

CREATING A  
**DISCIPLESHIP  
PATHWAY**

by Michael Kelley

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## **INTRODUCTION: Walking the Discipleship Pathway**

If you've been around the church very long, you've heard the Christian terminology of having a "personal relationship with Jesus." This is how we describe our interaction with Jesus, and in that phrase we find some really great truths. We find that we have more than a casual acquaintanceship with Jesus; it's a relationship. And like any relationship, it can be deep or shallow. It needs to be nurtured. We also find that the relationship is personal. We don't enter into it because of our association with a group or because we have a membership card. We come into because something has happened to us individually.

But here's the interesting thing: When the Bible describes how we interact with Jesus, we don't find the phrase, a *personal* relationship with Jesus, anywhere in its pages. The Bible never talks about a "personal relationship with Christ." Sure, the ideas are there, but the terminology is absent. Instead, when the Bible talks about what we have with Jesus, we find a single word:

*Walk.*

Isn't it interesting that "walk" is the word the Bible uses? Take a look at Micah 6:8: "Mankind, he has told each of you what is good and what it is the Lord requires of you: to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God." Or consider the Book of Ephesians, where Paul uses the word "walk" six times to describe how a Christ-follower is supposed to live with Jesus: "Walk worthy. Walk in love. Walk in good works." Then there's the intriguing usage of the word in Genesis 5:21 about a curious character we know little about:

*“Enoch was 65 years old when he fathered Methuselah. And after he fathered Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years and fathered other sons and daughters. So Enoch’s life lasted 365 years. Enoch walked with God; then he was not there because God took him.”*

Genesis 5 is a genealogy, and it lists the descendants of Adam to Noah. And here’s the pattern the book takes: You have the name of a person—Enosh, Kenan, Jared, Seth, whoever—and when that person had lived a certain number of years, he became the father of another person. And then after he became the father of another person, he lived so many more years. And altogether he lived so many years, and then he died. That’s the pattern. Except with Enoch.

These other characters lived. But not Enoch. Enoch didn’t simply live; he *walked*. That was the description of his life: not just living but walking with God. And while all the other characters died, Enoch was no more because God took him away. What a remarkable way to describe the life and end of a man. In fact, so remarkable was Enoch’s life, that thousands of years later, the writer of Hebrews wrote: “By faith Enoch was taken away, and so he did not experience death. He was not to be found because God took him away. For before he was taken away, he was approved as one who pleased God” (Heb. 11:5).

Evidently, “walking” is an entirely different way of living. “Walking” is the life of discipleship. As disciple-making church leaders, our job is to help people walk in this way. Our task is to help them take step after step on the pathway of discipleship toward the goal of Christlikeness.

But what exactly does that pathway look like?

On any other pathway, there is a clearly delineated path to walk. There are markers of progress; there is a sureness of direction. At any time, we know where we are and how far we’ve got to go. But the pathway of discipleship is more nebulous.

- What should the discipleship pathway look like?
- What are its characteristics?
- Does discipleship look the same for everyone regardless of age, race, gender, or educational background?
- Does discipleship look the same in every church?

The intent of this small book is to help answer those questions, but it's also to help you as a church leader, be able to clearly and simply articulate a vision for a pathway of discipleship for the people in your church. In the end, by God's grace, this resource will help us do more than just articulate a discipleship pathway - it will give us firm footing to walk on it.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Uniqueness of the Discipleship Pathway

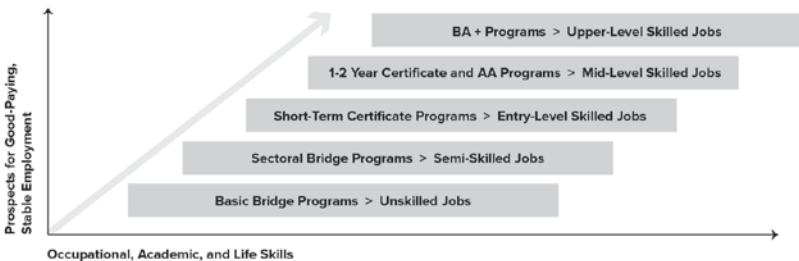
It's appropriate to refer to our walk with God in terms of a pathway. Just like any pathway:

- There is a beginning point and a destination.
- The goal is to make progress toward that destination.
- There are markers along the way to let us know we are making progress and walking in the right direction.
- There will be hills and valleys. Progress will be easy at times, but harder at other times.

