

FOREWORD BY MATT CHANDLER

GOOSPEL



Discipleship

Jonathan K. Dodson

Gospel-Centered Discipleship

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GOSPEL POWER: THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Perhaps the most neglected motivation for discipleship is the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. This neglect is the result of a variety of factors. One primary factor is theology by reaction. Fear of charismatic excess has driven many evangelicals to emphasize Jesus to the exclusion of the Spirit. This occurs not only in the area of spiritual gifts but also in the practice of discipleship. Those who have taken a cessationist or “open but cautious” position toward spiritual gifts of healing, tongues, and prophecy have carried their caution to an extreme.¹ In turn, “safety barriers” are erected around the third person of the Trinity, effectively dividing him from the second person of the Trinity, Jesus. This reaction to “Spirit-related” excesses has reduced the Spirit to the status of what one member of our church refers to as “the bastard child of the Trinity.” Evangelicals rarely emphasize the role of the Spirit in motivation for discipleship. If we are to discover the gospel’s power for following Jesus, we will have to teeter over the edge of caution and plunge down the cliff of the Spirit. This chapter may be the most critical of all, as we consider the essential role of the Spirit in discipleship.

No Spirit, No Gospel Holiness

In his vast theological writings, Puritan theologian and pastor, John Owen, frequently refers to a disciple's sanctification as the pursuit of "gospel holiness."² What is gospel holiness? In short, gospel holiness is obedience to Christ procured from belief in the gospel, not from one's moral effort. Owen labors to differentiate between gospel holiness and morality. In his distinction, the latter is the product of human effort, not of grace. Although morality and holiness may, at times, look similar on the outside, they are altogether different on the inside. Morality is self-centered; gospel holiness is Christ centered. Morality holds self up high in reaching for moral virtues, but gospel holiness holds Christ up high in virtuous failure and success. Gospel holiness requires the truth of God's Word and his grace to believe and obey the truth. This truth and grace, which comes to us in Jesus (John 1:17), is central to holiness. Owen describes gospel holiness as "peculiarly joined with and limited unto the *doctrine, truth, and grace* of the gospel; for holiness is nothing but the implanting, writing, and realizing of the gospel in our souls." Gospel holiness requires both truth and grace. How do we receive grace to believe truth? How is the gospel implanted, written, and realized in us to produce holiness?

Owen takes up gospel holiness in his two volumes on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. He maintains that gospel holiness is impossible *apart from the Holy Spirit*. In fact, his principal reason for writing the first six hundred pages on the Holy Spirit is to show that holiness is "the dispensation and work of the Holy Spirit with respect to the gospel."³ And again, "There neither is, nor ever was, in the world, nor ever shall be, the least dram of holiness, but what, flowing from Jesus Christ, is com-

municated by the Spirit, according to the truth and promise of the gospel.”⁴ To bluntly summarize Owen, it is impossible to have gospel holiness apart from the Holy Spirit. No Spirit, no gospel holiness. You might get morality, even a veneer of Christianity, but no gospel holiness. True joy will escape you. Discipleship devoid of the Spirit’s power is no discipleship at all. Apart from the presence and power of the Spirit, our attempt to desire God, believe his promises, fear his warnings, and walk in his ways is absolutely futile. Disciples need more than resolve to believe the gospel; they need the Holy Ghost.

The Presence and Power of the Spirit

How does the Spirit produce gospel holiness? Through his presence and power in disciples of Jesus. The presence of the Spirit is necessary because we are natural born enemies of God (Rom. 5:10), who are spiritually dead in our sin (Eph. 2:5) and darkened in our hearts (Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:18). It is impossible to express genuine faith in God apart from the Spirit’s wooing and life-giving work. The good news, of course, is that by faith in Jesus we can receive new hearts, which are able to trust God. These new, lifeless hearts, however, require the animating presence of the Spirit: *“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules”* (Ezek. 36:26–27). The repeated phrase “put the Spirit,” emphasizes the central role of the Holy Spirit in making us new. The newness generated by the Spirit’s presence is called *regeneration* (Titus 3:5; Gal. 6:15).

