

## *PRE-RELEASE VERSION*

Dear Reader,

Thank you for your interest in reading the Culture of the Few. We are honored to share the book with you as we prepare to release it in early 2016. The book is currently in the editing process. In fact, the editor has just finished his initial round of revisions for the first third of the book and you will be the first ones to read it.

As you read the book, we would love any feedback that you could provide us with. Our goal is to provide leaders with a resource that will help them equip and empower believers to follow Jesus in impacting the world around them. In addition to sharing this with other missional leaders, I have been blessed by the response from many denominational pastors and leaders as well. So far leaders from...

Anglican, Baptist, Church of God (Anderson), Church of God (Findlay), Episcopal, Evangelical Presbyterian, Global Legacy, Non-Denominational, Vineyard and Wesleyan churches have been reading the book and are helping us grow in our understanding for how this book can impact their churches by empowering believers to become followers of Jesus. We are excited for you to join in on this process.

Please give us your name and email address and you will receive an email with your downloaded book.

Thanks again for your interest in Culture of the Few. If you have any questions, please let me know by emailing me at [book@cultureofthefew.com](mailto:book@cultureofthefew.com).

Thanks in advance,

Brad McKoy



# CULTURE OF THE FEW

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# introduction



# PREFACE

## how it all began

Several years ago, I had been invited to speak to the Residence Life staff at a Christian college in our town. I was honored by the invitation and had been praying for several days about what to share. As I woke up that morning, I kept hearing the phrase “Remember the importance of the culture of the few” replay in my mind.

As I stepped into my prayer closet—AKA the shower—I was aware that while I had never really thought about the phrase “the culture of the few,” I knew exactly what it meant. In just a few hours, I was to address twelve resident directors who had been charged with providing a healthy academic, social, and spiritual atmosphere for 2,500 students.

How could twelve people effectively steward the atmosphere of an entire college campus? How could they bring a calm perspective that would help students prioritize and manage their time in a high pressure, academically rigorous environment? And how could this team of twelve do all of this without burning themselves out?

These were the questions I asked myself as I prayed in the shower that morning. My heart got excited as the talk “The Culture of the Few” began to take shape. Little did I know that years later it would still be shaping me.



# INTRODUCTION

## **the power of a focused few**

In 2002, my wife, Adriane, and I moved from Wilmington, NC to a small town in Western Pennsylvania to begin the process of planting churches for the unchurched. Our house in North Carolina was just a few miles from the beach, and the fact that we moved away from the warm and sunny south to come to the grey “frozen tundra” of Ellwood City posed a mystery to many of our new neighbors.

“Why on earth would you leave there to come here?”

We had a short list of answers depending on who asked. Sometimes we said how we loved the idea of experiencing all four seasons. Other times we talked about how Adriane didn't like the crazy traffic of the growing city. And then there were those we told that we had moved because we felt like Jesus had invited us to.

There is another answer to the question about our relocation that is relevant to the story. When someone would ask me why I was willing to leave my home three miles from the ocean for the Pennsylvania winters, I would tell them, “To get away from the Hurricanes.”

In the few years prior to our move, Wilmington had been a favorite destination for hurricanes and tropical storms. I *still* remember the direct hit we took in 1984 from Hurricane Diana. Over the years, we had several other close calls, which would send my family into “hurricane party mode.”

We would clean out the fridge of any desirable goodies, stay up late playing games by battery-powered lanterns, and get a few days off from school. From what I remember, South East North Carolina was spared from any real storm damage for twelve years. That all changed in 1996, however, when Hurricanes Bertha and Fran made their way to our region. They destroyed hundreds of homes and businesses, causing millions of dollars of damage to my city. Hurricane Bonnie did the same in 1998, followed by Hurricane Floyd a year later.

T-shirts were made that read, “Welcome to Wilmington, NC - Choice of 4 out of 5 Hurricanes.” One local ice cream stand sold special shakes labeled “Bertha,” “Fran,” and “Category 5.”

So while I didn't *really* leave my beloved hometown to get away from the storms, I was glad they were no longer a part of my life... Or so I thought.

By the summer of 2004, we were getting settled into our new life in Pennsylvania. Following the invitation to "be and do church for people who wouldn't go to church" meant relearning how to do "ministry." We had planted a small "simple church"<sup>1</sup> made up of a committed core of 12 - 15 people and a growing number of new believers. We had started a "missions and relief agency" hoping that it would provide us with opportunities to show God's love to people who were going through a hard time. We fed the hungry, prayed for the sick and hurting, and helped struggling families with utility bills. That fall, the remnants of two tropical hurricanes gave us an opportunity to do more.

In all the storms I had experienced in North Carolina, I had seen the damage from a distance, in a way that had never directly hit home for me.

Wow. Things were different now.

Flooding from the storms impacted over 300 local families, destroying dozens of homes in the process. Hundreds of our neighbors were temporarily displaced, and there was no set system to help them.

Prayerfully, I began calling pastors and leaders from the area to see if there was any way that our little "simple church" could help. The pastor of one of the largest Evangelical churches in the region invited me to a community meeting to help assess the total damage and put together a plan of action.

I remember the feeling that I had walking into that meeting. "God, what are these families going to do?"

Once inside, my pastor friend quizzed those in attendance about the extent of the damage in our corner of the county. Tears flowed as community residents described losing everything, many without a clue of where to go next. Some families had been sleeping in tents and cars, while others exhausted their lifesavings at local hotels. We had to do something to help them.

As the leader of a church of fifteen people, I felt helpless to make any real contribution, but was determined, along with the rest of our team, to do whatever we could. After all,

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<sup>1</sup> A good working definition for "simple church" would be a group of at least two or three people committed to following Jesus together.

we had moved thirteen hours away from the beach to come to this place and show these people how much God loved them. Surely He had a way to meet their needs.

My pastor friend and I helped to form the Northeast Beaver County Flood Assistance Team (NBCFAT). The team consisted of members from several different local churches, and each congregation had a job to do. Our little tribe helped make up an assessment form to determine the specific needs of the families affected by the flood, and then get that information back to the NBCFAT so appropriate care packages could be provided. We spent days and weeks walking the flooded out areas, talking to neighbors, crying with them, praying with them.

As the weeks turned into months, fewer volunteers were available to help coordinate relief. We ended up with a handful of committed volunteers from around the community, mainly members of my pastor friend's large church and our small one. All of us were astonished at how God provided for people; tens of thousands of dollars worth of resources flowed through the NBCFAT! Drywall, furnaces, clothing and in some cases *new homes* were given to help those in need. We even got to throw the affected families a party at the nicest restaurant in our area during Christmastime.

As we served refreshments, gave the kids presents, and provided gift cards to help parents have something to show for the holidays that year, my pastor friend pulled me aside to talk. What he said that night changed my life forever.

Marveling at all the activity in the room, he turned to me and said, "You know, it's really amazing how much the Lord can do through a few people who live life intentionally."

He went on to talk about the impact that our "little church" had made on a big situation.

"You guys have been able to provide more service and man hours than churches twenty times your size. There is a lot of power in a few people living with a focused mission."

While I was honored by what my friend was saying, these were more than just nice words; these were words that changed my grid for success. Here was the pastor of one of the largest, most well-respected churches in the region—a church that had given generously and been integral in helping hundreds of families—yet he was talking to me about the "powerful impact" that fifteen people could make. That if it wasn't for our team going to fill out surveys with the families, the resources that their church had to offer would have had no place to flow.

Something changed in my heart that day. It was not that I had been trying to build a church that looked like his—I wasn't—but I guess in some ways I still thought that in order to

be significant and successful, I needed to reach “critical mass.” I thought that bigger, by definition, was always better, stronger and more important, until I witnessed firsthand the impact that a small group of dedicated Christ followers could have on the world around them.

That day, my heart started learning to value the culture of the few.

## Chapter One

# SO YOU WANT TO CHANGE THE WORLD?

### **the culture of the few**

What could God do with a few people committed to live a focused life in the midst of the crowd? Throughout the course of history, a simple truth rings out to me: The direction of the masses is typically shaped by the relative few. Influence in the hands of a handful can change the course of history, for better or for worse.

I remember hearing the story of how thirteen people gathered around a young leader near the turn of the twentieth century to discuss a new idea. They believed that within fifty years their “new idea” would rule the world, and in fact, over twenty countries came to subscribe to their beliefs at the height of its popularity, with several major world players still professing it today.

The idea was communism. Thirteen people committed themselves to an ideology that revolutionized the world.

In the introduction of Malcolm Gladwell’s book *The Tipping Point*, a story is told of how Hushpuppy shoes were on the verge of extinction until a handful of trend setting students in an artsy neighborhood of New York City decided that the shoes were “cool.” Within three years of these students’ influential decision to start wearing Hushpuppies, the brand was stronger than ever before and won the prize for best accessory at the Council of Fashion Designers awards dinner at the Lincoln Center.

Scripture records the story of how four young refugees rose to power in one of history's greatest empires. Daniel and his three friends were literally pulled from amongst the exiled Jews and forced into positions as princes in Nebuchadnezzar's reign of terror, but they then used that influence to make decisions that spared thousands of lives.

The *Culture of the Few* is unashamedly written for those who want to change the world. In many ways this is a book about cultural transformation, and how cultural transformation usually begins away from the public eye and the flashbulbs of press conferences. Real transformation is most often catalyzed by a few "agents of change" that live intentionally and infect others with their lives.

This catalysis happens most noticeably in pop culture with fashion, art and music. Have you ever thought about the process of "alternative" music becoming a part of mainstream culture? What was once considered to be "on the fringe" somehow works its way into acceptance as the fringe infects the crowd. It starts when someone decides they are not satisfied with the status quo and recruits a few friends to see things differently.

These types of decisions don't just shape musical trends or define what is "fashion forward" for the season; they help determine what social causes will gain traction and what products will succeed during the Christmas rush. Politics, family, and faith are all drastically impacted by those who consider themselves to be outsiders, or different from the crowd.

Of course, many "outsiders" simply feel discontent and disenfranchised. Negativity and injustice can become both the fuel and the focus of their attention. For some, the discontentment will grow to a place where they are determined to disrupt the norm, forcing change on the masses against their will. While able to make an immediate impact, this kind of lifestyle rarely leads to positive, long-term change.

But there is another type of "outsider" that operates from a different ideology. They are fueled by their quest *for* justice instead of dwelling on injustice, focusing on solutions instead of problems. Regardless of whether their cause is hugging trees, fighting bad music, or loving lonely hearts, the actions of these agents of change are driven by an intentional desire to see things improve for all people.

While there are plenty of outsiders who are content to complain and accuse, these would-be world-changers are not satisfied debating ideology. They will not leave well enough alone. They scorn the good and strain for the best.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of the culture of the few relies heavily upon the truth that agents of change have great influence on their surroundings. We can easily forget the impact that the "micro" has on the "macro" if we make the mistake of believing that the masses drive culture. The macro parts of our culture are, after all, made up of multiple micros converging into something larger.

When we forget this important truth, we begin to shift our thinking into neutral, forgetting that we can actually effect change in our own lives and in the lives of people around us. This can be true for governments, businesses, churches and any other social system comprised of people. While the opinions of the masses are not unimportant, they are not typically formed by each member of society coming to the same conclusion both simultaneously and independent of one another. The opposite is actually true.

The crowd is filled with followers. Throughout history, leaders have used this truth to advance humanity towards its greater self or reduce it to its basest and most sheep-like qualities. Some have used it to manipulate people into fighting unjust wars. Others have used it to deliver oppressed people from bondage. Despite the positives and negatives of our tendency as a species to "follow the herd," one thing is certain—it does not cause cultural transformation.

No, transformation occurs when someone makes a bold move that sets them apart from the crowd, a move that says, "Follow me or oppose me, but I'm going this way. I'm wearing Hushpuppies. I won't bow down."

It is easy to think that in order to be an agent of change you must become some revolutionary political leader, but that isn't the case; world-changers are all around us. They are young and old, male and female, black and white. Some have grown their influence to a place of fame and power; others infect the crowd from within. For each of them, it started with a choice. World-changers decide to be different, even as they live in the midst of the crowd.

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<sup>2</sup> Pete Greig - The Vision, Red Moon Rising.

