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Chapter 1

THE PARABLE OF THE SOIL

Once upon a time there was a farmer who lived with his family on a great farm. Each spring he went out to his fields to sow. As he wandered through his fields, scattering grain to and fro, he watched the tiny seeds disappear into the cracks in the earth. *How I hate to sow*, he thought to himself. *I shall have to wait weeks before the seedlings even appear.*

All summer the farmer tended his fields. He hoed the long furrows to loosen the soil around the young plants, he watered the thirsty roots, and he pulled away the choking weeds. *How I hate to tend the fields*, he thought. *I shall have to bend my back and wipe my brow for three more months before the harvest.*

Finally the harvest season came. The farmer waded through the thick, golden bounty. He bundled great sheaves of grain, he gathered great clusters of grapes from dewy vines, and he plucked scarlet fruit from the bowing trees. *How I love to harvest*, he thought. *I will hold a great feast. My wife will bake the bread and my children will press the grapes. We will eat and drink and rest from our labor.*

When the feast was over, the farmer began to think about the planting season ahead. *The harvest is scarcely over*, he brooded, *and already I must turn under my fields and prepare for the next season. How I hate to sow. How I hate to tend the fields. But I love to harvest!* So the farmer decided then and there that he would no longer sow or water or weed. He would only harvest.

The farmer returned to his fields. There he found grain the gatherers had missed and fruit the pickers had not been able to reach. So the farmer continued to harvest. "From now on," said the farmer, "every day will be a harvest, and every night will be a feast."

But the harvest was thin. Each day, as the land grew more and more desolate, the farmer continued to wander through his fields. He plucked an occasional piece of shriveled fruit or picked up a fallen ear of grain. He continued to do what he loved to do until there was nothing left to gather at all. But still, each day he walked through his fields, swinging his scythe over arid ground or tugging at the brittle twigs of a barren tree.

In the spring, when it was time for the new seedlings to emerge, the farmer's fields were still bare. Seed that had fallen during the harvest could not break through the crusty soil that had felt no plow. The few tender plants that emerged soon parched and withered without water. Only thick, thorny weeds could survive. They scratched the farmer's arms and tore at his clothing as he drifted through his fields, still looking for something to harvest.

At last the farmer's children cried out, "Alas, Father, what have you done to us? You have harvested but you have not sown, and now the fields are hard and lifeless. You have gathered the last harvest, and now your children will starve. There is nothing left for us but to move to a new land where the fields are still fertile."

So the farmer and his family loaded their wagon and rolled away.

Harvesting for Christ in the New Millennium

This is not a book about farming. This is a book about the time in which we live: the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first. The end of the second millennium. Some say the end of time.

It's about the year 2000, and what many Christians believe is our one final chance to fulfill the Great Commission.

It's about the Last, Great Harvest. It's about the evangelical world's commitment to break up the fallow ground, send every worker into the harvest, and make one last-ditch effort to reach our country and the world for Jesus Christ. It's about the aspect of the harvest many workers have forgotten: the need to sow, even as we harvest, and to prepare for a harvest still to come.

The fourth chapter of the gospel of John contains the well-known encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well. The woman hurried into the city of Sychar to tell everyone about "a man who told me all the things that I have done" (v. 29). As curious men poured from the city to investigate this phenomenon firsthand, Jesus turned His attention to His disciples. "Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest?'" (v. 35 NIV). Jesus was quoting a familiar proverb of the day, the equivalent of our "All things come to him who waits." But there would be no waiting here. For generations past, God had sown the Semitic soil with the words of His prophets and watered it with the blood of His faithful messengers and servants. Now, in the fullness of time, He had sent forth His Son. This was no time to stand idly by. This was a season of harvest.

"I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields!" Jesus urged them. "They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life . . ." (vv. 35b–36 NIV).

