

Dawson Trotman – The Navigator

Dawson Trotman was born in Bisbee, Arizona, in 1906, but was not raised in a Christian family. His family was Presbyterian by tradition, but not practicing. After his family moved to Lomita, in Los Angeles County, California, Dawson occasionally attended Sunday school classes during his elementary, middle school and high school years. His high school science teacher happened to teach a young people's class at the local Presbyterian church.

By the time Dawson Trotman turned 20 years old he led a rather pagan lifestyle. He was running bootleg liquor from San Francisco during prohibition, committing theft with regularity, and earned a reputation as a pool shark at the local bars. But after getting drunk and being caught by local law enforcement, he said a quick "save me" prayer and committed himself to attending church again.

Trotman heard about a local young people's meeting sponsored by Christian Endeavor at Lomita Community Presbyterian Church where they had a Scripture memory contest. He was considered to be an intelligent young man and he wanted to impress the attractive young women in attendance, so he committed himself to memorizing the 10 verses and coming back the following week to recite the verses with perfection. While working on memorizing the next week's verses, he suddenly realized the logic of the gospel. He was on his way to work at a local lumber yard and as he recalled John 5:24 where Jesus Christ stated, "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life." Trotman asked himself the honest question: *Have I crossed over from death to life?* He prayed to Jesus to give him this life right there on the sidewalk.

Soon after Trotman shared his conversion experience with a Christian co-worker who encouraged him to share this testimony with all of his co-workers at lunch the following day. That began Trotman's speaking ministry.

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The only church that Trotman knew at the time was Lomita Community Presbyterian, so he began attending the Christian Endeavor meetings with regularity. Learning Scripture through memorization was how he came to understand the outline of the Bible. The leaders of the group soon encouraged him to take classes at the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (now known as Biola University) and the Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary (now known as The Master's University).

At these institutions Trotman began to flex his spiritual muscles in the areas of preaching, evangelism, and disciple making. He also came into contact with professors and students who could encourage him in his giftedness. He was a good student and enjoyed the classroom environment and the learning he felt unsettled by the thought that academia could potentially lead to feet dragging with respect to The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Dawson Trotman ultimately left both institutions to practice what he believed God wanted him to do – make disciples. Trotman coined a phrase that would come to define his ministry and his organization: *Emotion is no substitute for action. But action is no substitute for production.* Trotman feared that formal biblical education, if handled incorrectly, could lure Christians towards more emotion about the Great Commission instead of leading to more productivity.

Trotman was working as an attendant at a service station by the end of the 1920s, and in addition to the job had an apartment in the back of the station. One of his classmates from the Bible Institute happened to be friends with a sailor named Les Spencer. Les had heard that Trotman was the kind of guy who could help him become a producer for Christ, or as they said in that time, “A real soul winner.” Trotman began to meet with Les Spencer one-on-one and trained him to share his testimony, memorize and quote Scripture, do the work of apologetics and evangelism, and lead Bible studies.

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Spencer would rotate between being aboard ship and shore duty every six weeks, and Trotman saw this as an opportunity to mentor Spencer and create virtual seminaries on board the Navy ships. Spencer left for his first six-week trip and came back with a dozen new converts. The new Christian converts would stay with Trotman in his apartment and spend many hours with him praying, studying the Bible, and memorizing Scripture.

This model of ministry was the basis of the early days of Trotman's career, and he would tend to think about it as "soul winning" ministry. Then in 1928 Trotman had a hitchhiker experience that further changed the direction of his ministry. While driving the Pacific Coast Highway one Trotman picked up a hitchhiker who was swearing and was generally unpleasant. Trotman began to witness to him during the course of the ride, and the hitchhiker looked at him in a puzzled manner. They both came to realize that Trotman had picked up this man a year earlier and witnessed to him and led him to Christ. At that time, Trotman dropped him off, quoted Philippians 1:6 and sent him on his way. "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

In that latter moment, Trotman came to see a gaping hole in the common ministry approach of soul winning at that time. Lots of people were being converted, but there was no infrastructure or channel, or process of following up to ensure that new believers could grow in Christ. Trotman realized all of the Christian training that was offered at that time was geared towards getting people converted and not towards helping believers grow in Christ. Thus, the vision of The Navigators was born.

