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CHAPTER ONE

Where It All Began

I grew up in a large family. When I say, “large,” I mean *very* large. My parents had sixteen children. I was number fifteen of sixteen, so I’m glad that my parents had so many children, or I would not be here! All of my brothers and sisters, except for the oldest three, have first names that begin with the letter “D.” We always joked that we wanted the last child to be called “Done.”

When child number sixteen was born, my mom went off to the hospital (only the last few were born in the hospital) and we heard through the grapevine that it was a boy. Everyone was excited! This is “Done”!

By the time my mom and dad arrived home, the whole family was eagerly waiting to see if our new brother was named Done. Dad delivered the news sheepishly: “We named him Dallas.”

Everyone was disappointed. “Why didn’t you call him Done?” they asked.

Dad looked up with a twinkle in his eye and said, “Well, to be honest, we aren’t sure we are done yet!”

Even though I was the next-to-last child born, as far as I know, I was the first in my family to come to a clear understanding of what it means to become a Christ-follower. It happened while I was attending an engineering school in South Dakota. In order to catch a free ride to his hometown to see his girlfriend, my roommate, also named Dann, decided it was worth it to tolerate seven hours in a car with a bunch of “Jesus freaks.” During the weekend, Dann and his girlfriend couldn’t

find anything fun to do, so they attended the very first Campus Crusade for Christ conference (CRU) in the state. Dann accepted Christ that night, and it changed his life! Immediately when he returned to our fraternity house, I noticed a change in his life. One night after a keg party, I came back to our room and found him reading a Bible.

“What happened to you?” I asked. “Why are you reading that?”

With trembling hands, he pulled out a Four Spiritual Laws tract and began to read it to me. He was so nervous that I had to hold the booklet so he could read it.

The Holy Spirit moved that night. On December 17, 1970, at 9:43 p.m., I bowed my head with my roommate, repented of my sin, and asked Christ to take control of my life.

My roommate and I began reading the Bible together, and we were thrilled by what we found. One evening we got so excited when we discovered that the story of Noah and the ark was a true story in the Bible! And because of the Spirit’s work in our lives, we saw that story in a totally new way. We wept for joy because we had been rescued from the judgment of sin.

We went up and down the halls in our fraternity house and read the Four Spiritual Laws booklet to anyone who would listen. Several prayed to receive Christ and—because we had been Christians and studying the Scriptures just a few weeks longer than they had—we led the Bible studies.

It didn’t take me long to realize that I needed some training, both in ministry and understanding the Scriptures. I hardly knew the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament, much less how to interpret them. So I left engineering school and headed to Bible school. Much to my surprise, a small church on the north side of Chicago offered to pay me money to minister to their youth! *I should be paying you*, I thought. *But if you want to pay me to practice on your kids, I’ll take it.*

One day in a class on the gospel of John, my professor, Stan Gundry, made a statement in passing that changed my life. “Some of Christ’s first disciples could have been teenagers,” he said.

This totally changed my perception of Jesus! I thought Jesus was an old guy (I was only twenty at the time) and that His disciples were old guys. But when I realized that John could have been in his late teens, and several of the other disciples could have been in their late teens or early twenties, I was amazed! I was working with students the same age. Maybe I could learn to lead my youth group by exploring how Jesus worked with His youth group!

After class I rushed up to my professor and asked how I could learn more. He encouraged me to study the life of Christ chronologically. Dr. Gundry had just compiled a harmony of the Gospels, which looks at Christ's life chronologically, and he encouraged me to get a copy.¹ Study what Jesus did the first year, he advised. Where did He go? What did He say? Why did He do the things He did? Then do the same with the second year and the third year. He encouraged me, in short, to study the Son's life.

