
WITH ME

RELATIONAL ESSENTIALS
FOR A DISCIPLESHIP ETHOS

LANCE FORD
Author of UnLeader

WITH ME
Relationship Essentials
For A Discipleship Ethos

Lance Ford

With Me: Relational Essentials For A Discipleship Ethos

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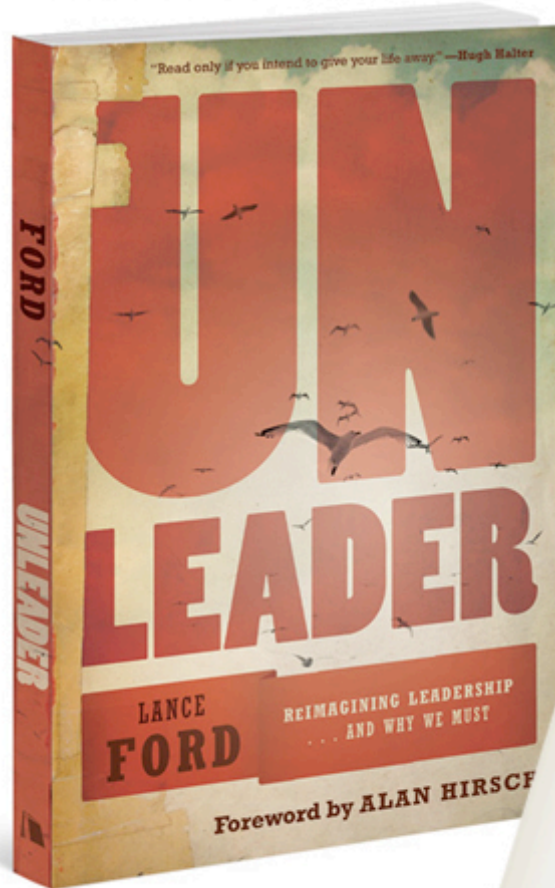
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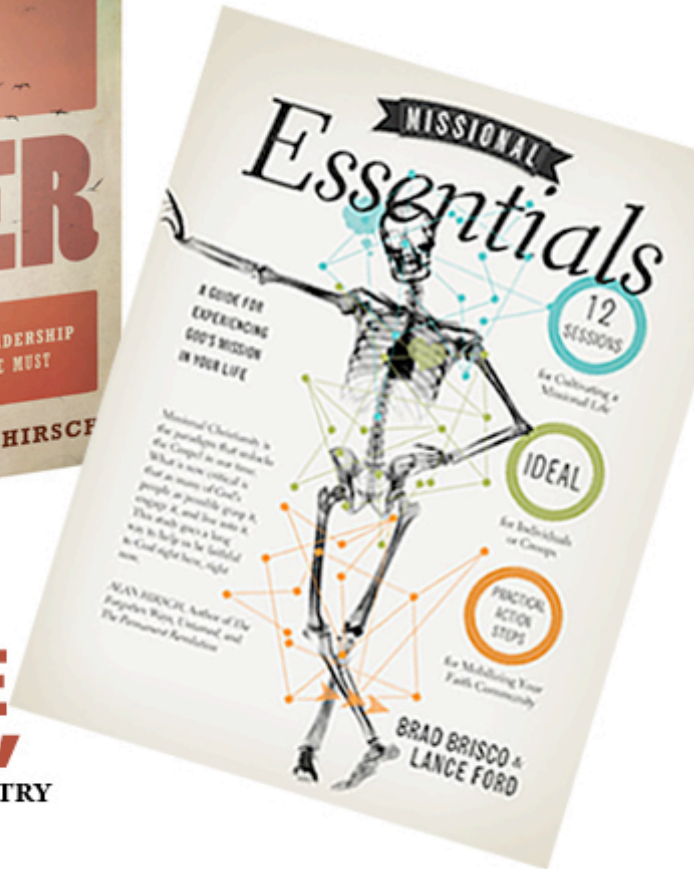
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Introduction

WHAT'S MISSING HERE?

Frequently I ask pastors, “Who disciplined you?” Quite often, they begin unfolding their life. It usually begins with, “I was raised in a Christian home . . . went to church and Sunday School...” Then the story winds through seminary, all of the churches they worked at, along with the books, authors and favorite preachers that have influenced them. I then ask, “But who *disciplined* you? Tell me about the person or handful of people that invited you into their lives as a friend so that you could learn from their experience and wisdom?”

Way too often, that pressing question is met with seat shifting or even agitation. “What do you mean?” they sometimes ask, to which I respond, “Tell me about the person that you have a deep personal relationship with that helped you grow up in the things of following Jesus.” Sadly, many pastors and church leaders cannot name someone who disciplined them.

My next question to them is, “Who are *you* discipling? Tell me their names.” Again, quite often this question elicits a confused facial expression or verbal response: “Well . . . I preach every week, and I lead a group study . . . I lead our staff, etc. “But who have you invited to do life with you?” I ask. Unfortunately, the majority of pastors cannot name one person, much less a small handful of people, they’re discipling. Bible studies, sermons and small groups are parts—important parts—of the growth process for all Christ followers. But they do not fully engaging the non-formal, relationship-based component of life-on-life interaction of discipleship.

There is no need to repeat the most recent statistical reports and studies indicating that the evangelical church in America is losing ground. Every research poll on the subject of church attendance reveals the same finding: We have more large churches than ever but cumulatively less people attending them. Additionally, the lifestyles and character of professing Christians are remarkably but sadly the same as those who make no claim to be followers of Jesus.

