“Nothing is more central to the global mission of the church than making disciples. This is at the very center of the gospel. Gospel-Centered Discipleship captures both the heart of the gospel and the essence of discipleship in the proper order. For too long we’ve put making disciples ahead of a clear understanding of the gospel. In cultures around the world, disciples lean away from the gospel toward religious performance or spiritual license. As a result, disciples burn out or drift from devotion to Jesus. Gospel-Centered Discipleship is an authentic re-centering of discipleship around the gospel of grace, in the context of community, for the mission of God. Don’t miss it!”

S. Douglas Birdsall, Executive Chair, The Lausanne Movement

“Refreshingly honest and realistic, Dodson shares from experience the struggles and the blessings of making disciples. He does not give us a rule book, but gives practical teaching that can help every follower of Christ more effectively live out the gospel and the Great Commission.”

Robert Coleman, Distinguished Professor of Evangelism and Discipleship, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“Every church planter zealously runs into mission with a mandate from Jesus to make disciples of all nations. But what is a disciple? How are they formed? What needs to be done in order for a new church to make disciples? Dodson does a brilliant job of painting a picture of the head, heart, and hands of a disciple, as well as addressing how they are formed. This book provides a clear target for the church planter’s mission to make disciples.”

Scott Thomas, President, Acts 29 Network; Pastor of Church Planting, Mars Hill Church, Seattle

“Jonathan strips away a stagnant view of discipleship and replaces it with something so refreshingly honest and deep, you find yourself craving it. This book will redefine all of your relationships with depth and transparency and Christ-centeredness. This isn’t just God’s design for discipleship—it’s how we were designed to live. Jonathan just took discipleship from the spiritually elite to dorm rooms and neighborhoods and coffee shops.”

Jennie Allen, author, Stuck: The Places We Get Stuck and the God Who Sets Us Free

“Jonathan Dodson is the real deal! After reading the prequel to this book, we asked Jonathan to speak at our annual meeting. He blew us away with his grasp of the gospel and discipleship! If you want to take a deep dive into the mystery and joy of the gospel, this is the book for you. Jonathan will help you fight to keep the gospel the gospel. He will show you how to avoid the traps of performance and license. He will show you how to avoid believing a lie. And, most of all, he will help you to taste the sweetness of Jesus.”

Patrick Morley, author, The Man in the Mirror; CEO, Man in the Mirror

“Jonathan has done us a huge favor in writing this book. As I read it, a growing passion to fight sin grew within me. I want to be a card-carrying member of a ‘Fight Club’ so that in community we can take sin seriously, encourage one another to believe the gospel deeply, and pray for each other to respond to the Holy Spirit passionately. What else can I say? This is an excellent book. Buy it. Read it. Do it.”

Steve Timmis, coauthor, Total Church and Everyday Church; co-director, The Porterbrook Network, United Kingdom

“Takes us to the heart of the gospel and true discipleship, reminding us that the fight of faith is done in community in radical dependence on the power of the Spirit. It is a rare book that brings together clear theological thinking, stories of personal experience, and practical application. This book will be helpful to pastors, counselors, leaders, and anyone wanting a practical vision of gospel-centered life. It will surely challenge, convict, and encourage all who pick it up.”

Jason Kovacs, Pastor of Counseling, The Austin Stone Community Church
“With all of the talk of gospel-centeredness these days, I’m thankful to see Jonathan unpack this topic with a clear, compelling, Spirit-empowered approach. He goes beyond just answering the question: ‘What is gospel-centered?’ to help us see how the gospel of grace really works in the details of everyday life. His clarification of the unhealthy divide between evangelism and discipleship will bring about a more holistic approach to gospel-centered discipleship. I know Jonathan and respect the fact that these are not just concepts or theories, but truths coming out of the practice of his own disciple-making ministry. I trust that this book will serve to further advance the work of discipleship that has the gospel of grace as its foundation.”

Jeff Vanderstelt, Pastor, Soma Communities, Tacoma, Washington; Vice President, Acts 29

“Jonathan cuts to the heart of the discipleship crisis we are facing by showing us that discipleship isn’t an optional response to Jesus. Rather, it’s embracing ‘a whole way of following Jesus Christ as Lord in the whole of life.’ This book will stir your heart and awaken in you the places the Good News is calling to reflect the likeness of Jesus. On top of this, his ‘grace agenda’ will push you to live out the multiplying principle we see at work in the Great Commission.”

Mike Breen, author, Creating a Discipleship Culture; leader, 3DM Ministries

“One of the most healthy trends in the church today is a renewed focus on ‘making disciples.’ Jonathan Dodson has added an invaluable contribution to that trend. He makes it clear that making disciples must be gospel-centered and must take place in community. But he not only reminds us that this is what should be happening, he tells us how to actually make it happen. This book will give you a practical and proven approach that can work in your ministry setting. Read it carefully, both for its biblical challenge and its hands on approach to ministry.”

Stephen Smallman, author, The Walk: Steps for New and Renewed Followers of Jesus

“For the longest time, I have been hoping to see two books on discipleship. The first would be a practical resource for churches that, on the one hand, was serious about the kind of discipleship and accountability that are necessary for Christian growth and yet, on the other hand, would put forth the gospel of grace, not legalistic self-improvement, as the key to change. The second book I’ve wished for is one that would situate the task of discipleship specifically within the missional calling of the church. I was thrilled to discover that Jonathan Dodson has managed to write both of these books in one. In Gospel-Centered Discipleship, Jonathan pulls together all these different themes—gospel, mission, discipleship, church, and Spirit—into an integrated whole. And quite honestly, I don’t know a better person for that task.”

Abraham Cho, Assistant Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York

“I am grateful for Jonathon Dodson’s new book Gospel-Centered Discipleship. He masterfully took the truth and beauty of the gospel and pushed it into an area of Christendom that is typically performance driven. I came away from this book understanding how to think about discipleship in a new way. I also love that the book isn’t just theory; Dodson has clearly lived what he is teaching. The truth in this book has built my love for the Holy Spirit. It has challenged my thinking on community and discipleship. And it has effectively pushed my comprehension of the gospel to a new level.”

Jessica Thompson, coauthor, Give Them Grace: Dazzling Your Kids With the Love of Jesus

“Dodson writes with conviction and leaves the reader with important truths and responses to ponder. There is nothing cheap about the gospel he promotes. In fact, it’s all about the Jesus whom we profess and the Father we adore, who lead us to a life of victory in God’s Spirit. Read Gospel-Centered Discipleship with an open heart and a willing spirit to sustain you!”

Stephen A. Macchia, Director, Pierce Center for Disciple-Building, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; author, Becoming A Healthy Disciple
“What is often vague or implied in the phrase ‘gospel-centered,’ is rendered clear and convincing by Jonathan Dodson. Here is the practical how-to of heart change, teaching how souls are changed and not simply their wanton behaviors. The tools are all here: what we need to know, think, do, and most essentially believe about the gospel to live as a new creatures in Christ. This fills in the practical gaps of gospel-centered discipleship and gospel-centered living.”

Rick James, Publisher, CruPress; author, Jesus Without Religion

“One of the greatest challenges facing the missional movement is for disciples to ground their identity in the gospel, not in their mission. Gospel-Centered Discipleship clearly shows how true discipleship starts with a new identity in Christ, not a new behavior for Christ. It is saturated with deep truth and is as practical as it is informational. This book is a game-changer.”

