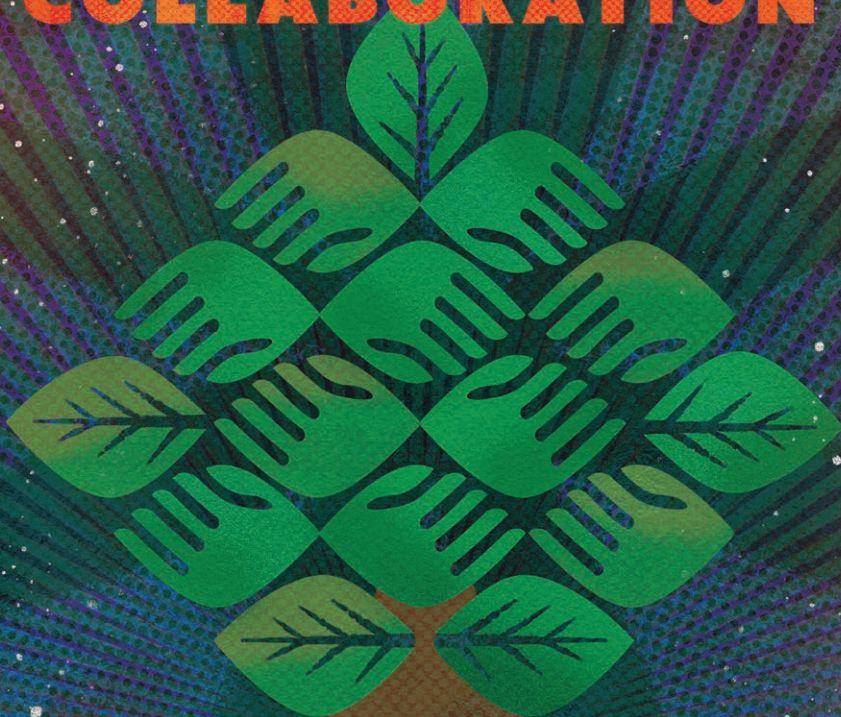


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FOREWORD BY **EKEMINI UWAN**

DISCIPLESHIP AS HOLY COLLABORATION



**HELPING OTHERS FOLLOW
JESUS IN REAL LIFE**



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

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MY DISCIPLESHIP JOURNEY



IN 1999, I SPENT THE SPRING SEMESTER of my junior year of college interning for a TV and film production company and in the post-production office of a TV show that rhymes with “Schmawson’s Schmeek.” I was so hyped to go to Los Angeles, escape the bootleg Ithaca, New York, “spring” and be back in a real city (like Brooklyn) where I could get my party on for real. My mind danced with thoughts of seasoned food, good weed, and dope parties in real clubs (shoutout to “Club Semesters” in Ithaca for holding me down, but you weren’t enough). I was living in Los Angeles for the semester and had big dreams and aspirations, y’all! I was making seventy-five dollars a week, going to industry parties—and after meeting Nice & Smooth at the 1999 Soul Train Music awards you couldn’t tell me nothing! I was on track to graduate a semester early with a television and radio production degree and my goals were to network with enough industry big wigs to secure a job offer after graduation.

God changed my plans.

A family friend, who grew up in the same Brooklyn Baptist church that I did, lived and worked in Los Angeles, and I reached out to her as soon as I arrived with hopes that she



could connect me with her industry friends. She was a successful film and television actress so I wasn't sure if she would reach back, but she did, and not in the way that I'd hoped.

She reintroduced me to Jesus and saved my life.

Ariyan disciplined me without me even knowing it. It started with her offering me rides to get groceries. (I didn't have a car, and I can't think of anything more Christlike than voluntarily driving through LA traffic.) The rides turned into lunches, and the lunches turned into her letting me tag along to industry events where I did my fair share of schmoozing. She was obviously very busy but made time for me. She introduced me to her industry friends and, if I asked, offered up advice about moving through the TV/film industry as a young Black woman. She told me that even though there was fierce competition for acting roles written for Black women, she prayed about the jobs that she would take and trusted God to direct her path. But most importantly, for that entire semester, I watched her sneakily model a Christlike life in front of me. Much of discipleship is caught not taught—and I was watching.