We live in the Information Age. Never before have we had such widespread accessibility to biblical teaching, preaching, books, articles, conferences, etc. While Western culture is in the midst of a complete moral collapse, the Information Age has failed to yield a Transformation Age—massive amounts of deeply committed disciples of Jesus. In *Untamed*, missiologists and authors Alan and Debra Hirsch stress that if we have any hope of making kingdom impact in the West, we need to be convinced that the lost art of disciple making must be rediscovered and replanted into the heart and psyche of leaders in our churches:

“Our lives, individual and corporate, play a vital role in the unfolding of the grand purposes of God. More is at stake in discipleship than our own personal salvation. The Gospel cannot be limited to being about my personal healing and wholeness, but rather extends in and through my salvation to the salvation of the world. To fail in discipleship and disciple making is therefore to fail in the primary mission (or “sentness”) of the church. And it does not take a genius to realize that we have all but lost the art of disciple making in the contemporary Western church.”¹

Massive numbers of books on discipleship are available today. Yet, most all of them attempt to describe what a disciple looks like. Very few books describe how to actually *make* disciples. We live in a culture that believes if something has been studied, it has been done. The United States is going on five decades of focusing on church growth, which has become an industry in itself. Pastors and church leaders of all streams focus primarily upon developing churches and leaders while tossing the leftovers of their time and resource to Jesus-style disciple making. The gospels mention *church* two times compared to *disciple*, which is mentioned more than 260 times. Interestingly, by the time we get through the epistles, the word *disciple* is not even mentioned once, while *church* is spoken of almost 90 times. Not to make any empirical claims, but my observation here is that Jesus focused on disciple making, the apostles did the same, and the end result was the church. It seems reasonable that we church leaders would follow the founder’s plan and pattern. The problem before us is that we have not followed Jesus’ plan. Most likely it is because we have not been disciplined in discipling. It’s pretty hard to do something you were never taught or shown how to do. My hope in this brief book is to point to the solution side of the problem of non-disciple-making, highlighting it’s characteristics and helping the reader become a better disciple maker.

Chapter 1

SYSTEM FAILURE

How did I get to the place where I was so off-task, caring more about my church's "organizational extension and survival" and measuring success in business terms—attendance, buildings and cash—rather than in becoming and making mature disciples of Jesus? How did church become more of a business organization for consumers of religious goods and services than a training ground of followers of Jesus?
Keith Meyer, *Whole Life Transformation*²

Just a few months after a prodigal-like encounter with the Lord, I was a 19-year-old follower of Jesus in need of direction. Having grown up in a Christian home, I was able to make my way around the Bible fairly well, but was somewhat clueless when it came to living it out. I was hungry to learn and had developed a voracious appetite for the Scriptures, listening to cassette tapes of every sermon I could get my hands on and faithfully attending church and Bible studies. But I knew something was missing. I needed *someone*. I needed another flesh-and-blood human to help me process my newly found love.

At the time, I didn't know what to call it. But I was yearning to be discipled. The hometown church I attended was small but growing. We had mid-week church services, men's groups, women's groups and various Bible study groups. But none of that met the need I felt inside. I figured the best one to ask for help was the pastor. He was a fantastic communicator, preaching long and hard every time he reached the pulpit. I loved the way he would walk out into the congregation with his worn-out Bible held open in one hand, revealing tons of handwritten notes and multi-color underlining. He could preach for an hour at a time without seeming to pause for a breath. Our pastor knew the Bible and oh, did he know how to preach! If anyone in our little church could help me I had no doubt he was the one.

I was excited the day I approached Pastor Bill. "Lancer! How are you doing, buddy?" He asked with a big grin. "That's what I want to talk to you about," I said. "I feel like I need some help in my walk with the Lord. I'm not in some kind of sin or anything. And I

am spending a couple of hours a day in the Word. But I feel I am missing something and was wondering if I could just start hanging out with you some. Maybe on a weekly basis.”

That was almost 30 years ago, and I can still remember the look on Pastor Bill’s face. His smile quickly turned into a puzzled, open-mouth expression. After a deep swallow and whisker rub, Pastor Bill haltingly said, “Uh, yeah ... sure. I, uh ... guess we could do that. What did you have in mind?”

What I had in mind was something along the lines of what I was seeing in the gospels and the epistles. Jesus had a handful of guys that hung out with Him. Paul had a lot to say about imitating His walk, and seemed to always have young guys traveling alongside him. As a young believer, it didn’t seem too complicated. It looked pretty straightforward to me, and I just figured that this was what older, more mature Christians did with the younger ones.

Though he was beyond less than enthusiastic about the whole deal, Pastor Bill agreed to my request. I envisioned us hanging out in his workshop, going fishing together, attending baseball games, visiting sick or hurting people to pray with them and bring them the practical wisdom of the Bible.

Our times together were not at all what I had hoped for, to say the least. We began meeting weekly at Pastor Bill’s house. Each time we got together, we sat at his kitchen table working our way through a discipleship “curriculum” he had purchased at a local seminary bookstore. Each week we would read through the material, he would ask if I had any questions, and then gently shoo me out the door. We never *went* anywhere.

Another Bible study was not what I wanted. I needed a relationship and the opportunity to see the Bible lived out as life unfolded unexpectedly. Pastor Bill knew this was not working as well. After just a few meetings, he told me he thought I was doing fine and that the Holy Spirit would lead me on. It was his way of saying that we were done with the meetings. The biggest smile I had seen from him since the day I asked him to disciple me was the one on his face as he waved goodbye to me from his driveway after our final meeting. Pastor Bill was great at leading a church but lacking, even terrified, when it came to disciple making—to having someone *following* him around.

Follow *With Me*

Jesus' system was and is a "follow me" system. It is a system we must learn. The church needs a band of everyday people who are flesh-and-blood examples of what it means to follow Jesus. There is no substitute for people who are incarnating the Word of God and have invited others to live alongside them as they work out their own salvation. Young converts need to be able to look at others and say, "Okay, I get it now. That's what it means to follow Jesus' words in a situation like this." Just as with any trade or skill, classes (sermons) and books can only go so far in the training process. People not only need proof that the Gospel can still be lived out, they need to see *how* it is lived out.