We also need the power of the Spirit. The Spirit not only regenerates but also *motivates* us to obey the Lord. Apart from

the presence of Spirit, our new hearts don't beat for God. But when they beat, they generate religious affection and faith in God. Calling upon Ezekiel 36, Paul explains that the regenerating work of the Spirit inevitably motivates good deeds (Titus 3:5–8). These deeds are the natural fruit of newly born sons of God, also called the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5). This Christlike fruit is the result of our new lives in the Spirit: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25).⁵ As soon as we have the Spirit's presence, we have the Spirit's power to live as new creations (Gal. 6:15). The Spirit regenerates us so that our lifeless hearts can beat for God in lives of obedient worship and adoration of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In summary, Scripture shows us a clear connection between the Spirit's regenerating presence and his motivating power. Disciples possess gospel holiness through the power and presence of the Spirit. How does this work practically? What does reliance on the Spirit look like? I suggest we learn how to rely on the Holy Spirit in two main ways: first, by observing how *Jesus* relied on the Spirit, and second, by cultivating a similar *relationship* with the Spirit.

The Presence of the Spirit in the Person of Jesus

Although Jesus had no need for regeneration, he depended on the presence of the Spirit to motivate his obedience to the Father. Luke, theologian of the Holy Spirit, goes out of his way to emphasize the necessity of the presence and power of the Spirit in the life and ministry of Jesus. In accordance with Scriptures, Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit prior to his public ministry (Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18). This anointing lines Jesus up with the prophets who possessed the Spirit in a unique way. In Luke 3, Jesus is baptized by the Holy Spirit and approved by

the Father for ministry (21–22), but proceeds into the wilderness, compelled by the Spirit, for a forty-day trial. He emerges from the wilderness “in the power of the Spirit,” succeeding where Adam and Israel failed in their “temptations” (Luke 4:14). Next, Jesus makes his way to Nazareth to announce he is the much awaited, Spirit-anointed Messiah the Jews have been longing for (Luke 4:18–21). After being anointed with the Spirit, Jesus’s ministry is marked by a cycle of prophetic teachings on the kingdom of God, performances of exorcism, and profound healings. How did he accomplish this? It was the motivating power of the Spirit that enabled Jesus to endure temptation and live in obedience to the Father.

If Jesus required the Spirit for life and faith, how much more do we need the Spirit? Will Walker helpfully illustrates this point by posing the question: “If you had the choice between Jesus and the Holy Spirit for your ‘disciple,’ who would you choose?”⁶ Most of us would gravitate toward Jesus; after all, he is the Master disciple. However, disciples need the Spirit’s power to truly follow Jesus (John 20:21–22; Acts 1:8). We should choose the Holy Spirit. When we consider Jesus, very often we look to him as an example of godly character but fail to see his example of dependence upon the Spirit. The life of Jesus is exemplary not just in what he did but also how he did it. Jesus was not immune to temptation or impervious to suffering. He fought the good fight of faith but he did not fight it alone. Jesus did not sever himself from the Trinity in order to accomplish his mission. He remained in communion with the Father and dependent upon the Spirit. The Spirit empowered and motivated everything Jesus did. In order to discern how the Spirit motivates following Jesus, we will examine how he empowered Jesus in two areas: decision making and temptation.

Decision Making

After his baptism, Jesus was “led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil” (Luke 4:1–2). Notice that the Spirit played a directive role in the life of the Son of God. Mark tells us that the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness (Mark 1:12). Jesus clearly relied on the Spirit for direction. This sensitivity to the directing influence of the Holy Spirit is characteristic of the disciples in the book of Acts. Philip is directed to speak to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). Peter is directed to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10). The Jerusalem Council is directed in their decision making (Acts 15). Paul is directed to not go to Bithynia (Acts 16). How is the Spirit directing your life? Very often, our modern, self-reliant sensibilities cut the Spirit right out of everyday decision making. Rarely do we request or expect the Spirit’s direction. Yet, we are repeatedly told to “walk” in the Spirit throughout the Bible (Ezek. 36:27; Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:16, 25) and to make decisions by seeking the Lord (Prov. 5:4–6; James 4:13–15). Being motivated by the Spirit should affect not just moral decisions but also our general approach to life. Paul tells us to “be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). How often do we start our day by requesting a fresh filling of the Spirit’s power for the day that lies ahead? Instead, we assume his presence and barrel forward. Our assumption of the Spirit reveals a self-reliant faith. Instead of starting and continuing our days in our own strength, what would it look like to fight for faith with utter dependence upon the power and direction of the Holy Spirit?