Harvesting What Others Have Sown

The Master Farmer was about to turn the work of harvesting over to His laborers—ignorant, ungrateful laborers. The disciples were like farmhands not hired until the beginning of the harvest season. They had missed the backbreaking labor of the spring plowing and seeding. They had no callused ridges from harrow or hoe. Their backs were not bent from pruning; their necks were not thick and leathery from the summer sun. They were hired in the cool of the autumn, when the fruit hung low on the trees and the heads of grain could be picked without stooping. They could *enjoy* the harvest, but

they could never fully *appreciate* it until they understood the contribution of those who had come before them. Worst of all, they were in danger of spiritual pride. From a human perspective, who should really take credit for this harvest? The rooster crows, but it's the hen that laid the egg.

So the Farmer spoke to the farmhands: "Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor" (John 4:36–38 NIV).

Welcome to the harvest, Jesus said. Have a good time, but don't get cocky. Remember, this is not your harvest—it's Mine. Some planted, others watered, but I made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. You're just fellow workers, hired harvesters—and you're not even harvesting your own crop. You know the old saying, "One sows and another reaps." You know what it feels like to be the sower and to see someone else reap the benefit of all your labors. Remember what Solomon said? "I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me." This time you're the reapers, and you're about to reap what generations before you tirelessly and thanklessly sowed. Without them, there would be no harvest. Don't forget it.

Both the farmer and the Christian love to harvest. But Jesus told His disciples at Sychar that they would only be able to enjoy the glory of the harvest because countless others in generations past were willing to do "the hard work." And what is this crucial hard work to which Jesus referred?

The work of sowing.

Many of our modern churches and evangelistic movements were founded during a time when the American fields were abundantly white for harvest. But the fields of the fifties and sixties, like the fields of Jesus' time, were ripe for harvest because of countless sowers who had worked to create a soil that was conducive to the growth of the gospel. The "soil" of our society is the whole environment in which Christians seek to live and minister. It is the culture, the atmosphere, the worldview, the *zeitgeist*—the "spirit of the time"

in which we live. In each generation, Christians must attempt to plant the seed of the Word of God in the soil of the prevailing culture. Historically, some soils have been better than others. In each case, the nature of the soil determines what kind of life it will support.

The simplicity and neatness of a redwood forest gives the impression that it was ordered by human hands. It wasn't. The great sequoia trees of California cover the ground beneath them with a thick bed of pine straw. As the needles decompose, they alter the acidity of the soil. Almost nothing can grow except for green, leafy ferns. Analyze the soil; the soil will tell you what will grow.

Jesus told us that ministry is like sowing seed on different kinds of soil. Some soil is thin, rocky, and choked with thorns. Some soil is rich with nutrients for growing plants. Each human life is a type of soil, with its own level of fertility to the seed of the gospel. "Good soil" is a personal worldview that makes acceptance of the gospel possible: a belief in the possible existence of a God, a belief in historical objectivity, a belief in moral absolutes, a belief in the possibility of miracles, and so on. Each of these beliefs is a kind of "nutrient" that makes the soil arable. Without all of them, belief in the gospel is virtually impossible.

There is no doubt that the soil of our society has eroded significantly in a short period of time. Over the last forty years, many parachurch organizations and churches have struggled with a thinning harvest in America. In an attempt to recapture the glory of past harvests we have recruited more harvesters, sharpened our sickles and scythes, and challenged our workers to greater commitment and longer hours.

Maybe it's time to analyze the soil. Maybe it's time to *sow*.

Sowing for the Next Harvest

Each nation as a whole has its own soil, created slowly over a period of years—perhaps generations. This is the domain of the sower, a world of millions of daily communications and interactions between people that help to create an environment where the gospel will either flourish or flounder. A constant battle goes on for the soil of the culture, a battle that is rarely recognized as such because it

takes place at an evolutionary pace. It is a grand conflict, the eternal struggle, the ultimate battle—but, strangely, it has become the evangelical world's Vietnam. Instead of being recognized as the crucial ministry that it is, sowing has become an unofficial war waged by unsupported, underequipped personnel who return from daily battle unnoticed, unheralded, unworthy of the recognition due those who serve in “true ministry.”