I understand that many Christians are intimidated by the "follow me" idea at the core of disciple making. What is important to understand and not miss is that we are not called to make followers of ourselves. The idea here is not to follow *me*, but to follow *with me*. The modern word for disciple making could just as well be *mentoring*. It lies at the very crux of disciple making. In their book, *Connecting*, Paul Stanley and Bobby Clinton convey the key ideas of disciple making as mentoring:

"Mentoring is as old as civilization itself. Through this natural relational process, experience and values pass from one generation to another. Mentoring took place among Old Testament prophets (Eli and Samuel, Elijah and Elisha) and leaders (Moses and Joshua), and New Testament leaders (Barnabas and Paul, Paul and Timothy). Throughout human history, mentoring was the primary means of passing on knowledge and skills in every field—from Greek philosophers to sailors—and in every culture. But in the modern age, the learning shifted. It now relies primarily on computers, classrooms, books and videos. Thus, today the relational connection between the knowledge-and-experience giver and the receiver has weakened or is nonexistent."³

Reading through the gospels, we witness a pattern and ethos of disciple making based upon everyday disciples who make other disciples in a life on life ebb and flow. The New Testament gives us a model in which followers of Jesus bring others into their own lives and help them become followers themselves. It's not just pastors, church programs or preaching that yields disciples. The early church sought to make followers that were follow-worthy. This was the movemental ethos that emerged. A person could not decide unilaterally to join the church. The early catechisms were clear on this. Author and

consultant Neil Cole often hearkens back to this mindset when he says, “We need to raise the bar on discipleship and lower the bar on (doing) church.”

I can’t help but wonder what our church planting assessments would look like if they focused on a potential church planter’s ability to make disciples as much as they focus on the skill sets and acumen needed for starting and running a church. As leaders of church planting networks and denominations, if we are genuinely serious about disciple making we will seek to change this. Until we do, we will continue to be successful at starting hollow chocolate bunny churches—gorgeous on the surface but failing to deliver the goods.

It has become somewhat palatable to lament, with the critiquing phrase that churches are “vendors of religious goods and services” filled with *consumer* Christians. As leaders we need to slow down and find a mirror. We should not blame the saints when the only things we leaders have offered are churches aimed at appealing to the consumer side. While our churches should be more along the lines of a culinary arts school—where people are trained to feed themselves and others—we have largely created churches that are like restaurants: *Come and eat from the kitchen of the experts.*

At a recent conference presented annually by Forge America (my tribe), about mid-way through the three-day event, I approached a friend who is a church planting coach and consultant and asked him how his conference experience had been so far. “I’m just trying to figure out the system for all of this,” he said. “You know me, I’m a systems guy.” I knew what my friend was looking for when he spoke of a system. He was trying to figure out how he could use the information he was being exposed to in his work with helping people start churches.

Ours is the age of systems and structures. Post-modernity yielded a leadership culture dominated by architects and engineers. It is almost as if we have come to believe that anything that is not at least semi-complicated is suspect. How can it be legit if just anyone could do it? Not too long ago, Exponential and LifeWay Christian Resources released a report titled *7 Top Issues Church Planters Face*. LifeWay Research President Ed Stetzer explained that the findings were based on interviews with more than 30 well-

known leaders who had 600-plus years of cumulative experience working with hundreds of church planters. Stetzer commented on the findings:

“Leadership development is the most frequently cited challenge of planters, according to our research in this survey of church planting leaders and thinkers. Leadership issues included recruiting and developing leaders; implementing teams; creating a reproducible leadership development approach; developing a leader/oversight/elder board; hiring and leading staff; discerning changes required to facilitate growth; healthy decision making; and delegating and empowering volunteers.”⁴

In a subsequent post, Stetzer continued:

“I asked [church planter Darrin Patrick], ‘Why do most churches stay small?’ Darrin explained: Largely because most pastors don’t know how to build systems, structures, and processes that are not contingent upon them. Most pastors can care for people, but don’t build systems of care. Most pastors can develop leaders individually, but lack the skill to implement a process of leadership development. When a pastor can’t build systems and structures that support ministry, the only people who are cared for or empowered to lead are those who are “near” the pastor or those very close to the pastor. This limits the size of the church to the size of the pastor.”⁵

Todd Wilson, Exponential co-founder, also commented on the report:

“Discipleship is cited as a uniquely ... separate thing from leadership development in the report. Where leadership development is in the context of building the institution bigger, discipleship is in the context of growing the believer better ... What if our paradigm of seeing them as distinct ... is actually part of the problem? Isn’t it strange that we are coming off two to three decades of leadership ... as the silver bullet (or pill) for everything and now ... we’ve entered a period where the most elusive, frustrating issue for most pastors is with ineffectiveness in discipleship? Down deep most church leaders know that we are struggling to make disciples who are a distinctly different aroma to the world.”⁶

Todd’s conclusions appear spot on. Discipleship has languished in obscurity, starved from living on the scraps of our *leadership* obsession. Our fixation on developing leadership systems that make us successful church builders has crowded out thoughtful development of discipling systems. The answer is not throwing off the developing of leaders. We need to do both.

Church Builders

About two years into the life of a church I helped plant on the outskirts of Saint Louis, I sat across from an extremely agitated church member. Danny and his wife had joined our

core team in the church's earliest stages of development. He was the oldest member of our church and over the past few months had begun to demonstrate a foul mood. His harsh words to a young lady and his body language the previous Sunday at our church service brought me to the breaking point. I knew I had to confront him and feared that things would not turn out well.