A pathway is an ideal image to capture the progressive and ongoing nature of walking and growing in Christ. A pathway captures the nature of discipleship that other models miss. Here are two examples of poor models:

#### THE ACHIEVEMENT MODEL

A pathway of progression within an organization or business might look something like this:



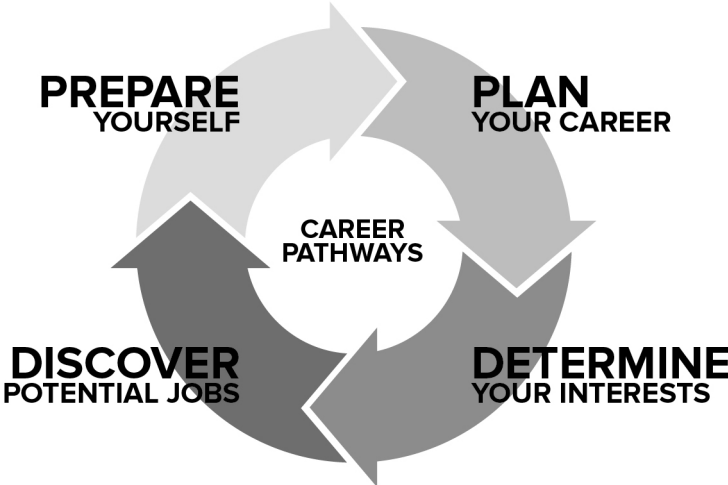


You can see the stair-stepping kind of progression visualized in the diagram. Each step represents some kind of achievement, such as the mastery of a new skill or the accumulation of knowledge.

While this model clearly shows the starting point and goal, it is fundamentally flawed when applied to discipleship. Discipleship has a beginning point and an eventual goal of Christ-likeness, but unlike this model, discipleship is not based on achievement. We don't climb a ladder in discipleship; in fact, it often seems that the longer you walk with Jesus, the further you realize you have to go. The longer you walk with Jesus and the more time you spend in His presence, the more you become aware of your own sin and shortcomings.

Furthermore, there are no levels of "mastery" in discipleship. If we consider ourselves having mastered some skill or character trait, then we should be very concerned about our spiritual condition because we have become filled with the kind of pride that will lead to our downfall.

**THE "WHAT'S NEXT" MODEL**



This model seems to eliminate the concept of achieving or mastering one thing before you climb to the next level. There is no image of climbing from one level to the next, but it does present achievement in another way. This model is circular in nature, so after you've gone the route with one skill, topic, or interest, it raises the question, "What's next?" You start the cycle over with another skill, topic, or interest. Unlike the Achievement Model where skills build on each other, the What's Next Model tackles one thing and just moves on to something else.

When brought into discipleship, this model leads an individual or a group to ask, "Now that we finished that study, what do we want to do now? What's next?"

What this model also fails to show is that discipleship is a lifelong journey; it is never fully completed until we die and are with Christ in His eternal kingdom.

The discipleship pathway avoids the errors of these two common models. It is not built on achievement; it is a pathway tied to the ongoing nature of walking with Jesus. The discipleship pathway confronts us with the fact that we are making progress in holiness and Christlikeness.

And Christlikeness is the destination we seek. God's will for every Christian is to be born again in Christ and then progress toward maturity, being conformed more and more to the image of Jesus. The discipleship pathway takes work to walk, and we will do so as we engage in certain spiritual disciplines.

Let's consider what that pathway looks like.





## CHAPTER TWO

### The Characteristics of the Discipleship Pathway

A biblically faithful pathway of discipleship is built on three key characteristics: The discipleship pathway is centered on the gospel, expanding in scope, and displayed in real life.



#### **CHARACTERISTIC 1: CENTERED ON THE GOSPEL**

The pathway of discipleship begins with the gospel because life in Christ begins with the gospel. We believe the gospel message, and we are born again as new creations. Once we are born again, we are placed on a spiritual growth trajectory that we are meant to intentionally engage in.

