

Viral Faith

How to be a supernaturally contagious follower of Jesus

I have participated in the multiplication of the chicken and spaghetti. So I suspect I have a pretty good idea what the disciples felt like when they saw five loaves and two fish feed a multitude. Let me tell you my story.

The rapid explosion of churches in Madrid had just begun. My friends had just won seven people to the Lord as I arrived at their apartment. The plan was to feed them and for me to begin to disciple them in the basics of Christianity. My friend Mariluz had prepared a chicken, salad and spaghetti dinner to feed them. In all, there were the seven new Christians, Mariluz, her fiancé, Manuel, two of Manuel's roommates and me. We had barely enough food for the 12 people there: two chickens, a large platter of spaghetti, a salad, two loaves of bread and a couple of bottles of wine.

We hadn't counted on two crucial factors, however. First, our guests were hungry; and second, the new Christians from the other churches decided to visit Manuel and Mariluz. The only polite thing to do was invite them to dinner. So as I spoke of salvation and the love of Jesus, I also dished up the spaghetti and chicken. As they asked questions, they would hand me their plate and I'd give them more chicken and spaghetti. Then as the discussion wore on, I'd do it again. Soon the apartment was full of visitors from the other new churches. Mariluz asked the people seated at the table to come to a corner of the apartment to have a discussion with Manuel while I fed the new guests. Eventually 36 people were fed, and I was serving the food.

I was so absorbed in the dialog about Jesus and the new arrivals to the table that I wasn't paying much attention to those two chickens and the large plate of spaghetti. However,

as the last person was fed it was as if Jesus tapped me on the shoulder.

“Look at the chicken. How many were there?”

“Two, Lord, yet there’s still chicken left. But I saw many people taking two and three pieces each.”

“And how much spaghetti was there?”

“One plate full, Lord.”

“How much is there now?”

“There is still a half a plate left over, Lord.”

A chill went down my spine that I will never forget. I was in the presence of the King.

The Supernatural Norm

Much like the chicken and spaghetti, Jesus’ instructions to His disciples—and later the 72 others—when He sent them out to preach involved the supernatural (Matt. 10:1-16; Luke 10:1-23). He gave them a specific pattern on how kingdom-advancing work was to be done. The instructions in Matthew 10:7-8 list them all: “As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give” (NIV).

Though the other Gospel accounts of Jesus’ directives vary on which miraculous elements are described, all of them mention the supernatural. The issue, then, isn’t which kind of supernaturalism is allowed in kingdom ministry; the point is that it’s part and parcel to kingdom ministry. In fact, we see supernaturalism as an integral reality in the ministry of Jesus, in the original 12 apostles and in the later apostolic work as mentioned in Acts and the Epistles. Jesus doesn’t mention in any of these passages that signs and wonders are to be a part of kingdom work, yet He multiplied fish and loaves

twice when He preached the kingdom. Further, a significant sign and wonder was accomplished with Peter's shadow:

"Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed" (Acts 5:14-16).

Later in Acts, "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them" (19:11-12).

Jesus used a prophetic word of knowledge with the woman at the well in John 4 to reach many in that Samaritan village. Peter had a prophetic vision that connected him to Cornelius. Cornelius himself had an angelic visitation. Jesus and Paul cast out demons, as did the 12 and the 72.

The point is that we should expect supernaturalism in the context of expanding the kingdom and preaching the gospel. Though the supernatural can materialize through us as it did with these mentioned, it isn't under our control. Jesus is the Lord of the harvest; we are not. He gets to decide what He will do, when He will do it and how that will take place. Is it always supernatural? I think it would be more honest to say that supernaturalism was normal and expected in evangelism and church planting in the New Testament. My friends and I have also come to expect it to be part and parcel of our ministry. But we don't necessarily expect miracles every single time. We have no idea what will happen, when it will happen or how. Nor do we know if the miraculous will be involved at all. Still, whatever happens will be supernatural, because God, who is a supernatural God, is leading the process.

We can only do what we see the Father doing. Jesus could do no more than that; neither can we. However, like Jesus in the Gospels, we can pray often, listen and obey what we hear. And that's the secret to contagious, viral faith. There's no power in technique, but there is tremendous power in listening, prayer and immediate obedience. When you start doing that, don't be surprised when you see God respond with supernatural power.

Is What You Have 'Sneezable'?