Danny looked across the table as he poured creamer into his coffee. He smirked and said, "You're not a pastor. You're just a church builder." I laughed inside, brushing his words into the categories that were the sum of Danny's personal problems. Based on previous counseling sessions with he and his wife I knew Danny had anger issues. I used this knowledge as a free pass, refusing to consider his words had any merit and instead wore them as a church-planting badge of honor: *You're dang straight I'm not a pastor—I'm not a chaplain that's just maintaining status quo—I'm building something great here.*

It took me about five years to *hear* what Danny was saying. He was right. Spot on. I had become so wrapped up in my own persona as a leader that I had set aside the actual "Great Commission" directive to make disciples. I was too busy—too focused on building a church. And anyone who got in my way would either have to change or leave. The truth was that I wasn't doing *my* job. Like so many church planters and pastors, I was trying to do Jesus' job. I was trying to be build a church.

Lets face it. It is possible to be a "great" leader while being a lousy follower of Christ. With all the good thinking the emphasis on leadership has produced it has also allowed a culture to emerge that has produced an enormous number of pastors and ministry leaders with world-class organizational leadership skills but little to no Christlikeness behind the scenes of church services. In many cases, their staffs are in constant fear of reprimand or even being fired for making mistakes. Leadership has become so valued and emphasized that narcissistic men and women skate by on leadership immunity passes because they deliver the bottom line in church growth metrics. All the while, they demean and dominate lesser leadership-gifted servants who are part of their church teams.

If we take seriously what it means to follow Jesus, then it stands to reason that if a person is not following Jesus in humility, mercy and kindness, then that person is not *following* Jesus, period. This doesn't mean that leaders don't have to make hard decisions

at times, but it does not make it acceptable to be a *hard* person. Several times, Jesus scolded His disciples for such attitudes and actions:

“Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’” Matt. 20:25-28

It is entirely possible to preach beyond your own character and Christlikeness, but it is an impossibility to *disciple* another person past the level of your own character. The pulpit and the lofty position it so often implies can be a safe haven for surly souls. Leaders can be whoever they want to be from the positions of hierarchy. But when we take the mantle of the servant and join the everyday people on the dusty trails of day-to-day life, our true selves can’t help but to come forward. The plea here is this: Be followable. Do everyone else a favor and don’t develop people like yourself if you are not like Christ—regardless of your *leadership* level.

The book I wrote titled *UnLeader* emphasizes that Jesus taught us to reject the desire of being identified as leaders in the way the world’s system does so. Should we do our best at being the best leaders we can be? Certainly. But the Lord wants our *identity* to be as servants. The church should not be modeled on a leadership culture but rather a servanthship culture. Unleaders are followers of Jesus who invite others to follow them into a life of servanthship. Unleaders shun titles and applause and find their greatest joy in shining the light on the supreme beauty and wonder of Jesus Christ. They refuse to touch, much less hijack His glory. They serve God in humility and obscurity as much as possible. Unleaders treat their fellow servants with mutual honor and respect, as peers and co-followers of Christ. They embrace the family of God as a covenant of kindred fellowship. Unleaders follow Jesus, embracing the towel and basin of serving along the journey.⁷ These are the followable ones.

Chapter 2

THE JESUS PLAN

“He climbed a mountain and invited those He wanted with Him.
They climbed together. He settled on twelve, and designated them apostles.
The plan was that they would be with him.”
Mark 3:13-14 (*The Message*)

Please hear those words. *The plan was that they would be with him.* Jesus had a system and a *plan*. He modeled it and commanded us to use it. We don't need to reinvent it either. Although it was not complicated, that doesn't mean it was easy to carry out. Jesus' plan was to actually let a handful of folks share His life. He didn't live just the life of a preacher. He didn't spend 20 to 30 hours a week crafting a sermon and sketching out a church service without leaving margin for others to share life with him. Our Lord spent the majority of His time with others, sharing his life with them. Jesus had a distinct plan to bring others into the actual living of His life. He gave access to a few people so that he could rub off on them. Jesus' strategy was to invite followers to get their hands dirty with the actual doing of the stuff of serving others. This entailed fieldwork more than class work. Jesus pushed His disciples into situations that stretched them and exposed their weaknesses of faith, perseverance and character. Sure, He taught them in the classroom as well, but He *trained* them on the job. As I wrote in *UnLeader*:

“The issue of disciple making and what it means to be and to make authentic followers of Jesus is most likely the most vital factor in the shaping of our church's culture and mission. We have proven our ability to amass large groups of people in church buildings, but to fail in servant making/disciple making, through followership, is the ultimate failure of all. C. S. Lewis was on target when he said that the paramount purpose of the church was to create little Christs. He said, ‘If the Church is not doing this, then all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible, are a waste of time.’⁸ Jesus invited his followers into a process that was more apprentice-like than classroom-like. He formed a culture of life as laboratory, where ideas and theories were practiced and tested rather than merely preached and taught. His was a community of disciples, where the newly converted followed the previously converted in a new way of doing life.⁹

An ever-present danger within a discipling culture is the propensity for hero worship and cloning. These are the seeds of cults. Christianity has not escaped its episodes of

people focusing on men and women rather than Jesus. The earliest churches faced such challenges. Paul cautioned:

“For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I follow Paul,’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow Cephas,’ or ‘I follow Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I Cor. 1:11-13

Modeling is a useful and biblical concept. Paul’s writings show a history of him advocating the “imitate me” model, but always with a caveat that he (Paul) was seeking to imitate Christ Jesus. He wasn’t trying to make followers of himself. Paul sows seeds of the *imitate-follow-copy* theme throughout his letters, as the following passages from the *New American Standard Bible* demonstrate (italics added):

“Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.” 1 Cor. 4:16-17

“Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.” 1 Cor. 11:1

“Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.” Phil. 3:17

“The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” Phil. 4:9

“You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” 1 Thess. 1:6

“Nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example.” 2 Thess. 3:8-9

“The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” 2 Tim. 2:2

Paul is not trying to get people to imitate him *per se*. His point is always to get others to imitate his imitation of Christ. Several times we read Paul as he shuns any touching of Jesus’ glory or drawing followers to himself. His is a “follow *with* me” command.