## my first encounter with a world-changer

Donna Bishop was one of the first agents of change that I ever had a chance to know. We met when I was a junior in high school. She was a transfer student I had never seen before, but it didn't take long to realize that she was different. I'd often run into this beautiful young woman alone somewhere on campus, just praying and worshipping Jesus. We shared a couple classes and became friends, but she never ceased to amaze me with how serious she was about following Jesus.

Donna actually seemed like a character in a sappy Christian movie. I don't mean that in a bad way, but she said and did things that "normal people" just don't. I remember her telling me once about her "hit list"—her top ten friends that she was praying to see come to Jesus. She was the real deal, Donna was. So it didn't surprise when I heard that she was going to become a missionary.

We lost touch after high school, but I reconnected with Donna when I became an assistant pastor at the church she attended. It was a relatively small church that was reaching out to marines who were stationed about forty-five minutes away. Donna and a few of her friends had started hosting Bible studies on Saturday evenings, and some of the marines would gladly use the excuse to get away from base and enjoy a few home cooked meals over the weekend.

One Saturday evening, her little group of friends headed to go get burgers after Bible study when the car that Donna was in got hit. While she seemed to be okay at the scene of the accident, Donna had several serious internal injuries. She was taken to the hospital later that night, and would spend the rest of her short life surrounded by friends and a small but committed army of intercessors.

I was out of town when the accident happened, but I got a phone call telling me that I should come home as soon as possible. I arrived at the hospital Sunday night to find the hallways, waiting room, and chapel all filled with family and friends. Prayer went on around the clock for the next several days as we waited to see what would happen.

I remember walking out into the hallway one evening to find five or six marines standing quietly outside of the doors that led back to the intensive care unit. I was astounded by the fact that most of them had tears in their eyes. I was even more astounded when I found out that only one or two of these men actually knew Donna. Most of them had only heard stories about her from her boyfriend or other people.

In that moment, my mind raced back to my last conversation with Donna, just a few weeks before the accident. It was one of those times when she said things that "normal people" don't say. I had walked in on one of her prayer times and we started talking. She had

been praying and meditating on Philippians 1:20-21. Her prayer sounded something like, "Jesus, be glorified in me, whether by life or death. For me to live is Christ, to die is gain."

She hadn't been praying this as a morbid death wish; on the contrary, she was excited to live and become a missionary. Her heart was filled with dreams of friendship, love and family, but her First Love was Jesus and she had given herself to Him in a way that made me a little uncomfortable. She talked about Jesus in such real terms, and lived her life in such a clear way, that it somehow made sense to me that strong men who had never met her were standing in the middle of a hospital with tears in their eyes at the thought of her condition.

That Wednesday afternoon, we all cried when Donna passed away, but we had *no idea* how God was about to use such tragic circumstances to answer her Philippians 1 prayer. Over the next several months, dozens of people gave their lives to Jesus as people encountered the God that was so real to Donna. Every one of the friends on her "hit list" became believers within just a few months.

Our "little church" was transformed. Over the next three years, over three hundred and fifty people gave their lives to Jesus, including scores of members of the United States Marine Corp. Within six months of Donna's death, we had Bible studies happening on aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean Sea, in Okinawa, and across marine bases and air stations around the United States. The gospel was spreading, and Jesus was receiving glory from across the face of the earth, in part because of one nineteen year old girl who decided to pray and follow Jesus with a handful of friends.

Focus on the Family would later recognize Donna as one of their "Young Women of the Year" in *Brio* magazine, and our church dedicated a youth center in her honor where we shared the gospel with area teenagers every week for the next several years. As our church continued to grow, so too the number of people who had never personally met Donna increased, but her life had released an influence that still affected them. In fact, the influence of her radical love still affects people to this day.

But the greatest reward that Donna received was not the honors from well-known organizations, or buildings that bear her name. It comes from the answer to her prayer that she would glorify God, be it in life or in death.

### **multiplying seed**

Several years after Donna had passed away, a group of friends, most of whom she had never met, gathered on Saturday nights to hang out at the youth center. Afterwards they would go pray for their friends in the church sanctuary. I didn't always make it to the youth center on Saturdays, but I remember being there one week when my friend, Al, was

praying for his roommate, Jeremy. Al and Jeremy were both big, tall Marines, but right about there is where their similarities ended. Al was following Jesus, while Jeremy was a member of a pagan church.

As I watched Al and our friends pray for Jeremy that night, I was reminded of the dozens of people who had come to Jesus in our little church since Donna passed away. I joined in praying for this man that I had never met. There was great faith and expectation in my heart that night, waiting to see what God would do to bring Jeremy to His Son.

The next morning seemed to be a pretty typical Sunday at our church. I was halfway through the lesson I had prepared for the adult Sunday School class when the back door of the church opened. Everyone turned around in time to see a tall marine walk in wearing dark sunglasses a long, black trench coat. Jeremy had come to show his roommate that his pagan faith would not be shaken by a visit to church.

Jeremy came in and sat down on the second row for the rest of class. He kept his seat as the worship band filed in and our morning worship service began. I remember watching his face as praise filled the atmosphere. At first, his expression looked hard as a rock, but minute-by-minute I watched him struggle to keep his composure as the reality of God's love and presence became real to him. Jeremy didn't make it through the worship service before he was ready to give his life to Jesus.

I will never forget the tears that flowed from the eyes of the now former pagan as we went through the story of the gospel. Jeremy found faith in Jesus that morning, and we baptized him the following week. The change in his life was quite dramatic. I noticed it in measures as he began to grow over the next few months, but it was not until several years later that I discovered just how impactful Jeremy's witness was.

Lee was a staff sergeant that had grown up in the church but had drifted away from Jesus as he entered into adulthood and the marine corp. He was assigned to the same squadron as Al and Jeremy. It was Lee's responsibility to check the rooms for men in his squadron. He was so struck by the change in the atmosphere of Jeremy's room and the change in the content of his locker that it brought him under conviction. He started hanging out with another friend who had recently started following Jesus, and it wasn't long before Lee had rededicated his life to the Lord.

One man (Lee) had recommitted to following Jesus because of change in another man's (Jeremy) locker, who had started following Jesus in part because of his roommate's (Al) prayers, a roommate who had come to Jesus as a result of the gospel going out from a youth center named after a girl (Donna) whose life seem to end too soon.

During the seven years I had the privilege of serving as one of the pastors of that “little church” in North Carolina, my life was forever altered. One of the things that changed me the most was the truth God taught me from the events surrounding Donna’s life and death: You don’t have to be famous to change eternity.

I left North Carolina in 2003, but I continue to see how the lives Donna touched are still making a difference. Most of those young marines have grown up to be husbands and fathers leading families that love Jesus. Their children have probably never heard the whole story about how a nineteen year old gave her life to Jesus through prayer and intercession; a story they may not know, but are a part of.

“Jesus, be glorified in me, whether by life or death. For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.”

### **dear would-be world-changers...**

If we are going to follow Jesus, the idea of being a “world-changer” should be as natural as the sun rising in the East. The desire to effect change is a good thing, and for a disciple of Jesus, it is a part of the invitation to “Come, Follow me.” And that is ultimately what this book is about.

But God is not looking for the next Billy Graham or Mother Theresa. He is not in heaven wringing His hands hoping that someone will step to the forefront and write a book like CS Lewis used to write. The world is not waiting on the next great conference speaker, nor is it longing for some edgy church planter to move into a warehouse and start a trendy new community of faith. The world is waiting for you.

In fact, all of creation waits eagerly for the sons (and daughters) of God to know who they are and simply be themselves.

It is easy to imagine traveling to third world countries or speaking to the masses and think, “That would really make a difference.” There is nothing wrong with those things, but if we hold on to this Christian fantasy of becoming something special for Jesus, we allow our identity to flow out of “what we do” instead of “who we are,” when its who we are that changes the world.

I’d like to submit that you can do more for Jesus by encountering His love everyday and overflowing onto those around you than you ever could with a stage and a microphone. Those things aren’t bad, but if you simply draw close to Jesus each day and allow the power of the Good News to transform your own “status quo,” you will become that catalytic agent of change by accident, impacting eternity in ways you never could have

imagined or checked off on a list. That's because God is love, and once we realize we are made new in His image we become free to *be* His love to those around us.

Remember Donna's story. It is exceptional in many ways, but in no way is it the exception. History is filled with stories of influential movements that were sparked by lives that went seemingly unnoticed on this earth. Remember that a life that has been given to Jesus becomes seed in the hands of the Father. It is His job to work transformation through us, as we yield ourselves to Him and live out our lives in holy confidence, a confidence that comes when we are free to be who He made us to be.

I was only twenty years old when Donna died, but I have been blessed to spend a majority of my life following Jesus with other passionate, young "world-changers". My friend, Lee Myers, (who you will hear more about later) was one of these leaders. One night, he invited me to come to Allegheny College and speak to a few dozen students from around the region. As I stood to begin, I remember looking up and realizing the magnitude of the collective destiny in the room that night. Tears began to fill my eyes as I tried to speak. Although it doesn't happen often, that night I was speechless.

After several quiet minutes, I opened my mouth and asked, "What do you say to a room full of people who will change the world?" I felt the desire of these young leaders to know and encounter Jesus putting a demand on my heart that night. There were things stirring in me that I didn't know how to explain. The hunger for Jesus in that room was both astounding and humbling. These people were not following Jesus so they could have a nice life; they were convinced that following Jesus would change everything in them and that they, in turn, would change the world.

### **following the ultimate agent of change**

If we were to look back through all of history's examples, no one modeled the truth of the culture of the few more clearly than Jesus. While His public ministry was filled with stories of healing the crowds, He spent much of His "private ministry" focusing on twelve ordinary men. He especially poured into three.

Three years, focusing on three men who would be integral in forming and leading the church after His death and resurrection.

Many times in Scripture we find Jesus performing miracles and giving parables to the crowds, but there was always something deeper for the few back at the house. To the crowds He would say, "He who has ears, let him hear..." but to his disciples He would reveal the meaning of the message, saying, "To you the Kingdom has been given..."

Jesus knew that the crowds were susceptible to the spirit of the day. They cried out "Hosanna" one week and "Crucify" the next. It was not the chanting thousands that waited for the promise of the Father in the upper room ten days after His ascension, but the relative few.

What was so different about this son of a carpenter from Nazareth that prompted Him to invest in a handful of fishermen from Galilee instead of allowing the masses to make Him king? He was free from the expectations of how greatness should be measured in the eyes of man. Resisting the religious and political opportunities of the day, Jesus chose instead to draw greatness out of common, unschooled men and to be identified as a friend of sinners.

What we can learn from the life of Jesus in regards to transforming culture is that He sees men responsible for "turning the world upside down" inside a group of ragtag disciples. The rest of this book will be dedicated to discovering what it was that allowed Him to give Himself to a handful of such men with full confidence that it was God's best plan to change the world. We will journey together to find out what made Jesus the ultimate "agent of change," and we might be surprised at how different it looks from our expectations.



SECTION I:

# identity



## Chapter Two

## DESTINY FLOWS FROM IDENTITY

Jesus was, without a doubt, the ultimate agent of change. His life was so transformative that all of history hinges on His incarnation. What happened Before Christ had to be distinguished from everything that happened after.

It seems somewhat ironic to me that we can spend a lifetime trying to follow “Jesus the belief system” without ever allowing the way He actually lived to influence our lives. We will spend a large majority of this book examining the life with the intention of following in His footsteps today.

The remainder of this book is divided into five sections, each dedicated to a different core truth that I believe are keys to living out the culture of the few. Each section will consist of several chapters. The first section will focus on the issue of identity in the life of Jesus. We will primarily examine how Jesus understanding His identity was crucial to living out the culture of the few. With this in mind, we will study two key stories that provide insight into exactly *how* Jesus understood His identity.

**setting the stage**

As we go back two thousand years to the time when Jesus walked the earth, let us remember the setting. Palestine, along with most of the rest of the known world, was under the control of the powerful Roman Empire. The Jewish people, God’s chosen people, had been eagerly awaiting the arrival of the coming Messiah. This “Anointed One” would deliver God’s people from their oppressors.

From time to time, some hopeful prospect would catch the eye of the public, leaving Israel wondering if Messiah was about to reveal himself. I can imagine a group of

“Messiah Watchers” that acted as the expert panel of their day, who had a grasp on all of the prophetic promises about the coming deliverer, and presented an image of Messiah that left every Israelite ready for that deliverer to come with might and destroy the yoke of Roman tyranny.