Brandon Hatmaker, author; Barefoot Church; pastor, Austin New Church, Austin, Texas

“Jonathan knows that discipleship is of strategic importance in terms of the vitality, sustainability, and impact of the church. He also knows that to be true disciples we must become more like Jesus or else degenerate into religious ideology. Gospel-Centered Discipleship is a really helpful and fertile book for a critical time.”

Alan Hirsch, Founder, Forge Mission Training Network

“If in your struggle against sin you’ve been beaten up by the duty-bound, legalistic, moralistic methods of contemporary discipleship or enslaved by the licentious approach to holiness by proponents of cheap grace, then Gospel-Centered Discipleship is for you! Dodson calls us to join the fight against sin, legalism, and license by believing everything the gospel says about who God is for us in Christ, and how he is conforming us to the image of His Son. Read this book. Form a ‘club.’ And begin fighting sin for the glory of God and your joy in Christ.”

Juan Sanchez, Preaching Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas

“I am a big fan of Jonathan Dodson and grateful for this book. The church is desperate for this vision of grace-based, gospel-centered discipleship. I know I am! The guilt-ridden, shame-based, discipleship trail I stumbled on for years left me tired, defeated, and self-righteous. The discovery of gospel-centrality in my journey as a disciple and in making disciples, like this book reinforces and lays out so beautifully, saved my life, gave me hope, and, quite simply, changed everything. Gospel-centered sanctification and gospel-centered ecclesiology are like two lost continents to the current church. Thanks, Jonathan, for your work to help blaze the trail!”

John W. Bryson, Teaching Pastor, Fellowship Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee

“A timely book about gospel-centered accountability in an age of anonymity and shallow relationships. Dodson has done a masterful job highlighting how the Holy Spirit uses gospel truth to give us new, Christ-centered affections that dispel our thirst for sin. Moreover, he helps us see how we can come alongside each other to unearth the deeper heart-ids that drive our more obvious sins. For those still playing at religion through superficial, pseudo-accountability, this book is a welcome killjoy. You’ll never look at accountability the same way again.”

Luke Gilkerson, Internet Director, Covenant Eyes; blogger, Breaking Free

“Gospel-Centered Discipleship is a breath of fresh air. Dodson does an excellent job of combining theology and praxis. Highly recommended for those seeking to build a discipleship culture in their church.”

Jon Tyson, Acting Parish Pastor, Trinity Grace Church, New York, New York

“Dodson’s book sheds a great deal of light on a topic that is widely known, constantly discussed, but rarely understood. I am grateful for Jonathan and the Spirit’s lead in giving us much to consider and attempt to apply.”

Matt Chandler, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Dallas; author, The Explicit Gospel
Other Re:Lit Books by Crossway

The Explicit Gospel by Matt Chandler
Community by Brad House
Disciple by Bill Clem
Note to Self by Joe Thorn
A Meal with Jesus by Tim Chester
Redemption by Mike Wilkerson
Rid of My Disgrace by Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb
Church Planter by Darrin Patrick
Doctrine by Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears
Leaders Who Last by Dave Kraft
Scandalous by D.A. Carson
Religion Saves by Mark Driscoll
Vintage Church by Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears
Death by Love by Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears
Total Church by Tim Chester and Steve Timmis
Practical Theology for Women by Wendy Horger Alsup
Vintage Jesus by Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears
FOREWORD BY MATT CHANDLER

GOSPEL

Discipleship

Jonathan K. Dodson
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FOREWORD

As a pastor, I constantly pray and engage the people of the Village Church to keep what is “of first importance” at the center of their thinking, in both their justification and their sanctification. Over the years, I have become painfully aware that people tend to drift away from the gospel soon after their conversion and begin to try their hand at sanctification. In other words, they operate as if the gospel saves them but doesn’t play a role in sanctifying them. In the end, people become exhausted and miss out on the joy of knowing and walking with the Spirit of God. They miss out on intimacy with Jesus.

This is why I think Paul keeps preaching the gospel to people who already know it. He does it in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Over and over, he preaches the gospel to people who know the gospel. Why does he do that? He tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:1–2: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received”—past tense—“in which you stand”—perfect tense—which tells us that the Corinthian disciples stood in the gospel in the past and continued to stand in the gospel. We see that the gospel was received, and now it is holding them up. So the gospel not only saves me, but it also sustains me. Paul continues: “and by which you are being saved”—present tense. The gospel is good news for our past, it continues to be good news for the present, and will remain that way for all eternity.

The book you are holding is of significant help in keeping the gospel of first importance. Jonathan is going to clearly and biblically unpack how the gospel plays the lead in not only how we are saved, but also how we are sanctified. I have used this
Foreword

material in small group discipleship for over a year and am grateful that it is now being published. I have witnessed a great deal of fruit in my own life as well as in the lives of those I walk closely with. The chapter on the Holy Spirit was especially powerful for me, and I have found myself going back and reading it over and over again.

As a pastor and a man who desires to lead other men into maturity, I wish there were more resources like Gospel-Centered Discipleship. Dodson’s Spirit-led, gospel-centered, organically relational, and authentic book is such a rare jewel. I am grateful for Jonathan. He is a good friend and an even better ally in the gospel. God has used him to teach me much, and I pray the Spirit would use this book in your hands to challenge and change your heart and the way you view and do discipleship.

Matt Chandler
Lead Pastor, The Village Church,
Flower Mound, TX
INTRODUCTION

This book is the result of my struggle as a disciple of Jesus. Over the past three decades, I have failed in countless ways to obey and honor Jesus. I have wandered the wasteland of religion in an attempt to earn the unearnable favor of God. I have chased the pleasures of the world in an attempt to satisfy my infinite longings with finite things. Neither the legalistic rules of religion nor license from rules in worldly living have satisfied. These twists and turns on the path of discipleship have not honored Christ. Yet, despite my failures, year after year the desire to honor and obey Christ has not withered. In fact, it has grown amid failure.

Along the way, I’ve come to understand that following Jesus alone is not really what it means to be a disciple. Both the church and the parachurch taught me that being a disciple means making disciples. I was told that this meant two primary things. First, I should be active in “sharing my faith.” Second, I should find Christians who are younger in the faith to demonstrate how to be older in the faith. It took me quite a while to realize that this practice of making disciples was incomplete. Discipleship is not a code word for evangelism, nor is it a hierarchical system for spiritual growth, a way for professional Christians to pass on their best practices to novice Christians. Making disciples requires not only “sharing our faith,” but also sharing our lives—failures and successes, disobedience and obedience.

Professional vs. Novice Discipleship

Real discipleship is messy, imperfect, and honest. I wanted clean, “perfect,” and limited honesty. I preferred to disclose
only my successes, to pass on my accumulated wisdom and knowledge while hiding my foolishness and ignorance. It’s not that I wasn’t making disciples; people gobbled up my platitudes and piety. The problem was the kind of disciples I was making, disciples who could share their faith but not their failures.

