

RETHINKING DISCIPLESHIP & EVANGELISM

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Jesus' call to discipleship was an invitation to choose a direction—"follow me"—and not a command to adopt a doctrinal manifesto or align with a set of religious rites. ~ Reggie McNeal

I believe that the key to the health, the maintenance, the extension, and the renewal of the Church is not more evangelism, but more discipleship. ~ Alan Hirsch

Mission is more than and different from recruitment to our brand of religion; it is alerting people to the universal reign of God through Christ. ~ David Bosch

Despite what people think, within the Christian family and outside it, the point of Christianity isn't "to go to heaven when you die." ~ N. T. Wright

In his 2024 book, *Revenge of the Tipping Point: Overstories, Superspreaders, and the Rise of Social Engineering*, Malcolm Gladwell introduces the concept of the "Overstory" to explore how dominant cultural narratives influence societal behaviors and the spread of ideas.

Sometimes, creating a new overstory is necessary to challenge deeply ingrained assumptions and shift collective perception. When a long-standing narrative no longer serves or reflects the current reality, introducing a fresh, compelling overstory can help people reframe what they've taken for granted, opening the door to transformation and progress.

We need a new overstory when it comes to the way we understand evangelism and discipleship. In most church settings, people think of evangelism as something you do with lost people, while discipleship is for those who have already decided to follow Jesus. This binary approach has led to a fragmented understanding of spiritual formation and mission. A new overstory—one that sees discipleship as beginning before conversion and continuing as a lifelong journey—can help reframe how we walk with people toward Jesus and beyond, integrating discipleship and evangelism into a single, holistic movement of spiritual companionship.

Reframing Discipleship and Evangelism

Set aside your usual perspective on evangelism, and let's take a fresh look at its connection to discipleship, using the Great Commission as our framework.

We would all agree that if you are a disciple, you are called to be a disciple-maker, which should mean we will disciple people anywhere and everywhere. Jesus clearly states that we are to make disciples "as we are going." With that in mind, we contend that discipleship is best seen as a process, illustrated by the image below.¹



As the image illustrates, discipleship is not merely something we do with believers after conversion; rather, it encompasses both pre-conversion and post-conversion discipleship. While conversion is ultimately the work of the Spirit, our role is to be disciple-makers—committed to walking alongside anyone willing to embark on the journey. In other words, whenever we point people to the person, work, and ways of Jesus, we are discipling them—whether they realize it or not.

Evangelism still plays a vital role, but it takes place within the broader framework of discipleship, rather than the other way around. This shift repositions evangelism where it belongs—as an integral part of the Great Commission, entrusted to the church to make disciples of all nations.

Before rejecting the idea of rethinking discipleship in this way, consider how Jesus disciplined his followers in the Gospels. Scholars still debate when the disciples were truly "born again," with some pointing to John 20:22, when Jesus breathed the Spirit on them, and others arguing it occurred at Pentecost (Acts 2). Regardless of the precise moment, it is evident that their conversion was not prior to these events. This suggests that even "the Twelve" (and "the Seventy") could be seen as "pre-conversion disciples."

Furthermore, in the first three centuries of the church, individuals had to demonstrate their faithfulness to Jesus through discipleship before they were welcomed as full members of the church. This was the original purpose of catechisms—to guide people through a process of discipleship that began long before formal conversion. In world-changing movements, discipleship is not merely an additional practice for the most devoted believers; it is an ethos—a way of life.²

Reframing evangelism around discipleship in this way also creates better space for long-term, authentic relationships with the various people in our lives. We ought to have multiple different kinds of discipling relationships. We will have pre-conversion discipling relationships where we are pointing people toward Jesus, by sharing in both word and deed why we orient our lives about the person of Jesus. At the same time, we should also have post-conversion relationships where we are doing life with other people, growing together toward maturity in Christ.