Each religious sect lobbying for influence within the Jewish Sanhedrin undoubtedly projected a preview of the Promised One that served its own views. We know that others arose in the years leading up to the days of Jesus claiming the title Messiah, but none ever lasted or proved to be truly Him. This only increased the Israelites longing for the true Promised One’s appearance.

Word began to spread about a strange man attracting crowds, baptizing hundreds in the Jordan River for repentance from sins. Some called him Elijah; others thought him a prophet. But could this weird, country preacher be *Him*?

*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.<sup>3</sup>*

John preached a simple message: “Make straight the way of the Lord.” People get ready. He was known for his strange diet and wardrobe, but what really set him apart was the fact that he welcomed people down into the Jordan River to be baptized. He said that he baptized people in water as an act of repentance, but there was someone else coming who was greater. One who would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit.

These claims must have seemed fantastic to those gathered on the riverbanks hearing him preach. Some must have wondered “Just who does this guy think he is?” while still others put their hope in his word. Yet day after day, John went on about the promise of the coming of “One greater than I.”

Then one day, John looks up and makes an announcement to his flock: “Behold, the Lamb of God!” Imagine the gasp that went up over the crowd as every head turned to get a look at Messiah. What would the “Lamb of God” look like? Who was it? While I cannot say for sure, I can only imagine their sense of disappointment and skepticism when the crowd realized that John was pointing to... his cousin. I can just hear the scoffers scoffing: “I knew this guy was a phony. Let’s get out of here before they take up an offering...”

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<sup>3</sup> John 1:6-8

But then Jesus does something that surprises everyone. Even John. Especially John. Jesus, the 'Lamb of God', insists on being baptized—In the Jordan—by his redneck cousin. This is not what the people of Israel had been expecting.

This was not the mighty warrior king rushing to their rescue. He was not decked out in armor and riding on a white stallion. He was wearing carpenter's clothes and walking into a dirty river to be baptized with the same baptism that was being offered as an act of repentance to sinners.

Nevertheless, Jesus continued on into the waters. With each step He made a statement. To some, that statement disqualified Him as a legitimate candidate for Messiah. "There is no way that we have been waiting all these years for *this*." But in reality, Jesus's actions crushed the fantasy of what Messiah "should" be in order to reveal the very nature of God.

I can imagine the "experts" conferring with one another to find out if there was any possible way that this humble carpenter from Nazareth could really be the Messiah. The scriptures certainly do not describe a scene that would look like a national political convention, but I like to imagine that Jesus saw the pundits huddling together, criticizing His every move. Whether or not the "Messiah Watchers" were there on that day, we do not know. But we do know that He continued down into the waters.

Jesus was free to step into the Jordan because He wasn't concerned with the expectations of man. He knew the truth about who He was, and that *that* was all that mattered. It didn't matter if He met all the expectations of what people thought He should be. It didn't even matter if the crowds accepted Him or rejected Him. Before He set one foot into the water, Jesus already knew what God was about to announce to the rest of the world. He was God's Son.

### **understanding the source of significance**

Some eighteen years earlier, when Jesus was just a boy, he had gone on a trip with his parents to Jerusalem. Several days into their journey home, Mary and Joseph realized that Jesus was not with the rest of His relatives as they had thought, and so headed back to Jerusalem to find Him. Can you imagine the terror that was going through Mary's mind?

"I've lost the Messiah... How could this happen? I am the worst mother ever..."

For three days they search in all the places that you would expect to find a twelve-year-old Messiah. I can imagine them searching through camel stalls and soccer games and dreidel shops, only to be both amazed and relieved when they end up finding young Jesus at the temple, sitting at the feet of the teachers. He was listening to them and

asking questions that revealed such an uncommon understanding of the scriptures it left onlookers astonished.

Can you imagine the parental exasperation in Mary and Joseph's hearts as they found Him there?

*Jesus Christ Emmanuel the Lord, where have you been? Why did you do this to us? We have been worried sick looking all over for you!*

"Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know I would be looking after My Father's business?"<sup>4</sup>

I have heard the story of Jesus as a boy in the temple my whole life. (I still remember what the flannel-graph images look like from Sunday school.) Yet only recently have I begun to understand the true significance of the story. This is more than a snapshot glimpse of adolescent Jesus. This is not just filler for the life story of Messiah. There is an important message for us to see here.

At the end of their search, Mary and Joseph find their boy, and He is genuinely surprised that they did not know where to look. It was only logical to Jesus that He would be in the Temple, busy about His Father's business.

Long before the Father ever spoke words of affirmation at His baptism, Jesus knew who He was. Throughout His whole life, He had the issue of His identity settled in His heart. He was His Father's Son.

### **destiny flows from identity**

Jesus lived His whole life aware that He was Daddy's Son, and that that fact was irrefutable. He knew that being loved no matter what was His identity, and that it wasn't subject to change based on His actions or other people's opinions. I believe that is why He was free to step into the baptismal line and identify Himself with sinners. He knew who He was.

Time after time throughout His life, Jesus seems to make choices that set Him apart as a champion of the sinful and socially impoverished of His day. This was important, because He said that these were the ones He had come for, those who were lost. Whether it was dining with tax collectors or allowing harlots to touch Him, Jesus did not allow the fact that others were scrutinizing Him to determine what His behavior should be. Jesus never allowed opinion to hinder love.

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<sup>4</sup> (See Luke 2:41-52)

Jesus grasped the truth that His significance upon the earth did not come from the approval of any man, or even from the resume of His righteous deeds. His significance came from His Father. Jesus models that when we understand that our identity flows from sonship, we are free from the need to measure up to the expectations of man and the pressures of this world. That is why "identity" is the first of the five foundational truths for living out the culture of the few.

When our hearts can truly grasp the significance of belonging to the Father, it will free us to live life from a different perspective. At the same time, when the issue of identity is left unsettled in our hearts, both our motives for wanting to impact the world and our definition of success will be skewed.

As those who were created in the image of God, we were created with a sense of significance. When we are able to clearly see that this significance comes from our Father, we can worship Him and steward who He made us to be out of a place of purity; but when we think that significance is something to be earned or attained, it can lead us to a broken way of living life. Our quest for significance can actually fuel a pressure to perform that can lead us away from the Father.

In the next chapter, we will look at how we can follow Jesus in embracing a life of sonship. We will explore how living with a healthy understanding of our identity can shape our lives as agents of change.

## Chapter Three

# MY NAME TAG SAYS SON

As we begin to look at how we can follow Jesus into a greater understanding of what it means to be a child of God, it is important that we do so through the lens of the culture of the few. Why is understanding our identity so important? How does it relate to cultural transformation?

These are good questions and they need to be answered. Understanding where our true significance comes from is essential because it will free us from living under the pressures of needing to measure up to the broken rulers of this world. It is hard to see real cultural transformation take place around us when we still long for affirmation from the culture we are trying to transform.

Living with a clear understanding of our identity allows us to approach life with nothing to prove. We become free to love, serve and invest into culture around us with no strings attached. This is the way that Jesus lived, loved and led. Because he did not need to be affirmed by the world, He did not need to be conformed to its standards. This is important, because when we try to conform ourselves to society, we lose the ability to transform it.

Jesus did not enter into His earthly ministry in search of significance. In fact, as we look at His life, I believe we will see that it was His confidence in His identity as a Son that released Him into the impact of the last three years of His life. Why do so many of us have this backwards?

It can be easy to spend our lives striving to become somebody for God and continuously falling short. Plagued by our own humanity, sin and shortcomings, we face constant inner turmoil as we try desperately to make a name for ourselves. A distorted pressure to "change the world for Jesus" or have "our own ministry" can weigh us down, leaving us unsatisfied with life.

I believe that many young “would-be world-changers” struggle with this everyday. While it is normal to have a heart to make a difference, we cannot allow the pressure to “become somebody” rob us of the joy that comes from recognizing the significance of who we already are.

The life of Jesus reveals the freedom and confidence that flow from belonging to the Father. Simply put, Jesus fully embraced His sonship here on the earth. Defying any need to “become somebody,” He allowed the Father to determine the priorities of His daily life by only saying what He heard the Father say and doing what He saw the Father do. Instead of trying to make a name for Himself, Jesus was satisfied to be known as His Father’s son.

Yes, I am aware that Jesus was God and we are not, but that fact was not meant to become an obstacle. Jesus meant it to be an invitation. He left the glory of heaven and became God incarnated in the flesh on this earth so that we could become like Him. He humbled Himself as a man so that He could walk as an example of what it meant to bring heaven to this earth by living in communion with His Father.

Communion with the Father was what drove the life and ministry of Jesus. More than the mission that He was sent here to accomplish, Jesus desired to do the will of the Father on the earth. The more we practice following Jesus in embracing this life as a son or daughter of God, the freer we will be to bring heaven to earth out of our relationship with the Father.

### **measuring up**

One of the biggest challenges world-changers face is the sense of weight or pressure that rests on their lives. Between the burdens and passions of our hearts, and the prophetic words that we carry, we can walk through this life feeling overwhelmed by all that we need to accomplish. But have you ever thought what it must have been like to be Jesus for the first thirty years of His life?

This was the Son of God—the One present at the creation of the world—and He lived in obscurity as the son of a carpenter for the majority of his time on earth. He was aware of His royal pedigree, but the people of Nazareth probably drew own conclusions about the “miraculous” circumstances that surrounded His birth. But Jesus knew why He had come.

His mission to redeem the world would have been enough to weigh a normal man down. And prophetic words? There were hundreds of prophecies that pointed to what His life would be:

Redeemer.

Savior.

Lamb of God.

Emmanuel.

The Christ.

Wonderful Counselor.

Mighty God.

Everlasting Father.

These titles and names were impressive, each carrying a certain weight that demanded respect. Yet of all of the names that had been prophetically attached to the life of Jesus throughout the Old Testament, why did He choose “son” as the name by which He would be known?

Jesus is referred to as either the “Son of Man” or the “Son of God” over 130 times in the New Testament, and this is also the primary way He identifies Himself.

*“...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”*

Yes, Jesus came as the Messiah, the Christ, and the Promised One—but He chose to reveal Himself as a son. And by doing that, the veil was lifted. What was eternally true about God was now revealed to all of mankind. He is Father.

This revelation of sonship is what turned the religious world upside down. For centuries, God had been known as Creator, King, Judge and Ruler of All. But Father? Very rarely was that imagery used in the Old Testament. Then Jesus splits eternity, and the Firstborn Son was born to become a first fruit of many others to follow.

### **the process of Sonship**

Although Jesus came as Son to restore us to the Father as sons and daughters, His sonship was important for another reason. Jesus modeled how to live and relate to the Father as a son in this world. While it is true that Jesus had the advantage of being completely sinless, Scripture also make it clear that in becoming a man, He subjected Himself to every temptation that we encounter.

The manhood of Jesus is something to be celebrated because it was central to heaven’s plan for redemption and restoration. Jesus came to this earth fully God and fully human, but Paul tells us in Philippians that while He existed in the form of God, He emptied Himself to assume the likeness of men—to become like us—and set aside his divine rights

to take the form of a servant. By His humility in obedience to the Father, Jesus made Himself into an example that we could follow. Within this ultimate act of sonship lies the key to moving past knowing that we are God's children in our theology to actually becoming sons and daughters of God at a cellular level.

There is a process that living out of our identity will lead us into. Often time it is humbling and draws us into some seemingly hidden places. Jesus experienced this at a carpenter's shop in Nazareth. Yet there is something so powerful about the hidden life of Jesus, something that speaks so strongly to what it takes to live out the culture of the few: He was born a King, the Christ, Messiah, and yet He was relatively silent for thirty years.

There were no miracles or public ministry to speak of. No sermons on mount or temple.

How could this be? All of eternity was waiting on the arrival of the Christ, but then He arrived and seemed in no hurry at all to save the world.

It is not as if the birth of Jesus went unnoticed. There were angels, shepherds and traveling wise men. King Herod was so terrified by the birth of the King of the Jews that he ordered the execution of thousands of baby boys. While it is true that the identity of the Messiah was not revealed to the masses at the nativity, the events surrounding the birth of Jesus shook the world.

