

## Shaped in Solitude

*Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from [being baptized in] the Jordan River. He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil for forty days. **Luke 4:1-2a***

*Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went to an isolated place to pray. **Mark 1:35***

*One day soon afterward Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night. At daybreak he called together all of his disciples and chose twelve of them to be his apostles. **Luke 6:12-13***

Baptisms are a time for celebration and community. It is time to party. And we see some of that at the baptism of Jesus—God affirms Jesus’ belovedness. But then there is no party. The Holy Spirit immediately leads Jesus...not to town, not to a palace, not to a party, but into the desert, the wilderness. Jesus is alone. The Holy Spirit must have thought, I presume, that there was something valuable about solitude.

Throughout his ministry Jesus returned to the desert, to the desolate place. He experienced something there that strengthened him and energized him. He found renewal in the desolate places. It is where he went when he felt pressed by the crowds, when he felt “busy.” It is where he went when he had to make a significant decision like choosing his apostles. It is where he went when he felt overwhelmed by his feelings like in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Sometimes we simply need to be alone. Even with his disciples, Jesus would separate himself from them. Sometimes it is important to be alone even when intimate, close friends are available.

Jesus was comfortable with himself and could be alone. His “alone time” was not loneliness, but solitude. Some people are lonely when they are alone—they are uncomfortable with themselves and they cling to others in needy desperation. Some people are too busy to be alone and even when they are alone they are easily distracted by the busy-ness of life. Some people don’t want to be alone (certainly not silent) because they are afraid to face their true selves and consequently they need the distractions.

Being alone, however, is more than just being with oneself. Being alone is not loneliness when we find companionship with God in those times. It is not withdrawal in the sense of isolation but the pursuit of God through communion (prayer) for the sake of renewal or recreation.

When we are too busy to “recreate” with God, then life has distracted us from our true essence. When we are too uncomfortable with ourselves, then we have not faced the truth about ourselves in God’s presence. When we are lonely when alone, then we have not embraced the joy of solitude with God.

Jesus pursued God in that solitude. Some of Jesus’ vigils would be early morning, some would be all night. Sometimes something (or someone) is more important than sleep (yes, it is true!). Sometimes prayer was more important than sleep. Has it ever been for you? It was for Jesus.

Jesus found time for solitude. His discipleship began in the desert alone with God. His solitude—his companionship with God—fueled his ministry; it energized his other relationships. If he was discipled by solitude and apprenticed through solitude, perhaps...just perhaps...so should we.

When life is so busy that I am too tired to pray, too tired to sit quietly, too tired to seek God in solitude, then life is too busy. My fatigue has not only a physical but a spiritual root. I have no energy because I am not plugged into the one who is himself Energy. I have no spiritual power because I have no time for God—no time for just him. That is not only too busy, it is idolatry.

## Questions for Discussion:

1. Do you think Jesus “needed” those times alone with the Father? What did he “need” and why did he “need” them?
2. Why is it so hard for human beings to be alone without being lonely? Why do we find it so difficult to be alone with God? What distracts us or repels us about spending time alone with God?
3. Do you remember those “all-nighters” you pulled at work or in college in order to get something done, to meet a deadline? Have you ever felt that way about prayer or solitude with God? If you remember an occasion, share it with others.
4. Share with the group what practices or routines you have found helpful? What helps you ignore the distractions and focus on being with God?

## ***Shepherding Those Who Don't Like You***

Being at peace with your enemies requires tact and sensitivity.

Gary Preston

*Being a leader is hard enough. But what about leading those who don't like you? Here are a few pointers to help soften the tension.*

### **Resist What Comes Naturally**

In ministry, doing what comes naturally is often the best approach. That's not true, however, when it comes to pastoring difficult people. One of my natural responses is to distance myself from difficult people. But, I've learned to make it a point to seek out difficult people and spend a few moments talking together. Even if our contact with the person doesn't solve the problem, it builds a bridge rather than a wall between us. There is something positive and healing about face-to-face contact with people at odds with us.

### **Invite Talk About Sensitive Subjects**

It's important to let people know that even subjects of conflict can be discussed; they don't end the relationship. I've had ongoing differences with one couple over the style of our worship service. I've met with them to talk specifically about that issue. We continue to disagree. We see each other regularly, and sometimes, when we are talking about something unrelated to worship, I will intentionally bring the subject into our conversation. I might casually ask, "I've been wondering if you have noticed any positive changes in the worship services lately?" Or, "Did you enjoy the extra hymns we sang today?" I'm not trying to stir up controversy; I simply want them to know it's okay to talk about something we disagree on. We can disagree and still work together.