The problem is that, because the discipleship pathway begins with the gospel, many of us think the gospel is something we leave behind as we move toward maturity in Christ. We see the gospel as only the starting point of our walk with Christ.

By way of illustration, think about the starting blocks on a track. The runner braces him or herself against those blocks in order to push off into the race. It's vitally important for them to brace themselves securely because the rate at which they get out of the blocks can determine the finish. Unfortunately, we often see the gospel as the starting blocks. We place our faith securely on these "blocks." The gospel enables us to push off in order to run the race of the Christian life. And just as the runner

leaves the starting blocks far behind, we think the Christian should move beyond the gospel.

But the gospel isn't the starting blocks; it's the whole track we run on as disciples.

We aren't meant to push off on the gospel into the real business of living; we are to continually find our feet falling on the truth of the gospel. Our lives are to be driven daily by the cross and the resurrection of Christ.

- Our Bible study is centered on the gospel.
- Our pursuit of moral purity is centered on the gospel.
- Our generosity is centered on the gospel.
- Our \_\_\_\_\_ is centered in the gospel.

The gospel gives shape and power to everything we do for the entirety of the Christian life.

*“So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude”  
(Col. 2:6-7).*

In the same way we have received Christ (through the gospel) we are to walk in Christ (through the gospel). Throughout the journey of discipleship, we never move past the gospel; instead, we grow in our knowledge of the gospel, our experience with the gospel, and our application of the gospel.



## **CHARACTERISTIC 2: EXPANDING IN SCOPE**

A biblical discipleship pathway must emphasize the expansive nature of discipleship in the life of a Christian. John Newton, the slave trader who became a Christian and eventually wrote “Amazing Grace” is credited with saying: “I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not

what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am.” So it is with all who follow Jesus.

When we first began following Christ, we might know little of the Bible and God’s will revealed in those pages. Similarly, we might daily or even hourly struggle with the same temptations we once sought satisfaction from before we were saved. But we change.

Our knowledge of the Bible grows. We move past certain struggles and into others. Our commitment to godliness deepens. In this way, we see one of the ways that discipleship is expansive: it expands within us over the course of our lifetime walk as we grow in our faith.

But the pathway is expansive in another way as well. Not only is it expansive in us, it is expansive through us. It is God’s will for every Christian to be a disciple who makes disciples. That is, we are to invite others to join us on the pathway of discipleship; we are to teach them to observe the same things we ourselves have been taught to observe. Paul expressed this characteristic as he wrote to his son in the Christian faith, Timothy:

“What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

This verse includes four generations of disciples:

- Generation 1: Paul
- Generation 2: Timothy
- Generation 3: Faithful men
- Generation 4: Others

**“I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am.” -JOHN NEWTON**

Paul → Timothy → Faithful men → Others

The discipleship pathway expands outward as we exert our influence for Christ on other people: our children, our friends, and our co-workers. God works through us to bring more and more people onto this pathway of following Jesus.

As the Holy Spirit continues His work in us, this dual expansion should take place in every believer. The transformative power of the gospel expands inward as we become more and more like Christ, and it expands outward as we intentionally invest our lives for the cause of discipleship in other people.



### **CHARACTERISTIC 3: DISPLAYED IN REAL LIFE**

We have the tendency to veer in one of two ditches when it comes to thinking about the process of discipleship.

- 1. The Ditch of Education.** We might easily drift into believing that discipleship is a matter of classes and the transfer of information. In this mindset, the measure of a mature disciple is whether he is able to articulate clearly the key doctrines of the faith, background of biblical books, and historical church events.

These are important aspects of discipleship. We are, after all, called to love the Lord with our minds (Matt. 22:37). But though education is an important component of discipleship, it is not the summation of discipleship. Jesus helped us see this clearly in His Great Commission, calling us to make disciples, “teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). Note that Jesus didn’t define discipleship as “teaching them” but instead “teaching them to observe.” The implication is clear: We cannot isolate discipleship to the realm of the intellect.

