THE POWER OF THE OIKOS

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Alan R. Johnson

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Introduction

A few years back I was in northern Thailand helping teach a part of a seminar on church growth issues for our pastors in that region. I asked these pastors how they were seeing God bringing people to faith in their churches. It did not take them long at all to come up with an answer. They began to share about how their believers had relationships with non-Christians, and that out of these friendships they invited people to come to church. As people were exposed to the message of Christ and the warmth of Christian fellowship they would make the decision to become followers of the Lord. Incorporation into the body was not a problem them because they already had an existing network of relationships.

My next question to them was how they were structuring their current outreach in light of the way God was bringing people to faith. Without hesitation they all replied that they passed out tracts on Sunday afternoons. So I backed up and asked my original question, got the same answer, and then asked again how they <u>thought</u> they should structure their outreach. It stumped them. They were so used to passing out tracts that they could virtually see no other way to evangelize. There was no planned, intentional connection between the way that they were seeing God effectively bring people to faith in their congregations and the way they were seeking to spread the Gospel message.

The experiences these Thai pastors related concerning the way people were coming to faith in their congregations has also been confirmed by research in the American cultural context: 75-90% of the people who make decisions for Christ point to a friend or a relative as being primarily responsible for them coming to know Jesus and becoming a part of a local church (Egli & Hoerr, 1993, p. 7). What I want to suggest is that this relational context for sharing the Christian faith that is turning up in church growth research around the world is not simply a modern phenomena, but rather it is a Scriptural method. It is a clearly identifiable

strategy in the ministry of Jesus, the apostles, and the early Church, and is our most powerful way to mobilize our people for outreach and to reach and disciple new people.

Sharing the Gospel through Relational Networks: Defining <u>Oikos</u>

Acts 16 provides an excellent example of how relational networks were used to rapidly spread the Gospel in the early Church . In 16:11-15 as Paul shares the Gospel the Lord opens Lydia's heart to the message (vs. 14). In the tightly compressed language of Luke it is easy to miss the sense of movement and change of scene that must have taken place. In verse 15 we see that Paul is baptizing Lydia's entire household. Note again this same process with the jailer in 16:25-34. We move from the scene of Paul talking with the jailer in verse 31 to him sharing with the entire household in verse 32, and then in verse 33 baptizing all of them.

The word translated in our English versions as house and household is the Greek word <u>oikos</u>. What we see Paul doing here in Acts 16 is intentionally using the <u>oikos</u> as a vehicle for spreading the Gospel. Rather than lead a single individual to Christ outside of their family and social context, Paul proclaims the Gospel not only to them but then seeks out their families. He then sought to bring them into faith and to follow the Lord in water baptism as a household.

<u>Understanding the Oikos</u>

Both in Roman and Israelite culture the home was the fundamental unit. Michael Green (1970), remarking on the strategy of the early church in evangelizing through the <u>oikos</u>, notes that "sociologically speaking, the early Christians could not have hit on a sounder basis" (p. 252).

Starting from the Old Testament, we see that the household was fundamental to salvation in God's economy. Noah and his house are brought into the ark, Abraham and his house are brought into the covenant, David and his house are promised the Kingdom. The wife and children, servants and resident aliens are all included in the house in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 14:26 the use of the word household is equivalent to the

expanded description of Deuteronomy 12:12 with its "sons and daughters, menservants and maidservants."

In Greco-Roman society the household included one's immediate family and relatives as well as the slaves and a class called the freedmen who frequently took the family name and remained in the looser connection with it known as clientela. This group owed loyalty to the head of household and expected protection and assistance from him as well. In addition to these groups there was often a class known as the amici, the trusted friends to whom intimacy was granted and from whom reliable support and devotion were expected (Green, 1970, p. 253).

The Meaning of Oikos Today

To summarize, in Greco-Roman culture the oikos described not only the immediate family in the house, but included servants, servant's families, friends, and even business associates. An oikos was one's sphere of influence, his social system composed of those related to each other through common kinship ties, tasks, and territory (Arn 1982, p. 37). Today we can look at our oikos as consisting of those with whom we have common kinship (larger family), common community (friends, neighbors), and common interests (associates, work relationships, recreation) (Arn, 1980, p. 75).

