

# YOU'RE NOT CRAMMING FOR AN EXAM

Discipleship, Evangelism,  
and the Cross

If you visit the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency of the US government, you will see the words “And Ye Shall Know the Truth and the Truth Shall Make You Free” inscribed on the floor of the entrance concourse. Taken from the passage we looked at earlier in John 8, these words embrace a worthy desire to know truth and to bring freedom—but they miss the critical step. The journey toward truth starts with becoming a follower of *Jesus*. He is the Truth.

We misunderstand discipleship if we focus on the forensic pursuit of truth in such a way that we forget that it is all about a friendship with Jesus. Being a friend of God is the basis for understanding the secrets of the kingdom of God (see Matt. 13:11). As Dallas Willard comments, “If I am Jesus’ disciple that means I am with him to learn from him how to be like him.”<sup>12</sup>

Have you ever noticed how so many of the great heroes of the Bible—those from whom we learn so much about being a disciple—are described in language that talks of their being friends of God?

We think of God choosing to bring Abraham into the conversation about the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:17–19, or the summary verse about Moses in Exodus 33:11, “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.” Hebrews 11 famously lists many of the great men and women of faith in the Old Testament, and it is clear that their commendation is related to their friendship level of trust in God. He was no remote deity to these people: he was, to quote Solomon, that “friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24). As

that Hall of Fame chapter comments, "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them" (Heb. 11:16).

The greatest illustration of this connection between discipleship and friendship comes from the lips of Jesus in the hours before the crucifixion: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15).

These examples are no accident—because discipleship and true friendship are closely aligned.

The way we enter into a friendship with God is entirely at his initiative. None of us have any right to demand anything from him, and we certainly don't have the power to force anything on him!

Yet because of his intrinsic relational wiring, God has reached out to us in Jesus, inviting us into relationship with him, dealing decisively with what damages our relationship, namely our sin. At the cross, Jesus died in our place not only so we can experience forgiveness of sin, but also so we can live a life of purpose and significance today—as God's apprentices.

What finer destiny could there be than becoming more Christlike in nature and lifestyle, bound ever more closely to God in love and friendship, representing him wherever we go through our words and works? Such is the wonder of discipleship!

## UNDER GOD'S STEAM

*The lack of discipleship undermines all else that we seek to do.*

—Alan Hirsch

If you are like me (Alex) in desiring to represent Jesus anywhere and everywhere, then you also realize that you simply don't have the capacity to pull that off consistently and convincingly under your own steam. Speaking personally, even as someone who daily receives afresh the forgiveness and new life of Jesus, I still mess up and know that I can't really represent God with much effectiveness just by trying harder. I need help. (No doubt many people have thought that about me, even if they've been kind enough not to blurt it out to my face!)

The Holy Spirit has many roles, but one of them is to come alongside us as disciples of Jesus and empower us to live differently. As Jesus reminded the first disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses . . ." (Acts 1:8).

Wherever you are in your walk with God, God's Spirit stands ready and able to help, to guide, to give you wisdom and strength so that you genuinely start to change and live differently. Whether you are thinking about relationships, experiences, or information, the Holy Spirit can and will help you.

The work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is far-reaching and so very needed. But we must realize that our relationship with him is a partnership and that we must play our part as well. Sometimes learning and growing as a disciple is fun and rewarding, but other times it can be challenging and costly.

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## THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself  
and take up his cross daily and follow me.*

—Luke 9:23 ESV

*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.*

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

Our Western world highly values comfort and ease. Those are not bad things—for instance, I love all the electronic gizmos that are so fun to play with! However, the temptation is to take from supplementary blessings a principle that becomes primary.

In the context of discipleship, then, we need to understand that discipleship is *not* about our comfort. It is not all sunshine, prizes, and fragrant flowers with unicorns sitting on top! And here's why:

God is most interested not in making us happy but in making us holy.

In the Bible, the word *holy* is never fully defined. That's because it is a way of summarizing the very nature of God—God is holy, and thus to be holy is to be like God. “Be holy, because I am holy” (Lev. 11:44).

Of course, God is a generous and loving Father who is thrilled at any opportunity to pour out tangible blessings into our lives. But at the same time he is not misty-eyed about the big picture; that is, he is working to make us mature in Christ and to see more of his kingdom revealed in this broken world. And this means that, while salvation is free, discipleship comes at a cost.