This set me on a journey that became my life passion. We named our youth group Sonlife—we were just trying to live out the Son's life. For twenty-five years I led a ministry called Sonlife, through which we trained countless numbers of youth pastors and pastors in the Son's life. Over the years I've discovered that Jesus modeled a very simple pattern for disciple-making, a pattern every Christian can easily imitate. Jesus's disciple-making strategy follows four challenges He posed to His followers: "come and see" (John 1:39), "follow me" (John 1:43), "follow me and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19), and "go and bear fruit" (John 15:16). With this simple pattern, Jesus led His disciples through the natural growth process from children, to young men, and to spiritual fathers. This book is dedicated to explaining this simple process. In chapter 4 we will introduce four chairs as a simple metaphor to explain this disciple-making process. These four chairs will reflect the four challenges of Jesus, a simple transferable metaphor of how Jesus developed "fully trained disciples" (Luke 6:40).

THE MESSAGE OF JESUS

Unfortunately, it took me many years to discern this very simple pattern. For the first ten years I studied the life of Christ, I focused

mainly upon His message—the words of Jesus. Twenty percent of the words in the New Testament are the words of Jesus. One in every four verses in the New Testament is quoting the sayings of Jesus. That’s a lot of material!

Jesus’s message is profound. He spoke in simple terms. He spoke, for example, of the “lilies of the field,” the “birds of the air,” and “the sowers and the seed.” But His simple words carried profound weight. People were “amazed” at Jesus’s words, for “he spoke with authority,” unlike the other teachers of the Law (Mark 1:22). But I would argue that if you completely understand the message of Christ but fail to understand His methods, you won’t truly know the Jesus of the Scriptures. Jesus was much more than just His words and message.

THE METHODS OF JESUS

For the next ten years of my Christian life, I focused on the methods of Jesus. I studied to identify His major priorities and analyze them in His life and ministry. I wrote a Harmony self-study, which explained what I consider the strategy of Jesus.² We trained tens of thousands of youth pastors, pastors, and church leaders in the methods of Christ. Some of those methods included:

Jesus was deeply committed to relational ministry. John 3:22 tells us that Jesus “spent time with his disciples.” The Greek word translated “spent time with” here is *diatribo*. It means “getting under the skin of.” Jesus gave His disciples time to get to know Him and took time to invest in them.

Jesus invested early in a few. Within eighteen months of beginning His ministry, Jesus identified five individuals (James and John, Simon and Andrew, and Matthew) and challenged them to go deeper with Him. Even before He chose His twelve disciples, Jesus deepened His investment in these few, teaching them how to be “fishers of men.”

Jesus often slipped away to pray. More than forty-five times in the Gospels, Jesus escaped the crowds to pray. The busier He became the more He prayed. His ministry began with prayer and ended with prayer. Before every major turning point in Jesus’s life, He spent focused time in prayer.

Jesus loved sinners profoundly. Jesus was described as a “friend of sinners.” His opponents used that title to condemn Him, but Jesus wore it as a badge of honor. He associated with those others condemned. He befriended those others despised. He was always drawn to the neediest, not to the sharpest.

Jesus balanced His efforts to win the lost, build believers, and equip a few workers. Jesus understood that His mandate was to “make disciples.” Disciple-making for Jesus meant meeting the needs of people where they were spiritually and then challenging them to the next level. His goal was multiplication, and with laser focus He trained His few disciples to multiply their lives in others. And in the Great Commission, which is a great summary of His life, He told His disciples to go and repeat the process with others.

JESUS'S MODEL FOR DISCIPLE-MAKING

Jesus, as the perfecter of our faith, develops us to become “fully trained disciples,” reflecting His character and priorities completely (Luke 6:40). In order to perfect the faith of His disciples, over a period of more than three years, Jesus modeled a pattern for us to study and follow. Unfortunately, it has been my experience in training leaders in disciple-making that very few look to Jesus as the model of how to do this! There are several reasons for this.

Many people fail to recognize Jesus's intentional disciple-making process because they don't expect to find a pattern in Jesus's ministry. Few have analyzed what He did with His disciples the first year, the second year, and then the third year. More than 80 percent of the books I've read about Jesus in the last forty years talk about the message of Jesus. The rest of them may also allude to some of the methods of Jesus. But I can only identify four major books that look deeply at Christ's life as the pattern for disciple-making.³

Others are resistant to the very idea that the Gospels contain a pattern for disciple-making. They argue the Gospels were never intended to be studied that way. “If God wanted us to study Jesus's life chronologically,” I've heard many people object, “He would have given us a chronological record of the life of Jesus.” There is a simple response

to this objection: He has! Luke begins his gospel with this explanation: “Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus” (Luke 1:3). Luke researched the life of Christ by consulting eyewitnesses and weighing their testimony (1:2) and studying historical documents comprehensively. Once he compiled his information, he made an orderly account of Jesus’s life. The Greek word *kathexes*, translated “orderly account,” indicates a successive, or chronological, record.

