



# DISCIPLESHIP that **FITS**

an eBook that introduces the **5 DISCIPLE MAKING CONTEXTS**



BOBBY  
**HARRINGTON**

ALEX  
**ABSALOM**

A Discipleship.org Resource

ZONDERVAN

*Discipleship That Fits*

Copyright © 2016 by Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook. Visit [www.zondervan.com/ebooks](http://www.zondervan.com/ebooks).

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

---

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Harrington, Bobby, 1958-

Discipleship that fits : the five kinds of relationships God uses to help us grow / Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom.  
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-310-52261-4 (softcover)

1. Discipling (Christianity) I. Title.

BV4520.H374 2016

253—dc23 2015030233

---

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version<sup>®</sup>, NIV<sup>®</sup>. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.<sup>®</sup> Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com). The NIV and New International Version are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.<sup>®</sup>

Scripture quotations marked ESV are from the ESV<sup>®</sup> Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version<sup>®</sup>). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published in association with the literary agency of Mark Sweeney and Associates, Bonita Springs, Florida 34135.

*Cover design: LUCAS Art and Design*

*Interior design: Kait Lamphere*



# Join the conversation.

- National Discipleship forums
- Learning communities (for leaders)
- Collaboration with Discipleship Leaders
- Collaboration with Discipleship Organizations
- Videos, ebooks, and downloads

Discipleship • org  
CHAMPIONING JESUS' WAY OF DISCIPLEMAKING

*A personal message from Alex*

**If you're applying the 5 Contexts,  
I'd love to hear from you!**

Send your best story,  
or most pressing question,  
to my personal email address:  
[alex@dandelionresourcing.com](mailto:alex@dandelionresourcing.com)

Also check out  
[www.dandelionresourcing.com](http://www.dandelionresourcing.com)  
- that's my initiative to empower  
leaders just like you!

**DANDELION**

*Empowering Disciple-Making Leaders*



# Foreword

Jesus kept it simple. *Make disciples*. That was the primary command of the Great Commission. It remains the primary responsibility of the local church. Our Savior's call to missions and evangelism is much more than a call to share the gospel with those who do not have it. It is a call to make *disciples* of the nations. It is a call to lead those who do not know Jesus Christ to become fully orbed followers of our King, men and women who know what it means to live for Christ's glory and to advance his kingdom. Disciple making begins by proclaiming the gospel. It continues as new Christians are adopted into a New Testament community of faith, the local church, and taught the implications of living out the gospel. *That* is how the church teaches disciples to obey "all" that Jesus has commanded (Matt. 28:18–20). Evangelism and discipleship are gospel centric and inseparable.

Surprisingly, the church as a whole has not always understood the correlation between evangelism and discipleship. This misunderstanding has given rise to churches that produce large numbers of converts with little depth, converts who could hardly be called disciples of Jesus Christ. These churches are often said to be great at evangelism but poor at discipleship. Conversely, there are also many churches that emphasize great teaching and theological depth but fail to see God use them to bring very many, if any, new believers to faith in Christ. These churches are often said to be great at discipleship but poor at evangelism. Neither pattern, however, reveals churches that practice biblically faithful evangelism and discipleship.

The church's struggles to make and disciple Christians has not been lost on her leadership. In an effort to address contemporary shortcomings in the church's discipleship ministries, numerous authors (including me) have produced a staggering number of resources on the topic in the last

few decades. A quick perusal of the topic on Amazon.com reveals almost twenty thousand options! When those resources are added to the number of websites, blog articles, and downloadable sermons on this subject, there are seemingly innumerable alternatives from which church leaders can choose as they seek to lead their churches to greater effectiveness.

To that gargantuan collection of resources, Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom have added *Discipleship That Fits*. The question arises, Does the church really need *another* book on discipleship? The answer is a resounding yes! Harrington and Absalom offer a refreshing and helpful perspective on this topic and remind us of an often-neglected context for effective disciple making: relationships.

When the gospel is preached, sinners are called to enter into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. At the same time, the gospel calls us to enter the community of faith for which Christ died: the church. Christianity *happens* in relationships. They are the context in which meaningful spiritual growth takes place. In *Discipleship That Fits*, the authors articulate a helpful and meaningful paradigm through which church leaders can utilize natural, relational dynamics to cultivate a meaningful and biblically faithful discipleship ministry within the local church. Do yourself a favor; buy this book, study this book, and evaluate your church's disciple-making ministries in light of its conclusions. A church that utilizes the approach advocated by Harrington and Absalom cannot help but produce maturing disciples who labor together to advance the kingdom.

—Thom S. Rainer, President and CEO, LifeWay Christian Resources

# Acknowledgments

Numerous sticky fingers have left their marks on this book, and we are so grateful, since this work would not exist otherwise. Some have inspired us to cook up ideas, others have been in the trenches as we tried to live them, and still others have served to capture and present their essence in these words.

In particular, we are immensely grateful to the whole team at Zondervan, led by our editors Ryan Pazdur and Brian Phipps, who have been patient, encouraging, and diligent in the details of the publishing process. Our gracious and generous agent, Mark Sweeney, also deserves our warm thanks.

On the ideas front, Joseph Myers has been an ongoing fount of out-of-the-normal thinking, and it is an honor to be able to build on his previous work. Many years ago, Anders Michael Hansen first pointed Alex in this direction of thinking, while simultaneously drinking quad espresso and trying to break the speed limit in a golf cart. Most Scandinavians seem to be like that. A special thanks to Kyle Froman for the icons; he has always been a great help to Harpeth Christian Church as a graphic designer. Plenty of other thinkers and practitioners have been a rich blessing along the way, such as Jim Putman, Alan Hirsch, Jeff Vanderstelt, Mick Woodhead, Neil Cole, Mike Breen, Caesar Kalinowski, Dave and Jon Ferguson, Todd Wilson, Hugh Halter, Matt Smay, Bill Hull, KP Yohanan, Francis Chan, Robby Gallaty, Robert Coleman, Dann Spader and others.

Many thanks to Thom Rainer for the insightful and kind foreword. He has a wicked sense of humor, and he has been a wise and kind friend to Bobby since the days when Thom served as his doctor of ministry mentor at Southern Seminary. And if you bought this book because you glimpsed his name on the cover and thought it was all by him, apologies.

Bobby is grateful to his son Chad, who helped him with some of the writing and his wife Cindy, for all her support. He is also grateful to the leadership at Harpeth Christian Church: David Sanders, Ed Kaeser, Tony Dupree, Mike Shake, Josh Patrick, Michelle Eagle, Kathy Cawley, Alan Garrett, Cam McLaughlin, Aaron Spelzhaus, and Nicky York.

Alex is grateful to Carey Wachtel for tech support, and the amazing team at Rivertree Christian Church in Ohio for five years of collegiality, fun, and experimentation—notably Tammy Jones, Al Dangelo, John Moores, Gary Dolan, Greg Nettle, and Jason Lantz. Special thanks go to all those leaders of Missional Gatherings / GoCommunities / Housechurches / Clusters who, down the years, we have had the privilege of coaching, leading and learning alongside. Thank you for being willing to take the risk to pioneer, and to boldly go and make disciples wherever Jesus takes you. Thank you to Hannah, my idyllic partner in life and ministry: I love watching and learning from you, and I look so much wiser than I really am by being known as your husband. Joel, Samuel, and Isaac, you each make us such a wonderful family with whom to live on mission and never stop taking risks with Jesus. And finally, thank you, Jesus, for your grace, blessings, and sense of humor in letting me be in any way involved in church leadership.



