

# Transcend

*Beyond the Limits of Discipleship*

MATT SMAY

 A M I S S I O  
P U B L I S H I N G  
M O N O G R A P H

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*I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.*

*As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.*

*These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full (Jn 15:5-11, NKJV).*



# Intro

## The Morning Run

The buzz of the alarm pulls me from my dream. Part of my brain desperately tries to hold on to sleep while the other half urges me to turn off the obnoxious noise before it wakes my wife. Moving in slow motion, arms leaden, brain muddled, I fumble with the supposedly “intuitive” touch screen, cursing Steve Jobs under my breath, until the noise stops.

I lay in bed, thinking of all the reasons I shouldn't get up. I am pretty sure I am coming down with a little cold; I should get my rest. After all, what kind of father would I be if I got my girls

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sick? The oldest might even end up missing school and don't we place a high value on education? If I am sick I can't work, can't provide for my family and I have a "to-do" list as long as my arm.

Excuses failing, my feet hit the floor. I sit on the edge of the bed, searching internally for . . . drive? Desire? Will power? Inspiration? As quietly as I am able in a mostly dark room and half-asleep body, I don the appropriate attire and tie up my shoes.

Walking down the stairs I can spot the coffee pot calling to me from the counter. The chair in the corner begs for me to sit and read the paper with a hot mug of caffeine. I know if I stop for a cup of coffee I won't make it—I won't run today. In a half hour my girls will wake up ready to hang out with daddy, eat a bowl of cereal and watch some cartoons. After that my wife will take over kid duty, and we'll talk over our plans for the day while I finish my second mug of coffee. Then it will be work, responding to emails and returning phone calls, meeting with people and putting out last minute fires. Home for dinner with my family, listening to the oldest tell me about her day at school and the littlest chat about whatever crosses her mind. The girls will go to bed and I'll turn on a show, using the last part of the day to lounge with my wife on the couch. I will go to bed without ever

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putting my sneakers to use. I will have spent my day, my time, doing good things, worthwhile things, but not the thing I had hoped to do: run.

So, while not on the first attempt, I *do* finally make it out the door into the cool Colorado morning. The sun almost over the mountains, the birds chirping, and the dew on the flowers should all inspire me to the task at hand, but my attitude is entirely too black to notice. I stretch my arms, shake out my shoulders, and turn my iPod to a tune that should get me moving, but my shoes feel filled with concrete. My brain is still objecting, refusing to move my body.

My legs are stiff, my toes still beyond the reach of my fingers as I try to stretch my legs. I am not a runner. I am not one of those long, lean men who look built for speed. It isn't that I am in bad shape for a man days away from his 40th year. It's just that running doesn't come naturally to me like it does to others. My body is strong and healthy, just not a runner's body, and I will never be able to wear those little running shorts. Those who can't wait to start their day by hitting the pavement, who feel refreshed after several miles? I am not one of those. But what I lack in inspiration, I make up for in knowledge.

Knowledge that I am not as young as I used to

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be. Knowledge that entropy will eventually get the better of me and I want to be able to play with my grandkids someday. Knowledge that the Alzheimer's disease attacking my father's brain is genetic and I may be able to keep it at bay by being healthy. And to be healthy one must exercise. Knowledge that I need time away from the phone, computer, TV, and everything else that vies for my attention.

Knowledge drives me forward when lack of inspiration would have me drinking coffee. Knowledge drives me when fear of looking foolish would keep me reading the paper. Knowledge laces up my sneakers even though change is hard.

After the first few blocks my body objects loudly. As I continue on, the sunlight burns the cobwebs out of my brain, the black attitude gives way under the beauty of a Colorado sunrise. My music choice starts to inspire. My head clears, my ears open, and God speaks.

Yes, I run as if trying to flee all the distractions that keep me from hearing my God. It isn't that he doesn't speak to me otherwise, it just gets nearly impossible to raise my head above the chaos and noise that life can become and really listen to him. Running is as good for my soul as it is for my body.

I round the last corner of my route. Home is in sight. My body is tired but ready for the day ahead.

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My soul is refreshed. Within moments of opening the front door to my house, my girls will be ready to start their next adventure. I will be ready to walk alongside them, shoes already tied.

### **A unique calling**

I grew up in the church, sitting in the back with elders Jack and Larry while they taught me new paper airplane designs with the bulletins. I have heard all kinds of preaching, in all different parts of the country, in all different denominations. I have a heart for pastors trying to do the right thing. I have a heart for people struggling to find faith. I have a heart for the next generation that will grow up with fewer church options and fewer friends that know God. The church—we the people of God—is in a special place in its life right now, facing a similar “change or pay” ultimatum as I am with my health.

If you're like me, you might have countless goals and dreams. Surrounding those dreams are obstacles and barriers that hinder your advance. You likely even have some spiritual aspirations and probably some thoughts on what's wrong with the church. Or you may be fortunate to be in a great church environment. Either way, I run into people all the time who are discouraged that they haven't

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found or lived up to their true sense of identity and calling. I'd like to share a bit of my journey and see if it helps you in yours. After all, the hardest part is deciding to set the alarm, giving yourself a chance to get out of bed and lace up your shoes.

Maybe you have started—you put on your shoes and made it to the kitchen only to see the coffee pot, and now you can't find your way beyond breakfast. On more than one occasion you've found yourself stuck. Simply investing more of your time and energy into your church or your community may not have made the difference for you. You have a feeling there's more potential and a greater opportunity, but you're tired of failed attempts. Adding another New Year's resolution won't compel you beyond the comfort of your kitchen.

Maybe you got as far as the front porch, noticed the weather wasn't what you thought and, lacking inspiration, you decided that you'd wait for a better opportunity. Maybe you're sitting back, hoping a friend would take the lead, setting a time and date with them so you can't back out. Only they haven't showed up yet so you venture back inside. No harm, no foul. No damage done, but no one seems to notice that your goals, dreams, aspirations, and a deep sense of purpose and meaning have been left at the door.

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This is a call to the body of Christ to stand up and pay attention. While it is always nicer to journey with those who share your vision, share your passion, and feel your frustrations, it isn't always possible. Sometimes you must become the model for change you wish to see in those around you.

I am calling you out to lace up your running shoes, wherever you're starting from. I know you may not be a leader, but I am here to tell you what you already know deep in your heart, or you wouldn't have picked up this book.

We the church—the people of God, you and me—are being prodded to embrace a deeper sense of calling, to discover our identity as disciples, as followers of Jesus.

In the book *The Tangible Kingdom*, Hugh Halter and I talk about a paradigm shift that needs to happen. We discuss starting a new community of believers in an organic, love-filled, Jesus-centered reality. We talk about why change is needed and how we have found that we can no longer draw hard and fast lines between “us” and “them” if we are truly driven to go and make disciples. We look at the nitty gritty numbers and draw some conclusions about why we can't keep doing the same things while expecting different results. We talk

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about what exactly has to be different and how we need to rethink our worldview of the good news of the Gospel. We describe the three components of Kingdom DNA that we must integrate into our lives—communion with God, incarnational community, and mission. If any of these ideas resonate with you, then I encourage you to check out *The Tangible Kingdom*.

Since writing that book, I rarely find people who still need to be convinced that the way we view discipleship, community, and the purpose of the church needs to change. *Mostly, what I find is that people are stuck!* Stuck in their development as disciples, and also frustrated by the inability to make disciples.

I can't promise that this book is the silver bullet—the complete answer. What I believe you'll find in this book, though, is a new framework to help you better understand where and how you got stuck, and in that process you'll discover a pathway forward.

I want to help you see that you can embark with a community of believers on the greatest adventure of your lives. I will give you a new framework to use to lead yourself, your family, friends, community, and church on the best run ever.

You can see this book as something of a field

## The Morning Run

guide, a template, a starting point in a discipleship journey. When faced with a way that's familiar but ineffective, it's easy to feel paralyzed. Hopefully this book can help you get through that.

The first thing we'll cover is the relational environment in which we present the good news of the Gospel—we call this EXPOSE.

We'll talk about taking truth from head knowledge to heart desire—we call this EMBRACE.

Knowing truth is different than living truth; at some point you must make a sacrifice to live a new story—we call this ENGAGE.

It isn't enough to start the journey; we must have a skillset to work from—we call this EQUIP.

Most of all, we must remain light on our feet, able to pass love on from generation to generation, repeating the process as we go—we call this EXTEND.

Remember that change is never easy. Just as your muscles will object when you first take up running, you might also feel foolish trying out the new vocabulary I'll give you. You will definitely feel vulnerable. But you are not alone. I may never be a long-distance runner. I may never look great in those tiny little running shorts. But I believe that, like running, overcoming the obstacles to our faith and calling is worth doing even though it is hard.

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So push through. Push past the fear, the soreness that comes with muscle growth. Doing what's right matters more than being comfortable, so lace up and let's do this.

# Chapter 1

## Fishing Trip Fail

Fish don't talk, and that may be one of my favorite things about them.

On the social continuum, I land somewhere between an introvert and extrovert. I love being with people, being in relationship, and living in community. It is my calling, and at the risk of sounding dramatic and self-important, it is what God has tasked me with. I find joy in developing people. Until I don't.

And then I max out, going down in flames like the Hindenburg. Gone is my easy-going nature,

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replaced by a surly, impatient, snappy counterpart. It is at this point my wife kicks me out of the house, and I go commune with the fish.

That was the plan when I left the house early one morning. A day spent relaxing on one of the best fly-fishing rivers around. Just me, the Colorado sunshine, running water, and some fish. It promised to be a perfect day.

I had decided to drift the river that morning in my small pontoon boat. This complicated the trip a bit, but I was pretty sure I could solve the problem by dropping my bike off where I hoped to finish my float. At the end of the day, I'd stash the boat, ride my bike back to the truck, and grab my boat on the way out. No problem.

I stopped the truck at a place by the river that I knew well. I hauled the bike out of the truck and found a good tree near some bushes where I could secure it. As I chained up my bike, the key broke in the lock. Despite my best McGyvering, I couldn't seem to make it work. I was about to give up when I was distracted by a bug on my leg. I looked down to brush it off and noticed it wasn't a bug, but a whole lotta bugs. In my haste, I had kneeled down on a red ant hill. I immediately jumped up and started beating my pant legs, trying to get the nasty little buggers off as

## Fishing Trip Fail

they worked their way into my socks. I am sure if anyone was watching me, their first thought would not have been, “Look at that guy out for a relaxing day fishing,” but, “Who let crazy out? And why is he dancing and screaming like a girl by the river?”