Why did I embrace this kind of discipleship? Who was to blame—the church or the parachurch? Neither. It was my fault. Although I didn’t understand it at the time, my motivation for obeying Jesus had shifted from grace to works. It progressed from attempting to earn God’s favor, to gaining the favor of my disciples. “Discipleship” had become a way to leverage my identity and worth in relationship with others. I was comfortable on the pedestal dispensing wisdom and truth. The more disciples I made, the better I felt about myself. My motivation for discipleship was a mixture of genuine love for God and lust for praise. I sincerely loved God and wanted others to fall more deeply in love with him, but my motives weren’t always pure. I quickly became a disciple who lacked authenticity and community.

Don’t get me wrong, there were good intentions and good fruit from these relationships, but in a sense, I was still following Jesus alone. The professional/novice relationship created a comfortable distance from admitting my failures in genuine community. I stood at the top of the stairs of discipleship, peering down at those who sat at my feet instead of sitting in the living room with my fellow disciples, where I belonged. I put the best foot forward and hid the ugly one. As a result, disciple became more of a verb than a noun, less of an identity and more of an activity. The center of discipleship subtly shifted from relationships centered on Christ to an activity centered on what I knew.
Introduction

The Gospel Is for Disciples, Not Just “Sinners”

Fortunately, the gospel is big enough to handle my failures, and Jesus is forgiving enough for my distortions of what it means to follow him. In fact, the gospel of grace is so big and strong that it has reshaped my understanding of discipleship. As I continued to “disciple” and read the Bible, I was struck by the fact that the disciples of Jesus were always attached to other disciples. They lived in authentic community. They confessed their sins and struggles alongside their successes—questioning their Savior and casting out demons. They continually came back to Jesus as their Master and eventually as their Redeemer. As the disciples grew in maturity, they did not grow beyond the need for their Redeemer. They returned to him for forgiveness. As they began to multiply, the communities that they formed did not graduate from the gospel that forgave and saved them. Instead, churches formed around their common need for Jesus. The gospel of Jesus became the unifying center of the church. As a result, the communities that formed preached Jesus, not only to those outside the church but also to one another within the church.¹ I began to realize that Jesus is not merely the start and standard for salvation, but that he is the beginning, middle, and end of my salvation. He is my salvation, not just when I was six, but every second of every day. In the gospel, Jesus gives me himself, his redemptive benefits, and the church to share those benefits with. As it turns out, the gospel is for disciples, not just for “sinners;” it saves and transforms people in relationship, not merely individuals who go it alone.

It slowly became apparent to me that the gospel of Christ was where I was meant to find my identity, not in impressing God or others with my discipling skill. Refusing to share my
life with others, especially my failures, was a refusal to allow
the gospel of Christ to accomplish its full breadth of redemp-
tion in me. Very simply, God was leading me into a kind of
discipleship with the gospel at the center—a constant, gracious
repetition of repentance and faith in Jesus, who is sufficient for
my failures and strong for my successes. The wonderful news
of the gospel is that Jesus frees us from trying to impress God
or others because he has impressed God on our behalf. We can
tell people our sins because our identity doesn’t hang on what
they think of us. We can be imperfect Christians because we
cling to a perfect Christ. In this kind of discipleship, Jesus is at
the center with the church huddled around him. We give and
receive the gospel of Jesus to one another for our forgiveness
and formation. In sum, discipleship is both gospel centered
and community shaped.

Gospel-centered discipleship is not about how we perform
but who we are—imperfect people, clinging to a perfect Christ, being
perfected by the Spirit. As a result, I no longer stand at the top of
the stairs but sit in the living room, where I can share my faith
and my unfaith, my obedience and disobedience, my success
and failure. As we give and receive the gospel, we don’t linger
in imperfection, unbelief, disobedience, and failure. The Bible
repeatedly tells us to fight. We have to fight to believe this gospel.
Otherwise, we will slide back into individualistic, indifferent, or
professionalized discipleship. This fight is a fight of faith. It is a
struggle to believe what the gospel truly promises over what sin
decievfully promises. We need to remind one another that Jesus
has not called us to performance or indifference but to faith in
him. We need relationships that are so shaped by the gospel that
we will exhort and encourage one another to trust Jesus every
single day. We need gospel-centered discipleship.
Introduction

Gospel-Centered Discipleship (and How the Book Unfolds)

Knowingly or unknowingly, everyone puts something in the center of discipleship. In fact, everyone has a habit of putting rules in the middle of their relationships. Some like to keep the rules while others prefer to break them. I want us to replace the center (not necessarily the rules) with grace. This grace originates with the Father, flows through the Son, and settles on us in the Spirit. We can’t get to it without going right through Jesus, which is why discipleship is Jesus- or gospel-centered. Discipleship is about trusting Jesus, believing his gospel. While this may sound simple enough, the problem is that we all struggle to understand what trusting Jesus or believing the gospel really looks like. In addition, the notion that we should fight for this belief is rare. I have tried to show how we can believe the gospel and why it is every bit worth fighting for. Why and how we believe the gospel is the burden of this book.

Here is how the book unfolds. Part 1 forms the base of discipleship by providing a definition for disciple. Chapter 1 situates gospel-centered discipleship within the broader framework of disciple making, paying particular attention to the distinction between evangelism and discipleship. Is this a helpful or harmful distinction? How does gospel-centered discipleship address it? Chapter 2 builds on the definition of discipleship by identifying its clear goal—the image of Jesus. We all care about image, about the way people see us. Often this image falls short of Jesus, yet we are willing to strive for it. What must be done so the noble, beautiful image of Christ to be revealed in us?

Part 2 addresses the heart of a disciple. Chapter 3 explores where we go off center our fighting by focusing on misguided motivations in discipleship. In turn, chapter 4 calls us away from
Introduction

these extremes into gospel-centered motivations for following Jesus. With the gospel at the center of discipleship, we can live as Jesus intended—with faith in Jesus to produce the image of Jesus. Chapter 5 explains where these motivations come from—the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, the Spirit has been widely neglected by many Christians. Without the Spirit we cannot believe the gospel.

Part 3 tackles the practical aspect of discipleship by showing how we can apply the gospel in community and on mission. With proper motivations in place, chapter 6 turns to the communal nature of discipleship. If we aren’t careful, we’ll follow Jesus on our own. Failure to grasp the community focus of the gospel can cut us off from the grace God gives through the church. This reminds us that discipleship is a community project because the gospel redeems a people. Jesus created and redeemed us as people in relationship, not individuals in isolation. Instead of following alone, we can fight the good fight of faith with the church. Chapter 7 offers a practical way to apply the gospel in everyday life. It is a call for fight clubs—small, simple, reproducible groups of people who meet together regularly to help one another beat up sin and believe the gospel. Fight clubs have been crucial in my life and in my church. I hope and pray that you’ll find them helpful, too, that you’ll form a fight club and start fighting with the church for faith in the gospel. Finally, chapter 8 explains how to nurture and multiply truly gospel-centered disciples in your church or ministry.

