

# Making Disciples

Going Small in a Big World

By Dan White Jr.

You would think if Jesus really wanted to make an impact he'd show up in all his glory at the largest venue possible, like a Roman Coliseum, and declare he was God for all eyes to see. These first-century arenas hosted spectacular public entertainment events such as gladiator fights and wild animal hunts. In terms of impact, captivating the attention of the largest crowd possible would make the most pragmatic sense.

The first-century world was filled with spectacle that assaulted the senses and ratcheted up the emotions. Roman rulers knew this well and so to increase their popularity and prestige with the people; they put on lavish shows in venues across the empire.

So why didn't Jesus didn't mimic the grand scale nature of the culture he was situated in? Why did Jesus embrace a peculiar smallness to his method of ministry? Instead of going for the crowds, he gathered two handfuls of disciples to join him in the revolution of bringing Good News to the world.

Don't you find this culturally unimpressive compared to the behemoth way modern leaders and rulers spread their message? The God of the Universe limited himself to a small band of ragamuffin disciples when he had all the resources of the world at his fingertips. Why do we focus on the crowds when Jesus focused on the twelve?

## **Jesus the Church Planter**

It is here that we learn from Jesus the most vital element of the church. Jesus founded the church "... he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning..."Colossians 1:14 The Message translation paraphrases this way "...when it comes to the church, he organized it

and holds it together”. Before we go dig up best practices in the corporate world we should take a look at Jesus and unpack the way in which he, as the founder and head of the church, planted the church. We are invited to follow in the wake of Jesus, to imitate him.

One of the most significant elements about Jesus’ ministry was that he was a “Disciple Maker.” Jesus formally invited twelve people to be his disciples in Mark 3:13-19. This micro space was small numerically but atomic in significance.

At the heart of the revolution is a relational phenomena; a core committed to a dangerous journey together. There is a unique relationship being shaped with *the twelve* and Jesus. While Jesus invited others to join his Kingdom movement (Levi for example Mark 2:13-17), the disciples had unique access to the life he lived and the messaged he carried. The twelve were invited into a separate (yet not isolated) cluster where they were shaped for living and leading in the kingdom of God.

The twelve knew what kind of relationship they were being invited into. They were being invited into an intentional shaping relationship where they would learn what Jesus knew (competence) and discover who Jesus was (character). We contend that under the hood of missional church planting should be this engine of discipleship.

### **Cultivating a Core**

In the movie version of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*, at the Council of Elrond, a plan is hatched to cast the One Ring into the fires in Mordor, which will destroy the Ring and end Sauron’s evil reign. As the question of what to do with the ring is brought before a team assembled by Gandalf the Great, fighting breaks out. Wills clash. Frodo, with small stature and quiet conviction, amidst the arguing says, “I will take the ring to Mordor!” Suddenly, silence settles in and the cost and courage required for what is next becomes clear to everyone.

Will they join Frodo? Will they do this together?

The Fellowship of the Ring is formed. Nine companions choose to take on the mission together. A community is formed around a daunting quest. Quests require great exertion on the part of those undertaking the quest; they will face many unforeseen obstacles, their relational bonds will be taxed, and their resolve to be faithful will be challenged. That scene from the Lord of the Rings provokes a tear from me (Dan) every time. I find the Fellowship of the Ring a helpful metaphor for cultivating *Discipleship-Core* to live on mission together. This is what Jesus did, calling others into a daring commitment to go on mission with him. This was a space of high invitation with low control. Every disciple that joined Jesus could leave at anytime. But the center of the call was hot. It radiated significant heat in their lives.

Like Paul, we have to say, "Follow me as I follow Christ"(1 Corinthians 11:1). This phrase makes Jesus the exclusive focal point for the journey, while at the same time offering our own humble pursuit as a model for what it looks like to follow Jesus in a particular place and time.