This vision came to fruition one day after Les Spencer led a shipmate to Christ, Spencer brought his new convert to Trotman and asked his mentor "Teach him what you taught me." This time Dawson Trotman responded, "No, you teach him!"

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And with that Trotman applied the vision of Timothy 2:2 to his ministry. “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.”

Trotman started The Navigators ministry in the late 1930s and dedicated his mission to what he called “follow up” ministry – that is, the Navigator key men and key women would focus on ensuring that people were led to Christ and then appropriately trained and mentored through one-on-one relationships to grow up in Christ. By the mid 1940s, The Navigators were known in Southern California as the elite task force of Christian ministry. Because the vast majority of ministries were geared towards large group evangelism efforts, the Navigators were the only group that could help large-scale evangelists process through all the decision cards that came after a revival, gathering or event. Trotman developed an exhaustive and large-scale system of follow-up ministry that helped new Christian converts come to understand the basics of following Jesus and know how to find a church to see this growth continue after a revival meeting.

Billy Graham hired the Navigators to do follow up work in 1948 at his Hollywood Bowl Youth For Christ event. It was a great success. Afterward, Trotman pressed Graham, Torrey Johnson, and other key evangelical leaders to incorporate follow-up ministry into their revival preaching ministries. Graham took him up on this recommendation by recruiting The Navigators in 1951 to create and manage the official follow up teams for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

When Bill Bright came to California from Oklahoma, he needed a place to stay. A friend recommended that he stay in the home of Dawson Trotman and his wife, Lila. He was not a Christian at the time and left the Trotman’s home still unconverted.

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Bill Bright tried a few business ventures that did not pan out. During this time, he began attending First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood and met Henrietta Mears, Director of Christian Education at First Presbyterian, and one of the founders of the National Sunday School Association. Mears was also a mentor to both Dawson Trotman and Billy Graham. Bright came to faith in Christ through Mears's ministry. Once Bright decided to venture into his own ministry, Mears suggested that Bright get in contact with Trotman, who encouraged Bright toward campus ministry.

Bright went to UCLA to do evangelism, conservatively estimating that it would take him a year to see substantial fruit and thereby skimping on his preparedness for discipleship ministry. After a month, 50 students had come to put faith in Christ, and Bright had no idea what to do next. He phoned Trotman, who personally loaned resources, training, and key Navigator volunteers to Campus Crusade for Christ for the first five years of Bright's time on UCLA's campus. Campus Crusade for Christ built itself on the framework of Navigators methodology and uses Navigator resources to this day.

Trotman never saw his ministry as a replacement for the local church or congregational worship. Trotman saw the local church as a marketplace where Navigators could come in and work with the pastor of a local church to begin a program for disciple making. In essence, Trotman saw the local church was a place to fish for baby Christians so that Navigators could turn them into real Christians.

Although Dawson Trotman was a gifted evangelist, he declined speaking at mass-evangelism gatherings so that the Navigators were free to focus on one-on-one follow-up. By 1953 The Navigators had become the official follow-up ministry arm of Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Campus Crusade for Christ, Young Life, and Wycliffe.

Anyone who uses the term "disciple" as a verb and not as a noun is testifying to the lasting influence of Dawson Trotman. Disciple is nowhere defined as a verb, and yet churches, universities, writers, bloggers, and pastors will use the term as a verb.

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This verb usage of disciple communicates the pervasiveness of an understanding of discipleship, not as a spirituality for Christians, but as an intentional process of one-on-one mentoring towards the goal of spiritual growth. That evangelicals tend to talk and think and minister in these terms is a direct reflection of Trotman's effect on the local church and the evangelical movement.

Dawson Trotman left this world to go home to the Lord on June 18, 1956. Dawson was 50 years old. He was married with five children, high-school-aged or younger. He was at Schroon Lake, New York, speaking at a camp hosted by Jack Wyrzten and Word of Life ministries.

One afternoon while riding a boat with Wyrzten and other campers, they hit some choppy water. Dawson and a young woman fell off the boat. Dawson held her up out of the water so she could be saved, but Trotman drowned and died in the process. Billy Graham spoke at Dawson Trotman's funeral and said of his last act of heroism, "Dawson died the same way he lived – holding others up." While we cannot comprehend the reason why Dawson Trotman died after doing so much for Christ and seemingly having so much more to do, we can remember the legacy and great contributions he made to his own Christian discipleship ministry and the ministries of so many others.