



Seven

*'A disciple of Jesus is someone
who tries to live all their life in a Jesus way.
A disciple is an active, intentional learner, a practitioner,
a doer of the Word not just a student.
A disciple is accountable to someone
who knows them and helps them grow and live.
A disciple is an apprentice.'*

Beginning

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If there is one thing that I long for, it is that people get to hear about Jesus and that they then begin to trust him, dedicate themselves to him and then follow him. I want this because when this happens good things take place both in their own lives and the lives of those around them. Life gets better, more fulfilling, more secure. Not that every bad or painful thing is immediately sorted out as if by magic, but when we trust Jesus with our lives new things happen and we find ourselves refreshed and renewed. **Trusting** Jesus is key and when we do this, when we allow him to direct our thinking and our actions, and take up his invitation to enter something he called the 'Kingdom of God', life takes on a whole new meaning and direction.

The term for this is '**discipleship**' and that's what this short book is about.

In all things there is theory and there is practice. Both are important. None of us would attempt to make a meal without knowing at least something about how ingredients go together and even fewer of us would try to build a house without knowing anything about the right mix for cement. It's the same with being a disciple. We need to know how things go together. We need to get the mix right.

Matthew's gospel is the longest and most detailed by far, but it finishes quite abruptly. The last chapter rattles through at speed and it goes like this: The tomb is empty, the women meet the risen Christ, the local authorities concoct a cover up for the empty tomb and then we have a tiny paragraph about Jesus' last meeting with his disciples on the hillside where Jesus says this:

*"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."

And that's it.

The gospel ends.

Given that we've just read twenty eight long chapters it all strikes me as a bit sudden.

But I wonder if there is a reason for it all.

My suspicion is that Matthew had picked up something very important from Jesus about discipleship that he didn't want us to lose sight of. I think he wanted discipleship to be the last thing we have left ringing in our ears.

Discipleship is a central theme in Matthew's gospel and is woven right the way through it.. Again and again we see Jesus looking for disciples, teaching his disciples, correcting them, warning them, encouraging them, sending them out. Discipleship meant everything to Jesus. It's what he was about. If seeing God's Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven was Jesus' mission, making disciples was his strategy for getting there.

Keeping going

When the grace of God finally wins our hearts and we begin to trust God for the first time all kinds of things happen - new things, good things. Sometimes people describe it like being born all over again, or as a new beginning. And that's exactly what Jesus

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offered us when he invited us to trust him, turn around and start walking in a completely new direction.

This experience of new birth can for many be an intoxicating, exhilarating experience. For others it is less dramatic. Either way it is just the start of the journey and we soon discover that co-operating with God's grace is an **on-going daily thing**.

And that's where new disciplines, attitudes and behaviours come in.

Over the centuries Jesus' followers have discovered that some activities, attitudes and behaviours help us to stay close to God while others inevitably draw us further away. Determined to remain faithful to the end of their lives, Christians have deliberately chosen to discipline themselves. They have adopted various practices and attitudes that helped them finish the race and win the prize.

This book sets out a way for us to be disciples today, right here, right now and the truth is that we can't be a disciple if we don't engage in disciplines. We all know that it is not the starting but the finishing that we really long for. And to finish well we need solid rugged disciplines to help us get there. Anything less and we'll stumble and fall.

Disciplines are not about earning God's love or about earning our new life. They are simply about helping us stay in the centre of it.

We cannot earn God's grace.

But we can co-operate with it.

This book is about helping you get it, stick at it, and win. It's about helping you finish the race and finishing with a crown. We are all at different points on our journey of apprenticeship. Some of us are just starting out with Jesus and are experiencing God's reign over our lives for the first time. Others of us have been his disciples for many years. Wherever we are, this small book is about enabling you to **keep the main thing the main thing.**

Seven

The book is divided into **seven** chapters – hence the book title. Each section deals with a different truth, or theme, and each has its own number which relates specifically to the chapter – one to seven. All of them are important but as you read through you will find that they build on each other.

They are :

- ONE** The Kingdom
- TWO** Loving God and others
- THREE** Father, Son and Spirit
- FOUR** Spiritual formation
- FIVE** Connecting with and praying for others
- SIX** Work and purpose in life
- SEVEN** Rest, rhythm and balance

The idea behind the numbers is that they might help to make the material more **memorable**. This is important because my dream for this book is that very quickly you

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won't need it anymore - you will have it *inside* you. It will be something you can carry around in your heart. Just know the numbers and everything else will follow. Learn the numbers and their meaning, and then stick to them, and I believe you will be able to keep the main thing the main thing.

At the end of each chapter there is a **prayer** to pray. This acts as a kind of summary of the chapter but also is a way of making a commitment to God in response to the content. By all means, if you'd prefer, make up your own prayers instead. Mine are there only in case you get stuck, feeling you want to pray, but not exactly sure what to say.

Right at the end of the book you will also find some questions to discuss with others for you to make use of, again, if it helps.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge as I do again on the last page, that this book is the accumulation of other people's ideas and thoughts too many to mention. Please follow up the list of names at the back to read further. They are my heroes.

I think that's enough of an introduction.

Let's get under way.

One

The Kingdom

ONE

First things first

Before we get *doing* things we need to get something right in our *thinking*. We need to know what Jesus was on about and it needs to make sense.

For all the things that he said, when you read the gospels it quickly becomes clear that Jesus had **one** main message. It was a message that was received with great enthusiasm by those who heard it. It was a message of hope and it was delivered with great confidence and authority.

And it was this - **"The Kingdom of God is at hand!"**

Again and again Jesus made this announcement about God's Kingdom the central theme of his teaching. And then he turned it into an invitation. "Seek *first* the Kingdom of God," he said, "and all things will be added to you."

The announcement concerning this Kingdom is a simple message and its meaning is not complicated. What Jesus was announcing was **the arrival of God's rule and reign upon the earth** and this was a great thing. Everyone knew that when God became King again the world would be put right, sorted out, healed and renewed. Old Testament prophets talked about it as the day when all tears would be wiped away and the people longed for it, anticipated it, dreamt of it, and prayed for it to come.

The arrival of the God's Kingdom would be the day when God became King.

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The people who saw Jesus with their own eyes and heard his voice with their own ears lived in a time of poverty, oppression and crisis. They knew the words of the prophets and they ached and longed for change. They longed for renewal and for transformation. They longed for God to come and act. They longed for God's **Kingdom** to come.

All of us experience **pain** in our lives, both physical and psychological. All of us experience the damaging effects of other people's and of our own **sin**, and all of us will one day **die**. These three things – illness, sin and death – are evidence, according to Jesus, that another ruler, an imposter, has attempted to take control over our world. Despite God's love and goodness, God's rule has been rejected by humanity and another kingdom has established itself on earth and taken root. Instead of the 'Prince of Peace', we are ruled by the 'prince of this world'.

Before anything else we need to know that the news Jesus heralded was that the time had come when things would **change** and this false king, this 'prince', would at last be dethroned. In his life, Jesus claimed, what people were seeing was God acting decisively to win his world back to himself and to establish his own rule on earth as it is in heaven. Despite the way things had seemed God was indeed faithful to the promises he had made with Israel to save and bless the world through them and now, at last, they were being fulfilled.

This was **good news**. A new King was on his way and with him, a new Kingdom. A Kingdom driven by **love**.

As Jesus told people about the coming of God's Kingdom other signs accompanied him. He cast out demons, forgave sins, healed people and even raised some from the dead.

These dramatic actions backed up Jesus' message of good news as they were exactly the kind of thing you'd expect if God's rule was at hand confronting the old kingdom of illness, sin and death. Simultaneously they also pointed to another deep truth concerning Jesus' identity – that he was not just God's prophet, but God's **Son**.

In light of this it is not at all surprising that crowds flocked to Jesus eager to receive a touch from God and hear more about this coming Kingdom. Describing it in stories and parables, Jesus invited everyone to **submit** to God's rule, to **rethink** their way of living and to put their **trust** in him as the **Messiah**, not just of Israel, but of the whole world. Anyone who believed in him, he promised, would receive the gift of a **new life** - life in all its fullness - the life of the age to come.

Inside or out

A kingdom is simply a 'domain ruled over by a king'. It is literally a 'king-dome'. It has edges. It is the extent of someone's will and rule.

Each of us have our own kingdoms where what we want to happen happens just because we want it to happen. So, as our bodies are under our authority they are in our kingdom. A parent has their children in their kingdom. A boss has employees in his or hers. A King has subjects in his. God has a kingdom too. It is everywhere where what God wants happens exactly as God wants it to. His Kingdom is where he is King.

And just like all kingdoms, God's Kingdom has edges too. Anywhere where God's will is perfectly expressed is *in* his Kingdom. Anywhere where his rule is rejected is outside his Kingdom. His Kingdom is the extent of his rule. It is where his will is done.

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And as we know, there can only be one king in a kingdom at a time. Either a parent is in charge or the child is. Either the boss is in control or the employees are. Either we are in control or our bodies are. Jesus rightly reminded us that it is impossible to serve two masters. We will either obey one, or the other. We have to choose.

Jesus knew this and that's why his invitation to enter his Kingdom always demanded a **response** from people. They had to **decide** whether they would follow him or not, believe in him or not. They had to decide whether they were in or out. They had to decide whether they wanted to live in this Kingdom or not.

To help people in this decision Jesus was straightforward and upfront with them. We find him talking about taking the narrow way, carrying a cross, and counting the **cost**. He talked about giving up everything to follow him. It was important people understood the deal. Living in God's Kingdom meant submitting to his rule and governance and accepting that Jesus really was the way, the truth, and the life. It meant accepting that the way to the Father was through **him**. You had to choose. Jesus' message had edges.

That's why, despite the welcome, despite the miracles and the healings, despite the message of hope, we read that people went away sad, rejecting Jesus' narrow way imagining that they had too much to lose. Some were clearly threatened by his Kingly claim, others rejected his demand for submission to his way *alone* and others again questioned his authority. Many decided that they were not ready to live in his kingdom.

Alongside his welcome and inclusivity, therefore, Jesus' message divided people. It is clear that he was straight talking, fiery, even **angry** at times. This contradicts the gentle,

meekest and mildest version of Jesus we are often fed but we must not edit out this side of his personality. It is an important part of his character.

Jesus' anger was most visibly displayed against those who resisted his kingdom, especially when it touched the **poorest**, the least, or the outcast. But in fact whenever an attitude, a religious behaviour, a tradition, or a vested interest prevented God's good rule being expressed, he exposed it, named it and confronted it. This made him enemies.

Jesus was uncomfortable to be around as well as wonderful.

Unsurprisingly this uncompromising approach brought him into conflict with the powers and authorities of the day. The more Jesus spoke out the more the tension rose and we see people increasingly testing him, questioning him, pushing him.

Jesus anticipated people's reaction but uncovering their hardness of heart only served to make him even more outspoken. When he finally turned the tables in the temple as a symbolic protest and judgement against Israel it was inevitable that his life would be in danger from that moment on. It was a significant incident. In a very blunt and provocative manner Jesus was telling his people, that despite being God's chosen people they had *failed* – failed to live up to their calling to be a blessing to the nations. And he was making it clear that their consistent resistance to accepting his teaching, or to living the way he had described, was evidence that their hearts were hardened, not just against him, but against God. Rejecting him, they were rejecting Yahweh.

It is not surprising to read that soon afterwards Jesus was handed over to the Romans to be crucified. He had confronted the powers and they wanted him dead.

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We are familiar with the story of those last hours – how Jesus was betrayed, beaten and hung up to die with a crown of thorns pressed into his head beneath an ironic, sarcastic sign that read, “King of the Jews”. He was intentionally humiliated and defeated. His voice was deliberately extinguished. His message about the Kingdom was deliberately snuffed out.

A dead messiah is no messiah at all and a dead king is no king at all and as a result you’d have thought that Jesus’ humiliating death would have been the end of the story for this radical and charismatic prophet from Nazareth. Once his body was in the tomb surely his disciples would fade away and his inviting but unsettling message would disappear.

But that is not what happened. Instead the name of Jesus has become the most famous in all history and his message has gone on to shape more lives than any other. No-one else has even come close to having influenced more people, inspired more dreams, or given more hope. Jesus’ name still lives on.

Why? How did this happen?

The simplest way to explain this, and yet perhaps also the hardest to get your head around, is that the story Jesus’ disciples quickly started telling about what happened next, the story about Jesus’ **resurrection**, was in fact actually true.

Without the resurrection story it is certain that his message would have died with him, his words would have disappeared, and his actions would have become distant memories. Instead, there is not a moment of the day when someone somewhere on this planet isn’t recalling his name, worshipping him as King or remembering his sacrifice.

In and of itself, the fact that the early disciples risked their lives on the reality of seeing Jesus alive again doesn't 'prove' the resurrection beyond doubt. But it is a significant factor to take into consideration. Why else would they have acted this way? Surely it would have been madness to die for a dead messiah.

Like millions of others I believe that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead, remarkable, and unbelievable as that seems. **I believe** the story told by hundreds who claimed to have seen him alive again, physically renewed and restored – transformed.

And I subsequently believe that Jesus, having **ascended**, lives on at the right hand side of the Father, sitting on the throne as **King** of this world, **Lord** of creation. Because of his resurrection I believe that his name is indeed above all other names and that one day all knees will bow to him as he establishes heaven on earth, his will on earth, just as he invited us to pray.

And I believe that one day he will return to earth, wipe away all tears, and restore all things in him. Death and sin, already dealt the fatal blow, will be overcome once and for all and will be consigned to destruction, never to return.

And in line with both the prophecies of old and the revelation of John, I believe that on this day when Jesus returns to reclaim his world, there will be a **new heaven and a new earth** and that the old order of things will have passed away. God will once again live with his people and they will enjoy him forever. On this day the 'Kingdom of God', inaugurated by Jesus, will come in its completeness and the glory of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. The Alpha will be the Omega. The beginning will be the end.

Rethinking everything

This is the story of Christianity. This is the story you are invited to live in, or to see your life as a part of. It is the story you are asked to submit to.

Jesus' invitation for us today is exactly the same as the one he gave those who heard him first-hand 2000 years ago. "The Kingdom of God is at hand. **Repent and believe.**"

The first step on this journey is one of **submission**. If there was another way forward I would tell it to you. But there isn't. In fact, surrendering to Jesus as Lord is a daily requirement if we are to gain the life that Jesus offers us in his Kingdom and under his protection. This is the **main thing** – the first thing – the **one** thing we must do before all others.