Deciding that most people who like rivers are naturally honest and I wouldn't need a lock anyway, I hid the bike and headed back to the truck. As I pulled up to the spot where I would drop the boat, I overheard one of the other fly fishermen talking about a guy who would shuttle your truck down the river for you, park it, and leave the keys under the mat, all for a low fee of ten dollars. That would have been nice to know one ant hill ago.

I quickly jumped in on the conversation, and in no time passed the guy my truck keys. Happy to have such an easy solution present itself, I was ready to start my day of rejuvenation. Standing by the river with my boat, patting myself on the back for my creative problem-solving, my truck drove off . . . with all my fishing gear still in the back.

Hat in hand, all back-patting forgotten, I explained my plight to another fisherman who graciously agreed to drive me to my truck to retrieve the fishing gear. I pretended to not notice his smirk. This day was not going as planned—this

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was not relaxing and certainly was not improving my mood.

Fishing gear retrieved, I was finally ready to start my day on the river when I noticed two men. One was getting his boat prepared to launch like me, setting up rods and lines, and tying on the first fly of the day. The other was standing on the shore, watching.

The one watching asked, “So, what is that yellow line?”

Without hesitating, the first man replied with infinite patience, “That would be your fly line.”

It was obviously a guide with a newbie out for a day on the river. The guide knew just what needed to be done. He took care of preparations, made sure all supplies were gathered, and was happy to pass out tips along the way.

And that’s when it hit me. Even though I have a ton of fishing experience, enough to be a guide in another life, what I needed that morning was a guide of my own. Someone who took care of all the details, not because I was incompetent, but because no matter the level of experience and the hours spent with fly rod in hand, at some point we all run into new and unique situations, and like me that morning, we find ourselves in need of a guide.

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### **A guide**

As I look back over my life, specifically my Christian life, I find this isn't the first time I've needed a guide. Every time I start to lose my way, God sends someone along to show me the path again. That's sort of God's way. He has a long history of providing guides to those who are struggling. From Moses—the guide who led the Israelites out of the desert to the promised land—to the Prophets and Judges—instruments of God's correction and rescue—to Jesus himself—who taught people a new way to live and see the world—providing guides seems to be God's m.o.

To understand what we need to change, we need to be clear on what isn't working. Opinions about what's wrong with Christianity and the church are like mosquitoes on a humid, summer day—plentiful, often obnoxious, and likely to leave everyone irritated and itchy. So I will try to keep this brief and to the point.

I don't believe the heart of the church is the problem. I firmly believe that today's church leaders have a heart for the lost, the needy, the struggling, and everyone in between. If the church's growth was based solely on the love church leaders have for people, it would be unstoppable. Unfortunately, the

church's growth is not even on the up-tick, which means we have a problem on our hands.

### **Church in distress**

Back in the early 1900s, church was often the cultural and social heart of a community. It seemed like everyone went, even if they didn't want to, because it would be hard to explain over and over again to all your family and friends why you didn't go. My grandpa came to faith in this era and started a family legacy. It's a simple story—a member of a small church happened to invite my grandpa to a service during a five-minute conversation as they were pumping gas. If only things were that easy now.

The industrial revolution really shook things up in America. The rapid expansion of trains, automobiles, and factories created a new world, and those tight-knit communities spread out. Suburban sprawl took flight. Churches could no longer be the pulse of the town.

And then there were the '60s—a time when kids threw away the beliefs and traditions their parents held dear, including organized religion. Another strike against the church's cultural significance.

Christians have a beat-up reputation. Not all undeserved. We the church are supposed to be the

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ones extending love and blessing to all people. We can spend time arguing the “whys” and pointing fingers, but that’s been done and has led nowhere. Those outside the church don’t get it and those inside the church can’t seem to fix it. There is no shortage of books that have been written on the topic. The best number crunchers have given us some helpful, if conflicting, data. However, they all point to a steady and gradual decline in church attendance.

A well-researched article on church attendance called “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America” by Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Lowry, states,

If present trends continue, the percentage of the population that attends church in 2050 is estimated to be at almost half of 1990’s attendance—a drop from 20.4% to 11.7%.

Reading this can be pretty discouraging, but you likely are beyond talking about it. If you are like most people, you have invested countless hours in your church, in your own spiritual development, and you’d like to side step the debates and start doing something about it.

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### **The vision**

Fatherhood is life changing in ways I never could have predicted. I mean, I assumed I would get less sleep. That I would love my kids in a crazy way. That real “free time” might be a thing of the past. What I wasn’t expecting was all the ways that God uses my girls over and over in my life to give me a glimpse of himself and his plans for the future.

I remember watching my oldest daughter in the bath. She was all of three months old and we were so sleep deprived yet fascinated by this new little person who monopolized every moment. I watched as she flailed and flopped her arms and legs. She had no idea that they were even hers, let alone that they could work fluidly together. She would catch one fist with the opposing hand and concentrate until she brought it to her mouth only to have it fly out of her grasp and have to start the process all over again. She kicked her feet in frustration, splashing water in her face, and bath time ended in screams and tears.

I think of that as I watch her swimming now, using arms and legs to propel herself through the water, blowing bubbles, laughing and clapping. What a difference five years can make. But it was a process to get to this point. There was a fear

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of water for a while, understanding how her body moved under it, coordinating the breathing, keeping it out of her nose.

We as Christ-followers go through an entire journey of development. Even though we desire to run, swim, and claim to be Christ-centered, we all start like a three-month-old baby. All of the different limbs akimbo, different ideas and expectations flailing around, with lots of energy and very little impact. We hopefully go through all the stages to finally reach a place of fulfillment and purpose, having developed as a fully-formed follower of Christ. It takes lots and lots of time, though. There are no short-cuts in our spiritual journey.

I am sure God, as our father, looks down on us and has moments like I did with my girls—watching, waiting, wondering how they will grow, what they will excel at, and what our relationship will be like once they learned to talk.

Identifying a proper and healthy Kingdom perspective is the first challenge. We need to set our eyes individually and collectively on one grand and common vision for our lives. I am thankful God already has addressed this problem. He knew if we were left to our own devices we would flail about, splashing water until we were so worked up and soggy that we couldn't accomplish anything. So

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God, in his infinite wisdom, provided us perspective and a vision for his followers.

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Mat 28:16-20, NIV).

I am sure you are familiar with this passage. It is often called the Great Commission and is one of the foundational passages of the missional movement. This is where Jesus lays it all on the line, making it clear what we as the church are supposed to do—grow and go. Simple. A nice, clean vision statement. Love Jesus, love others.

First there’s the GROW. This is disciple-making—a process whereby we help each other to become

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more like Jesus, to love more fully, to trust God with everything. This is the growing that the passage calls for. The bride of Christ. The true body. Love in motion. Choosing to deal with the ugly sin and choices that keep us from living a full life in a proactive way. And through that constant process of development we'll see families changed, relationships restored, lives transformed, and a church on the move. Ultimately, we would leave no part of our world untouched by this beautiful, unfolding story.

Then there is the GO.

He isn't talking to a select group of top-notch believers. This isn't for those who have all the answers. This is a mission for every believer, anyone who says Jesus matters to them, anyone who wants to share his heart. Mission is a posture you take toward the world, a way of seeing life.

As I sat through church sermons as a kid, I was always a bit petrified that God would someday want me to do something I didn't want to do. Pastor Paul would tell stories of how he was called into ministry. A tragic accident left him paralyzed below the waist and since he just graduated from high school, he was angry and upset at God. Strangely, in the sincerity of his frustration, God was there in his life, okay with the honest feelings of pain and sorrow. Sometimes we find God when and where

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we least expect. We seem to place God in a nice, neat box most of the time, afraid to deal with him toe-to-toe, as if we'll somehow offend him or not live up to His expectations. If you find yourself feeling that way, you should spend some time in the Psalms. I'm always intrigued by the authentic relationship David develops with God, and there's nothing neat and tidy about it.

I eventually experienced my own seasons of going toe-to-toe with God. I tend to wrestle with God when I don't see things from a proper perspective. Perhaps I was right to fear God's call because it eventually changed my dreams and aspirations, but it turns out His purposes are way more fulfilling, much more rewarding, and entirely more enjoyable than I expected!

There is one word that too often creates a fundamental problem with our perspective on what it means to be a Christian—ministry. This word has become synonymous with those brave souls who choose to go to seminary, get a Bible education, and take up a church-related occupation. Therefore, ministry and disciple-making are perceived to be the role of professionals, those who get paid to do the work.

So first things first, we need to redefine what ministry is. Checking back with our good friend,

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the Bible dictionary, we find this definition:

One who serves another. God’s call to Abram (Gen. 12) contains the foundations of ministry. God’s promise was to begin with Abram and Sarai and from them make a nation God would bless, which would be a blessing to all nations. The English words “minister” or “ministry” appear as translation of the Hebrew word *sharat* that literally means “to wait on” or “serve” as Joseph did for Potiphar (Gen. 39:4; Exod. 24:13; 1 Sam. 2:11).<sup>1</sup>

Ministry describes our roles as the people of God, living a life of service to God as we have been sent by him. This is what it means to be “missional.” It is the choice we make to put service to others at the very core of who we are.

That is also the center of this book—taking your call more seriously, starting wherever you are and bringing focus and vision back to the core of your

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<sup>1</sup> Bond, S. (2003). Minister, Ministry. In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, E. R. Clendenen & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, E. R. Clendenen & T. C. Butler, Ed.) (1134). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

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life: Go and Make, Love Jesus and Love Others. This is a simple call that we are each given. No more waiting around for someone to do the work for you or to fix all the issues with the church.

It seems so simple. However, I do understand the dilemma—we've gotten so accustomed to letting the pros do the work that we lack the skills. Often, even with the best intentions, we just can't seem to nail the "how."

How do we help people shake off the cultural values of independence and consumerism and replace them with an insatiable need to love and serve others while growing each day to be more like Jesus?

This is where I want to help you, I want to step in as a guide, not the guy who has it all figured out and is presenting the "right" way to develop disciples. I want to take what Jesus did and said and lay it out, neat and clean, as a pathway for personal development.

What we are called to is the simplest message of love that has more life changing power than any other adventure you might ever embark upon. And it all starts with making friends.

# Chapter 2

## Expose

### World of Glitter

I live in a house full of women—one full grown whom I convinced to be my wife many years ago, and two who have a fair amount of growing left to do. This means I live in a house full of shoes, dresses, and things that sparkle with lots of pink. Then there is the glitter.

I have come to believe that glitter is the parasite of the crafting world. My youngest daughter has a love of all that sparkles and no picture is complete without a splash of glitter. With the dexterity of a

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three-year-old, she gets glitter in all sorts of places. Do you know how hard it is to act manly when your hunting rifle sparkles and your fly rod shimmers in the sun?

