

THE BIG IDEA TO CHANGE YOUR VIEW OF CHURCH

The Five Contexts of Discipleship

- "Sometimes I find our church services to be deeply frustrating. While there are weeks where I meet with God in worship and find my mind and spirit fed by the sermon, I often have this nagging feeling of, 'Is that it? Is that the best way we can do and be the church?'"
- "I love my small group, but the problem is that people keep bringing new people. I realize that sounds so selfish, but actually I want to stay with a limited number of people, getting to know them deeply over a long period of time. There is this pressure in small group life to invite others in, to help neighbors and friends discover what we have, but by their very joining, what we have is lost, as the group simply becomes too big to properly care for each other."
- "When I read the Bible's descriptions of church life, I have trouble matching that with our pastor's insistence that what we are doing on a Sunday morning is the same thing. For instance, since when was the Lord's Supper meant to be a quick pause for a snack on a nasty cracker and a droplet of grape juice that is being rapidly passed around a big room in virtual silence?"
- "Our church said we had to multiply our home group. It was horrible—all these people I'd grown so close to were now off somewhere else. To me it felt like a divorce, not a celebration."
- "I get annoyed with these people who complain that they don't feel close to everyone in our worship service. What do they expect—we go around the room and ask all 250 people for their prayer requests?"

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

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

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

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

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

indications across the breadth of human society—his creation—that may point us to some ways forward.

If we believe that the entire world is God's domain and that Jesus is Lord of the scientist in the laboratory as much as

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he is Lord of the pastor in the pulpit, then perhaps we can look for clues outside of the traditional literature on church life. This is not to say that we should ditch everything we've known up to now about church; as you

will see, we believe that what we are proposing is deeply biblical. At the same time, we believe that we can learn from the insights of the social sciences—as all truth is God's truth!—and even experience some new breakthroughs in our approach to discipleship.

THE SEARCH TO BELONG

When I first read Joseph Myers's book *The Search to Belong*, I knew I'd struck gold! It is one of the most helpful resources on building Christian community—yet it also is deeply indebted to the sociology of how people connect with others in different-sized spaces, or contexts, for gathering.²⁰

Published in 2003, Myers's book builds on the work of the pioneering 1960s sociologist Edward T. Hall, who developed a theory based on the relationship between space and culture, calling it Proxemics. Hall suggested that human beings use four different "spaces" to develop communication and connections: public space, social space, personal space, and intimate space. His research focused on the actual physical distance between people in those different environments, and it had obvious implications in areas such as building design and public transportation.²¹

Myers took these innovative ideas and applied them afresh to look at how community is built and how people experience belonging. He explains, "How we occupy physical space—whether through actual real estate (the shopper standing next to my wife and me in the grocery store line) or through more subtle 'spatial language'—tells others whether we want them to belong."²²

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

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


Over the past decade, we have played with these ideas in practice,²³ running them through the filter of how and where Jesus disciples us. Bobby and I have made some adaptations as well. We refer to the different


gathering sizes as “contexts” rather than “spaces,” to provide a more flexible, nonspatial label. We’ve added an extra context into the mix and have relabeled what Myers calls “intimate space,” now calling it the Transparent Context (primarily because in teaching these ideas, several men became distracted by all this talk of intimacy!).

In recent years Joe Myers has become a friend and we have enjoyed some stimulating debate on these matters. He has been a huge help—swapping ideas with us and even teaching with Alex—and we pay tribute to his groundbreaking work that paved the way for this book. If what follows is flawed in any way, we take full responsibility!

THE FIVE CONTEXTS

Let’s take a quick look at the Five Contexts, remembering that the following is more descriptive than it is prescriptive:²⁴

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

 **SOCIAL** **The Social Context** is the range between twenty and seventy people, where we share snapshots of who we are and thereby seek to build affinity with others. Myers points out that in this context (think of a backyard grill-out) three things happen: we build neighborly relations (people we can call upon for minor favors), we start to identify those with whom we’d like to become closer friends, and we reveal elements of our identity and our journey. In terms of Proxemics, we will be somewhere between 4 and 12 feet apart. Interestingly, the distance between two people shaking hands is about 4 feet, which in a new relationship is a common preamble to testing the three things Myers lists.²⁵



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



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



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

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

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

TABLE 1

Mind the Gap

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

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

You also may have spotted some overlap between the Transparent and Personal Contexts. Sometimes a small group dynamic occurs in a group of as few as four people, though it also can exist in a larger group of very close friends. This is one of those situations where outcomes come into

play. You will likely need to talk about what you are trying to achieve as a group, and that will determine what your group will actually "feel" like in practice.

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

Mental Gymnastics

Throughout life you will encounter situations that seem to blur the boundaries between these different contexts. When you find yourself in such a spot, your mind will "fix" the physical distance to something that feels most comfortable for you. Myers puts it like this: "Our concept of space is largely a matter of perspective; it's in our minds. Humans adjust their definition of space based on surrounding variables."²⁶

For instance, when you are sitting on a plane, physically your proximity to the person in the seat beside you will plop you straight into the Transparent Context. Yet you will mentally massage that experience so that you all remain in the Public Context, enabling you to safely ignore the stranger who was randomly assigned to the neighboring seat. In all likelihood you don't share names, you don't talk (other than for courtesy to meet basic needs), and you certainly don't have lingering eye contact at that close range! As Myers notes about these situations, "We may be touching, but we are far from intimate."²⁷

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

Sometimes, however, these mental gymnastics are unhealthy and can cause the individual to miss the value of that particular context.