As Jesus made clear, any move *towards* him is also simultaneously a step *away* from other things. Jesus talked repeatedly about repentance. Repentance means **rethinking** something. It means turning around and heading in the opposite direction. Trusting in Jesus, believing in him, always leads us away from sins, our pasts, our inherent selfishness. It means accepting our brokenness and failure, and it means taking full responsibility for any fault that is our own and asking for his forgiveness. It also means completely re-thinking our ways of living in the light of Jesus' Kingdom announcement.

Believing in Jesus is everything. And we display **faith** when we submit to Jesus' teaching and direction and accept his rule over every aspect of our thinking and living. As we do this we turn our backs on any behaviour, attitude or thought that doesn't belong in

God's Kingdom. We admit our failures and sin and reject any further co-operation with evil.

Walking away from one set of **attitudes** and **behaviours** will result in us developing another set of attitudes and behaviours. This is what is meant by the 'obedience that comes from faith' which St Paul talks about. When we believe in Jesus we find ourselves wanting to obey him and allowing our wills, our desires and our heart, to be shaped by his. This is 'the way' Jesus taught us to live and we accept Jesus teaching as perfectly suited to enabling us to live a **good and righteous life**.

The fruit of this submission, this trust, is a life of goodness and generosity, a life of peace, freedom and joy. It is the life we always wanted.

And the good news is that this life is available to **everyone**. Everyone is welcome in the Kingdom. Everyone is invited to let Jesus be their king. God has forgiven our sins and paid the debt of our failures. We are all invited to his party.

A different way of seeing and doing things

Making the Kingdom of God, or the rule of God, our primary objective in life also shapes our **values** and our **goals**. Desire is a good thing and is God given but as we submit our desires to God we find him reshaping them, refining them and renewing them, leading us into whole new areas of activity and service. We routinely find ourselves submitting our money, our resources, our time, and our abilities to his purposes and we discover that amazing things are possible with God even when we have so little to contribute. God loves to multiply our gifts.

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Someone once said that 'Life in the Kingdom of God starts with *submission* and continues with *surrender*'. We never change our attitude to God. We let him be God and we submit to his loving rule over every aspect of our lives. We resist the urge to take back control of our own lives and we actively resist temptation in whatever form it comes at us. We recognise that the 'kingdom of this world' will offer all kinds of alternative ways of finding life and we choose to resist these, believing instead that we will find life as we lose it for the sake of others.

Values matter, but living in the Kingdom of God is not just about *how* we do things (our ethics) it is also about *what* we do. It is about **purpose** and **direction**. As members of God's Kingdom we allow God to set the direction and trajectory of our lives. We invite his Spirit to lead us and to use our lives for his purposes. We let go of our personal ambitions and surrender them to him, allowing him to shape them and set the agenda for our lives. We submit our work to him and invite him to express his character and will through our daily life. We invite God to make us ambitious for him.

Just as Jesus saw God's will being expressed in his words and actions we open ourselves up to him expressing himself through *our* lives, *our* words, *our* actions. Looking for God's activity in the world we heal the sick, preach good news to the poor, release the oppressed and the possessed, care for those in need and proclaim that this is indeed the year of the Lord's favour. All these things, just as they were for Jesus, are signs which point towards Jesus, signs that identify him as Lord, and signs which anticipate the future, giving people a taste of what is to come.

Like Jesus we want our lives to be a **sign**, an **agent** and an **instrument** of God's Kingdom rule.

This is what it means to make the main thing the main thing.

This is step one.

The vital decision

The first step, in light of Jesus' gospel announcement about his Kingdom, is to make a decision about whether you believe him or not. Is he 'Lord' or was he just a failed messiah?

If Jesus is who he claimed to be and the words he spoke were true, trustworthy, and dependable then he is likely to be worthy of your discipleship. If you doubt this, however, then you will be unlikely, and would be unwise, to trust him with your life.

But the thing you need to do is to make a **decision** about him.

Someone once noticed that Jesus gives us little room for manoeuvre. His claims about his vocation and his identity are too big to be ignored. He forces us to make a decision about himself one way or another. He was either mad, bad or God.

This is a good summary of our options. He is certainly one of them. It is up to us to decide which one.

The gospels record Jesus' resurrection as a *fact* supported by the witness of a large number of people who saw him physically alive in the days following his burial. This is a massive claim and demands our careful consideration. If it is true then Jesus' teaching

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and announcement concerning the rule of God is likely to be true too. For if the resurrection means anything it means both that death's power has been overcome by God and that Jesus' message and claims have been vindicated - God's Kingdom is indeed at hand, his rule has indeed been inaugurated in the life of Jesus and our forgiveness has been assured.

Jesus' gospel is that **Life in the Kingdom of God** is available to you today and every day. If you want to accept this gift from God then the only thing we need do is ask. It is ours for the receiving.

It's up to you.

...

If you are keen to receive this life from Jesus and enter the Kingdom of God for the first time or if you have already done this before but want to recommit yourself to Jesus I invite you to turn your desire into a prayer. To help you out I have written one for you. It is a prayer of submission. Read it through first. Consider its implications for your life. If you want the life Jesus offered, I invite you to pray it. It's about one thing - Jesus' Kingdom.

Dear God

I have come to accept that Jesus Christ is completely reliable, completely dependable, and completely trustworthy. I believe that he is who he said he was – God's son, his Messiah, our Saviour. I believe that he rose from the dead and that he is Lord of all.

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I accept Jesus' teaching that 'life' - rich life, life-in-all-its-fullness – is found only when I give up everything to attain the Kingdom of God which he has invited me to enter. As a result I have decided to make this the focus of my life, placing it at the centre of my thinking and activity each day. This Kingdom is my prize, my pearl, my treasure and my goal. It is a place of security, holiness, beauty, confidence, creativity and love. I have decided to make his Kingdom my home and to completely trust Jesus as my Lord.

I am truly grateful, Father, for all that you have accomplished through Jesus' death and resurrection and for all that you will complete when he returns as earth's rightful King.

Father, my life is now yours. All that I am now belongs to you - my money, my ambitions, my past and my future. I am surrendered. Thank you that you offer me forgiveness for every sin I have committed. I receive your forgiveness and accept your love.

Thank you, Father, that I can now say that I have been reconciled to God, that I have been bought with a price, that my debts have been paid, that amazing grace has won my heart and that, living in a state of trust and faith, I have been saved by God from death, sin and shame. Thank you that I have been given a fresh start, that I am a member of your worldwide family, adopted as your 'child', and that I am now an heir with Christ.

As your 'child', I recognise that I now represent you to others and that I am one of your ambassadors. I am part of a royal priesthood. Help me live up to this calling and give me your Spirit breathing your life and power into me. I am determined to live this new life you offer me, and to reject old ways of behaving and living. Teach me to live in new ways. Renew my mind and give me a new heart. Protect me from evil, from temptation.

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Father, as a disciple of Christ I am committed to fight valiantly against sin, the world and the devil. From this day on, and to the end of my life, I am determined to remain faithful to Christ, my Saviour, friend and Lord.

Amen

Two

Love God

Love neighbour

TWO

There is this story about Jesus.

A man came up to him and asked him a question. “Which is the greatest, or most important, commandment?” It was a good question and Jesus gives a good answer.

“The **two** greatest commandments,” he replies, avoiding reducing it simply to one, “are to **love God** with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and to **love your neighbour** as yourself.”

Actually, there are three versions of this story in the narratives handed down by Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Matthew and Mark both tell a story of Jesus being quizzed in the Temple in Jerusalem right at the end of his life by a ‘Teacher of the law’. In Matthew’s gospel, you get the impression that Jesus is being tested. It’s as if he is on Newsnight or Question Time.

Mark portrays a more genuine seeker – a man more honestly asking Jesus for his wisdom and eager to find points of agreement. By the end of the conversation Jesus tells the man that he is ‘not far from the Kingdom of God’.

Luke places the episode much earlier in Jesus’ ministry and again the tone is less confrontational than Matthew’s story. Here the ‘expert’ in the Law again seems more genuinely interested in what Jesus might think. It’s as if he is really looking for truth not just trying to trip Jesus up. And it is on this occasion that Jesus develops his theme by telling his famous parable about the **Good Samaritan** which we all know so well.

Three stories about two commandments

I started this book with a simple idea – that Jesus’ main thing – his most important thing, and therefore the most important thing for **us** to get our heads around – is the arrival and availability of ‘the Kingdom of God’ which Jesus inaugurated. “Seek *first* the Kingdom of God” Jesus told us.

It sounds simple. But what does that mean? What does it look like when we do that? How do we decide what is right and wrong? What stuff should we *do*, and what stuff should we *avoid*? Having free will is great – but how exactly do we use it? What are the **rules** in this Kingdom?

Once we have decided to live in the Kingdom of God and to let God rule every thought and action, it doesn’t take us long to wonder what that **means in practice**.

So, which *is* the most important commandment? We need to know.

And Jesus answers our question.

The only trouble is that most of us know what he’s going to say. We’ve heard it before.

The first commandment is this, ‘Love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ It’s all quite familiar.

But let’s stop for a moment to think about the significance of what Jesus is teaching.

The most important thing we can do is **love** God.

Repeat that last sentence a few times, slowly, to let it sink in – emphasising the word ‘love’.

Now, before moving on, is that really what you think Jesus thought was the most important thing to do above all other things? To love? Before *doing* anything, before *saying* anything, before *thinking* anything, do you really believe that God’s biggest issue is whether or not we *love* him?

Let’s play around with this thought for a moment. Let’s change the word – just so that we hear it right. How about this: “The first commandment is that you **desire** God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength.”

Desiring God. There’s a thought.

How about we try another word? How about we swap the word love for **enjoy**? How does it sound to you to hear Jesus **command** you to ‘*enjoy* God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength’?

“Before anything else – make sure you *enjoy* God!”

We are so familiar with the word love that we can miss its meaning.

Jesus was asked about obedience – “What must I *do*?” More accurately he was asked, “What must I *not do*?” Either way he was asked about the rules. The question assumes that there is a law somewhere, a commandment somewhere, that is so important to God that, if you break it, that’s it – you’re finished.

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Imagine you asked your Dad a similar question. "Dad, what's the one thing I must never do? What's the most important rule I must never break, Dad?" And imagine he said this in reply, "If you really want to know, the most important thing to me is that you love me."

I wonder how many people on earth truly get this.

God is primarily looking for people who love him.

Big word

Despite being only four letters long, love is a big word. And we know that real love, when we experience it and express it, always affects our whole lives, every bit of our personalities. It dominates us. Love for family, for children, for wives and husbands, love for anything is a **whole life thing**.

It's the same with God. When our hearts are turned towards him with *love* our *whole lives* are his. When we truly love him, desire him, or enjoy him, our hearts are directed towards him, our minds are submitted to him, our strength, our energy, our bodies belong to him. Everything is his. This is what it means to love him.

Rest for a moment with that thought.

All God wants is for me to love him, to long for him, to enjoy him, to desire him. Above anything else, all he really wants is for me to think so well of him that the only word I could use to accurately describe it would be that I 'loved' him. All he wants is **relationship**. How do I feel about that?

Others

The second thing that Jesus says matters most is loving **our neighbour** as ourselves. Countless words have been written about this command and I won't add too many of my own here, other than to make what seems to me to be an obvious point. Summarizing the Law in this way makes it plain just how much **people matter to God**. They matter more than anything and it's why they should matter to each one of us too.

Jesus tells us to love others as we *love ourselves*. Contrary to many more recent interpretations of these words I don't think that Jesus is telling us that *loving ourselves* is something we should be particularly worried about. It would be wrong to imagine, I think, that Jesus is introducing us to the importance of loving *ourselves*. The key word in this verse is not 'ourselves' but 'neighbour'. Jesus is not telling us that loving *ourselves* is the first stage of his second command and I think he would be surprised to hear us understand him this way.

Much more straightforwardly I think Jesus simply assumes that people *already* love themselves but then asks us to love others in the *same way*. Jesus is pointing out something that we already know, that no matter the level of our self-esteem, we love ourselves more than we love others, we tend to meet our own needs first, we have a natural bias towards self-concern, and we find sharing hard. The thrust of his teaching is not that we first need to love ourselves so that we can then move on to loving others. It is more simply that we ought to love others in the same kind of way we usually love ourselves, and therefore a lot more than we usually do.

TWO

This teaching very quickly becomes practical. Loving others means we must forgive others, we must think of them more highly than we do ourselves, we must let others go in front of us, we must share, we must worry as much about their needs as our own, we must put others first.

Jesus is being straightforward. He is telling us that loving others is the way to life.

Straightforward it may be, but this is indeed a difficult command.

How many people do you know who love others as much as they love themselves?

It makes you think.

Forgiveness

If Jesus placed the love of others at the centre of his teaching, at the centre of this love he placed forgiveness. Forgiveness is the most powerful force on earth and Jesus invites us to experience it and share it on a daily basis.

Forgiveness is not primarily a feeling or an emotion. Forgiveness is an action. The best way I have found to define it is, 'Paying the debt that someone else owes you.' Forgiveness is about bearing the cost of someone else's behaviour instead of making them pay for it somehow themselves. Forgiveness is about giving people something.

We often talk about people 'owing' us an apology. The reason we talk this way is because when someone hurts us, takes something from us, or harms us in any way, a

debt is incurred. And it is this loss that causes us pain, sadness and anger. Forgiveness is not about letting the person off as if their offence never mattered. It is about bearing the full cost of the offence *oneself* instead of making the other person pay.

And the larger the hurt, the greater the debt people owe. There is no point in crying over spilt milk because milk is cheap and it is easy to wipe up. But crying over bigger things is natural and right. Bad things hurt. And the larger the loss, the more pain we feel. We all know this.

Justice demands that people pay for what they have done. We all know this instinctively. People matter and it matters when they are hurt. It is wrong to simply let people off. The cost of an eye is an eye. The cost of an ear is an ear. People are valuable and we should not minimise the true cost that our sins have on others. Love gets angry at injustice. How could it not?

But given the reality of sin, the effect of sin and the power of sin, Jesus came with a message of forgiveness. First he forgave us. Then he invited us to forgive others.

Forgiveness is not natural. It's against the rules. Indeed, it *breaks* the rules. On the cross Jesus 'broke' the Law. He cancelled its power over us by cancelling the debt we owe. Here he displayed the depth of God's love for us. He paid the price. He set us free. He rescued us from our sins. This is great news.

But then Jesus asks us to join him, to participate in this same reckless undeserved generosity.

