

FOREWORD BY MATT CHANDLER

# GOOSPEL



*Discipleship*

*Jonathan K. Dodson*

REVISED AND EXPANDED

“In this tumultuous season of evangelicalism, we are in great danger of a kind of gospel amnesia—a dangerous assumption and even erosion of the precious substance of gospel-centrality. Jonathan Dodson is one of the original architects of the once-nascent gospel recovery movement, and his *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* is a seminal text in our renewed understanding of how people change and how people grow in Christ. I’m excited about this new edition of such an important work, and I trust it will aid in our recentring and recalibrating around the amazingly powerful grace of God once again.”

**Jared C. Wilson**, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry,  
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Gospel-Driven  
Ministry*

“Jonathan Dodson’s Spirit-led, gospel-centered, organically relational, and authentic book is such a rare jewel. Jonathan is a good friend and an even better ally in the gospel. God has used him to teach me much, and I pray the Spirit will use this book to change the way you view and do discipleship.”

**Matt Chandler**, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Dallas, Texas;  
President, Acts 29 Church Planting Network; author, *The Mingling  
of Souls* and *The Explicit Gospel*

“Jonathan strips away a stagnant view of discipleship and replaces it with something so refreshingly honest and deep, you find yourself craving it. This book will redefine all of your relationships with depth and transparency and Christ-centeredness. This isn’t just God’s design for discipleship—it’s how we were designed to live. Jonathan just took discipleship from the spiritually elite to dorm rooms and neighborhoods and coffee shops.”

**Jennie Allen**, *New York Times* best-selling author, *Get Out of Your  
Head*; Founder, IF:Gathering

“With all of the talk of gospel-centeredness these days, I’m thankful to see Jonathan unpack this topic with a clear, compelling, Spirit-empowered approach. He goes beyond just answering the question *What is gospel-centered?* to help us see how the gospel of grace really works in the details of everyday life. His clarification of the unhealthy divide between evangelism and discipleship will bring about a more holistic approach to gospel-centered discipleship. I know Jonathan and respect the fact that these are not just concepts or theories, but truths coming out of the practice of his own disciple-making ministry. I trust that this book will serve to further advance the work of discipleship that has the gospel of grace as its foundation.”

**Jeff Vanderstelt**, Visionary Leader, Soma; Pastor, Doxa Church, Bellevue, Washington; author, *Saturate*

“For the longest time, I have been hoping to see two books on discipleship. The first would be a practical resource for churches that, on the one hand, was serious about the kind of discipleship and accountability that are necessary for Christian growth and yet, on the other hand, would put forth the gospel of grace, not legalistic self-improvement, as the key to change. The second book I’ve wished for is one that would situate the task of discipleship specifically within the missional calling of the church. I was thrilled to discover that Jonathan Dodson has managed to write both of these books in one. In *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*, Jonathan pulls together all these different themes—gospel, mission, discipleship, church, and Spirit—into an integrated whole. And quite honestly, I don’t know a better person for that task.”

**Abraham Cho**, Assistant Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York

“I am grateful for Jonathan Dodson’s *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*. He masterfully took the truth and beauty of the gospel and pushed it into an area of Christendom that is typically performance driven. I came away from this book understanding how to think about discipleship in a new way. I also love that the book isn’t just theory; Dodson has clearly lived what he is teaching. The truth in this book has built my love for the Holy Spirit. It has challenged my thinking on community and discipleship. And it has effectively pushed my comprehension of the gospel to a new level.”

**Jessica Thompson**, author, *Everyday Grace*; coauthor, *Give Them Grace*

“If in your struggle against sin you’ve been beaten up by the duty-bound, legalistic, moralistic methods of contemporary discipleship or enslaved by the licentious approach to holiness by proponents of cheap grace, then *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* is for you! Jonathan Dodson calls us to join the fight against sin, legalism, and license by believing everything the gospel says about who God is for us in Christ, and how he is conforming us to the image of his Son. Read this book. Form a ‘discipleship group.’ And begin fighting sin for the glory of God and your joy in Christ.”

**Juan R. Sanchez**, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas; author, *The Leadership Formula*



# Gospel-Centered Discipleship

Jonathan K. Dodson

Foreword by Matt Chandler

Revised and Expanded

 **CROSSWAY®**  
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*Gospel-Centered Discipleship: Revised and Expanded*

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*To Robie*

*You remind me of Jesus every day, without a single word.*





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## Foreword

AS A PASTOR, I constantly pray and engage the people of the Village Church to keep what is “of first importance” at the center of their thinking, in both their justification and their sanctification. Over the years, I have become painfully aware that people tend to drift away from the gospel soon after their conversion and begin to try their hand at sanctification. In other words, they operate as if the gospel saves them but doesn’t play a role in sanctifying them. In the end, people become exhausted and miss out on the joy of knowing and walking with the Spirit of God. They miss out on intimacy with Jesus.

This is why I think Paul keeps preaching the gospel to people who already know it. He does it in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Over and over, he preaches the gospel to people who know the gospel. Why does he do that? He tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:1–2: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received”—*past tense*—“in which you stand”—*perfect tense*—which tells us that the Corinthian disciples stood in the gospel in the past and continued to stand in the gospel. We see that the

gospel was received, and now it is holding them up. So the gospel not only saves me, but it also sustains me. Paul continues: “and by which you are being saved”—*present tense*. The gospel is good news for our past, it continues to be good news for the present, and it will remain that way for all eternity.

The book you are holding is of significant help in keeping the gospel of first importance. Jonathan is going to clearly and biblically unpack how the gospel plays the lead in not only how we are saved, but also how we are sanctified. I have used this material in small group discipleship, and I have witnessed a great deal of fruit in my own life as well as in the lives of those I walk closely with. The chapter on the Holy Spirit was especially powerful for me, and I have found myself going back and reading it over and over again.

As a pastor and a man who desires to lead other men into maturity, I wish there were more resources like *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*. Dodson’s Spirit-led, gospel-centered, organically relational, and authentic book is such a rare jewel. I am grateful for Jonathan. He is a good friend and an even better ally in the gospel. God has used him to teach me much, and I pray the Spirit would use this book in your hands to challenge and change your heart and the way you view and *do* discipleship.

Matt Chandler  
Lead Pastor, The Village Church,  
Flower Mound, TX

## Preface

WHEN I WROTE THIS BOOK a decade ago, gospel-centeredness was just gathering steam in the United States. Tim Keller's influential white papers on the nature of the gospel and gospel change had been watering the soil of attentive evangelicals for some time. His books were starting to shoot out, as were new gospel-centered churches and church planting movements. I was fortunate to be a part of all this. I emerged as a writer in a constellation of gospel-centered influences. You will find them in the footnotes.

### What Is *Gospel-Centered*?

In using this clunky word, *gospel-centered*, I am referring to a way of following Jesus that makes his person and work central in everything. The gospel is as big as the cosmos and as small as you and me. It renews all things, even us. This book focuses on us—on how the good news of Jesus Christ not only earns us a place with him for eternity but how eternal life works here and now (John 17:3). To be gospel-centered is not only to believe the gospel for salvation but to continually return to it for transformation. But it means even more than that. It means so *cherishing*

*union with Christ* that, like a devoted spouse, he rubs off on us in every way.

There are various entry points into this life-changing discovery. Some enter through the portal of *adoption*. Laboring for the approval of others, they find it incredibly liberating to discover the unwavering, free approval of our heavenly Father. Others enter through *justification*. For those of us trying to prove ourselves to God, others, or ourselves, justification points us to Jesus, who proves us worthy of acceptance before a holy God. Others come through what many consider to be the centerpiece of the gospel, *union with Christ*, which brings us into an intimate, mystical relationship with Jesus. My entry point into this gospel deluge was through a deeper grasp of adoption.

I was seized by God's grace at age seven. One summer afternoon, I stepped out on the back porch with my dad and asked him how I could know God. As he explained the gospel, I was floored that the God of the universe took interest in me. What did I, a seven-year-old boy in an East Texas town, have to offer *him*? I realized the gospel was not mainly about what I could offer God, but what he was offering me—through faith in Jesus I could become his son. The gospel of adoption overwhelmed me. When I was baptized, I took the microphone to declare to the church the joy of my salvation. I've often wondered why I came to faith through the gospel of adoption. Why was that gospel reality so compelling to me? Looking back, it's likely because I had such an attentive, loving father. If my earthly father could love me like that, what would it be like to join my heavenly Father's family?

Yet, even with that benefit, I'm still working out the answer to that question! I'm often disinterested in using my time to love

others, a sure sign I'm loving myself more than enjoying God's sacrificial love for me. Other times I catch myself evaluating the week to see if I've ministered enough to earn an easy weekend, an indication I'm trying to earn God's unmerited love. I've wandered the wasteland of religion and chased pleasures of the world to find that neither really satisfies. Yet despite my sins, the desire to follow Jesus has not withered; it has grown alongside the desire to help other disciples.

### **Professional versus Amateur Discipleship**

In college, I bought into a professional model of making disciples. I'd gather with several guys at five or six o'clock in the morning (in college!) for Bible study and prayer. I walked them through Romans (like I really grasped its theology of grace at that time in my life). I was the pro; they were the amateurs. I was the guru; they were the novices. I stood at the top of the stairs; my acolytes sat at my feet. I descended the stairs, dispensing exegetical insights and spiritual best practices, only to return to the privacy of my room. I put the best foot forward but hid the ugly one. This created a comfortable buffer from those I mentored, but it also increased the distance between my true self and Jesus Christ. I really belonged on the floor, beside my fellow disciples, at the feet of Jesus.

Although I didn't comprehend it, I was motivated by good works not deep grace. I was attempting to earn God's favor *by gaining the favor of my disciples*. The more disciples I made, the better I felt. "Discipleship" became a way to leverage others for worth. "Disciple" was more verb than noun, an activity more than an identity. My spiritual center of gravity subtly shifted from Jesus and his work to me and my work. It's not that I wasn't making



disciples; people gobbled up my platitudes and piety. The problem was the *kind* of disciples I made, disciples who could share their faith but not their failures. People who orbited around me not Christ. To be sure, my motivation was a mixture of genuine love for God and lust for praise. But the way out was not through gaining more attention. Escape came through a deeper grasp of the gospel, through repenting of sin and believing in my Father's full and freeing approval in Christ.

### Jesus-Centered Discipleship

Fortunately, the gospel is big enough to handle my failures, and Jesus is gracious enough to redeem me and my distortions of following him. In fact, the gospel of grace is so big and strong, it has reshaped my understanding of discipleship. As I continued to "disciple" and read the Bible, I was struck by the fact that the disciples of Jesus were always attached to other disciples. They lived in authentic community. They confessed their sins and struggles alongside their successes—questioning their Savior and casting out demons. They continually came back to Jesus as their Master and eventually as their Redeemer. As the disciples grew in maturity, they did not grow beyond their need for him. They returned to him for forgiveness, wisdom, compassion, and *him*. As they began to multiply, the communities they formed did not graduate from the gospel. Instead, churches formed around their common need for Jesus, tutored by his grace. As a result, the communities that formed preached Jesus not only to those outside the church but also to those within the church.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on this,

1 Joe Thorn, *Note to Self: The Discipline of Preaching to Yourself* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

I began to realize that Jesus is not merely the start and standard for salvation, but the beginning, middle, and end of salvation. He is salvation—not just when I was seven, but every second of every day. In the gospel, Jesus gives us himself, his redemptive benefits, and the church to share those benefits with. As it turns out, the gospel is for disciples, not just for “sinners”; it saves and transforms us in relationship, not merely as individuals who go it alone.

It slowly became apparent to me that the gospel of Christ was where I was meant to find my identity, not in impressing God or others with my discipling skill. Refusing to share my failures with others was a refusal to allow the gospel of Christ to accomplish its full redemption in me. God was leading me into a kind of discipleship with the gospel at the center—a constant, gracious repetition of repentance and faith in Jesus, who is sufficient for my failures and strong for my successes. The wonderful news of the gospel is that Jesus frees us from trying to impress God or others because he has impressed God on our behalf. We can tell people our sins because our identity doesn’t hang on what they think of us. We can be imperfect Christians because we cling to a perfect Christ. In this kind of discipleship, the church huddles around Jesus, not a professional.

Gospel-centered discipleship is not about how we perform but who we are—*imperfect people, clinging to a perfect Christ, being perfected by the Spirit*. I no longer stand at the top of the stairs but sit in the living room, where I can share my faith and my failures, my obedience and disobedience, my sins and successes. As we give and receive the gospel, we don’t linger in imperfection, unbelief, disobedience, and failure. We fight. We have to contend

for belief in this gospel. Otherwise, we will slide back into using or neglecting Jesus. We need relationships so shaped by the gospel that we exhort and encourage one another to trust Jesus every single day. We need gospel-centered discipleship.

### **New Stuff in This Book**

I chose to revise and expand *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* for several reasons. First, with the passage of time certain things become clearer. When I was younger, I was eager to get the gospel out and into peoples' lives. As I aged, that eagerness collided with the gritty, long-haul work of pastoring souls, which helped me see the importance of getting the good news not just out but down, into peoples' lives. In my youth, I had a shorter view of people—get them into the kingdom. Over the years, I've learned to take the long view—get more of the kingdom into them. I've also learned to disciple people with an eye toward not only who they are presently, but also on whom they will become in Christ. The descriptions in Scripture of who we are in Christ are stunning. Taking this view has fostered patience, a reluctance to correct every error, and a prayerful expectancy for the Holy Spirit to massage grace and truth into the soul. My revision of this book weaves in some of these life-experience insights. I hope they will enrich you.

In addition to this general revision, I have set out to accomplish several other things, which warrant three new chapters. First, I broke chapter 1 into two separate chapters, resulting in a separate chapter titled "The Gospel Commission" (chap. 2). This allowed me not only to reduce the page length of chapter 1 but also to expand upon the challenges and practices of living out each of Jesus's descriptions of disciple-making (going, bap-

tizing, teaching). Second, I added a chapter on mentor-based discipleship (chap. 8). In the previous edition, I focused mainly on peer-based discipleship. I did so because discipleship among evangelicals was, at the time, primarily a mentor-to-mentee experience. One-on-one discipleship, it was called. While this kind of discipleship has tremendous benefits, it can function as a kind of professional-novice relationship in which the spiritual pro hands down lessons learned to the spiritual upstart. In my experience, this professionalized discipleship rarely included transparency into the mentor's struggles. This can result in discipling out of success not failure, sharing our righteousness but not our repentance. The whole discipling enterprise was out of whack.

I tried to redress this imbalance by making the gospel, not discipleship, the center of discipleship, and by focusing on transparent, peer-to-peer relationships. I discovered that peers often feel less pressure to impress one another than many mentors do. However, the reason I began emphasizing peer discipleship wasn't mainly pragmatic; rather, my emphasis arose out of a firm conviction that the gospel converts us not only to Jesus but also into his church, where we are called to help one another change into the likeness of Christ. I have seen the benefits of this kind of discipleship over and over again. Nevertheless, peer discipleship is inadequate for individual and corporate maturity.

As a family, the church flourishes when spiritual fathers and mothers disciple their spiritual sons and daughters: teaching, correcting, and encouraging. When spiritual children lean into their mentors' instruction, they receive wisdom they could not discover on their own. They also absorb character and dignity that is infrequently found among their peers. Conversely, younger

disciples have an invigorating effect on older disciples, transmitting hopeful zeal and thoughtful curiosity about life and faith. This triggers growth in those who take up the call to disciple others. When these familial relationships are strong and vibrant, the whole church benefits. The entire body is strengthened as we grow into the full stature of Christ.

The third new chapter addresses the question I am asked most often: How do you implement discipleship groups (chap. 10)? To answer this question I have rewritten most of the original chapter and included four keys to promoting healthy groups. Over the years, I have seen discipleship groups form and fail, mature and multiply, or just hang on in crummy coexistence like a clingy dating couple. My hope is that this section will help existing groups realign with the gospel for healthy interdependence as well as send new groups off on better footing.

In revising the book to include hard-won life insights, mentor-mentee discipleship, and guidance in implementing discipleship groups, I hope you will be encouraged and helped in your ministry. More than that, I pray Christ will dazzle you yet again to follow hard after him.

---

I am incredibly grateful that I get to witness the power of the Spirit through the gospel in my local church, City Life. Thank you all for being the church with me and for encouraging me to put these ideas on paper. Your fight for faith in the gospel causes many to look on and give glory to our great God. It is an honor to serve Jesus with you.

## PREFACE

I extend a special thanks to Sam Kleb for his editorial assistance in an early version of the book and to J. T. Caldwell who read several versions of that manuscript, offering encouragement along the way.

Also, thank you to Crossway for taking a risk on an unpublished author in 2012, and ten years later, allowing me to improve and expand this book. I'm grateful to Tara Davis for improving the manuscript with her editorial eye.

I am deeply grateful for "the good deposit" of the gospel I received from my wonderful parents. No son could ask for more in a mother and father. Thanks, Mom and Dad!

Robie, thank you for teaching me so much about God's grace, for your unparalleled love and companionship, and for our lifelong partnership in fighting to believe and spread the good news of God's remarkable grace. Finally, thank you, Father, for your enduring love; Jesus Christ, for being both my Lord and my Christ; and Spirit, for making me new and giving me eyes to peer into the beauties of the gospel.



PART 1

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DEFINING  
DISCIPLESHIP





## Making Disciples

I'LL NEVER FORGET MY introduction to discipleship. It was the year I returned from a semester of Bible school at Capernwray Hall, a stunning manor nestled in the rolling green hills of the English Lake District. I didn't return home voluntarily.

I left the States after a string of moral failures and arrived in England in a state of spiritual confusion. As a young Christian I knew God hated my sin, but I had no idea how much he loved me. In Bible school I struggled with questions like: *Who am I? What does God think of all my sins?* I journaled, wrestled, and prayed. I also met an attractive, spiritually curious Austrian girl. We had deep conversations about faith, life, and culture. I fell in love. She brought me joy and comfort that papered over my painful questions. We learned the Bible by day and snuck out to the pub by night. The staff warned us several times about breaking curfew, but in foolish disregard for my girlfriend and Capernwray's policies, I blew them off. We were caught making out in a restricted room and were kicked out of Bible school *the*

*day before the semester was over.* To make matters worse, twenty years earlier my mom met my dad at Capernwray. Instead of repeating their lovely romance, I was kicked out. I called home to confess my blemish on the family legacy, packed my bags, and walked out of the courtyard and down the path of crushed rock, humiliated. After returning to the States, I enrolled in college with a gaping emotional wound, deep sense of shame, and a sincere desire to improve, to restore the reputation of Christ in my life, to get it right.

When I returned home, my parents treated me as the father treated the prodigal son in Luke 15, not with arms crossed but arms wide open. I was crowned with forgiveness and love. My parents could see that my sins were a distorted attempt to deal with my past. In college, I found a best friend and got a discipler. My friend held me accountable to biblical morals, and my discipler helped me mature in my faith. The three of us met regularly for Bible study. I was taught how to interpret the Bible, share my faith, and cultivate character. As I understood it, discipleship was about maturing as a Christian. But somewhere along the way, I was also told *evangelism* is discipleship, and that all Christians are supposed to evangelize in order to “make disciples.” Brushing aside the confusion between evangelism and discipleship, I went for it. I began to evangelize non-Christians *and* disciple Christians. My spirits lifted. I was on a better track, making things right. But deep down I still struggled with how I could have sinned so much *as a Christian*. I tacitly concluded it was a lack of discipleship. Some might say the reason I struggled with sin so much was because I only became a *convert* when I was seven but I became a *disciple* when I was twenty.

## Two Discipleship Errors

My story illustrates a common misunderstanding of *the gospel*. When we separate evangelism from discipleship, we imply that “sharing the gospel” is something we do only with non-Christians. It intimates that the good news of Jesus’s forgiveness, acceptance, and approval is relevant only to making converts but not to maturing disciples. This dichotomy implies that the gospel has the power to save but not to sanctify. It assumes the gospel functions like a space shuttle’s external fuel tank, falling away after the shuttle has launched the convert into God’s orbit. Once you’re there, you’re on your own. However, the gospel is more like an internal engine, always propelling us into God’s presence. God’s grace toward us in Christ is what maintains our orbit around him, not our effort. I did not grasp this in my youth, despite the fact that my parents expressed Christ’s love so well toward me. As a result, every major moral failure sent me reeling into outer space, where I floated about in guilt and shame. What I desperately needed to know was that the gospel is for non-Christians *and Christians*, for sinners and for sinful saints. I needed to know that Jesus does not weary of announcing his good news to me. Rather, he desires to meet us with glad-hearted forgiveness *every time* we turn to him, not just the first time we repent. He does not look upon us disdainfully as we approach his throne of grace thinking, “Oh boy, here he comes again. Such a screwup.” Quite the opposite; Jesus seeks his wandering sheep thinking, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).

Every time a sin-sick son or daughter rises to go to Jesus, Christ has already been at work. Like the Father of the prodigal son,

Jesus casts dignity to the wind to meet us on the road before we even reach him. He embraces us without hesitation, rejoicing over the return of his wayward child. The Greek wording of Matthew 11:28 reads even stronger, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and *I will rest you*” (cf. 1 Cor 16:18; Philem. 20). Jesus does not merely *give* us rest; he *is* our rest. He does not hold his nose with one hand, extending a clean handkerchief with the other hand, so we can clean ourselves up. He embraces us, foul stench and all, to refresh us with his ten thousand charms. The good news is continually good for all repentant sinners.

I was also confused about the word *discipleship*. Some people use it to refer to a sanctification process for maturing Christians, perhaps what I experienced after returning from England. This kind of maturity might happen through a discipleship program, a Bible study, or meeting someone for coffee. In this approach, the evangelist proclaims the gospel to make converts, and the discipler teaches converts how to grow into disciples, hence the phrase “evangelism and discipleship.” This is how LeRoy Eims explains discipleship in his influential book, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*: “[The man] is now equipped to reach out in evangelism, resulting in converts, and then establish these new Christians to make them disciples.”<sup>1</sup> According to Eims, the gospel evangelizes converts, and we establish disciples. But this leads to a two-step Christianity. The gospel gets you in the door, as a convert, but it’s on you to go the rest of the way, as a disciple. This two-step approach to discipleship undermines God’s grace. The gospel actually makes and matures disciples;

1 LeRoy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 124.

it is the catalyst for salvation and sanctification. This is why we need gospel-centered discipleship.

## Defining Discipleship

What is a disciple? The Bible uses the word *disciple* more frequently than *Christian* to refer to believers.<sup>2</sup> This repeated use tells us that disciple is a fundamental category for Christians. We are disciples first and parents, employees, pastors, deacons, and spouses second. Disciple is an identity; everything else is a role. Our roles are temporary but our identity will last forever. If this is true, then, it is incredibly important to have a sound definition for *disciple*.

### *Disciples Are Rational*

There are at least three aspects to a disciple's identity. The first is *rational*. Popular descriptions of the word *disciple* are often taken from the definition of the Greek word *mathetes*, which is rendered "student or pupil." The Sophists used the term in precisely this way, reducing discipleship to an exchange of information between master and student.<sup>3</sup> People often treat Christian disciples the

2 The word *disciple* occurs 269 times, whereas *Christian* appears only three times. Luke, the early church historian, uses these terms interchangeably (Acts 11:26). To be a Christian is to be a disciple.

3 Karl Rengstorf comments: "The first time that master and disciple meet on the soil of Greek culture is when Socrates associates with his circle in deliberate avoidance of the teacher-pupil relation which was taken for granted among the Sophists. This is by its very nature rational and professional, and those concerned were in part aware of this. It was now replaced by a purely ideal fellowship between the one who gave out intellectually and those who received intellectually." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ed. Gerhard Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 4:418–21.

same way, defining them as a learner or student of Jesus. Certainly, disciples should study the Scriptures to know God and be trained in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16–17). We should love God with all our *mind* (Matt. 22:37), strive for our *intellect* to be transformed (Rom. 12:2), and take every *thought* captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). Disciples should not check their brains at the door of salvation but apply their minds to every sphere of life, especially theology. *However, a disciple is not merely a brain on a stick.*

While *mathetes* includes the rational meaning implied by a student-teacher relationship, the biblical definition of disciple cannot be determined by classical Greek usage alone. In fact, the Greek philosopher Socrates eschewed *mathetes* as a term to designate his followers because of its limited focus on reason. How then should we define disciple? Distinguished Professor of New Testament Dr. Michael Wilkins fills out the meaning of *mathetes* in his landmark book, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship*. He notes, “The type of relationship is not to be found within the inherent meaning in *mathetes* but within *the dynamic created by the master and the kind of commitment to him.*”<sup>4</sup> If we’re to fully grasp the meaning of disciple, then we must understand the dynamic that existed between Jesus and his disciples.<sup>5</sup> Let’s take a look at the second aspect of a disciple.