The Cost of Disciple Making

A lot of great books and articles have been written on the cost of discipleship from the perspective of being a disciple. But there is also another likewise enormous cost when it comes to the making of disciples—the discipler perspective. Making disciples is not easy, and it is not always fun, mainly because the people you’re discipling do not begin as disciples. They arrive very raw. Sometimes they come to you as extremely wounded people in one or more areas. Depending on age and experience, the person you’re working with may be a young, know-it-all novice or an older, seen-it-all cynic.

Geoff and Sherry Maddock serve as urban missionaries in the heart of a rough and tumble neighborhood in Lexington, Ky. They love and have given themselves to make disciples with devotion like few people you will ever meet. Nevertheless, they’re human. They grow weary at times with the never-ending needs of the people in their broken community. From time to time, I have heard Geoff or Sherry speak of people who have “the gift of inconvenience.” When we open our lives up to others in a full-on discipleship relationship, the ethos is organic, not mechanistic. Prior agreements regarding boundaries notwithstanding, you are working with people who are not necessarily mature but are *maturing*. Your patience will be tried, and your frustration will show from time to time. It was the same with Jesus. Just think of how many times He said, “Ye of little faith.” Or, “Have I been with you this long and you still don’t get it?” Disciple making does not fit in our designer boxes. It’s too organic for that. And we all know the mess that anything organic brings with it.

I opened this book with the story of a failed discipleship encounter I had with Pastor Bill. Thankfully, shortly after that experience I became acquainted with another pastor who was a true discipler. Sam came into my life at just the right time. I had enrolled in Bible college and had become friends with his daughter and began spending time hanging around their family. I never approached Sam to ask for a discipling relationship, and he didn’t ask if I wanted one. It just happened naturally. He would call me up and say, “Hey partner, I’m driving into Fort Worth to pick up some horse feed. You wanna’ come along?” At other times, he might say to me, “I’m going to visit the Griffins. They are an elderly couple that needs looking in on from time to time. Do you want to go over there with me and then we can grab a coffee afterwards?” I could describe many more

scenarios that Sam took me into over a five-year period. Walking with him was a great experience. That was over 25 years ago, and I still find myself in situations where I think to myself, “How would Sam respond to this situation in a Jesus-type way?”

I have no doubt that if someone were to ask Sam about his perspective of the experience with me, he would probably grin and his first words would be, “Whew ... that was quite an experience.” There were times I embarrassed him, failed him, dropped the ball—you name it. Sam gently rebuked me, firmly rebuked me, encouraged me and always received me back into the fold when I strayed.

My experience with Sam became a foundation that others built upon. I could tell stories from my relationships with other mentors, such as my father-in-law, to a couple of other significant disciplers that have shared their God-given resources, shaping my life relationally. Over the last 20 years, I’ve never found myself at a place where I was not doing the same thing for a handful of young men. Every ministry assignment or city I have lived in has had young men who are starving to be discipled. Just like I was doing, they are reading, watching videos, attending conferences and church services, but looking for mentoring—for someone that says, “Follow with me.”

In his book *Discipleship Essentials*, Greg Ogden defines discipling others as, “... an intentional relationship in which we walk alongside other disciples to encourage, equip and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ. This includes equipping the disciple to teach others as well.”¹⁰ Ogden’s definition provides a good outline for the potential discipler and disciple(s) to consider when entering into a purposeful discipling relationship:

Intentional relationship...

This entails an agreement to pursue the mentoring relationship. More than “getting together from time to time,” this means scheduled consistency.

Walk alongside other disciples...

Take note of the wording here. The word “alongside” negates any hint of hierarchical superiority. The relationship is not leveraged with authoritative strength. We must get past the propensity to impose superiority over one another. The strength in disciple making is trust and mutual humility and accountability. That’s why I prefer the term “co-following” as a good descriptor of the relationship.

...to encourage, equip and challenge one another in love...

Equipping refers to sharing our resources, skills and talents with others. The least expensive course in the school of hard knocks is to learn from someone else's mistakes. An equipper is willing to be vulnerable by not only telling stories and experiences of success but also the, "Here is something stupid I did" stories. This requires deep humility and vulnerability on the part of the discipler. Challenge means holding one another to commitments and stretching toward growth. The independent nature in all of us (especially Americans) pushes against this. The issue and call here is to mutual submission (Eph. 5:21).

...to grow toward maturity in Christ

Discipleship has a goal of maturity in Jesus. The goal is not to become a mini-me of someone else. We are seeking to become like Jesus. Mutual accountability is entailed because there is no one person that has arrived at the place whereby they can model the complete picture of Jesus.

...includes equipping the disciple to teach others as well

Christianity is a movement because it travels through the lives of believers that embody the message and ethos of Jesus, constantly passing them along. Reproduction and multiplication happens through intentional discipling. Disciples should have outward-focused eyes to look for and be willing to invite others into discipleship relationships. This should be a constant posture.

Good Disciplers

The first requirement for being a discipler may sound simple. It is *willingness*. Are you willing to make yourself available to the messiness of the process—the inconvenience, annoyances and interruptions to your own private life involved in discipling relationships? As I mentioned before, it's a lot easier to just preach and lead Bible studies than it is to become involved in the muck and mire of actual relationship. Disciplers have tons of patience. Their bottom line is not the church machine they're trying to build. They have taken their hands off that job, understanding that it is Jesus' job to build the church, and their job is to make disciples.