TWO

Only the victim can forgive someone. No-one 'deserves' it. It is always a gift. But when we forgive people we release them from the debt that they owe us – sometimes a debt they would never be able to pay off themselves. We set them free. But simultaneously something else happens. When we forgive, we release ourselves from the role of debt collector. We free ourselves. Cancelling the debt someone owes, bearing it ourselves, carrying our cross, is the way to life.

Imagine a world without forgiveness. It would be hell. Because without forgiveness, without atonement, without reconciliation, the cycle of hurt just keeps on growing and expanding. And none of us want that. We've all got debts to pay. All of us have hurt someone. We all owe someone something.

But thank God that forgiveness has entered the story. And just as we are forgiven our trespasses, so we forgive those who trespass against us. Not once, but seventy times seven. As many times as needed. Because forgiveness is the heart of the gospel. It's the most powerful force on earth. It's the essence of the Kingdom of God.

Two vital things for your life

In God's Kingdom, when people submit to his rule over their lives, two things happen: they **love God** with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and they **love others** as they love themselves. These two activities or attitudes are fundamental for anyone who would like be known as one of Jesus' disciples. They are non-negotiable.

As Christians we repeatedly use these two commands as checks for how we are doing. We accept that these are the two easiest ways of working out what is wrong in our lives.

We recognise that all sins, all problems, have their root in either failing to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, or in failing to love others. As a result, down through the centuries, Christians have always taken these two commands as the central components of whole-life-discipleship and constantly returned to them as guides to help them assess the condition of their hearts. We are no different and as a result I recommend that you repeatedly invite the Spirit of God to help you consider how you are doing against these two simple commands.

Do you love God? Do you love others?

Simple questions that go straight to the heart of the matter.

Remember, love wins

When we review our lives honestly in this way it will not be long before we discover that we fail in these matters all the time. How do we deal with this? Two temptations need to be avoided. One is to gradually avoid honestly reviewing our lives against these two commands for fear of failure and shame. The other is to wallow in self-pity and begin to reinforce an idea of ourselves as 'miserable sinners'. This can sound holy but isn't what Jesus was intending. Jesus didn't let us in on this summary of the Law so that our guilt would increase but rather that we might simply know the direction our lives would take when we lived in God's Kingdom. Recognising our failure to either love God or to love others does not put us off picking ourselves up and trying again, for we know that God's love is stronger than our failures. The door of forgiveness is always open to us. Receiving God's love again and again we recommit ourselves to his Kingdom and his way. This is the Kingdom we live in. The Kingdom where love wins.

TWO

As in the previous chapter, what follows is a prayer that you are invited to pray to the God of love. Again, there is no rush. You can take your time. Let the words guide your thinking and, out of your love for God, allow yourself to be present both to him, and to your own heart, as you let God's Spirit fill you with his presence.

Dear God

Over and above all things I believe that what matters to you most is simply that I love you and that I love others. These are the two most important commands Jesus gave us for life in the Kingdom of God and I accept these as the primary measurement of my own faithfulness to your way and of my goodness as a person.

Thank you that you love me completely, fully, and perfectly. Despite everything that I have ever done, and everything that I failed to do, thank you that you still consider me worthy of your love. Thank you that you sent your Son for me so that I might believe in you and receive forgiveness for my sin. I receive it now with joy. My debt has been cancelled. Jesus has paid the price. I am free. Thank you Father, for this gift.

Father, knowing that I am loved by you, I wholeheartedly commit myself to you and want to enjoy you forever. I love you because you have first loved me. You are my creator and my Father. Life is a gift and everything I have originates from you. You have given me so much. I want to worship you in all that I do, think and say. I want to worship you with all my mind, strength, body and soul.

Your love for me draws me outwards into relationship with others and I am committed to loving my neighbour as myself. Guiding me in all this is the knowledge that love is patient and 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, and it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. Love never fails. Love wins.

Help me Father, to truly love others, as I love myself. Help me to put other people first and to share myself, my time and my possessions with them. Help me to forgive people who hurt me. Help me to be generous towards them. Help me to show hospitality. Help me to truly love people, even my enemies. This is what Jesus has taught me to do.

Help me to live up to the way Jesus has taught me and shown me.

Thank you Father.

Amen

TWO

Three

Father

Son

Spirit

THREE

The purpose of this short book is to set out a memorable way for you to follow through on your desire to be a disciple of Jesus. The content of each chapter is shaped by a number – one to seven. Chapter one is about the **one thing** Jesus talked about more than anything else and the thing he told us to seek first – The Kingdom of God. Chapter two concerns Jesus teaching about the **two directions** our lives take once we decide to live in this Kingdom – loving God and loving others. This third chapter is about knowing God fully. It is about one God in **three persons** – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

God

‘God’ is an easy word to say. It slips off our tongues easily and we think it is obvious what we mean by it. But actually the word ‘God’ is not so straight forward. When we talk about ‘God’, it is important that we know what that means, who he is, what he’s like.

Christians believe that in order to get a full understanding of God we need to know him as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit. There is so much that can be said about this, far more than is needed right now, but in this chapter all I really want to do is to make sure that each of us knows God in the fullest way possible. This is foundational stuff and if we have a gap in our understanding here it will affect things later on. To know God properly we need to know him as **all three** – Father, Son and Spirit.

It’s worth noting that the way we understand God has evolved and developed, just as all life has on this planet. It has taken time for people to make sense of who God is. Put another way, it seems that God has taken his time to reveal himself to us.

THREE

In the earliest parts of the story God reveals himself as Creator – the great 'I AM'. The people of Israel called him Yahweh. Keen to avoid using his name inappropriately they left out the vowels when writing his name down and so we find that God's name is written as 'YHWH', pronounced as Yahweh.

Judaism has a clear idea of who God is. It is proudly monotheistic. God is indivisible. The Lord is **one** and this is core to their belief. There are not many gods, and neither is god found in things. There is one God who is the creator of everything. One God, above and beyond all things. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Christians also believe that there is one God, but we believe that this one God is three persons - Father, Son and Spirit – the Trinity.

Now, as any of us who have spent any time trying to think that last statement through will know, this truth can't be explained or outlined in the normal way. Christians talk about the Trinity as a *mystery* or a *paradox*. We can't explain it even though we believe it.

This sounds shaky, but this mystery is not all bad. Far from it! Mystery can sometimes help to make the most sense of things. Indeed, the reason we believe God is 'three in one' is because it seems the best way to make sense of all the evidence before us.

Most of our ideas about God are shared with Judaism (which is of course the root faith of Christianity). With Jews we believe that God is one, he is personal, he is all powerful, he is all loving, he is relational, and he is all knowing. All these things are Jewish beliefs and like Jews we believe that God is the creator of the world, the '**Father**' of all mankind.

But we also go further, for we believe that we have also 'seen God' in **Jesus**, a man from Nazareth, and not just aspects of God's character or his personality but the fullness of his being.

One early Christian writer put it like this, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and **the exact representation of his being**, sustaining all things by his powerful word."

This is a massive thing to say, especially for a Jew. How could it be possible to attach such words to a man from Nazareth?

The reason is actually very simple. Very quickly early followers of Jesus, most of whom were Jewish and therefore believed that God was one, began to discover that everything that they believed about God was also true of Jesus and vice versa. This stretched their understanding of God until they got to the point where they started describing him as 'the visible image of the invisible God', 'the exact representation of his being'.

See Jesus and you see God.

All kinds of things fell into place when this radical and daring move was made. Although it broke open all their previous ideas about who God was and is, suddenly a whole load more things began to make sense. Jesus' miracles, his authority, his forgiveness, his resurrection, his ascension, all the things he said about himself, began to fit together in a

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way that they never did before. Jesus was not only 100% human. It made sense to believe that he was 100% divine too.

Seeing the **Spirit** as a distinct person in the Trinity was also an innovation of the early church, although again this also grew from the rich soil of ancient Jewish thought and belief. For centuries people had thought of the Spirit, or breath of God, as the presence, the wisdom and the voice of God and talked readily of his activity in the lives of ordinary people and in creation. When Jesus told his first disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Spirit to empower them, they would have been comfortable with this idea of God's presence making a difference to people's lives.

But, just as with ideas about Jesus' divinity, over time Christians began to see the Spirit was not just an agent of God, but was as much 'God' himself as was the Father and the Son – a person – distinct from the others but united with them.

It took some time, but Christians are now settled in their belief that God has revealed himself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that to truly know him we must know him as Father, as Son and as Spirit.

Love

Scripture teaches that **God is love** and that this love existed before the creation of the world. Perceiving that God exists as three persons in **relationship** with each other is compatible with this idea because, as we all know, love needs an object to exist. It can't exist in a vacuum. Love only exists when there is something or someone to love.

Understanding God as a trinity of three persons in perfect relationship with each other reinforces the idea that love is at the heart of everything - not just of all creation, but at the very heart of God. Believing that the Father, Son and Spirit exist in complete unity, we believe that love is at the root of all that is and all that will be.

Not only this, but because we are described as being made 'in the image of God', God's three-in-oneness provides us with a specific insight into our own existence – that **we are designed for community**. Knowing this in our bones, it is no accident that relationships matter more to us than anything else in our lives. This is how we were made. Just as the Father, Son and Spirit relate to each other out of mutual love and self-giving, so we are designed for mutuality, companionship and relationship.

Love is at the heart of things.

Knowing God

Getting to grips with the idea of God as a Trinity is complicated and ultimately a mystery to us. But talking or thinking about God as 'three in one' is not primarily about *describing* God. It is about **experiencing** him. As we experience God as Father, Son and Spirit we find that we become better able to make sense of him. Indeed, we begin to talk about 'knowing him'. When we see the one God acting in different but complementary ways, and as three unified but distinct persons, many things fall into place - his character is more fully known and experienced by us, the bible narrative makes more sense and a larger vision of God's purposes for the world becomes clearer. That's why it is so important that we understand that God is all three persons – Father, Son and Spirit – because only then do we get to know him fully.

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Father

When we say that God is Father we are, at a very simple level, accepting that God is the **source** of all life, that he is the **creator**, the 'Father' of all things.

But there is more. Calling God our Father we are also saying something about the kind of relationship he has to those he calls his children. It tells us something about the depth of God's **love** and **faithfulness**. That is what people mean when they say that God has a '**Father's heart**' towards us. They are commenting on the nature of both God's character and his heart towards us.

Every time I take a funeral I quote a portion from Psalm 103. *"The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great goodness. As a **father** is tender towards his children, so is the Lord tender to those that fear him."*

Tenderness and compassion lie at the heart of God's being and so it is no surprise that Jesus invites us to call God 'Abba', or 'Dad'. God is tender.

But there is more still.

While we are perhaps familiar with the idea of calling God Father implying a deep sense of care and nurture, it is important to distinguish the emotional or psychological nature of a Father/child relationship and the **social** nature of it. It should be noted that when the scriptures were written, while fatherhood meant many things, a father's **role** was primarily one of **responsibility**, **commitment** and **obligation** and it is this aspect of the

father/child bond that is so important in scripture when describing God's relationship to us as his children.

When you read the word 'son', or 'child' in the bible, it is important that we don't just read it as if it is about God having an emotional or psychological relationship with us like we do with our own children. Certainly the meaning of the father/son relationship in the world of the bible involved emotions, but more important was what the relationship meant in social or contractual terms. Being a 'son' was not primarily about having a *relationship* with a father or a 'Dad' in the same way we tend to think about relationships with our children today – about swings in the park or hugs - it was more about being a dependant and an *heir*. It was about being their offspring or their beneficiary – someone who inherits the father's wealth.

Just as a father is obligated to provide for his family in life and will eventually hand over an inheritance to his children, so God calls us to be his sons and daughters so that we see ourselves as both his **dependants** and his **heirs**.

As this was the meaning of God's Fatherhood in the Old Testament it is no surprise that Jesus tells us that the blessed will be called 'children of God' and that they will 'inherit the earth'. Being God's child and receiving an inheritance go together

And there is more still.

God's 'father's heart' is revealed most powerfully in the giving of his Son, Jesus. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son." It is here we see his love displayed vast as an ocean, undeserved and unwarranted. And it is in Jesus' death on the

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cross that we see the height, width, and depth of this love that is beyond knowing. Contrary to all expectation we discover in the cross that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we might do to make him love us less.

The truth is we are Abba's beloved. And we always will be.

As Jesus tells us, God is a Father who runs down the street to welcome us home, wraps his arms of forgiveness around us, puts a ring on our finger, gives us new clothes to wear and invites us inside for a party. Once we were lost, but now we have been found - by the Father.

Son

The first way Jesus is introduced to us in the gospel narratives is as a **Saviour**. We read in the first chapter of the New Testament that Joseph was told "to give him the name Jesus, because he will **save** his people from their sins." Through Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension, God has obtained for us all kinds of things that we could never have achieved on our own - forgiveness, victory, reconciliation, redemption and eternal life – the word for this is 'salvation'. We receive this salvation with thanks.

In the very next verse we are given another name for Jesus. He is to be called Emmanuel which means '**God with us**'. Jesus is God right up close. Not distant from us looking in on the world. God is engaged and connected. God understands us because he has truly become one of us. He has 'moved into the neighbourhood'.

Interestingly Jesus' preferred title for himself was not 'God' or 'Son of God', but 'Son of man'. As God's son, Jesus was not only desperate to show us what God looked like, but to show us what being human could look like. Jesus was not the first person to bear the **image of God** but he was the first one to present it perfectly. It was vital for the Word to become flesh, not the flesh to become Word. Jesus shows us what it's like to be truly alive. In his everyday living Jesus becomes a model for us to copy. We accept him as our way, our truth and our life.

When we remember Jesus' suffering and death, and remember that his body was broken and his blood poured out, we see in this **the love of God** for us, his love for us. We see amazing grace. Looking at the Son on the cross we see a remarkable thing. We see a God who enters our own suffering and pain. We see a crucified God. We see a God who takes upon himself the sin of the world. We see a God who pays the debt that we can never pay.

Jesus reveals to us a God who gives up everything to win us back to himself.

Of course, the story does not end there. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive.

All through his life Jesus was faithful to his Father. "Not my will but yours", he said. Jesus took up his cross, broke the bread and drank from the cup of wine. He was faithful to his calling. And on the third day God vindicated him. He rose to new life. Same but different. Resurrection. He led the way for us to follow.

And now he has ascended. He is Lord. He is King. And one day he will return.

THREE

Spirit

As we open our lives up to God and invite him to direct and shape our futures we are given a gift. We experience the life of the Spirit.

We recognise the Spirit of God as his **presence** in us and working through us. We increasingly rely on this Spirit to be our Counsellor, our Comforter, our Strength, and our Guide. We invite him to fill us daily, and to clothe us with God's power for living lives of righteousness and goodness.

