

Seeing People, Trusting God

The Relational Art of
Disciple-Making

Rupert Loyd Jr., PhD

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Dedication

To the “Two Jims,” J.F. and J.R.
for seeing the potential and having the patience.
and
the Thursday Night Men’s Group,
true disciples of Christ, each one.

Foreword

We are facing significant questions about the future of the local church. Where will the next generation of Christian leaders come from? How will they be identified, formed, mentored, equipped, and sent? How do we prepare the local church for mission in a rapidly changing culture? We've been given the answers to these questions in the Great Commission: "Go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19 NLT).

For years, I have worked with pastors, ministry leaders, and Christians who say they want to make disciples. Many know what they are supposed to do: "make disciples." Yet when we talk about discipleship, most pastors, church leaders, and church members often move quickly to programs, curriculum, classes, small groups, and strategies. We ask, "What else should we do?" when perhaps the better question is: "Who are the people, not the programs, God has placed in front of us?"

That is what I appreciate about this book. Rupert brings the focus of discipleship back to where it needs to be—people. Jesus did not simply give His disciples information. He walked with them. He got to know them. He challenged them. He allowed them to fail. He equipped them, and then He sent them out to *go* do the same thing He did. His goal was not simply that they would know something but that they would also become more like Him and join Him in His mission, doing something with what they had learned.

As coaches to pastors and leaders in local churches, we know that relational discipleship is important right now for three reasons.

First, churches have no shortage of discipleship programs. Yet having more programs has not necessarily produced more mature, multiplying

disciples. We have more resources available to us than perhaps any generation before us has had. But all of those resources cannot replace Christians actually walking alongside other people and helping them follow Jesus.

Second, entirely too much ministry has become dependent upon pastors and paid staff. The New Testament makes it clear that leaders equip God's people for ministry and that God's people then become active participants in God's mission. Disciple-making was never meant to be something reserved for pastors, church staff, or a handful of highly trained Christians. It is part of what it means to follow Jesus.

Third, the future of the Church's mission will require rediscovering relational disciple-making and multiplication. We can no longer rely on buildings and bank accounts to be the core driving factors in making disciples. Relationships must be that driving factor. We cannot program our way into Great Commission fruitfulness. We need Christians who recognize the people God has already placed around them and who are willing to invest in them.

Ultimately, disciple-making must move toward taking God's mission beyond the walls of the church and beyond just something pastors and staff are hired to do. Spiritual formation and discipleship multiplication matter to the transformational change in our communities that we are desperately praying for every Sunday morning. Rupert lays it out clearly. Jesus formed His disciples so they would eventually go. They became people who could help others follow Jesus, who could then help still others follow Jesus. That is how the Gospel moves outward and how the mission continues from one generation to the next. So, if you want to see transformational change in our world, start by being a disciple who makes disciples by seeing those people already around you.

As you read this book, I encourage you not to begin by asking what new discipleship program your church needs. Ask who God already

placed in your life. Discern who needs someone to walk alongside them. Who could you encourage, equip, or help to take their next step with Jesus? And then who might that person eventually disciple?

We may never know the impact and reach of one faithful relationship. But that is how multiplication begins. We see the people God has placed around us, trust what He is already doing, and join Him in His mission. And like a pebble in a pond, the ripple effect of that relational focus will make a difference.

The Great Commission begins by seeing the person God has placed in front of you and being willing to walk with them as you grow in faith, trusting God for each next step.

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Introduction

Discipleship has a language problem.

For many Christians, the word *disciple* belongs to the world of the New Testament. We understand what it means when we read about Peter, James, John, and the other disciples of Jesus. But bring the word into an ordinary relationship today, and it can begin to sound different. Calling someone “my disciple” feels uncomfortable. Saying, “I am discipling him,” can sound even worse—as though one person has assumed the role of spiritual expert and the other has become the student.

That is unfortunate, because discipleship stands at the heart of the mission Jesus gave His Church.

When Jesus told His followers to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19 CSB), He was not describing a specialized ministry for unusually mature Christians. He was describing the work He intended His followers to continue after He was gone.

If we misunderstand discipleship, we risk misunderstanding the very mission Jesus gave His Church.

If we imagine discipleship primarily as a relationship between a spiritual expert and a less knowledgeable student, we will naturally assume that some Christians are qualified to disciple and that most are not. We may also assume that discipleship consists primarily of transferring biblical knowledge from the person who knows more to the person who knows less.

There is certainly a place for teaching. Jesus taught His disciples, and mature believers have much to give those who are younger in the faith. But teaching alone does not adequately describe what we see Jesus doing with His disciples—or what we see happening among believers throughout the New Testament.

Discipleship is much more relational, much more personal, and much more dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit.

That changes the question.

Instead of beginning with, “What should I teach this person?” we begin by asking, “What is God already doing in this person’s life, and how might He use me in what He is doing?”

That question takes us in a different direction. It places the work of the Holy Spirit before our methods and the person in front of us before whatever plan we might have for them. It also allows for the possibility that discipleship may look different from one relationship to another.

That is the territory this book will explore.

We will look at the way Jesus formed people, the role relationships play in spiritual formation, and several different purposes those relationships can serve. My hope is not to give you another discipleship system to master. It is to help you see more clearly—to recognize what God may already be doing in the people He has placed around you and to become more confident about joining Him in that work.

And perhaps that is the best place to begin.

Who has God already placed in front of you?

As we explore discipleship together, I want to help you see that person—and your relationship with them—in a new way.

PART I

**Seeing Discipleship
Differently**

CHAPTER 1

Jesus' Goal: Transformation, Not Just Information

It was the kind of meeting that stays with you.

The elder board had gathered for its annual review of ministry programs. The reports looked reasonable. Attendance was steady. The small group curriculum had been completed by most participants. The new discipleship class had drawn a solid number of sign-ups.

Then one of the elders—a quiet man who had served the church for nearly thirty years—set down his papers and asked the question nobody had planned for.

“Are our people actually becoming more like Jesus?”

The room went quiet, not because the question was unfair but because no one was sure how to answer it. They had numbers for everything else. They had nothing for that.

If you ever sat in a room like that, you already know what the tension this book addresses. Churches can be genuinely busy with discipleship activity and still quietly wonder whether any of it is producing what Jesus was actually after.

This chapter is about that tension—not to condemn your efforts but to reframe your aim. Because when you look closely at Jesus in the Gospels, you do not see a leader primarily concerned with getting

people through a certain volume of content. You see a Lord relentlessly focused on who His followers are becoming.

Information matters. But transformation is His goal.

That single shift in perspective changes not only how we define discipleship but also how we practice it.

When Knowing More Isn't Enough

Most church leaders are not indifferent to discipleship. They are confused by it. The confusion is understandable. We have more books, conferences, podcasts, curricula, and discipleship resources than any generation in church history, yet many leaders silently wonder whether their people are actually becoming more like Jesus.

You know the questions.

- Should we build around small groups or Sunday school?
- Do we need triads, one-on-one mentoring, or a two-year track?
- What is the best curriculum for spiritual formation?

Those are not bad questions. But Scripture does not begin there. Scripture begins with people before it begins with methods.

When “What program?” becomes our first question, several things almost always follow. We begin to assume that discipleship is primarily a matter of content delivery. We measure success in attendance and completion rather than in long-term fruit.

And we quietly assume that if we can just get people into the right environment often enough, maturity will happen automatically.

If you have led for any length of time, you already know this is not true.

You can have people in Bible study for twenty years and still watch them react with fear, anger, or self-protection when life does not go according to plan. You can have leaders who quote Scripture easily but struggle to forgive, to listen, or to surrender control.

Dallas Willard used to say that “Everyone receives spiritual formation, just as everyone gets an education.”¹ Churches that focus on information alone assume that if we give people enough true statements about God, formation will take care of itself. The New Testament will not let us make that assumption. If Jesus’ goal is transformation, then we should expect His approach to discipleship to reflect that goal.

There is a better way, and Scripture points us toward it. The New Testament does not present a single discipleship program or a one-size-fits-all method. Instead, it gives us something far more useful: a gallery of relationships, each serving a different purpose in God’s transforming work. Learning to recognize which kind of relationship each person needs—and why—is the art this book is about.

We will get there. But before we explore how Jesus made disciples, we must first understand what He was trying to produce.

What Jesus Was Actually After

Listen to a few of Jesus’ own words.

- “‘Follow me,’ he told them, ‘and I will make you fish for people’” (Matthew 4:19 CSB).
- “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:8 ESV).

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’s Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (HarperOne, 2014), 69.

- “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40 ESV).

In each of these statements, Jesus defines discipleship in terms of what kind of person someone is becoming. Classes, accumulated knowledge, and church activity may all have their place, but transformation is the goal.

Former fishermen who now participate in His mission. Branches that bear visible fruit, evidence of His life flowing through them. Learners who are like their teacher in character, priorities, and way of life. Notice what Jesus emphasizes: His concern is whom His followers become.

Jesus’ goal is Christlikeness, not mere familiarity with Christ’s teachings. He wants people who increasingly think, feel, choose, and act in ways that reflect His life in them. This is the destination toward which every act of genuine disciple-making is aimed. Everything else—teaching, mentoring, small groups, serving, even preaching—is meant to serve that end.

The Apostle Paul makes this explicit: “For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29a CSB).

God’s plan reaches beyond our final destination. He is conforming us into the likeness of His Son here and now. That is a breathtaking vision of salvation. God is not merely preparing a place for His people; He is preparing His people to reflect His Son.

That distinction matters deeply for those of us leading churches because our systems and habits tend to produce what they are designed to produce. If our discipleship systems are designed primarily to transfer information, we will consistently produce people who *know* more but may or may not *be* more like Jesus. If, however, our systems and relationships are designed to cooperate with the Spirit in

transforming people, then information will serve transformation rather than replace it.

To see the danger of information without transformation, we need only look at one of Scripture's most sobering case studies.

When Information Outruns Formation: The Pharisees

Pastors and teachers often feel an uncomfortable kinship with the Pharisees, and for good reason.

The Pharisees were not secular skeptics or casual observers. They were the serious Bible people of their day. They studied the Scriptures. They memorized large portions of the Law. They created detailed traditions to help others obey God. If discipleship were primarily about knowing the Bible, they would have been the heroes of the story.

And yet, when the Word became flesh and stood in front of them, many could not recognize Him.

They knew the text. They did not know the Author.

Their knowledge had outpaced their formation. That may be one of the greatest dangers facing the modern Church as well. We have unprecedented access to biblical knowledge, yet access to truth and transformation by truth are not the same thing.

Some of the harshest words in the Gospels are directed toward religious leaders whose spiritual formation had stalled while their knowledge kept increasing. They tithed meticulously but neglected justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23). They searched the Scriptures but refused to come to Jesus for life (John 5:39-40).

Paul, who had once been a Pharisee himself, later warned the Corinthians plainly: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8:1b CSB).

It is possible to grow in information and shrink in humility at the same time. It is possible to build churches full of people who can answer doctrinal questions correctly yet do not increasingly resemble Jesus in their relationships, decisions, and reactions.

Scripture is meant to do more than increase our knowledge. As we receive it, it challenges our assumptions, shapes our desires, and reorients our story.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright² has shown how many first-century Jews knew Israel’s Scriptures thoroughly but tried to fit God’s Messiah into a story that was too small—mainly a story about national restoration and political victory. When Jesus came announcing the Kingdom through suffering love, a cross, and an empty tomb, they could not imagine that this was how God would keep His promises.

Something similar happens in our churches today. People may know individual Bible stories, but they try to fit them into a smaller narrative—one mainly about personal comfort, success, or religious performance. Jesus becomes a supporting character in their story instead of the Lord who invites them into His.

When that happens, discipleship becomes little more than adding Bible data to the same old story. Information is being added. Transformation is not occurring.

We need a better picture of how Jesus actually formed people.

² N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress Press, 1996).

How Transformation Actually Happens

Watch Jesus' approach in the Gospels. His invitations are profoundly relational. Before Jesus explained His mission, He invited people into His life.

- “Come and see” (John 1:39 NLT).
- “Follow me” (Matthew 4:19 CSB).
- “Abide in me” (John 15:4 ESV).

Each invitation calls people into a relationship and into a way of life. “Come and see” invites proximity and curiosity. “Follow me” invites apprenticeship in the midst of real life. “Abide in me” invites ongoing, surrendered union.

So, what does Jesus do with those who accept His invitation? He certainly teaches them. But He also walks with them, corrects them, serves them, challenges them, forgives them, and ultimately lays down His life for them.

Consider Peter.

When Jesus first called him, Peter was a fisherman with more confidence than self-awareness. He was bold, impulsive, and well-intentioned—exactly the kind of person who is easy to like and difficult to form. Jesus did not hand him a curriculum. He invited him into three years of life together.

Over those three years, Jesus let Peter walk on water and watched him sink (Matthew 14). He took Peter up the mountain of transfiguration and watched him say exactly the wrong thing (Luke 9:33). He told Peter plainly that Satan had asked to sift him like wheat and then told him just as plainly that He had prayed for him (Luke 22:31-32). On the night of the arrest, Jesus watched Peter draw a sword in misguided courage (John 18:10-11) and then, just hours later, deny three times that he even knew Him (John 18:10-11, 15-27).

And then, after the resurrection, Jesus did not send Peter a letter of correction or assign him a remedial course of study. He made breakfast on the beach, asked Peter three times whether he loved Him, and restored him to ministry with his own hands still smelling of fish and charcoal smoke (John 21).

That is not information transfer. That is transformation through relationship. Peter did not simply learn from Jesus' words. He was formed by Jesus' presence.

By the time we reach the book of Acts, Peter stands before thousands in Jerusalem and preaches with a clarity, courage, and humility that bear almost no resemblance to the man who once argued about who was greatest in the Kingdom. The same impulsive fisherman who swore he had never met Jesus is now willing to die for the name of Jesus.

What changed? Not primarily what Peter knew. What changed was who Peter was becoming—and that happened through years of walking with Jesus in the middle of real life, real failure, and real grace.

This is what Dallas Willard meant in *The Great Omission* when he described spiritual formation as the process by which the inner life of the human being—thoughts, feelings, will, and body—increasingly takes on the character of Christ. That kind of transformation does not happen automatically when we deliver information. It happens as the Word of God reshapes our understanding and imagination, as the Spirit of God works in the hidden places of the heart, and as the people of God walk together in relationships of honesty, grace, and mutual sharpening.

For our purposes, transformation means this: *the gradual, Spirit-driven process by which a person's desires, instincts, reactions, and relationships increasingly reflect the life of Jesus.* This transformation reaches beneath behavior and knowledge to the inner life itself—the kind of deep renovation Paul describes when he writes that we “are being transformed into the same

image” from one degree of glory to another and that this comes “from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18 CSB).

Content is essential in that process. We cannot be formed into Christ’s likeness apart from His Word. But information alone, detached from intentional relationships and the Spirit’s work, will not produce Christlike people. Truth is indispensable, but truth was never intended to travel alone. In the hands of Jesus, truth is lived, modeled, practiced, corrected, encouraged, and embodied in relationships.

As leaders, this means we must pay as much attention to relationships as we do to resources and as much attention to the Spirit’s work as we do to our strategies.

All of this raises a question. If transformation is what Jesus is after, why do so many of us keep drifting back toward programs and information?

Why We Drift Toward Programs

Most pastors and ministry leaders did not enter ministry because they love managing programs. They stepped into leadership because they love people and want to see them grow in Christ.

And yet, over time, the gravitational pull of church life often drags us toward calendars and event cycles, budgets and buildings, structures and strategies. That is not entirely bad. Organizational leadership is part of shepherding a real congregation. But there are specific reasons we so easily drift from people to programs as the center of discipleship.

Programs are easier to measure. You can count how many people signed up, how many showed up, and how many completed the material. You can put those numbers in a report and feel like you have something concrete to show for your work.

Transformation is harder to quantify. How do you measure a slow-growing capacity to forgive? A quieter, deeper trust in God through suffering? A leader's increasing ability to listen before speaking? Those changes rarely show up in simple metrics. They emerge in stories, in long-term observation, and in the testimony of others.

Programs feel more controllable. Discipleship framed as “run this program” feels manageable. You choose the curriculum, schedule the room, recruit the leaders, and follow the plan. Discipleship framed as “join the Spirit in the slow, relational work of transforming people” does not feel nearly as controllable. You cannot script people's pain. You cannot predict their questions. You cannot schedule breakthroughs.

As leadership theorist Peter Senge has observed in *The Fifth Discipline*, we are often more comfortable managing events than engaging with the deeper systems and relationships that actually drive behavior.³ So we default to what feels tractable: more events, more content, more activity.

Programs shield us from discouragement. When you are weary, it is easier to tinker with a program than to sit with a person whose life is in pieces. It is easier to adjust the schedule than to confront a dysfunction in your leadership culture. It is easier to launch something new than to admit that what you have been doing has not produced the fruit you had hoped for.

Tod Bolsinger, writing about adaptive leadership in *Canoeing the Mountains*, points out that real change surfaces loss.⁴ Shifting from discipleship as programs to discipleship as purposeful relationships will

³ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization* (Doubleday, 2006).

⁴ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (IVP, 2018).

force us to grieve certain expectations: quick results, simple success stories, and the illusion that we can engineer transformation.

If we are not careful, we will respond to that discomfort by doubling down on the very thing that is not working. More content, more structure, more of the same. The result is a lot of movement but not much change.

Churches rightly celebrate attendance, participation, and engagement. Those are encouraging signs of a healthy ministry. But they are not, by themselves, measures of discipleship. Jesus ultimately measures something deeper: Are people becoming more like Him? If transformation is His goal, then our measures of discipleship must reach beyond activity to changed lives.

So how do we respond? By returning to Jesus and letting Him reframe how we think about disciple-making.

Starting Where Jesus Starts: People and Purpose

If Jesus' goal is transformation—people who actually resemble Him—then the first question in disciple-making cannot be what program should we run.

The first question must be this: Who has God placed in front of me, and what is the Spirit seeking to do in this person's life right now?

That is a very different starting point. It shifts our attention from managing ministries to discerning people. It invites us to listen before we prescribe, to pray before we plan, and to ask not merely what someone should learn next but how God is already at work in their life. It reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the primary discipler and that we are privileged to join Him in what He is already doing.

Over the course of this book, we will explore several different purposes that discipleship relationships serve. Some relationships are designed to

establish believers in the faith. Others are focused on encouraging and restoring the wounded and weary. Still others foster mutual spiritual formation among peers and leaders. Some are aimed at equipping believers for ministry where they already live and work. And some are intentionally designed to multiply disciple-makers who can invest in others.

Not every relationship is meant to do all of those things at once. Different people in different seasons need different kinds of discipling relationships.

A brand-new believer does not need the same kind of relationship as a seasoned elder who is burned out and disillusioned. A young leader sensing a call to ministry needs something different than a longtime member who has quietly carried hurt for years.

Wise disciple-makers learn to ask the right questions. What is God doing in this person's life? What is the primary purpose of my relationship with them right now? What kinds of conversations, practices, and environments will best serve that purpose?

That leads us to an important theme of this book: *The purpose of the relationship determines the kind of discipleship that is needed.*

When we forget this, we tend to force everyone into the same mold. We assume one model—one-on-one mentoring, or small groups, or classes—should meet every need. Inevitably, some people are helped, but many are not.

When we remember this, we gain both freedom and responsibility. Freedom from chasing the one perfect program. Responsibility to prayerfully discern what God is up to in each person and to align our relationships accordingly.

In the next chapter, we will see that Scripture does not present a single universal discipleship method. Instead, it gives us a gallery of

relationships—Jesus with the Twelve, Paul with Timothy, Barnabas with John Mark, Priscilla and Aquila with Apollos, and many others—each serving different purposes in God’s transforming work.

But before moving to the next chapter, take a few moments to let this land in your own context. The questions below are not a test to pass. They are an invitation to practice the very thing this book is about—slowing down, looking carefully at the people God has placed in your life, and discerning what He is already doing.

You might work through them alone in a quiet morning. You might bring them to a staff meeting or elder board. Either way, resist the urge to move through them quickly. The habit of unhurried discernment is one this book will ask of you repeatedly.

Reflection and Discernment for Leaders

Take a few moments with these questions. Again, they are not a test to pass but an opportunity for honest diagnosis. You might use them with your staff, elders, or leadership team.

About your current discipleship culture:

- When you talk about discipleship in your church, what do people primarily think of? A class, a small group system, a particular curriculum? Or a way of life in relationship with Jesus and others?
- How do you currently measure success in discipleship? Attendance and completion of material? Or observable growth in Christlike character, relationships, and mission?
- Where do you see clear signs of information without transformation? People who know more but are not noticeably more patient, forgiving, or generous? Leaders who can teach well but resist correction or confession?