The disciples in the New Testament often followed their Lord expecting unplanned change. We, on the other hand, like to manage our lives in order to eliminate unplanned change. We regulate everything through clocks, calendars, PDAs, smart-

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phones, routines, and rhythms. When our planned course of action is disrupted, we frequently respond impatiently or angrily. What if you began to expect unplanned change and interpreted it as an opportunity to rely on the Spirit? Obstacles, challenges, and trials would take on a very different meaning. Instead of becoming inconveniences and injustices, unplanned change could become an opportunity to rely on the Spirit to discern God's will and purpose in our circumstances. The person cutting us off on the highway might become a reminder to fight sinful busyness or celebrate God's protection. When heading to a coffee shop, we might ask the Spirit to take us wherever God wants us to be and to whomever he might want us to see. One very practical way we can be motivated by the Spirit in our discipleship is to expect unplanned change and respond to the Spirit in those circumstances. For example:

- Instead of getting angry or frustrated when unplanned things occur, ask the Spirit to show you his purposes in the circumstances.
- Instead of just deciding which restaurant or coffee shop you want to go to, ask the Spirit to lead you.
- Instead of jamming your calendar full of personal preferences, pray and ask the Spirit to guide you as you plan your week, month, or year.

Now that we have considered the Spirit's role in decision making, we will examine how Jesus relied on him in the face of temptation.

Overcoming Temptation

The necessity of the Spirit to obey Jesus as Lord is replete in Paul's letters (especially 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Galatians). When confronted with temptation, Paul under-

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scores that victory comes through the Spirit: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). Our flesh longs for a variety of things, including control and sinful self-reliance. How do we combat these fleshly patterns? Paul tells us explicitly that the way we avoid the desires of the flesh is to “walk by the Spirit.” How then do we walk by the Spirit? Many of us have become so dependent upon ourselves that we don’t have a clue of how to walk by the Spirit. Like stumbling infants, walking in the Spirit looks like we are learning to walk for the very first time.

The Spirit will direct us into undesirable circumstances. He led Jesus to fast for forty days, in a human body, in the wilderness, under the attack of the Devil. The leading of the Spirit sometimes includes suffering, but even that suffering is designed for our gospel holiness. Consider how Jesus relied on the Spirit during his wilderness temptations. During each temptation, Jesus relived the temptations of Israel during their forty years in the wilderness. Yet, instead of failing at each temptation of food, faith, and fame, Jesus succeeded. How? He relied on the power of the Spirit to believe the promises of God. When faced with the promises of Satan, Jesus responded by faith in God’s promises. He realized God’s words were true and reliable and that the Devil’s words were false and unreliable. Jesus trusted in the promises of God by the power of the Spirit. Let’s examine Jesus’s temptations more closely.

When tempted by food, Jesus refused the temptation to turn stones into bread during his fast. Instead, he kept his Spirit-led course by reciting and trusting Deuteronomy 8:3: “Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” By the power of the Spirit, Jesus refused to distract himself from fasting and devotion to the

Father, and instead chose to trust in God's unyielding, soul-nourishing promises and truths. In this, Jesus is exemplary for those who are overstuffed with false promises and undernourished with true promises. In his weakened state, how could Jesus resist such a temptation—fresh bread in a dry wilderness? He walked closely with the Spirit into undesirable circumstances—a forty-day fast in the wilderness—where he suffered well. Taking up the failures of Israel and all humanity, Jesus overcame temptation through his relationship with the Holy Spirit.

In his second temptation, Jesus was tempted to fame by flippanently throwing himself off the temple to be caught by angels. In response, he recited and trusted in Deuteronomy 6:16: "You shall not put the LORD God to the test." By the power of the Spirit, Jesus believed it was better to trust and revere God than to one-up the Devil through a miraculous display. By resting in God's humbling design of the wilderness, Jesus shows us the importance of faithfully relying on the Spirit's direction and power.

