

THE LONG CHAIN

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Jerry Egglan had never preached a sermon in his life until one snowy Sunday morning. The pastor wasn't able to make it to church due to the heavy snowfall. In fact, Mr. Egglan was the only deacon to show up. He was not a preacher, but he was faithful. So, on that particular Sunday morning, he preached.

God rewarded his faithfulness, and at the end of his hesitant sermon, one young man invited Jesus Christ into his heart. No one in attendance could possibly appreciate the significance of what had taken place that morning.

The young man who accepted Christ that snowy Sunday morning was none other than Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the man who became known as the "Prince of Preachers."

God blessed Spurgeon's preaching. When he was still less than 30 years old, he became the pastor of London's Metropolitan Tabernacle, and served that congregation for 38 years. His sermons were so powerful that although the auditorium seated 5,000 people, with standing room for another 1,000, the crowds who came to hear him were so great that they had to line up outside the building in an effort to hear.

Spurgeon preached nearly 3,600 sermons and published 49 volumes of commentaries, sayings, anecdotes, illustrations, hymns, and devotions. His sermons and lectures on preaching still impact those who read them today. Yet, few people have ever heard of Jerry Egglan!

Form a Chain

Wrote Paul to Timothy:

2 Timothy 2:2 You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others.

In other words: I have taught you the truth. Now, you teach it to others, who, in turn, will teach the same to others. And so on... forming a long chain of communicating the life-changing truth of Christ.

Few servants of Christ will be remembered beyond a couple of generations, but all may be part of "The Long Chain" of impact for Christ.

Each One Win One

A Sunday School teacher, named Edward Kimball, remembered a teenager, who began to attend his class, to whom he spoke about the love of God. He recalled, "I have seen few persons whose minds were spiritually darker than was his."

Even after he led the teen to put his faith in Jesus Christ, Kimball reflected that he had never met a young man "more unlikely ever to become a Christian of clear and decided views of Gospel truth, still less to fill any extended sphere of public usefulness."

The teen's name was Dwight L Moody, who became a renowned evangelist and founded the Moody Church and the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago. But few people know who Edward Kimball was.

Billy Sunday was another well-known American evangelist. Due to his enormous influence, a group of laymen in Charlotte, North Carolina, whose names are long forgotten, formed the Layman's Evangelistic Club (later known as the Charlotte Businessmen's Club), to carry on the impact of Billy Sunday's meetings. At the leading of the Holy Spirit, they invited Evangelist Mordecai Ham to hold meetings in Charlotte.

Mordecai Ham preached morning and night, six days a week, for eleven weeks. During those meetings in 1934, the hard drinking, party-going son of a local farmer was converted. His name: Billy Graham. Yet, few people know who Mordecai Ham was.

Who Gets the Credit

Former President, Harry Truman, said, "It's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit."

Later, President Ronald Reagan adapted that saying for his own generation: "There is no limit to the amount of good you can do if you don't care who gets the credit."

Those are words to live by.

Born in Ontario, Canada, Dr. William H. Leslie, M.D. followed his intended profession as a pharmacist until his conversion in 1888. He moved to the Chicago area, where God began to grip his heart with the desire to become a medical missionary.

Dr. Leslie began his service in Congo in 1893. Two years later he developed a serious illness. A young missionary named Clara Hill took care of him until he recovered. Their budding friendship ripened into love and a marriage proposal. William and Clara were married in 1896.

In 1905, William and Clara pioneered a work in Angola, where they endured a hurricane that struck the night before one of their children was born, and other lesser difficulties, like charging buffaloes and armies of ants. It took seven years to clear enough of the leopard-infested jungle along the Kwilu River for a new mission station to be built. Some of the surrounding villages were still practicing cannibalism at that time.

The Leslies spent 17 years at that station, but their service ended on a rocky note. “Dr. Leslie had a relational falling out with some of the tribal leaders and was asked not to come back,” Ramsey says. “They reconciled later; there were apologies and forgiveness, but it didn’t end like he hoped.” In 1929, the Leslies returned to the U.S.—deeply discouraged, feeling they had failed to make any significant impact for Christ. Nine years later, Dr. Leslie died.

But in 2010, 81 years after the Leslies returned home, another missionary team made a shocking and remarkable discovery deep in the jungle of the Democratic Republic of Congo. After a 2.5 hour flight, a ride across a river by kayak, and a 10-mile hike, they found a network of reproducing churches throughout the jungle! In one of the villages, they even found a 1000-seat stone cathedral. In the 1980s, this church had become so crowded that they began a church planting movement in the surrounding villages. Each of the eight villages they visited had their own Gospel choir, and wrote their own songs of worship, and held annual singing competitions!

The Gospel is Our Responsibility

God did not entrust the proclamation of the Good News to angels, but came Himself, God the Son, in the likeness of a man, to usher in the Kingdom of God and to rally a following of ordinary men and women to carry on His work.

Jesus, the Son of God in human form, preached to many, but He taught carefully only twelve (and one of them was a traitor). That doesn’t seem like enough to change the world. Yet, empowered by the Holy Spirit, that’s exactly what they did!

