



CHAPTER 5

THE GOD DESIGN SPIRITUAL CHANGE: A PROCESS NOT AN EVENT

CORE IDEA

Scripture and life experience make clear that spiritual change occurs over time. It is a process, not just an event—whether it is a single individual who turns to Christ or a community that is transformed by the power of the gospel. What appear to be “decisions made in a moment” are almost always based on preceding events and influences. Quick results on tough spiritual issues are very rare. The God design almost always involves multiple people and multiple forms of communication over a period of time. Effective partnerships help raise awareness of this process, can effectively link people committed to a common vision, reveal how the different parts fit together, help monitor progress, and provide encouragement to everyone along the way.

Let me say it straight out. The main points of this and the following chapter contrast sharply with much of traditional Western Christian teaching and practice on strategies for witness and service. When I have shared these ideas there is frequently agreement. Some people even have real “ah ha” moments of new understanding, and in many cases there is enthusiasm and a sense of encouragement. But the issues discussed in the next few pages are among the many points on which we’ve allowed our culture to thoroughly influence our assumptions about the gospel, and how it is to be lived and presented.

The Western cultural perspective of individualism and quick results powerfully affects our view of scripture itself, how individuals come to Christ, how discipleship occurs, and how effective strategies of evangelism and service are carried out. Effective partnerships challenge all that.

But let’s allow Jesus to open the discussion.

You have a saying, “Four more months and then the harvest.” But I tell you, take a good look at the fields; the crops are now ripe and ready to be harvested! The one who reaps the harvest is being paid and gathers the crops for eternal life; so the one who plants and the one who reaps will be glad together. For the saying is true, “Someone plants, someone else reaps.” I have sent you to reap a harvest in a field where you did not work; others worked there, and you profited from their work.

John 4:35—38 (TEV)

This well-known passage is a kind of parenthetical exchange between Jesus and the disciples during the encounter with the Samaritan woman. The first verse or two are often used to inspire us to consider the readiness of hearts all around us and the urgency to

share the *good news*. While urgency and motivation are critical, notice how the “now” of the early part of the passage is uniquely balanced with a process-oriented, big picture, longer-term emphasis in the remainder of the passage.

What kind of Kingdom vision is God putting on your heart? Is it the people of your neighborhood, or a vision for the poor and homeless of your city? Maybe it’s a desire to take the *good news* to refugees settling in your area. Or you may sense a burning concern for a little-known “unreached people group” somewhere in Asia.

Joining hands in a strategic partnership with others is the best means for realizing the vision and addressing the all-important spiritual process.

More on how all this relates to good partnership practice just a bit later. But keep this in mind: You are not alone. First, God has a heart for the same people. He has already been working in their hearts in various ways—ways you may know nothing about. In addition, events are happening every day in the lives of these people; they are touched by others and by communications of many kinds. You minister to and connect with lives that aren’t static but are moving, like a river.¹

The people you want to reach and serve are on a journey. The different members of a partnership can play many roles, touching lives in your audience in different ways—pointing them to Jesus and ultimately seeing their spiritual maturity. But to realize the full potential of what God can do, we need a new respect for the importance of the roles of others. Realizing that significant change may take time and that participation by others has value can bring us balance and new hope while *never diminishing the urgency of the vision*.

PARTNERSHIP IN PRACTICE: It was a very up-market apartment in a trendy building in a large, East Coast city. The reception was crowded with dozens engaged in animated conversation over their drinks and hors d’oeuvres. I was introduced to a striking woman who, in the course of our conversation, said she had recently become a believer. Always interested in how people make the journey into the Kingdom, I asked if she would tell me her story.

She had been raised by religiously indifferent parents. But an aunt who was a committed Christian, with her parents’ permission, had taken her to Sunday School and church regularly throughout elementary and junior high school. A memorable part of those Sunday outings was lunch or ice cream after church, she recalled. The aunt reminded her niece that she prayed for her every day. In time, the aunt moved away. But she wrote her niece and kept up the prayers.