The early Christian missionaries "made a deliberate point of gaining whatever households they could as lighthouses, so to speak, from which the gospel could illuminate the surrounding darkness" (Green, p. 253).

Reaching the Oikos as a Scriptural Methodology

Because we have a tendency to read Scripture through the lens of the individualism of our culture, we often miss the fact that sharing the Gospel message through the relational networks of the oikos is woven deeply into the fabric of the Gospels, Acts and the Epistles.

Oikos in the Ministry of Jesus

As we look at the ministry of Jesus it is clear that He utilized existing relationships to serve as bridges to spread His message. In Mark 5:19 the man delivered from demons is told to go back to his oikos to tell what great things the Lord had done for him. In the case of both Levi (Mark 2:15-17) and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:9) they gather their close associates around them to be with the Lord. John 4 has two examples with the Samaritan woman telling her friends about Jesus (4:39) and after the healing of the official's son his whole oikos believes. John 1 shows the natural connections as Andrew brings his brother Peter to the Lord (1:41) and Philip brings Nathaniel (1:45).

As Jesus sends his disciples out to proclaim the Kingdom of God he instructs them specifically in an oikos based methodology. They are to find the "worthy man" (Matthew 10:11) or the "son of peace (Luke 10:6) and use that home as a base of operations and sponsorship for their ministry in the community.

Oikos in Acts and the Epistles

In Acts we find references to preaching and teaching house to house (5:42 and 20:20) and to meeting in the home of Tituis Justus (18:7). The Gospel message is received in many households: that of Cornelious (10:2, 22, 30; 11:14), Lydia (16:15), the jailer (16:31-32) and Crispus (18:8).

In the Epistles there is a reference to Paul baptizing the household of Stephanas (I Corinthians 1:16) and the rest concern churches which meet in the house (Romans 16:5; I Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15 and Philemon 2).

It is clear that for the early church the household was the critical factor in the spread of the Gospel in terms of methodology. The relational network of the household provided bridges to large numbers of people through which the Gospel could spread and helped new converts to stand as a group rather than as an individual in an often hostile environment. Using the actual home as a place of evangelism allowed for dialogue and interchange between

the preacher and listeners, a relaxed atmosphere and the chance to offer hospitality (Green ,

1970).

<div align="center">Rationale for Using <u>Oikos</u> Principles</div>

The preceding sections have shown that the use of the relational network as a

methodology for evangelism is Scriptural. However, it is also a very practical methodology.

Arn (1980) lists the following advantages of using <u>oikos</u> relationships: it is natural, cost-

effective, fruitful, a constant source of enlarging contacts, brings satisfaction to members, is

most effective in assimilating new members, and has the potential to win entire families (p.

75).

Another reason why relational based evangelism should be implemented is that it helps

the majority of our church members who do not have the gift of evangelism to creatively and

effectively share their faith using their spiritual and natural gifts in the context of their everday

life. There has been such an emphasis on evangelistic techniques which utilize speaking and

monologue that many Christians think that they are just unable to share the Gospel at all.

Believers need to be taught that their life is a bridge to others who have not heard of Christ.

Their goal is to build relational bridges so people can meet the Savior, and not walls that will

keep Him hidden. Another word picture comes from farming. Church members can be taught

that evangelism is a process that starts with cultivating a relationship with someone, beginning

to plant the seed of the Gospel through word and deed, and harvesting when the fruit is

prepared. Our people can be taught to realize that their current everyday life and sphere of

activities and relationships <u>is</u> their field of ministry.

Another key reason for the implementation of a relational based evangelism strategy is

that it is the first step towards assimilation of new believers into a local church. This kind of

evangelism produces a more stable convert because of the network of relationship that is

already in place before their conversion. My experience here in Thailand has shown that if a

person makes a profession of faith without a pre-existing relational connection, as through a

large crusade or cold contact personal evangelism, they very rarely will become a part of the church. Evangelism through relational networks gives the seeker a chance to not only hear the Gospel message but to see and consider its implications in their life. Thus when they make a profession of faith they are prepared to begin to follow Christ in fellowship with others as they have already been participating in such fellowship prior to their conversion.

