Symmetry
Fixing Broken Patterns for Kids in Crisis

By Dave Rahn, Ph.D.

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This book uses a not-so-common word as its title—“Symmetry.” And among the many excellent synonyms for this elegant word is my favorite—“Kindred.” It’s fitting that I’ve been given the honor of writing my first-word thoughts about symmetry for a youth ministry book written by Dave Rahn, because we are kindred spirits. There is symmetry in our relationship. I don’t mean that we share the same passion for the Cubs (the popularity of baseball perplexes me) or that we run in the same circles (a lot of his people have more letters before and after their name than my people do) or that we like the same foods (I doubt that Dave eats a mash-up of yogurt/fruit/granola every day for lunch).

No, what makes Dave and I kindred spirits is that, simply, we’re both ruined by Jesus and ruined for Jesus.

If you’re looking for true kindred spirits in life, start talking about Jesus as he really is, then watch how others respond. I remember the first time I walked into the church that, later, I’d serve for more than a decade as an elder. We sat near the back, because that’s what you do when you’re “trying out” a new church. A few minutes into the pastor’s sermon, he started to describe Jesus. But he had to stop midstream, because his emotions welled up so strongly that his tears were getting in the way of his tongue. And that was enough for me. I knew that Tom Melton, that pastor, was a kindred spirit. We’ve been friends ever since…

And I know one thing about the experience you’re about to have as you plunge into this excellent and prophetic book—you will know if you’re a kindred spirit with Dave, as I am. Because the core of this book is a siren call to a stripped-down pursuit of Jesus, in life and in ministry. Unlike a lot of “ministry strategy” books, Dave is not “loading more burdens on our backs,” a charge Jesus leveled at the Pharisees. No, his “stripped-down” pursuit is a concrete description—he’s inviting us to be naked before Jesus so we can be naked before others (so to speak).

Jesus often said uncomfortable things—things like “for those who have ears to hear.” He meant that some would be captured and gripped and ruined by what he
had to say, and some wouldn’t. This book often had me on the edge of my seat—my prayer is that your response is kindred…

Rick Lawrence has been editor of GROUP Magazine for 27 years, and he’s the author of many books, including Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry.
Acknowledgements

The inspiration for this book has come from the Lord Jesus’ loving, persistent nudging over many years where I have alternated between research, reflection, prayer, conversation, disciple-formation and teaching. I’ve been obsessed with the conviction that how we practice life and ministry is not meant to be as complicated as we’ve made it.

My direct and indirect participation in the front lines work of Youth for Christ has offered me, most consistently, the windows of hope and transformation that drove me to this ambitious problem-solving adventure. To the many YFC heroes around the world, thanks for your faithfulness and efforts every day. And to Dan Wolgemuth, our YFC president, and the members of our national Board and Cabinet, thanks for an assignment that’s rich and support that makes this the best season of my life and ministry. May the Father be pleased with our work.

More specifically, I have been privileged to work with my talented son-in-law, Jake Bland, and his team on this project. Thanks to Barry, Ryan, and the gang at Whiteboard, especially, for helpful feedback along the way. And thanks, too, to Alison Joy Bland, Jake’s lovely wife and my keen-eyed daughter. At the moment she first read an early draft and pronounced herself “hooked” I knew that this was a book worth writing.

We road-warriors need to figure out quickly who gives us life during our travels. Rick Lawrence has become such a friend and ally. His work has often inspired me, but never more than his love for Jesus. I’m glad there was no video captured of the moment I read the email where he agreed to edit my book; old men like me should never be seen dancing with so little regard for our dignity! Rick made this book so much better by applying the skills of his craft and, even more, by engaging the material as a fellow brother in Christ and servant of the One True King.

New friends and long-time friends were pressed into reading early drafts and offered me the kind of encouragement that’s like saying “sic ’em” to a dog. I’m very grateful for their contributions. And to the graduates of Huntington University’s MA in
Youth Ministry Leadership, you will quickly recognize the polished forms of early seeds of thought that were often tested in the classroom with you all. Thanks.

One of my highest values is authenticity. So it stands to reason that my long-suffering wife, Susie, helps me try to bake the ideas and words of these pages into my life. The extra treat of this season of life has been for my son, Jason, his wife (Whitney) and two children (Brigham and Preslee) to live in our home while they’re building their own. To say that they aided me by reminding me often about what matters most is an understatement. Thanks, family and fellow home-dwellers, for all the love.

Above all, please accept this offering, Lord Jesus. May my work bring you a small portion of the glory you deserve.
**INTRODUCTION**

Simple. Nimble. Prevailing. Essentially faithful. Taken together, these words describe the sort of ministry that can equip God’s people to thrive anywhere, even when planted near the gates of hell.

That’s what could be. But in far too many places the work of God has operated in uncoordinated isolation, without benefit of synergy or symmetry. We can collectively report pockets of excellence. In fact, my fear is that are able to cite just enough stories of fruitfulness to keep the existing ministry machinery humming along. We’re working hard and getting a lot done—surely that’s good enough, isn’t it?

No, it’s not.

In America, at least, we are not yet the prevailing Church that Jesus expects us to be. I know this because the youth outreach wing of God’s mission is in desperate need of reinforcements. And I suspect there are many other ministry emphases close to the heart of Jesus that could claim this same need.

My purpose in writing this book is to describe the kind of symmetrical ministry that matters everywhere. It’s a first, foundational offering to the Big Answer discussions we must begin to have. If I offer solutions that work only for the cause of youth evangelism, I will be guilty of contributing to the same pervasive silo-dwelling approaches that currently hamstring the Body of Christ. The best thing we can do to offer the exclusive hope of Jesus Christ to kids who are stuck in crises and desperate for rescue is to do whatever it takes to help us all get our collective act together.

Nobody invited Youth for Christ to step into this space. But we’ve concluded our greatest hope for teenagers exceeds the wildest dreams we have for our YFC capacity.
So we pray for an elegant symmetry in how Christians look and what they do. The current background image we collectively provide for the gospel is anything but irresistible.

We want to live out our Christ-following so that anyone, anywhere can experience an accurate representation of Jesus. As was true over 2,000 years ago, we want God’s people to be a force to be reckoned with.

We can’t keep working hard with teenagers and pretend that others will handle the big challenges of a sleepy Church. It’s only as we collectively become awakened to the Holy Spirit that the kids we seek to reach in Youth for Christ will get their greatest opportunity to be transformed by Jesus.

Symmetry is a launching pad for the conversation we hope to provoke for this bodacious cause. Ultimately, we want to incite Christians everywhere to more faithfully follow Jesus. To look more like Jesus than we do. To mirror him in thought, word, and deed. To provide symmetrical evidence of his love and truth and grace everywhere in the world. Our Symmetry strategies are dedicated to taking big swings with people who can make a difference for Christ and the kids he loves in their communities.

Kids who live in chronic crises are typically not on the radar for local churches. Their perilous predicaments tempt us to come up with inventive rather than faithful solutions. But creativity doesn’t guarantee the outcomes we care most about, and only God keeps every promise. As it turns out, my specialized work with teenagers is no different in its essence than any other ministry focus with any other people group.

We don’t want to use this Symmetry platform to lobby for kid-specific solutions. What we want is to contribute a framework to pursue answers we all need. Once you’ve wrestled with our offering, we’ll need a host of problem-solvers to weigh in with your insights. There is much vetting to do as we attack our biggest problems together. Ultimately, we’re pretty sure a more trim, fit, and muscular Body of Christ will benefit kids in chronic crisis.
A Question of First Importance
Jesus First, Jesus Clearly

We can tell a lot about people by listening to the questions they ask.

My grandson, Brigham, just turned 3 years old. His capacity to ask questions would be very impressive if it wasn’t so exhausting. I did not realize how many variations there are to the simple question, “Pop, what are you doing?”

Even at this early age Brig seems to have figured out how to ask set-up questions. “What are you eating?” is never as innocent as it sounds. It will soon be followed up with, “Can I have some?” just as the inquiry about what I’m up to will surely lead to “Can I help?”

I love these exchanges. They give me a window into how Brigham is thinking and what’s important to him. My grandson is learning how to use questions to clarify his path forward. If he discovers, for instance, that I’m nibbling on some cauliflower he will likely drop the follow-up question. But when I’m popping cherry tomatoes he will persist with his probing until he can snack along with me. He’s using questions to sort out what he wants.

Jesus Christ was the master of using questions to entice people to reveal what they want. For example, when he asked religious leaders if the law permitted healing on the Sabbath while a man with a deformed hand stood hopefully nearby, Jesus exposed the hard hearts of the rule-keepers to everyone. When he asked a man who had been an invalid for 38 years if he wanted to get well, onlookers might have wondered whether such an obvious question was necessary. But Jesus knew there’s a certain comfort in predictability, even when the daily routine centers around our disabilities. In fact, the question prompted not a resounding “Yes!! I want to be healed!!” response from the sick man, but a rehearsed script of excuses for why he’d been stuck in his mess for so long. Jesus customized his response to heal both the man’s infirmity and his learned helplessness by telling him to take a long-overdue next step.
There are rules of engagement at work in social gatherings that suggest proper question-asking is a way to make polite conversation. These sorts of questions are usually harmless ways to occupy time and make nice. Some topics, like religion and politics, are supposed to be avoided because they can tap into passions that may introduce discomfort into an otherwise pleasant social experience. Jesus would not have abided these expectations well. Every word was intentional, and his purpose was linked to what matters most in life. Jesus used questions to get to the heart of the matter. Or, more specifically, he used questions to get inside our hearts.

Perhaps no other question asked by Jesus was as important to his mission as this one: “But who do you say I am?”. Jesus tossed this curveball question to his closest followers, after he asked them to report what others were saying about his identity. These 12 disciples had been watching Jesus from the very beginning, and had been chosen to join his inner-circle nearly a year earlier. Their formation was a crucial aspect of Jesus’ mission on earth. This was the team that would give birth to the Church, a movement of dedicated Christ-followers that will ultimately spread to every corner of the earth. Through Jesus’ people, the whole world will be invited to know God—his love for them, and how to receive the life he offers through Christ. The “right answer” to this question was a matter of some urgency for Jesus’ master-plan.

Jesus’ identity has always been the cornerstone of the Christian faith. The gospel-writer John points to this purpose in his writing: “The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name.” Throughout John’s gospel we “taste and see” what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah: he claims to be the Son of Man, the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, both the Gate and the Good Shepherd for his sheep, the Resurrection and the Life, the Way, the Truth and the Life, and the True Grapevine to our branches.

No wonder Peter’s answer to his question received such an enthusiastic response from Jesus. And after Peter affirmed that he was, indeed, the Messiah, “… Jesus replied, ‘You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you
that you are Peter (which means ‘rock’), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.’”

Significantly, what Peter and the disciples thought they understood about the Messiah needed some correction. Jesus began to clarify “from then on” that suffering and death were ahead of him. This prediction must have been very confusing for the disciples. They expected that the Messiah would swoop into their occupied land and deliver them from oppressive Roman rule. It was, as we can imagine, not easy to get their minds around the notion that Jesus’ Kingdom was not of this world. The far-reaching nature of Jesus’ identity claims are confirmed during the interrogation that led to his crucifixion on our behalf:

Then the high priest stood up before the others and asked Jesus, “Well, aren’t you going to answer these charges? What do you have to say for yourself?” But Jesus was silent and made no reply. Then the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus said, “I AM. And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God’s right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest tore his clothing to show his horror and said, “Why do we need other witnesses? You have all heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?” “Guilty!” they all cried. “He deserves to die!”

As a result of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and resurrection from death, we can experience God’s Kingdom as an ever-present internal benefit, tucked safely in our hearts where Jesus reigns without regard for any political landscape. When Jesus is in charge, we can live as Kingdom children to bring God’s light and hope where there is only man’s darkness and despair. Even today, nothing can separate us from Jesus. This makes perfect sense if Jesus is who he says he is. But it makes no sense to those who don’t know him as their Lord and Savior. After all, the one who fashioned all things can easily operate from within any one of the dimensions he created to bring about his purposes. The early church reduced this question of Jesus’ identity to the simplest of confessions: Jesus is Lord. Jesus told Peter that this special knowledge was a gift from God. Paul told the Corinthians that no one could confess that Jesus is Lord without the Holy Spirit supplying that revelation. One day everyone will be compelled to admit this truth about Jesus. And, arguably, the introduction of sin into the world
was ushered-in by Adam’s unwillingness to live according to God’s instructions, under obedience. The essence of sin is to assert, *I am Lord of this moment.* Put another way, when we sin we are essentially denying that Jesus is Lord of this moment.

The question of Jesus’ identity as Lord is the defining question of history. It’s the decision-making anatomy for how everyone who ever lived has come to sin and be estranged from God. And it proclaims an exclusive pathway to the rescue we either crave or existentially need.\(^\text{13}\) It projects what a timeless future will look like as Jesus takes charge of his creation.

If there ever was a universal question of first importance it is this: *Who do you say Jesus is?*

Most young people in America, at least, seem to be quite confused on this issue. Findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion indicate that 60 percent of 13-17 year-old teenagers believe that “many religions may be true.”\(^\text{14}\) Princeton Professor Kenda Dean summarizes the NSYR findings in a disturbing way for all who consider Jesus’ Lordship preeminently important:

*Three out of four American teenagers claim to be Christians, and most are affiliated with a religious organization—but only half consider it very important, and fewer than half actually practice their faith as a regular part of their lives...the hot lava core of Christianity—the story of God’s courtship with us through Jesus Christ, of God’s suffering love through salvation history and especially through Christ’s death and resurrection, and of God’s continued involvement in the world through the Holy Spirit—has been muted in many congregations, replaced by an ecclesial complacency that convinces youth and parents alike that not much is at stake. In the view of American teenagers, God is more object than subject, an Idea but not a companion. The problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people focused primarily on “folks like us”—which, of course, begs the question of whether we are really the church at all.*\(^\text{15}\)

For many Christian traditions, the question of Jesus’ identity has been essentially reduced to a membership test—a creedal correct-answer that has little practical significance except to recall during life’s big moments (weddings, baby dedications and funerals). Is it any surprise that a graduate researcher found that 58 percent of the
369 involved youth she surveyed from her particular mainline denomination’s student ministries believe someone can be a Christian without believing in Jesus?\textsuperscript{16} Whatever else is going on in these churches, too many young people are not responding to Jesus as Lord of their lives.

Knowing that Jesus is Lord is far more than a question of theological orthodoxy, though it is that. It also asserts itself as \textit{operationally significant} for the practice of ministry in any circumstance, anywhere. I’ve never heard someone openly admit that Jesus’ Lordship is irrelevant to the ministry they lead. But plenty of folks slip into default ministry patterns that, for all practical purposes, treat Jesus as the Church’s figurehead, not the Head of the Body. We often behave as though Jesus is not actually holding all things together, coordinating all things toward outcomes that serve his purposes.\textsuperscript{17}

I was recently involved in a conversation that exposed the practical downside of this pre-eminent theological reality. We were exploring what it means to launch ministry that can be sustained. Driven by the desire to be good ministry stewards, we recognized how damaging it is when start-ups fail. Resources are squandered. The next attempts to re-establish new gospel work in the same territory face a steeper incline than did the first. In the midst of this conversation, someone observed that if the Holy Spirit doesn’t preserve our work, everything is lost anyway. After this was acknowledged to be true, we pressed on with other practical considerations, as if Jesus’ Lordship is a mysterious wildcard we can do nothing about. Is there no activity on our part that increases the likelihood that we can benefit from the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit?

Of course there is. We can recalibrate our activity so that we are submissively aligned to Jesus as Lord of everything. Discernment takes on strategic importance because we believe the risen Christ-as-Shepherd speaks in a voice we can recognize, and can lovingly guide us. Our attentive obedience ensures that Jesus’ commands circulate as our lifeblood, delivering the fruit we cannot produce unless we branches stay connected to the Vine. We love like Jesus taught us to, especially moving to seek and save those who are lost, poor, and oppressed. There are truly tangible steps we practice when we embrace Jesus’ Lordship as a more important reality than any other.
Our first ministry instincts don’t seem to center around this truth. Instead, earnest ministry in Jesus’ name functionally denies his Lordship every time we…

...treat sin lightly, as if it’s not constantly a factor.
...trust programs to accomplish what matters most.
...target people for work without regard for their gifts.
...track eternally inconsequential outcomes to give us direction.
...tackle God’s vision without considering all of God’s assets.
...test our effectiveness against timelines of our choosing.
...trade excellent planning for fervent praying.
...think our efforts are more important than they are.
...think our efforts are less important than they are.

The current state of organizing God’s work on earth includes a sociological footprint that can name 40,000 different church denominations! This does not account for tangible local church and para-church ministries, each of which is perfectly capable of trotting off in their own direction at any time. The sheer number of ways we can act as spastic body parts at any particular moment is staggering. Answers defy organizational responses. And the issue is hardly specific to young people.

But if we submit again to Jesus as Lord...BOOM! We’re back in the game, supernaturally coordinated into a beautiful, symmetrical, synergistic Body. The discouraging complexity of our organizational challenges are more than met by Jesus’ immeasurable capacity to hold all things together. We simply need to answer the most important question of history, just as Christians throughout the ages have done and will continue to do.

Jesus had a conversation with Peter that helps clarify the ministry posture he intends for us. After receiving his own customized leadership assignment and being warned about the difficulties ahead, Peter ventured to ask what would happen to his inner-circle friend, John. Jesus’ words are telling:

“I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don’t want to go.” Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, “Follow me.”
Peter turned around and saw behind them the disciple Jesus loved—the one who had leaned over to Jesus during supper and asked, “Lord, who will betray you?” Peter asked Jesus, “What about him, Lord?”

Jesus replied, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? As for you, follow me.”

18 Peter discovered that his life and work were based on a “need-to-know” reality, as he followed Jesus. And in perfectly symmetrical form, the leadership instructions he received were no different than what he first heard from Jesus as a hard-working fisherman. Every one of us who seeks to do ministry can confidently start here.

Jesus is Lord.

Follow him.

Details available upon request, in the pages ahead.
The Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma was a rough place to grow up. Gang violence was common ever since the LA-based Crips got a foothold and started to make crack cocaine readily available. There was even a wild-West-style street shootout between gang members and Army Rangers in 1989. Neighborhoods don’t forget that sort of experience.

It’s one of the most racially diverse neighborhoods in the country, with a third of Hilltop’s residents living below the poverty line. That’s where Patrick—friends called him *Paddy*—grew up. He fit right in. Paddy’s older, bigger brother was a brute, picking on him relentlessly while they were kids. It wasn’t long before Paddy felt like he didn’t matter to anyone. Insignificant. Crises at home had a way of calling attention to everything and anyone *but* Paddy.

His dad was very sick. Paddy had hatched a plan in his head. If he stayed away from home he figured that his dad’s illness would suspend in time. Instead of dying at any moment, his dad wouldn’t pass if Paddy wasn’t around.

It’s not a bad survival strategy to hit the streets for hours when stuff at home is so volatile. You could count on friends and, in a weird way, if you all got in trouble together, it didn’t really matter. Paddy got in a lot of trouble.

By the time he started his freshman year in high school, Paddy was drifting the wrong direction and he knew it. He was a good athlete, so sports provided some escape from the drama at home. But he wasn’t exactly making good decisions and when his actions led a friend to press charges against him, the juvenile justice system cracked down, ordering him into community service. Before long he was caught stealing, which led to another round of community service.

There was an incident when local gang members did a slow drive-by and flashed their AK-47s at Paddy, his brother, and some other friends. It was the extra motivation
he needed to change things up. His first two years of high school were bad enough that Paddy was looking for another solution. One that would work.

He started showing up at neighborhood activities led by Youth for Christ staff. Bible studies, camp, weekly Sunday night worship, and other events. It fit Paddy’s pattern to dive in and keep busy, so he was trying to figure out whether his life could get better by following Jesus. And he was trying to figure out exactly how to follow Jesus without, of course, actually following Jesus.