<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 75.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to Wilkins’s book, I recommend Jonathan Lunde, *Following Jesus, the Servant King: A Biblical Theology of Covenantal Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

*Disciples Are Relational*

While Jesus appealed to the reason of his followers, he did not view his disciples as mere students. He created a family dynamic between himself and the disciples and among the disciples themselves. When informed that his mother and brothers were waiting to speak with him, Jesus responded by saying: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And stretching out his hand *toward his disciples*, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’” (Matt. 12:48–49). Jesus’s response demonstrates that a disciple is a family member. In fact, Jesus’s reply implies that his spiritual family belongs to him more than his biological family.<sup>6</sup> God’s family isn’t tied together by blood, stage of life, politics, race, or hobbies, *but by Jesus*. He created a whole new community. But when Westerners think of family, we often prioritize the nuclear not spiritual family.

In an incisive article, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks traces the rise and decline of the American nuclear family: “The period when the nuclear family flourished was not normal. It was a freakish historical moment when all of society conspired to obscure its essential fragility.”<sup>7</sup> According to Brooks, the exclusivity of the nuclear family, as opposed to the interdependence of extended family, is a historical flash in the pan. People really flourish when they have a larger web of relationships to draw strength from. As young men mature, the voices and influences

6 For a helpful study on the social context and theological underpinnings of church as family, see Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H, 2011).

7 David Brooks, “The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake,” *The Atlantic*, March 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.



of uncles and grandparents help guide them in the transition to manhood. Instead of a single fatherly voice, multiple masculine voices shape and nurture young men. Instead of rearing children alone, young mothers gain significant emotional support, physical help, and wisdom from other women in rearing their kids. But when the nuclear family cuts itself off from other familial influences, it struggles to thrive. Brooks notes record divorce rates, strained parent-child relationships, isolated, lonely grandparents, and a whole generation of never-marrieds as proof the nuclear family is inadequate. This demonstrates we're created to mature in a broader, more diverse set of relationships. Christians find these relationships within our spiritual family.

Ivan entered our City Group zealous and jobless.<sup>8</sup> He wanted to make an impact on the world and provide for his young wife and two small children. So he signed up for the Army. As we got to know the Valdez family better, it became clear that his family needed him to stay home not ship off. We listened to his reasons for joining the army, weighed them, and offered counsel. The night before he was supposed to finalize his commitment with his recruiting officer, we strongly suggested he stay and look for work in Austin. In a defining City Group gathering we took a show of hands to the question, "Who wants Ivan to stay?" The "vote" was unanimous!

To help the Valdezes, a couple in our group met with Ivan to assist him in developing a resume and coached him in how to interview. Meanwhile, Ivan was learning a lot about ministry in

8 "City groups" is what our church calls our missional communities. City groups are where we can be the church to one another and to the city by meeting regularly to reflect on the gospel, enjoy community, and serve our city.

a progressive city. I met with him to discuss the cultural differences between the conservative burbs of Houston and the liberal downtown core of Austin and encouraged him to sprinkle cultural discernment into his evangelistic zeal. He began meeting with a thoughtful skeptic in our group. About a month later, Ivan interviewed with a company and landed the job. Within weeks he was their top salesman. And in a matter of time, the skeptic in our group came to faith in Jesus. Ivan matured vocationally and spiritually, but not because of a single person. Ivan's maturity was the result of many—the nurturing influence of the family of God. Of course, just because the church is a spiritual family doesn't mean it won't face typical family dysfunction. However, our shared bond with Jesus gives us resources to work through our dysfunction. Christ is the uniting factor in the church.

Within his greater family, Jesus focused attention on twelve disciples, whose occupations ranged from fisherman to tax man. He shared everything with them: his meals, his heart, his teachings, his sufferings, and his hopes for the future. Discipleship happened on road trips, mountain hikes, special retreats, and the throes of ministry, all while Jesus moved toward his urban martyrdom. He was present with his disciples in episodes of grief, fear, loss, disillusionment, hope, ministry success, and ministry failure. Imagine how strong and intimate these relationships were after three years! *The disciples weren't simply called family; they became family.* And the family expanded. Jesus's truth and grace were not restricted to these twelve disciples. Jesus made many disciples, who in turn made more disciples. The New Testament frequently refers to the important role of women disciples (Mark 15:41; Luke 8:1–3; 23:49; 23:55–24:12) and countless nameless disciples whom Jesus welcomed into his

family (Luke 6:17; 14:33). The family grew. Truth spread and grace overflowed, which brings us to the third aspect of a disciple.

### *Disciples Are Missional*

Jesus doesn't settle for classroom learning or a holy huddle; he sends his followers out as sheep among wolves. The Gospel of Luke demonstrates this missional impulse. After modeling gospel ministry in Luke 5–8, Jesus sends his disciples out in pairs to proclaim the kingdom message and perform miracles. He does this with the twelve (9:1–6) and then with the seventy-two (10:1–12). While his disciples are on mission, they learn to live by faith, depend on the hospitality of others, and preach to people who are hostile to their message. Moreover, they gain insight through the challenges they face on mission, which they couldn't have grasped if they remained in the safety of the classroom or family. Disciples are saved into God's mission.

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*In summary, disciples are rational, relational, and missional. They learn the gospel, relate in the mission, and convey the gospel.* But if we focus heavily on the *rational*, our discipleship will not be battle-tested by the real questions people ask. Without meaningful engagement with community, our counsel to others will remain bookish and wooden. What happens if we focus more on the *relational* aspect? Church can easily devolve into a kind of social club or fortress where “bad people” are kept out and “good people” are kept in. Community becomes ghettoized as we retread Bible lessons and experiences without the perspective and presence of

non-Christians. But Jesus calls his church to be a light to the world. Disciples who downplay this *missional* aspect dim the light of the city on the hill, but those who embrace their call to mission turn up the light. Most importantly, they become like their Master, who was sent into the world to proclaim the good news.

Jesus proclaimed the same gospel to the crowds that he taught to the disciples. He did not have the twelve on a special, gospel-plus track to study advanced subject matter. The good news is for everyone because nobody ever graduates from the gospel. Jesus taught the same gospel of the kingdom to sinners and to saints. Why? Because his agenda of grace is the only solution to our common predicament of sin, Christian or non-Christian. Both desperately need the forgiving, reconciling, and restoring power of the gospel to know and enjoy God, not just once but for a lifetime.

Reflecting on this definition of disciple, I did not become a convert at seven and a disciple at twenty. My collegiate sins did not betray a failure to become a disciple upon my conversion; they demonstrated a failure to grasp the gospel of grace. We aren't converted at the outset of the Christian life only to join the gospel-plus track a little later as a disciple. *What I was missing was not a new set of relationships to usher me into Christian maturity but a deep understanding of the gospel of grace.* What I needed was a deeper comprehension of the cross and the resurrection. I needed to know that Jesus's sacrifice is sufficient, not just for pre-Christian failures but also for post-Christian failures. Jesus died to set us free from condemnation by embracing our judgment on a cross. He rose from the dead to give us a righteous status as his new creation.

Riddled with guilt and sin, compounded by a dichotomous view of discipleship, I could not grasp the freeing forgiveness purchased

for me at the cross of Christ. Unaware of my union with Christ, his enduring approval seemed like something I had to regain. I did not grasp the present-tense power of a Jesus “delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25), which confers forgiveness and acceptance on us not only in the past but also in the present. I needed to give up on myself and give in to Jesus. As the exemplary disciple Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it, “When a man really gives up trying to make something out of himself—a saint, or converted sinner, or a churchman, a righteous or unrighteous man, . . . when in the fullness of tasks, questions, success or ill-hap, experiences and perplexities, a man throws himself into the arms of God . . . then he wakes with Christ.”<sup>9</sup> Discipleship is a lifetime of returning to the arms of God and waking up in Christ.

9 Edited by G. Leibholz in his memoir to Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 23.

## The Gospel Commission

AFTER MOST OF THE SERMONS I've heard on the Great Commission, I've walked away feeling guilty for not making disciples. Some preachers emphasize the need to "Go!" Others zero in on our need to "make disciples." Many preach the text to raise up missionaries for unengaged people groups. While all of these are valuable, they miss the fact that the Great Commission is a *gospel commission*. As we take a close look at Jesus's words in Matthew 28:18–20, we'll discover he sends us not merely to make disciples but to do so in the gospel.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

## Going in Jesus's Authority

Jesus's commission describes three ways to make disciples—*going*, *baptizing*, and *teaching*. The word *go* possesses a particular force, emphasizing our *sentness*.<sup>1</sup> Disciples of Jesus are sent into the world to make disciples. Reformers Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli failed to see this as a missional text, interpreting it as a commission given only to the apostles. Instead, they used these verses in Matthew 28 as a proof text for the deity of Christ, baptism, and the Trinity.<sup>2</sup> But we know Jesus's commission is for all Christians, because he says, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." None of the original disciples lived until the end of the age; therefore, Jesus must be addressing all who will hear or read his commission. Jesus calls each of us into making disciples. This isn't a mission we stumble into. It requires intentionality. *All Christians are sent to make disciples.*

However, not everyone feels qualified to make disciples. Kristan, a young mother in our church, confided in me that she felt inadequate to make disciples. She believed she lacked the necessary wisdom and experience. Hearing her concern, I sympathized with her struggle and reminded her that we are not sent in the authority of our experience but in the authority of Jesus. The lordship of Christ, not a certain set of experiences, is what qualifies us. Imagine what the brand-new disciples must

- 1 Contrary to popular interpretation, the "going" participle should not be rendered "as you go," but as "go and disciple the nations." The main point is not to go, or while you are going, but that we are sent to make disciples. See Roy Ciampa, "As You Go, Make Disciples?," *Every Thought Captive* (blog), August 18, 2008, <http://everythoughtcaptivearchive.blogspot.com/2008/08/as-you-go-make-disciples.html>.
- 2 Timothy Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), loc. 5110–5130, Kindle.

have felt when Jesus sent them into neighboring villages! Yet, they overcame their discomfort by trusting Jesus's authority and embracing his commands.

After our conversation, Kristan began reaching out to a Hindu neighbor. Their children played well together, which created a natural opportunity for Kristan to get to know the mother. Kristan developed a real friendship with her neighbor, who responded by inviting Kristan into her home, where her neighbor felt the freedom to share about her religion. The more Kristan learned about Hinduism, the more she was challenged in her aim of making disciples. When she was invited to participate in a Hindu festival, Kristan thoughtfully wrestled through how she could support her neighbor's culture without affirming her religion as true. This gave Kristan the opportunity to clarify the difference between the gospel and karma. If Kristan had stuck with her initial belief that experience is what qualifies one to make disciples, she never would have had these opportunities. What would it look like for you to go in Jesus's authority? What neighbor might Jesus be calling you to befriend? Take thirty seconds to consider your neighbors, jot down a name and pray for them.

### *People Were Jesus's Program*

In his best-selling book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, Robert Coleman says: "[Jesus's] concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow. . . . Men were to be his method of winning the world to God."<sup>3</sup>

3 Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1963), 21.



*Men were his method.* Jesus came with people attached. He moved about with crowds, the twelve, a select few, and occasionally with just one companion (John 3:1–21; 21:15–19). He was discipling constantly. In turn, his disciples disciplined others. Jesus instructed the twelve not only to go in pairs but also to take “nothing for your journey,” so they would be dependent upon the hospitality of others (Luke 9:1–6). Imagine what evening meals with their host families would have been like after the disciples came home from a long day of proclaiming the kingdom of God and healing diseases! People were Jesus’s “program.”

To mobilize Christians for discipleship, churches often require their members to take a seminar or complete a course. I have taught and participated in many of these. However, if programs and classes are our exclusive or primary method for making disciples, we tacitly convey the idea that discipleship is rational, not relational. It’s important to disciple in environments that nurture the relational and missional aspects of a follower of Jesus. Our method, as well as our content, forms disciples. This is one reason why I require people who take my discipleship classes to pick a person outside of the class whom they will disciple in the context of everyday life. This keeps them relationally engaged as they expand their intellectual understanding of discipleship. We must remember that people were Jesus’s program.

As the twelve learned from Jesus’s teaching, they went in his authority and made people their method. They followed Christ’s example by proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing everywhere (Luke 9:2, 6). They joined Jesus in calling people to repentance, and as they did, the number of disciples increased (Luke 6:17). Jesus’s disciples made more disciples. They went not

in the authority of their own experience or wisdom but in the authority and power of Jesus. That has not changed. Today, Jesus sends us in his authority to make disciples of all nations. Like Kristan, we simply need to trust his power and obey his words.

### *Jesus-Centered Going*

The Great Commission is certainly great in scope—all nations—but it is also great because of its depth. The gospel is its message and its motivation. *Since all authority has been given to Jesus, all discipleship success is in his hands, not ours.* He is Lord of the harvest; we are not. This truth is empowering and freeing. It empowers us to talk to our neighbor about the uniqueness of Jesus without feeling a sense of condemnation if they are disinterested. Wherever we go, Christ goes with us. This should embolden us to talk about the liberating grace of God.

The commission motivates us with the gospel by beginning with Jesus's authority and ending with his presence: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). We are not sent on a rogue op that requires plausible deniability should we fail. Rather, we are sent *with Jesus* on a mission that will eventually succeed. Christ is with us not just some of the time but all of the time—always. In short, the mission of making disciples starts and finishes with Jesus. We are sent in his authority and with his presence to make disciples of all nations. What greater motivation could we have? Let's go!

### **Baptizing into His Name**

What should we do when people come to Christ? *Baptizing* is also part of his commission. What does it mean? Baptism is three

things: a symbol of salvation, immersion into community, and a commission to make disciples.

Every summer our church makes its way down to Barton Springs, a natural spring that feeds cold water into Ladybird Lake in Austin, Texas. There, alongside the hippies, nudists, and dogs, we wade out into the swirling currents of our city and baptize people in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. After each baptism, the witnessing church on the shore erupts in applause. Onlookers often stop what they are doing and respectfully observe. We frequently have the opportunity to explain the gospel to people intrigued by the sacred ceremony. In addition to those who are baptized, numerous people have joined the church as a result of this public witness.

Baptism is a powerful symbol of the gospel. It signifies identification with Christ: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). In baptism, we are meant to see that Jesus’s death and resurrection have become our death and resurrection. The life that emerges from the baptismal waters is a life dead to sin and alive to God. In this sense, baptism is not merely a ceremony but a symbol of our salvation. Jesus calls everyday Christians to make disciples by sharing life and the gospel, and then baptizing those who believe. Baptizing is not something reserved for clergy or church leaders. It is a commission given to everyone. One of the greatest joys of the Christian faith is lowering a repentant sinner into the baptismal waters and pronouncing, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

We are also baptized into two overlapping communities. The first is the divine community: “Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). We are miraculously introduced to all three persons of the Godhead. Our baptism is a reminder that we have been immersed in the life of the Trinity, a veritable fountain of love, joy, and peace. The more we enjoy life in the Father, Son, and Spirit, the more we will compel others to dip their cup into Trinitarian fellowship. The second community we are baptized into is the church: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). Christ is the head of the church, and we are the many parts that make up his body. Together we present the full stature of Christ to the world—a diversity of ages, genders, occupations, cultures, and ethnicities. Our baptism into the Trinity is an immersion not only into the Godhead but also into God’s family.

Baptism is also the result and renewal of God’s mission. Jesus’s disciples baptized those who responded in faith to the gospel (John 4:1–3). Peter proclaimed the gospel and urged people to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38). Others followed suit (Acts 8:38; 10:48). Disciples made disciples by baptizing sinners into Christ and onto Jesus’s mission. Thus, baptism isn’t merely the result of mission; it is the renewal of mission. Each person’s baptism is his or her induction into a life of disciple-making. *Our baptism is our commission.*

When the Barton Springs baptism rolls around each year, numerous people wade out into water to baptize: pastors, city group leaders, parents, friends. Our staff come alongside new disciples to clarify the meaning of baptism, make sure they understand

and believe the gospel, and help them write down their story of grace. Jesus's mission isn't bottlenecking on pastors. We are not alone in lifting up his name, and this brings me joy.

### *Jesus-Centered Baptizing*

Like going, baptizing is also Jesus-centric. People are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection—not an evangelist's death and resurrection. As a young Christian I was occasionally asked how many people I had led to Christ. As a young church planter, I was often asked, "How many are you running (on Sundays)?" Both of these questions treat converts like notches on a belt. While God has used me to draw others to himself, I have never "led" anyone to Christ. That is Christ's work. Jesus says, "My sheep hear *my* voice, and *I* know them, and they follow *me*. *I give them eternal life*" (John 10:27–28). Nor am I called to run his sheep. I do have the immense privilege and responsibility of shepherding *his* souls. So, when we baptize, we baptize into Jesus's name. People take his name not our name, *Christian*. In the words of Peter, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). *People are not notches to be counted but souls to be shepherded.*

Furthermore, when we are baptized into fellowship with the Trinitarian community, it is because of Jesus. He is the door into divine fellowship (John 10). There is no back entrance into life with God. The Father elects, the Spirit regenerates, and the Son redeems. Jesus Christ is our introduction to communion with God. He is the head of the church. Jesus is Lord, not our evangelistic record, numbers baptized, or church attendance. Baptizing is Christ-focused.

## Teaching His Commands

What should we do once someone is baptized? The third and final part of Jesus's command to "make disciples" is *teaching*: "... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded" (Matt. 28:20). What "teaching" is Jesus referring to?<sup>4</sup> New Testament scholar John Nolland writes: "In Matthew 'all that I have commanded you' has in mind the teaching of Jesus *in the Gospel as directed to the disciples*."<sup>5</sup> What did Jesus teach the disciples in the Gospel of Matthew?

Matthew's Gospel includes the breadth of Christ's redemptive story and the depth of later doctrinal reflection on that story. Before being baptized and beginning his public ministry, Jesus indicates what his story is for when he says he has come "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). He will fulfill the requirements of the law in the way no one else has—perfectly and on our behalf. Thus, Jesus is both the storyteller and the point of the story (cf. Luke 24:27, 44). He further taught his disciples how the Old Testament reveals his suffering, death, and resurrection (Matt. 12:40; 26:61–64). Therefore, when we teach "all that Christ commanded," we should follow his example. We should rehearse the breadth of the story and instruct one another in the depth

4 Throughout church history, the church has attempted to summarize "all that Christ commanded" through catechesis. The Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostles' Creed lay an ethical, spiritual, and doctrinal foundation. Winfield Bevins has appropriated these in a fresh and accessible way for new and renewed disciples in *Creed: Connect to the Basic Essentials of Historic Christian Faith* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2011).

5 John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 1270. Emphasis added.

of the story, paying attention to its narrative detail and Christocentric doctrinal meaning. This, of course, is a lifelong endeavor. Discipleship never ends. The gospel is like an endless cave filled with inexhaustible riches. We are invited to learn the contours of the cave as well as pause and examine a single gem.

Jesus also says we are to teach one another to *observe* all he commanded. The word means to pay close attention to, with the intention of obedience. Our aim should not only be to learn the gospel but also to observe it, which means cherishing all of Jesus's instruction. When the church does this, it produces a myriad of good works. Like fireworks' emblazoning light and sparkling color on the nighttime sky, our good works draw attention to our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:14–16).

My grandfather was a minister for seven decades in Nacogdoches, the oldest city in Texas. Growing up in Nac, it wasn't unusual for me to meet a stranger who, upon hearing I was a Dodson, would say, "Are you related to Brother Dodson? His teaching changed my life." Why did his teaching change people's lives? *Because that is what the gospel does.* The gospel is teaching to be observed, good news that demands a response. In fact, when I asked my grandfather to share some preaching advice with me, he said, "Johnny, when you preach the gospel, always make sure you call for a response." The gospel demands a response. It is not a notification to be dismissed with a simple swipe. It is a history-altering, life-changing announcement that Jesus has defeated sin, death, and hell to make all things new! This requires a response.

When Jesus came preaching the gospel of the kingdom, he called people *to repent* (Matt. 4:17). When describing himself as

gentle and lowly, he invited the weary *to come* (Matt. 11:28–30). When teaching his disciples about gospel proclamation, Jesus said, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46–47). He taught them to call for a response: *repent and receive forgiveness of sins*.

Is there a sin you need to repent of? Is there a burden you need to cast on the Lord Jesus in order to find rest? Jesus speaks to us in the gospel. He calls, warns, exhorts, invites, and comforts. Therefore, when we share the gospel, we should also invite a response. In fact, disciples should respond to the gospel not just once but their entire life. Our initial response of faith in the gospel secures our salvation, and all our subsequent responses of repentance and faith are an expression of that initial, authentic, saving faith. The faith that saves us is the faith that sanctifies us. (I discuss this further under “three conversions” in chap. 7.) Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32). The truth does not set us free when we simply hear or read it; the truth sets us free when we *abide* in it, when we live in Jesus’s words and make our home in his teaching.

### *Jesus-Centered Teaching*

The doctrine we teach should be Christ-centered. When we explain the broad story of Christianity, we should focus on how everything points to Jesus. Just as Adam and Eve left the garden clothed with the promise of redemption, so we reenter the garden



clothed with the righteousness of Christ (Gen. 3:21; Col. 3:9–10). Just as God provided a ram in a close stand of trees for Abraham to sacrifice in place of Isaac, so also God provided his one and only Son to die on a tree in our place for our redemption (Gen. 22:9–14; Gal. 3:13–14). Israel was unable to righteously keep the law, but one faithful Jew kept it perfectly on our behalf (Deut. 30:15–17; Matt. 5:17–20). We could go on and on. The breadth of Scripture testifies to the centrality and beauty of Jesus Christ.

### **The Gospel Makes and Matures Disciples**

Jesus's approach to disciple-making includes three activities: going, baptizing, and teaching. Each of these activities aligns with one of the three aspects of what it means to be a disciple. The going disciple is missional; the baptizing disciple is relational; and the teaching disciple is rational.

Missional	→	Going	→	communicate the gospel
Relational	→	Baptizing	→	relate in the gospel
Rational	→	Teaching	→	observe the gospel

However Jesus, not our activity, is what makes us a disciple. Notice that each of these activities is Christ-centered: we go in Jesus's authority, not our own authority; we baptize into Jesus's name (and the Father and the Spirit), not our name; and we teach Jesus's commands, not our best practices. Matthew 28:18–20 is grounded, centered, and anchored firmly in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The Great Commission is not discipleship-centric but gospel-centric.<sup>6</sup> This is why I prefer to call it the *Gospel Commission*. Jesus makes and sends disciples that communicate the gospel, relate in the gospel, and observe the gospel. This good news isn't just for evangelism; it is also for discipleship. The message we believe to be baptized is the same truth we believe to be sanctified. Followers of Jesus make *and* mature disciples by going with the gospel, baptizing into gospel community, and teaching the gospel. When we internalize the gospel of grace more and more, we are compelled to spread the gospel more and more.

This gospel-centric approach to disciple-making is largely missing from discipleship today, which tends to focus on evangelistic techniques and discipleship methods. Unless these methods are tethered to a robust understanding of the gospel, they will actually sabotage discipleship. What we need is a recentering of Christian discipleship. The Gospel Commission is not evangelism- or discipleship-centered; it is gospel-centered. Professor of Systematic Theology Michael Horton writes: "We have to reevaluate the

6 Yet, some talk about discipleship as if *it* is the master. For instance, Mike Breen, author of *Building a Discipleship Culture*, writes: "Most of us have become quite good at the church thing. And yet, disciples are the only thing that Jesus cares about, and it's the only number that Jesus is counting." The only thing Jesus cares about? Surely this is an overstatement? What about the fruit of the Spirit, justice and mercy, the Beatitudes? Jesus certainly seems to count the seven churches he writes to in the first few chapters of Revelation and the churches he wrote to through the apostle Paul. But Breen states his conviction with greater strength when he describes discipleship as the engine of the church. Surely the engine of the church is the gospel? Jesus says as much when he tells us it is his authority and presence that propel his mission forward. While Breen's book is helpful in cultivating a discipleship culture, it dangerously replaces the gospel center of discipleship with disciple-making. This may seem rather pedantic, but it makes a profound difference. Quote from Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture* (3DM International, 2014), loc. 73 of 3162, Kindle.

common assumption today that we move from being *evangelized* to being *discipled*. These terms are interchangeable. Believers need to be immersed in the gospel every week.”<sup>7</sup> Disciples are people who introduce and reintroduce themselves and others to the person and power of Jesus over and over again. A disciple of Jesus never stops learning, relating, and communicating the gospel.