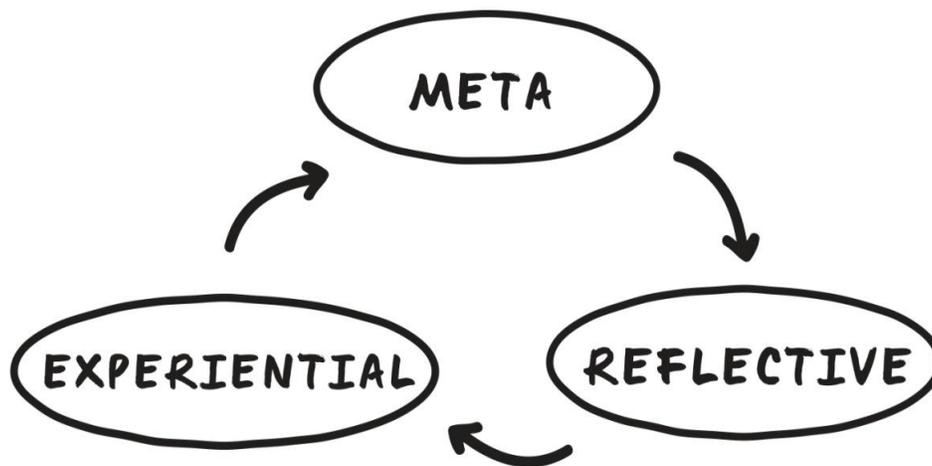
### **Formational Learning**

When starting a Missional-Incarnational Community, it is vital to cultivate a fertile learning environment for discipleship. Discipleship involves *heart, mind* and *body* learning, not just the transfer of information and beliefs. To merely transfer spiritual information can inoculate us to on-the-ground practice. Practice is the inner quality of being formed and informed by the bumps, bruises and baptism of application. Practice is at the soul of being a Jesus-follower. But more than that, it becomes the material for credibility as the people of God. "Be people who live out the truth, not people who merely receive it and fool

themselves. When you do this you are like a person who looks in the mirror, walk away, and then forget what they look like” (Jas 1:22).

The methods we implement for maturing as Jesus-followers either leads to increasing integrity in our lives or an increasing lack of authenticity. Within the church we have the tendency to take our cues from the halls of academia, or training seminars in the business world. We launch a program or start a sermon series in order to “master” a spiritual topic. While this approach may be quicker and easier, these types of programs often shield us from direct contact with each other and with the real material of the world.

Resist the urge to remove the clunky channels of relationship and the slow work of forming trust with one another. Jesus was not looking to fast-track or graduate disciples with a fill-in the blank 8-week class. Jesus addressed the *heart*, the *mind* and the *body* by using three different learning approaches with his Discipleship-Core.



Formational Learning



## Meta-Learning

*Meta-learning* is the effort of exposing a learner's *mind* to a new reality through information that brings sudden awakening. You stumble across something that captures you and gets the *gears* of your mind moving in new ways. Meta is akin to the popular slogan "you just blew my mind". Meta teaching seeks to press towards the truth in such a way that exposes assumptions, misconceptions and missed realities.

Creating meta moments often happen when we are contemplating stuff we've heard a thousand times before, but seek to deconstruct it a way as to reveal the "big meaning" hiding in plain sight. Meta-learning is eager to grapple with a beautifully unsettling idea.

Throughout the gospels we see this type of learning. One time, our Rabbi Jesus is teaching about the surprising and often misunderstood nature of God's love for all. He says, "People who are well don't need a doctor! It's those who are wounded who do! Learn the meaning of this, 'It isn't your sacrifices and your worship I want—I want you to be merciful. For I have come to invite the hurting, not the self-righteous back to God'" (Luke 9:11–13).

Jesus is being explicit about his own nature, God's Kingdom and what the heart of a disciple should be. Jesus is telling a completely new story, re-narrating life. Jesus is creating a shift in self-understanding in how God sees us and what mission we were designed for.

**We long to live by story.** I (Dan) see this in my little boy, who, living in his head, re-enacts great scenes in which he's a superhero doing great things. I may look at him and think, "Stories are for kids," but deep within me is a longing to live within a grand story, to sense

significance in my life's unfolding plot. I am almost forty years old now, and that childhood whimsy is asking to be remembered and resurrected. It must not be ignored. More than ever, what I need, what we all need, is to know, feel, hear, and be called into the truest story pulsing at the heart of God's world.

Discipleship is not merely concerned with blasting out more propositional truths in order to sure up belief. We cannot live by, be sustained by, be nourished by static propositional truth. Although I (Dan) believe in orthodoxy and historic doctrines, they are not enough to sustain. The Apostle Paul invites us to have a renewed mind, a renovated imagination about where we find ourselves:

“For the Messiah has been revealed, the one who is your life, who is revealing His glory in you. So lay to rest the Old World in your bodies and in your minds, and see the New World coming about and put on the New Humanity... From now see everyone as defined by Christ, for all things are being renewed according to the image of the Creator”(Col 3:4-5, 9-10. Paraphrase).

Discipleship helps disciples see the world differently because it's becoming different. NT Wright explains, “Paul's mind and body know it's already daytime, while the rest of the world is still turning over in bed.” The Apostle Paul understood the plutonium power of the “meta” because he understood the challenges that his churches faced. The victory of God in Christ might not have felt as though it had been installed for first-century Christians given that they were running for their lives under Pagan rulers. Their harsh circumstances challenged their imagination. Paul's words poked, prodded, and powerfully unsettled the Church's mind's-eye about what God was up to in the world through the Body of Christ.

The same is true today. The only way to live on mission in God's world is to have a deep, pulsing, epic sense of this Story. In the micro-space of discipleship we should feel the boldness to follow Jesus' approach. In *meta-learning* we place the beauty and subversion of what God is up to in the world and funnel it into the center of the room for our *minds* to encounter and grapple with. When we seek *meta-learning*, we ask questions that get at the

big meaning, the large shift that's taking place, the meaning behind the meaning in the story.



