

Categories Of Understanding

Introduction

Matthew 28:18-20

No doubt, Matthew 28:18-20 gives the basis for discipleship being the emphasis of the Church, modeled through the life and ministry of Jesus. As we consider the command to make disciples, Jesus characterized the process into three parts: Going to all nations, Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit, and concluded with Teaching them to observe all I've commanded you. In previous workshops, we've looked at each of these principles in detail from a propositional perspective. Yet, when we consider the heartbeat of making disciples, we find that it is a very relational process that involves building deep relational intimacy with God and with other people.

Understanding The Challenge And The Goal

Romans 3:23

The challenges of discipleship are many, yet, can be summarized as follows: All people are naturally relationally dysfunctional. From conception forward, the flesh of each person has been intensely influenced by Satan and his world system to create relational barriers toward God and other people (this will be unpacked in the sections below). At the point of belief, a person's status with God changes from enemy to child, yet, the relational experience of being a child is a lifelong process that occurs best through relational discipleship. Suffice to say, our goal in discipleship is to help the believer, who is a new creation through the Spirit of God, grow toward building relational oneness with God and relational wholeness with other people.

When we are relationally engaging with others for the purpose of making disciples, it is helpful to consider the Larger Story of what God is doing in human history and how God desires this person's life to integrate into His Larger Story. To help keep God's Larger Story in mind when conversing with others, we will frame His Larger Story in six Categories of Understanding, all asked in question form. The sections below provide a brief description of each.

1. Who is God?
2. What is God up to?

3. Who are we?
4. What went wrong?
5. What has God done about our mess?
6. How is God working now?

We will then take a look at answering the question, “How can we join God in His work?” and conclude by looking at a simple framework for having conversations with others that matter at the deepest level of a person’s being.

The information presented in this document is meant to be a beginning framework for helping people along in the discipling process. It is by no means exhaustive and will require continual learning and growth on the part of the one engaged in making disciples.

Who is God?

Genesis 1-2, Matthew 28:19; John 17:5; Romans 3:23

This is a question that will take all of eternity to search out and answer. Yet, God does give enough information in His Word to provide a beginning understanding of Himself. Since the Bible claims that people are made in the image of God, a good understanding of God provides us with a better understanding of people.

Genesis 1:1 states, “In the beginning God...” Interestingly, the original Hebrew word for “God” in this phrase is Elohim, which is a plural form of the word for God. This continues throughout Genesis 1 and 2. As we peruse these two chapters, we find that pronouns and verb tenses referring to God are all in the singular. This indicates the unifying plurality nature of God. As we continue through the Bible, we see clear indications that God exists as three equal persons in substance, wholly united in their deposition toward each other, and united in their purpose for all things, including people. Jesus makes this unifying plurality nature of God clear in Matthew 28 when he instructs the Church to baptize His disciples in the name (singular) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Each of the persons of the Trinity are of the same substance and purpose that are unique only to them in all existence. Each of them belongs to the God-kind. Each has the complete attributes of the God-kind. Together, they form a unifying God-kind that is unmatched for all time.

When considering that God existed before creation, the question comes to mind, “What was He doing before creation?” Although the Bible does not speak to this explicitly, Jesus’ prayer in John 17:5 seems to give a clue. There was a glory that Jesus had with the Father before the world existed and He was praying for the Father to restore Him to this former glory. Whatever this glory is, we know that, because of sin, all people fall short of that same glory. This begs the question, “What glory did Jesus have with the Father before the world existed that He did not experience in the flesh, but to which He was looking forward to

being restored?”

When putting all the pieces together, this glory seems to be connected deeply to relationship. The only thing that existed before all creation was the personal relationships between the Father and the Son and the Spirit. In this relational dynamic, the Father’s love was always being directed toward the Son in deep, personal, experiential, in-his-presence ways. In addition, the Son’s love was always being directed back to the Father in the same way. Sin was not a barrier, distance was not a barrier, distraction was not a barrier. The Father and the Son each had the same personal Spirit who was THE carrier, personalizer, and distributor of the love between the Father and the Son. This relational love was and is and will always be outgoing from each for the benefit of the other.