In the third and final temptation, Jesus was promised worldly power and glory in exchange for worshipping the Devil. Jesus spots the false promises, reciting and trusting in Deuteronomy 6:13: "It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve." By the power of the Spirit, in the lowliest of places, Jesus refused the temptation to ascend to the heights of power and believed that it was better to worship the one true God. In each temptation of food, faith, and fame, Jesus succeeds where Israel and all humanity fail. How did he do it? Through Spirit-empowered faith in the promises of God. Jesus followed the leading of the Spirit, relied on his power, and trusted in the promises of God. The Spirit enabled him to trust in what was true in the face of what was false. Jesus is exemplary, not merely in his holiness but also in his reliance on the Holy Spirit.

Communion with the Holy Spirit

Without the Spirit, we are powerless to believe the gospel of Jesus, but those who are in Christ have *the most powerful motivation* for discipleship present in them—the very Spirit of God! The challenge, then, is to actually know the Spirit so that he becomes our motivation in following Jesus. What we need is a *relationship* with the Holy Spirit.

In chapter 1, I mentioned my first encounter with discipleship, at age twenty. Six years later, I began a relationship with the Holy Spirit. For two decades I simply assumed his presence. Like a neglected sibling, the Spirit remained faithfully present but relatively unknown. He was, as Francis Chan has put it, my “forgotten God.”⁷ Two men were influential in reacquainting me with my forgotten God. The first was Richard Lovelace, author of *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*.⁸ I had the privilege of taking two courses from Dr. Lovelace while I was in seminary. It was during the dynamics class that I was deeply challenged to know the Spirit. Lovelace shared with us how he made a point of communing with each person of the Trinity throughout the day by praying to the Father in the morning, the Son in the evening, and the Spirit in the afternoon. I began this practice immediately and continue it to this day. Lovelace struggles from a stroke that caused the left side of his face to droop and he has limited physical ability. Despite this, you can tell that Lovelace has been with Jesus and is acquainted with the Spirit. His book *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, is as much a reflection of his life as it is the history and elements of spiritual renewal. I recall riding with him to eat pizza one day. On the way there, he exuded a general happiness in the Lord, an awareness of the Spirit to such a degree that he missed the turn! His kind demeanor and genuine affection for God were abundantly clear as we ate. More could be said about

Lovelace's theology of the Spirit, but I will leave you with his books for that.⁹

The second person instrumental in reacquainting me with the Spirit was Colin Gunton. I've never met Gunton, but I am deeply grateful for his writings and sermons. About a year after meeting Lovelace, I read Gunton's book *The Triune Creator*.¹⁰ While reading the book in the quiet guest bedroom of our garage apartment, I collapsed to my knees in tears, repentant over my neglect of the Spirit. I choked out prayers of repentance for failing to adore, know, and rely upon the Holy Spirit. I was met with a sweet forgiveness and spiritual sensation that attuned me to the third person of the Trinity. I have continued to commune with the Spirit ever since. To some this may seem elementary, and to others, intimidating. Regardless of your experience, the Spirit is eager to commune with us and to empower us for gospel holiness.

Communion is a word that has fallen out of practice. What does it mean to "commune"? To commune with someone is to share something with him or her that is of mutual benefit. We commune with a friend over a great piece of music, a film, or a theological truth when we both exult in its creativity, excellence, or brilliance. John Owen defines communion as "the sharing of good things between persons who are mutually delighted being cemented together by some union."¹¹ Communion, then, is not just shared delight, but the "cementing effect" of that shared delight between two persons.

You have probably experienced communion with close friends. What makes a friend close? You are close, not because of proximity, but because you share a delight in some of the same things (music, film, food, values, beliefs), and that shared delight has a cementing effect, which creates a close

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bond between friends. Prayer fosters this bond with God, cementing our souls with him through shared delight in the gospel of grace. All too often we eliminate the Holy Spirit from our communion with God. We live as functional bi-nitarians, communing with the Father and the Son, not Trinitarians—communing with Father, Son, and Spirit. In order to experience the Spirit's power, we need know the Spirit as a Person, to begin a relationship with him through prayer. Here are a few ways to begin:

- You may need to begin with repentance over your neglect of the Spirit. Confess your sinful self-reliance to the Father and the Spirit, asking the Son for forgiveness, and thanking God for the gift of the Spirit.
- Make a point of addressing the Spirit throughout the day in ways that reflect his role in your life (understanding, discernment, decision making, power to overcome sin, desire for God, faith in the gospel, etc.)
- Memorize and meditate on texts that show you who the Spirit is so that you can get to know him (Ex. 31:3; Num. 27:18; 1 Sam. 16:13; Joel 2:28–29; Acts; Romans 8, 15; 1 Corinthians 2; 2 Corinthians 3; Galatians 3–6).
- Rejoice in the gift of the Spirit as a Person who indwells us with power to believe the gospel, glorify, and enjoy God!

