

Introduction

Evangelicalism, particularly American evangelicalism, is failing the modern church. Evangelicals have done a superb job of evangelizing people, of bringing them to a knowledge of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, but they are failing to provide believers with approaches to living that keep them going and growing in spiritual relationship with Him.

—Alister McGrath¹

An individualistic Christianity leads inevitably to an individualistic god. Those who have been suckled at the breast of American culture will not easily be weaned from the milk of individualism.

—Donald McCullough²

The Bigger Picture

In the West, we have become so preoccupied with analyzing a leaf (a statement of Jesus) under the microscope that we tend to forget that the leaf came from a tree (the Gospels), and that the tree is part of a great forest (all of Scripture). This has certainly been true with respect to making disciples. As a result, we can become so focused on the ground-level issues that we lose sight of its contextual background – the bigger picture. What we really need is an elevated perspective of discipling, a different and wider point of view, one where we can see and take in the whole forest, or in the case of making disciples, the whole vineyard. Having done that, we can then parachute back down into a passage to closely re-examine what we thought we knew and understood, and discover what we may have been missing.

Taking a contextual approach to the Gospels is the difference between looking at a portion of a tapestry up close and then moving back to take it all in. While the portion being examined up close hasn't changed at all, how we now see it in relation to the whole scene does. When we reconnect with the contextual presuppositions in the Gospels, we can more clearly see the missing ingredients for “making disciples” today – ingredients that are essential for carrying out “make disciples of all nations.”

Missing Ingredients

In this present study, we will first look at four missing Gospel *perspectives* in our Western approach to discipling (Chapters 1-4), then observe three *patterns* of Jesus that seem to be missing in our contemporary discipling methodology (Chapters 5-7). We will end our contextual journey by

examining two oft-missed pieces that are essential for the fruitful making of disciples (Chapters 8-9). In rediscovering these missing ingredients, we will be in a better position to make appropriate adaptations to revitalize our contemporary approaches to what we now call “discipleship.”

Rediscovering What We've Missed

Jesus was purposeful in everything He did. As a result, He was intentional right down to His vocabulary. He knew why He had come and what He needed to leave behind – a vision and wisdom for a new Kingdom as well as for co-laboring partners who would lead it in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, His choice of words and phrases, as well as their sequencing, were deliberately chosen to communicate a timeless message. That intentionality also manifested itself in how Jesus chose and shaped the first disciples preparing them to live and lead in the Kingdom of God.

This book is not intended to be an expansive treatment of all aspects of making disciples, let alone for all cultures. There is much that others have written and observed which is helpful. Dallas Willard's, *The Divine Conspiracy*, and A.B. Bruce's classic, *The Training of the Twelve*, are two excellent resources that quickly come to mind. Rather, this book will try to emphasize those contextual issues that were foundational in Jesus' discipling methodologies, particularly those key discipling perspectives and practices that we may have either missed or lost sight of in the West.

Context Always Matters

The undergirding premise of this book is that context always matters when we encounter the inspired words of Scripture. The words in the

Bible have precise meanings, and those meanings are drawn from their context. Thus, if we are to connect fully with the intended meaning of a passage today, we need to know what its words – verbs, phrases, idioms, events, names and places – meant to those who first heard them.

Consequently, if we are going to truly understand what it means to make disciples today, we need first to establish what it meant to Jesus and His disciples. That raises some questions: What was a disciple back then, and how were they made? What did Jesus mean when He used the words “make disciples?” To answer these questions, we need to reconnect with the historical, cultural, and literary meanings embodied in those words,³ something the Gospel writers assumed their readers and listeners would know and understand.

Context is Often Missing

In contemporary discipleship books, there seems to be little emphasis given to examining the context of what it meant to make disciples during the time of Jesus. Usually no more than one or two pages are devoted to that topic, often with observations too general to be helpful. Missing is a look at the first-century contextual presuppositions and cultural givens embodied in what it meant to make and be a first-century disciple. Not having that Gospel discipling mindset makes it relatively easy to create our own Westernized notions of what we think “making disciples” was, is, or should be. And therein lies the root of much of the discipleship malady of today. By way of analogy, it is the same issue that is currently unfolding in the United States' judicial system as the courts re-interpret separation of church and state. Having become disconnected from the Judeo-Christian

ethic intentionally embedded in the original meaning of those words, courts are increasingly choosing to re-interpret them from a secular perspective.