After about six months of circling among those who lived for Christ, the possibility of a new life of faith started to make sense. Paddy got hungry to learn more, asking a bunch of questions and digging deeper. He was really excited to discover that his life could be bigger than he ever imagined, even while living in Hilltop. His search gave him real hope that eventually things would get better.

Jess and his wife were the first people to show him what following Jesus could look like. They seemed to grasp right away that Paddy and his brother were broken—more victims than culprits. They had a marriage unlike any Paddy had ever seen, and their love seemed to spill over to the brothers. While they were at Jess’ home one night there was a breakthrough as they all prayed together. In Jess, Paddy could see how somebody who was all-in for Jesus lived.

When life seemed to get better for him during his junior year of high school, he concluded that his sports successes and better friendships were finally working for him. Even his dad’s health was improving. Then in August before his senior year, just after football camp, Paddy’s dad died suddenly. He was shaken to his foundations, and blamed God instantly: “What more do I have to do?” he demanded of the Lord.

Paddy reverted to his earlier strategies of escape, logging 95 school absences during his senior year. He nearly gave up on school, except he could sweet-talk his teachers into extending his projects, which kept him from failing. Friends resurfaced and he began partying all the time with drugs and alcohol.

As far as Paddy was concerned, he was ready to forget God and move on. The Lord wasn’t looking out for him, so he wasn’t about to give God the time of day.

Then one night he bumped into Myron, another YFC leader. Paddy felt the need to blurt out a short summary of what was going on with him: “I’m sorry, but I’m done
with God.” Myron listened carefully and started to explain to Paddy that God still loved him. During that conversation Paddy broke down, confessing his sins and weeping hard. The hardening exteriors of his heart were pierced by the Spirit of God. Almost instantly he experienced an inner peace that fortified him for the uphill battle to turn things around and repair his broken life.

With only three months until high school graduation, Paddy worked feverishly to get his grades up. In spite of every friend (but one) thinking they were stupid, he and his brother, both decided to make Jesus the Lord of their lives. It wasn’t easy. As Paddy says: “We never had money to do anything. There was always a force telling us that there was no way to win. It was like a sixteen-round fight with Tyson, but somehow we hung in there.”

Paddy soon got baptized and started sharing his story about Jesus’ rescue wherever he could. He and his brother found opportunities to serve within YFC while they continued to grow in their knowledge of God’s Word. When he was only 18 years old he traveled to Cambodia with other Christians, staying there for more than five weeks and telling lots of people about Jesus. He describes himself as “on fire with God, ready to storm the gates.”

After helping out with a middle school ministry, he and his brother kept looking for ways to make a difference in young kids’ lives. Soon enough they were volunteer basketball coaches. Another school principal recognized that these two were great young leaders and enlisted them to mentor his students. After three months of working for free a few hours each day, Paddy and Justin (older, once-brutish brother…now best friend and ministry partner) were actually hired to be an influence on the kids of their middle school. By the time the next school year came around the two were even asked to share with all the school staff their strategy for mentoring kids. Their effectiveness at helping middle schoolers from Hilltop make good decisions so they could live up to their undiscovered potential was an asset that was changing the school.

Paddy and Justin know who should get the credit for what they can offer, and they’re not shy about sharing it. “These guys see Christ in us and want it in their schools.”
Life hasn’t become instantly easy for the brothers. They’re trying to start college classes without neglecting their passion for ministry. In fact, Paddy says that “stuff is rocky…we never have enough money.” But he’s quick to add that Christ has been the focus of their hearts. Jesus is supplying them with so much more that “everything else is irrelevant.”

“We’re overcoming and are victorious. Because of Jesus.”

I first met Paddy and Justin at camp where I saw firsthand how the Hilltop kids from their cabin were hanging all over them. Their love for Jesus infected us all. Before the week was over most of the young men they brought to the remote Oregon camp had decided to take a chance on Jesus, much like the brothers did a few years earlier after getting to know Jess, Myron, and others.

These guys inspire me. They’ve hung in there to overcome crises of poverty, violence, education, and family tragedy because Jesus Christ is alive, large, and in charge of their lives. Paddy and Justin figured out that when they answered the big question about who Jesus is, everything else drops into proper perspective. Jesus is their Lord, and they are going to let him handle the details of their lives while they follow him.

Does ministry really have to be more complicated than this?
The first few minutes of a movie need to hook me. I can judge whether I want to purchase a new song by listening to the first 30 seconds. And if the first pages in a book haven’t engaged me I’m likely to set it aside.

I’ll confess that I make a lot of my early book value-judgments based on writing style. If there is artistic craftsmanship at work I enjoy reading and will hang in there just for the pleasure. Every once in a while I recognize that a book offers an important idea or fresh perspective that I need to wrestle with. In those cases I roll up my sleeves and work at reading, tackling it as a discipline that will be good for me.

I’m doing my best to be entertaining, but I’m not trying to write a page-turning novel. This is a book about big ideas. And since you’ve now been exposed to the biggest idea, it’s fair to invite you to consider whether now may be the time for you to move on to other things. Let me make this break-up as pain-free as possible.

It’s you, it’s me.

I’m not interested in pursuing solutions for life and ministry challenges that do not find their origin in the Lordship of Jesus. I’ve been in too many conversations where leaders imagine that they have outgrown Jesus-is-the-answer solutions. I am fatigued when I’m around those who are so eager to be original and impressive that they are dismissive of Jesus. I’m aligning myself with Rick Lawrence’s recent confession. 19 I, too, am bored by everything but Jesus now.

So I’m heading to a private party in the back room of the neighborhood pub. I hope you’ll join me, but be forewarned. This gathering is not for everyone. We’ll confiscate cell phones at the door and ask you to sign a waiver. The conversation from here on out is welcome to all who agree that Jesus is Lord and want to talk more about what that means for life and ministry today.

Those who share this conviction may find their hearts stirred by the Christ-honoring, penetrating, and symmetrical ministry solutions we will explore. I’m going
for the gut of what ails us the most today. Our lives are messed up by the choices we make, the way we squander our time, and disfigured relationships we’ve come to accept as normal. Today’s ministry practices too often bypass these great life needs. They deserve candid scrutiny for the sake of Jesus’ good name and those who suffer most when we’re incompetent.

Here’s a revealing reversal: those who don’t share my passion to elevate Jesus above all else will likely be bored by what follows. To you I say, “Thanks for checking us out, but you should feel free to step away now. No hard feelings.”

God’s people have a formation problem.
We’ve been informed but we’re largely deformed.
Maybe we’ve been malformed…because there’s plenty of evidence that we’ve conformed to the wrong standard.
We are not yet mirror-image reflections of Jesus.
There is not yet symmetrical evidence everywhere of Jesus power to transform us. But there can be.
Reformation is possible. In fact, it’s a certainty.
Because Jesus is Lord.
To know that someone is listening to you carefully is a gift—especially when we believe they’re trying to understand without judgment so they can encourage us in some meaningful way. We feel valued at the very fiber of our being.

The opposite is in play when we’re not listened-to or, worse, we’re willfully ignored. Parents are exasperated when their children hear but choose not to obey. And when we’re not listened-to we feel disrespected.

Now, here’s something that’s tough to write—I don’t listen to my wife as well as I should. I could offer a pile of excuses, most of which have to do with being preoccupied. In the end, my excuses don’t matter; the outcome of my behavior is what matters. Susie too often feels devalued when I choose to hide out inside my head, nurturing some distant thought when, by all appearances, I am present in the room with her.

Listening—and not listening—is a choice.

Lots of voices clamor to influence the steady stream of choices we face. Technological advances have opened up possibilities that were mere fantasy through most of human history. We’ve invented ways to go faster, travel farther, and acquire more information than ever. Our options are overwhelming us. As a result, one test of modern life-management is how efficient we are in sorting through the spam. We can’t pay attention to everything, so we’ve learned to ignore a lot of what comes our way. Howard Snyder helped me to understand how we’ve wandered into this mess.

After presenting a ground-breaking paper at the first International Congress on World Evangelization, Snyder went on to develop his thoughts into a book. His intention was to help us distinguish between the timeless, universal, and essential nature of the Church and the flexible forms and structures we create to organize as the Church. While much of the book follows the outline of his original paper, Snyder’s
last chapter includes a forecast of the future. He predicted a society that over-values what goes on inside our own heads or hearts—a future where humankind is so consumed with HOW that we don’t care about WHY. Snyder describes the marriage of these two formational forces as “Satan’s dirty trick.” What’s most remarkable is that Snyder pinpointed this tyranny of technique at the expense of wisdom in 1975! Years before personal computers, cell phones, and satellite TV, he asserted that technology is how God’s people would experience a steady assault of distraction. Forty years after his predictions, a preoccupation with self and an infatuation with technological progress explain much of what ails our contemporary church culture.²⁰

Addictive communication and connectivity has infiltrated worldwide social norms—we use our devices like an IV drip, dosing little bursts of identity into our soul’s arteries as if our technologies can help us solve our brokenness. So much is possible that it feels impossible for us navigate our choices with confidence. As a result, life’s first great gift—the gift of choice—has become hijacked by an over-dependence on technology. In the beginning, God gave us clear guidance and the choice to obey.²¹ Our ears have been assaulted with so much noise that we can’t hear the one voice that matters most. Carried away by a technological tsunami, church leaders have been swept into the ministry potential promised by “faster, farther, and more.” We act quickly to seize the moment, setting aside the importance of deep listening to the Lord, who said: “Be still, and know that I am God! I will be honored by every nation. I will be honored throughout the world.”²²

Listening—and not listening—is a choice.

But it’s not as if the deluge of our possibilities is the ultimate reason we’ve lost our ability to hear as Christ’s followers. As Adam’s poor original choice reveals, it only takes one attractive option to make a historically tragic decision. But today’s “new norms” leverage our senses in a new way—and they’re insidiously effective. The noise masks the necessity of choice, hundreds of times a day, in big and small matters. Choices must be made, but they’re lost in the din.
Visitors to Las Vegas will find no wall clocks in the casinos. The business model of every gaming establishment is built on an expectation that gamblers will keep pulling the slot machine arm, or rolling the dice, just one more time. The casino bosses would prefer that none of us recognize how long we’ve been throwing our money away. They’re not preventing us from making wise choices, but they’re definitely not working to help us make careful decisions.

Our ability to choose is a human capacity so commonplace that we regularly fail to recognize it for the fantastic life-gift that it is. Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl anchored his psychiatric theories in the precious gift of choice, making profound observations like this: “Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him-mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp… It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful.”

Of course, kids in crisis haven’t heard about Viktor Frankl. They’re trapped inside a vortex of destruction without a clue that escape is possible. In quiet despair, they believe that the choices they’re allowed have no power to change their hellish conditions. In a certain respect they are right. Strategies that target external circumstances without empowering the inner person cannot succeed.

The cumulative effect of our choices can strengthen or diminish us. Some of us are quicker at making decisions than others. Some are wiser. Ultimately, God’s gift of choice invites the dignity of personal responsibility. That’s why, as our original human story illustrates, it’s so important to seek God’s voice in every choice we make.

In the Garden, before Satan slithers into the picture, God gives Adam explicit instructions: “You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die.” God offers history’s first choices with the built-in accountability of parameters. Adam is not told that he can eat whatever he wants. There are glorious options to choose from, and one to avoid. The consequence of choosing what is forbidden is clear. Most significant, it is God himself who lays out the boundaries for the freedom he gives to his first man-creation.
Arguably, the Lord does not need to articulate what will happen to Adam and Eve if they choose to rebel. Our Creator surely could’ve responded to them as parents have done throughout the ages, when their kids ask why they can’t do something: Because I said so! In God’s first interaction with man he underscores his commitment to give us the information we need to make the right decision.

Even today we don’t have a knowledge problem—we have an acknowledge problem. Like Adam and everyone we know, we routinely fail to seek the Lord in our decision-making. We have a tough time admitting we need help. Such is the curse of sin. We functionally believe that our choices do not require the input of the One who holds all things together. If Jesus’ Lordship means anything at all, nothing could be further from the truth.

This reality first rocked me some years ago, when I was trying to navigate some choices about how to spend my time. Competing priorities surfaced. As a young father I knew that my children needed my steady presence in their lives. But it also seemed that the Lord had given me gifts and a calling that required a lot of travel. Much of the counsel I was hearing seemed to elevate my family obligations above all else. But I was uneasy about how casually such judgments were made in the evangelical sub-culture I knew best. How would my own children recognize Jesus’ Lordship in my life if I consistently made family-related decisions on autopilot? Did the Lord always want me on the sidelines, cheering my son or daughter? Would that guarantee that they grew up to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and mind? Were there no ministry opportunities strategic enough in God’s master plan that my own gifts were required, even if it meant missing important family moments?

As much as I have gained from Covey’s “seven habits of high effective people,” they were no help with this dilemma. Neither did I get clarity from using an old-school legal pad to write out the pro’s and con’s of each schedule choice. My breakthrough came when I returned to ground-zero.

Jesus is Lord.

He alone would be the judge of whether I was a great father to my children, and it’s to Jesus alone that I’m accountable for my gifts and ministry. When I dreamt about the outcomes most important to me, I realized that only Jesus could be trusted with
my kids’ future. Everything that I also hoped might happen as a result of my ministry was up to the Holy Spirit.

To summarize:
1) I didn’t know what to do.
2) I couldn’t guarantee that what I chose to do would turn out like I wanted.
3) These were very important decisions, each affecting the other.
4) Jesus is Lord.

Why not ask Jesus to guide me into the right choice, every time? I wasn’t looking for a decision-making principle from the Lord so that I could wave him off after I’ve been seasoned by enough experiences. I need Jesus’ direct counsel, all the time and everywhere, forever! From that time forward I resolved to quit making decisions without consulting him. I’m not too proud to admit that if Jesus doesn’t lead me, I’m in deep trouble.

To be honest, I still battle the pride and underlying addiction to control that keeps me from asking Jesus for direction.

Listening—and not listening—is a choice.

The biblical condition of hard-heartedness is linked to our ability to hear, listen, and understand what the Lord is saying. It’s what happens inside us when pride is left unchecked. When Jesus explains to the disciples why he uses parables, he frames this teaching device as a necessary fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy—hardened hearts prevent people from listening, responding, and (ultimately) being healed by the Lord. Elsewhere this same prophecy is referenced by Jesus to describe the crowds in Jerusalem on the eve of his execution, and by Paul when he describes why so many Jews would not trust in Jesus, and later when he makes his evangelistic appeal to Roman Jews.

Four different Scripture writers record the same sentence in eight locations: “Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.” In addition, a close variation is repeated for each of the seven churches addressed by Jesus’ revelation to John: “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.” This repetition alone should be enough for us to take notice that there’s something important at stake in our choice to listen, or not.
The ability to hear from the living Lord Jesus is a privilege granted to those who will treat his words with the honor and respect they deserve. Understand, it’s not our right to hear from the Lord; it’s a gift. Our submission to him as Lord is our determined commitment to follow and obey what we’re about to hear. It’s when we say “Yes, Lord” before we even begin to seek him in our choices that we receive his guidance. But pride and control-addiction keep us from this posture of listening to Jesus as we move through life.

Nothing reveals the true condition of my heart as much as my eagerness to listen, learn, and submit. I’ve noticed, for example, that a flash of anger immediately hardens my heart. It’s like a superhero transformation—or, rather, a morphing into a super-villain. Until my anger cools I’m Pride Man, ready to assert myself anywhere and everywhere, with about as much self-control as a tornado. And that’s not, ultimately, who I want to be. Thankfully, the Lord Jesus knows that.

Does this reality have relevance to urban teenagers who’ve known nothing but violence their entire lives? Absolutely. And I’ve seen evidence of the same relevance in the lives of millionaires hacking away on the golf course.

Sometimes life crushes the pride right out of us. Such was the condition of the Israelites after they’d been captive exiles for a while. Under the pain of slavery, God had their attention. He gave them instructions for how to experience his deliverance. Notice the practicality of the Lord’s guidance, the warning against other voices that could lead them to poor choices, and how often prayer is included in God’s direction (underlining is my own).

This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: “Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.”

This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let your prophets and fortune-tellers who are with you in the land of Babylon trick you. Do not listen to their dreams, because they are telling you lies in my name. I have not sent them,” says the LORD.
This is what the LORD says: “You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you,” says the LORD. “I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land.”

You claim that the LORD has raised up prophets for you in Babylon. But this is what the LORD says about the king who sits on David’s throne and all those still living here in Jerusalem—your relatives who were not exiled to Babylon. This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: “I will send war, famine, and disease upon them and make them like bad figs, too rotten to eat. Yes, I will pursue them with war, famine, and disease, and I will scatter them around the world. In every nation where I send them, I will make them an object of damnation, horror, contempt, and mockery. For they refuse to listen to me, though I have spoken to them repeatedly through the prophets I sent. And you who are in exile have not listened either,” says the LORD.30

This same pattern of practical direction, alert warnings about bad influences, and encouragement to seek the Lord Jesus is also common in Paul’s letters. Woven into his instructions on how to behave to Ephesian Christians are discernment directives: “Carefully determine what pleases the Lord... so be careful how you live... don’t act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do... be filled with the Holy Spirit... give thanks for everything... pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion... stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.”31

With such a clear biblical imperative for seeking the Lord’s input in our decision-making, why is it that so many Christians fail to practice prayerful discernment in their daily routines? If Jesus is our Lord, why can’t we expect to find symmetry wherever there are Christ’s followers—wouldn’t we expect our “norm” to be characterized by listening prayers that fuel choices that, in turn, result in bringing glory to our Lord Jesus? Even more disturbing—what’s going on when ministry leadership fails to exhibit this Christ-like pattern?

I have a theory.
I’ve already focused how the noise of many voices can infiltrate our heads to steer us away from the Lord’s wisdom. I’ve also pointed out that we’re still battling with fundamental pride that makes guarding self-interests our default posture. So we will, at best, face daily internal battles to want to seek Jesus. And when we do break free and live out of the captive desires of our heart, we can yet be easily distracted.

How great is it that our Lord Jesus understands all this! “For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.” One of the extraordinary benefits we gain from God’s in-the-flesh tour on earth is that Jesus recognizes—and speaks to—the relentless nature of our struggle. It is Luke’s carefully written gospel that gives us a key word: “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me.” The genius of manna as a daily provision was that God could weave humility and trust back into the character-fabric of his people before self-sufficiency could unravel it. No wonder Jesus instructs us to ask the Lord for our daily bread and not worry about tomorrow. We need to take heart-softening medicine every day. There is certainly a point where our brilliant long-range plans become monuments to our hubris.

Of course, Satan is our active Enemy in this process. When he secures a foothold inside our hardened hearts, he’s a tactical genius at guiding us away from clear-headed, Jesus-seeking decision-making. Sometimes he will fog-up our memories, challenging the very words of God, as he did in the Garden with Adam and Eve. Often he will simply distract us. Apparently, we are not naturally a well-focused species. If we were trout in a stream, our attraction to shiny objects would land us in a fisherman’s ice chest before noon.

We don’t have a chronic problem with our life-size desire to live under Jesus’ Lordship. Our confessions are real and heart-deep and they anchor our ability to make moral judgements—however theoretical. I investigated this cause-and-effect through my doctoral research on how we make value decisions, undertaken at Purdue.

In January of 1991 I interviewed 80 ministry/religion majors from four different Christian colleges in the Midwest. In each case I presented the students with short descriptions about 20 behaviors, systematically moving through a grid of questions to
discover more about how they think. By the time I started to analyze the data I had collected 1,600 open-ended explanations to go along with thousands more “yes/no” responses.

What the persons in my study did not know was that other research had established that even young, school-age children were in agreement about whether some behaviors should be considered wrong in every situation. There is empirical evidence to show we humans agree that no one should ever murder, rape, steal or bring harm to someone else. But the list of these “universal wrongs” is actually quite small, and does not account for the more complex decisions that are characteristic of those who follow Jesus as their Lord.