Bounded Set (Fences) and Centered Set (Wells)

To give you another framework to think differently about discipleship, we want to introduce you to *social set theory*, which is a model for *how* and *why* people gather. When discussing the difference between groups of people and how they organize, some use the language of "bounded set" and "centered set." Here is the basic difference:

A **bounded set** (sometimes called "closed set") is defined by a clear boundary that distinguishes who is "in" and who is "out" based on specific criteria or rules. In the context of the church, this approach often leads to discipleship and evangelism models that emphasize membership, adherence to specific beliefs, and conformity to particular practices. Bounded set thinking tends to categorize people according to whether they meet these established criteria, making it a more exclusionary framework that focuses on who qualifies as a disciple of Jesus. People that are "in" must first *believe* and *behave*, before they *belong*.

In contrast, a **centered set** (or "open set") approach is not defined by rigid boundaries of who is in or out but by the direction people are moving in relation to a central point—Jesus. This model of

discipleship and evangelism prioritizes movement toward Jesus rather than requiring individuals to meet specific criteria before they belong.³ It recognizes that people may be at different distances from the center and moving at different paces, as long as they are oriented toward Him. By viewing discipleship as a journey rather than a fixed status, it creates an inclusive environment where seekers, skeptics, and mature believers are all welcomed and encouraged to grow.

Wells and Fences

A more practical way to understand the bounded versus centered-set discussion is with the metaphor of wells and fences. In the book *The Shaping of Things to Come*, the authors (both from Australia) discuss the idea of social set theory by illustrating it with a practice in farming.

In some farming communities, the farmers might build fences around their properties to keep their livestock in and the livestock of neighboring farms out. This is a bounded set. But in rural communities where farms or ranches cover an enormous geographic area, fencing the property is out of the question. In our home of Australia, ranches are so vast that fences are superfluous. Under these conditions a farmer has to sink a bore and create a well, a precious water supply in the Outback. It is assumed that livestock, though they will stray, will never roam too far from the well, lest they die. This is a centered set. As long as there is a supply of clean water, the livestock will remain close by.

Churches that see themselves as a centered set recognize that the gospel is so precious, so refreshing, that like a well in the Australian Outback, lovers of Christ will not stray too far from it. It is then a truly Christ-centered model. Rather than seeing people as Christian or non-Christian, as in or out, we would see people by their degree of distance from the center, Christ. In this way, the missional-incarnational church sees people as Christian and not-yet-Christian. It acknowledges the contribution of not-yet-Christians to Christian community and values the contribution of all people. Jesus' faith community was clearly a centered set, with him at the center. There's evidence that some disciples drew closer to the center than others (Peter, James, and John) and that at least one disciple drew away from the center. The gospels speak of the women who traveled with them. Acts makes reference to numerous faith communities. It seems that the community of Christ was not as simple as thirteen guys roaming the countryside. There was a rich intersection of relationships with some nearer the center and others further away, but all invited to join in the kingdom-building enterprise.⁴

A centered set perspective aligns much better with a broader view of discipleship. The center must be Jesus Himself. When He is at the center, a church will be concerned with fostering increasing closeness to Jesus in the lives of all those involved. Our job is to point people to the center, both in our pre-conversion and post-conversion relationships.

And when one gets closer to the center, the more Christlike one's behavior should become. Therefore, core members of the church will exhibit the features of Christ's radical lifestyle (love, generosity, healing, hospitality, forgiveness, mercy, peace, and more), and those who have just begun the journey toward Christ (and whose lives may not exhibit such traits) are still seen as "belonging" and the growth toward the center is seen as the process of discipleship.⁵

Applying Centered Set Thinking to Discipleship and Evangelism

1. Focus on Direction over Membership

In a centered-set approach, the church will prioritize the direction people are moving in their relationship with Jesus rather than whether they have achieved a particular level of belief or behavior. This will allow for different stages of faith development and offer a more inclusive approach to discipleship that welcomes people at various levels of commitment and understanding.