Disciplers also have the ability to *see potential* in others. Think of Barnabas and his keen eye to look beyond the rough edges of a recent convert such as Saul (Paul) or young John Mark, who Paul (Saul) sent packing because of his immaturity. Consider this account:

“And when (Saul) had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen

the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.” Acts 9:26-27

Two thirds of the New Testament is penned by Paul and Mark, both of whom were mentored by Barnabas after being shunned and rejected by other notable apostles. He was the one that took Paul under his wing when other leaders wanted nothing to do with him. Just think what may have happened if Barnabas had not risked his own reputation for the sake of investing in Paul and later, Mark, who Paul rejected. It’s no wonder that the name Barnabas means “son of encouragement.” Just imagine how many Saul’s and Mark’s are in our midst, looking for their Barnabas. Jesus-style disciplers are those who are willing to bear their souls and maintain a posture of humility, serving and care. They are not afraid to be known outside the walls of the church building as being less than perfect. And they are willing to let their own reputation risk being sullied in the process of hanging with the neophyte disciple. Hear the words of the apostle:

“Even though we had some standing as Christ’s apostles, we never threw our weight around or tried to come across as important, with you or anyone else. We weren’t aloof with you. We took you just as you were. We were never patronizing, never condescending, but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children. We loved you dearly. Not content to just pass on the Message, we wanted to give you our hearts. And we did. 1 Thess. 2:6-8, (*The Message*)

The best disciplers are those who are willing to *tolerate the mistakes* of those they are bringing along. The great thing about so many young emerging disciples is that they have moxy. The bad thing about so many young emerging disciples is that they have ... moxy. Like young stallions, they are ready to go, go, go! They want to burst out of the barn and run like the wind, leaping over, or barreling through any obstacle set before them. Young men and women see broken or stagnant systems and believe they can change them. In fact, they believe they can change the world. The brashness and abrasiveness that accompanies youth is a two-edged sword. It slices through the jungles of stagnant systems but when wielded wildly causes those around them to duck and dive to avoid being chopped to pieces in the process.

The Discipling Relationship

Don't settle for discipling programs. Your church needs to offer discipling relationships. This doesn't mean that we do not need systems. But the systems we develop need to be organic in nature. They should have the aroma of relationship, not the smell of grinding gears and machinery fuel. There are many tremendous organic, relational discipling tools available from the likes of seasoned authors such as Neil Cole and Mike Breen. Find what works best for you and your faith community. Regardless of how you do it, discipling doesn't just happen. It is an intentional relationship. For the discipler, keep several things in mind as you move towards mentoring others in a discipling relationship:

1. Invite thoughtfully and prayerfully.

Remember that Jesus is the one who did the inviting. He said, "Follow me." As I mentioned earlier, that's not our line. Our invitation to others is, "Follow *with* me." Even in the smallest of churches, there are usually more people to be discipled than any one person can handle. Jesus prayerfully (Mark 3) chose the ones He would give His total self to in an intense discipleship relationship.

2. Look for the hungry ones.

Again, you're not looking for the sharpest and smartest people in the room—which is the thing almost all leadership systems teach us to do. Amazingly, Jesus didn't do that. He didn't recruit from the local synagogue. He recruited from the streets. Quite often the smart ones are not the hungry ones. That fact should stop us in our tracks. Jesus wanted faithful, hungry people who were willing to endure the rigor and paces of a life of servanthip. Paul instructed Timothy to do the same:

"What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." 2 Tim. 2:2

Notice that Paul did not tell his protégé to look for those who will become *able*. He didn't look for ability as much as he looked for a spiritual hunger. He said to entrust his own learning to those he deemed as faithful. Their faithfulness would eventually yield the ability needed to get the job done.

3. Help them discover their gifting.

It's vital that disciplers realize they're not the ones with all the answers. None of us are Jesus. We don't have to be the expert. Point those you are discipling to books and resources that have helped shape your own calling. What have you found to be the most helpful assessment tools? Who are your favorite authors? What are the best conferences you've attended? Expose disciples to the resources and tools that may or may not tie into your own personal giftings but do speak to their unique spiritual gifts, natural skills and talents. This includes human resources as well. For example, you may have a strong pastoral call, but you sense a prophetic gifting in someone you're discipling. Who in your relationship network is seasoned in this gifting? Introduce your disciple to this person.

This is where personal discipleship comes into play. It is different than programmatic discipleship. Every person is different and uniquely called, gifted and talented. This is not about just running a person through a program. Relational time is essential to discover the needs in the life of the disciple.

4. Let them go.

You're not making clones of yourself. Nor do you want to fuel a co-dependent relationship. You want to give disciples opportunities to play in the game and to play it their way. Way too often, older leaders refuse to trust younger ones with responsibility. This coincides with the axiom, "If you wait 'till they're can do it, they will never be able to do it." Jesus sent the disciples out before they were ready, which was essential to getting them ready. They failed miserably at times. Sometimes they returned to tell stories of success, and other times they returned in tatters. They failed to show faith in some circumstances and mercy in others. But Jesus kept sending and bringing correction in between assignments.

Chapter 3

DISCIPLESHIP COMMUNITIES

“He responded, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
Luke 10:27

Jesus’ answer to the question, “What is the greatest commandment?” gives us the coordinates we need to follow the path of discipleship. He emphasizes specific areas of our human make up that require constant recalibration to the coordinates of the Father’s heart. Doing so results in an ethos of sincere love for others. Let’s look at the areas Jesus’ emphasizes:

Heart and Soul

Over the last couple of decades, a resurgence of attention to inner formation has come to the fore of the evangelical church. Spiritual formation is a lifelong journey of expanding our capacity to live from the heart of Jesus. Significant voices such as Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, Pete Scazzero, Mindy Caliguire and others are producing much-needed resources, teaching and direction in this area. The subject of spiritual formation is too vast to try to cover here, but it should be pointed out that disciple making must begin with and stay centered in the rhythms of spiritual formation—prayer, Scripture reading and meditation, fasting and the like. Jesus modeled and taught His disciples in all these areas and any form of disciple making that fails to make spiritual formation a priority in both theory and practice will fail to produce Jesus-like disciples. Disciples need to cultivate habits and practices that produce a ministry life, which emerges from *being* more than *doing*.