The Spirit seals us in Christ and enables us both to call God 'Abba Father' and to name Jesus our 'Lord'. He equips us to live differently and we depend daily on his presence so that our lives may bear the fruit of a renewed character.

The Spirit also empowers us, giving gifts to his people through which he builds up the church. Just as there is one God, and one Lord, there is one Spirit. But there are many gifts. We are all differently gifted, but all through the same Spirit. The Spirit energises us, driving us forward, leading us outwards. It is the Spirit who sends us out on his **mission** of love to the world and empowers us for this same mission, equipping us for acts of love and power.

Developing the relationship

The amazing truth of Scripture is that each one of us is invited by God - the Father, the Son and the Spirit - into **relationship** with him. This is the most important thing that he

desires. God is love, and he exists wanting us to know this love, experience this love, trust this love and to share this love.

We do this primarily through **prayer**.

Prayer is like breathing. It is a vital component of life. Without it we die.

If our relationship with God is to be real and to be alive, then prayer is the primary way that we make this happen. Jesus showed his disciples how to pray and told them what to pray. We use these prayers that Jesus taught as a pattern for our own prayers.

As God's children, born of the Spirit and saved by the Son, it is exciting that we are encouraged to pray to God as 'Abba Father'. This means our prayers are honest, relaxed and authentic. We do not need to be formal in our prayer with God. We talk to him as Abba.

Scripture also teaches that we pray to God the Father, *through* the Son, in the *power* of the Spirit. This means many things. When we pray we are reassured by the truth that in doing so we are joining in with the prayers of Jesus who is there already interceding for us at all times. We are further encouraged by being told that when we run out of words the Spirit, who perfectly knows the heart of God, shares our experience and groans with us. We know therefore that every prayer makes a difference.

Every prayer is powerful. Even when we run out of words.

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Prayer is not just about asking. It is about conversation. In prayer we enter the heart of the Trinity and experience the reality of a relationship with God. It is here that we come home, find rest, strength and peace. Prayer is not always easy, but it is a natural, normal and vital part of our lives.

And that is why we make time for it. We want to know God and be known by him.

...

Once again, at the end of this chapter, I invite you to commit yourself through prayer to the ideas in this section and I make two suggestions. The first is that you just take time to consider God and pray to him as Father, Son and Spirit, taking your time to pray to each person of the Trinity in turn with thanks and gratitude.

Praying spontaneously is a great thing but praying in this way is not always as easy as it first may seem. Often when we 'just chat' we get distracted easily and our minds drift. And that's when a written or memorised prayer can help. They help us stay focused. They help us connect.

For those of us who would like to try something different, I share with you a very simple prayer you might like to use. It is based on a very simple form of prayer that goes way back called the 'Jesus prayer' although this one is Trinitarian in form instead of just focused on Jesus.

One thing you might like to try is to pray it in step with your natural breathing pattern. If prayer is like breathing then it can be helpful to find a way of praying that fits exactly with our natural rhythms of breathing, in and out.

The way to do this is to start by being still for a while, sitting comfortably, and paying attention to our breathing – simply noticing the in and out of our breathing patterns. Don't try to change the speed of your breathing or the depth of it, just pay attention to it and let yourself become still. If things creep into your mind or distract you, just put them to one side and return to paying attention to your breathing.

Once we have become stilled we begin to add the words to our breaths.

You will notice that the prayer that follows has two lines for each phrase.

Pray the *first* line of each phrase breathing *in*.

Pray the *second* line as you are breathing *out*.

There are a couple of ways you can pray this prayer. One is to take one phrase at a time and when you feel you have prayed a phrase enough, simply move on to the next one. Alternatively, you can take the prayer as a whole and repeat the whole thing as many times as you find helpful.

Either way, remember that the point of it all is help you to connect with God – Father, Son and Spirit.

...

THREE

A prayer to God – the Father, the Son and the Spirit

IN *Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth:*
OUT *May your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.*

IN *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God:*
OUT *Have mercy on me, a sinner.*

IN *Holy Spirit, breath of the living God:*
OUT *Renew me and all the world.*

Chapters one, two and three, outline a Christian way of **thinking**.

The next four chapters are more about how we **do** things.

Their purpose is to give a framework for discipleship,
a **practical** way forward that will hopefully enable you to
follow through on your decision to live in Christ.

In the past various Christians developed what they called a '**rule of life**'.

Together these next four chapters offer a broad outline for
a rule of life that I believe will lead to fulfilment and joy.

I commend them to you.

Four

Spiritual Formation

Rule 1: belong

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The problem and cure

When we look around at the world we live in, our communities, our families, and when we look into our own hearts, it is clear that despite our amazing human ingenuity to find solutions to the problems we face, much of life is in a mess. We are still struggling.

Social and political renewal, technological innovation, psychological insight and therapeutic developments are all vital parts of us trying to make things better and they all have their part to play, but despite our best efforts our troubles are often depressingly resistant to change.

Someone once said, 'The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart' and I believe them to be right. It is my belief that our biggest human problem is **spiritual** and that if this is the case so must be the cure.

But if the cure is spiritual, how does modern Christianity fit into the answer? Very poorly, it seems, at least if we look at the statistics. Sadly Christians seem to be as much in a mess as anyone and Christian faith is routinely dismissed by others as powerless, archaic or irrelevant. Christianity can only succeed as a **guide for humanity** if it exemplifies realistic methods of human transformation. It must show how ordinary people can become, through the grace of Christ, a love-filled, effective, and confident community of mature people. It must do what it says on the tin. It must enable people discover life in all its fullness.

I believe the only way this will happen is when normal Christians routinely participate in a process of spiritual formation that is coherent, consistent and robust. A 'rule of life'.

No one alone

There are a number of things that we discover quite quickly once we start to live as a Christian and perhaps the most obvious, although not always the most accepted in practice, is that **we just can't do it on our own**. We need others to keep us going.

This is normal. When you think of it, there is almost no human activity that succeeds without the help of others. It's not just that 'many hands make light work', it's that without many hands most things just don't work. And it is no different for us in our life with Jesus.

Because this is true, there have never been disciples without a thing called '**church**'. Church is not a building or a service on Sunday that we go to. Church is not an institution or an organisation. Church is simply what we call a group of people who are dedicated to Jesus and committed to applying his teaching to every aspect of their lives.

Church is the *fruit* of discipleship. It's what happens naturally when people dedicate themselves to Jesus' teaching and to his family. Church grows organically. It grows as disciples are made. Discipleship leads to church because disciples belong to each other.

When discipleships gather we find them repeatedly praying, worshipping, reading scripture, breaking bread together, encouraging each other in their faith, confessing their sins to each other, and learning from each other. There are all kinds of churches, each with different ways of expressing themselves, but these same activities and practices crop up time and again.

So, while it may *possible* to be a disciple of Jesus without being part of a church, it is virtually unimaginable. If you belong to Jesus you belong to a thing called 'the church' by right. They need you and you need them. Church is never perfect, just as disciples are never perfect, but we need each other just the same. We represent Jesus *together*, not alone. We belong to each other. We are family.

And it's for this reason that I feel the need to encourage you to see your *commitment to Jesus* as a *covenant* to **belong to** and **participate in church life with others**. Get involved. Belong. Participate. Do not give up the habit of meeting together with others, as some are prone to do, but make it a priority in your life. I believe that this is a vital part of any disciple's 'rule of life.'

It is important to note, though, that it is not the **scale** of a gathering or a group that makes a church a church. A church can be any size. What makes a church a church is simply the commitment of the individuals who make up the group, to Jesus. A church is a gathered, literally 'called out', group of people who belong to Jesus. His 'body'.

As Christians we gain much from being part of a *large gathering* of disciples worshipping together or being taught together, and for good reason. In a large group we can express ourselves in worship in fantastically creative ways and enjoy the sense of being part of something important, communal, and universal. A large group experience can be exciting, exhilarating and thrilling. It can also help us hear what God is saying to us as a group, as a people, not just as individuals. It helps form a culture which can shape us and hold us in, keeping us faithful. Although the purpose is very different the large group experience is mirrored by the thousands of fans who fill stadiums each weekend

FOUR

as they watch their favourite teams. We are social beings and meeting in large gatherings is natural.

But large gatherings are not good for everything. They are not as good at giving people a sense that they matter individually, or as a place where people can share what's on their mind or their heart. In large groups people can feel isolated or lonely, and in large groups we can sometimes hide.

I increasingly believe that the most important, most significant, most authentic scale for church life is the **small scale**. Just as a body is made up of many tiny cells, I believe that larger expressions of church life *begin* with life at the smallest scale. And just as the whole body becomes ill when just a few cells deteriorate, so the health of the whole church body is most affected by the health and vitality of our life together at the smallest scale. Big is great, but no matter how brilliant the teaching or amazing the worship, it is not best for creating and growing disciples who are rigorous in their commitment to Jesus. For this to happen we need to be in committed **small groups of accountability and honesty**.

It is for this reason that I am increasingly convinced that belonging to a small group of three or four people is the **best way** to produce growth in our discipleship to Jesus and I would like to encourage you to consider forming one of your own to belong to.

You can call these groups anything you want, but I call them '**formation groups**' so that we remember that they are about the **formation of our characters into the likeness of Jesus**. They are the place where we keep ourselves on track in our apprenticeship to him, as we learn to be like him.

As we are all different each formation group of three or four people will be different. This is unavoidable. Just as different cells in our bodies produce radically different results yet share the same DNA so each group is different but shares the same basic building blocks or DNA. They share a similar purpose and direction.

The shared DNA of 'formation groups' are **Discipleship, Nurture** and **Accountability**.

Discipleship

Over and above all other things formation groups are focused on discipleship. To this end participants actively encourage each other to engage in appropriate disciplines that shape their inner character (prayer, fasting, worship, giving, solitude, silence, celebration, study etc.). Members remind each other of their new identity in Jesus Christ (a child of God; an ambassador of the King; a servant of the creator of the universe; a learner who is being made whole) and we admonish and encourage one another to obey Jesus' commands.

Nurture

It is an obvious truth from nature that things grow best when they are in the best environment for growth. Organic things need to be nurtured if they are to flourish. It is the same with our relationship with God and consequently formation groups must become nurturing environments where members get to know one another, listening closely both to each other's stories and to the Holy Spirit so they can carefully and empathetically direct each other to truth. All this is surrounded in prayer – the air that the disciple breathes.

Accountability

If the group is to touch the depths of each other's heart it is vital, lastly, that each member becomes accountable to the others. For this to happen there must be trust, openness and safety. Competition must be avoided at all times.

Practically speaking in the group members will review their successes and failures and share these with the others. Together there is a commitment to support each other by making goals and encouraging others to fulfil them. When needed it will also be a place where we speak the truth in love to one another, correcting and rebuking with God's Word.

Becoming like Christ

Our aim in all this is to keep the Kingdom of God our first priority and to fulfil Jesus' teaching to love God and love others.

Our desire is to live lives of fruitfulness and significance. It is to grow in maturity and into the likeness of Jesus. It is to avoid falling back into old patterns of behaviour and to clothe ourselves with new attitudes and actions.

Our aim is the **renewal of our hearts**.

Formation groups help us work towards these things by: **Doing four things** and by **Asking four things**.

Four things to do

- Sharing** The first requirement in a formation group is a commitment to being honest, open and accountable to each other, willing to confess our sins to each other. As we do this trust rapidly builds and we talk about the gifts and character of Jesus that we want to develop as well as the temptations we are trying to resist.
- Discerning** Listening is a vital part of being in a formation group and we aim to help each other discern where God has been present in our lives and what he is saying to us. We do this by paying attention both to each other's stories and to the Spirit's voice together.
- Encouraging** As the groups are focussed on helping each other become "people who naturally love God and love others", we encourage one another to engage in simple practices, or disciplines, that will develop our character and help us in our personal growth towards maturity in Christ. This could be to pray, to retreat, to fast, to serve, to give something away, to worship or to celebrate with others. Making commitments in front of others to follow through on these disciplines keeps us on track in our personal discipleship.
- Praying** Recognising the significance of prayer we are committed to praying for each other and for others we know. We encourage each other in praying for others who we hope will become disciples too and end each meeting praying for each other to be filled with the Spirit once again.

FOUR

Four questions to ask

If we want to evaluate our life in Christ there are **four** questions that we can ask ourselves and our formation group friends. How is our **worship**, how is our **discipleship**, how are our **relationships with others** and how are we involved in God's **mission**?

Worship, discipleship, community and mission are the four markers of all disciples and **all churches**. They are an expansion of the two commands to love God and love our neighbour. Worship and Discipleship are our ways of loving God. Community and Mission are our ways of loving others.

For a more developed list of questions that might help us evaluate ourselves the following further questions can help.

How is my worship?

- What place does God have in my life right now?
- What temptations am I currently facing?
- Have I given in to any addictive behaviour this past week?
- Have I been sexually pure in both thoughts and behaviour?
- Have I been honourable in my financial dealings?
- Have I been tempted by jealousy or envy?
- Have I been generous?
- What time have I given to praise and worship of God?
- Has my day to day life been giving God glory?

How is my discipleship?

- In what ways did God make his presence known to me since the last meeting?
- How much time did I make for prayer this week?
- Have I received any specific answers to my prayers? What were they?
- Am I getting to bed on time and getting up on time?
- What Scripture have I read this week? Did it shape the way I think and live?
- Have I sensed any influence or work of the Holy Spirit since the last meeting?
- What spiritual gifts did the Spirit enable me to exercise? What was the outcome?
- What fruit of the Spirit would I like to see increase in my life and what area of my life do I feel that God most wants to change? What disciplines might be useful in this effort? What specific steps am I taking with this?

How are my relationships with others?

- Am I at peace with everyone I know?
- Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold resentment toward or disregard? If so, what am I going to do about it?
- Have I damaged another person by words, either behind their back or face to face?
- Have I been honouring, understanding and generous in my relationships this week?
- Have I needed to forgive anyone this week, and if so have I been able to do that?
- Do I need to say sorry to anyone for anything?
- Have I invested the right amount of time in the relationships most important to me?
- Is there anyone who I need to contact, call, or spend more time with?

How involved am I in God's mission?

- Have I been witnessing to Christ in both words and actions?
- Have I talked with anyone about Christ?
- Have I prayed for my five friends?
- What opportunities did God give me to serve others since the last meeting? How did I respond?
- Did I encounter injustice to, or oppression of others? Was I able to work for justice and shalom?
- Where is God at work in my community, workplace or family? How could I bless what I see him doing?

