WITNESS TO THE WORLD

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Introducing
W. Oscar Thompson Jr., Carolyn Thompson Ritzmann, and Claude King

W. Oscar Thompson Jr. was a pastor for 20 years before joining the faculty of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in the area of evangelism. He served as the president of the Oscar Thompson Evangelistic Association; as a pastoral consultant for the Cancer Counseling and Research Foundation; and as a pastoral consultant and board member of the Trinity Valley Hospice Association, Incorporated. Thompson died of cancer in 1980 before developing a manuscript for Concentric Circles of Concern. That task was left to his widow Carolyn.

Carolyn Thompson Ritzmann is living what she believes is important in life: building and maintaining relationships. Carolyn was the wife and ministry partner of the late Oscar Thompson. After his death Carolyn edited his notes and transcripts of audiotapes to create the best-selling book Concentric Circles of Concern. Over the past 27 years Carolyn has been active in speaking and teaching on the subject of relationships, while taking on the additional challenge of relationships in a blended family by her marriage to widower Bud Ritzmann. Carolyn and Bud reside on a ranch in central Texas and are active in an intentional interim ministry to churches. They have three adult children and five grandchildren.

Claude King is an editor in chief for leadership and adult undated resources at LifeWay Christian Resources. In 1999 he and Carolyn worked together to revise and expand Concentric Circles of Concern for Broadman & Holman Publishers. Other LifeWay courses he has written or coauthored include Experiencing God, Fresh Encounter, Come to the Lord’s Table, The Mind of Christ, The Call to Follow Christ, Pray in Faith, and Made to Count Life Planner. He is married to Reta and has two daughters and one grandson.

Note: The primary text in each daily lesson is written from the perspective of author Oscar Thompson.
Introduction

Prior to attending seminary in New Orleans, I served on the church staff of a dynamic, evangelistic church in Nashville, Tennessee. I was trained in an evangelistic method that normally took our team to share the gospel with total strangers. However, we were prepared to break the ice and establish a relationship before talking about a person’s spiritual needs. I am very grateful for that training experience because I studied the Scriptures and came to better understand what faith in Christ means. I learned how to use God’s Word to tell others about His conditions for their salvation.

After going through the training course several times, I led the course for a while. From that perspective I made some observations. Although we saw a number of people pray to receive Christ in their homes, very few ever followed through with a public commitment to Christ. We were not very effective at helping these people get established in a local body of Christ where they could grow.

Many adults did make public professions of their faith in Christ, but most of these did not come directly from our evangelistic-visitation program. I noticed that most of these people were family members, relatives, neighbors, or friends of our members. God was using people who had learned to share the gospel with others to lead people in their circles of influence to Christ. These were the people we were able to effectively assimilate into the church.

We didn't really plan for this type of outreach. It happened only as God's people shared the gospel with those to whom they were related. Our planned evangelism strategy served primarily to prepare and equip people for sharing Christ. God took them from that point and used them to share through their relationships. During this time I felt uneasy about the fact that our greatest evangelist fruit came not from our evangelistic program but through unplanned experiences of our members.

While I was attending seminary in the early 1980s, I came across Concentric Circles of Concern in the bookstore. As I began to read the experiences of Oscar and Carolyn Thompson, I kept thinking, This is it! Concentric circles explained what God had done through relationships in my previous church. I began to wonder why this book was not required reading for every seminary student. It explained in moving ways how I could guide God’s people to share Christ in a very natural way with the people they knew and loved. I saw the way I could help people be used by God to show His love and see loved ones drawn to Jesus. If every believer reached his or her concentric circles, the whole world could be drawn to Christ.

When I began to develop and write curriculum for lay discipleship, I saw two types of books. One was very inspiring and informative, but I could read it and never change over time. It was like preaching an evangelistic message without giving an invitation to respond.
The other type called me to apply what I was learning. Then in a small-group context other Christians could help me follow through in the application in ways that thoroughly changed my life. As I watched what God did through courses like *Experiencing God*, *Fresh Encounter*, and *The Mind of Christ*, I developed a conviction that book writers should regularly give an invitation for a reader to respond and apply the truths being taught.

