

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary

Formal Critique: Concentric Circles of Concern

A Paper
Submitted to Professor Aaron Marks
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Course
Personal Evangelism
EVAN565

By
Dave Shields

Bibliographical Entry

Thompson Jr, W Oscar and Claude V. King. *Concentric Circles of Concern: Seven Stages for Making Disciples*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 1999.

Author Information

The original author of this work, W. Oscar Thompson Jr. was a church pastor for 20 years and then took a position as an evangelism instructor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, TX. During his time at the seminary, he launched the Oscar Thompson Evangelistic Association and was a consultant for pastors working with the Cancer Counseling and Research Foundation. His life-threatening illness took his life in 1980 and this book was released after his death.

The final work was revised and updated by Claude V. King who is an evangelism teacher at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and a discipleship instructor. He works with the Office of Prayer and Spiritual Awakening. King has authored a large number of books over discipleship but is best known for his book *Experiencing God*.

Content Summary

In Thompson's work, the seasoned evangelist steps readers through how to build disciples by getting right, surveying relationships, praying, building bridges, showing love by servant evangelism, making disciples, and starting again so that they can reach people and draw them to Christ through seven layers of relationships from most personal to most impersonal. The content of the book is organized into an introduction and seven 'stages' with each stage containing approximately two chapters and a few with more and a few with less. According to the information provided by King, he originally read the book and did not see the seven stages included so he chose to revise the book and include this information in an effort to clarify (Thompson Jr. and King 1999, 3). At the end of each chapter, King has also added a section for

personalizing the content of each chapter and encourages a journal to aid in growth as well as a 'Small Group' section of the material which essentially provides a devotional route for small group leaders. In this way the book provides more of a guideline for making disciples which were also added by King to encourage the 'building of the body' (Thompson Jr. and King 1999, 3) as he calls it.

From the onset of the book, the reader is encouraged to understand the value of relationships and that the ministry of the reader may very well be in their direct relationships rather than distant people unattached to their life. Starting at the innermost circle, the reader is encouraged to consider their relationship with God (or the vertical relationship) and their own personal value of self. Thompson works his way through the longest 'stage' as he guides readers through what is needed to reconcile with God, how to develop a positive self-image through Christ, bearing Spiritual fruit, common barriers both internal and external for the bearing of those fruits, and the importance of mending ruptured relationships with closest friends and family.

Furthermore, the reader is guided through a unique manner in which they are encouraged to 'shake the family tree' (Thompson Jr. and King 1999, 98) and survey as many of the reader's family as they can to find not only broken relationships they might have with that family member but that person's broken relationships as well and steps through the second and third circles. The author explores the value of these relationships by sharing stories of his family as well as those of others whom he has had contact with to help put a healthy dose of reality into the messages.

To complete the circles, the author then carries the reader through the remaining four circles of friends, associates or co-workers, acquaintances, and finally the most ubiquitous 'Person X.' (Thompson Jr. and King 1999, 109) which could be any person in the world.

Thompson paints the connections between circles in such a way that ties it all together and shows how one person's circle 3 may contain someone who is "Person X" in another's circle and so forth. In this manner, the reader can almost visualize a web of circles covering the whole of this earth and interconnecting every person into a world of lost people who need to be introduced to Christ.

From this point forward, Thompson's book focuses on the importance of prayer as a unique tool for reaching the people in their circles using colorful stories. Once prayer is in the works, the readers are directed through a means of how to build bridges with their circles through times of joy and sadness as well as simple everyday life interactions. With bridges connected, Thompson returns to focusing on relationships by explaining to the readers how to love the people in their circles as God loves all His children and explains how the reader can live out Jesus' message and make disciples in their circles. Finally, the topic turns to rebirth of the cycle and Thompson provides an all-inclusive 'lessons learned' summary to guide the readers through the common mistakes and great successes as he continually ministered to people.

Evaluation

Thompson's intention with the book is to share a unique and intuitive way to not only train followers of Christ to better witness to their families, friends, acquaintances, but also to the stranger in the street. To that end, the book accomplishes what it intended to accomplish and offers even more to the reader and disciple of Christ. The author's style makes the book not only easy to read but offers a host of real life situations that bring its content to life.

Just as the reader begins to follow Thompson's words, they are greeted with the unique style that is likened more to a conversation between himself and the reader than a published book.