Eventually the young woman went to university, obtained an advanced degree, and moved up rapidly in her field. Along the way, she married, but the marriage ended in divorce. In addition, she was having problems on the job. In short, what had been the good life was looking bleak.

“One night in my apartment by myself, I was sitting with a drink in my hand, surfing the television channels. Suddenly I came across

Billy Graham preaching at some crusade. I'm not sure why, but I continued to watch. At the end, he looked right at the camera and asked viewers to follow him in saying a prayer to accept Jesus as savior. He said, 'If you're hopeless, Jesus can change your life and give you hope.'"

"Well," she said, "I prayed the prayer and, in short, my life has been changed. Not some magic thing. Just the realization that I was set free, forgiven for my sins and failures, and given hope."

There had been hundreds of conversations between the aunt and her niece, hundreds of prayers by the aunt, and all those Sunday School and church visits followed by lunch or ice cream. There had been all the ongoing letters of support and prayer. Here is the question: Who was the evangelist? Billy Graham, who never met the woman? Or the faithful aunt?

Many lessons can be learned from such stories. You probably know of or have experienced similar stories yourself. How about your own spiritual journey? Sometimes the journey involves dozens of influences we can actually remember; people, books, movies, circumstances. Whatever your journey, it probably reflects the input of many who have been part of bringing you to where you are today.

A KEY PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE:

- Significant spiritual change occurs over time. It usually:
 - Involves more than one person and more than one form of communication.
 - Acknowledges that different people in our audience are at different stages in the spiritual process.
 - Allows strategic partnerships to put all available Kingdom resources to work, since different forms of service and witness are appropriate for different members of the audience.
 - Means that individuals touched by a ministry at one point on their spiritual journey can be consciously linked or referred on to another because the partnership empowers this kind of coordination and effectiveness.

Jesus' incisive interaction with his disciples in John 4 by the well in Samaria, quoted at the opening of the chapter, serves us well here.

- First, we need to respect the fact that others are or have been involved in the spiritual outcomes we're praying and working for in others.
- Second, recognize that each person has a role that, when faithfully played, will be used by God.
- Third, consider the blessing when we acknowledge the Lord of the harvest actually links those who "sow" and those who "reap" for his glory—each playing a vital role.

A further look at God's communication can be helpful as we work in partnerships. Consider how his communication for spiritual change in individuals and in communities

has been and continues to be a process. Understanding this part of the God design is vital but often misunderstood. Clarifying this helps us see the value of effective partnerships—how they can empower God’s people working together to deal with an otherwise seemingly impossible Kingdom vision.

Early passages in the New Testament book of Hebrews sum up the history of God’s communication with man. They suggest that, through history, many times, in many ways, and with ever greater specificity, God communicated to us—concluding with Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The sequence of events started very early. God communicated directly with Adam and Eve. Those communications, before sin, were open, clear, and full of trust and hope. Man’s sin clouded communication with God, resulting in the saga of Noah, the flood, the tower of Babel and, eventually, as the redemption story began to unfold, the call of Abram out of Mesopotamia. With Abram’s faith, a remarkable journey began, in which he would become Abraham and the father of a great nation, whose people would be in number “like the stars in the night sky.” The journey led to Canaan, to Egypt, to the wilderness, back to Canaan, through priests, Kings, and prophets.

Finally the journey led to the coming of the magnificent promised Lamb of God, the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Here’s the passage from Hebrews:

In the past, God spoke to our ancestors many times
and in many ways through the prophets,
but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son
He is the one through whom God created the universe, the
one whom God has chosen to possess all things at the end.

The message given to our ancestors by the angels was shown
to be true, and those who did not follow it or obey it
received the punishment they deserved.

How, then, shall we escape if we pay no attention to such a
great salvation?

The Lord himself first announced this salvation, and those
who heard him proved to us that it is true.

At the same time God added his witness to theirs by
performing all kinds of miracles and wonders
and by distributing the gifts of the Holy Spirit according
to his will.

