

“DISCIPLESHIP THAT FITS”
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Evangelism and discipleship are gospel-centric and inseparable. A disciple is following Jesus, being changed by Jesus and is committed to the mission of Jesus.

A disciple is the kind of person who becomes the kind of person Jesus would be. Being a disciple is all about becoming like Jesus, and then helping others become like Jesus.

The two key questions of discipleship are:

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

So often we in the church focus the vast bulk of our discipling (and evangelistic) energies on the transfer of information. For most people, faith in Jesus is best transferred and deepened in the context of relational experiences. You cannot have a culture of empowerment without a parallel value of accountability.

Tell me and I'll forget. Show me and I may remember. Engage me and I'll understand”
~ Chinese Proverb

While all sorts of things can shape us, the deepest impact on our core being comes from the investment of others in our lives.

Good discipleship is a balance of relationships, experiences and information. Regrettably, the Western church has the tendency to emphasize information downloading over relational discipleship. Discipleship and true friendship are closely aligned.

“Ultimately, each church will be evaluated by only one thing—it's disciples.”
~ Neil Cole

We tend to build a culture that produces Christian consumers rather than Christian disciples, and then we wonder why we aren't growing missional leaders in the Kingdom of God.

The five contexts for disciple-making

1. **Public Context**—Weekend Services-100's to 1,000's

Inspiration, Movementum, Preaching

The hazard that must be avoided is expecting that a weekend worship service will somehow magically do things that it simply is not set up to do very well. Public context ministry is an important part of our receiving, giving, discipleship. It has a number of amazing strengths, but it carries some potentially huge pitfalls as well.

We will need to engage properly with the biblical text, lift Jesus high in the message, share the gospel and seek a clear response from those listening.

We'll also need to think about our listener's hearts, making sure their minds and lifestyles are being both encouraged and challenged, and seeking, as the preacher, to have a winsome and engaging manner that is clearly spirit-led.

Don't promise how close they are going to feel to everyone in the public context, because that outcome is simply not deliverable. Don't expect the public context to be a gathering where people feel a strong sense of community and closeness.

The public context is not the spiritual pinnacle of the week for people! It is an important part of their spiritual walk, but discipleship should occur throughout their lives, day by day, hour by hour, in all five contexts of discipleship.

In the public context, People should expect to hear what Jesus is saying to them and determine what they are going to do in response.

2. **Social Context**—Missional Communities-70+

Community, Mission, Practice

When Jesus named the core 12 disciples, Luke highlights that they came from a wider group. "He called his disciples to him" and out of this existing group of disciples (Social Context) he called the 12. The different contexts should complement, rather than compete with each other. Fruitful Social Context groups which we refer to as *missional communities* operate by a different set of rules than public context gatherings.

The barrier to entry at this size of gathering is pretty low and doable, especially in comparison to a traditional small group of six to ten people.

The social context is large enough to dare and small enough to care. A missional community is not a place for raw accountability, since it includes too many people for such sharing to take place at a deep and consistent level.

The social context is great for seeing people come to faith in Jesus, however too many churches act as if everyone is going to come to faith through the public context, when self-evidently that is not the case in a post-Christian culture.

We need to be out there and fully incarnated in our particular neighborhood or network of relationships. Success when envisioned this way becomes less about the number of seats filled in our services (Public Context) or the amount of money given and far more about the number of people involve in discipling relationships.

3. **Personal Context**—Small Groups-4-12

Closeness, Support, Challenge

The personal context tends to promote relational closeness and bonding more than the social context does because more time is available to develop relationships with others in the group.

Jesus spent much of his time in the personal context. Pastor and author Jim Pitman says, *“I believe in and focus on small groups, because that is the primary way that Jesus made disciples.”*

Jesus focused on the small group more than the public gatherings. He ministered in all of the different contexts we are looking at in this book, but he prioritized his time with the small group. Jesus used the small group context to teach and model. Jesus used the small group as his forum for leadership development as well.