I can't help but think of the impact the church could have if we all acted like glitter. What if we left the shine of Christ's love everywhere we went? What if I was intentional about spreading the Kingdom, like glitter, everywhere I went? Would I leave a sparkling trail when I volunteered as a classroom parent or when I cheered with the other parents at my kid's soccer game? Would the barista who makes my coffee shimmer a little more brightly because I remembered her name and asked how her kid was doing? What if I just left my glitter, the love of Christ, at home in a drawer? I am sure I might accidentally leave a sparkle here and there, but my world would lack an intentional shimmer, and the people around me would not experience the good news of the Kingdom.

I want to spread the love of God in my world like my daughter spreads glitter on every art project that crosses her path. She uses it with vigor, excitement, love, and a full conviction that it really does make everything better. In this way, I want to intentionally make friends and enter into relationship with those in my sphere of influence,

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and spread a little glitter and a lot of good news along the way.

Friends. The people you call when you have an extra ticket to a game or need a buddy to go golfing with. Those who play at your poker table. The family you go camping with. The one who brings over a meal when you have a new baby. The person who cries with you over the death of a family member, who laments a bad day at work with a lousy boss with you, who understands your sense of humor, and even laughs at your jokes. Real relationship. This is the meat and potatoes of life.

We were created for relationship. First, with our creator and God. Second, with others. So why can it be so hard? Our culture has taught us that we should be independent, that if we work hard enough we can do it ourselves. If needing other people seems weak, needing an unseen God to save us seems especially crazy. But our culture is propping up a myth. Without the strength to be vulnerable we fail to develop real relationships with those around us. In the end, we become lonely—a rising epidemic in our culture today.

Lives change in relationship. When we enter into relationship with God, we suddenly have our worldview radically shifted. Our lives go from

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being all about us to serving a hurting world with love in the name of Jesus. If the world doesn't know of our love then it will not be willing to listen to our words, or his.

If you don't know your neighbors' names, I bet they are not that interested in hearing about your loving God. If you haven't had your coworkers to your home for dinner, they might not really want to come with you to your Bible study. When we show people we are willing to love them in THEIR environment they are much more willing to consider being part of ours.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (Jn 13:24-25, NKJV).

This scripture is a key to discipleship: living into this life of love we have received and now share with others. It states that our act of love will identify us to the world. That love is what we are to expose to others.

## Expose

### **EXPOSE**

What does it mean, this word “expose”? The dictionary defines it:

#### **expose**

to lay open to something specified. to present to view; exhibit; display. to make known, disclose, or reveal.

While it might seem obvious, there are many things a person can be exposed to: a new type of food, a new piece of technology, or an entirely new paradigm for life. In this book I am attempting to expose you to a subtle paradigm shift in the way we view the Christian discipleship process. This paradigm is founded on the premise that we serve a truly loving God that has conquered the penalties of sin through his Son. The truly good news of the Kingdom is that we can now have an eternal relationship with God.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

## *Transcend*

Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God (Jn 3:16-17, NIV).

In the scriptures above, we can see that Jesus is the one doing the exposing for the purpose of revealing the new truth meant to move us toward a relationship with him. I was first exposed to this knowledge of the Gospel as a young child, and that truth continues to transform my life.

Unfortunately, we most often think of disciple-making as simply exposing people to information about God, rather than the full narrative of the Gospel that has been shaped by countless stories across thousands of years, including your story.

While knowing God certainly requires knowledge, this is just the beginning of a dynamic relationship between God and us.

Like any love relationship, the nuances that shape a discipleship environment vary, but it often involves significant time to develop. If you think back to how you came to know Christ, what did that process look like? Did a parent or friend expose you to God's love? Did your circumstances drive you to a point of desperation—a place where God exposed his love in some unique and tangible way?

## Expose

Did you stumble into an environment where God was the center of the conversation? All of these questions are meant to get you thinking about your own journey and how you were initially exposed to the love of God.

Understanding your journey and relationship with God can help shape how you communicate it to others. For example, if you were going to expose someone to the thing you most enjoy, how would you do it? Would you make them read a book about it, take a class on the subject, go hear someone speak about it, or would you take them with you to do it? The context of relationships might be the most essential aspect of the expose process.

It is very comfortable to simply attend a good church service. It feels like an easy place to hear God's voice. Everyone is there for the same reason, to love on the same God. It can be a great place to get exposed to God, and in times past it might have been the best place. The problem that we now face is that it's not the best environment to demonstrate God's love to others who may not already be searching for him.

The problem with relying so heavily on church services and leaders to do the exposing is that it is inefficient. Much of what holds back the church is its inability to mobilize its most valuable

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resource—the people of God. I'm not talking about making everyone something they're not. I'm talking about helping every follower of Jesus discover their identity and calling as people entrusted with the good news of the Gospel, living a lifestyle of love in relationship with those inside and outside the faith.

### **Environments for relationship**

The other day I read a Facebook post of a friend of a friend. She is married with children and she and her husband thought they might want to take their kids to church for the first time. But she was wondering how to go about it. She posted some interesting questions: What was the etiquette? Could they show up to a church unannounced or did they need to wait for an invitation? What church should she go to? Was it okay to bring the kids?

I was impressed and appalled at the same time. I was so impressed by this woman's bravery to talk about this on Facebook. How many others have wanted to add a level of spiritual awareness to their family life but didn't know how to start? How many ended up doing nothing? But I was also ashamed. How did we get to this point? How did God's people become so difficult to connect with?

## Expose

It simply demonstrates that this is a new day. No longer do many people feel that church is a comfortable and neutral environment. People need an invitation. Lives are changed through relationship and you cannot influence people you are not invested in.

My dad came to faith as a teenager after two sisters had invited him and his brother to their youth group. My dad would have been considered one of those troubled teens, having grown up in a very difficult home after losing his mom when he was young. My dad had stumbled into this youth group chasing a girl that would later become his wife (my mom). It was in this environment that he was exposed to the love of Jesus for the first time through a relationship with a man named Jack, the same man that had invited my grandfather to church more than ten years earlier, the same man who demonstrated love to me as a young boy in the back of the church.

When we talk about exposing people to a new way of thinking, environment matters. Relationships matter. You can only develop meaningful relationship when people are in an environment where they feel safe enough to be themselves. Which means you need to be yourself, in all of your joy and pain and wisdom and dysfunction. It's easy to get caught

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putting on our “happy church people” mask to hide our brokenness from others. But without authenticity, real relationships can’t be formed. Without authentic relationships people can’t be exposed to the life-changing love of Christ.

### **Exposed to a new truth**

I remember the conversation clearly. It was one of those life-changing moments that gets seared into your brain. I was young and in college. I had recently gone through a very ugly break up with my fiancé. I was spending weekends at home, showing up at my parents’ church, building relationships with some teenagers that needed a big brother figure.

One day a friend pulled me aside and said, “Maybe you should go into ministry.”

I was stunned. I thought, *What?! Are you kidding me?! I am going to college to get a business degree and am already making plans to expand the third generation family business. I am not exactly an extrovert or pastor type. I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t be any good at it.*

I said, “Seriously, I think you MUST be thinking of someone else.”

But the idea stuck.

Here was a man who knew me. He had been

## Expose

there during a tough season in my life. He knew where I was and what I was going through. He saw my hurt from the engagement that had dramatically ended, leaving me reeling and wondering what to do with all my plans and dreams.

He was the man who watched me stumble into starting a junior high youth ministry at my parents' church. He understood my frustration at the poorly run program, the fact there were more kids hanging out at the park across the street than attending the church, and he listened to me figure out my vision for what it could become if I just gave it some time and energy. He watched it succeed and he watched me learn to trust myself again, to dream, laugh, and develop new relationships.

And now he thought I should consider doing it for life. As a calling. As a career.

If it were anyone else, I would have laughed the idea away. I even told him so, "God would have to strike me with lightning before I would go into ministry." But I had a relationship with this man, and I knew he only wanted good things in my life. Here he was, exposing me to an idea I never would have otherwise considered.

God uses all kinds of things to expose us to a new truth. He often uses family, friends, and even acquaintances to challenge us to think in a new

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way. Sometimes a new idea is exposed in a still, small voice—a nagging idea that won't get out of our head. God will use the Bible again and again to bring things to mind that we need to deal with. Sometimes it's a book we have read, a song on the radio, or a conversation we've had. I know that I can be a little thick and God has to use all of the above.

Sometimes it's a crisis. We humans have a gift for busily strolling through life, happily accepting the status quo until we run smack into a wall. We lose our job, a relationship ends, a health issue emerges, or someone passes away. Or he uses the less dramatic but wearying bumps in life such as tension at home, struggles with a rebellious child, or the stress of balancing life and career. Sometimes we have to slow down enough to even notice that God is trying to help us grow.

Even though you have already made the choice to love and follow Jesus, you are not off the hook for exposure. You could be on the first step of a new journey! Choosing to be a Christ-follower or ministry leader is just one of many continual choices you will be faced with. I continue to cycle in and out of vocational ministry, and sometimes I'm late to catch the next season of change.

God is a good God who moves people through

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relationship. At the same time you are using your life and service to expose others to Christ's love, you will be exposed to ideas, truths, and opportunities to deepen your walk with Christ. God loves you too much to allow you to remain stagnant.

This is a call to listen. Let yourself be exposed to new ideas and truths. Let God show you how he wants you to grow.

### **Exposed to change**

You have felt it in your soul for some time. Others have talked about it. Now is the time for intentional movement. You know, deep down, that your pathway of discipleship could be different. It could be better. It could be more impactful. And it starts with you!

We are designed for a journey of imagination, creativity, and inspiration. We need to help each other understand that God is always in the midst of change. Whether change comes from good or bad circumstances, we have a God who delights in turning all things into good for those that love him (Romans 8:28).

It might be that change in our lives hasn't happened in years because we lack faith that change can be good for us, required of us, and the biggest

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step toward faithfulness. It's time to challenge the way things are done—so go buck the status quo and find someone willing to go on the adventure with you!

# Chapter 3

## Embrace

### Lightning's Call

I listened to my sister, who is a doctor, interpret the medical jargon as my mom did her best to fill us in on what dad's doctors had told her. I sat there nodding, not sure what to think or feel. When a loved one is diagnosed with something like Alzheimer's disease, so many things go through your head. What will the next couple of years be like? How fast am I going to "lose" my relationship with my dad? What do I tell my kids? How can I help? Shock. Dismay. And then a bit of an, "Oh,

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so that's why . . ." And, then all the thoughts spin round again.

When I heard that there is a risk of the disease being passed down genetically, I thought, "Is this my future too?"