David Watson commented, “Every Christian is called to a clear and dedicated discipleship, whatever the personal cost may be.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus talked about this in Luke 14:26–27: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

Consider the paradoxical nature of discipleship:

- A disciple receives friendship with Jesus as a gift—but then must lay everything down to follow through on that relational commitment.
- A disciple sees Jesus as better than life itself—but life itself is enriched to the max when we follow Jesus.
- A disciple prioritizes Jesus over every other relationship—but every other relationship is made richer in Jesus.

This sounds like a tall order—and, of course, it is. But since discipleship is imitation, we are not left alone to work out how to do these things. Jesus went ahead of us

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when he counted the cost, gave up far more than any of us will have to sacrifice, and chose to take the path to the cross, both literally and figuratively. And he

tells us, “Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples” (Luke 14:33).

Being a disciple of Jesus is not easy. Sometimes we may feel like we're being challenged beyond the breaking point—and we're tempted to wonder if the sacrifices we've made are worth it. But then we bring to mind the big picture of what the Lord is doing in our lives, of the way he is moving through us in the lives of others, of how our church community is representing him in our place of mission. And while being a disciple still can be enormously challenging, we know that we are sacrificing for the greatest of causes.

A wise disciple counts the cost and is willing to pay the price.

## GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES

*Ultimately, each church will be evaluated  
by only one thing—its disciples.  
—Neil Cole, Ordinary Hero*

If you are a follower of Jesus, you have been commissioned by him to go and make disciples. In Matthew 28:19–20 he summarizes the call in these famous words: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” As an expression of your love for God and neighbor, there is no more meaningful task to which you can give yourself.

Yet too often we have a faulty understanding of what it means to go and make disciples—because we do not in our hearts have real faith that Jesus' discipleship model actually works. We think of discipleship as the transfer of knowledge, and if we're really spiritual we do some good deeds. But really discipleship is about a change of heart. The doing comes out of a new heart (and only then does it not burn you out or turn into legalism).

Our friend Jim Putnam tells the story of when he realized he didn't actually know how to make disciples. What he'd been taught was how to teach a class, prepare a sermon, and make a pastoral call. As Jesus was challenging him about this, and about the lack of fruit being produced, he reflected on the place in his life where he had most experienced discipleship—through the sport of wrestling. Jim took on the lifestyle of

his wrestling coach in an effort to immerse himself in the sport and thus become very good at it. As he looked at the principles of how he'd been trained, he was able to translate them to Christian discipleship.

This experience played out further in his life when he felt called to plant a new church. Feeling pressured to put on a big show, he realized that he and his team just didn't have the resources to do that. So they decided that their most important thing would not be the church service. Instead, they recognized that people needed relationship and answers for life, and that's what they would offer.

Jim notes that we tend to concentrate on the masses instead of the few because we think that's quicker. Yet Jesus interacted with thousands but focused on a few in order to reach the thousands.<sup>14</sup>

In case those of you with existing churches are worried, we are not going to argue that you should scrap your weekend worship service! Far from it. As the chapters on the Public Context will demonstrate, we strongly believe church services have enormous value. The hazard that must be avoided, however, is expecting that this larger gathering will somehow magically do things that it simply is not set up to do very well.

However, what we are saying is that in all five of the contexts of discipleship, the essence of our transformation is always our relationship with God, lived out through relationship with others. This means that if you are not in relationship with God and in relationship with others,

loving them well, you are not making disciples.

**Discipleship is always relational.**

Don't just take our word for it though. Have you ever noticed how each of the fruits of the Spirit is relational? That's because discipleship is always

relational! In a world of loneliness, people know they need the love that ultimately comes from God, enfleshed in those around them who follow that same God.

Effective disciples of Jesus must have an unshakable conviction that relational discipleship is the smartest and most biblical way to reach the world. Unless you believe that at the core of your being, you will continually focus on being externally successful, striving after the things that bring acclaim or affirmation.

## EVANGELISM, DISCIPLESHIP, AND THE CROSS

Throughout this book we will be arguing that God discipled us through five distinct contexts: the Public, the Social, the Personal, the Transparent, and the Divine. Undergirding this argument, however, is an assumption we have made about how evangelism and discipleship interrelate.