It’s from this relational dynamic within the Trinity that all of creation was brought forth. Therefore, the Trinity is the center of all existence. With this in mind, let’s look at answering the questions that unpack God’s Larger Story.

What Is God Up To?

Genesis 2; Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 3:23

When understanding the disposition of the Father toward the Son and the Son toward the Father as the relational glory of God, it makes sense that sinful people would fall short of this glory. They do not naturally have this disposition toward God or toward other people. So, in short, God is in the business of restoring people to their originally-designed purpose of participating in the relational dynamic of the Trinity.

Genesis 2 reveals the distinction of people compared to the rest of creation. Human beings were the only creatures into which God breathed the breath of life. Theologians have understood this to mean that human beings were given a unique spirit by God that had his imprint and the ability to participate in relational intimacy with God and with each other. People were designed with the capacity to relate to God and each other in the same way that the Father relates to the Son and the Son to the Father.

Because the first humans chose to reject this intimacy with God, He is now working to restore this to His original design.

Who Are We?

Genesis 1:26-27; Genesis 2:16-18; 2 Kings 12:9;

Human beings are the only creatures that have the capacity to reflect something of the relational nature and character of God. This is what it means to be an image bearer. All human attributes are unto this end: To have deep relational intimacy with God and other image bearers. We were designed and created for

this purpose and we were to experience life from this fundamental disposition toward God.

Genesis 1:26 provides even more detail about the image-bearing quality of human beings.

Genesis 1:26-27 (ESV). ²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Undoubtedly, each human being in his or her own right is a full image bearer of God. Yet, there is something about the male/female relationship that also reflects God. Two questions come to mind, “What is there about femaleness that reflects the image of God?” and, “What is there about maleness that reflects the image of God?”

Femaleness

In Hebrew, the word used for female in Genesis 1:27 is neqebah. The word literally means “punctured” or “opened to receive something.” In 2 Kings 12:9, the verb form of the word neqebah is used to describe boring a hole in a treasure box. This box was then placed near the altar of the Lord and was “open to receive” resources through the bored hole to support the Lord’s work of repairing His temple.

The Greek word for female used in the New Testament is thelus. It contains the root word thé which means to suckle. When properly understood, the word thelus literally means a woman with nursing breasts or one who gives suck.

In addition, Genesis 2:18 describes the woman as a suitable helper to the man. This same phrase is used throughout the Old Testament (Psalm 54:4) to refer to God being a helper.

When putting these three descriptions together, we begin to see God’s perspective on the female as He has designed her. In addition, since she is designed at the core as a relational being, these provide insight into her relational qualities. Relational femininity means at the core a woman is

- Open to relationally receive God’s purpose
- Supplied to relationally nourish God’s purpose
- Designed as a relational helper for God’s purpose

It’s no coincidence that the physical characteristics of the female body reflect God’s design for her on a relational level.

Maleness

In similar fashion, the physical characteristics of the male body reflect God's design for him on a relational level. The Hebrew for male in Genesis 1:27 is *zakar*. Properly translated, it means remember. The term was often used to describe the person a tribal chief would call on to remember the responsibilities of the chief and to move toward the chief to help him do his job. In fact, that particular person would often be called the *Zakar* of the chief. In short, the term *zakar* means one who remembers something important and moves accordingly.

Here are a couple of examples. The command given in Genesis 2:16-17 was directly given to Adam by God. It is assumed that, after God gave Eve to Adam, Adam remembered the command and moved toward Eve accordingly to inform her of God's will. In addition, the role that Adam had in naming the animals displays something about Adam's design. His job was to move into the chaos of all the animals with the purpose of bringing order through naming the animals.