In 1999 I revised *Concentric Circles of Concern* to do just that. The message has so impacted my own life that I sensed God would use it in even greater ways as Christians helped one another make the applications to their own lives and ministries.

When I returned to LifeWay in 2005, we began developing the Growing Disciples Series, designed to teach new and growing disciples how to follow Christ as they learn and practice six foundational Christian disciplines. To teach the discipline of witness to the world, I could think of no more effective approach than the one presented in *Concentric Circles of Concerns*. By reaching out with God’s love to those in your ever-widening circles of influence, you can witness to your world for Christ.

As a result of this study, you will be able to—

• explain how the gospel spreads through relationships;
• evaluate your vertical relationship with God and your horizontal relationships with others in order to be reconciled in all of your relationships;
• identify immediate-family members, relatives, friends, neighbors, associates, and acquaintances in your circles of influence who need to know and trust Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord;
• complete survey forms that help you identify the needs of lost people in your concentric circles and ways you can meet those needs;
• intercede in prayer for those who are yet to believe in Jesus Christ;
• build relational bridges and show God’s love to people who are yet to believe;
• prepare yourself to introduce people to Jesus Christ;
• identify ways to become involved in God’s worldwide redemptive mission.

**SMALL-GROUP STUDY OF WITNESS TO THE WORLD**

Although you could study this book alone, I want you to experience God’s best. When God saved you, He placed you in the body of Christ so that you can benefit from the ministry of other members of the body. You are also in the body to help others. The writers of Hebrews instructed us, “Let us be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works, not staying away from our meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other” (Heb. 10:24-25). I encourage you to join a group of other believers in Christ and work through this study together. You will find that we need one another, and we can help one another live the truths of this study.
If you are the person who will lead the small-group sessions, you will find a brief leader guide on pages 80–88. For each of the six sessions, we’ve suggested learning activities that will guide you to share, process, and apply what you are learning.

PERSONAL STUDY OF WITNESS TO THE WORLD
This book is designed for you not simply to read but to actually interact with the concepts you study. We’ve given you several types of activities to help you respond to the Lord as He teaches you how to share His love with others.

Five daily lessons. Each week you will study five daily lessons before meeting with a small group to process what you are learning. Don’t wait until the end of the week to start your study. Set aside time to spend with the Lord each day for working on the study. This will help you develop a daily time to come before the Lord and allow Him to encounter you. For the next six weeks let this book be your guide for your daily time with the Lord. By starting the day with your focus on Christ, His Word, and His work, you will be in a position all day to let God apply biblical truths to your life. As you do this one day at a time, you will learn and grow at a reasonable pace. You will need to study week 1 before your first small-group session.

Prayer. Several prayer activities are included in the study. At the end of your personal study each day, you will find an activity called “Praying for My Circles Today.” By praying as suggested, you will utilize prayer as a significant strategy for reaching people in your circles of influence. Other prayer activities are found in the text. They are indicated by an arrow pointing up to God and down to you, symbolizing the way prayer is to function. Prayer is communication with God that goes both ways: you talk to the Lord, and He speaks to you. Please do not omit or rush through these times of prayer, but stop and spend time with the Lord. These may very well be life-changing moments between you and the Lord.

Personal response. Another type of activity, indicated by an orange, circled number, tests your understanding of the previous text, helps you make application to your own life, or gives another assignment for you to accomplish. Several activities will direct you to complete portions of the Discipleship Helps at the back of the book. These activities will help you identify the people in your life who are yet to believe in Jesus Christ and apply the principles in this study to meet their needs and point them to Christ.

By completing these activities as you read, you will get the most from your study. God wants to use you to reach others through the relationships in your life. Make yourself available to Him, and you will be surprised by what He will do through you.

Claude King
The Gospel Moves in the Context of Relationships

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Acts 1:8
For 24 years I preached and pastored churches. Most of the concepts of evangelism I had read stressed training believers to tell people they had not previously met about the Lord. I call a stranger like this Person X.

A person can never lead another closer to the Lord than he or she already is. Evangelism must flow from a life that is deeply in love with the Lord. It is not something you can learn in a textbook, take tests on, and be assured of success. When you get out into the world, if you do not have a godly lifestyle, you will flunk the course. Your lifestyle should reveal who you really are.