2. Relational and Process-Oriented Discipleship

Centered-set discipleship views discipleship as a relational, dynamic process rather than a static membership or achievement. This approach might use mentorship, community support, and spiritual practices to encourage individuals toward a Jesus-centered life. The goal is to help people move toward Jesus in their contexts rather than conforming to specific, uniform benchmarks.

3. Evangelism as an Invitation to Journey Together

Rather than focusing evangelism on securing a clear conversion or membership commitment, a centered-set perspective encourages inviting others into a shared journey of discovering Jesus. Evangelism shifts from “conversion events” to opportunities for inviting others into relational exploration and ongoing discipleship, no matter their initial beliefs or practices.

4. Pre-Conversion Discipleship

In a centered-set model, discipleship doesn’t start at conversion but includes a pre-conversion stage, where people are welcomed and encouraged to explore the teachings of Jesus without pressure to immediately conform. This means that non-Christians could engage in discipleship activities and communities, where they learn about Jesus’ life and values, building a connection that gradually transforms their beliefs and behaviors as they journey toward faith.

5. Flexible Metrics for Spiritual Growth

Metrics in a centered-set model will not focus solely on church attendance, doctrinal knowledge, or specific moral behaviors. Instead, markers for growth will include indicators of increasing interest in Jesus, questions about spiritual matters, personal changes reflecting Christ-like values, and participation in the community. This approach values transformation over time rather than adherence to immediate standards.

6. Creating Safe Spaces for Doubt and Exploration

A centered-set church will create environments where people feel safe to express doubts, ask questions, and explore faith without feeling pressured to conform quickly. This encourages genuine exploration and allows for an authentic journey of faith. Such an environment can be appealing to seekers, who often value authenticity and relational integrity over rigid institutional norms.

7. Reduction of "Us vs. Them" Mentality

Centered-set thinking reduces the divisive mindset that can sometimes develop in bounded-set models, where people are categorized as either “inside” or “outside” the faith. In a centered-set framework, everyone—regardless of their current beliefs or practices—is seen as capable of moving toward Jesus. This reduces judgmental attitudes and fosters a more compassionate, grace-filled community, where people are viewed as fellow travelers on the journey toward spiritual growth rather than outsiders. This approach can break down barriers and build bridges, creating a more welcoming atmosphere for those who might feel hesitant about approaching the church.

Inputs and Outputs (Faithfulness and Fruitfulness)

But practically speaking, what does this journey toward the center look like? What kinds of activities are involved in becoming more and more like Jesus? One helpful way to think about the behaviors of discipleship is to consider *inputs* and *outputs*.

Inputs are those activities or habits that we adopt today when desiring a particular change in the future. For example, when we have a goal to lose weight, an input might be to count calories or to exercise daily. We exercise (input) to lose weight or feel better physically (output). We engage in certain input activities to see some kind of output in the future. The two are unmistakably linked. Input goals are the things that you can do *today* that will produce the results that you want *tomorrow* (output goals).

In the book *No Silver Bullets*, author Daniel Im contends that most churches use output goals, such as attendance and giving, when measuring whether someone is a mature disciple. Because outputs are often difficult to measure the church defaults to simply counting how often members attend programs and how much money they give. However, counting attendance and giving is not an adequate way of knowing if someone is becoming more like Jesus.

To make the point that the church needs to focus equally on input goals, Im presents the results of a major study conducted by Lifeway Research that examined the state of discipleship in the church today. The study included interviews with 28 discipleship experts, a survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors, as well as 4,000 lay people throughout North America.

One of the more interesting aspects revealed in the research was the existence of certain *behaviors* that consistently show up in the lives of maturing disciples. These habits included behaviors like consistent engagement with the Bible, serving others, sharing Jesus, exercising faith, obeying God, and building relationships. The research showed that when people regularly engaged in these activities, they eventually exhibited the attributes of a maturing disciple. In other words, *faithfulness* to these behaviors (inputs) leads to *fruitfulness* of becoming more like Jesus (output).