On one hand, this book was very easy to write. As if guided by a “muse” to bring my thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and experiences together in written form, I often watched words flow freely onto the screen. Periodically, I was provoked to heart-enthralled worship as I struck geysers of insight, repentance, and joy.
Introduction

On the other hand, this book was, at times, difficult to write. For one, I had to taste the bitterness of my own sin as I reflected on my failures. In addition, I faced the challenge of writing something that is neither purely practical nor theological but both. I would like to write a biblical theology of discipleship; however, several helpful ones have already been written. Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship by Michael J. Wilkins and The Gospel Commission: Recovering God’s Strategy for Making Disciples by Michael Horton both address this topic. Therefore, in this book I have labored to integrate theology with everyday practice put into accessible form. For that reason, I have included theological sources in the notes, in the hope that many will read the sources. Finally, I pray that you will read this book in conversation with your heavenly Father, pausing to reflect, repent, and rejoice wherever the Holy Spirit prompts you. As you read, may God not only prompt but also cause you to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18)!
PART ONE

Defining Discipleship
I’ll never forget my introduction to discipleship. I had been a Christian for fourteen years, and was returning from a semester of Bible school at Capernwray Hall in Carnforth, England. My return was not voluntary. I was kicked out. The reason I left was the reason I went—an inordinate desire for female affection.

Months prior to my departure from Capernwray, I had been through the most devastating experience of my life to date. A lust-ridden relationship with a girl I met at college came crashing down all around me. I was nineteen. Big deal, right? It gets bigger. I was a whirlwind of emotions, unable to separate love from lust. One night my girlfriend broke the news that her father had abused her growing up, and that she was going to have to return home due to her poor grades.

What should I do? I couldn’t let her return to an abusive home. I took some time to pray and consider the best way to respond. In my mind, there was really only one appropriate conclusion—to marry my girlfriend, rescuing her from abuse. We eloped. Confident of my noble action, I couldn’t wait to break the news to my parents. I just knew they would be proud of me. I will never forget my mother’s shrill cry on the other end of the payphone when I called to tell her the good news. In between
Defining Discipleship

sobs, she told me that my girlfriend wasn’t telling me everything. Within days the truth came out. My girlfriend had intentionally deceived me about the abuse in order to “keep me.” Aware her failing grades would require a move home, separating her from me and therefore threatening the loss of our relationship, she decided to lie to me. She fabricated the story about her father’s abusive behavior to get me to intervene. There was no abuse, but there was a marriage. What was I to do? Who was this person? How could true love deceive me and go along with our marriage under false pretense?

Confused, angry, and heartbroken, I returned home where I sought my parents’ counsel and healing love. Within two weeks, we had agreed to terminate the “marriage.” The court passed a rare annulment, but nothing could annul the pain. I felt as though someone had taken a shotgun to my heart, shattering my emotions into a thousand pieces. The road to recovery would take many twists.

As a Christian, I knew that God hated my sin, but I had no idea how much he loved me. I shipped off to Bible school in England to try to figure things out, where I struggled with questions like: Who is God in the mess of my life? What can I do with this gnawing pain of betrayal? What does God think of my shameful Christian failure? I prayed and cried a lot but eventually sought comfort in a lesser savior. Although my escape to England numbed the pain, I quickly ran into the arms of another lover. I started dating a girl, sneaking out with her at night to go to the local pub. Eventually, I was caught making out with her on the premises and was kicked out of Bible school the day before the semester was over. Did I mention that this was the place where my parents had met, twenty years earlier? I made another phone call to them, this time fully aware of my failure. I limped home
in shame. To my parents’ credit, they had taught and loved me well. This failure was all my own doing. I reentered college with a gaping emotional wound and a sincere desire to improve, to restore the reputation of Christ in my life, to get it right.

When I returned home from England, I found a best friend and got a discipler. My friend would hold me accountable and my discipler would help me mature. The three of us met regularly for Bible study. As a disciple, I was taught how to study the Bible, share my faith, and cultivate character. As I understood it, discipleship was about maturing as a Christian, which is why the notion that I, too, could or should make disciples was pretty foreign. But somewhere along the way, I was told that evangelism is also discipleship, and that all Christians are supposed to evangelize in order to “make disciples.” Brushing aside the confusion between evangelism and discipleship, I went for it. I began to evangelize non-Christians and disciple Christians. My spirits lifted. I was on a better track, making things right. Along the way, I pondered how I could have sinned so much as a Christian. I tacitly concluded it was a lack of discipleship. Some might say the reason I struggled with sin so much as a Christian was because I only became a convert when I was six but finally became a disciple when I was twenty.

I’ve shared part of my story to illustrate the confusion over the meaning of discipleship and clarify its meaning along the way. Discipleship has become a catchall term that means different things for different people. When some people use the word, they think of a process for maturing Christians, perhaps what I experienced after returning from England (which I will come back to later). This kind of maturity might happen through a discipleship program or by meeting someone for coffee to discuss spiritual matters or to study the Bible. Others consider discipleship an
Defining Discipleship

evangelistic method. In this view, discipleship isn’t about maturing Christians; it’s about making Christians. Discipleship is sharing the gospel to win people to Christ. Evangelists make disciples. Entire organizations and churches are subtly divided by these two approaches to discipleship. Some organizations focus on maturing Christians, while others focus on making Christians. The former is about discipleship and the latter about evangelism. The evangelist proclaims the gospel to make converts, and the discipler teaches converts how to grow into disciples, hence the clarifying phrase, “evangelism and discipleship.”

The problem, however, is that this phrase is not clarifying at all. The attempt to clarify discipleship by separating it from evangelism actually muddies the waters. The problem is twofold. First, both evangelists and the disciplers refer to their ministries as “disciple making.” Should discipleship be understood as evangelizing non-Christians or the maturing of Christians? Second, and more importantly, the separation of evangelism from discipleship implies that “sharing the gospel” with non-Christians is an activity that is unnecessary with Christians. It intimates that the gospel doesn’t need to be shared with disciples. This dichotomy surfaces a false view of the gospel, namely that the gospel has the power to save but not to sanctify. It assumes that the gospel functions like a space shuttle’s external fuel tank, falling away after the shuttle has launched us into God’s orbit. The gospel, however, is more like an internal engine, always propelling us into God’s presence. The gospel is necessary for getting right and doing right with God, for salvation and sanctification.

What, then, is the truth about discipleship? In this chapter, I will try to clarify these two issues surrounding discipleship by establishing a definition for the word disciple. With a clear definition in place, we will proceed to show how the gospel integrates,
Making Disciples: Evangelism or Discipleship?

not dichotomizes, evangelism and discipleship. As I will show throughout this book, understanding the role of the gospel in discipleship can make a huge difference in our lives. It certainly has in mine! Once a gospel-centered definition of discipleship is established, we will turn our attention to how the gospel actually makes disciples.

Defining Discipleship

The word *disciple* is used more frequently than *Christian* to refer to believers in the Bible. This repeated usage tells us that disciple is a fundamental category for Christians. We are disciples first and parents, employees, pastors, deacons, and spouses second. Disciple is an identity; everything else is a role. Our roles are temporary but our identity will last forever. Marvelous. If this is true, it is incredibly important to have a sound definition for the word *disciple*.

