



**THE  
FALSE  
PROMISE  
OF DISCIPLESHIP**

**BILL HULL**

**BRANDON COOK**

# The False Promise of Discipleship

by Bill Hull and Brandon Cook

## The False Promise of Discipleship

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## **Foreword**

Bill Hull is one of the best discipleship gurus writing today. Together with the deep thinking Brandon Cook, the two leaders show us how to love Jesus, love Jesus' Kingdom mission (to make disciples), love the church, and love the world. They will help you to do the same.

*The False Promise of Discipleship* will draw you into the heart of Jesus and compel you to ask the right question. It is the most fundamental question that should be asked about the focus and goal of discipleship. Hint: This question is not *about you*, and it's not *about you and God*.

Hull and Cook deftly raise *the issue* that church leaders need to grapple with today (and in all generations). This issue should form a seamless bridge between the best of the discipleship movement and the best of the missional movement. In fact, properly understood, it points us to a merger of the discipleship movement and the missional movement.

As soon as I read this eBook, I thought to myself: *I want my staff in our church and my national discipleship leader friends to read this book!* Then I thought to myself again, *Wait: A lot of other young leaders in their 20s and 30s out there really need this book ...* And then I smiled when I said to myself, *I think God will be very pleased if a lot of people read The False Promise of Discipleship ... and God will be especially pleased if they put what they need into practice.*

Dr. Bobby Harrington  
Founder and director of Discipleship.org (co-author of DiscipleShift)

# **INSIDE**

## **Introduction**

### **Chapter 1**

The Human Paradigm

### **Chapter 2**

The Wrong Question

### **Chapter 3**

The Jesus Paradigm

### **Chapter 4**

Living Into the Third Question

## **Endnotes**

## **About the Authors**

## Introduction

*"I hurt with the hurt of my people. I mourn and am overcome with grief. Is there no medicine in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why is there no healing for the wounds of my people?" (Jer. 8:22).*

Imagine if Jesus had spent all of His time planning a big banquet. He gets baptized in the Jordan River and then retreats back up to Galilee, puts a deposit down on a huge venue, and prepares to put on a killer party. No need for deejays to get the party started. The man makes a world-class wine.

Then the big night comes, and Jesus waits, eager, excited, His foot tapping nervously on the floor. But by 8 p.m., only a few people have shown up. He makes do. At least the sparse crowd enjoyed the wine (what on earth *was* that vintage?). The next week, Jesus tries the whole thing again hoping for a better turnout. This time, He brings in a band. But once again, the numbers are low.

Not one to give up, He tries it again, adding dry ice and a fog machine—the ancient equivalent, anyway. He continues to attempt a bigger and better party.

Kind of a crazy scenario, right? But when you think about it, for the last 50 years the American church has been doing the same thing, with fewer and fewer people showing up for the party. Even when attracting people *has* worked to bring people to a local church, we haven't consistently created Christlike disciples and disciple makers. The harder we try, the farther behind we get. The cultural landscape is shifting so rapidly and substantially that the strategies are outdated before we even get out of the gate. Trying to build church programs and having a slick show may still "work" in some parts of the United States, but increasingly, the impact of the attractional model is more like, "Turn out the lights; the party's over." Bottom line: *The church as we've known it is dying. What will be resurrected in its place?*

We need a new movement.

Of course, we know that Jesus did *not* focus on putting on a slick, attractive show. He didn't throw a big party (although He did crash a few). Instead, He spent the vast majority of His time with a few individuals. Looking at His life in the gospels, we can clearly see that Jesus zeroed in on making disciples, not throwing parties. We can all give thanks for the growing awareness and conviction that disciple making—following Jesus and learning to live and love like He does—is our work, too. *Disciple making is the hope for the church's future.* As author and 3DM leader Mike Breen has said, "If you make disciples, you will always get the church. But if you try to build the church, you will rarely get disciples."<sup>1</sup>

In Luke's gospel, we read Jesus' words to the crowd that had gathered: "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross

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daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give you life for my sake, you will save it” (Luke 9:23-25).

When we follow His plan, everything gets done just right. We can all greet the discipleship renaissance with hope. It is a breath of fresh air. It is a commitment that teems with possibilities.

Yet, at the same time, *we also have major problems with discipleship, at least as we understand it.*

I (Brandon) grew up in the church and walked through a string of discipleship programs. Usually they involved reading the Bible and talking about whatever I (or we, depending on who was in the group) was struggling with. The assumption seemed to be that if we just read more and tried harder, we could get ourselves in order and live real, effective lives for Jesus. There was value in that thought, for sure. But I always left each program with the feeling that I wasn’t quite there, that I needed to try harder, that there was some special place of “arrival” just around the corner if I did the right things.

Ultimately, I ended up resenting the entire process because I could never “get there.” I’ve discovered that most people approach God the same way, thinking that they need to earn their way towards Him, and then they end up frustrated by the entire process. Sure, everyone talks about grace when it comes to getting our sins forgiven and going to heaven, but almost immediately we start striving to get to a new level with God. I’ve watched many of my peers leave the church entirely.

What’s happening? Bill and I believe we’re losing a generation because, at the root, *we’ve not taught discipleship as Jesus taught it.*

In fact, these days committing to “discipleship” may not actually mean much. The word has so many meanings—much like the word “Christian” (just notice how *that* word is wielded in media and popular use)—that we can’t assume we know what any one person means when they say discipleship. As Bill so often says, “We may be using the same words, but we are speaking a different language.”

Is discipleship mentoring? Is it meeting regularly with someone or with a few someones? Maybe, maybe not. It all depends on what’s happening (the content) during that time. Discipleship probably *includes* mentoring, but mentoring is not sufficient in and of itself to constitute discipleship. Or is discipleship teaching people to read Scripture and to talk about what they’re struggling with? That is, is it Bible reading with some accountability thrown in?

Again, discipleship no doubt includes Scripture reading as well as honestly sharing our lives with one another. But is that how Jesus spent all of His time with the disciples—reading Scripture and asking them to tell Him what they struggled with the past week? Clearly, we don’t have a lot of clarity about what discipleship is (and isn’t). Moreover, our ways and means of making disciples may have little resemblance to how Jesus made disciples. To some degree, it makes sense—given

that we live in a completely different context absent of itinerant teachers who traveled the countryside. And yet, *might there be something fundamentally askew about our baseline assumptions of what discipleship is?* Our problems, after all, aren't usually caused by what we know but just the opposite. They are usually caused by what we don't know.

We wanted to write this eBook to examine why discipleship, so called, so often fails, and to explore what's required to restore potency and power to discipleship within the church. Ultimately, what do we need to do in order to see towns and cities renewed, and the world find hope in the living God.

Imagine building a house. You lay the foundation first, clearing away rubble, making a sure start. Then you raise the actual structure. It takes a lot of work, but oh boy, when you're done, holy Toledo! A veritable castle. You move in, excited for a new beginning. But over time, you notice that something's wrong. Your glass of orange juice starts sliding across the kitchen table. One day you notice that the living room floor dips in the middle. The corners of the bedroom are no longer flush. The siding is askew.

Naturally, you call in a carpenter, and then an engineer, eager to learn what has gone wrong. You soon discover the problem, and it's a doozy: You've built the entire structure on a rotten foundation. You think back, and truth be told, you *do* remember wondering if everything had been made level, if everything had been allowed to settle. But you were just so excited to get on with it and build the house. The extra work seemed like a waste of time. *Everything would probably be fine.* Or so you thought. Now, as you look at your house, which is quickly losing integrity, you realize that you'll either need to put some major work into overhauling and rehabbing the whole thing; or you'll just have to start from scratch, razing everything down to the foundation and beginning again.

Is it possible that our foundation for discipleship could be wonky? Is it possible that it might be off in some way, perhaps significantly? Jesus warned us, after all, about building our house on sand rather than a rock. Of course, He was talking about building a life on Him, but the metaphor holds true for whatever endeavor we set our hearts and hands to.

Could it be that too often we've built our discipleship on sandy beaches?

### **The False Promise**

Very simply, the false promise of discipleship is the premise that *discipleship is about you and I getting closer and closer to Jesus.*

Sounds like one of those paradoxical statements Jesus is known for, right ("The first shall be last and the last first"; "He who finds his life will lose it")? Isn't being close to Jesus a great thing? Of course it is. But here's the rub. A close relationship with Jesus is not the *goal of discipleship*. Most people, quite simply, have been trained to think that discipleship is "for me":

- *It's about me growing closer to Jesus.*
- *It's about me becoming a better person, a better Christian.*
- *It's about me feeling like I know God more.*

All of these things are good. But this self-focused discipleship is exactly what has to shift. This myopic view is why maturity—at least, the type that Jesus seems to have in mind—never happens. Whatever the paradigm for discipleship, if it's primarily about you and it's primarily asking the question, "How am I doing?" it's doomed to fall back to earth. We're left staring up at the heavens, knowing that surely there is soaring yet to be done but not quite sure how to get there above the clouds.