Therefore, when we go, baptize, and teach, we express all three aspects of discipleship in Christ. Recalling Michael Wilkins’s point that the definition of a disciple be determined by “the dynamic created by the master” (see chap. 1), we can conclude that a disciple is someone *who learns the gospel, relates in the gospel, and communicates the gospel*. Disciples are gospel-centered.

7 Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission: Recovering God’s Strategy for Making Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 176.

## The Goal of Discipleship

MOMS FIGHT FOR THEIR KIDS to feel loved. Athletes train hard to break records and win titles. Salespeople work long hours to make the sale. Goals motivate us. Disciples who have a worthwhile goal fight for it. What is your goal in discipleship?

### Fighting for Image

Growing up, I loved watching Andre Agassi play tennis. His powerful topspin forehand, offensive return of serve, and flashy style of play were appealing. I was not surprised to see him in a commercial for a Canon camera called “the Rebel” saying, “Image is everything.” Inspired by Agassi, I decided to pick up a racket in eighth grade with the aim of making the junior varsity team. I stayed after school to practice my groundstrokes against the huge, red brick wall of the basketball gym adjacent to the tennis courts. After countless hours of practice and some coaching from my dad, I tried out for the team and made it. *I fought for an image.*

Many men like a fight: a favorite sport, working out, or action movies like *Mission Impossible* or the Marvel *Avengers* series. But more than ever our fighting impulses are expressed through digital media. The overnight success of games like Fortnite and Call of Duty demonstrate that our desire for a good fight is far from gone. My teenage son glories in each “kill” on Fortnite, while congratulating his friends on their combat success. While much has been written on the pros and cons of first-person shooter games, our interest in fighting is undeniable.<sup>1</sup> What we ought to consider is whether our fighting is pointed in the right direction. Josh Jackson, editor of *Paste* magazine, comments:

Violence in the media is a terrible thing. Except of course, for those great battle scenes in *The Lord of the Rings*. . . . I am really repulsed by the idea of torture-porn flicks like *Saw* and *Hostel*, and don’t understand how anyone could enjoy watching them. And I’m bothered by games like *Grand Theft Auto* that put you in the shoes of a gangster. Yet I gleefully watch Samuel L. Jackson burst onto the scene like the vengeful hand of God and lay waste to pathetic junkies in *Pulp Fiction*. . . . From the Bible to the work of Cormac McCarthy, the best stories are filled with conflict, and often that takes the form of violent antagonists and heroes who fight for justice.<sup>2</sup>

What sets biblical fighting apart from digital fighting? One distinctive is that biblical fighting calls us to fight for a noble

1 For a critique of screen-mediated experiences, see Thomas de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006).

2 Josh Jackson, “Signs of Life and Death,” *Paste*, October 2008.

cause, like justice. Alternatively, digital fighting calls us to fight for entertainment. At best, virtual fighting enhances cognition while procuring fictional justice. At worst, it functions as a kind of voyeurism through which men escape the responsibilities of real manhood for the rush of irresponsible, serial entertainment. Men who have nothing to fight for in real life often live out their fighting desires through the screen. We must remember that Saint Paul calls us to exhibit self-control in all things (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8, 2:2, 5). While violent voyeurism isn't manly, it does reveal the innate, sometimes suppressed desire to fight for something worthwhile. Deep down, we long to fight for something noble.

Women also fight. They may fight to be unique, recognized, or beautiful. At best, this kind of fighting reveals a longing to be noticed and loved. At worst, it is a competition between women in fashion, beauty, and influence. Competitive beauty makes self the center of attention. Being noticed isn't inherently bad, but when the desire to be noticed, appreciated, and adored is so strong it causes you to compete against other women, it distorts femininity.<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to be content with our appearance when we receive a thousand messages a day that tell us to improve our beauty. An Oakley sunglasses advertisement depicts supermodel Kareena Dawn running with a pair of \$130 shades. The caption underneath says it all: "Perform beautifully." True beauty is a competition. You are up against supermodels and airbrushed women. So take all the

3 C. S. Lewis points out that our desire to be noticed is part of humanity's inconsolable secret, a secret that only God can console: "We should hardly dare to ask that any notice be taken of ourselves. But we pine. The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality is part of our inconsolable secret." C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Harper One, 2001), 40.

help you can get, even if it includes running with \$130 shades when you can only afford \$10. The principle driving this kind of beauty is a principle of *performance*. Perform well against one another, and you will gain the attention of others. Perform poorly, and you fail to be attractive. But true beauty is not a competition based on performance. In fact, competition can distort beauty with false notions of femininity. Women need to fight for true beauty.

But the desire to fight isn't exclusively masculine or feminine; it's human. Deep down we all want to be noticed; we want our lives to count for something. The problem is that we direct our fighting desires toward the wrong things. We fall short of beauty and nobility. As a wayward college student, I needed a cause more noble than individual piety and a beauty more breathtaking than any woman could offer. I needed to fight for the nobility of faith in God and to be ravished with the image of his glory shining in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). Although I was unaware, I was fighting for an image far from what I was made for.

We're often tempted to project false images of ourselves because we find the real image inadequate. This is especially visible on social media. Our online image is often different from our offline image. We rarely post unflattering pictures on Instagram or our latest sin on Twitter. Instead, we labor to get the lighting and words just right to bring out our best. We project what we want others to see, not who we truly are. Facebook and blog posts are often attempts to signal our virtue and intelligence or just attract attention. If we are honest, our real image is nowhere near as attractive as we want it to be. We want to be more beautiful, more successful, more creative, more virtuous, more popular, more intelligent, and more justice-minded than we actually are.

We have an image problem. The problem, however, is not that we lack beauty, success, creativity, virtue, popularity, intelligence, or even justice. The problem is that we believe obtaining these images will actually make us happy. Believing the lie, we fight rigorously to obtain our image of choice. We discipline ourselves for what we desire most. We lose weight, thinking a thinner body will bring us happiness. We work long hours climbing the vocational ladder, thinking success will give us worth. We even throw ourselves into more noble causes like religion, politics, and justice, in search of fulfilment. We strive for the images we seek, using whatever it takes—money, time, sacrifice, overworking, and the occasional white lie. In doing so we put faith in what is false.

After achieving great success on the tennis court, Andre Agassi admitted that his off-court life was a mess. He relied on crystal meth, wore a hairpiece, and struggled with depression in coping with the pressure to be number one.<sup>4</sup> Yep, that flamboyant bleached-blond mullet was a hairpiece. It's crazy the lengths we will go to achieve our image. Even though Agassi won all four Grand Slam tournaments and became an icon of the sport, he was not satisfied. His image failed him. What would happen if, instead of spending hours in front of the screen or mirror, we spent hours in front of the gospel? What if we fought for a more noble cause, a more glorious image?

## The Image of God

Christianity is about image, but not in the way our world thinks about it. The Bible affirms we were created in God's image—*imago*

<sup>4</sup> Andre Agassi, *Open: An Autobiography* (New York: Vintage Press, 2010).



*Dei* (Gen. 1:26–28). But this image was disfigured in our fall with Adam (Rom. 5:12–21). This image is not superficial; it constitutes our essential dignity as human beings, an imprint of the Creator’s divine nature. Apart from the *imago Dei*, the dignity of mankind is merely a social or political construct, which can be unmade just as easily as it was made. However, God’s eternal revelation affirms that all people bear his image, granting humanity exceptional value and worth.

What is the *imago Dei*? While the image of God conveys quite a lot about our humanity, I will focus on one implication of the image of God.<sup>5</sup> A consequence of being made in God’s image is to be in relationship. When God made Adam and Eve in his image he said, “Let us make man in our image . . .” (Gen. 1:26). The plural pronouns *us* and *our* reflect that the one God is also tri-personal, or communal: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person is fully divine and relates to the other in perfect love and communion, unlike anything in the created realm. God is one, yet in himself is a being-in-relation, which we know by his gracious action to create us and reveal himself to us.<sup>6</sup> This is why we value relationships so much. As social creatures, we reflect the relational nature of God.

Unfortunately, our disfigured image influences the way we socialize, which is why our relationships are shot through with disappointment and hurt. The abundance of relational conflict

5 To be made in the image of God is to be embodied, gendered, relational, and regal, and to possess creative stewardship over the earth. I will focus on the relational consequence of the *imago Dei*.

6 I take the phrase “being-in-relation” from theologian Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 67.

and psychotherapy are clear evidence. We often treat God and others with contempt or disregard in an attempt to compensate for or hide our relational deficiencies. But the good news is that God has done something decisive to mend our broken relationships, both with himself and with one another. He accomplished something therapy could never accomplish. You would not hire a schoolboy to restore the Sistine Chapel or a novice to recondition a Monet. God restored the *imago Dei*. So how did he do it?

### *Restoring the Image*

Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), and therefore is uniquely qualified for this restorative work. He committed his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return to renewing us. Since we are born into this world ignorant of the glory of God and unable to gaze into his face, Jesus brought the glory of God to earth. He lived, died, and rose in our place so that our image can be renewed and our relationship with God restored. This happens through an initial, continual, and final gaze at Christ.

Jesus’s countenance holds such redemptive power that our *initial* glance of faith into his glorious face heals our disfigured image. When we direct our attention away from ourselves and our petty images onto Christ, we behold “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). By faith in him we are renewed according to the image of our Creator (Col. 3:10). This gospel glance corrects our vision so that we not only behold but also become the image of his glory. This first glimpse opens our eyes to Christ’s never-ending beauty, where we lay eyes on what we’ve longed for our whole lives, discovering that true beauty and nobility converge in Jesus. Once we are saved,

God sees us through the glory of Jesus. We obtain the position of righteous before him. God views us as he views his very own Son. We need not strive to measure up because we now belong in God's family. However, our positional glory is not matched by our present morality. Our character has some catching up to do. We must cultivate the family likeness. This is sanctification—the process of becoming more like Christ.

Our initial, saving gaze is followed by *continual* sanctifying glimpses. Where we look is important because we become what we behold.<sup>7</sup> Children become like their parents, apprentices like their mentors, and players like their coaches. We reflect the character of our models, whether for good or for ill. But when we behold the beauty of Christ, we become beautiful like Christ. A disciple of Jesus is a person who so looks at Jesus that he or she reflects his glory in everyday life: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). This transformative vision comes from the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17–18), whom we will discuss at length in chapter 6. For now, suffice it to say that gospel-centered disciples rely on the Spirit, who focuses our hearts’ attention onto Jesus, where beholding results in becoming like him. This is a goal worth fighting for.

Jesus also offers the hope of *final* transformation. One day the dusty image of Adam will be transformed entirely into the heavenly image of Christ: “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor. 15:49). We will no longer desire to look away from Christ

7 For an insightful, biblical examination of this theme, see G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008).

and will forever reflect his character and glory. As a result, we will be eternally satisfied.

### The Fight of Faith

So what does life look like between the initial and final glimpses of Christ? It is a fight to behold his glory and enjoy his grace. Fighting imagery is prominent in the New Testament. Sometimes it is associated with war: “wage the good warfare” (1 Tim. 1:18; cf. 2 Cor. 10:3–4). Other times it draws on athletic or boxing metaphors: “Fight the good fight of the faith” (1 Tim. 6:12). Both images indicate that faith is a struggle. The primary word for *fight* in the New Testament is *agonizo*, which means “contend.” This word, which appears frequently in Paul’s letters, is where we get our word *agonize*.<sup>8</sup> *Biblical fighting is spiritual contending to believe the truth of the gospel.* So, if you struggle to behold Christ, you are not alone! In fact, Paul repeatedly reminded his protégé Timothy to fight for faith in the gospel.

- “*Fight the good fight of the faith.* Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” (1 Tim. 6:12)
- “This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son . . . you *fight the good fight*, keeping faith and a good conscience.” (1 Tim. 1:18–19 NASB)
- “I have *fought the good fight*, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” (2 Tim. 4:7)

8 See 1 Cor. 9:25; Col. 1:29, 4:12; 1 Tim. 4:10; 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7.

Like Timothy, we have been called to “take hold” of eternal life. True faith struggles to pry our hands off the old life and keep them on eternal life, to shift our eyes off of fleeting images and onto the one, true image. Disciples fight to believe that Jesus’s death and resurrection are our death and resurrection. His death is our death and his life is our life (Rom. 5; Gal. 2). We are new creatures in Christ Jesus! Believing this gospel is not a passive, one-time decision; it is an active, continual fight to cherish what God says is good, noble, and true.

Refusing to engage in the fight has devastating consequences. Have you ever seen a fight where one person refused to fight back? The reluctant fighter is beaten to a pulp. Paul reminds us that refusing to fight will wreck us: “This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son . . . you fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Tim. 1:18–20, NASB). If we cease to struggle, we can end up in the hands of Satan.<sup>9</sup> This fight really matters.

Real faith is fighting faith. Once the struggle begins, we must never give up. We must “not lose heart” (2 Cor. 4:1, 16). *Gospel transformation comes through pain, struggle, suffering, and staring*

9 Hymenaeus and Alexander had rejected faith in the gospel and opted for faith in something else. By rejecting Christ, they placed themselves in the hands of Satan. By “handing them over,” Paul exercises church discipline that is remedial, not retributive. The hope is that these brothers will repent and return to Christ and his church to continue fighting the good fight of faith. Elsewhere, Paul makes the point that when anyone is outside the church, they are inside Satan’s house (2 Cor. 4:4; cf. 1 John 3:8–10). This striking, spiritual contrast reveals how serious God is about sin and grace.

*your ugly sin right in the face.* The trick is to stare it down with truth. Nobody sins because he wants to be deceived. We sin because we believe that what sin offers is true. We believe that being sexually aroused will bring us personal satisfaction or being socially in the know will bring us meaningful acceptance. So we look at porn and gossip about others. If we really believed that porn and gossip were based on lies that don't satisfy, we wouldn't participate in them.

Sin lies to us. We need to get in the habit of talking back with the truth. Instead of expressing faith in the lies of sin, we need to have faith in the truth of the gospel. The gospel is the heartwarming, mind-renewing truth that the image of the glory of God in Jesus is all we need to be truly satisfied, complete, and accepted. Yet, crafting any image takes hard work. Each morning I pray the Lord's Prayer, asking him to lead me not into temptation but deliver me from evil (Matt. 6:13). Some of the temptations I ask him to deliver me from change over the years and some stay the same, but they gradually decline in their attraction. God's grace works through our prayers and our effort. In the words of J. P. Moreland, "Grace is opposed to earning, not to effort."<sup>10</sup> If we are to enjoy the breathtaking beauty of Jesus, we must put effort into the fight of faith.

In summary, disciples of Jesus are called to contend, not in physical or virtual combat, but for the noble cause of everyday faith in Jesus. *We fight to believe that Jesus is more precious, satisfying, and thrilling than anything else this world has to offer.* Until the day of final transformation, we must contend to cherish the knowledge of the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ.

<sup>10</sup> J. P. Moreland and Dallas Willard, *Loving God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 12.



PART TWO

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GETTING TO  
THE HEART





## Twisted Motives

I LOVE GATHERING WITH my city group every week. We often share a meal, pray, and discuss our church's most recent sermon. Getting into the nooks and crannies of one another's lives, we offer compassion, prayer, and timely words of grace. But sometimes, when God's word convicts, a person will blurt out, "I don't want to be legalistic." Other times someone will say, "I don't want to take too much license here." How do you know when you've veered right or left of the gospel? Our motives are so easily twisted. In this chapter we will consider two ways our motivations veer away from the gospel.

### **Veering from Scripture**

When Christians discuss any given topic, our aim should be to align our thoughts with God's thoughts, not his thoughts with our thoughts. We should expect God to disagree with us. Since Scripture claims to be God-breathed and profitable for teaching, reproof, and correction, we ought to inhale its instruction like

fresh mountain air (2 Tim. 3:16). But often we hold our breath. Instead of receiving his word as good and true, we treat it as toxic and false. In that unbelieving moment, we think being right is better than being righteous, or continuing in sin is more satisfying than walking in his ways. But it's our taste that is off. If we're not attentive to our intake of the words of the world, we will lose a sense of the sweetness of Scripture: "How sweet are your words to my taste, / sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Ps. 119:103). When this happens, we are prone to explain away Scripture or simply avoid its guidance. Driving under our own license, we veer left of the word.

It's also possible to veer right of Scripture. Believing the Bible is God-breathed, we may eagerly use it to teach and correct one another. Unfortunately, this can also be done without a sense of Scripture's sweetness. Zeroing in on the truth, we may quickly quote or apply a verse when someone shares a sin or struggle. Like an untrained surgeon we yield the scalpel clumsily, taking a cut without discerning where the real issue is. In our zeal to be right, we blurt out an answer. But when we're confident of our righteousness in Christ, we're more prone to ask questions to sensitively expose a spiritual malady in others. People become more of an end in themselves and less of a means of self-righteousness. We try to make just the right incision to apply a healing word of grace. But when the desire to be right eclipses our desire to serve others, we veer from the gospel and hurt others.

### **Religious Performance**

When we're not operating out of the gospel of grace, our motives are distorted by religious performance or spiritual license. Some-

times we vacillate between these two extremes. But understanding and repenting from legalism and license can lead to tremendous freedom and joy.

Religious disciples don't think of themselves as legalists. They think of themselves as "biblical." They're right! Legalists follow biblical commands without cherishing gospel promises. They get stuck on ethical rules without enjoying gospel graces. They are like people who can describe a sweet plum in detail—its semioval shape and smooth, deep purple skin—but don't know its perfectly balanced sweetness because they haven't tasted it. Their knowledge of the Bible is objective not subjective. They stay on the outside of the gospel. When we live out of legalism, we measure ourselves and others on moral, spiritual, missional, you-name-it performance. Religious performance operates on an assumption: *If I perform well, God will accept me.* This assumption is subtle and deadly.

Christians from a pietistic background perform *spiritually* to impress God—regular Bible reading, prayer, fasting, speaking in tongues, and service. Christians oriented toward mission perform *missionally*—renewing their city, serving the poor, sharing the gospel, and making disciples. Other Christians perform *morally*—avoiding “the culture,” doing what's right, exposing what is wrong. The trouble with this performance-driven discipleship is that it's awfully unreliable. If we perform well in our version of Christianity, we think highly of ourselves, but when we perform poorly, we think poorly of ourselves. Our self-image rises and falls with our performance. Like a nauseating roller coaster, discipleship by religious performance will seem fun at first, but eventually it leaves a bad taste in your mouth.

As a pastor of a missional church, one of the ways I've tried to gain favor before God is by my missional performance. As a young church planter, not a week went by without self-interrogation: "Have I shared the gospel enough?" "Am I spending enough time making disciples?" "Am I serving the poor enough?" On one hand, these questions can be good. They help me cultivate integrity and live in a way that blesses others. On the other hand, they can be a substitute form of acceptance before God. If I'm evangelizing, discipling, or serving consistently (and with results), then I'll feel more approved by God. This isn't living by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord; it's living by faith in a missional version of myself. Even personal holiness or social justice can become a functional lord. This is deadly.

Whenever we replace Jesus with another lord, we displace the gospel from the center of our discipleship. We substitute Jesus's perfect performance with our imperfect performance, which always fails. The gospel reminds us that our approval before God rests not on our performance but on the performance of Jesus in his perfect life, death, and resurrection. Religious performance deceives us by saying, "Impress God, and he will approve of you." The truth of the gospel, however, says, "You don't have to impress God, because Jesus has impressed him for you." When we turn to the God of the gospel, we can't help but serve him.

### **Spiritual License**

Alternatively, we may be motivated by spiritual license. Spiritual license is the tendency in the human heart to find meaning in freedom from rules. Disciples who operate by spiritual license perceive themselves as liberated, set free from the bondage of

more conservative Christians. Instead of believing the lie of performance—*If I perform, God will accept me*—they believe the lie of license—*Because God has forgiven me, I'm free to go my own way*. Instead of using God's word to judge others, they simply disregard it. Holiness becomes negotiable. These disciples don't think of themselves as disobedient; they think of themselves as free.

Spiritual license may be expressed by drinking too much, watching inappropriate films, or refraining from Bible reading, all in the name of freedom. They often say, "I don't want to be legalistic." They define themselves against the legalist instead of *in Christ*. Their identity is formed in the negative—not being legalistic—instead of the wonderfully positive of being united with Christ.

Singer-songwriter Ray LaMontagne sings: "And freedom can be an empty cup from which everybody want to drink."<sup>1</sup> Spiritual "freedom" looks full and satisfying but eventually proves empty and bitter. Spiritual license will eventually leave you with a hangover. The truth is, everyone serves somebody. Even the rebellious disciple is obedient, bound to obey his or her fleeting desires. Those fleeting desires are connected to other "gods." For example, the god of self curtails Bible reading while consuming an unlimited stream of social media. "Free" to read whatever they like, liberated Christians allow unfiltered data to float through their hearts and minds without the redemptive lens of Scripture. The god of alcohol rules over the "free" drunk, who obediently takes drink after drink in pursuit of pleasure or escape. Those

1 Ray LaMontagne, "How Come," *Trouble*, RCA, 2004.

who are motivated by spiritual license are actually ruled by the ultimate god of freedom. Freedom to not read the Bible or to drink in excess actually ends up hurting more than helping. Freedom is a deceptive master. So while disciples who operate on spiritual license may appear liberated, they are, in fact, bound to a false, self-injurious form of freedom. Anyone who has chased this so-called freedom for any length of time can testify to its eventual, gnawing emptiness.

A disciple motivated by spiritual license drinks from the empty cup of spiritual freedom. Gospel-centered disciples drink deeply from the cup of costly grace and fight to live in obedience to King Jesus. Faith in the gospel actually makes us slaves of Christ, who frees us from sin and graciously binds us to him. At his side, we discover a better God and enjoy a more gracious Master. Spiritual license deceives us by saying, "Because God has forgiven me, I'm free to disobey." The truth of the gospel is, "Because God has forgiven me in Christ, I'm bound to obey."

The gospel points us to Jesus as Christ and as Lord. Neither the religious nor rebellious are truly free. The religious bind themselves to keeping rules, and the rebellious are bound to breaking rules. *The gospel, however, tells us that we are bound not to rules, but to Christ.* We have been crucified with Christ, and he now lives in us (Gal. 2:20). In Christ we are liberated from sin and delivered into the arms of a new Savior. The gospel steeps our hearts in a new motivation of grace, which neither flaunts disobedience nor feigns obedience. Grace gives us a new identity, not a new set of rules. We all need grace. We all need to be continually awakened to the beauty and glory of Christ and the sufficiency of his grace, which compels Christ-beholding obedience.

## Accountability Groups

These legalistic and licentious tendencies are often intensified in Christian accountability groups.<sup>2</sup> The aim of an accountability group is to foster obedience to Christ by “holding a person accountable” to a checklist of godly virtues. Accountability partners gather together to ask questions of one another, which are often stated in the negative: “Have you exposed yourself to any sexually explicit material?” “Have any of your financial dealings lacked integrity?” The questions asked lift up good, godly rules like sexual purity and financial integrity. However, the questions tend to focus on *not committing sin* as opposed to *cherishing Christ* or cultivating virtue. Often these accountability lists conclude with a final question that goes something like “Have you lied in any of the questions above?” Again, a negative statement is used to promote positive behavior. The discipleship accent is on adherence to (good) rules. This plays right into the hands of people with legalistic tendencies, resulting in spiritual pride when they keep the rules and self-condemnation when they don’t.

Although accountable relationships start with a noble aim—commitment to confession, obedience, and prayer—they often devolve into relationships based on rule keeping or rule breaking. The religious verbally punish one another for failing to keep the rules, while the rebellious are quick to overlook one another’s failure. Both are rule-centered. The religious person is inclined to keeping rules, and the rebellious person to breaking rules. Both miss Christ. Whether you’ve experienced “accountability

2 I originally worked out some of these ideas regarding accountability in a seminal article entitled, “Accountability Groups,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 24 (Spring 2006): 47–52.



groups” or not, we all can identify with the impulse to either keep or break the rules.