About your relationships:

- Think of three or four people God has already placed in your life right now: a younger believer, a struggling leader, or a peer in ministry. For each one, ask what seems to be the main thing God is doing in their life right now. Then ask what they most need from you in this season: establishing, encouragement, mutual sharpening, equipping, or preparation to invest in others.
- Where are you most tempted to default to content instead of relationship? Offering a book or a link when a conversation is really what is needed? Inviting someone to a program instead of walking with them personally?

About your leadership:

- When you feel pressure around discipleship in your church, what is your first instinct? “We need a new program”? Or, “We need to understand our people and what God is doing with them”?
- How might Jesus be inviting you, as a leader, into deeper transformation rather than simply better methods?

As you sit with these questions, remember that Jesus does not shame struggling disciples. On the road to Emmaus, He came near to two confused and discouraged followers, walked with them, listened to them, opened the Scriptures, and stayed with them until their hearts burned and their direction changed.

He does the same with leaders today.

You do not have to fix your church’s discipleship in your own strength. You are invited to walk with the risen Christ, to listen, to learn, and to join Him as He continues His transforming work in the people He has entrusted to you.

In the chapters ahead, we will look at the wide variety of discipleship relationships in the New Testament and learn how to discern which kind of relationship best serves what God is doing in a person's life right now.

For now, hold on to this: Information is essential. Programs can be helpful. But transformation is the goal—and that always happens as the Holy Spirit works through purposeful, Christ-centered relationships.

That is the kind of disciple-making to which Jesus is calling you and your church.

CHAPTER 2

Different People, Different Paths, One Goal

Most church leaders would never say it out loud, but many of us secretly believe it: “If I could just find the right discipleship model, everything would finally click.”

Every new conference, best-selling book, or growing church silently raises the same hope: *Maybe this is the missing piece we’ve been looking for.*

So, we go to conferences. We listen to podcasts. We watch what seems to be working somewhere else. We hear about a thriving mentoring culture, a dynamic small group system, or a clean four-step pathway, and something in us immediately asks, “Is this it? Is this the biblical way?”

We are drawn to formulas. Systems. Reproducible programs. They feel safe. If there is one biblical pattern and we can just discover it, we can roll it out, train people in it, and expect predictable results. Programs give us sign-up sheets and completion numbers—things we can report and celebrate.

So, the question we instinctively ask is: “Which model is biblical?”

But when we bring that question to Scripture, the Bible answers differently than we expect. Instead of prescribing one method for every believer, Scripture repeatedly shows God working through a remarkable variety of discipling relationships.

The Myth of One Biblical Model

There is no single universal discipleship program in the New Testament. What you find instead is a rich, varied collection of relationships:

- Jesus with the crowds, the Twelve, and the three
- Jesus with individuals: Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the rich young ruler
- Paul with Timothy and Titus
- Barnabas with John Mark
- Priscilla and Aquila with Apollos
- Churches shaped by webs of “one another” relationships

Scripture gives us relationships rather than programs, examples rather than formulas, and wisdom rather than techniques.

That is not an oversight. It is God’s wise design.

If God had given us one fixed structure and said, “This is discipleship,” we would be tempted to trust the structure rather than the Spirit. We would assume that getting everyone into the same system would automatically produce formation. We would stop paying careful attention to the actual people in front of us.

Instead, God gives us a gallery of relationships and invites us into discernment.

Structures and programs can serve discipleship well when they support its relational purpose. The danger comes when the structure becomes the definition of discipleship rather than a servant of it.

But before you ask “What model should we use?” you need to answer a deeper question: “What is the nature of the people we are discipling,

and what does Scripture actually show us about how God forms them?”

The answer begins with one foundational observation: God always works with real people, never generic categories.

Transformation Is Personal

Here is a conviction that is simple to say and easy to forget: “God never disciples an abstraction. He discipled people.”

Not “our church.” Not “leaders.” Not “young adults.” He discipled the specific elder who is quietly exhausted, the staff member wrestling with doubt, the eager but immature volunteer. Every one of them arrives with a different story, a different wound, a different need.

Some need healing. Some need courage. Some need theological grounding. Some need accountability. Some need hope. Some need a direct challenge.

The destination is the same for all of them—to be conformed to the image of Christ. But the starting place is rarely identical.

Consider three people sitting in the same church on the same Sunday morning.

From the back of the sanctuary, they look remarkably alike. To the Good Shepherd, they could not be more different.

The first is a young woman who grew up with a harsh, critical father. When she hears the word *Father*, she instinctively braces for disapproval. The second is a young man raised in a warm, stable Christian home who has never been genuinely stretched. He avoids risk, resists sacrifice, and has quietly built a comfortable life around his own preferences. The third is a theologically sharp man who has

privately nurtured a pattern of sin for years—and it is now beginning to threaten his marriage.

All three need to become more like Jesus. But the path will not look the same for any of them.

The first may need a patient, gentle mentor who embodies the kindness of God—someone who can help her slowly unlearn a lie she has believed about His heart. The second may need to be called into something costly: serving the poor, stepping into a mission context, doing the uncomfortable thing he has spent years avoiding. The third may need honest confrontation, structured accountability, and a safe place to confess and repent.

If people are different, discipleship relationships should reflect those differences.

That sentence might sound obvious. It is not a small point—it is one of the central arguments of this book.

When we ignore it, discipleship becomes a spiritual conveyor belt. Everyone receives the same content, in the same format, at the same pace. Once again: some benefit, many do not. The gospel remains the same, but the people receiving it are wonderfully different. Disciple-making therefore requires discernment about the kind of relationship that will best serve what God is doing in each person.

When we learn to see people before prescribing solutions, our entire posture changes:

- We stop assuming one relationship can or should accomplish everything for everyone.
- We begin asking, “What is God doing in this specific person’s life right now?” rather than, “How do I fit them into our system?”
- We start treating discipleship as purposeful and personal, not generic.

This posture change raises an obvious question: Is there any model for this kind of discernment?

As it turns out, yes. And it begins with watching how Jesus actually worked. If our goal is to make disciples who become like Jesus, it makes sense to begin by asking how Jesus Himself disciplined people.

Jesus Never Used One Method

If anyone had the right to use one standard method with everyone, it was Jesus. He is the perfect Teacher, the perfect Shepherd, the One in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Yet when you watch Him in the Gospels, you do not find a single formula repeated mechanically. You find a Person who responds differently to different people—not because He is inconsistent but because He is discerning. Walk through a handful of familiar encounters, not simply to recall the stories but to ask why Jesus responded the way He did. Each encounter is different on the surface, but together they reveal a consistent pattern: Jesus first saw the person, then chose the approach.

Nicodemus: Theology in the Night (John 3)

Nicodemus came to Jesus after dark. He was a Pharisee, a respected teacher of Israel, a man steeped in Scripture and religious practice. He opened with polite, careful respect: *“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God”* (3:2a CSB).

Jesus did not tell a story or perform a miracle. He went straight to Nicodemus’ theological framework: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”* (3:3 ESV). When Nicodemus struggled to grasp this, Jesus pressed further: *“Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”* (3:10 ESV).

Why theology? Because that was where Nicodemus lived. His identity was tied to his mastery of the Law. His confidence rested in his religious performance and understanding. Jesus lovingly exposed the limits of that confidence. He told this learned man that entry into the Kingdom was not something he could achieve by mastery—it must be received as a gift by new birth from above.

For Nicodemus, theology was not abstract. In Jesus' hands, it became a surgical instrument—precise enough to cut through self-assurance and to open him to grace.

The Samaritan Woman: Thirst and Living Water (John 4)

Jesus was sitting by a well in Samaria. The woman who approached came at noon—likely to avoid the eyes and whispers of others in the village. Her life was marked by broken relationships. She was not a teacher of Israel; she was someone who had been through five marriages and was at that time living with a man who was not her husband.

Jesus did not open with the doctrine of new birth. He started with thirst: “Give me a drink” (4:7 CSB). Then He said, “If you knew the gift of God ... you would ask him, and he would give you living water” (4:10 CSB).

Her questions were real—about worship, about Samaritans and Jews, about which mountain is the right one to worship on. But underneath them was something deeper: a long-standing ache for love, belonging, and worth. Jesus named her story without shaming her. He touched the place of her deepest pain, then offered Himself as the One who could finally satisfy it.

For this woman, it was an encounter with grace that met her exactly where she thirsted.

Thomas: Evidence for the Doubter (John 20:24-29)

Thomas had not been absent because he did not care. He had missed the first appearance of the risen Jesus, and when the other disciples told him what they saw, he gave voice to a skepticism many of us know well: “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (20:25 ESV).

Jesus could have rebuked him from a distance. Instead, He appeared again and spoke directly to Thomas: “Put your finger here, and see my hands” (20:27 ESV).

Why evidence? Because Thomas’s barrier was honest doubt—not rebellion or laziness but a sincere need for something solid to stand on. Jesus does not coddle unbelief. But He does not despise sincere questions either. He offered what Thomas asked for, then called him forward: “Do not disbelieve, but believe” (20:27 ESV).

Thomas responded with one of the clearest confessions in the New Testament: “My Lord and my God!” (20:28 ESV).

The Rich Young Ruler: Confrontation for the Self-Sufficient (Mark 10:17-22)

The rich young ruler was enthusiastic and moral. He ran up to Jesus, knelt, and asked with genuine urgency: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:17b ESV). He had kept the commandments from his youth. From the outside, he looked like exactly the kind of person you would want in your discipleship group.

Jesus “looking at him, loved him”—and then said the one thing the man least wanted to hear: “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor ... and come, follow me” (10:21 ESV).

Why confrontation? Because this man's obstacle was not ignorance, not thirst, not shame, not doubt. It was an idol—his wealth, the security it provided, and the identity built around both. Jesus named the idol and refused to disciple around it. The man walked away sorrowful, not because Jesus was unkind but because Jesus loved him too much to let him stay comfortable.

Four encounters. Four completely different responses from Jesus. Yet beneath those different responses was the same approach: He first saw the person before He chose the response.

- Nicodemus needed his theological confidence turned into humility.
- The Samaritan woman needed her shame met with living water.
- Thomas needed honest doubt met with honest evidence.
- The rich young ruler needed a direct challenge to his functional god.

Jesus is not random. He is responsive. He sees people clearly, discerns the real barrier to transformation, and engages in a way that serves that specific person in that specific moment. If the Lord we follow refused to disciple everyone the same way, we should hesitate before requiring everyone to follow the same pathway.

The Holy Spirit Forms People Uniquely

Jesus' resurrection did not mark the end of His personal ministry of forming disciples. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ continues that ministry today. His Spirit carries on that ministry by forming people into the image of Christ—still personally, still wisely.

Some are drawn to Christ through a sermon that cuts them to the heart (Acts 2). Others are drawn through a quiet roadside conversation (Acts 8). Saul was confronted dramatically, blinded by light on the Damascus road (Acts 9). Lydia heard the Gospel beside a river; Cornelius received

it in his own home (Acts 16 and Acts 10). The Spirit works through preaching, conversation, visions, suffering, hospitality, correction, and encouragement. There is no single template.

This biblical pattern has not gone unnoticed by careful observers of the Christian life. In *Sacred Pathways*, Gary Thomas suggests that believers often experience intimacy with God through different practices—some through nature and others through study, service, contemplation, or worship.⁵ His categories are descriptive rather than prescriptive. They simply recognize what Scripture itself demonstrates: The same Holy Spirit wisely applies the same Gospel to different people in different ways.

That observation is useful, with one important guardrail: Scripture remains the norm; experience is always tested by the Word. We do not shape discipleship around individual preferences. But we do recognize that the Spirit applies the same Gospel wisely—meeting people where they are and moving them steadily toward maturity.

Every believer needs the whole life of discipleship: Scripture, prayer, community, mission, repentance, and obedience. But in any given season, the Spirit may press one of these more deeply into a particular person's life.

For a grieving widow, He may emphasize honest lament through the Psalms. For a comfortable professional who has long avoided costly obedience, He may press toward risk and sacrifice. For a new believer, He may highlight basic doctrinal grounding. For a seasoned leader, He may call for deeper humility, confession, and hiddenness.

Our purpose here is far simpler and more demanding than mapping out endless categories of Christian personality types: *The Holy Spirit is not running a mass production operation. He is a wise, attentive, personal Teacher.*

⁵ Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways: Nine Ways to Connect with God* (Zondervan, 2020).

If that is how the Spirit works, our discipleship relationships must be flexible enough to cooperate with Him—which brings us to the heart of this chapter.

Discernment Before Direction: Four Questions Every Disciple-Maker Should Ask

Everything in this chapter has been building toward one simple but demanding shift:

Before you decide how to disciple someone, learn to see them.

In practice, that means resisting your reflex to prescribe quickly:

- “You should join this group.”
- “You need this book.”
- “You should go through this class.”

Those may all be good tools. But wise disciple-makers do not start with tools. They start with discernment.

They pause. They observe. They pray. They ask questions. They listen longer than feels comfortable. And out of that posture, they discern. Over time, that discernment tends to organize itself around four questions—questions that are simple enough to remember and searching enough to reshape how you see every person God places in your path.

Question 1: Who has God placed in my life?

Discipleship does not begin with a program you wish you had. It begins with the people God has actually entrusted to you.

- Who are the younger believers, peers, and leaders already within your reach?

- Who consistently shows up in your conversations, your small group, your sphere of ministry?
- Who keeps coming to mind when you pray?

God's providence is often the first indicator of your discipling assignment. Start there.

Question 2: What is God already doing in this person's life?

Before you decide what someone needs, slow down enough to ask what the Spirit seems to be doing already.

- Are they grieving? Searching? Coasting? Hiding?
- Do you see signs of conviction, hunger, resistance, confusion, or exhaustion?
- What are they talking about most—pain, doubt, opportunity, fear, boredom?

You will not always know with certainty. But you can pay attention. Ask questions. Listen far more than you speak, especially at first. Invite them to tell their story. Pray for insight.

This is where the examples from Jesus become practical. You are asking: Is this person more like Nicodemus right now or more like the Samaritan woman? More like Thomas or more like the young ruler—or any of the dozens of other individuals Jesus encountered across the Gospels? The specific comparison matters less than the habit of asking it.

Question 3: What kind of relationship will best help them grow in this season?

Once you have some sense of what God may be doing, you can ask what kind of relational approach will best cooperate with that work. Consider whether this person primarily needs:

- Establishing—basic grounding in the Gospel and the Christian life
- Encouragement and restoration—a Barnabas-like presence through failure or pain
- Mutual sharpening—a peer relationship marked by honest, reciprocal challenge
- Equipping—intentional coaching toward ministry or leadership
- Multiplying investment—a Paul-Timothy apprenticeship for someone ready to pour into others

Not every relationship needs to do everything. Clarifying the primary purpose of a relationship in a given season allows you to focus your time, conversations, and expectations—and frees you from the pressure of trying to be everything to everyone.

Question 4: How can I faithfully join the Holy Spirit in that work?

This question keeps you humble.

You are not the primary discipler of this person. The Holy Spirit is. Your role is to join Him—not replace Him.

- What simple, concrete steps could you take to cooperate with what God is already doing?
- Is it a weekly conversation over coffee? An invitation into your home? A longer-term leadership residency?
- Is it introducing them to someone better suited to walk with them in this season?
- Is it a hard conversation you have been putting off?

Sometimes joining the Spirit means speaking truth someone does not want to hear. Sometimes it means listening far longer than feels productive. Sometimes it means slowing down what your program would prefer to accelerate.

These four questions do not give you a formula. They give you a way of seeing.

They turn discipleship from “plug this person into our system” into “discern what God is doing and align with Him.” They invite you to treat real people the way Jesus did—with clear eyes, patient attention, and the kind of love that is willing to do the hard, unhurried, personal work that transformation actually requires.

Different people. Different paths. One goal. And the wisdom to know the difference. The right model was never the point. The person in front of you always was.

Reflection and Discernment

This chapter has argued that disciple-making begins not with choosing the right program but with learning to see people as Jesus did. Before moving to the next chapter, take time to prayerfully reflect on someone God may already be placing before you.

1. Who has God placed in your life?

As you sit quietly before the Lord, who comes to mind? Resist the urge to think about everyone. Instead, identify one person God may be inviting you to notice more intentionally.

2. What is God already doing in this person's life?

What evidence do you see of God's activity? Are they hungry to grow, wrestling with doubt, carrying hidden pain, resisting change, or sensing a call to something more? Ask God for the wisdom to recognize where His Spirit is already at work.

3. What kind of relationship would best help this person grow in this season?

Rather than asking, “What program should they join?” consider what they actually need. Would they benefit most from encouragement, accountability, theological grounding, mutual sharpening, restoration, or intentional equipping? What kind of relationship would best cooperate with the Spirit’s work?

4. How can you faithfully join the Holy Spirit in that work?

What is one simple, faithful next step you could take this week? It may be inviting them to coffee, asking better questions, praying with them, introducing them to another mature believer, or beginning a conversation you’ve been postponing. Focus less on developing a plan and more on taking the next obedient step.

CHAPTER 3

The Master Discipler

It is one thing to say that Jesus used different approaches with different people.

It is another thing entirely to sit with that reality long enough to let it reshape how you think about the people God has placed in your life. The fact is, most of us admire Jesus as a teacher. Few of us stop long enough to study Him as a disciple-maker. Yet that may be one of the most important things He came to show us.

Chapter 2 walked through four encounters—Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Thomas, and the rich young ruler—and asked why Jesus responded so differently to each one. The answer was always the same: because He saw each person clearly, discerned what they most needed, and engaged in a way that served that specific person in that specific moment.

But those four encounters are not isolated examples. They are windows into something larger—a consistent pattern that runs through every page of the Gospels.

Jesus is not simply a good teacher who happened to be flexible. He is the Master Discipler.

And when you step back far enough to see His whole ministry, a portrait emerges that is both deeper and more demanding than any discipleship program you will ever find at a conference or in a catalog.

This chapter is about that portrait.

We are not to admire the portrait from a distance. We are to be formed by it. We study how Jesus made disciples so that we increasingly see people the way He does, love them the way He does, and trust the Spirit to do what only the Spirit can do.

He Knew What Was in People

There is a verse in John's Gospel that many readers move past too quickly. John noted, almost in passing, that Jesus "knew what was in man" (John 2:25 ESV).

For example, after the feeding of the five thousand, the crowd wanted to make Jesus king by force. He withdrew. Later, many followed Him across the lake, and He gently exposed their motive: They were following "not because you saw the signs, but because you ate the loaves and were filled" (John 6:26 CSB). The crowd began to thin. Even some of His disciples pulled back.

Jesus did not need anyone to tell Him about people. He did not rely on personality assessments, intake forms, or lengthy interviews before engaging someone. He looked at people and saw them:

- The fear behind the confidence
- The hunger behind the religious performance
- The grief beneath the theological question
- The idol obscured by the moral resume

This is not a small detail about Jesus. It is the foundation of everything that makes Him the Master Disciple.

Every encounter in the Gospels makes more sense when you hold this in mind. Once you begin looking for this pattern, you see it everywhere.

When Jesus told the Samaritan woman about her five husbands, He was not showing off. He was meeting her precisely where her real story lived—below the theological sparring, below the social awkwardness, in the place of her deepest longing. When He looked at the rich young ruler and loved him before delivering those hard words, He was not performing affection. He saw a man genuinely reaching for life—and saw with equal clarity the thing that would keep him from finding it.

For those of us who follow Him into disciple-making, this raises an immediate and humbling question: How well do we know the people God has placed in our care?

How well do we know what is actually in them—the real fears, the hidden doubts, the functional gods, the long-held wounds, the quiet hungers that have never quite been named? We cannot know people the way Jesus does, and we should not pretend that we can. But we can learn from the way Jesus disciplined people: *He saw them first. He paid attention to their context in life. And so should we.*

He Moved Among Different Circles

One of the most revealing structural features of Jesus' ministry is rarely discussed in discipleship conversations: Jesus did not have one kind of relationship. He had several, each operating at a different level of depth and purpose, each serving a different function in His overall mission.

Consider the circles.

There were the crowds. Thousands of people followed Jesus at various points—drawn by miracles, by teaching, by the sheer force of His presence. Jesus engaged them. He taught them in parables. He fed them. He healed them. He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. But He did not pour His primary investment into the crowds.

There were the seventy-two. Luke records that Jesus appointed seventy-two others and sent them out two by two ahead of Him into every town and place He was about to go (Luke 10:1). These were not the Twelve, but they were commissioned, trained, sent, and debriefed. They returned with joy, reporting that even the demons submitted to them in His name.