## Reflective-Learning

*Reflective learning* is the effort of excavating deeper learning in the *soul* through good questions and conversation. It's taking a *magnify glass* to explore what's below the surface. God made us as relational beings, and he brings understanding through interaction and reflection. Contrary to some common assumptions, Jesus is not the ultimate Answer Man. He is more like the Great Questioner.

Jesus asks 307 questions in the gospels. While he is asked 183 questions, he only answers 3 of them. He typically answers a question with a question. Inquiries pervade his ministry. Jesus was an expert at asking questions that challenged peoples underlying assumptions. We would do good to model this in our discipleship spaces.

“[Jesus] said to them, ‘but who do you say that I am?’” (Matthew 16:15)

Jesus was helping the disciples understand what was in their *hearts*, by asking them questions and drawing them out. Good questions make space for God's disruptive Spirit to work. Sometimes the disciples are caught off guard by Jesus' disarming questions, a technique he used to put them in a learning posture. Jesus wasn't seeking to create spectators, he was seeking to make disciples, and making disciples involves reflective learning.

Jesus is guiding his disciples into reflection by pummeling them with excavating questions like:

- Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye yet fail to perceive the wooden beam in your own eye? (Matt 7:2)
- Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? (Matt 12:48)
- Who do people say the Son of Man is? (Matt 16:13)
- Which of these three in your opinion was neighbor to the robber's victim? (Luke 10:36)

In discipleship we must cultivate wide-open space for questions that seek not the regurgitation of information but the processing of Meta-learning's implications.



### **Experiential-Learning**

*Experiential-learning* is the effort of creating fresh learning in the *body* through real-time experiences; taking *active steps*. Imagine you're a first-century disciple and Jesus drags you into "table fellowship" with notorious sinners. There you are eating and drinking, reclining and conversing with people that could ruin your reputation. In this situation, you are forced to ask yourself some questions. "What is Jesus thinking?" "Why does he have me eating with *these people*?" "What is he trying to do?"

The first time he puts you in this situation, you find yourself sweating. You're anxious. It's disorienting. After a few of these feasts, it starts to dawn on you, "Oh, this is what extending love and mercy is about. This is what it feels like to be with people different than me."

You see, true learning doesn't take place until we learn experientially. And experiential learning often starts by someone else modeling what we are to do. As you sit there at the table, you start to be thankful that Jesus is *with* you, leading by example.

But then some religious inspectors pop in on your party and ask you a difficult theological question: "*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*"

All of the sudden you are caught off guard. You have no idea how to answer. You are being plunged into a living truth. You are being exposed to a discipleship course that moves you deeper into the world rather than higher up in the Synagogue. To learn from Jesus the Messiah is to participate. It involves interactive learning. It's learning by being on mission *together*, by building relationships *with* others. Jesus didn't just preach about "serving the least". He served the least. He taught by example. He invited his disciples to live with him on mission. It was an immersive experience. This *experiential-learning* was not haphazard or accidental; it was the means for shaping disciples.

- How might you create pathways into experiential practice?
- How might you call disciples into hands on experiments with what they are learning?

If you read through the gospels while asking yourself the questions "How did Jesus make disciples?" you will see that Jesus incorporated these three levels of learning: *meta-learning*, *reflective-learning*, and *experiential-learning*. Essentially, Jesus led the twelve through a developmental, formational journey that was the prototype ground floor of a church and it shaped them in *mind, heart* and *body*.

## **Discipleship within Community**

While the twelve had a unique discipling relationship with Jesus, they weren't the only ones who hung out with Jesus. Mark tells us in his gospel that, "When he was alone, the Twelve *and the others around him* asked him about the parables" (Mark 4:10). There were clearly other people who were with Jesus, and the disciples.



**Discipleship within Community**

The point is that *the twelve* were a part of a clearly organized cluster that had a unique, formal discipling relationship with Jesus<sup>1</sup>, but that discipling group did not operate in isolation. It took place in the context of a larger group of people curious about Jesus.

At the end of those 3 ½ years of being disciplined, Jesus turns to the twelve and tells them: "Go and make disciples". If you were one of the twelve, you would most likely be thinking

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<sup>1</sup> While the twelve obviously have symbolic significance, correlating to the twelve tribes of Israel, it also had practical significance.

“Oh! You mean the thing you have been doing with us for the past 3 ½ years, you want us to find some other people and do that same thing with them?”

Essentially, they were being sent out by Jesus to disciple people in the way that Jesus had disciple them. Can you see how discipling the core is fundamental to church as movement? Each of these learning modes should be brought together *not* parceled out to different programs. Together they create a path we walk together.

An emotionally unhealthy disciple-maker wants others to follow them indefinitely, nurturing inappropriate levels of dependency. A good disciple-maker will cultivate and release disciples to “go and do likewise”. Without this process we stifle our movemental DNA. Sustainable movement must equip people to “go and do likewise”.