The soaring life that Jesus invites us into is, quite simply, *a life lived for others*. Contrary to what we've been taught or may have taught (or are currently teaching), discipleship is always, unceasingly about "the other." As God Himself said to His people in Isaiah 58 (paraphrasing): "If you'll focus on others, if you'll focus on rebuilding the broken places for others, if you'll focus on bringing light into the darkness, for others, then *your* salvation will break forth like the dawn!"<sup>2</sup>

Wasn't this Jesus' constant work? To provoke His disciples into loving and serving others, since He Himself came "not to be served, but to serve?" Before Jesus fed the 5,000, he turned to His disciples and said, "*You* give the people something to eat." He constantly challenged His disciples to love, serve, feed, and proclaim life to others. He said that the whole law and prophets—the whole story of God!—is about loving God with everything you have "*and your neighbor as yourself.*"

Don't miss this: *Reorienting your life to loving, knowing, and serving others is both the heart of true discipleship, and the endpoint of discipleship.*

Yet, sadly, the church has not often adopted Jesus' ways and means—teaching His disciples to orient their life and energy around serving others. When it has, it feels more like an activity we're supposed to fit into crowded schedules rather than a lifestyle of adventure, teeming with possibilities, where the Kingdom of God could burst forth at any moment. Sadly, we have often preferred to put on banquets, hoping people will like us, or outreach events, hoping that they will be curious about us. Good intentions, no doubt. But events and programs are simply not the path that leads to cultivating a vibrant church built on a movement of disciple-making disciples.

Through the course of this short, digestible book, we'll discuss specific steps toward a Jesus-centered, others-focused discipleship. But first, we need to explore why discipleship as it now stands—generally built on the question, "How am I doing?"—is so prevalent, and why true, Jesus-centered discipleship is often so elusive.

As with the call to the carpenter and the engineer, maybe we first need to put on our hard hats and take a good look at the foundations we're building on for life.

## Chapter 1

### The Human Paradigm

In John chapter 3, we read the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a leading Jewish figure. Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of night, apparently worried about who might see him talking with the enigmatic rabbi from Galilee. He comes because he's concerned. He's wondering what foundation he's building his life on, and if there's something he might be missing. After all, this teacher named Jesus speaks with an authority that Nicodemus has never heard before. Still, Nicodemus is conflicted: Jesus' message is compelling, but he has built his life on a certain way of thinking about God and how one rightly approaches Him. Namely, through the right sort of religious life, by which he makes himself acceptable before God.

Jesus says something quite strange that goes right over Nicodemus' head. "Nicodemus, you must be born again."

"Sure. Wait ... what?"

Jesus repeats it. "You must be born again," implying that Nicodemus must forsake what he was born into (his physical birth) and leave that behind to be born into something new.

Nicodemus is right in the thick of that which he has been born into. Let's call it *The Human Paradigm*, for it represents the paradigm of human life outside the Kingdom of God.

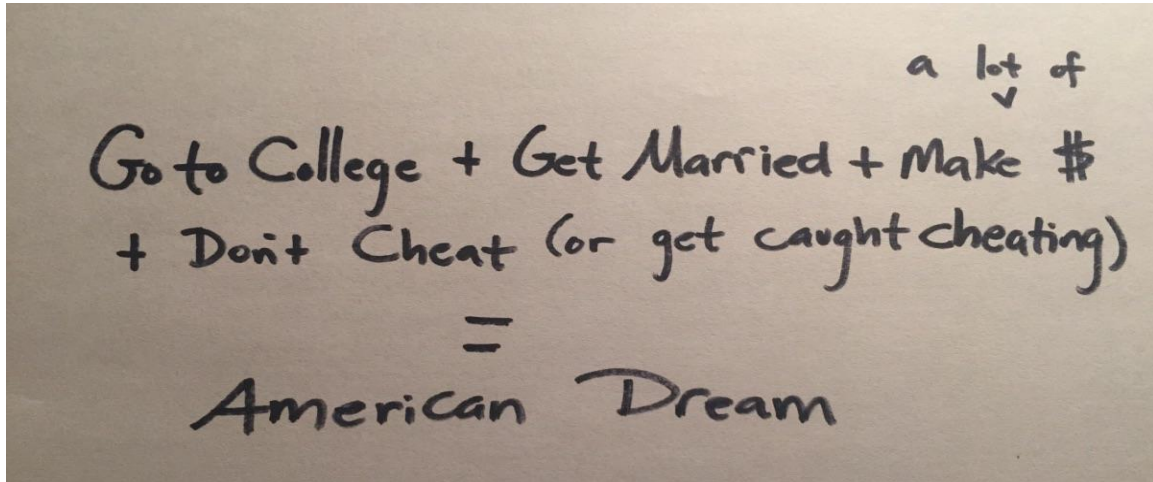
#### The Human Paradigm

The Human Paradigm is endemic to most religious systems and beyond that, to the human heart, where it gets its start. It's based on the idea that if we do A, B, and C, we can earn X. (If you're having a cold-sweat flashback to sophomore algebra, fear not. That's as complicated as this equation gets). This is the "eat what you kill" paradigm that all of us are born into and grow up in, reinforced at every corner: "Be a good boy, and Santa will bring you lots of presents"; "Be a good girl, and Mommy will give you a cookie."

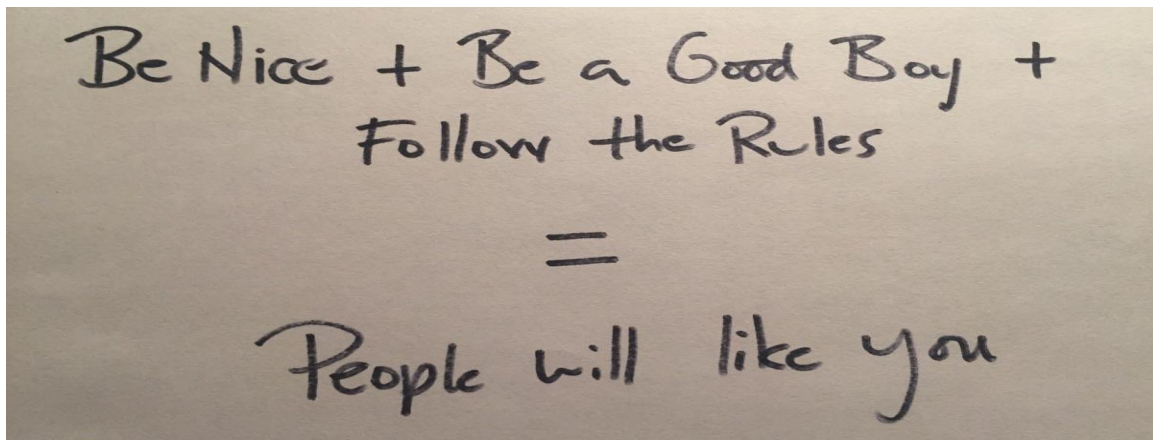
In The Human Paradigm, there's always some "X" that we want; presents, cookies, love and affection, etc. X marks the spot. It's the treasure we're after. We all have these X's that we long for, and pretty much every human context has some X—the place you want to be. Advertisers are always preying on our belief that if we just have X or buy X, or take a vacation to X, we'll be, finally, satisfied. X might also represent what you want your life to be: You have enough money, the house, the car, the boyfriend or girlfriend you're pining for, the skinny body you hope for. It's the place where people like you. The place where you're confident. In short, it's the place where you've arrived. And won't life just be wonderful once you've arrived!

The good news is that it's all in your power. Just follow the simple steps. Whatever they may be.

Consider this equation:



Or this one:



What are your favorite equations? What are the X's in your life?

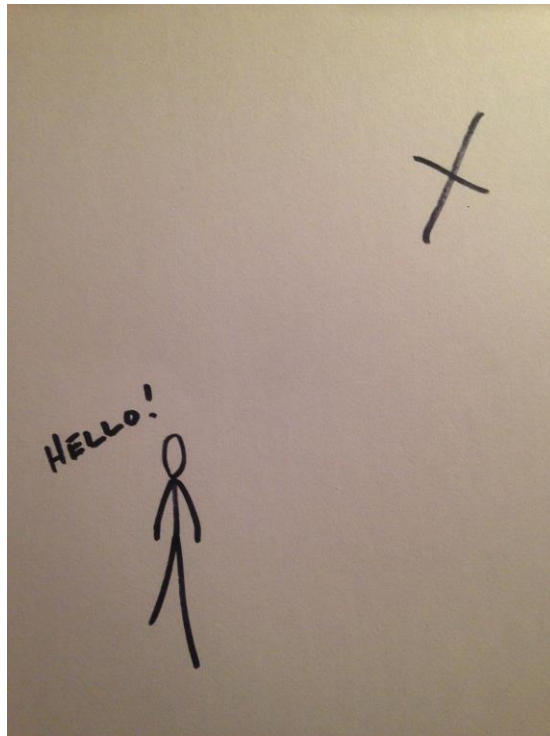
Maybe your equation is: Don't speak up + Smile a lot = People won't reject me

or

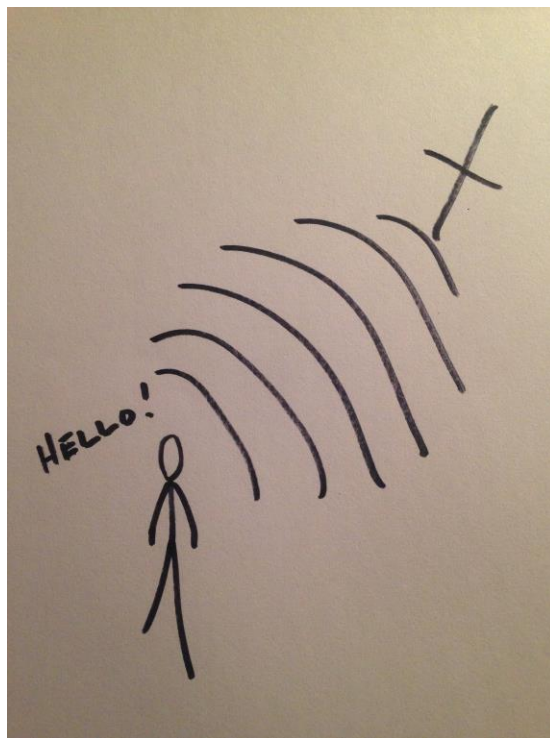
Be loud + Insult people = I'll get what I want

The two simple pictures below illustrate The Human Paradigm.