Viral faith is exactly that—*viral*. It spreads like a contagion and creates an entire movement. These viral movements are not and cannot be controlled by human intervention. In fact, one of the worst things we can do is try to control them.

his is the gospel set loose, the gospel moving so fast that we aren't concentrating on preaching the gospel. Instead, we're focused on the issue Jesus actually told us to concentrate on: making disciples. Jesus' Great Commission tells us to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20).

In the original language the command is to make disciples. The other actions describe what that looks like. Jesus is the one in control here. He's the one with all the authority. We just play our part, which is to make disciples. We baptize them. We teach them how to obey everything Jesus commands, but we don't control what is happening. Every move we make is done in His power, under His direction.

As we make disciples, they then become the newly infected ones with the Jesus virus, and they start to "sneeze." Alan Hirsch explains this in his book, *The Forgotten Ways*: "This reference to sneezing is not just whimsical. We know from the study of ideas that they spread in patterns very similar to that of

viral epidemics. We also know that in order to really take hold and become an 'epidemic,' they have to be easily transferred from one person to another. And to do this they need to be profound and yet simple—easily grasped by any person, and in many cases illiterate peasants.”

True discipleship—led by Jesus Himself—is “sneezable.” It spreads just like a highly contagious disease spreads. And as Hirsch points out, for something to be contagious it has to be simple. Simple is not the same thing as simplistic. Simple means that it is clear, understandable and uncomplicated. Simplistic, on the other hand, means that it has been dumbed down. It removes anything that is hard to understand or tries to explain it to the last detail. Christianity is quite simple, but it is not simplistic.

What happens when someone begins to follow a Jesus he or she is actually encountering? What happens when Jesus begins to actually lead small gatherings of believers? What happens when they all start obeying Him, even when it seems foolish and counterintuitive, even irrational? What happens is that the gospel begins to spread like a contagion. It spreads easily because what's being spread is Jesus Himself, not a complex set of systematic doctrines. Yet what is being spread will be doctrinally sound because it is the Jesus of the Bible to whom new Christians are being introduced. It is His Spirit who inspired the writing of the Bible. He won't contradict His own writing.

New Christians in this type of simple viral gospel movement come to know Christ personally, often through experiencing a miracle, sign or wonder. From that point on, they expect Jesus to be supernaturally powerful. They don't need to be convinced; they've already experienced a vital and viral Jesus. And as a result, they begin to tell their friends. They don't need to be told what to do; Jesus is doing that by reigning in their hearts. That's why the gospel begins to spread like a virus. The new Christians are out sneezing it to

all of their friends.

Once a movement like this gets started, those of us who have more experience will have our hands full just teaching the new Christians how to obey Christ in community. We'll need to teach them to distinguish which of their experiences is actually Jesus and which is the world, their flesh or the devil. That is simple, but it won't be simplistic or necessarily easy. It will be a lot of hard but rewarding work. It will be messy. It will be taxing, and it will be exciting.

Our Humanistic Problem

To carry a viral faith and to guide others toward one that's equally contagious begins with simple, viral discipleship. My first experience with discipleship was with a well-known campus ministry. As a new Christian, I was given a series of topical books to look over that would introduce me to the basic doctrines of Christianity. These books were short-answer books where a question would be posed, a few verses would be suggested, and I would fill in the answer. I learned many more things from this study than was intended.

I learned that Christianity was boring. Actually what I learned was that this aspect of Christianity was boring. I was excited about Jesus saving me from my sin—that I could start over and that I finally felt clean. I didn't desire to do the things I used to do. Particularly God had taken away my desire for alcohol, carousing and swearing.

What amazes me now is that no one actually explained to me that this was evidence of the Holy Spirit working in my life. No one explained to me how to access and walk in supernatural power to overcome new areas of brokenness in my life. I was told about confessing sin and asking the Spirit to control my life, which was good. But nobody explained to me what the control of the Spirit really was. No one explained and trained me to hear God's voice, to discern God's voice, to trust God's voice and obey. Instead, I was told to read the Bible. I was

trained that if I knew my Bible and its doctrines I would be a good Christian. I actually had more of a relationship with the Bible than I did with Jesus.

Much of what I learned at this time was good. Bible knowledge is a good thing. So is memorizing Scriptures, studying the Bible and all that I learned about prayer. I'm deeply grateful to the campus ministers who poured their hearts and souls into me. Looking back now, I know they truly loved me. The problem wasn't with the campus ministers, nor was it with much of what they taught or modeled.