## Chapter 1: It's a Journey

### It's a Journey

#### Reimagining Discipleship

This is an eBook that is an introduction to the fuller book called *Discipleship That Fits* that will be published in 2016 by Zondervan.

*Ryan and Ginger are passionate about training the children in their missional community to be disciple makers. A missional community is 20-50 people who serve others, build community, and make disciples. Their missional community is made up of young families, most with children who are elementary school age. At the start of their gatherings, they share a meal together. Then after everyone has assembled and finished eating (typically between thirty-five and forty-five people total, counting children and adults), thanksgivings are shared around the table. Every person, young and old, is invited to contribute, simply by sharing something from the past week for which they are thankful to God.*

*Next, a short story from Scripture is read out loud twice to the room. Then parents are told to find a corner in the house, close their Bibles, and retell that same story twice to their children! In response the kids tell it back to them, and then they discuss as a family what God is saying to them out of that passage. Afterward everyone comes back together and a few reports take place.*

*This time with the families together is followed by small group time. There are groups for men and for women, for the seven- to thirteen-year-olds, and for the three- to six-year-olds. The*

*seven- to thirteen-year-olds are led by a couple of young teens, and the youngest group is led by some nine-year-olds, who take turns joining them. They play a game, look at a Bible story, sing some songs, and pray. The kids love it (as do the parents!), and you can tell that the children are tangibly growing in their walk with Jesus. A third children's small group is about to launch, as the overall community is growing quickly and the kids' small groups are proving to be a fruitful avenue.*

*What a wonderful picture of disciples making disciples! It's something so easy, "even" a child can do it!*

## What Is a Disciple?

When you look at Jesus and see the kind of person he is, the quality of life he lives, and the depth of character he has, do you ever wish that you could be more like him? We certainly do!

We have good news for you. If you share this desire to trust and imitate Jesus more closely and you are willing to commit to doing what it takes to look and live like him more consistently, then—bingo!—you are now a disciple of Jesus! Being a disciple of Jesus simply means that you are modeling your life—your thoughts, your words, your actions, your everything—after the example and teaching Jesus has given us. And the related word *discipleship* simply refers to the process through which Jesus turns us into people who trust and follow him.

A friend of ours put it like this:

A disciple is the kind of person who becomes the kind of person Jesus would be.

We love that! Wouldn't you like to be the kind of person who shows others what Jesus is like?

Bobby uses the following definition of a disciple:<sup>1</sup>

A disciple is someone who is following Jesus, being changed by Jesus, and is committed to Jesus' kingdom mission.

People like this definition because it ties together the focus (Jesus), the process (being changed), and the call to lead others to become disciples with us (Jesus' kingdom mission).

What we want you to see is that being a disciple is all about becoming like Jesus, and then helping others become like Jesus, because that is the way God has designed for us to experience fullness of life. One of our favorite verses in the Bible is John 10:10, where Jesus says, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Becoming like Jesus is the greatest thing we could ever wish for someone!

Alex uses a slightly different formulation of *disciple*, yet with the same goal in mind:

A disciple is an intentional learner from Jesus.

Thus the two questions of discipleship are:

1. What is Jesus saying?
2. What am I doing in response?

As you will see in a moment, this definition picks up on the idea that being a disciple is akin to being an apprentice, and that discipleship is a dynamic process. The two questions—"What is Jesus saying?" and "What am I doing in response?"—are like viruses when released into a community! Whatever situation in life we are facing, we can use the two questions of discipleship to stop and analyze the issue and then take next steps as followers of Jesus.

It's not hard to find lots of fabulous pithy statements that summarize what it means to be a disciple. And all of the best ones revolve around the truth that a disciple hears and obeys Jesus, leading to a lifestyle that reflects him well to the watching world.

Since this book is all about discipleship and being a disciple of Jesus, we think it is enormously helpful to begin here—with a simple phrase that summarizes what being a disciple means in the context of your local church. Such a description gives us something to aim at and neatly provides us with a snapshot of what the church, as a Jesus-centered community, is all about. At a personal level, a definition of discipleship will help you to make intentional choices in your everyday life that draw you closer to Christlikeness.

Even though we don't all use exactly the same definition, it is essential in every local church context to have a clear and Bible-based definition so that people understand the goal—being disciples of Jesus. Of course, there is value in going deeper, in tackling a far more detailed unpacking of what it means to be a disciple. Throughout the two-thousand-year history of the church, this journey of discipleship has been front and center in the thoughts and hearts of so many of the great men and women of God who have gone before us. Countless areas could be touched upon, and many excellent resources are available to help in areas where you are being challenged by Jesus to go deeper.

Such in-depth analysis of the content of discipleship is beyond the scope of this book. However, what this book will focus on is something that tends to get neglected in all the discussion about discipleship. We have found that having a clear definition of the goal is invaluable, *but equally important is understanding the different ways in which God works to shape us into disciples*. That's what this book is for. It is written to help you think about the different contexts in which Jesus disciples us.

You see, it is a myth that you can be discipled solely in one size of gathering, and we will show you how to set smart expectations for the different times and places where Jesus helps

people to grow and mature. Before we jump into that, we need to add a few more brushstrokes to our understanding of how discipleship works.

## What Is Discipleship?

We want to keep the concept of discipleship simple, and so we have a simple definition of it.<sup>2</sup> And though there are different terms for discipleship, each with its own nuance (which is very helpful), for the purposes of this book, we are going to equate the term *discipleship* with *disciple making*. So don't try to read any nuance into the words we use: discipleship means disciple making, and disciple making means discipleship.

Matthew 28:19–20 gives us a summary description of Jesus' discipleship mandate:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

We do not use the exact words from this text, but we use the concepts and principles in a way that makes it easily applicable and repeatable today.<sup>3</sup> We simply tell people that disciple making is *helping people trust and follow Jesus*. The four concepts behind these verses provide us with four summary words: Help, Trust, Follow, and Jesus.

- *Help*: We are to initiate and be intentional—to “go” and “make disciples” (v. 19). We use the word *help* because it is a love-based word that sums up all the various intentional actions in disciple making, from *going* to *modeling* to *teaching* to *coaching* to *releasing*.
- *Trust*: Disciple making is about the heart change toward God upon which conversion/baptism is based—“baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (v. 19).

- *Follow*: Disciple making is about obedience and sanctification (increasing holiness)—“teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (v. 20).
- *Jesus*: He is both the focus and the constant presence in discipleship, just as he promised—“Surely I am with you always” (v. 20).

With these four components from Matthew 28 in mind, we define discipleship this way:

Discipleship is helping people to trust and follow Jesus.