Hebrews 1:1–2, 2:2–4 (TEV)

One could imagine that the God who is capable of all things could have chosen at some point in early history to greatly simplify and shorten the process of revelation and redemption. Following man’s catastrophic decisions in Eden, and to break through the sin and mess man had made, God could have stepped in and “solved the problem” in pretty short order. But he didn’t.

While the history of man’s journey played out, God’s communication was always true. It became increasingly diverse, increasingly specific, increasingly complete, and increasingly personal. But, while made up of many parts, it was a process, not a single

event. In the great saga of Jesus, God finally came *looking like us*. Jesus said that he didn't come to set anything aside but, rather, to fulfill the Old Testament. Yet here he was, right in front of us! God himself! Absolutely perfect, complete communication.

But even with Jesus' death and resurrection, there were still more chapters ahead in the process of God's revelation, communication with us, and provision for *our* spiritual journey.

The dramatic fulfillment of Jesus' promise to the disciples about the coming "helper," the Holy Spirit, was played out in Acts 2—the famous scenes of Pentecost. Standing before the huge crowd, now pretty shaken and confused with the amazing events that were underway, Peter put matters in perspective when he said that they should not be fearful or confused but, instead, joyful. These developments were something God had planned in His salvation communication strategy all along. In making his point, Peter quoted the famous passage from the prophet Joel:

This is what I will do in the last days, God says:
I will pour out my Spirit on everyone.
Your sons and daughters will proclaim
my message;
your young men will see visions,
and your old men will have dreams.
Yes, even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will proclaim my message.
I will perform miracles in the sky above,
And wonders on the earth below.

Acts 2:17–19a (TEV)

By now, you are likely asking yourself, "What in the world does this have to do with partnership? This is old history. Jesus has come. The Holy Spirit is with us today. What difference does this make in the everyday strategy of working with others in partnership to touch people's lives with Jesus' power and love?"

Go with me just a bit further. I think it will become evident how all this ties together. As it does, I think you'll be as excited about the God design as I and others involved in the partnership movement have become.

For a long time, the Church has accepted that God communicates in many ways and, through these communications, gives individuals an opportunity to respond.

In Romans 1, the Apostle Paul suggests that God is *always* communicating—*always* drawing us to himself. Only our sin blinds us, confuses our minds, and hardens our hearts. Romans states that *no one* has an excuse because, if eyes are open and hearts receptive, *God can be known*. It is a stunning statement.

Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities,
both his eternal power and his divine nature,
have been clearly seen;
they are perceived in the things that God has made.
So those people have no excuse at all!



Romans 1:20 (TEV)

Theologians call it general revelation. Simply put, God's eternal and invisible character can be "decoded" through his visible creation! Or, said in reverse, God's visible and transient (according to Revelation) creation is a giant decoding system for man to see and come to understand God's eternal and invisible character. Heady stuff!²

But in his grace, God does not rely on just such general revelation. He does not even rely on the remarkable kaleidoscopic array of Old Testament witness.

Always gracious, always taking the initiative in redemption, God makes the ultimate sacrifice to demonstrate his love. He sends his own son. He sends a messenger that looks like us, is tempted like us, eats and sleeps like us, and, yet, is transcendent. Then God complements creation and the magnificent work of Christ by giving us further resources through the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. And, finally, empowered by all this, Jesus *sends us*, in his power, as his representatives, out into the world (Matt. 28:19–20). Now *we* both carry the message and *are* the message! As the Apostle Paul describes:

All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us
from enemies into his friends and gave us the task
of making others his friends also.