There you are! (That's you, bottom left.) And you can see the X you want to get to!  
But how? How do you get there? No problem. There are simply steps you have to take.



So there are X's, and then there are the steps we're supposed to take to get to X, the rungs we're to climb. If you just work hard, study, play nice, cheat, don't cheat, follow the rules, don't follow the rules, etc., you'll get to X! This is the heart of The Human Paradigm: Do the things you're supposed to do, work hard enough, try hard enough, and you can make X happen. This paradigm is incredibly alluring because it promises us control. It's based on the governing narrative of the human universe that says if you try hard, you'll be rewarded. You are the master of your fate! The size of the self-help section in your local bookstore is a testimony to just how alive and well this paradigm is.

We were born into this way of thinking. And it's fine and good (to an extent) to rely on this paradigm. It reflects an actual reality of how the universe works. Right now, my wife and I (Brandon) are potty-training our daughter, and you better believe we're using just such a system. Every time our little girl uses the potty, she gets gummy bears! Her X is gummy bears, and our X is getting our daughter to put her stuff where it's supposed to go so that (thank God!) we don't have to change any more diapers. If we have to spend a small fortune on candy, so be it. Whatever works! We're using The Human Paradigm, or reward system, to get something done. In this way, earning things we want works and is useful, insofar as we understand what we're doing.

The flip side of The Human Paradigm (earning what you get) is that if you do bad things, bad things will happen to you. Either because the universe is karmic or because God will get you. You often find this thinking in religious circles. Jesus' disciples seem to fully depend on this sort of universe and on that sort of equation when they pass by the blind man and ask Jesus, "Who sinned that this man was born blind, him or his parents?" (It's worth noting that Jesus doesn't buy into this way of thinking, and thus answers, "Neither.")

The Human Paradigm is so prevalent because, quite simply, we really like it. We resent it when our equations don't work out, but there's something alluring about the possibility that *if we do these things, we'll make it, we'll earn it, we'll arrive!* And we'll have done it all by ourselves.

Like I said earlier, this sort of thinking is very much at home in most religious settings, and it translates quite easily into Christian spirituality. In the church world, the X may be a great thing, like being a good Christian, being the Christian I should be (note: "should" is a huge word in The Human Paradigm), being more giving, being missional, being more Spirit-filled. X represents the place where we have arrived at some envisioned spiritual maturity. And X is often connoted with "being close to God."

Can you see that picture of arrival in your own faith? The place where you're no longer struggling with Y or Z because you've arrived at X? What would be complete in your personal realm of X? What struggles would you no longer have? And again, won't it just be wonderful when you get there!

When I was nine years old, I [Bill] went to the altar at my grandmother's church. A gaggle of praying folks surrounded me and informed me that I had "prayed through," which meant that I had been saved from my sins and was heaven bound. Later that week, my grandmother informed me that I would need to be faithful and sometime in the next year or so I would need to be sanctified. She said that was the next step. It was my X. A week later, I was laughing at my friends' off-color stories and thinking way too much about girls. I was moving in reverse. I never made it to X. Actually, X didn't look that good to me, but I knew I should try to get there, like it or not.

The big question, of course, is how do we get to X? Most church teaching offers up the answers in the form of a list of do's and don't's, all designed to get us "close to Jesus." You just climb the rungs. If you do these things, you'll get to X. Most church activity is based on that assumption. Do the things your church or denomination or tradition says you should do—go to church enough, read your Bible enough, get enough information in your head, pray enough, have enough faith, have enough quiet times, tithe enough, don't use those words, don't watch those movies—and you'll get to X.

The promise that's so often taught even if it's never explicitly stated is that "if you engage in certain religious practices in the right context—like through church membership or participation—you will become a mature Christian." Obviously, the rungs vary according to context. In some legalistic contexts, a rung might be, "Don't cut your hair or wear shorts." In some holiness contexts, a rung might be, "Don't drink any alcohol." In a hipster context, it's all about the black frame glasses (we should know since we both wear them). Whatever the case, we generally have a clear list of "should's" presented to us—things that we're supposed to do that will get us to X.

I (Brandon) have a very clear memory from high school of lying on my bedroom floor with a yellow legal pad, onto which I frantically scribbled all the things I could identify about myself that needed to be fixed. A spiritual inventory of sorts. And there were a lot of things to write down. I was hyper aware of all that I judged as unacceptable—to myself and, no doubt, to God. *Stop wanting so many material things. Stop being jealous. Make more time for prayer and Bible study. Do this, don't do that.* The list went on and on, and after I'd gotten a page full of items, I sat in frustration, literally rapping my fists on the floor at just how overwhelming it all was. But I couldn't see any other way. I felt incapable of transforming myself, and yet the only possibility I saw was trying harder. The only economy I knew was one based on me doing well enough to earn rewards, in this case, from God Himself.

That's a stark example, and almost cartoonish, but I would assert that most of us, deep inside, have some sort of remnant belief that this is exactly how the universe works, and that God's favor must be earned, not for entry into heaven, but for life. And the reason we practice spiritual disciplines is to climb the rungs of the ladder and get to X. *That* is what The Human Paradigm is all about.

You can probably tell we're about to tear apart The Human Paradigm, but first it bears repeating that a lot of this paradigm is true and helpful. This is the way the world functions, and when Jesus said, "be wise as serpents," there's something to be said about understanding how the world works. Moreover, most of the "must do's" listed above—reading the Bible, praying and living generously and so forth—are great things! And we do pursue them and seek out some sort of spiritual growth and transformation. All of that is true.

That being said, The Human Paradigm has some real problems. And many of us are stuck in life because we buy into this paradigm, which results in a lot of confusion, frustration and, ultimately, anger toward God. We get stuck there because while we understand how things work in the world, we don't understand how they work within God's Kingdom, in which a totally different paradigm—an economy that is *not* based on earning—is the only economy that matters. So we need to understand the problems with The Human Paradigm because without that understanding it will be difficult for us to fully enter the Kingdom of God or to thrive as disciples of Jesus.

## Chapter 2

### The Wrong Question

The first, and perhaps the most obvious, problem with The Human Paradigm is that we never arrive! Have you noticed that X is ever-elusive? The closer you get to it, the farther away you realize it is! This plays out in life all the time, when say, we get the job we wanted and find that somehow it doesn't satisfy us. Have you ever noticed that getting what you thought you wanted can actually be a miserable experience?

And in spiritual terms, we all know that for all the growth and progress we make, there's always more to go. We're never where we could or "should" be. The more mature you get, the more you realize that attaining some sort of spiritual standing on your own merits is not going to happen. We're always discovering just how far we are from the person we want to be. And yet, many—if not most—of us believe that we have to earn God's love or grace, and then resent that, and resent that we aren't able to do it.

So that's a real problem: As much as we grow, we never arrive and, in fact, we can feel like we're traveling in a circle, not a straight line. For this reason, many Christians get burned out on following Jesus. It's just exhausting, if you're approaching it through The Human Paradigm.

Growing up, I (Brandon) was constantly told to have a quiet time for prayer and reading Scripture. I thought that was the only way I would get close to God, and I did sense the value in times of quiet for my soul. To this day, I believe that silence makes way for an encounter with God, and that without silence there is no space for spiritual transformation. Yet I struggled—as did most everyone else I knew—with having quiet times. It's just hard and somehow unnatural to approach with any eagerness a God who you believe, at root, is trying to fix you or trying to get you to climb a ladder toward Him.