As we said earlier, this is a simple definition, but don’t assume it is simplistic. While it is easy to use and apply, it is comprehensive as well. Bobby uses this definition widely in the ministry of his church and discipleship.org, and he also has coauthored a book called *The Disciple Makers Handbook*, which describes in greater detail how everyday Christians live out this definition.<sup>4</sup>

We have found this definition to be easy to use in a local church context. High school students easily adopt it and grasp the key ideas. It is also easy to use in family life, where parents can use it with their children to help them grow into adulthood as people who trust and follow Jesus on their own.<sup>5</sup>

*Trust* and *follow* Jesus. *Trust* covers all the teachings in the Bible that call us to rely on God’s grace, promises, and power. *Follow* encompasses all the teachings in the Bible that require us to respond to God—in obedience, faithfulness, and resistance to sin.

Both parts together capture the New Testament meaning of the word *faith*.<sup>6</sup> And both parts are consistent with the response necessitated by Jesus and his gospel.<sup>7</sup>

## A Disciple Is an Apprentice

In the New Testament, the word for “disciple” (*mathetes*) occurs 264 times. In its original ancient Greek context, it meant someone who was either an apprentice in a trade or a pupil of a teacher.

Apprenticeship is a helpful picture for Jesus followers because it conveys the sense of a journey that cannot be bypassed in order to mature as a disciple. It takes time and practice to become a mature disciple, yet the only way you truly grow is by actually trying out the lifestyle you are observing. Apprenticeship allows us to gain a wonderful mix of both experience and knowledge, conveyed to us in the context of a long-term, deeply committed relationship. The Greek philosopher Aristotle noted that we owe more to our teachers than to our parents, since (as he put it) our parents give us life only, but our teachers give us the art of living well.

You see, the critical question that the ancients understood is this: “From whom are you learning?”

Put another way, a disciple is someone who is learning from a master craftsman.

For instance, if you want to learn how to do carpentry, you would be very unwise to ask me! I might be able to talk a good game for a minute or two, but you’d quickly realize I was scraping the barrel for information. A quick look in my garage would reveal that my carpentry tools are limited to a hammer (good for most things I find I need to do!) and a couple of quietly rusting saws tucked away in the corner. However, if I introduce you to my friend Dave, you would have an entirely different experience of carpentry. Dave is a master craftsman, with decades of experience in everything to do with woodwork. He has a truck full of all sorts of interesting-looking tools, many with the added bonus of power cords. Dave knows exactly what to do in every carpentry situation. He demonstrated that know-how to my family when he oversaw the

task of finishing our basement, installing all sorts of items and hand building a perfect cupboard and shelving system that is the focal point of the room. If it had been left to me, there would be a couple of wobbly shelves clinging to the wall for dear life! When it comes to developing carpentry skills, you'd do well to learn from someone like my friend Dave.

When it comes to growing spiritually, from whom are you learning? And if your answer truly is Jesus, then what are you doing about what he is showing you?

To put that more precisely, what has Jesus been speaking to you about in the past seven days?

And what are you actually doing in response?

If you can't answer these questions, it's worth asking: Are you really committed to being an apprentice of Jesus?

Dallas Willard comments, "The assumption of Jesus' program for his people on earth was that they would live their lives as his students and co-laborers. They would find him so admirable in every respect—wise, beautiful, powerful, and good—that they would constantly seek to be in his presence and be guided, instructed, and helped by him in every aspect of their lives."<sup>8</sup>

Being a disciple means that I model my life around that of my master. I take note of how he lives, what he says, how he says it. I tease out his motivations and values so that when I encounter new situations, I can attempt to represent him faithfully. After each new experience, I discuss with him what went on and listen to his feedback, on both what went well and what could be improved next time. And then I try it out again.

Discipleship requires a humility that recognizes that I still have much to learn, and that because I belong to Jesus, he can send me into new places and situations. John Wimber describes



this mindset: “A disciple is always ready to take the next step. If there is anything that characterizes Christian maturity, it is the willingness to become a beginner again for Jesus Christ. It is the willingness to put our hand in his and say, ‘I’m scared to death, but I’ll go with you. You’re the Pearl of great price.’”<sup>9</sup>

As I do this, I learn to imitate what Jesus would do in the different situations and relationships of life.

## Discipleship as Imitation

Because I (Alex) was raised in England, drinking tea is a central part of my cultural identity! Whatever the situation—a celebration, a welcome, a crisis, an afternoon break—the response of a good Brit is to put the kettle on and brew a pot of tea for everyone in the room to share.

Coming to the United States was quite a shock, mainly because everyone drank coffee and seemed ignorant of the vital role of tea in extending the kingdom of God. I would try explaining to my new colleagues that coffee is the devil’s brew, and that the word *theist* means (1) someone who believes in a personal God and (2) someone who loves tea, ergo tea drinking is from Jesus, but my words had little impact.

I was greatly disheartened.

So I took a new approach. I brought an electric kettle and some tea into the office and simply made my own cup of tea. One of my colleagues was standing nearby and asked what I was doing. When I explained that I was making a cup of tea, she replied, “That looks nice—could you make me one?” As I did, I showed her the importance of boiling the water and allowing the tea to brew and explained why milk works better than cream. So she went off to her desk with her cup of tea and no doubt produced some of the finest work of her career over the rest of the

morning. The next day she saw me and declared that she'd really enjoyed her tea, and could I show her again how I made it just right, which of course I gladly did.

A couple of days later I was walking down the corridor and passed one of my other colleagues, who was carrying what looked like a cup of tea. "That looks nice—do you drink tea?"

"Not until yesterday, but I saw Su drinking tea, so I asked her to make me a cup as well. You should try it sometime!"

Over the next few months the number of tea drinkers slowly went up, the supplies of tea in the staff room increased, and the coffeepot looked lonelier and lonelier. Tea drinking had become the dominant source of refreshment, and the shift had come about through a process of discipleship by imitation.

So often we in the church focus the vast bulk of our discipling (and evangelistic) energies on the transfer of information. And while there certainly is an unending depth to what we believe, an overemphasis on information transfer is not the most effective way to disciple others—and definitely is not the predominant biblical pattern.

In order to bear fruit as we follow Jesus, we need to grasp the centrality of discipleship as imitation.

## Paul on Discipleship as Imitation

As you read the New Testament, you might be surprised to know that Paul's emphasis is not on convincing us to accept abstract propositional truths. After all, some of those harder-to-understand sections of his letters seem at first glance to be all about that!

Yet if we truly look at what Paul teaches, reading his words in parallel with the accounts of his ministry in the book of Acts, a different picture emerges. While he teaches us fundamental doctrine, shares wonderful insights, and loves to demonstrate the intellectual rigor behind submitting to Jesus, his repeated focus is on living out what we know about God in the world around us. He himself was an apprentice in multiple areas (in the world of tent making, as a Pharisee under Gamaliel, and then notably to Barnabas) and in turn apprenticed many men and women in how to live a life worthy of the Lord (as he prayed in Col. 1:10). Paul understood that for most people, faith in Jesus is best transferred and deepened in the context of relational experiences.