Health and Safety

Importantly, if these groups are to be a safe place for personal accountability to be a participant in a formation group you must commit yourself to being **100% confidential**.

In a similar vein, because of the need for honesty and transparency, we find that this is best done within **all male** or **all female** groups. Confession is never easy but we are often more honest with those of the same gender. This also protects us from forming inappropriate relationships that would be detrimental to us and to others.

Significantly, there is no need for a leader. One of the joys of this model is that anyone can facilitate a group. All you have to do is choose a location, find some others to join you, make a commitment and get started.

Why they work

Formation groups work because they are safe, intentional, and missional.

Firstly they are places of **honesty and truth**. They are not therapy sessions but they are places where the masks are dropped and community is birthed - places of safety and friendship.

Secondly they are **intentional** - they exist to help us keep on track in our relationship with God. Each person sets their own goals and works at their own pace. Growth is expected and happens naturally when the conditions are right. The groups help us overcome habits we don't like and take up activities that are good for us. They help us pray more, and hear what God is saying. They help us stay in touch with Jesus. They shape our character.

Lastly they are **missional**. What is interesting is that even though these tiny groups are not specifically designed to be evangelistic, people who join them find that over time they become more confident in their faith, better at praying for their friends, colleagues and neighbours, more enthused about reaching out and more passionate about making a difference with their whole lives. Simply having a moment each week or fortnight when someone asks you about how you have been helping others to enter the Kingdom, sharpens your witness up considerably. As a result what often happens is that groups tend to grow and then split (to keep the number of people in the group down to 3-4). In this way formation groups grow the church from the grass roots level just as a body grows as cells reproduce and divide.

Signing up

Ok, so that's the theory... what about the reality?

As you can imagine, participating in and being committed to one of these small groups is a demanding thing. They require a high level of **commitment** and **intentionality**. This is no bad thing as although they significantly raise the bar of discipleship they will produce much fruit in our lives.

Meeting with other Christians on a regular basis is always good but you will find, like hundreds before you that in practice these small groups have the **biggest impact** on our lives when we make them a **priority**. It is best when they go in the diary first, fixing them to happen at a regular time, and place, which doesn't change – whether that's weekly, fortnightly or every three weeks – and I encourage you to start the group off in that way. Put those dates in your diary!

If you are going to be able to make a success of being in a formation group you need to **find a few others** to join with you – 2 or 3 others. A pair is too small and five is too big.

There is no right or wrong about *who* to choose, but I recommend praying about it first. The people you think of do not need to be your 'friends' – at least initially. It is likely that they will *become* your friends as you open yourselves up to each other. Having said that, bear in mind that you will need to be honest and vulnerable with the others and so think about people you can imagine relating easily to. You might also want to make your group time limited – say for 6 months – giving each member the chance to review how things are going and giving permission for things to change.

Warning

The biggest thing that will stop your group working is a **lack of commitment** to it. Many people will initially think that it all sounds great and jump in with two feet, but very quickly you will notice that they miss the group, can't make it at the last minute, or fail to arrange the next meeting. Be aware that if you start this thing you will need to be committed. Get everyone to agree at the beginning how often you want to meet, what time you will meet and where. Then put the dates in your diary. And then protect these dates. Don't let other things get in the way. Don't let each other be late. Make them a priority. Put them first.

Go for it!

If you are still reading this then I am delighted! I am excited that you have got this far through this chapter and perhaps you are considering the possibility of getting your life in shape by being part of a formation group. Let me assure you that if you do go for it and you give it your best shot you will definitely benefit from the effort.

I believe that being in a formation group will radically change your life and lead you to the kind of life you always wanted.

Life in Christ doesn't just happen. We need to co-operate with God's grace. Formation groups do exactly that. They align you with God's grace and when we do that we can't help but be blessed and bless others. Growth is inevitable. Go for it!

Spiritual Practices that can help us

Here is a list of some of the most common Spiritual Disciplines Christians engage in:
(Don't be overwhelmed! You don't do them all at once!)

- Celebration** Taking delight in ourselves, our life and our world builds confidence in God.
- Confession** Sharing our deepest weaknesses and failures with God and trusted friends, through which we experience grace, forgiveness and healing.
- Fasting** Abstaining from food (usually), so we learn to be sweet and strong when we don't get what we want.
- Fellowship** Engaging with other disciples enlarges our capacity to experience more of God.
- Giving** Giving stuff (and money) away releases us from the love of things and money.
- Meditation** Prayerful ruminating on God, His word and His world. This may also include memorising scripture.
- Prayer** Interactive conversation with God about what we and God are thinking and doing together.
- Sacrifice** Deliberately forsaking the security of satisfying our own needs with our resources - in the faith and hope that God will sustain us.

- Secrecy** Consciously refraining from having our good deeds and qualities generally known disciplines our longing for recognition.
- Service** Loving, thoughtful, active promotion of the good of others and God's causes in our world helps us to go beyond ourselves.
- Silence** Closing off our souls from sounds, noise, music and words. This stills the inner clatter of our hearts, and helps us to be increasingly attentive to God.
- Simplicity** A single-hearted focus on God results in an outward lifestyle of modesty and openness. This checks our hunger for status, glamour and luxury.
- Solitude** Creating an open, empty space in our lives by abstaining from interaction with others puts us in a place to be found by God.
- Study** Engaging the mind with the Bible and God's world so the mind conforms to the thing on which it concentrates.
- Submission** Allowing God to direct your life and allowing others to input into your life.
- Worship** Expressing the greatness and goodness of God and entering into his presence.

FOUR

Dear God

Thank you that you have accepted me in Christ and grafted me into your worldwide family. Thank you that I belong to you and as a result have been adopted into a family of all nations, backgrounds and cultures. Thank you that church matters, community matters, friendship matters, belonging matters.

Help me, Father, to play my part in this wonderful, mixed, growing, changing, being-transformed, community of believers locally. Help me to share my life with them. Help me be honest. Help me forgive. Help me avoid judging others.

Seeing myself as part of your church I want to participate fully in joining with others in growing into Christ and developing his character and nature. To this end I commit myself to being part of a small 'formation' group. I promise to be share my life honestly with them, to seek to discern your will, to encourage them in their own personal discipleship and to pray for them.

With the help of these friends, help me to put off the old habits of the flesh, to resist the enemy and to grow into the likeness of Christ. Help me to become the person I always wanted to be.

Amen

Five

**Five senses
and five people**

Rule 2: share

FIVE

Five senses

God has created us with **five senses** through which we experience everything in life. Without these the world is dead to us and we are dead to the world. Ideas are not enough. Even life is not enough. It needs to be experienced, felt or heard.

I believe that this is why the Word had to become 'flesh'. It is why Jesus said we would be a light, or a city, or like salt. It is why Paul taught us that together we make up the 'body of Christ'. It is why Peter says we are a people, a nation, and a temple of the Spirit.

The message, the truth, and the 'life', all need to be **felt** and **heard** and **touched** and **seen**. We need to **taste** it.

More than church services or church buildings or church programmes, I believe that the world simply needs a church that is good at **being church**. In other words the world needs a 'community', a 'family', a 'body', or a 'gathering of people', who are so singularly intent on being 'in Christ' that they embody the message with **all** their lives. They give off the right aroma, the right flavour, they make the right sound, they feel right.

And not just on Sunday but every day.

This is my vision for church life. I long for the church to **be** good news, not just have good news. We are called to **be** the church, not just go to church. Just as the smell of good coffee or the waft of bacon from a café draws you in, I long for the church to appeal instinctively to our community, our friends, our colleagues pulling them in to life in the Kingdom. People have been given five senses and we must appeal to each one.

Five friends

As part of our witness it is natural that we **invite others to find life in Christ** just as we have – to taste and see that the Lord is good – and to this end I recommend that you commit yourself to **praying for five friends** on a regular basis.

Having experienced new life in Christ our desire for others to join us is not about winning an argument, trying to persuade people to believe something against their will, or about growing the church. Our desire to share Christ is only authentic when it is motivated by a genuine concern and love for the person we are sharing him with. We remember that we are sharing good news, not bad. We are telling people that God is for them not against them. We are encouraging them to lean on him, to trust him, to have faith in him. We are sharing life with them.

But all love needs to find some form of expression and one way we can do this is to deliberately and intentionally pray for people. We do this believing that our prayers of blessing make a difference. The first step is to pray.

This sounds so easy, but remaining faithful is difficult. What I have found, as I have set out on a course of intentionally praying for five friends, and as I have encouraged others to do the same, is just how **hard** it is to keep up. Perhaps this is because this is the last thing that God's enemy wants us to be engaged in, but whatever the reason, I know that unless I get help on this, over time I simply forget to pray for others as I would like to. This is another reason why I choose to belong to a *formation group*. It is at this group that I share the list of five people I sense God has particularly put on my heart to pray for and to invest in.

Sharing Jesus authentically

Praying is a vital first step but we need to go further.

As we have already discovered from the way Matthew rounds off his gospel, Jesus commissioned each one of us to become **disciple-makers** not just disciples and it is important that we each see ourselves as such. Deliberately thinking of and praying for five people helps this become a reality but we then need to consider how best to share our life and faith with others.

It's amazing just how quickly after Jesus had invited the first 12 to follow him and become his disciples that he began to send them out again to share the news about the Kingdom with others. They probably felt anxious and inadequate as they left but we read that they returned with excitement and joy about what they had seen and experienced as they announced the coming of God's rule and demonstrated it with signs of healing and power. The group of disciples grew once more, and once again, very quickly, we see Jesus sending out a larger group of 72 to go and share the news.

We find the story in Luke's gospel in chapter 10

Luke 10:1-2 *After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to **send out workers into his harvest field.**"*

FIVE

There is much to learn from this story but one thing to notice is that as Jesus looked around him he saw a 'field ready for harvest'. Very often when we look around us we see the opposite. We imagine that news about God, about life in the Kingdom, about forgiveness, about healing, about Jesus is in fact the last thing people want to hear about. We see a field nowhere near ready for harvest. Notice how often people in church talk about 'planting seeds' as if the field is ready, not for harvest, but for sowing.

Where we see a barren land, Jesus saw a harvest ready for the picking.

Secondly, in the story Jesus sends out his disciples inviting them to look for 'people of peace' and to spend time with them. Don't waste time on people whose ears are closed. Talk to people who want to listen. This makes complete sense. In settling on my 'five' I deliberately choose people who are open people of peace. I think about those I naturally connect with and who seem to connect naturally with me too. I think of people I sense I might be able to influence in some way and who I will enjoy blessing.

I will undoubtedly also be praying for other people I know who live a distance away, or who are part of my family, or who I would love to see come to know life through Jesus but whom I never cross paths with, but these are not the ones that put on my 'five'. On my 'five' I put people who I see **regularly** and with whom I have a **relationship**. My aim is not to pray for random people I don't know, nor for people who I know well but who I never see or talk to. My aim is to pray for five people who I both know *and* relate well to. I pray for my own 'people of peace'.

Lastly, I notice that Jesus sent them out in **pairs**.

I think we miss a great piece of wisdom here unless we follow Jesus' example. Jesus thought it better to send out 36 teams of two people than 72 individuals into the villages. I think he knew they needed the extra confidence that comes from working in pairs.

The same is true for us.

If there are five people you want to invite into the Kingdom of God, people who you sense God has put on your heart, then the best thing for you to do is to spend time with them **with another Christian** brother or sister. Don't simply see it as a job for you *on your own* to be the agent of good news. Get someone else to help you.

Doing it

Putting all this together and getting really practical, let's say the neighbour or friend you are praying for spends quite a bit of time down the pub. You may or may not be into going to the pub, but because you want to spend time with them, because you want to bless them and because you want to see them discover life in the Kingdom of God you decide that it would be a good idea to meet up with them there.

But, and here's the wisdom, don't go on your own. Have a think and a pray about someone else who could go with you. Go in a pair. And of course the best thing would be to go with someone who would also connect with your friend in a natural way and who would enjoy going to the pub too.

In this way you are making your discipleship-making very **intentional**.

At first this may seem strange, but it will not always be so. The idea is not to force someone into the Kingdom against their will or better judgment, it is to create the right environment so that they naturally desire it, just like a man who found treasure in a field went and sold everything he had just so that he can buy that field and gain the treasure. Our aim is to make the good news of the Kingdom of God feel good, sound good, taste good, look good, and smell good. This is what Jesus did, and this is what the first disciples did. We must do it too.

Remember too, that our prayers for our friends make a difference. We don't need to try too hard. We can be ourselves while being open to the direction of the Spirit, ready to give a reason for the hope we carry around in us.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to encourage you to take seriously your role as a **disciple-maker** as a part of a **discipling community**. As a follower of Jesus you belong to a community of believers that give off a certain 'aroma' or 'feel' and all of us need to play our own part in making the life of the church community as attractive as possible.

Think, for example, about which café you like going to for a coffee? There will be a number of factors that will win your loyalty and price will undoubtedly be one of them. But it will not be the only one. The café you enjoy most will feel right, it will smell good, it will be the right temperature, it will have great hospitality, it will have the right ambience. These things don't just happen by accident. Someone, probably the café employees and management, made them a reality.

The same is true for life in the Kingdom. People will only want to join our way of life if it looks appealing and feels good.

But while there is a call on us as a group, or as a church, to make things good and to do things well, it is even more important that we take seriously our **individual role** in inviting others into discipleship.

The suggestion of this chapter is that we each **commit ourselves to pray** specifically and regularly for **five people** who we know well, meet often, and who God puts on our hearts.

To help us in this we share this list with the others in our **formation group** and join with them in praying for their friends and neighbours too.

As we pray for these friends we also consider what might be good ways of developing our relationships with them, blessing them and serving them so that they might get a taste of how good God is and how life in the Kingdom of God is so much better than going it alone. To this end we commit ourselves to joining with others and sharing the task of sharing the good news with others just like the first disciples were taught to do by Jesus.

Behind all this is the commission Jesus gave us to '**go and make disciples**'. We are people sent on God's mission. We are not simply recipients of a gift we are givers of the gift. We are not consumers, we are participants. We are not just guests, we are hosts. This is our role – to bless the world through words and actions and to invite others to enter the Kingdom that God has planned for all creation.

The disciple-makers' prayer

Having sought God for the five people you are committing yourself to pray for and reach out to, here is a prayer you can pray to cement your commitment to become a maker of disciples.

Dear God,

Thank you that you have rescued me and brought me into your kingdom. I am so glad that you have found me and brought me home. Thank you for your forgiveness, your love and your life, and thank you that I have good news to share with others.