After I got back on a moral track in college, I leaned upon accountable relationships to stay on course. However, I placed too much faith in accountability and not enough faith in the gospel. This influenced how I disciplined others. When one of the guys I was discipling caved in to a particular sin he was “being held accountable for,” he had to put ten bucks in a jar. I enforced the punishment for breaking the moral rules. In our aim to promote holiness, ten bucks was the penalty for pandering to sin. We thought this approach to accountability was especially good for fighting sexual sin. If one of the guys I disciplined had a particularly lustful week (viewing inappropriate TV, reading pornographic material, or masturbating), he had to “pay the price.” When we met for our weekly accountability meeting, I would ask a range of questions designed to promote accountability, but as I recall, we assigned the steep penalty of ten dollars only to sexual sins. Other sins were considered less heinous. Sometimes the accumulated cash was put in the offering, other times it was used to celebrate “not sinning” over dinner.

This practice was supposed to motivate holy living, but instead, it fostered a self-condemning or self-praising legalism that undercut the gospel of grace. Instead of holding one another accountable to belief in the gospel, we were accountable for exacting punishments for certain misbehaviors. The unfortunate result was a kind of legalism in which peer-prescribed punishments were substitutes for repentance and faith in Jesus. In relationships like this, our motives for holiness get twisted. Confession is relegated to “keeping from sinning,” making discipleship a

duty-driven, rule-keeping journey. We end up fighting for rules instead of for Christ.

### **Confessional-Booth Accountability**

Alternatively, accountable relationships can devolve into a kind of confessional booth. I confess my sin; you confess yours. I pat your back. You pat mine. Then we pray. We depart absolved of any guilt, fearing merely the passing frown of our fellow confessor. These accountability groups become circles of cheap grace, through which we obtain cheap peace from a troubled conscience. You know you are in a group like this if you rarely ask one another penetrating questions based on the temptations you have confessed. For example, “How is that anger toward your wife going? Are you taking that frustration to Christ?” This encourages what Jesus described as “bear[ing] fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8). It is a reminder that turning to Christ always results in reflecting more of his image. When matched with sincere love for one another and God’s word, these kinds of questions powerfully stimulate holiness.

However, when we simply confess our struggles and refrain from encouraging repentance, we leave our friends stranded in sin. Confession divorced from repentance reduces holiness to half-hearted morality. Accountability becomes a man-made mix of spineless confession and cheap peace. It can be tempting to relate to others this way. If I don’t ask much of you, then you won’t ask much of me. But what does that do to our discipleship? It makes mediocrity the standard for following Jesus. Why would we settle for mediocrity? Because we would rather gorge ourselves on individual freedom than live enslaved to Christ. In those moments, we believe that self, not God, knows best. This,

of course, is the original deceit that sent the whole world spinning away from God.<sup>3</sup> Confessional-booth accountability prizes individual freedom over Christian faith. It trusts the judgments of self rather than the judgment of God. This is as irrational as it is foolish. When applied, the eternal wisdom of our Creator produces true humanity. When we trust him, he liberates us from the prison of self-deceit into the freedom of true grace.

### True Confession

How do we avoid punishing and confessional-booth accountability? What does true confession look like? True confession brings a healing grace: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16). Sometimes we avoid confession and prayer in the name of grace: “I don’t want to be legalistic.” But confession and prayer aren’t ways of earning our way into God’s good favor; they *are* his favor. In confession we drag our darkness out into the light, where we can be healed and forgiven. In prayer, we commune with the most powerful, gracious, loving being in the universe. To avoid this is to avoid grace!

We don’t always feel like we’re missing out when we avoid confession and prayer. We may feel quite normal, cordially interacting

3 Satan appealed to the idea that Eve could know better than God, and that God was holding back on her, when he said, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). However, Eve already knew what was good and evil because God had made it clear: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (2:16–17). Therefore, the original deceit was not that Adam and Eve could take God’s moral knowledge, but that they could take his judicial place. In fact, the phrase “knowing good and evil” is shorthand for making a judgment (2 Sam 14:17; 1 Kings 3:9). Thus, the original deception was that humanity can make better judgments than God.

with others and regularly attending church. We might even be fun to be around. But like an undiagnosed cancer patient, we carry on ignorant of the deadly disease growing inside of us—unconfessed sin. In Psalm 32:3–4, David poignantly describes the effect of unconfessed sin:

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away  
 through my groaning all day long.  
 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
 my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

We waste away when sin goes unconfessed and our hearts remain unrepentant. David became conscious of his unconfessed sin, but unfortunately, many of us remain unaware of its strength-sapping effect. We can become so passive in fighting the fight of faith that confession to others, and daily confession to God, seem bizarre. We might write confession off as morbid, failing to believe its life-giving blessing. David discovers this blessing in the very same psalm:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,  
 whose sin is covered.  
 Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no  
 iniquity,  
 and in whose spirit there is no deceit. (Ps. 32:1–2)

The person without deceit is a person who is honest about who he or she is—failures and all. Honest confession brings the blessing of forgiveness, and forgiveness brings us back under

God's blessing to enjoy his grace and peace. The goal in confession isn't to cleanse ourselves before God, because we can't (Zech. 3:3–5; Ps. 51:1–2; 1 John 1:7). And it isn't to forgive ourselves, because our sin isn't ultimately against self; it's against God (Gen. 39:9; Ps. 51:4). God is the standard of righteousness and the judge of sinfulness. Fortunately, God is not only Judge but also Redeemer to us in Jesus. In fact, Jesus quotes Psalm 32:2 to refer to Nathanael's unwavering hope in the Messiah, a Messiah who alone could climb the ladder between God's holiness and man's sinfulness to offer forgiveness to those who hope in him (John 1:47–51). This forgiveness is a fountain flowing from Jesus's side, available to all who are willing to reveal their dirty garments and dip them in his guilt-absorbing blood: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). In confession, we return to Christ our righteousness, where we are perfectly loved and accepted.

Therefore, confession isn't to be viewed as a ritual bargaining chip we cash in to obtain a clear conscience. Our forgiveness has already been bought in Jesus; we simply procure his purchased forgiveness through confession. This may seem abstract. Perhaps it would be helpful to think of confession in terms of *authenticity*. Confession is a verbal way of spiritually recovering our authenticity in Christ. It's letting go of the sin we've held onto and stretching out to lay hold of Jesus. Confession rejects an inauthentic image in order to realign with our true image. Sin stands in the way of authentic, new creation selves. It is a silent, spiritual rejection of our identity in Christ. It denies judgment and grace.

However, when we confess our sin in true repentance, we come to our senses in Jesus. We return to ourselves. Confession of sin is

a kind of repentance from being inauthentic. We essentially say, “Heavenly Father, forgive me for not acting like your child, for pretending to be someone I’m not. I want to return to my authentic self as your beloved child and live accordingly.” Confession relies on Christ’s judgment and grace. He bears our judgment (for sin) and gives us his grace (as his children). The gospel reminds us to live authentically as his children, either through repentance or obedience. In confession, we live authentically Christian lives, agreeing with God about our judgment-deserving sin and trusting in his sin-forgiving grace. We return to the reality of grace, in Christ, which in turn compels real obedience.

Legalism and license cut away at authenticity. They beckon us to choose “sinner” over “son” or “daughter.” The rebel avoids God while the religious tries to impress him. One runs away from Christ, while the other runs past him. But both the rebellious and the religious can run straight to God in confession of sin and in confidence of his forgiveness. The reason we can confidently run to God is because we have an advocate in Christ. Jesus sits ready to receive us. Right now he sits at the right hand of the Father ready to plead our innocence: “But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1). His advocacy never ceases: “He always lives to make intercession” for us (Heb. 7:25). Jesus, who bore our judgment and pleads our innocence, is our advocate with the Father. As a result, we can be forgiven and accepted by a just and holy God. The gospel coaxes us to run neither away nor past God but straight into his loving arms. In the gospel, we get to live authentically as God’s forgiven and accepted sons and daughters. Grace brings us to our senses, delivering us from the insanity of sin.

Thankfully, my discipleship and accountability have improved with time. Over the years I've come to realize the shortcomings of religious performance and spiritual license. How can we make Jesus central and avoid these twisted motivations? We need to displace what is at the center of our discipleship. We need to remove rules, rule keeping (religion), and rule breaking (rebellion) from the center of discipleship and replace it with the gospel, which graciously binds us to Christ's side. Instead of forming relationships gathered around rules, we need to gather around Jesus.

## Gospel Motivation

AS I PICKED UP MY PHONE to post a tweet about the gospel, I paused and thought, *Why am I typing this? Am I genuinely trying to help others or just trying to increase my followers?* Jeremiah the prophet wrote, “The heart is deceitful above all things, / and desperately sick; / who can understand it?” (17:9). It’s true, isn’t it? Even the heart of a disciple can be deceived. John Calvin writes: “The vices with which we abound we both carefully conceal from others, and flatteringly represent to ourselves as minute and trivial, nay, sometimes hug them as virtues.”<sup>1</sup> What I thought was a virtue—posting an eternal truth on social media—was actually a vice—an attempt to garner the attention of others. Since our motives are so easily twisted, how can we cultivate godly motivation?<sup>2</sup>

- 1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 3.7.4.
- 2 Dane Ortlund’s *A New Inner Relish: Christian Motivation in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2008) summarizes motivations in three areas—past (gratitude), present (identity), and future (personal benefit). Ortlund



## The Motivational Center

Jesus emphasized the importance of motives when he said, “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). While it is important to produce good not evil, Jesus gets the past morality to its source—the heart.

In the Old Testament, the heart encompasses the mind, will, and emotion. It is the motivational center for human action.<sup>3</sup> As Proverbs says, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, / for from it flow the springs of life” (4:23). The heart, not the mind, animates our life decisions. Therefore, we should keep watch over what we allow into our hearts. Jesus describes our motives as the “treasure of the heart.” This treasure trove of motives determines whether an act is good or evil. So, if we want to bear good fruit, we must pay close attention to our heart. What *motivates* Jesus’s followers is what *makes* his disciples. What our hearts behold, we become. It is here, in our motives, where following Jesus really begins. How does the gospel change the heart? Let’s look at three overlapping areas of gospel motivation—religious affection, promises and warnings, and repentance and faith.<sup>4</sup>

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supports these helpful categories primarily through the writings of Jonathan Edwards. This is a helpful book on the much-neglected topic of motivation.

3 See Gen. 6:5; Deut. 6:5; 1 Sam. 12:20; Ps. 51:6; Prov. 4:23. See also Acts 16:14; Rom. 10:9; Heb. 4:12.

4 Authors John Piper and Tim Keller have written extensively on the topic of Christian motivation. Keller uses the language of motivation more explicitly, frequently referring to the role of the gospel in motivating obedience. Piper emphasizes the role of joy or religious affections in motivating obedience to God. Both Keller and Piper have been significantly influenced by the writings of Jonathan Edwards. I, too, have benefited tremendously from Edwards, in large part because of Piper’s influence.

## Religious Affection

The name Jonathan Edwards is virtually synonymous with “religious affections.” Contrary to what it sounds like, religious affection has nothing to do with religious performance. Perhaps “Christian affection” would be a helpful modernization of the phrase. Nevertheless, *religious affection is affection for Christ that results in obedience to Christ*. To say it another way, religious affection is gospel-generated delight in God. This delight compels us to follow Jesus, not because we have to, but because we get to. Religious affections motivate obedience to Jesus as Lord not out of religious duty, but out of a foundational *delight*. Edwards writes:

The first foundation of the delight a true saint has in God, is his own perfection; and the first foundation of the delight he has in Christ, is his own beauty; he appears in himself the chief among ten thousand, and altogether lovely.<sup>5</sup>

Notice that Edwards pairs two things as foundational to delight in God: the perfection of God and the beauty of Christ. The perfect goodness of God’s glory and the aesthetic beauty of Jesus Christ provoke happiness in the heart like no other. They stand a head above the rest and are altogether lovely. As we have seen, the gospel of the glory of God shines in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). It is the good news of who Christ is and what he has

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Much of what I will say about religious affections and the gospel will reflect the influence of these men.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Hickman, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (London, 1834; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 1:277.

done for us that awakens this delight. A true saint, or disciple, possesses foundational delight in Jesus.

We need not take Edwards's word for it. The Bible regularly appeals to delight as a motivation for obedience:

- "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15)
- "Delight yourself in the LORD, / and he will give you the desires of your heart." (Ps. 37:4)
- "Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart. . . . therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you." (Deut. 28:47–48)
- "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." (Phil. 4:4)
- "Rejoice always." (1 Thess. 5:16)

### *Delight Defines Discipleship*

Love compels obedience; delight directs the heart; joyfulness stimulates service. Scripture is filled with appeals to delight in God, and very often these appeals are followed by an ethical command. In John 15, Jesus repeatedly tells disciples to obey him out of their love for him. Obeying out of love is not unusual. Spouses often obey their marriage vows to serve one another for better or for worse, out of love. In Philipians and Thessalonians, Paul issues a variety of moral commands, while calling us to rejoice at all times. God-centered delight defines our discipleship.

With this basic understanding of religious affection, let's consider how it motivates following Jesus. Jonathan Edwards's famous

honey analogy helpfully illustrates the role of religious affections in motivating obedience. Edwards explains faith by comparing it to honey.<sup>6</sup> Allow me to paraphrase Edwards:

I can show you honey. You can marvel at its golden hue, the way it refracts light, and its viscosity. And I can tell you that it is sweet . . . and you can believe that it is sweet. But unless you have tasted it, you don't know it is sweet. Believing honey is sweet doesn't mean you really know it is sweet. I could be lying to you. You only know honey is sweet when you have tasted it.

Similarly, it's not enough to believe Jesus is the Son of God and that he died on the cross for our sins. There are many people in the southern states who believe these facts but have not tasted their sweetness. Religious affection compels us beyond "mere belief" into genuine faith, a relishing of all that God is for us in Jesus. It is not enough to agree with Jesus; we must worship Jesus. Genuine faith not only believes but "tastes" the sweetness of Christ. How can we cultivate this affection?

### *Gospel Joy*

Religious affection is impossible apart from the gospel. The reason for this is that the treasure of our hearts is naturally bad. Our motives are self-seeking apart from the intervening work of the Spirit. We are born with animosity toward God, harbor sin in our hearts, and are filled with evil (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 1:18–31). The gospel is the good news that Jesus has defeated sin, death, and evil, through his

<sup>6</sup> *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1:280.

own death and resurrection, and is making all things new, even us. In the gospel, Jesus extends to his evil creatures his plan of renewal for all creation. Jesus pronounces victory over our sin through his death and resurrection, and accomplishes our joyful surrender with his life. When we “taste” Christ for the first time, our hostile man is executed and a joyful man is born. Through faith in the gospel, Jesus’s death and resurrection become our death and resurrection. We are buried in his death and raised into newness of life (Rom. 6:4). This gracious act liberates us from shallow joys to deliver us into infinite joy: “In [his] presence there is fullness of joy; / at [his] right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11). The gospel enables true joy.

In Christ, we secure a new heart capable of a joy our old heart could never imagine. When I look out on the rolling Rocky Mountains in Edwards, Colorado, and see brilliant, orange sun-rays breaking across their peaks, I am stunned with a double joy. The grandeur of the mountains is magnificent in its own right, but when I follow their beauty back to their Creator, my soul leaps up to a second, higher joy:

The Mighty One, God the LORD,  
 speaks and summons the earth  
 from the rising of the sun to its setting.  
 Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,  
 God shines forth. (Ps. 50:1–2)

It is because of the gospel that I can experience this second, higher joy. Through Jesus I can behold the Beauty shining behind the beauty.

The gospel is also an altering of joy. It changes what brings us joy by drawing us into spiritual and moral happiness. But what

do we do when we don't feel this joy? We believe. Even John Piper admits that faith is not synonymous with affection.<sup>7</sup> Faith includes trusting God when we *don't* desire him.<sup>8</sup> For help, we can turn to God's promises and warnings.

### Warnings and Promises

God's word prods us with holy warnings and woos us with stunning reward. In Psalm 19:11 David remarks, "Moreover, by them [the decrees of God] is your servant *warned*; in keeping them there is great *reward*." God's warnings and promises are the second gospel motivation.

#### *Warnings of God*

We often read over biblical warnings as if they don't apply to us. However, they are explicit and clear:

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. *I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.* (Gal. 5:19–21)

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let

<sup>7</sup> Piper says, "Delight in the glory of God is not the whole of what faith is." John Piper, *Future Grace* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2005), 203.

<sup>8</sup> See John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).

there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), *has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.* (Eph. 5:3–5)

These warnings are written to Christians in order to strengthen their faith, promote their joy, and honor God. Biblical warnings are not empty threats from a temperamental apostle, but God-breathed warnings from a loving Lord (2 Tim. 3:16). The sinful patterns and accompanying idols in these lists should not be *characteristic* of Christians. Christians aggressively fight our sin, rather than passively live with it. These warnings remind us of how serious God is about discipleship. He will not be mocked by mile-wide and inch-deep religion. As each text indicates, the proof of our inheritance in the kingdom of God is our present faith. Belief in God's holy warnings can be a gospel motivation if we respond to the warnings by turning to Christ.

A roommate once confronted me with one of God's warnings. Quoting 1 Corinthians 5:11, he told me he didn't want to live with a Christian who lived like an unbeliever: "But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one." I don't recall this being delivered in a very gracious way, but God used the truth to catalyze repentance! It was incredibly painful to hear, but God used this warning to prod me to deeper satisfaction in Christ.

*Promises of Reward*

A disciple of Jesus fights sin with sober belief in God's warnings *and* abounding delight in his promises. Fortunately, God is not a mean-spirited tyrant issuing threats to flaunt his power. He is a loving, gracious, just, and infinitely desirable God who binds himself to thousands of promises for the good of his people. Peter tells us that we have been given everything we need for life and godliness through God's very great and precious promises (2 Pet. 1:3–4). Paul reminds us all the promises of God are “Yes” and “Amen” in Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20). They are doubly trustworthy. Consider the following promises God has made to us, guaranteed in his Son:

- “Delight yourself in the LORD, / and he will give you the desires of your heart.” (Ps. 37:4)
- “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (Matt. 5:8)
- “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Rom. 8:28)
- “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.” (1 John 3:2 NASB)
- “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you at the proper time.” (1 Pet. 5:6 NASB)

These promises offer us joy, hope, strength, glory, and a place in the kingdom of God. God motivates our discipleship with



both his unblushing promises of reward as well as his sobering warnings of judgment.

New Testament scholar Daniel Fuller refers to these twin motivations as the pitchfork and the carrot.<sup>9</sup> God prods with the pitchfork of his holy warnings and dangles the carrot of his staggering promises to draw us to Christ. But how do they draw us to the gospel? The warnings remind us that *Jesus is King*. He is a Lord to be obeyed not merely a Savior who rescues. The rewards remind us that *Jesus is a Redeemer*. He is not only royalty deserving of our obedience, but he is also a Redeemer who forgives our disobedience. Jesus is both Christ and Lord, Redeemer and King. The gospel cannot be divided because, at its heart, the gospel is the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, biblical promises and warnings are gospel motivations. The threats drive us to Jesus and the promises woo us. Both are Christ-centered.

But what should we do when we fail to be motivated by the gospel? When both religious affection and faith in God's promises and warnings fail to motivate us? God offers a third gospel motivation—repentance.

### The Gift of Repentance

*Repentance is not a one-time act to get us into heaven, but an entire way of life to maintain Christian joy.* It isn't a work we tack onto our faith that restores our fellowship with God. Repentance *is* faith. Tim Chester helpfully illustrates how repentance and faith are one:

9 Taken from John Piper's Bethlehem Institute seminar "Faith in Future Grace."

How do we repent? We repent through faith . . . turning to God in faith and from sin in repentance are the same movement. Try it now. Stand facing the window. Then turn to face the opposite wall. The act of turning from the window and turning towards the wall is one movement. You can't turn towards the wall without turning away from the window. And you can't turn to God in faith without turning away from sin in repentance.<sup>10</sup>

True repentance includes faith.<sup>11</sup> Turning and trusting are two sides of the same gospel coin, one movement made possible by grace. This gospel grace is continually at our disposal in Christ. Reformer Martin Luther said that the entire life of believers is to be one of repentance. Why our entire lives? Because in our everyday failures, we have every opportunity to turn to Jesus for grace and forgiveness. Jesus himself exhorted the disciples at Laodicea to repent: "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent" (Rev. 3:19).

Unfortunately, repentance is often misunderstood: if we've done something bad, repentance is what we do to get on God's good side. We think to ourselves, "If I feel sorry enough, get angry enough at my sin, then God will forgive me." This view tries to split the coin of repentance. It assumes that turning from sin is our work, and returning to Christ is God's work. But remember: repentance is one movement, a single coin. To turn from sin

<sup>10</sup> Tim Chester, *You Can Change: God's Transforming Power for Our Sinful Behavior and Negative Emotions* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity, 2008), 123.

<sup>11</sup> Scripture frequently uses repentance in a way that implies faith (Luke 5:32; Rom 2:4; 2 Cor. 7:10). Other times, repentance and faith are stated explicitly together (Acts 3:19; 20:21).

is to turn to Christ, a fluid movement of grace, which is a gift from God (Rom. 2:4).

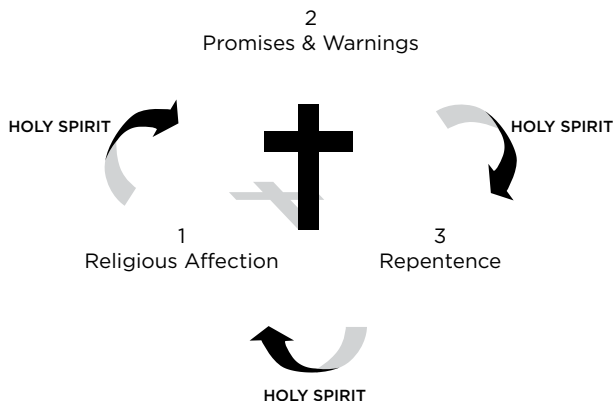
To break repentance down into its two sides, we could say that it is a *turning from* and a *turning to*. We turn from our sinful behaviors *and* turn, not to good behaviors, but to Christ. Repentance subsequently overflows in loving obedience. We turn from trust in little gods to trust in the one true God.<sup>12</sup> Repentance is turning from belief in a false promise in order to trust in a true, satisfying promise. Repentance is an exchange of joys, the lesser for the greater. For example, I exchange the joy of self-flattery for the joy of the Lord when I turn away from finding praise in what others say about my preaching, and turn to what God says about me in *his* preaching. God preaches grace to me when he reminds me that I am insufficient in all my preaching, but made sufficient in him as a minister of the gospel: “Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:5–6). When I repent from finding my main joy in what others say about my sermons and turn to what God says about me in his Scripture, I find true joy. I am inadequate as a preacher but more than adequate as a son. You could say this about any role—parent, child, employee. Praise from men is fleeting, but the joy of the Lord is our strength (Neh. 8:10).

Repenting Christians are growing Christians. Tim Keller underscores the role of repentance when he says, “All-of-life repentance is the best sign that we are growing deeply and rapidly into

12 For a gospel-rich explanation of repentance from “gods” see Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009).

the character of Jesus.”<sup>13</sup> The purpose of repentance is to lead us into true joy. Repenting is for rejoicing! The intoxicating joy of the Lord exposes our lesser joys for what they are—false and empty—and leads us to faith in the true and rewarding promises of God. A gospel-centered disciple rejects the pursuit of perfection and embraces the gift of repentance. In short, a gospel-centered disciple is a repenting disciple.

Circle of Gospel Motivation



To summarize, gospel motivations are expressed through religious affection, belief in God’s promises and warnings, and repentance. To synthesize these three motivations, we can say that (1) religious affection motivates (2) belief in God’s warnings and promises which, in turn, (3) motivate a life of repentance and faith. These three motives come together to form a circle of gospel motivation, surrounding the believer with a host of graces.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Keller, “All of Life Is Repentance,” Redeemer Presbyterian Church, [https://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/All\\_of\\_Life\\_Is\\_Repentance-Keller.pdf](https://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/All_of_Life_Is_Repentance-Keller.pdf).

These motivational graces are applied by the Spirit and move us closer to Jesus. As a result our joys are altered: the lesser for the greater, as Christ becomes sweeter.

These gospel motivations are compelling, but how can they become predominant in our lives? In the next chapter, we consider the Spirit as the power for gospel motivation.