Here’s one of the scenarios I developed for these interviews: A woman refuses to forgive a man for the damage he’s done to her reputation, even though there is real sorrow and forgiveness has been asked for. I then asked if it was wrong for this woman to refuse forgiveness. Was it always wrong? Were there any conditions, situations or circumstances whereby it would not be wrong? All together, I asked eight questions like this one, and repeated the process for 19 other target issues.

What I verified was that dedicated Christians use a decision-making filter that social scientists have not yet recognized when it comes to how they make judgments about right and wrong. Jesus has made statements that are explicitly clear about what we should or should not do. That was the only evidence these students needed to render their judgments. The statistical analysis I did confirmed that, in their minds, it was as wrong to refuse forgiveness to someone who wronged you as it was to murder, steal or rape.35

Once we confess that Jesus is Lord, we settle many questions about what we should do. But our theoretical knowledge is not sufficient to empower us for real-time, real-world decision-making. What we could do… what we should do… we don’t do. Our sincere commitment to Jesus too often fails to inform the choices we make hundreds of times a day. We’ve been ill-formed in how to make that happen. Some of the credit for our failures should go to the Enemy, who recognizes and exploits our weaknesses in ways we don’t anticipate.
For instance, ministry leaders are often misled by their eagerness to do right in the moments when God’s blessings are greatest. They become so intent on seizing urgent opportunities that they go rogue in their choices, coming up with responses that are self-generated, however well-intended. For example, when Johnny Cash hosted a national TV special to benefit Youth for Christ in the late 70s, the donations flooded into local ministries at an unprecedented level. Eager to expand their missionary reach to unchurched kids, many local leaders made quick hires. Less than a year later they had burned through their influx of cash, had to lay off their new staff and close down promising ministry sites.

Sometimes we assume that the way God has worked in the midst of our past experiences is how he will work again. I have developed particular sermons for a specific audience and been amazed by how the Holy Spirit moved. So, naturally, I delivered the same message to another crowd at a later date. The second version had none of the power of the original. Moses made a similar mistake—when he took the Lord for granted he was denied access to the Promised Land.36

Other times Satan swoops onto the scene of our ministry successes to fuel our addictive thinking, blinding us to how our desire for more of a good thing can lead us away from careful, Spirit-led discernment. Peter, for example, was fresh from the roller-coaster experience of getting Jesus’ identity right and then being rebuked as a hindrance to Jesus’ obedient journey of sacrifice. Luke’s gospel reports that “about eight days later Jesus took Peter, John, and James up on a mountain to pray.” This was to be a memorable field trip.

“Peter and the others had fallen asleep. When they woke up, they saw Jesus’ glory and the two men standing with him. As Moses and Elijah were starting to leave, Peter, not even knowing what he was saying, blurted out, “Master, it’s wonderful for us to be here! Let’s make three shelters as memorials—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” But even as he was saying this, a cloud overshadowed them, and terror gripped them as the cloud covered them.

Then a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to him.”37
God the Father stepped in to slow Peter’s impulsive response on the heels of a holy and powerful experience. We can chuckle about how geeked-up Peter was because, frankly, we would likely be the same way if we were privileged to witness such a vivid scene of Jesus’ Lordship. In our identification with Peter we excuse his blurting eagerness and imagine it to be as harmless as when a two-year old reaches tearfully toward the sky because he wants to play with the moon as his ball (my son did this). The life-changing lesson pressed into Peter’s soul in that moment might be lost on us as we read about what he experienced first-hand: God’s rare, audible instruction. But that doesn’t mean our life and ministry choices have to bewilder us.

**Jesus is Lord.**

**Listen to him.**

Remember, listening—and not listening—is a choice.

Life’s great gift of choice yields immeasurable benefit every time we submit our decisions to our Lord Jesus. When we practice prayer-as-listening we’ll find ourselves more effective with our petitioning prayers. Fruit appears. Evidence attaches itself to our lives as a glorious testimony to Jesus’ goodness, power, and love. If we find our life by losing it, then surrendering each choice to Jesus is how we breathe. We become heart-ready for action, validating the wisdom of Solomon, who said: “Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.”

Prayer-based decision-making should be a universal, symmetrical ministry practice, a micro-tactic that we can expect from one another because Jesus is Lord. It’s a compelling ministry strategy because it seeks to redeem a life-gift common to all of us. The simple strength of the ministry logic should not be missed.

I urge all of my brothers and sisters who are comfortably unacquainted with this discipline to think carefully about the testimonies of kids in this book who were once

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<th>Universal Life Gift</th>
<th>God’s Intent</th>
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<td>choice</td>
<td><em>Every choice made reveals the perfect relationship we have with our Creator.</em></td>
<td><em>Sin infects every aspect of our decision-making.</em></td>
<td><em>The wisdom we need.</em></td>
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Symmetry - Dave Rahn

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consumed by their crises. As it turns out these teenagers have much to teach us. Most significantly, they bring focused resolve to do what Jesus wants them to do. And their commitment is infinitely more important than learning helpful prayer-as-listening techniques. Like any deep value, they find a way to be attentive to the Lord Jesus because they think of it as a necessity. If it’s only a good idea to seek the Lord's input for decision-making, it’s not life-essential; it’s life-optional.

Having said that, willing but untrained novices in Spirit-led discernment could use some instructional assistance. What does it look like to listen carefully to Jesus? There are many helpful aids available from masters far more experienced than me. But I have gained great benefit from the early morning practice of being quiet with coffee in hand, reading a small portion of Scripture, and capturing on paper or e-note what the Lord Jesus inaudibly whispers into my soul about the day ahead. This foothold seems to do two things: 1) it launches me well into the day and 2) it offers a home base of comfort and familiarity for what meets me later in the day. The morning experience of seeking Jesus makes it somehow easier to be attentive to him as the hours unfold.

We make hundreds of choices a day. Daily vigilance (at least!) is required. And that leads us to consider the next great life gift.
Brennon is a college student who’s been unsuccessful at finding summer work. When I asked him what he did each day, he acted a bit embarrassed. Gaming, TV-watching, and finishing an online course pad the hours of his days while he waits for friends to get home from their seasonal jobs. He’s not a slacker; he’ll graduate in three years. But this isn’t the way he hoped to spend his summer.

Jason is a young father of two who heads to work at 4:30 each morning. These early hours don’t bother him because his factory job gives him the chance to pursue his first love as coach of the local high school baseball team. Like most of the 30-year-olds he runs with, he scrambles to meet church and family obligations each week. He and his wife, Whitney, are also stretching themselves to build a house. There’s a new financial burden pressing in, though they’re making good money. Whitney works as a school speech therapist, so summers give her some much-needed catch-up space. With a three-year old and a one-year old, time may be their most precious commodity.

Jim stepped away from an effective public education career so that he could enjoy an active retirement. His teaching and coaching legacy was secured by hours of dedication; he brought the same integrity into his later roles in administration. Now he’s become quite skilled at buying and selling antiques, is refreshed by his tinkering, and spends as much time with loved ones as he wants. But he’s a bit uneasy about whether this is the way he wants to live out his golden years.

Jim’s wife, Kris, built up a successful insurance business over the years. As the opportunities came her way she carefully expanded, always guarding her desire to be a good mom and small-group discipleship leader for her church. Much of her time these days is dedicated to setting up the business for her two sons to take over.

Heath is a young man in his early twenties, with a felony record. In his early high school days he demonstrated the kind of football skills that put him on college
coaches’ watch lists. He began to think of himself as bulletproof, and started to cut corners with as much ease as he cut upfield on a touchdown run. Poor choices cost him his football career and, eventually, landed him in jail. While imprisoned he turned to the Bible and had a profound encounter with the Lord Jesus. His fire and growth in Christ was amazing when he was behind bars. But he’s experienced confusing setbacks after his release from prison, and is struggling to spend his time wisely.

Alison and Jake are a young, mobile couple living on the outskirts of Denver. With family in the Midwest they feel the strain of staying connected to loved ones. A rich community of Christ-followers helps fill their need for support, though they sometimes wonder if they shouldn’t make more time to go deeper with some of these friendships. They’re also trying to embrace their own rhythm as they head into their fifth year of marriage. Jake is a ministry vice-president with lots of travel obligations. Alison has had experience in that ministry and is now trying to launch her own work. He can feel crushed by the number of obligations he faces in a week. She can feel discouraged by the uncertainty of her new adventure. In spite of their different journeys right now, they share a commitment to invest their time in what’s most important. It just takes a lot of effort to figure that out each week.

My wife, Susie, spent much of her working life doing jobs where she could help others and have time to invest in our two kids. For most of that time that meant part-time work in health care or human resources. Now, two years after we moved to a new area, she feels wildly busy, in spite of not being employed. Aging parents in poor health, two young grandkids, and new friends, church, and home all demand attention. (Her husband is also high-maintenance…)

There is perhaps no cleaner indicator of what’s important to us than how we spend our time. Brennon is a young man I’ve been mentoring for two years. Jim and Kris are lifelong friends. I’ve known Heath since he was a baby. Jason and Alison are my adult children; Whitney and Jake their spouses. Susie keeps me sane while I drive her crazy. And all of us seem pinched for or uncertain about how to spend our time. Even Brigham, my grandson, fights for more minutes to play before he has to lay down for his nap.
In God’s original vision for lives that reflect his mission and movement in the world, time was our playground—**it is the second great gift humans receive from our Creator.** In the beginning, God gave us meaningful work and the time to do it. David expressed this in one of his psalms:

“**LORD, remind me how brief my time on earth will be.**
Remind me that my days are numbered—how fleeting my life is.
**You have made my life no longer than the width of my hand.**
My entire lifetime is just a moment to you;
at best, each of us is but a breath."
**We are merely moving shadows,**
and all our busy rushing ends in nothing.
**We heap up wealth,**
not knowing who will spend it.
**And so, Lord, where do I put my hope?**
**My only hope is in you.**”

Notice that David’s appreciation for time included an awareness that he was on the clock. His time was a life-gift that he did not want to squander. David is longing here for a meaningful life, just as we all do, and he is well-aware of our shared propensity to squander what feels like an inexhaustible resource. His only hope for avoiding the tragedy of wasted time, and therefore a wasted life, is his trust in the Lord himself. We can share David’s confidence. Flash back to the creation story—shortly after God introduced the concept of “after.” Now that Adam was free of the dust in his lungs he could breathe, so how would he spend his time? God had already considered the question: "**The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it.**”

If left to our own wandering momentum, we squander life’s second great gift—the gift of time—in meaningless pursuits with vaporous results. But God has no intention of leaving us without direction for our days.

Provided, of course, we confess Jesus as Lord and seek his guidance. Without this qualifier we simply will not be able to recognize his voice. But once the first question is settled in
our hearts, God’s will opens up to us in tangible ways. Paul’s letter to the Romans maps out an exceptionally clear connection between Jesus’ Lordship, our full surrender to him as we make decisions, and our opportunity to experience Jesus’ daily leadership. These instructions are a symmetrical reflection of Paul’s first experience with the risen Christ. “Who are you, lord?” Saul asked. And the voice replied, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” First, settle the question of Jesus’ Lordship. Next listen. Then act in obedience. Repeat.

Symmetry.

Symmetrical art is pleasing to the eye. Repetitive patterns offer balance and reassurance. Symmetry produces an elegant beauty that is boundaried by an intrinsic sense of order—and you can find the heart of the artist within those boundaries. Logic is a form of symmetry. And this book is built upon the logical premise that God has given us a natural progression—an observable pattern—as we move from first following Christ and then to maturing in ministry leadership. The same focus that guides young Christians’ growth is evident as they become active contributors and even leaders in the Body of Christ. What the world can see among Christ’s followers living in the Bronx River Projects should be equally evident among Christians living in Manhattan’s most trendy neighborhoods. How we live and work at the beginning provides us the same essential core we’ll need for a lifetime of faithfulness. “More of the same” is a symmetrical formula.

I have, at various times in my life, worked as a drug store clerk, a warehouse laborer, a junior high camp cabin leader, a youth minister, researcher, author, and college professor. As a teenager I was trying to figure out where to spend my after-school time, what to do on weekends, and how to navigate the turmoil in my relationship with my dad. I no longer struggle with dating anxiety, but I am well aware that I can improve the way I love my wife, adult children and grandkids. My life will likely get more complicated before it becomes simple. But this much I know: At every step along the way, regardless of my job, my age or the people I spend most time...
with, I cannot imagine improving on the following symmetrical pattern of practicing Jesus’ Lordship in my life.

>>> Seek him in every decision. He is unfailingly faithful.

>>> Offer him every moment. He generates unimaginable fruit through me.

>>> Let Jesus love every person through me. His bottomless love secures hope in our hearts.

Before we get too far down the road, let’s recap how symmetry should be evident in this early chapter progression:

• If Jesus is alive, large, and in charge of everything, then there is no question of more personal importance to anyone’s life than to know him as Lord. Patrick’s life in the Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma turned around when he settled this question. Throughout history, millions have demonstrated that Jesus’ Lordship is life-pivotal (Chapters 1 and 2).

• If Jesus is who he says he is, should it not be easy to see evidence of his Lordship in the decisions I make, however great or small? God’s first gift to everyone is choice, and we will be held accountable for what we do with our freedom. If I want to bring glory to Jesus as Lord I need to seek him in prayer for my choices (Chapter 3).

• If Jesus is who he says he is, should it not be easy to see evidence of his Lordship in how I spend my time? Time is the second great gift God has given us, and we will be held accountable for what we do with the moments we’ve been given. If I want to bring glory to Jesus as Lord I need to trust him in obedience with my time (Chapter 4).

• As each of my week’s thousand choices and hundred hours are deliberately offered to the Lord Jesus to do with as he sees best, my heart becomes ready to hear the answer to another important identity question: Who does Jesus say that I am? I bring glory to Jesus when I embrace my true identity and faithfully carry out my assignment in the Body of Christ. Shelby’s story will illustrate what happens when Jesus so consumes us that our old self is lost and our new identity is found in him (Chapters 5 and 6).

• If Jesus is who he says he is, should it not be easy to see evidence of his Lordship in the way I relate to others? God has given us a third great gift, the treasure of our relationships with other people, and we will be held accountable for
how we treat the people who make up the tapestry of our lives. If I want to bring glory to Jesus as Lord I need to love people like Jesus does (Chapter 7).

I have chosen to write these very words, and so I have dedicated my time to a particular task. Because you (and millions more—please indulge my fantasy) are reading these words, you have given me the privilege of directing your time. In the last few paragraphs I’ve guided you into a reflective time-out. I want you to have confidence that your first steps and your next steps are leading you somewhere important. This is why reflection is so important—one subtle way we waste time is to rush ahead of ourselves before we have settled into a “first step, next step” cadence. If I’m a good guide and a decent writer you will appreciate this pause, catch your second wind, and dive back in, ready for wherever I want to take you next.

But I know, of course, that the disparate collection of readers who stand at this place are not homogenous—you are profoundly individuals, each of you, with a vast array of individual eccentricities and proclivities driving your lives. How can I possibly know what will work best for all of you to stay engaged as readers?

I can’t. It’s impossible. Hopeless, really. Why, I would have to know everything about everyone to perfectly leverage my time so that readers can get the most from the moments they spend in these pages. Only Jesus knows that level of detail, and only Jesus can handle that level of complexity.

Exactly.

At the end of the day—this day and every day—I want to be faithful to Lord Jesus with my time. Whether I spend an hour or six hours writing, I can be delivered from the tyranny of an impossible burden when I simply lean into Jesus and use my minutes in artful obedience to the nudge of his Spirit. That means when my grandson swoops into my office, or my wife asks for help, or my phone signals a text-message, or my boss wants to chat, or my grass needs mowed, or my brain needs a break—I embrace my fundamental deferral to Jesus. Because he is my Lord.

Here’s the cool thing when it comes to ministry: I want the exact same thing for you. If you are faithful to Jesus with your moments, what else could I possibly want from you?
Well...since you asked...

- I might want you to buy what I’m selling.
- I might want you to volunteer for the cause I’m leading.
- I might want you to donate money to my ministry.
- I might want you to work on weekends.
- I might want you to cruise with us through a rival gang neighborhood.
- I might want you to join the party and bring a side dish.
- I might want you to show up for jury duty.
- I might want you to drive your car without slowing me down.
- I might want you to watch my video or read my blog.
- I might want you to play a game with me on Facebook.
- I might want you to call more often so I can hear your voice.
- I might want you to join the rest of the family for the holidays.
- I might want you to respond to the email I sent you this morning.
- I might want you to respond to the email I sent you last week.
- I might want you to respond to the email I sent you last month.

Others’ expectations can tempt, frustrate, excite, bewilder, intrigue, and overwhelm us. And when they do, we’re still on the clock. Our life is a noisy cafeteria of options that’s impossible to consume. Without clarity, we’ll gorge on our minutes as we try to do it all.

But we have a choice about which voices to listen to. This is an extraordinary competitive advantage for all of us who recognize Jesus as Lord. He offers a time-management solution to those who trust him with what matters most: “Then Jesus said, ‘Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.’”

Jesus Christ wants to tutor us in how we spend our time. He wants us to learn from him how to handle impossible obligations when we don’t have as many minutes as we think we need. The soul-liberating exchange Jesus is offering is this: We trade our endless chaos of concern for a single gift-burden—faithfulness to him.

The Lord of all creation offers us unusual credentials as he woos us into this time-use apprenticeship. Rather than arguing that he knows us better than we know ourselves, he invites us to trust one who is “humble and gentle at heart.” Jesus
recognizes that this tutorial will require his access to what matters most to us. When such raw nerve endings are exposed, we want our doctors to be careful and our teachers to recognize how much the change can hurt. Jesus understands.

Against the backdrop of time as the second great gift of life is the universal need to spend our minutes wisely. This is no small challenge. If you are an average teenager today who is freshly introduced to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you will likely start your new faith journey with a pattern of devoting more than 50 hours each week to entertainment media. The transformation that Jesus wants to bring will most certainly include a new priority for how to spend a chunk of time that represents roughly half of the weekly hours you’re awake. This is significant retraining and we should not underestimate how difficult it is. I remember a group of high school guys who could not imagine how to spend their Friday and Saturday nights now that their new commitments to Jesus meant they shouldn’t drink and party like they had been doing every weekend.

Sustainable change involves more than not doing something. Where are we to spend our time? In the simplest set of instructions imaginable, we are to follow Jesus. We will never outgrow this directive. And it is our amazing privilege to discover that our Jesus-following always surfaces a meaningful assignment for each of us. It includes meeting the same, shared obligations expected of everyone who trusts in Jesus. But it is also customized specifically for each of us. The earlier passage of Paul’s instruction to the Romans continues with this set of instructions:

Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don’t think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us. Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ’s body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.
Paul himself had a keen sense of his own distinct calling. He was an apostle to the Gentiles, especially assigned to take the gospel and plant churches where Jesus was not yet known as Lord. That large life calling helped him to understand how to spend his time. But the Lord was also active in telling him how many days to spend in each location, what to do, what to say, and who to invest in.

The Bible teaches that each of us should think of ourselves like one of the Blues Brothers—We’re on a mission from God! Our life assignments are an extension of God’s gift of time, and we report to work each day. We get to make a difference. “For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.”

We should not expect every Christian to have the same customized assignment from the Lord as we do. A teacher’s schedule should look different from a doctor’s, a homemaker’s, a CEO’s, or an urban teenager’s, locked in a cycle of dire poverty. But it’s fair to expect biblical obedience from each one of these persons who decides to follow Jesus. As a result, ministry everywhere must include help in preparing people to spend their time faithfully.

There’s probably no one else on Youth for Christ/USA’s payroll right now whose call, gifts, and experience might lead them to say that writing for 20-30 hours a week is the most faithful use of their time. But that’s me. It’s hasn’t always been me. It wasn’t me in 1981 when I was a Campus Life director at South Side High School in Fort Wayne. It wasn’t me in 1989 when I was the lone youth ministry professor at Huntington University and pursuing my doctorate. It wasn’t me in 2007 when I jumped back into work with YFC, this time as a senior national leader assembling a team that could deliver valuable support for our mission across the country. But it is now. And it fits my life-size calling in this season of my life, because Jesus has said so.