Father, I want to pray for (insert 5 names here):

1

2

3

4

5

Thank you for putting them on my heart. I long to see them trusting you with their lives and becoming disciples too. I am excited about you working in their lives, healing their

pain, forgiving their sin and enabling them to find their role in your kingdom. Bless their lives, and fulfil your purposes through them. Thank you for your love for them.

Help me, Father, to know how best to display your love and your kingdom to them. Help me to be sensitive to them and to honour them. Help me to be sensitive to you and to honour you in all I say and do. Season my speech with good things and help my actions and behaviour witness to you. Help me point to you naturally, in words and deeds and to invite them into a life of discipleship.

Following Jesus' example I also pray, Father, that you would help me know who I can invite to share in all this with me. Help me find others who will join me in being a blessing to my five friends too.

Alongside all this, Father, I pray for my place in your church. Thank you that you want to use us as your family together to display your character and your life. Help us as a church to represent you to our community and friends in a wonderfully rich way. May we give off the 'aroma of Christ' in all we do and say. Most of all, Father, help us to love one another for we know that it is by our love that the world will know that we are your disciples.

Amen.

FIVE

Six

Work

Rule 3: live

In this chapter I am concerned with the **six days** *between* Sundays.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

I am sure that God has much that he wants to impress upon us or to change concerning how we do Sundays, but it is my contention that it is how we use the other six days that concerns him even more.

Just pause for a moment with that thought. What if that is true? What if God is more interested in how you live the six days between Sundays than what we do as Christians at church on Sunday? If that idea is true, would it change the way you saw your work?

Many hundreds of years ago God spoke to his people through the prophet Isaiah and God made it clear that, when it came to fasting and to worship, what mattered was not how humble they were in the temple but how they lived their lives the moment they left the temple. Here are the opening verses of Isaiah 58.

¹ "Shout it aloud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion

and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.

² For day after day they seek me out;

they seem eager to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that does what is right

and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

They ask me for just decisions

and seem eager for God to come near them.

³ 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
and exploit all your workers.

⁴ Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife,
and in striking each other with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on high.

⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

and your healing will quickly appear;

then your righteousness will go before you,

and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

⁹ Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;

you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

Mark Greene speaks truthfully when he states:

“Church leaders spend an enormous amount of energy trying to work out how to make the church a place people will want to come to, but they spend much less energy working out how to train Christians to make the most of the places where they already are.”

For the majority of us the place we spend most time and meet most of the other people in our lives is our **work place**.

In this chapter I want to highlight the significance of this and to invite you to see your work as one of the most important places where you express your discipleship to Jesus and see his Kingdom come. If you currently don't work, for whatever reason, then please don't just pass over this chapter thinking it is irrelevant to your life. The chapter is really about whatever we do on the six days between Sundays. It's just that for most people this means work.

The Kingdom grows naturally

Before talking specifics I want to lay out some general principles that guide my thinking - foundational building blocks upon which the rest of the discussion stands. Firstly, I'd like to go back to chapter one and revisit the topic of the Kingdom of God.

One of the things that often goes unnoticed is how Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God as something that grows **organically**. Again and again he talks about it using organic images of seeds, or plants, or yeast and from this we can conclude that the Kingdom of God is something that grows naturally when the conditions are right.

I don't know if you have ever noticed it but it is striking that Jesus **never** once invited anyone to *build, extend* or *advance* the Kingdom of God. Instead he only invited them to receive it and to enter it.

Contrary to how we often find ourselves talking about our mission our prayer is not, "Dear God, help us **build** your Kingdom", it is rather, "Our Father, in Heaven, your Kingdom **come**". These two prayers may seem similar but they are in fact very different. One assumes that the Kingdom belongs in some way to us – as if it is something we can build or extend. The other sees it as something that can only ever belong to God. Something that only he can bring in or establish. Of course he uses his church as a sign, instrument and agent of the Kingdom, but ultimately it's up to him to sort it out and build. The Kingdom of God does not grow by our effort. It grows by **grace**. It grows as people encounter God's grace.

Now, this is great news because it releases us from all kinds of anxieties and potential problems. Time and time again we have seen what a mess of things the church makes when it assumes that it has responsibility for bringing in the Kingdom, or establishing it here on earth. Think of the Crusades. It is time we learned, not just from our past mistakes, but also from how Jesus taught us about it all himself.

What Jesus taught was that the Kingdom grows just as a mustard plant grows or when some seed has exactly the right *conditions* in which to take root, sprout and grow. This is the natural order of things. God's rule works just like that. It is not built or developed by people forcing it into being or imposing it on others, like a road is made by the laying of tarmac upon the earth. It grows, or expands, when individuals become the right kind of soil in which the seed (the word of God) can take root and grow and begin to express

God's rule through their attitudes and behaviours. It happens quite naturally. It happens organically.

Along with this it's also important to recognise that the Kingdom of God, the rule of God, is expressed only to the extent to which people allow God's rule to govern their **own lives**. People need to let God be their King for his Kingdom to be expressed in their lives and for God's Kingdom to be exhibited in the world. Until Jesus comes again the Kingdom comes by invitation only. People might want to take hold of it by force, like people who want to get into a big shop in the January sales, but it doesn't force itself on anyone. It is like treasure hidden in a field waiting to be found.

The great thing about this though, is that when individuals put their trust in Jesus and allow his rule to shape their behaviour and attitudes, God's Kingdom *automatically* gets displayed through their lives. It is a natural process. It is inevitable.

So far so good.

Lord of all

Add to this thought the fact that it is God's plan and deepest desire for every inch of creation to come under his loving rule - every single individual, every single thought and attitude and behaviour. **Everything**. It is God's plan not just for Jesus to be Lord by title and authority, but to be Lord in practice, governing everything. His Kingdom come, his will to be done, everywhere, over everything.

Right now, right at this moment, we believe that **Jesus is Lord**. This means that he is Lord **of all**. This is his rank, his position, his status, his identity. And we accept this because we believe God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand after his 'ascension'.

But to call Jesus Lord of all is not the same thing as saying that his Kingdom or his rule is perfectly or fully expressed and experienced right now here on earth over everything, **over all**. This is clearly not the case, for all around us we see illness, sin and death permeate every aspect of life. Instead of harmony we see division, instead of peace we see conflict, instead of justice we see greed and oppression.

Paul, writing a letter to his brothers and sisters in Corinth put it like this:

1 Cor 15:20-28 "Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died. So you see, just as death came into the world through a man, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life. But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back.

After that the end will come, when he will turn the Kingdom over to God the Father, having destroyed every ruler and authority and power. **For Christ must reign until he humbles all his enemies beneath his feet**. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death. For

the Scriptures say, "God has put all things under his authority." Then, when all things are under his authority, the Son will put himself under God's authority, so that God, who gave his Son authority over all things, will be utterly supreme over everything everywhere."

I love this passage. I love what it tells us about what's going to happen in the **future** when Jesus returns. I love the fact that resurrection is our destiny.

I also like it because of what it tells us about what is happening **right now**. It tells us that Jesus is already reigning, already King, already Lord – actively working to put all counterfeit rulers and powers under his feet – the last of which will be death itself. Jesus' work has not yet been completed.

This passage tells us what we all know – that we live in a world that still awaits its final renewal. But it also tells us what Jesus is doing in the mean time until he finally comes in glory – he is **reigning in order to put all things under his feet**.

What has this all to do with how people like you and I understand our work? Let me explain.

Mustard and yeast, salt and light

As Mark Greene points out, *"The parable of the mustard seed shows us that little things can make a huge difference over time. The parable of the yeast adds another vital dimension: 'The Kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all the way through the dough.' Yeast not only pervades the*

dough, yeast transforms it into something much tastier and much more satisfying - into bread. It takes just 10 grams of yeast to turn a kilo of flour into bread. It's not quantity that counts but impact.

*The Christian is intended to be an **agent of transformation** in the world. We are not simply there to arrest decay, to add savour, or to expose sin. We are not simply there to introduce the world to a different way of living. We are there to **radically transform the society in which God places us**. Imagine that.*

The key to mission and social transformation in the UK - and also globally - is for Christians to be equipped for where they are, not where they are not, where they have relationships, not where they don't."

Because you matter to God, and the people around you matter to God, the place that matters most to God about you right now is the place you spend most time. And for most of us, this is our work place.

Firstly, we need to see our work as a Christian. As a disciple you have dedicated yourself to God. You have submitted yourself, your whole self, every aspect of your life, to Jesus' rule. He is your Lord, your master. As a disciple there is no area of your life which does not belong to God or through which God's Kingdom shouldn't shine. Just as yeast transforms a whole loaf, so the Kingdom of God transforms the whole of our life. Everything is changed by it.

Quite obviously, this includes your **work**. It includes all six days, not just Sunday.

As a disciple, you will not be surprised to hear that you express God's rule over you in how you think and act *sexually*. We expect God's Kingdom to affect our sexual ethics and we are used to Christians discussing such issues, working out how to be faithful to the image God created us in, being faithful in marriage and chaste outside it. Similarly we readily accept that we express his rule over our life in how we spend, save, or give away our *money*. We also know that we express his rule over us in how we relate to others, how *we* forgive, how we express our *anger*, how we think about politics, what we *dream* about, or what we watch on *telly*. As a disciple, as we have already accepted, we have submitted *everything* to God's rule. Jesus is our Lord.

And if Jesus is your Lord, then he is also Lord of you at *work* too.

All of which requires us to think for a moment. What does it mean to say that **Jesus is Lord of my work?**

Quickly we realise that this statement effects not just **what** work we do, but also **how** we do the work we do.

This is why Paul sent this message to the community of disciples at Colossae, "*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for people.*" (Colossians 3:23) Why? Because if Jesus is our Lord then we express his Kingdom and represent his rule all day every day, 24/7. Only then, when he is Lord of us at work, can his Kingdom grow and blossom as he longs for it to.

So before moving on, consider for a moment **what** you do. Think about the **content** of your work – the practicalities of it – what it's about. Think about the **people** at work.

Think about the company you work for, or your clients, if you are self-employed. What do you do? How do you think God feels about your work?

And think about the **way** you do your work. Do you give it your all - every last bit of energy and commitment? Do you do it as if Jesus was the boss?

*"When we do this, whatever we do, whether it's in a hospital, in a business, in a factory, in an office, in a school, in a garden, in a home for elderly people, whatever we do we are giving shape to God's rule on earth and in a thousand small ways God's Kingdom will be growing. Right where we are, we have the opportunity to enable the wisdom of Christ to bear on the way that things are done. Will the priorities of the King who created all have some impact on His created order? On what products we make, what games we play, what wages we pay, what hours we expect others to work and so on. The Christian in God's world has a mandate not only for **verbal witness** but also for **social transformation**. We are called to express God's rule through our lives, through our work, in anticipation of the day when God's rule is expressed over everything."*

Re-invigorating the people of God

"At the moment, many Christians are totally unaware of their potential to serve God where they are. They go to work, do a good job, try to be honest and dash home at the end of the day to go to the prayer meeting or to involve themselves in some church activity, so that they can 'do something for God' that day. They do not know that they have already served God. They do not know that whatever they do can be done to the glory of God."

One woman put it this way: 'I've worked in the NHS for 17 years. And for many years I've wondered what ministry God had for me. About a year ago, I suddenly realised where God wanted me: right here in the NHS. And it has transformed my attitude to my job. How sad it is that some people die without realising the ministry God had for them.'

*If Jesus isn't relevant to Christians where they spend most of their time, why should he be relevant to non-Christians where they spend most of their time? And if God isn't relevant to us where we spend most of our time, why would he be relevant where we spend all the other bits of our lives? If we Christians don't live as if faith affects all of our life, then why should non-Christians believe that Christianity is relevant to all of theirs? If people who are exploring life with God don't see any difference about us in our work time, then they will continue to believe that Christian activities are merely our preferred way of spending our leisure time rather than the power plant of our **entire existence**."*

Being a disciple-maker at work

Because Jesus loves people he **invites** them to make their home in his Kingdom and under his rule. He longs for them to become his disciples. And as we discussed in chapter five, this invitation comes through you and me. We are Jesus' body on earth and through our lives and through our words he uses us to entice others into this life of discipleship. In the bible this is called **evangelism** – the first step towards helping people become disciples – telling people good news.

Evangelism, contrary to popular understanding, is something that everyone can do without training. In fact all of us do it quite **naturally** every day. Every time we tell a friend or colleague about a great film we watched, or our latest gadget, or the route to

take somewhere we are evangelising – we are sharing good news. I noticed this recently when I got my first dog. I was so excited about my new dog that I couldn't help but tell people about him. I chatted to everyone about my dog and would start a conversation at the slightest opportunity. Why? Because he was great and I loved him.

I was an evangelist for the 'Kingdom of Dog'!

Evangelism is simply telling people **good news about stuff**. And because we have some good news to tell people about Jesus you would expect *all* disciples of Jesus to be in some way 'evangelists'.

Loving others

Randomly telling people good news is fine but as we know from all areas of life, the best people to share good news with are people you already know, and its motivation must always be love.

Christian evangelism is best based on relationships. Not only is this more authentic, but research repeatedly confirms that relationships are a critical factor in the process of someone becoming a Christian. Simply put, people are influenced most by their *friends*. If you don't really know someone it is difficult to really influence them.

And because of this every single disciple matters. I recently discovered that the 4.5 million people who attend church in the UK are probably **already** connected to over 90 per cent of the wider population. We don't need to go anywhere if we are to change the world. And with this in mind, while people have relationships in all kinds of contexts in

which the Gospel can be planted - clubs, pubs, teams, on the web, on the train – it is undoubtedly the **workplace** where most Christians have the highest number of on-going relationships. Which also means that it is a great place to exercise our role as 'disciple-makers'.

Again, Mark Greene sets out some great reasons why:

- Firstly, the workplace is where Christians are **credible**. Most Christians do a good job. Most have good relationships with their colleagues. And that makes them credible to their colleagues.
- Secondly, the workplace is where Christians are **transparent**. People can see the difference Christ makes. People see us fail and succeed; lose our temper, control our temper; gossip, not gossip; go out of our way to shift the blame, accept responsibility when it's ours. People see whether honesty and integrity really matter to us or not. People see whether people really matter to us or not. They see whether God really matters to us or not. We can't hide. This is important for it is through our regular and daily responses to all that life throws at us that the reality of our faith will make sense to others. They will see us *being* a disciple.
- Thirdly, the workplace is where we **chat** most. It is impossible for people not to talk about what matters to them and this happens most at work. Very naturally people will talk about what they did at the weekend, what film they saw, how their kids are, what their marriage is like, what their fears are – everything that matters to them – at work. It will be the same with you. What matters to you will leak out. If Jesus matters to you it will be obvious.