There were the Twelve. These were the men Jesus called to be with Him—to witness His ministry up close, to hear His private explanations of parables the crowds could not understand, to watch Him pray, to be sent out on their own and then gathered back. He invested years of his life in these twelve men. He corrected them, challenged them, rebuked them, and prayed for them by name.

And within the Twelve, there were the three. Peter, James, and John: These three were present at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9). These three went further into the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of His arrest (Mark 14:33). To these three, Jesus was most fully revealed in both His glory and His agony.

The pattern is difficult to miss. Jesus loved everyone. But He did not invest equally in everyone.

He had compassion for the many. He equipped the seventy-two. He formed the Twelve. He drew closest to the three.

This pattern carries an important implication for every disciple-maker reading this book: You cannot give the same depth of investment to everyone, and you were never meant to. Jesus did not try to have the relationship with the crowds that He had with Peter, James, and John. He did not attempt to pour into every person who sought Him what He poured into the Twelve.

Wise disciple-makers are not trying to disciple everyone at the same depth simultaneously. They are learning to recognize which relationships are calling for deeper investment in this season—and they

are giving that investment faithfully, trusting that the Spirit is at work in the other circles as well.

Love is constant. Investment is discerning.

He Was Fully Present

Jesus was never in a hurry with people.

This is remarkable when you consider who He was and what He came to accomplish. He was the Son of God, on a mission of cosmic significance, with a fixed appointment at a cross in Jerusalem. The weight of human history rested on His shoulders. And yet.

He stopped for a blind man calling from the side of the road when His disciples may have kept walking (Mark 10:46-52). He let a woman interrupt a journey to touch the hem of His garment and then took time to find her in the crowd, hear her story, and speak peace over her (Mark 5:25-34). He sat at Jacob's well in Samaria long enough for a conversation that changed a woman's life and sent her running back to her village (John 4). He made breakfast on a beach for seven discouraged disciples who had fished all night and caught nothing (John 21).

These people experienced Jesus not when He was looking for them but when He allowed Himself to be interrupted by them.

He was present. Unhurried. Attentive.

Dallas Willard observed in *The Great Omission* that the most important thing about a person's spiritual life is what they do with their time. But there is a prior question for those of us who disciple others: What do we do with our *attention*?

It is entirely possible to spend time with someone without really being present with them. We are thinking about the next meeting, the unread

messages, the curriculum we planned to cover. We are waiting for the person to finish talking so we can give them the answer we came prepared to deliver.

Jesus did not engage people that way. He was with them. He listened. He asked questions that went beneath the surface. He noticed what others overlooked.

When Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree just to catch a glimpse of Jesus passing by, Jesus stopped, looked up, and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5 ESV). In a tree, Jesus saw a man the crowd had written off—a collaborator, a cheat, a social outcast—and He went to his home for dinner.

By the end of that meal, Zacchaeus was giving away half his possessions and repaying fourfold everyone he had defrauded. No curriculum. No class. No program. Just the presence of Jesus, fully given to one overlooked man.

For disciple-makers, presence is not a soft skill. It is a theological conviction made visible.

It says: *You matter to God, and I am paying attention to what He is doing in your life.* It creates the conditions in which people feel safe enough to be honest, humble enough to receive truth, and hopeful enough to believe that change is possible.

You cannot manufacture that kind of presence. But you can cultivate it—by slowing down, asking better questions, and resisting the temptation to fill every silence with advice.

He Taught in the Middle of Real Life

Walk through the Gospels and notice where Jesus did most of His teaching.

He taught in synagogues, but His classroom extended far beyond them: a hillside, a boat, a wedding, a dinner table, the road between towns, the middle of a storm, beside a grave. He used what was present—a fig tree, a coin, a fishing net, a field of grain, a child standing nearby—to open up the Kingdom of God. He did not separate instruction from experience. He wove them together so seamlessly that His disciples often did not realize how much they were learning until they looked back on it later. He allowed life itself to become the classroom in which truth could be seen, practiced, and remembered.

The night before He died, He got up from the table, wrapped a towel around His waist, and washed His disciples' feet. Then He sat back down and asked, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" (John 13:12 ESV). The lesson was not spoken first and then illustrated. The lesson was lived first and then interpreted.

This is the pattern of apprenticeship in its truest sense. The learner does not simply receive information from a teacher and then go practice it somewhere else. The learner watches the teacher in action, participates alongside the teacher, reflects on what they observed, and gradually internalizes the teacher's way of seeing and responding to the world.

Jesus called twelve men to "be with him" (Mark 3:14 ESV) before He sent them out to do anything.

The "being with" came first. The doing flowed from it.

For those of us who disciple others, this means that some of the most formative conversations will not happen in a scheduled meeting with an open Bible on the table. They will happen in a car on the way to a service project. Over coffee when someone's week has fallen apart. On a walk. At a ball game. In the parking lot after the meeting ends and the real conversation finally begins.

Curriculum has its place. But the classroom of Jesus was life itself—and His most effective teaching happened when truth and experience collided in real time, with a real person, in a real moment.

He Let People Struggle

Here is something that might be the most uncomfortable feature of Jesus' discipleship: He did not always rescue His followers from difficulty.

He could have. He was (and is) the Son of God. There was no storm He could not calm, no doubt He could not immediately resolve, no failure He could not instantly repair. And yet He often let the storm go on a little longer. He let the disciples row against the wind through the night before He came walking toward them on the water (Matthew 14:22-25). He let Mary and Martha grieve for four days before He arrived at Lazarus's tomb (John 11). He let Peter sink before He reached out His hand (Matthew 14:29-31).

Why?

Because struggle, properly accompanied, is one of the Spirit's most effective classrooms.

When Jesus slept in the stern of the boat while a storm raged and His disciples panicked, He was not being negligent. He was creating the conditions for a question that would stay with those men for the rest of their lives: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41 ESV). The fear they felt in the storm became the threshold of a deeper faith.

When Peter stepped out of the boat and began to sink, the lesson was not simply that he should have trusted more. The lesson included the feel of Jesus' hand catching him—the physical, unmistakable reality that when he went down, Jesus was there. He would remember that

hand in the courtyard. He would remember it on the beach. He would remember it for the rest of his life.

Formation often requires friction—the kind of loving accompaniment that stays present through difficulty without removing it prematurely. Growth is rarely produced by removing every difficulty. More often, it comes from discovering that Christ is present in the middle of it.

Disciple-makers who understand this stop trying to smooth every hard edge out of the people they are forming. They stop rescuing people from every consequence, resolving every tension, and answering every question before it has time to do its work.

Instead, they learn to stay present in the struggle. They ask questions rather than delivering solutions. They trust that the God who allowed the difficulty is more than capable of working through it. They believe that the person they are walking with is more resilient than they appear—because the Spirit who indwells them is more powerful than the struggle in front of them.

This requires a kind of discipler's patience that does not come naturally. It must be cultivated in prayer, in the ongoing work of our own formation, and in the repeated experience of watching God do what only He can do in the lives of people we love. The goal of disciple-making is not to eliminate every struggle. It is to help people discover Christ in the middle of it.

He Called People Forward

Jesus never left people where He found them.

He met them there—in their shame, their confusion, their self-sufficiency, their grief, their doubt. He met them fully and without condemnation.

But He always called them forward.

“Come and see” became “Follow me” became “Abide in me” became “Go and make disciples.” Each invitation carried people further into the life He was offering, from hearing about the kingdom to participating in it.

Even His hardest words were acts of love aimed at movement. When He told the rich young ruler to sell everything, He was not slamming a door. He was pointing to an open one—and honestly naming the thing that was blocking the threshold. When He rebuked Peter with “Get behind me, Satan,” He was not destroying Peter’s future (Matthew 16:23 ESV). He was refusing to let Peter’s well-intentioned misunderstanding become a permanent ceiling on his formation.

Jesus believed in the people He was forming—not naively, not sentimentally, but with the clear-eyed confidence of One who knew both what they were and what they were becoming.

He told Simon the fisherman that he would be called Peter—the rock—before there was much evidence of rocklike stability in him. He told the disciples they would do greater works than He had done (John 14:12), which must have seemed impossible from where they were sitting. He told a grief-stricken Mary Magdalene to go and tell His brothers—making a woman the first herald of the resurrection in a culture that would not have considered her testimony reliable (John 20:17).

He consistently called people into a future that was larger than their past.

This is what it means to disciple with vision. Not flattery. Not false encouragement that pretends problems do not exist. But the genuine, Spirit-informed conviction that the person in front of you is not finished—that God is not done with them, that the trajectory of grace is always forward, and that your job is to keep pointing in that direction even when they cannot see it themselves. Disciple-makers are stewards of hope.

He Modeled What He Expected

There is a moment in John 13 that contains one of the most important lessons in the entire New Testament about discipleship.

Jesus had just washed His disciples' feet. He had taken the role of the lowest servant in the household—the one who handled the dirtiest task at the end of a dusty day of travel. He knelt before Peter, who objected, and before Judas, who betrayed Him before the next morning. He had washed every pair of feet in the room.

Then He sat down and said: “For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:15 ESV).” *I have given you an example.*

This is the method of Jesus in its most concentrated form. He did not primarily disciple through abstract instruction. He discipled through embodied demonstration. He showed them what He was asking of them.

He went first.

He prayed, and they watched Him pray until they asked Him to teach them. He wept at Lazarus' tomb, and they watched the Son of God allow Himself to grieve. He welcomed children when His disciples tried to send them away, and they watched a different set of values take visible form. He ate with sinners, engaged with Samaritans, honored women, and touched lepers—and they watched a Kingdom emerge that was nothing like the one they had expected.

By the time Jesus gave the Upper Room Discourse in John 13-17, His disciples had spent three years watching Him live the very things He was then putting into words.

The teaching did not create the reality. The teaching gave language to what they had already seen.

This means that for disciple-makers, character is not optional. It is the curriculum.

If you are discipling someone in generosity, they need to see you be generous—not perfectly but genuinely. If you are discipling someone in handling failure with grace, they need to watch you handle your own failures honestly. If you are discipling someone in prayer, they need to hear you pray—not polished, performed prayers but real ones.

The most powerful thing you bring to any discipleship relationship is not your knowledge of Scripture, your ministry experience, or your carefully prepared content. It is the degree to which the life of Jesus has become visible in your own character, choices, and relationships.

This is humbling. It is also liberating. Because it means you do not have to be finished to be useful. You simply have to be honest about where you are and genuinely moving in the right direction.

The Portrait and the Commission

Step back now and look at the portrait as a whole.

Jesus, the Master Discipler, knew what was in people. He moved among different circles with different depths of investment. He was fully present with those He was forming. He taught in the middle of real life. He let people struggle rather than rescuing them prematurely. He called them forward into a future shaped by grace. And He modeled everything He expected, going first in servanthood, prayer, love, and costly obedience.

This is not a program. It is a way of life.

And it is the way of life to which He is calling every person who follows Him into the work of disciple-making.

The commission He gave was simple and direct: “Make disciples.” It was a relational, personal, ongoing, Spirit-dependent endeavor that looks different in every generation, every culture, and every individual relationship, but always moves toward the same destination: people who increasingly resemble the One who called them. That commission rests on a promise: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20 ESV).

The Master Discippler has not retired. He has not handed off the work to human program managers and stepped back to observe. He is present, through His Spirit, in every conversation, every moment of honest confrontation, every patient accompaniment through struggle, every gentle calling forward that happens between His people.

Your role is not to replicate His divinity. It is to cooperate with His presence.

If this portrait looks beautiful, it may also feel overwhelming.

How can ordinary believers disciple people this way?

In the chapters that follow, we move from the portrait to the practice. Together in Part Two we will explore five distinct purposes of discipleship relationships: establishing believers on firm foundations, encouraging and restoring those who have stumbled, fostering mutual spiritual formation among fellow disciples, equipping believers for ministry, and multiplying disciple-makers who will continue Christ’s work in others.

But before you turn the page, linger for a moment with the portrait.

Reflection and Discernment for Leaders

The portrait of the Master Discippler is not meant to be admired from a distance. It is meant to reshape the way we see people, invest in relationships, and walk alongside others. Before moving into the

practical chapters that follow, take time to sit quietly before the Lord. Ask Him to bring to mind the people He has entrusted to your care. Then prayerfully reflect on the questions that follow.

Seeing People Clearly

- When you think about the people you are currently discipling or hope to disciple, how well do you actually know what is in them—not just their surface needs but the real fears, hidden wounds, functional gods, and quiet hungers beneath the surface? What would it take for you to know them more deeply?
- Is there someone in your life right now whose real need you may have misread? What assumptions have you been making about them that might need to be set aside?

Stewarding Your Relationships

- Who are the people in your life who are calling for deeper investment in this season? Are you giving that investment, or are you spreading yourself so thin across many relationships that no one is receiving what they most need?
- Are you trying to be everything to everyone? Where might you need to focus more intentionally—or entrust certain people to someone better suited to walk with them right now?

Practicing Presence

- How present are you in your discipling relationships? When you are with someone, are you actually with them—or are you mentally somewhere else, waiting for your turn to give the answer you came prepared to deliver?
- What one practical change could you make to be more genuinely present with the people God has placed in your life?

Teaching in the Middle of Life

- Are your discipleship conversations happening primarily in scheduled, structured settings—or are you also creating space for truth to meet experience in the middle of real life?
- Who might benefit from being invited into your life more fully—not just into a meeting but into the messiness and ordinariness of how you actually live?

Walking through Struggle

- Is there someone you have been over-rescuing: solving problems, resolving tensions, and answering questions before they have had a chance to do their formative work?
- Is there someone you have been under-encouraging: someone who needs to hear from you that God is not finished with them, that the trajectory of grace is forward, and that you believe in who they are becoming?

Modeling the Way

- If the people you are discipling were asked what they have learned from watching your life—not from hearing your teaching but from watching how you live—what would they say?
- What area of your own formation most needs attention right now, both for your sake and for the sake of those who are watching and learning from you?

As you sit with these questions, remember what you saw in this chapter: Jesus was not a discipler who produced “perfect” disciples. He was the perfect Son of God who poured His life into imperfect, ordinary people and trusted the Spirit to do the rest.

He is still doing that.

He is doing it in you. And He is inviting you to do it with others.

In Part II, we turn to the specific relationships through which that work takes shape.

PART II

**The Purposes of
Discipleship Relationships**

There is a question that sits at the heart of every discipleship relationship, whether we ask it consciously or not:

What does this person actually need right now?

Not what our program offers. Not what worked for someone else. Not what we feel most comfortable providing. But what does this specific person, in this specific season of their life, most need from a discipleship relationship in order to take their next step toward Christ?

Part I argued that Jesus never used a single method with every person. He saw people clearly, discerned what they most needed, and engaged in a way that served that specific person in that specific moment. The Holy Spirit continues that same wise, personal work today—pressing the Gospel into different places in different people, calling each believer forward from exactly where they are.

Part II is about learning to cooperate with that work.

Across the New Testament, five distinct purposes emerge in discipleship relationships. They are not five steps in a sequence, and they are not five levels of spiritual achievement. They are five different kinds of relational investment, each designed to serve what God is doing in a person's life in a particular season.

Establishing: helping new or young believers build a foundation in the Gospel, the Word, prayer, identity in Christ, and the community of faith that will hold when the storms come.

Encouraging and Restoring: walking faithfully alongside people who have stumbled, suffered, or lost their way, offering the kind of patient, grace-filled presence that makes it possible to get back up and keep going.

Mutual Spiritual Formation: the reciprocal sharpening that happens between peers—friends, colleagues, and fellow travelers—who speak

truth to one another, pray for one another, and call one another forward in love.

Equipping for Ministry: moving believers from passive consumption to active contribution, helping them discover, develop, and deploy their gifts in the places God has already positioned them.

Multiplying Disciple-Makers: the intentional investment in people who are ready to pour into others, developing not just disciples but disciple-makers who will extend the work of the Gospel beyond what any single leader could accomplish alone.

Every chapter in Part II follows a similar pattern. It opens with a picture of the need this kind of relationship addresses. It roots the purpose in Scripture, drawing from the relationships and examples the New Testament actually gives us. It describes what this kind of relationship looks like in practice—what the discipler brings, what the person being disciplined needs, and what faithful engagement in this season actually requires. And it closes with questions designed to help you discern where this purpose might be most needed among the people God has already placed in your life.

As you read these five relationships, you will notice that some of the marks of maturity appear more than once. That is intentional. Christ does not produce one kind of maturity for rooted disciples, another for restored disciples, and another for disciple-makers. The fruit increasingly overlaps because the goal is always Christlikeness. What changes from relationship to relationship is not the destination but the emphasis. Each relationship highlights the work God is doing in that particular season.

One important caution before you begin: Resist the temptation to read these five purposes as a checklist or a classification system. Real people are more complex than any framework, and real relationships rarely fit neatly into a single category. Someone may need establishing in some areas while simultaneously needing encouragement in others. A peer

relationship marked by mutual sharpening may also carry significant elements of restoration after a season of failure.

The five purposes are not boxes to put people in. They are lenses to help you see more clearly—to ask better questions, to discern more wisely, and to give your relational investment a focus and intentionality that serves what God is already doing.

With that in mind, we begin where every discipleship relationship that lasts must begin: with foundations.

CHAPTER 4

Establishing Believers: Laying Foundations That Last

Paul had not planned to leave Thessalonica so soon.

He had arrived in the city with Silas and Timothy, found his way to the synagogue as was his custom, and spent three weeks reasoning from the Scriptures that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead—and that Jesus was that Christ. Some were persuaded. A great many God-fearing Greeks believed, along with a number of leading women of the city (Acts 17:4).

And then the trouble started.

Jealous opponents formed a mob, threw the city into an uproar, and dragged some of the new believers before the city authorities. Under cover of darkness, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. The young church in Thessalonica was left behind—new in faith, untested by time, surrounded by hostility, without their founding apostle.

Paul could not stop thinking about them.

He tried to come back—more than once, he would later tell them—but was prevented. So he sent Timothy in his place, specifically “to establish and exhort you in your faith” (1 Thessalonians 3:2 ESV). And when Timothy finally returned with news that their faith and love were

holding, that they were standing firm, Paul's relief poured out in words that reveal everything about his heart for these young believers: "For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 3:8 ESV).

"Now we live."

Those three words reveal everything about Paul's heart.

The spiritual well-being of these new believers was not a program metric for Paul. It was a matter of life and death—his own life bound up with theirs, his joy inseparable from their standing firm.

That is the heart of the establishing relationship.

And it raises the question that this chapter is about: When someone is new to faith—or when someone has been in church for years but is standing on a foundation that was never properly laid—what do they actually need? And what does it look like to give it to them faithfully?

What Establishing Actually Means

The word "establishing" is borrowed from the Apostle Paul, who used it and its close relatives repeatedly when describing his concern for young believers and young churches.

Writing to the Thessalonians, he described sending Timothy back to them specifically "to establish and exhort you in your faith" (1 Thessalonians 3:2 ESV). When he could not visit the Romans in person, he expressed his longing to see them so that he might "impart ... some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (Romans 1:11-12 ESV). In Colossians he described his labor as warning everyone and teaching everyone "that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:28 ESV).

Though the settings differed, Paul's concern remained remarkably consistent: He wanted believers whose faith would stand.

Jesus described that kind of faith with the unforgettable image of two builders.

Two builders. Two houses. One built on rock, one built on sand. From the outside, they may have looked identical. The difference only became apparent when the rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against both houses (Matthew 7:24-27).

The establishing relationship is about building on rock. Everything else in the Christian life is built on that foundation.

It is not about producing a believer who can pass a theology exam. It is about helping a new or young follower of Jesus sink roots deep enough into the Gospel, into the Word, into prayer, into community, and into a basic understanding of who they now are in Christ—so that when the inevitable storms arrive, they do not simply survive. They stand.

The New Testament Picture

The establishing relationship has deep roots in the New Testament, and it takes several recognizable forms.

Paul and the new churches. Everywhere Paul planted a church, he was consumed with the question of whether those young believers were being properly established. When he was forced to leave Thessalonica earlier than he had planned, he was so concerned about the spiritual state of those new believers that he tells them he “could bear it no longer” and sent Timothy back in his place (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2 ESV). The letter he eventually wrote them is saturated with a father's anxiety for his children—not anxiety about whether they liked him but anxiety about whether their faith would hold.

This is the heart of the establishing discipler: a deep, almost parental concern for whether the foundation is solid.

Barnabas and the new believers at Antioch. When the church in Jerusalem heard that Gentiles in Antioch were coming to faith, they sent Barnabas to investigate. What he found when he arrived clearly moved him. Luke records, “When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (Acts 11:23 ESV).