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

Of course, we also need to account for the fact that different cultures will have variations in how they perceive and express the boundaries between the contexts. Edward Hall was fascinated by these variations as well, and he looked at both Western and non-Western cultures. While he found that the different spaces (to use his label) exist fairly universally, people did perceive the social rules differently. For example, in the Arab world he found that “privacy in a public place is foreign to them. Business transactions in the bazaar, for example, are not just between buyer and seller, but are participated in by everyone. . . . There is no such thing as an intrusion in public. Public means public!”²⁸

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

Dysfunction in Each Context

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

- **Public.** Sharing private information with the person who has been placed next to you by chance. Simply because they happen to be sitting alongside you does not make them your friend!
- **Social.** Expecting the gathering to be a performance that is consumed, when actually it is built around mutual interaction and shared contribution.
- **Personal.** Revealing to others what was shared in the privacy of the Personal Context.

- **Transparent.** Talking solely about what you do on the outside rather than who you are on the inside. Living this way will torpedo intimacy.
- **Divine.** Thinking that you can engineer or control this context, as if somehow you can hide from Jesus. For instance, when the Holy Spirit prompts you with a question, he is not doing it to gather information!

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

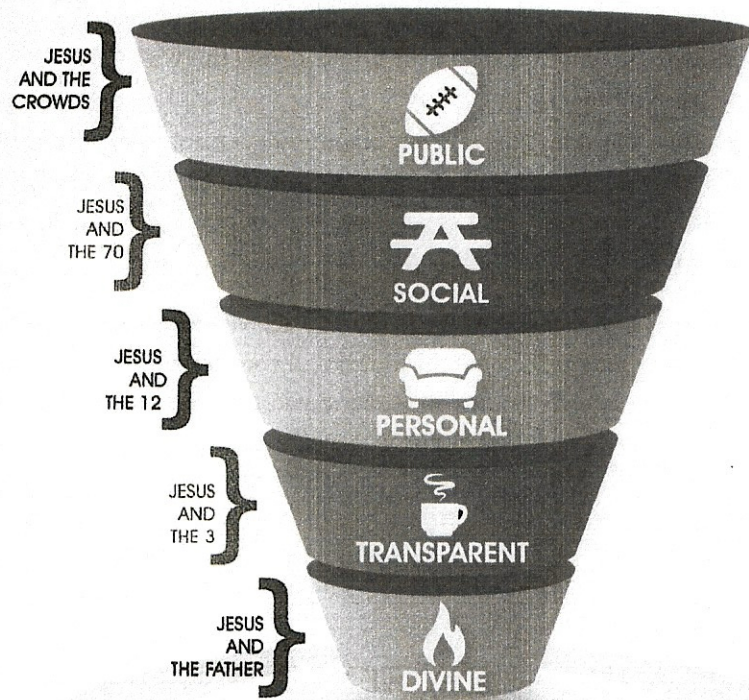
JESUS AND THE CONTEXTS

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

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

Jesus used each of the Five Contexts with great wisdom and discernment.

Our introduction of the Divine Context might cause a “pause to ponder” moment for you. After all, we could be implying that Jesus is not really all that present in the other contexts—as if somehow we are taking the omnipresence of God out of all things and creating the very sacred-secular divide that we wrote against a few pages ago!



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FIGURE 6

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

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

TABLE 2

our fruitfulness in both being disciplined and discipling others in the other four contexts.

THE CHURCH AND THE CONTEXTS

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

- *Sunday worship services* clearly equate most readily to the Public Context. This is the most common size of church gathering—which leads to the problem of wrongly expecting Sundays to deliver most of our discipling.
- *Missional communities* are the rare, but best, expression of the Social Context in church life. This context is conspicuous by its absence in most churches! Even if you have a group of this number of people, it likely is not bound together by people sharing snapshots of who they are in order to build a common affinity. A missional community is an extended family of relationships, centered around Jesus, that goes and makes disciples among a specific group of people. A lot more detail follows in later chapters!
- *Small groups* are an obvious example of how churches operate in the Personal Context, and clearly these are a widespread expression of Christian life. The pressing issues tend to be that most small groups are allowed to grow too large, thus undermining their original strengths, and if we are honest they usually have little to no real ongoing missional impetus.
- *Deepest friendships, discipleship groups, and marriages* clearly have the ability to reach into the Transparent Context. Most churches do fairly well at encouraging these areas, but they cannot be organized centrally. Your church pastor can't tell you whom your best friend should be or decide whom you should marry (unless they're forming a cult—in which case, run!).
- *Your personal walk* with God is how the Divine Context impacts every one of us. The quality and strength of your relationship with

Jesus will have a direct bearing upon the vitality of the other four contexts. The difficulty, of course, is that it is hard to measure how someone else is truly doing alone with God.

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

You will notice immediately that, bar one, these are not lists of actual tasks; they are expressions of measurable values. This is a reflection of the missional nature of your calling: your unique place of mission requires you to express these outcomes in ways that impact the people you are called to disciple. In whatever context you find yourself, you can use the three outcomes to assess and develop that specific situation.

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

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

- You must *stop* expecting complete discipling from just one or two contexts.
- You must *start* a sustainable rhythm of church that gives you each of the Five Contexts, thereby enabling you to play your part in discipling others!

How is any of this possible, especially in our crazy-busy lives? That is what we want to show you in this book as we move through each of the contexts in turn, beginning with the Public Context.

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

TABLE 3