Communion with the Spirit brings us a general happiness and contentment that cannot be found anywhere else. Communing with the Holy Spirit produces a vertical relationship with the Lord that has horizontal results. When we repersonalize the Spirit, he reintegrates us as disciples who have a whole way of living wholly under God's redemptive reign in Christ. The more we relate to the Spirit, the less we will be concerned about balancing vertical and horizontal discipleship. Spirit-empowered belief in Jesus Christ as Lord leads to an inte-

gration of piety and mission. This communion with God takes us deeper into holiness *and* sends us further into mission. As we relate to the Spirit, he empowers us to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. How do we tap into this power? How does communion with the Spirit produce gospel holiness?

Surrendering to the Spirit

I'm discovering that most of the time the power of the Spirit is subtle, not showy. The Spirit is present in our subtle inclinations to serve our spouses, do what's right, read the Bible, love the marginalized, make disciples, and commune with God. He is that renewing presence that says: "Choose what is good, right, and true." He is that tug toward self-sacrifice for the good of others. He is that challenge to boldly tell someone how Jesus is changing your life. He is the Person that brings Scripture to mind and coaxes you to believe it. He is the one who prompts you to pray for others. He is the one who restrains you from clicking on that image on the Internet, making that purchase, or silently judging someone. He prompts you to encourage a friend, to praise the good in a coworker, or to rejoice in God's remarkable grace. If you are in Christ, you have the Spirit, and he prompts you all the time. We simply need to surrender to his prompting!

If all we need to experience the Spirit's power is to surrender to his prompting, then why is communion with the Spirit so important? I can think of two important reasons. First, those who are in communion with the Spirit are more likely to sense his promptings. Have you ever noticed how out of step you can be with a friend or spouse when you haven't spent much time together, how mechanical the conversation can be? When we are out of communion with the Spirit, it is very difficult to dis-

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cern his promptings. Second, as Westerners we easily mistake the presence of the Spirit for our own conscience or “enlightened” reason. When we make this mistake, we easily dismiss the promptings of the Spirit as mere rational options. For instance, the Spirit may prompt me to do the dishes, but I don’t have to do them because I did them yesterday. Decision making is reduced to an inner dialogue with our reason, not an opportunity to relate the person of the Spirit. We succumb to a ploy of the Deceiver who would have us “mistake” the Spirit for fleeting personal preference or a rational option. When we do this, we depersonalize the Spirit.

When we depersonalize the Spirit, it becomes much easier to disobey or deny the Lord. When we reduce the promptings of Spirit to options, we miss out on communion with God. We deny his power and fellowship. Don’t be deceived. The Spirit is prompting you all the time to believe the gospel, to serve others, to choose what is good and true, and to walk in gospel holiness. He doesn’t want you to enter into a conversation with the Spirit. Satan wants to thwart your communion with God. He wants us to converse with “our reason,” dismissing the subtle presence of the Spirit and his power to motivate holiness. How many times have we rationalized away an opportunity to communicate the gospel? “They are in a hurry.” “She would think I’m weird.” “I don’t even know that person.” These rational objections didn’t stop Philip with the Ethiopian, or Peter with his kinfolk, or Paul with strangers. Instead of assuming a dialogue with your reason, enter into dialogue with the Spirit. Talk to him and ask him for clarity, direction, and power to believe the gospel. In a word, surrender! Surrender to the Spirit’s promptings, follow his nudging, and talk to him about it along the way. When we surrender to the Spirit we become ourselves in Jesus. We walk in a shared delight

that so cements us to the Lord that we develop a missional holiness. Communion with the Spirit releases the power of the Spirit so that we can follow Jesus and make disciples.