Notice what Barnabas did. He saw the grace of God already at work and rejoiced in it. Then he exhorted these new believers to hold on—to remain faithful with steadfast purpose. He stayed with them. He taught them. And when the work grew beyond what he could handle alone, he went and found Paul and brought him back. The establishing relationship is often that simple: See what God is already doing, come alongside it, and help the new believer hold on and go deeper.

Priscilla and Aquila with Apollos. Here the establishing relationship takes a slightly different form. Apollos was not a brand-new believer. He was a gifted, passionate, and articulate man who knew the Scriptures and spoke with great fervor. But Luke tells us that he knew “only the baptism of John”—his understanding of the Gospel was incomplete (Acts 18:25 ESV).

Priscilla and Aquila heard him speaking in the synagogue. Rather than correcting him publicly, they “took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26 ESV). Privately. Carefully. With enough relational investment to have him in their home.

The result was a more fully equipped Apollos who went on to be enormously useful in the church: “he greatly helped those who through grace had believed” (Acts 18:27 ESV).

The establishing relationship is not only for brand-new believers. It is for anyone whose foundation has gaps—people who have been in

church for years but whose understanding of the Gospel is incomplete, whose identity in Christ is shaky, or whose basic practices of the Christian life were never properly formed.

What New Believers Actually Need

Walk slowly through the needs of someone in the early season of faith and a picture begins to emerge of what the establishing relationship is actually called to provide.

They need the Gospel to become their story.

Most new believers understand the Gospel as the entry point to the Christian life—the thing that got them in. One of the most important gifts an establishing discipler can give is helping them see that the Gospel is not just the door. It is the entire house.

They need to understand that the same grace that saved them is the grace that sustains them—that when they fail, they do not need to earn their way back into God’s favor because they were never in God’s favor on the basis of their own performance to begin with. They need to see that repentance is not a punishment but a gift, that confession is not humiliating but liberating, and that the righteousness of Christ credited to them is not a legal fiction but the most solid ground they will ever stand on.

This takes time. And it takes a discipler who has not moved past the Gospel themselves—someone who still lives in the wonder of it and can speak about it with the freshness of someone who has never gotten over it.

They need a working knowledge of Scripture.

Not exhaustive theological training. Not seminary in a small group. But a genuine, working familiarity with the Bible—how it fits together,

what its great story is, how to read it with understanding, and how to begin letting it speak into their daily life.

Many new believers are intimidated by Scripture. They open it and feel lost. One of the most practically loving things an establishing discipler can do is sit with someone and open the Bible together—not to lecture but to explore. To model what it looks like to ask questions of a text, to let a passage challenge an assumption, to sit with something difficult without immediately resolving it.

The goal is not to make them dependent on you for biblical interpretation. The goal is to help them develop a living, ongoing relationship with the Word of God that will continue long after your time together ends.

They need to learn to pray.

The disciples watched Jesus pray before they asked Him to teach them (Luke 11:1). There is something deeply instructive in that sequence. They did not learn to pray from a lecture about prayer; they learned to pray by watching Someone who actually prayed—and then asking Him to show them how.

New believers often have more honest prayer lives than experienced ones. They have not yet learned to perform prayer or learned to use it as a spiritual discipline to be checked off a list. They tend to pray with a raw directness that is actually quite close to what Jesus modeled.

The establishing discipler's job is to nurture that instinct to help the new believer understand that prayer is conversation with their Father, that it encompasses lament as well as praise, petition as well as gratitude, and that it is the lifeline of the Christian life rather than an accessory to it.

They need to understand who they are in Christ.

This may be the most underestimated need of new believers and the one with the longest-lasting consequences when it goes unaddressed.

Many people come to faith carrying years of accumulated messages about who they are—messages from parents, from failures, from relationships, from their own inner critic. Those messages do not disappear at conversion. They go underground, and they continue to shape how the new believer relates to God, to others, and to themselves.

The establishing discipler helps the new believer begin to replace those old messages with the truth of who God says they are, not through positive thinking or self-esteem exercises but through the patient, repeated work of bringing the Word of God to bear on the places where lies have taken root.

You are loved. You are forgiven. You are adopted. You are not condemned. You are a new creation. The old has passed away; the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

These are not slogans. They are the load-bearing walls of a life built on rock. And helping someone begin to actually live from these truths—not just recite them—is some of the most important work an establishing discipler will ever do.

They need to be connected to the community of faith.

The Christian life was never designed to be lived alone. From the earliest pages of Acts, new believers were added to a community—“they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42 ESV). Establishing a new believer means helping them understand that church is not an optional add-on to their personal relationship with Jesus. It is the body of Christ, the family of God, the primary context in which formation happens.

This means introducing them to relationships, not just services. Helping them find their place in a community where they are known by name, where their absence would be noticed, and where they will experience both the joy and the difficulty of actual life together.

What the Establishing Discipler Brings

If the new believer brings hunger, openness, and the raw material of a life just beginning to be reoriented around Christ, what does the establishing discipler bring?

Patience. Formation is slow. New believers will ask the same questions multiple times. They will make progress and then stumble. They will grasp something one week and seem to have forgotten it the next. The establishing discipler is not frustrated by this. They have been there themselves, and they know that repetition is not failure—it is how foundations get set.

Consistency. The establishing relationship gains its strength through showing up reliably, predictably, and over time. No single conversation carries the weight of the relationship. The new believer needs to know that you will be there next week, that you will remember what they told you last time, and that your investment in them is not contingent on their performance.

Transparency. One of the most disorienting things for a new believer is the discovery that following Jesus does not make life easier or simpler. When they experience doubt, failure, confusion, or suffering, they often wonder if something has gone wrong with them specifically. The establishing discipler who is willing to be honest about their own journey—including the hard parts—normalizes the experience of the Christian life and models the kind of honest faith that can survive real difficulty.

Gospel-centeredness. The greatest danger in the establishing relationship is a subtle drift from grace toward performance—from “here is who God says you are in Christ” toward “here is what you need to do to be a good Christian.” The establishing discipler guards against this drift not by avoiding the call to obedience but by always rooting that call in the indicative before the imperative. You are loved—therefore love others. You are forgiven—therefore forgive. You are free—therefore live in freedom.

What the Establishing Relationship Is Not

It is worth pausing to name a few things that the establishing relationship is not—because well-intentioned disciplers sometimes drift into these patterns without realizing it.

It is not primarily a content delivery system. The goal is not to get through a certain number of topics in a certain number of weeks. The curriculum, if you use one, serves the relationship. The relationship does not serve the curriculum. If the new believer is in the middle of a crisis, you set aside the planned topic and you are present with them in the crisis. That is not a detour from discipleship. That is discipleship.

It is not a dependency relationship. A healthy establishing relationship moves the new believer toward Christ and toward the community of faith—not toward you. If they are growing in their dependence on you rather than on Jesus, something has gone wrong. The goal is always to make yourself progressively less necessary as the new believer grows in their own walk with God.

It is not one-size-fits-all. Even within the establishing relationship, different people need different things. The young professional who grew up in church but never really understood the Gospel needs something different than the person with no church background who came to faith out of addiction or trauma. Pay attention to the person in front of you, not just the material in front of you.

Knowing When This Season Is Ending

One of the most practically useful questions an establishing discipler can learn to ask is: How will I know when this season of the relationship is complete?

Look for observable realities in the new believer's life. Think less in terms of graduation requirements and more in terms of signs that healthy roots are taking hold. Are they reading Scripture on their own—not perfectly but regularly? Are they praying with some degree of confidence and honesty? Do they have a growing understanding of the Gospel as the foundation of their daily life, not just their conversion? Are they connected to the community of faith in a meaningful way? Are they beginning to serve others, however simply?

And perhaps most tellingly: When difficulty comes—when doubt surfaces, when they fail, when life does not go according to plan—where do they turn? Do they run toward God or away from Him? Do they reach for the Word and for community, or do they isolate and collapse?

These are not tests to pass. They are indicators of whether the foundation is beginning to hold. And when you see them taking shape in a person's life, you have the joy of knowing that the establishing season has done its work—and that the person God entrusted to your care is ready for the next thing He has for them.

A Picture of Establishing Done Well

Paul's relationship with the Thessalonian believers is perhaps the clearest picture in the New Testament of the establishing relationship at its best.

He came to them. He lived among them. He shared not only the Gospel but his own life with them (1 Thessalonians 2:8). He worked

alongside them so as not to be a burden. He dealt with each of them: “like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 ESV).

When he was forced to leave, he was so worried about their foundation that he sent Timothy back. By the time Timothy returned with good news about the Thessalonians, Paul had done what an establishing discipler could do. He had given them the Gospel, shared his life with them, taught them, encouraged them, and sent Timothy to strengthen them when he could not be there himself. Now he had to trust that the foundation would hold.

That is what establishing ultimately requires. We invest deeply in people while knowing that their faith cannot finally rest on us. We help them put down roots in the Gospel, Scripture, prayer, the community of faith, and their identity in Christ. Then, increasingly, we entrust them to the God who is at work in them.

The goal is a believer who can stand.

Reflection and Discernment for Leaders

Seeing the people in your care:

- Who in your current ministry context is in the early season of faith and most needs an establishing relationship? Are they receiving one—or are they simply attending services and hoping formation will happen on its own?
- Think about your own early season of faith. What was most formative for you? What foundations were laid well—and what gaps, if any, are you still working to fill?

Your establishing relationships:

- If you are currently in an establishing relationship with someone, honestly assess: Are you primarily delivering content, or are you genuinely present with them as a person? Do you know what they are afraid of, what they are struggling to believe, what the Gospel is bumping up against in their actual life?
- Are you helping them move toward Christ and community—or toward dependence on you?

Your church culture:

- When someone comes to faith in your church, what happens next? Is there a clear, relational pathway that connects them to an establishing discipler—or does the responsibility fall through the cracks between programs and departments?
- Who in your congregation has the gifts, the patience, and the Gospel-centeredness to serve as establishing disciplers? Are they being identified, equipped, and deployed?

Your congregation's foundation:

- If you were to honestly assess the spiritual foundation of your congregation, where do you see the greatest gaps? Are there longtime believers whose foundations were never properly laid, people who need something closer to an establishing relationship than they would ever expect or ask for?

As you consider these questions, remember that the establishing relationship is not about your competence as a discipler. It is about your willingness to be present, to be patient, and to trust the Spirit to do the deep work that only He can do.

You are not building the foundation. You are helping someone find the Rock.

And the Rock, as Paul reminded the Corinthians, is Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4).

In the next chapter, we turn to a very different kind of discipleship relationship—one that meets people not at the beginning of their journey but in the middle of their hardest moments. We will look at what Scripture shows us about the ministry of encouragement and restoration and what it means to walk faithfully with someone who has stumbled, suffered, or lost their way.

Foundations are laid in the quiet, unhurried work of ordinary days. So is the kind of faith that stands when the storms come.

CHAPTER 5

Encouragement and Restoration: Walking with People Through Their Hardest Moments

His name meant “Son of Encouragement.”

That was not the name his parents gave him. His parents named him Joseph. But somewhere along the way, the apostles looked at this man from Cyprus and gave him a new name—one that said something about who he was and how he moved through the world.

Barnabas.

Son of Encouragement.

It is worth camping out on that for a moment. The apostles were not in the habit of handing out honorary titles. They renamed people because they saw something—a consistent pattern of character, a recognizable way of being present with others, a gift so evident that it had become inseparable from the person’s identity.

What they saw in Joseph was this: When people were struggling, failing, doubting, or overlooked, he showed up. When the early church was afraid to trust the newly converted Saul of Tarsus, Barnabas took him by the hand and brought him in. When John Mark abandoned the first

missionary journey and Paul refused to give him another chance, Barnabas took him and went anyway. When new Gentile believers in Antioch needed someone to come and see what God was doing and stay long enough to help them hold on, it was Barnabas who went.

He was not the most theologically brilliant man in the room. He was not the most gifted preacher. But he had a genius for seeing people at their most vulnerable and staying with them anyway—and the New Testament is full of evidence that God used that genius to change lives.

This chapter is about a different kind of relationship. It meets people in the middle—in the middle of failure, in the middle of suffering, in the middle of disillusionment, in the middle of the long and disorienting process of finding their way back after they have lost it. It is the ministry of encouragement and restoration. And it may be the most needed and most neglected form of discipleship in churches today.

The People Nobody Quite Knows What to Do With

Every church has them, though they rarely announce themselves.

The elder who has served faithfully for twenty years and is now quietly burning out—still showing up, still fulfilling his responsibilities, but increasingly hollow behind the eyes. The woman who walked through a devastating divorce and came back to church six months later, only to find that nobody quite knew how to talk to her anymore. The young leader who fell into a pattern of sin that eventually became public and who now sits in the back row wondering whether grace is really as wide as he used to preach.

The man who has been praying for his prodigal child for a decade and is beginning to wonder, in the small hours of the morning, whether God is listening. The pastor's wife who smiles every Sunday and cries every Monday. The gifted woman who stepped away from ministry

after a wounding experience with church leadership and has not been able to find her way back.

These are not people on the fringes of faith. Many of them are deeply committed followers of Jesus who are simply in a season where the weight is heavier than they can carry alone. They are not looking for a program. They are not looking for advice. They are not looking for someone to fix them.

They are looking for someone to stay.

That is what the ministry of encouragement and restoration is about. It is about the kind of presence that communicates, without needing to say it directly: *I see you. I am not going anywhere. And I believe that God is not finished with you.*

What the New Testament Actually Shows Us

The word most often translated “encouragement” in the New Testament carries the beautiful literal meaning of “to call alongside.”

Not to call ahead and give directions from a safe distance. Not to call from behind and push. To call *alongside*—to come and stand next to someone in their difficulty and be present with them there.

It is the same root word Jesus used for the Holy Spirit in John’s Gospel—the Comforter, the Counselor, the One called alongside.

The ministry of encouragement is, in its deepest form, a participation in the Spirit’s own work.

And the New Testament does not treat it as a secondary or supplemental ministry. Paul lists encouragement alongside prophecy, service, teaching, and giving as a gift to be exercised with diligence (Romans 12:8). He commands the Thessalonians to “encourage one another and build one another up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11 ESV). The

writer of Hebrews calls the community to “exhort one another every day ... that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13 ESV). These are not optional extras for particularly empathetic Christians. They are the normal texture of life in the body of Christ.

But alongside encouragement, the New Testament speaks of something more specific: restoration.

The Theology of Restoration

Restoration appears most explicitly in Galatians 6:1, where Paul writes: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (ESV).

The word Paul uses for “restore” is rich with meaning. In the ancient world it was used for setting a broken bone, mending a torn fishing net, and equipping a ship for a voyage. In each case the idea is the same: something that was broken, incomplete, or out of commission is being made whole and functional again.

That is what Paul envisions for a believer “caught in transgression.” Not condemnation. Not expulsion. Not a cold silence that leaves them to find their own way back. Restoration—the careful, gentle, skilled work of helping someone become whole again.

Notice the qualifications Paul attaches. Those who restore should be “spiritual”—not in the sense of being spiritually superior but in the sense of genuinely walking in step with the Spirit with enough self-awareness to guard against their own temptation in the process. And the spirit in which restoration happens is gentleness—the same gentleness that is listed as a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:23, the quality that holds strength and tenderness together without sacrificing either.

This is not soft or sentimental. Paul is not suggesting that sin be minimized or that consequences be ignored. He is insisting that the person who has fallen be treated as a person—as a brother or sister for whom Christ died—and that the aim of every conversation, every confrontation, and every act of accompaniment be their wholeness, not their punishment.

The restoring discipler holds both truths simultaneously: This matters, and so do you.

The Shape of Encouragement and Restoration

What does this kind of relationship actually look like in practice? It does not follow a single script because the people who need it arrive from very different places. But several consistent features characterize the ministry of encouragement and restoration when it is done well.

It begins with presence, not prescription.

The most common mistake well-meaning disciplers make with hurting or struggling people is moving too quickly to solutions. Someone shares their pain, and within thirty seconds the discipler is offering a Bible verse, a book recommendation, or a suggested course of action. The advice may be entirely sound. But it communicates, however unintentionally, that the discipler is more interested in resolving the discomfort than in sitting with the person in it.

Job's friends are the biblical case study in this failure. For the first seven days, they sat with Job in silence—and those were their best days. It was when they opened their mouths and began explaining his suffering that they became a burden rather than a comfort. God's assessment of their counsel at the end of the book is devastating: "You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7 ESV).

Presence before prescription. Listening before leading. Staying before solving.

This does not mean the encouragement and restoration relationship never involves truth-telling, challenge, or redirection. It does. But those things have their proper place—and their proper place is almost always later than we think and only after trust has been built through genuine, unhurried presence.

It distinguishes between suffering and sin.

One of the most important discernment questions in the encouraging and restoring relationship is this: Is this person suffering, or have they sinned—or both?

The answer shapes everything about how you engage.

Someone walking through grief, illness, job loss, a prodigal child, or a crushing disappointment needs the comfort of presence, the anchor of truth, and the patient companionship of someone who will not rush them through their pain toward a tidy resolution. They do not need to be fixed. They need to be accompanied.

Someone who has sinned—who has made choices that have caused real harm to themselves or to others—needs something that includes comfort but also involves honest acknowledgment of what happened, the gentle confrontation that Paul describes in Galatians 6, and the kind of structured accountability that makes genuine repentance and lasting change possible. They need grace and truth held together, in the right proportion, at the right pace.

Many situations involve elements of both. The person whose marriage ended partly because of their own choices is both grieving a loss and living with consequences. The leader who burned out partly because of an impossible workload and partly because of their own inability to say no is both suffering and in need of honest self-examination. Wise

encouragement and restoration holds both realities with care—neither collapsing them into each other nor separating them so sharply that the person feels either excused or condemned.

It takes the long view.

One of the defining features of the encouraging and restoring relationship is its willingness to be slow.

Restoration rarely happens quickly. Wounds that go deep take time to heal. Patterns of sin that have been entrenched for years do not unravel in a single conversation. Disillusionment that has built up over a long season of ministry does not dissolve in an afternoon of honest talk.

The discipler who enters this kind of relationship looking for quick results will either give up too soon or unconsciously pressure the person toward a premature resolution that looks like healing from the outside but is not yet real on the inside.

Barnabas took the long view with John Mark. When Paul refused to take John Mark on the second missionary journey because he had deserted them in Pamphylia, Barnabas did not argue that John Mark was already fully restored and ready. He simply took him and went.

He stayed with the process.

He gave John Mark the gift of another chance—not a guarantee of outcome but an opportunity to grow. And years later, Paul himself would write from prison that John Mark was “very useful to me for ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11 ESV).

The long view is not passivity. It is faith—the active, patient conviction that the God who began a good work in this person is faithful to complete it (Philippians 1:6).

It maintains appropriate honesty.

Encouragement is not flattery. Restoration is not the erasure of consequences. The ministry of encouragement and restoration tells people what is true, including the hard truths, with enough relational warmth and genuine investment that the truth can actually be received.

Nathan's confrontation of David is the Old Testament model of this balance. He did not avoid the truth about what David had done. He did not soften it beyond recognition. He delivered it with precision and courage—"You are the man" (2 Samuel 12:7 ESV)—but he delivered it in the context of a relationship, and he delivered it in a way that opened the door to repentance rather than slamming it shut with condemnation.

David's response—"I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Samuel 12:13 ESV)—is the response of someone who has been confronted by truth in the context of relationship. He did not defend himself. He did not rationalize. He acknowledged what was true. And the restoration that followed—imperfect, costly, and marked by real consequences—was made possible by the kind of honest, courageous, relational engagement that Nathan embodied.

The encouraging and restoring discipler is willing to have hard conversations. But they earn the right to those conversations through presence, patience, and genuine love—and they hold the hard truth with enough tenderness that the person on the receiving end knows they are not being attacked but helped.

The Particular Challenge of Restoring Leaders

There is a dimension of the encouraging and restoring relationship that deserves its own attention: the restoration of leaders who have fallen or burned out.

This is one of the most complex and sensitive forms of the ministry and one of the most frequently mishandled.

When a leader sins publicly—through moral failure, financial misconduct, or a pattern of abusive behavior—their church faces competing pressures. There is the legitimate need to protect the congregation, to name what happened honestly, and to hold the leader accountable. There is also, in many cases, a genuine human being behind the failure—someone who needs the same grace they once preached, walking now through the most humiliating and disorienting experience of their life.

Churches often handle one of these well and the other poorly. Some communities protect the leader at the expense of those who were harmed—a failure of justice that compounds the original wound. Others pursue accountability so aggressively that restoration becomes functionally impossible—a failure of grace that forgets that the goal of church discipline is always the person’s wholeness, not their permanent removal.