That spring, somehow, I got tickets to the Soul Train Music awards. Lauryn Hill took home four awards, and as we left the Shrine Auditorium the day seemed like it couldn't get any better. But then it did. When I walked into the House of Blues afterparty and realized I was in the same room as Busta Rhymes and Whitney Houston, I nearly lost my mind! I set up shop at that open bar and commenced to drinking. Ariyan kept an eye on my underage ratchetry with no judgment. She just hit me with a *lemme me know when you're ready to go* and stayed close while sipping a mocktail and talking to her industry buddies. She always said, "You can be a Christian in this business and still be a Christian in this business." What I caught that night was that it was possible to be a Christian, have biblical convictions,

and not be a weirdo. Ariyan had been on full merit scholarship for Alvin Ailey, Harkness Ballet, and Martha Graham but chose to share her gifts and talent as the director of the liturgical dance ministry at her local church. She chose to live as a woman set apart for God's use, even though she had options to do otherwise. She was the same person at the awards show afterparty as she was on car rides to the grocery store. She never switched up. And I was taking it all in.

I also subconsciously compared her to the industry executives that I hoped would offer me a job at the end of my internship. Ariyan had ambition, but, unlike my peers, the industry wasn't everything to her. It was everything to me. I'd be restocking my bosses' mini fridges with Diet Cokes, daydreaming about how to get one of the scripts that I'd written for my screenwriting class into the right hands so I could be set for life. One day I was in the Carsey-Werner intern room watching reruns of *A Different World* when someone ran in and said, "Turn on the news! There's been a shooting at a school!" This was back when school shootings were rare, so everything stopped while we learned about a place called Columbine in Colorado. It got real somber really quick and we interns were sent home early. As I wandered around Studio City that day, I began to think about my life. I remember thinking, *These execs and show writers are everything that I want to be . . . but none of them have joy like Ariyan. Ariyan is the happiest person that I know out here!* Earlier in the semester Ariyan invited me to a worship service at her church, but I didn't go. She offered once or twice again but never pushed it. She just said to me, "If you ever want to come, let me know. Even if you're out and it's late, let me know and come through. I'll leave a spare key in the flowerpot by the front door, and we can go together." After the Columbine shooting, I finally said yes.

Because God has a sense of humor, the Saturday night before I'd planned to visit her church, I went out partying with some friends. We went to a bar and the night ended with my friend being arrested for public drunkenness (apparently that's a crime in Pasadena). While we waited for him to be released, I started to think. It was about an hour drive back to our apartment complex in the valley and as we finally headed home, I began to think about my life again. You get real deep when you're half drunk. I thought about the semester (which was almost over), the relationships and connections I'd made, and what I was going to do with my life. And then—*Oh snap!! Church!!* I thought, *Just go home. You can go another Sunday. It's been a crazy night.* But as we got closer to LA, something shifted, and I told my friends to take me to Ariyan's house. When they dropped me off, I found she'd left a key in the flowerpot by her front door so I could let myself in, just as she'd promised.

When I got in, I marveled at how she'd left Post-its all over the house with instructions on where I could find food, drink, and linens. I remember looking around, whispering a prayer of thanks, and then passing out on the pull-out bed. The next morning, I woke up to Ariyan cooking and playing CeCe Winans, and she was like, "You look awful, we'll go to the second service." And so we headed to church later, and for the first time in a long time, the Word of God penetrated my soul.

The pastor was named Kenneth C. Ulmer, and he preached a sermon called "The Wills on the Wheel" from Jeremiah 18. The premise of the sermon was that God's will was to mold us like a potter shapes clay. In the pastor's analogy, God was the potter (who had a will), we were the clay (who also had a will), and the potter's wheel represented being in the will of God. No matter how marred the clay, or how good or bad it felt to be shaped by God, if the clay stayed on the wheel, it was in "good

hands.” As he preached, I tried (with my hung-over self) to put myself in the sermon, but the only reference that I had for pottery was the scene from the movie *Ghost* with Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze. Not ideal, I know.