This idea of remembering and moving has been designed into the physical characteristics of the male body. Adam was to remember the command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and to move toward Eve accordingly to initiate this happening. In the same way, Eve was to open herself up to receive Adam for God's purposes. These were not just physical characteristics, but also relational qualities that indicated how a man and a woman were to relate to each other and to God. On a relational level, the male was designed to

- Remember the relational Larger Story of God
- Move into and lead others into the relational Larger Story of God

When considering the combination of male and female together, we get a picture of how they reflect God's image. Being a woman has much to do with invitation. Being a man has much to do with movement. Both of these qualities are demonstrated in the nature and character of God. Jesus Christ remembered the Father's plan and moved toward humanity to do the work that makes it possible for people to be restored to a relationship with God. Because of His work, Jesus Christ now invites all to come to Him.

Keeping the Larger Story of God in mind, including the male/female relational qualities, is helpful when having a conversation that matters in the lives of others.

What Went Wrong?

Genesis 3:1-19

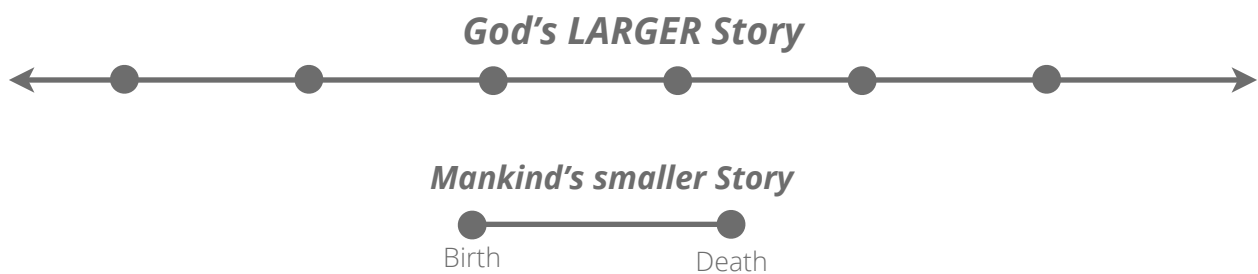
Considering that people were designed to experience relational oneness with God in the Trinity and to live with one another out of that relational dynamic in a way that reflected God's relational glory to others, we can now look at what happened at the Fall through a relational lens.

Satan's main objective was to bring disorder into Adam and Eve's relationship because their relationship reflected God. Notice that Satan chose to approach Eve over Adam. Since Eve's relational design was to be more open and invitational, this makes perfect sense. Through a cunning arrangement of deception, Satan was able to convince the woman that relational independence from God was more personally beneficial than remaining in relationship with God for His provision. In her soul, Eve believed there was something more available outside of God's will. Satan convinced her that she could now define good and evil, life and death according to her own standards. Convinced of these things, Eve then chose to operate outside of her design by moving toward the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and taking a bite for herself.

Not only that, but then Eve moved toward her husband and gave some to him and he chose to eat. Notice the switching of the roles. The man was designed to move towards and the woman was designed to accept and receive. In this case, Eve moved towards Adam with the forbidden fruit and Adam received and ate, choosing not to remember God's Larger Story.

Upon Adam eating, we observe there was immediate relational dysfunction that occurred between them. Because of their relational oneness prior to the Fall, being naked was not shameful. After the Fall, because of sin and the relational dysfunction in their souls, they felt extremely exposed and vulnerable in their nakedness. This was so penetrating that they immediately covered themselves with fig leaves.

Their relational dysfunction continued. When God came into the Garden, they hid themselves from His presence because they feared his response to their choice for independence. This was a picture of their relational alienation from God. Then, when God questioned them about their choice, their immediate response was to place the blame onto someone else, another picture of relational alienation from God and from each other. They began to define life and death in their own terms, life being the pursuit of things that felt good and death being the avoidance of things that felt bad. From this point forward, they no longer pursued God's Larger Story and began following their own smaller story. This has been the pattern of humanity from that time.



As we follow the consequences of their choice for relational independence from God, we also see mankind beginning to operate outside of God's relational design. Instead of Adam focusing on remem-

bering God's Larger Story and moving accordingly to make an impact for God, he would now be busy laboring in the fields to produce food for his family. This likely put him in a position of neglecting his wife and responsibilities at home. Because Adam would be putting his attention elsewhere, it's probable that Eve felt neglected and determined that she would move toward her husband to coerce him into taking care of things.