There are three aspects that comprise a disciple’s identity. The first is *rational*. Popular descriptions of the word *disciple* are often taken from the definition of the Greek word, *mathetes*, which is rendered “student or pupil.” Interestingly, the Greek philosopher Socrates eschewed *mathetes* as a term for designating his relationship with his followers. This was primarily due to its rational connotation among the Sophists. The Sophists reduced the meaning of *disciple* to an exchange of information between master and student. While *mathetes* certainly includes the rational meaning implied in the student-teacher relationship, the biblical definition of disciple cannot be determined by classical Greek usage alone. Rather, the whole of biblical theology, and Jesus’s way of making disciples in particular, should shape our definition. Michael Wilkins offers this perspective in his foundational biblical theology of discipleship, *Following the Master*:
Defining Discipleship

*A Biblical Theology of Discipleship.* He notes that the meaning of “disciple” should not be restricted to a dictionary definition alone: “The type of relationship is not to be found within the inherent meaning in *mathetes* but within the dynamic created by the master and the kind of commitment to him” (emphasis added).³

What kind of dynamic existed between Jesus and his disciples? It certainly included a rational dynamic. Jesus appealed to the reason of his followers by instructing them through sermons, stories, and object lessons. He labored to teach them the gospel of the kingdom of God (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; Mark 1:14–15).

However, like Socrates, Jesus did not view his disciples as mere students. He viewed them as family: “‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’” (Matt. 12:48–49). For Jesus, discipleship was rational and relational, the second aspect of being a disciple. His relationship with the disciples was based on truth and grace (John 1:14–17). He taught them the gospel and embodied its grace for them in everyday life. God humbled himself in Jesus to share everyday life with everyday people. He chose twelve disciples from various vocations ranging from fisherman to tax man and shared everything with them! Jesus shared his meals, his heart, his teachings, his sufferings, and his hopes for the future with these men, all while taking road trips, mountain hikes, and moving toward his urban martyrdom. Imagine how strong and intimate these relationships were after three years! The disciples had become family. Yet, Jesus’s truth and grace was not restricted to his immediate family of disciples. It was meant to overflow. The family was intended to grow. We might say Jesus’s discipleship relationships had a grace agenda.
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The Great (Gospel) Commission

Jesus’s grace agenda reveals a third aspect in the identity of a disciple—missional.* A disciple is rational (learner), relational (family), and missional (missionary). All three aspects of discipleship are expressed in Jesus’s so-called Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20: “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”

Gospel Going

In this commission, Jesus reveals his agenda to make disciples, not just of the twelve but also of every ethnic group in the world. How would his audacious agenda be accomplished? Jesus tells us that by going, baptizing, and teaching we can fulfill his commission. These three participles modify the main verb “make disciples.” Going reflects the sent nature of a disciple. Disciples are sent to make more disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples. . . .” (Matt. 28:19). The main point isn’t to go (in your effort), but that we are sent (under Jesus’s authority and in Jesus’s power). Jesus is the ground of our going. When Jesus sends, he sends not merely to evangelize but in his power to make disciples. Under his authority, the so-called Great Commission begins with Jesus, not our great effort, and ends with Jesus—“I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). The mission of making disciples starts and finishes with Jesus. As we will see, this is what truly makes the Great Comis-

*I plan on writing a follow-up book that focuses exclusively on the missional aspect of discipleship.
Defining Discipleship

Assuming a disciple is on mission, how are we supposed to make disciples? Should we start a discipleship program? What did Jesus expect his disciples to do? In his classic book, The Master Plan of Evangelism, Robert Coleman answers precisely this question: “His [Jesus’s] concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow. . . . Men were to be his method of winning the world to God.”

Men were his method. Men and women sharing the gospel with other men and women is how Jesus would spread his grace agenda. They did this, like their Master, by communicating a rationally coherent gospel. Jesus sent the twelve and the seventy on missions to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. We might say that they “evangelized” by announcing the arrival of God’s rule and reign in Christ. They joined Jesus in calling people to repentance, and the number of disciples increased (Luke 6:17). The disciples made disciples by going with the gospel.

Gospel Baptizing

As the disciples went, they also baptized. Baptism reflects all three aspects of a disciple’s identity, with particular emphasis on missional. First, baptism is a sign that we have learned the gospel. It signifies our identification with Christ in his death as we are lowered into his “watery grave,” and identification with his life, where we are raised up into his resurrection life (Rom. 6:4). In baptism, we are meant to see that Jesus’s death and resurrection becomes our death and resurrection. The life that emerges from the baptismal waters is a life that is dead to sin and alive to God. In this sense, baptism is not merely a ceremony but a symbol of the gospel. Second, we are baptized
into two overlapping communities. The first is the divine community of the Trinity: “Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt: 28:19). The second community is the church: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). Baptism results in our participation in a new, spiritual family—the family of the Trinity. Jesus is the entry point into the divine community and the head of our new community. When we learn Jesus, we are baptized into his family, both human and divine. Third, baptism is missional because it is the outcome of obedience to the Great Commission. If sent disciples don’t share the gospel in the power and authority of Jesus, then people don’t get to respond by repentance, faith, and baptism. If sent disciples do live out their identity, sharing Jesus, then people are baptized in vivid commemoration of their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. In a sense, baptism is the end of the Great Commission and, at the same time, it is its beginning. Baptism begins our participation in the wonderful gospel mission. Whenever someone is baptized, another disciple is sent in the power and authority of Jesus to join the mission of making disciples of all nations.

Once we become his disciples, our challenges don’t disappear. Although Jesus’s death and resurrection becomes our death and resurrection by faith, we often exchange our new life for the old life. We temporarily place our faith in something or someone other than Jesus. One of the great challenges of disciples is to walk out our new life of Christ, enjoying his victory over sin. God gives us the gift of repentance so that we can continually return to our new life in Christ and enjoy communion with him. The disciple who fights to believe the gospel and live out his or her baptism becomes a witness to the power of the gospel. The fight to be who we are in Christ is what this book is all about.
Defining Discipleship

I want to encourage you to be disciples who believe what God has said about you and what he has done for you in the gospel. To summarize, the first two directives of the Great Commission, going and baptizing, primarily reflect the relational and missional aspects of a disciple. They also reveal that when a rational gospel is truly believed, a relational and missional disciple is made. We make disciples by gospel going and gospel baptizing.

Gospel Teaching

Jesus’s Commission is further described as “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded” (Matt. 28:20). What is the teaching Christ commanded? John Nolland comments: “In Matthew ‘all that I have commanded you’ has in mind the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel as directed to the disciples.” The teaching is gospel including the breadth of the redemptive, Christ-centered story and the depth of later doctrinal reflection on that story. It is the story of how the good news unfolds and what that story means. The meaning of the story is unlocked for the disciples when they discover that it is wrapped up in the person and work of Jesus himself: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Jesus is both the storyteller and the point of the story. He showed the disciples how the Old Testament revealed his suffering, death, and resurrection. Moreover, our aim is to not only teach the gospel but also to observe the gospel. We are to teach disciples to observe all that Christ commanded. As the point of the story, Jesus should be applied to our lives, which is precisely what he calls for: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”
(Luke 24:46–47). Christ-centered repentance and forgiveness is something to be heard and applied, not just once, but for the entirety of a disciple’s life. At the risk of oversimplification, we could say that the Great Commission commands us to learn the gospel by the gospel. We learn the breadth and depth of the good news by continually situating ourselves in it, through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus is the gospel of our teaching and observing. It is this understanding of the gospel that makes disciples, which is why it would be better to refer to the commission as the “Gospel Commission.” The Gospel Commission sends us to teach and observe the gospel.