The research is clear, that at the very least, our disciple-making inputs must include consistent reading of the Bible. Therefore, discover the best way for your church to engage in Scripture reading. Perhaps it involves individual Bible reading plans. Different types of group Bible studies. Reading of Scripture in all corporate gatherings. Or all the above. The point is that you must discern the best way to incorporate Bible reading (input) into your church.

The research also asks what input goals can get people to serve others? How can people in your church better exercise their faith by engaging in God's "risky" mission? How can they build deeper relationships that include both pre-conversion and post-conversion relationships? How can they step out of their comfort zone and point a broken world toward the person, work, and ways of Jesus? If we want people to exhibit the evidence of maturity in Christ (love, radical generosity, hospitality, forgiveness, mercy, peace, and more) we must help them engage in consistent disciple-making behaviors.

Remember, input goals are the things that you can do *today* that will produce the results that you want *tomorrow*.

Rethinking Evangelism

The *missio Dei*—the mission of God—extends far beyond evangelism alone. While evangelism is undoubtedly a crucial aspect of our participation in God's redemptive work, it is not the whole picture. As David Bosch insightfully states, "*Mission is more than and different from recruitment to our brand of religion; it is alerting people to the universal reign of God through Christ.*" This alerting happens through both words and actions, proclamation and demonstration. To fully grasp evangelism, we must see it within this broader mission.

At the same time, we should be cautious not to mistake unexplained actions for evangelism. In the New Testament, evangelism is inherently verbal—it involves proclamation. It is a declarative act that requires words. Good deeds alone, without explanation, may reflect Christ's love but do not constitute evangelism.

One challenge many Christians face with evangelism is the pressure to share the "whole gospel" in a single conversation. This often stems from the fact that many believers primarily interact with other Christians, leaving evangelistic moments to chance encounters with strangers—on airplanes, at bus stops, or in passing conversations. In such moments, the urgency to convey everything at once can be overwhelming. However, when evangelism happens relationally, over time, with friends and neighbors (think pre-conversion discipleship), it allows for a fuller, more natural expression of the gospel—one that unfolds gradually rather than being reduced to a single hurried pitch.⁶

In the book *Road to Missional*, evangelism professor Michael Frost paints a picture of what genuine relational evangelism ought to look like,

When we understand what it is to be truly missional—incarnated deeply within a local host community—we will find that evangelism is best done slowly, deliberately, in the context of a loving community. It takes time and multiple engagements. It requires the unbeliever to observe our lifestyle, see our demonstrations of the reign of God, test our values, enjoy our hospitality. And it must occur as a communal activity, not only as a solo venture. Unbelievers must see the nature and quality of the embodied gospel in community. And all the while, conversations, questions, discussions, and even debates occur wherein we can verbally express our devotion to the reign of God through Christ. No more billboards. No more television commercials. No more unsolicited mail. If evangelism is like a meal, think of it as being prepared in a slow cooker and served over a long night around a large table. It can't be microwaved. It can't be takeout.⁷

Seeing evangelism in this broader environment helps us to understand that the experience of conversion is not ultimately a matter of knowing certain truths about Jesus; instead, it is the fruit of an immediate encounter with Jesus. Therefore, evangelism, in large part, is about fostering and cultivating opportunities for a person to meet Jesus. It is not about persuading people to accept certain truths, but it is about meeting Jesus in person and in real time. In the end, evangelism is all about Jesus.

Evangelist or Evangelistic

When considering the topic of evangelism, it is helpful to make a distinction between the "gift of evangelism" and being "evangelistic." Contrary to the false idea that every believer ought to be an

evangelist, the apostle Paul seems to assume a twofold approach when it comes to the ministry of evangelism. First, he affirms the gifting of the evangelist. Second, he writes as though all believers are to be evangelistic in their general orientation.

Paul places himself in the first category, seeing his ministry as an evangelist. But it doesn't appear that he believes all Christians bear the responsibility for this same kind of bold proclamation to which he has been called. Note his description of this twofold approach in his letter to the Colossians:

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. . . . Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (Colossians 4:2-6).