Ministry leaders must shift their target to serve Jesus’ time-shaping agenda with his people. If each of us has 100 waking hours a week (we likely have more), and a local church has 500 members, why isn’t it a worthy mission for pastors to consider 50,000 hours a week as their ministry “reach”? To boldly influence 50,000 hours each week so that the Kingdom of God is advanced by the faithfulness of individual Jesus-
lovers is quite different from a mindset that settles for hosting programs five to eight hours a week.

We will make progress in this ministry micro-tactic when we start measuring our coaching and accountability conversations against moments, days, and weeks rather than years. Our symmetrical transformation (where we all begin to look like Jesus) needs to be squeezed through the hourglass.

I pray that Brennon, Jason, Whitney, Jim, Kris, Heath, Alison, Jake, and Susie discover the liberating pace found exclusively inside a singular focus on faithful, moment-by-moment obedience to Jesus as Lord. I pray that my own faithfulness will invigorate theirs.

Such faithfulness with our time is enough. It’s sufficient for all of the work God wants to accomplish in and through his people. Ministry competition will cease to exist when Christ’s followers yield their minutes to Lord Jesus to use as he sees fit. Lost and confused kids, caught up in chronic crises, will not automatically find transformation because YFC staffers recruit more mentors for their mission. But they will most certainly benefit when God’s people give Jesus all their time. This distinction is vital. By seeking the first outcome without working on the second we will continue to labor under current conditions, where too few people are available for too many causes.

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There’s good news tucked inside the notion that faithfulness is enough. When Jesus has our ear and gets our time, God’s big mission challenge gains momentum and we get to spend our lives doing what we were made to do.
The Next Question Gets Personal
Finding Our Selves in Jesus

The choices we make and the way we spend our time reveal who we are, but they also form us. How could they not?

Like most young teenagers, I was clueless about this process. When I joined more than 500 others in my high school’s freshman class it was a stretch just to remember my locker combination. The social landscape got very confusing real quick. Soon I was hurrying home after school each day, convinced that others were hanging out with friends while I was watching TV sitcoms. Early awkwardness was pretty common for incoming freshmen. As I watched others get connected with new groups, my own loneliness grew more acute. In those days I was unaware of what it meant to have a personal relationship with God, unattached to a church, and uncertain about life in general. The word “lost” is a pretty accurate description of who I was when I was 13…14…15 years old.

Then I met Jesus. A classmate reached out to invite me to a church event. Some might be wary when they hear “church event.” I had so little church experience that I didn’t flinch at all about attending something called an “outreach.” My focus was solely on the fact that Brent, a pretty cool guy, had apparently befriended me. That night, days before my 16th birthday, I heard the gospel for the first time in my life.

The biggest change for me in the months that followed was that I hung out with Brent a lot. I certainly did not become a regular church attender. My cussing slowed down a bit. Eventually I showed up more often at church, and I started to read my Bible. Soon I was discovering that I was supposed to be, say, and do things differently as a result of Jesus living inside me. That’s when I realized that Jesus wanted to inhabit my life, not as an invited guest, but as my Lord. Everything changed. My choices and time started to revolve around what Jesus wanted from me. I had a new purpose, and was experiencing a new identity.
A new identity is the first fruit we taste as newborn followers of Jesus. But there’s work to be done following our commitment. Prayer shapes our choices. Biblical truth informs our lifestyle adjustments. Jesus himself, given full access to our lives, begins to form us into a symmetrical version of himself—simultaneously fueling, of course, our own distinctiveness. Important features of this process are part of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Can one blind person lead another? Won’t they both fall into a ditch? Students are not greater than their teacher. But the student who is fully trained will become like the teacher.

“And why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying, ‘Friend, let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.

“A good tree can’t produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can’t produce good fruit. A tree is identified by its fruit. Figs are never gathered from thorn bushes, and grapes are not picked from bramble bushes. A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart.

“So why do you keep calling me ‘Lord, Lord!’ when you don’t do what I say? I will show you what it’s like when someone comes to me, listens to my teaching, and then follows it. It is like a person building a house who digs deep and lays the foundation on solid rock. When the floodwaters rise and break against that house, it stands firm because it is well built. But anyone who hears and doesn’t obey is like a person who builds a house without a foundation. When the floods sweep down against that house, it will collapse into a heap of ruins.”

“A tree is identified by its fruit”—that’s why it’s fair to expect fruit from Christ’s followers that identifies them as Jesus’ own. All of us who listen to Jesus and obey him will naturally exhibit character qualities that set us apart from the people we once were, people who didn’t know God. And this fruit will grow and ripen because we are “in Him,” not because we’re now working much harder to be good people.

Recognizable indicators of our new life in Christ are symmetrically produced in God’s people by God’s work in us: “But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!”

Paul instructed the Ephesians to
“Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ… For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light! For this light within you produces only what is good and right and true.”

It is clearly a part of God’s missional master plan that millions of us live similar, selfless lives. We make Jesus known in our world by displaying his character, and we exhibit this character as “the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives...” This phenomenon is so clearly evident among Christ-followers in ancient Antioch that the watching community gave them a nickname that has stuck for two millennia: Christians.51

Our foundational identity in Christ is marked by how different we (collectively) look from the rest of humanity. Jesus made it clear that this new identity could not be conferred upon casual followers. “If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it.”52 This is the sort of identity that, while available to all, is clearly not embraced by all.

Historical evidence suggests there are dry spells for the Church, where large numbers of self-proclaimed Christians don’t meet Jesus’ threshold of commitment for following him. We may be living in such a time. As a sociological group, American Christians have failed to identify themselves with Jesus’ character in a way that distinguishes their lifestyles from others. The best explanation I can offer for any landscape where most Christians don’t look like Jesus is that most are not consumed by Christ. It’s simply not possible to abandon ourselves to Christ and fail to experience his transformational power. Paul’s expression represents an identity overhaul that is supposed to be normal for Christians: “My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Instead, this description is exceptional—in stark contrast to what constitutes the “norm” in Christian living today. Princeton’s Kenda Dean considered the data from The National Study of Youth and Religion and summarizes the challenge facing us all:
“The simple truth seems to be that young people practice an imposter faith because we do—and because this is the faith we want them to have. It’s that not-too-religious, ‘decent’ kind of Christianity that allows our teenagers to do well while doing good, makes them successful adults without turning them into religious zealots, teaches them to notice others without actually laying their lives down for any of them. If this is the faith they see lived out by their parents, their pastors, and their churches, how would they know it’s a sham? In a world crazed with violence and intolerance, isn’t being ‘good enough’ good enough?”

That’s too bad. Because giving us a new foundational identity is only part of the transformation Jesus wants to accomplish in us. But he can’t complete an operation as complex as an identity transplant if we insist that we can keep holding on to other things that we’ve built our lives upon. As Mark’s gospel revealed in the story of the rich young ruler, the Lord Jesus asks for everything because he cares about changing everything for our benefit. “Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him. ‘There is still one thing you haven’t done,’ he told him. ‘Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’ At this the man’s face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.”

This exchange confuses the disciples. They assume that those who had a lot also had their act together and could bring a lot of value to Jesus and his cause. As it turns out, wealthy and powerful people often bring baggage that makes an identity transfusion nearly impossible. Cautiously, Peter tests how this moment’s insight will affect them personally: “We’ve given up everything to follow you.” Jesus assures them that they will be overwhelmed by the return-on-investment they receive as his followers.

Herein lies an advantage that kids in crisis might have going for them when it comes to overhauling their identities. Developmentally, they are typically still in the process of trying to figure out who they are. And their lousy life circumstances make them like beneficiaries in Extreme Home Makeover, more than willing to abandon their shabby, unstable digs to the renovation experts. What’ve they got to lose?
the other hand, too many of us are like those who are featured on *Hoarders*. We’ve got a vague sense that things aren’t as they should be, but this stuff we’ve wrapped ourselves in over the years is affixed to the identity sections of our heart like an inoperable tumor. We need Jesus, and we need “troubles” to help lever open our door to his every-moment Lordship in our lives.

I understand how some folks might feel that their identity chooses them. If you are part of an ethnic or racial minority in your community, there’s a good chance you experience social injustices that hammer hard at the fiber of your being. When the world sees you first of all as a person of color—and relentlessly carpet bombs your psyche with that message—how could you not think that your melanin overrides other identity considerations? My response is so simple that I fear it could be dismissed as naive and insufficient by all except those who know the power of Christ: *Who does Jesus say that you are?* To be consumed by Lord Jesus means that even our most pre-eminent identifiers must not be allowed to define us.

On the surface this identity journey does not appear to be fairly distributed to everyone. Whenever we are not like most other people we can wonder why we were born with this trait or without this capacity. Young men and women with same-sex attraction suffer considerably as these questions gnaw away at their souls. Today’s progressive social thinkers have helped clear the path for tolerance and acceptance of the LGBT community—so much so that two additional letters have now been affixed to this shorthand designation. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) has evolved into LGBTQA (adding two new categories, “questioning” and “allied” to the acronym.)

The change in the social landscape for Western cultures has been sweeping and remarkable. Only intolerance cannot be tolerated. What can’t be heard in the cacophony of overpowering voices is what Jesus has to say about all matters of identity. If we are swallowed up by race, sexual orientation, or anything other than Jesus we will, in the end, be left with an identity-image of ourselves that is at least false and at most destructive. Lord Jesus insists we find ourselves only by losing ourselves in him. And we have an enemy clearly defined in Scripture whose primary psychopathic pattern of engagement in our lives is to destroy our God-given identity, by all means. If he can successfully plant “weeds” of false identity in our life, then
nurture them into maturity, they will (literally) choke the life out of us. The issue of identity transformation, under the Lordship of Jesus, is life-or-death for us.

My friend Don Talley has helped me understand how this journey works when the obstacles are especially formidable. Don has a rare form of muscular dystrophy and doctors have told him they don't know of anyone else in the world who's lived as long as he has with this particular disease (he's in his early 40s with a lovely wife and two cute-as-can-be girls). He gets around in a wheel chair, and whether he's in one of our YFC national leadership meetings or speaking to hundreds of teenagers at a camp, he must grab the hair on the back of his head so he can hold it erect. The disease has robbed Don of the capacity to build muscles.

If anyone has a “right” to have his identity consumed by something other than Jesus, it’s Don. But he testifies that the breakthrough moment of his life, his deepest liberation, came when he surrendered to Jesus the need to be healed from his disease. He could not have done this without shifting his hope entirely to Jesus. Lord Jesus is truly good, and he can be trusted with what is most important to us. In Jesus’ time, and for his glory, Don will be healed. In the meantime, Don has found his life by going all-in with Jesus.

There are two stages to our identity formation in Christ. During stage one we are clearly being painted by Jesus, an artistic master. Brush-strokes of love, colors of joy, light as truth—all represent the signature artistic style of Lord Jesus. We’re recognizable as his. When we continue to live as discerning and obedient followers of Jesus, our own images take on a more personally descriptive definition. Unquestionably, through the work of Jesus, we become distinctively gifted and are given our own personal assignments inside of God’s epic redemptive mission. As new creations we can experience our liberating potential when we discover the answer to life’s second most important question: Who does Jesus say that you are?

After Peter gave the right answer to the question of who he is, Jesus returned the favor. “Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means ‘rock’), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.”56 Jesus offers
each of us a custom-fit identity. When we’ve secured our foundational identity in him he forms us into the specific, unique members of the Body of Christ we were created to be. Don Talley is secure in who Jesus made him to be. Amazing, isn’t it?

There are always other forming voices in our lives, forcefully (and often subtly) lobbing opinions about us, our identities, and our potential. That’s why it’s so important that we learn to block out the noise from others so that we can hear from Lord Jesus. No one else has the clarity necessary to offer true belief in us, or to love us in truth. And no one else has the power to change us for his glory. Only Lord Jesus can lead us into our identity sweet-spots. After encountering the one true God, Abram became Abraham, Jacob became Israel, and Saul became Paul. Early in the life of the church, Joseph was a generous Christian from Cyprus. But Bible-readers will remember that he was given the name Barnabas, son of encouragement.

Jesus himself promises to give a special, private new name to all of us who overcome Satan’s challenges and remain faithful. Picture him whispering in your ear a name so perfectly chosen that your heart throbs with hope, promise, and expectation the moment you hear it.

Am I the only one who ever envied a friend with a cool nickname? Jesus promises a better deal, by far! For more than 40 years I’ve been probing the new identity I received from Jesus when I fully surrendered to him. The Lord wired me with gifts that make me most fruitful when I have space to listen, reflect, learn and discern…provided I translate my insights to benefit others. A team is important to me and I need a few close, authentic relationships to keep me from falling into sinkholes of self-doubt. It’s a blast to be the life of the party as long as I can recuperate at home while wearing sweats and clutching my remote control. Over the years I have begun to understand me. Jesus and I talk in detail about still needs his healing touch. Two items top that list: 1) my unhealthy drive to produce stuff that impresses others, and 2) my inclination to be so consumed by an important task that I fail to care about people in my immediate orbit. Significantly, I’m OK with being a work in progress as long as Jesus is doing the work. I am a combination of wildly positive achievements and suspect motives. And nothing has been more empowering than to know in the fiber of my being who Jesus says that I am in this identity mish-mash. He loves me...
unconditionally and is drawing me into the best possible version of me every day. All of us can expect fruitfulness and fulfillment to flow from our faithful obedience and Jesus’ indwelling presence in our lives.

Our thinking about ministry needs to adjust to this progression. We get to leverage the life assignments we were uniquely designed for, AND we can help others live within their own sweet-spot. The symmetry of God’s master plan reveals itself through the beauty of our one-hearted diversity rather than our same-look uniformity. We won’t all make the same choices or spend our time in the same way. So long as our choices and time glorify Jesus, that’s not a problem.

Shelby’s story will help us see how one person experienced her new identity surfacing as she met, then attached herself more intimately, to Lord Jesus. After that it will be natural for us to consider the explosive ministry power that is available when we are faithful with life’s third great gift.

Back in the day, Hannibal Smith was the über-crafty leader of TV’s A-Team. Every time I heard him deliver his catch-phrase I got excited: “I love it when a plan comes together.”

So does Lord Jesus. The symmetrical beauty is breath-taking.
Throughout history men and women transformed by Jesus burst with creative, deeply personal, expressions of gratitude. This is the sort of ecstatic song that flowed from Mary’s heart when she learned that God had wondrously chosen her to give birth to the Savior of the world. More than 2,000 years later another teenager, Shelby, wrote a poem that almost captures the wonder infused in her amazing, fresh-start in Christ. I wish you could see her eyes dance as she read this aloud to you!

innocence
it started small
weed, alcohol, ignorance
I believed this is what I wanted
progression
meth
what I thought was freedom
from intentions of independence to being dependent
addicted

I threw it all away
education, family, aspirations, my life
alone, empty
my soul was withering
dying
this was it, this was my life, this is what I deserved
this is what I was worth

as I was buried in a cell
a gift that cannot be measured
a seed, tiny, persistent
buried in my heart
what I could not do for myself: sobriety

then, I met Him
the darkness in which I lived was shattered
light flooded my life
colors poured into my soul

this is freedom
sweet redemption
accepted, pursued, loved
he permeated my body
heart, soul, mind
not just fixed, but made whole
an entirely new creation

to see again
the beauty and vastness of the ocean
the vivid colors of the sunset
creation at it's finest

to hear again
worship on Sundays
the birds on a spring morning

to feel again
the warm sun on my face
my heartbeat when I see my mother smile
the joy of being fully alive

from a life ravaged by lies
to a soul healed by truth
the truth, the way, and the life
the sweetest friend
unbelievable grace
my savior, Jesus Christ
“Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.”

I heard this brilliant piece of wisdom at an unlikely time nearly 20 years ago, and I think about it almost daily. It was spoken by one of my Huntington University colleagues while we were racing down a basketball court. Our faculty team was battling a student team for the intramural championship, and the referee was letting us big men get away with murder. Pushing, shoving, holding, hacking—no whistles, and no fouls called. After some gratuitous criminal behavior under our basket, Jeff (frustrated to the core of his easy-going nature) said these words to his undergrad counterpart on the opposing team: Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.

It’s the kind of truth that exposes every poor choice I’m about to make, because no one will ever know. And it’s a phrase that can recover every minute I’m about to waste because no one is watching. Just because I can, doesn’t mean I should. I might be able to get away with making bad decisions or misusing my time, but why should I? When Jesus is my Lord, there is no defensible reason for squandering these two life gifts.

Expected anonymity increases the likelihood of moral stupidity. Our brains do rapid, cost-benefit calculations before we act. As it turns out, we’re not so good at math. The Bible frequently associates sinful behavior with deeds done under cover of darkness because we wrongly (and regularly) assume we can get away with something if there are no witnesses.

This delusional thinking runs into a slight snag when considered in the context of how we treat other people. Someone always knows, right? Yes, but… The formulas we use factor-in only those who matter most to us. We imagine we can keep our workplace relationships isolated from our friends and family. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. So we persist in our belief that nothing is wrong until we get caught.
And so we end up abusing life’s third great gift—the gift of people—because we THINK we can. Horribly disfigured by sin, we’re fundamentally incapable of being good or loving others without selfishness messing us up.

All of us are fruit-producing trees, eventually revealing our true nature. Maybe you’re not a murderer. But do you ever let anger take over your heart so completely that you secretly wish bad things would happen to someone? Perhaps you’ve never cheated on your spouse. But do you ever indulge secret sex fantasies that reduce someone to an object for your own pleasure? When Jesus taught about such things in the Sermon on the Mount, his listeners were astounded at his insights and pricked with conviction about their own guilt.

Today we glorify our common deprivities through our entertainment choices. Our damage to one another is one of life’s givens—a constant that we plug into life’s choice and time calculations. Humankind, far from being evolved or enlightened, has continued the downward moral spiral described in the first chapter of Romans. We live in a culture where we’ve gone far beyond accepting once-unthinkable behaviors toward one another; instead, we encourage them.

No wonder so many kids are so confused.

Just because we can, doesn’t mean we should.

In the beginning, God introduced Eve into his creation mix so that Adam would not have to endure living and working alone. This gift of companionship was twisted into mistrust and jealousy as soon as sin’s corruption could work its poison into our bloodstream. Adam moved quickly into a blame-game, leaving God to sort out what really happened inside the first he-said, she-said dispute. Cain tried to get away with murder. His banishment from the Garden represents the estrangement we’ve all felt at one time or another when a relationship generates more headaches than it’s worth.

Cell-phone cameras and the Internet have introduced a new factor into our can vs. should equations. Celebrities are learning how easily their missteps can be captured by amateur digital photographers, affecting their carefully constructed public images and sometimes costing them millions of dollars. Every day there’s fresh video popping up on YouTube that exposes a darkness-into-light reality—it’s foolhardy
to believe that the truth about who we are and what we do will not eventually see the light of day.

Jesus warned the religious leaders of his day that their hypocrisy would eventually be known: “The time is coming when everything that is covered up will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made known to all.” Paul told Christians that the Lord’s judgment is coming, and that everything we think we’ve hidden will be presented as evidence in our trials: “…For he [God] will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives…”

Whether it’s a casual interaction or a long-term relationship, what we bring to our exchanges with other people testifies to who we are. Largely bred to live competitively, we look out for ourselves first and treat others as a means to our all-consuming ends. Instinctively, we know we can’t go it alone, so we broker arrangements with others who routinely deliver back to us a mix of joy and pain. When it comes to God’s great gift of other people in our lives we often act like we can’t be bothered by their realities. Sometimes we’re simply exhausted, so we settle for tepid tolerance of one another. We treat others poorly because we think we can get away with it. But when Jesus is our Lord, the fruit of our relationships will taste a lot better than that.