After we had time to process my father's diagnosis, my wonderful wife sat me down. She explained, lovingly but with no room for argument, that some changes needed to be made. If there was anything we could do to reduce the risks for me, we were going to pursue them. She wasn't going to lose me this way, not if she could help it.

It isn't that my health is bad. Sure, I have some allergies. And I suppose if I was born in an age before modern medicine I wouldn't have made it this far, but I don't exactly feel like I live in the shadow of the grim reaper or anything.

A little bit of research shows that we have some control over Alzheimer's disease. I could change my diet, manage my stress levels, keep my brain healthy, stay active—all things that can help fight against this traitorous genetic code.

When my wife gets an idea in her head, it's best to just go along. It isn't that she is confrontational, because she doesn't have an aggressive bone in her body. It's just that when she has made a choice about something this important, she's going

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to stick to it. She had quickly and decisively become proactive, and our family was no longer taking our health for granted.

I like to think that I live the way most do. Occasional fast food junk. A fridge containing some fruit and veggies, but also some things that would be less likely to fall into the category of “health conscious.” The full-sized freezer in the garage full of red meat doesn’t help my cause. Plus, I don’t always manage stress well or eat a balanced diet—I really do prefer a big ol’ chunk of red meat and something with protein, but I was far from unhealthy. Maybe a little softer than in my 20s, but I still workout and stay active.

My wife said being “fine” or “good enough” wasn’t good enough. This is my health. This was whether or not I would have the chance to watch my grandkids get married someday. This was her not wanting to grow old by herself. “Good” wasn’t enough when you could have “better.” I was exposed to a new world of fruits and vegetables, behavior modification and exercise, stress management and goal setting. I was exposed to a new way of thinking about my choices in life.

The contents of my refrigerator began to change. Veggies have never really been my thing, but they started showing up on my plate and I found they

## *Transcend*

weren't as bad as I thought. The brown bread was edible too. I suppose grilled chicken breasts never hurt anyone. All of a sudden I was eating whole grain noodles mixed into the normal nutritionally devoid white ones. Then there were the contents of the kitchen. A lot more colorful things that grow, and a lot less items that come in a box.

At this point I could have dug in my heels. I could have thrown a fit and made a stink about how grumpy I was about the loss of my beef jerky. I was faced with a choice—embrace the new way of living or revert back into old habits and behaviors.

And then there was my dad. I needed to stop and understand what I would be dealing with. Not just understand the information, but really let it sink into my heart. Dealing with emotions is not something I'm good at. I needed to get my head around what the immediate future looked like, to see the long-term fallout of a disease for which there is no cure. I started by doing what I'm good at, serving my dad in every way possible. Fixing up his house and helping him move so he could be closer to family was the first big hurdle, but there was a lot of work left if I wanted to come to terms with the reality of things.

## Embrace

### **EMBRACE**

The word “embrace,” by its very nature, is a feeling word. It brings to mind a hug, being wrapped up. We are talking about feelings, about the heart, and getting “wrapped up” in an idea.

### **em·brace**

to take or receive gladly or eagerly; accept willingly: to embrace an idea.

to avail oneself of: to embrace an opportunity.

to adopt (a profession, a religion, etc).

to take in with the eye or the mind.

In the Expose chapter, we talked about the effects of being exposed to the love of God and the good news of the Kingdom that comes through Christ-centered relationships. Once exposed to this love, it may trigger some emotional reactions, because that is what real relationships do. When we are loved without condition, with Christ’s love, people notice.

We can all think of a moment in our lives when something got our attention. When an idea we had been fiddling with in the back of our minds started to demand our undivided attention. A moment when we were faced with a choice, a fork in the road. A time when our hearts stirred us and we chose a path.

\* \* \*

### **How does this happen?**

When you have been exposed to an idea in an environment of love and you recognize that it's time to take the next step to own the idea, a few things must happen. First of all, you must feel discontent with where you are, that what you are currently doing is lacking. I had to take a look at my lifestyle with the lens of my future and my father's illness before deciding I wanted something different.

Being discontent with where we are does nothing but make us grumpy if we don't understand where we are trying to go. So, you must also have a vision. I had to have a vision of myself in twenty years, enjoying my grandkids and being healthy enough to run and play with them. I had to understand what I truly desired, what was my hope.

The last bit of embracing involves gaining enough knowledge and understanding to make an informed decision about the future. For me, it was pasta and running shoes—I knew I needed to start with small diet changes and find a way to be more active. Sitting on the couch cheering for the Broncos while eating hot wings was not going to get me where I wanted to be. But I needed a few steps to get there.

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### **Feeling discontent**

The current American culture tells us, “You are most important.” The message is that all choices should be made according to what makes me most comfortable, what gets me the most money, and what makes me look and feel the best. A job that requires everything from me and leaves nothing for my family is worth it if it makes me rich. We have embraced an idea of entitlement that implies we should never have to deal with discomfort of any type. We attempt to self-medicate it away with busyness, comfort, entertainment, drugs, alcohol, or money. All of the big promises leave us feeling so empty.

God calls us into a different story. A story where He loves us more than words. A story in which he calls us into a Kingdom reality that has significance, meaning, and purpose beyond our own ambitions. When we choose to live God’s story and not our own, people notice. When we choose to love in a sacrificing and radical way, heads turn, and people are faced with the choice to embrace a bigger story of God in their life—a choice to join a loving relationship with the Creator of the Universe.

For us to feel discontent enough in our own life to make this choice, we must first see and experience the Kingdom lifestyle lived out.

\* \* \*

## **Embracing a calling**

I remember going home that night I was exposed to the idea of going into vocational ministry. It was such a ridiculous idea, but it bounced around my head like a superball. I could think of a million reasons why the ministry was a terrible fit for me. But the idea rubbed, and despite my very best effort to go to bed and get some sleep, I was wide awake and questioning.

That night there was a huge thunderstorm. The kind I couldn't have slept through had I been able to fall asleep. It was the kind of storm that draws you to a window to bear witness. The kind of lightning that looks and feels like the world is bursting at the seams. The kind of power that reminds you how big God is and how little you are. It reminded me of another time I had stood at that same window as a small child, watching a similar storm—a bolt of lightning struck a small pole in our backyard, blowing out our kitchen window one room over. That memory brought to mind my statement, “God would have to strike me with lightning before I would become a pastor.”

By morning's first light, I had decided my calling was to embrace a life of ministry.

And I vowed to never use that phrase again,

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because he just might take me up on it.

When we talk about embrace in regards to someone who is searching, we are talking about an “I get it” moment. Some call it an “altar call,” the moment when all this God talk finally resonates and a choice is made to follow a Savior. Sometimes this moment is like an electrical storm and it gets everyone’s attention with a bang. Other times the embracing is a slow and gentle, but no less holy, experience. There comes a moment in everyone’s life when they will make a choice to live for God or not. Our God is a God of grace and so often he will repeatedly extend his hand for relationship.

As a Christ-follower, it is our role to love on those we are in relationship with and to pray for God to lead their hearts to him. Our goal is to embrace our role as disciples and disciple-makers, exposing others to his love so that he can whisper to their hearts.

As Christians we will again and again find ourselves exposed to ideas, to our failings and our callings. Often, it seems like God chooses one area of our lives at a time to really work on. As we live in community with others who are loving God, we too find ourselves with a choice.

With each exposure, we must decide to embrace or walk away. Our God often gives us many

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opportunities to embrace a truth, but it still comes down to God and us. Will our heart own the truth God is trying to teach?

### **Embracing community**

As we walk with others in our community to embrace a new truth and walk away from a comfortable and familiar way of living, we must be willing to get our hands dirty. It hurts to change and when people hurt they are not always at their best. That is okay. We need to shed the idea that the Christian community is a place where you come once you have it all figured out, and rather embrace a “come as you are” environment.

It’s time to be real. It’s time to be vulnerable. It’s time to admit that we are all just pilgrims on a journey. God is working in everyone’s life. No one has all the answers. Failings can be confessed with humility and a deep, soul-longing desire to change. We bear each other’s burdens in Christ, knowing we are all broken and deeply wounded—but this is what brings us together, not pushes us apart.

The joy we have in Christ is that while we were yet sinners, God loved us enough to give everything. He said we are worthy of his all, so we must embrace that. We must embrace each other with

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the full Gospel message that we are all injured and need a Savior. If we embrace this truth, God will meet us there.

We engage each other with grace and understanding. We know patience and perseverance. We willingly mourn with the hurt and broken, serve those who are unable to help themselves, and live fully the love of Christ in each other's lives. We choose to live the life of the blessed and embrace each season for what it is.

### **The God-given task**

What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.

I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his

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labor—it is the gift of God (Ecl 3:1-13, NKJV).

Seasons change. Lives are lived in flux. Plans are interrupted, callings are adjusted and yet truth remains. For the third time in my adult life, I am technically not in “vocational ministry.” I am not on the payroll of any church. The truth in my life hasn’t changed just because my career has been tweaked. I am still called to embrace others, follow after deeper truths God is leading me to, and, above all, to seek him. Even though I am not a vocational minister, I am serving—my ministry as a missionary is ripe. Even though I don’t have “pastor” on my business card, I am called to shepherd those who God has placed in my life. Even though many of my daytime hours are filled with business, I am called to embrace deep and meaningful relationships.

I have found the passage above from Ecclesiastes to be calming throughout my life of ministry. My calling has not changed, but often the seasons, vocations, and relationships ebb and flow. The call is to embrace the season you’re in. Find others to walk through it with you, and realize the truth that you’re never alone.

# Chapter 4

## Engage

### A New Leaf

I didn't realize that there are two types of 5 a.m. There is the "fishing 5 a.m." where you roll out of bed with a smile on your face and try to keep from whistling while you brew your coffee so you don't wake the wife and kids. You sneak out of the house with time to spare and a sunny outlook on the day despite the un-risen sun.

And then there is the other kind. The "running 5 a.m." Rumor has it some people love this 5 a.m.—I am not one of them. I dislike having to roll out

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from under my nice warm covers, tie on my running shoes, and abuse my body by beating my feet repeatedly against the pavement.

But I do it anyway.

That first day's run was hard, and though I would like to say it got easier, it wasn't the truth. That first day I went running wasn't pretty. I had no form. My muscles objected to the rough treatment. Fishing doesn't leave me feeling like this. Fishing is worth rolling out of bed for.

When I stumbled back home, I wanted nothing more than a hot shower, a cup of coffee the size of my head, and bacon. Or sausage. Or biscuits and gravy. I settled for a shower, a reasonably sized mug, and a bowl of crunchy, brown, healthy flakes of something topped with blueberries and low-fat milk.