I tried to create a mental picture of what the pastor described and imagined myself as an amorphous, messed-up lump of clay in the corner of a pottery barn with God sitting next to an empty potter’s wheel nearby. If I followed the pastor’s metaphor, I knew I wasn’t on the wheel (or in God’s will) and I had no clue how to climb on. I was going to decide what to do with my life after that semester, not God. I was going to decide whether to live in NYC or LA after graduation, not God. I was going to decide what job I took or didn’t take, not God. So my question was, *How does a messed-up lump of clay get up on God’s pottery wheel—how do I get in God’s hands?* And for the first time, without answers, I began to personally wrestle with God’s Word for myself. I closed my eyes and began to pray. It’s a miracle that I didn’t doze off, but in that moment a song came to mind. It was a song that I’d heard many times as a child back in Brooklyn at Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church: “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder, we are climbing Jacob’s ladder, soldiers of the cross.” I began to cry because in that moment, the song seemed cruel. I knew myself, and I knew that in my own strength—even if I white-knuckled it and tried my best to be a “good Christian”—I could never get “high enough” to be in God’s will (or on the wheel). That was for Christians like Ariyan.

I wondered about where in the Bible that song came from and, as the sermon continued, I grabbed a pew Bible and searched for Jacob’s name. (I knew he was somewhere in Genesis.) Eventually I found the passage where Jacob dreams about a ladder that rests on earth and reaches all the way to

heaven. I whispered to myself, “Oh snap. Jesus is the ladder! Jesus is how we get to God!” I probably sounded crazy to the people in my pew, but for the first time in my life, I began to understand why the gospel was good news.

At the close of the sermon, I did a super dramatic gospel stage-play slow walk to the front of the church, and I flung myself on the altar to rededicate my life to Christ. I could barely see through my tears. I flushed all my weed down the toilet, and, by the end of that semester, I was catching multiple buses from the valley to Inglewood for midweek Bible studies. For the first time in my life, Jesus felt like someone I was getting to know personally. Like, I’d always known Jesus, but I had been reintroduced. I even changed my email address to clayinhishands(at)mac.com. As I think about that spring, I’m filled with gratitude toward my parents for taking me to church as a child because a seed was planted within me through those Sunday school Bible stories and old hymns. If you’re a parent trying to nudge your children to follow Jesus and feel discouraged because nothing you say seems to be sinking in, be encouraged; God is working.

In the weeks that followed, Ariyan would try her best to answer my questions about applying the Bible to my life. She never made me feel stupid or silly when I pushed back, she just listened . . . a lot. She was firm in her convictions, and she let the Word of God speak for itself—she wasn’t really about arguing. Her life was saturated with the gospel even though she wasn’t super preachy. She was good news to the people around her. What I mean is that she modeled a life of following in the footsteps of Jesus and had real joy doing it. Even years later I could always call her and ask for advice, prayer, whatever. She would always point me to Jesus and differentiate between her advice and God’s Word.

Even though we're on different coasts, we still keep in touch. When I told Ariyan that I was writing about that spring and asked her what she remembered from that time, she said,

At that time you were a wild chick. But I didn't treat you like a wild chick. Because I didn't have a prescribed three-point discipleship plan. It's not my job to figure out my thing—that's almost cultish—nobody's God but God. My job is to show people how good my God is. I am nothing without God—if I didn't have him where would I be? I'm just a Black girl from Bed-Stuy. God brings people across our path for a reason, and we're responsible for one another. If you cross my path, I should impart goodness to you on your journey. In the industry and in life, people have done me wrong, but I still try to maintain my integrity as a woman of God. Like John the Baptist said, it's not about me. I'm not the one. Jesus is the one! Everybody has their purpose. Once you know what your purpose is you can pour into people. I'm not a reservoir; I'm a river.