I can imagine that the shepherds who were present on the hillside around Bethlehem that night must have wondered what happened to that baby in a manger. For years they had told the story of the how the host of angels had appeared to them, lighting up the dark night sky. They were waiting to see what would become of the Savior whose birth had been announced to them. I wonder how many years it took for them to begin to question if anything would become of the little Christ child.

Jesus just did not seem to be in a hurry to enter into His public ministry. All we really know was that He knew He was His Father's son at twelve and that He had worked as a carpenter from Nazareth. Thirty years. His Father's son. A simple carpenter.

I do not want to read between the lines too much and try to draw something out of a story that is not there. Scripture remains largely silent on the matter. I do, however, want to point out something about Jesus' public ministry that I believe He picked up long before He turned water into wine. Central to the message that Jesus preached as He traveled from town to town, and imperative to the miracles that He performed to demonstrate that message, was that He knew how to wait on the Father.

In becoming one of us, Jesus took on the limitations of our humanity. While remaining fully God, He lovingly humbled Himself to be restrained and confined to being fashioned as a man. This is such a powerful part of the ministry of Jesus. He did not rely on His understanding of the doctrine of healing to bring wholeness to those around Him. He operated out of knowing what the Father was doing and understanding that His role was to bring the will of the Father to earth. This is what allowed Jesus to live His life tucked away in the carpenter's shop for thirty years.

It is not that His heart was not moved with compassion when He saw the blind and the lame during those first thirty years, but that He was willing to wait until His Father said it was time for Him to move out from the carpenter's shop. When Jesus intervened on behalf of the woman caught in adultery, was that the first time He had witnessed a mob seeking to take judgment into its own hands? What must it have been like for Him to remain silent, waiting for the release from the Father to announce to the world that He had come to fulfill the law that no one else could keep?

Jesus practiced a restraint over the course of His public ministry that should cause us to reevaluate our view of ministry. For instance, everyone that came to Jesus with a physical need was healed, but there are stories recorded in Scripture where Jesus did not heal everyone present. John chapter five records the story of Jesus healing the man at the pool of Bethesda. Jesus walks into a room full of needs and sees a certain man that had been sick for thirty-eight years. John does not record Jesus speaking to anyone except him. Out of the estimated hundreds of sick people present, Jesus recognized that the Father was highlighting one certain man.

I believe that a part of the process of sonship Jesus modeled for us was His willingness to be restrained by love. By submitting Himself to do only what He saw the Father doing, Jesus passed up many good ministry opportunities. He did not claim the royal rights at age eight like King Josiah, but instead waited patiently and faithfully for His Father to say that He was ready.

By doing this, Jesus trusted that the love of the Father for Him was more than enough to satisfy every one of His needs. He also trusted that the Father's love for the world was sufficient to lead Him as He walked this earth, and that God would release Him at the time He would have the most significant impact. Because He embraced sonship, Jesus knew that whether He was feeding the five thousand or cutting logs into boards, that as long as He did what He saw the Father doing He was bringing the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

so send i you

Grasping the goodness of the Sonship of Jesus sets us up to walk with Him as sons and daughters. For those of us who hear the call to “come and follow” Him, this is vitally important. I believe sending Jesus as a son was central to heaven’s plan for redemption.

Every time that Jesus places an emphasis on His relationship with God as Father in Scripture, He is also emphasizing sonship. When Jesus speaks to His friends in the twentieth chapter of John’s gospel, He addresses them as the risen Son. While Matthew 28:20 is commonly known as the Great Commission, John 20:21-22 also contains a powerful, apostolic assignment:

*So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”<sup>5</sup>*

Jesus came as a son, and I believe that He emphasized the Father in this passage to remind His friends that they were also being sent out as sons. Only a few days earlier, He had told the twelve that He was sending the Holy Spirit so that they would not walk as orphans in this world. Now He is sending them out to make disciples of the nations and releasing the Spirit of sonship to them as He does.

Paul says in Romans 8 that all of creation is waiting and groaning for the revelation of the sons (and daughters) of God. I find it interesting that Paul did not say that creation was waiting for apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. No—the world is waiting, with baited breath, for the children of God to manifest their true identity as they more deeply know and understand the boundless love of the Father towards them as His sons and daughters.

Jesus modeled this life for us and released His followers to live out of that same paradigm. Understanding the importance of *Identity* is not only important to living out the values of the *Culture of the Few*, it is foundational. Everything else must be built on top of knowing who we are as sons and daughters of God.

One of the most radical ways that we can follow Jesus is by embracing sonship. We will spend the rest of this chapter looking at two important truths that can help us practically follow Jesus into reshaping our identities.

**come to Papa**

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<sup>5</sup> John 20:20-21

The first of these truths is that Jesus came to restore us into a real relationship with the Father. This is more than theology; it is an invitation to know God as our dad. When Jesus walked the earth referring to Himself as a son, He was tampering with the image of Who Israel understood God to be. The terminology used in the New Testament to describe God as Father is most often "Abba". This would not be translated today as "father" in a formal sense, but as "papa" or "daddy".

Even though I am part of a church culture that places a high value on intimacy and practicing the presence of God, this "papa" approach can seem uncomfortable and too familiar to my understanding. But in the life of Jesus, the God of Isaiah 6—the One who is "high and lifted up", and whose train "fills the temple"—chose to reveal Himself as Abba.

Make no mistake about it: He is still "Holy, Holy, Holy," but through Jesus the "Son" we find that He is also "Daddy".

Can you imagine how angry the Pharisees and the other religious leaders of the day must have been when Jesus showed up and proclaimed *I and the Father are one*? If it is still uncomfortable for many of us today, what must it have been like for those who heard the very words come from Jesus' lips?

By proclaiming that He was the "Son of God", Jesus redefined God as "Father" and insinuated that it was "Father God" that had sent Him to come. This is important; for it was as a son that Jesus became the Way, the Truth and the Life that we might come to...the Father.

When I was a child, I had a friend from school that lived on an exclusive island off the coast of North Carolina. I had heard about Figure Eight Island for as long as I could remember. It was where movie stars and politicians lived. Well, one day, my friend invited me to come spend the night.

When the day of the sleepover finally came, my parents picked us up from school and we headed off to his house. I was so excited to get to go spend the night. No longer would this special place be a figment of my imagination; I was going to stay there for the weekend! But as we drove up the road to the bridge that led to his house, I encountered a problem: a tall, locked gate stood between the island and me.

The guard inside the gatehouse had the job of making sure that only those who could prove that they belonged on the island could cross the bridge. Somehow, I thought we'd be in trouble.

Our vehicle didn't have the special sticker that all of the other cars in line with us had. I felt nervous. Would we be allowed to cross the bridge and get onto the island? My dad rolled his window down as the guard asked if he could help us. Then my friend chirped up from the back seat.

*Hey, it's me. This is my friend Brad and he is staying the night with me.*

Just like that, the guard smiled and raised the gate. We were instantly granted access to cross the bridge because we were with someone who belonged. The guard recognized my friend, and I was allowed onto the island because I was coming home with a son.

I must admit that for most of my life I thought that "Father", "Son" and "Holy Spirit" were more the "job titles" of God than anything else. That being the Son was a job that someone had to do to take care of our sins. In John 14:6 I thought Jesus was saying, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no man comes to salvation except through me." But that is not what Jesus said. He said you cannot come to my Father unless you come with me. We gain access to the Father because we come to Him with His only begotten Son. The One He loves perfectly became a man so that all of creation could be reconciled to His Dad.

The goal of the gospel itself goes beyond the salvation of our souls from sin and hell. The goal of the gospel is that through the life, death and resurrection of the Son, we who were once far away are brought close and restored to the Father. That we who were orphans find a place at the Father's table.

Being 'the son' was more than a job title; it was the essence of who Jesus was. It is true that there were hundreds of prophecies about what Messiah would be like, but when Jesus showed up, He didn't rely on His prophetic words to tell Him who He was. The prophetic words relied on His identity as God's son.

Jesus came as a son so that He could grant access to us to become sons and daughters with Him. He became the firstborn son, so that He might be first among many brothers. He entered this world in humility as a human so that we might become more than mere servants of God like the angels are. The angels long to look into the salvation of the redeemed, blood bought sons and daughters of God. Simply stated, Jesus came to us so that we could come home to Father.

The incredible cost that Jesus paid at the cross to restore us from our sin into a relationship with God was worth it in heaven's plans. We have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of the Son of His love. This is more than a theoretical, theological position. It is an invitation to embrace the eternal life of knowing

the Father by following the Son. As we follow Jesus, let us make sure to make room in our lives to follow Him in being intentional about coming to the Father through the life of the Son.

### becoming sons

We can come to the Father because of what Jesus did on the cross, but it can still be challenging to believe that we *really belong* in His presence. It is easy to accept that I have access to God because of Jesus, but the thought of actually living life as a son or daughter of God is a stretch. For the rest of this chapter, we will focus on the importance on what it looks like to *become* sons and daughters of God.

*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.<sup>6</sup>*

When I talk about *becoming sons*, I am focusing on the transformation of the way we think about the fact that we have been adopted into God's family. Again, this is more than a mental assent that we have been born again and are children of God in a generic sense. *Becoming sons* means that I am no longer destined to live life as an orphan under the bondage of fear. I am free to embrace what it means to belong to a Father who has chosen me to belong to Him.

I have a friend who is a businessman. He has been blessed in many ways, including financially. He has a heart for orphans from a particular former Soviet nation. He and his wife adopted several siblings. Things went very well with his adopted daughter, but his adopted son struggled with the transition. For most of his life he had been an orphan.

Do you know that there is a significant difference between the ways that orphans and sons approach life? The orphan does not have the luxury of receiving hugs and kisses and "I love you's" from a mother and father. They may not know where they will live next month, or even if there will be three square meals the next day. For my friend's son, he struggled to build any kind of real attachment to his new family. Instead of being able to enjoy the blessings of his father's house, he related to the world out of his experience as an orphan. Even to the place of petty theft, he could not grasp the love of his new parents or the benefits that came with being their son.

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<sup>6</sup> John 1:12

Many believers have been duped into thinking that while we may be the children of God from a doctrinal vantage point, that in this life, we are still orphans. Failing to grasp the goodness of our Dad, we grovel as spiritually pitiful paupers instead of walking out our role as princes in our Papa's Kingdom. The saddest part of this may be that a counterfeit understanding of the scriptures have allowed so many to embrace this theology as truth, lessening the power of the message of the cross. If it had been God's plan to redeem us up to servant status, that would have been better than hell and more than we deserved, but it was His good pleasure to restore us to the place of His very own.

I believe that there is a process of becoming a son in our thinking. It is sometimes painful to face up to our orphan fears and welcome the Father to replace those fears with His love, but it is worth it. It is important to invite the Holy Spirit—the one that Jesus promised would come so that we don't have to live like orphans—to help us understand what it means to live life as sons.

Growing in this area of thinking like sons is really the key to having our identity settled in him. Though at times it feels like a spiritual fiction to believe that I am *<sup>7</sup>holy and blameless before Him in love*, choosing to believe the truth of our Father's words over our lives will bring freedom to receive the perfect love that He has always had for us. In the next chapter, I will share a bit of my own journey to embracing sonship.

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<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 1:4

## Chapter Four

# LIVING WITH AN UNFAIR ADVANTAGE

### my own story

Things had gone from bad to worse. I remember lying across my bed feeling like such a complete failure. Our ministry was falling apart. Our income was gone. Relationships that I had thought were lifelong covenant friendships had dissolved. The lone bright spot in this bleak season had been the arrival of our precious little girl, Abigail.

For the first time in my life I recognized that I was struggling with depression. Gone was the excitement about our growing church plant. The calls for me to come and preach at churches around our region had stopped. No more radio interviews or newspaper stories. Friends seemed distant. I felt exposed as a failure, ashamed of the outcome of my ministry.

My thoughts of self-pity were mingled together with an apologetic prayer: *Lord, I sure am sorry for the mess that I seem to have made down here. I was only trying to obey you, trying to love people and lead them to you. I feel like I have failed in every area: as a husband and father, as a ministry leader, as a son. I am sorry to bother you with all of this...*

As I lay there crying, my thoughts went back to when I was a little boy. While I have always loved and adored my mom, my dad has always been my hero. I looked like his mini-me right down to the same haircut and style of glasses. We loved doing things together. We

would play ball, wrestle, and go fishing. Every once in a while, my dad would even reward me by allowing me to miss a day of school and go to work with him.