## Gospel Power

IF YOU HAD THE CHOICE between Jesus and the Holy Spirit as your “discipler,” whom would you pick? Most of us would pick Jesus; after all, he is *the Master*. But actually, it would be better to choose the Holy Spirit, since without him we’re powerless to follow Jesus (John 20:21–22; Acts 1:8). The good news is we don’t have to pick between the two. We are given the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to follow and imitate Jesus. But the bad news is that many of us neglect the Holy Spirit.

This neglect is the result of a variety of factors. One factor is theology by reaction. Fear of charismatic excess has driven many evangelicals to emphasize Jesus to the exclusion of the Spirit. This occurs not only in the area of spiritual gifts but also in the practice of discipleship. Some who have taken a cessationist or “open but cautious” position toward spiritual gifts of healing, tongues, and prophecy have carried their caution to an extreme.<sup>1</sup> In turn,

<sup>1</sup> For more on this debate, see Wayne Grudem, ed., *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

“safety barriers” are erected around the third person of the Trinity, effectively dividing him from the second person of the Trinity. This reaction to “Spirit-related” excesses has effectively made the Spirit a footnote in the Trinity. If we are to discover the gospel’s power for following Jesus, we will have to teeter over the edge of caution and plunge down the cliff of the Spirit. This chapter may be the most critical of all, as we consider the essential role of the Spirit in discipleship.

### No Spirit, No Gospel Holiness

In his vast writings, Puritan theologian and pastor John Owen frequently refers to sanctification as the pursuit of “gospel holiness.”<sup>2</sup> Owen differentiates between gospel holiness and morality by noting that holiness is the result of grace and morality the result of human work. Although morality and holiness may look similar on the outside, they are altogether different on the inside. Morality is self-centered; gospel holiness is Christ centered. Morality holds self up when reaching for virtue, but gospel holiness holds up Christ in virtuous failure and success. Owen describes gospel holiness as “peculiarly joined with and limited unto the *doctrine, truth, and grace* of the gospel; for holiness is nothing but the implanting, writing, and realizing of the gospel in our souls.”<sup>3</sup>

How is the gospel implanted, written, and realized in us? Owen answers this question in his two volumes on the person and work

- 2 All references to Owen’s writings are from John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols. (1850–1855; repr., vols 1–16, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965–1968).
- 3 John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, vol. 6 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols. (1850–1855; repr., London: Banner of Truth, 1965–1968), 123.

of the Holy Spirit. He maintains that gospel holiness is impossible apart from the Holy Spirit. In fact, his principal reason for writing the first six hundred pages on the Spirit is to show that holiness is “the dispensation and work of the Holy Spirit with respect to the gospel.”<sup>4</sup> And again, “There neither is, nor ever was, in the world, nor ever shall be, the least dram of holiness, but what, flowing from Jesus Christ, is communicated by the Spirit, according to the truth and promise of the gospel.”<sup>5</sup>

Not an ounce of holiness is possible apart from the work of Jesus applied through the Spirit. To bluntly summarize Owen: no Spirit, no gospel holiness. Without reliance on the Spirit we may get morality, even a veneer of Christianity, but no gospel holiness. Apart from the presence and power of the Spirit, our attempt to desire God, believe his promises, fear his warnings, and walk in his ways is absolutely futile. Disciples need more than resolve to believe the gospel; they need the Holy Ghost.

### The Presence and Power of the Spirit

How does the Spirit produce gospel holiness? First, we need his *presence*. The presence of the Spirit is necessary because we are natural-born enemies of God (Rom. 5:10) who are spiritually dead in our sin (Eph. 2:5) and darkened in our hearts (Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:18). It is impossible to express genuine faith in God apart from the Spirit’s wooing and life-giving work. The good news, of course,

4 John Owen, *The Holy Spirit: His Gifts and Power*, vol. 3 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols. (1850–1855; repr., London: Banner of Truth, 1965–1968), 152.

5 Owen, *Holy Spirit*, 3:371. Furthermore, he writes: “It is too high an impudency for any one to pretend an owning of the gospel, and yet to deny a work of the Holy Ghost in our sanctification,” 387.



is that the Spirit gives us new hearts that are able to trust God. The new heart beats with the animating presence of the Spirit: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezek. 36:26–27). The repeated phrase “put the Spirit,” emphasizes the central role of the Holy Spirit in making us new. This newness generated by the Spirit’s presence is called *regeneration* (Titus 3:5).

We also need the Spirit’s *power*. Apart from the presence of the Spirit, our hearts don’t beat for God. But our new hearts generate religious affection and faith in God. Echoing Ezekiel 36, Paul explains that the regenerating work of the Spirit inevitably motivates us to be a people “devoted to good works” (see Titus 3:5–8). These works are the natural fruit of newly born children of God, the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5). This Christlike fruit is the result of our new lives in the Spirit: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). As soon as we have the Spirit’s presence, we have the Spirit’s power to live as a new creation (Gal. 6:15).

In summary, Scripture shows us a clear connection between the Spirit’s regenerating presence and his motivating power. Disciples cultivate gospel holiness through the power and presence of the Spirit. How does this work practically? We can learn from Jesus’s reliance on the Spirit.

### **Dependence on the Spirit**

Jesus was exemplary not only in what he did but also in how he did it. He relied on the Spirit for power, direction, and resistance against temptation.

Although Jesus didn't need the Spirit for regeneration, he depended on the Spirit for motivation to obey his Father. This is especially clear in the writings of Luke, who traces the role of the Spirit in the ministry of Jesus and the early church in Acts. In Luke's arrangement of the life of Jesus, Jesus isn't seen doing a single act of public ministry until he is anointed by the Spirit (Isa. 61:1; Luke 3:21–22; 4:18). Immediately after his baptism he is compelled by the Spirit into the wilderness for a forty-day trial, where he faces temptations similar to Israel's temptations in their forty-year wanderings. After succeeding where Israel failed in their temptations, Jesus emerges from the wilderness in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:14). He then makes his way to Nazareth to announce that he is the much-awaited Spirit-anointed Messiah the Jews have been longing for (Luke 4:18–21). After this, Jesus's ministry is marked by a cycle of prophetic teachings on the kingdom of God, exorcisms, and healings. How did Jesus accomplish all of this? *Through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.*

### *Making Decisions*

Let's take a closer look at how Jesus made some decisions.<sup>6</sup> After his baptism, Jesus was "led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil" (Luke 4:1–2). Mark describes the same episode by saying the Spirit "drove" Jesus into the wilderness (Mark 1:12). Clearly, Jesus relied on the Spirit for direction. This sensitivity to the directing influence

6 I elaborate on how to make Spirit-led decisions in *Here in Spirit: Knowing the Spirit Who Creates, Sustains, and Transforms Everything* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 73–79.

of the Holy Spirit is also characteristic of the disciples in the book of Acts.

- The Spirit directs Philip to speak to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8).
- The Spirit directs Peter to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10).
- The Spirit led the Jerusalem Council (elders and apostles) in an important decision for the church (Acts 15).
- The Spirit directs Paul away from Bithynia (Acts 16).

The disciples of Jesus learned from their Master to rely on the Spirit. How is the Spirit directing your life? Very often, the alarm goes off; we hit snooze; and within minutes we're motoring through our morning routine without a single thought of the Spirit. We may even read the Bible without asking for his illumination. Our commute may be filled with the latest news, a new episode from our favorite podcast, or some of our favorite tunes. We inhale a stream of Spirit-quenching information. By the time we're at work, we're in productivity mode. We pull up our task list and set goals for the day, all without a request for the Spirit's help.

Our modern, self-reliant sensibilities cut the Spirit right out of everyday decision-making. We don't seek his direction because we think we don't need it. Yet, we are repeatedly told to "walk in the Spirit" (Ezek. 36:27; Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:16, 25) and to make decisions by seeking the Lord (Prov. 3:5–6; James 4:13–15). The Spirit should affect our moral decisions *and* our general approach to life. Paul instructs us to "be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). What if, instead of living our days in our own strength, we began to rely upon the Holy Spirit?

*Unplanned Change*

When following Jesus, the disciples learned how to respond to unplanned change. On his way to heal a synagogue leader's daughter, Jesus welcomed the interruption of a woman who had suffered for twelve years. Although Jesus healed the woman, during his delay the leader's daughter died. But the Spirit was at work. When Jesus arrived, he raised the girl from the dead (Matt. 9:18–26)! Jesus's sensitivity to the Spirit enabled him to minister to others in a powerful, unexpected way. While our sensitivity to the Spirit may not result in resurrections, it can lead to personal change or ministry to others. Unfortunately, we prefer to manage our lives in order to eliminate unplanned change. We regulate everything through clocks, calendars, smartphones, routines, and rhythms. When our planned course of action is disrupted, we frequently respond impatiently or angrily.

What if we began to expect unplanned change by seeing it as an opportunity to rely on the Spirit? Obstacles, challenges, and trials would take on a very different meaning. Instead of becoming inconveniences or sources of frustration, interruptions would become an opportunity to discern the Spirit's leading and purpose in our lives. You've probably seen the video of the BBC reporter whose children burst through the door while he is on camera. Slightly miffed, he pushes a child back with one arm, but then a baby in a walker rolls in. The reporter is half smiling, half crying inside. But then, the mom comes in like a ninja to clear the kids out in seconds, and then stretches back into the room to close the door. How would you respond if that happened to you? How would your parenting change if you chose to see your children's

interruptions *as invitations* to respond to them out of the Spirit's love? Driving in the Spirit, the person cutting us off on the highway might become a reminder to fight sinful busyness, or an opportunity to pray or celebrate God's protection. When a meeting is canceled, we might pause to ask the Spirit how he would like us to fill the time. One practical way we can be motivated by the Spirit is to expect unplanned change and respond to the Spirit in those moments. For example:

- Instead of getting angry or frustrated when unplanned things occur, ask the Spirit to show you his purposes in the circumstances.
- Instead of mindlessly driving home, ask the Spirit to prepare you to serve your family or engage a neighbor when you arrive.
- Instead of jamming your calendar full of personal preferences, pray and ask the Spirit to guide you as you plan your week, month, or year.

Now that we have considered the Spirit's role in decision-making, let's examine how Jesus relied on him in the face of temptation.

### Overcoming Temptation

Saint Paul emphasizes the role of the Spirit in his letters, paying special attention to how the Spirit helps us face temptation.<sup>7</sup> He puts it bluntly: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). "The flesh" is Paul's

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of this theme see Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

shorthand for life apart from the Spirit, what we might call carnal living. If we walk in the Spirit, we won't indulge carnal desires. It sounds simple, but in reality we are so accustomed to relying on ourselves, we often walk more like stumbling toddlers than ambling adults.

The Spirit led Jesus to fast for forty days, in a human body, in the wilderness, under Satan's attack. Satan tempted Jesus with food, faith, and fame. How did Jesus endure? When tempted with food, Jesus refused to turn stones into bread during his fast. Instead, he kept his Spirit-led course by reciting and trusting in Deuteronomy 8:3: "Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." Jesus's reliance on the Spirit was expressed by countering temptation with biblical truth.

In the second temptation of misplaced faith, Satan promised Jesus the kingdom and glory of the world in exchange for trusting and worshiping him. Jesus responds by reciting and trusting Deuteronomy 6:13: "It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve." Instead of holding power, wealth, and Satan in high regard, Jesus chose to trust and revere the Lord. In his third temptation, Jesus was tempted to fame. Satan took him to the top of the temple and said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you'" (Luke 4:9–10). Jesus responded by reciting and trusting Deuteronomy 6:16: "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test." The Spirit compelled Jesus to revere God rather than showboat his glory to the devil through a miraculous display.

In each temptation of food, faith, and fame, Jesus succeeded where all of us fail. How did he do it? Through Spirit-empowered

faith in the promises of God. *Jesus shows us that a Spirit-filled life is a Scripture-trusting life.* We must know the word to trust the word, and to trust the word we must know the Spirit! The Spirit enables us to trust what is true in the face of what is false. The Spirit is key to overcoming sin and temptation.

### Communion with the Holy Spirit

Without the Spirit, we are powerless to believe the gospel, but in Christ we have the most powerful motivation—the very Spirit of God! Our challenge, then, is to so know the Spirit that he becomes a pervasive presence in following Jesus. In short, we need *communion* with the Holy Spirit.

*Communion* is a word that has fallen out of use. John Owen defines communion as “the sharing of good things between persons who are mutually delighted being cemented together by some union.”<sup>8</sup> Communion is not just shared delight but the “cementing effect” of that delight between two persons. After seeing the 2018 film *Annihilation* with a couple friends, we lingered in the lobby to discuss what we’d seen. We were awestruck by the visuals, but even more by the theological depth of the movie. As we explored the themes and events in the film, in light of the gospel, we were moved to deep gratitude over God’s saving grace. We communed over a great film and the greater truths of the gospel. Communion happens when we experience mutual delight over the beauty, goodness, or truth of a great piece of music, film, or literature. This has a cementing effect between friends. This is also true of our friendship with God. In prayer and delight in the Scriptures

<sup>8</sup> This definition is my adaption from John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 93.

our souls are cemented with him. But all too often we eliminate the Holy Spirit from our communion with God, living as functional bi-nitarians, communing with the Father and the Son but not in Trinitarian fellowship with the Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14). To experience the richness and power of the Spirit we must nurture a relationship with the Spirit through prayer.

When I was first introduced to discipleship, I learned how to be discipled and to disciple others, but I learned next to nothing about the discipling presence of the Spirit. For two decades I simply assumed the Spirit's presence. He was, as Francis Chan puts it, my "forgotten God."<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, two men reacquainted me with my forgotten God. The first was Dr. Richard Lovelace, author of *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*.<sup>10</sup> I had the privilege of taking two courses from Dr. Lovelace while I was in seminary. During his Dynamics class I was deeply challenged to know the Spirit. Lovelace shared with us how he made a point of communing with each person of the Trinity throughout the day by praying to the Father in the morning, the Son in the evening, and the Spirit in the afternoon. I began this practice immediately with wonderful effect and commend it to you. Addressing the Spirit opens up the lines of communication and invites his direction in our lives.

Lovelace suffered from a stroke that resulted in muscular weakness on the left side of his body. The left side of his face drooped, and he struggled to walk. Despite this physical inability, he walked noticeably with the Spirit. We need not be the picture of health

9 Francis Chan, *Forgotten God: Reversing the Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Colorado Springs: Cook, 2009).

10 Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977).



to be a picture of the Spirit-filled life. I recall riding with Lovelace in the car one day to go eat pizza. On the way there, Lovelace exuded a general happiness in the Lord, an awareness of the Spirit to such a degree that he missed the turn! His kind demeanor and genuine affection for God were abundantly clear as we ate, and I could say much more about Lovelace's intimacy with the Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

The second person who reacquainted me with the Spirit was Colin Gunton. I have never met Gunton, but I am deeply grateful for his writings and sermons. About a year after meeting Lovelace, I read Gunton's book *The Triune Creator*.<sup>12</sup> While reading the book in the quiet guest bedroom of our garage apartment, I collapsed to my knees in tears, repentant over my neglect of the Spirit. I choked out prayers of repentance for failing to adore, know, and rely upon the Holy Spirit. I was met with a sweet forgiveness and spiritual sensation that attuned me to the third person of the Trinity. I have continued to commune with the Spirit ever since. To some this may seem elementary, and to others, intimidating. Regardless of your experience, the Spirit is eager to commune with us and to empower us for gospel holiness.

How can we cultivate communion with the Spirit? Here are a few ways to begin.

- You may need to begin with repentance over your neglect of the Spirit. Confess your sinful self-reliance to the Father

<sup>11</sup> In addition to *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, see Richard F. Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life: A Guidebook for Spiritual Growth* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002). The latter is a condensed version of the former and contains more emphasis on spiritual formation.

<sup>12</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

and the Spirit, asking the Son for forgiveness, and thanking God for the gift of the Spirit.

- Make a point of addressing the Spirit throughout the day in ways that reflect his role in your life (understanding, discernment, decision-making, power to overcome sin, desire for God, faith in the gospel, etc.).
- Memorize and meditate on texts that show you who the Spirit is so that you can get to know him (Ex. 31:3; Num. 27:18; 1 Sam. 16:13; Joel 2:28–29; Rom. 8; 15; 1 Cor. 2; 2 Cor. 3; Gal. 3–6).
- Thank God for the gift of the Spirit, who indwells you with power to resist temptation, believe the promises of God, minister to others, make decisions, and glorify God!

Communion with the Spirit brings us a general happiness and contentment that cannot be found anywhere else. When we repersonalize the Spirit, we gain greater insight into who God is. Communion with God takes us deeper into holiness *and* sends us further into mission. As we relate to the Spirit, he empowers us to believe the gospel. How do we tap into this power?

### **Surrendering to the Spirit**

I'm discovering that most of the time the power of the Spirit is subtle, not showy. The Spirit is present in our subtle inclinations to serve our spouses, do what's right, read the Bible, love the marginalized, make disciples, and commune with God. He is that renewing presence that says, "Choose what is good, right, and true." He is that tug toward self-sacrifice for the good of others. He challenges us to boldly tell someone how Jesus is changing

our lives. He is the person that brings Scripture to mind and coaxes you to believe it. He prompts us to pray for others. He restrains us from clicking on that image on the Internet, making that purchase, or silently judging someone. He prompts us to encourage a friend, praise the good in a coworker, or rejoice in God's remarkable grace. If you are in Christ, you have the Spirit, and he prompts you all the time. We simply need to surrender to his prompting!

If all we need to experience the Spirit's power is to surrender to his prompting, then why is communion with the Spirit so important? I can think of two reasons. First, those who are in communion with the Spirit are more likely to sense his promptings. Have you ever noticed how out of step you can be with a friend or spouse when you haven't spent much time together, how mechanical conversations can be? When we are out of communion with the Spirit, it is very difficult to discern his promptings. Second, as Westerners we can mistake the presence of the Spirit for our own conscience or "enlightened" reason. When we make this mistake, we easily dismiss the promptings of the Spirit as mere rational options. For instance, the Spirit may prompt me to do the dishes, but I may think I don't have to do them because I did them yesterday. I subvert the Spirit with rationalization. Decision-making is reduced to an inner dialogue with our reason, not an opportunity to relate to the person of the Spirit. We succumb to a ploy of the deceiver who would have us "mistake" the Spirit for fleeting personal preference or a rational option. When we do this, we depersonalize the Spirit.

When we depersonalize the Spirit, it becomes much easier to disobey the Lord. When we reduce the promptings of the Spirit

to options, we miss out on communion with God. We deny his power and fellowship. Don't be deceived. The Spirit is prompting you all the time to believe the gospel, to serve others, to choose what is good and true, and to walk in gospel holiness.<sup>13</sup> Satan wants to thwart your communion with God. He doesn't want you to enter into a conversation with the Spirit. He wants us to converse with "our reason," dismissing the subtle presence of the Spirit and his power to motivate holiness. How many times have we rationalized away an opportunity to communicate the gospel? "They are in a hurry." "She would think I'm weird." "I don't even know that person." These rational objections didn't stop Philip with the Ethiopian, or Peter with Cornelius's family, or Paul with Lydia. Instead of assuming that your thoughts are a dialogue with your reason, enter into dialogue with the Spirit. Ask him for clarity, direction, and power to believe the gospel. In a word, surrender! Surrender to the Spirit's promptings, follow his nudging, and talk to him about it along the way. When we surrender to the Spirit, we become more like Jesus. Communion with the Spirit releases the power of the Spirit to follow Jesus and make disciples.

### **Returning to the Trinity**

When we refuse to rely on the gospel of grace, we trivialize the Trinity by not trusting the Father's promises, selling out the Son's sacrifice, and slighting the Spirit's power. We cheapen the atoning work of Jesus by trying to add or subtract from the decision-making cross. We dismiss the Spirit as a forgettable God, relying

<sup>13</sup> I explain how to discern the Spirit's promptings in my *Here in Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 73–79.

on our own effort or reason when facing temptation. To avoid twisted motivations for discipleship, I have sketched three major gospel motivations: religious affections, promises and warnings, and repentance and faith. However, all three of these motivations are powerless apart from the Holy Spirit. In the words of Owen, “The immediate efficient cause of all gospel holiness is the Spirit of God.”<sup>14</sup> The Spirit is the motivation behind the motivation, the personal presence of God’s power inclining us to believe the gospel.

The wonderful news is that all disciples of Jesus are indwelt with the Spirit. He is working with us, not against us, for gospel holiness. Gospel holiness can be as simple as surrendering to the promptings of the Spirit and as difficult as fighting the flesh. The Father, Son, and Spirit are collaborating for our gospel-centered discipleship.

And along with the power of the Spirit, God has given us another grace—the church. Disciples of Jesus are part of a *community* that fights the fight of faith.

<sup>14</sup> Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, 3:523.

PART 3

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APPLYING  
THE GOSPEL



## Communal Discipleship

SO FAR WE HAVE ADDRESSED the definition of a disciple (part 1) and the motivation of a disciple (part 2). In part 3, we turn to the practice of a disciple. How can disciples apply the gospel in practice? This chapter will show that the gospel converts disciples three times, not just once. Each conversion—to Christ, to church, and to mission—provides context for gospel application. We begin by examining the formative role of the church.

### **Rediscovering the Gospel in Community**

For years Haydn coasted in his faith. Burned out by the legalistic culture of his Christian college experience, his postgrad years were a combination of disillusionment and disengagement with church. Church attendance was infrequent. Instead of investing in spiritual things, he decided to pursue his career, start a family, and carve out a spot in the good life. He climbed the career ladder pretty quickly. Before he knew it, he was a father of two, living in a nice home, and enjoying a new community among



fellow cyclists. What could be better? But after a while, his good life seemed flat. He tried a few things to jump-start it, including increased church attendance, but nothing seemed to work.

One day Haydn's friend Nate shared with him how God was changing his life *through community*. Haydn was skeptical but interested in the church. He started asking questions and even invited me—the pastor!—to his daughter's birthday party. The more Haydn learned about the church, the more he was intrigued. Something was different about this church. It was less about religious performance and more about relationships and service. The people cared about one another and for their city. Haydn joined the church in social service projects and even showed up at some small group gatherings. Deep down, he knew this was what he had been longing for, something better than the so-called good life. Eventually, he began asking God if he should sell his house and become a missionary, but the Spirit led him to keep his house and be a missionary to his own people in Austin. Haydn was converted to church in a new way. And a new understanding of the gospel soon followed.

It wasn't until Haydn started sharing his struggles with others that he really sensed significant change. As he and his family integrated into the church, Haydn joined a discipleship group. He began meeting with two other guys who were serious about fighting sin, enjoying God, living in community, and serving their city. It was through these relationships that Haydn rediscovered the power of the gospel. He came to understand that the gospel of grace wasn't just something that makes you a disciple; it matures you as a disciple. He understood that the gospel frees imperfect people to cling to a perfect Christ, who are perfected by the Spirit.

He began to grow in his understanding of theology, community, and mission. Haydn and his wife hosted member classes and city groups, and eventually became deacons in the church.

What changed Haydn's view of faith and church? A community of gospel-centered disciples.<sup>1</sup> He encountered a group of people that made grace, not rules, central to their following Jesus. Instead of emphasizing religious performance, they focused on the gospel. His discipleship group was instrumental in deepening his understanding and experience of grace. They met regularly to pray, share life, read Scripture, and fight sin *together*. Through these relationships, Haydn rediscovered the power of the gospel and the preciousness of Christ. Commenting on his experience, he wrote: "The gospel is more than a one-time event that 'saved' me. I have learned, and continue to learn, that the gospel is something I need every minute of every day. It changes me as a husband, a father, a friend, an employee, a manager. . . . Everything, every day. This was a 'light bulb' moment. Furthermore, I have seen the gospel in this community. As imperfect as it is, it is true to the gospel."<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, Haydn's story is not the norm in the church. Many people think of church as a service to attend or an optional weekend event. Instead of *being the church*, they settle for *attending the church*. While church service attendance is important, it is inadequate to sustain and grow our faith.

1 I use *church* and *community* interchangeably. This does not mean that I view them as one and the same. All church should be communal, but not all community is church. The whole of church is more than community. It also involves mission, biblical leadership, and gospel ministry.