Many people, in fact, leave the church entirely after discovering that "doing the dance" doesn't deliver all they thought it would. People leave the church because they discover the gospel they have believed—that life will basically work out if you do this dance—proves to be insufficient. Tragedy occurs. Life twists and turns, sometimes painfully, and if you believe that it's because you didn't do the dance well enough, you'll either conclude that God is capricious or that all this Jesus stuff is just hokey. *This just can't be who God is, and if it is, then I want no part of Him.* Who could blame them? We've taught people, in essence, "do these things, and everything will be okay" instead of "everything will *not* always be okay, but God is with you and that's enough!" Our gospel, under the influence of The Human Paradigm, is often way off. Rather than teaching people the gospel of God with us, we've taught them the gospel of "do it right to get close to Jesus."

The second problem—and this is a critical one—centers on focus. Where is the focus in this paradigm? On self! How am *I* doing? Am *I* having enough faith? Am *I* reading

my Bible enough? I, I, I! In fact, as we said earlier, the defining question in The Human Paradigm is “How am *I* doing?”

Now, this is not a bad question per se. In fact, it’s a great discipleship question that Jesus often engages people in. But if it’s your only, or even primary, discipleship question, you’re in big trouble. Any spirituality exclusively, or even just primarily, focused on this question is cut off from real life and vitality. It’s trapped, imprisoned; it leads to highly educated people who have no real outlet for their knowledge and desire. They often grow tired and give up, and the desire for more dissipates into the tissue of ordinary life.

The problem is, while the question, “How am I doing?” is really satisfying to the ego, the concerns of our spirit are wholly different. We were designed to be most satisfied when we’re forgetting ourselves, not focusing on us. Heaven is self-forgetfulness. Jesus described our way of being as “like little children.” Think of the freedom of a two-year-old who has not yet developed his fear of “what people might think about me.”

Come over to my (Brandon’s) house most nights and you’ll find our daughter dancing in circles, the definition of “throw your hands in the air like you just don’t care.” When we give, when we focus on others instead of our own immediate needs, when we do something beautiful for another, we discover that truly “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” And the opposite holds true: The heart of hell is a soul focused only on itself and its own needs at the expense of others. So it’s very unlikely we will experience much joy or abundance if we’re constantly monitoring, evaluating, and bemoaning on the one hand—or pridefully exulting, on the other—how poorly or how well we’re doing.

Jesus is constantly trying to get our focus off of ourselves and onto loving God and loving others. He said that such a devoted life sums up the entirety of His work in human hearts (Mark 10:45). But oftentimes, we are so caught in a paradigm that has trained us to constantly check in on how well we’re doing at being “good Christians” that we never *become* good Christians.

### **And The Biggest Problem**

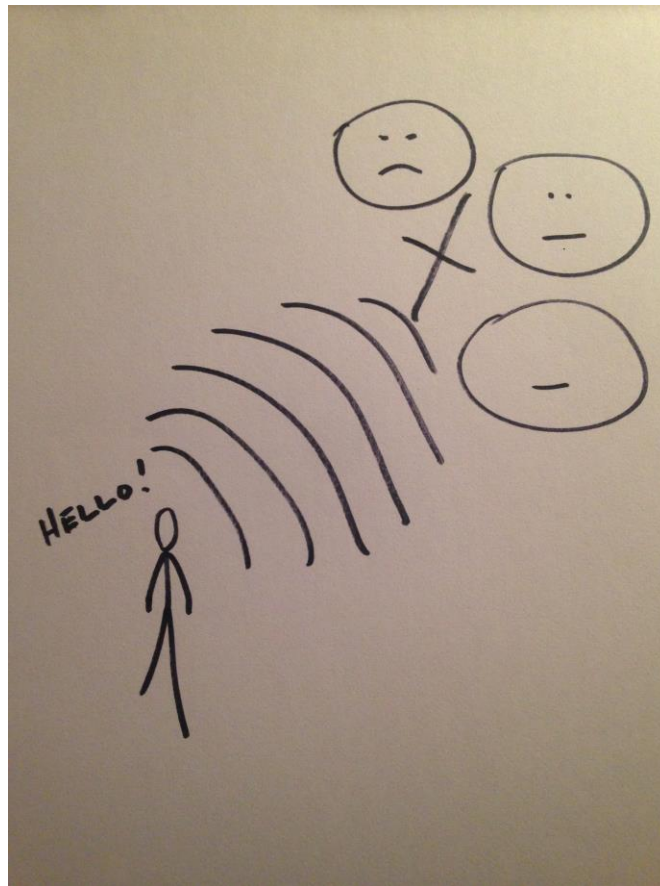
But the biggest problem with The Human Paradigm is just that. It’s strictly human. It’s a human way of thinking about the world. It is, at its core, untouched by the economy of God’s Kingdom. And, at its core, it is often driven by a misshapen view of God. *The gas that drives the entire engine is the belief that God must be persuaded that we are worthy of further good things and responsibility.* That we must wrestle blessings from His hand, that, ultimately ... God is not really good.

It’s amazing when we start to discover just how deep that belief runs in us, even if we would never acknowledge it on an intellectual or theological level. But there is always the belief of the mind and the belief of the heart—what we *really* believe, on an emotional level. There’s the truth we ascribe to and the truth we actually hold to. It’s amazing just how far our thoughts about God can be from reality. As Dallas

Willard said, most people are most comfortable thinking of God as “The Western Exterminator, a divine curmudgeon.”<sup>3</sup>

A young woman in a Bible study once said to me (Brandon), “People keep telling me, ‘God’s your good Father,’ but that doesn’t mean anything to me! I don’t have warm and fuzzy thoughts when I think about my own father, and I don’t have warm and fuzzy thoughts when I think about God as Father.” This woman knew what she was *supposed* to believe about God, but what she actually believed, based on her experience with her earthly father, was something else entirely. Thank God she was in touch and honest enough to say so!

So let’s add some pictures of God to The Human Paradigm. In the illustration below, God is either angry (the frowny face), ambivalent and distant, like an old Grandfather in the Sky (the neutral face), or is absent altogether (the eyeless face).



Even if we have had amazing experiences with Jesus, an inner knowledge and intuition of who He really is, and a bunch of intellectual and theological training to back it up, we nevertheless often have remnant beliefs, deep down in our souls, that God is simply not that good. So, we have to *do* good or make ourselves good so that He’ll pay attention to us. The Bible has a word for images of God that we fashion and worship, trying to wrestle blessing from it: idols. And if you know Scripture, you know that 100 percent of the time idolatry leads to death.

I (Bill) think that, in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus was nudging the Jewish leader toward a confrontation with his view of God. A God he could wrestle blessing from by following all the rules. Like the older brother in The Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus tends to zero in on religious people who put their confidence in and trust in their ability to be in the Father's house by "slaving" for the Father. The belief that we can earn it, even if that's not what we *really* want, is such a powerful narcotic. We want God—or say we do, anyway—but we also really want to avoid being undone by something that's beyond our ability to control. Which makes grace a really, truly, very difficult thing for us to receive.

Oftentimes, in the name of "discipleship," we've tried to get people to do better or try harder, because that's what we do ourselves, driven by a warped view of God. And oftentimes, we believe more in The Human Paradigm than we do in the grace and nearness and goodness of God. And if we live by The Human Paradigm, we entirely misread and completely misunderstand the story of the New Testament and what was accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

Jesus knows, as he tells Nicodemus, that we must be born again. We must die to our merely human ways of thinking and be born into the Kingdom of God. For in Jesus' Kingdom, things work very, very differently, and The Human Paradigm has no place.

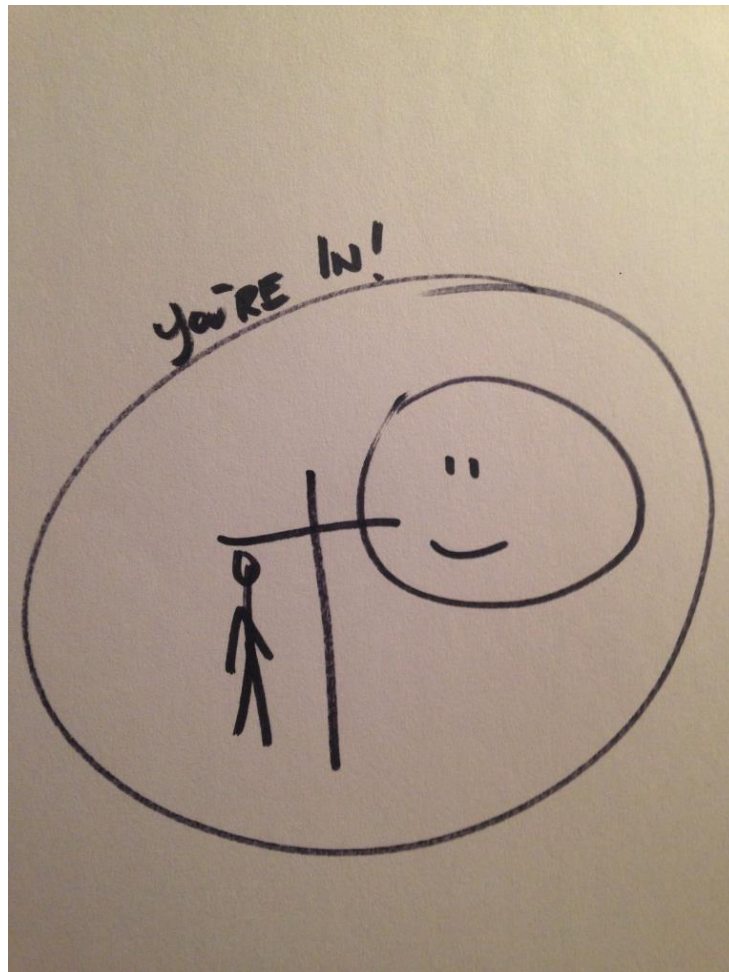


## Chapter 3

### The Jesus Paradigm

*Rather than building on sand, the wise builder asks, "Hey, is there a rock around here?"*

Jesus demolishes The Human Paradigm and replaces it with something wonderful and glorious, dazzling and brilliant. The Jesus Paradigm (of life inside His Kingdom) looks something like this:



X still marks the spot, but the X is territory claimed by the cross of Jesus. The difference is that there are no rungs because, in Jesus' view, *we are already there*. "You're in," Jesus says. It's done. You've been adopted.