Making a difference

The purpose of this chapter is to encourage you to take your work seriously. Not just because it gives you an income and a purpose (vital though those things are), but because it is where God's Kingdom can be expressed through you.

Your work matters.

What if God already has all his workers in place? What if you are God's?

"The fact that a Christian in work or school spends 40 hours a week or so with, on average, 50 people represents a huge opportunity. The fact that a 23-year-old who likes dancing spends eight hours a week in clubs represents a superb opportunity for relationship building. The fact that a housewife with a child at a primary school has the scope to interact with up to 30 or so sets of parents for seven years suddenly looks like an enormous opportunity to build relationships. The fact that a 70-year-old in a retirement home gets to mix 12 hours a day with 30 or 40 or 50 other people of similar age represents a huge opportunity.

We have the people. And we have them in place."

What if God wants you exactly where you are? What if your work is exactly the place where God wants to use you most to display your commitment to him, to make a difference for the Kingdom of God and to invite others into that Kingdom with you? Think differently about your work. Take it seriously. It matters to God. See yourself as one of his **ambassadors**. Whatever you do, do it for the Lord.

As a practical response to this why not try this – fill out this ‘LICC Ambassador Profile’ about yourself. It won’t take long and is just a simple exercise to help you think differently about your work, the people you work with and how God might want to use you there.

Ambassador Profile

Your name:

Your occupation:

Your daily commute time:

The location of your main mission activity:

The total number of people in main area of activity:

Your number of weekly contacts:

The number of Christians among your weekly contacts:

What are the main challenges/opportunities you are facing in your work right now?

What would you like prayer for?

Dear God

I believe that you have work for me to do and that you have given me gifts and talents with which to serve you and those around me. I am committed to discovering your purposes for my life and discerning the best way that I can get involved in what you are doing in the world. I see the way that I work as a central expression of my worship to you. I am committed to working hard, and enthusiastically, whether this is working at home, at work, paid or unpaid and I will work as if working for you. I will respect those over me and honour those under me. As far as it is possible I want to live at peace with everyone at work, serving others and loving them as myself. I will not lie but will tell the truth and be a reliable and faithful worker. I will be a good time keeper and I will avoid laziness which I see as a form of stealing from others. All the money I earn comes from you and belongs to you and I look to you for the best way to use the gifts and skills you have given me. I invite your Spirit to empower me in all that I do. Help me to glorify you through my work each day, to grow in my abilities and to enjoy your pleasure as I work for you.

Although I value my work I will not let work determine my value, or the value of others. I remember that everyone has different gifts and skills and everyone is equally valuable to you.

Help me, Father, to represent Christ at work. Help me to display his character and his wisdom. Help me to love others like Jesus would love them. Help me avoid temptation and to remain true to my true identity in you. Help me too, Father, to talk naturally about you, about your love, your power, your message. Help me see myself as an ambassador and witness for you at my work. Amen

Seven

Rest and Rhythm

Rule 4: stop

SEVEN

Fitting everything together

My intention in this book has been to provide a framework which might enable you to succeed in your desire to follow through on your commitment to being one of Jesus' disciples. It is based on the premise that there are seven things that every disciple needs to know. Believing in Jesus, being a Christian, is not just something we do by thinking something or by mentally assenting to some set of truths about him. Rather it is about doing something on the basis of faith. It is about putting our complete trust in Jesus and letting him rule every single aspect of our lives and, crucially, about letting this trust shape our behaviour and attitudes every single moment of our existence.

The first thing we need then is to enter or receive the Kingdom of God which Jesus heralded and inaugurated in his life, death and resurrection. This is our first and most vital decision.

Next we need to follow through on this decision by making Jesus teaching about loving God and loving others our guiding moral compass.

Along with this it is vital that we relate to God in the fullest way possible – as Father, Son and Spirit.

Next on my seven most important things was an encouragement to join with at least two or three others to create a 'formation group' that is intentionally focused on keeping the main thing the main thing. Here we found there are four things to do and four questions to ask. This will require honesty, accountability and commitment but will bear much fruit in a renewed character.

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The fifth piece of the jigsaw concerned us joining in God's purposes and mission praying for five others to discover the life of the Kingdom and to join in with the life of the local church finding your own personal part to play in making the good news available to them.

The sixth chapter concerned the vital role we have in expressing God's rule through how we fill our days – both in *what* we do and the *way* we do it. Here we were concerned to highlight the importance of seeing our work as the primary sphere through which God's Kingly rule is expressed in and through us.

If we follow through the advice of each of these six chapters, I believe we will discover life-in-all-its-fullness and that our lives will begin to display something of the character of Jesus.

However, there is one more thing that I feel is vital to complete the picture – one which we neglect at our peril – emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

It is this - our need to rest.

Keeping the Sabbath wholly

The people of God, the people of Israel, were given a precious **gift** to mark their freedom from the oppression of the Pharaohs in Egypt. They were given a day off. They were given the gift of time, freedom, rest, relationships and relaxation.

It was called the '**Sabbath**'.

Treasuring this gift was so important to God, so vital to how he had put the world together, that he eventually made it **compulsory**. Knowing that our lives needed a rhythm and a pace, God constantly reminded his people of the importance of the seventh day. It was after all, as the story tells us, on the seventh day that God himself rested after having created all things.

Rabbis have long reflected on the creation story and the place of the seventh day of divine rest and enjoyment and they have discovered a deep truth that we ignore at our peril. The seventh day of creation was as vital as all the others. On the seventh day God may not have 'worked', but his creation was incomplete. He had one more thing to make. On the seventh day he created **rhythm** and **rest**.

In our modern, interconnected, twenty-four-seven world we have lost touch with this pattern for life and we are suffering as a result. We didn't notice it at first as we rejected the ritual of a workless day each week, but we now feel strangely out of sync with ourselves.

So important was this truth that the Sabbath law was one of the ten commands God gifted his people following their liberation from slavery. This may seem an arbitrary command but it was as vital as all the rest. It was an antidote to the enforced labour that they had been subjected to in Egypt having to make bricks without straw every day of the year. In contrast to their slavery Yahweh gave their lives a new pattern of rhythm and rest. "Keep the Sabbath day holy" he commanded them, regardless of rank or position "and remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm."

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Ever since then the Sabbath day has been a day of **recreation**, and of **freedom**. It has been a day of equality and liberation, for at least on one day a week all status, wealth and position are abolished for twenty four beautiful hours. All are free. All are equal. All are one. Sabbath is for everything and everyone. No matter who you are, you get a day off.

It took a long time for this pattern to take root in the culture and psyche of the people and we read of how they were tempted again and again to mistrust the God who provided for them year in year out. God had to teach them to **trust**, first turning Manna into mould overnight, and later reminding them again and again through the prophets to 'keep the seventh day holy'. But over time God's plan worked and the Sabbath took root not just in Israel but all over the world.

Once again, however, in our own time, the day of rest is under threat. Not just from the Pharaohs of our own day – the organisations who lord it over us demanding us to work ever longer hours with less resources, 24/7, year in year out – but also from within ourselves too – as we let our desire for *things* dominate our lives.

Mammon is a hard task master.

Look around you and you will see that this day of rest, this day enabling us to worship the living God has been reduced once again into another day of work, of effort, of worry, of concerns, a day of things that need to be done, a day where people in their thousands upon thousands worship inanimate objects made by the hands of men all sold in the cathedrals of consumption. Surely we are worth more than this!

Walking to a different drum

As a Christian church, as a community of disciples, with minds renewed, no longer conformed to the pattern of this world, we determine to resist this temptation and keep one day set apart, one day holy. We take this seriously. On this day, if at all possible, we avoid shops and money and online banking. We let our minds drift. We take a break with friends and family. We enjoy food and wine and rest. We worship together, pray for each other and celebrate the new world opened up for us by Jesus by breaking bread together. We make music to God, and sing. We enjoy each other.

We stop.

All this is of course increasingly counter-cultural and it often clashes with the values of those around us. Keeping a 'Sabbath' makes us different.

But all this is vital to us, and because we know it is going to be an uphill struggle to keep ourselves from slipping into old ways, we know we have to encourage each other in this discipline of time and rhythm.

And that's a big reason why we gather on this day, now Sunday, the **first day** of the week – in celebration of the new day that Jesus birthed when he rose from the dead on that first Easter Sunday – and choose to mark this day out as different.

As new people we keep the new day holy, not out of duty, but out of delight and a desire to keep ourselves in balance with our creator and with ourselves.

Sabbath rest as an identity marker

As Jesus taught however, we know that keeping this day *holy* is not simply a matter of avoiding work or about not doing things. We remember that Jesus *healed* on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. God doesn't stop being good on the Sabbath, so neither should we.

So although Jesus kept the Sabbath holy and his disciples followed him in his practice he repeatedly subverted its place in the life of Israel. Instead of being one of their primary identity markers, one of the main ways they could show their **faithfulness** to God and show themselves to be righteous, Jesus introduced a new way of being marked out as faithful – by dedicating themselves to *him* and by putting *his* teaching into practice. Life in the Kingdom wasn't about not working one day a week, it was about being about God's business every single moment of every single day, including on the Sabbath. And to be about God's business was to be about Jesus' business.

That's why Jesus broke the Sabbath rules of the day.

Not because God had decided that a day of rest was no longer vital for the people he had created, but because Jesus was trying to realign people's thinking in a radically new direction.

Being one of God's people had always meant that you kept the Sabbath. From now on, being one of God's people meant keeping Jesus' commands instead. Jesus was claiming to be more important than the Sabbath itself.

Saturday to Sunday

Without understanding Jesus' desire to redraw the boundary marker of faithfulness around *himself* over and against the *Law* handed down through generations of Israelites, we might be excused for thinking that Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath means that we can safely ignore it for ourselves. But it would be wrong to jump too quickly to the idea that Jesus was keen to uncouple us from any commitment to a pattern of weekly rest.

The first Christians, many of whom were Jewish, wrestled directly with this issue and they were clear about its implication for their lives. Yes, the new Israel – Christians of both Jewish and Gentile background – no longer had to keep Saturdays holy. But this didn't mean that they could throw out this command as irrelevant. Instead we see them quickly making Sunday their new Sabbath, distinct from the old Law, but a day of rest all the same.

Keeping Sunday special may be a new thing for you, but can I encourage you, as a disciple of Jesus, to make it a priority for your own life just as disciples have done throughout the centuries.

Sabbath was made for you. Receive it as a gift. Let it refresh your body, mind and spirit.

Worshipping together

Over time Sundays have become the day Christians have set apart for worship *together* as a larger family of God's people. Recognising that we worship God by how we live our

lives, we also know that worshipping God **with others** is a significant part of what it means to be a Christian.

Christian worship declares that Jesus is Lord and that therefore, by strong implication, nobody else is. It doesn't just declare it as something to be believed, like the fact that the sun is hot or the sea wet. It commits the worshipper to **allegiance**, to following this Jesus, to being shaped and directed by him. Worshipping the God we see in Jesus orientates our whole being, our imagination, our will, our hopes, and our fears away from the world where other false gods make absolute demands over our lives and lead us down blind alleys. Worship creates - or should create, if it is allowed to be truly itself - a community that marches to a different beat, a community that keeps in step with a different Lord.

Worshipping together as a church family is vital for our faith to be maintained and developed. What style or approach our worship takes is not the most important thing and the New Testament Scriptures give us no direction on shaping this at all, other than it being connected to the breaking of bread, to prayer, and to teaching. What is spoken of time and again is the content of the worship and the quality of the community life that participate in worship. Corporate worship is to be rich, strong, passionate, Spirit led and yet also orderly.

This is our goal and aim. To worship God with all our hearts and souls and minds.

It has been said that we become what we worship. As our aim as Christians is to become like Christ it is important that we make worship a vital part of our weekly pattern of discipleship.

Dear God

I believe that you have created a rhythm for a life of work and rest. You rested on the seventh day and established a Sabbath rest for your creation. This Sabbath rest is for our benefit and for the benefit of every living thing. Thank you for this Sabbath gift which reminds me that life itself is a gift from you that I have not earned or worked for. It reminds me that I have been saved from slavery by God's power and not by my own efforts. It reminds me that all men and women are equal. It reminds me that I am valued more than the sparrows. It reminds me that my relationship with God and others is what matters most in life.

Father, I embrace your gift and am committed to resting. I commit myself to taking one day off each week to rest from work and to enjoy you and others around me. This is one of the ways that your divine life shapes me and I treasure the rhythm that this brings to me emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

Amen

SEVEN

End

Church

END

*The church is not a vendor
of religious goods and services
but a people sent on a mission*

Not church

When I started writing this book I was clear in my mind that it was not going to be a book about the church but instead a book about **you** – *your* discipleship, *your* relationship with God, *your* walk as one of Christ's followers. However, as you will have noticed, it has been impossible for me to avoid talking about church too. The more I have tried to outline a coherent Christian 'rule of life' the more I have found myself writing about our personal connection to this thing called church. This has surprised me, but maybe it shouldn't have.

As I mentioned earlier, discipleship and church go together. Disciples belong to the church by right. It is impossible to separate them. No wonder then, that in talking about discipleship, I have ended up talking so much about life in Christ's body – his church.

But once we have accepted that church is important, what next? What is church all about? Why does it matter?

I want to end the book by saying something more specific about the vision I have for church and the understanding I have about its purpose and meaning.

The bible uses all kinds of brilliant metaphors and pictures for the church that help us answer this question. It is a body, a bride, a family, a temple, a flock. They are great metaphors but here are another three, more contemporary images to help us:

Greenhouse, teabag, and logo.

END

Church as greenhouse

A friend of mine recently noted the difference between church being a 'community of disciples' and a 'discipling community'. Both phrases are good but if I had to choose my favourite for a description of church, it would be the latter – a 'discipling community'.

For better or worse we are all being disciplined by others all the time. We usually don't notice it. It just happens. How we think, how we act morally, what we find funny, or sad, or outrageous, is very much shaped by our community, the society we live in. We are shaped by what's on TV and what we read in the papers.

Because of this we need to pay attention. As has often been noted, the values that we naturally pick up from our surrounding culture may well not be very Christian after all. They might seem like 'common sense' to us, but they might not actually be Christ-like. That's why asking ourselves the question, "What would Jesus do?" is a good thing to ask on a regular basis. It helps us as individuals reflect on our lives and wonder whether we are being shaped by Christian values or non-Christian ones.