Change is hard. It hurts. At times I wonder if it is worth it. I look at my girls and my wife, remember my promise to myself that I will enter this next generation of life in the best health I am able, and I press on. One painful run by one bowl of salad by one day at a time.

## **ENGAGE**

The word engage brings to mind pictures of a happy couple, madly in love, grasping hands with sparkling

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diamonds proudly displayed. A couple who is ready to meet head-on the new world of married couple-dom. A bachelor ready to start putting the seat down and hanging up his towel, all for the love of a good woman. A couple who, with hindsight, realizes they really had no idea what it meant for two to become one.

This image isn't far off the mark. When we use the word engage, we are talking about the mindful, intentional, and purposeful leaving behind of one way of life to embrace a new way.

### **en·gage**

To pledge or promise, especially to marry.

To attract and hold the attention of; engross.

To draw into; involve. To enter or bring into conflict with. To involve oneself or become occupied; participate. To assume an obligation; agree. To enter into conflict or battle: To become meshed or interlocked:

There are some things to take note in the definition of engage. Most importantly, perhaps, engage is a verb, an action word. When we talked about expose we meant an environment. When we discussed embrace we referred to a change of heart and mindset. And now we must act, we must change, we must move.

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Notice the words “pledge” and “promise” used in this definition. The idea is a mindful, intentional choice. Making a promise isn’t something you accidentally do—it’s thought out and sworn upon, as it is when we use the word engagement. It’s the promise of movement in a specific direction. It’s a commitment through action.

You can also see words like “engross” and “involve.” To engage in something should occupy your thoughts as you assimilate your life into the new reality. It isn’t a one-time, passing notion but an on-going quest. When an idea engages you, you become “enmeshed” with the concept—it becomes part of who you are.

Lastly, we would be remiss if we chose to overlook the words “conflict” or “battle.” Often times, ideas that we engage are ones we must wrestle with. Change is hard and to engage an idea often requires a struggle. You might be asked to rethink what you thought you knew. You might be required to change lifestyles or habits that have become comfortable. When you are called to engage, you are called to pay a price.

### **Engaging discomfort**

New things can be scary. There is a reason for the

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saying, “Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t.” Even if something seems to be a good idea, or maybe even a better way, the very fact that it challenges what we are currently doing can be unsettling. Going into the unknown takes courage. This is the discomfort of fear.

Sometimes it feels like God springs these ideas on us with no warning. We think we have it all together until tragedy strikes and our faith is tested. It can feel like the rug is being ripped out from beneath our feet. Suddenly, the once familiar landscape seems new and overwhelming. We want to engage, but it all seems too big. This is the discomfort of insecurity.

Then there is humility. It isn’t fun to be humbled, but when we are called to engage a new idea, we are forced to face the fact that what we were doing was wrong. Or if not wrong, at least not best. No one likes to say they are wrong, and the more public the change the more public the humbling. This is the discomfort of humility.

We then face uncertainty. Did I really understand God right? Maybe I made the whole thing up in my head and I am not really called to do this after all. Or maybe I am not strong enough. Moses was given very clear directions about what he was called to do, but that didn’t make him feel

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any better about being able to carry it out. This is the discomfort of uncertainty.

Change is a lot of work. Sometimes the work is internal, forgiving past hurts, understanding a new way of thinking and making things right. Sometimes the work is physically moving a family, finding a job, caring for and serving others. No new idea is engaged without work of some kind. This is the discomfort of hard work.

Rarely is change in one area of our life isolated. Just like an alcoholic giving up his drink who realizes he also lost all his drinking buddies, we are also faced with the ripple effect of change. Choosing to tithe means less money for eating out and someone in the house needs to learn to cook. It's hard to foresee the fallout. This is the discomfort of assimilation.

When we call someone to engage an idea, or when we ourselves are called, we must be honest about what that means to fully engage new truth. We must give ourselves time to mourn what we believe we are losing, to feel scared and uncertain with the change, to feel the pain of engaging. Having faith in a big God who is telling a big story doesn't mean we won't ever feel uncertainty or pain. It just means we are willing to hold hands and do it anyway.

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### **Moving**

My bags were packed. This was it. There was no turning back. After all the convincing I had done with my parents and all the leg work to find a college where I could double major in business and ministry, there was no way to go but forward.

A new school. A new state. A new career path and calling. When I decided to engage the calling God had placed on my life, I'm not sure I was fully aware of the cost. I knew it would require some change, but I felt like my world was completely turned on its head.

I arrived at my school, my new home, and started the journey of my new life.

I hated it!

I was entering the school mid-way through my junior year and, of course, at a school this small, everyone already knew each other. There was no new student orientation for me; I was just the new guy taking the bunk of someone who had dropped out after the first term. I didn't know how much I'd miss leaving sunny California for a considerably less sunny Oregon, and not seeing family and friends on weekends made the move chafe even more. In my most honest moments, I was still mourning and hurt over my engagement that had been abruptly

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called off, and I disliked the feeling that I was somehow escaping from my past.

I must have heard God wrong. This was too hard. This couldn't be what he wanted me to do! Why was I here? I was discouraged.

To add insult to injury, I was behind on my "Christian service hours" required for graduation and needed to choose something from the "approved ministry" list to get caught up. There were few options that would get me the hours that I needed in the time frame in which I needed them. I found myself stumbling into "Street Evangelism Ministry."

My nights and weekends became consumed with dark alleyways, conversations under overpasses, and spending time among "the least of these." I made friends with kids who society had let down and forgotten. I got to know their stories. I tried to understand their world, their worries, their hopes and dreams. I loved on them, protected them, and tried to help them make good choices for their future.

This is how I met Duki, a teenage girl who had watched me intervene in a fight between a homeless man and one of her friends. After the cops had taken the man to jail and everyone had been interviewed, she walked over and introduced herself. Her initial question was straightforward and to the

## Engage

point, “So, are you a nark or a drug dealer?” In her world, adults only interacted with her if they were on one side of trouble or the other. When I explained that I often hung out in the area because I was involved in a college ministry, she was intrigued. What had her stumped was that I had actually engaged in a practical way. She knew that Christians were supposed to love others, but she hadn’t seen it.

Like any kid who had spent too much time on the street, she had a troubled background. She was a little different though—she had become a ring-leader of sorts, the one others looked to for help. So, in the street community she knew everyone, and everyone knew her. For the next six years, I would get to know the real Rebecca (Duki) and walk alongside her as she battled her past and the ramifications of a drug addiction. As my community engaged her, we were drawn deeper into relationship, loving her and her many friends. We had countless conversations with her about God and his love. She got it and often helped us in our ministry efforts. I’ll never forget one such conversation—she overheard a ministry student trying to piece together an explanation of the Trinity to one of the street kids. With a huff, she interrupted the conversation. After taking a long draw on her cigarette,

## *Transcend*

she said, “The Trinity is like this cigarette, the paper is God, holding the universe together. The tobacco is Jesus, a necessary sacrifice for the sake of love. The smoke is the Holy Spirit, while you can’t really catch the smoke, it’s ever-present, moving things toward God like the wind.”

Despite the pain of choosing to engage, I wouldn’t trade that time in my life for anything. I got a front row seat to see God doing amazing things in kids’ lives, sometimes through me, and sometimes in spite of me. Engaging was the hardest and best thing God could call me to do.

### **Why bother?**

If engaging is painful, why bother doing it? Is “good enough” really such a bad place to be? Can’t I just make a little more progress by adding the new information into my existing life?

In a word? No. That isn’t how this works. God never called us to be comfortable or complacent. When we look at the life and ministry of Jesus, he again and again called people out.

“Give up what you think is good and let me show you more!”

“Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men”  
(Mt 4:19-20, NKJV).

## Engage

God calls us to be part of a bigger story than our own. We are called into a relationship with the Creator of the Universe and that is going to leave a mark. When you are walking through life, holding the hand that created the Milky Way, the pace might be a little faster or a little slower than you feel comfortable with.

Change happens through relationship. We are in relationship with the King. We can only be changed on his terms.

God doesn't call us to engage in his mission because he is some type of masochist who wants us to suffer. God calls us to engage so he can bless us more profoundly than we can imagine. We don't always see the "whys" right away. When we choose to give things up for Christ, he doesn't take our sacrifice lightly. He only asks us to give up our dreams so he can replace them with his.

There is a great story about a little boy who is playing in a puddle on the side of the road. A rich man stops and invites him to the shore to see the ocean, to play in the sand, and hear the waves. The little boy, who has never been to the shore, politely declines. He has no ability to picture a world beyond his mud puddle. So often this is us when God calls us to live a truth that seems so radical we can't picture how it could be. So, we choose to play

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in our mud puddles instead of the vast ocean of his goodness.

### **Engaging with others**

We are now on the third step of a disciple-making framework.

Let's do a quick review: First, God always starts by changing up our environment. The very essence of growing as a disciple requires us to go where he sends us. Christians are a sent people, whether it's out of the church building to talk with our neighbors or getting involved in serving the community and developing a relationship with someone. We are prompted to expose the world to God's love. We stop expecting others to take the lead in our spiritual development. We stop waiting for someone to wander into our lives by some happenstance and tell us what to do. We take initiative; we begin to move forward, one step and one day at time.

Second, we are asked to embrace in friendships. Not everyone we come into contact with will be our new best friend. We won't enter into meaningful relationships with everyone. At some point, God will make it clear who it is we "click" with. Sometimes that's someone with whom we share a lot in common, other times it's someone who is

## Engage

from another cultural context, age group, or social class. It is through meaningful relationships that God moves, where we see his hand in those around us. We love on people, and are loved on. God works in hearts, one small miracle at a time, and lives are changed—ours as well as those around us.

Now, this is where it gets real. Our conversations go from weather and sports, to marriages and child rearing, to living a life radically different than what we see the world doing. We will find ourselves spending time, doing life, and having real conversations with those we expose ourselves to. We engage the change that is happening. We subtract the things God calls us to cut from our life and are ready to grow.

### **Engaging a new perspective**

For someone who has just been exposed to the idea of a relationship with Christ, who has embraced it and chosen to make his desire theirs, the engagement process is a thrill ride. All of a sudden they are viewing everything differently and it can be unsettling.

A new Christian needs a Jesus with “skin on.” A new disciple needs someone who has walked this road before to guide them on this new journey.

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They need to know salvation is grace-based and not works-based, that they are forgiven from past mistakes even if they are still dealing with the consequences of those choices.

It often feels like if we are a new creation in Christ, we shouldn't have to fight all the old battles. Unfortunately, it just isn't the case. Old trouble can be seen through a lens of grace, but still must be dealt with. A new believer beginning to engage a new life will need support, encouragement, and, most importantly, meaningful relationship with other believers.