Chronology is important because it gives us insight we could not gain in any other way. For example, without a chronological understanding of Jesus’s life, few realize that Mark 1:17, where Jesus tells His disciples “follow me and I will make you fishers of men,” is not His first connection with these disciples. At that point, they had been with Jesus for at least eighteen months, and now He is calling them to a new level of involvement and development. When Jesus chose the twelve apostles (Luke 6:12–16), He had been investing in them for two and a half years. Understanding the chronology of Jesus’s life helps us to understand how He developed His disciples. This book explores this chronology to identify disciple-making Jesus style.

But perhaps the greatest roadblock that keeps people from studying the life of Christ as their model for disciple-making is an underlying assumption that few people will openly state. It goes like this: *I really can’t do what Jesus did. He was God. I can’t do what God does!* One young man said to me after a recent training event, “Dr. Spader, you state over and over again that we should ‘do what Jesus did.’ While I like what you are saying, my problem is simply this: He was God and I’m not!”

I appreciated this young man’s honesty. His concern is one I’ve heard before. However, his objection is rooted in a faulty view of the real Jesus. It has been my experience in North America (not so much in other parts of the world) that many Christians imagine Jesus to be some sort of Superman. He may *appear* to be a human—a Clark Kent by day—but this humanity is a disguise. In actual fact, Jesus is a caped wonder, a superhero with superpowers. This is poor theology! Jesus was no super man. He was *fully* human. And that distinction is critical.

If we believe that Jesus was superhuman, we may likewise conclude that it is therefore impossible to do what He did.

Paul did not view Jesus in this way. He understood Jesus as a very real person, set in time and space. He understood both His humanity and deity and told us that this Jesus, the real Jesus of the Bible, is the Jesus that we are commanded to imitate. We are commanded to “walk as He walked” (1 John 2:6). We are to follow the very pattern of His life that He so powerfully modeled to the first-century disciples, the pattern they so clearly recorded in the Gospels, under the influence of the Holy Spirit. “That which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched,” John wrote, “this we proclaim” (1 John 1:1). I love how Philippians 2:5 says it: “think the same way that Christ Jesus thought” (CEV) or “think and act like Christ Jesus” (EXB).

In the next chapter, I want to begin to explore a critical aspect of the “real Jesus.” It’s important that we discuss this aspect before we move on to talk about Jesus’s model for disciple-making, because a wrong view of Jesus will lead to a misunderstanding of disciple-making. I’m convinced that you can’t get to know that real Jesus until you understand both His deity and His humanity. His deity is profound. Jesus *is* God Himself. But the reality that Jesus “became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” adding humanity to His deity, adds a whole new dimension to the real Jesus (John 1:14). We cannot possibly “think and act” just like Jesus if we only understand the message of Jesus. We cannot even “think and act” just like Jesus if we understand both the message and methods of Jesus. In order to “walk *as* He walked” (1 John 2:6) and “do what Jesus did” (John 14:12) we must understand the real Jesus who walked on this planet over 2,000 years ago. To “think and act” like the real Jesus, we must clearly understand His full humanity. In the next chapter we will begin to explore that profound mystery.

PONDERINGS

1. How do you react to the author’s personal journey of moving from the message to the methods to the very model of Jesus’s life? Have

you found anything similar in your own Christian journey? How has your understanding of Jesus developed as you've matured as a Christian?

2. Look up Philippians 2:5 in several different translations (the simplest way to do this is on a website such as BibleGateway.com). In the space below, write out two or three translations of this verse that impact you especially. What do you find interesting or challenging about this verse of Scripture?

3. What could happen in a person's life if she fully lived out this verse? What does the context of Philippians 2 tell us about how to do this?