Thus Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1), and “Therefore I urge you to imitate me” (1 Cor. 4:16). That’s bold stuff! But it wasn’t a one-off challenge for a unique situation.

To the church in Philippi he instructed, “Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do” (Phil. 3:17). In the following chapter, Paul added, “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice” (Phil. 4:9).

The same understanding of discipleship as imitation was taught to the Thessalonian Christians. “You became imitators of us and of the Lord” (1 Thess. 1:6), followed up with this reminder in 2 Thessalonians 3:7: “You yourselves know how you ought to follow our example.” As an aside, personally I find that these verses doubly challenge me: Am I following the example of Christ in other believers, and is my example worth others following?

Paul spent a number of years living in the city of Ephesus and knew that church very well. Therefore we should not be surprised when we read, “Follow God’s example, therefore, as

dearly loved children and walk in the way of love” (Eph. 5:1–2). For Paul, the journey of discipleship was founded upon a lifestyle of imitation—direct imitation of Jesus as well as imitation of the lives of other believers around us, especially those we are learning from and following.

## Play While Being Coached

The New Testament model of disciple making is essentially to call people to play their part in the church from day one—to jump into the game—and for that to be the context for their discipleship. We are encouraged to try out what we believe, and to be apprenticed as we do so.

Where it raises anxiety about the risk of error in belief or practice, this apprenticeship approach is far from allowing an “anything goes” mindset. We must receive robust coaching as we grow (from the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and other believers), which is one of the reasons Paul places such a strong emphasis on tying discipleship to the local church. You cannot have a culture of empowerment without a parallel value of accountability. Which, of course, is how we best train people in any area of life.

I (Alex) have three teenage sons, who either have gone or will go through the nerve-shredding rite of learning to drive a car. While they have to study the driver’s manual (or *The Digest of Ohio Motor Vehicle Laws*, as one state snappily titles it) and go to classes, ultimately they won’t learn to drive by reading a book or hearing a lecture, but by sitting behind the wheel and scaring the whatnots out of their long-suffering parents. After yet another near-miss I’ll sit there thinking, “I’m paying for this. I must be mad.” But it is the only way for them to grow into safe and responsible drivers, who one day will be so good at driving that they will pass on their skills to their children.

Apprenticeship really does work. But we need to understand the way in which it operates.

The way Jesus does apprenticeship is through three broad elements: relationships, experiences, and information.

## R.E.I.—Relationships, Experiences, and Information

Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand.

—Chinese proverb

We're going to give you a quick game to play, but you'll need a scrap of paper to do so.

First off, set a timer for one minute. Now press "Start" and write down the five sermons you have heard that have most drawn you closer to Jesus.

No overrunning on time!

Now reset the timer, and in one minute record the five experiences that have most drawn you closer to Jesus.

Finally, take one minute to name the five people who have most drawn you closer to Jesus.

Look at the three lists and answer these questions: Which one was easiest to write? And which one was toughest to complete?

If you are like the hundreds of people we have tested this on, you found it hardest to think of the five sermons (we're church pastors, and we struggle to list five life-changing sermons that we've heard ourselves preach!). The experiences will be easier to come up with, but the clear

winner is almost always the relationships. We bet you could comfortably list more than five names in one minute.

What this game illustrates is that God has wired us to be highly relational beings. While all sorts of things can shape us, the deepest impact on our core being comes from the investment of others in our lives. They may be coaching us in a specific skill, but their character, love, and lifestyle will go deeper and farther into our lives.

Discipleship is primarily about imitation over information, and it is through relationships that it most powerfully occurs. Now to be clear, viewing discipleship this way is not an anti-intellectual approach—together we have spent thirteen years studying theology full-time, and we remain very grateful for that opportunity and those who taught us—but it is about resetting our perspective. Most of us have been raised in the Western world that has been heavily influenced by Enlightenment thinking, which prioritizes the mind and our rationality over everything else. Unfortunately, just thinking clever thoughts does not produce disciples who are ready to go and make other disciples.

Good discipleship is a balance of relationships, experiences, and information. Regrettably, the Western church has the tendency to emphasize information downloading over relational discipleship. Instead, relationships should be the highest priority, the context in which we disciple others life on life, combining love and invitation with vision and challenge. And experiences play their part, as through them—whether it's as simple as sharing a meal together, serving alongside someone, or going away on a trip or retreat—we have an external context for the working out of an internal transformation.

The information element is also far richer within the framework of relationships, as questions are asked, dialogue takes place, specific applications are made, and together we learn what it

means to know and follow God. Done in this order, we make dynamic disciples of Jesus; done in reverse, we make Pharisees.

Let's consider how we see Jesus making disciples in the Gospels.

## Jesus on Discipleship

In Matthew 11 Jesus invites us to come to him if we are weary, to give him our burdens, and in exchange to receive his rest. To drive home the point, in verses 29–30 he uses the following farming illustration: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

A yoke is a large piece of timber that is carved and shaped to sit comfortably on the shoulders of a specific ox, and then extends across to a second creature, which also receives that custom molding of the wood. If the fit is not done well, the animal will end up with sores on its shoulders and be unable to plow effectively, if at all.

If you put yourself in the hooves of an ox, you'll find it is not the most natural thing to be hitched alongside another ox and forced to walk in straight lines across a field all day long. To counter this, the way farmers train a younger animal is to pair it up with an older ox, who can model how to recognize and respond to the farmer's commands, to plow in the direction he needs you to go, and to carry the yoke in a way that is comfortable and sustainable.

Here Jesus is using the picture of carrying his yoke to illustrate how he disciples us.

For spiritual people at the time of Jesus, the yoke represented something negative: obligation and oppression, keeping the law as interpreted by the Jewish traditions, trying to earn your way closer to God. It was an uncomfortable constraint that people had to bear in order to try to move in God's direction.

But Jesus completely turned that around. What he places upon us is something perfectly formfitting, designed to steer us in the right direction at his lightest touch, so that we can truly honor God and live in such a way that we bring him a great return.

His invitation is into an apprenticeship, to become a disciple who learns from a gentle, kind, and loving Master who doesn't have an unhealthy ego that must be maneuvered around first. Jesus is enormously attractive in his personality, and we are rightly drawn to know him better and become more like him in our own characters. John Ortberg says, "This is why Jesus came. This is what spiritual life is about. This is your calling—to become what [C. S.] Lewis calls an 'everlasting splendor.'"<sup>10</sup> To be a disciple is to become increasingly like Jesus in our character as we reflect the attractiveness of his personality.

As we choose the path of discipleship, an inexpressible peace and rest will fall upon our souls. Of course, if we think of this rest as equating to lots of time lying on the beach, then we miss the point of what Jesus is saying here: discipleship is a lifestyle far more than it is an event, and it is a posture from which we can engage with the world in a healthy and fruitful way.

When Jesus invites us to accept his yoke, we can be confident that it will train and mature us to make an impact for him. In addition, we are reminded that we don't do discipleship flying solo—we will always be connected to other people so that we can both imitate and be imitated as we go through life, pointing people to maturity in Christ.

## Finding the Ancient Paths

In speaking of rest for our souls, Jesus also may have been thinking of the prophecy in Jeremiah 6:16:

“Stand at the crossroads and look;



ask for the ancient paths,  
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,  
and you will find rest for your souls.”