The New Testament holds both. Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 take sin seriously and describe a process that involves honest confrontation, community accountability, and in some cases removal from fellowship. But the same Paul who instructed the Corinthians to hand the unrepentant man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh did so “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:5 ESV)—and later urged the same community to “forgive and comfort” the repentant man, “or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (2 Corinthians 2:7 ESV).

The goal was never punishment. The goal was always restoration.

For leaders who have burned out rather than fallen morally, a different but equally careful approach is needed. Burnout is rarely simply the result of working too hard. It is usually the convergence of several factors: an unsustainable pace, an unexamined theology of ministry that equates exhaustion with faithfulness, unresolved personal wounds that ministry was unconsciously being used to manage, and a loss of the

primary relationship with Jesus that made the work meaningful in the first place.

Restoring a burned-out leader is not primarily about giving them a sabbatical, though rest may be part of it. It is about helping them find their way back to the One they were serving before the serving consumed them. It is about creating enough safety for them to be honest about what actually happened—not just the external circumstances but also the internal dynamics that made them vulnerable. And it is about walking patiently with them through the long, slow process of rebuilding both their capacity for ministry and their desire for it.

This kind of restoration requires a discipler who is neither naive nor cynical—someone who has enough experience to understand how leaders break and enough faith to believe that broken leaders can be made whole.

What the Encouraging and Restoring Discipler Brings

The ministry of encouragement and restoration asks specific things of those who practice it.

A settled sense of their own identity in Christ. The encouraging and restoring relationship can be emotionally demanding. You will sit with pain you cannot fix, hold tension you cannot resolve, and accompany people through processes that are slower and messier than you would like. If your own sense of worth and identity is fragile, this work will either overwhelm you or tempt you toward unhealthy patterns—rescuing people to feel needed, fixing problems to feel competent, or withdrawing when the situation becomes too uncomfortable.

The discipler who can stay present in difficulty without either fixing or fleeing is someone who knows who they are in Christ—someone

secure in their identity, able to remain steady regardless of the other person's progress, and confident that God is at work even when the outcome is uncertain.

Genuine empathy without emotional merger. There is a difference between empathy and enmeshment. Empathy means entering into another person's experience with enough imagination and care that they feel genuinely understood. Enmeshment means losing yourself in their experience to the point where you can no longer think clearly, maintain appropriate perspective, or offer anything beyond the validation of their current feelings.

The encouraging and restoring discipler practices empathy. They sit with pain without rushing past it. They resist the temptation to minimize or spiritualize someone's suffering before it has been honestly felt. They let people be sad, angry, confused, or afraid without immediately trying to move them to a better emotional state.

But they do not merge. They maintain enough separateness to hold hope when the person cannot, to see possibilities the person is too close to their pain to notice, and to speak truth when truth is what is most needed—even if truth is not what the person most wants to hear.

Patience with the process. Some of the people who need encouragement and restoration will make progress slowly, stumble repeatedly, and require more accompaniment than you expected when you entered the relationship. The discipler who approaches this work with a fixed timeline or a clear sense of how recovery should look will be frustrated—and will, however unintentionally, communicate that frustration to the person they are trying to help.

Patience in this context is not the absence of expectation. It is the presence of faith—the genuine conviction that God is at work in this person's life, that His timeline is not yours, and that the unhurried work of accompaniment is itself a form of grace.

Wisdom about limits. Some situations that call for encouragement and restoration also require care beyond the scope of a discipleship relationship. Some people are dealing with levels of trauma, mental illness, addiction, or relational complexity that require professional care—counselors, therapists, addiction specialists, or medical providers—alongside or instead of a discipling relationship.

Wise, encouraging, and restoring disciplers know their limits. They are not therapists, and they do not pretend to be. Part of faithfully caring for someone may mean helping them find the professional support they need and walking with them through that process—not as a replacement for the discipling relationship but as a complement to it.

Knowing When This Season Is Shifting

As with the establishing relationship, the encouraging and restoring relationship has a natural arc. Its intensity changes as the person heals and grows. The goal is always movement—toward healing, toward wholeness, toward a renewed capacity to receive from God and give to others. How do you know when the season is shifting?

Watch for the moment when the person begins to turn outward. When someone who has been primarily receiving begins to notice others' needs, begins to ask how they might serve, begins to think about what they have learned in their suffering and how it might help someone else—that is often a sign that the most acute season of the restoration relationship is giving way to something new.

Watch for a renewed appetite for God's Word and for prayer—not performed for your benefit but genuinely sought because the person has rediscovered their need for it. Watch for the return of hope—not naive optimism but the kind of hard-won, Gospel-grounded confidence that God is good and that the future is open.

And watch for the moment when the person can begin to speak honestly about what happened—their own part in it, if there was one, and what they have learned—without either defending themselves or collapsing in shame. That kind of integration is a sign of genuine restoration, not just surface recovery.

When you see these things beginning to emerge, the relationship does not end. But it changes. What was primarily a relationship of accompaniment through difficulty begins to become something else—perhaps mutual friendship, perhaps equipping for ministry, perhaps a peer relationship of ongoing mutual sharpening. The encouraging and restoring season has done its work, and a new season is beginning.

The God Who Restores

Before closing this chapter, it is worth stepping back to remember who is ultimately doing the restoring.

Not you. Not the discipleship relationship, however faithful. The God who is in the business of restoration—who takes what is broken and makes it whole, who takes what is lost and brings it home, who takes what is dead and raises it to life.

He is the God who met Elijah under the juniper tree when the great prophet had collapsed in exhaustion and despair, the God who did not rebuke him but fed him and let him sleep—twice—before speaking (1 Kings 19:1-9). He is the God who pursued a runaway prophet to the bottom of the sea and then commissioned him again for the same task from which he had fled (Jonah 1-3). He is the God who, in the person of Jesus, made breakfast on a beach for seven discouraged disciples and restored a three-times-denying fisherman to ministry with a question asked three times in the morning air: “Do you love me?” (John 21:17 ESV).

Not “Have you learned your lesson?” Not “Can I trust you now?” Not “Are you ready to explain what happened?” Just the most fundamental question, asked with enough tenderness to open the door and enough repetition to make sure Peter heard it all the way down.

That is the God in whose name and by whose Spirit the encouraging and restoring discipler works. And that is the God whose patient, personal, resurrection-powered ministry of restoration you are invited to participate in when you show up for someone in their hardest season and refuse to leave.

Reflection and Discernment for Leaders

About the people in your care:

- Who in your current ministry context is quietly carrying a weight that nobody seems to have noticed? Who might be in a season of suffering, failure, or disillusionment that calls for the ministry of encouragement and restoration?
- Think about your own experience of being encouraged and restored. Who showed up for you in a hard season? What did they do that helped most—and what, if anything, made things harder?

About your own capacity:

- Are you someone who moves too quickly to solutions when people are hurting? What would it look like for you to practice staying present in someone’s pain without immediately trying to fix it?
- Where are your own limits in this kind of ministry? Are there situations that consistently exceed what you can helpfully offer, and do you have a clear sense of when to refer someone to professional support?

About your church culture:

- Does your church culture make it genuinely safe for people to admit failure, struggle, or disillusionment, or does the pressure to appear spiritually healthy keep people from being honest about their real experience?
- What happens in your church when a leader falls or burns out? Is there a clear, thoughtful, grace-filled process for accountability and restoration, or does the community tend toward either cover-up or permanent disqualification?

About the ministry of encouragement:

- Who in your congregation has the gift of encouragement—the ability to see people at their most vulnerable and stay with them anyway? Are those people being identified, affirmed, and deployed in this ministry?
- Is encouragement treated in your church as a genuine spiritual gift to be cultivated and exercised or as a personality trait that some people happen to have?

About your own need:

- Is there an area of your own life—a wound, a failure, a season of weariness—where you yourself need the ministry of encouragement and restoration? Is there someone in your life who has the capacity to offer it? And if not, what step might you take toward finding that person?

As you sit with these questions, remember the image that began this chapter. A man whose very name meant “Son of Encouragement.” A man who showed up for the overlooked, the fallen, and the frightened—not because he had a program but because he had a gift as well as the wisdom and the grace to use it.

God is still raising up people like that. He may be raising one up in you.

And somewhere in the community He has placed you in, there is someone—sitting in the back row, serving behind a smile, or staying just far enough to the margins that nobody has quite noticed—who needs exactly what Barnabas brought.

Presence. Patience. The steady, unhurried, Gospel-rooted conviction that God is not finished yet.

In the next chapter, we turn to a different kind of discipleship relationship—one that does not flow primarily from one person to another but moves in both directions simultaneously. We will explore what Scripture shows us about mutual spiritual formation among peers and why the relationships we have with our equals may be among the most formative of our lives.

CHAPTER 6

Mutual Spiritual Formation: The Discipleship That Flows Both Ways

There is a kind of relationship that does not appear in most discipleship primers. Mentor and mentee meet here as peers, with each person both giving and receiving. Wisdom moves in both directions. The challenge, the encouragement, the prayer, and the honest word spoken at exactly the right moment—all of it moves back and forth, sometimes in the same conversation, sometimes in the same sentence.

It is the relationship between peers. Between equals. Between people who are, as far as anyone can tell, at roughly the same place in their journey—and who have somehow found in each other a companionship that makes both of them more like Jesus than either of them would be alone.

The Church has not always known what to do with this kind of relationship. We tend to organize discipleship vertically—more mature believers investing in less mature ones, experienced leaders pouring into emerging ones, the established guiding the new. That vertical movement is real and important, and the previous two chapters have explored two of its most essential forms.

But the New Testament does not only show us vertical discipleship. It shows us something that moves horizontally as well—the deep,

reciprocal, mutually formative power of walking through life alongside someone who is genuinely your peer in faith.

This chapter is about that relationship. About what it looks like, why it matters, what makes it work, and why many of us are more desperately in need of it than we have ever admitted.

The Loneliness Nobody Talks About

Before we can talk honestly about mutual spiritual formation, we need to talk about something that makes it so necessary and so rare.

Loneliness.

Not the surface loneliness of being physically alone, though that is real enough. The deeper loneliness of being known only partially—of living in communities where people see your role, your gifts, your public self, but not the person beneath all of that. The loneliness of having no one in your life who knows both where you have been and where you are struggling to go, who has seen you at your worst and still shows up on Tuesday morning, who will tell you the truth when you most need to hear it and most do not want to.

This kind of loneliness is epidemic among church leaders, and it is not limited to leaders. It quietly afflicts faithful believers at every level of church life—people who are genuinely committed to Jesus, genuinely connected to a community, and genuinely isolated in the ways that matter most.

We have created church cultures that are simultaneously highly relational on the surface and deeply lonely underneath. We have small groups and serving teams and elder boards and staff meetings. We have plenty of people to sit next to. What many of us do not have is someone to be genuinely known by.

C.S. Lewis, in his beautiful essay on friendship in *The Four Loves*, described the birth of genuine friendship as the moment when one person says to another, in effect: “What, you too? I thought I was the only one.”⁶ That moment of recognition—of finding someone who shares not just your circumstances but your inner world, your questions, your struggles, your longings too—is the seedbed of the kind of relationship this chapter is about.

It is rarer than it should be. And its rarity is costing us more than we know.

What the New Testament Shows Us

The New Testament does not have a single term for mutual spiritual formation among peers, but it is saturated with the reality of it.

The most obvious expression is in the remarkable density of “one another” commands that run through the epistles. Believers are instructed to love one another, pray for one another, confess to one another, bear one another’s burdens, encourage one another, admonish one another, serve one another, forgive one another, and spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

Every one of these commands is reciprocal. They do not describe what a mentor does for a mentee or what a mature believer does for a new one. They describe what members of the body of Christ do for each other—mutually, simultaneously, in the context of relationships where the giving and receiving flow in both directions.

But beyond the one another commands, the New Testament gives us specific relationships that embody this mutual quality in ways worth examining closely.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (HarperOne, 2017).

Paul and Barnabas. Even as Barnabas became the one who encouraged and restored others, he and Paul walked together as genuine peers in the most demanding missionary work of the early church. They traveled together, suffered together, planted churches together, and stood together before the Jerusalem council to defend the Gospel of grace for Gentile believers. Luke describes them as “the apostles Barnabas and Paul”—a pairing of equals, each contributing what the other needed, neither consistently above or below the other.

Acts 15 records a sharp disagreement between them over John Mark—a disagreement serious enough that they parted ways. The sharp disagreement over John Mark that eventually separated them was real and painful. But even that conflict—and the fact that both men continued doing significant kingdom work after it—says something about the nature of genuine peer relationships. They are not without conflict. They are relationships in which conflict can be survived and the work of God can continue even when the two people involved are no longer walking together in the same direction.

Paul and Silas. After the separation from Barnabas, Paul chose Silas as his traveling companion. What follows in Acts is one of the most striking pictures of peer companionship in the entire New Testament. They were beaten and imprisoned in Philippi. And at midnight, in the inner prison, with their feet in stocks and their backs bearing the marks of the rods, they were praying and singing hymns to God (Acts 16:25).

Singing. Together. In the dark.

That is not a performance. That is what genuine peer companionship produces—the capacity to hold on to what is true together when holding on alone would be nearly impossible. Their faith had become genuinely shared through walking closely together—so much so that the other person’s trust in God became a resource for their own.

Mary and Elizabeth. Luke’s account of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth is one of the most tender pictures of mutual spiritual formation in all of

Scripture. Mary, young and overwhelmed and carrying a secret that must have felt impossible to hold alone, traveled to the hill country of Judea to be with her older relative. And when she arrived, something remarkable happens: Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke words of affirmation and blessing over Mary before Mary had said a single thing about why she came: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (Luke 1:42 ESV).

And Mary, receiving that blessing, broke open in one of the most beautiful songs in Scripture—the Magnificat, a declaration of praise and trust and prophetic vision that she could not have spoken alone, in isolation, without someone who knew enough to see what God was doing in her.

They needed each other. The older woman’s affirmation released the younger woman’s voice. And the younger woman’s song must have deepened the older woman’s wonder. What flowed between them was not instruction from teacher to student. It was the mutual recognition of two women caught up together in something far larger than either of them—and the shared joy of knowing they did not have to carry it alone.

The disciples on the Emmaus road. Two disciples, devastated by the events of the crucifixion, were walking away from Jerusalem in confusion and grief, talking with each other about everything that had happened. Jesus drew near and walked with them—but before He revealed Himself, He listened to their conversation. What they were doing before He arrived was not nothing. They were doing what grieving, confused, disoriented people most need to do: They were processing together, giving language to their experience, being present with each other in the disorientation.

When Jesus finally opened their eyes and then vanished, their first impulse was to find the others—to go back to Jerusalem and share what they had seen and heard. And the question they asked each other

on the road, before they even knew fully who they had been walking with, is one of the most beautiful questions in the Gospels: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32 ESV).

They recognized the burning together. They named it to each other. And that shared recognition became the fuel for their return.

These relationships differ in circumstance, but they share a common reality: God forms His people not only through those who lead them but also through those who walk beside them.

What Makes Peer Relationships Uniquely Formative

If vertical relationships—mentor to mentee, establisher to new believer, encourager to the struggling—are so clearly important, why do we need horizontal ones as well? What does the peer relationship offer that other kinds of discipleship relationships cannot?

Peers can challenge you in ways mentors cannot.

There is a kind of challenge that only a true peer can offer—not because mentors lack wisdom or courage but because the dynamic of the relationship changes what can be said and received. When a mentor challenges you, however gently, there is an inherent asymmetry. You know they have more experience. You know they are evaluating you to some degree. You know the relationship itself depends partly on you continuing to make progress.

When a peer challenges you, none of that is present. They are not above you. They have no institutional authority over you. They are simply someone who knows you well enough and cares about you enough to say what needs to be said—and who has earned that right not through seniority but through shared life. That kind of challenge,

when it comes from a genuine peer, often lands differently. It is harder to dismiss and easier to receive.

Solomon knew this. “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17 ESV). The image is not of a whetstone smoothing a blade—a more powerful tool refining a lesser one.

It is of iron meeting iron.

Two things of equivalent strength creating friction that sharpens both.

Peers can normalize your experience in ways mentors cannot.

When a mentor shares their experience of struggle, doubt, or failure, it is genuinely helpful—but there is often a subtle distance. They are sharing it from the other side, from the vantage point of someone who came through it. Their testimony is real, but it is retrospective.

When a peer shares the same struggle you are currently in the middle of, something different happens. You are not hearing how someone else survived what you are going through. You are discovering that someone else is going through it too—right now, alongside you. The loneliness lifts. The sense that something is uniquely wrong with you dissolves. You are not behind. You are not failing. You are in the middle of what following Jesus actually looks like, and so is the person sitting across from you.

That kind of normalization is not lowering the bar. It is telling the truth about the journey—and the truth about the journey is that it is genuinely difficult, genuinely uncertain, and genuinely worth it and that the people who make it are almost never the ones who made it alone.

Peers can receive from you in ways that keep you honest.

There is a spiritual danger in relationships where you are always the one giving. It is subtle and it accumulates slowly, but it is real: You begin to

organize your identity around being the helper, the wise one, the person others come to. You stop noticing your own needs. You stop being honest about your own struggles because honesty about your struggles feels incompatible with the role you have come to occupy.

Peer relationships interrupt this pattern. When the person across from you is not primarily looking to you for wisdom but bringing their own—when they are as likely to see something in you that you cannot see in yourself as you are to see something in them—you cannot hide behind your role. You have to show up as a person. And showing up as a person consistently in the presence of someone who knows you is one of the most formative things that can happen to a follower of Jesus.

The Conditions That Make It Work

Not every peer relationship becomes genuinely formative. Many stay at the surface—enjoyable, comfortable, mutually affirming, but not particularly transforming. What distinguishes the relationships that actually sharpen from those that merely sustain?

Honesty That Goes Beneath the Surface

The peer relationship that produces genuine mutual formation is one in which both people have agreed, explicitly or implicitly, to tell the truth. Not just the polished version of the truth. The actual truth—about their doubts, their failures, their besetting sins, their real questions about God, their genuine struggles with the people in their lives.

This level of honesty does not happen automatically. It has to be initiated, usually by one person going first, taking the risk of saying something true about themselves that they have not said before, and watching to see whether the other person meets them there or pulls back.

James understood this. “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16a ESV). The healing that James had in mind is not primarily physical, though it includes that. It is the healing that comes from being fully known and fully accepted—from bringing the hidden thing into the light and discovering that the relationship can hold it.

Commitment That Outlasts Comfort

Genuine peer relationships are not sustained by convenience. They are sustained by commitment—the decision, made and renewed repeatedly, to keep showing up even when life gets busy, even when the conversation is hard, even when the relationship itself goes through a rough patch.

Most peer relationships that could become genuinely formative never do, not because the people involved do not like each other but because nobody made the relationship a priority. It stayed in the category of “important but not urgent” until it quietly faded into occasional contact and friendly distance.

The peer relationships that form us are the ones we fight for—the ones where both people have decided that this matters enough to protect, to schedule, to return to even after a gap, to repair when it has been damaged.

Mutual Accountability Without Mutual Enabling

There is a version of peer relationship that feels like accountability but functions as enabling. Both people know each other’s struggles. Both people offer sympathy and understanding. But neither ever says the hard thing—never names the pattern, never asks the uncomfortable question, never holds the other to the standard they both claim to want to live by.

This is not iron sharpening iron. It is two blades lying beside each other, equally dull, equally comfortable.

Genuine peer accountability means that both people have given the other explicit permission to ask hard questions and expect honest answers. It means that when one person sees something concerning in the other—a pattern of rationalization, a drift from integrity, a hardening of the heart—they say so. And it means that both people have committed in advance to receiving that kind of challenge as a gift rather than a threat.

This requires a level of trust that takes time to build. It also requires a theological conviction that is easy to affirm and hard to live: that the person who loves you enough to tell you a hard truth is more genuinely your friend than the person who tells you only what you want to hear (Proverbs 27:6).

Shared Investment in Something Larger than the Relationship Itself

Some of the most formative peer relationships in the New Testament happened in the context of shared mission. Paul and Barnabas were not primarily meeting regularly to work on their spiritual formation. They were planting churches, navigating opposition, preaching the Gospel, and making decisions under pressure—and their formation happened in and through that shared work.

There is something about pursuing a common purpose together that creates conditions for mutual formation that a scheduled conversation alone cannot replicate. When you are working alongside someone toward a goal that genuinely matters, you see each other under pressure. You watch how they handle failure, how they respond to success, how they treat the people around them when things are difficult. You have the raw material of real life to bring to your conversations—and your conversations are sharpened by the fact that

they connect to something real and important that you are both invested in.