Traditionally, many Christians talk about evangelism—someone's response to the message of the gospel—as happening up to the point of conversion, when an individual consciously commits to Christ as Savior and Lord. After that, the focus of our efforts shifts to discipleship, as the new Christian learns how to follow through on that commitment within the context of the church. Such a process can be illustrated as in figure 1.

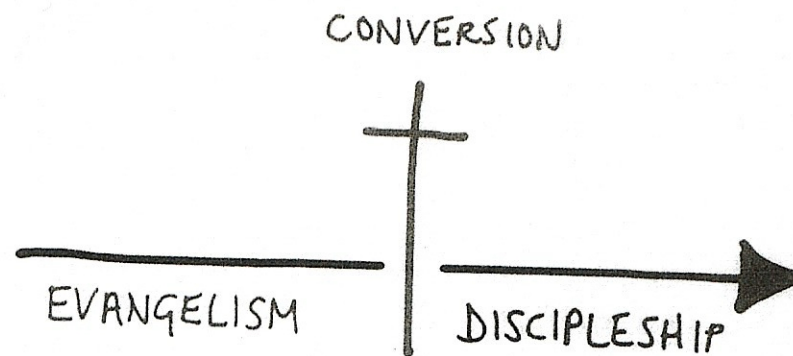


FIGURE 1

We believe, however, that this traditional view is not a biblical pattern. Here's why.

Evangelism is clearly biblical. But it does not end at the point of conversion. As a follower of Jesus, I need to hear afresh the challenge and encouragement of the gospel and respond to it.<sup>15</sup> There will always be days when God calls me to repent of some instance when I failed to act with godly patience (not one of my most natural personality traits!). Ideally, over time, fewer areas of my life will be in open rebellion, but that doesn't mean I no longer need to hear the gospel. So the gospel is not just

something we use in evangelism—it is a key aspect of our discipleship as well.

Hopefully most of you can agree with that. But we want to take this idea one step farther by flipping it around. When it comes to discipleship, our experience is that people far from God can be discipled where they are today. They might be light-years from acknowledging Christ as Savior and Lord, but they are open to learning from him (perhaps as he lives in you) in a certain area of life. For instance, I have found my neighbors to be very open to learning from Jesus about parenting, or caring for the vulnerable, or handling finances, and so on.

### Discipleship begins at “Hello.”

One way of describing this truth is to say that discipleship begins at “Hello.”

Nowhere does the New Testament indicate that a person must attain a certain level of knowledge before they can officially commence the journey of discipleship.

To help illustrate, figure 2 shows a modified version of figure 1.

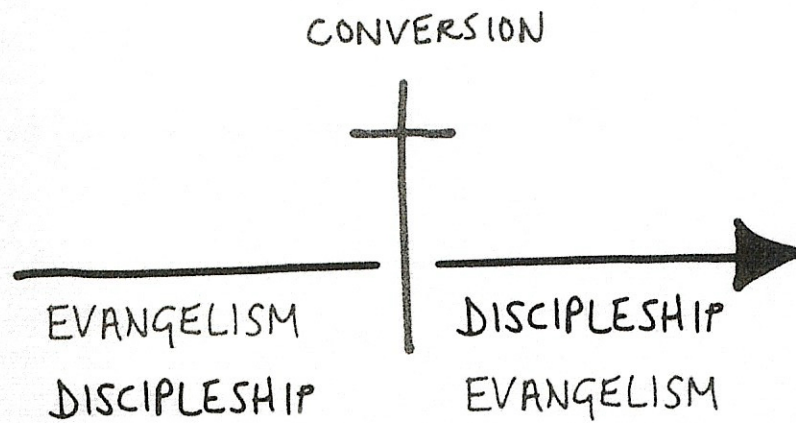


FIGURE 2

Here you can see that both evangelism (responding to the challenge of the gospel) and discipleship (hearing what Jesus is saying and then doing something about it) are ongoing works in our lives. While evangelism and discipleship are distinct areas, they are far more closely related

than many realize, and they certainly don't operate in a linear manner (“I must complete the whole process—or event—of evangelism before I can begin discipleship”). As N. T. Wright has shown, the good news changes everything, every day.<sup>16</sup> Jesus and his resurrection bring an entirely new perspective to life. We believe he will come back soon and fully consummate and establish his kingdom. So on a daily basis we respond to the gospel and live as disciples of King Jesus. While there is a more obvious emphasis on evangelism in the early stages, it is ultimately unhelpful to separate evangelism from discipleship. They are organically entwined and feed off each other, working together in our walk with Jesus.