**2. The Ditch of Behavior.** In this ditch, we focus all our efforts on behavior. We “disciple” others with the goal of raising up good citizens. A model citizen is not the same as a growing disciple of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship is a matter of transformation. Paul described the ongoing life of the follower of Jesus like this:

*“We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).*

Discipleship, then, goes much deeper than mere behavior modification. Spiritual transformation is holistic in nature, transforming every aspect of our lives. It changes the way we think, believe, feel, and ultimately act to be more like Jesus.

The discipleship pathway must walk the balance between these two ditches. Walking with Christ is more than simply knowing the right things or doing the right things; it is a combination of those two that is seen in real life. It is learning to hear the call of obedience and doing it!

Obedience comes as a matter of transformation; obedience is inside out, beginning in the heart. When we experience true transformation, then the evidence of that transformation—our obedience—is clearly visible in our lives.

What does obedience look like? Specifically, what are the marks of obedience that are displayed in real life and are constantly expanding? These are the signposts of the discipleship pathway.







## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **The Signposts of the Discipleship Pathway**

If you've ever been on a trail in the woods you know the importance of signposts. These are markers placed along the path that help you know for certain that you are still on the right path, how far you've come, and how far you have to go. The same thing is true for the discipleship pathway.

Throughout the last decade, LifeWay Research has engaged in the largest research study of its kind around the subject of discipleship. This included surveying seven thousand churches to discover the principles involved with congregational health. This qualitative survey of experts in the field of discipleship included pastors, professors, and church leaders from a variety of backgrounds. This also included one thousand Protestant pastors in the United States to discover the type of discipleship ministries being used in churches and the satisfaction level they had with them. An additional four thousand Protestants in North America were surveyed regarding their personal practice of discipleship.

All this research led to eight areas of the Christian life that lead to spiritual health in a believer. These attributes of discipleship are the signposts along the discipleship pathway. In other words, these are the characteristics that ought to be present, in increasing measure, in the life of someone who is growing toward Christlikeness. Here are these eight signposts:



- 1. Engage with Scripture.** Transformation can be recognized when our mind is sharpened by the Bible, our perspective is shaped by the Bible, and our actions are directed by the Bible.

*All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).*

- 2. Obey God and Deny Self.** Discipleship is the process of obedience to one who is in authority over you. Transformation can be seen when we progressively set aside earthly delights for kingdom priorities.

*If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me (Luke 9:23).*

- 3. Serve God and Others.** Transformation is evident when personal needs and even dreams are set aside for the needs we see in others.

*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. (Matt. 25:40).*

- 4. Share Christ.** Even with the need to live out the effects of the gospel, maturing believers know that speaking about the message is a necessity. Transformation is evident when we talk about Christ and the message of the gospel.

*But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. (1 Pet. 3:15).*

- 5. Exercise Faith.** Transformation is seen in believers when risk-aversion is set aside and our lives are characterized by faithful obedience to God's will.

*I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20).*

**6. Seek God.** Transformation is seen when our desire is to know God more deeply and experience His work more fully.

*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you. (Matt. 6:33).*

**7. Build Relationships.** Our faith is personal but it is not intended to be private. Our horizontal relationships should develop just as our vertical relationship with God does. Transformation is occurring when relational maturity is evident in our lives.

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. (Acts 2:42).*

**8. Live Unashamed.** Transformation is evident when a believer is transparent and unashamed in presenting their own life as being aligned with Christ.

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:16).*

As Christ works in us and transforms us from the inside out, we see the evidence in outward acts of obedience. Scripture used an agricultural metaphor to capture this: fruit. Jesus said we would recognize people by their fruit (Matt. 7:20). Just as a tree produces fruit according to its kind, so it is with the follower of Christ. In our journey, as we walk closer and closer to Jesus, that fruit becomes evident.