This is not the economy of The Human Paradigm, where "you eat what you kill." Earning by human standards *does* work in our world exactly as described in The Human Paradigm. But grace! Grace—which drives the Kingdom of God—does not run on the gas of earning, competence or merit. Grace stands in complete contrast to

our merely human ways of doing things, which is why we call it amazing. We don't come by strength; we come by being weak and acknowledging that weakness. Paul called it "rejoicing in grace" (Phil. 1:18).

In Jesus' paradigm, our awareness of what Jesus has already done and the humility to see and receive it is missing. We earn nothing; we just learn to abide. We become okay with *not* arriving. That's what abiding is all about: not arriving. Our labor is not to earn, but to surrender to what Jesus has done. This is a sort of dying, what Jesus calls "being born again." He knows that trying really hard is actually not how spiritual growth happens. Transformation happens when we learn that our best efforts aren't going to get us there, and that God was never interested in our best efforts in the first place! It's the very reason the scriptures tell us to "labor to rest" (Heb. 4:11).

What a paradox! Laboring to rest means coming into a completely new understanding of God's economy of grace. Going to conferences and reading books may be great things, but the reality is that the earliest disciples were not invited into seminaries or systematic theologies or endless study. They were simply invited into a full awareness of who Jesus was and the Father whom Jesus reveals. If you're aware of this, if you become fully aware of just how good, generous, and near God is—then everything—*every* thing—will take care of itself. As we like to say, "*Follow Jesus and He will teach you everything you will ever need to know.*" Love takes care of it all. It's no wonder then that Jesus defines eternal life, very simply, as *knowing* the God of love. Not knowing *about* Him, but knowing Him in the way you would know an intimate friend, a confidant, a spouse.

Our minds cannot readily grasp that God would so humble Himself as to have mutuality and a reciprocal "knowing" in His relationship with us. But that's the very mutuality revealed in Immanuel, God with us. Further, Jesus so easily worked acts of power and grace because His feet were always rooted in the waters of the Jordan, even when they were dry. He always lived in that place where God said to Him (again, paraphrasing), "You are in. You are my beloved. I'm proud of you." Jesus knew that He was "in," and because of that, He could bestow that "chosenness" on others. Everything good flows from knowing the "you're in" that God speaks over us. It's what Jesus came to adopt us into.

*A disciple, then, is someone who, grounded by grace and guided by the Holy Spirit, is increasingly rooted in an understanding and experience of how generous God is—and how God has given us a new identity based not on our performance but on His profligately generous acceptance.*

But! We know this is nonsense. Everyone knows that Santa brings presents to only good boys and girls, and at a core level most of us remain comfortable relating to Jesus like Santa Claus. A Santa Claus we can control. There's just no space for thinking that we—broken, sinful, selfish people—could be adopted in and brought to the table, accepted. And it's this very unwillingness to receive that allows us to stay in control. Like the tragic character Javert in *Les Miserables* throwing himself

off a bridge because he can't accept the reality of grace, we have to wrestle with something that is completely offensive and insane to our merely human minds. This is why grace is so hard: It *is* an offense to our survival mechanisms and to every system of reward and punishment by which we've survived life. We are simply unready and untrained for grace. And so we drift back to The Human Paradigm and its mighty gravitational pull. We shrink the gospel to something we're more comfortable with, something less offensive to our egos, something within our power to control. That way, we're never confronted with the tension of needing to be humble enough to receive God's gift or to focus on the Giver rather than ourselves.

I (Brandon) find that as much as I know about grace, there is some part of me—no doubt it's what the Bible calls my flesh or ego—that does *not* want to submit to God or even be touched by Him. I'm always seeing how I can try to do the dance better, which must be more appealing to me than just saying, "Wow, I don't get it, but thank you." I'm always thinking I can't approach Jesus if I'm not in a good space, if I've not been "doing well" (whatever I think that means). Again, where's the focus in that thinking? On me! Certainly not on God. And not on others.

In short, if we live outside of Jesus' paradigm, our energies will always drift back to focus, even obsession, on the question, "How am I doing?" But Jesus wants to redirect our energies! Of course, we get exhausted if our best discipleship processes are just rehashes of The Human Paradigm in the latest, hippest garb. This was never Jesus' intent for us. His goal was never to get us to try really hard—but that we should learn to abide and reorient our lives around loving and serving others. That commitment to reorientation of life and energy fuels our transformation into the image of Jesus.

### **The Beginning of New Questions**

It takes practice to follow Jesus, and it takes practice and a whole lot of divine help and revelation to grow in grace.<sup>5</sup> But once we accept that we have been adopted in, an amazing thing happens. We realize that "getting close to Jesus" is not the point of discipleship, and we shouldn't teach that it is! Jesus had a different end point in mind for His followers.

Once we accept the bankruptcy of The Human Paradigm and the reality that we will never arrive, we can only abide and start asking new questions. The obvious one: "How can You (God) be this good?!" In the glory of God's goodness and generosity to us, our obsession with "How am I doing?" can melt away like wax.

And now we are prepared, simply by learning to receive what Jesus has done for us and others, to focus on the discipleship that Jesus taught. The end point of discipleship is not "getting close to Jesus." We are already close to Him! Rather, the end point of discipleship is "loving others like we love our own self." And, ironically, almost like a cosmic joke, if we will focus on loving others, the spiritual needs and transformation of our self will take care of itself.

Without this focus on reorienting our life and energy around others, we don't experience true discipleship, the discipleship Jesus has for us. Once we start living in the question "How can You be this good, God?" it naturally follows that we ask the question, "How am I doing with loving others?" Love begets love. Receiving God's love begins to transform us into the sort of people who don't *try* to love our neighbors, but just naturally do.

Discipleship movements must be built on these two questions: "*How can You be this good?!*" and "*How am I doing with loving others?!*"

These two questions form the basis of the whole point of the Law and Prophets—that is, God's work through human history, and they are the questions Jesus would have us live into.

### **The Promise of True Discipleship: A New End Point**

Before we move on to chapter 4, let's pause to sum up the points we've covered:

- The Human Paradigm asks, "*How am I doing?!*" This is not a bad question, but if it's your primary discipleship question, then you're probably building discipleship on a false promise—a sandy foundation, so to speak. Discipleship that's based on "getting closer to God" and "arriving" at some level of Christian performance is not what Jesus was about. The Human Paradigm overly focuses on "me," sacrificing discipleship along the way. Discipleship born out of The Human Paradigm will fail because it is a closed system that doesn't reproduce. It fails because no one ever arrives. In fact, striving for a certain level of performance breeds self-contempt; the longer you try, the more you fail, and you know it. Usually this leads to what author and theologian Dallas Willard called "sin management."<sup>6</sup> Christianity becomes about trying to manage your most difficult sins until death. No wonder so many of our discipleship processes have no strength: They are built on the wrong question and the wrong assumption.
- The Jesus Paradigm moves us into a new question: "*God, how can you be this good?!*" We are reoriented to a new reality in which the X we were striving for is, wonder of wonders, brought near to us! We are *already* there. We have to learn to abide in that reality, where the focus is not on ourselves and "how we are doing," but instead centers on the amazing goodness and nearness of Jesus. The reason for Christian practices or spiritual discipline is to develop your awareness of this gift of salvation. Asking the question, "God, how can You be this good?" is a vast improvement and movement in the right direction. But left to its own devices, this wonderful question will also fail you.
- God sure does appreciate our appreciating Him (just as we love being appreciated by those we love), but it's not His end point for us. Appreciation and awe are always meant to lead us into obedience, into a new way of being people. God's mission for us, in short, is to become like Him, which means learning to love and serve others with the same heart of authentic mercy, compassion, and

love that He has. “Be perfect,” Jesus said, “just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” In his seminal work, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis writes, “The command, ‘Be ye perfect’ is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command.”<sup>7</sup> “Being perfect” is an impossible task for us, and yet Jesus will make us perfect if we will orient our lives around the third question.