God makes the first move in reaching out to us with an invitation to follow him. As we begin to walk in the pathways of the kingdom of God, even if much still needs sorting out within our hearts, we experience his grace and thus come to an increased understanding of his truth. As we choose to imitate Jesus, we enter into his eternal rest here on earth today.

In an intriguing statement, Jesus put it like this in John 8:31–32: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

The order here seems opposite of what we would expect: Jesus wants us to start doing what he does and saying what he says—holding to his teaching—and only then will the truth come and set us free.

Some churches (and church leaders) do this the opposite way. They say: “If you believe what we believe (because what we say is the fullest expression of God’s truth, especially compared to that church/pastor down the road), and do/sign the thing we make people do/sign to demonstrate that they believe what we say, *then* we will start to disciple and invest in you. And if you don’t rock the boat, we’ll let you help us do what Jesus told you to do.”

All of which is, of course, a complete reversal both of what Jesus said to do and of what Jesus actually did.

Jesus discipled those around him into the knowledge of the truth while being fully aware that some might not come to accept and believe that truth. He was willing to take that risk—and, as the Gospels make clear, people did walk away from him as they encountered his truth. So either

Jesus was a terrible discipler of people, or he really meant it when he said we need to be disciplined into all truth, rather than first having to accept the truth before we can be disciplined!

Again, we believe that the truth that Jesus brings is absolutely vital, but he knows how we will best be transformed by it—by walking the path of a disciple. In other words, discipleship takes time and is built on relationships and experiences, which provide a context for information to be internalized. And our primary relationship is with Jesus himself and consists of the experiences we have with him.

## God Disciples People through Relationship

We've just provided a very brief introduction to the concept of discipleship and the importance of relationships in the process. If we were to summarize the key points in this book, we'd say it this way:

1. God disciplines us.
2. God disciplines us *through relationships*.
3. God disciplines us through relationships *differently in different relational contexts*.

The Great Commission in Matthew 28 assumes two very important things that we want to note: God has commanded that we *make disciples*, and Jesus is *with us* in the process, working through us. Our part is to make disciples and Jesus' promise is to be with us as he makes disciples through us.

In a slightly different context, Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, gives us a helpful metaphor for God's role and our role in disciple making. He gets us to "picture a long, narrow ridge with a sheer drop-off on either side."<sup>11</sup> The chasm to the right is the way of strictly human effort. It is where we try to make disciples in our own strength and power, through our

goals, plans, and schemes alone. This approach is based on a misguided focus on and trust in ourselves. But the chasm to the left can be just as dangerous; in the absence of human effort and participation, we just leave it all up to God, taking no responsibility for ourselves or those around us.

On the ridge between the two extremes is a path. It is the path where God is at work in us as we make disciples. It is God's Spirit, God's power, and God's presence, moving through our efforts (as disciples and disciple makers), that molds people increasingly into the image of Jesus (2 Cor. 3:17–18). The apostle Paul astutely sums up our role and God's role in 2 Corinthians 3:2–3: "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

While we could write an entire book on avoiding these two extremes, that's not our focus here. We want to emphasize that there are specific and contextual ways in which God disciplines us, namely through other people.

And that brings us back to the main topic of this book: God uses people to disciple us differently in different relational contexts. We see this through the ways Jesus did his own discipleship. There were times when Jesus impacted people through a sermon delivered to hundreds, other occasions when he was shaping a midsized community in the thirties or forties in number, and other times when he was discipling just his small group of twelve. And then again, sometimes Peter, James, and John were the only ones Jesus was discipling. Added to these four contexts, of course, are the times when Jesus directly disciplined without the involvement of others.

We believe you will be much more effective in helping people trust and follow Jesus if you understand what God *typically* does in each of these “five contexts” of discipleship. Knowledge is power, because knowing what is most effective in a particular context empowers you to make the biggest difference.

## Discipleship Matters

Discipleship matters because it is at the center of what Jesus has commissioned his followers to be about. Not only does discipleship summarize God’s interactions with us, but it should be the primary way we invest ourselves in others.

Yet to be effective disciple makers, most of us will need to go through a “debugging,” dismantling the false understandings we have of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. In following chapter we’ll give you an overview of the core content of the fuller book—the Five Contexts of Discipleship. We hope you will be challenged (as we have been) as you read through this introduction and most importantly, that it will spur you on to lifestyle focused upon making disciples of Jesus.

## Chapter 2: The Big Idea to Change Your View of Church

# The Big Idea to Change Your View of Church

### The Five Contexts of Discipleship

- *“Sometimes I find our church services to be deeply frustrating. While there are weeks where I meet with God in worship and find my mind and spirit fed by the sermon, I often have this nagging feeling of, ‘Is that it? Is that the best way we can do and be the church?’”*
- *“I love my small group, but the problem is that people keep bringing new people. I realize that sounds so selfish, but actually I want to stay with a limited number of people, getting to know them deeply over a long period of time. There is this pressure in small group life to invite others in, to help neighbors and friends discover what we have, but by their very joining, what we have is lost, as the group simply becomes too big to properly care for each other.”*
- *“When I read the Bible’s descriptions of church life, I have trouble matching that with our pastor’s insistence that what we are doing on a Sunday morning is the same thing. For instance, since when was the Lord’s Supper meant to be a quick pause for a snack on a nasty cracker and a droplet of grape juice that is being rapidly passed around a big room in virtual silence?”*

- *“Our church said we had to multiply our home group. It was horrible—all these people I’d grown so close to were now off somewhere else. To me it felt like a divorce, not a celebration.”*
- *“I get annoyed with these people who complain that they don’t feel close to everyone in our worship service. What do they expect—we go around the room and ask all 250 people for their prayer requests?”*

Whenever people gather, there are so many expectations! Whether it’s as a family, with friends, at work, or simply to watch a sports game, multiple agendas are at play.

This range of expectation is taken to a whole new dimension of complexity when the gathering is a church event. While everything in life has a spiritual dimension, when people gather to meet with Jesus, they bring heightened levels of unstated desires, dreams, and needs. In such expectations lie the joys, and frustrations, of church life!

Because the church is in the business of making disciples, all sorts of opportunities are open to us as we encounter these competing demands. If we can help provide contexts where people learn to better listen to Jesus and obey him, their journeys of faith will be deepened and our witness to the world strengthened.

Unfortunately, our preconceived notions of how the church should look when she gathers often inhibit our discipleship. We take our own cultural norms and read them back into the Bible as the only way of doing things, yet it is easy for us to forget that most of what we view as normative came about only through the willingness of previous (and often quite recent) generations of Christians to innovate, whether in their desire to worship Jesus, build community life, or witness to the world.

These tensions are rooted in our humanity. They are not always sinful or wrong, though human sin does affect all of our relationships. Neither do our divergent viewpoints on church life surprise God, since he created us this way. We are dealing with the ways people connect, both with each other and with God, since these are the primary pathways through which disciples are made. It naturally follows that there will be indications across the breadth of human society—his creation—that may point us to some ways forward.