From that point forward, relational dysfunction has permeated the human race. Sin (our natural inclination for relational independence from God) was passed down from Adam and Eve to their kids and beyond. All humans are now broken image bearers of God, with our flesh being inclined to define life and death on our own terms based on our experiences from the time of birth until physical death. Instead of pursuing a glad commitment to the well-being of others at any cost to self, we now pursue a glad commitment to the well-being of self at any cost to others. Our love is naturally curved inward on self. Our flesh works to create relational dysfunction in every relationship we have, including, for believers, their relationship with God.

Our flesh takes opportunity at every juncture in life to create relational chaos. When a child experiences something negative, his flesh defines that as death and moves the child to avoid at all cost any such similar experiences. If the experiences can not be avoided, a child will build self protection modes in his mind, blotting out and even forgetting traumatic moments. All of these self protection modes create relational dysfunction that continues into adulthood. In fact, it's been said that every non-clinical pathology has relational roots.

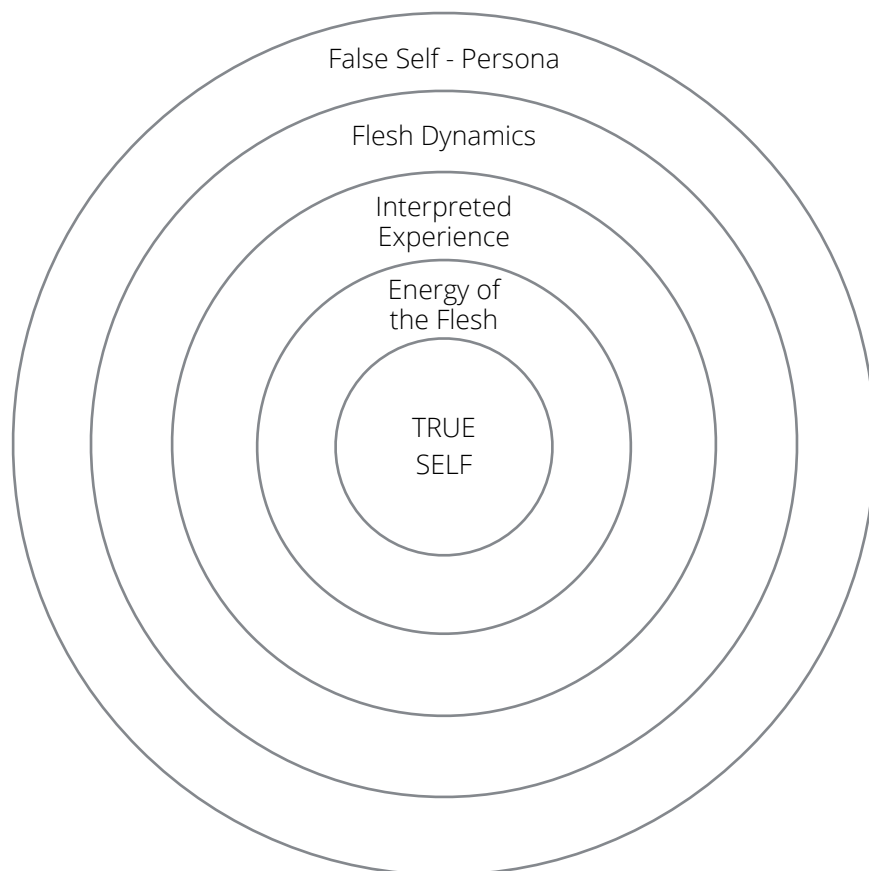
Recall God's core design for a man is to remember God's Larger Story and to move accordingly with impact. A fallen man still has that design, but it is laden with fear and the capacity to fulfill it was lost. The core fear/terror of a man is weightlessness—moving into something, but having no impact. The core terror of a woman is to open herself up to a man who doesn't want her. Prior to the Fall, people had the capacity and calling to relate to each other in the same way that God relates to Himself in the Trinity. After the Fall, the calling remained, but the capacity was lost.¹

Because of sin, as a natural condition of the soul from conception onward, the flesh takes opportunity to shape our style of relating. Wounds may shape our style of relational dysfunction, but wounds aren't the problem. The problem is the active agent of the flesh who takes opportunity at every experience to define for us life (that we should spend all our energies pursuing) and death (that we should spend a lifetime avoiding or numbing). The pursuit of life and the avoidance of death all result in relational dysfunction. Every person has relational barriers that prevent them from experiencing the relational intimacy that God has designed. This includes all believers in Jesus Christ.