Some of the more traditional practices related to discipleship land in this stage, learning to pray, worship, study scripture, etc. I'm sure you've noticed that these practices often get prioritized as the primary way to make disciples. But in the framework for discipleship I'm suggesting, they are just one aspect of a much fuller picture.

### **Becoming practitioners**

It has been said that "God loves us just the way we are, and too much to let us stay that way." Growing up, or maturing in Christ, is an ongoing process. You will never "arrive" until you "arrive" in heaven, but God loves us too much to leave us where we

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are, wallowing in our self-involvement. He continues to draw us closer and deeper into relationship with himself. This means change. This means being called out to not settle for what is “good” in our life, but striving everyday to be made more and more into his image. We are called to have our hearts break over what breaks Christ’s heart. We are called to grow in love.

Often God uses times of great outward change in our lives to inspire great inward change. The loss of a job makes us reconsider what material items have stolen our attention. Health issues challenge our ideas of how and with whom we spend our time.

As we embrace these new ideas, we must remember to give ourselves a little bit of grace. We will feel scared. We will feel overwhelmed. We will mourn what we used to know and the comfort it brought. But by engaging in the new truth God has set before us, we allow ourselves to embark on a new adventure that will deepen our love and dependence on him.

### **Five barriers to authentic discipleship**

Let’s look at Moses. He was given a very clear message: “So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh

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to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt” (Ex 3:10, NIV). Nothing like a talking bush on fire to expose a man to the truth of God’s call on his life! However, Moses wasn’t sure how well it was going to work out, so he asks five clarifying questions, what I’ll refer to as the five barriers to authentic discipleship:

1. “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Ex 3:11, NIV). In this section Moses doubts his calling as a minister, something a good majority of us will experience as we engage the discipleship process.
2. “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” (Ex 3:13, NIV). Next, Moses doubts his relationship with God. He’s not sure he has this God thing down yet, and doesn’t even seem to know how to refer to him. Have you ever felt tongue tied when someone asks you about God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit? It can be intimidating to be a minister of God when we don’t have it all figured out.
3. “What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘The Lord did not appear to

## Engage

you?” (Ex 4:1, NIV). Next, Moses doubts his credibility to speak about what he has witnessed.

4. “O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue” (Ex 4:10, NIV). Next, Moses doubts his ability to communicate. Even if he had enough knowledge, he realizes he may not have the speaking skills to accomplish the task before him.
5. “O Lord, please send someone else to do it” (Ex 4:13, NIV). Last, we all have felt the temptation to opt-out. Even if we get all the knowledge down, at the end of the day there’s a cost. It’s a cost of time and energy, of pride, putting God’s desires above our own. Of all the questions Moses asked, this is the only one that received a harsh rebuke, “Then the Lord’s anger burned against Moses.”

God is more than willing to help us through all of our doubts and fears during our development process, but whenever we make a choice to stop following, we have ceased to respect God’s wisdom, love, and truth in our lives. As Paul states in Romans, “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather

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than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen” (Rom 1:25, NIV).

Moses was initially scared and unsure, but nonetheless he chose to embrace his calling. He wasn’t left with a lot of room for argument, though he did his best. Now, Moses could have parked his rump in the sand and refused to move until God spelled out exactly how he was going to free his people. But he didn’t. He realized that God had the power to work it out. So, Moses paid the price of obedience and returned to where he had a price on his head. And God showed up.

In my discipleship journey, I have experienced all five of those barriers. Sometimes I feel torn in different directions and there’s always some doubt and fear waiting to creep in with any ministry opportunity. Whenever I lean into God in those moments, mentally “put on my big boy pants,” I see God’s hand at work in my life like no other. Ultimately, we all have a choice whether to overcome each barrier. They’re barriers that God would love to help us overcome, and in the process you’ll likely see God’s hand in your life in remarkable ways. This passage out of Corinthians demonstrates this common pattern:

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were

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wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:26-31, NIV).

When we choose to move on faith, we leave room for God to do great things. We serve a God who loves to inspire, a God who loves beauty for its own sake, a God who wants to go on an adventure with you in a passionate relationship—for your *good*.

# Chapter 5

## Equip

### Fitted for Action

It was that time again, time for the morning run. I didn't dread it like I first did, but I still felt less than thrilled to leave the comfort of my bed at this ungodly hour. Sneakers tied, out the door, finding my rhythm, zoning out to my iPod—the run was going smoothly. About half way through, I noticed something felt a little strange with my left shoe. The thing about being half way out is the only other way to go is back. You can't just quit.

So on I ran, my foot getting more and more

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uncomfortable and yet I was unable to stop. I had no choice but to make it back home.

My front porch in view, I slowed to a walk. I turned off my iPod and notice a strange, new pain. I sat on my front walk and assessed the problem. Turns out that somewhere along my run I had worn a piece of material off the inside of my shoe and it had created a significant blister.

It seems that running daily is a bit hard on footwear. My Nikes that had held up fine during everyday activities had never been put through a true test. Now they appeared to not fit perfectly.

In my area there is a store that the real runners frequent. They take this shoe thing pretty seriously. I decided it might be time to check it out. My feet were measured, my stride computed, my arch assessed and the perfect shoes were assigned. These people knew what they were talking about. This was a whole store devoted to getting it just right. These were no “big box specials,” but shoes that would perfectly equip my feet. If I didn’t succeed in my morning runs after this, faulty footwear wouldn’t be to blame.

Being outfitted correctly for the task at hand is often the difference between floundering uselessly in one place and making a difference, becoming useful.

## **EQUIP**

In the last chapter we discussed how engaging involves acting upon a truth you have come to own. It might seem a bit strange that now we are talking about equipping you for action. Isn't that backwards? Shouldn't we be in possession of the equipment required before we set out?

It's not by accident that you have been asked to step out in faith without all the know-how. When God lays something on your heart, it would feel better, more secure and confident, if he would provide you all the details for the journey before you set out. But, God doesn't seem to find it necessary for us to understand where each piece of the puzzle goes before we start. God seems to view the faith journey as equally important to the destination.

### **e·quip**

To supply with necessities such as tools or provisions. To furnish with the qualities necessary for performance.

There comes a time after you have engaged a truth that carrying on without being properly equipped turns faith into folly. This is the point we are talking about. This is when a faithful heart has moved your feet in the right direction and you now

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need some help before you find yourself running with a poor fit and faulty shoe.

### **Equipping for everyone**

It would be easy to say that equipping is a “leader” thing. After all, isn’t this why the pastor takes the stage each Sunday? It’s true that a pastor might be uniquely educated and equipped to teach. The problem with assuming that “equipping is a leader thing” is that it lets all the other disciples off the hook. Remember the call to “go and make disciples” was to you and me—to all Christ-followers!

The legacy imparted to me as a small boy by a group of non-paid elders in a small church in Southern California is astonishing. It was a church built on the necessity of discipleship. Pastor Paul’s love for people and his physical handicap had created a culture where everyone had to step-up, lend a hand, make house calls, and disciple one another. My paternal grandfather lived nearly his entire life apart from God’s love, but from the time I was six until my grandfather passed away when I was eight, he would regularly pick me up on Saturday nights to go watch Jack and my uncle play basketball. Remarkably, Jack had a major role in leading my entire family on my mother’s side

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to faith, as well as my dad and his brother. I even got to watch Jack love on my grandfather, a man apart from God until his final days. Jack took his calling seriously, serving faithfully as an elder in that church for over fifty years.

I challenge you to recognize that God has uniquely made each of his followers to become both a disciple and a disciple-maker. We were all given the ability and calling to disciple others. If we continue to make disciple-maker a leadership function, we will continue to miss the point and the church will continue its decline.

Let's look at how Jesus developed people. Sure, he was known for teaching on the hilltops and those people were changed for the better. But the majority of Jesus' time was spent with twelve guys. He spent hours upon hours with these men, talking, eating, fishing, and sleeping. He had a real relationship with them. They talked about hard things. Even after three years of one-on-one time, these men still didn't have it all figured out. In the end, Judas betrayed Jesus, Thomas doubted Jesus, and Peter disowned Jesus.

Discipleship is not intended to be a high bar. We often confuse discipleship with apostleship. Yes, eleven of Jesus' disciples became apostles, a role with a title and authority. These disciples were,

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after all, trained by the best, so we should not be surprised that they became vocational ministers. However, the discipleship process itself is open to all. Whether or not you ever take a title or leadership position, Jesus established an accessible model for us all to follow.

### **Building discipleship relationships**

If you've spent most of your life simply being exposed to the truth and embracing that truth with very little engaging, know you're not alone. I find that most Christians find themselves stuck at this point. I think it's because regardless of how long you've been a Christian, church programs and structures have not been well-designed for true equipping.

So, don't start throwing things if you're starting to realize the progressive nature of discipleship and how difficult we make this journey on ourselves by skipping steps, making assumptions about the development process, or not being honest about where we're at in the journey. Discipleship is not a "one and done" type proposal. Most churches have done a great job helping people focus on *expose*, *embrace*, and providing some environments for *engaging*, but it's hard to find a great *equipping* church. If everyone

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were striving to be both discipled and discipling others, then our expectations would have changed.

Equipping takes an investment of time after there is a basic awareness of the skills needed. The *expose, embrace, engage* process should create a sense of need and purpose that's based on a desire to become a fully committed follower of Christ. *Equipping* helps disciples overcome barriers and provides an environment for the development of additional skills. The challenge is that true equipping environments occur along the path of everyday life. Equipping should take place in real time, as people are practicing becoming disciples. This is where we move from the classroom to the practice field.

One of the challenges of equipping is that it's a big idea. Equipping for discipleship can be a daunting task. Therefore, I'd like to provide some broad categories that can provide focus to foundational areas in which we all need to be equipped as disciples.

### **Equipping the calling**

When we decide to model our lives after God's heart, we are given a calling that is both collective and personal. We have already touched on the collective calling, or the great commission to

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“Go make disciples of all nations.” There is also a personal calling, which involves helping people discover their true identity and the areas in which they have been uniquely gifted. In 1 Corinthians, there is a passage of scripture that illuminates the importance of diversity in the body of Christ—to be equipped first requires that we become aware of our distinct purpose and call:

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many . . . But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body (1 Cor 12:18-20, NIV).

Equipping the calling helps disciples discover their unique ministry contribution (act of service). This is where we can speak into each other’s lives, blessing each other by pointing out areas we see giftedness, abilities, skills, and expertise. There are all kinds of resources available to discover spiritual aptitudes. While these may not answer every question we have about our role in the bigger story, it is a good place to start asking good questions.