Revisiting First-Century Context

This book revisits the Gospel record through the lenses of first-century context. Doing so allows us to see more clearly what methods and patterns Jesus used in detoxing the Twelve from their religious culture, and then remaking them so they could see and understand the Kingdom of God. It's not just what Jesus did, but the how and when He chose to do it. For the Twelve to be fit for leadership in His new relational community called the Kingdom of God, Jesus had to completely remake the interior of their lives. This included remaking their minds and hearts – changing their paradigms (how they saw things) as well as their ethos (how they felt about things).

Foundational to an understanding of biblical repentance is “to change one’s mind or purpose...involving a change for the better.”⁴ This contextual backdrop will help us understand what kind of a moral transformation climate Jesus created, and how He then chose to use that learning-teaching environment to accomplish His worldview and paradigm changing purposes. With those insights in place, we can then begin to consider their implications for making disciples today.

Compare and Contrast

Maybe it is time to look into the mirror and ask ourselves what is it that we have been presenting

to believers as “discipleship” that they do not seem to be embracing? Then ask, are we even focusing on the right things for effective discipleship? To put this question into the language of the marketplace, what are we offering and selling from our pulpits and lecterns as discipleship that the pew is no longer buying? If you are interested in these issues and related ones that pertain to the whole issue of making disciples and spiritual formation, then come along as we revisit the Gospels through the eyes of context. We will examine the essence of discipling THEN – at the time of Jesus – as well as NOW – Western discipleship today. Then we just might be in a position to ask: What does this compare-and-contrast diagnosis suggest as an effective discipling remedy for today?

Take Time to Reflect

Appropriate “Reflections to Journal and Share,” as well as some thoughts to “Ponder,” will be found at the end of each chapter. In the rabbinic tradition, you will find no fill-in-the-blank questions nor any easy questions; but, rather, thought-provoking questions to wrestle with to further hone your discernment regarding discipling issues.

For small groups and Bible studies, these guided thoughts can serve as helpful discussion questions with which to collectively wrestle. For devotional purposes, they can also serve as a guide for personal meditation and journaling. The prayed-for outcomes of both are the same – transformation by the Holy Spirit.

Reflections to Journal and Share...

- What is your sense of how discipling is working itself out in your life?

- In the church today, are we intentional about making disciples of Jesus, or do we operate as if making disciples somehow occurs by spontaneous combustion, even if we don't give it continual prayerful priority?

- From your experience and/or perspective, describe what a fruitful environment for making disciples of Jesus Christ needs to be like?

- What issues and implications do you see for people in today's Western culture reading biblical words that have first-century Middle Eastern contextual meanings?

Ponder...

Trying to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is not the same thing as training to be His Disciple.

*We seem to assume that spiritual growth will automatically result from
knowing more about the Scriptures.*

—**Bruce Demarest**⁵

Nondiscipleship is the elephant in the church.

(It sits in the middle of the sanctuary. Everyone sees it, yet walks around it and ignores it.)

—**Dallas Willard**⁶ (added)

*There is widespread discontent in North American Christianity.
Many of us are being asked to settle for life-support Christianity
instead of thriving Christianity. We should be saying,
“Are we missing out on something?”*

—**Jack Stackhouse**⁷

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

—**Psalms 51:10**

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

—**Psalms 139:23 & 24**

Prayer...

Jesus, I really do want to be an authentic disciple of Yours,

But it seems I often just do not have enough desire within me to want to live like one.

Please put within me the desire to want to consistently seek You, and to honor You in all that I do and think.

Search my heart O Lord, implant Your holy desires and fan them into flames with Your Spirit,

Creating a new heart within me.

Bathe me and immerse me in the deep wells of Your Word;

Refresh and renew me in their power.

And lead me in the ways that are everlasting starting right now.

Amen.

Notes and Sources

¹Alister McGrath, *Spirituality in an Age of Change* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), p. 9.

²Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1995), p. 23.

³For a fuller development of this contextual approach, see Doug Greenwold, "The Case for Context" in the Appendix of *Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God* (Columbia, Md.: Bible-in-Context Ministries, 2004), pp. 69-75.

⁴W. E. Vine, *Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Unabridged Edition (McLean, Va.: MacDonald Publishing Company, undated), p. 962.

⁵Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1999), pp. 72 and 23.

⁶Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 301.

⁷Jack Stackhouse, As quoted in *Christianity Today*, May 15, 1995, p. 51 in an article entitled "Toronto's Blessing: Is it a Revival?"