2 Corinthians 5:18 (TEV)

So where does this get us? And how does all this relate to effective strategic partnerships? Here's a kind of recap of the thoughts to help us focus:

- God *may* "reveal" himself to us in a memorable event or moment. He's done it millions of times. He will do it today with many. But God's *typical pattern* is to communicate with us *over time*, giving us many ways to hear, learn, and respond.
- God uses *many forms* of communication to help us see, hear, and understand. He's a multi-media communicator! Think of rainbows in the sky, burning bushes, talking donkeys, still small voices, plagues, pillars of fire and cloud, miracles, voices from heaven, prophets, and the scriptures themselves. His creativity is extraordinary!
- God has given his Church today a remarkable diversity of voices, gifts, and ways to communicate his power and love.
- *When praying for God's work in a community, a city, an ethnic group, or on an overseas mission field, durable partnerships, operating over time, can help coordinate and make the many channels of God's communication far more effective than if we all just "do our own thing."*

Let's be honest. Particularly in the West, we want simple solutions and quick results. Even in our personal financial planning, professionals are always urging us to resist trying to get rich quick. Rather, we're encouraged to take the longer-term view, to "buy and hold." Not surprisingly, the desire for immediate results pervades every nook and cranny of our thinking. Its functional influence on our view of redemption is powerful,

whether we're praying for an individual life, restoration of a great city, or freedom through the *good news* for a Satan-bound unreached people group. We want the results now.

The combination of our desire for quick results and the Western tendency toward individualism has created frustration, ineffective strategies, and unrealistic expectations. As a result, millions have yet to even hear of Jesus, much less give their lives to him! Individualism means you go it alone, ignoring or minimizing the value of others and the creative roles they could play. Desire for quick results means we make unreasonable demands on people and the decisions involved in their journey from darkness to light.

Why is it important to understand that real, lasting spiritual change is almost always a process, not just an event? Because life is a journey. Our savior, Jesus, "even though he was God's Son... *learned* through his sufferings to be obedient." (Heb. 5:8 TEV, emphasis added) On that journey, partnerships help God's people work together, celebrate each other's roles, and witness to Jesus' ability to make us truly human—in relationship.

Bruce Barton, one of America's advertising copy writing legends and a founder of the ad agency Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborne, wrote a book, now out of print, titled, *The Man Nobody Knows*. It was Barton's effort to look, as a layman, at Jesus' communications through the eyes of a modern, professional communications specialist. Here is my paraphrase of a simple but powerful illustration from Barton:

How do you get on a moving train? Do you approach it from right angles? At best you'll be embarrassed. At worst you'll be injured. No, the only way to get on a moving train is to come alongside, approximate the speed of the train and, then, all you have to do is step on.³

Barton's point is powerful and simple. In our effort to share Christ, we often:

- Ignore the fact that the train is already moving.
- Appear to care less what direction it's taking.
- In effect, ask the individual we're hoping to influence "to get off the train" so we can talk on *our* familiar turf, in terms familiar to us.

Of course "today is the day of salvation." Of course the message is urgent. Of course it is vital that we urge people to make a decision to turn *from* their old ways and *to* a new life in Christ.

In a metaphor that is foreign to city folks today, but was clearly understood in New Testament times, Jesus introduced the imagery of the farm worker, the planter, in Matthew 13. It is a parable about the process of planting seeds and the types of "ground" (hearts) the seed falls on. But in the passage about the harvest at the beginning of this chapter, John 4:34–38, Jesus turned the metaphor into a means for understanding our strategic roles in working together—under his direction. In it he summarized how he and the Holy Spirit work in individual lives: some plant, some water, and some reap. Each one is doing God's work. Each *is important*. And, standing around his throne someday, *they will rejoice together!*

Jesus outlined the principles of spiritual change; then others elaborated on them in other sections of scripture—particularly the Apostle Paul. The diagram below helps graphically illustrate the process of spiritual change that is suggested in the passages we are examining.

?

At the bottom of the diagram are the early stages—the stone clearing and the planting. Further up is the watering. Still further up are the reaping and discipling stages. Some may complain that the diagram is far too simplistic. I contend that, while the journey may be complex and extend over a great period of time for some, in any audience we are seeking to influence with the love and power of Christ, these key elements are always present. Subsets may be proposed, further refinement of the elements can be added, but, in the end, being aware of *and strategically taking these basic elements into consideration* is a major challenge and a discipline all too often ignored.

Effective partnerships link everyone in the process—each of us using our gifts, being faithful, and celebrating the joy of being part of God’s plan.