- The third question, which constitutes the heart of practical discipleship, is “*How am I doing with loving the people that God has already put in my life?*” Jesus was a man for others, and the church is really the church when it exists for others. When we follow Christ, like our leader, we live for others.<sup>8</sup> Real discipleship—Jesus-styled discipleship—has a very different end point than being close to Him. If we’re already close, then everything changes, and most especially, the goal of discipleship changes. What did Jesus define as the end point of discipleship? Very simply, loving others. Of course, we should expect nothing less from a God who is the very heart of Love itself.

## Chapter 4

### Learning to Live Into the Third Question

To learn to live into this third question, and to develop a movement of discipleship based on this question—that is the work ever-present before the church. It is the reason we cannot divorce “discipleship” from “mission,” as so often happens, as if they are two different things. The end point of a disciple-making movement, simply, is disciples who have reoriented their lives around loving and serving others. We have to learn to live into this third question, and we have to learn to make disciples who do the same.

The urgent work of the church is to rescue discipleship from the clutches of The Human Paradigm. Notice how seldom discipleship in the church is intentionally oriented around loving others. Most of what we call “discipleship” is not Jesus discipleship. Most discipleship programs, as such, fail because they’re still built on the assumption that “getting close to Jesus” is our goal, our X, and that we can get close to Jesus “if we just do these things.”

If your goal as a church leader is to get people into a discipleship program that’s founded on the question “How are you doing?,” you won’t get mature disciples unless you’re orienting them around loving and serving others. We need a radical reorientation to our approach to discipleship. We have to start with the ending, as it were, and design discipleship processes that start with “you are already close to Jesus” and end with loving others. And we have to design discipleship processes that compel people to reorient their lives around others now, not waiting until they’ve arrived at some “ready point.” That point will never come! We have to throw people into the deep end of the pool. After all, isn’t that what Jesus did when He said to His disciples, “*You give the people something to eat?*” He taught them that everything He did was about loving others. This is our work, too.

#### **Healing Balm in Gilead?**

The title of this eBook points out the emptiness of much of the discipleship in our churches, but at the same time it’s also meant to confess something. If there is a false promise, then there also is a true promise, as well—a “healing balm in Gilead.” There is something real and genuine to be found in all this programming and infrastructure we call church that makes it all worthwhile. But we have to change our ways if we expect to find it.

I (Bill) recall the day that Brandon and I were discussing discipleship and this very matter of the third question: *How am I doing with loving the people whom God has already put in my life?* Brandon said that he often would struggle with conventional discipleship because it centered on getting people to do certain spiritual disciplines with no clear focus. The assumption was that transformation would result from doing these spiritual disciplines. Brandon asserted that these disciplines—praying,

reading the Bible, fasting, silence and solitude, etc.—were falling flat because people were not arriving at X. I concurred. The product of the church, our disciples, is not impressive. Moreover, they are not relevant to the world around us. I have always thought the church is for discipleship, and disciples are God's gift to the world. God has charged the church with the task of developing Christlike people, and then those people are sent back into the world to love it like He does.

That is when, essentially, we came up with the third question. Loving the people around us was the only relevant thing—a true expression of how God loves us.

Dallas Willard spoke quite often of the discipleship funnel. The idea being that you could put all the discipleship teaching and tools from the church into the top of the funnel but the only worthwhile thing to come out from the bottom would be God's *agape* love. I (Bill) use the word *agape* because of our tendency to misunderstand love primarily as an emotion or something romantic. *Love, rather, is an action taken for the benefit of another.* This is where the third question comes into play. "How are we doing with loving the people in our homes, our workplace, our kids' schools and activities?" And we might also ask, "Who else is God bringing into my life for me to love?"

If discipleship is about loving others, then how do we pursue it, practically speaking? In other words, how does all of this work out differently than the ways we have normally gone about discipleship? These are big implications that can't be covered in any depth here, but we would like to suggest three steps forward. We need to shift:

1. How we teach spiritual disciplines/practices;
2. How we approach corporate church gatherings and everything else;
3. What we do in discipleship groups, our discipleship processes.

Let's look at these three areas.

### **1. Teaching disciplines (spiritual practices)**

Most people operating out of The Human Paradigm will ultimately avoid disciplines and spiritual practices (not to mention leave the church) because they resent them. Still, we're not calling leaders to soften the call to spiritual practices, far from it. Instead, we have to make sure people are being oriented out of The Human Paradigm and into Jesus' way of approaching spiritual disciplines. We're confident that when Jesus "often withdrew to solitary places to pray"—while there was perhaps discipline to overcome His exhaustion and still make space for prayer—there was no drudgery in it. No doubt Jesus approached connecting with His Father and becoming more aware of His Father's nearness and goodness as a delight. It was a meal to be enjoyed, not a mush to be endured.

And from this place, He was empowered to live a life of care and compassion for

others. If, unlike Jesus, we have a root belief that we have to earn God's favor, we will resent both God and the things that we believe we have to do to get close to Him—and we will rarely see our lives as an instrument of God's grace for others.

I (Brandon) grew up in the South, where there was a huge focus not just on quiet times but also on reading Scripture. I liked the idea of reading the Bible. Yet, again I grew tired of trying to read it like I felt I should. And I watched most everyone around me struggle to read Scripture with any consistency, as important as we were told it was. To this day, I find that if I'm approaching spiritual practices as tasks to check off because I should do them, there's no life in it. Asking, "How am I doing?" by itself just has no horsepower.

But (oh, glorious "but") if I'm asking the questions, "Jesus, how can You be this good?" and "How am I doing loving others?," then everything changes. What emerges is a completely different approach to spiritual practices: We practice the disciplines not to earn something, but to become fully aware of how our lives can be energized to live in awe of God's goodness and empowered for loving others. This is part of how we "grow in grace."

What we find as we become aware of grace is that everything becomes a response to Jesus, not an attempt to be rewarded by Him. We don't come to Scripture because we must read our Bible to grow close to Jesus. We read our Bible to become more aware of how Jesus has already brought us close to Him and how we can be empowered to live lives that bring hope and blessing to others. It's not about earning a reward; it's about responding to a gift that has been given. In this way, The Human Paradigm is interrupted, and all of the disciplines we practice become "get to's," not "have to's." We find ourselves actually wanting to spend time with the God who is so generous as to have invited us in with lavish love.

For example: Not long ago, my (Bill) wife, Jane, was spending a few days out of town taking care of the grandsons. I called her to see when she was coming home. She informed me that she was staying longer than expected and that she had made additional commitments for the next week. I began to question her and communicate that I was very unhappy with her decision. She had made that decision without talking to me and considering my needs and work that needed to be done at home.

Later, I began to talk to myself: *Bill, Jane has supported you and let you be you for 46 years, and she has never complained when you made commitments to speak, go to meetings, or even play golf with friends, without talking to her first. I wasn't finished talking to myself, so I went on, Taking care of people is what Jane does. There is a reason everyone loves her: because she loves them! She serves many, but she serves you the best. So stop trying to stop her from loving others as Christ loved. This could have been the Holy Spirit speaking because I am rarely that brilliant. I had to repent. In fact, I had to ask a question, Lord, what do I need to do to love Jane the way You loved?* The answer came quickly: I would need to pray and meditate on Scripture. I would



also need to serve her and help her with her work so that she could thrive in her ministry to others.

You see what happened? I realized I had to practice certain spiritual disciplines to become the kind of person that loves as Christ loved, so that I could live for others.

Once you realize that discipleship is being like Christ and that doing what He did always leads to loving others and serving them, there is such joy and satisfaction that you can never go back to the old Human Paradigm. You forget self, and when you do, your self gets better. This is God's secret sauce. Transformation of the self happens when we're learning to forego the demands of the self. The self, paradoxically, is transformed when we focus on others, not on ourselves!

As leaders, we must teach those in our sphere of influence an approach to disciplines grounded in the questions, "God, how can You be this good?" and "How am I doing with loving others?" We must teach them that they have already been brought close to Jesus, and they just need to become aware of this reality.

## **2. How we approach corporate church services and gatherings**

Bill recently taught in our (Brandon's) church community in Long Beach. At the end of the message, he turned to the congregation and asked the people, "Okay, so ... what are you planning on doing with this message? How will your hearing of this message affect those in your life?"

These are brilliant questions because just by asking them, you interrupt the consumerist mindset that society and sadly, the church, have conditioned people to follow.

When we gather, we must teach people that, "they are already close to Jesus." That can sound crazy, especially when we consider the struggle and brokenness of ourselves and the people around us. But in acknowledging this weakness, we can teach what the Bible teaches: Despite your brokenness, despite your woundedness, no matter how damaged you may feel, you are close to Jesus! You don't have to work to get close to Him. How to teach that well is the topic of another, longer book by someone more gifted than the two of us, but suffice it to say, we have to actually teach what Paul taught: that we are already dead, buried, and resurrected with Christ. We work out our wholeness from that place of already being brought near rather than laboring under The Human Paradigm's false promise of arrival and "being fixed" if we just try hard enough.

Further, when we gather, including and especially during Sunday and large church gatherings, we create culture based on what we celebrate and the questions we ask. And we need to make it clear to people—through celebration and the questions we ask—that discipleship is about loving and serving others.