2 Haydn Schwedland, email to author, February 24, 2011.

One reason we have surrendered being the church is because we have embraced an anemic gospel.<sup>3</sup> With a thin-blooded gospel comes a focus on Jesus's death and resurrection as only a doctrine to be believed, ignoring the person to be trusted and obeyed. An anemic gospel treats the good news like a ticket to get past the pearly gates, but the biblical gospel is so much more. *The gospel is the good and true story that Jesus has defeated sin, death, and evil through his own death and resurrection and is making all things new, even us.* The gospel is as big as the cosmos and as small as you and me. Its renewing power is for us—the church—and for all things—the cosmos. Its power didn't fall from the sky like a magical meteorite; it was born in flesh and blood to reconcile all things on earth and in heaven (Col. 1:20). Jesus's gospel is about redeeming the physical and the spiritual, the here and now, not just the by-and-by. News of a postmortem paradise is not robust enough to renew the body of Christ. It cannot produce the transformative conversions to Christ, church, and mission.

### The Three Conversions

Martin Luther was the first to write about three conversions. He said three things need to be converted in man: the heart, the mind, and the purse. While the gospel should certainly change the use of our hearts, minds, and money, it does so by converting us to Christ, to church, and to mission. Christ, church, and mission are what man is converted to, and they show up in every epistle in the New Testament. These three conversions are not optional

3 For a helpful examination of various reasons for church decline from a gospel-centered perspective see Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008).

but essential to full-blooded discipleship.<sup>4</sup> The Bible uses two primary metaphors of the church to demonstrate how these three conversions hang together: the body and the temple.

### *The Body of Christ*

When we are converted to Jesus, we are also converted into his church. Jesus died and rose from the dead to create a new community, not a loose collection of individuals. This community has a head and a body: “[Christ] is the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18). Jesus comes with the church attached. The head is the vital source of his body, where we are “nourished and knit together” as a life-giving fellowship of saints (Col. 2:19). Just as a body is incomplete without all its parts, so each person is incomplete without connection to the body (1 Cor. 12). In fact, we are called to speak the truth in love to one another (Eph. 4:15, 25), forgive and forbear with one another (Col. 3:13), and teach and admonish one another (Col. 3:16), to strengthen the ailing parts and grow Christ’s impressive stature in the world. When we are converted to Jesus, we are converted into his diverse body.

Unfortunately, many Americans treat the church like a bobble-head Jesus—inflated head, shriveled body. Playfully swiping at the bobble, they use Jesus instead of worship him, his body barely visible. They attend church when they feel like it, participate in small groups when it’s convenient, and give little thought to

4 In fact, each conversion reflects an aspect of what it means to be a disciple. The rational aspect is present in our conversion to Christ; the relational aspect is present in our conversion to community; and the missional aspect is present in conversion to mission. Of course, each conversion also changes more than these aspects of being a disciple.

building up the body. This bobble-head savior is totally out of touch with the biblical vision of Jesus. We cannot speak truth in love, forgive and forbear, or teach and admonish in a vacuum. Distance from the church impedes these graces from flowing through Christ's community. But when we embrace the Jesus of Scripture—head and body—we step into God's awesome design for our flourishing.

In my twenties and early thirties I had the privilege of being a member of several notable churches. Each church was known for its strong teaching and preaching ministry, which had a profound impact on my own theological convictions. These churches also gave me ministry opportunities among college students and young adults, as well as teaching Sunday school. I often thank God for these influences. However, it wasn't until I joined a smaller church and began to invest in people who were very different from me that I fell in love with the church. I began to share life with people who, apart from Jesus, had little in common with me. And it was this step of faith that endeared me to the beautiful vision of Jesus to create a diverse, redeemed body. This came with its fair share of challenges, but that's part of the point. My sharp edges wouldn't have been worn down without close relationships in true community. I've learned to truly forgive and bear with others, and they with me! When I embraced my conversion to community, I fell in love with the bride of Christ, warts and all.

The third conversion—to mission—is the growth of the body. Its growth is internal and external. The internal growth matures our faith, while the external growth adds new members to the body. As we teach and baptize, the body grows into a redeemed, multiethnic humanity that displays the full stature of Christ (Eph.

4:13). This missional growth requires bold, loving gospel witness to the world. The more we benefit from the body, the more we ought to invite others into it and into Christ. The body metaphor contains all three conversions—the head, the body, and the full stature of Christ (Christ, church, and mission).<sup>5</sup>

### *Steady-State Community*

In City Life Church we practice conversion-to-community through our city groups. City groups are where we are the church to one another and to the city. These communities are small enough to foster the “one anothers” and nimble enough to renew the city in small, local pockets. After spending some time teaching our core team about conversion to the church, we began our first city group. When I suggested we meet every week, Geoff asked, “Do we have to meet every week? Can we meet every other week?” I thought about his question and then said, “How can we be a family if we gather only once every two weeks? Families share life, not occasional meetings.” Geoff and his wife quickly became a vital part of our community, faithfully loving and serving others.

Depending on what your biological family was like, church-as-family may intimidate or inspire you. It’s easy to import our own baggage or expectations into the church, but it’s also important to be aware of the baggage. Creating some space to talk about these issues with one another can be very fruitful. But in our society,

5 Although I have developed the concept of the “stature of Christ” biblically and theologically, I owe the initial insight to Andrew F. Walls, who writes: “The very height of Christ’s full stature is reached only by the coming together of the different cultural entities into the body of Christ. Only ‘together’ not on our own, can we reach his full stature.” Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 72–81.

meeting with relative strangers for two-and-a-half hours a week, sharing a meal, giving and receiving grace from people very different from us, isn't ordinary. We are used to being dependent on ourselves and, if we are honest, our highest obligation is to self—doing, saying, and feeling whatever we want. In an interesting twist, self-love is the paradigm for true love. Jesus tells us to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 19:19; see Lev. 19:18). Disciples of Jesus should do, say, and try to feel what is best for others, not just for themselves. To put it bluntly, disciples of Jesus should regularly sacrifice privacy, convenience, and comfort in order to love and serve one another.

All of this is possible! Over the years many of our city groups have become much more than a weekly meeting, living in what we refer to as “steady-state community.” True community is a steady state of social, gospel, and missional connections: relating in social settings, in the good news, and on mission. It isn't unusual for our city groups to gather multiple times a week (often in pockets): at a baseball game, restaurant, or bar, in the projects, a neighborhood, or in homes. For many, steady-state community starts as a discipline to love and serve others, but it slowly matures into deeper community and heartfelt love. The challenge of loving others as we love ourselves confronts our deep-down idolatries. It exposes our functional worship of individual privacy, convenience, and comfort. However, when we practice this kind of community, it becomes a remarkable display of the gospel to the world. It was Jesus who said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

Haydn was drawn to the church not through Sunday gatherings but through the testimony of friends and mercy minis-

tries. In fact, non-Christians often find steady-state community a more natural entry point into the church. The overlap of Christians and non-Christians happens naturally during meals, birthday parties, happy hours, and in service to your city. In this flow of social, gospel, and missional connections people get to witness our love for one another, and we get to witness God's love for them.

When you gather like this, be sure to look for opportunities to talk about the deeper things of life, to love people well by listening to their struggles, doubts, and fears. Share how the gospel has helped you in your own struggles, doubts, and fears. Apply the gospel to yourself out loud with non-Christians.<sup>6</sup> Be transparent and authentic with them. Instead of hiding your faith and the deep grace you have found in Jesus, talk about it in natural ways. As you do, be sure to pray to the head of the church for new members, and watch the body grow!

### *The Temple*

The second church metaphor is the temple. Peter describes the temple as a “spiritual house” anchored by Jesus as the cornerstone (1 Pet. 2:4–8; Ps. 118:22). A cornerstone is the most important stone in the whole building.<sup>7</sup> The building depends on it for

6 Secular people often find gospel presentations off-putting, but when we authentically share how the gospel has changed us, it can be quite compelling. I describe how to “share the gospel with yourself out loud” in my book on evangelism, *The Unbelievable Gospel: Say Something Worth Believing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 49–51.

7 There is considerable debate over the meaning of the Greek word we translate as “cornerstone.” Peter actually uses two words that translate as “head corner,” which is an accurate translation of the Hebrew psalm he quotes. The word *head* can also be translated as “top,” rendering it a decorative stone put on top of a building once complete, or the cornerstone that united two walls of the temple. But these miss the cultural



structural integrity. However, the cornerstone connects to other “living stones” that together form a temple-people in which the glory of the Lord dwells (1 Pet. 2:9). As his holy temple, we are to promote one another’s holiness. Kristin shares an example of how she was converted to the church as a “living stone” that ministers to others.

It came to my attention that one of my friends was bitter and angry with those around her. She was ready to leave the church. I knew I needed to sit and have a talk with her. However, there was a large part of me that didn’t want to confront her. I was afraid of what she would think of me, of what she might say about me. I was worried about myself, and held off from loving her well, because I was afraid of what she would think of me. I lacked faith that the Holy Spirit could and would be at work in both of us.

After praying and reading about the issue, I realized that I did not need to go over a laundry list of her offenses. What she needed was a sister who would lovingly look with her at what the gospel has to say about anger, and create space for her to confess, repent, and pray for forgiveness. It was a time for me to be someone who actually loved her, pointing her

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context. In the ancient Near East, kings who presided over temple reconstruction took great pains to align a new temple with the old temple blueprint, sometimes down to the inch. Then, they would perform a ceremony, taking a stone from the old temple and fitting it into the new temple. This would often be accompanied by singing or shouting, which actually occurs in the book of Zechariah (4:7). In effect, Jesus is the essential stone (head, top, or corner) for the reconstruction and expansion of his temple, the spiritual house where the glory of the Lord dwells—the church—which comprises people from every ethnic group united in the Lord Jesus.

back to Jesus, who loves her better than anyone could. After we met, she felt blessed by the time and asked for forgiveness from those she had hurt.

Perhaps the greatest change of all happened in me! At first, I thought it was my responsibility, as a ministry leader, to confront her. But then I asked myself, “Would I do this with others if I didn’t feel the pressure of my position description? Isn’t this a part of my role as a disciple of Christ?” I fear man when I forget Jesus. The gospel is powerful, and having fresh encounters with Jesus in the gospel allows me to walk in the courage of the Holy Spirit. While I may not have it all together, God can use me just as he uses those around me, to speak into my life.<sup>8</sup>

Kristin reminds us of the loving obligation we have to speak truth and grace into others’ lives. Her story also reminds us that God’s grace agenda works best in community, where both those who correct and those who are corrected submit to the chief stone. Notice what she learned about herself: “I fear man when I forget Jesus.” Conversely, when she stepped out in faith, remembering Jesus, she loved her sister in Christ. As a result, both of them reflected the image of Christ more. God wants to use us to minister his grace to one another. Our conversion to community is clear: conversion to the cornerstone is connection to living stones. You can’t have one without the other.

How this temple metaphor conveys our conversion to mission is, perhaps, less obvious. As living stones in a holy temple, we

8 Kristin Vasquez, email to author, March 1, 2011.

have been called to display the holiness of God and proclaim the excellencies of Christ (1 Pet. 2:9). Our holiness should attract people outside the church to Christ. Our lives should be a vibrant witness to the Jesus who has changed us.

While I was getting my hair cut by a new hairdresser, she inquired about our church. I shared our commitment to renewing the city socially, spiritually, and culturally with the gospel of Jesus. She was intrigued. I gave her examples of our city-renewing activity. As the haircut ended, I shared why we do all this: “The reason we do all this isn’t because we are great; it’s because God is great. I’m not even a great pastor. The reason I do all this, Amber, is because I’m quite taken with Jesus. I’ve had a profound, personal encounter with him.” Living stones speak about their life in Christ. They can’t help it. Amber hasn’t become a living stone yet. We’re still talking about the gospel, but when anyone becomes a disciple of Christ, the temple expands as a living stone is added. God’s grand plan, from the beginning, was for the garden-temple of Eden to expand throughout the whole world, to be populated with new stones who worship Jesus Christ, the great cornerstone.<sup>9</sup> The gospel converts us three times—to the cornerstone, the living stones, and the expansion of the temple—to Christ, church, and mission.

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9 For a striking treatment of this biblical theme see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004). Beale convincingly argues that the garden of Eden in Genesis 2 was meant to be viewed as a kind of garden-temple, and that the patriarchs, Israel, and the church are all called to participate in the global expansion of God’s temple through the proclamation of the gospel.

Jesus is present in the church metaphors as head of the body and cornerstone of the temple. The body is not the head, and the living stones are not the cornerstone. Christ has exclusive claim to these primary roles because Jesus alone is Lord, not the church or our mission. Be careful you don't get that mixed up. It's easy to make more of our relationships or mission than we do of Jesus. Both church and mission will fail you, and you will fail your church and mission. The good news is that Jesus never fails. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: "He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter."<sup>10</sup> Every Christian must have his ideal community shattered before entering into real community. The same can be said of mission. He who loves his dream of mission (social justice, mercy ministry, cultural apologetics, evangelism, cultural renewal) more than he loves Jesus will become a destroyer of mission. Community and mission are second to Jesus's glory, but Jesus pursues his glory through them both. As Lord of all, *Jesus calls us into a whole way of following him in the whole of life*, including our relationships with the church and our role in his mission.

Whether these concepts are new to you or not, they probably sound challenging. The three conversions fly in the face of individualistic, consumeristic values of Western society. Repenting from Western values and returning to gospel values takes a church, which is why God gave us one another. As the church, we can live, grow, and encourage one another to believe in a gospel that reflects all three conversions. Let's not settle for an

10 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 27.

anemic gospel but live out the full-blooded good news together. Let's insist on a whole gospel in the whole of life: conversion to Christ, church, and mission. In the next couple chapters, we'll explore how to practically disciple one another.

## Mentor Discipleship

OUR THIRD CHILD, ROSAMUND, was born on Palm Sunday, 2011. She entered the world in record time among the children in our family, but not so quickly that I wasn't able to witness her birth. As her little head crowned and she took her first breath, I knew I had witnessed a miracle. New life entered the world—an eternal soul lay resting in our hands. And yet, it was also an ordinary event. That day over 360,000 babies were born. That very minute, at least two hundred and fifty souls entered the world. Birth is miraculous and mundane. In the book of Acts we witness the birth of the Christian movement. What begins as a few hundred people in Palestine grows into a multiethnic movement of thirty million by AD 350.<sup>1</sup> How did it happen? The miraculous and the

1 While many have found the rapid growth of Christianity incredulous, Professor of Social Sciences Rodney Stark has documented religious conversion rates, noting the Christian movement is statistically plausible at an annual growth rate of 3.4 percent. What is particularly striking about the Christian movement is its makeup. Biblical Christianity has always been urban-centric, transclass, multiethnic, notably compassionate, and women affirming. For more detail see, Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of*

mundane. Ordinary men and women were reborn in an instant through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, most of them unnamed, and yet the Spirit worked through them to launch a gospel movement that changed the world. How did they do it?

### Discipleship Strategy

When Peter preached his first sermon in post-resurrection Jerusalem, the Spirit fell upon the world in an unprecedented way. Salvation came to men and women from many nations, ranging from present-day Iran, throughout the Middle East down into Africa, and eastward to Turkey (Acts 2:1–13). As the burgeoning church began to organize, deacons were appointed to assist with the practical and economic needs of the rapidly growing church, “and the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly” (Acts 6:7). What was their growth strategy? *The word of God increased, and the disciples multiplied.* The word *increased* can mean to grow in size or scope, while the word *multiplied* means to increase in number. This word pair is a redemptive echo of the original mandate given to Adam and Eve to increase and multiply (Gen. 1:28).<sup>2</sup> As the gospel spreads in influence, it remakes humanity and refocuses our mission in

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*Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 156–58.

- 2 The words translated “fruitful” and “multiply” in Genesis 1:28 of the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, are the same two Greek words that occur in Acts 6:7, translated “increase” and “multiply.” The original creation mandate to fruitfully produce and multiply images of God is refocused through the fruitful word to multiply renewed images of God, that is, disciples of Jesus. The gospel is renewing humanity and will one day renew the whole, subdued creation. This deliberate echo is a reminder that gospel ministry isn’t anemic but robust, a whole way of living wholly under Christ for the whole of creation. For more see Jonathan Dodson, “Missional

Christ. But *how* did the gospel remake humanity? What is the magic link between the gospel increasing and disciples multiplying? The answer is *you*. Someone has to carry the gospel message *to* potential disciples. There is no plan B. The magic is in the mundane—the church. The priceless word of God increases in influence through ordinary Christians who give the gospel to others. The whole Christian movement hangs on ordinary people *sharing life and sharing the gospel*. This is exactly what Paul did.

### *Sharing Life and the Gospel*

Early in his ministry, the apostle Paul and his companion, Silas, made an unexpected visit to the Greek coast, where they ministered in the Macedonian capital city of Thessalonica. Despite the abundance of deities in the large, cosmopolitan city, we're told that "a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women" responded in faith to Paul's gospel teaching (Acts 17:4). In fact, Paul and his companions were accused of turning the whole world "upside-down" and were driven out of the city.

While in Thessalonica Paul and Silas didn't rent a hotel room and just pop in on the church when it was convenient. They lived in their midst, staying in the home of a man named Jason. Paul worked with the Thessalonians, ate meals with them, and developed a fond affection for them: "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8). Their strategy was simple: *share not only the gospel but their very lives*. We often complicate ministry, thinking

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Discipleship: Reinterpreting the Great Commission," Boundless.org, May 21, 2020, <https://www.boundless.org/>.



we need to achieve seminary-level education, participate in elaborate programs, and possess expertise in cultural apologetics. While God uses all of these things, it is refreshing to see the simplicity of Paul's discipleship practice: share life and the gospel with others. What would happen if you did the same thing? What could God do if you shared your meals, your affection, and your good news with your neighbors? You too might turn a city upside down.

Sharing life and the gospel is the most effective thing we've ever done at City Life. It's how we started the whole church. I remember sitting in my office before the first core team meeting in our home thinking about what I should say to everyone. I had a prospectus, a finely-crafted vision statement, a passion for theology, a read on the culture, and hopes and dreams about what we could become. Where to start? Panicking, I called a friend to ask his advice. He said to me, "Jonathan, just share a home-cooked meal and learn their stories. Get to know their nicknames from Junior High. The church is a family, so become one." That's just what we did, and people came back for more. It's what we're still doing, and people still keep coming. We shared not only the gospel but our very lives.

### **Spiritual Fathers, Mothers, and Brothers**

In a family, it's important for a mother and father to develop relationships with each child, not just the family unit. My relationship with each of my daughters and with my son is unique. As they age, I become less of a parent and more of a friend. This is also true when discipling spiritual family. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul describes his discipling efforts in terms of three roles: a father, a mother, and a brother. In the fatherly and

motherly approach, he acts more like a mentor or spiritual parent.<sup>3</sup> But in the brotherly role, he acts like peer or a friend.

### *Spiritual Fathers*

Paul writes: “For you know how, *like a father with his children*, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:11–12). Paul’s discipleship goal is to encourage the Thessalonians to walk in a manner worthy of God, to live like Christ. How does he accomplish this? As a fatherly mentor he exhorts and encourages others in the faith.

Exhortation has fallen out of practice in our society. Since we live in a flat authority culture, where everyone feels as though he or she possesses as much authority as anyone else, it can be difficult to discharge this fatherly responsibility. I experience this tension often when I am at a restaurant in our progressive city. Often Austin servers will wait on you with a bit of an edge in their demeanor, as if to say, “Just because I’m serving you doesn’t mean you’re better than me.” This flatness can make us feel as though we don’t have the right to exhort others.

However, while everyone is equal, *Christ* is our unequal. We are bound together under the authority of Christ, who possesses all authority in heaven and on earth, and commands us to teach one another to obey all he commanded. Therefore, when we exhort

3 Paul Stanley and Bobby Clinton helpfully identify six different types of mentors in three categories: *Intensive* (discipler, spiritual guide, coach); *Occasional* (counselor, teacher, sponsor), and *Passive* (model). When we narrow down what we are looking for, it is easier to find someone to mentor that particular need. Stanley and Clinton, *Connecting: The Mentoring Relationships You Need to Succeed in Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1992), 42.

one another, we are not appealing to our own authority but to the authority of Christ. Even in our society's egalitarian ethos, people recognize the importance of good authority. We expect football players to run the play the coach calls. We elect politicians who we believe will promote legislation in the best interest of others. We submit to city planners when we yield to traffic lights knowing that, if we don't respect their authority, it could be fatal. Good authority promotes safety and human flourishing, and so does fatherly exhortation.

How should we exhort one another? *To exhort is to challenge people to live in step with their beliefs.* When I was in my early twenties, I disregarded Jesus's teaching about sexual purity. One day my father pulled me aside and said, "Son, when are you going to keep the integrity of God's word?" I believed the word of God but wasn't living in line with it. My father called me to align my behaviors with my beliefs. He challenged me to be a person of integrity, a person whose inner and outer life aligns. And he did it with a question. He wasn't condemning or demeaning, but he was serious. He could see the damage I was causing, the dangers that lay ahead, and how I was dishonoring Christ. So he lovingly exhorted me with a sincere question. It pierced my heart, on the spot. His exhortation changed the course of my life. I stopped being sexually promiscuous and started honoring women and Christ.

Exhortation doesn't always yield peaceful repentance. Stanley came to Christ through our young adults ministry in South Hampton, Massachusetts. He was eager to grow in his faith, so we began meeting regularly for breakfast on Saturday mornings. He asked good questions and gobbled up God's word, and I en-

joyed his company. We became quite close. After each Saturday breakfast, I walked away with my spirits lifted. Stanley was making godly decisions and becoming more like Christ. Then, one Saturday morning he shared he was seeing someone who wasn't a Christian. He said he'd hesitated to let me know because he was afraid I wouldn't approve. I told him I would love to meet her, and that we ought to see what God says about his dating relationship. We opened our Bibles and studied 2 Corinthians 6, where Paul exhorts Christians to not yoke or harness themselves with non-Christians (6:14–16). The answer became clear—light doesn't bind itself to darkness. Since we are the dwelling place of God's glory, we shouldn't make marital commitments that bind us to people who reject God's glory (2 Cor. 6:14). I exhorted him to honor God's word and trust that God's command was for his good. Stanley agreed. Since I was familiar with his temptation, I prayed fervently for him. The next Saturday we met, he ended the breakfast by announcing he was going to marry his girlfriend and that there was nothing I could do about it. I pleaded with him to reconsider and honor God. After he walked out the door, he didn't return my calls, and I never saw him again. Although this happened some twenty years ago, it still pains me to think about it.

Being a spiritual father isn't easy, but it can be rewarding. I think of the time I confronted Aaron for not loving his wife as Christ loves the church (Eph. 5:25). She complained that he wasn't available to help with the kids after he got home from work in the evenings. Aaron felt entitled to play video games after a hard day's work. I asked him what would happen to him if Jesus had lived according to what he was entitled to? He paused for a second, then said, "He wouldn't have died on the cross for

me, and I wouldn't know him or have forgiveness of sins." Then I asked, "What would it look like for you to love your wife the way Christ has loved you?" He stopped ignoring his wife and children when he got home, and started serving his family and leading them spiritually.

Nate was a musician who lived off of gigs and led a sordid life on tour. When I challenged him to fight sin, love God, and serve his family, he started taking sin and his roles as a husband and father seriously. He grew in grace and eventually started a roofing business that gives back to his employees and community in a way few roofing companies do. Years later, Nate said to me, "Thank you for teaching me so much about the gospel and about being a man. My life is entirely different because of it." It's inspiring to see exhortation result in fruitful life change, and this privileged view isn't just for spiritual fathers. It's for everyone. Hebrews instructs Christians to exhort one another *every day* lest we be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, so we can live as one who shares in Christ (Heb. 3:12–14). Exhortation isn't only about living up to our beliefs but also helping one another live into our true identity.

### *Spiritual Mothers*

Discipling also includes encouragement. Ironically, in our age of online "likes" and "hearts," people find it difficult to encourage one another in person. Our media platforms cater more toward narcissistic self-praise than to actual affirmation. Yet, we pine for praise of our good qualities, hard work, and sincere spiritual growth. So why don't we encourage others?

To encourage is to come alongside someone, to put an arm around him or her, and say, "You can do this." When I was in

graduate school, a couple professors encouraged me to consider publishing. So I did. I wrote an article on the topic of accountability groups and submitted it to blogs, websites, and journals. It was rejected over and over again. Disheartened and ready to give up, I shared my rejections with a mentor who had published a number of books. He encouraged me by saying I had a gift and to not give up editing and submitting the article. Eventually the article was accepted by a journal I respected, and it became the seed of the fourth chapter in this book. If Steve hadn't encouraged me, you might not be reading this book!