We can do better. Jesus showed us how and taught us why. God loves us unconditionally. It is because Jesus is Lord that we experience his immeasurable love. And our attachment to him—our branch in his Vine—gives us the ability to pay it forward, transformationally loving everyone who crosses our path. Friend or foe, family or co-worker, it doesn’t matter. There’s an inexhaustible reservoir of God’s love available for God’s people to spread around. Our main problem is that we don’t “…have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.”

In one sense, this love is indiscriminate. When Jesus unpacked the Great Commandment for an expert in the law who was fishing around for the lowest common denominator in his relationships with others, he told the parable of the good Samaritan. The summary is as clean
as Stephen Stills’ famous song title, *Love the One You’re With.* (If only Stills had been describing Jesus’ agenda, not his own wandering desires!) When we are under obedience to Jesus, born out of our ruined-for-him love, we are compelled to love everyone we encounter while we’re moving through life.

Under the Lordship of Jesus there are no exceptions and no acceptable excuses for not loving someone. Some of us have a sense of urgency about the mission of our ministries. In the name of the good work we are doing for Jesus over there we fail to love those closest to us over here. Expediency and missional self-importance lead us to a terrifying self-delusion—we think we can do what God wants without doing it the way God wants.

God wants us to love anyone, anywhere, at every opportunity. When we let Jesus direct our paths we don’t second-guess who’s on the journey with us, in need of our help.

What does such indiscriminate love look like? It’s sunshine on a cloudy day. (Hum along if you want.) In a world that says it’s okay to casually treat people like they’re no big deal, we agree with Jesus that no person has small value. The kids we work with in YFC are caught up in their crises and often suffer invisibly. Undervalued by many, they are never unseen or unloved by Jesus. Why do they so seldom experience a break in the cloud-cover of their lives?

A change in weather for millions of teenagers far exceeds any one organization’s capacity. Such an ambition requires extraordinary solutions. We need the assets of someone who could, if he wanted to, wake up from a nap in a storm-tossed boat to calm a raging sea. Jesus is, quite honestly, our only hope.

It makes symmetrical sense that when we report for assignment with Lord Jesus he deploys some of us as “cloud sweepers,” clearing the way for the sunshine of his love to reach those accustomed to the grim darkness. It’s our privilege to invest our first two life gifts in the greatest gift of all—people. When we love others we make choices that benefit them instead of ourselves. When we love others we spend time on their behalf rather than our own. As long as Jesus is guiding our decisions and our time, our love will make a difference. Naps are okay, too.
It is possible, of course, to offer people our service without being led by Jesus to do so. This is what Henri Nouwen called the temptation to be relevant.\textsuperscript{66} When ministry is defined simply as meeting others’ needs, we quickly become overwhelmed by the countless opportunities we have to do good. We may be tempted to respond to every call, answer every request, come through for every need. This kind of decision-making and time investment can make us feel good about ourselves but, as Nouwen warns, doesn’t automatically reflect the agenda of Lord Jesus. Even he did not heal everyone he met. Like us, Jesus was constrained by the limitations of a flesh-and-blood body dwelling inside the space-time continuum. His instructions to the disciples reflected this priority: “You will always have the poor among you, and you can help them whenever you want to. But you will not always have me.”\textsuperscript{67} Gratefully, we’ve been given intimate access to the wisdom of our risen, all-knowing Lord Jesus. He sees perfectly which needs we should meet and when we should meet them, including our own.

Loving our neighbor can seem like a relentless obligation, a face-slap in the midst of our me-centered reverie. But there’s a capacity clause embedded in the Great Commandment. We are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. As it turns out, I am not unlimited in my resources.

Oxford anthropologist Robin Dunbar has studied the evolutionary link between a primate brain’s neocortex size and its capacity for social relationships. His research has led him to theorize about the limits we humans have for emotional closeness based upon the frequency of contact needed to sustain such relationships. Dunbar’s Number suggests that, typically, we have an upper limit of around 150 friendships we can maintain at one time. Some could be categorized as good friends (50), some will be best friends (15), and a few (5) will be intimate friends. “Beyond this outer layer of 150 lie several further layers of increasing size that include mainly casual acquaintances and people we know by sight or name but may never have met and certainly don’t have a real relationship with…”\textsuperscript{68}

Make sense to you? Those number barriers certainly describe my own limitations. And the short chorus I learned as a child translates into impractical and insufficient advice as the sheer numbers pile up over the years:
Make new friends, but keep the old.
One is silver, the other is gold.

With a high school reunion coming up, I’ve been recalling old friends I’ve missed over the years. I moved five hours away from my home for college and have not returned to live there since. Along the way I’ve made new friends, including my wife. I’ve also invested in youth ministry students, Youth for Christ leaders, and kids who don’t know Christ. I can’t keep up. Dunbar’s Number offers me the excuse I’ve needed for my guilt about not being a better friend to those who once meant so much to me.

So why don’t I feel better about these losses?

My short answer is that God has gifted us with a Kingdom longing that can’t be satisfied in this world—not as long as we live within the confines of our earth-suits. More significantly, we’ll be relationally crippled as long as sin and death are factors in this world. Some of our relational pain and frustration testifies to the reality that we were made by a loving Creator for living and loving better than we do right now. But Lord Jesus has stepped into our relational miseries with the offer to set us free. He knows how to love and will tutor us if we let him.

The unanswered emails that have piled up since I began writing this book could easily steamroll into a huge burden in my life. But Lord Jesus is available to guide every choice and minute of my life into the priority of loving others. He may ask me to step away from the keyboard for a Good Samaritan interruption. When he does, I don’t want to be doing anything else. On the other hand, he may ask me to not join others who are distributing food to the poor because he has another assignment for me at that time. (He asked the same of the early church’s first leaders.) As hard as it may be to overcome others’ expectations for what love looks like, it’s Jesus’ voice that matters most. When it comes to loving others, Jesus’ Lordship delivers me from an impossible array of options every day. My own first priority is to seek him and trust him.

What I learn from Jesus is that sometimes his love is intensely focused and wildly discriminatory. It was to his best friends that Jesus gave a new commandment—they were to love each other like Jesus had loved them all. He’d picked these 12 over a
year earlier to “accompany him” and preach the gospel. Jesus lived within the constraints of human capacity. Dunbar’s Number was real enough for him that he could not grant everyone the frequent access that’s necessary for deep emotional bonding.

How fitting that these words from Jesus were captured by the gospel writer who referred to himself as “the disciple Jesus loved.” John, his brother James, and Peter were all privileged to be in Jesus’ inner circle. They, alone, were invited to witness Jesus raise a little girl from the dead, see his transfiguration on a mountaintop, and support him while he agonized in prayer the night before he was crucified. Even Jesus needed intimate friends.

Those who received Jesus’ most intense attention benefited from a formational love. This sort of love brings about combustive life-change when paired, as it must be, with truth in action. John, an intimate friend, learned to experience the love of God up-close and personal. No wonder his gospel uses the word “love” more than all the other gospels combined. This message continued to bear fruit in John’s life. By the time he was affectionately referred to as The Elder among first-generation Christians, he would bake the importance of love so thoroughly into his three short letters that “love” shows up nearly as much as all of the other “second-hand gospels” combined. John was a witness of Jesus’ love, and it formed him to lead with love.

If Great-Commandment love is as indiscriminate as sunshine, Great-Commission love is focused like a laser. Sunshine love is a witness-light for a watching world squinting to see the God it does not know. Deeds of love and good works are eye-catching, and can be exhausting. Those of us grafted in to God’s family are supposed to gush love. It’s our operating system for life and ministry—the one thing we’re called to “spur” in each other. And God is glorified (revealed) when we do.

Significantly, it is laser love that’s in play when we’re forming one another into faithful disciples of Jesus. We’re called to “…speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.”
Our great gift of relationships with other people has also ensured that we’ll experience a universal need. How should we relate to each other? Jesus’ solution could not be more clear or more demanding. It’s captured by a single word, so small that it can be tattooed on our knuckles: L-O-V-E. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that this is the defining mark of Christian life and ministry.

But what’s obvious in Scripture is not common enough in practice. Apparently we can speak with compelling words, act with an impressive faith, and serve with exemplary sacrifice and it may not amount to a hill of beans. Jesus accepts no protests from those inclined to defend the love-less work that their ministries do. In the ledgers of heaven, where entries are only made when what we do really counts for something, any exertion that is not born out of love gets logged as a zero. And today, far too many of our ministry efforts add up to nothing. That’s a bad return on investment. Love is the third of three ministry micro-tactics at work in our symmetrical transformation into people who look and act and feel and sound and smell like Jesus.

Every journey pivots around a story of distance. How far do we have to go before we start to represent the love of Jesus accurately? I’ve been moving toward mirroring Christ for decades. And I’m not sure if my starting point was an advantage or disadvantage.

Those who are lost are very often unaware of their condition. I was just such a clueless kid in 1970. My ability to articulate what was missing in my life was vague, at best. I sincerely thought I was a Christian because of my American roots—I’d been taught in school that the USA was a Christian nation. It was not until I heard the gospel 11 days before my 16th birthday that I realized God wanted a personal relationship with me, made possible because of Jesus Christ. A quick inventory of what I had going for me at the time was my version of “counting the cost.” I calculated that I had nothing to lose and everything to gain by trusting Jesus with my life. Without understanding fully what I was getting into, I said yes to Christ. That pledge has defined my life for almost 45 years.

When I read about Jesus’ passion for the lost it’s personal. Once, when Jesus was teaching, he reeled off this banquet riff: “Then he turned to his host. ‘When you put on a luncheon or a banquet,’ he said, ‘don’t invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich
neighbors. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you.” After he whet the appetite of the crowd with these tasty appetizers, he spelled out exactly where these instructions would be most challenging: “If you want to be my disciple, you must hate everyone else by comparison—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple.” They were advised to count the cost of following Jesus. So are we.

We cannot back into the conclusion that Jesus is Lord without considering the weight of this life-altering confession. Everything changes. Every relationship changes when Jesus takes over. We become flavorless, unusable salt if we hedge on our commitment to surrender all of life, including our most precious relationships, to Lord Jesus. We can’t possibly love like Jesus until we die to our selves like Jesus did.

I was wandering and clueless, with natural relational instincts that were thoroughly sheep-like. Where’s everybody else? I want to be there! Until a friend overcame his hesitation and reached out to me, I was lost. Once I found my way into the church, I began to recognize how good it was to be loved well, and the old instincts kicked in again. Where are my 99 friends and relatives hanging out? That’s where I want to be!

But Jesus made it clear that we aren’t just sheep. We’re his sheep. And the abundant lives we seek are not the result of our induction into a good herd. Fulfillment, joy, peace, and love come from recognizing the voice of the Good Shepherd and trusting him in every situation.

When we follow Jesus as Lord some of us will be sent on intentional search-and-rescue missions that may not be the assignments we prefer. Compelled by the love of Jesus, we’ll be called-upon to pursue those who are heading in the wrong direction. These efforts will cost us relational capacity. They will require choices to be made that have an impact on all of the current relationships layered up within our own Dunbar’s Number maps. Our time will need to be carefully and deliberately reallocated as Lord Jesus, who came to seek and save the lost, directs us.
Those of us who receive such assignments love to party. We know that a celebration in heaven happens every time someone lost gets rescued. I’m grateful that God has given me an assignment in the Kingdom to work on behalf of such young people. It’s my life passion. Because I live in this world all the time, I’m acutely aware of how this huge operation could use more people enlisted in our rescue efforts. Roughly half of all teenagers in our country don’t naturally show up on the radar screen of a local church. These lost-and-anonymous are even more common in our dense urban populations. Surely I’m justified to do whatever it takes to recruit others to the worthy cause I’m so passionate about?

Not exactly. More about this in the chapters ahead.

For the moment, I want to affirm the symmetry of Lord Jesus’ master plan and gratefully acknowledge how this makes beautiful, liberating sense of my own calling. When Great Commandment sunshine and Great Commission lasers make a difference for clueless, lost kids in crisis, we’ll know that God’s people are loving like we were re-born to do.

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We can start to look like the Church Jesus predicted we would be. We’ll prevail near the gates of hell. We’ll be simple enough and nimble enough to love anyone, anywhere—including broken teenagers. We’ll be faithful mirror-images of Jesus, bringing him glory always.

But first we’ve got some organizational challenges to face.
I’m one of a handful of leaders who serve Youth for Christ’s national camping program all over the country each summer. This fall, when we gather to swap stories and share impressions, we will agree about the heartache we saw over and over again from the most recent camp season.

A scary number of kids have been damaged as a result of absentee or dysfunctional fathers. Among the kids YFC works with, stories of healthy father relationships are more and more rare. Since research affirms the importance of a father’s warm, close, and affirming relationship in transmitting faith to kids\(^7\), this is a double jeopardy scenario for millions of teenagers. They have poor relationships (if any) with unbelieving dads.

DeShawna grew up poor and didn’t know her father. She says she “needed to be tough in my household. I was the youngest of four. Didn’t get much attention from my mom. Mom had to pay attention to my brother in gangs and my sister who was pregnant. So I always wanted that attention, craving someone to love me, but for all the wrong reasons. Guys tried to control me.”

When DeShawna was 15, she was questioning who she was and who she wanted to be. It was a challenge for her to understand what, if anything, her purpose was on planet Earth. In the summer between middle school and high school her mom lost her job and couldn’t pay the rent. So DeShawna had nowhere to live, and eventually landed with a friend far away from the YFC leaders she had recently met. She detached from positive influences and began to lose herself in unhealthy lifestyle patterns. A good friend was killed in a gang shooting. The abusive guy she was in a relationship with didn’t want her to be around “churchgoing people.”
But Crissy was determined to not give up on DeShawna. She pursued her with the love of Christ, patiently and persistently inviting her into YFC’s neighborhood Bible studies. Crissy helped DeShawna get connected at the same time that everything was going bad—when she was desperate for something good to happen in her life. God’s love soon pierced her life through relationships with Crissy and other YFC mentors. They won her over, and she put her faith in Jesus. As the seed of God’s love took root, hope started to bloom.79 The deeper she journeyed with Jesus, the more DeShawna was intrigued by the mystery of God’s purpose and mission for her life.

Over time, as she matured through YFC ministries, DeShawna saw herself in other girls who were going through similar experiences at the same age. She had a growing passion for helping youth. She was convinced that her life experiences could help her engage young people with the love and hope she’d discovered in Jesus. And she was right. High school girls started to look up to her, opening more doors of ministry possibility.

While serving as a camp leader for young girls, DeShawna realized she had the ability to talk with them easily. As she says, “Girls would talk to me since they knew I would understand. Like when I was their age, I never thought God could forgive me. Also, being surrounded by YFC people who are SO passionate for the ministry to inner-city kids, they really are dedicated for neighborhood kids when no one else cares. They really inspired me to want to join them.”

Eventually, DeShawna’s mom saw the changes in her and wanted to join her as a follower of Jesus. They encouraged each other to overcome their struggles by talking about how the Bible’s truths related to their lives. Until her mom came to Christ, DeShawna never had that sort of relationship with her. Jesus’ love changed everything.
In fact, Jesus’ love still is changing everything. Newly secured by the love of a God who has great plans for her, DeShawna sought out and found her absentee father.

“We talk now ‘cause I found him.”

Sometimes the simplest of statements represent the most amazing truths about how the love of God works its redemptive miracles in all of us.
This book is about to take another pivot—the last major shift I want to address. I’ll explore fruitfulness, multiplication, and what it will take for Jesus’ people recover our swagger. There’s nothing quite so intriguing as the marriage of humility and fearlessness.

As we overcome organizational inertia and personal indifference we’ll discover our symmetrical rhythm. I’ll call it like I see it because I believe the Church needs revitalization if kids (and others) are going to be reached. I’m asking Lord Jesus to help me discern what needs to be said and be brave enough to say it. If you’ve been inclined to quibble with what I’ve tried to do so far in this book, picture me refusing to make polite. I hope to make a scene at the party. Let’s take it outside.

In love, of course. (Love-infested melees can be a blast to watch.)

Anyway, just in case you’re weary of my style or the book’s agenda is not irresistible to you, now may be a good time to shelve it. In all sincerity, I would rather you spend your minutes doing what Lord Jesus wants than reading a book promoting a goal that may not be helpful to your life and ministry journey today.

As a parting gift, take a look at my simple drawing below. I tried to capture what a symmetrical ministry model looks like for each of us as individuals. We’re about to embark on a grand-vision exploration. Before we dream about the lush, beautiful forests that could be, I want to make sure we have a clear picture of what a healthy tree looks like. (This is me taking a shot at the silly proverb—“You can’t see the forest for the trees”—actually, you can’t grow a forest without trees. So, enough with aerial fly-bys that glorify vision as a wall-hanging. The Kingdom of God supplies all the vision we need. On this point I agree with my friend and former student, Brad Johnson, founder of Mission of Hope—Haiti. We need clarity about what to focus on so that we can be faithful to God’s vision rather than original with our own.)

You want vision? Here’s a picture for you…
Imagine millions of us who’ve figured out how to “…strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.”

Imagine millions of dazed kids, surprised by God’s people with a love they never knew existed.

Imagine a great cloud of witnesses in heaven’s stadium, on their feet in anticipation, roaring their approval, urging us on.

Imagine that your own life feels more integrated, more coherent, more together than you ever thought possible.

“Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! AMEN!”

For our own benefit and the glory of God we give ourselves to Lord Jesus Christ, loving and submitting to him As fruit of our deepening attachment to Jesus we love our neighbors as ourselves one expression of this love is to “make disciples” while we are “going into all the world”

LISTEN CAREFULLY 1,000 choices each week

ACT FAITHFULLY 100 hours each week
As I was winding down my last year of college I took on a part-time job with Youth for Christ. My assignment was to start a Campus Life outreach at a nearby high school, and my employer expected me to spend 20 hours a week doing this work. God taught me much during the five months before I graduated, so I joined YFC full-time as soon as I could.

I especially remember a Monday night in April of 1976. Just a month earlier I’d asked my girlfriend to marry me. All around me my best college friends maximized every opportunity to hang out together, in anticipation of our four-year experience coming to an end. Final projects and class papers led to frequent all-nighters. With the tug of life on campus enticing my heart, the last thing I wanted to do was drive 30 minutes to lead a Campus Life meeting with kids I didn’t even know three months earlier.

I remember vividly how desperate I was to get out from under this obligation. If I could’ve identified anyone else to call, I was prepared to tell a lie about being sick so I could stay home. I needed to tackle a Greek paper and wanted to attend an outdoor concert with my fiancé. But in this early stage of the ministry there was no one else I could dump this meeting on. Imagine me complaining to God like I’m a soccer player who’s sure the ref missed the call and you’ve got the picture about right. Flung across my bed, with an attitude that I’ve confronted in others countless times since, I whined this prayer: “Okay, God, I’ll go to the meeting. But if I’m going to spend my (precious) time doing Campus Life tonight I need you to work through me. ‘Cause I got nothing for these kids.”

The meeting topic had to do with honesty. I’d prepared from the standard curriculum and had no intention of telling anyone what was really going on in my heart. Thirty-five kids showed up, our biggest attendance yet. As I worked from my notes to explain the Johari window, I offhandedly said something about being a
Christian. From the back of the room a question was shot my way. “When you say ‘Christian,’ what do you mean?” Instantly my heart engaged the moment with intensity and clarity. “That’s a great question,” I said. “Maybe we can talk more about that right after the meeting.” From all over the room hands popped up. “Can we come, too?”

I immediately shifted gears and tossed aside the meeting that I had prepared for. Instead I explained to 35 Norwell High School teenagers how they could (and should) put their trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. Before the evening ended 14 young people had entered into a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Afterward, finally alone in my car, I burst into tears of repentance. I was overwhelmed by joy and overcome by God’s grace. He had used the teeniest opening inside my whiniest prayer to do something that only he could do. Lord Jesus did something powerful in and through me that night. I cried all the way home.

There’s nothing more important to the vitality of my life and ministry than being connected to Jesus as Lord of my life. Fruit offers evidence of that connection.