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Sometimes we fail to follow the path we have been called to out of fear. Your calling is a deep and intimate part of who you are and it's hard to expose the deepest part of who God created you to be. It requires you to be seen, vulnerable, and open. This is why it's so critical that we create environments of safety and openness that allows people to follow the path that God laid out specifically for them without excess pressure to succeed. Discovering one's calling and maintaining that focus through the changing seasons of life should not be measured or evaluated based on any measure of success beyond faithfulness.

### **Equipping character**

We toss phrases like character building and spiritual formation around as if there is something about our character that is built, made, or developed over time. By default this means it doesn't just happen.

This may be the main thing people think about when they hear the word "discipleship." If our character demonstrates our true nature, then who we are and how we define ourselves should reflect Christ-like attributes.

One way of building character is through the ability to read and understand the Bible. I have to

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say that this is an area that the church has done quite well. Bible studies, preaching, and “knowledge building” courses all help us understand how to read God’s word and apply it to life. We need to know how to pray and how to listen to God’s whispers in our lives. This is where someone who loves Jesus has the chance of being exposed to new, life-changing truths that God is trying to work out in their lives. The most important healthy relationship someone can have is the one they have with Christ.

But the most difficult equipping involves helping people overcome damage done to them and by them in past relationships. I rarely meet a person who doesn’t struggle with their view of God in light of their parents (especially father figures). As a father, I am acutely aware that I’m not a perfect representation of my girls’ heavenly Father, and that gap creates a perspective that must be re-shaped by God’s perfect love and grace.

Sometimes, equipping requires working through our past experiences and story in order to firm up the foundation we’re building upon. To forgive as we have been forgiven is never an easy task. To unlearn old habits and behaviors and to be further equipped for Kingdom service takes time.

## **Equipping for community**

Man was created to live in relationship. We live in such a broken and hurting world, too many people have never seen what a healthy marriage looks like, what good parent/child interactions are, or what it means to be a good friend. An area so often overlooked in the church is dealing with messy, broken relationships. The church should be equipping Christians to live in relationship with others. Counseling, marriage retreats, and parenting classes can help with all of this.

A Christian community may not be just a church group. It may be a group of believers devoted to each other and committed to growing, serving, and loving others. They might be a group with a “common ownership” of mission.

Where two or more are gathered, living authentically and vulnerably, there is bound to be conflict. Part of equipping people to live and serve together will be equipping them with the tools for conflict resolution. How do you respect what others choose when it is different, though not necessarily wrong, than what you would choose? What about personality conflicts? Temperaments? Emotions?

Christians are equipped for community development through all kinds of circumstances and

## Equip

relational tension. True character development happens in deep and abiding relationship with others who are on the journey with us.

### **Equipping for culture**

We must also actively and intentionally equip the church body to live a life of service and love. Sometimes it can be intimidating to figure out where to start. We must help each other understand the circle of influence that God has placed us in. We must help each other embrace how we are uniquely gifted to love others in that area of influence. We must provide support, wise counsel and modeling of what a life of loving service looks like.

Equipping is not a task to be undertaken at arm's length. The best and most meaningful equipping of the saints happens in relationship where each is recognized for the unique gifts they bring to the table. Respect and grace go a long way to equipping the saints for meaningful service. Jesus describes what this process will eventually look like in the following passage from John 15:

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I

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command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. These things I command you, that you love one another (Jn 15:11-17, NKJV).

Laying down your life in this passage does not simply mean taking a bullet for someone. It also includes the slow death to the things you call your own—time, priorities, schedule, comfort. Once you have settled that you will live this life of love, then Jesus reveals a startling fact. We will move from servants that lack understanding, doing things out of obedience, to friends who are doing things out of love, out of a desire to bear fruit.

# Chapter 6

## Extend

### Love Smitten

As I've said before, being the only male in my house, I am still surprised by the physical manifestations of the females with whom I live. There are baby dolls, ponies and tea sets and lots of pink. And, of course, glitter. My wife isn't an especially a girly girl—you are more likely to find her in jeans and a ponytail than layers of makeup and heels—but somehow, somewhere along the line, my youngest daughter discovered princesses.

Maybe I can blame commercials and the

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marketing people who believe that all little girls must love all things princess, but I can tell you for sure that my youngest has fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. From the gaudy brightly colored dresses to the clacking plastic heels, she is the epitome of princess perfection.

And of course for every princess there must be a prince, and being the only male in the household, the role often falls to me. I don't mind the plastic tea party sets and the "rescues" that have my feminist friends rolling their eyes, but what I worry about is the LOVE thing.

In every princess story, the climax of every fairy tale is the moment they "fall in love." The sighing deeply, swooning, follow-you-anywhere type of love story that our culture has embraced as truth. My daughter will grow up someday. She will swap her princess shoes for a pair of Doc Martens or heels or Chuck Taylors or running shoes, but what about that love story? Will that stay with her? Will she spend her life in search of a prince to make her swoon and with whom to attempt a happily ever after?

### **Real love**

When Jesus spoke of love, he wasn't thinking of soft music and romance. Sighing and singing praises is

## Extend

far from what was on God's mind when he spoke of love like this: "God is love."

Though our culture has turned love into a throw-away word used for any deep emotion, love isn't an emotion at all. Love is a set of behaviors driven by a deeply-held belief.

Real love is messy.

Real love is an adoptive family stepping into a child's life to change their story. It isn't a cute little baby brought in to add color to a family portrait—it's sleepless nights and endless therapy. It's a child who is reeling in the loss of identity. It's loving in spite of the blank eyes and unreturned hugs. It's knowing that the big God you serve can use love to heal a broken-hearted child. It's knowing the pain and stepping up anyway.

Real love is my friend Ryan, who knew he was going to die of cancer at the age of twenty-nine. It's his courage to write birthday cards to his kids for birthdays he knew he wouldn't be around for. It's his willingness to engage in relationships he knew he would have to leave. It's choosing to invest in people he knew he would have to say goodbye to. It's choosing to live a story that matters instead of one that is expected.

Love is investing in people who may never choose to return the favor. Love is nailing expectations to

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the foot of the cross. Love is mourning with those who weep. Love is serving those who don't care about you. Love is saying sorry first and treating others with kindness when they don't respect you.

Lest you get the idea that love is weak and akin to being a doormat, let me assure you that nothing you will ever do will be as hard as loving others. Loving takes more courage than most have. It is much easier to take care of your own, to turn a blind eye to all the pain in the world and decide it isn't really your problem. But love says it is your problem.

Love is tireless, working harder and longer, never resting until there is not one person who remains unloved, uncared for, unfed, unseen. The calling on our lives is not an easy one. The journey we are on is not for the faint of heart.

We will blow it. We will stubbornly choose our own comfort. We may lose our cool and shout obscenities when we can't take anymore. We may run away when we should stop and be still. We are sinful and we are fallen. We will envy the ease of others' lives. We will want to throw cash in the offering plate to soothe our conscience rather than getting wrapped up in the mess of loving relationships.

We are not alone. God has not given up on us.

## Extend

### **EXTEND**

God has called us to be in relationship—a love relationship with both himself and others. Relationships without love lack substance, so we are to extend his love in every relationship.

### **ex-tend**

To open or straighten (something) out; unbend. To stretch or spread (something) out to greater or fullest length: To exert (oneself) vigorously or to full capacity: To increase in quantity or bulk by adding substance: To enlarge the area, scope, or range of. To expand the influence of. To make more comprehensive or inclusive. To offer: To make available; provide; To cause (something) to be or last longer:

The idea of extending encompasses so much.

First, there is the idea of increase. We increase in our love of Christ so that we may better love others, and thereby increase the number of Christ-followers who will in turn love others, and on the cycle goes. Talk about extension! Love grows.

Then there is the idea of offering inclusivity and availability. It is easy to love those we like. The idea of extending love to everyone is what really can get us hung up. That can require a lot of work and

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some honest vulnerability. It's hard to imagine how Jesus loved the least and the most challenging, but we are called to extend that love.

Extending can also refer to making something last longer. This works with our concept of love also. I want to leave a legacy of love to my children by modeling it in my relationships, first my relationship with Christ and then with their mother. I want them to remember me as a man who went out of my way to love others well.

### **Extending what?**

My biggest concern in the Christian movement is that we've lost the art of exposing people to love. Why? Because exposing people to love takes considerable time and energy, after all.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to

## Extend

the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (1 Cor 13:1-7, NIV).

This passage from 1 Corinthians 13 was a theme verse for me a few years ago. I felt that God was trying to get my attention as it related to my understanding of love, so I focused on it for an entire year hoping to gain clarity and understanding. Rather than conquering this concept of love, I have found myself trapped in its depth. Love requires many things and provides many things to those that experience its full measure. I've come to realize that I have a limited understanding of love and it will take a lifetime of pursuit to grow in it.

I am challenging you to stop and really read this because it isn't about your spouse. It isn't describing your relationship with the prince charming of your future.

## *Transcend*

This passage is about the neighbor that annoys you.

This passage is about the coworker who always takes credit for your work.

This passage is about the friend who betrayed your trust.

This passage sums up life in the bigger story that God has called you to. God is love, Jesus is his Son given because of his *love*—who is God himself. We are to grow to be like him. We are to grow in love.

### **Extending where?**

I'm sure you've heard the real estate credo, "Location, location, location." You can have the best house imaginable, but if it's in a bad location its value will be shockingly affected.

Similarly, context is everything. The context or environment in which we expose people to an idea matters immensely. If I want to expose you to baseball, I could scribble the field and positions on a napkin, buy you a ball and glove and play catch, or take you to Dodger Stadium. To experience an idea in its rightful context is crucial. The context in which we demonstrate love is a vital issue that we must consider if we ever want to understand what we are called to as disciples.

## Extend

Unfortunately, we most often think of love in a vacuum, void of context. We tend to think that we can share love in a conversation. We put so much emphasis on the words “I love you” that we often overlook everything that builds up to that dramatic moment. To really love someone requires that you get to know them, that you are willing to love the person for their amazing and quirky attributes, that you have accepted them for who they are, and that you love them for all those things. This takes time, often there’s emotion involved, but we should never hold onto the emotion over the significance of the commitment and resolution of the true meaning.

### **Extending love to others**

Whatever relationships God has placed in your life at this moment, they are there so that you will be able to demonstrate God’s love to them. God took the time to expose you to his love. He worked on your heart until you embraced it as something you believe. You took the steps to follow, engaging despite the cost. You have searched out areas you need to grow and took the time to be equipped for your calling.

And now you must extend.

You must see how the work God has done in

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your life uniquely enables you to love those you are around. You are unique. Your relationship with God is one of a kind. God has chosen to work on your heart in a way that is his own. Now you must love. Where you are, what you are doing, you must love in a way that seems absurd.