With this all too brief explanation of the Great Commission directives, we must conclude that the gospel isn’t just for evangelism, the initial making of disciples. It is also for discipleship, the continual making of disciples. Jesus’s view of discipleship is radically gospel centered. The gospel is for not-yet disciples and already disciples. The gospel people believe to be baptized is the same gospel people believe to be sanctified (through the work of the Spirit). Followers of Jesus make and mature disciples by going with the gospel, baptizing disciples into gospel community, and teaching the gospel. We are to go in the power of the gospel, baptize into the grace of the gospel, and teach the Person of the gospel. Jesus is the ground of our going, the goal of our baptizing, and the gospel of our teaching. Making disciples is radically Jesus centered. This is how we make disciples—gospel going, gospel baptizing, gospel teaching.

If making disciples happens through gospel-centered going, baptizing, and teaching, the semantic distinction between evangelism and discipleship is superfluous. Disciples are made, whether for the first or the fiftieth time, through the gospel. Jesus’s real concern was not evangelism versus discipleship, but
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the good news. Both are a product of the gospel. The evangelism/discipleship debate misses the point of the Gospel Commission. Jesus’s Commission is not mission centered but gospel centered. It focuses on proclaiming the gospel to not-yet disciples and teaching the gospel to already disciples. Jesus puts the gospel first, which leads to making and maturing disciples. He does not call people to evangelize first, making discipleship an optional second. Both evangelism and discipleship are gospel motivated.

When the Gospel Commission is understood rightly, the dichotomy between evangelism and discipleship becomes significant. This dichotomy removes the gospel of grace from discipleship while maintaining its centrality in evangelism. But as we have seen, the gospel is central to making disciples! This clarification helps me reinterpret my initial encounter with discipleship. I now see that spiritual growth as a disciple isn’t what rectified the moral failures of my past. No, the death and life of Jesus is what rectifies my past, forgiving all my sins, Christian and pre-Christian. Therefore, it is continual trust in his death and life for my sin and righteousness that matures me, drawing me deeper and deeper into an ever-present hope of acceptance before God. This hope is Jesus Christ as my Lord and Redeemer, not a better moral track record. When we absorb the radical gospel focus of the Gospel Commission, it compels the mission of making disciples who, in turn, preach and teach the gospel of grace to others.

Christians who internalize the gospel of grace more and more are compelled to spread the gospel more and more. The problem, however, is that very often the gospel we preach and teach is malnourished. In evangelism, the gospel is frequently reduced to a spiritual ticket to guarantee a reservation in heaven. This view of the gospel makes joining the mission of God or submitting to Jesus Christ as Lord optional. It teaches us that
the gospel is all we need to cash in the ticket when death comes knocking at our door.

When this view of the gospel is adopted in discipleship, it relegates the gospel to evangelistic activity. As a result, discipleship must become something different. We force it to set itself apart by focusing on something more “advanced” like theology, piety, or social justice. These views on evangelism and discipleship stem from a gross misunderstanding of the Great Commission, namely that the Commission is centered on either the mission of soul winning or the mission of Christian maturing. These interpretations are gospel anemic. The Great Commission is not evangelism or discipleship centered; it is gospel centered. Rightly understood, the gospel calls the evangelized to more than belief to obtain a ticket, and disciples to more than spreading an anemic gospel which must be beefed up through spiritual disciplines or social justice. Jesus’s disciples would never have made this gross error. They knew the gospel was of kingdom proportions, animating and laying claim to all of life. The gospel makes all-encompassing demands, and what the gospel demands, it supplies. The disciples knew that the gospel, not mission, was the invigorating power of Jesus’s Commission. This is why they devoted their lives to the mission of making disciples by going, baptizing, and teaching the gospel.

Therefore, when we go, baptize, and teach others, we express all three aspects of discipleship—rational, relational, and missional. As learner, family, and missionary, every disciple joins Jesus’s grace agenda by baptizing and teaching others the gospel, for the first or the fiftieth time. Recalling Wilkins’s insistence that the definition of a disciple should be determined by “the dynamic created by the master,” we conclude that Jesus’s definition of a disciple includes the three aspects of rational, relational, and mis-
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sional. These aspects are expressed through the communication of gospel truth (rational) within everyday relationships of love (relational) with a grace agenda to baptize people into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (missional). A disciple of Jesus, then, is someone who learns the gospel, relates in the gospel, and communicates the gospel. In short, disciples are gospel centered.10

The Gospel Makes and Matures Disciples

A disciple of Jesus is someone who learns the gospel, relates in the gospel, and communicates the gospel. This definition of disciple shows us that the gospel both makes and matures disciples. We see this in Jesus’s ministry. Jesus proclaimed the same gospel to the crowds that he taught to the disciples. He did not have the twelve on a special, gospel-plus track to study advanced subject matter. The gospel is for undergraduates and graduates because nobody ever graduates from the gospel. Jesus taught the same gospel of the kingdom to sinners and saints. Why? Because his agenda of grace is the only solution to our common predicament of sin, Christian or non-Christian. Both desperately need the forgiving, reconciling, and restoring power of the gospel to know and enjoy God, not just once but for a lifetime.

In light of this understanding of discipleship, I did not become a disciple at twenty; I became a disciple upon conversion to Jesus Christ, at age six. My collegiate sins did not betray a failure to become a disciple upon my conversion; they betrayed a failure to grasp the gospel in sanctification. We aren’t converted at the outset of the Christian life only to join the gospel-plus track a little later as a disciple. What I was missing was not a new set of relationships to usher me into Christian maturity (with a discipler and an accountability part-
ner) but a deep understanding of the gospel of grace. What I needed was a deeper comprehension of the cross and the resurrection. I needed to know that Jesus’s sacrifice is sufficient, not just for pre-Christian failures but for post-Christian, lifelong failures. Jesus died to set me free from judgment by embracing my judgment on the cross. Riddled with guilt and sin, and a dichotomous view of discipleship, I could not grasp freeing forgiveness purchased for me at the cross of Christ. Unaware of my union with Christ, his enduring approval seemed like something I had to regain. I did not grasp the present tense power of a Jesus “delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25), which confers forgiveness and acceptance not only in the past but also in the present.

The power of God’s reckless love and remarkable grace could not pull me out of sin into repentance because, in some way, I perceived that love and grace as restricted for better men. I felt I had transgressed in my new life in Christ, forever trapped in a struggle to return to the new. I failed to believe Romans 6:6–7: “We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.” I believed the bonds of sin were stronger than the power of grace. Naturally, I turned to performance, not grace. At every failure, I concluded that I needed to work harder, get better accountability, and perhaps find a stronger discipler. What I did not know is that discipleship is not performance based. What I needed is what all of us need—continual belief in the depth of God’s forgiveness and the resilience of his genuine approval in Christ. In brief, what I needed was more Jesus, not more discipline. As Bonhoeffer points out, I needed to give up on myself and give in to Jesus: “When a man really gives up try-
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ing to make something out of himself—a saint, or converted sinner, or a churchman, a righteous or unrighteous man, . . . when in the fullness of tasks, questions, success or ill-hap, experiences and perplexities, a man throws himself into the arms of God . . . then he wakes with Christ.”