For evangelists, Paul asks for opportunities to share Christ and the courage to proclaim the gospel clearly (vv. 3-4). But he doesn't suggest the Colossians need to pray this for themselves. Rather, Paul says that they should pray for the evangelists (people like Paul) and for them to be wise in their conduct toward outsiders and to look for opportunities to answer outsiders' questions when they arise (vv. 2,5-6). "When it comes to the spoken aspect of their ministries, evangelists are to proclaim, and believers are to give answers." ⁸

It seems as if Paul assumed that the number of gifted evangelists wouldn't be great, and he believed that the gifted evangelists could be local (like Timothy—see 2 Timothy 4:5) or trans-local (like himself). He also seems to assume that some gifted evangelists would occupy a leadership function in local churches (see Ephesians 4:11), building up the church to be increasingly evangelistic. So, while it is an essential gift for all churches, it isn't a gift given to every single believer. Rather, the "normal" believers' function was to pray and conduct themselves, in word and deed, in such a way as to *provoke* unbelievers to question why they lived the way they did and, therefore, enter an evangelistic dialogue.⁹

Peter agrees with Paul when he writes in a well-known passage in 1 Peter:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander (3:15-16).

To summarize, the biblical model is for leaders to, 1) identify, equip, and mobilize gifted evangelists, and 2) inspire all believers to live "questionable lives." If all believers are leading the kind of lives that arouse curiosity and questions from the people around them, then opportunities for sharing the story of Jesus will flourish and chances for the gifted evangelists to boldly proclaim will increase.

This two-fold approach was so effective it literally transformed the Roman Empire. With evangelists and apologists such as Peter and Paul proclaiming the Gospel and defending its integrity in an era of polytheism and pagan superstition, literally hundreds of thousands of ordinary believers were infiltrating every aspect of society and living the kind of questionable lives that evoked curiosity in the Christian message.

They devoted themselves to sacrificial acts of kindness. They loved their enemies and forgave their persecutors. They cared for the poor and fed the hungry. In the brutality of life under Roman rule, they were the most stunningly different people anyone had ever seen.¹⁰

Incarnational Evangelism Framework

What does it look like to live a questionable life? A life that evokes curiosity. One that is countercultural to the way most people live. Below is a framework for rethinking evangelism from a book by Hugh Halter titled *Flesh: Bringing the Incarnational Down to Earth*. This way of thinking about evangelism coincides well with a pre-conversion and post-conversion discipleship perspective.

Five keywords form a relational progression to remind us of the proper model of Jesus when it came to sharing the good news in both word and deed. The five words are incarnation, reputation, conversation, confrontation, and transformation. (See image below.) Let's examine each of these words and consider how they link together in the broader process of evangelism.



Incarnation

The word *incarnation* comes from a Latin term meaning "in the flesh." It refers to the act of God taking on human form and entering our world to bring reconciliation between Himself and humanity. The incarnation is the ultimate expression of God's mission (John 3:16-17). When God came into the world through Jesus, He didn't remain distant—He lived among us. As John 1:14 (The Message) beautifully puts it, "*The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.*"

The incarnation not only reveals how God works in the world, but it also provides a model for how we are to engage in His mission. If God's primary method of reaching the world was to enter it through Jesus, then our mission must also be incarnational. Two key words—*proximity* and *presence*—help clarify what this looks like in practice.

The word *proximity* emphasizes the need to live in close relationship with others. We cannot love and serve from a distance. Just as Jesus physically entered human life, we are called to step into the lives of those around us. This may mean relocating to be nearer to the people God has sent us to reach, or it may simply require us to intentionally create time and space to engage meaningfully.

The word *presence* goes beyond proximity to deep identification and self-giving love. Jesus didn't just live near people—He humbled Himself, identified with them, and advocated for them. Philippians 2 reminds us that He emptied Himself for the sake of others. In the same way, incarnational presence calls us to relational investment, leading to tangible acts of love and sacrifice.