Ministry fruitfulness can be explained not by our efforts, but by Jesus’ work through us. Don’t get me wrong. There is plenty for us to do and we should strain with all our might to be faithful. But we’ve got to figure out (like Paul did) how to do our part while depending on all of Christ’s might within us to bring results. Jesus explained this phenomenon in one of his parables.

“The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, while he’s asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not understand how it happens. The earth produces the crops on its own. First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens. And as soon as the grain is ready, the farmer comes and harvests it with a sickle, for the harvest time has come.”

When we cooperate with the Holy Spirit we can expect God-grown fruit. Some of the evidence of God’s indwelling power in our lives displays itself in our character. We see identifier fruits—the kind that “outs” us as one of Jesus’ kids. Paul supplies us with a great, one-list summary of these identifier fruits: “But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”
Many of Paul’s letters celebrate the evidence of Jesus’ work in and through the lives of his followers. The Thessalonian Christians, for example, got a major shout-out for the clarity and range of their fruit-display. The progression of their life, ministry, and fruitfulness offers us a glimpse into our own capacity for fruit production, and a prod to own this description for ourselves.

“We know, dear brothers and sisters, that God loves you and has chosen you to be his own people. For when we brought you the Good News, it was not only with words but also with power, for the Holy Spirit gave you full assurance that what we said was true. And you know of our concern for you from the way we lived when we were with you. So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord. As a result, you have become an example to all the believers in Greece—throughout both Macedonia and Achaia.

And now the word of the Lord is ringing out from you to people everywhere, even beyond Macedonia and Achaia, for wherever we go we find people telling us about your faith in God. We don’t need to tell them about it, for they keep talking about the wonderful welcome you gave us and how you turned away from idols to serve the living and true God.”

Notice the inseparable connection between Paul’s efforts and God’s power in bringing about these extraordinary ministry results. This is no accidental outcome. Paul is clearly committed to making sure his efforts cooperate with Spirit of God. The outcome he seeks in others is dependent upon securing their faith in Lord Jesus, not in his own impressive abilities. He embraces Jesus’ own posture as a servant who agrees to lead. Such a combination, as has been wonderfully described by Blanchard and Hodges, requires character-fruit to avoid the pitfalls that keep us from loving well. We need humility to overcome pride so we can serve. We need courageous faith to overcome fear so we can lead.

This begs the question: If we go rogue with our own ministries, why would we expect God’s blessing? I feel a rant coming…

• Why do we assume we’ll lack tactical advantages by focusing solely on glorifying God in our ministry?

• What inner urgency convinces us that ministry leaders should concentrate on massive macro-strategies rather than what God wants to do in individual lives?
• Why is it so hard for us to consider how our long-held assumptions about ministry practice may be blinding us to needed corrections?

• Who deluded us into believing that unless we carefully build and care for our ministries, God’s labor will be in vain?

Many church leaders agree on what we’re missing today. God’s people do not, largely, display God’s fruit. How to fix what ails us is more elusive. Frank Sinatra sang of New York, “If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere…” Similarly, those of us who’ve learned to minister among unchurched kids whose lives are in chronic crisis may have discovered solutions that will work anywhere. Necessity breeds no-nonsense problem solving.

I think we’ve complicated what’s meant to be very simple.

When Jesus sent out the twelve on a mission assignment he gave them a short set of explicit instructions. As he poured into those who would eventually advance the world’s most enduring movement of change, it’s hard not to be impressed by the elegant simplicity of his coaching. Later—when frenetic church growth made food distribution to widows a challenge—these same apostles didn’t panic. They rededicated themselves to focus on what mattered most.88

The right little things, done over and over, fuel a resilient ministry and transformational outcomes. If these practices are truly essential we can expect them to work regardless of external chaos, cultural diversity, or situational context. They’ll make a difference for pregnant 13-year olds, wealthy retirees, underpaid professors, disillusioned gang-bangers, über-stressed housewives, conscientious CEOs, dedicated teachers, confused adolescents, hard-working laborers, local church pastors, and international televangelists.

Our Youth for Christ work concentrates on kids who have not recognized the ultimate importance of the first, most important question of life. They don’t know Jesus. We offer them the pivotal hook-up they need by engaging them in authentic, Christ-sharing relationships. Often we are in conversations with community leaders, school administrators, court officials, and parents who do not operate within a robust faith framework. Nevertheless, we can communicate our work to them in a way that makes sense within their value system.
As young people struggle with crises of identity and worse, YFC brings caring adults alongside them to help them make better decisions, use their time productively, and enjoy healthy relationships.

The beauty of God’s design is that when we focus on what’s timelessly true we get on the right side of his natural laws—like sowing and reaping. We have a right to expect that what we will do will bring benefit to everyone, whether or not they understand the dynamics of our trust in Jesus. In the case of Youth for Christ, we should be able to translate our ministries to anyone who cares about kids’ well-being.

We just want to be sure we don’t get lost in our translation.

God alone produces the crop we hope to harvest. It only makes sense for us to get with his program. Only God generates fruit that lasts forever. Our expectations for God-shaped fruit are fair because Lord Jesus dwells in us. Fruit-bearing is symmetrical in the sense that apple trees can be counted on to produce apples, not oranges. Who we are is on display for all to see. The mission of God, as Christopher Wright asserts, includes millions of us symmetrically formed to reveal Lord Jesus to the world. We do that when we defer to Lord Jesus in ministry.

It’s time to make ministry all about the Big Connection.

Prayer, obedience to God’s Word, and love are the three specifically-named practices mentioned in John 15 that secure our connectivity to Jesus and strengthen our capacity to remain in him. As the fruit-generating Vine, Lord Jesus asks only that we branches hang on and fortify our bond to him so he can load us up with evidence of himself. In a sweet parallel to life’s three great gifts, we reinforce our connection to Jesus as the operating Lord in charge of our lives and ministries with every choice we pray about, every hour we commit to faithful obedience, and every person we love. Since these three represent a universal necessity for God’s people, it makes sense that ministry practices everywhere should be shaped around these essentials.

Herein lies a first-order symmetrical design for ministry anywhere. We will never outgrow our need to practice these three micro-formation tactics. They are evident throughout Scripture and featured as both highlights from our creation story and high points from Jesus’ teaching moments before he was arrested, as we’ll see below.
In the beginning, God gave clear guidance and the choice to obey

In the beginning, God gave meaningful work and the time to do it

In the beginning, God gave others so that we need not live and work alone

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**God’s word** and **prayer** interact to provide essential soil for

a) knowing what Lord Jesus asks of us all (moral direction),

b) knowing what Lord Jesus asks of each one (daily direction),

c) yielding pride & fear by asking Lord Jesus for courage to obey,

d) acting faithfully inside each choice & every hour to glorify God

Lord Jesus releases his **love** to flow through us and into every human encounter, an essential way for us to glorify God by living and working together

**In John 15 Jesus asserts that our essential fruit-bearing capacity is linked to whether or not we – as branches – remain in him, the vine.** Notice how prayer (v 7, 15, 16), obedience to God’s word (v 3, 7, 10, 14), and love (v 9, 10, 12, 13, 17) are strategies that we practice to secure our connectivity to Jesus and strengthen our capacity to remain in him.

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**We will never outgrow the need to practice micro-tactics. Further, their vitality as life disciplines may be the greatest predictor of our effectiveness as multipliers.**

**ASK:** How do the decisions I made today (this week) reflect that Jesus’ voice guides me?

**ASK:** How does the way I spent my time today (this week) show my alignment with God’s will?

**ASK:** How do my interactions today (this week) reveal that I love others like Jesus does?

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**Essential Micro-Ministry Tactic #1**

Equip followers of Jesus to pray, discern and submit to his Lordship (recognize and quiet whatever distracting voices compete for influence in their lives)

**Essential Micro-Ministry Tactic #2**

Equip followers of Jesus to order their lives around Biblical truth (grow to know God, discover how they uniquely contribute to God’s work, and use their time faithfully)

**Essential Micro-Ministry Tactic #3**

Equip followers of Jesus to love others without pride or fear (pursue the lost, serve the poor, defend the helpless, comfort the afflicted, encourage the faithful)

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We should not be surprised that the darkness of our current sin-infested world can be largely explained by decision-making ineptitude, stress over time, and broken relationships. As God’s people, we’re repositories for the answers that the world most craves. But we “give out of our good treasure” unless we focus on cultivating and sustaining our connection to Lord Jesus, as we’re taught to do. Christ’s instructions
were simple enough that a one-page summary with practical questions to ask of one another should help get us moving in the same direction.

We dare not neglect these tactics—especially when their vitality as life disciplines may be the greatest predictor of our God-honoring fruitfulness.

Well, as it turns out, faith needs constant nurturing. When my lawn goes too long without water it changes from lush green to brittle brown. Water is an essential life-giving need for my yard. If I give my grass a lot of attention in May and none in June or July, August will look ugly. “But I watered the lawn!” would sound like a silly and feeble explanation to my image-conscious neighbors. Our fruit-bearing capacity also needs constant attention. Jesus summarized this reality in the simplest terms: “Remain in me.”

Everything is at stake around this focus. For example, husbands are to love their wives like Christ loves the church. How becomes crystal clear within our symmetrical ministry paradigm. Each man sits submissively under Jesus’ Lordship, asking for direction about decisions that affect his spouse. He then shifts the way he spends his time so his wife feels loved, valued, and ready to follow Jesus with all of her heart. It’s in the guy’s best interest to not cut any corners in this investment. Couples can bond around the single agenda of following Lord Jesus wherever he leads and—as long as prayer, obedience, and love are routine practices—they will be strengthened and encouraged by the person who knows them best and loves them most. A marriage is secured for the glory of God by a lifetime of asking each other questions about the day’s choices, time, and other people.

By contrast, consider a marriage that uses a different operating system. The man wants to control his wife, directing her activity because he thinks he knows best. He signs off or makes all the decisions that matter, and protects his time. The word “submission” gets tossed around a lot in this marriage, but it’s intended to be a one-way formula, conveniently overlooking the fact that the Bible also says husband and wife should submit to one another. Love doesn’t grow because it doesn’t get the attention it needs. When the wife acts more assertive at the urging of her well-meaning friends, a vicious cycle of competition infects their relationship. Occasional
appearances at church services make no difference in the DNA of this marriage. Neither spouse is seeking Jesus, though both would say the other should.

Re-read the last two paragraphs with your local church in mind. Which one is the more accurate description of what’s going on in congregational relationships? Other scenarios could be developed for our ministries, but the story patterns would essentially be the same. It doesn’t matter if the cause is clear and compelling when those who fuel the mission are bent and spiritually deformed. Many churches today are hindered from concentrating on this formation agenda because lay or pastoral leadership thinks more highly of their own capabilities than they ought to. They imagine there’s another way, other than a growing and persistent attachment to the Vine, to be fruitful. There is not.

Here’s what I’ve observed. We ministry leaders often start with an acute awareness of our essential need to remain in Jesus. After we’re drafted by Jesus for the role he wants us to play in the Body of Christ, we get smarter—too smart for our spiritual britches. We impede his lordship in our lives and ministries by failing to concentrate our own choices and time on Jesus himself. Instead, we read books, attend conferences, or get degrees that grow our skills for the jobs we’ve been hired to do. We delude ourselves into thinking that if we live in a neighborhood that was built for Jesus and populated by street-names that remind us of Jesus that we’re actually living with Jesus. It begins innocently enough. It could even begin after an amazing ministry moment like the one I described at the beginning of this chapter. Jesus came through for me and 14 Norwell High School kids in April 1976. It was natural for me to be excited about what God was directing me to do with my time. The more motivated I was by kids’ needs, the more eager I was to enlist others into my mission. Pretty soon I was spending days learning new strategies to recruit, screen, train, and supervise new workers. After awhile I began writing curriculum or traveling to teach so that my time and skills could be more widely distributed. Someone convinced me that an hour in front of 1,000 people is a better use of my gifts than 100 hours with 10 people. I bought into this mindset because it seemed like a more comfortable way to live. Before long I was loaded with obligations in the For-the-Love-of-Jesus subdivision and stopped taking time to seek him. I never consciously
reneged on my vow to honor him as Lord. But when I tried to hear from him, his voice was muffled and less recognizable than it once was. I was afraid to seek him with all my heart. What if Jesus calls me to make choices that undo all I’ve worked so hard for? I gained new empathy for the rich young ruler and began to consider whether my defensiveness was a sign that I’m more like the Pharisees than I ever thought possible. I was driving ministry big-rigs so fast that my heart for Jesus was in danger. That’s when I begged for mercy. It was the breakthrough move I needed to redeem 20 years of work. Jesus is in charge of my daily adventure because I’m listening again.

The great media philosopher Marshall McLuhan said, “I wouldn’t have seen it, if I hadn’t believed it.” The sad fact is that many ministry leaders can’t see the need for this radical return to simpler ways because they’ve stopped believing in their utter incapacity to do something worthwhile apart from Christ Jesus our Lord. They think they’ve got game. They don’t. No branch severed from the Vine can bear fruit, in spite of all the stories we can circulate to secure congregational approval and donor dollars.

Our hope for ourselves is in the wisdom of Jesus Christ, made available through God’s Word and the illuminating guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is also our hope for others. Inside our weeks’ 1,000 choices and 100 waking hours, we must be re-formed to follow Jesus humbly and courageously, loving others so well that lives are changed and the world takes notice. As leaders we’re called to equip everyone for this purpose, empowering them to carry out their own distinct assignments in the Kingdom.

WARNING: This is about to get messy. Empowered people expect their contributions to be valued.
Every New Year’s Eve I spend a few hours reviewing a list of men and women I’ve invested in who are currently ministry multipliers. This annual reflection sends me soaring with gratitude, humility, and resolve as I launch into the new year.

All of those eligible for my list have adjusted their lifestyles to make room for evangelism and disciple-making. Some are in full-time vocational Christian ministry, but many are not. If I journeyed for a time in an authentic relationship with someone who was not a Christ-follower when we first met, that person makes my list. If I poured significant time into the formation of someone who was already a Christian when we first met, that person also would likely make my list. Since I’ve done a lot of speaking for youth camps, conferences, and events over the years, there are some kids who’ve come to Christ during my ministry—but I don’t have much history with them beyond our shared camp experience. Persons that fit this description cause me to wonder appreciatively about the complexity of God’s Master Matrix, but I typically don’t put them on my list. These are artificial standards, I know, but it reveals that I really try hard to make sense of how I’m making the most difference in someone’s life. I do so hopefully, humbly, and prayerfully. This is not an opportunity for self-congratulation. It’s a focus-reminder. I want to do more of the same in the year ahead.

My New Year’s Eve annual exercise is what made me instinctively appreciate Dunbar’s Number when I first learned of that research. Looking back on the people I’ve spent time with over the years has helped me understand how many hours, literally, it takes to form a follower of Christ. It seems like it’s an important question for ministry strategists, however imprecise the numbers may be.

To illustrate, I tried to redeem my math education by constructing a formula based upon what happens after someone who’s curious about Jesus is drawn by the Holy Spirit into a faith relationship with him. My thinking assumes that Christian growth the day after I begin to walk with Jesus will have some symmetrical similarity
to how I keep growing 40 years later. We want to be faithful to Jesus as Lord. It will be helpful in our journey if we can zero-in on a limited number of progress indicators along the way. Weekly and even daily conversations about decisions we make, time we spend, and interactions we have with others can serve our purposes well. These factors give us a practical focus that is embedded in biblical truth.

(Many of us have used program attendance as an indicator of our ministry effectiveness. While this stands the test of practicality, it lacks a solid theological root system. In research jargon, it might be reliable, but it’s not valid.)

The ministry multiplication question behind my math-scrawling is simple. How can we represent the interaction of these factors in a process that moves faithful followers of Jesus to become faithful deputies of Jesus—those like the first disciples, who take on part-ownership of God’s mission through their Great Commandment and Great Commission efforts?

I decided to take a dry erase pen to my windows like Russell Crowe did in A Beautiful Mind. (Math expressions are often the ways hypotheses get expressed in social sciences because they help clarify what research can be done to test a theory.)

The first factor is a saltiness multiplier. Jesus describes us as the “salt of the earth,” but cautions us with this: “Salt is good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? Flavorless salt is good neither for the soil nor for the manure pile. It is thrown away. Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!” We’ve all known people who are powerhouse influencers. Those of us who’ve sought Jesus’ Lordship for each week’s choices, hours, and people-encounters will taste like wonderful, fully-flavored salt. Here’s how that formula looks:

\[
C_d \text{ (my discerning choices per week)}/1,000 \text{ (possible choices per week)} + T_f \text{ (my faithful hours per week)}/100 \text{ (available hours per week)} + P_l \text{ (people loved-well per week/people I could have loved-well per week)} = S \text{ (my saltiness quality multiplier, somewhere } \geq 0 \text{ and } \leq 3) 
\]

\[C_d + T_f + P_l = S\]
Next, how does love work to transform lives when we have a limited capacity for relationships? Thinking about *Dunbar’s Number* led me to realize how similar these numbers are to those within the layers of relationship Jesus experienced over three years of public ministry. Check out the comparison below:

\[ \text{Dunbar’s Number} = 150 \quad \text{Jesus’ followers} = 120 \]

The limitations we experience with other people are a function of time, proximity, and the brain space needed to emotionally connect with people. M.I.T. professor Thomas J. Allen studied the optimal distance between engineers’ offices. What works best to facilitate the communication they need to work together on projects? His findings have been graphically summarized in the *Allen Curve*, showing that as physical distance increases, the frequency of communication between people at their work stations decreases. For purposes of weekly technical communication, anything farther away than 50 meters predicts a significant drop-off in effectiveness. Recently, researchers have sought to understand whether Internet and cell-phone technologies have had any impact on the *Allen Curve*. They don’t appear to. When there’s highly complex information to talk about, face-to-face communication is necessary. And this kind of personal interaction requires close proximity.93

How do we understand Jesus’ teachings so well that they infect our lives? On the one hand, our Lord is profoundly simple and straightforward. On the other hand, as
we reviewed earlier in this book, not everyone has “ears to hear” what Jesus wants them to learn. Our personal stakes are very high; the very fiber of our identity must undergo transformation. My judgment is that communication about my life-change fits the category of complex described by Allen’s research. This has implications for those who dream of Internet-based discipleship. The computer screen is insufficient for what we need in our formation into the image of Christ, and for our role in joining Jesus in the formation of others.

When Jesus called 12 men out from the crowd of his followers, he was essentially increasing their access privileges. And, as we’ve already observed, Peter, James, and John gained exclusive insider access to Jesus. This was a deliberate strategy that would form Jesus’ team into persevering world-changers. Over the course of almost two years, their lives together would put them inside Jesus’ 50-meter access perimeter all the time. They could observe one another in a variety of situations and build the kind of shared experiences that are so critical to loving each other. Locked inside these many proximity hours were some that Jesus dedicated to teaching truth and coaching these men on how to live that truth in their everyday lives. My estimates suggest that Jesus was totally available to the 12 in his inner circle about 50 hours a week. Let’s allocate an average of 10 of those hours to explicit teaching and coaching. (I’m trying to be conservative in these estimates so we don’t get too discouraged!)