Encouragement also comes alongside others and draws attention to their Christlike character. Paul bragged about the Thessalonians' brotherly love and how it was an example for the rest of the churches (1 Thess. 4:9–10). He praised the Macedonians for their generosity (2 Cor. 8:1–5). He expressed profound gratitude for the Philippians' partnership in the gospel (Phil. 1:4–5). We could go on. When you see the persistent presence of growth in others, try to point it out. "I've noticed how disciplined you've been about your chores." "Your attention to detail on this project has been so helpful." "I've noticed you are encouraging others more; that's awesome." "I've seen a real humility in you lately." "When you served that person, it really reminded me of Christ." "Honey, I am so impressed by how you integrate your faith with your work. Your patience and grace with your clients is amazing."

The Greek word for encouragement also has undertones of comfort. Paul uses the same word later in 1 Thessalonians when he exhorts every church member to "encourage the fainthearted" (5:14). When people feel downtrodden, they don't need to be exhorted but encouraged. They need to know they are loved and

that others are for them. When expressing this discipling quality, Paul draws on the imagery of a gentle mother with a nursing child. Gentle mothers conform their lives to the needs of their children. They sacrifice sleep, sanity, and freedom to nurture life, and they often do it tenderly not begrudgingly. When others are struggling or crushed in spirit, we may be tempted to quote Scripture to them or back off, unsure of what to do. We may think, “Strugglers are time-consuming.” But that’s precisely what struggling people need—a sacrifice of time, a gift of empathy, and most of all, Christ. Jesus is the most encouraging person alive. He welcomes the weary, the sinner, and the flat-out failure with open arms. He is not thinking, “I have something else better to do.” Quite the opposite—he loves to encourage his followers (Matt. 11:29–30).

Amber is an encourager. When sufferers share what they are going through, she often offers a groan of empathy but waits to speak. She listens carefully to what others say. Then, after gently listening to others, she offers a wise word of encouragement. She doesn’t flatter the ego. She points people to Jesus in a discerning, heartfelt way. One night in our city group we joked that she is the mother of the group. We can all learn a lot from Amber. Be on the lookout for motherly encouragers and try to absorb what you can. Let’s encourage one another.

### *Spiritual Brothers*

Finally, Paul also related to the church as a brother. He uses the term “brother” eighteen times to refer to the Thessalonians, writing to encourage, urge, exhort, inform, and celebrate them. In turn, he receives encouragement, love, respect, and prayer from his spiritual brothers and sisters. Paul wasn’t just a spiri-

tual mentor; he was their friend. As their friend, he didn't turn a blind eye to their sin or ghost them when things got difficult. He praised their exemplary brotherly love (1 Thess. 4:9) and urged everyone to live mature Christian lives: "And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all" (5:14). Patient admonishment, encouragement, and help aren't activities reserved for an apostle or a pastor; they are everyday expressions of brotherly love. To refuse them is to not care for our spiritual family. This is baseline Christianity: exhorting and encouraging one another in the faith, men and women discipling one another as fathers, mothers, and brothers.

### All Three Roles

I met Ryan at Frank, an artisan hotdog restaurant in downtown Austin, where our mutual friend Mike introduced us. Right away, I knew there was potential for discipleship. Sometimes you can just feel the Spirit creating an affinity for mentoring. Ryan was a spiritual outlier. He had some exposure to Christianity in college, but since then had moved on. He formed a successful touring band based out of Chicago, then moved to Austin to start over, where he founded a company. In our first conversation, I tried to get to know Ryan. I asked all him kinds of questions: Where are you from? What do you love to do? Why do you love it? What are you looking for out of life? (This is a good question to make a deeper connection.) I could tell he was surprised by my level of interest in him, something Christians ought to be known for. After our lunch, I asked if he would be interested in meeting again. He said yes. I walked away praying for him.



Next time we met for pizza. Ryan expressed serious doubt about Christianity and the person of Jesus. So I suggested we start reading the Gospel of John together to get answers from the primary source. He agreed it would be a good idea. I'll never forget our first meeting to discuss John. He sat down and said, "Man, I don't mean to offend you, but Jesus can be a real jerk." That was a first for me, and a real eye-opener to how a skeptic can interpret Jesus's actions. Ryan was put off by Jesus's stiff words to the Pharisees. This gave me an opportunity to explain the difference between religious people who should know better and irreligious people who don't. This quickly led to reflection on the gospel of grace, where I used the principles of repenting of sin and rejoicing in Christ in an informal way. We began to meet regularly.

The Spirit was wooing Ryan, who had great questions like, "How can God be jealous if he's perfect?" "What does 'give it to God' mean?" We discussed these questions in depth. Ryan was spiritually hungry and intellectually intrigued. Eventually, my wife and I went to dinner with Ryan and his fiancée. The ladies hit it off. Ryan soon began attending Sunday gatherings. He was moving away from skepticism to wholehearted belief. One day he said to me, "After you see it, you can debate the truth all you want, but it won't go away." This somewhat reluctant observation eventually gave way to awe over the gospel when, one day over coffee he said, "Bob Dylan's melodies are like the gospel, simple enough for anyone to grasp but layered enough to ponder a lot." I said, "Ryan, that is insightful, and I am writing that down!" When our church band recorded an EP, Ryan did the lead vocals on "And Can It Be." After the recording he turned to our worship leader and said, "Man, if three years ago you told me I would be

singing in church, I would have said, ‘No way.’” But Ryan gained an interest in the Savior’s blood, and now he’s making disciples.

Discipling Ryan has been a true joy. I’ve moved through the various roles of spiritual father, mother, and brother. As you can probably tell, I’ve learned a lot from him. This is one mark of effective, individual discipling—*discipleship is a two-way street*. Engage others with the conviction that you always have something to learn. Validate their insights. Don’t disciple as if you are the guru and your disciple is the novice. There’s only one “guru.” We’re all trying to learn from him. Remember, everyone has something to contribute, and when you treat people with that kind of respect, it will endear them to Christ. Discipleship is always a two-way street. Here are several observations from Ryan’s story to implement when you’re discipling others.

- Disciple in the *everyday rhythms* of life (meals, coffee break, double date).
- *Ask good questions*; don’t just dispense information.
- *Pray* for those you disciple before, during, and after meetings.
- *Listen carefully* to what people say. Words are often attached to hopes and fears of the heart.
- *Affirm* their insights, questions, and accomplishments.



## Peer Discipleship

WE ARE DISCIPLED CONSTANTLY. Newsfeeds, podcasts, Facebook, and Instagram battle for our formation. “Another injustice? I hate the \_\_\_\_.” “Man, after hearing that podcast I should probably rethink my whole faith.” “I can’t believe they’d post that; they’re so out of touch.” “Why don’t I look like *that*?” Very often our media inputs play to the flesh not to the Spirit. It’s rare to see a social media encouragement to die to ourselves and live in Christ. Rather, the message tends to be: “Fulfill yourself. Express yourself. Satisfy yourself. Define *your* self.” Nothing could be further from the gospel. And that’s just our online influences; how much more carefully should we select our friends?

### Spiritual War

We are in a spiritual war. It has several fronts. On one front, Satan prowls about like a lion seeking to devour, but the tricky thing is he often looks like an angel of light. His attack is so subtle, we often have no idea we’re under siege. Often he tries to subvert our

commitment to the church. He knows if he can turn members against one another, the church will fall and faith in her head will follow. When I meet with upset church members, we often discover that their anger was in response to a misperception. The deceiver is always hard at work. Meanwhile, the world parades a hundred comforts in front of us a day. We are tempted by the values of the world to live for career success, the comforts of home, and social ease. Is it any wonder we're reluctant to embrace self-sacrifice? Then there's the battle against the flesh, that lingering vestige of our pre-Christian lives. Dr. Richard Lovelace, expert in church renewal, describes the flesh as "the fallen human personality apart from the renewing influence and control of the Holy Spirit."<sup>1</sup> The Spirit is critical. The world and the devil are external fronts in the spiritual war while the flesh is an internal front, where evil is smuggled into the heart. This primary front is where we need to hold the line. If we don't, we die: "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:13). Spiritual fighting is a matter of life and death.

The good news is we can triumph over the flesh in the power of the Spirit. We can "put to death" our slinking anxiety, self-pity, anger, fear of man, vanity, lust, pride, and greed. Every evil thing. We can skewer it. But not alone. Just as our sins affect others, so do our victories. Upon salvation, we are enlisted into

1 Lovelace further explains the flesh: "The New Testament constantly describes it as something much deeper than the isolated moments of sin which it generates. The lists of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19–21 and Colossians 3:5–9 point mostly to heart conditions rather than discrete actions." Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 89–90.

an innumerable army with limitless resources. But lone soldiers are easily picked off. If we work together as a company, a unit, as peers under the Lord Jesus Christ, we are formidable. In fact, Jesus promises, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). He builds his church, together.

How can we fight the good fight of faith? In this chapter, I will explain the concept of “discipleship groups” as a way for all disciples to fight for what is noble and beautiful. My hope is that discipleship groups will help you experience victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil and enjoy Jesus Christ.

### What Is a Discipleship Group?

Discipleship groups are small, simple groups of two to four people who meet regularly to *repent of sin, rejoice in Christ, and reproduce disciples*. Men meet with men and women meet with women in order to effectively address gender-specific issues head-on. I have been in discipleship groups for years. Some have been better than others. Along the way, I’ve discovered groups that make the gospel central are much more effective and enjoyable.

When we planted City Life Church, I preached a sermon on fighting the fight of faith and cast a vision for what we then called “fight clubs.”<sup>2</sup> People started forming groups right away. I quickly wrote an article to give the groups some guidance. The groups

2 I have removed the fight club imagery in this edition for several reasons. First, it was never my intention to associate the fight of faith with ultimate fighting or hypermasculine activity. Second, while some have found the term helpful, others have found it off-putting for these and other reasons. Renaming them *discipleship groups* has a broader appeal.

went viral. People started meeting all over the city to fight the fight of faith during the week in bars, coffee shops, and homes. Since discipleship groups form less top-down and more bottom-up, they are difficult to monitor for health, which is a big reason I wrote this book. I wanted to equip our people to fight well with Spirit-empowered faith in the promises of God.

We launched discipleship groups informally because we didn't want them to compete with the primary community structure (city groups) in our new church. To clarify the difference between the two we like to say: *God picks your community (city groups), while you pick your friends (discipleship group)*. Community is a command; friendship is elective. We're saved into God's new community where, hopefully, we're able to choose some friends. Since city groups are based on providential geography, they are populated by different genders, personalities, races, and so on. This diversity is critical to spiritual formation and mission. However, discipleship groups are made up of people we pick. They may or may not include people from your city group. City groups are family; discipleship groups are friends. Ideally, there's overlap, but it's not required. What matters is a relationship of trust and these three principles: (1) Repent of sin, (2) Rejoice in Christ, (3) Reproduce Disciples.<sup>3</sup>

3 When we originally started fight clubs, our three principles for fighting sin were: Know your Sin; Fight your Sin; Trust your Savior. While these principles are still true, I felt like the mantra was inadequate in several ways. First, the principles were heavy on sin. While sin is a serious enemy, Christ is a greater Savior. So, I decided to push "knowing and fighting" together into repentance. Second, I wanted to emphasize not only trusting Jesus but the religious affections—the *joy* of trusting Jesus—hence the phrase "Rejoice in Christ." Finally, in keeping with the missional aspect of discipleship, I felt it was important to include vision for reproducing disciples. As we grow in the gospel, we ought to give it away to people who need Jesus.

### 1. Repent of Sin

As we explained in chapter 5, *repentance is not a one-time act to get us into heaven, but an entire way of life to maintain Christian joy*. It is a single turn from the bogus promises of sin to the blood-bought promises of the Savior. But to turn to our Savior, we must disentangle ourselves from our sin. We must become students of our spiritual pathology so that we can help one another apply God's healing remedy. We can know our sin by asking three questions: What? When? and Why?

First we must ask, *What?* What sins are you currently tempted by? Some temptations change from season to season, while others remain the same. Name your temptations and sins. Confess them to your friends. An unknown or unacknowledged opponent is impossible to defeat. Our temptations can be as obvious as anger or as subtle as self-pity. As you prayerfully examine your life, remember, you are God's child not his project. He knows you, sees all your sins, and loves you still! Talk openly with him about your struggles; ask him to reveal your sins and convict you of them (Ps. 139:23–24; John 16:8). Invite your discipleship group to point out sins they see in your life. Very often, our self-perception is about as accurate as a carnival mirror.<sup>4</sup> A loving community can help us by holding up the mirror of God's word so we can see ourselves more clearly. The word is powerful, sharper than any sword, dividing between things visible and invisible, judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12). Use God's word as a mirror to expose sin and as a scalpel to excise it.

<sup>4</sup> See Paul Tripp in his *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 152.



Once you have identified the *what*, it is important to consider the *when*. If we don't think about the times when we're most likely to be tempted, sin will sneak up on us to take us out. It is always crouching at our door (Gen. 4:7). When are you tempted to sin? Consider the circumstances that surround your sin and identify your sins. For example:

- Do you find yourself tempted to vanity or self-pity when lingering in front of the mirror?
- Does sexual lust or despair creep in on late, lonely nights watching TV?
- Are you prone to pride when you succeed or receive a compliment?
- Are you easily angered in traffic or while waiting in line?

If we know the circumstances of our temptation, we can be prepared to fight it off.

Finally, a critical question to ask is, *Why*? Why do you sin in this way? The *why* question is important because it gets below sin to the heart. The truth is, we never sin out of duty. No one stands behind us twisting our arm. We sin willingly. In that moment, our hearts desire something other than Christ. If we don't address the motivational issues behind our sin, we will treat it superficially, adjusting our behavior not our hearts. God doesn't want mere behavioral adjustment; he wants affectionate obedience: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

To love Jesus and uncover your motivation, ask yourself why you gravitate to certain sins. What do you believe they will do for you? What is it that your heart longs for? What are you desir-

ing or valuing most when you sin in a particular area? Using the examples above, we may sin because we desire:

- Worth and beauty
- Satisfaction or companionship
- Confidence or success
- Convenience or efficiency

Notice that none of these desires are bad, but when they are directed to the wrong place, they become deadly. Sin promises us that these desires can be ultimately fulfilled apart from Christ. Consider how these good desires can be twisted by lies into sinful motivations.

*Vanity:* If you perform beautifully, then you have worth.

*Lust:* If you find sexual intimacy on the internet, then you won't be lonely or stressed.

*Pride:* If people paid you more compliments, then you would be more confident.

*Anger:* If you don't get your way, you have the right to get angry.

Many of our sins can be traced back to a belief in a lie. These false promises of worth, satisfaction, confidence, and convenience motivate our sin. If we are to discover true acceptance, approval, satisfaction, worth, beauty, and significance, we need the ability to expose those lies. Cultivate a habit of looking beneath your sin to the lie underneath it, "to the sin under the sin."<sup>5</sup> Help one

5 Timothy Keller, "All of Life Is Repentance," Redeemer Presbyterian Church, [http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/All\\_of\\_Life\\_Is\\_Repentance-Keller.pdf](http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/All_of_Life_Is_Repentance-Keller.pdf).

another get to the motivational *why* by asking questions such as, “What do you believe that will give you?” “Why do you desire that more than Christ?” “Any idea why that is more appealing?” Once we understand why we sin, we can expose the false promise and replace it with a true promise. If we don’t address the *why* question, we will inevitably drift into religious white knuckling or rebellious shoulder shrugging. To avoid drifting, we need gospel motivation.

Repentance involves knowing the *what* (sin), the *when* (circumstance), and the *why* (motive). But it’s not enough to analyze our sin; we must also wrestle free from it. To do that, we must stretch out to grasp something better.

## *2. Rejoice in Christ*

Jesus is better. We sing it; we say it; we counsel it. But *how* is Jesus better? That’s the trick to defeating sin, because sin secretly says, “I’m better than what Jesus has to offer.”

*Attributes of Jesus.* There are numerous ways to uncover the glory of Christ. One way is to consider the roles and attributes of Jesus and compare them to sin’s offer. For instance, if we are tempted to sulk in self-pity, believing no one cares about us or will stand up for us, we can remind ourselves that Christ is our *advocate* (1 John 2:1). If Jesus willingly advocates for us before the greatest audience, our heavenly Father, how much more can we trust him when snubbed by a lesser audience? Jesus stands in heaven eternally making intercession for us (Heb. 7:25). There is no greater advocate.

Or perhaps we’re exhausted, worn down by the week, and feel like we need refreshment. While Netflix can be an innocent

distraction, it does not offer rest. Films are for entertainment, but Christ is for refreshment. As we saw in chapter 1, Jesus is our rest. He says, “Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Jesus is our peace, comfort, and rest! Get in the habit of asking your discipleship group how Jesus is better. Compare sin’s offer to Christ’s offer, and you’ll uncover the unsurpassed glory of Christ.

*Gospel Metaphors.*<sup>6</sup> Another way to rejoice in Christ is to consider what he offers us in the gospel. All of us have deep-down longings meant to be fulfilled in the good news. However, we’re daily tempted to find satisfaction in inferior announcements. Gospel metaphors offer us specific satisfaction for deep longings. For instance, we may be tempted to gossip to a friend about someone else in order to feel accepted. Our desire—acceptance—is good, but our faith in gossip with a friend is misplaced. The gospel of justification, however, reminds us that we are perfectly accepted by God in Christ. Since he accepts us fully, we need not gossip to find acceptance with others. God invites us to repent of sinful gossip and place our hope in the good news that we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone. To those seeking acceptance, justification promises perfect acceptance before a holy God through his Son.

The metaphor of *new creation* can be especially compelling for those longing for a new start in life. If your life has been littered with failure, scarred by abuse, humbled through suffering, darkened by depression, or ruined by addiction, there is hope of becoming a new creation. This gospel metaphor offers more than a new identity; it offers a new reality. God sees you as new *because*

6 I explain and apply each metaphor in depth in Jonathan Dodson, *The Unbelievable Gospel: Say Something Worth Believing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 123–90.

*you are renewed.* In Christ, you have a new worth, a new spirit, a new power, a new Redeemer. You need not be ruled by the past; Christ is your merciful King. To those seeking hope, new creation exiles the old life and welcomes a new life, sending a bright ray of hope into the heart of the hopeless.

The metaphor of our *union with Christ* is especially rich because it offers mystical intimacy with Jesus. Our search for intimacy in relationships seems to never end. Even the best friendship or marriage isn't enough for our insatiable need to be noticed, loved, and cared for. We all want a place where we can be ourselves and know we are accepted. We want relationships where we feel safe to share our innermost thoughts and darkest struggles. This is especially true of the sexual struggler, the spouse stuck in a broken marriage, or the lonely single. To those seeking intimacy, union with Christ invites an intimate, loving, unbreakable, fulfilling relationship that brings deep healing and joy.

Instead of simply asking, "How is the gospel better?" invite one another to claim a specific gospel metaphor that displaces the power of sin.

*The Promises of God.* A third way to repent is by trusting in the promises of God. Trusting our Savior makes discipleship personal. When we trust in his promises, we cut through religious performance and spiritual license, leading to soul-sweetening obedience. And guess what? He is utterly trustworthy—the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8)! All of God's promises are guaranteed, "Yes" and "Amen," in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20). Jesus is a totally trustworthy Redeemer who double-backs his promises. As if that isn't enough, God gives us his Holy Spirit to prompt faith in God's promises. Like lightning through steel,

the Spirit's power is released through Scripture to awaken our hearts to the glory of God dazzling off the face of Christ. But to experience that power, we need to know his promises. We need not just random verses but specific promises and warnings for personal temptations and trials. Fumes from Sunday worship are not enough. We need to have the word at our side, ready to wield the truth at a moment's notice. Develop a practice of identifying the promises of sin and comparing them to the promises of Christ. Let's examine a few specific sins and compare them to specific promises.

*Sexual Lust: seeking satisfaction.* Instead of trusting in sexual lust for satisfaction, trust God for true satisfaction. Jesus says: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). God is the most beautiful, glorious, satisfying being in the universe. Seeing him is thrilling. The psalmist reminds us, "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, / that we may rejoice and be glad all our days" (90:14). So, when you are tempted to lust, turn to God for true satisfaction and be ravished.

*Lust* says: Act on your urges, and you will be satisfied.

*Scripture* says: The pure in heart will be satisfied.

*Vanity: seeking beauty.* Instead of relying on vanity for worth, consider the beauty of God: "What we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). When you are tempted to find your worth in your appearance, turn to God's beauty and be content with the beauty you have in him.

*Vanity* says: Perform beautifully, and you will have worth.

*Scripture* says: Behold the glory of Christ, and you will bear his beauty.

*Pride: seeking confidence.* Instead of trusting in compliments or praise for confidence, believe the truth that your adequacy comes from God: “Such is the confidence we have toward God through Christ. Not that we are adequate in ourselves so as to consider anything as having come from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate” (2 Cor. 3:4–6 NASB). It’s true we are inadequate, but we are made more than adequate in Christ.

*Pride* says: Cherish compliments, and you will be confident.

*Scripture* says: Your confidence comes from being made sufficient in Jesus.

*Anger: responding to circumstances.* Instead of getting angry because you don’t get your way, put your trust in the Lord’s way: “Be angry, and do not sin; / ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. / Offer right sacrifices, / and put your trust in the LORD” (Ps. 4:4–5). Put your trust in God, not in circumstances going your way or what you think is right.

*Anger* says: If I don’t get my way, I have the right to get angry.

*Scripture* says: Trust in the Lord, not in controlling your circumstances.

These precious and magnificent promises are so freeing! Get in the habit of comparing the promises of sin to the promises of Scripture. Write down a sin promise next to a gospel promise in order to see the staggering difference between the two. When you identify the sin promise, it forces you to search the Scriptures

for how *the gospel is better*. There's something about seeing the futility of sin next to the truth of Scripture that helps us enjoy Christ. Memorize God's promises together; write them on your heart, quote them to your temptations and, most importantly, cherish them.

The verse we examined earlier in this chapter also comes with a promise. If we "put to death the deeds of the body," we will live (Rom. 8:13). Those who skewer sin by trusting the Redeemer enjoy life. One day that life will flower into eternal enjoyment of the promises of God in his renewed creation forever and ever. No more sin, temptation, or repentance! We will fully and forever face the Lord. There will be only joy!

### 3. *Reproduce Disciples*

Finally, disciples should reproduce. The joy we receive from Christ should compel us to share the gospel with others. C. S. Lewis wrote, "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment. . . . The delight is incomplete until it is expressed."<sup>7</sup> Joy in Christ is not meant to be kept under lock and key, but opened up to share liberally with others.

After mentoring someone for a season, I will typically invite a third person to join us, moving from one-on-one discipleship to group discipleship. We set a regular meeting time to connect, read the Scriptures, and pray (which I'll discuss in detail in the next chapter). When discipling as a group, you can add, multiply, or even subtract disciples.

7 C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1958), 95.



*Adding.* One way to reproduce disciples in the group model is to add a third or fourth person to the group with the stated goal of dividing up to reproduce in the future. This allows the new person to immerse in the rhythms of *repent of sin, rejoice in Christ*, and then move on with the goal of *reproducing disciples*.

*Multiplying.* After a season of investment in a discipleship group, I typically challenge the guys in my group to start new groups. Then, I move on to disciple someone else. Ideally, this multiplies disciples a couple times. I typically have two discipleship groups going at once: a mentor group and a peer group. In my experience, the mentor group tends to be more missional, “mentoring down” to those exploring Christianity or younger in the faith. In these relationships I am more of a spiritual father. In the peer group I disciple and am disciplined more evenly. In these relationships, I am a spiritual brother. In my experience, the mentoring groups tend to be more missional and multiply more often. However, I’ve heard plenty of stories of peer groups that include non-Christian friends who are spiritually curious. Sometimes these groups will read an apologetic book together, and other times people will get right to the primary source of God’s word to examine Jesus’s claims.

*Subtracting.* Sometimes a discipleship relationship doesn’t work out. This can be the result of someone rejecting an exhortation, like Stanley, who chose to walk away (see chap. 8). Or it may be the result of a conflict. In those cases, it is important to follow Jesus’s guidance in Matthew 18 to win a brother, even if you lose a disciple.

There are many ways to reproduce disciples. However, we should be cautious in making multiplication the golden calf of

ministry. Some have said, “Everything that is healthy multiplies,” implying that if we “do discipleship right,” our disciples will multiply like rabbits. A problem with this mantra is that it assumes health. We are all a work in progress—images in glorious ruin that the Spirit is slowly restoring. Some grow faster than others. We all have tough seasons, and some of us have especially challenging backstories that limit our pace. Growth for some is facing the finish line. For others it’s running a six-minute mile. Since spiritual growth is relative, multiplication of disciples will not always be normative. We are disciples not rabbits. In the words of Saint Peter, our goal is to grow in the *grace* and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).