Peer relationships that are only inward—only focused on the two people’s personal growth—tend to become self-referential over time. Peer relationships that are oriented outward, toward a shared mission or a shared community, tend to stay alive and generative in ways that purely internal relationships cannot.

The Particular Gift of Peer Relationships for Leaders

Leaders face a specific version of the loneliness described at the beginning of this chapter, and they need the peer relationship for specific reasons that go beyond what ordinary community provides.

Leadership creates a set of pressures that most people in a leader’s congregation do not fully understand. The weight of decisions that affect many people. The experience of criticism that comes with visibility. The tension between the public role and the private person. The difficulty of being honest about doubt or struggle in a context where people are looking to you for stability and direction.

Many leaders respond to these pressures by becoming progressively more isolated. They have plenty of people around them but nobody who actually knows them. They project health and confidence in public while quietly carrying burdens that have nowhere to go. And over time, that isolation becomes one of the primary factors in burnout, moral failure, and the slow erosion of the inner life that eventually hollows out the ministry.

For leaders, peer relationships can become one of the essential supports of healthy, sustainable ministry. What leaders specifically need from peer relationships is a space where the role can be set down. Where they are not the pastor, the elder, the director, the senior

leader—where they are simply a person, known and loved and held accountable and prayed for as a person. Where they can say the things they cannot say from the platform or in the staff meeting. Where someone who understands the particular pressures of leadership can say, with genuine authority: “I know. Me too. Keep going.”

This is why peer relationships among leaders—pastors who meet regularly with other pastors, elders who have genuine friendships with other elders outside their own church, ministry leaders who are part of cohorts or peer groups where real honesty is expected—are among the most important investments a leader can make. Not for professional development. For survival. For the long obedience that leadership requires.

What the Mutual Formation Relationship Is Not

It is not a relationship without direction. Genuine peers tell each other the truth. They challenge each other’s blind spots and hold each other to account. Mutuality means that both people give and receive that challenge.

It is not a relationship without difference. Even among genuine peers, there will be areas where one person has more experience, more wisdom, or more insight than the other. Genuine peer relationships make room for that asymmetry without being threatened by it. The person with more experience in a particular area offers what they have. The person with less receives it. And then, in a different area, the dynamic reverses. True peers are secure enough in the relationship to learn from each other without either becoming the permanent teacher or the permanent student.

It is not a substitute for vertical relationships. The peer relationship does things that mentoring relationships cannot do. But mentoring relationships do things that peer relationships cannot do. Most believers need both—someone further along the journey who can see

what they cannot yet see and someone alongside them in the journey who knows what it feels like from the inside. Emphasizing one at the expense of the other produces an incomplete relational diet.

It is not a relationship that can be manufactured. Genuine peer relationships grow rather than being manufactured. You can create the conditions for it—by being honest, by being consistent, by choosing to invest in certain relationships over time, by asking the kinds of questions that invite real answers. But the relationship itself, the quality of genuine mutual knowing and mutual sharpening, is something that grows. It cannot be forced, and it cannot be rushed.

Cultivating Peer Relationships Intentionally

If genuine peer relationships are so important and so rare, what can we do to cultivate them?

Start by identifying the right people. Not everyone in your life is a candidate for genuine peer formation. You are looking for someone who shares your commitment to following Jesus, who has enough self-awareness to be genuinely honest, who is at a broadly similar place in their journey, and who has demonstrated enough consistency over time that you have reason to trust them. These people may already be in your life, closer than you realize. Or you may need to be more intentional about finding them.

Go first. Most peer relationships that could become genuinely formative stall at the surface because nobody is willing to go first—to take the risk of saying something real, something vulnerable, something that opens the door to a deeper level of honesty. If you are waiting for the other person to go first, you may be waiting indefinitely. Go first. Say the true thing. See what happens.

Protect the time. Genuine peer formation requires regular, unhurried, prioritized time together—the kind that survives busy seasons because

both people have decided it is important enough not to sacrifice. What gets scheduled gets done. What gets left to spontaneity tends not to happen.

Ask better questions. Surface peer relationships stay surface partly because the questions stay surface. “How are you doing?” answered with “Busy but good” is not the raw material of mutual formation. Better questions go beneath the role to the person:

- What is God doing in you right now, not just through you?
- Where are you most tempted?
- What are you most afraid of?
- Where do you sense resistance in your own soul?
- What is the thing you most need to say that you have not said to anyone yet?

Those questions feel risky to ask. They feel even riskier to answer. But they are the questions that open the door to the kind of knowing that makes mutual formation possible.

Pray together, not just for each other. There is a difference between telling someone you will pray for them and actually praying together, out loud, in each other’s presence. The latter is more vulnerable and more powerful. It has a way of cutting through the performance and bringing both people into genuine contact with God and with each other. Peer relationships that include regular, honest, unhurried prayer together tend to go deeper and last longer than those that do not.

A Final Word About Mutuality

There is a paradox at the heart of the peer relationship that is worth naming before we close.

The relationship that is most explicitly about mutual formation—about both people growing—often produces the most growth precisely when

both people stop thinking about their own growth and start genuinely attending to the other person.

When you are fully present with your peer—listening to them, praying for them, speaking truth to them, bearing their burden, celebrating their progress—something happens in you that could not have happened if you had been focused on your own development. You are stretched. You are given perspective. You are pulled out of the self-referential loop that so easily becomes the enemy of genuine formation.

Paul’s vision of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 is the theological foundation of this paradox. Every member needs every other member. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’” (12:21 ESV). The strong member cannot dismiss the weak one. Every part depends on every other part—and the health of the whole depends on each part functioning as it was designed to function.

Mutual spiritual formation is what it looks like when two members of that body take that vision seriously in the context of a real, honest, committed, prayerful relationship with each other.

Neither of them is the whole body. Neither of them has everything the other needs. But together, attending to each other with the kind of love and honesty and patience that the Spirit makes possible, they find themselves becoming more like the One whose body they both belong to.

That is the gift of the peer relationship. And it is a gift that the Church desperately needs to recover.

Reflection and Discernment for Leaders

About your own peer relationships:

- Do you have a genuine peer relationship—someone who knows you well enough to tell you the truth, who is at a broadly

similar place in their journey, and with whom the giving and receiving of challenge flows in both directions? If not, what is standing in the way?

- Think about the peer relationships you have had across your life in faith. Which ones were most formative, and why? What conditions made them work?

About honesty and vulnerability:

- How honest are you in your closest peer relationships? Are there things you are carrying that nobody in your life actually knows about? What would it take for you to bring those things into the light with someone you trust?
- Are you someone who goes first—who takes the risk of honesty and vulnerability that opens the door for others to do the same? Or do you tend to wait for others to go first and stay surface-level if they do not?

About your leadership context:

- If you are a leader, do you have peer relationships where the role can be set down—where you are known and loved and held accountable as a person, not just as a leader? If not, how is that absence affecting you?
- Are there other leaders in your context—staff members, elders, ministry leaders—who are quietly isolated? What might it look like to cultivate a culture where genuine peer relationships among leaders are expected and protected?

About your church culture:

- Does your church culture make room for the kind of honest, reciprocal, mutually formative peer relationships this chapter describes? Or does the pressure to appear spiritually healthy

keep people from the level of honesty that genuine formation requires?

- How might you begin to cultivate that culture—not through a program but through the example of your own willingness to be known?

About the people God has placed in your life:

- Who in your current relational world might be a candidate for a deeper peer relationship? What would it look like to be more intentional about investing in that relationship?
- Is there a peer relationship in your life that has drifted toward the surface—that used to go deeper but no longer does? What would it take to recover it?

As you sit with these questions, remember that God, who said, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18 NIV), was not only speaking about marriage. He was speaking about the fundamental human need for genuine companionship—for the kind of knowing and being known that makes us more fully ourselves and more fully His.

He designed you for this. He placed you in a body where every member needs every other member. And somewhere in the community He has given you, there is likely someone who needs what you have to offer—and has something to offer that you need.

The question is whether you are willing to go first.

In the next chapter, we turn from the horizontal movement of mutual formation to a relationship with a more intentional direction—one aimed at helping believers discover, develop, and deploy their gifts in the places God has already positioned them. We will explore what Scripture shows us about equipping believers for ministry and what it means to help someone move from passive consumption to active contribution in the body of Christ.

The most formative relationships are rarely the ones where one person has all the answers. They are the ones where two people are honest enough, committed enough, and brave enough to look for the answers together.

CHAPTER 7

Equipping Believers for Ministry: Moving People from the Seats to the Field

She had been sitting in the same pew for eleven years.

Not metaphorically. Literally the same section, third row from the back on the left side, every Sunday morning without fail. She served in the nursery once a month because the rotation required it. She attended the women's Bible study when her schedule allowed. She gave faithfully and sang enthusiastically and smiled warmly at everyone she passed in the lobby.

And she was bored.

Not with God. Her private devotional life was genuinely alive. She prayed with real faith, read Scripture with real hunger, and had developed over those eleven years a theological depth that surprised people who assumed the quiet woman in the third row was simply a faithful attendee.

She was bored because nobody had ever looked at her and said: *"There is something in you that the body of Christ needs. Let's find out what it is and figure out how to release it."*

She had gifts she did not know she had. She had a calling she had never been helped to name. She had a capacity for ministry that had been

sitting, week after week, in the third row from the back, quietly waiting for someone to notice.

She is not unusual. In most congregations, she is the norm.

Many church leaders treat establishing and equipping as the same conversation. They are not. Establishing asks: *How do we help this person become firmly rooted in Christ?* Equipping asks something different: *How do we help this person discover and faithfully use what God has entrusted to them for the good of others?* One focuses on foundations. The other focuses on stewardship. Confusing them leaves people like her waiting indefinitely.

That said, in practice these relationships often overlap. A new believer may begin discovering and using spiritual gifts while still being rooted in the faith. Likewise, a mature believer who has walked with Christ for decades may need fresh equipping as God opens new opportunities for service. The relationships described in this book are not sequential stages to complete but recurring relational purposes. They overlap, reinforce one another, and reappear throughout the Christian life as the Holy Spirit continues His personal work of forming people into the likeness of Christ.

That is why equipping deserves its own place in this framework. Establishing and equipping often overlap, but wise disciple-makers learn to discern when a person's gifts and opportunities for service need to move into the foreground.

The equipping relationship is not primarily about filling ministry positions or recruiting volunteers. It is about helping people recognize that God has entrusted them with gifts, experiences, and opportunities through which they can serve the body of Christ and participate in His work in the world.

The Rooms

There is a connection that the church has not always made clearly enough.

Discipleship and spiritual gifts are not two separate conversations. They are not two different departments of Christian education, two different tracks in a ministry program, or two different concerns that happen to coexist in the same congregation. They are, at their deepest level, the same conversation—because they are both about the same thing: the Holy Spirit’s transforming work in the life of a particular person, moving them steadily toward the fullness of what God created and redeemed them to be.

We have tended to separate them. Discipleship goes in one room—the small group, the one-on-one mentoring relationship, the personal devotional life. Spiritual gifts go in another room—the spiritual gifts inventory, the volunteer recruitment process, the ministry placement conversation. And because we have separated them, we have impoverished both.

When discipleship is disconnected from spiritual gifts, it can become excessively inward—focused on the individual’s personal growth and spiritual health without ever asking how that growth is meant to overflow into contribution to the body and the world. The result is believers who are genuinely growing in their knowledge of God and their personal walk with Christ but who have never been helped to ask: What has God put in me that the body of Christ needs? Where is the Spirit calling me to give myself away?

When gifts are disconnected from discipleship, they can become excessively functional—focused on what a person can do for their church without attending to who they are becoming in the process. The result is busy, serving believers who are managing programs and

filling roles but whose ministry is not deepening their formation. They are doing more and becoming less, and nobody quite understands why.

The equipping relationship brings these two conversations back together—because genuine equipping has always been about both.

Gifts Are Not Separate from Formation—They Are Part of It

The same Spirit who transforms us is the Spirit who gifts us.

Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 12, where his discussion of spiritual gifts is framed not as a conversation about organizational efficiency but as a conversation about the body of Christ—a living, organic, interdependent community in which every member has a role that is essential to the health and functioning of the whole. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7 ESV). Every believer. Every one. Not the spiritually advanced. Not the theologically trained. Not the formally ordained. Every member of the body has received something from the Spirit that the rest of the body needs.

This means that discovering and deploying a spiritual gift is not something that happens after discipleship is complete—as a kind of graduation into usefulness. It is one of the primary ways discipleship continues and deepens. The person who is growing in Christlike humility will find that humility tested and developed in the actual practice of serving others. The person who is growing in faith will find that faith stretched and strengthened as they step into ministry that requires more than they currently possess. The person who is growing in love will find that love refined and purified in the particular difficulties of actual ministry with actual people.

Formation and function are not sequential. They are simultaneous. They shape each other. And the equipping relationship is the discipleship relationship that holds them together.

Unused Gifts Stunt Formation

This is perhaps the most important and most neglected dimension of the gifts-formation connection, and it deserves to be said plainly: A believer who never discovers or uses their spiritual gifts is not simply an underperforming church member. They are a partially formed one.

Paul's body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 is not primarily an organizational argument, though it has organizational implications. It is a theological argument about what it means to be a member of the body of Christ. A hand that does not function is diminished in its own life. A part of the body that fails to do what it was designed to do atrophies eventually.

The same is true spiritually. The believer who has been sitting in the third row for eleven years, faithfully attending and generously giving and quietly waiting for someone to tell them they have something to offer—that believer is not simply a missed ministry opportunity. They are a person whose formation has been stunted by the absence of the very thing God designed to develop them: the experience of giving themselves away in service to others, in the power of the Spirit, in the particular way that reflects how God made them.

Jesus understood this. His parable of the talents in Matthew 25 is not primarily about money. It is about the stewardship of what God has entrusted—and about the spiritual cost of burying rather than investing what we have been given. The servant who buried his talent acted out of fear and self-protection and ultimately revealed that he had misunderstood the very nature of the master he claimed to serve.

Unused gifts are buried talents. And helping people unbury them—helping them discover, develop, and deploy what the Spirit has placed in them—is one of the most genuinely formative things a discipleship relationship can do.

Equipping Is Deeply Personal

Because gifts are personal—woven into a person’s particular temperament, history, and story and into the Spirit’s specific work in their individual life—helping someone discover and deploy them requires exactly the kind of attentive, discerning, relational investment this book has been describing from the beginning.

You cannot equip people in the abstract. You cannot run everyone through the same gifts inventory and assume the process is complete. You have to know the person—their fears and their longings, the experiences that have shaped them, the moments when they have come most alive in serving others, the places where they have consistently made a difference without quite knowing how they did it.

Think about the four discernment questions from Chapter 2.

1. Who has God placed in my life?
2. What is God already doing in this person’s life?
3. What kind of relationship will best help them grow in this season?
4. How can I faithfully join the Holy Spirit in that work?

Every one of those questions applies directly to the equipping relationship. Equipping begins with seeing a person—really seeing them—and discerning what the Spirit seems to have placed in them. It continues with the patient, relational work of helping them name it, develop it, and find the courage to use it. And it is sustained by the kind of honest, committed, prayerful accompaniment that can only happen in a genuine relationship.

Equipping Completes the Transformation Arc

There is one more connection worth making before we move into the equipping relationship itself.

Throughout this book, we have described transformation as the gradual, Spirit-driven process by which a person's desires, instincts, reactions, and relationships increasingly reflect the life of Jesus. That definition is accurate as far as it goes. But it is incomplete if it stops at the inward.

Jesus was not primarily inward. He gave Himself away—completely, costly, in the particular form of service that the Father had given Him. His transformation of the world came through His self-giving. And the people He formed were not formed simply to become spiritually healthy individuals. They were formed to give themselves away in His name, in the power of His Spirit, to the ends of the earth.

Transformation that never moves outward has not yet completed its arc.

The person who is genuinely becoming more like Jesus will inevitably begin to look for ways to give themselves away—to serve, to contribute, to invest in others, to participate in the mission of God in the particular way that reflects how God has made and gifted them.

The equipping relationship is the discipleship relationship that helps that outward movement take intentional shape. It takes the inward work of formation and asks: *Now what? How does who you are becoming express itself in how you serve? What has God put in you that the body of Christ needs? Where is the Spirit already calling you to give yourself away?*

With that foundation in place, we can turn to the equipping relationship itself—what it looks like, where it appears in Scripture, and what it actually requires of those who practice it.

The gap between what believers are capable of contributing and what they are actually contributing to the mission of God is one of the most significant and most under-addressed problems in the Church today. We have built congregations of consumers when God designed communities of contributors. We have organized churches around the gifts of a few when the Spirit has distributed gifts to every member of the body.

Closing that gap is what equipping is about.

The Ephesians 4 Vision

No passage in the New Testament speaks more directly to the equipping relationship than Ephesians 4:11-13: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (ESV).

This passage has been read and quoted so often in conversations about ministry and leadership that it is easy to move past it without letting it fully land. But when you slow down and sit with it, it contains one of the most radical reframings of ministry leadership in the entire New Testament.

The leaders Christ gives to the Church—apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, teachers—are not given so that they can do the ministry while everyone else watches. They are given so that they can equip the saints to do the ministry. The work of ministry belongs to the whole body. The role of leadership is to prepare, release, and support the whole body in doing it.

The direction of the flow matters enormously. In many churches, the implied model is this: The pastor and staff do the ministry, and the

congregation supports them through attendance, giving, and occasional volunteering. The professionals are the players; the congregation is the audience.

Paul's vision is precisely the reverse. The leaders are the coaches; the congregation is the team. The leaders are not doing the ministry instead of the congregation. They are equipping the congregation to do it—which is a fundamentally different calling and requires a fundamentally different set of skills.

This distinction has profound implications not only for how we think about pastoral ministry but also for how we think about discipleship. If the Spirit has given gifts to every believer for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7), and if those gifts are meant to be exercised in the building up of the body and the advance of the Gospel, then helping believers discover and deploy those gifts is not an optional add-on to discipleship. It is one of its central purposes.

The equipping relationship is the discipleship relationship specifically designed to serve that purpose.

What Equipping Actually Means

The word Paul uses carries the idea of preparing someone to be fully ready for a particular purpose.

Applied to believers, equipping means helping a person become fully functional for the ministry to which God has called them. It is not simply teaching them information about spiritual gifts. It is not running them through a spiritual gifts inventory and handing them a results sheet. It is the ongoing, relational, often messy process of helping someone discover what God has put in them, develop it through practice and reflection, and deploy it in the actual places and relationships where God has positioned them.

That process takes time. It takes discernment. It takes a discipler who is paying close enough attention to see what the person themselves may not yet be able to see—and who is committed enough to stay in the relationship through the inevitable seasons of uncertainty, false starts, and course corrections that genuine equipping always involves.

One simple illustration has helped many disciple-makers visualize how equipping often unfolds. Sometimes called the Discipleship Square, it describes the gradual transfer of responsibility from discipler to disciple.

- I do; you watch.
- I do; you help.
- You do; I help.
- You do; I watch.

The value of this simple model is not that it provides another discipleship formula. It reminds us that people usually grow into ministry through increasing responsibility, thoughtful coaching, and growing trust. The model describes the transfer of responsibility. The equipping relationship provides the relational environment in which that transfer can take place wisely.

The New Testament Picture

The equipping relationship appears throughout the New Testament in a variety of forms, each illuminating a different dimension of what this kind of investment looks like in practice.

Jesus and the Twelve. The clearest model of intentional equipping in the entire New Testament is Jesus' relationship with His disciples. He did not simply teach them truth about the Kingdom. He prepared them to extend the Kingdom—to do what He was doing, in the power of the Spirit He would send, in the places He would not physically be after His ascension.

Mark 3:14 captures the shape of this preparation with characteristic economy: Jesus appointed the Twelve “so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14 ESV). The “being with” came before the sending out. The formation preceded the deployment. And the sending out was not a graduation ceremony—a moment when the training ended and the real work began. It was a continuation of the formation, now in a different mode.

When Jesus sent the Twelve out in Matthew 10, He gave them authority and specific instructions—what to take, where to go, what to say, how to respond to rejection. He prepared them as thoroughly as He could for what they would face. And when they returned, He debriefed them, processed their experience with them, and continued their formation in light of what they had encountered.

That send-debrief-reflect pattern is one of the most practically useful models of equipping in the Gospels—and one of the most underutilized in the Church today. It is also, as we will see, a pattern designed from the beginning not simply to equip twelve men but to reproduce itself through them into every generation that followed.