Returning to the Trinity

When we refuse to rely on the gospel of grace, we trivialize the Trinity by not trusting the Father's promises, selling out the Son's sacrifice, and slighting the Spirit's power. We cheapen the atoning work of Jesus by trying to add or subtract from the cross. We dismiss the Spirit as a forgettable God, relying on our own effort or reason in decision making and temptation. As we have seen, self-reliant legalism and spiritual license produce very unattractive disciples who fail to behold and become the image of Jesus. In order to avoid twisted motivations for discipleship, I have sketched three major gospel motivations—religious affections, promises and warnings, and repentance and faith. However, all three of these motivations are powerless apart from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the motivation behind the motivation, the personal presence of God's power inclining us to believe the gospel. As it turns out, the gospel is not enough. We desperately need the Spirit to have affection for Christ, to believe his promises, to heed his warnings, to repent from our sin, and to trust Jesus. Without the Spirit, we cannot believe the gospel. When we neglect God's Spirit within us, we will fail to experience the joy of gospel holiness. Without the motivating cause of the Spirit, our efforts to believe the gospel are in vain. In the words of Owen, "The immediate efficient *cause* of all gospel holiness is the Spirit of God."¹² We need the Spirit, his presence and his power, to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. Spirit-empowered faith in the gospel is required

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not only to become disciples but also to continue as disciples. No Spirit, no gospel holiness.

The wonderful news is that all disciples of Jesus are indwelt with the Spirit. He is working with us, not against us, for gospel holiness. Gospel holiness can be as simple as surrendering to the promptings of the Spirit and as difficult as fighting the flesh. He wants to commune with us in everyday decision making. God has called us to surrender to his Spirit and to fight our flesh. We have every power necessary in the Spirit to fight for the noble image and beauty of Jesus. Father, Son, and Spirit are collaborating for our gospel-centered discipleship. Along with the power of the Spirit, God has given us another grace—the church. Disciples of Jesus are part of a *community* that fights the fight of faith. The Spirit indwells and empowers us to be gospel-centered communities that fight for communion with God in everyday life.



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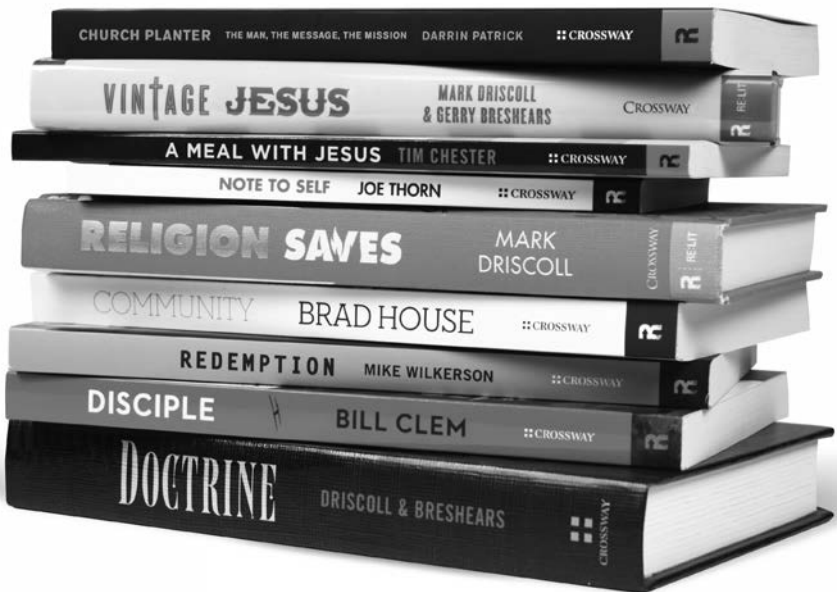
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Everyone's idea of discipleship is different. Some people emphasize evangelism—sharing their faith. Still others promote a hierarchical system for spiritual growth, a way for older Christians to pass on best practices to younger believers. Yet, both ideas are incomplete. Real discipleship is so much more.

Avoiding extremes and evaluating motives, Jonathan Dodson insists on a way of following Jesus that re-centers discipleship on the gospel.

This book helps us understand and experience the fullness of discipleship as God intended. It combines the mess and the weight, the imperfection and transformation, the honesty and wonder of being a disciple who revolves around Jesus. Here is a practical guide to discipleship that is Spirit-filled, Christ-centered, field-tested, and easily implemented.

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