We need to put performance and rebellion to sleep so that we can wake up to Jesus. The gospel promises us the arms of God’s loving embrace every single minute of every single day, provided we give up on ourselves. When we give up on our rebellion and religion, we can give in to God’s amazing grace. This surrender is a recentering of faith in Jesus. Jesus, alone, should take the center place in our lives, not our Bible reading, evangelism, character, or effort to be different or spiritual. No disciple will ever graduate from the school of grace. Every follower of Jesus needs to know, and be reminded, that the gospel that makes disciples is the very same gospel that matures disciples. We are born in grace and we breathe by grace, all bought by the blood of Jesus.

In summary, this gospel-centered definition of discipleship collapses the dichotomy between evangelism and discipleship by showing that disciples are made and matured through repentance and faith in the good news. If this news is what makes and matures a disciple, then evangelism and discipleship are both gospel endeavors. The gospel integrates, not dichotomizes, evangelism and discipleship by announcing a grace that saves and sanctifies disciples! Michael Horton captures this well when he writes: “We have to reevaluate the common assumption today that we move from being evangelized to being discipled. These terms are interchangeable. Believers need to be immersed in the gospel every week.”

This gospelcentric approach to disciple making is largely
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missing from discipleship today, which tends to focus on evangelistic techniques and discipleship methods. Unless these methods are tethered to a robust understanding of the gospel, they will actually sabotage discipleship. What we need is a recentering of Christian discipleship devolving it into forms of spiritual performance. The Great Commission is not evangelism or discipleship centered; it is gospel centered. It calls us to make disciples by being a people who orbit around Jesus and his blood-bought benefits, not performance and self-made efforts. Disciples are gospel people who introduce and reintroduce themselves and others to the person and power of Jesus over and over again. A disciple of Jesus never stops learning the gospel, relating in the gospel, and communicating the gospel.

Integrated Discipleship

With a clear definition of “disciple” in place, we see that the gospel integrates, not dichotomizes, evangelism and discipleship. The key to resolving this dichotomy is the gospel itself. Before concluding our definition of discipleship, I will briefly sketch a more constructive, gospel-centered framework for discipleship. He is the integrating center of everything!

The Integrating Gospel

When discipleship is gospel centered, it integrates more than evangelism and discipleship; it integrates all three aspects of a disciple through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus uniquely brings the rational, relational, and missional aspects together as our Lord and Christ.

When the word Lord is used to refer to Jesus in the New Testament, it aligns Jesus with Yahweh. Here’s how: the Greek word for Lord, kurios, is used to refer to Yahweh in the
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Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) and to Jesus in the Greek New Testament. This is why: in the Old Testament, we see Yahweh referred to as Lord, and in the New Testament, we see Jesus referred to as Lord. This alignment places Jesus in God, where the Father and the Son share their identity and sovereignty. As part of the Godhead (together with the Spirit), they rule over all created things. Therefore, when we read, “Jesus is Lord,” divine identity and sovereignty should ripple through our minds in awe-inspiring recognition of an immense Jesus. To put this in simple terms, when we see Jesus referred to as Lord, we should see Jesus as God and Jesus as King.

Think, for a moment, about the implications of Jesus’s divine lordship. If Jesus is Lord, then he doesn’t merely rescue sinners from judgment, but he also brings disciples under his divine authority. Translation: when we become Jesus’s disciples, we also become his servants. Disciples are servants who take up their cross and follow him (Luke 9:23). When we turn to Jesus, we turn everything over to him. When we confess Jesus as Lord, we embrace his authority over every aspect of our lives. This is precisely why Bonhoeffer can say: “When Jesus calls a man, he bids him to come and die.” When Jesus is Lord, we give up on our old life (a sort of death) in order to live a new life. When we put our faith in Jesus as Lord, we surrender self-rule in order to come under God’s wise, gracious, and all-powerful rule. We submit to his reign and join his mission. This life-altering truth forms Jesus’s preface to the Gospel Commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). This new, expansive, awe-inspiring authority orders the life of a disciple to learn the gospel, relate in the gospel, and communicate the gospel in glad submission to King Jesus. As a result,
we grow in the gospel as his servants, relate in the gospel as part of his family, and communicate the gospel as his ambassador-missionaries. As Lord, Jesus integrates the rational, relational, and missional aspects of discipleship under his sovereign and divine authority. Consequently, wherever we go, the King goes, and where the King goes, people will bow.  

But what happens when we fail under Jesus’s lordship? How does King Jesus respond to disloyal servants who go headlong into sin? We discover Jesus as Christ. The Greek word for Christ is Christos, which means “anointed one.” This title refers to Jesus’s messianic identity as the anointed servant of the Lord, prophesied by Isaiah, as the one who would rescue and redeem God’s people (Isaiah 42, 49, 50, 53). Jesus rescues and forgives disloyal, undeserving disciples from their sin over and over again through his once-for-all death on the cross. The King becomes Servant for all who hope in him, when Jesus lays his life down to atone for our every failure to obey and honor him as Lord. The King descends from his throne, moves out beyond the courtyard to a place outside the city, where his body is engulfed in sin to sanctify a people for himself: “So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood” (Heb. 13:12). God made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, “so that in him we might become the righteousness God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Because Jesus is not only Lord but also Christ, every disciple has every reason to hope in failure. Jesus has secured our never-ending forgiveness through the end of his life. And with his triumph over death, he bought for us a new life of glad submission to him. Because Jesus is Christ, he is sufficient for our failures and strong for our successes.

When disciples turn to Jesus Christ as Lord, they gain a
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whole new way of living under God’s reign in his grace. Jesus is King and Jesus is Savior. God has made Jesus “both Lord and Christ” so that he might make and multiply a new humanity after the image of his glorious Son (Acts 2:36). Therefore, when a gospel as lofty as Jesus’s lordship and as earthy as his suffering take center place in the heart and life of a disciple, the impact is immeasurable. This good news can affect everything in our lives as we rest in Christ and live for the Lord.

Vertical Discipleship

When Jesus is Lord of everything, it can be difficult to focus on something. Some disciples focus on piety, a category that includes spiritual disciplines and personal holiness. Others prefer to focus on mission, a category that includes social justice, evangelism, and cultural renewal. Gospel-centered discipleship radically alters our approach to both Christian piety and mission. Very often, pious disciples and missional disciples don’t mix. Pious disciples tend to withdraw from the world (to draw near to God), while missional disciples tend to engage the world (to bring God near to it).

The differences between these foci run deeper than preference. It is a division that springs from a foundational crack in our understanding of discipleship. As the crack grows, it sends Christians in one of two ways of being a disciple. The first way, piety-centered discipleship, is associated with our personal relationship with God. We will call this vertical discipleship. Vertical discipleship points up to God’s character, showing us how great he is and how far we fall short. Vertical discipleship promises to close the gap between our sin and God’s holiness through things like Bible reading, prayer, fasting, confession, and personal piety in order to know God. Entire branches of Christianity, such as
monasticism, have focused on this vertical aspect of discipleship. When Jesus is simply Lord over our piety, disciples begin to measure their Christianity in ways that run counter to the gospel. Vertical disciples unknowingly try to cultivate righteousness on their own apart from Christ. You may have this tendency if you get down on yourself for not reading the Bible enough or for having a weak prayer life. The implication here is that you are “up on yourself” if you do read the Bible more and have a strong prayer life. Piety-centered discipleship says: “Be this kind of person and you can feel good about yourself.” The gospel, however, says: “Give up on yourself and become the person you already are in Christ.”