The Gospels describe Jesus as a *friend* of sinners. Not just an acquaintance, but a friend. People wanted to be around Him; they invited Him into their homes and gatherings. There was something compelling about His presence—a holiness that welcomed rather than alienated. Someone once observed that people who were nothing *like* Jesus, *liked* Jesus. Shouldn't the same be true of His followers? This is why evangelism must be shaped by the incarnation. It begins with proximity—being close enough to people to share life with them—and presence—engaging in relationships that reflect Jesus' love in real and meaningful ways.

Reputation

If we truly incarnate and do life with people, one of the results is that we should begin to develop a good reputation. Evangelistic mission is most effective when we are living generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, Christlike lives as missionaries to our neighborhoods. This is, of course, also true in our workplaces, as well as any of the social spaces we inhabit. Anywhere we are around people, we have an opportunity to display a new way to be human. We can extend the love, grace, mercy, hospitality, and generosity of Jesus.

However, this is not only true for us individually; it is also true corporately or as a missional community or church plant. Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin is known for saying that "the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it."¹¹ In other words, as a faith community truly lives out the ways of King Jesus, people will take notice. They will begin to see firsthand that the way genuine Jesus followers live is beautiful, intriguing, and life-giving.

But unfortunately, in most cases, Christianity in North America doesn't always have the best reputation. People haven't had the opportunity to observe up close how a genuine Jesus follower lives. Instead, a person may have seen a poor example of a Christian on television, or perhaps they work with someone who professes to be a Christian but doesn't live out the ways of Jesus, so they have a negative view of Christianity.

Think about it this way. The Incarnation of Jesus is ultimately about *representing* and *revealing* the real God to people. So, for us to be able to represent the real Jesus to people and develop a good reputation, we need to be *with* people. We need to incarnate into the places God has sent us and show people with our lives what it means to follow Jesus.

Conversation

The point of the word *conversation* is that when we do life with people and develop a good reputation, we *will* have meaningful conversations. Others will seek the truth in our lives. Jesus was God and thus the most holy, true, and perfect being. And He was the most nonjudgmental person you would have ever met. People should have been intimidated and afraid to even approach Him, yet they came toward Him. People wanted to hear what He had to say about their broken lives. And when He spoke, they listened and changed. Jesus showed that you don't need to condemn a person before that

person will change—and that’s why He said He did not come into the world to condemn but to save (John 3:17). And He did exactly that. People around Him didn’t feel condemned, and they responded to His truth.¹²

Unfortunately, many times we don’t have the opportunity to share the broader story of Jesus simply because we don’t have friends who are not Christians. When offered the chance to “share the gospel,” we rely on a sort of artificial, reduced summary of the work of Jesus. We have to create ways to “turn” conversations in a spiritual direction, because we are not doing life with lost people. If we were, there would be frequent opportunities to talk about the King we follow and share the story of how He has changed our perspective, not only on death but on life in the here and now.

We need to be prepared to share in natural, relational conversations what it means to follow Jesus. To follow Him through His atoning work on the cross. To follow Him in a cruciform-shaped life of discipleship. And to follow Him into the good news that through Christ, the in-breaking kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Confrontation

If we have done the work of incarnation, reputation, and conversation, we will have the opportunity to share the good news about the kingdom and its King. And we need to be prepared for the gospel (along with the work of the Spirit) to confront. It will confront a person’s sin. It will confront a person’s worldview. It will confront their attitudes and assumptions about themselves as well as others. The gospel of the kingdom is so countercultural to the ways of the world that it will confront a person’s sensibilities on every level. In most cases, that will not happen overnight. But if we are in a genuine pre-conversion discipling relationship with people, there will be opportunities to have ongoing honest conversations about the reign of God through Christ. Ultimately, the goal of confrontation is to help people take ownership of their sins and let God reign over every single aspect of their lives.

Transformation

When the Spirit does His work, the outcome will be transformation. Notice that the word *transformation* is used, not *conversion*. Now, conversion is a starting point, but transformation is the full heart of the incarnation. Jesus came to change *everything* in us. “Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6, ESV). The apostle Paul shared with the Galatians that he was in anguish until “Christ was formed” in them (Galatians 4:19). This is a call far beyond conversion. It is the call to transformation.