He gave his life to these men as he trained and discipled them and then entrusted the future of his whole ministry to them. Jesus gave both this relational model and his message of salvation that the world would come to believe. Moreover, many of the high points in Jesus life and ministry occurred exclusively with the twelve.

Discipleship is about more than just learning facts and repeating information. It’s about learning to apply the gospel to our lives and, along with others, working out the implications of Jesus teachings at a personal, practical level.

We believe that Jesus and the New Testament show us the foundational goal around which every small group needs to be organized—discipleship.

A disciple is following Jesus, is being changed by Jesus, and is committed to the mission of Jesus. The answer for why Jesus called the twelve together was so that he could make disciples who make disciples. Leaders of small groups are responsible for discipling those in their small groups. Small group leaders can become disciple-makers only if they are being discipled.

Small groups are different than listening to a podcast, attending or watching church online, or even reading the Bible in solitude. Certainly these practices can be valuable, but we also need spiritual friendships with real flesh-and-blood human beings in order to follow Jesus and experience the power of the Holy Spirit.

The idea, in many places, that a small group is just a group of friends at a similar stage of life will not be sufficient. Sharing life with others in a small group develops a depth and closeness that builds over time as we navigate the joys and sorrow of life together.

Many Christians have spent a great deal of time attending church services but have never experienced Christian relationships.

Don't expect intimate friendships in the Personal Context, especially when you are first getting to know others. Discipleship—growing in relationship with Jesus together requires as much consistency as playing sports does, perhaps even more.

Helping people trust and follow Jesus means being like Jesus—we initiate relationships, we spend time with people, we teach people, and we invite them to commit their lives to God at deeper and deeper levels.

4. **Transparent Context**—Groups of 2-4

Intimacy, Openness, Impact

The Transparent Context is the closest of the discipling relationships that we experience with other people. The Transparent Context is the relational setting where I (Bobby) have had the most fruitfulness in developing leaders in the local church. To this day, the most effective leadership development we are witnessing in our church is the discipleship based on the principles of transparent discipling relationships.

As we have mentioned earlier, in our Western culture, our primary discipleship methods have been educational in focus. A strictly educational approach doesn't describe the discipleship method of either Jesus or Paul (or any of the apostles).

If trust is a two-sided coin, the two sides of the coin are openness and authenticity.

Discipleship is helping people trust and follow Jesus as Lord, and it requires that we both *understand* the truth and *obey* it. What we know matters only if it translates into how we live. If we are not applying biblical truth to a person's real everyday life, it is not true discipleship. The true test of helping people know the Bible is how they apply and live out the Bible's teachings.

The Bible both understood and applied is crucial to effective discipleship. Grace-filled accountability is the companion of heartfelt Bible study. Disciples hear Jesus speak and obey him. Obedience expresses faith and is a fundamental principle of the Christian life.

5. **Divine Context**—You and God

Identity, Destiny, Truth

The Divine Context of discipleship gives us the capacity to engage fully in the other contexts.

Jesus entire life, as recorded in the gospels, shows the regular practice of spiritual habits (spiritual disciplines) in the Divine Context.

Our God is the God who dreamed you up—which make you the fulfillment of his dream. Wow! But here's the thing; too often we allow the big dream to be overtaken by the clamor of the American dream.

Knowing the truth means having a relational knowledge of truth—knowing truth in such a way that it shapes who you are. It forms your character, defines your desires, and influences your choices.

Create and sustain a culture in the church that emphasizes alone time with God and spiritual disciplines as part of the normal Christian life.

When we read God's Word with the goal of listening to God, we allow it to affect our lives in all sorts of ways.

Cally Parkinson of the Willow Creek Association summed up for us what they had learned after surveying more than 250,000 Christians and 1,500 churches. She said, "The single most important thing a church can do to help people grow is to help them engage with God in the Bible on a daily basis."

Discipleship is about following Jesus, hearing what he is saying and then obeying,