towards institutionalism and secularization. The focus shifts to preserving traditional programs and structures, and the goal of discipleship is lost. The mandate of disciple-making provides the touchstone for whether our church is engaging in Christ's mission. Are we making genuine disciples of Jesus Christ? Our goal is not to make church members or members of our institution, but genuine disciples of Jesus.

Or to return to our parable—our goal is to grow the vine, not the trellis.



THE IMAGE OF THE TRELLIS AND THE VINE RAISES ALL THE fundamental questions of Christian ministry:

- What is the vine for?
- How does the vine grow?
- How does the vine relate to my church?
- What is vine work and what is trellis work, and how can we tell the difference?
- What part do different people play in growing the vine?
- How can we get more people involved in vine work?
- What is the right relationship between the trellis and the vine?

In the following chapters, we will be suggesting that there is an urgent need to answer these questions afresh. Confusion

reigns. Everyone wants their churches to grow, but most are unsure how and where to start. Church growth gurus come and go. Ministry methods fall in and out of favour like women's fashion. We troop from one new technique to the next, hoping that this one (at last!) may be the secret to success.

Even among those godly, faithful pastors who avoid the trendsetting fads of Christian marketing, there is confusion—most especially between what Christian ministry is in the Bible, and what Christian ministry has become in the particular tradition or denomination of which they are part. We are all captive to our traditions and influenced by them more than we realize. And the effect of tradition and long practice is not always that some terrible error becomes entrenched; more often it is that our focus shifts away from our main task and agenda, which is disciple-making. We become so used to doing things one way (often for good reason at first) that important elements are neglected and forgotten, to our cost. We become imbalanced, and then wonder why we go in circles.

Endnote

1. DA Carson, 'Matthew' in Frank E Gaebelein (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1984, p. 596.