In our zeal for the harvest, we have forgotten—we have deliberately *devalued*—the role of those who sow in our generation. And why not? After all, what kind of fool would continue to sow when the harvest has arrived? Because of the evangelistic success of the last forty years, we have concluded that we have entered a state of perpetual harvest—the Last Harvest—and that the fields of our society will be forever white. In our enthusiasm we have declared harvesting to be our exclusive domain, forgetting that we have reaped the benefits of someone else's labor—the labor of sowers—and that *we are also responsible to sow, or the next generation of Christians will have nothing to reap.*

In the 1990s, scores of Christian organizations announced evangelistic efforts focused on the year 2000. In the minds of many Christians, this is not just any harvest—this is the Last Harvest. This is the fourth and final lap of the Olympic 1500-meter run, and we have started our fateful kick toward the finish line.

But what if this *isn't* the final lap?

Jesus told His disciples that one day, in heaven, both the sower and the reaper would “be glad together.” But what if the sower decides not to sow? What if he decides to sit and watch? What if he decides that he would really rather harvest? What if the sower is unwilling to do the exhausting, unrewarded, behind-the-scenes work of *preparing* for the harvest?

What if the sower decides that harvesting is the only worthy form of labor? What if the harvester, by elevating the importance of his own role, devalues the role of the sower until no one can be found who will fill that second-rate role?

Answer: There will be one last harvest, and then there will be famine.

This book is about avoiding that famine.

The poet Virgil said, “Not every soil can bear all things.” This

book is a kind of soil analysis of the American culture at the beginning of the third millennium. It's a warning that our spiritual soil is being depleted to the point that it may soon be incapable of supporting life. It's a call to a new generation of sowers to come help reclaim our eroding soil and begin to prepare the harvest of the future. And it is a rebuke to the Christian world for *encouraging the erosion to happen*.

A Parable for Our Time

Once upon a time there was a Christian who ministered in a great country. It was not an easy country in which to minister. The people were stubborn and uncaring, like their fathers before them. They did not like to talk about God. They would not listen to the Christian, and they were embarrassed to be around him. For years the Christian prayed for them and did what he could for them, just as his father before him had done. *How I hate to minister this way*, he thought. *It takes years of work to see any results at all*.

Over time, the people began to change. The Christian had talked with them and prayed for them for so long that they were no longer uncomfortable around him. They began to think about God; they even talked about Him. They had many questions and complaints, but the Christian handled them as best he could. "How I hate these endless questions and complaints," he grumbled. "How long will I have to deal with all these problems before I can tell them what they really need to hear?"

Finally, the people were ready. Everywhere the Christian looked, people seemed willing—even eager—to hear about the gospel. The Christian could tell them what was *really important*. They listened, and they believed him, and they apologized for their stubbornness and apathy. Everywhere, people began to change. "Now this is what I have waited for!" the Christian cried. "The great harvest has come, and God has let me taste the fruits of my labor."

One day, the Christian met a man whose life had not changed. The man did not like the Christian, and he did not want to listen to him. He had many difficult questions. *Why waste my time on this person?* the Christian thought. *It will take so long to answer all of his questions, and there are so many people who are ready to listen to me now*. So the

Christian decided then and there that he would no longer answer questions or hear complaints. He would only talk to people who were ready to respond. "After all," he reasoned, "changing lives is the important thing, and every day I can see a life change."

But over time, the Christian found fewer and fewer people who seemed willing to listen to him. People began to have more questions, even harder than before. "I must not be distracted," he insisted, and he continued to look for those who were ready.

One day, the Christian could find no one at all who would listen to him. *These people's hearts have grown cold*, he thought. *These are surely the end times. I must talk to anyone else who is ready without delay.* The Christian heard of a country far away where the people were always willing to listen. *If that is where people are ready, then that is where I will go.*

So the Christian loaded his car and rolled away.