### **Keep Private Battles Private**

One person had battled me repeatedly about my emphasis on evangelism. At a business meeting, the subject of evangelism came up, and several people expressed excitement about how the church was finally reaching out. I took the opportunity to point out that one of my most vocal critics was part of a shrinking minority. I had scored a major victory on this issue, and a public one at that—or so I thought. Ultimately, the statement came back to haunt me. Just as a negative political ad campaign can generate sympathy for the opponent, so too can a public attack against someone in the church. Even though people didn't agree with this man's position, they disagreed even more with my public attack of him. Some things are best left unsaid. Don't make private battles public.

### **Practice Kindness**

There is a bumper sticker that reads: "Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty." It's a good reminder of one of the most helpful lessons I've learned about pastoring people I find difficult to love. It is amazing what acts of kindness can do to build bridges to people.

### **When Best Efforts Fall Short**

Of course, no approach to dealing with difficult people will be successful with all the people all the time. But, the more I seek to love difficult people, the more God uses them to refine me into the image of Christ. After all, learning to love people is one of the ways we become like Christ.

### **Discuss**

1. How have you seen these principles at work in conflicts you've been a part of?
2. Which one presents the greatest challenge to you?
3. Can you think of a disagreement that God used to refine your character?

*This article is an excerpt from one of our top-selling downloads: [Dealing with Difficult People](#)*

## **8 Questions for New Ministries**

Decide which ministry you should start.

Church Central

*In most cases it takes the starting of new ministries to attract new people and give them an opportunity for the love of Christ to be shown. But what ministry should you start? Here are eight questions to answer.*

### **1. Who is our audience?**

Reaching the whole world with the gospel is the mission of the Christian faith, but life-giving churches recognize that the world is made up of many different audiences. Since different groups of people have quite different cultures, needs, and methods of communication, a church that intentionally tries to reach a specific group with the message of Christ will normally be much more effective than one that tries to reach everyone with a general outreach. Every church should have a sign that says, "Everyone Welcome," but unless they have a deliberate strategy in place to help people become a part of the church, they will see only accidental growth.

### **2. Where do we sense the burden of God in our church at this time?**

The number one attitude seen in a church that does a good job welcoming newcomers is the desire to reach out to others. Caring service is the center of all that they do. A church desiring to serve others should seek God's leading and wisdom and carefully evaluate resources and abilities to implement a new ministry. God desires to use our gifts and abilities to serve others. Carl George, respected church consultant, once noted that in Luke 10:25-37, Jesus tells us not to ask, "Whom am I required to love?" ("Who is my neighbor?"), but "How can I show the love of Christ to others?" ("To whom am I a neighbor?").

### **3. What specific group of people is God giving us a burden to serve?**

Different people have different needs. Gone are the days of thinking broadly. It is now time to think specifically. At one time churches developed a one-size-fits-all ministry for adults. Later we thought in terms of a ministry for younger adults, middle-aged adults, and senior adults. Now we must view adult ministry even more specifically. Young adults can be divided into several categories, such as collegians, career singles, young couples without children, young couples with children, and single parents.

Middle-aged adults are never-married singles, couples with elementary-school children, couples with junior high, couples with senior high, couples with college-age children, empty-nest couples, and single parents.

Older adults include the recently retired, adults living in care facilities, adults living with their children, adults raising their grandchildren, and on and on. A church cannot say it wants to minister to adults. Today you must be very specific about the type of adult to whom you want to minister.

### **4. What needs do these people have that we could meet?**

If you don't know what the needs are, ask the people. Sticking to your own idea of what people want without asking them for their input is a mistake. Not all new ministries end up in the Hall of Fame. Some end up in the Hall of Shame.

### **5. What specific ministry are we qualified to start that fits with God's burden and the people we wish to serve?**

People in a church like to think that they can care for everyone. In a general way churches do care for people from the cradle to the grave. But when it comes to beginning a new ministry, we must think strategically. The fields are truly ripe for harvest. People are hurting and need to be loved and served in ways that will draw them to the Great Shepherd—Jesus Christ. No church has all the necessary resources—money, people, time, knowledge, skill—to do everything that can be proposed. Thus we need to investigate as many ministry opportunities as reasonable before deciding which one to pursue. Talk with leaders from other churches who are already doing the ministry and, if possible, even participate in their ministry for a short time. While you are doing your research, prayerfully ask God what he wants your church to do.

