

ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 9: TRACTION

Mark 1:8-42; Luke 10:8-11

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What makes a dynamic movement of the church of Jesus Christ energetic? We observe such movements happening and sometimes we get to be a part of them.

One such movement relates to a man who lived in the late 1800's and early 1900's named E. D. Whiteside, affectionately called Daddy Whiteside by many. He was born in Canada but moved south to Pittsburgh for the sake of his health. He attempted to pursue slum work, but was hindered by his weak physical condition. Everything changed for him when he had an experience of divine healing. He later wrote: "Years were consumed in the search for health. ...To my utter amazement, when I finally threw up my hands I was instantly touched by Jesus. Divine life flowed through my body."

He then applied his new-found energies to the work of evangelistic ministry, especially centered on homeless and imprisoned people. The work blossomed and began to draw others to serve alongside him. Daddy Whiteside began to seek opportunities to expand the ministry throughout the region. Someone would come to him with an idea about a ministry, they would pray about it together, and then soon send someone pursue it. Among other ministries this resulted in many new churches in the Pittsburgh area and western Pennsylvania in general. He became the center of a network of relationships which produced not only pastors but also missionaries. There were so many of them that these Alliance workers came to be called "Whiteside's boys."

A key aspect of his productivity was his familiar statement which he made in the face of every problem which arose: "Brethren, let us pray." Throughout his life he conducted a ministry of prayer which impacted so many people that he became known as "the praying man of Pittsburgh." He also held annual missionary conventions which generated great sums of money for missions (*All for Jesus*, Camp Hill: Christian Publications, Inc., 1986, pp. 275-276).

How did Daddy Whiteside get so much traction for ministry? As we think of such lions of the faith we need to be careful to remember that there is more than one way to energize a movement of people. It is crucial to look to our authoritative source, the word of God, to determine the way that God energizes his church. We may not have the same opportunities as Daddy Whiteside or the early church, but we have the same Lord, and he has promised to build his church until he comes back to take us home. By definition, essential churches always move toward traction in ministry.

SIGNS OF TRACTION

If we want traction we have to start by finding out how to identify it. If anyone had traction it was the Lord Jesus Christ who started a spiritual revolution in three short years. The following list of nine signs of traction is organized in the order in which they appear at the beginning of Jesus' ministry as described in the first chapter of Mark, beginning in verse nine: "**In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan**" (Mark 1:9). The example of Jesus provides our first sign, namely, that people surrender to God. As John the Baptist pointed out, Jesus did

not need to be baptized for repentance because he never sinned. Yet because he was fully man, Jesus insisted on it "for righteousness sake." It was the mark of his surrender to the necessary plan to save mankind that he be fully man. His baptism was a dramatic sign of his surrender to the will of the Father. When we see people submitting their lives to God we know we have traction.

The second section shows Jesus being affirmed in his role as the Son of God: "**Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; and a voice came out of the heavens: 'You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased'**" (Mark 1:10-11). We know we have traction when men, women, and children accept their new identity as children of God by faith in Christ. No longer is our primary family relationship by blood and the will of man, but by the Holy Spirit and the will of God.

Devotion to the Father in Heaven is our third sign of traction: "**Immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him**" (Mark 1:12-13). Devotion to the Father takes many forms such as spending time reading God's word, talking to him in prayer, and appreciating him in creation. It is marked by a desire to be with him. Mark's summary makes it seem as if Jesus' main purpose of going to the desert was to do battle with Satan. While that happened, the first reason was to spend time with his Father.

A fourth sign of traction is that believers undertake to preach the gospel of salvation without compromise: "**Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'**" (Mark 1:14-15). In the real gospel, the rule of God is magnified, the desperate sin condition of man and his need for repentance from it are clearly explained, and the central place of faith is proclaimed. There is more but even Mark's heavily condensed version goes to the core of the good news. The energy of God is revealed in people who will not back down from the true gospel and proclaim it faithfully whether it is received or not.

A fifth sign of genuine traction for ministry is that people respond unquestioningly to the voice of God: "**As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.' Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets. Immediately He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him**" (Mark 1:16-20). Notice that Mark does not care to tell us how much interaction with Jesus these men may have had in advance of the moment of their calling. All Mark wants to show is that these men responded immediately and unquestioningly to the voice of God. Jesus said: "Jump," and they said: "OK!"

A sixth sign of traction is the authoritative teaching of the word of God by the appointed leaders of the church: "**They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach. They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes**" (Mark 1:21-22). Jesus was the example for his disciples and he is our example as well. We need to know that teaching with authority will drive people crazy if they are not moving toward God. If they are moving toward God it will feed the deepest need of their

souls.

A seventh sign of traction is the expression of divine authority over evil spirits: **"Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, 'What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are--the Holy One of God!' And Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be quiet, and come out of him!' Throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice and came out of him. They were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.' Immediately the news about Him spread everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee"** (Mark 1:23-28). Let's be clear that we are not Jesus Christ, but we are, in fact, seated with him in the heavenly realm in the spirit. The authority to command evil spirits was delegated to us by the Lord himself. Every instance of the use of this authority points to the energy of God at work in his church.

An eighth sign of traction is the evidence that people are being healed and made whole in many ways: **"And immediately after they came out of the synagogue, they came into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was lying sick with a fever; and immediately they spoke to Jesus about her. And He came to her and raised her up, taking her by the hand, and the fever left her, and she waited on them"** (Mark 1:29-31). As we pray for people individually to be healed and the elders anoint people and pray the prayer of faith over them we see the release of the Spirit of God on the earth. Our broken humanity gets fixed in ways which cannot be explained.