The challenge here is that too many times "mission" and "loving others" are presented as programs or activities (projects), like going to the homeless shelter

once a month. We're all for going to the homeless shelter, but we have to break down people's notion that mission is confined to a specific slice of the calendar rather than a lifestyle that we engage in at every moment as we become aware of where Jesus is at work around us. When Jesus encountered the woman at Jacob's well, He didn't look at His sundial and say, "Yes, it's time for my missional hour." No, Jesus was aware that at any moment He might walk into a space where His Father was clearly at work.

How, then, do we lead people into this awareness of ministry at any possible moment?

As an example, in our (Brandon's) community in Long Beach, we have begun to close our worship gatherings by asking, "How are you doing loving those that Jesus has placed in your life?" and "What is Jesus speaking to you, and how will you respond this week?" We have used very specific training to clarify what we mean by "those that Jesus has placed in your life," so it's not quite as broad as it sounds at first (see below under discipleship processes). But the point is that we are being intentional about communicating that discipleship is not a two-hour activity we fit into already busy schedules. We are seeking to create a culture based on the core premise that discipleship is about orienting our lives around loving others and being prepared to watch the Kingdom of God manifest and tell the story of God.

In addition to the challenge of re-teaching people what mission is, sharing God's story is a core challenge. Many people have wonky paradigms for what evangelism is. They have been taught that you're "doing evangelism right" if you're trying to persuade someone within an apologetics argument, or you're angling for an opportunity to share Jesus with them. Apologetics are great, and so is being prepared all the time for putting words to the hope that lives within us (1 Peter 3:15), but if those things are not born out of Christlike presence with others and an experience of love, they will have little effect or value. Again, that's the subject of a different book, but suffice it to say that re-teaching and retraining people how to live their lives with and for others—ready to explain the hope that comes from Jesus—is a major challenge.

First things first, though: Are we creating cultures based on The Human Paradigm of "How are you doing?," or are we orienting people into the bigger questions of "God, how can You be this good?" and "How am I doing loving others?"

If we ask the right questions, we can start to understand how to create a culture of discipleship in our unique contexts.

### **3. Our discipleship processes**

Discipleship groups will not thrive or reproduce if they're based solely on reading Scripture and sharing in some sort of openness and accountability. As great as those things are, if they lack the intentionality of challenging people to focus their love—expressed in action—on others, there will be no movement. In fact, groups that are built on such principles often become exclusionary. Discipleship groups should

include Bible study, vulnerability and accountability, but the context—the container in which these things make sense and find their bearing—has to be clearly set. Our goal as disciples is to learn to love others. If what we're doing doesn't result in that, and if we aren't explicitly committed to others-centeredness as our end point, then we aren't following in Jesus' way of making disciples.

The trickiness in this is, again, how we do it. Most people have vague notions of mission as going down to the soup kitchen or looking for an opportunity to tell someone about Jesus. There's a lot of demystifying that has to happen, and the key to making discipleship work is to make it concrete and practical, as Jesus always did. Notice how often Jesus gets really concrete with His disciples: *Give the people something to eat. Sell what you have and give to the poor. Go to your brother who is offended with you.* Love expressed as action—not just sweeping theological statements—is where Jesus usually lands.

How do we form discipleship processes based on practical ways of loving and serving others?

As an example, in my (Brandon's) community, we have launched discipleship groups of three to six people that meet weekly, at least, and journey together for more than a year. Each meeting has a basic, though very flexible, outline:

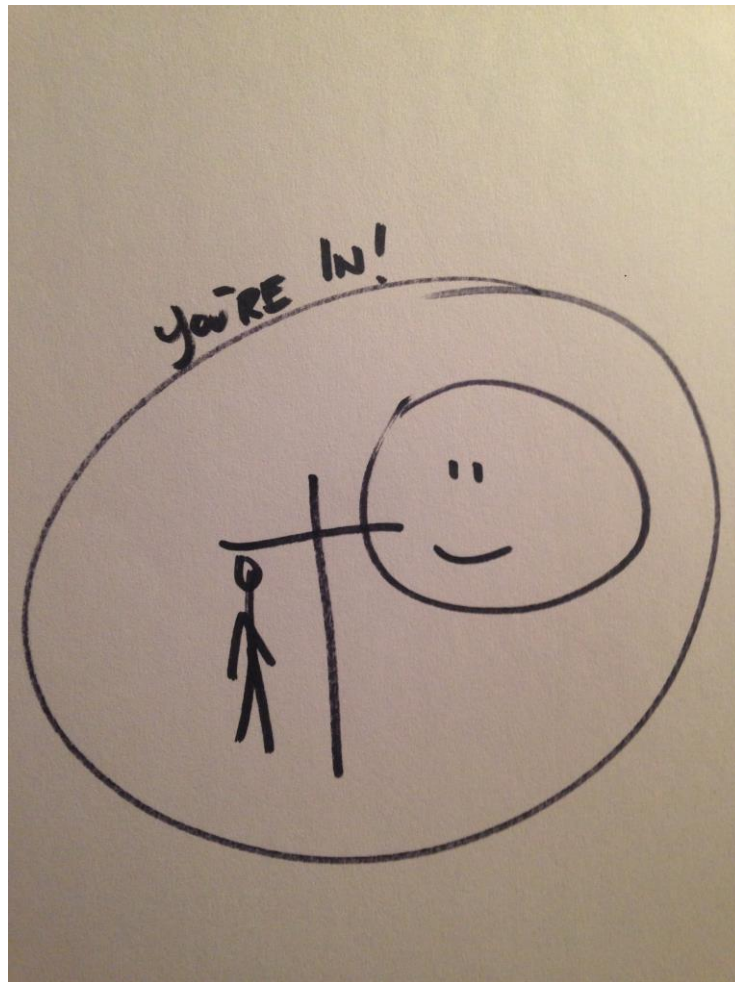
1. We start each group by asking the third question: "How's it going with loving the people Jesus has given you to love?" We have very specific categories for these groups, including Intimates (family and friends), Spiritual Family (our brothers and sisters in Christ), and our Neighbors. We also use the "Person of Peace" concept (our friend Alex Absalom explores this concept in his free eBook [The Viral Gospel](#)) to help clarify how we can be aware of where Jesus is clearly at work among our neighbors who don't identify with Jesus. By asking that question, we interrupt the gravitational pull back toward living only in the, "How am I doing?" question. In fact, more specifically, we focus our discipleship on what it looks like to love our neighbors and persons of peace because there's always a gravitational pull in human hearts just to focus on loving our family and spiritual family—those people who are often most like us—and avoid our neighbors or neglect to reorient our lives to be with, and for, them.

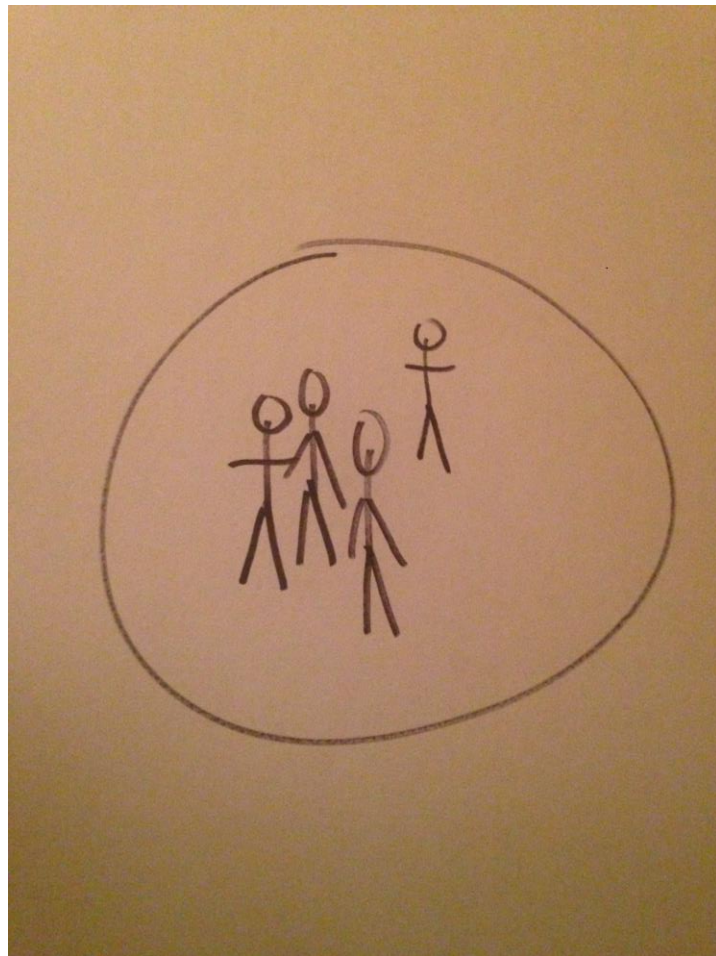
I find that asking the question—"How's it going with loving your persons of peace?"—tends to surface any discipleship issue that needs to be addressed. If, for example, someone is running around working 80 hours a week with no time to be with their neighbors or the persons of peace in his life, that will immediately surface. If someone is struggling with hidden sin, they won't have a lot of energy left over to be with others. Asking the question, "How are you doing loving others?" is the best question for spiritual transformation that lines us up with the mission and heart of Jesus.