### Bounded Set Discipleship

To underscore this understanding of discipleship as a journey that is open to all, some very helpful insights are available to us in the sociology of sets, which look at how groups of people connect over a period of time. Broadly speaking, there are three types of sets: bounded, fuzzy, and centered.<sup>17</sup>

The bounded set is, unsurprisingly, focused on the *boundary* that determines who is inside and who is outside a specific group. A classic example would be a country club, where those who pay the fees, keep the rules, and satisfy the requirements of the leadership committee are allowed to be members of the club. So if you roll up at the front gate on a hot summer's day with your swim gear, the only way you are using the pool is if you are a member. There are no exceptions! This is a binary world—either you are in or you are out.

In figure 3, the circle represents the boundary, and the arrows are different people. Many (arrow A) try to enter but fail to clear the fence around the organization and are turned away. A few (arrow B) manage to hop inside but become like arrow C—drifting around with no further meaningful goals or objectives. As long as they don't upset the leadership (represented by the crown, as they often have near absolute authority!), they can stay in the group.

The church often operates like a bounded set. We create our boundary—perhaps sitting through sixteen hours of membership classes, or being baptized, or speaking in tongues, or believing what we believe on end-times theology (because we are the ones who have finally decoded

the mystery)—and then we devote an enormous amount of energy to enforcing that separation. This boundary, we imply, is the litmus test for a disciple.

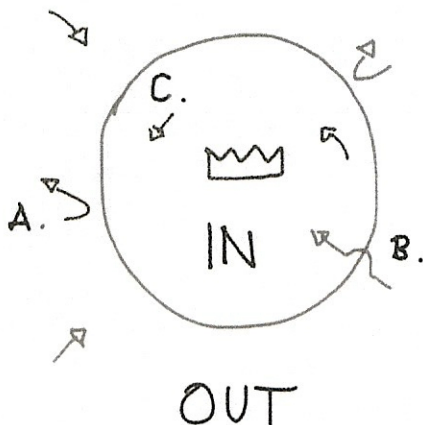


FIGURE 3

Of course none of those things listed as church boundaries are intrinsically wrong, but by overemphasizing a few specifics we raise the bar beyond what Jesus requires, keeping many from experiencing what it means to follow Jesus. Those who pass the test are now on the inside, but where are they going after they get in? Where is the ongoing sense of pilgrimage, of growth and maturation as a follower of Jesus Christ? Instead of seeing themselves as apprentices, people in churches like this take on an entitlement mentality. They are in the club, and membership has its privileges! Thus we build a culture that produces Christian consumers rather than Christian disciples, and then we wonder why we aren't growing missional leaders in the kingdom of God.

A bounded set mentality can also hinder our missional openness. Considerable research has been conducted on how group affiliation takes place, with fascinating results. In *The Respect Effect*, Paul Meshanko concludes, "We are much more likely to treat others in ways that communicate value if we perceive that they are, somehow, like us. . . . Controlled experiments consistently show that we are more courteous, generous, and

empathetic towards those with whom we share some meaningful common bond."<sup>18</sup>

A church that is seeking to be missionally fruitful and to reach previously unreached people groups must be willing to build authentic Christian community with people *who are not like themselves*. This requires a different sociological underpinning for how we affiliate with others, particularly in our understanding of how the church is bound together.

### Fuzzy Set Discipleship

In response to a bounded set style of discipleship, some brave souls may decide to break away from the institution. Declaring that all are welcome into their group, they say that since all are equal in God's sight there is no need for leaders or boundaries. After all, wasn't the New Testament church all about valuing and sharing the varied gifts of the body of Christ?