The delivery of information is such that the black and white text of the pages seem warm and inviting to seasoned disciples and new believers alike and seems to fit better as a conversation with Thompson on his couch in his Texas home than in a book read by seminary students. This style serves to make the challenging area of discipleship about as challenging to handle as a conversation with a person's relatives during the holidays about life and love.

As the pages are turned, the reader will feel more at home with each chapter but not only in the words they read but in the vivid manner in which Thompson draws the pictures of the subjects he discusses. When the author discusses the story where he challenges his ranch-hand father's wardrobe choices while showing the importance of thinking through circumstances (Thompson Jr. and King 1999, 53), it is styled as such that the reader can actually 'see' Thompson's father as he delivers quiet wisdom to his son. This vivid picturesque style is prevalent throughout the book from cover to cover yet it does not seem to overshadow the real messages.

Colorful style and warm delivery do not, however, lead the reader to question the credibility of the information that Thompson offers. With each step in the road from the upward and outward relationships with self and God to the far reaches of 'Person X,' the author offers biblically sound directives and guidance. The scriptures that he selects to help identify the need of God's children for salvation and the provision of the Father run from Romans, Ephesians, to John (Thompson Jr. and King 1999, 50) as well as the verses in 1 Corinthians to help the reader see Paul's perspective on relationships (Thompson Jr. and King 1999, 136) are contextually accurate yet still keep their situational value. In this fashion, the author is able to offer advice from God's word interspersed with his own experiences to help build a discipleship matrix to reach every person rest on the firm foundation of the Holy Bible.

Furthermore, as Thompson invites readers to build loving relationships with each and every one of the people in their circles, they can sense how much he, himself, loved people and loves the readers of his manuscript. Within the confines of the pages discussing how one can best share their love with a lost and hurting world, Thompson's warm delivery easily exemplifies that he practiced what he preaches in the book. The 'love by action' principle in the latter chapters is explained with as much love and compassion as Thompson urges people to have for their fellow man.

King's supplemental personalization and small group tools that he appended to Thompson's work are an added bonus which serves to give an already well established book a secondary purpose for real-life application. While reading a book in concept and theory can help one improve their circumstances with proper application, the extent of that value is often limited by readers who may not know how to apply a certain principle in practice. This is not the case with the additions that King appended as the guides for personal growth and small group growth cover obvious and slightly less obvious applications of the content in Thompson's work to elevate the educational value even more.

One drawback to the additional supplements that King includes, however, is that they sometimes cause the reader to 'break the flow' of the subject matter in a way that does not fit the original structure of the book. It is clear that Thompson wrote the book without them included as various chapters seem to flow directly into each other if the reader omits the supplements. In instances such as the transition between chapters six and seven, Thompson was building the end of chapter six in such a way that it would smoothly transition into chapter seven yet this transition is abruptly broken when the reader must change from a listening stage to a working stage upon arriving at King's supplements.

Even so, the supplements have their value and the reader can easily forgive the ‘interruption’ when they consider the parcels of knowledge and direction that are provided within.

For all the guidance that Thompson offers as he teaches the reader how to use their own relationships as a basis for ministry and discipleship, there is a notable omission for the seasoned Christian. Much like contemporaries of the age in which the work was created, Thompson does not offer much to prepare his readers for the spiritual warfare that they will face as they try to reach those in their circles or work through the stages. Certainly, some of the stories the author uses to illustrate points show how a considerable amount of effort is involved before a message can reach the world that needs it, yet the backbone for handling these situations is left rather ambiguous. Perhaps it was Thompson’s intent to let the reader learn the prayer and struggles in a way that is true and real to them. Nonetheless, this detraction does not leave too large of a hole in the guidance offered and it certainly does not cause any of the other structures to collapse.

Overall, the message and application of Thompson’s book is a well formulated guide for all believers to equip them for making lasting disciples out of the people that are already right in front of them all the way to the ones they may never see. For a Christian who seeks to see the way to grow the church and spread the Gospel from the inside out, they will likely find Thompson’s work a wonderful resource and a spiritual life preserver. Small group leaders will find *Concentric Circles of Concern* with its faith-building addendums a great resource for a short-term or long-term course in maturing in faith and reaching others. Even in the eyes of a secular reader, the warmth and personable delivery of the book may serve to impress them as a time well spent and maybe even lead them to find the love of the one who first loved them.