Paul and Timothy. The relationship between Paul and Timothy illustrates the equipping relationship in one of its most concentrated forms. Paul spotted Timothy in Lystra—a young man spoken well of by the believers there—and immediately gave him something more valuable than instruction: proximity to actual ministry.

What followed was not a curriculum. It was an apprenticeship. Timothy watched Paul work, carried his concerns to volatile churches, and was trusted with real pastoral assignments before he had fully developed the confidence to carry them. Corinth when the situation was unstable. Thessalonica when Paul was desperate for news. The most sensitive, demanding work of the early church—given not to the most experienced man available but to the one Paul was deliberately forming.

This is the equipping relationship at its most essential: real responsibility, offered before the person feels ready, with a trusted discipler close enough to provide honest support when the weight becomes difficult to carry.

Paul addressed Timothy's apparent tendency toward timidity directly—*"For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control"* (2 Timothy 1:7 ESV)—with the specificity of someone who had watched his man closely enough to know exactly what needed to be named. That kind of honest, targeted, relationally grounded feedback is one of the most practically loving things an equipping discipler can offer.

What Paul and Timothy's relationship ultimately became—the full arc of one person deliberately forming another not just for ministry but for multiplication—belongs to a later conversation. Here, in the equipping relationship, what matters is what it demonstrates most clearly: that genuine equipping is not about information transferred but about a person, formed through proximity, responsibility, and honest accompaniment, into someone capable of doing what they could not do alone.

Paul and Titus. Where Timothy seems to have needed encouragement and confidence, Titus appears to have been more naturally bold—the man Paul sent to Corinth with the difficult letter, the man he left in Crete with the daunting assignment of appointing elders in every town. Paul's letter to Titus is different in tone from his letters to Timothy—less pastoral and more strategic, more focused on the work to be done and less on the person doing it.

That difference is itself instructive. Equipping is not one-size-fits-all. Paul equipped Timothy differently than he equipped Titus—because they were different people with different gifts, different temperaments, and different assignments. The equipping discipler pays attention to the person and tailors the investment accordingly.

Priscilla and Aquila with Apollos. We encountered this relationship in Chapter 4 in the context of establishing, but it belongs equally here. Apollos was not a new believer in need of foundational grounding. He was a gifted, passionate communicator whose ministry was being limited by an incomplete understanding of the Gospel. What Priscilla and Aquila gave him was not just establishment—it was equipping. They took him aside, filled in the gaps, and released him to continue the work he was already doing, now with greater accuracy and greater effectiveness.

The result was immediate and significant. Apollos went to Achaia and “greatly helped those who through grace had believed” (Acts 18:27 ESV). The equipping relationship did not create his gifts. It released them.

What People Need to Be Equipped

Walk slowly through the equipping process and several consistent needs emerge—things that the person being equipped almost always requires in order to move from where they are to where God is calling them.

They need someone to see what they cannot yet see in themselves.

This is perhaps the most fundamental gift the equipping discipler offers: the ability to see gifts, capacities, and callings in a person that the person themselves has not yet recognized or named.

Most believers significantly underestimate what God has put in them. Years of messages—from family, from culture, from their own inner critic, sometimes from the Church itself—have taught them to minimize their gifts, doubt their calling, and assume that real ministry is for other people, more qualified people, more confident people, people with more training or more obvious talent.

The equipping discipler interrupts that narrative. They notice the gift in action—the way this person naturally brings clarity to a complex situation, the way they instinctively draw out the quietest person in a room, the way their writing consistently moves people, or the way they can walk into a chaotic environment and bring order without anyone quite knowing how they did it—and they name it. Specifically. Honestly. With enough detail that the person cannot easily dismiss it.

That naming is not flattery. It is a prophetic act—calling forth what God has placed in a person in much the same way that Jesus looked at Simon the fisherman and called him Peter before there was much evidence of rocklike stability.

They need real responsibility, not just instruction.

Equipping does not happen primarily in classrooms. It happens in the field. People are not equipped by being told what ministry involves. They are equipped by doing ministry—with support, with supervision, with the freedom to fail safely, and with a trusted person alongside them to process what they are learning.

This means the equipping discipler must be willing to give away real responsibility—not simulated assignments or closely supervised tasks where failure is impossible but genuine opportunities to lead, to serve, to create, to shepherd, to teach, to organize, to engage—and then to stay close enough to provide honest feedback when the experience is over.

Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs before He sent them out as the Church's primary missionaries. He gave them real authority and real assignments. And when they returned, He did not simply affirm them. He debriefed them—processing what had worked, what had been difficult, what they were still learning.

That pattern of real responsibility followed by honest reflection, followed by continued formation is the engine of genuine equipping.

They need honest, specific feedback.

One of the most practically loving things an equipping discipler can offer is honest, specific, timely feedback on what they are observing in the person they are equipping.

Not vague encouragement. Not the kind of generic affirmation that leaves the person feeling good but no clearer about what they actually did well or where they need to grow. Specific, honest, grounded feedback—the kind that says: *Here is what I saw. Here is what it accomplished. Here is what I think you could do differently next time. Here is the question I want you to sit with before we talk again.*

This kind of feedback requires a relationship strong enough to hold honesty and a discipler secure enough in their own identity that they are not threatened by the person they are equipping eventually surpassing them. The goal of equipping, after all, is not to keep people dependent on their equipper. It is to release them into greater fruitfulness than either of them could achieve alone.

They need theological grounding for their ministry.

Equipping is not only practical. It is also theological—helping the person being equipped understand not just how to do what they are doing but why. What is the theological foundation of the ministry they are engaged in? How does what they are doing connect to the mission of God as Scripture reveals it? What does it mean to serve in this particular way, in this particular place, as a follower of Jesus?

These questions matter because ministry without theological grounding tends to drift—toward pragmatism, toward mere effectiveness, toward the gradual replacement of a God-centered motivation with a human-centered one. The person who knows not just how to lead but why leadership in the Church is fundamentally different from leadership in the world, the person who knows not just how to teach but what teaching is for in the economy of God's Kingdom—that person is far

more likely to sustain faithful ministry over the long term than the person who has been trained in skills alone.

They need permission to fail.

Perhaps the most underrated element of genuine equipping is the creation of an environment in which failure is not fatal—in which the person being equipped knows that getting it wrong, stumbling, and needing to correct course do not mark the end of the relationship or the end of their ministry.

Most people who have unused gifts are not lazy. They are afraid. Afraid of getting it wrong in front of people who are watching. Afraid of discovering that the gift they thought they had is not as developed as they hoped. Afraid that one public failure will define them permanently in the eyes of the community.

The equipping discipler creates a counternarrative to that fear, not by pretending that failure has no consequences but by being honest about their own failures, by responding to the person's failures with grace and perspective rather than disappointment and distance, and by consistently returning to the truth that growth always involves getting things wrong on the way to getting them right.

Paul understood this. His letters to Timothy and Titus are full of the kind of honest, unsentimental encouragement that says: *This is hard. There will be people who oppose you. There will be moments when you want to quit. Keep going. The One who called you is faithful.*

The Equipping Discipler's Own Formation

There is a dimension of the equipping relationship that is easy to overlook but deeply important: what it does to the person doing the equipping.

Genuine equipping requires a level of security and generosity that does not come naturally and is not easily sustained. It requires the willingness to give away real responsibility—which means accepting the loss of control that comes with it. It requires celebrating the growth of the person you are equipping, even when their growth eventually surpasses yours. It requires finding your satisfaction not in what you yourself accomplish but in what you help others become capable of accomplishing.

That is a fundamentally different orientation from the one that most of us bring naturally to ministry leadership. Most of us are drawn to ministry partly because we have gifts we want to use—and using them feels good, feels meaningful, feels like what we are made for. There is nothing wrong with that. But the equipping discipler learns to find equal or greater satisfaction in seeing someone else's gifts released and flourishing.

Paul captured something of this in his letter to the Philippians, written from a prison cell while younger, freer ministers carried the work forward without him: *"What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice"* (Philippians 1:18 ESV).

The work continuing without him—through others, in ways he could not control or directly shape—was not a source of anxiety for Paul. It was a source of joy. He had not stopped caring about the Gospel. Rather, his investment in others had become its own form of proclamation.

That is the posture of the equipping discipler at their best: not the center of the story but the one who helped the right person find their way to contribution—and whose joy is complete in watching the Gospel move through lives they helped prepare.

What the Equipping Relationship Is Not

It is not a talent search. Equipping is not about identifying the most impressive people in the congregation and developing their gifts for the church's benefit. It is about helping every believer—including the quiet woman in the third row, the man who has always assumed he has nothing to offer, the teenager who has never been asked what they care about—discover what God has placed in them and find a way to use it.

Equipping belongs to the whole body. Much of what gets called “equipping” in church is quietly selective—focused on the people who seem most obviously talented, most naturally confident, most likely to make a visible impact. The assumption, rarely stated but frequently operative, is that equipping is worth investing in when the return seems likely to justify the investment.

That assumption runs directly counter to the vision Paul articulates in Ephesians 4. The Spirit has given gifts throughout the body. Every member has something to contribute, including those whose gifts have not yet been recognized or developed. The equipping relationship exists to serve that whole-body vision.

The Spirit has already made His investment—specifically and personally in every member of the body. The equipping discipler's responsibility is simply to take that investment seriously enough to help people find what has already been placed in them.

It is not a transaction. The equipping relationship is not a program in which the discipler deposits skills and knowledge into the person being equipped, who then goes off and uses them independently. It is a relationship—one marked by genuine care, honest feedback, shared prayer, and the kind of mutual investment that continues even after the most intensive season of equipping has passed. The person Paul equipped became his coworker, his friend, and his partner in the Gospel—not simply his graduate.

It is not a redirection toward the discipler's ministry. The greatest practical danger in the equipping relationship is subtle and usually unintentional. The discipler who has found deep meaning in a particular kind of ministry—teaching, pastoral care, evangelism, mercy work, leadership—will naturally tend to see that ministry as the destination toward which they are helping others move. They recognize gifts that resemble their own. They open doors that lead toward the contexts they know. They speak with the most conviction about the work that has most shaped them.

None of that is wrong in itself. But when it becomes the primary lens through which a person is being equipped, the relationship has quietly shifted from serving the person's calling to serving the discipler's vision.

Genuine equipping requires the discipler to hold their own ministry experience loosely enough to ask honestly: *Is this where God is calling this person? Or is this where I would go if I were them?* Those are not the same question. And the willingness to sit with the difference—to help someone move toward a calling that looks nothing like yours, into contexts you have never inhabited, using gifts you do not personally possess—is one of the marks of an equipping discipler who is genuinely serving the person rather than the discipler's own sense of legacy.

The person's calling belongs to God. The equipping discipler's role is to help them find it, not to find it for them.

Knowing When This Season Is Maturing

The equipping relationship does not have a clean ending. Equipping is less like a course of study that concludes with a certificate and more like the formation of a craftsman—a long, gradual process in which growing competence and growing confidence accumulate over time

until the person can work with increasing independence, even as the relationship itself continues.

But there are signs that the most intensive season of equipping is maturing into something different.

The person is initiating more and responding less—bringing their own ideas, their own discernment, and their own theological reflection to the work, rather than primarily implementing what the discipler has suggested. They are beginning to equip others—noticing gifts in the people around them, investing in those people, passing on what they have received. They are developing their own voice, a recognizable way of engaging their ministry that is genuinely theirs, shaped by their formation but not simply an imitation of their discipler.

And perhaps most tellingly: They are beginning to see things in their field of ministry that their discipler cannot see from the outside. They have developed the kind of local wisdom, earned through presence and practice, that cannot be taught and cannot be transferred, only grown. When that begins to happen, the equipping discipler's role shifts. They become less a coach preparing someone for the field and more a trusted conversation partner—someone to whom the person brings their hardest questions and their most significant decisions, not because they need direction but because the relationship has become a resource they value for the long term.

That shift is not a loss. It is the goal.

A Picture of Equipping Done Well

There is a moment in Acts 19 that many readers pass through quickly on the way to more dramatic events yet which contains one of the most instructive pictures of equipping in the New Testament.

Paul is in Ephesus, in the middle of an extended ministry that Luke describes as unusually fruitful—“extraordinary miracles,” a growing

community of believers, the Word of the Lord spreading and prevailing. And in the middle of this, Luke notes almost in passing that Paul “took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus” (Acts 19:9 ESV).

For two years, Paul gathered disciples around him in that lecture hall—not to give them information about ministry but to form them in the middle of active, fruitful, demanding ministry. They were not students waiting to graduate before they began. They were participants in the work, being formed by the work, with Paul alongside them to help them make sense of what they were experiencing and to keep pointing them toward what mattered most.

The result? “All the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10 ESV). Not because Paul was extraordinary—though he was—but because Paul was equipping people who were equipping people and because the Gospel was spreading through a network of equipped, released, Spirit-empowered believers who had been prepared to carry it.

That is the Ephesians 4 vision made visible. That is what equipping, done well and sustained over time, actually produces.

Not a congregation of consumers. A community of contributors. Not a few gifted professionals doing ministry while others watch. A body of equipped believers, each functioning in the gifts the Spirit has given them, together building up the body and advancing the Gospel into places that no single leader could ever reach alone.

That is what the woman in the third row was waiting for.

And it is what your church is capable of becoming—one equipping relationship at a time.

Reflection and Discernment for Leaders

About the people in your care:

- Think about the believers in your congregation or ministry context. Who is sitting in the equivalent of the third row—gifted, faithful, and significantly underutilized? What would it take to begin an equipping relationship with them?
- Are there people in your context whose gifts you have noticed but never named to them? What is stopping you from doing so?

About your own equipping relationships:

- Are you currently in an equipping relationship with anyone? If so, are you giving them real responsibility—genuine opportunities to lead, serve, teach, or create—or are you primarily giving them instruction?
- How do you respond when someone you are equipping gets it wrong? Does your response create space for them to learn and grow, or does it communicate disappointment in a way that makes them less likely to take risks in the future?

About the Ephesians 4 vision:

- How closely does your current ministry model reflect the vision Paul describes in Ephesians 4—leaders equipping the saints for the work of ministry? Where is the gap between that vision and your current reality?
- What would need to change in your church's culture, structures, or use of pastoral time for that vision to become more fully realized?

About your own formation:

- Are you secure enough in your own identity and calling to genuinely celebrate the growth and fruitfulness of the people you are equipping—even when they surpass you? Where do you feel the pull of competition or comparison, and how is that affecting your equipping relationships?
- What does it mean for you, in your specific context, to find your satisfaction not only in what you accomplish but in what you help others become capable of accomplishing?

About your church culture:

- Does your church culture communicate that ministry belongs to every believer, or does it functionally communicate that ministry is what the paid staff does? What specific messages, structures, or habits are reinforcing that culture?
- What would it look like to begin shifting that culture—not through a new program but through the example of leaders who are genuinely, visibly investing in the equipping of the people around them?

As you sit with these questions, remember that the gifts sitting untapped in your congregation are not an embarrassment. They are an invitation to look more carefully at the people God has already placed in your care. To ask better questions. To name what you see. To give away real responsibility. To stay close enough to offer honest feedback and patient accompaniment. To trust the Spirit who distributed those gifts to also guide their development and deployment.

The body of Christ is not short on gifted people. It is short on leaders who are willing to do the slow, relational, sometimes costly work of equipping them.

You can be one of those leaders.

In the next chapter, we turn to the most intentionally reproductive form of discipleship relationship in the New Testament—the relationship that is specifically designed not just to form a person for ministry but also to develop them into someone who will invest in others. We will explore what it means to multiply disciple-makers and why this particular relationship may be the highest-leverage investment a disciple-maker can make.

CHAPTER 8

Multiplying Disciple-Makers: The Relationship That Reproduces Itself

He had been a pastor for nineteen years when he finally asked the question that changed everything.

It was not a question about strategy. Not a question about programs or attendance metrics or the next capital campaign. It was a question so simple it actually embarrassed him a little, sitting there in his study on a Tuesday morning with a cold cup of coffee and a calendar full of good things that somehow added up to less than he had hoped.

“If I left tomorrow, what would remain?”

He thought about the sermons—hundreds of them, carefully prepared, faithfully delivered. He thought about the small groups he had launched, the counseling conversations he had sat through, the hospital visits he had made, and the committees he had served. He thought about the building program that had taken years off his life

And then he thought about people. Specific people. Not the congregation in the aggregate but individuals—men and women he had walked with closely enough, long enough, to ask whether they were different because of it. Whether they were more deeply rooted in Christ. Whether they were investing in others. Whether, if he were

gone, the work would continue—not because the institution would carry it forward but because the people would.

The answer was more honest than he expected.

He had been, for nineteen years, a faithful minister of the Gospel. A staunch believer in the Great Commission and discipleship.

He had not been a multiplier.

He is not unusual. In most churches, the gap between faithful ministry and multiplying ministry is one of the most significant and most quietly unexamined distances in the life of a leader. We work hard. We serve well. We preach faithfully and care genuinely and show up consistently. And we rarely stop to ask whether what we are doing is designed to outlast us.

But here is what is also true: The gap need not be permanent. The question the pastor finally asked on that Tuesday morning is a question that can still be answered—not by abandoning the faithful ministry he had built but by adding to it the one thing that would allow it to outlast him.

This chapter is about that one thing.

The Difference That Changes Everything

Every form of discipleship relationship explored in this book has been about transformation, about the Holy Spirit's work in a particular person's life, about moving them steadily toward the fullness of what God created and redeemed them to be.

That remains true here. The multiplying relationship is not less concerned with transformation. It is deeply, intimately concerned with the formation of the person being invested in—their character, their theology, their walk with God, their integrity in ministry.

But it brings to the forefront something that may already be emerging within the other relationships.

It asks not only: *Who is this person becoming?*

It also asks: *When is this person ready to begin investing in someone else?*

This does not mean the multiplying relationship begins only after the other relationships have ended. As we have seen throughout this book, these are not sequential stages but recurring relational purposes.

Multiplication may begin while someone is still becoming established, while they are learning to walk with others through restoration, while they are growing alongside peers, or while they are being equipped for ministry. The question is not whether every previous relationship has been completed. The question is whether the Spirit is beginning to invite this person to give away what they have already received.

Paul captured it in a single sentence that contains one of the most revolutionary ideas in the entire New Testament: “And 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 Timothy 2:2 ESV).

Four generations in one sentence. Paul to Timothy. Timothy to faithful men. Faithful men to others also. The Gospel moving not in a straight line from one person to the next but multiplying—branching, spreading, reaching into places and people that no single leader could ever touch alone.

That is the vision. And it begins with a relationship.

Every Relationship Looks Beyond Itself

Throughout this book we have described four distinct relationships that the Holy Spirit uses in forming people into the likeness of Christ.

Although each relationship serves a unique purpose, none of them exists for itself. When these relationships accomplish their purpose, they do not simply produce mature disciples. They produce disciple-makers.

The establishing relationship is not complete when someone has become firmly rooted in Christ. It reaches its fullest expression when rooted believers begin helping others find that same stability.

The encouraging and restoring relationship is not complete when wounded people are healed. It reaches maturity when those who have experienced grace become people who stay with the wounded.

The mutual formation relationship is not complete when companions help one another grow. It bears fruit when those companions become companions to others.

The equipping relationship is not complete when believers discover their gifts. It reaches its goal when equipped believers begin equipping others.

Multiplication is not another relationship added onto the previous four.

It is what happens when every previous relationship becomes reproductive.

Every relationship eventually asks the same question: *Who will you help next?*

Why Multiplication Is the Completion of the Arc

In these pages, we have described the goal of discipleship as transformation—the gradual, Spirit-driven process by which a person’s desires, instincts, reactions, and relationships increasingly reflect the life of Jesus.

But there is a dimension of Jesus' own life that this description, taken alone, does not fully capture.

Formation was not the end. Jesus was sent.

He spent three years forming twelve men—not simply so that they would be spiritually healthy individuals who increasingly resembled Him but so that they would go. So that they would make disciples of all nations. So that what had happened in them would happen in others, and in others after that, until the knowledge of the glory of the Lord covered the earth as the waters cover the sea.

The Great Commission is not an appendix to the discipleship Jesus practiced. It is its culmination. The formation He invested in the Twelve was always pointed outward—toward Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. The people He formed increasingly resembled Him by learning to give themselves away—in the particular, Spirit-empowered, reproducible way that He had modeled for them.

Transformation that does not eventually turn outward has not yet completed its arc.

The multiplying relationship is what that outward turn looks like when it becomes intentional, structured, and sustained. It takes everything the other relationships have built—the foundation, the resilience, the mutual sharpening, the deployed gifts—and asks: *Now will you do for others what has been done for you?*

That question is the hinge on which the multiplication of the Gospel turns.