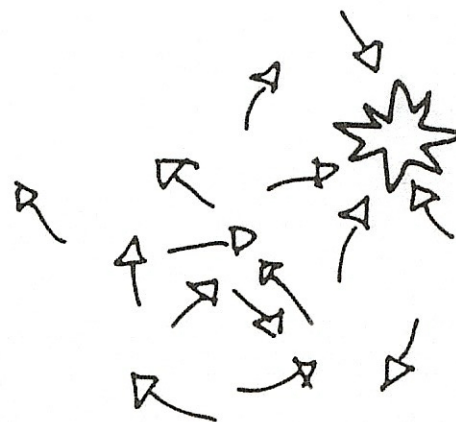


FIGURE 4

This "fuzzy set" approach feels wonderful at first. Everything is so relaxed and relational, especially when compared to the more controlling bounded set environment. In figure 4, where the arrows represent people, everyone can move around as they please. It's something of a hippy paradise!

Unfortunately, this collegial climate doesn't last long. Without a defining identity or clear direction, conflicts inevitably emerge (represented in the figure by the starburst). A choice presents itself, a decision has to be made about which way to turn, but group consensus can't be reached. Two dominant individuals fall out, and no system is in place to deal with the collateral damage. People begin to pull away, and the group dissipates like a mist on a sunny day.

While fuzzy set discipleship sounds ideal in theory, in practice it simply is not robust enough to deal with the fallen nature of humanity.

### Centered Set Discipleship

Our third option, then, is a centered set community. Here, the key element is a defining idea that exists at the center of the group's life, giving it cohesiveness, direction, and structure. This defining idea might be a particular service that is offered, an item that is manufactured, a charitable work that is undertaken, or something else.

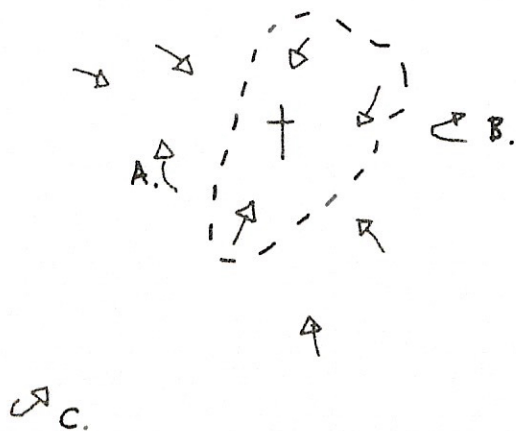


FIGURE 5

For the disciple-making church, the uniting idea is actually a person, and his name is Jesus (represented in figure 5 by the cross at the center). We are together on a journey toward Christ and Christlikeness. None of

us make it all the way there in this life, but with Jesus at the center, we have a vision to unite us and a framework for resolving every dilemma and relational difficulty (if we will hear and obey!). As a friend put it to me (Alex) recently, "The journey toward Christ is the primary point where doctrine and practice meet."

And here is where the type of "set" we adopt matters for discipleship. In its posture toward the world, a centered set church will invite even the most notorious of sinners to learn from Jesus, even if most everything in their life bears little resemblance to him (arrow C in the figure). This open posture creates a low bar of entry yet does not require that we compromise the demands of the gospel. The point is less about getting someone over a somewhat arbitrary boundary and more about inviting everyone to take their next step toward Jesus. As Jim Putman writes, "Most of the time when discipleship is intentional, spiritual growth happens quickly."<sup>19</sup>

Of course, the centered set approach is not without difficulties. We need to take into account the context and the particular situation. So, for instance, churches do need leadership, and the dotted line represents the higher level of maturity that is expected of leaders (and clearly documented in the Scriptures). Where to place that line will vary between churches, and there should be some fluidity in how people can move in and out of a leadership role. (You are a leader only for as long as you are leading, not for as long as you hold a particular office!) Likewise, not all people will keep moving toward Jesus at the center. Some will go so far and then be comfortable going into orbit around Jesus (arrow A), while others will be offended by a fresh challenge and choose to turn away from Jesus, in at least one aspect of their life (arrow B).

Of course, Jesus speaks clearly in John 3 of the shift that occurs when we are born again, and he presents that shift as a radical change. Matthew 25 includes repeated challenges to make the right choice in the ultimate binary decision: wise or foolish virgin, faithful or unfaithful servant, sheep or goat.