## **6. What similar ministries are other churches or individuals already doing?**

Once God gives you an idea of a ministry you could start, investigate other churches doing similar ministries. Talk with those involved. Learn what is working and not working. What types of responses, roadblocks, and problems might you expect. Learn all you can from these ministries.

## **7. What will be our strategy and plan?**

Study your target group and put together a plan to reach them, beginning with a specific need. Everything doesn't need to be planned before you get started serving others, but do consider the resources of your people: their time, commitment, knowledge, skills, and money. Do not allow your desire to know everything beforehand squelch the burden and momentum for ministry that has been growing. Learn by doing.

## **8. What process do we need to follow to get approval from our church?**

Understand and follow the process for ministry approval from your church. Go ahead and start your ministry so that leaders will know you are serious and know what you are doing. Leaders will want to give you suggestions, advice, and ideas. Some may even want to get involved. After approval, be certain to keep leaders informed on the progress of the ministry.

*Adapted with permission from Beyond the First Visit: A Complete Guide to Connecting Guests to Your Church, BakerBooks, 2006.*

### **10. Building a Culture of Discipleship —*Training Theme***

Many small-group ministries fail because churches view them as "just another program." In reality, a successful small-groups program should be a foundational element for the church that runs it, and building community should be a central goal and regular practice. This download will help your church grow a culture of discipleship that goes beyond a single ministry focus.

### **9. Coaching Small Group Leaders —*Practical Ministry Skills***

The role of a small-group coach is to teach, support, and confront the group leaders. This downloadable resource can help focus and strengthen your church's coaching ministry. And if your church doesn't support small-group leaders with coaches yet, this resource can help you get started today.

### **8. Ministering to Difficult Group Members —*Practical Ministry Skills***

The task of leading a small group can become nearly impossible when your group contains one or more challenging personalities—people who talk too little or too much, people with emotional problems, people who promote false theology, and so on. This download contains articles and assessments written by noted experts and is sure to be a source of comfort and help to any group leader attempting to serve where extra grace is required.

### **7. Small-Group Assimilation Strategies —*Practical Ministry Skills***

It can be hard to integrate newcomers to your church into small groups. Similarly, small-group visitors may have a difficult time becoming more involved in other ministries. This training resource can help your church accomplish both, as well as help your individual small groups become more welcoming.

### **6. Best Church Practices: Small-Group Ministry —*Best Church Practices***

Leading a small group isn't easy, but we've taken the chore out of creating documents and procedures for you! This download contains 16 policies and forms that can be fully customized to fit your church and ministry. These documents include job and ministry descriptions, application forms, leadership criteria, profiles, and much more.

### **5. Missional Small Groups —*Training Theme***

There's no question that the word missional is generating a lot of buzz in ministry circles today. Can missional practices and principles really enhance your small-group ministry? Yes! This downloadable resource features devotionals, activities, assessments, and how-to articles from trusted leaders around the world.

### **4. Effective Turbo Groups —*Practical Ministry Skills***

Turbo groups are an effective way to train several new small-group leaders and co-leaders at once. An extensive five-week curriculum will also show you how they are an excellent method for exposing potential leaders to the routines and requirements of a small group in order to gauge their willingness and capability for the role.

### **3. Sermon-Based Small Groups —*Practical Ministry Skills***

This resource features a wealth of practical training material that can help your church adapt to a sermon-based discipleship program in a short amount of time. Experienced authors help you write discussion questions, create study guides, and even build sermon-based DVD curriculum. This download also features a variety of helpful sample forms that you can adapt to get started now.

### **2. Small-Group Evaluations —*Assessment Pack***

You may have received this top-selling guide during our free giveaway in July. If you haven't seen it yet, the handouts in this Assessment Pack are designed to evaluate specific dimensions of small-group ministry. They address individual small groups as well as church-wide group ministries to maintain ministry health.

### **1. Small Group Leader —*Orientation Guide***

This guide is a must-have for every new leader and ministry. It is designed to help you equip your church to provide orientation and basic training to new small group leaders, and to help seasoned small group leaders refresh themselves on their responsibilities. Use for a training meeting or hand out to individual leaders.

**Bonus! Editor's Pick** While this download didn't make the Top 10, SmallGroups.com's managing editor Sam O'Neal selected [Meaningful Worship in Small Groups](#) as his pick for 2008. He says of this Practical Ministry Skills download, "Worship is something that a lot of groups struggle to do well, and I really think this download has some practical and innovative tips that can help."