Strength

We need more than information to bring about change. Contemporary culture is frequently called *The Information Age*. Experts say knowledge is doubling every couple of years. Christians have more biblical information, sermons, articles, etc., at their fingertips than anyone could have imagined in the history of the church. Nevertheless,

significant transformation is not taking shape in the people of God in the West. We need more than information to be changed ourselves. Information must be *experienced* to bring about transformation. The disciple, like any apprentice, must have opportunities for hands-on application to develop skillfully as a practitioner of Jesus' ways.

Mind

Loving God with our minds means we must *change* our minds. Paul teaches us that the mind of the flesh wakes up each morning ready to wage warfare with God and His ways (Rom. 8:7). He then adjures us to be transformed by renewing our mind (Rom. 12:2). Disciples work with those they are discipling on the renewing and shaping of thought and attitudes. Challenges through reading and group reflection are essential platforms for the shaping of minds toward thinking with Christ-mindedness.

Mutual Accountability Cultures

Discipleship takes place best in a group. Jesus certainly spoke into the lives of individuals, including the *twelve*. But the general ethos of His discipling took place in the group collective. There is a certain synergy that can only happen within a group. Most experienced disciplers suggest the process happens best in groups of three to eight. Any more than that makes it difficult to give the needed attention individuals require. Less than three people (plus the discipler) drops the energy level and diversity that sparks and keeps conversations going by putting unique spins on situations the group encounters. Keep in mind that we are the body of Christ only when we're together. The individualistic mindset of Western Christianity clouds this view way too often. Alongside individualism, the leadership-centric mentality we talked about earlier tends to cause people to look to one superior leader as the focus of accountability. The New Testament models and teaches something very different—*mutual* accountability. Blogger, Len Hjalmarson writes:

“When we no longer see dominance and social influence as the basic activities of leadership, we no longer think of people in terms of leaders and followers. Instead, we can think of leadership as a process in which an entire community is engaged.”¹¹

It's extremely difficult for us to clear our minds of the ways and means of leadership as practiced in the world's systems—what Jesus called the ways of the gentiles. One of the first questions that comes when I enter into conversations or teach at conferences on the subject of accountability is, "But who do people answer to?" I respond, "We are accountable to one another."

It's dumbfounding that we've missed this—especially when it is scattered throughout the New Testament. We are not taught that the ethos and metaphor of the church is a business or corporation. The language of the New Testament is that the church is a *family*. Seminary professor, Rusty Ricketson has written an excellent book, *Follower First*, in which he emphasizes the need for leaders to be followers first and for our churches to be communities of equal co-followers. While understanding that some individuals serve in the role of guides, performing the tasks of leading. Ricketson writes:

Biblical follower activity is based upon the freedom the followers have to exercise their gifts, talents and abilities... the titular leaders of the church must establish a permission-giving atmosphere in which the follower is secure to initiate activity without fear of reprisal. Leaders do not empower followers. Rather, leaders create the structural freedom in which followers can exercise their gifts and abilities. Such freedom results in high follower participation and greater productivity. The interdependent nature and the humility required of persons within the biblical follower-leader relationship allow both followers and leaders the freedom to serve within the scope of their giftedness. In a follower-centric organization, position and rank are not highly prized. Therefore, followers and leaders can cooperate with each other under the lordship of Christ without fear of being replaced or being upstaged by someone else.¹²

Paul says he is confident that the body of Christ is capable of carrying out the task of admonishing one another. Remember, the letter to the Romans was not addressed to elders, senior leaders, or a board or committee. It was written to the priesthood of believers, the community of saints (Romans 1:7). Paul writes: "Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another" (15:14, NKJV).

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul declares that he is confident in the goodness, knowledge and ability to admonish that is present in the body of Christ—everyday believers. He does not say, "You need an executive staff to admonish the lower-level staff members." Paul places the responsibility of warning and exhorting one another

squarely upon the shoulders of the collective community of believers. This raises the bar on expectations of maturity for the “normal” everyday saint. The community as a whole has the front-line responsibility for social order and group harmony. Throughout the epistles, verse after verse underscores the responsibility of the brothers and sisters, the servanthood community, to rebuke when necessary and edify at all times. Below are but a sampling of such passages:

- Honor one another (Romans 12:10)
- Build up one another (Romans 14:19; 1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 3:13; 10:25)
- Warn and exhort one another (Romans 15:14; Col. 3:16)
- Provide discipline among yourselves (1 Cor. 5:3-5)
- Bear one another’s overwhelming burdens (Gal. 5:13; 6:2)
- Submit to one another (Eph. 5:21)
- Teach one another (Col. 3:16)
- Incite one another to “love and good works” (Heb.10:24)
- Confess sins to one another (James 5:16)

Church discipline is not to be carried out by a hierarchical few. It is the responsibility of the everyday saints.¹³ The brothers and sisters throughout the faith community are called to be accountable to and for one another. This concept points steers the ethos away from a leader-centric to a follower-centric culture. The church is a family affair. In her book, *Followership*, Harvard’s Barbara Kellerman provides insight into the underappreciated influence of sibling relationships:

“The new science of siblings confirms that the impact on us of our equals (siblings) rivals that of our superiors (parents) even as early as childhood. By the time children are eleven years old, they spend approximately 33 percent of their free time with their siblings, more than they spend with their parents, teachers, friends, or even by themselves. In fact, from the time they are born, our brothers and sisters are our collaborators and co-conspirators, our role models and cautionary tales. What we can say, then, is that followers follow each other first and foremost because they model their behavior on others similar to themselves. Followers also follow other followers for some of the same reasons they follow their leaders. That is, followers go along with other followers because they (1)

lend stability and security, (2) provide order and meaning, and (3) constitute the group to which they want to belong. Of course, when followers follow other followers, as opposed to following their leaders, formal rank plays little or even no meaningful role. No one is designated superior—which means no one is the designated subordinate.”¹⁴

Our obsession with the concept of the single, top-dog leader has diluted the New Testament theme of the “family of God” as the most frequently used metaphor for the interactive relationship of the church. Relearning these attitudes and practices in the context of the micro unit of discipleship groups is the perfect laboratory for spreading the practices into the larger body of Christ. Simply put, teach and practice the type of relationship dynamics with those you are discipling so as to train them to do the same among those they will influence as they move out into influencing the broader body.