Our second question and the question we end our time together with is simply, "What is Jesus speaking to you, and how will you respond this week?" By asking this,

we place a value on action beyond mere reflection. We coach people towards specificity so that responding in the week ahead is clear and specific, not vague and ambiguous.

Our goal in our discipleship process, then, is to deconstruct The Human Paradigm, with its focus on arriving, and to replace it with three discipleship pictures:





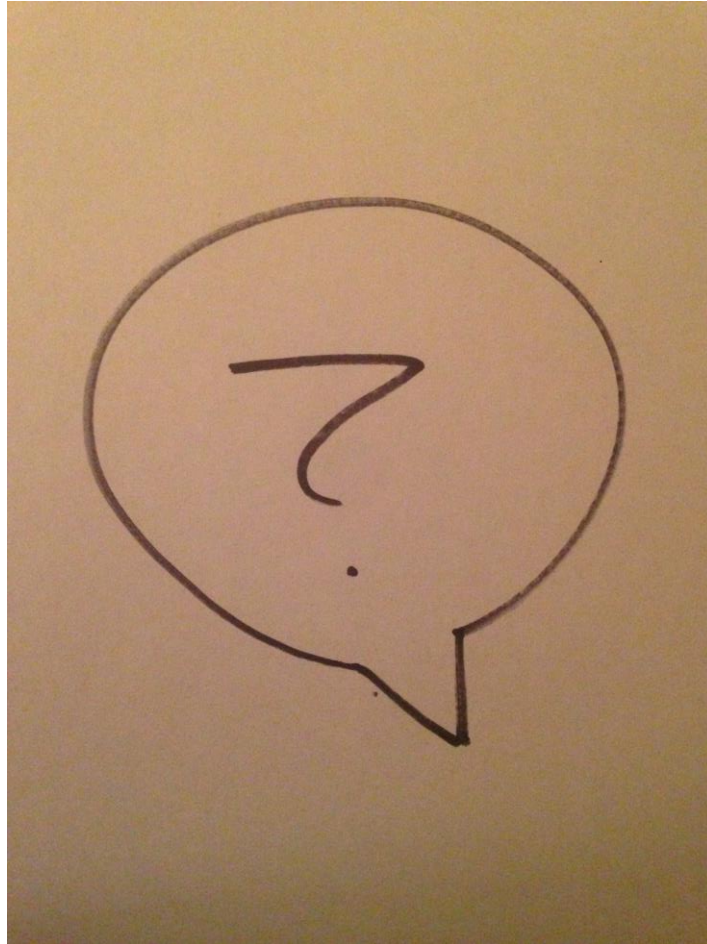


Illustration 1: Disciples are grounded in the grace of God (“How can You be this good, God?”). Illustration 2: Disciples focus on those that Jesus has given them to love (“How am I doing with loving the people that Jesus has given me to love?”), and illustration 3: A disciple asks the question, “Jesus, what are you speaking to me?” and then responds. This last question comes closest to the question, “How am I doing?” but now it has been placed in a different context, which changes everything. My response to Jesus has nothing to do with earning anything or trying to get somewhere. Rather, it has everything to do with responding to His goodness. These three pictures are about growing awareness and abiding in Jesus.

In between these two questions, we use materials that center on spiritual practices, which are meant to develop awareness of Jesus’ nearness and goodness and our adoption in Him. But we are very clear that the curriculum is *not* the materials; rather, the curriculum is the actual act of responding to the questions. In fact, we like to call it the “Big Curriculum” because the “Big Curriculum” is life itself that comes at you every day. Discipleship comes when we reorient our lives around being present with others. And in our experience, asking these two questions creates the best crucible for transformation and discipleship that we have found.

These three steps forward are steps among many, but they are significant. The important thing is that you, as a leader, can change the way people approach discipleship, and you can help catalyze a new movement of disciple making in your context.

But wait, you, the reader, will need to do this yourself! Start by asking yourself these questions. Let's take the questions in reverse. Begin with:

**1. How am I doing loving the people whom God has already placed in my life?**

*What do you notice? What thoughts come up?*

**2. God, how can You be this good?**

*Practice the discipline of receiving the new identity that comes from adoption. This may not come naturally to you, and you might need to really practice it! But by practicing, we can start doing away with the belief that we have to earn something to be "in."*

**3. How am I doing?**

*I bet you won't need to ask the third question ever again, because you will already know the answer, you will feel the joy in your soul.*

## **Towards the Future**

Our goal is to move people out of The Human Paradigm, with its tantalizing but impossible promise of arrival, into abiding in Christ and learning to orient our lives around others. This is urgent work.

The contemporary world is asking an ancient and poetic question: "Is there healing balm in Gilead." The person on the street is asking, and if not asking, wondering, and if not wondering, seeking, for something real, something that works, something to bind up their wounds and give them relief. And the false promise of discipleship has not delivered. They try church, they hang out with our disciples, and they have largely concluded that, "No, there is no healing balm in the church." The sad result is a growing number of "nones" and "dones" with "nones" referring to those people who profess no religious affiliation or belief system. "Dones" are those people who have tried religion and are now done with it.<sup>10</sup> We believe the "nones" and "dones" derive greatly from the fact that the church has not delivered Christlike disciples to the world.

The promise of discipleship—of followers of Jesus who orient their lives and energy toward learning to live and love like Him—is a wholly different paradigm. One that can deliver on hope. One that can create a true movement of discipleship in the church, even as the church we know fades away.

Rather than panicking or trying to throw better parties in Galilee, we have the exciting opportunity to rediscover, redefine, and re-create what the church is! The church as a vibrant, dynamic, life-saving body of passionate disciples who make disciples. We have an opportunity to rediscover the church as it existed in the book of Acts, when, by the power of the Holy Spirit, people were added daily to their

numbers. We have the opportunity to live the great adventure of a life lived for others, with Jesus.

Here's to the journey that awaits us.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mike Breen. "Why the Missional Movement Will Fail, Part 2." September 20, 2011. <http://www.disciplingculture.com/why-the-missional-movement-will-fail-part-2/>

<sup>2</sup> See Isaiah 58 in its entirety.

<sup>3</sup> From notes, Dallas Willard lecture, Long Beach, California, June 31, 2011

<sup>4</sup> See Isaiah 58 in its entirety.

<sup>5</sup> See Paul's prayers for the church in Ephesians 3:14-21.

<sup>6</sup> *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard

<sup>7</sup> *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis

<sup>8</sup> *Letters and Papers From Prison Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 8*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer

<sup>9</sup> John 3:16,17; John 13:34,35

<sup>10</sup> "Nones" are those people who profess no religious affiliation or belief system. "Dones" are those who have tried religion, and are now done with it. "America's Changing Religious Landscape," the Pew Research Center.

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## **About Bill Hull**

Bill Hull considers himself a discipleship evangelist. His passion is to help the church return to its disciple-making roots. This God-given desire has manifested itself in 20 years of pastoral service and authoring 11 books. His first book, *Jesus Christ Disciple Maker*, is celebrating 20 years with a new edition. *The Disciple Making Pastor* and the *Disciple Making Church* are two successive books, which make up his popular disciple-making trilogy. These books have provided the church with a new paradigm for disciple making.

Bill speaks about discipleship around the world to both congregations and leaders. He recently participated in the first-ever Exponential Discipleship Forum with a gamut of leaders, including Francis Chan, KP Yohannan, Jeff Vanderstelt and more. He is also a co-founder of The Bonhoeffer Project, a group of nationally known thought leaders challenging today's default gospel that says you can become a Christian and go to Heaven—and following Jesus is an option. This group is championing a “new” gospel—that which Jesus taught saying that those who are called to salvation are called to discipleship.

After a fruitful ministry with Athletes in Action and receiving his Master of Divinity degree from Talbot School of Theology, Bill pastored in the Evangelical Free Church for 20 years, spent eight years as the U.S. director for the Evangelical Free Church of America and created T-NET International, a training network dedicated to local church transformation. He currently writes, teaches and serves as adjunct professor at several seminaries.

Bill and his wife, Jane, make their home in Long Beach, California, and are the parents of two grown sons.

## **About Brandon Cook**

Brandon Cook serves as lead pastor at Long Beach Christian Fellowship and is a co-founder of The Bonhoeffer Project, a group of nationally known thought leaders challenging today's default gospel that says you can become a Christian and go to Heaven—and following Jesus is an option. This group is championing a “new” gospel—that which Jesus taught that says those who are called to salvation are called to discipleship.

Originally from Birmingham, Alabama, Brandon studied at Wheaton College in Illinois, Jerusalem University College, Brandeis University, and The Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. Before joining a transformational training organization and moving to Southern California in 2006, he worked as a professional storyteller. In 2009, he went to Long Beach Christian Fellowship, and over the course of five years of pastoring became convinced that his work—and the work of the church—is to become fully committed to discipleship and making disciple makers. The Bonhoeffer Project is for him a quest to live into the question: *How are people transformed to live and love like Jesus?*



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