I remember the feeling of significance that came from being the only eight-year-old insurance salesman in my class. I would dress up in my little shirt and tie and be off to work with Dad. It was so exciting to be out of school and in the car on our way to our first appointment. The excitement would last for about the first ten minutes of my dad's presentation and then...

What could a rambunctious eight-year-old with ADD do for 45 minutes while my dad explained Medicare to senior citizens?

I tried to remember all of the things Dad had told me. Sit still. Don't break anything. Please try not to interrupt me. And most of all: DO NOT PICK YOUR NOSE. I don't know how successful I was at following my father's instructions, but he always made me feel like his partner and continued to allow me to go to work with him. Even though selling Medicare supplements was not something that particularly interested me, I loved being with my dad and over the course of time I memorized his presentation.

One day we stopped by my dad's office before heading out for our first appointment. When I walked in everybody made a big fuss. "Oh wow Tom, he looks just like you..." I will never forget turning around to see the look on my dad's face. He was beaming with pride. Then he looked at me and said, "Son, why don't you go ahead and explain Medicare to them?"

The small sales team gathered around as I went through and diagramed Parts A & B of Medicare on my dad's yellow legal pad. "Wow, not only does he look just like you, but he sounds just like you too." Still brimming with pride, my dad reached out and put his arm around me and said, "Yes, that's my boy."

Through the memories I began to hear God the Father speak to me in a way that changed my life.

"What qualifications did you have as an eight-year-old to be an insurance salesman? What did you bring to the table that would help your dad sell insurance?"

A picture of me sitting there on one of my dad's client's couches trying not to pick my nose popped into my head. I began to realize that my dad didn't ask me to work with him because he needed my help, but because he loved me and he loved having me with him.

I thought back to that moment in the office and heard the Father say, "Brad, I love you and I love it when people see the ways that you look like me. I am proud of you and proud of the way that I made you. And when you take the time to listen to what I am saying, I love it when others hear my voice in your words. I didn't call you because I need you or your giftings, but because I love you and it gives me great joy that you care about my business."

Immediately, the weight of my failure began to lessen. The pressure that I had been carrying to be successful in ministry so I could make something of myself was gone. In that moment, my heart caught the fact that my significance did not come because I was an eight-year-old insurance salesman, but because I was my father's son.

### living with an unfair advantage

I was born with an advantage. In fact, I've had an unfair advantage my whole life. It is an advantage that cannot be bought or earned. It is the advantage of sonship<sup>8</sup>. From my earliest memories, I have always known that I was a beloved son. I have a mom and dad who have loved me every day of my life. As a child, I would wake up to find my parents weeping and praying over our family, lifting my sisters and me up to the Lord.

I have known my parents' affection and deep love from the very beginning. They have celebrated me not only on my good days, but even on my worst. I can honestly say that I cannot remember pillowing my head once in my life feeling that I was outside of my parents' love and favor.

I knew that I was loved because my parents told me they loved me. Multiple times each day, I heard an affirmation of their love for me. But it was more than just the words and the accompanying hugs and kisses. It was watching the way they prayed and worked to lead and provide for our family. It was recognizing the look of joy on their face when I would bring them a picture that I had drawn, and even as a child knowing that the joy did not come from the quality of the drawing but from their love for the artist.

I also knew my parents loved me because of how they corrected me. In fact, I would say that the way my parents approached discipline was probably one of the most important shapers for the cultural development of my heart. My dad spanked me "early and often." It didn't take a Class 3 felony for me to receive the "rod of correction." Their approach was based on consistency to produce godly character in my life. When I was four or five years old we actually had a family project cutting out a paddle for use on my rear end. We used

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<sup>8</sup> when I speak of *sonship*, I am referring to belonging to the Father as a son OR daughter.

that paddle for the rest of my spanking career. By the time we were through, there were layers of duct tape around the handle to keep this special family heirloom intact.

I am writing these details for you because they were such an important part of my life. My parents never beat or abused me. They never punished me out of anger, but with a firm love they modeled humility and brokenness. I always understood the reason for my spanking and I always, always knew that I was only being spanked because my parents loved me. It was common for our spankings to end with my dad holding me, and both of us crying. We would pray together that God would help me remember how to do what was right.

My parents "early and often" philosophy was based on the hope that if they could build godly discipline in my sisters and I early, that with God's help, it would produce a character as we grew older that would be able to stand against grownup challenges and temptations. Looking back, I am sure that there were times my broken behavior tested their philosophy. But my wrong choices never jeopardized the love that I received from them.

I do remember one time as a teenager, getting caught in an especially bad situation. My sin was exposed and I was afraid. I remember wondering if I had finally found the eject button that would send me out of my father's love and favor. This situation was a big deal. Big enough that I knew that the events of that day could be a game-changer for the rest of my life. I had done something terrible. I had been caught, guilty of my sin. In my mind at the time, if my parents would have decided that they didn't want me in their home anymore, they would have had just cause. I never questioned their love in those moments. I did question if the greatness of my sin would be more than their love could handle.

I was right, it was a life-changing day for me. When my parents spoke to me that night, they did it firmly and without any compromise to the standards of what it meant to live in their home. There was no room in my mind for me to think that my actions were "not really that big of a deal" or that they were acceptable in any way. But this firm love was spoken over me as they held me and cried with me. At the end of the talk, both of my parents told me that they loved me and that there was nothing that I could ever do that would make them stop loving me. They told me that they were so thankful that God had given me to them and that they were proud to be my parents.

It's official. This was my worst day, and at the end of it I was still a beloved son in my father's house. I don't know how this translates to your heart, but it changed my life forever. It silenced the accusations of the enemy that "if you ever get caught, your parents

will never want to see you again.” The events of that day testified that what my parents had been telling me all of my life was true. They would love me no matter what.

The rules of life and love in the supposed “real world” are all based on performance. You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours. What have you done for me lately? I’ll love you forever if you (fill in the blank). These are a part of the basic principles of this world that Paul told the Colossians we have died to. We don’t have to live by these broken rulers any more. When I say that I live with an unfair advantage, it is the advantage of sonship. It is the advantage of living with the security that I am loved and that I belong. No matter what.

Win, lose, or draw, I know that at the end of the day my mom and dad are going to love me, and that they are proud of me. This knowledge has brought me to a place of real freedom. It has brought me to a place of receiving the Father’s love with security. Because I know that His love for me does not rest on my ability to earn His favor, I am free to follow Jesus as a son, not as a slave. I know that I don’t need to build a successful ministry to be somebody. I don’t need to become a “big success” to make something big out of my life. I am already significant to the Father because I was formed by Him and for His pleasure. He gets excited to hang my “finger paintings” on His refrigerator, not because my artwork is all that great but because His face lights up when I walk in the room. I am my Father’s son.

### **finding Daddy**

“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” - Jesus Christ

The truth of the gospel is not found in grasping an accurate doctrine about man’s need for salvation. Knowing the truth is more than merely understanding correct information. Knowing the Truth is knowing Jesus and the freedom that He came to bring. It means coming to the Father and being made a son in His household. It means finding Daddy and hearing His invitation to abide with you and for you to make your home in His love.

We cannot progress into the other principles of the *Culture of the Few* until we grasp the foundational importance of living out of our identity as sons and daughters of God. We cannot effectively follow Jesus into seeing society transformed until we grasp His perspective on life and ministry.

Sometimes, it is easy for those with world-changer mindsets to try to be a noble servant of God and disregard the fact that our hearts were made for love. God is not asking you to go through life feeling disconnected from His goodness so He can use you to do something great. Jesus came to earth so you could come to the Father. Because of His sacrifice, you can draw close to the throne of God. The throne of heaven is your Papa’s

chair. Press into the heart of God for a greater understanding of His unconditional love for you.

All of your desire to impact the world for Jesus will not be enough to sustain you if you don't have love. The conviction of God's calling in your life will not satisfy the deepest need of your heart to be perfectly loved. His love for you is perfect, and His perfect love perfects you, setting your heart free from fear and from abandonment.

I have already shared my own story with you, how in a moment of hurt and despair, my heart was set free from the bondage of needing to become somebody for God, and I realized that I was already somebody to God. I was His son. Shortly after that story, God took things a little further with me.

I was standing in the bedroom of our tiny apartment holding my daughter, Abigail. She was about four months old at the time. She was old enough to recognize me, but not old enough to really communicate. As I was standing there, two things happened that the Father used to demonstrate the reality of His love to me.

First, I recognized the immensity of love that was in my heart for this little girl, as I held her in my arms. So far, she had done nothing but eat, sleep, cry, giggle and make messy diapers, but she had stolen my heart and I couldn't imagine loving her anymore than I did in that moment.

As I looked down at her, I sensed God speaking to my heart.

*Remember that every good and perfect gift comes from me, the Father of lights. The love that you feel towards your daughter right at this moment is just a drop in the ocean of what I feel towards you. My love for you is full of the pleasure and satisfaction that you are feeling towards Abigail.*

In that moment, the Father's love took on a more tangible dimension that propelled me farther into understanding His heart. God's love is more than good theology; it is the essence of His person. To know Him more *is* to know His love for me.

What happened next wrecked my heart even more. As I studied my little girl's face with all the joy of a father, she looked up and gave me the most incredible smile. As her face lit up, I felt so much pleasure in my heart. Pure pleasure unlike any other feeling I had ever known.

Again, I heard the Father speaking to me:

*The pleasure that you feel when your daughter looks at you is just a drop in the ocean of what I feel when you look at me. When you turn your attention towards me and give me your full affection, my heart is satisfied. When you worship me and tell me that you love me, it really does bless me and I receive it as love from you.*

As I stood in the middle of the room, weeping and holding Abigail, my heart melted. I had grasped the significance of sonship a few months before, but now I was truly finding the Father's heart for me. I was experiencing His pleasure in a way that I didn't know was possible. Not only was I discovering the depths of God's love for me, but also the King of heaven had made Himself vulnerable to my affections.

The apostle Paul talked to the church at Ephesus about knowing God this way. In the middle of his prayer for the Ephesians recorded at the end of chapter three, Paul prays for the believers to be "rooted and grounded in love," and that they would be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—"to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

The Father's heart for you is for you to know a love that goes beyond your ability to understand. The word "know" in this context means "knowledge gained through experience." It is God's plan for you to experience the fullness of His love in this lifetime.

### **i see me**

Understanding our identity helps us begin to grasp the significance of the Father's heart for us. As this happens, it shapes our perspective of life in ways that are hard to imagine. It allows us to clearly see the truth of God's love. It also helps us look past the distortions of the brokenness that the realities of this world present to us.

God really showed me this several years ago, as I was trying to work with our godchildren on scripture memory. Every Sunday morning, people from our simple church would come over for brunch and we would spend time together. After brunch was over, I would pick a Bible verse and teach it to Jace and Gloriana. Jace was seven, and Gloriana was a very precocious four-year-old.

My goal in teaching them the verse each week was to go beyond scripture memory and help them to discover the person behind the words. On this particular Sunday, I was teaching them one of my favorites: Proverbs 16:15. *In the light of the king's face is life, And his favor is like a cloud of the latter rain.* My main objective that week was to teach Jace and Glori the importance of seeking the face of God.

Jace was getting it pretty easily, but Gloriana was struggling a bit. I decided that maybe she would understand things easier if she could act it out, so I sent her about twenty feet down the hallway and asked her to stop and face me.

"Gloriana, look at me," I said. "Now what do you see?"

"Uhh, I see you Uncle Brad."

"What else do you see?"

She frowned. "I see the sofa you are sitting on, and the window behind you..."

She did not seem too enthusiastic about my object lesson. I had her walk about ten feet closer and then asked her the question again.

"Gloriana, what do you see?"

This time she let out a little huff before she answered. "I see you Uncle Brad."

"What else do you see?"

"The same things I saw before," she said. "I see the sofa and the window."

"Look closer, Gloriana," I said. "Can you see any thing else?"

I could see her little eyes focusing as she started to notice details that she could not see from her original view. Now we were getting someplace.