When discipling broken image bearers, we are working to understand the roots of their relational dysfunction with the hopes of helping them walk through the process of building relational oneness with God.

¹ Notes from the School of Spiritual Direction, Dr. Larry Crabb. Pg 111.

There are many layers and barriers and wounds and self-protection mechanisms in place for each of us that must be carefully, patiently, and humbly exposed by the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The following diagram is helpful in understanding the complexities of the fallen human being.²



What has God done about our mess?

² Notes from the School of Spirit Direction, Dr. Larry Crabb. Pg 82.

**Romans 3:21-26; 5:5-11; 7:6; 7:22; 8:11; Ephesians 1:19;1 John 4:4; Galatians 2:20;
2 Corinthians 5:17**

Romans presents a very clear picture of what God has done about our mess of relational alienation from Him and all of the consequences that followed. God sent Jesus as THE substitute sacrifice to pay the death penalty for the sin of all people. For all those who believe in Jesus and His work, God has declared them in a right-standing with Himself and has moved them into the same relational position as His Son, Jesus. They now have the status as children of God with complete access to God. It's important to note that justification provides the status as children of God, but it does not automatically give the experience of relational intimacy with the Trinity.

Relational intimacy is the journey of sanctification that a believer takes throughout his or her life. For this to occur, the relational barriers that the flesh has built over time through experiences that resulted in our natural definitions of life and death have to be deconstructed. In their places, we must reconstruct God's definitions of life and death and learn to trust His goodness at work through both good and challenging times. This process does not come natural and involves the battle that Paul describes in Galatians 5.

Through His Spirit, God's love has been poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5). With his Spirit residing deep within our souls, we now have a restored capacity and call to relate with the Trinity and with other image bearers in the same disposition as the relational dynamic that exists within the Trinity. This relational dynamic can be referred to as the Trinity Love Dance. Having both the capacity and the call does not automatically mean we know the Trinity Love Dance. Just like it takes time, instruction, practice, and failure to learn actual dance steps, we will need time, instruction, practice, and failure to learn the Trinity Love Dance. But, God has provided for us everything we need to learn it.

God's Spirit has provided four renewed aspects to our new hearts as children of God to help us relate to Him and others in the same way that the persons of the Godhead relate to each other. We have a new passion, a new power, a new purity, and a new identity. In Romans 7:22, Paul states, "For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being..." Deep within Paul's interior world, a new passion was given by the Spirit to want to follow the will of God.

Similarly, we have been given a new purity that aligns with our new passion. Romans 3:21-22 talks of a new righteousness that we have obtained upon receiving Christ. "21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." Our new purity deep within our souls is what directs our new passion.

To help put our new passion, driven by our new purity, into actual practice, we've also been given a new power to overcome the desires of our flesh driven by Satan's world system. In Ephesians 1:19, Paul is praying that the eyes of their hearts would be open to see "...the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might..." Likewise, 1 John 4:4 states that "he who is

in you is greater than he who is in the world.” And again, Romans 8:11 says, “Since the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” The same power that raised Jesus from dead lives within us. This new power enables believers to put their new passion, that is being directed by their new purity, into action.

All of this is possible because we are newly defined. Who we were as unbelievers is no longer true according to God’s definition of us (even though we sometimes feel like it still remains). We have a new identity. Romans 6:4 says, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Again in Galatians 2:20, Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” 2 Corinthians 5:17 concludes, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” All of these point to the fact our core identification has changed. We are no longer identified with sin, but are now identified with Christ and His righteousness.