The problem was the underlying system and worldview that was being unintentionally taught along with all that was good and right. Further, it was what could and should have been taught and modeled but wasn't. I was taught the rudimentary issues of following Jesus (prayer, Bible study and memorization), but it didn't go very deep. I was taught that Christianity was basically informational. What I didn't learn was how to listen to Jesus' voice in the myriad ways He can speak to us. I was not taught to compare what I was hearing to the Bible, nor how to tap into the power of the Holy Spirit to obey God's communication with me. I wasn't taught to discern God's voice from my own, or the world's or the evil one's. I wasn't taught the life of faith as I learned to trust the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. In effect, I was tacitly taught to be a follower of the evangelical branch of Christendom's system, as it is currently expressed in the West. What I wasn't really taught was how to have a deep, abiding relationship with God.

This is largely due to how deeply humanism has crept into our modern, Western understanding of Christianity. As Brother Yun says in his book, *Living Water*: "Today much of Christian activity seems to originate with human plans, and it is then carried out in human strength, with human results. It has nothing to do with the kingdom of God. The world does not need any more religion! It needs Jesus Christ."

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines *humanism* as “a doctrine, attitude, or way of life centered on human interests or values; *especially*: a philosophy that usually rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual’s dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason.” The basic issue of humanism is that humans make the decisions and cause things to happen by their own will and ability, using their own rational intellect. We may do this for the best of intentions, but since we started from the wrong place and are functioning with the wrong operating system, we end up in a very desperate situation. We’re lost in the woods thinking we know where we are going; yet all the time we’re moving farther and farther away from home, away from God.

We’ve brought this same humanism into discipleship. Hence we focus on such things as witnessing techniques, small group dynamics and biblical doctrine. None of this is wrong, in and of itself. The problem is the source of our accomplishment. We aren’t asking some prior questions. Rather than asking what is a good technique of sharing the gospel, perhaps we should ask: Did God set up this witnessing situation? How is He leading us to share the gospel? Instead of asking how can I utilize good small group dynamics to lead this group, perhaps we should ask how is God leading in the small group? Through whom does He want to minister? How is the Holy Spirit activating the truth of the Bible into our lives through His power?

Humanism strips away from us the tendency to look to God instead of ourselves. It isn’t that God has lost contact with us; rather, humanistic Christendom teaches us to rely on our own abilities.

Viral Discipleship

If Jesus is truly Lord, *He* ought to lead the discipleship process. In fact, we are not the disciples of other people; according to the Bible, we are Jesus’ disciples. So what does discipleship look like when He leads the process? How can we

learn to cooperate with His leadership, in community, so that we can stir each other to love and good works?

For starters, we should learn to pay attention to what's going on in the disciple's life. Often we tend to be more concerned with cleaning up a new disciple's life, of making sure he or she fits into our subculture. This is a mistake. I'd much rather try to help someone who is rough around the edges engage with God than train someone how to fit into a squeaky-clean subculture. God is interested in holiness, but He works at His own pace. He chooses the issues He wants to deal with. When we take over, we end up discipling people in how to clean up the outside of the cup and not really deal with the filth inside. We're training them to become hypocrites. Only the Holy Spirit can really change a life. We must learn to let the Counselor do what the Counselor is good at.

The end point, then, in this type of discipleship is changed lives that lead to obedience. The Holy Spirit does that changing as He leads the process. Those who engage with God will start to become like God in character. As the Holy Spirit takes control of their lives, they will start to express the character of the One who is in control of their spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

This kind of discipleship is not only possible, it's also powerful and satisfying. It connects us with Jesus and teaches us how to live in His supernatural power and with a deep, abiding, fulfilling relationship with Him. This kind of discipleship leads us to become individuals and communities committed to seeing God's will done on earth and with the power to see it through to completion. It's the kind of discipleship we need if we are to see a viral movement of the Spirit once again in the West.

My friends and I long to see such a contagious pandemic of the gospel sweep through the West. We long to be a part of it. We

hope to see Jesus sneezed from one person to another like the spread of the Jesus virus. We desire to see Jesus' supernatural power become normal again here in the West. We dream of a time when viral discipleship becomes normal. Will you join us? Will you not only dream with us, will you also ask Jesus to make it happen? Will you trust Him and obey Him when He asks you to participate with Him in the impossible? I believe that this is one more instance where Jesus would say, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Ross Rohde *is a house church planter and house church planting coach in the San Francisco Bay Area. A missionary for nearly 20 years, he has worked as a consultant and speaker on the effects of postmodernism on the European church.*