Because our story ends happily ever after.

Live a story that matters, or in Ryan's words, "We're all in the process of dying. The real question is: What kind of story are we going to live out as we are dying?"

# Chapter 7

## Where Do You Start?

*Survivorman*. Do you know it? It's the show where they drop this guy off in the middle of nowhere and he has to find his way back to civilization. He does all this crazy stuff, from eating things I wouldn't let my dog roll in, to navigating his way through deserts, swamps, and jungles. I'm pretty sure you grow chest hair and become manlier by just watching the show. The first thing *Survivorman* always does is evaluate his circumstances. Where is a source of water? What can be used as a source of shelter? Are there

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basic foods available? Which direction offers the best opportunity for rescue? These are all critical components of survival. If you know where you want to end up, you must first understand where you are and what you have available so you can know the path forward.

### **Where am I?**

It's time for a little self-reflection. One of my biggest worries in writing this book is that you will finish it and think, "Wow, that is really interesting," and do nothing more. I would much rather have you walk away irritated or in disagreement because at least then you would continue searching for something better to implement. My goal with this book is to guide you in your understanding of discipleship and motivate you toward a wise course of action. But, just like *Survivorman*, you need to know where you are before you can choose the correct path forward.

I like things neat and tidy, clear directions, and a good map. It must come from my years studying engineering. However, I'm afraid this isn't going to end up like a neatly drawn map with a big arrow that points out "You Are Here!" Life, relationships, spiritual growth—all these things are too messy to

## Where Do You Start?

neatly draw out linearly and say, “This is where you are and here is where you need to finish.” God is an endlessly unique creator. He’s designed over six billion individuals and a cosmos we can’t measure. You need to spend some time thinking about the implications of these thoughts and spend some time asking God, “What’s next?”

### **Starting at EXPOSE**

I described the first step in the framework as EXPOSE. God has exposed himself to you. It is your relationship with Jesus that begins everything. If you are not sure about who is in charge of your life, about where you will spend eternity, or whether or not God even likes you, this is the place to start.

Maybe you are a long-time believer, involved in the church, have all the understanding of what it means to follow Christ, but something might be holding you back. If so, you might still start here and that is okay. We are all called to start where we are. It does no good to waste time wishing we were somewhere else.

Let God’s love sink into your life. Love doesn’t work without relationship.

## *Transcend*

\* \* \*

### **Starting at EMBRACE**

We serve a big God who is gracious enough to meet us where we are. He is also a gentleman who gives us the ability to make our own choices. Jesus isn't ever forced on us. New truth and chances for growth are not forced down our gullets.

You may find yourself in meaningful community. You may have been invited into an environment of openness and acceptance by those around you. You might have some great friends on the journey. Now it is time to look at what God is talking to you about. So how do we embrace this relationship with God?

*His Word*—When you want to understand someone, you have to talk them. So try God's word, get to know his story. Plus, a lot of his best friends wrote some great things about him there.

*Other people*—One of the many reasons it is important to live in community with others is that they sometimes possess the unique ability to see truth in our lives. Too often we are blinded by our feelings or circumstances to see what God might be trying to teach us. Wondering what you need to embrace? Try talking with a friend.

*Our circumstances*—Life is busy and messy. The day-to-day can be so consuming that we forget the

## Where Do You Start?

bigger picture we are supposed to embrace. God can speak in a still, small voice—often we ignore it. I don't believe that God causes bad things to happen in our lives to get our attention, but I do believe he is there when they happen to help us sort through the pieces. Wondering what God wants you to embrace? Have you stopped and looked at the things in life that you are struggling with? Is God waiting in the wings to give you a hand? Are you upset with God about something—it might be time to go toe-to-toe with him. He can handle your sincere and deep issues.

*The still small voice*—The Holy Spirit. That “nudging” feeling deep within. Some people call it the peace of God. Whenever we're contemplating something and we don't have peace about it, it's a very good idea to stop and carefully look at the options. Is there a reason you don't feel peace about something? Could it be preventing you from a deeper relationship with God? Are you embracing the Holy Spirit as a guide and helper in your life?

God isn't being coy with you. If there is a truth he wants for your life, he wants to show you. You need only to listen and pray. Grabbing a cup of coffee with a friend might help too. Spend some quality time in the Word. Be still. Listen.

## **Starting at ENGAGE**

Sometimes we find ourselves stuck. It happens. You know there's something more out there, you can embrace God's love, but you know deep in your heart that to fully engage in the new will cost the old. While the old might not be right, it is comfortable. It isn't best, but it feels good enough and familiar.

This is when you must dig deep and take a step of faith. It requires a higher level of trust, knowing that God has a better plan for you than you have for yourself. It requires believing that whatever the price, it's worth it. The things that cost us most in life are the things we end up placing the most value on. It comes down to one truth: *faith*. It's believing that God has your best in mind, even when we can't see it or understand it.

Is there a truth God has brought into your life that you have embraced but not acted on?

Do you know the cost of engaging that truth?

Have you been trying to add this into your life without removing what it conflicts with?

Courage. Faith. Relationship. This is what it takes to engage in a new truth. God is with you now and always. You are not on this journey alone. Being in meaningful relationship with others who

## Where Do You Start?

are also on a spiritual quest is what gets us through the hard times. We all have times in our lives when we need a Jesus with “skin on,” a friend who holds us up, encourages us, and reminds us that engaging the journey is the only way to reach the goal.

### **Starting at EQUIP**

You have a great group of people you’ve been hanging out with. You understand what God is trying to lead you toward. You have embraced the new truth into your life and even engaged it. You have started to walk but are now unsure.

It’s time to learn—you need to be equipped for your calling. We are created for meaningful relationship and the process of equipping happens best in this environment. Not sure where to start? Grab a few friends and check these resources out:

If you are looking for a resource to help you be better equipped in your character, I encourage you to take a look at *The Gospel Primer*. This eight-week guide will help you better understand and communicate your story in light of God’s story.

My ministry partner Hugh and I have developed a resource specifically to help people get equipped for incarnational community. If you are looking for ways to be equipped for community I encourage you

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to take a look at *The Tangible Kingdom Primer*.

If you're looking for a resource to help you engage culture, then take a look at *The Barefoot Primer*. It will help you understand how to bless and serve others with spiritual, emotional, and physical needs.

### **Starting at EXTEND**

The sweet spot. You are pretty sure you have found it. You are growing, thriving, living in community. You have friends who get you, encourage you to grow, love your kids, and you are living in the context of your calling. This is what the Christian life was meant to look like—a disciple now looking to make disciples.

If you haven't already, identify the people God is specifically asking you to love and bless. Extend is often a by-product of a lifestyle of love. Invest in the equipping of those around you. Look for opportunities to share your story—disciple-making at its finest.

# Chapter 8

## Conclusion

My daughter is an iPad whiz. She has no problem navigating to her favorite games, turning on a show, and I am pretty sure she would help herself to some new music if she knew my password. My daughter is three.

At her age, I played games on boards. I watched one of a few stations on a TV, no remote and no DVR, and waited for my favorite shows to come on. I listened to music on the radio. I feel old even writing this.

The world is changing. Technology is used for

## *Transcend*

everything from brewing the perfect cup of coffee, to meeting new friends, to overthrowing governments. My daughters will grow up using technology I could never have imagined at their age. We don't even know how to educate children to be successful in their future because the world is changing so fast they will be in careers that don't even exist yet.

Yet some things stay the same.

Some of the best things in life come from the simplest ingredients. Bread, made from salt, flour, and water, baked in a brick oven is high on my list of "best things." The world has advanced and technology gives us pictures from the surface of Mars, but there still isn't anything better than real sourdough. Real bread, made without any fancy technology, the good old-fashioned way.

It isn't surprising that the Bible uses bread to explain things. Bread is universal—every nation and people group has a type of bread. From tortillas in Mexico to naan in India to arepas in Venezuela, bread is the stuff of life and a perfect illustration of a thriving church.

If you mix flour and water and leave it out, lightly covered, things happen. At first, it might not look like it. Every twelve hours you pour out a little of the flour and water mixture and replace

## Conclusion

it with new flour and water. With patience and persistence you will soon notice a change.

At first it is small, a couple of bubbles, a little fermented smell. By the end of the week, you have something that no one would argue is not alive. Sourdough starter, cultured by the environment and fed by flour, ready and able to make an amazing loaf of bread. One cup full of starter, a little more water and flour, add a dash of salt. Knead and let it grow. Shape it, bake it. Enjoy.

Put a bunch of Jesus followers' together, exposed to the culture and in a thriving community environment, and things start to happen. First, it is small. On the surface you don't see anything happening. It's tempting to give up and toss it all out, calling it a loss. But just keep feeding it. Soon it gets a little bubbly. The people of God take on a scent of the Kingdom. Give it what it needs to grow and it will. A starter can be used over and over again, replicating itself—a thriving disciple can do the same.

It is so tempting to disinfect, boil, and sanitize before we start. If you were to take all the items you were going to use for making sourdough and started by cleaning them with hot soap and water, sealed them up tight in a jar, what would happen? Nothing! Just like a disciple that gets sealed away

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from the culture. Discipleship void of authentic, vulnerable, and messy relationships will never grow into something useful and productive. Flour and water in a sterile jar is worthless.

Sometimes when a starter is just getting started, something else will grow—something unhealthy that is trying to steal away what is good. What is fed grows. A bad environment produces bad results. Believers, fed Jesus and the Gospel in the context of community, will grow and eventually the “bad” will be overcome. Those that are left alone, in isolation, may not be so lucky.

And then there is the salt. Bread without salt is disappointing on the best day, inedible on the worst. We are called to be salt in this world. A world without Jesus is sad and hopeless. Christians are called to show the world another way, a path of radical love, the ability to live a story bigger than ourselves.

### **What if**

I hope this book challenged your current perception of how we make disciples and gave you a pathway forward. If you needed it, I hope I was able to provide enough guidance to help you make some progress in a positive direction. If nothing else, I

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hope you are encouraged that you are not alone in this discipleship journey.

### **tran·scend**

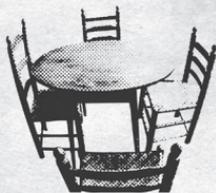
To pass beyond the limits of: To be greater than, as in intensity or power; surpass: To exist above and independent of.

This is a call for each participant in the church—the people of God, the body of believers—to rise above a simple and unhealthy measure of success. Only you know what God is asking of you. Only I know what God is asking of me. The church is made up of its individual parts. We serve an amazing, powerful, life-changing God and have all the reasons we need to live in the abundance of his love and share that love with others. I hope you discover what it truly means to “go and make disciples!”

# Acknowledgements

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