Of course, God’s general revelation, referred to earlier in this chapter (Rom. 1:19–20), continues throughout all this—if the person has eyes to see and a heart to understand. All efforts we make to share the love and nature of Christ should take advantage of or build on the powerful, self-evident revelations God makes of himself every day he faithfully keeps the sun coming up over the horizon!

By the way, the Church usually prefers to invest her resources in activities dealing with the middle to upper half of the diagram. Why? Because that’s where

- 1) you can see the “results” and
- 2) existing Christians can grow in Christ, have fellowship, and “enjoy” the blessings of the Christian family.

The bottom half of the diagram is where the going is tough, often with little visible results.

In the next chapter, we look at other diagrams that help unpack this idea of spiritual change as a process. They also illustrate how effective partnerships are ideally suited to empower this kind of process, realizing the greatest impact in the shortest period of time.

But one more look at the New Testament’s agricultural metaphor.

From the parable of the planter and Jesus’ use of the metaphor with the disciples in John 4, the Apostle Paul takes the image a step further. In the church at Corinth, he was faced with factions who favored one preacher or teacher over another. Here was Paul’s response:

When one of you says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos”—
aren’t you acting like worldly people?

After all, who is Apollos? And who is Paul? We are simply God’s
servants, by whom you were led to believe. Each one does the
work which the Lord gave him to do:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plant, but it was God who made the

plant grow.
The one who plants and the one who waters really do not matter. It is
God who matters, because he makes the plant grow.
There is no difference between the one who plants and the one who
waters; God will reward each according to the work each has done.
For we are partners working together for God, and you are God's field.
1 Corinthians 3:4–9 (TEV)

Tough words. But from this passage we see several things.

The mother who prays for her children as she washes dishes, the godly teacher who acts and speaks like Christ in the classroom, and the individual who “calls for the decision,” whether over a cup of coffee or from a platform in a stadium, are all important. Everyone is part of God's plan of evangelization and salvation. All should be celebrated and encouraged in faithfully carrying out their God-given roles. And—great news—all will rejoice together in the harvest!

Particularly striking and reassuring is that remarkable line, “There is no difference between the one who plants and the one who waters; God will reward each according to the work each has done.” (3:8 TEV)

So we see that the real issue is *faithfulness*. Are we doing everything we can, in the power of God's Spirit, to put our assets, our gifts to best use in his work in helping others come to know him or grow in him?

We know from passages like Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4 that the Holy Spirit has distributed a wondrous range of gifts among God's people. The Apostle Paul described Apollos, himself and God as partners—using the gifts the Holy Spirit had given them to see Christ released to the fullest in the life of each Corinthian believer.

Effective partnerships of God's people, whether in your neighborhood or in some technically complex international radio and television strategy, empower us to join hands, acknowledge each other's roles, plan for the sowing, watering, reaping, and discipling, and actively monitor how well the different elements are working together.

PARTNERSHIP IN PRACTICE: For hundreds of years the tribal group had been Islamic. For nearly a hundred of those years, pioneer missionaries had faithfully shared the good news. Yet only a scattered handful had believed. While working in the country, a Christian organization agreed with the government to help drill vitally needed wells in the villages, many remote, of this tradition-rich tribe. On the edge of the desert, water was critical. Throughout their history, these people had had to hand carry water, often polluted, for hours each day. This water, from rivers or other secondary sources, kept them alive.

It was a huge, challenging project. But when it was complete, wells were operating in hundreds of villages. Village leaders testified, “The traditional Muslim leaders only wanted our money and a share of our crops. You Christians have brought us the most important thing we've ever needed—water.”

But when the Christian leader of this project was interviewed, he said, “Some in my own organization kept asking, ‘Where is the evangelism in your project?’” He went on to say, “I thought I was doing evangelism all along!”

Just about the time the well drilling project was complete, a partnership of over a dozen international and local Christian ministries was born for this tribal group. Today, seven or eight years after the launch of this partnership, an international prayer initiative supports the partnership; the Jesus Film is complete and in wide circulation; the New Testament is finished and has been published; literature production is being coordinated; literacy is being taught, empowering education and scripture reading; local-language radio programs are on the air; and clinics are meeting physical needs.