<div align="center">Mobilizing Evangelism Through Relational Networks</div>

If <u>oikos</u> based evangelism is both a Scriptural methodology and effective then we need to develop an intentional plan and strategy for using these principles and methods in our church life. If we are going to mobilize our churches to use relational networks, the first thing we must realize is that this is not a program. <u>Oikos</u> based evangelism is not some kind of program that you start, but is both a principle and methodology. As a principle it is something that we can begin to have energize everything that we do. As a methodology it is something that we can train people to utilize as they seek to share their faith.

The second thing we must realize is that relational based evangelism does not start by changing anything at a structural level, or adding anything, but instead it becomes a framework for understanding outreach and training people in sharing their faith. All existing activities from Sunday school to the various groups of the church (youth, men, women) and all evangelistic outreaches can be developed along relational lines. The change is within our hearts and minds first. In order to do this it is necessary for leadership to cast the vision of reaching those in our networks and that our first ministry responsibility is to that network. An outward rather than inward vision must be inculcated into all existing groups and ministries.

While the vision is being cast, opportunities to reach their networks can be presented. Rather than spending great amounts of money in advertising to have people with no connections at all come to an outreach function, we can instruct out people to work on those in their relational network.

As a beginning to helping our people focus on reaching their personal networks Arn (1982) suggests seven steps which can be followed (pp. 83-87).

Identify your extended family-make a list of everyone in your <u>oikos</u>.

Develop a profile on each person of what they like/dislike etc., this will help in planning how to build friendship and ministry to each person.

Focus your efforts on those who will be most receptive.

Develop a disciple making plan.

Work your disciple making plan.

Pray regularly and specifically for each person on your <u>oikos</u> list.

Accept your responsibility before God and others to minister to your <u>oikos</u> and to follow up on those who become believers..

Even in a congregation with only 10-20 believers, analyzing relational networks like this can result in a list of nearly 100 people. These are not strangers, but people who are already in contact with your members. By focusing prayer and ministry on them you have a ready made harvest field which is going to be much more receptive than the general public.

Reaching People by Using Relational Networks

The only limit there is to finding ways to reach personal networks is the limits of our own creativity. In this section I want to develop some ideas for both preparing people to do evangelism and actual strategies for reaching people in relational evangelism.

1. **Preach on <u>oikos</u>**. In order to help our people value evangelism through relational networks we must build a common vocabulary and definitions so as to create understanding and then help them to see its benefits. Preaching and teaching about outreach through personal networks creates a shared understanding and value among your people. Pastoral leaders must cast the vision for reaching the lost that exist in our personal networks. Too often we talk about the need of the lost in general, or they are somewhere else on a mission field or another district. People begin to look past those who are in their

own field of ministry and focus on those who are outside of their immediate circle of responsibility.

2. **Model reaching the oikos**. People are going to value what they see happening in the lives of their leaders. It is not enough to talk about reaching personal networks, they need to see us doing it and doing it with them. We will never take our people higher than where we are spiritually ourselves. We as leaders set the ceiling of spiritual growth. In my experience I have met too many pastoral leaders both in Asia and the West that are talking about and expecting members to do something that they do not personally do themselves.

3. **Make lists of the personal networks of your members**. Follow the seven principles laid out by Arn which I noted above and have every member keeping a list with them and one at the church. The first step is awareness and then comes identification, only then can believers begin to reach out, they have to know who they will reach first.

4. **Pray corporately and privately for the lists of member's personal networks**. We say that we believe in prayer, yet so often we do not structure ourselves to pray specifically for people who are in regular contact with our own believers. Believers should be praying over their list and prayer should be made for such lists in corporate worship services and in every sub-group and prayer group of the congregation. What might be the impact on your congregation and community of concentrated prayer for hundreds of people by name who are in daily contact with your church members?

5. **Make reaching personal networks the goal of every existing group**. So many groups in our churches become turned inward upon themselves and focus only on their needs. Pastors can begin to work with existing group leaders to see that the focus of classes and groups becomes connecting with new people that are in the personal networks of group members. Such an approach can revitalize many groups that are stagnated and have been covering the same ground year after year. New believers ask questions, and their problems stimulate mature believers to help them.