My goal was for her to see that if she got closer to me, then she would be able to see me in more details. I had her come and stand right in front of my face. I was sure that this would help her to understand my point. Little did I know that she was getting ready to go beyond that and teach me one of the most important lessons I have ever learned.

As she stood just a few inches away from my face, I repeated my instructions.

"Gloriana, look at me. Now what do you see?"

As I have already stated, Gloriana was a precocious little four-year-old. As she opened her mouth to answer, I watched her facial expression change from the kind of exasperation a teenager trapped in a four-year-old's body would express at being asked the same question for a third time into amazement and wonder.

"Gloriana, what do you see?"

"Ah!" she squeaked. "I see me! I see me!"

It took me a moment to figure out what she meant. Then it hit me. Glori was standing close enough to me that she was seeing her own reflection in my eyes. I think my spirit went into shock that morning as God used a child to teach me the lesson of a lifetime.

When we get close enough to God, not only are we changed from glory to glory as we behold His beauty, but we become free to see ourselves in His eyes. When we see ourselves in the eyes of His love, it is without all of the distortions and brokenness of this life.

When we determine to pursue God as a loving Father, with the confidence that we belong in His presence because we are His children, it will free us to get close enough to see ourselves in His eyes. Who you are in His eyes is who you really are. Your experience in this world will try to convince you that you are guilty and condemned, but through His eyes you are Holy and blameless before Him in love.

Ephesians 2:6 says that you are already "seated with Christ in the heavenly realms." We know that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, which means that we are too. I believe that we were meant to live this life from the lap of our Father, drawing close to His heart, looking deep into His eyes.

Gloriana ended up writing a song that encapsulated our experience a few months later. The lyrics reveal to me that her encounter led her into an important truth.

*I know You're here, I know You're true.  
I know You're my Father up in heaven.  
I know You're God, I know You are my father,  
And I know we are Your sons and daughters.*

I have watched the reaction to this song in amazement as it has been sung over congregations, conferences, house churches and other groups of believers. Something takes place in both the old and the young as this simple, foundational truth settles into minds and hearts of those who hear it. Its like I can almost see people's thoughts being rewired as they sing a song written based on a child's encounter with God.

Before you move on into the rest of the content of this book, I want to invite you to stop and meditate on how much the Father loves you. 1 John 3:1 says, "Behold what manner

***Identity*****Living With An Unfair Advantage**

of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!" This is more than a happy thought or some positive message: it is the fuel to living a life that is dangerous to darkness.



SECTION II:

# invitation



## Chapter Five

# COME AND SEE

Understanding who God made us to be brings so much freedom to our lives. As we move forward in this book and look at the other four foundational truths in the *Culture of the Few*, they are all established on the core truth of Identity.

When we understand the significance of our own identity, it releases the Father to reveal it to everyone else. We see this expressed so clearly in the life of Jesus. I believe it was His clear understanding of who He was that allowed Him to move freely into the Jordan River to be baptized.

Following Jesus into this kind of freedom will empower us to walk with the confidence and courage necessary to make world-changing decisions. Confidence and courage, harnessed with humility, freed Jesus to shift the atmosphere of His surroundings at His baptism. In fact, it was what happened immediately after He came up out of the water that had everyone talking.

*When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."*

Can you imagine what it would have been like to be there? Whether those in attendance were among the disappointed or curious, it is certain that none of them were expecting this baptism to come with special effects. You and I have the advantage of living in a day

where 3-Dimensional, computer generated images are commonplace. Our minds have a grid for what this scene could look like if Stephen Spielberg had been hired to direct the movie. But for those who had come out to see a country preacher in the wilderness, in the days before subwoofers and silver screens, this was unlike anything they had ever seen.

The heavens opened to Him. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended and rested on Him. And then, the voice of the Father, the One that Israel worshipped, spoke out saying: "This is the One, My beloved Son. My pleasure rests on Him."

I don't know if they had false teeth back in the day, but I can just about see dentures falling out as the whole crowd stood there, jaws dropped in amazement. Any sense of disappointment was gone. Wonder now filled their hearts. This was certainly something to write home about. After thousands of years, the Messiah had come.

The stage was now set. What would Jesus do for an encore? How would Messiah set up His non-profit? Where would His headquarters be? Who would He select to be on His board of directors?

Stewarding the momentum of open heavens, descending doves, and heavenly voices is not for the faint of heart. This was a major moment. It was time to call in the media for a press conference and capitalize on the opportunity for Jesus to establish His own ministry. He could have released a new book, announced the opening of a ministry school, or posted service times for a crusade at the local arena.

Everyone who had heard about His baptism was asking one question. What would Jesus do next?

*Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God!"*

*The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, "What do you seek?"*

*They said to Him, "Rabbi" (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), "where are You staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day.*

Evidently, Jesus skipped the after parties that one would have expected to be thrown for the occasion. The next day, we find Him together with His cousin John and two of John's disciples. I believe that what happened in this moment is recorded in Scripture for an important reason: It captures the essence of God revealed through the life of Jesus and reveals the second principle in cultivating the culture of the few. Jesus lived His life with a

spirit of invitation.

In the same way that Jesus told the disciples to “come and see,” Scripture is full of invitations from God to His people. Taste and See that I am good. Call me, I will answer you and show great and mighty things that you can’t imagine. Seek me and you will find me.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus is “the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person...” In other words, Jesus is the exact re-presentation of God on the earth. If we look at how often God extends invitations to His people, then we should not be surprised that Jesus, the one who reveals His true nature to us, would do the same.

### **we’ve had It backwards**

Many years ago I read an article in a magazine. I don’t remember learning anything new from the article, but it’s content encapsulated what I had been learning in that particular season of life and ministry.

The article explained how throughout the last several centuries of common church culture, we have created an unhealthy matrix that we force people to go through to really become a part of “us”—the church. The basic concept can be summed up in three words: Believe, Behave, Belong.

The first thing we do is find out what they BELIEVE.

In the churches that I grew up in, we would ask, “If you died today, where would you go?” This question was followed up by a sixty-second presentation about the highlights of the Gospel. Sometimes it was from Romans, sometimes from John, but at the end of the sixty seconds, the newcomers were told that if they wanted to go to heaven, all they had to do was believe these four things in their hearts, pray a prayer, and you’re in.

Please don’t get me wrong. I believe that we *must* be “born again” as Jesus told Nicodemus. But sometimes we ask people to believe in someone we haven’t introduced them to yet.

So they pass the BELIEVE test, professing faith in Jesus. Then what? Naturally, we want to see how they BEHAVE.

This is the step that causes Protestant churches to have about a bazillion different options for newcomers to Jesus. Not only are we asking them to conform to the way we believe, we then accept them based on whether or not we like the way they act.

What kind of clothes do you wear?  
What music do you listen to?  
Do you think it is okay to say \_\_\_\_\_?  
Do you watch R-rated movies?

Then we have *another* list of BEHAVE questions for how you act in church.

Do you like to clap your hands?  
Do you speak in tongues?  
Do you tithe?

Again, it is not that behavior is unimportant, but when we place so much emphasis on the way people act, we put a pressure on them to do just that—act.

So now they believe the way we believe, and behave the way we behave. What's next?

While no one would ever actually say these words, the message that we send to the world rings loud and clear: If you believe the way we believe, and behave the way we behave, maybe one day you will have the chance to actually BELONG here.

This is such a broken way of inviting people to experience God's love and His family. BELONGING is the Gospel. That orphans get adopted, that strangers find family, is the core of Christian belief. Not only is Believe, Behave, Belong a broken invitation; it is exactly backwards from the way Jesus did it.

Think back to our Savior, a twinkle in His eyes as He walks past the two disciples. "Come and see," He says. "Come and see."

### **belonging**

We don't know all the details about what happened next; the scriptures simply say, "They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day." (John 1:39a)

Jesus did not stop to quiz them on their theology or ask them what they believed about Him. He extended a simple invitation to them in response to their curiosity. "Where are you staying?" He invited them to come find out and to belong together with Him. Once they came and saw where He was, they remained with Him. As we will talk about in more depth later, Jesus follows the "Come and see" invitation with "Come, follow me."

Jesus knew that for someone to know Him, they needed to encounter Him. He lived His life as an open invitation for people to encounter the heart of God through His life. The

crowd listening to Jesus share the story about the prodigal son was filled with “sinners” who were always being drawn to Him because of the spirit of invitation that was on His life. When we are secure in our own identity, it releases a confidence in us to live a life that is accessible to others

This book is in large part about the power of transforming the culture around you by investing intentionally in a few people. Jesus modeled this as a lifestyle while still living as an invitation to everyone He came in contact with. I am not suggesting that you focus on the few in a way that is connected to small thinking, or neglecting the masses. I believe that Jesus poured intentionally into a few because He knew that it was the best way to disciple the nations.

Jesus had a pretty specific strategy in inviting people to BELONG with Him right from the start. He knew who He was. Confident of the power of the Spirit that He carried, He knew something that we have forgotten in the church today: That if people really belong and remain together with Jesus, it will change the way they BEHAVE.

*“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”*

Jesus is telling His friends that the key to producing Kingdom fruit is abiding or “remaining” in Him; that apart from Him we can do nothing. Could it be that by inviting people to BEHAVE before they BELONG we are inviting them into the frustrations of fruitless living?

Jesus invited “unschooled, ordinary men” to walk with Him, knowing that if they remained with Him their lives would be transformed, that their walk would begin to look more like His. The fact is Jesus began discipling people long before they ever BELIEVED. He started discipling them from that first invitation to come and encounter Him.

It was not until the end of the last supper, after Jesus had told His disciples about His coming death, having stripped down and washed their filthy feet, not until He had loved them to the end, that they really BELIEVED.

*“Now we are sure that You know all things, and have no need that anyone should question You. By this we believe that You came forth from God.”*

Again, I am not underestimating the importance of believing. But even after the disciples had witnessed the miracles of Jesus, even after they had been sent out to heal the sick and drive out demons with their own hands, there was still something unsure and unsettled in their hearts. They walked with Him. They moved in the power He carried. But

only after that special supper were they truly able to move to a place of confident belief, and Jesus didn't hold it against them.

Jesus invited people to BELONG knowing that would lead to a change in the way they lived life (BEHAVE). In sharing His life with them, He was leading them into a confident heart BELIEF that came from truly knowing and trusting Him. The disciples had tasted and seen, and it was way too good to pass up.

Why have we have been doing things so differently from the way that Jesus modeled life for us? We have separate strategies for evangelism and discipleship. Sometimes, it seems that the people that we "lead to Jesus" end up being a completely different bunch than the ones we release into ministry. Could this flow from the disconnect between how we evangelize and how we disciple?

Jesus engaged people by inviting them to come share life with Him, knowing that *knowing Him* is what would really make the difference. Those who heard the invitation were the people He spent the next three years of His life with. They were the same ones He commissioned to go disciple the nations when His time on earth was completed.

Learning to live life as an invitation is important to living out the *Culture of the Few*. Invitation creates access for people who do not follow Jesus to encounter the transformational power of the Good News. It also creates a clear example for new disciples, teaching them that they too can live a life that invites others to encounter God's love. Because we are confident in our identities as recipients of the Father's love, we can cultivate a lifestyle that invites people to experience that love in ways that a lifeless form of religion never could.

We have been focusing on the way that Jesus invited people to walk with Him (discipleship). If we can learn from *how* Jesus called His disciples, what can we learn from the types of people He called?

## Chapter Six

# WHO JESUS CALLED

Central to the message of this book is the fact that Jesus entrusted His life's work into the hands of ordinary people. The heart of the culture of the few relies on the fact that there is great power in ordinary people being influenced to a place where the status quo becomes interrupted. The influenced become influencers, and their message is multiplied as the ordinary become empowered to share their experience with others.

This principle applies to all types of social change. We can see it in the way that advertisers rely on the power of word of mouth in their marketing strategies and in the importance of cultivating grassroots networks in political campaigns. As ordinary people become passionate receivers of a message, there is great potential for that message to spread as the receivers are empowered to become carriers of that message. That is why it is important to look at the way that Jesus invited people to follow Him AND to look at the type of people that He called.

Often times, much is made of the diversity of the twelve. I think this is done to show us that Jesus is interested in fishermen and tax collectors, radical religious zealots and those in whom there was no guile. This is true, but if we primarily look at the twelve through the "diversity lens," we can easily miss that most of these men were family and neighbors.