Here’s the formula I worked out to represent the relationship of proximity hours to dedicated teaching and coaching hours in light of Jesus’ own standard-setting practice:

\[
\left[ T_{pI} (\text{proximity hours shared per week for individual X}) - T_{dI} (\text{dedicated teaching and coaching hours per week for individual X}) \right] \\
\times T_{dI} (\text{dedicated teaching and coaching hours per week for individual X}) \\
\div 40 (\text{Jesus’ weekly proximity hours–his weekly dedicated teaching and coaching hours})
\]

= \( I_{xI} \) (my weekly investment rate in individual X)

\[
\left[(T_{pI} - T_{dI}) \times T_{dI} \right] \div 40 = I_{xI}
\]
There’s at least one more factor I want to account for in my mathematical model-building. Each of us brings something different to the table when we enlist as followers of Jesus. Blanchard & Hodges’ work builds on situational leadership research, noting that people should be developed differently based on their maturity, with regard to what they have to learn. I totally agree. I have also seen motivational elements at work that affect our readiness to learn. As a long-time professor, I’m keenly aware that a hungry learner is easy to teach. And, frankly, it’s a real pain to teach those who don’t care. This is such a big deal that I want the Likert-scale I might use for this measurement to reflect its comparative importance to maturity. This last equation will depend on our best-informed estimates as we plug in the numbers:

\[ L_{mI} \times L_{rI} = I_xF \]

Now to bring it all together. Since I think our own saltiness, the quality and quantity of time spent together, and others’ learning profiles are all contributing factors, I want to represent these in my final formula. Here’s how each of the three combine to yield a score that could provide a measurement estimate of summary strength for any particular empowerment relationship (a relationship where one person over the course of a single year is trying to help the other become a fully deputized ministry multiplier).

\[ S \times I_xI \times I_xF = I_xER \]

(where \( I_xER \) estimates the empowerment relationship between me and individual X)

When applying the model to Jesus’ relationship with Peter, it’s fair to say our Lord scores a perfect “3” on our saltiness scale. As previously noted, I assume that Peter had 50 hours a week where he was near Jesus, and that during 10 of those hours he was receiving customized instruction about how to live. This would lead to a score of “10” after I work out the math. And, as far as I can see, Peter was a true novice when it came to the tasks Jesus was preparing him for (I gave him a “1” for maturity)
but he was a pretty motivated learner (I gave him a “6” for readiness). Finally, and importantly, I want to multiply the resulting ER number by 3 because Jesus was able to invest three years in Peter at this (average) rate. Here’s the resulting calculation:

\[(3_{\text{Jesus}} \times 10_{\text{Jesus-Peter}} \times 6_{\text{Peter}} = 180_{\text{Jesus-Peter}}) \times 3_{\text{years}} = 540\]

What if Jesus wasn’t working with someone as normal as Peter? What if he was pouring himself into someone who was perfectly mature (4) and perfectly ready (7) to learn from Jesus? But, he only had six months of this sort of investment. Here’s what that would look like—a pretty impressive empowerment relationship score over a shorter time frame, but still less than what Jesus was able to accomplish with Peter:

\[(3_{\text{Jesus}} \times 10_{\text{Jesus-PerfectoMan}} \times 28_{\text{PerfectoMan}} = 840_{\text{Jesus-PerfectoMan}}) \times .5_{\text{years}} = 420\]

What if I was committed to personally investing in someone named Roscoe? I assume I might be able to average four hours a week with Roscoe, and since I am his professor it’s easy to see how two of those hours each week would be deliberately focused on teaching. But I’ve got so far to go in my own journey to let Jesus be Lord of my choices, time, and relationships that I scored a measly “.5” on the saltiness scale. The good news is that Roscoe is a hair more mature than Peter when he started, and just as motivated. And I’ve got a four-year college window to make a difference. These numbers don’t look too good when compared with what Jesus could do:

\[.5_{\text{ME}} \times .1_{\text{ME-Roscoe}} \times 12_{\text{Roscoe}} = .6_{\text{ME-Roscoe}} \times 4_{\text{years}} = 2.4\]

Moved by conviction, I rededicate myself to abiding in Jesus more deeply, thus becoming more salty. Who I am is always a factor in the impact I have on others. I also conclude that I need to find someone better than Roscoe (someone perfect!) to work with over a four-year college experience. I see considerable progress in the empowerment relationship score, but I’m still a far cry from what Jesus had going with Peter:

\[1.5_{\text{ME}} \times .1_{\text{ME-(Roscoe)}} \times 28_{\text{PerfectoMan}} = 4.2_{\text{ME-PerfectoMan}} \times 4_{\text{years}} = 16.8\]

As a final test of how high I might score in a fictional empowerment relationship, I double the time I spend with PerfectoMan from what I once gave Roscoe. I exercise my power of woo and convince him to stay with me for another year after getting his
undergrad degree so he can get a master’s degree. After inviting him to share life with me eight hours weekly, and allocating half those hours to coaching and teaching him, I register my highest score yet...about 15 percent as effective as Jesus was with Peter:

\[
(1.5_{ME} \times .4_{ME-2Roscoe}) \times 28_{PerfectoMan} = 16.8_{ME-PerfectoMan}) \times 5_{years} = 84
\]

At this point my model-building and testing has served its purpose. I am thoroughly convinced that we’re mired in a ministry mess that will require Lord Jesus’ miraculous intervention. But I’ve clarified how to pray.

**#1—Lord, lead me to motivated Roscoes.** Jesus was able to do much with Peter because Peter was a hungry, willing follower. If Peter barely cared (plug in the number “1” where the number “6” is in the original calculation) I doubt whether he’d have been adequately prepared to be the rock Jesus needed him to be for the early church.

**#2—Lord, help me to focus on my own game.** “Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life” is an anchoring truth (Proverbs 4:23). Unless my choices, time, and love for others reflect more of Jesus’ power in my life, I may be a dis-empowerment factor in the lives of others. Notice in the calculations how my own first number of “.5” (with poor Roscoe) actually shrunk the end result! It’s certainly tough to imagine how I can expect to raise up ministry multipliers if I can’t bring myself as a positive multiplier into the equation. I should not underestimate the importance of my own personal vitality under Jesus’ Lordship in my life when it comes to ministry multiplication.

**#3 - Lord, show me how to leverage more life-time with people.** When the boys first started following Jesus they likely had less time with him than what they enjoyed later. The access and intensity grew over time. Twenty hours in year one could have become 40 hours in year two. By year three, it’s not unreasonable to imagine they were together 80 hours a week. Over a three-year period they hung out within 50 meters of Jesus for upwards of 7,000 hours.
With whom am I called to share 7,000 hours? Or 1,400 deliberate coaching and teaching hours? Jesus’ original ministry model, the one necessary to give birth to the Church, seems impossible and impractical today.

That’s because we can’t easily think outside our current structures. And we don’t currently have the benefit of seeing how growth in our lives can provide a simple symmetrical template we could use with others. Let’s change that.

Unlike the conditions during Jesus’ day and at the dawn of the Church, confessing Christians can be found everywhere. The notion that disciple-making is done by a mature follower of Jesus to someone who is not yet mature—largely through scheduled weekly meetings—deserves critical review. Significant, life-defining formation takes place all the time through non-formal means. Socialization is a powerhouse of influence, so much so that it can explain the current state of befuddlement that runs so rampant throughout our Western churches.

Any well-formed follower of Christ can grab the wheel that turns this ship around. That’s how hope works. It’s viral and organic, defying management structures. And the only qualification we must have is to be all-in for Jesus. The true secret to empowerment is found in Paul’s admonition to some confused Christians in the first century: “And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.”

His qualifier to other believers puts to rest any concern that he thinks too highly of himself. “I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.”

This sort of influence ignores org charts.

Every believer of Jesus already has life patterns with people that make it possible for some to have more proximity hours than others. What would happen for the Kingdom if those who see me 30 hours a week experienced me as a salty, positive multiplier? And what would happen if we grabbed deliberate conversational coaching lunches three times a week, where we talked about our choices, hours, and interactions with others?

So, in the spirit and pattern of Paul, I want to just put it out there. I want to press into my attachment to the Vine so that my life’s rhythms are increasingly dominated by Jesus. To do so, I’m going to be vigilant about my choices, my time, and my
encounters with other people. When my decisions show evidence that I am discerning the mind of Christ, I’ll know I’m making progress. When my hours show evidence that I’m a faithful servant, making the most of what Jesus has given me, I’ll know I’m making progress. When the people I encounter experience the love of Christ through me, I’ll know I’m making progress. And when a few people get more of my formational focus (because Jesus directed these connections), I’ll know I’m being a multiplier.

Who can’t do this? There’s symmetry and synergy embedded in this plan. As a dedicated flag-waver for the cause of reaching lost, broken kids for Jesus, I pledge right now to trust the Lord fully to send us the mentoring-workers needed for this harvest of teenagers. They may be scarce now. But they’ll be abundant when God’s people are well-formed and empowered to start multiplying like rabbits.

Our influence will, soon enough, become exponential.

First, Jesus forms in us a deeply dependent connection to himself through prayer, obedience to God’s Word, and love for others. This is the Vine-and-branch dynamic at work. Our love for others eventually bears fruit, leading us into a more focused love with a few. We start forming others to copy us as we imitate Jesus, doing all we can with those God calls us to. This is an aha! for many, because we move from being a follower of Jesus to becoming one of his deputies, contributing all we’ve been given to his beloved Church and mission. The Bible teaches us that this is exactly the growth leaders are supposed to bring about among God’s people.

“Theyir responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won’t be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.”

Symmetry - Dave Rahn 80
This is not intended to be a complicated process whereby we learn one way to follow Jesus and another way to do ministry. Rather it represents a first-order ministry shift, because it can be described as more of the same. What we do from the beginning with our choices, hours, and relationships is a mirror-image of what we should do at every step of growth along the way.

_Symmetry._

Inside the world of mathematics, symmetry is represented by the equal sign (=). Art and architecture might draw upon repetitive fractals (like a spiral) for their symmetrical designs. In both math and art, symmetry assumes that parameters have been defined. That’s what this book has tried to do: clearly define universally repeatable ministry practices that reflect Jesus as Lord.

When Lord Jesus leads us to the people he wants us to invest in, we can empower them by showing them how to shrewdly leverage their decision-making and time to influence others with whom they already have loving relationships. The catalytic question to ask of would-be ministry multipliers is: _With whom is Jesus calling you to make a prayerful investment of time so that they might reach their potential?_
After years of traveling the United States, certain restaurants, airports, historic monuments, and cities take on identifying characteristics. Chicago is home to my beloved Cubs, Bears, Bulls—and deep-dish pizza. New York never sleeps, hosts Broadway musicals, and is known for Wall Street and Times Square. But ask me to identify highlights of Columbus, Ohio, and (after Ohio State University) there’s not a lot to make it famous. This seems patently unfair. Columbus is often labeled the “forgotten big city,” perhaps because most people would be surprised that it ranks as the 15th largest city in the country.

Katie grew up feeling forgotten inside the 15th largest city in America.

She was the youngest in her family of five siblings—none of whom shared the same father. But census data seldom tells the full story. Katie’s mom was constantly taking people in, helping to raise them. Their dysfunctional house was usually better than other kids’, even with 16 people living in her house. And when her brother and sister moved out, they merely moved across the street. It was a close-knit family, however confusing.

Katie’s mom always had a man. After one brother’s dad beat her and left her for her best friend she moved on to hook-up with another sister’s dad. Soon enough he went to prison for robbing banks. That’s when she got with Katie’s dad—until the bank-robbing dad got out of jail. Then Katie’s mom left her dad to return to her sister’s father, who helped raise Katie until he went back to jail for robbing more banks. Meanwhile, Katie’s biological father was banned from living in Ohio for selling drugs. He was a fearsome man, very strict, and an alcoholic. (Told you it was confusing!)

Their house was always full of people, parties and drinking. Katie can’t remember a New Years Eve where she wasn’t allowed to drink. She had figured out how to get attention or get her way by crying and never experienced any discipline until she got older, when she “would get smacked and stuff.”
As Katie describes her family now: “Katie poor, so we had food stamps and welfare and Section 8. Sometimes we would have to choose which bills to pay because we wouldn't have enough to pay them all. We didn’t have deep relationships, mostly because I don’t think we knew how. My family didn't know how to do healthy conflict resolution so we had a lot of arguments and fights and the next day we would just sweep it under the rug like nothing ever happened. But we still celebrated birthdays and holidays and stuff. My mom was functional; like she would always provide clothes, shelter, and the essentials with whatever she had. She even came to all our school functions and stuff. She was just incomplete, in the sense of [not being able to provide] nurturing, loving discipline or a healthy environment. My mom is actually really kind and giving. She unfortunately chose to sell drugs to provide and stuff.

At the impressionable age of six, Katie began to notice specific times that she and her siblings were told to leave the house. Katie’s mom would declare, “It’s adult time now,” and the children would quickly exit. Soon after she made this observation, Katie became interested in what was going on at her home behind closed doors. Spying through a crack in the door, Katie saw that her mother was selling prescription drugs for a living. That’s why she didn’t have to go to work like other moms in the neighborhood. When her mom eventually discovered that Katie was watching, she didn’t get upset. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Her mom told Katie, “Well... as long as you know you might as well help me.” Six-year-old Katie became a drug dealer that day.

One way you could get revenge on people you were mad at in the hood was to call Child Protective Services on your neighbor. Katie grew up learning how to handle herself in these interviews and not say anything about the drug trafficking in the house. She was only slightly bothered by this deception, mostly because all of the dealers who moved in and out of the house gave her money when she asked. “We actually got close to the people my mom sold to and knew a lot about them. I think I knew, too, when I was younger that we needed the money to survive. I remember sitting in my 5th grade class and DARE was speaking and telling us that if we knew people who did drugs that we should tell. I felt so conflicted; I loved my mom and
knew she pushed drugs. But these other adults were telling me it was wrong. I hated that feeling, but I was very loyal to my mom.”

Fortunately for Katie, she got involved in Youth for Christ about the same time she started dabbling more seriously in drug use. She was 14 when she smoked her first marijuana blunt—with her mom and friends. Soon after she started popping pills and even selling to other kids at school. When a police S.W.A.T. team busted their house and the family moved in with others Katie became more skilled at concealing drugs. She originally came to the City Life Center in Columbus because her friend convinced her it was a way to have fun and meet cute boys.

After a couple of weeks Katie had a conversation with Dre, one of the volunteer leaders. At first it was all small talk. Then Dre shared a story about how God had helped him get out of a tempting situation. Katie was mesmerized. Dre laid out the Gospel, telling her that “this same God loves you, cares about you, and wants to change your life.” The idea that she was loved by God, in spite of all the stuff she was doing, blew Katie away. She put her trust in Jesus that night.

Her change was anything but instantaneous. Katie admits that she was still having sex, drinking, smoking, stealing, and more. Soon enough she stopped showing up at City Life. But an encounter with a classmate who said she didn’t believe in “all that Jesus stuff” awakened a curious desire to change her friend. Katie brought her to a Bible study and, a few months later, she led her to Christ. As she says, “God used her to bring me back to him—I became serious after that.”

Erica was the leader who invested most directly in Katie. They met together weekly to read the Bible and much more. Erica invited Katie to dinners, to clean, to garden, to grocery shop. She helped her stop smoking, encouraged her to stop having sex, and stood by Katie’s side when she made bad choices, helping her understand what God’s plan really looked like for her life. Their relationship was authentic and fortified by the love of Jesus. By the time Katie was around 16 years old she was no longer part of the drug-dealing/using life that she grew up in.

The practical life-coaching that Erica offered Katie is often what it takes for mentors to help at-risk kids overcome their significant challenges. In Katie’s own words, Erica “helped me fill out college applications and get a car and get a job and
the list goes on and on. She stuck in there with me. She was like a mom to me. And when she married Dre (yes, the same guy!), they both loved me like I was their daughter. There’s so much I want to say about her, I honestly don’t believe I would still be walking with the Lord if it weren’t for her influence. She’s been discipling me for almost 8 years. We are great friends. She trained me to take over our high school club, we are in home church leadership together and co-run the VIT program (volunteers in training).”

Now twenty-two, Katie is drawing a salary with Youth for Christ. The love of Jesus was authentically delivered to her through caring adults like Erica and Dre. Today she spends most of her time loving and mentoring urban youth, leading a small group at the same City Life center where she met Jesus. On Sundays Katie chauffeurs those neighborhood kids to church.

When once-lost kids experience Jesus’ radical rescue and are empowered to make a difference entire neighborhoods can change. Katie’s a multiplier, driven by the desire to see others, like her, come to know and experience the love of Jesus.

What she brings to the table is desperately needed in the Church.
Two years ago, after 38 years of living in the Fort Wayne area, Susie and I moved more than an hour away. I think it was the kind of decision that I’ve been describing in this book. In fact, since it fell into the “major life change” category, I know that we prayed about this move for about a year before heading north.

We left life-long friends behind. Basketball and golf partners. Doctors, dentists, bankers, car dealers and favorite coffee shops. Work relationships have changed dramatically (no one who does what I do is 50 meters from where I live and work).

The sense of loss is keen. Our confidence that this is what Jesus was leading us to do has been critical to the adjustments we’ve had to make. The Lord brought one (now two) new persons into our sphere of influence, and we both became convinced that these little people need to be targets of some of our focused love formation in the years ahead. Brigham and Preslee are our grandkids, now 3 and 1-year-old. Real losses have been met by extraordinary gains.

Before we moved I bumped into people all the time who might have, at least for a season, been on the receiving end of my ministry focus. The Lord has blessed me with memories from those many years. But in the past two years I’ve had to build new relationships with people who’ve lived, worked, and ministered in this region for as long as I had a history in the Fort Wayne area.

If I’d stayed anchored to what I knew so well, I’m sure I would’ve poured into existing relationships as I considered how to best empower others to make a difference for Jesus. But nowadays I’m trying to discover who’s who and what God is already up to. And, honestly, I’m just trying to join in. It’s like there are a bunch of kids playing pick-up soccer and I’ve ask to play. When they say “yes,” I offer my new ball and a willingness to play the goalie position that no one else wants to play. I fit in, and bring something new to the mix.
My new life represents a different kind of multiplication strategy—it’s not exactly an empowerment path. If it was, I’d pursue exponential influence by growing up well-formed deputies for Jesus who would do the same for others. This is generational multiplication. It’s classically represented by Paul’s admonition to Timothy: “You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others.” But this is merely a form of how the Father delivers on his promise to make Abraham a father to a nation so large it can’t be counted. It’s a grow-your-own strategy.

I’m familiar with this strategy because, as a die-hard fan, I’ve heard it touted as the only way the Chicago Cubs will ever be good enough to win a World Series. So, with renewed hope in more purposeful baseball management activity, I’ll wait (again) ’til next year.

But there’s another way to get better, of course. The Cubs could negotiate with other ballclubs to make trades for new players. Or they could barter with agents and spend money to get free agents on the team. Apparently this approach to team-building is more expensive and less certain than growing your own. One factor working against this collaboration strategy is that other teams or agents don’t necessarily want to give the Cubbies all the help they need to get better.

That’s the way it is in competitive, big-time sports. Usually. But sometimes a greater common-cause surfaces that changes everyone’s willingness to truly collaborate. Such was a moment for USA Basketball after the 1988 Olympics, when America—in spite of being home to the world’s best players—finished with a bronze medal.

Amateurs and professionals agreed that this (relatively) poor representation of American basketball on the Olympic stage could not continue. New rules were put in place to allow professional basketball players to represent their countries in the Games. Fierce competitive adversaries from the NBA’s Bulls, Lakers, Celtics, Jazz, Spurs, Warriors, Knicks, Trailblazers, and 76ers came together to become the Dream Team, arguably the greatest sports team ever assembled. Their goal was to reclaim
the gold medal for America. For a time, this unifying pursuit gave fans a display of basketball unlike anything the world had seen.

When people with shared passion, similar pedigrees, and diverse assets collaborate together, synergistic multiplication can result. When Christians intent on following Christ decide to work together in love for God’s glory, it’s also causes the world to sit up and take notice.

Collaboration is a different kind of multiplication strategy. Like empowerment, it seeks exponential ministry influence by leveraging the gifts of those formed by Jesus through prayer, obedience to God’s Word, and love for others. The symmetrical fractal is secured; but that’s where the similarities between collaboration and empowerment cease.

Empowerment is the *grow-your-own* strategy that results in a *giant sequoia* type of ministry. Single sequoia trees have grown for as long as the Church has existed—more than 2,000 years. They reach hundreds of feet in the air, and their awe-inspiring size is jaw-dropping.