6. **Make every big event an <u>oikos</u> event**. During the course of a year there are many big events that churches often stage. This includes Christmas and Easter programs, Mother's and Father's Day emphases, and oftentimes Valentines day in addition to others. An evangelistic focus should be put on such events months in advance with people praying for their personal network that they will come to hear the Gospel at that event.

7. **Teach friendship building skills and activities**. The longer a person is a Christian, the fewer relationships they have with non-believers. They need help and encouragement in building friendships with other people and a plan to make the time for a relationship with a non-believer in their life. The only way people are going to see Christ is through the lives of His people, loving and serving them. Relation building activities can be as simple as having friends over for dinner, playing a sport together, playing table games together, going shopping together and more.

8. **Use natural events as <u>oikos</u> opportunities**. There are many natural events that happen where numbers of our church family gather formally or informally. These include birthday parties, fellowship oriented dinners, weddings, etc. When our members begin to look at life through the lens of reaching their personal network, such events become opportunities to build relationships and expose people to other believers and the Gospel message.

9. **Have a neighborhood party**. Believers as families or in groups of families can invite neighbors in their area over for some kind of meal. In such venues it is not always necessary to have a formal sharing of the Gospel, although that can be part of the program through testimonies or special sharing by someone.

10. **Use media tools in personal networks**. Believers can give away Christian books, tapes, videos and correspondence materials through their relational networks. They can then make an appointment to come back and pick it up (if it is borrowed) and inquire about how the person liked it and their response to it.

11. **Plan a community service day**. Find some creative way to serve people in your community and try especially to make contact with those that your members already know. Things like painting a home, taking care of the lawn, passing out care packages, visiting people in the hospital, looking after widows or single moms, taking meals to new neighbors, helping with little league teams, anything that meets a perceived need in the community. Service activities like this will help to create all kinds of new relational networks as people see that you really care.

12. **Use the empty chair at all small group meetings**. The idea of the empty chair is often used with home groups, but it is equally applicable to Sunday school classes, and other group meetings in the church. This exercise helps the group members to focus on reaching those in their network outside of their group. The last thing done in the meeting is to have an empty chair set in the group, and all group members pray that in the next meeting Jesus would send someone to sit in that chair for the group to love and care for in His Name.

13. **Build <u>oikos</u> principles into early discipleship**. When a person becomes a new believer, almost all of their relational networks our outside of the church. This is the critical period for leaders and spiritual parents to help the new believer see that it is their task by God's help to reach those people. Rather than just doing curricular type work with a new convert, the person doing the follow up can go with them to visit and meet people in their personal network. This provides early opportunities for them to share their faith with a mature believer there to help and back them up. The mature believer is a model for the new convert and shows them how to bear witness. It is an ideal "see and do" learning situation.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

What I have shared here about reaching people in our relational networks is not new, dramatic, costly or difficult. What it all comes down to is people caring for people. Christians caring enough to build bridges of relationship made of love and compassion so that someone

else can hear, understand and respond to the Good News of Jesus Christ. It does not mean starting a new program or adding new staff or radically altering things so that people in the church feel uncomfortable. But what it does mean is that leaders need to open themselves to the heart and passion of the Lord Himself for reaching the lost. Carl George, after consulting with thousands of churches has put it this way:

> I have yet to be in a place where, from everything I could sense, God was not more willing to bless than the leaders were willing to receive. God wants to give you a spiritually healthy church with a positive, faith-oriented, biblically sound approach to your community, under Christ, such that if someone joins you, he or she will be significantly better off for having done so. Maybe that means touching ten more people than at present. Or maybe it means ten thousand. Your responsibility is to do whatever you can, humanly speaking, to make spiritual ministry available for 'whosoever will.' (George, 1993, 98-99).

I believe that God wants to use us as pastoral leaders to mobilize His people to reach out in love to those who are closest to them. As you cast the vision and train your people how to touch their personal networks, be ready for an explosion of new babes in Christ!

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