As many as eleven of the twelve apostles were from Galilee, with a number of them being from the same hometown of Bethsaida. My friend, Dr. Pam Arlund, is a missiologist who believes that the twelve apostles were all between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. If this is true, then not only were most of these guys from the same neighborhood, but they were also all close in age. If the twelve apostles had lived in twenty-first century America,

many of them would have gone to “Lakeside High School for Future Fisherman” together. Some of them would have been in the same graduating class.

It is easy for me to think that when it was time for Messiah to build His ministry team, He would have scoured the land looking for the bravest, brightest and best that Palestine had to offer. I can imagine that an assessment form that included a personality profile as well as a spiritual gift inventory. But that is not the way Jesus went about calling the twelve.

Of course, we do not get a detailed explanation of the hiring strategy, but this is what we do know: The day after Jesus was baptized, Andrew asked Him where He lived. Jesus said, “Come and see.” Some time later, presumably after Jesus was led into the wilderness, Jesus approaches Andrew and his brother, Peter, and invited them to “Come, follow me.” He went a little farther and finds two more brothers who happen to be Andrew’s neighbors. He extends the same invitation to James and John as He had to Andrew and Peter.

We know that Phillip was another fisherman from Andrew’s neighborhood. Jesus found him and said, “Follow me.” Phillip found Nathaniel and introduced him to Jesus.

Are you seeing the pattern here? Jesus was not conducting interviews with the elite candidates from Apostle Preparatory School. He met Andrew and invited him into the place where He stayed. Then He went and found Andrew in the place where Andrew lived and invited him to walk with Him. He invited Andrew and his brother. He invited Andrew’s neighbors to walk with Him as well. In turn, the neighbors started finding other friends and introducing them to Jesus.

Jesus invited people to know Him and follow Him. It cost them something to do that, but in return He said that those who would lose their own lives would find what life could really be. He both invited people into His life *and* engaged them where they lived. This is a strategy that will still work today.

### **the keys are in the pocket...**

The way Jesus connected with the twelve was by reaching Andrew and his “pocket of people.” The fancy, missiological term for “pocket of people” is *oikos*. The Greek word *oikos* literally means “household.” While sometimes used to talk about a physical structure shared by a family, often it refers to the family (or sphere of influence) itself.

Throughout the life of Jesus, we see Him reaching an individual and subsequently their “pocket of people” get saved or impacted as well. We see this in John 4 with the woman at the well. He encounters her in the midst of her everyday responsibilities and then

reaches her whole town because of her testimony. This was also evident when Jesus recognized the hunger of Zacchaeus as he entered into Jericho and called him to come down out of the sycamore tree. He invited Himself to Zacchaeus' house that night and proclaimed that, "salvation had come to his house (oikos)."

The model of reaching a household was central to the instructions that Jesus gave his disciples as he sent them out in Luke 10. In fact, he tells them that as they enter a city they should find a house (oikos) that they can bless with their Peace, and that they should stay there and focus on that house for as long as they are in the city. I believe that this is what Jesus did in reaching Andrew and his "pocket of people." This oikos became the core of the early church, those who turned the world upside down.

Remember, most of these men were family members and neighbors. They may have had different vocations, but there was a strong common connection between eleven of the twelve. If you are wondering which one of the twelve was not from Galilee, his name was Judas Iscariot. Interesting indeed.

### **fishing tales**

There is one other commonality that we find in many of the twelve. These men were fishermen, either professionally or recreationally. We know that Peter, Andrew, James, John and Phillip are specifically named as "fishermen," but there are stories included in the gospels that indicate that most, if not all of the twelve found themselves out fishing from time to time.

It strikes me as very important that Jesus came and called fishermen first. He called them away from the casting of their nets to come fish for men. I know that we could say that Jesus was just putting the invitation of following Him into terms that were relevant to His audience—and that may be true—but I believe He came to fishermen first with the intention of timeless impact.

So in focusing on what we can learn from *who* Jesus called, let's take a look at *what they did*. What exactly were these anglers from Galilee up to when Jesus came and invited them to follow Him?

### **casting nets**

When Jesus came to the first set of brothers, Peter and Andrew, they were fishing. They were casting their nets. This is the fun part of fishing, because it's the part where you actually catch fish, which is, after all, the whole point.

There is a process of trying to catch fish, and it starts with the actively trying to find them. I believe that this part of fishing represents the work that apostolic evangelists are to equip us for, the intentional investment of the gospel among people who do not yet know Jesus.

When Jesus extended the invitation for Andrew and Peter to become fishers of men, they would have understood that it would include seeking out men in an active way. After all, Jesus said that He came to seek and to save, that which was lost.

Peter and Andrew were men who understood that in order to catch fish, you have to go to where they live. We know from a later story where Peter's mother in law was healed, that he lived in a house, not on a boat. That means that when Peter woke up each morning, he had to make a decision to leave where he was to go to where the fish were. As we grow in becoming fishers of men, we have to do the same thing.

It has never been the job of the fish to come to where we are, but it is all too common in church culture for us to spend a lot of effort in decorating our churches and customizing our gatherings in a way that will attract fish. We can learn so much from Peter and Andrew. They were fishermen who knew that in order to catch fish, you needed to go out and get wet.

Intentionally investing our lives in the places where people who do not know Jesus live and work and play must become natural for us. I find it all too common that well-meaning Christians, who have a heart to follow Jesus, don't have any part of their lives where they are making room to spend time with people who have never met Jesus. But we must remember that following Him means becoming fishers of men.

I have a friend named Erik Fish who has an infectious passion for seeing people come to Jesus. I have learned so much about becoming a fisher of men from him. He has spent much of His life equipping and stirring up the body to reach the lost. I have watched the light bulb go off for seasoned pastors and young college students alike as Erik points out this truth from the first chapter of Mark's gospel: Following Jesus means that He makes us into fishers of men. It was not an optional part of the invitation, but an expected outcome of walking with Him.

I think one of the greatest misconceptions in the church is that making disciples of the lost is only for those with the gift of evangelism, or for the pastor. It is not just for the more extroverted followers, or for those who are comfortable with sharing their faith. Jesus is still seeking and saving "that which is lost," and if we intend to move beyond being a believer and answer His call to become His followers, then we will have to go out there with Him.

Compelled by His love, we must go beyond our all-too-comfortable comfort zones, and rely on the Comforter to help us do what can be so uncomfortable. Every follower of Jesus can see the life-changing message of the gospel transform the lives of people who do not know the One we follow.

### **the problem with mishandling dynamite**

In my journey of following Jesus, I have found that the gospel works. As someone who grew up hearing about Jesus my whole life, I found out that hearing about Him and knowing the stories were not enough for me. I needed to encounter the power of the good news in a way that would transform my life.

In Romans 1:16, Paul says that inside the Good News about Jesus is a power to bring salvation to those who will receive it. The word "power" in this scripture comes from the Greek word *dunomus*, which is where we get the word for dynamite. There are other times that we see the English word power used in the New Testament that comes from a Greek root meaning "legal authority" or "power of attorney." This is not that.

There is a big difference in a "power of attorney" and a stick of dynamite. Both are useful, but I have found that in my own life I need to encounter more than just the "power of attorney" to change me. I need to come face-to-face with the explosive power of God to transform me into a man who looks more like Jesus.

The thing is, the gospel does work and it changes our lives. It will also change the lives of men and women who have never heard of Jesus. It worked for me; a proud, religious wannabe who was addicted to lust and shackled by shame. I have seen it work for those caught in the clutches of crystal meth, prostitution, and pornography. I have seen the gospel work for social orphans in search of family. I have seen it work for those with broken sexual identities, transforming them into confident, maturing men and women. The gospel works.

The dynamite power of the gospel has the power to displace us from darkness and into the Light. That's what dynamite does. It changes things. It always has and it always will. Regardless of the changes to our culture, the good news about Jesus will always be more than enough to bring humanity to salvation. It will do what it does best and restore orphans to the Father until the King returns. But did you know that the gospel working can actually create problems for us?

If we as the church are not ready to disciple those whose hearts are coming awake to the light of Jesus, we leave these new believers believing that Jesus and the gospel *does not work*, at least not for them. When we preach the message of the gospel to bring people

to a new birth and fail to disciple them, its like going through all of the labor to deliver a precious baby and then leaving it alone in the hospital room to fend for itself.

This often happens when people who have grown up outside of cultural Christianity come to Jesus. They can have a genuine encounter with God and become born again, but outside of a discipleship relationship, they are left alone to try to figure out how to follow Jesus on their own. Scripture makes it clear that we are each a small part of One Body, and that a severed member—whether hand, eye, or foot—cannot function because it is no longer connected to the life source. If there is something scary or dangerous in the idea of church leaders living lives unconnected from meaningful covenant relationships, how much more those who have only just believed?

It is my personal belief that none of us were intended to follow Jesus alone. When we ask new believers to do this, we provide them with an inferior encounter of the God to whose family they now belong, and we set them up to fail.

### **Jesus says, "Come," but that means we go**

When Jesus first encountered Andrew, He extended the invitation to come and see where and how He lived, but that next invitation is what would really satisfy Andrew's curiosity to see what the Messiah's life was like. As Jesus spoke the words, "Come, follow me," He was inviting Andrew and the others to go beyond knowing about His life. He was inviting them to share it.

For three years, twelve men went with Jesus wherever He went. They walked the same roads that He walked, ate the same food that He ate, and slept in the same places He slept. As Jesus walked the earth, crowds gathered from town-to-town to see Him, each urging Him to stay with them a little longer; but "the few" knew that He was a "going" God. Insist though they did, He kept moving.

*But He said to them, "Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth."*

Jesus lived to complete His journey. For the twelve, knowing that "the going" was an important part of following Jesus while He was on earth must have prepared them for the commission that they received before He ascended back to heaven.

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

This was not the first time that Jesus had sent out His few. He sent the twelve out in Luke 9, and by the beginning of chapter 10 there are “seventy others” who joined them in the going. Jesus was equipping them and sending them out to cast their nets, to find a pocket of people and share the love and power of the gospel of the Kingdom of God there.

That was two thousand years ago. It is tempting for us to think that the call to follow Jesus has changed over time. We hear the “Come to me all who are weary,” the “Come and see,” and even the “Come, follow me,” and somehow forget or miss that coming to Jesus will eventually demand that we go. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. In the twenty-first century, Jesus is still moving. I believe now, more than ever, the gospel is a “going message,” going out in power wherever those who are following Him end up.

For Andrew and the other fishermen, they received this great commission knowing that Jesus would soon be leaving them for good. He had told them that His time on the earth was drawing to an end, but that He would soon send His Spirit to be with them. At the end of His instructions to disciple all nations, He made a promise that must have meant so much to these lowly, ordinary men. He said, “I am with you always, even to the end...”

This meant more to them than a flowery closing to a religious speech. These were His friends and He was committing to be with them, even after He was gone. Andrew had experienced the times when Jesus had made a difference. He was with them in the boat several times, when it seemed they were doomed. In over their heads, with storms raging around them, their lives were spared by the presence of the One who could speak “Peace, be still.”

Jesus had also been with them when it seemed they were wasting their time. Having fished all night with no fish to show for it, they heard Him say, “Cast your nets on the other side.” At least twice, Jesus led His fishermen few into a supernatural catch when their best attempts had been fruitless. So a promise that He would stay with them in the midst of His leaving and their going would have meant a lot to Andrew and the others—probably everything. It would have bolstered their spirits with confidence, hope, and courage to keep casting their nets until they had turned the world upside down with the message of the Messiah.

In learning about who Jesus called, we can see that He invited ordinary men to walk with Him. Over the three years that He spent with them, He modeled a lifestyle of fishing for men. He trained them to go find the fish, and left a promise that He would leave His Spirit to be with them even after He was gone.

**Invitation**

## Who Jesus Called

As we continue to look at the culture of the few, we will look at another part of fishing and how living with a spirit of invitation is important in equipping followers of Jesus to live as fishers of men.

## Chapter Seven

## THE OTHER PART OF FISHING

We have looked at how Andrew and Peter casting their nets is a picture of the apostolic (sent out), evangelistic focus of following Jesus and being fishers of men, but when Jesus went a little further down the sea shore, He found James and John busy doing something else.