## Discipleship Groups

NOW THAT YOU HAVE READ most of the book, you're probably wondering how to start a discipleship group. It's quite easy to start; the real challenge is sustaining it. When starting a group, you'll want to pray, pick, plan, and peruse.

### **Forming Your Group**

#### *Pray*

Ask God to connect you with one or two friends you can grow with. In addition to directing you to other disciples, prayer sets you off on the right foot—dependent upon God not yourself or others. I frequently pray when I'm between mentoring groups, asking God to guide me to someone who is spiritually hungry and a wise choice to invest in. Even Jesus withdrew at daybreak to pray before calling his disciples (Luke 6:12).

#### *Pick*

Discipleship groups are relationally driven, so pick people you can trust. Establish an agreed-upon level of confidentiality within

your group and make a commitment to one another. Discipleship groups of uncommitted people simply don't promote gospel-centered growth.

### *Plan*

Set a regular meeting time. One of the first things you should do is sync your calendars for an agreed meeting time. Groups that don't schedule a regular meeting time, don't meet regularly. Meet once a week or every other week. Allow at least an hour.

### *Peruse This Book*

People who don't apply the principles in this book often don't grow well. They end up reinforcing legalism or license, making their discipleship soft or wooden. Reading this book will get you on the same page, so you can repent of sin, rejoice in Christ, and reproduce disciples. I recommend reading a chapter a week and discussing it, so you can pursue gospel-centered discipleship together. If you don't have time to read the whole book, you can just read part 3.

## **Sustaining Your Group**

Healthy discipleship groups are simple, reproducible, and biblical.

*Simple:* No more than two to four people to a group, gathering in the ordinary rhythms of life (breakfast, lunch, an evening out) to encourage one another in the gospel.

*Reproducible:* If the group grows beyond three, it is important that the newest member participates a short while to get the idea and then starts a new group. This retains the intimacy and trust built in the initial group, while also fostering reproduction—more discipleship groups!

*Biblical:* Healthy discipleship groups allow the biblical text to order our lives, not our lives to order the text. As we'll see, reading Scripture in a Christ-centered way makes a world of difference.

### *Text-Theology-Life*

Text-Theology-Life is essentially how I read the Bible and teach others how to interpret it. This is a simplified explanation of what I usually take two months to teach in a City seminary-type class. If you haven't read a book or taken a class on Bible interpretation (also known as hermeneutics), I highly recommend doing so.<sup>1</sup> This will help you read the Bible in context and with Christ-centered understanding, which is critical to cultivating gospel holiness.

*Text.* I recommend that your group read the same biblical text together during the week. If the Bible isn't central, you will end up relying on yourself and one another. You will find it difficult to get past conversations about life. However, if the Bible is central, you will be more likely to respond to God and counsel one another with the gospel. Each person should commit to reading the same chapter from a book of the Bible each week. For example, your group could read through Colossians in four weeks, taking one chapter a week. As you read, make a point of asking the Holy Spirit to draw your attention to what he wants to say. The Spirit may be prompting you to repent of a sin, rejoice in a promise,

1 Here are a few recommendations, from introductory to more advanced: Robert Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010); Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007); Greg Beale, ed., *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994).

meditate on an insight, or praise God for an attribute. Each week, when you get together, make the text your initial focus by sharing how the Spirit has moved through the word to change you. Some groups use a Bible study aid to help them read the passage well. This can be helpful, but remember—the primary goal is to encounter God in the text not to get caught up in academic exegesis. This is a discipleship group not a study group.

*Theology.* Moving from text to theology, work through the text trying to follow the flow of the author. Ask one another questions like, “What do you think Paul meant in verse 1?” “How does the context inform our understanding of the story?” “How does that observation compare to the rest of the chapter?” This helps everyone follow the author’s intention instead of reading his own interpretation into the text.

From there, try to understand the central theological message of the chapter. Ask yourself, “What does this passage tell me about God?” A passage will typically highlight a divine attribute or action. It may emphasize the work of the Father, Son, or Spirit. As you move deeper into the text, look for the gospel. The gospel is always in context. Remember from chapter 9 that we can look for attributes of Jesus, gospel metaphors, or biblical promises to help us enjoy God’s grace. When the text brings sinful doubts, fears, and desires to the surface, discern your ungodly motivations and redress them with gospel motivations present in the passage. Identify your belief in false promises, repent, and turn to trust in God’s good and true promises. *Strive to be Christ-centered not application-centered.* The goal is not to “apply” the text but to be awestruck with Jesus, not to “do” but to delight in him. Then, from delight in what we have discovered about Christ and his

work, we can apply the gospel to our temptations and trials. Make Jesus central. For every look at sin, look ten times at Christ!

*Life.* As you move from theology to life, inject your life struggles and successes into the conversation. Allow plenty of time for this. Ask one another questions. Graciously press one another to discern ungodly motivations and get to gospel motivations. We're fighting for faith in Christ together. Share your lives not just your insights. Be sure to ask follow-up questions when someone confesses a sin. Remember the *what*, *when*, and *why* questions. Adorn the gospel by confessing sin and repenting well. Remember, Christ alone is sufficient for your failures and strong for your successes. Take it all to the Lord Jesus in faithful prayer for one another, on the spot not just afterward. Finally, be sure to share the names of people you are trying to share the gospel with. Pray as a group, asking God to help you trust his promises and that others would experience his saving grace!

It's important that the group keep the order of Text-Theology-Life. Groups that reverse the order to Life-Theology-Text rarely get to Scripture. Often they end up pooling their sorrows or complaints, reducing the meeting to a bickering group, a gossip group, or a social club. Instead of beginning with the life-giving power of God's word, they begin with life-draining struggles, issues, and complaints. This saps the discipleship group of its power by putting self, not the gospel, first. Groups like this have no spiritual center of gravity. They lack earnestness. Discussions become flat and powerless, and people fail to grow in grace. Fight to keep Scripture central, and keep your eyes on the gospel of grace!

To be sure, there will be occasions when someone needs to share a big trial or struggle he is going through. In those cases, don't be



wooden. Allow the person to share what's going on, and respond in grace. You may not even get to the biblical text in that meeting, but be sure to pray for the struggler. It's always important to allow time for prayer. When groups form a habit of not praying, they effectively put the burden of change on themselves not on Christ. They tacitly expect themselves, not the Spirit, to effect the change they have discussed. Prayer for one another puts one another in God's hands. When we pray, we acknowledge that the greatest source of love and power is not our own counsel and presence, but God's Spirit and *his* presence.

### My Discipleship Group

My current discipleship group meets every other Friday. We typically meet at a quiet coffee shop for an hour and a half. As friends, we will reconnect briefly and then jump into the reading. Sometimes our gathering is powerful and sometimes it isn't. Sometimes we miss due to travel or holidays, but taking the marathon approach, we've seen God work in and through each of us to make one another more like Jesus. Sometimes I am the one who asks questions that get us deeper into the gospel, but this isn't always the case. I've had discipleship groups where my friends asked those questions just as much. This may take time as the natural leader takes the lead. However, we all need to learn to ask deep and pointed questions in order to expose sin and make room for grace to seep down into the heart. This practice takes time.

When my discipleship group read through the book of James, I was challenged to cultivate biblical wisdom. I had an "Aha!" moment when I realized wisdom isn't about becoming a gray-haired sage with just the right answers for everything, but instead, it's

about becoming a person who pleads with God for Christlike change whatever the circumstances of life (James 1:2–8; 3:13–18). Here are a couple snapshots of “becoming wise” from one of our discipleship group meetings.

In a recent meeting, we read and discussed chapter drafts of this book. When we read chapter 4, one person asked, “Do you guys lean toward legalism or license?” This question was useful because it helped us understand where each of us is tempted to lean away from Jesus. Depending on the season of life, I lean toward one or the other. I described my legalism as a college student. As I talked, it became apparent to me that my collegiate focus on piety was a silent way to atone for my moral failures as a Christian. Although I read the Bible, fasted, and prayed with genuine desire for God, I also hoped that I would regain his approval through my religious performance. After all, I had been kicked out of Bible school. This pious self-atonement was entirely unconscious.

Eventually, I reached a breaking point in my early twenties. I recall sitting in the driver’s seat of my little Dodge Colt, slumped over, ridden with guilt, and weeping over my sexual failures. I straightened up in resolve. I would no longer heap shame on the name of Christ. With my pocketknife open and in hand, I decided to end my life and cease sinning. I pressed the knife to my wrist. I believed death was the way out of shame, and it was—only it was Christ’s death that rescued me that day, and continues to rescue me from the misery of religious performance. My discipleship group—my friends—helped me reinterpret my past with the gospel of grace by simply showing up and asking me good questions.

Truth be told, that day in my white Dodge Colt Jesus saved me for the billionth time. His gospel is always saving us because nothing else can, not even for a moment. Jesus shed his blood so that we don't have to shed ours. Instead of death, God gives us life, life worth living. God restrained my hand and turned me, once again, to Christ. Although I didn't realize it at the time, God was showering me with grace. He was teaching me the gospel. He was saying, "Jonathan, my Son has already performed for all your moral failures. His perfect death on the cross has washed away all your past, present, and future sins. His victorious resurrection has liberated you from the power of sin and given you new life. His gift of the Spirit will lead you into a life of repentance and faith in the gospel. That, not a perfect moral track record, will honor me. I do want your devotion, but I don't want your performance." Belief in the gospel will save you again and again and again.

I turned the question about discipleship leanings back onto one of my friends. One friend shared how he struggles with religious performance. He confessed that, very often, he feels like a failure if he doesn't spend enough time in sermon preparation. I asked him if he thought that was from God. He confessed it wasn't, and that it was a lie he had believed for some time. This religiosity overflowed into his prayer life. If he failed to pray or make it through a prayer list, he felt inferior. This too was a lie. As we talked, we witnessed repentance. It was powerful, sincere, and gospel-centered. I said something like: "God doesn't want your well-prepared sermons; he wants you." I tried to encourage him by pointing out that we are all inferior, but that God makes all of us sufficient in the gospel. I referred to 2 Corinthians 3:5-6: "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as com-

ing from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient *to be ministers of a new covenant.*" I emphasized God's qualifying work in the Spirit to be a minister, a pastor, a disciple. We asked questions that opened him up so the gospel of grace could flow down into the crevices of his heart.

The next Friday meeting, my friend was facing some unexpected counseling and a funeral, and he had just returned from a conference. Sermon preparation was not in order. I said, "Tell your people you've been so busy being a great pastor that they will have to settle for an okay sermon. Don't overprepare or beat yourself up. Just give them the gospel." He received it and not only preached the gospel but also preached from the gospel. Pastors need the very same thing every other disciple needs: the gospel of grace. They need to be reminded, challenged, confronted, and exhorted in grace. Every disciple needs relationships with people who will commit to helping one another keep Jesus in the middle of their discipleship.

Discipleship groups are simple, reproducible, and biblical, following the pattern of Text-Theology-Life. They avoid religious performance by promoting a Christ-centered reading of the Scriptures and gospel-centered motivation for following Jesus. They avoid spiritual license by taking seriously the fight of faith. Best of all, they promote lasting joy in Jesus. When we apply the gospel in community by repenting of sin, rejoicing in Christ, and reproducing disciples, sin is defeated and Christ is exalted. When we gather around the gospel, not breaking or keeping rules, we discover just how incomparable the gospel of Jesus truly is.



## Gospel-Centered Culture

HOW CAN CHURCHES AND MINISTRIES promote and maintain healthy, gospel-centered disciples? How should discipleship groups fit into the overall structure of your church or ministry? This chapter will address these questions and more in order to help you create a gospel-centered culture that makes and matures gospel-centered disciples.

### **Relational versus Systematic Thinking**

When implementing discipleship groups in a local church or ministry organization, it is important to remember how they are different from community groups. God picks your community, but you pick your friends. Community groups should be made up of people who are different from us in gender, spiritual maturity, life stage, ethnicity, and so on, but discipleship groups include people with whom we are alike in some way. We choose our friends not only because we share Christ but also because we resonate with them in some way. You can't schedule friendship.

When large churches contact me about how to implement discipleship groups, they frequently overlook this distinction. Since they are responsible for so many people, and they want to carry out the Gospel Commission faithfully, they often think systematically about discipleship groups, much like they would community groups. But what they need is relational thinking. To help them transition their approach I ask them, “Would you like your church to tell you who to be friends with?” They always answer, “No.” Then I ask, “How can you encourage spiritual friendship in your church?” This helps them make the shift from systematic thinking to relational thinking.

### **Influential Leaders**

Since discipleship is rooted in friendship, one of the most effective ways for leaders to promote discipleship groups is to *model* them. Remember, Jesus came with people attached. He made disciples in large groups, smaller groups, and in more intimate relationships. His impact on his close relationships is visible in Scripture. The letters of Peter and John reflect a real affection for Jesus. In the Gospel of John, Jesus expresses his love for Mary, Martha, and John the beloved disciple, and he weeps over the death of his friend Lazarus. Leaders need love-rich relationships. In fact, the friendships I have formed in discipleship groups over the years have lasted long after our group ended. When we model rich, spiritual friendship, it becomes contagious. People talk about what they are taken with. These stories pique people’s interest in groups, and a grassroots interest sparks. Moreover, leaders who start groups create more groups when they send one or two disciples out to form new groups. More spiritual friendship for everyone!

A second way for leaders to promote discipleship is through *training*. In order to get groups started, you may want to do a weekend seminar or a discipleship class to impart the vision, strategy, and heart of gospel-centered discipleship. Depending on the season of our church, I have used both seminars and classes. But, since these groups are friendship-based, it is a good idea to encourage friends to sign up for the training together. If they do, they can process what they are learning together, which allows the Holy Spirit to knit hearts together on the spot. You'll want to allow plenty of time for friends, groups, or tables to process the training during that time. Churches often have tons of content but too little space for friendship. Another way to stimulate interest is to cast vision for discipleship groups at men's and women's events. Toward the end of the event we will say something like, "If you've connected with someone this weekend, consider taking the next step in friendship by forming a discipleship group. Let us know how we can help." It's not a hard sell, but it keeps the vision in front of people.

Finally, leaders can stimulate interest in discipleship by making application to groups in their *sermons*. If you talk about groups from the pulpit, people will recognize they are an important part of the vision of the church. If you rarely address them or not at all, the church will perceive them as optional or unimportant. But when we talk about discipleship groups in our sermons, we create specific opportunities for people to apply the Scriptures in relationship. For instance, if I am preaching about sin and temptation, I will cast a vision for the church to help one another repent of sin, rejoice in Christ, and reproduce disciples. Or when discussing personal holiness, I may spend some time addressing



ways our friendships get off track, noting how groups can devolve into gossip groups, social clubs, or legalistic groups. I will invite groups to take some time to self-assess, repent where necessary, and relish Christ afresh.

## Discipleship Stories

Stories connect people to the need for discipleship groups and encourage them to join. Tell stories of how discipleship groups have helped people fight sin and trust Jesus. Stories breathe life and health into your groups by providing concrete examples of gospel-centered discipleship. Discipleship group stories can be shared on a Sunday morning and in your community groups. One Sunday one of our pastors shared how his group was instrumental in helping him through a difficult time in his marriage. His friends pointed him away from despair toward the hope of redemption in Christ. They encouraged him through a difficult season by regularly speaking the gospel into his life, texting him Scriptures, and praying for him. When our pastor shared this, couples took great encouragement in their own marriages and talked about it for some time afterward.

A few times a year we host a “Story Sunday,” which is designed for people to share what God is doing in their lives with the church family. On these occasions, the church preaches to the church! Sometimes a member will share a personal testimony, other times we will interview members. We typically ask a variety of people and look for three stories: one about the gospel, one about community, and one about mission. You can also use blog posts and video stories of gospel change. One Sunday a couple ladies shared how they were working through issues of racial jus-

tice. They confessed to becoming self-righteous in their judgment of people who weren't as passionate about racial justice as they were, while also turning to Jesus for forgiveness and continued commitment to justice.

### **Gospel Language**

Another way to promote discipleship groups is to develop practical gospel language people can use to disciple one another. I have noticed that our collective effort in discipleship overflows in the creation of helpful phrases. It is not unusual to hear people in our church say things like:

“God is good, all the time.”

“Are you fighting sin well?”

“What lie might you be believing?”

“How is Jesus better?”

“Are you having fresh encounters with Christ?”

“What are you learning about the gospel?”

Gospel phrases and questions can be helpful, but nothing replaces firsthand Bible reading. A final way to promote gospel-centered discipleship is for groups to meet regularly. Those that meet regularly experience much deeper gospel change. As we saw in chapter 10, groups that do not set a regular meeting time or meet only when it's convenient struggle to get off the ground and to remain centered on Jesus. Meeting at least every other week is key.

Again, encourage your church to read and reread this book. We ask our discipleship groups to read *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*

every once in a while so they continue to fight sin with faith in the promises of God. Take advantage of the free gospel-centered resources online at [www.gcdiscipleship.com](http://www.gcdiscipleship.com).

## What Some Other Churches Do

New Life Church in Bryan, Texas, enlisted coaches who oversee one to three discipleship groups to provide additional support and counsel for their groups. Pastor Rick White at CityView Church in Fort Worth says that their discipleship groups took off after introducing redemption groups. Mike Wilkerson, author of *Redemption: Freed by Jesus from the Idols We Worship and the Wounds We Carry*, describes a redemption group as “an intense small group that digs deep into difficult and seldom-discussed areas of life, such as abuse, addiction, and trials of all sorts.”<sup>1</sup> At CityView, they discovered that redemption groups furnished the church with language and significant heart change to fuel discipleship groups. Rick notes, “I consider Redemption Groups, in many ways, ‘reactive’ discipleship while Fight Clubs allow us to become ‘proactive’ in discipling one another.”<sup>2</sup>

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. *Can I call them something other than discipleship groups?*

Of course! What matters most is men and women getting together regularly, not for just small talk but for gospel talk. Call them whatever you like, just be sure to keep faith in Jesus and his promises central. Cultivate friendships that encourage religious

1 Mike Wilkerson, *Redemption: Freed by Jesus from the Idols We Worship and the Wounds We Carry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 13.

2 Rick White, email to author, February 24, 2011.

affection, repentance and faith, and deep dependence on the Holy Spirit.

*2. How long should discipleship groups last?*

This depends on the nature of the group. In my experience, peer groups tend to last longer than mentor groups. In fact, I start mentor groups not only to nurture gospel change but also to multiply disciples. If this is your plan, it's good to share this goal sooner than later so no one is caught off guard. Cast a vision for sharing what they learn with others. Peer groups tend to last longer because they are peers; however, if you agree to be more missional, you may set a sunset date on the group with the goal of multiplying disciples.

Sometimes groups split up over conflict. I have watched discipleship groups divide over personality or sin issues. But Jesus calls us to do precisely the opposite: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother" (Matt. 18:15). Remember, tension in relationships is God's appointed grace for our mutual change. Conflict is for Christlikeness. To leave a group without addressing the conflict or underlying issue is to neglect God's grace.

*3. What challenges have you faced in implementing discipleship groups?*

*Twisted Motives.* Since the default mode of the heart is legalism or license, these are unflagging challenges in discipleship. As a disciple, it's important to spot these leanings in one another and exhort, encourage, teach, pray, and equip one another for gospel-centered living. Never weary of it. It is your life's calling.

*Messy Discipleship.* The mess is coming. When people get deep and close, personal issues come out unfiltered. Prepare to love others through hard seasons. Love others as Jesus has loved you: patiently, faithfully, and full of grace. Don't be afraid to ask other mentors, counselors, or pastors in your church to help you through difficult seasons. Gospel holiness is not restricted to discipleship groups. In fact, the type of conversations you have in your discipleship group should also happen in your small groups. Healthy groups apply the three principles of *repent of sin*, *rejoice in Christ*, and *reproduce disciples* in all their relationships.

*Bible-less Groups.* People tend to slip away from making the Bible central in their meetings. When this happens, they end up relying on secondhand gospel sayings or old Bible verses, not fresh words from the Spirit and belief in the promises of God. As a result, the gospel loses its center of gravity and discipleship becomes dutiful. Don't reverse the order of your discipleship group from Text-Theology-Life to Life-Theology-Text! Fight for one another's joy by making Scripture central.

#### *4. How do discipleship groups work for pastors?*

Every pastor should be in a peer, gospel-centered, discipleship relationship. This enables him to effectively watch his life and doctrine closely. If he does, he will save both himself and his hearers (1 Tim. 4:16). I meet with two other pastors every other Friday. I am as transparent as possible with them about my life and struggle to believe the gospel. They have been a source of regular encouragement and correction for me. I occasionally share my experiences with our staff. I practice a similar level of transparency with our church, but with discernment. Everyone in

your church doesn't need to know your every struggle; that's what a discipleship group is for! In practicing pastoral transparency, I have found Matt Chandler's advice helpful. He tells people that they can't earn their way into close relationships with pastors, but they can earn their way out. Good counsel.

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In conclusion, this book is not about creating a discipleship culture. It is about gospel-centered culture, being and making gospel-centered disciples who fight to live all of life under the redemptive reign of Jesus Christ. This kind of disciple fights for image—to be transformed into the image of Christ with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). Religious legalism and spiritual license are set against this glorious purpose. Therefore, we must fight to keep Jesus, not rules, central to our discipleship.

Fortunately, God has given us everything we need in the gospel of Jesus Christ—religious affection, promises and warnings, repentance and faith. Most of all, he has given us himself in the presence and power of his Spirit, who is the motivation behind the motivation. He has made us new creatures in Christ so that we can walk out the implications of the gospel in everyday life.

Discipleship groups are simple, biblical, and missional, a relational way to make and mature disciples. Call them whatever you like or don't call them anything at all, but join with other disciples in making and maturing disciples who trust Jesus. Go in the power of the gospel, baptize in the grace of the gospel, and teach the person of the gospel. Gospel-centered discipleship

is Jesus-centered discipleship, and Jesus will be with us always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). Until we meet him face-to-face, may we be found learning the gospel, relating in the gospel, and sharing the gospel of his glorious grace with ever-increasing devotion.

## Epilogue

ONE DAY THE FIGHT will be over. Faith will become sight. Our image will be perfectly aligned with Christ's image. Our affection for Christ will be unchallenged because, as Jonathan Edwards said, Christ is chief among ten thousand and altogether lovely. All competitors for his attention will bow before him, and we will be forever thrilled in his presence. Every act will be a natural act of obedience sparked by joy. The warnings will fade and the promises will be fulfilled. Threats will no longer be necessary and rewards will abound. The Spirit will have full sway in our gladdened hearts as we live forever in Spirit-led worship.

Our sanctification will be complete, our community characterized by love, and our mission colored by worship. We will no longer repent of sin but will forever rejoice in Christ. Till then, may God grant us his grace to fight the good fight of faith, for our joy and for his eternal glory.





## Appendix

# Gospel-Centered Questions to Ask

HERE IS A LIST OF QUESTIONS to help you cultivate gospel motivations.<sup>1</sup>

1. What do you desire more than anything else?
2. What do you find yourself daydreaming or fantasizing about?
3. What lies do you subtly believe that undermine the truth of the gospel?
4. Are you astonished by the gospel?
5. Where have you made much of yourself and little of God?
6. Is technology interrupting your communion with God?
7. Is work a source of significance? How?
8. Where do your thoughts drift when you enter a social setting?
9. What fears keep you from resting in Christ?

<sup>1</sup> Questions 11–15 are from Sam Storms's *A Sincere and Pure Devotion to Christ: 100 Daily Meditations on 2 Corinthians*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 192–93. Used by permission.

APPENDIX: GOSPEL-CENTERED QUESTIONS TO ASK

10. What consumes your thoughts when you have alone time?
11. When people see how you spend money, do they conclude that God is a priceless treasure, exceedingly valuable above all worldly goods?
12. When people observe your relationship with others, are they alerted to the power of Christ's forgiveness of you that alone accounts for your forgiveness of them?
13. If you are complimented for some accomplishment, does the way you receive it drive onlookers to give thanks to the Lord?
14. Is your use of leisure time or devotion to a hobby or how you speak of your spouse the sort that persuades others that your heart is content with what God is for you in Christ?
15. Does your reaction to bad news produce in you doubt or fear, or does it inspire confidence to trust in God's providence?

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