Two Final Thoughts

There are two additional topics to consider before concluding. First, the entire “incarnational evangelism framework” must be bathed in prayer. We need to pray through each of the five “phases” mentioned above. Particularly we should be praying for deepening relationships with those who do not know Jesus. We must pray that God gives us opportunities to incarnate into our context, live questionable “Jesusy” lives in front of a dying world, and have life-changing conversations.

Second, while we believe the most effective evangelism happens through genuine relationships, we recognize that there are moments when the Spirit prompts us to share the gospel with someone in a limited window of time. In such cases, we must be ready to present a clear and concise summary of the gospel.

Action Steps

1. Create a "Spiritual Proximity Map"

Draw a relational map of the people in your life—family, neighbors, coworkers—and mark where they might be in relation to Jesus (closer or further from the center). Begin to pray for and intentionally invest in 1–2 of those relationships with pre-conversion discipleship in mind

2. Start a Discovery Group

Launch a group with spiritual seekers or not-yet-believers using Scripture (e.g., stories of Jesus) as the basis for open discussion. Focus on curiosity, not conclusions.

3. Reframe Church Metrics

Audit your current ministry metrics. Identify what inputs (habits, behaviors) you're encouraging and what outputs (maturity markers) you're measuring. Begin tracking a few key input goals that align with relational, centered-set discipleship (e.g., "number of spiritual conversations had," "time spent with not-yet-believers").

4. Host a 'Life Around the Well' Gathering

Plan an event for people at all stages of spiritual interest, framed around shared values (hospitality, justice, peace). Make Jesus visible in the culture of the gathering without requiring belief to belong.

5. Train a Team on 'Incarnational Framework'

Walk your leaders or small group facilitators through the five-part progression: *incarnation*, *reputation*, *conversation*, *confrontation*, *transformation*. Discuss how they see it working (or not) in their current relationships.

Reflection Questions

1. Pre-Conversion Discipleship

How comfortable am I with the idea of discipling someone who hasn't yet made a profession of faith? What shifts in language or posture would this require in my conversations?

2. Bounded vs. Centered Set

When I reflect on my church or ministry, do we function more like a fenced property or a well in the Outback? How might embracing a centered-set approach change the way we invite people into community?

3. Faithfulness and Fruitfulness

Am I focused more on results (outputs) or on practices (inputs) in my spiritual life or leadership? Which 1–2 input behaviors do I need to recommit to grow toward Christlikeness?

4. Living Questionable Lives

What is currently "questionable" about my life to those outside the faith? If someone followed me around for a week, would they be curious about Jesus?

5. Evangelist vs. Evangelistic

Do I feel pressure to be an evangelist, or am I content living evangelistically? How can I encourage others in my community to be more intentional about provoking spiritual curiosity?

Footnotes:

1. Alan Hirsch and Debra Hirsch, *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship*, (Baker Publishing Group, 2010)..

2. Ibid.

3. Abraham Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" emphasizes that humans must first experience a sense of belonging, through relationships, community, and social connection, before they can effectively engage in deeper pursuits such as belief, purpose, or spiritual growth. This aligns with the idea that individuals are more open to embracing new ideas or beliefs when they feel safe, accepted, and valued within a community. In this sense, belonging often creates the relational trust necessary for belief to take root and flourish.
4. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*, (Baker Publishing Group, 2013), pp. 68-69.
5. Ibid.
6. Michael Frost, *The Road to Missional: Journey to the Center of the Church*, Kindle Ed (Baker Publishing Group, 2011), pp. 44-45.
7. Ibid.
8. Michael Frost, *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People*, (NavPress, 2015), p. 4.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), p. 227.
12. Hugh Halter, *Flesh: Bringing the Incarnation Down to Earth*, (David C. Cook, 2014), p. 165.

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