A decade after the well drilling began, the partnership is helping coordinate a wide range of Christian service and witness. In a wonderful turn of events, long-term Christian missionaries are moving into those same villages to live there and provide vital educational and agricultural services and witness in the name of Christ. The credibility given to the gospel by the wells opened doors. More of these tribal people are turning to Christ, and a small church is beginning to develop.

Looking back, it is now clear that the faithful, often lonely, work of drilling wells in extreme heat and hardship not only gave these people water to live each day, but was a God step on the journey to opening their hearts to the eternal, living water of his life.

These people are turning to Christ as a result of a process through which God revealed his love through many—over time. And, all in the partnership, those praying around the world, those supporting from home, and those working in the field, look forward to rejoicing together when, in faith, together with the majority of this tribe, they will all stand around Jesus’ throne singing praises to the Lamb!

Take a moment and think about your own vision. Even though the circumstances may be sharply different, do elements of this story parallel your own situation? All Kingdom visions involve trying to encourage spiritual change, a spiritual journey. Your vision or project is no different. What can you learn and apply from this story?

Spiritual change is a process. Frequently, different people with different gifts, often at different times, are involved in that process. It’s the God design. Effective partnerships integrate the pieces to address the whole challenge. They acknowledge the different places members of the audience may be at in their spiritual journey, help identify the different gifts available, work out ways the elements can be linked together, encourage everyone to be part of monitoring progress, and share good news of spiritual progress.

As we conclude this chapter, a final, critically important note needs to be sounded.

No amount of brilliant planning, strategy, or coordinated, partnership-based execution is sufficient in itself. Healthy, effective partnerships take great energy, commitment, quality work, and tenacity. But hundreds of times I’ve had to remind myself and my colleagues that that kind of effort isn’t enough.

“Without prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit, all such efforts can crumble between our fingers or be nothing more than “a noisy gong or a clanging bell” (1 Cor. 13:1 TEV).

Jesus, when faced with the greatest challenges, spent long nights in prayer. He spoke and acted only as he heard the Father speak and saw the Father act (John 5:17–47). Jesus reminded his disciples, when they tried and failed to represent him, that the greatest challenges can only be addressed by prayer and fasting (Matt. 17:14–21).

We must employ the highest level of discipline, make the most cogent case, show the greatest compassion, and develop and carry out the most durable, effective partnership strategy. But spiritual change that brings an individual from darkness into light and washes away sin is solely the domain of the Holy Spirit. Anything else is short-term manipulation—not spiritual transformation.

It was not because of any good deeds that we ourselves had done, but because of his own mercy that he saved us, through the Holy Spirit, who gives us new birth and new life by washing us. God poured out the Holy Spirit abundantly on us through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that by his grace we might be put right with God and come into possession of the eternal life we hope for. This is a true saying.

Titus 3:5–8a (TEV)

Our partnerships will only have lasting, eternal significance as they are rooted in prayer and an awareness that our planning and work can, ultimately, only be empowered by the Holy Spirit’s work—in our lives and the lives of those we seek to reach and serve.

Footnotes

1. Heraclitus’s famous quote, “You never step into the same river twice,” acknowledges that countless influences make each day’s journey a part of a long and complex process.
2. One of the greatest of all tragedies in the Western Church is that, following the Enlightenment and the Renaissance we’ve dissipated away the vision, rights, and responsibilities given to us in Genesis 2 and our natural ability to relate the message of Jesus to everything around us. Slowly but surely, with a few (in some cases glorious) exceptions, we have detached the spiritual life and the truth on which it is based from the created order and all the wondrous elements that flow out of it, such as science, art, the humanities, aesthetics, the bio world we live in, and so on. Each of these glorious things (though often distorted or even perverted by sin) flows out of God’s nature and his creation, which we are supposed to know about, treasure, celebrate, be responsible for, and use creatively as wise stewards.
3. Barton, Bruce, *The Man Nobody Knows* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1925), 104–105.



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