A ninth sign of traction is the direct impact of Jesus Christ on many people at once: **"When evening came, after the sun had set, they began bringing to Him all who were ill and those who were demon-possessed. And the whole city had gathered at the door. And He healed many who were ill with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and He was not permitting the demons to speak, because they knew who He was"** (Mark 1:32-34). When we act in faith and see many people helped all at once we are watching the evidence of God before our eyes.

There are many more signs of traction in ministry, such as people giving to others sacrificially, and the fruit and gifts of the Holy Spirit. The mere count of people and money can never accurately designate traction or the lack of it. We look for the smell, touch, taste, look, and sound of heaven.

THE PURSUIT OF TRACTION

So we have a collection of signs by which we can discern traction in ministry as parts of the big picture. But a church cannot be an essential church just by the intellectual awareness of the signs. There must be a relentless search for traction. The continuation of Mark's account of Jesus' ministry in his first chapter reveals this key characteristic: **"In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there. Simon and his companions searched for Him; they found Him, and said to Him, 'Everyone is looking for You.' He said to them, 'Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for.' And He went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out the demons"** (Mark 1:35-39).

One might get the impression that Jesus was being rude by not telling everyone what he was doing. Shouldn't he have been available to everyone at all times? Absolutely not! His personal devotion to his Father trumped every human connection. That's the first aspect of his relentless pursuit of traction. Then he made a remark dear to missionaries: **"Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for."** Again, he was not being evasive, but he was making decisions about everything he was doing with reference to his mission in coming to earth, namely, to seek and save those who were lost.

We share this mission as a local church: "Our mission is to introduce people everywhere to forgiveness, healing, and purpose in Jesus Christ." Sticking relentlessly to his mission is how Jesus did so much in so little time. He simply did not allow himself to get turned to the right or to the left by human impacts. He gave his disciples an explicit command to work in the same way, found in Luke 10-8-11: **"Whatever city you enter and they receive you, eat what is set before you; and heal those in it who are sick, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whatever city you enter and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your city which clings to our feet we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near.'"** When we find ourselves rejected or stalled out in ministry we are commanded to move on while lodging a minor protest in explanation. In the first century in Israel the wiping off of the dust of the feet was a way of indicating that relationship was broken. For those ministering the gospel of Christ, it meant that the most important message anyone could ever hear had been rejected.

The upshot is that the disciples would move to the next town the same way Jesus did. They were constantly in search of traction for the kingdom, and when they did not find it they would immediately switch to a different target. That is one reason why Mark fills his gospel with the word "immediately." It is taken out in some translations because it seems repetitive. But Mark did it to make the point that the ministry of Jesus and his disciples was resolutely economical. When the good news found no purchase in the soil of human hearts they would switch to another target—another set of human hearts.

I am reminded of the practice of motorcycle hill climb races. Someone picks an impossibly steep dirt hill, people build special motorcycles to try to climb it, and then one contestant after another tries to get up the hill. Often they peter out part way, stall, or even flip over in the attempt. But the game, once the climb is begun, is to keep the power flowing evenly to the back wheel in the spots on the hill where traction can be found. The moment the tire spins the driver swings the wheel to another spot, along with adjusting the power to the wheel. This is a good picture of what those who minister in the name of Christ are supposed to be doing. We have been sent with a purpose as relentless as climbing a steep dirt hill—to seek and find God's lost sheep by ministering the gospel.

There is no comfortable sitting around in a motorcycle hill climb, and neither is there in the work of Jesus Christ. The moment we sit down we lose traction and headway. Churches and Christians all over America are stalled out in this way. Jesus has this word to say to all of them: "Move on to the place where the gospel finds traction, and if you lose traction there, move again, and again if necessary. Keep doing this until I come back."

THE SATISFACTION OF TRACTION

If you are like me, the personal resolve to keep moving into the unknown, the uncomfortable,

and the potentially dangerous leaks off pretty quickly. I would much rather turn off the engine of the motorcycle, lay it down on its side, dig a little seat for myself on the hill, and sit down. Yet the early disciples walked away from stable jobs and families into homelessness and persecution for Christ. Why would they do that? And how did they keep doing it?

A brief statement of Jesus in the fourth chapter of the gospel of John gives us the hint we need. The disciples had gone into the town of Sychar to find food, and Jesus remained to minister without food to the woman at the well and others who followed her. **"Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, saying, 'Rabbi, eat.' But He said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples were saying to one another, 'No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work'"** (John 4:31-34).

Jesus, the perfect man, had desires which were totally harmonious with those of his Father. So when the will of God was being done he had an overwhelming sense of satisfaction. Normal food could not compare in satisfaction to finding traction for God's kingdom. And as our inner persons are shaped by the Holy Spirit of God we will find ourselves overcoming discomforts, making sacrifices, and even ignoring pain and suffering as we experience the satisfaction of doing the will of God. That is the inner motive for a relentless pursuit of traction for the kingdom. Essential Christians live this way, and only essential Christians can build essential churches.

What is the status of your hunt for traction in ministry? Have you absorbed God's definition by studying the signs of traction found in the Bible? Have you committed your heart to seek these things above all personal or earthly goals? Is there some tasty thing you have permitted to deflect you from the pursuit of traction? Have the complaints and rejection of others turned you aside? Jesus was scorned even as he neared the total sacrifice of himself which would make atonement for the sins of the world. We should not expect it to be different for us.

In the end, whether for us personally or as a church, the satisfaction God gives to those who do his will overcomes all hindrances. So climb, brother and sisters, climb!

Some of you have not yet embraced the first sign of God's traction in your life: surrender to your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. You may be very religious or not, and still not have surrendered. It is not optional: no surrender, no salvation. Don't miss the first sign!