Yet in each instance, the call is to commit to following Jesus, to trust in a Person, or as John comments, to "believe in him" (John 3:16). While

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doctrine is of vital importance, ultimately the call is to far more than simply holding the right set of theological propositions in your head. To truly follow Jesus as Lord is an all-encompassing commitment that transforms everything.

Along the way, Jesus is gracious enough to give us significant moments that we can memorialize to represent key steps in our journey. Thus I can recall the day I finally went all in with Jesus and sincerely prayed a prayer of surrender and commitment (August 25, 1984, if you are interested!). But that deeply significant moment was never intended to become a boundary from behind which I could divide the world in two, defining how I would interact with each person once I had correctly categorized them.

Indeed, if I find myself closer to Jesus than my neighbor, my job is to do all I can to live out how to move toward Jesus in tangible ways that make sense to them where they are today, in a relationship of grace, acceptance, and generosity. This doesn't mean I ignore sin and wrong belief, and certainly my life should look different, but it does mean that I don't spend my energy judging lost people by the values of the kingdom they have yet to embrace. As my friend Ben Sternke puts it, I must be both high connection and high distinction.

Churches will also need to consider how a centered set approach impacts the practice of church discipline. In a bounded set, it will be clear who is subject to discipline, but in a centered set there are some gray areas. For what it's worth, my (Alex's) personal view is that church discipline is effective only where there is already an existing relationship (otherwise, why would the person be governed or concerned by it?). Where relationship and accountability already exist, discipline actually fits well as part of the pilgrimage culture that is being developed. Bobby supports a covenant membership paradigm because of this point. In this concept, once a person has fully committed to trust and follow Jesus, they believe it is a good thing to choose to be in covenant with a local body of believers where accountability like that described in Matthew 18:15–17 is upheld. The concept of church discipline is complex, and not all will agree on its implementation. We both agree that there are times when we need to be challenged and held accountable, as that is part of what it means to grow in Christlikeness. We also agree it is a tricky principle to

apply, requiring much prayer and guidance by the Holy Spirit. Different leaders will choose to handle discipline differently (at the membership and leadership levels). Yet the dotted line indicates that discipline remains part of a centered set, where people are working out their beliefs, relationships, and behavior in the context of journey.

In summary, when these sociological understandings are coupled with a biblical understanding of how evangelism and discipleship work simultaneously in our lives, we have a strong framework for shaping a disciple-making culture within a local church.

## GOD USES EVERY SITUATION

Thus far we have defined discipleship. We have addressed the need for relationships. And we've seen how the sociological context can affect the way we engage in discipleship. But let's broaden our perspective further by looking at the when and where of discipleship. We want to suggest that God can—and does—disciple us in *every* situation of life, in *every* type of relational interaction, and that he uses *different* situations and relationships in *different* ways.

We are continually engaging with people in various situations and in various sizes of gatherings. I see this in my own life when I'm with hundreds, perhaps walking around the grocery store, watching a football game, singing in a Sunday morning worship service, or typing my status into Facebook or Twitter.

Other times I'm with dozens of other people, for instance, gathering with the neighbors for a grill-out, joining in a family reunion, or sharing in a missional community.

I also have interactions with just a handful of people, whether debating with colleagues in a meeting at work, playing soccer with the guys on my team, engaging the members of a small group, or enjoying those who will sit around the dining room table with me for dinner this evening.

Then there are the deepest relationships, where I'm sharing the latest installment of life's story with my closest friends and family, perhaps

**God can—and does—disciple us in every situation of life, in every type of relational interaction.**



giving focused attention to one of my children, talking on the phone to my best man, or, most clearly, spending time one-on-one with my wife!

Finally come those times when I'm alone, maybe watching a TV show, singing in the shower, reading my Bible and praying, or driving to work and thinking about an upcoming appointment.

Jesus will disciple us in each of these five sizes of gatherings—if we will let him. Our task is to invite him to do so, to look for opportunities to be discipled, and to set the right expectations for the outcomes of each of those different contexts. As we embrace these varied places and times of discipleship, simultaneously our eyes will be opened to see the opportunities that exist to disciple others.

In the next chapter we will give you an overview of how the Five Contexts of discipleship work, along with an introduction to the sociology that lies behind each one.