For instance, initially, the people of Thessalonica were jealous of Paul’s Gospel ministry, and tried to make trouble for him, complaining:

Acts 17:6-7 “*These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also... saying that there is another king, Jesus.*”

What was happening? Jesus’ disciples were turning the world “upside down”—more like right side up(!)—and without weapons or money or political power. All they did was testify to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the love of God in Jesus Christ. Twelve men... impacting the world!

1 Samuel 14:6 *For there is nothing to prevent the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.*

How successful has Jesus' plan been?

In 2015, nearly 1 out of 3 persons on the planet called themselves Christian (31.2%, 2.3 billion). 1 out of 4 called themselves Muslim. 1 out of 6 called themselves Hindu. 1 out of 12 called themselves Buddhist. And 1 out of 6 were unaffiliated with any religion.

All of this has been achieved through word of mouth, from one generation of believers to the next.

Church programs do not win people to faith in Jesus.
Christian books do not win people to faith in Christ.
Christian films do not win people to faith in Jesus.
Christian music does not win people to faith in Christ.

People win people to faith in Jesus Christ. One by one. Won by one. In fact, not just "people," but individual people.

Yes, it is individuals who serve in the programs of the church.
Individuals who write books about the faith.
Individuals who make films about the faith.
Individuals who sing songs about the faith.
And individuals who read the Bible to their children. Individuals who teach Bible classes. Individuals who counsel curious seekers. Individuals who pray with their friends. Individuals who visit others in the hospital. Individuals who bring friends to church. Individuals who serve their communities in Jesus' name.

The church that Jesus is building is a church of so many gifted, diverse, faithful individuals. It's individuals who get the work done. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of individuals.

Each one breaking the chain of unbelief through their own life. Each one building a new chain of faith in Christ and setting others free also, through their witness of Christ, their sharing of the Good News.

Faith in Jesus Christ is contagious! You caught it from someone else. I caught it from someone else. And someone is going to catch it from you, unless you wear a mask and keep the Good News to yourself.

You don't have to be a giant or a superstar. Just be yourself—your most faithful self—and others will take notice. You may never see the fruit yourself, like Dr. William Leslie during his tenure in the Congo, but eventually it will appear, for God Himself watches over His Word to perform it; His Word will not return to Him without bearing fruit.

All that is required is a person to plow the soil with the Word of God, and another to amend the soil with loving deeds, and another to sow good seed abundantly, and another to water the soil that has been sown, and another to protect the tender young shoots, and another to pollinate the blossoms, and another to thin the developing fruit, and another to harvest the ripened fruit, and another to prune the branches for the next season, and so on...

Lots of people for lots of tasks, all working toward the same glorious goal: the harvest of new believers, the discipling of new followers.

The impact of the Gospel in Marin County is our responsibility. Our task is to reach this generation, and teach them to reach the next generation.

You can't do this alone, and I can't do this alone, and we can't do it as well without you.

Few Christ-followers will be remembered beyond a couple of generations, but each of us may be part of "The Long Chain" of impact for Christ.

Some Chains are Meant to be Broken

Some chains, of course, are meant to be broken! Jesus came to set people free!

I was set free and broke a long chain of unbelief in my family. My father was an unbelieving Jew; my mother, a backslidden Roman Catholic. Her priest brokered a deal for them to be married by the church: they must christen their children in the church and send them to catechism to learn the doctrine of the church. They kept their end of the bargain, but there was no talk of God or Christ in our home. And by the end of the third grade, each of their three children was done with church and God.

But a young man from the Ozark Mountains came to the Pacific Northwest to work on an apple orchard. Gene Slover's name will never be a household word, but I will never forget him, for he persistently and lovingly told me about Jesus until the Holy Spirit broke down my unbelief and resistance, and I surrendered my life to Christ.

My children, also, owe their faith, in part, to Gene Slover. As does every person, young or old, who has put their trust in Christ through my ministry over the last 47 years. Some of you in this room.

Chains of unbelief have been broken. New chains of faith have begun to be forged.

The church cannot save our kids; only Jesus can. And the church cannot keep our kids in the faith; only their parents can. That's the way God designed the family.

Are there exceptions to this rule? Of course. But they don't alter the rule. That's why we acknowledge Father's Day and Mother's Day in the church, because the role of parents in the dissemination of the faith is crucial.

Show and Tell

Passive parenting will not safeguard your children's faith. You must show them your faith and you must teach them to have faith also, through the circumstances of their everyday lives.

Joel 1:3 Tell your children about it in the years to come, and let your children tell their children. Pass the story down from generation to generation.

Keep the Story alive! Demonstrate it to them. Read it to them. Explain it to them. Teach them to worship. Teach them to pray.

Your name may not be remembered by a wide circle of people beyond a couple of generations, but if you teach your children and your grandchildren to trust Christ and to pass along their faith to others, you will surely be part of "The Long Chain" of impact for Jesus Christ.