*"I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me" (John 15:5).*

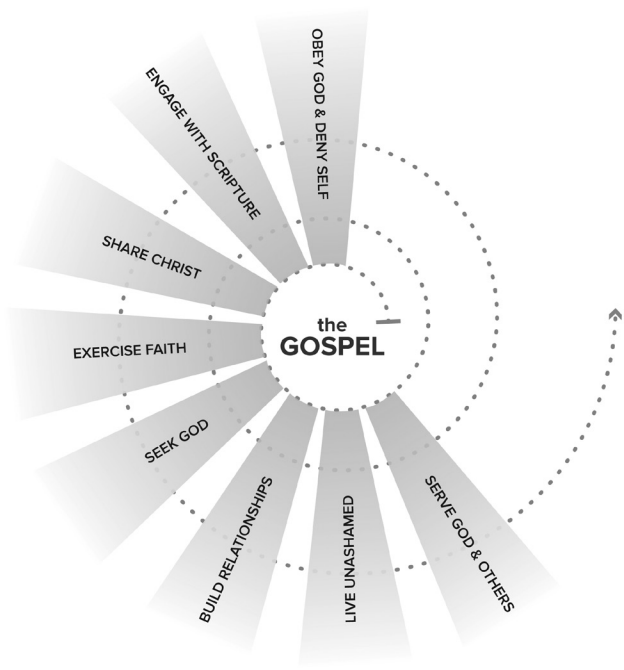
It's as simple as this: Genuine Christians produce fruit. But what kind of fruit is this?

**1. The fruit of character.** "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23).

- 2. **The fruit of evangelism.** “The reaper is already receiving pay and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that the sower and reaper can rejoice together” (John 4:36).
- 3. **The fruit of service.** “A good tree can’t produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So you’ll recognize them by their fruit” (Matt. 7:18-20).

As we grow in the character of Jesus, it is seen outwardly as we share Jesus and serve others in His name. That is fruitful living. The eight signposts above are merely the statistically validated markers that express this fruitful living. For a church leader, these signposts help determine whether the people in your care are actually making progress on the pathway.

When you bring all these characteristics together, we get this picture:





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## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Engaging the Discipleship Pathway**

Having a pathway for discipleship is important. It's clarifying. It can give vision and direction for the future. But as is the case with any tool, it's only as helpful as it is engaged. So how can you actually engage with this discipleship pathway? How can it become not just a piece of information, but actually the backbone of a discipleship ministry in a church? Here are three suggestions:

#### **1. Explain it to people.**

The first step to engage the discipleship pathway is to actually explain it to people. This explanation, in and of itself, is a potential discipleship moment. This is an opportunity to speak with conviction about the centrality of the gospel and how it drives everything we do as Christians.

Further, this is a chance to emphasize to people the growing nature of these characteristics. There will be moments of conviction and hope as people are challenged to take a look at their own experience to see how (or if) these characteristics are present in their lives in an expansive way.

As we explain the pathway to our people, it becomes a philosophy on which we can hang everything else. By God's grace, it can help people know they are indeed going somewhere—and going there with purpose and intentionality.

## **2. Simplify the programming.**

In the church, we seem to have a great capacity to complicate discipleship. There is no shortage of programs, resources, blog posts, and yes, small books like this one, each taking a different approach to the subject of discipleship.

But discipleship does not have to be complicated. It is rather, as Eugene Peterson famously said, a long obedience in the same direction. If we want to engage in this particular pathway, then we should notice there is not a lot of programming listed here. It is instead an intentionally simple approach to help people grow, but to do so in an organized way. This might very well require a thinning down of current programming options available to people. At the very least it will require evaluating whether the current programming options actually help people walk this road or not.

## **3. Resource accordingly.**

If we want to engage in the discipleship pathway, then we ought to care very much about the resources our people are using in order to help them grow in Christ. More and more, church leaders are delegating the responsibility of choosing Bible study resources to individual group leaders. That's a fine practice as long as those group leaders know, understand, and are committed to the overall pathway of discipleship. Whether you, as a church leader, dictate the resources for the ministry or whether you allow a degree of freedom to the group leaders, each must be done with care to make sure those resources are centered on the gospel and help people move forward in key areas of spiritual growth and development.

At Lifeway, we have developed a number of resources that align directly with this discipleship pathway. At *lifeway.com/balanceddiscipleship* you will find Bible study resources organized around the eight signposts of the discipleship pathway. A group leader can simply work their way through these signposts, one study



at a time, in order to make sure their people are growing in each of these key areas.