In summary, we are now identified with Christ, having the same position before the Father as Jesus, with His righteousness applied to us, His passion directing us, and His power making it possible to put His life on display through our lives.

Believers in Jesus are not exempt from big relational challenges that stem from life-shaping events of their past. Yet, we must remember that all children of God, even the most difficult ones, have been given a new purity that aligns with Jesus’ purity, a new position that gives the same access to the Father as Jesus has, a new passion to live out Jesus’ life in real time, and a new power that enables them to step into this new life! Our role in relationally discipling others is to help them recognize these new aspects of being children of God and to develop a primary appetite for pursuing deeper relational intimacy with God. When knowing Him becomes the primary pursuit of their lives, it positions them to best experience the work of the Spirit to form them more and more into the person of Jesus.

How is God Working Now?

John 10:10

At present, God is working, through His Spirit, to bring believers into the intimacy and power of the relationship between the Father and the Son. This is where we experience the joy-filled abundant life promised by Jesus in John 10:10 and experienced by Paul as demonstrated in his testimony through the letter to the Philippians.

The Holy Spirit takes us from where we are, laden with the inability to love, and gives us the capacity to love. Learning to express His love to others is life-long and occurs through building an ever-increasing

trust relationship with Jesus as we participate in His means of knowing Him more.³ This process involves helping one another move from a posture of pursuing God so He will make my life work according to “my” design to a posture of surrendering our lives over to God in all circumstances (good and bad) for Him to work according to His design. It’s a process of moving us from a position of managing my life for my benefit to surrendering my life over to God for His glory, moving from the managed Christian life to the surrendered Christian life.

Every person who believes in Jesus begins their Christian life with the basic principles of the world system still in place. These basic principles tell me that I am the most important person in the universe and that I can only fully trust in myself. When these are the two basic premises from which I operate, even as a believer, then objects, people, and God all exist for my benefit. As an immature believer, I believe that God wants my best and exists to provide that to me. There is indeed truth to this. The problem is that “my best” is defined by me.

Early in my Christian walk, “my best” is defined as blessings that make my life comfortable and advance my agenda of comfort, security, recognition, etc. God’s definition of “my best” is getting to know Him more intimately and handing the reigns of my life over to Him for Him to form me more and more into the functional image of Jesus. Because my definition is off base, and because God infinitely cares for my best, He allows and may even promote suffering into my life to help dislodge my faulty dependence on self and my faulty definition of “my best.”

As this suffering comes into my life, because my basic premises are still I am the most important person in the universe and I can only fully trust in myself, I now see God as the great Healer who surely wants to deliver me from this circumstance of suffering. And so, I pursue Him again for my agenda of what’s best for me in this suffering. Once again, because the Spirit knows what is truly best for me, He allows suffering and challenging circumstances to enter my life to bring me to a point of brokenness and emptiness. Once again, His agenda is to help me realize that “my best,” as I’ve defined it, is not “my best” as He defines it. The Spirit faithfully brings me to the point where I can continue to either fight, work, control, coerce, and manipulate or I can choose to surrender my life over to Him and what He’s doing.

If I continue to fight, it will result in confusion, anxiety, instability, and despair. I become more relationally closed to God and others. If I surrender, my brokenness turns into gratitude for who God is and what He has accomplished for me at the cross. My emptiness turns into a thirst to know Him more. Gratitude and thirst produce a Hope in the nature and character of God and His future promises. This feeds my faith in Him and His word. On the basis of this genuine faith, I’m freed from demanding everything in this world to satisfy me and can now genuinely love others.

³ These means are 1) gathering together with other believers (Matthew 18:20), 2) engaging Jesus through His Word (John 1:1, 14; 1 Peter 2:2), and 3) engaging Jesus through Prayer (Philippians 4:4). Another means is to respond to suffering as an opportunity to increase our relational dependence on Him versus a circumstance to avoid or numb.

In summary, the Spirit works to move us from our immature self-centered perspective, which drives our pursuit of the blessed and healed life, to a more mature others-centered perspective where we can enjoy God and love others. This entire process is modeled in the diagram below.