Unfortunately, piety often isolates us from mission, quarantining the disciple from Jesus’s expansive lordship. Ironically, the “pious” disciple in pursuit of God ends up with an incomplete God, subtracting mission from the missionary God. In an attempt to withdraw and know God, they fail to know his whole character. As a young disciple, I vehemently practiced vertical discipleship. I spent lots of time in prayer, fasting, study, and striving for holiness. I kept prayer journals, fasted regularly, memorized lots of Scripture, and pleaded with God to “break me” so that I could become holier. While God accomplished some great things in me during that season, piety-driven discipleship actually drove me away from grace.

*Horizontal Discipleship*

The second direction a disciple can go when Jesus is not both Lord and Christ is horizontal. If vertical discipleship points up to God’s character, *horizontal discipleship* points out to God’s mission. It focuses on missional activity such as evangelism, social justice, and cultural renewal. In horizontal discipleship,
Defining Discipleship

mission is easily divorced from piety. Strangely, it can become a substitute form of piety, an alternative self-made righteousness. The “missional” disciple discovers righteousness, not in who he is (holy), but in what he does (mission). He tends to separate God’s mission from God, focusing on what he can do for God as a disciple. When sharing the gospel, feeding the poor, or making great culture, the “missional” disciple feels up; but when he fails to do these consistently or with results, he feels down. This emotional roller coaster isn’t much fun. Believe me. Mission-centered discipleship has very little personal need for Christ. It also restricts his lordship to the horizontal way of living. Mission-centered discipleship says: “Do missional deeds and you can feel up.” The gospel says: “Because Jesus completed the mission (Col. 1:20), you can give up on your deeds and give in to Christ.”

Every disciple has a leaning, either toward the vertical or the horizontal. As I matured, I began to focus more on horizontal discipleship—spending more time doing world missions, evangelism, church planting, and social justice. When we lean toward the vertical or horizontal, we disintegrate discipleship. When integration is lacking, disciples easily become disillusioned and their character distorted. We can weary of the balancing act between piety and mission, as we swing back and forth between the two. In the midst of this disintegration, disciples sometimes give up, not realizing that what they gave up wasn’t Christianity but a form of discipleship centered on the wrong thing. The good news is that Jesus hasn’t called us to a life of balancing piety and mission. Instead, he has called us to a gospel-centered life that focuses in on Jesus as our Christ (forgiveness and righteousness) and as our Lord (King and Deliverer).
Diagonal Discipleship Is Integrated

Isn’t it wonderful that we don’t have to choose between vertical and horizontal discipleship? We do not have to run between the X and Y axis of piety and mission, keeping record of our pious and missional success in order to impress the Father. The gospel actually integrates piety and mission around a new gospel center. When the gospel is central to discipleship, our acceptance before God isn’t performance based but grace based. The gospel frees us from running ragged trying to please God with holiness and social justice, because Jesus has pleased God for us and secured the mission. Jesus is telling us to give up on our deeds and ourselves, and to give in to his deeds and him—as our Christ and as our Lord. The gospel frees us to rest in Christ and to live for the Lord neither vertically nor horizontally, but diagonally.

Integrated Discipleship

A diagonal disciple lives by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, not by faith in piety or mission. He or she recognizes that being
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a disciple is not primarily about having a personal relationship with Jesus, or joining a missional church. Instead, a diagonal disciple relates primarily to Jesus Christ as Lord, who graciously rules over the whole of life, not just one aspect of it. His expansive lordship prohibits division between piety and mission because Jesus reigns over every sphere of life. The Colossian hymn (1:15–20) shows us, in staggering theology, that Jesus is Lord of creation and redemption. All things were made in, through, and for him. Similarly, all things are reconciled in, through, and for him. He holds all things together as the agent of creation and redemption. Therefore, Jesus is what keeps created things and redeemed things from falling apart. As Creator, he is concerned with the whole realm of mission—his creation. As Redeemer, he has accomplished the reconciliation of impenitent men (Col. 1:21). Jesus, then, is the lynchpin of creation and redemption, holding mission and piety together as Lord and Christ! This means that Jesus has to be central, not piety or mission, or discipleship will fall apart, disintegrate, and disappoint. The gospel reminds us that Jesus is central, and as we believe its good news, we discover discipleship integrates and interweaves us deeply into his life. In his lordship we perceive that all things exist in, through, and for him (Col. 1:15–23), making all of life a matter of devotion to him (Col. 3:23–24), not of pious or missional performance.

Consequently, the gospel-centered disciple serves Jesus at work and at home, in the study and in the projects, in church and in culture. His aim is public obedience of every kind. He does this, not for approval, but from resilient approval in Christ Jesus. The gospel frees us to follow Jesus without fear of moral or missional failure. Jesus stands as the great King over every aspect of a disciple’s life, requiring devotion to him that, in turn, fosters
Making Disciples: Evangelism or Discipleship?

a life of both piety and mission. And when we fail in our devotion to him as our Lord, he remains our Christ, the Messiah who bears our sin and grants us forgiveness. Jesus remains central, whether it is through obedience or repentance. As a result, the death, resurrection, and continuing reign of Jesus Christ form the integrating center of discipleship. Jesus Christ is Lord, and when he is, all of life becomes a theater of devotion to him.

I failed to grasp this essential gospel (Jesus as Lord) as a young disciple. Even today I drift from the center, placing my faith in my vertical (holiness) or horizontal (missional performance). But I now understand that Jesus is still Christ in my wanderings, and that his grace brings me back to faith in him. He’s not measuring my performance; he’s just asking me to trust him. When I do, he puts my heart back together, removes my shame, and orders my loves. A diagonal disciple lives an integrated life by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. We trust Jesus as Savior and serve Jesus as King. This staggering view of Jesus compels holiness and mission. He is grander and deeper than we thought. As we continually come back to him, we increasingly long for him to be revealed as the Lord of all. We fight to trust and obey him out of devotion, not mere duty. As a result, gospel-centered disciples refuse to focus on piety and mission but assiduously hone in on Jesus Christ our Lord. We cease to pit the vertical against the horizontal in view of who Jesus really is, and as a result, we live as disciples devoted to God and to his mission. We become integrated disciples who choose a whole way of life living wholly under the gracious lordship of King Jesus.

In summary, the biblical definition of a disciple is radically Jesus centered. It brings all three aspects of a disciple (rational, relational, missional) together in the gospel, which show us a whole way of living wholly by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.
We learn the gospel, relate in the gospel, and communicate the gospel in everyday life. It is central in everything, from the way we relate to God to the way we relate to others. Of course, just because the gospel integrates our lives in Christ and under his lordship does not mean we cease to struggle. In fact, sin wants to disintegrate and unravel us from belief in the gospel, spinning us away from Jesus in any other possible direction. This is why the Bible constantly calls disciples to fight for belief in the gospel.
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