If we believe that the entire world is God’s domain and that Jesus is Lord of the scientist in the laboratory as much as he is Lord of the pastor in the pulpit, then perhaps we can look for clues outside of the traditional literature on church life. This is not to say that we should ditch everything we’ve known up to now about church; as you will see, we believe that what we are proposing is deeply biblical. At the same time, we believe that we can learn from the insights of the social sciences—as all truth is God’s truth!—and even experience some new breakthroughs in our approach to discipleship.

## The Search to Belong

When I first read Joseph Myers’s book *The Search to Belong*, I knew I’d struck gold! It is one of the most helpful resources on building Christian community—yet it also is deeply indebted to the sociology of how people connect with others in different-sized spaces, or contexts, for gathering.<sup>12</sup>

Published in 2003, Myers’s book builds on the work of the pioneering 1960s sociologist Edward T. Hall, who developed a theory based on the relationship between space and culture, calling it Proxemics. Hall suggested that human beings use four different “spaces” to develop communication and connections: public space, social space, personal space, and intimate space.

His research focused on the actual physical distance between people in those different environments, and it had obvious implications in areas such as building design and public transportation.<sup>13</sup>

Myers took these innovative ideas and applied them afresh to look at how community is built and how people experience belonging. He explains, “How we occupy physical space—whether through actual real estate (the shopper standing next to my wife and me in the grocery store line) or through more subtle ‘spatial language’—tells others whether we want them to belong.”<sup>14</sup>

As a Christian, Myers was able to apply some of his learning to church culture, particularly as a tool for assessing why small groups do (and don’t) work.

In discussing Myers’s work with several friends, what struck me in particular were his insights into how people experience belonging in each of the different spaces he examined. These insights inevitably led us to consider the question: How well is our church using all of these spaces, and in particular the social size (interactions between twenty to seventy individuals)?

Over the past decade we have played with these ideas in practice,<sup>15</sup> running them through the filter of how and where Jesus disciples us. Bobby and I have made some adaptations as well. We refer to the different gathering sizes as “contexts” rather than “spaces”, to provide a more flexible, nonspatial label. We’ve added an extra context into the mix, and have relabeled what Myers calls “intimate space,” now calling it the Transparent Context (primarily because in teaching these ideas, several men became distracted by all this talk of intimacy!).

In recent years Joe Myers has become a friend and we have enjoyed some stimulating debate on these matters. He has been a huge help—swapping ideas with us and even teaching with



Alex—and we pay tribute to his groundbreaking work that paved the way for this book. If what follows is flawed in any way, we take full responsibility!

## The Five Contexts

Let's take a quick look at the Five Contexts, remembering that the following is more descriptive than it is prescriptive:<sup>16</sup>



**The Public Context** exists where people gather in the hundreds around a shared outside resource. This might be an event (travelers on the same flight), experience (fans at a pop concert), or influence (followers of the same public figure on social media). If the resource is physically present, people will generally be at least 12 feet away from it (think of your distance from the stage if you go to see a play or concert). In this environment the focus is on engaging with the outside resource, rather than building relational depth with others who also happen to be there.



**The Social Context** is the range between twenty and seventy people, where we share snapshots of who we are and thereby seek to build affinity with others. Myers points out that in this context (think of a backyard grill-out) three things happen: we build neighborly relations (people we can call upon for minor favors), we start to identify those with whom we'd like to become closer friends, and we reveal elements of our identity and our journey. In terms of Proxemics, we will be somewhere between 4 and 12 feet apart. Interestingly, the distance between two people shaking hands is about 4 feet, which in a new relationship is a common preamble to testing the three things Myers lists.<sup>17</sup>



**The Personal Context** forms in groups of four to twelve, where we feel able to share private information. Think, for instance, of good friends talking over drinks, revealing personal thoughts and feelings about their ongoing lives and relationships. Usually we are 18 inches to 4 feet apart in this context, which is both within comfortable touching distance and close enough to see the other person as they truly are—warts, wrinkles, and all! Such acceptance and physical closeness

are representative of the emotional qualities of a relationship in this context, where we experience a genuine depth of friendship.



## TRANSPARENT

**The Transparent Context** is when you are with just one or two others, making a group of two to four people, your closest of relationships. In the Transparent Context, characterized by complete openness and candor, nothing is held back. This echoes the biblical ideal of being “naked and yet unashamed”—an ideal we live out literally in marriage and metaphorically with our best friends. Hall wrote that you are 0 to 18 inches apart in the closest moments of these relationships, noting that at such proximity the other person’s flaws seem to fade away (since your eyes can’t properly focus on them). This blurring of flaws is a wonderful metaphor for what is going on relationally at these safest depths of human engagement.



## DIVINE

**The Divine Context** represents God’s direct interactions with us, his people, at a one-on-one level. Our focus shifts from cultivating relationships with others to being alone with our Creator and Redeemer as he encounters us in our inner world. We delude ourselves if we believe there can be any barriers in this place; indeed, in this context we come face-to-face with our true selves, as reflected in the loving eyes of our heavenly Father. This communion with God in turn equips us to engage more fruitfully in each of the other four contexts.

To summarize, table 1 presents an overview of the various sociological definitions.

<b>Context</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Distance</b>
Public	100s	Engaging with an outside resource	12'+
Social	20–70	Sharing snapshots that build affinity	4'–12'
Personal	4–12	Revealing private information	18"–4'
Transparent	2–4	Living in vulnerability and openness	0"–18"
Divine	Alone with God	Being with your Creator and Redeemer	Inner world

## Mind the Gap

As you will have noticed, there are some gaps between the different sizes of groups. Certainly these exist in the real world, but they are typically transition phases, when groups are either growing into the next size or subdividing (or shrinking) into smaller contexts.

Whether this change is occurring with intention or haphazardly, these can be painful times, since the previous unifying focus begins to break down. We'll provide some coaching later in the book for navigating through these shifts, but for now recognize that these transition phases do occur. So if you are part of a small group that numbers in the low to mid teens, notice how the Five Contexts will give you a grid to explain why that number feels *less* fruitful now compared to when it was smaller. In a group of this size you are too big to share and recall everyone's prayer requests, but too small to have that sense of an extended community—an environment into which you can easily fold your unchurched friends and neighbors.

You also may have spotted some overlap between the Transparent and Personal Contexts. Sometimes a small group dynamic occurs in a group of as few as four people, though it also can exist in a larger group of very close friends. This is one of those situations where outcomes come into play. You will likely need to talk about what you are trying to achieve as a group, and that will determine what your group will actually “feel” like in practice.

Finally, we want to offer a word of caution. Don't get too hung up on the margins around the edges of the actual numbers. We'll look at this in more detail in the final chapter, but for now just assume that some well-founded sociology backs up the numbers and divisions we are identifying here.