What the New Testament Actually Shows Us

The multiplying relationship is not a modern innovation. It is the primary model by which the Gospel spread through the ancient

world—and the New Testament gives us several pictures of it that are worth examining closely.

Jesus and the Twelve: The Original Multiplying Relationship

Everything in Jesus' approach to the Twelve—the concentric circles of investment, teaching in the middle of real life, letting them struggle, calling them forward—was oriented from the beginning toward a specific end.

He was not forming them for their own sake alone. He was forming them to form others.

Mark 3:14 captures the shape of this with his characteristic economy: He appointed the Twelve “so that they might be with him and he might send them out” (ESV). The being with was always in the service of the sending out. And the sending out was not the end of the formation—it was the continuation of it, now extended through the people the Twelve would themselves form.

When Jesus stood on the mountain in Galilee and gave the commission that would define the Church's mission for every generation that followed, He was releasing the reproducible pattern He had spent three years embedding in the people around Him: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20a ESV).

Make disciples. Not make converts. Not build audiences. Not fill seats. Make disciples—people who are being formed, who are learning to obey, who are being sent, who will make disciples of their own.

The pattern was always meant to reproduce itself.

The Seventy-Two: Multiplication at Scale

There is a moment in Luke's Gospel that often gets less attention than it deserves and which contains one of the most practically important pictures of multiplication in the entire New Testament.

Jesus appointed seventy-two others and sent them out two by two ahead of Him into every town and place He was about to go (Luke 10:1). Not the Twelve. Seventy-two—a much larger circle of people who had been formed closely enough to be sent, specifically enough to be given instructions, and trusted enough to go without Jesus physically present with them.

They went. They returned with joy. And Jesus received their report, processing with them what they had experienced, what they had learned, what it meant that even the demons submitted to them in His name.

The same pattern. A much larger group.

That is not a coincidence. Jesus was demonstrating something about the nature of the pattern itself—it was designed to move beyond one small circle of twelve. It was designed to be handed on. To be practiced by the people He had formed with others they would form, who would practice it with others still.

The Seventy-Two are the New Testament's first picture of multiplication in motion—the send-debrief-reflect pattern breaking out of its original container and beginning to move the way the Gospel itself moves: outward, through people, into every town and place, without limit.

Paul and Timothy: The New Testament's Clearest Picture

If Jesus and the Twelve provide the original model of the multiplying relationship, Paul and Timothy provide its most detailed New Testament portrait.

Paul did not simply disciple Timothy. He deliberately, intentionally formed him to do what Paul himself was doing—to plant, to shepherd, to teach, to correct, to suffer, and to pass on to others what he had received.

The relationship began, as the best multiplying relationships always do, with Paul noticing something in Timothy that others may have overlooked. A young man in Lystra, well regarded by the believers there (Acts 16:2), whose mixed Jewish and Greek heritage made him an unlikely candidate by some measures—but whose character and faith had already been recognized by the community around him.

Paul took him along. And from that moment, Timothy's formation happened not in a classroom but in the field—traveling, watching, being sent on difficult assignments, carrying Paul's concerns to volatile churches, learning what ministry actually costs and what it actually produces.

When Paul wrote to Timothy from prison—twice—the letters he sent were not primarily theological treatises. They were the concentrated investment of a man who knew his own time was short, pouring into the person he had most deliberately formed everything that would be needed to carry the work forward.

The instruction to entrust what he had received to faithful men who would teach others was the natural culmination of what Paul had been doing with Timothy all along—forming him not just as a disciple but as a disciple-maker, not just as a minister but as a multiplier.

“What you have heard from me ... entrust to faithful men” (2 Timothy 2:2 ESV).

This is the multiplying relationship in its most essential form: one person, formed deeply enough and trusted completely enough, carrying forward what they have received into people who will carry it forward again.

What Makes This Relationship Different from Equipping

The multiplying relationship shares many features with the equipping relationship explored in the previous chapter. Both involve deep investment in a person’s gifts and calling. Both include real responsibility, honest feedback, and theological grounding. Both are oriented toward releasing the person into ministry, not keeping them dependent on the discipler.

But the multiplying relationship carries a specific additional focus that distinguishes it from equipping alone.

It forms disciple-makers, not only servers, workers, and ministers.

A person can be fully equipped for ministry—gifted, deployed, fruitful, effective—and still not be intentionally forming others. They are doing the work. They are not reproducing the work.

The multiplying relationship specifically develops the capacity and the conviction to do for others what has been done for you. It shapes not only what the person does but how they see—training them to notice the people around them the way Jesus noticed people, to ask the discernment questions that this book has returned to again and again, to recognize what God is doing in a person’s life and to know how to join that work faithfully.

It instills a theology of reproduction. The person being formed in a multiplying relationship needs to understand not just the mechanics of disciple-making but the theological convictions that make it imperative.

Why does multiplication matter? Not because the church needs more workers, though it does. Not because ministry is more efficient when more people are involved, though it is. But because the Gospel itself is reproductive by nature—because the Spirit who transforms one life is always moving outward through that life toward others, because the Great Commission is the natural expression of the Great Commandment, and because a disciple who has genuinely encountered the living Christ cannot indefinitely contain that encounter within themselves.

The multiplying relationship helps the person being formed understand that disciple-making is not a program to participate in. It is the shape of a life given over to the mission of God.

It requires a longer and more demanding investment. Of all the discipleship relationships described in this book, the multiplying relationship typically requires the most time, the most depth, and the most willingness on the part of the discipler to give away what they most value.

This is not primarily a relationship of weeks or months. It is a relationship of years—long enough for the person being formed to be tested, to fail and recover, to develop genuine theological depth, to discover their own voice in ministry, and to begin investing in others before the most intensive season of the relationship has ended.

Paul was with Timothy for years before he entrusted him with the assignment at Ephesus. Jesus was with the Twelve for three years—and the formation continued through the book of Acts and beyond. The multiplying relationship takes seriously what it actually requires to form someone who can form others.

What the Person Being Multiplied Actually Needs

Walk slowly through the multiplying relationship and specific needs emerge in the person being formed—things that distinguish what they require from what is needed in other discipleship relationships.

They need a model, not just a mentor. The person being formed in a multiplying relationship does not primarily need someone to tell them how disciple-making works. They need to watch it happen—in real time, with real people, with all the messiness and uncertainty and Spirit-dependence that actual disciple-making involves.

This means the multiplying discipler must be willing to let the person they are forming into their actual ministry—not as an observer watching from a safe distance but as a participant who is close enough to see what the discipler notices, how they pray, what questions they ask, how they respond when things go differently than expected.

Jesus did not give the Twelve a textbook on ministry and send them to practice on their own. He took them with Him. They watched Him engage Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman and the rich young ruler. They saw how He handled opposition, how He responded to failure, how He prayed when the weight was heavy. The model preceded the commission—and the model was always more than technique. It was a whole way of seeing and being that could only be transmitted through proximity.

They need to be trusted with people, not just tasks. There is a version of ministry formation that gives people tasks—programs to run, events to organize, roles to fill. That is not the multiplying relationship. The multiplying relationship gives people to people—specific individuals to walk with, to pray for, to invest in, to accompany through the particular season of formation they are in.

This requires the multiplying discipler to do something that is harder than it sounds: to release the people they care about into the care of

someone who is still learning. To trust that the Spirit who has been faithful in their own ministry will be faithful through the person they are forming. To accept that the people being cared for may not receive exactly what the discipler would have offered—and to believe that what they receive may be exactly what God intends.

They need honest, specific feedback on their discipleship relationships. The equipping relationship offers honest feedback on ministry tasks and skills. The multiplying relationship goes deeper—offering honest, specific, prayerful reflection on how the person is relating to the people they are forming.

Are they listening well or moving too quickly to solutions? Are they seeing the person clearly or projecting their own experience onto them? Are they staying present through difficulty or subtly withdrawing when things become uncomfortable? Are they pointing people toward Christ or toward themselves?

These are not comfortable questions. But they are the questions that distinguish a discipler who is genuinely forming others from one who is simply spending time with them. The multiplying discipler creates the kind of honest, safe relationship in which these questions can be asked and answered with both truthfulness and grace.

They need to develop their own theology of disciple-making. One of the signs that the multiplying relationship is maturing is the moment when the person being formed begins to articulate, in their own words, why they do what they do—not as a repetition of what they have heard from their discipler but as a genuinely owned theological conviction rooted in their own engagement with Scripture and their own experience of the Spirit's work.

The multiplying discipler does not aim to produce a copy of themselves. They aim to produce someone who has been formed deeply enough by the same Gospel, the same Spirit, and the same Scriptures that they can discern what God is doing in a particular

person's life and join that work faithfully—in their own way, with their own gifts, in the particular relationships and contexts where God has placed them.

What the Multiplying Discipler Brings

The multiplying relationship asks specific things of those who practice it—things that go beyond what any of the other relationships have required.

A willingness to be known, not just respected. The person being formed in a multiplying relationship does not need a perfect discipler. They need a real one—someone whose own walk with God is visible enough to be followed, whose failures are honest enough to be learned from, and whose love for the people they disciple is evident enough to be imitated.

This means the multiplying discipler cannot hide behind their role or their experience. They must be genuinely transparent—not in a way that burdens the person they are forming with unprocessed struggle but in a way that models the kind of honest, humble, Christ-dependent life that multiplication requires.

You cannot reproduce what you are not living. And the person you are forming will internalize not only your methods but your heart—your actual relationship with Jesus, your genuine love for people, your honest dependence on the Spirit. Those things cannot be taught in the abstract. They can only be caught in proximity to someone who actually has them.

A theology of decrease. John the Baptist said it most plainly: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30 ESV).

The multiplying discipler has to mean that—not as a slogan but as a lived conviction. Because the nature of the multiplying relationship is that it succeeds most completely when the person being formed

eventually surpasses the one who formed them. When they go to places the discipler cannot go, reach people the discipler cannot reach, and form others who form others in an expanding network of transformed lives that extends far beyond what any single leader could accomplish alone.

That kind of success requires a discipler who genuinely does not need to be the most important person in the story. Who finds their deepest satisfaction not in what they themselves accomplish but in what they make possible in others. Who can watch the person they have poured into walk into rooms they will never enter and trust that the work they invested is bearing fruit they will never personally see.

This is not natural. It is cruciform. It is the shape of the cross applied to leadership—the willingness to give yourself away so completely that what grows from that giving is larger than you.

The other relationships in this book can be described from the outside. Multiplication, I have found, can only be fully understood from inside it. I have largely stayed out of these pages. But multiplication is the one relationship I cannot speak about with integrity from a distance. So, I will tell you about a young man I knew early in my ministry.

He was young, married, and genuinely on fire for his faith. He could talk theology with fluency and passion. What he could not yet do was let that theology touch the actual texture of his life and marriage. The gap between what he believed and how he lived was wide enough that others around him had begun to notice it, even if he had not.

We met regularly—over coffee, over chores, in the ordinary unhurried rhythms of shared time. We talked about his marriage. We talked about theology. And we talked, honestly and sometimes uncomfortably, about the distance between the two. It took the better part of three years. But something shifted. The theology stopped being a system he defended and started becoming a life he inhabited.

He eventually moved away. We stayed in touch the way faithful friends do across distance. Then word reached me that in his new church he had begun meeting regularly with a couple of younger men—walking with them the way we had walked together, asking the same honest questions, showing up in the same unhurried way.

I remember thinking when I heard it: Here is a work that might stand in the last day.

I want to be careful how I tell that story. It was mostly what the young man and God did. I simply showed up with coffee and took the long view. But that is precisely the point. The multiplying relationship does not require exceptional gifting or carefully engineered strategy. It requires the willingness to be present, to be honest, to stay when the conversation gets uncomfortable, and to trust the Spirit to do what only the Spirit can do—including the part that happens after you are no longer in the room.

The long obedience of showing up.

The multiplying relationship is not sustained by intensity alone. It is sustained by consistency—the repeated, unhurried, faithful showing up that communicates, over years rather than weeks, that this person and this work matter enough to keep investing in.

There will be seasons when the relationship feels alive and fruitful. There will be seasons when it feels slow, when progress is hard to measure, when the person you are forming seems to be moving sideways rather than forward. The multiplying discipler does not abandon the relationship in the slow seasons. They stay—asking better questions, praying with more honesty, trusting the Spirit to do what only the Spirit can do.

Paul's letters to Timothy are the literary evidence of a man who kept showing up—in person when he could, by letter when he could not, through prayer always. The relationship did not end when the intensive

seasons of travel and ministry together were over. It continued, deepened, and bore fruit that is still being harvested two thousand years later.

What the Multiplying Relationship Is Not

It does not require a platform. The multiplying relationship is not reserved for the people who seem most obviously destined for significant ministry. Some of the most fruitful disciple-makers in the history of the Church have been ordinary men and women whose names no one will ever know—who quietly, faithfully invested in one or two people at a time, who invested in one or two more, and whose influence spread through generations of transformed lives that can be traced back to that original, unhurried, faithful investment.

Jesus chose twelve ordinary men. Paul chose Timothy—a young man who apparently struggled with timidity and a weak stomach. The multiplying relationship begins not with the most impressive candidate but with the faithful one—the person who is genuinely growing, genuinely hungry, and genuinely willing to give themselves to others.

Multiplication does not require a platform. It requires a person.

It is not a replication of the discipler's model. The danger in the multiplying relationship runs deeper than redirecting someone toward the wrong kind of ministry. It is the more subtle risk of forming someone in your own image as a disciple-maker—passing on not just the Gospel and the Spirit's work but your particular way of seeing people, your instinctive methods, your relational style, your preferred approach to the discernment questions this book has returned to again and again.

The person who has been formed in a multiplying relationship will inevitably carry the influence of their discipler. That is not the problem. The problem is when that influence becomes a template—when the person being multiplied feels that faithful disciple-making means doing

it the way their discipler did it, with the same methods, in the same kinds of relationships, toward the same kinds of outcomes.

Genuine multiplication produces disciple-makers who have been formed deeply enough by the Gospel and the Spirit that they can find their own way—who can sit with the person God has placed in front of them, ask the discernment questions with genuine openness, and join what the Spirit is already doing in that specific life, in that specific season, in a way that reflects how God has made and gifted them rather than how God has made and gifted you.

The goal is not another version of you. It is another person fully available to God—formed by the same Gospel, led by the same Spirit, and free enough from your particular expression of discipleship to discover their own.

Paul understood this. The disciple-makers he formed—Timothy in Ephesus, Titus in Crete, the faithful men of 2 Timothy 2:2—did not all look like Paul. They carried his Gospel. They did not replicate his method. And the diversity of their expressions of faithfulness was not a deviation from what he had passed on. It was the fullest possible confirmation of it.

Knowing When the Season Is Maturing

The multiplying relationship, like all the relationships in this book, does not end so much as it transforms. But there are signs that the most intensive season is giving way to something different and that the multiplication the relationship was designed to produce is beginning to take root.

The person is forming others without being prompted. They are not waiting to be told to invest in someone. They are noticing people—the way Jesus noticed Zacchaeus in a tree, the way Paul noticed Timothy in Lystra—and they are taking the initiative to begin investing. The

discernment questions that were once asked of them are now questions they are asking about others.

The person is making their own mistakes and learning from them. Not the mistakes of inexperience alone but the deeper mistakes of a person who is genuinely in the work—who has gotten something wrong in a relationship they care about, who has misjudged what a person needed, who has moved too quickly or too slowly, and who has brought that experience back to the relationship with enough honesty to learn from it.

The person is developing disciple-makers, not just disciples. This is the clearest sign of all. When the person you have been forming begins to invest in someone who begins to invest in someone else—when 2 Timothy 2:2 begins to take visible form in the relationships around them—the multiplying relationship has produced what it was designed to produce.

When the Church Lives This Way

Step back now and look at the full picture this book has been building toward.

A disciple-maker learns to:

Root people in Christ

Stay with them through failure

Grow beside them in mutual formation

Equip them for faithful service

And eventually:

Multiply disciple-makers who will do the same for others

A church is not built on programs. It is not built on the gifts of a few exceptional leaders. It is not built on the strength of its structures or the excellence of its services or the effectiveness of its strategies.

It is built, one relationship at a time, by ordinary people who have been formed by the Gospel and the Spirit and by other ordinary people who walked with them long enough and honestly enough and lovingly enough to help them become who God created them to be—and then turned them outward toward others, who turned outward toward others, who turned outward toward others still.

That is the vision of 2 Timothy 2:2. That is the vision that the Great Commission was always pointing toward—not a program to be administered but a movement to be joined, not a strategy to be implemented but a way of life to be lived, not a method to be mastered but a relationship to be offered, again and again, to the people God keeps placing in our path.

Reflection and Discernment for Leaders

About your own multiplication:

- When you consider your ministry over the past five to ten years, who are the people you have most deeply invested in? Are any of them now investing in others? If not, what has stood in the way—in them or in how you have approached the relationship?
- Is there a difference between the people you have discipled and the people you have multiplied? What accounts for that difference?

About the people God has placed in your life:

- Who in your current ministry context shows the marks of someone ready for a multiplying relationship—genuine growth

in character, a hunger to give themselves to others, a willingness to be known and to be honest? Are you investing in them at the depth their readiness calls for?

- Is there someone you have been equipping for ministry who is ready to be formed as a disciple-maker? What would it look like to intentionally shift the focus of that relationship?

About your own theology of multiplication:

- Do you genuinely believe that the goal of your ministry is to make yourself progressively less necessary—to form people who will do what you do and go where you cannot go? Where do you feel the pull of the need to be needed, and how is that affecting the depth of your investment in others?
- What would it mean for you, in your specific context, to embrace the theology of decrease—to find your deepest satisfaction not in what you accomplish but in what you make possible in others?

About your church culture:

- Does your church culture communicate that disciple-making is the calling of every believer—or does it functionally communicate that multiplication is what trained professionals do? What specific messages, structures, or habits are reinforcing that culture?
- Are there people in your congregation who are already quietly multiplying—investing in one or two people at a time, forming disciple-makers in workplaces and homes and neighborhoods—who have never been recognized or resourced for that work? What would it look like to identify and support them?

About the long view:

- If you were to invest the next three to five years in deliberately forming two or three people as disciple-makers—people who would form others, who would form others—what might that produce in ten years? In twenty? In a generation?
- What is standing between you and that investment, and is it worth the cost of what you would gain?

Conclusion

By now, I hope you have discovered that this book has never really been about methods. It has been about people. More specifically, it has been about the people God continually places in front of us and the invitation to join the Holy Spirit in His work of forming them into the likeness of Christ.

Disciple-making begins with a person willing to look at another person—really look, the way Jesus looked at a fisherman and saw a rock, the way Paul looked at a young man in Lystra and saw a Gospel carrier, the way Barnabas looked at a frightened convert from Tarsus and saw a brother worth standing beside—and to ask the questions that make transformation possible. The pastor’s question still matters. *What would remain?* Now you know the answer. Years later, if he were asked the same question—“What would remain?”—he would answer differently. Not because attendance had doubled, not because another building had been built, not because the budget had grown. Because there were now people who rooted others, who stayed with the hurting, who grew beside fellow believers, who equipped others, and who multiplied disciple-makers. The ministry no longer depended upon him. It lived beyond him.

What would remain?

The people.

The people who were formed. The people who were released. The people who were trusted with the most irreplaceable thing one person can give another—not information, not technique, not curriculum, but

the lived, embodied, Spirit-dependent, costly demonstration of what it looks like to follow Jesus and to help others do the same.

That is the legacy of the multiplying relationship. And it is a legacy available to you. It begins with a conversation, today, with the person God has already placed in your path—the one you have been reading this book and thinking about, whose face keeps coming to mind, whose next step toward Christ you may be uniquely positioned to help them take.

That is where every movement of God has always begun. Not with a program. With a person.

About the Author



Rupert Loyd Jr., PhD, a United States Navy veteran, has a Bachelor of Arts in history from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, an MDiv from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Boston, Massachusetts, and a PhD in leadership from Union University in Cincinnati, Ohio. He has over forty years of pastoral

experience in both urban and suburban churches, including multiethnic, multicongregational churches. Throughout his career, he has maintained a presence in both the church and the academy. He pastored churches in Luna Pier and Taylor, both in Michigan; Miami, Florida; and Point Place and Toledo, both in Ohio. He taught at Miami Christian College and Trinity College, both in Miami, Florida; Union University in Cincinnati, Ohio; Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Indiana; University of Toledo in Toledo, Ohio; and Lourdes University in Sylvania, Ohio.



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