*When He had gone a little farther from there, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending their nets.*

If casting nets is the fun part of fishing, then mending nets is the necessary part. I believe this picture demonstrates the importance of apostolically minded shepherding within the body of Christ.

Fishermen are famous for telling their fishing stories, and over the years I have heard my share of “whoppers.” I have heard stories of catching fish by the cooler full, and I have also heard tales about “the one that got away.” I recently heard a story from a friend who ended up with an angry manatee on his line. I have heard all kinds of fishing stories throughout my life, but I have never heard a fishing story about mending nets. It is not the glamorous part that anglers dreams about, but you cannot be consistently successful in catching fish without making time to mend the nets.

My father loves fishing, and some of my earliest memories as a young boy were going fishing with him. Whether it was fishing for Blue Gill on the quiet lakes of western

Pennsylvania, or catching mullet and spot from the rickety piers of Topsail Beach, it was fun to be with dad doing something that he loved.

When I was really little, all I had to do to go fishing was wake up and go; but as I got older, I remember my dad bringing me into the workshop he set up in a storage room and explaining that part of being a fisherman was preparing your tackle and rods. We spent hours untangling line, refinishing old poles and making sure our reels were ready to go. My dad took time to show me which fishing lures worked in fresh water and which ones worked in the ocean.

My dad had all kinds of fishing poles. He had a stiff, twelve-foot surf rod that he said should be used only when we were fishing from the beach. He had other rods that were good for fishing off of a pier, and some that were good for fishing out of boats. He even had one little “fly” rod that fit into a small canister. In addition to the rods, he had different tackle boxes that were full of bobbers, hooks and fancy lures. Each piece of tackle had a specific purpose and he wanted me to know what they were for and how to use them. My dad taught me that there was a lot more to fishing than simply “casting nets.” Good fishermen took time to be prepared.

I find it intriguing that Holy Spirit chose to let us know that James and John were mending nets on the day that Jesus called them. I believe it highlights two very important aspects of becoming fishers of men. The first is that it places an importance on the process of preparation.

The Greek word used for “mending” nets is *katartizō*. It is used thirteen times in the New Testament and means: “to render fit, sound or complete.” In addition to mending, the word is translated as “perfect,” “prepare,” and “restore.” It is also the root of the word “equip” found in the fourth chapter of Ephesians:

*And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ...*

The process of preparing and equipping was and is a vital part of being a fisher of men. It was central to the life and ministry of Jesus and is an essential part of practicing the culture of the few. For every great “sending story” recorded in the gospels, there were also “mending stories.” Yes, it is more fun to think about being with the twelve as they returned rejoicing about seeing people healed and set free from the clutches of demons than to hear Jesus say, “How long do I have to be with you?”

The commitment of Jesus, the perfect Son of God, to walk and work with simple men who struggled to have faith is a beautiful demonstration of His perfect love for us. In calling these fishermen from Galilee, Jesus chose men who would doubt Him, deny Him, and fall asleep in His greatest hour of need; yet He loved them until the end. Even as He was commissioning them before He ascended, Scripture tells us that some still doubted.

I have to admit; it is easier for me to think of the apostles as some kind of superheroes who really had it all together. The fact that they performed the same miracles that Jesus did has caused some theologians to set them aside as a different class of Christians. But then I read the stories of their weaknesses and fumbling and realized that they were a lot like me—imperfect men who had encountered the Perfect One. It was not their special abilities that allowed them to turn the world upside down; it was because they walked with and were loved by the One who entrusted them to carry the powerful message of the Kingdom of God. He was the one with all of the power to change people's lives and restore all things to His Father.

### **the unexpected joys of mending nets**

Over the past twenty years, I have had the privilege of being a part of several miraculous catches. There were times dozens or even hundreds of people came to Jesus within months or weeks. These were exciting indeed. But as we discussed earlier, when we bring people to Jesus without having a plan for discipling and equipping them, we leave them with an inferior encounter with the gospel. We say things like, "It is our job to catch them and God's job to clean them." The problem with this line of thinking is that if we leave our catch of fish lying unattended on the beach, the tide will come in and wash many back into the sea. While the process of sanctification is a work of the Holy Spirit, it is not disconnected from our call to make disciples.

The truth is, it is much easier to make converts than to disciple nations. We must not stop at casting the nets. We need to make time for and place a value on the perfecting, restoring, and equipping process of discipleship. I finally came to this conclusion after being a part of four or five miraculous catches and realizing that there was little long-term change in many of the lives of people who had come to Jesus.

For me, I came to the proverbial tipping point the morning after witnessing one of the most amazing demonstrations of the power of the gospel I had ever seen. The story happened while we were living in Ellwood City, PA. Our primary focus during our time there was reaching out to addicts, some prostitutes, and many social orphans. One night, we had gathered twenty-five or thirty of these friends together to hear about

Jesus. This was not a typical worship service. Most of these people were not only unchurched, they were anti-church. But they came that night to hear Sean's story.

Sean had been a practicing pagan who had been on his own since he was sixteen. I got to know Sean when he was nineteen. He was rough around the edges, but my wife saw something in him, something worth investing in. Sean was one of the more visible "social orphans" in our town. He was an easy target for all that was wrong and was frequently the target of accusations anytime an alley was vandalized or a store window was broken.

I remember being amazed as I looked around the room that night. Atheists, agnostics and anarchists had all come to hear what Sean would say. He was definitely not a polished speaker, but he was "one of them" and spoke their language. That night, Sean told them, in terms that they could relate to, how Jesus had changed their lives. When he was done, another friend got up and briefly shared from Romans 1 about the power of the gospel.

I watched the reactions on people's faces as they heard the story of Jesus, some of them for the very first time. People who practiced looking hard and disconnected were crying and laughing listening to the story that night. Many of them responded to the invitation to accept Jesus, and God moved powerfully in our small gathering that night. Many were healed physically, experiencing the tangible sense of God's presence in ways they had never imagined possible.

Because these were not church people, they had no idea of proper protocol. I noticed that some of the ones who were accepting Jesus were leaving as soon as we finished praying with them. I didn't think much of it at the time. That all changed a few minutes later when they returned, bringing new people back with them. They were leaving to go to find their friends. They went to parks and bars and to their neighbors' houses, telling whomever they could find that they needed to come meet this Jesus they had just encountered.

I was overwhelmed by how easily these brand new believers accepted the real, present reality of the gospel. Our little crowd had almost doubled as these new believers began doing the work of evangelists. I walked outside to get some fresh air, when I met one young woman who had literally run to the building. She was trying to catch her breath when she said to me, "My friend called and said Jesus was here, saving and healing people. Is He still here? I am too late?"

I was wrecked by her question. I had been brought up with Jesus being the most important person in our household, but I was astonished and amazed by the childlike

faith of this believing “unbeliever.” I felt more aware of the reality of Jesus than I ever had in my life.

I woke up the next morning excited to call the pastors in our city. At that point in time, our ministry was functioning as an outreach, so I needed to find churches that would welcome these new believers in. At first, I was disappointed when I realized that my pastor friends were not quite as excited as I was by what had happened the night before. My disappointment grew to frustration and anger when I was told that their churches were not really set up to handle “those kind of people.”

Borderline indignant, I began to pray. “God, what is wrong with these churches? Why don’t they want these precious people?” I was just about ready to call fire down from heaven when I heard the Holy Spirit say, “Why are you angry at other people for not wanting to do what I called you to do?”

That question stopped me in my tracks. I remembered that for several years, we had been telling people that God had called us to Ellwood City to be and do church for people who would not come to church. I realized that I had become busy and was caught up by casting nets, but had not prepared a place for the catch.

That was a turning point in my life. It was no longer enough to just have cool fishing stories; it was time to focus on preparing a net. I remember telling God that day, “Never again do I want to be a part of seeing people come to Jesus without knowing how we will love them and disciple them.”

Since then, I have had the incredible privilege of discipling, equipping, and sending out some of the most stunning people on the planet. God has changed my heart, and now I know that there is incredible satisfaction in committing to walking with people through the hard things in life. As I have given myself to the “mending nets” part of the process, I have witnessed God restore dignity to women whose lives had been filled with shame. I have been able to help boys grow into men, and then watch them grow into godly husbands.

We have helped train people to follow Jesus, make disciples, and plant simple expressions of church on college campuses, in their neighborhoods, and in the nations. But more than training people to cast nets, we have been able to teach them how to value the process of loving people and committing to walk with them through the hard things of life.

I mentioned earlier that there were two important things we could take away from the fact that James and John were mending nets. The first was that it highlighted the

importance of the preparation process. That second thing that I believe is relevant is that both the “casters” and the “menders” were recognized as fishermen and they were all called to leave their nets to become fishers of men.

While it is true that God has gifted each of us in unique ways, we should never hide behind our gifting. Some of us thrive at the mending part of fishing but struggle to spend time with people who don't know Jesus. It is important that we do not stay in our comfort zone, but remember to make room to intentionally invest our lives with the lost. It is a part of following Jesus. And for those of us who find it easy to share our faith with people, but struggle to commit to the long, messy process of discipling someone, it is imperative that we follow the example that Jesus modeled in tenaciously loving His imperfect disciples to the very end.

I would like to challenge every would-be world-changer to examine the life of Jesus, and ask Him to help your heart grow to a place of dissatisfaction with any view of following Him that does not include both casting and mending nets. Both the catching and mending of men were a part of His life and they are both an essential part of living out the culture of the few.

### **catching in community**

Before we leave our fishermen friends, there is one last observation I would like to point out: In all of the fishing stories that we read in the Bible, we find no mention of a fishing pole. As far as I know, fishing poles didn't exist during the days of Jesus. All fishermen used nets.

Because things have changed in our culture today, I think it is easy for us to categorize the calling of Andrew, Peter, James and John as the calling of four individuals. But Jesus didn't approach them as individuals and say, “I will make *you* to become a fisher of men.” He approached two sets of brothers and said, “I will make you *fishers* of men.”

The fact that these men fished with nets meant that there are always at least two fishermen involved in every story. Having a fishing pole would have allowed Andrew to go solo, but that wasn't the case.

I think there is a high value in applying this principal to becoming fishers of men. In every story where we see Jesus sending out His disciples, He sends them out in pairs. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, we continue to see people being sent out to preach the gospel in pairs or in teams.

This is not accidental. While it does not take a village to disciple an individual, it is important that we learn to make disciples within the context of community. Regardless of our passion for reaching the lost, it can become extremely draining when we try making disciples on our own.

Remember, we want to develop a culture where people do more than say a quick prayer to receive Jesus. We want to see them disciplined, equipped and sent out to then go make disciples themselves. The culture of the few calls for a commitment to building deep relationships with those we are discipling. One of the things that I have learned along the way is that it is easier to be excellent at disciple making when all of the pressure does not rest on me.

Every one of us will have days that we cannot be completely accessible to those we are discipling. We will avoid compassion fatigue and burnout if we have a “fishing buddy” that can help us when our plate gets full, or we simply need some time away.

Please do not underestimate the importance of building a culture of disciple-making around you. As you give yourself to inviting others to follow Jesus, it should become natural for those people to become disciple-makers themselves. This takes time, but it is worth waiting for.

If you don't know anyone that you can have as a fishing buddy, pray and ask God to send you someone. It might be someone who doesn't know Jesus yet or someone who has been a believer for a long time. Either way, take time to encourage each other and to regularly pray for people who don't know Jesus together. The old statement really is true: you can run faster alone, but you will run farther together.

Jesus started with his few. Most of them would have known each other well, had a lot in common, and would have already known how to work together. He chose men whose qualifications to lead the church did not come through their formal training, but from spending their lives together with Jesus.

*Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.<sup>9</sup>*

History tells us that this handful of brothers, neighbors and fishermen turned their world upside down with the message of Jesus, the cross, and the Kingdom of God. After 2000 years, Jesus is still calling men and women to follow Him and become

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<sup>9</sup> Acts 4:13.

fishers of men. It's our turn to walk with Him, give our lives to those who do not know Him, and turn our world upside down.

So far, we have looked at how Jesus knew His *identity* and lived with a spirit of *invitation* as He walked the earth. Next, we will look at the *intentionality* of Jesus to see exactly *how* He invested Himself in His disciples. This third key is an important part of cultivating a disciple-making culture, where others can join you in following Jesus and changing your world.