## Mental Gymnastics

Throughout life you will encounter situations that seem to blur the boundaries between these different contexts. When you find yourself in such a spot, your mind will “fix” the physical distance to something that feels most comfortable for you. Myers puts it like this: “Our concept

of space is largely a matter of perspective; it's in our minds. Humans adjust their definition of space based on surrounding variables.”<sup>18</sup>

For instance, when you are sitting on a plane, physically your proximity to the person in the seat beside you will plop you straight into the Transparent Context. Yet you will mentally massage that experience so that you all remain in the Public Context, enabling you to safely ignore the stranger who was randomly assigned to the neighboring seat. In all likelihood you don't share names, you don't talk (other than for courtesy to meet basic needs), and you certainly don't have lingering eye contact at that close range! As Myers notes about these situations, “We may be touching, but we are far from intimate.”<sup>19</sup>

Space, meaning the distance between people, operates in two realms simultaneously: the physical and the mental. While the former is fairly obvious, the latter is more hidden and yet, arguably, is more powerful. As Hall recorded, the way we interact in the different contexts is first developed and decided in the head, rather than in the physicality of the context. Thus the consequence is that, as Myers points out, we don't always interact physically the same way—because we determine our approach mentally in advance.

Sometimes, however, these mental gymnastics are unhealthy and can cause the individual to miss the value of that particular context. For instance, a small church of around forty-five people that gathers on Sundays to worship will almost invariably operate by the rules of the Public Context (which exists for hundreds of people), when actually their reality fits the Social Context (of twenty to seventy people). This “context confusion” may end up inhibiting their ability to grow in size and maturity.

Of course, we also need to account for the fact that different cultures will have variations in how they perceive and express the boundaries between the contexts. Edward Hall was fascinated

by these variations as well, and he looked at both Western and non-Western cultures. While he found that the different spaces (to use his label) exist fairly universally, people did perceive the social rules differently. For example, in the Arab world he found that “privacy in a public place is foreign to them. Business transactions in the bazaar, for example, are not just between buyer and seller, but are participated in by everyone. . . . There is no such thing as an intrusion in public. Public means public!”<sup>20</sup>

With this caveat in mind, we still can safely say that the Five Contexts shape every culture to some extent, even if some of the nuances of social norms are expressed differently.

## Dysfunction in Each Context

As you learn to recognize the different contexts, you will also be able to spot when people are operating in a dysfunctional manner. The following are just a few examples of this kind of dysfunction in the various contexts:

- **Public.** Sharing private information with the person who has been placed next to you by chance. Simply because they happen to be sitting alongside you does not make them your friend!
- **Social.** Expecting the gathering to be a performance that is consumed, when actually it is built around mutual interaction and shared contribution.
- **Personal.** Revealing to others what was shared in the privacy of the Personal Context.
- **Transparent.** Talking solely about what you do on the outside rather than who you are on the inside. Living this way will torpedo intimacy.

- **Divine.** Thinking that you can engineer or control this context, as if somehow you can hide from Jesus. For instance, when the Holy Spirit prompts you with a question, he is not doing it to gather information!

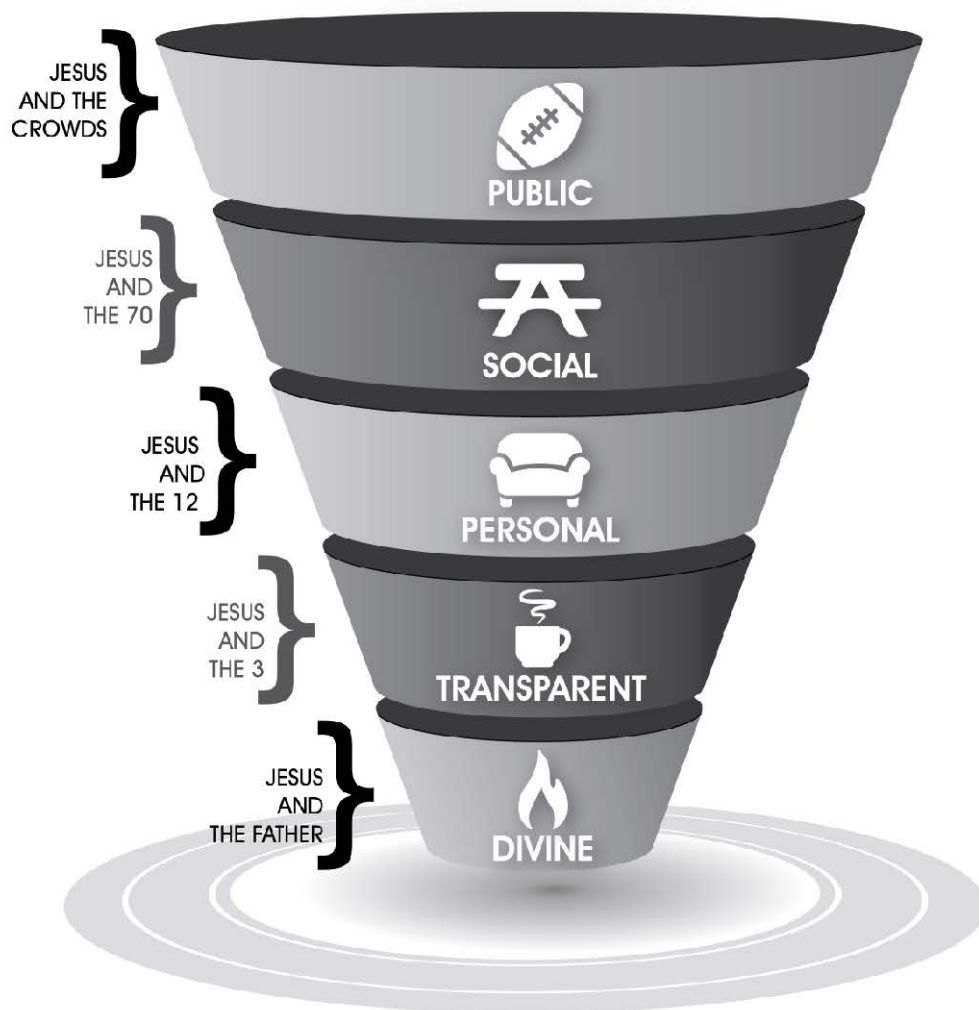
Another common misconception occurs when you meet someone who is highly competent in the Public Context and you automatically assume that he or she is equally at ease in the Personal or Transparent Contexts. Just because someone comes across as warm and gregarious on a stage in front of hundreds doesn't mean that he or she is good at interacting with individuals in private. If you reflect a little, you will realize that you know many people who are competent in only some of the contexts and not others.

## Jesus and the Contexts

As you read through this book, you will find plenty of biblical examples illustrating how each of the Five Contexts functions in the journey of discipleship. However, before we go into detail with each context, we want to outline how Jesus used each of the Five Contexts with great wisdom and discernment.

The concentric circles chart (see fig. 6) serves as a summary of how Jesus ministered in the various contexts. Each one is important, but we can see that the smaller the group, the more customized and focused is his discipling of us.