But *collaboration* provides a different pathway to greatness. It’s more like the *quaking aspen*. United by the same underground root system estimated to be nearly 80,000 years old, one aspen clonal colony (with thousand of visible trees-as-stems) is widely thought to be the heaviest single living organism known to man.

The Dream Team in 1992 was pretty cool. But I doubt whether *The Trembling Giant* (aspen) of Utah or *General Sherman* (sequoia) inside California’s *Giant Forest* are impressed. What *would* impress these majestic creations of God?

The *Church*, operating like Jesus intended!

Even stones cheer for what God is doing.⁹⁹ Why wouldn’t they? They were collateral damage when sin entered the world and became subject to God’s curse. They’re groaning under the weight of a world that doesn’t work like it’s supposed to. But big old trees in Utah and California and little garden rocks in Indiana will be part of a standing ovation that looks like a scene from *Lord of the Rings*, as “*the heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship.*”¹⁰⁰ What gives nature her voice? We do! “*For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are.*”¹⁰¹
The ultimate plan calls upon God’s people to be hybrids of sequoia and aspen trees. Huge, expanded kingdom growth is supposed to be sustained by an indestructibly-united root system. And the symmetrical common ground is something as small as a mustard seed.

Collaboration represents a second-order ministry shift, because it’s not a “more of the same” tree repeating itself in a carefully planned orchard. It’s an entirely new forest. It reaches for cultural change through wild, organic growth and personal breakthroughs. If empowerment is represented in symmetrical design by the defining parameters of a fractal, collaboration makes room for the many variations of a fractal that can be repeated. The spiral of a tornado is both different from and the same as the spiral of water draining from a tub.

When we collaborate we can appreciate the beauty in this diversity. We can enjoy what we recognize in others as evidence of same Holy Spirit that we’ve become so familiar with. The choices that other Christ-followers make might be very different from ours, but when we learn that they put their prayer-discernment pants on one leg at a time—just like we do—we relax considerably. We feel assured that we are, essentially, born of the same Seed. And our hearts swing gratefuly toward Lord Jesus, who smiles confidently in our direction. He has always had this under control.

How invigorating would it be to encounter Christians everywhere who, like us, prayerfully search God’s Word for decision-making wisdom? Who share our quest to make every minute count for Jesus? Who aspire to love everyone they meet with Jesus’ unmatchable grace? When a host of Christians come to these same pursuits from different starting points (gender, age, ethnicity, experience, and so on) we see a symphony of diverse assets put into play that we had not accounted for. And when this diversity is subjected to Jesus’ Lordship, the ensuing unity will make a splash in the culture.

In fact, we have only one record of a prayer by Jesus that explicitly references all of us who live for him today. It is, quite simply, that we might be one.  

The reason Jesus prays for our unity is not for our sake, but for the sake of others who will be drawn to believe in God by our faithful, powerful witness. It’s an essential multiplication strategy.
Many of the greatest leaders in the Church today aren’t great fans of collaborations. They don’t think it’s a strategy that works. Given their assumptions, I agree. When the first claim on our decision-making energy, our weekly hours, or our people investments is always the organization we’ve built rather than the Kingdom that God is building, we simply don’t have room in our lives for collaborating. We’ve twisted the first part of Matthew 6:33 to read something like this: *Seek first God’s Kingdom (provided we can do so inside of the ministries that have hired us).*

Jacques Ellul once described how the rebellious core of Cain led him to build a city that would provide for the security and future he lost when God banished him. This self-interest is poison even inside our organizations, as Patrick Lencioni has noted: “Teams that lead healthy organizations come to terms with the difficult but critical requirement that its members must put the needs of the higher team ahead of the needs of their departments.” I’ve noticed that many of us can get pretty territorial about the ministries we’ve built up. We seek what’s best for that which we’re most invested in, rather than investing most in that which God says is best. If that’s how you’re wired, I suspect collaboration won’t work well for you.

As fascinated as I am by organizational collaborations, I think I’m advocating for something less formal and more pervasive. A friend of mine recently sent me this definition: *Collaboration happens when both entities are willing to give up some things in order to further the mission of both.* True, I think, for inter-group cooperative work. But I’m challenging the first allegiance that organizations claim on their employees and lobbying for those within existing group structures to find one another and forge guerrilla tribes that can’t be controlled, suppressed, or managed by anyone but Lord Jesus. This fits the image I have of a prevailing Church.

When I moved north I began to move among persons of Kingdom influence to see if we might build a relationship of love and trust. Ultimately, I look forward to humbly collaborating with them. I believe God intends for us to gain synergistic benefit from each other by pooling our diverse assets for Lord Jesus’ agenda. Along the way we can model together the unity that exponentially reveals God’s glory.

Different from what might be asked of those sequoia-like empowering multipliers, the catalytic question to ask of would-be ministry collaborators is: *With*
whom is Jesus calling you to make a prayerful investment of time so that you might reach your potential together? There’s a symmetrical common seed between the two questions. Those with ears to hear will be intrigued by the possibilities, whatever it means to their particular ministries or churches.

Lord Jesus, help us get with your plan. The kids can’t wait much longer.
Author, novelist, poet, and farmer extraordinaire, Wendell Berry, stands tall among the eloquent. He is known as a wise spokesman and powerful activist—for helping root a story in a particular “place.” He once wrote:

...Belong to your place by your own knowledge

Of what it is that no other place is, and by

Your caring for it as you care for no other place, this

Place that you belong to though it is not yours...

Belong to your place by knowledge of the others who are

Your neighbors in it: the old man, sick and poor...  

Johnny Acevedo is from East Harlem, New York—he is far from Berry’s tranquil Kentucky farm, but he embodies the great author’s vision. Johnny offers himself to this rooted place. He belongs to it. He immerses himself in the people of Harlem, its rhythms of life, and its broken cries for redemption. He roots himself in this place because East Harlem is where Johnny met Jesus.

East Harlem doesn’t exactly have a reputation of “the place to meet Jesus.” In the 70’s and 80’s the neighborhoods were devastated by the crack epidemic; abandoned buildings were left to rot as a visual reminder of what this place had once been, and would never be again. Yet it always remained vibrant—a cultural hodgepodge of languages, ethnicities, old and young mixed together. It was much later when Johnny began to see just how strategic and beautiful such a setting could be for the Gospel.

Johnny was born in a Bronx ghetto, a second generation Puerto Rican American. He was more than acquainted with racism, and his culture clash meant that his own identity search was even more confusing. His parents sensed that something needed
They worked tirelessly until they could afford to move the family from the
ghetto and into a safer neighborhood in Queens.

Inside this new locale the most significant place for Johnny’s family quickly
became a little Baptist church in East Harlem. It was a church filled with Spanish-
speaking parents and English-speaking kids—a perfect fit for a young man trying to
figure out who he was amidst second-generation cultural challenges. Johnny thrived
in this environment. He was empowered.

As he continued to be exposed to those who saw his potential, Johnny learned
that he had a place and a role in the church. The elders and pastors encouraged him
with a steady message: “God has given you gifts, and God can move through you as a
leader.” According to Johnny: “I had never heard that before. It just blew my mind.”

To this day Johnny speaks of East Harlem, with all of its troubles and brokenness,
as a place with “lots of gifts.” It’s no surprise that he thinks the greatest of these gifts
are the young people in the neighborhood. He began ministering to East Harlem kids
as a passionate youth leader with a bit of a pride problem. He laughs, “I got into youth
ministry to ’show these people how to live.’” After almost eight years of moderate
effectiveness, the Lord made Johnny aware of how detrimental his arrogance was to
his ministry. That set him on a journey toward humility that still propels him. Lord
Jesus—ever gracious in love—was refining him to use him in powerful ways.

During this season, Johnny began to rethink the importance of this place, the
city of East Harlem. Convinced of the Lord’s leading and called to a particular
community, Johnny planted Open Door Fellowship Church of East Harlem in 2009.
While directing one young Puerto Rican American along a new path, Lord Jesus was
simultaneously sharpening another in his Church for faithful obedience.

Freshly called by the Lord from upstate New York, back to the city where he was
born, Ray Villegas crossed paths with Johnny. When God’s people find that they
possess the same symmetrical seed of Jesus within them, it’s not long before
convergence leads to collaboration. Ray was being called by the Lord to launch a new
Youth for Christ ministry in East Harlem and discovered that Johnny, like him, was a
graduate of the DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative. Not only were their hearts united
under Jesus’ Lordship, they were aided by common training and ministry values they could build on together.

Johnny and Ray began to speak and encourage one another, and soon committed themselves to partner in ministry together. “It gave something tangible for us [to do],” Johnny says. The church saw something concrete developing as Ray began to serve the community’s youth. Soon enough the church and YFC co-hosted Blaze Fest, a hip-hop camp for ages 11-18. Kids were quite literally running to get in. The work was “totally relevant for our type of community,” Johnny says. Sharing the same desire to channel Jesus’ love into transformational relationships with young people, they united in humility to serve youth at the level of their interests. Their collaboration provided a powerful witness of how Jesus’ Lordship transcends organizational self-interests on behalf of his Kingdom, one marked by immeasurable love.

God is weaving a rich and varied tapestry in East Harlem. When he brings people and their ministries together, it’s something to behold. Choices, time, and especially people reflect the mirror-image of Jesus. Berry’s poetic line gives us a peek into how Johnny, Ray, and others are making a difference:

“Belong to your place by knowledge of the others who are your neighbors in it.”

Herein lies a hope that is symmetrical, delivering an exponentially-evolving vision for Johnny and Ray and the throngs of East Harlem kids who don’t yet know Jesus.
I have a story to tell, a drawing to share, and a prayer to offer.

My story. I miss Troi terribly. He’s been dead for 25 years now, and I sometimes wonder if I don’t carry a burden of sadness in my soul because he’s not available to talk with me anymore. We were unusually bonded by the tragic death of Dave, Troi’s best friend, in 1976. In fact, Troi spent months in the hospital burn unit, recovering from the same electrocution accident that took Dave’s life. At the time, I was hundreds of miles away, going through my boot-camp training as a newly employed minister with Youth for Christ.

I’d had only a recent, but intense, history of shared experiences with Troi before the accident. A black student who lived in Fort Wayne’s Brookmill housing projects, Troi was a fabulously entertaining, Cosby-like storyteller. His outgoing personality made him beloved among his high school classmates. He was student body vice-president-elect going into his senior year. His white buddy, Dave, had been elected president. They were co-captains of the football team. And when I started to get acquainted with them in May of 1976, I was thrilled that they wanted to be involved in Campus Life. As a fresh college graduate I was eager to finally get started in full-time ministry. Maybe it was because I was only 5 years older than these two, but we hit it off well.

At the last minute Troi had to cancel out of a trip to the Smokies I was leading in June. I was disappointed that he couldn’t enjoy the backpacking experience with us. Dave was still able to go and he had a life-changing adventure. One evening, while sitting around the campfire a few days down the trail, Dave interrupted the Bible story I was sharing. “Are you saying what Jesus wants from us is everything?” There was
nothing but honest inquiry behind his question. As much as I was tempted to dress up my response, I decided to keep it simple. “Yes, Dave, that’s what the Bible says.” We held each other’s gaze for a few seconds before he responded, “Okay.” Understand, this was not a “shrug-it-off” okay. There was resolve in his voice. His eyes were dancing in anticipation. He had just made a decision to follow Jesus by surrendering his whole life. All of us who heard him say “okay” were witnesses to one of the most simple confessions of faith ever to echo through heaven’s halls. When I close my eyes and recall that night I can still hear the thick reverb of significance in his response.

Dave seemed to grasp instantly the importance of his decision, and Lord Jesus moved him to action quickly. The same day we returned from the Smokies, Dave visited Troi, told him what he missed, and convinced him to enlist as a new Christ-follower. The three of us spent hours together almost every day praying, laughing, dreaming, and studying. They loved having what they called Scripture feasts, where we started at one place in our Bible study and just kept turning pages to hunt for answers to the new questions they would come up with.

I suspected that we wouldn’t be able to keep up this pace once football started up in August. But I had no idea that Dave would join Jesus face-to-face just three weeks after his faith journey began. Okay. Dave’s was a profound commitment around the campfire.

Here’s how the accident happened. The two guys were helping to dig out a flagpole, enjoying the competitive pushing and shoving at the base while unaware that the top of the pole was whipping toward high voltage electrical wires. When contact was made, Dave died instantly. Troi seemed to recover from his burns, but after he died as a 29-year-old, the autopsy suggested that the electrocution had done damage that somehow paved the way for his untimely stroke.
By the time he died, Troi had started his own ministry to kids in crisis—in Texas. He was a sought-after speaker, often telling audiences that it was his identity as Jesus’ man—not as a black man—that sustained him through his many difficulties. In addition to the accident with Dave, Troi experienced the drowning death of his younger brother and the loss of his grandmother who raised him. Like so many kids we work with in Youth for Christ, his life challenges seemed unfair. But when he met Lord Jesus he found the symmetrical seed that brought order and hope to every tragedy, every heartache, and every opportunity.

When I first met Troi he had just memorized Dr. King’s I Have a Dream speech for a high school competition. He won meets over and over. But what I miss about Troi is how honestly and earnestly we could talk about the choices we had to make now that we were bonded as brothers in Christ. What should we do, and not do? Who was God asking us to love better than we had? Lord Jesus was, and IS, in charge. Everything else is just details. I miss talking with my buddy—a one-time kid in crisis who became an indigenous ministry multiplier—about the details of life under Jesus’ Lordship.

I picture Troi and Dave in heaven, leaning forward in their seats as they’ve cheered me on for years. They’re part of the great cloud of witnesses that has a rooting interest in me, in you, and in all of us! Our assignments as God’s people today are extensions of their’s yesterday. They’ve run their races.

My search for symmetry began with Troi and Dave. It’s been tested by Roscoe, PerfectoMan, and every kid’s story shared in this book. Symmetry is essentially a quest to simplify and clarify the common formation agenda shared by lost kids in crisis, urban hipsters, frazzled moms, godly pastors, and seasoned CEOs. It lends itself to a spreadsheet with innumerable columns, but only three rows. I can reflect fruitfully on my own journey or shift my attention to others’ narratives. It looks something like the
grid I’ve created below, and is much more useful as a template for jotting notes about progress than it is for entering numbers in each cell.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choices</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CATALYTIC TRUTH QUEST</strong>&lt;br&gt;Who do I say Jesus is?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONSUMING IDENTITY QUEST</strong>&lt;br&gt;Who does Jesus say I am?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHRISTLIKE FRUIT QUEST</strong>&lt;br&gt;In me? In others? Through others? With others?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*My drawing.* I’m a firm believer in napkins. If we’re at a restaurant together I’d likely draw something on a napkin that’s so compelling and clear that you’d want to take it home and use it as a bookmark in your favorite Bible.

You’ve already seen this graphic. It represents the symmetrical seed I’d like to see sown everywhere. It can fix what ails us. If you’re pondering what to do next with what you’re about to finish reading, this is what I’d like to scrawl on a napkin and shove your way.

If you’re wondering what your next move is with your spouse, or someone who would never read this book, please stare at this model carefully, with your heart wide open.

Maybe you’re stuck in a church that doesn’t seem to be working for you. Your next move can pop right out of this drawing.

Are you a ministry multiplier, eager to let the Lord move through you to bring about fruit that’s 30, 60, or 100 times what you’ve been able to accomplish? Don’t pursue your thinking about empowerment or collaboration outside of this model. Drop your efforts—whether they’re practical or mystical—smack dab in the middle of
the process outlined below. Symmetry’s seed can protect the fruitfulness of your work, but only if you stay inside the shell.

And I have a final suggestion for anyone who feels the weight of leading an organization. Unload your logo right in the center of this model and reflect on what could be different about your ministry if this simple seed served as the housing for your particular mission.

It’s what I’ve been doing with Youth for Christ since I began writing this book. I’m a pedigreed ministry architect. Strategic is my middle name. But for all of the money and manpower YFC cultivates for the cause I love, we will not be able to do enough for lost kids in crisis because we are an exceptionally shrewd and savvy organization. To the degree that I have misled any of the hundreds of ministry students I’ve taught to think that our leadership assignment in God’s mission could be accomplished by any other means than what is simply sketched below, I earnestly repent and ask for forgiveness. We all see through a glass darkly while traveling planet earth. I’m pretty sure I thought that window-tint was a cool thing some years ago.
My prayer. This book has been an act of worship. It's only fitting to close with a benediction.

Lord Jesus, may every one of our favorite causes be sweet offerings to you.

May we keep learning how to end our ego’s intrusion into ministry leadership.

May we seek you 1,000 times a week for our decisions.

May we obey you faithfully 100 hours a week, every week.

May we blow people away by how much our love for them smells like you.

May those who don’t know you,
like clueless, lost kids caught up in unimaginable junk,
benefit from the symmetry of your Church
expressed in gorgeous, diverse ministries.

May you be glorified now and forever.
Endnotes

1 Mark 3:1-6

2 John 5:1-18


4 see John 17

5 John 20:30-31


7 Matthew 16:17-18

8 Matthew 16:21

9 John 18:36

10 Mark 14:60-64

11 Colossians 1:27; 3:3; Matthew 28:20; Romans 8:38-39

12 1 Corinthians 12:3; Philippians 2:11

13 Romans 17:10


15 Kenda Creasy Dean, Almost Christian: What the faith of our teenagers is telling the American Church, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 10-12.

16 Jennifer Bradbury, The Christology of High School Students in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, (unpublished master’s culmination research project, Huntington University, 2013).

17 Romans 11:36-12:3; Colossians 1:15-20

18 John 21:18-22

19 Rick Lawrence, Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry, (Rick Lawrence, 2014), p. xvi.


21 Genesis 2:16-17

22 Psalm 46:10

24 Genesis 2:16-17

25 Isaiah 6:9-10; Matthew 13:15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10

26 John 12:39-40; Romans 11:8; Acts 28:27

27 Matthew 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:9; 14:35; Revelation 13:9

28 Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22

29 Matthew 7:21-27

30 Jeremiah 29:4-19

31 Ephesians 5:10-20, 6:18

32 Philippians 2:13

33 Luke 9:23

34 YFC colleague Tim Skrivan used this metaphor during some high level budget discussions, forever changing an otherwise tedious experience into one electrically charged with anticipation about what other gems he might offer


36 Numbers 20:2-12


38 Proverbs 4:23

39 Genesis 2:15

40 Psalm 39:4-7

41 Genesis 2:15

42 11:33-36, 12:1-2

43 Acts 9:5-6

44 Matthew 11:28-30


46 Romans 12:3-8

47 Ephesians 2:10
49 Galatians 5:22-23
50 Ephesians 5:1-2, 8-9
51 Acts 11:26
52 Matthew 10:37-39
54 Mark 10:21-22
55 Matthew 10:28-30
56 Matthew 16:18-19
57 Revelation 2:17
58 Luke 1:46-55
59 John 3:19; Romans 13:12-13; 2 Corinthians 6:14; Ephesians 5:11; Colossians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:5
60 Matthew 5-7
61 Genesis 2:18
62 Luke 12:2
63 I Corinthians 4:5
64 Ephesians 3:18
65 Luke 10:25-37
67 Mark 14:7
69 See Acts 6
70 Mark 3:14
71 John 13:23
72 Mark 5:37, 9:2, 14:33
73 Hebrews 10:24
74 Ephesians 4:15-16
75 1 Corinthians 13:1-3
76 Luke 14:12-14; 14:26
77 Luke 19:10
79 Romans 5:5
80 Hebrews 12: 1-2
81 Ephesians 3:20-21
82 Colossians 1:29
83 Mark 4:26-29
84 Galatians 5:22-23
85 1 Thessalonians 1:4-9
86 1 Corinthians 2:1-5
90 see Genesis 2:15-18
91 John 15:4-9
92 Luke 14:34-35
95 1 Corinthians 11:1
96 Philippians 3:12
97 Ephesians 4:12-16
2 Timothy 2:2

Luke 19:40

Psalm 19:1

Romans 8:19

John 17:21