Or, even easier, a group or an entire church can choose to use the *Bible Studies for Life* line of Bible study curriculum ([BibleStudiesforLife.com](http://BibleStudiesforLife.com)). This curriculum is specifically designed according to this pathway. Each year, Bible Studies for Life systematically emphasizes each of the eight signposts. (See pages 30-32)

#### **4. Care for your leaders.**

Finally, to engage in this pathway, care for your leaders. Care deeply for them. Check in on them regularly in order to make sure they are still growing in their faith even as they are helping others grow in theirs.

These leaders are your greatest resource for helping people walk on the discipleship pathway. Jesus never looked at a curriculum, a book, a Bible study, or any other resource and said to it, “You go make disciples.” No, this is the unique charge He has given to us as His followers. Let us never forget that disciple-making is done through people.



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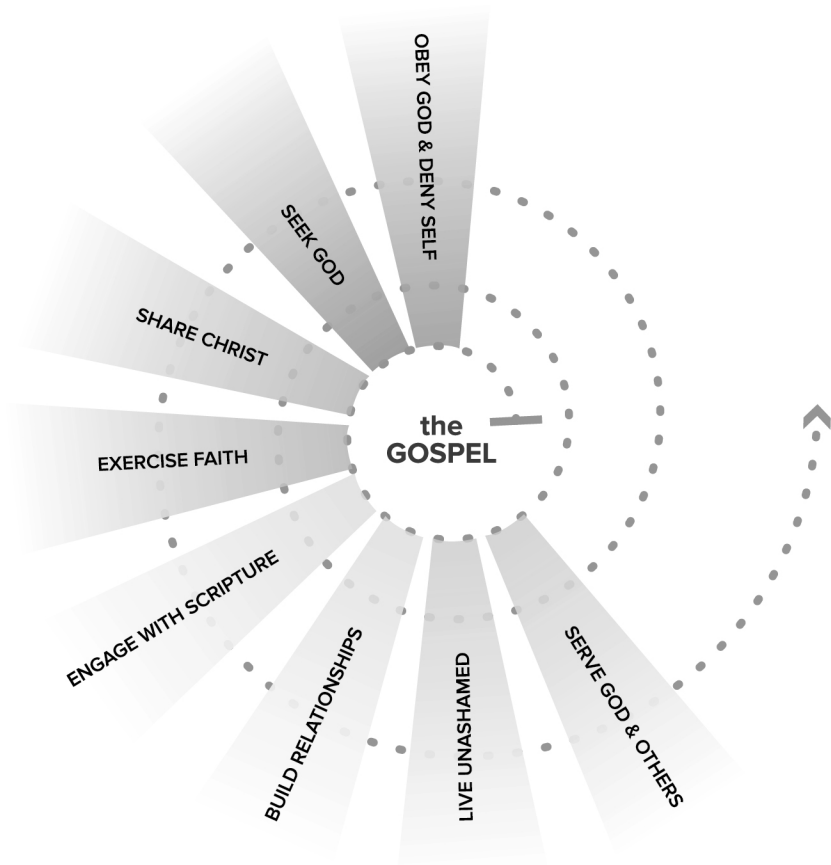
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Find him on Twitter: [@\\_MichaelKelley](#). Check out his latest book, *Growing Down: Unlearning the Patterns of Adulthood that Keep Us from Jesus* here.

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**SPRING** Holy Vocabulary  
Dealing with Messy Relationships