Some men are able evangelists in the pulpit and have led many people to make decisions for the Lord in their services. Yet I have watched these same men act rudely toward a waitress or a salesperson and be first-class, worldly Christians. There is no excuse for this behavior. What does the world see in your daily life? Does the world see Jesus?

The essence of a walk in Jesus Christ is His desire to produce His character within a Christian. If you are a Christian, you have a ministry, and that ministry is to reach the world around you for Jesus Christ. God wants you to express that ministry wherever you are. He wants to love your world through you and to draw it to Him. If you let barriers hinder you from doing this, little else you accomplish in life matters, for your basic purpose in life will go unfulfilled. Your life will be desperately empty.

OVERVIEW OF WEEK 1
Day 1: The New Testament Pattern of Evangelism
Day 2: Reconciled at Home
Day 4: Spheres of Influence
Day 5: Reconciled with an Absentee Father

VERSE TO MEMORIZE
“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

DISCIPLESHIP HELPS FOR WEEK 1
Concentric Circles of Concern (p. 89)
Survey Forms: Circles 2–3 (pp. 90–93)
Praying for Those Yet to Believe (p. 101)
Preparing Your Story (pp. 102–3)
After recognizing the seriousness of the task before me in teaching evangelism to seminary students, I committed myself to read through the New Testament once a month, looking for evangelistic strategy. Every teacher and pastor always looks for fresh, new ways of doing things. You do not want to do everything the same old way. But you must do everything in a biblical way. How did the early Christians do evangelism in the New Testament?

As I studied the New Testament, I looked for a strategy, an idea. Finally, I began to see it rise like fog in the morning above a forest. At first it was almost imperceptible. Then all at once it became clear: the most important word in the English language is relationship.

Read Acts 1:8 in the margin (“God’s Word for Today”) and complete the pattern described. We will be witnesses in—

1. ____________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________
3. ____________________________________________
4. ____________________________________________

In the New Testament church the gospel always moved on lines of relationship—to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth—and in waves that seemed to move outward. Have you ever thrown a rock in a pond and watched the waves move in all directions until they reached every edge of the pond? That was the pattern I saw. The gospel of Jesus Christ began to spread through relationships in ever-growing circles.

It seemed to me that we always trained people in evangelism to go to Person X out there somewhere—someone they have never met. But no prior relationship had been established with Person X. Lifestyle evangelism in the New Testament did not begin with Person X. It worked through relationships that had already been established.

After I had been teaching at the seminary awhile, I was asked to teach an evangelism class for a couple of nights for a friend at a Bible institute.
As I drove to class that first night, I mulled over this concept of relationship evangelism. When I got to class, I drew seven circles on the board to resemble a target with a bull’s-eye in the center—concentric circles.

I said to the class, “The gospel moves on contiguous lines—on lines of relationship.” I explained the circles and what each circle represented:

• Circle 1 is self.
• Circle 2 is immediate family.
• Circle 3 is relatives.
• Circle 4 is close friends.
• Circle 5 is neighbors and associates.
• Circle 6 is acquaintances.
• Circle 7 is Person X.

I explained that God holds us responsible for everyone He brings into our sphere of influence. Many of us would rather focus on circle 7 to salve our consciences, because we don’t want to deal with ruptured relationships in circles 2–6.

When we have ruptured relationships horizontally with people, we also have a ruptured relationship vertically with God. Although we know the Lord, we are not willing to let Him be Lord of everything and accept, love, and forgive people on His conditions.

With Person X, on the other hand, our lifestyles do not have to be consistent. We can talk to Person X and then be on our way. There is nothing wrong with telling Person X about Jesus. We are supposed to do that. God brings these people into our lives. However, if we do not tell people in circles 2–6 about the Lord, we are hypocritical. If our relationship with the Lord is authentic, we want to share the good news of Christ with those closest to us as much as we do with strangers.

2 On the diagram on page 89, list persons in your concentric circles of concern. We’ll work on a more detailed survey later. Begin by listing the names of one or two persons in each of the circles.

3 Look back over your list and circle the names of persons who do not know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. If you don’t know, write a question mark beside the name.

Pray as suggested in “Praying for My Circles Today.”