Discipleship • org

<b>Context</b>	<b>Major Expression</b>	<b>Gospel Passages</b>	<b>What Happened</b>
Public	Jesus and the crowds	Matthew 5:1–2 John 6:1–2 Mark 6:34	Sermon on the Mount Feeding of the 5,000 Compassion for the shepherd-less
Social	Jesus and the 70	Luke 10:1 Matthew 9:9–13 Luke 19	The 70 are sent out Eating with Matthew’s tax collector friends Party at the home of Zacchaeus
Personal	Jesus and the 12	John 13 Matthew 8:23–27 Mark 8:27–33	Washing the disciples’ feet Calming the storm Confession (and rebuke) of Peter
Transparent	Jesus and the 3	Luke 9:28–36 Mark 10:35–45 Matthew 26:36–38	Transfiguration James and John’s request Looking for prayer support at Gethsemane
Divine	Jesus and the Father	Mark 1:35 Luke 6:12 John 5:19	Waking early to pray Before calling the Twelve Jesus does only what he sees the Father doing

Our introduction of the Divine Context might cause a “pause to ponder” moment for you.

After all, we could be implying that Jesus is not really all that present in the other contexts—as if somehow we are taking the omnipresence of God out of all things and creating the very sacred-secular divide that we wrote against a few pages ago!

To clear up any confusion, think of the Divine Context in the following way. There are four contexts in which God disciplines us (and invites us to help disciple others) in the everyday reality of simply living life. He is fully present in all of those different situations and relationships. However, we also see an extra context at play, which is somehow different from the other four. It is beyond human interaction, functioning as an overarching environment where we encounter God's presence in such depth that all our human relationships can't help but be impacted. Our level of openness to God when we are alone with him will directly impact our fruitfulness in both being disciplined and discipling others in the other four contexts.

## The Church and the Contexts

Along with these biblical examples from the life and ministry of Jesus, we will examine how discipleship occurs in each context and how it comes to particular expression in church life.

- ***Sunday worship services*** clearly equate most readily to the Public Context. This is the most common size of church gathering—which leads to the problem of wrongly expecting Sundays to deliver most of our discipling.
- ***Missional communities*** are the rare, but best, expression of the Social Context in church life. This context is conspicuous by its absence in most churches! Even if you have a group of this number of people, it likely is not bound together by people sharing snapshots of who they are in order to build a common affinity. A missional community is an extended family of relationships, centered around Jesus, that goes and makes disciples among a specific group of people. A lot more detail follows in later chapters!
- ***Small groups*** are an obvious example of how churches operate in the Personal Context, and clearly these are a widespread expression of Christian life. The pressing issues tend

to be that most small groups are allowed to grow too large, thus undermining their original strengths, and if we are honest they usually have little to no real ongoing missional impetus.

- ***Deepest friendships, discipleship groups, and marriages*** clearly have the ability to reach into the Transparent Context. Most churches do fairly well at encouraging these areas, but they cannot be organized centrally. Your church pastor can't tell you whom your best friend should be or decide whom you should marry (unless they're forming a cult—in which case, run!).
- ***Your personal walk*** with God is how the Divine Context impacts every one of us. The quality and strength of your relationship with Jesus will have a direct bearing upon the vitality of the other four contexts. The difficulty, of course, is that it is hard to measure how someone else is truly doing alone with God.

What we want to show, in each of the following pairs of chapters, is that God discipulates us in each of the contexts, shaping and molding hearts, minds, and lives—and calling us to imitate his example with those we lead. As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, the key to fruitfulness is to bring the appropriate expectations to each context. Too often people arrive with a tangle of desires and misunderstandings, which short-circuits the blessings and opportunities that the Lord has hardwired into that situation. Over a number of years I have developed three desired outcomes for each of the contexts (which are described in detail in each of the relevant chapters). While the desired outcomes easily could have become a list of ninety-nine things, boiling them down to three core measures of health gives us a powerful evaluative tool.

You will notice immediately that, bar one, these are not lists of actual tasks; they are expressions of measurable values. This is a reflection of the missional nature of your calling:

your unique place of mission requires you to express these outcomes in ways that impact the people you are called to disciple. In whatever context you find yourself, you can use the three outcomes to assess and develop that specific situation.

All of the outcomes are summarized in table 3, along with the main points for each of the Five Contexts.

<b>Context</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Distance</b>	<b>Learning from Jesus</b>	<b>Church Expression</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
Public	100s	Engaging with an outside resource	12'	Jesus and the crowds	“Sundays”	Inspiration Momentum Preaching
Social	20–70	Sharing snapshots that build affinity	4'–12'	Jesus and the 70	Missional communities	Community Mission Practice
Personal	4–12	Revealing private information	18"–4'	Jesus and the 12	Small groups	Closeness Support Challenge
Transparent	2–4	Living in vulnerability and openness	0"–18"	Jesus and the 3	Deepest friendships; marriage	Intimacy Openness Impact
Divine	Alone with God	Being with your Creator and Redeemer	Inner world	Jesus and the Father	Personal walk	Identity Destiny Truth

As you look over this list, we want you to see that there are both *stop* and *start* implications that apply personally and to those you lead:

- You must *stop* expecting complete discipling from just one or two contexts.

- You must *start* a sustainable rhythm of church that gives you each of the Five Contexts, thereby enabling you to play your part in discipling others!

How is any of this possible, especially in our crazy-busy lives? That is what we want to show you in the full book, *Discipleship That Fits*. We hope this has wet your appetite to learn more!

This is an eBook that is an introduction to the fuller book called *Discipleship That Fits* that will be published in 2016 by Zondervan.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Jim Putman and Bobby Harrington with Robert Coleman, *DiscipleShift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples*, Exponential Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> This definition and the basis for it is taken from the book by Bobby Harrington and Josh Patrick, *The Disciple Makers Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The participles in vv. 19–20 are subordinate to the command “make disciples” and explain how disciples are made: by “baptizing” them and “teaching” them obedience to all of Jesus’ commandments. The first of these involves the initiation into discipleship, and the second focuses on the life long task of sanctification or obedience. See Craig Bloomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 431.

<sup>4</sup> Bobby Harrington and Josh Patrick, *The Disciple Makers Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Bobby shows how discipleship works in the home in a book that he co-wrote with his son, Chad Harrington, and Jason Houser. See *Dedicated: Training Your Children to Trust and Follow Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> This theme is traced out well by two authors. Writing from a Calvinistic perspective is David Platt, *Follow Me: A Call to Die. A Call to Live* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2013). Writing from an Arminian perspective is Robert Picirilli, *Discipleship: The Expression of Saving Faith* (Nashville: Randall House, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> For more on the biblical response to Jesus and his Gospel, see Bill Hull, *Conversion and Discipleship: You Cannot Have One without the Other* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming [2016]).

<sup>8</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 299.

<sup>9</sup> John Wimber, *Everyone Gets to Play*, ed. Christy Wimber (Boise: Ampelon, 2008), 14.

<sup>10</sup> John Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 18.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Myers, *The Search to Belong* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Edward Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

<sup>14</sup> Myers, *Search to Belong*, 36.

<sup>15</sup> I shared an early version of this thinking in Mike Breen and Alex Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities* (Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2010), 42.

<sup>16</sup> The following graphics are available to be downloaded at [discipleship.org](http://discipleship.org).

<sup>17</sup> See Myers, *Search to Belong*, 46.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>20</sup> Hall, *Hidden Dimension*, 162.