But because we are social beings and are so heavily influenced by the culture around us it is vital that we place ourselves in the right **environment for growth** in God's Kingdom. And because of this it is helpful to think of the church community acting like a greenhouse – regulating and enhancing the environment for your personal discipleship and growth. Rather than being left outside to fend for yourself, Christians help each other to grow into Christlikeness by committing themselves to being part of a church community. Without it we are vulnerable to the elements.

Church as teabag

We have mentioned before that Jesus talked of the kingdom of God like yeast in a batch of dough or salt on some food. If he was around today, I think Jesus would tell a parable about the church being a like a teabag.

We all know that there is nothing worse than weak tea. The best kind of tea bag is one which “lets the flavour flood out!”

A teabag is not made for the box or the cupboard. It is made for the cup and the water. Likewise the church is not made to exist on the fringes of our culture tucked away and kept safe. We are called to live in the world, front and centre. We are called to flavour it. We don't run away from the world. We run towards it hoping to add salt to each part.

In the same way we know that a teabag is only ever any good when it's been baptised in the boiling water, swirled around a pot, or squeezed against the side of the cup. A teabag is not designed to be kept dry. It is designed for the water.

A 'good' teabag is a used one.

One of the things that we often need to remind ourselves of is that we are living most truly to our calling as Jesus' followers when we give away our lives for others rather than trying to protect ourselves. Just as Jesus gave us the bread and the wine to remind us not only of his sacrifice for our sin, but also as the model for our lives – broken and poured out – so we recognise that we are the church most potently when we are like a teabag being put to use in a teapot. Sacrifice is expected.

END

And just as a teabag is not made for the box, so the Church is not made for the building. We come into our own when, and only when, we are outside, making a difference, displaying the presence of the Kingdom and inviting others to enter it. For too long the word 'church' has been naturally associated with buildings and things that go inside them – usually called services. Being involved in church meant being involved in the services on Sundays. It is vital that we reclaim the word church from this straight jacket.

The church is not a provider of religious services but a people sent on God's mission.

The church is like a teabag.

Church as logo

Advertising is all around us and we are constantly bombarded by images and logos from the moment we wake up to the moment we fall asleep each day. And the reason companies spend thousands of pounds each year on advertising is simply because it works. And it works best when people begin to associate a positive value or experience with a logo or brand.

It is a shame therefore that if you say the word 'church' to people, so many of them associate negative words or phrases with it. Something has gone wrong.

We can debate why this is for some time, but regardless of why this has been the case in the past, it is an urgent task for us as Jesus' body on earth, to begin to turn this situation around. I long for the day when people hear the word 'church' that they immediately and spontaneously associate it with words and experiences such as life, joy, forgiveness,

non-judgmentalism, openness, laughter, delight, focus, energy, justice, creativity, and peace. You can add your own words to the list.

Now, if this is to be the case then the **only way** for this to happen is for those of us who make up the church family to actually make these things the **reality** that people experience when they experience us. We are going to have to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

As we know, advertising only goes so far. Some products are easy to sell – they just sell themselves. Others are difficult to sell no matter how hard you work at it. Right now, anything with an Apple logo on is assumed to work well, look cool and be easy to use. And the reason for this is because Apple products have worked well, looked cool and been easy to use in the past.

What would it be like if the way we *wanted* people to see the church was the thing they *actually* saw?

This is my dream and my hope.

When it is living as it should be, at its best, the church is a colony, an agent and a sign of the Kingdom of God.

As a **colony** or outpost of God's Kingdom, the church displays the qualities of the King that rules over it. We are an alternative community, living an alternative lifestyle with different values - the values of the Kingdom of God. We are called to be different. As a logo we should stand for something different, something fresh. We should display life.

END

As an **agent** of God's Kingdom our goal is not to impose God's rule on others but to display it and express it both in *what* we do and in the *way* we do things. As we do the things that Jesus did, God's rule is demonstrated and we can invite others into this life with us. There is no compulsion.

Lastly we are **sign** of the Kingdom – pointing others towards it. And we do this best when we look like Jesus. It is no accident, I believe, that the logo of Christianity has become the **cross**. The cross is a sign of amazing love and outrageous sacrifice. When we display this in our lives together, when we live lives that echo the cross, people are always drawn to Jesus.

When we do this well we are like **light in the darkness**. When we fail to do this, it is as if we had put this light under a bowl.

All good churches are marked by four things – passionate **worship**, a rich **community** life, a deep commitment to **discipleship** and an enthusiastic participation in God's **mission**.

This is what I long for in my own church and for yours. And it is very possible indeed. It is not beyond us. All that needs to happen for this to become a reality is for people like you and me to sign up, enlist and get involved. When this happens, when normal people like you and me commit their lives to Jesus and take practical steps to making his life their life all kind of amazing things will take place. Lives will be changed. Communities will be transformed. God will be glorified. Join me as we give ourselves to this vision together. Be part of the greenhouse, give away your life like a teabag, and live lives that make others interested in the logo.

Conclusion

Thank you for reading this book.

Having read it, my hope is that you don't really need it any more. If you can count to seven you should be able to remember the content well enough without it.

Knowing stuff is one thing. Action on our knowledge is quite another. Jesus knew this and repeatedly encouraged his disciples to be doers of the word, not just hearers.

This book has seven chapters and it encourages you to **do** seven things:

ONE: To make the Kingdom of God the most important thing in your life

TWO: To love God with all your heart and to love your neighbour as yourself

THREE: To develop a relationship with God as Father, Son and Spirit

FOUR: To join or create a formation group sharing your discipleship with others

FIVE: To pray for five people and to be fully involved in God's mission

SIX: To value your work and whatever you do, to do it for the Lord

SEVEN: To create a rhythm for your life and to rest and worship one day each week

END

My prayer is that you will indeed do these seven things, not just for a season, but for the rest of your lives. If you do I am convinced that you will end your life having found life-in-all-its-fullness – a treasure more valuable than anything.

As a final prayer I wonder if we could do no worse than using John Wesley's prayer of submission. It is pretty comprehensive and summarises the themes of this book very well. Once again, it might help to read it through slowly before actually praying it – just to make sure that you understand the old English and more importantly that you feel comfortable about saying it all to God, your Father.

A prayer of submission based on one by John Wesley

To you, O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, my Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, I give up myself entirely. May I no longer serve myself, but you, all the days of my life.

*I give you my **understanding**. May it be my only care to know you, your ways, your works, and your will. Let all things else be as refuse to me compared the excellence of this knowledge. I am willing to have my mind renewed.*

*I give you my **will**. May I have no will of my own. Whatsoever you will, may I will, and that only. May I will your glory in all things, as you do, and make that my end in everything. May I ever say with the Psalmist, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you." May I delight to do your will, O God, and rejoice to accept it. Whatever threatens me, let me say, "God works all things together for the good of those who love him." And whatever happens to me let me give thanks even in the midst of difficulty.*

*I give you my **affections**. Dispose of them all. Be my love, my fear, my joy; and may nothing have any share in them except that which is for you and for your sake. What you love, may I love; what you hate, may I hate; and that in such measures as you are pleased to prescribe for me.*

*I give you my **body**. May I glorify you with it, and preserve it holy, fit for you, O God, to dwell in. May I neither indulge it, nor use too much rigor toward it; but keep it, as far as it is in my control, healthy, vigorous, and active, and fit to do you all manner of service that you shall call for.*

*I give you all my **worldly goods**. May I prize them and use them only for you. May I faithfully restore to you, through the poor, all you have entrusted me with, above the necessities of life; and be content to part with them too, whenever you, my Lord, shall require them from my hands.*

*I give you my **name and reputation**. May I never value it, but only in respect of you; nor endeavour to maintain it, but as it may do service and advance your honour in the world. I give you myself and my all. Let me look upon myself to be nothing, and to have nothing, apart from you. Be the sole disposer and governor of myself and my all; be my portion and my all.*

*O my God and my **all**, when hereafter I shall be tempted to break this solemn engagement, when I shall be pressed to conform to the world and to the company and customs that surround me, may my answer be: "I am not my own. I am not for myself, not for the world, but for my God. I will give unto God the things that are God's. God, be merciful to me, a sinner." **Amen.***

END

Chat

Questions and thoughts to help you go deeper

ONE : THE KINGDOM OF GOD

What did Jesus mean when he said, "The Kingdom of God is at hand"?

If each of us has our own 'kingdom', what do you consider to be in yours?

What happens when your 'kingdom' clashes with someone else's?

Why was Jesus crucified despite his early popularity?

What does the resurrection tell us about Jesus and his message?

What does 'repentance' mean?

Why did Jesus link repentance with 'faith'?

What difference does living in the Kingdom of God make to your life right now?

What are the costs? And what are the benefits?

Why does Jesus describe the Kingdom of God like a treasure found in a field?

What does it mean to 'Seek the Kingdom of God first'?

TWO : LOVING GOD AND LOVING OTHERS

What does it feel like to love someone?

What does it mean to love God?

Why does God long for our love above all other things?

What did you think of changing the word love to 'desire' or 'enjoy'?

Why is the love of neighbour so vital to Jesus?

What is the hardest thing about loving your neighbour?

Why does Jesus tell us to love our neighbour as ourselves?

What does it mean to forgive someone?

Why is forgiveness so central to Jesus' teaching?

Is there anyone you haven't yet been able to forgive? What is the next step you can take towards forgiveness?

What happens when we fail to fulfil these two commandments?

CHAT

THREE : FATHER, SON AND SPIRIT

What is God like?

How do you know?

Why do you think God is described as love?

How do you feel about God being a mystery to you?

When people talk about having a 'relationship' with God, what does this mean to you?

Which person of the Trinity do you find easiest/hardest to relate to?

Who do you pray to?

Father

What does it mean to call God Father? In what way is God a Father?

What does it mean to *you* to know God as Father?

Do you think of God as Dad?

What do you think of being one of God's dependants?

What do you think about the idea of being God's child and therefore his 'heir'?

In what ways does the sending of Jesus to us reveal God's Father heart?

What does it mean to be one of 'Abba's beloved'?

Which son are you in the parable of the prodigal son? What does this story tell you about God as Father?

Son

In what ways does Jesus reveal God's character to you?

What does it mean for Jesus to be our saviour? What do we need rescuing from?

What does it mean to you when you think about God being one of us – human like us?

Why do you think Jesus tended to call himself 'Son of Man'?

In what ways can you be like Jesus? What does it mean to bear the image of God?

When we look at Jesus on the cross what do you see? Do you see God on the cross?

CHAT

What does the cross say to you about the love of God?

What does Jesus' resurrection mean? What difference does the empty tomb make?

What does it mean to say that Jesus is alive?

Spirit

What does it mean to call the Spirit a 'person' equal in the Trinity with the Father and the son?

What does it mean to receive the Spirit? What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit?

What difference would we expect the Spirit to make in someone's life and character?

What gifts does the Spirit give to people to build up the church? What gifts has the Spirit given you for the benefit of others in the church?

Why is the Spirit so closely linked to the mission of God? Why do you think Jesus compared people 'born of the Spirit' with the wind?

Which is your favourite description for the Spirit – Counsellor, Comforter, Strength or Guide?

FOUR : SPIRITUAL FORMATION

What do you think about seeing your discipleship to Jesus as making a covenant to belong to, and participate in church life with others? What does this covenant mean to you?

What 'scale' of church life do you engage with? Why?

What do you think about the smallest scale being the most important scale for a healthy church?

Have you ever been accountable to others before in your life? What was that like? Did it make a difference? What was hard/easy about being honest and open with others?

What fears prevent us from being completely transparent to others?

What is the DNA of a formation group?

What are the four things people do in every formation group?

What are the four questions people ask in every formation group?

What would stop a formation group working very well? How would you avoid this?

FIVE : FIVE SENSES AND FIVE PEOPLE

Why does the good news need to be experienced to be believed?

What is your favourite café? What is it about it that you like so much?

What does it mean for the church to appeal to people's five senses?

Do you have any people whom God has put on your heart to pray for? What is it about their story or experience that moves you? How often will you commit to praying for them?

Who do you spend most time with in the course of your week? Can you list them in order, the first being the person you spend the most time with. Make sure you include people at work as well as your network of people near your home.

Why did Jesus send out his disciples to proclaim the Kingdom in pairs?

How does it feel to see yourself as a 'disciple-maker'?

Do you want to help make disciples of other people? Why?

What does it feel like to be intentional about this? What would be your natural style of disciple-making?

SIX : WORK AND THE KINGDOM

Which is the most important day of the week to you? Which is the most important day of the week for God? Why is your workplace so important to God?

How does God's Kingdom grow?

Why is it important that we don't take responsibility for building God's Kingdom for him? What goes wrong when we do?

What does it mean to say that Jesus is Lord of you at work?

What do think about the following sentence, "Jesus has indeed been crowned King by his Father, but his **work as King** to bring all things under his feet and to establish God's rule upon the earth, is still **very much in progress**."?

What do you think about seeing yourself as an 'agent of transformation' in the world?

Why might God want you exactly where you are? What difference could you make for him? Who might need you to be there right now?

What are you a natural evangelist of? What is the implication of seeing yourself as being a disciple-maker at work? What do you think about seeing yourself as an 'Ambassador for Christ' at work?

SEVEN : REST AND RHYTHM

Why did God give the Sabbath to the people of Israel?

In what way is the Sabbath a gift?

What was wrong with the Sabbath being the key identity marker for God's people? Why did Jesus break the rules?

What is the current rhythm of your life? What pace are you living at?

What is the attraction of stopping? Why do we avoid it?

In what ways is not doing something an act of freedom or liberation?

What would it feel like to truly have one day of rest each week? Is it possible? Why?

How does worship shape us?

How important is worshipping with others to you? How important to your family? Do you want to change this?

What plans have you made to rest this week? This month? This year?

END : YOU AND CHURCH

Why does Church matter to God?

What is Church for?

Is Church obligatory for disciples?

In what way is your church a 'discipling community'? Is it a good environment for growing disciples?

What are the ways your church gives away its life to the community it lives in?

What does it mean to say that the church is not a vendor of religious services but a people sent on God's mission?

What does the word 'church' mean to most people you know?

If your church was an animal, what kind of animal would it be and why?

In what ways does your church advertise God's Kingdom?

What part do you play in this thing called God's church?

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I've really enjoyed putting this book together even though I have found it hard work. Once I started I quickly realised just how hard writing is. There are so many little fears you have to get over on the way. And then there are big fears too. It is easy to give up and think it's not worth the effort. I am glad I managed to finish it.

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