**SUMMER** Living with Hope in a Broken World  
Why Do I Need the Church?

# BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE 2020-2021 STUDY PLAN



**FALL** How to Love Your Neighbor  
Choosing to Commit

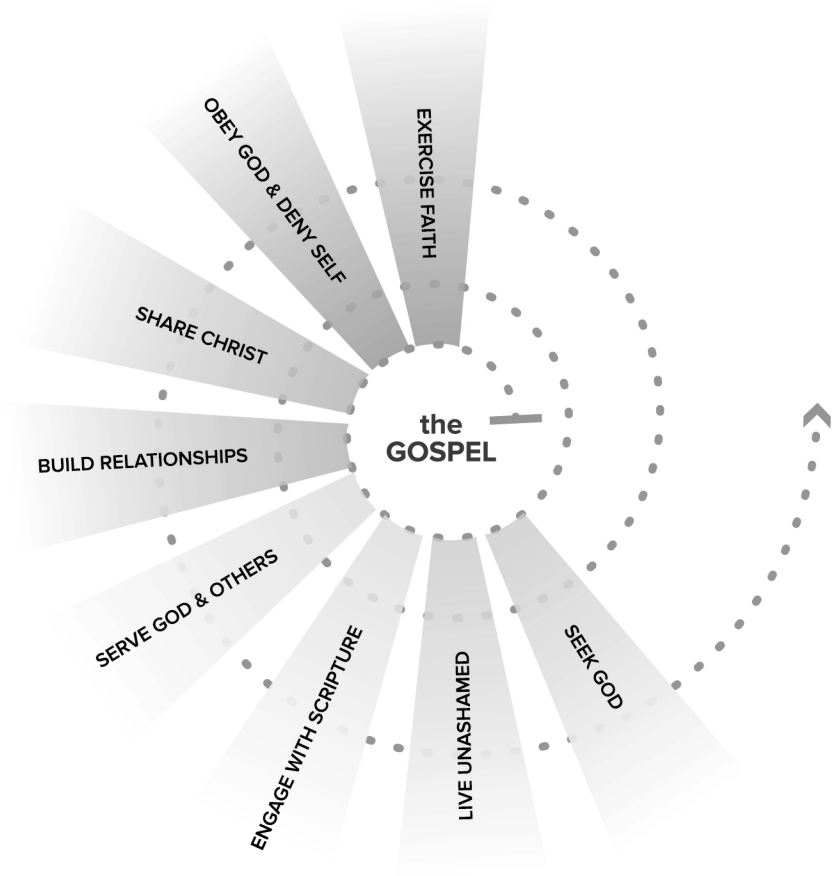
**WINTER** Dealing with Emotions  
Spiritual Disciplines: How to Develop Deep Roots

**SPRING** The Essentials of Christianity  
Tips and Tricks for Sharing Jesus

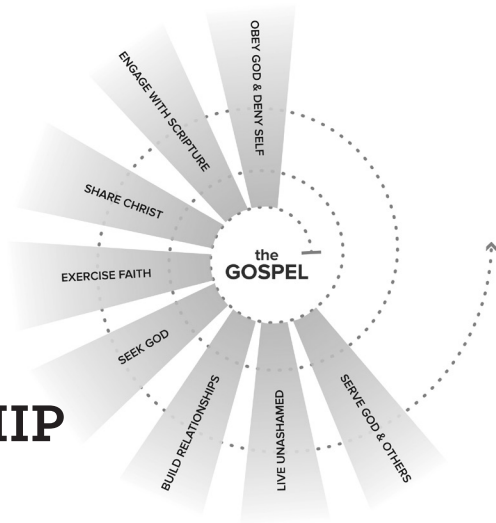
**SUMMER** Walking in Confidence  
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- SPRING** Jesus' Farewell Discourse  
How to Study the Bible
- SUMMER** Living in Light of the End Times  
The Work of the Holy Spirit



# DISCIPLESHIP PATHWAY

Discipleship is the lifestyle of walking with God. As church leaders, we need to give followers of Jesus a pathway to walk on as they become more like Jesus and advance His kingdom. The Discipleship Pathway is built on three characteristics:

## **1. Centered on the Gospel:**

True discipleship not only begins with the gospel, it's fueled and refreshed by the gospel on a moment by moment basis. The Discipleship Pathway, therefore, never moves beyond the gospel.

## **2. Expanding in Scope:**

True discipleship is expansive in nature, both in us and through us. God's work expands in us as we personally become more like Jesus in thought, mind, and action. God's work also expands through us as we seek to bring others on the pathway with us.

## **3. Displayed in Real Life:**

True discipleship results in practical change. Those walking the Discipleship Pathway will behave differently because they are being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Every pathway has signposts—markers to show a person's progress on the pathway. Our research has identified eight signposts of discipleship. These are lifestyle patterns that ought to be growing in ever-increasing measure the longer a person walks the pathway of discipleship.



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