Mutual oversight is the theme of the New Testament. Hierarchy is not only absent from the narratives of Jesus and the epistles, it is forbidden. This is not to say that people do not have responsibilities they must answer for. But no place do we find the idea of a boss/employee arrangement in the New Testament. What we do see is a commitment to self-discipline, accountability to the group as a whole, and personal responsibility. In *Leadership On The Other Side*, author and church growth expert Bill Easum points to three characteristics that are essential for the viability of an environment of servant-disciples practicing mutual accountability and oversight:

- Competency*: Those who function in a team have to be able to count on the other members of the team to do what they say they will do.
- Consistency*: They have to be able to count on the other team members to be there for them.
- Integrity*: They have to be able to take team members at their word.¹⁵

Responsibly mature disciples are servants who are faithful and need not be evaluated by a centralized office of command and control. They are constantly submitting themselves to the other members by maintaining a humble posture that invites straightforward critique on an ongoing basis from their peers. Disciples are constantly asking themselves several questions:

- Am I stewarding the resources I have been handed with integrity?

- Is there pride in me that's keeping me from soliciting advice from others around me?
- Am I being faithful—giving my best—to my calling?
- Is there someone here who could do what I'm doing better than I can?

In a servanthood community, disciples use these same types of questions to lay themselves on the altar of critique before their co-servants.¹⁶ Biblically functioning missional communities—churches on the mission of Jesus—live from an *interdependent* foci. The habits, skills and practices of interdependence at the depths we find in the New Testament are not mere add-ons or slight adjustments to the way we live our lives. This type of living necessitates cataclysmic change to the way we do life. That is the way it always is in the kingdom of God. Any new kingdom portal we enter into comes about because we turn around (repent) from the way we have been approaching things. Learning to live in the depths of biblical *koinonia* requires a new set of skills, selflessness and submitting ourselves into the hands of a broad community.

A Continuing Process

A couple of years ago, I was able to be a part of a small group of people that hung out for a couple of days in the Caribbean Islands with three of the most prolific authors of our generation. Tom “N.T.” Wright, Richard Rohr, and Brennan Manning shared their thought and hearts with about 20 of us over those two days. I’ll never forget the scene of Brennan Manning sitting on a couch in front of Richard Rohr and N.T. Wright, furiously taking notes and grinning from ear to ear. He was like a hungry little bird waiting for the next worm from its momma’s beak. Brennan, in his dawning years, maintained the humble posture of a disciple in the making.

As long as we are in the bodies of our flesh, the discipleship process will continue. The process will never be complete this side of the grave. We must always be learning and remain in a relationship of mutual submission. In their book, *Connecting*, Bobby Clinton and Paul Stanley advocate the need for a “mentoring constellation”¹⁷ in the life of all believers and leaders. They discuss four spheres of mentoring:

Upward mentoring

We all need someone in our lives we can look to and turn to who is more experienced and knowledgeable than ourselves. It's more obvious in our younger years, but we never outgrow it. The most mature Christians among us maintain a posture of humble learning and sincerely believe they still need the occasional mentor when they face times of decision or significant transition in life or ministry in addition to periodic times of "checking in" for their heart's sake.

Downward mentoring

We should all have a heart for those who are behind us. This is about passing along your experiences, knowledge, skills and insights to help someone younger develop in his or her followership of Jesus. One of the side benefits of this aspect of the mentoring constellation is that it keeps you on your toes. It pushes the mentor/disciple to keep learning and be self-aware.

Peer co-mentoring

Peers are friends we can relate to on common ground. This level of mentoring is probably the most untapped vein. There is a lot of treasure to be shared if we would only purposely posture ourselves to learn from our friends. There are two types of peer mentors. The *internal peer mentor* is someone inside the organization or ministry you work in. The *external peer mentor* is someone that works in a similar capacity as you, but in another organization or ministry. Clinton and Stanley describe the role:

"Unlike the vertical dimension mentors, peers are the same age and share more common experiences. This allows them to be more relaxed, relevant and open with one another. It is precisely these qualities in the relationship that enable peers to stimulate, interact, and hold one another accountable at a more personal level. They can and will shoot straight with us as well as empathize with our concerns and challenges, as they undoubtedly face the same ones. We can share confidential matters that may not be appropriate for upward mentors. We can also expect understanding and support."¹⁸

Regardless of the way you decide to develop a system or rhythm of discipleship in your own life or ministry, the essence of it must be a "with me" relational posture. You will never find a program, class, or curriculum that yields the fruit of genuine discipleship relationships that can make up for inviting others into your life. We live in a great time in history. Wonderful resources are at our disposal. Take them and use them as best fits

your style and the shape and context of your church or ministry. Be encouraged to go for it! Make disciples by inviting others to be *with you*, and watch Jesus build *His* church.

Endnotes

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- ³ Paul Stanley and J. Robert Clinton, *Connecting* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1992, 18)
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- ¹⁶ Ford, Lance. *Unleader Reimagining Leadership...and Why We Must*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Publishing, 2012, 151).
- ¹⁷ See *Connecting* by Stanley and Clinton
- ¹⁸ Paul Stanley and J. Robert Clinton, *Connecting* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1992, 166).

WITH ME

RELATIONAL ESSENTIALS
FOR A DISCIPLESHIP ETHOS

Character and wisdom is shaped in the mentoring relationships of a “with me” culture. And relationships at this level do not just happen. They are on-purpose agreements whereby skills, resources, knowledge, and experience are transferred and exchanged on a relational journey.

In **With Me** the intentional aspects of making disciples—the tools, resources, attitudes, and actions—are presented with real world stories and examples of these principles and practices at work.



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