EMBODIMENT

Even though I didn't understand it at the time, what made an impression on me is that Ariyan's discipleship was embodied. She didn't just tell me about Jesus, she embodied the generosity of Jesus when she shared her time, talents, friends, advice, and money with me. She told me about Jesus with her life.

John's Gospel describes Jesus' encounter with a powerful Jewish Pharisee named Nicodemus, as well as Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman. Jesus treats both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman as if they are equally worthy of his time and his teaching even though his culture did not. In the same way,

Ariyan embodied the character of Jesus when she didn't change up her personality whether she was talking to me or one of her celebrity friends. She showed me the love of Christ when she would buy me lunch not knowing that my weekly seventy-five-dollar paycheck had run out. She'd joyfully belt out the latest CeCe Winans song in the car whether she was booked or not. I thought I knew everything, and she embodied the patience of Jesus when my belligerent twenty-year-old self tried to give her advice. She listened. She made space for me in her life and even convinced her industry buddies to take me out to lunch and share their advice. She was following Jesus and made space for me to follow alongside her—all while she bore the fruit of the spirit. And she didn't try and disciple me by herself. I remember one Sunday she couldn't drive me to church, so she arranged for a friend to give me a ride. She had community, and she shared it.

One morning Ariyan took me with her to a dance ministry rehearsal that she was leading at church. I think I helped carry her bags and a boombox. Watching her spend her Saturdays empowering scores of people to offer up their bodies as a “living sacrifice” through dance to worship God was powerful, and it made following Jesus seem like something I could do too. Like Jesus, she was “making disciples” by teaching through kinesthetic learning, where palpable touch and movement was part of the lesson about serving others.

It's one thing to use your gifts to serve and love people, it's another thing to include the people that you're mentoring in spaces of ministry so that they can serve beside you. The miracles that Jesus performed on earth functioned as “we do” lessons because the people present didn't only see his miracles and believe—they participated in them. In the Gospel narrative about the wedding in Cana (John 2), Jesus could have

turned water in the wine all by himself, but he enlisted the help of the wedding guests and servants. The servants fill the jars to the brim with water, and they also draw it out as wine.

Theologian Richard Bauckham writes that the miracles Jesus performs “are means of seeing the glory of God.”¹ In dark times when it’s hard for people to see God working, the “we do” lessons we invite mentees into are incredibly formative because they help mentees get a glimpse of God’s glory as they experience Christ’s body at work in real time. So many people count themselves out of discipleship and spiritual mentoring because of what they don’t know; they say: “I don’t know enough Bible,” “I don’t know how to deal with awkwardness,” or “I don’t like people!”

But following Jesus is about how we embody the love of Jesus (2 Peter 1:5-9, 1 John 3:16) with the new lives Jesus has given us. It’s about the outworking of what we believe, motivated by our new God-given affections. So how can we tell the truth about Jesus with our lives? How can we continue Jesus’ redemption story with our bodies?

WE FOLLOW JESUS TOGETHER

Christ-centered community is a major key to making disciples because it’s a living witness of the gospel that proclaims that the kingdom of God has come on earth. When we make disciples and help people grow in spiritual maturity, we love our neighbor out loud and reflect the abundant generosity of God with our lives. The God of the Bible isn’t stingy with who he is. To redeem creation, God revealed himself to his creation through Christ, to give us access to the triune Godhead. The Son reflects the Father’s generosity by giving his life away on

¹Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 56.

the cross to save people, and the Father sends the Spirit to reveal God's will to us and progressively transform us to look like Jesus.

When our faith is disembodied and more about mental assent to a set of beliefs and less about presenting our bodies as living sacrifice, it's difficult for people to believe that Jesus is working on earth. If people can't see the arms and legs of "Christ's body" working, how will they believe that the head exists?

Most pastors know that discipleship is God's mechanism for the growth of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16) and that since Jesus prioritized making disciples in his ministry on earth, then Christ's body should do the same. But the rest of this book isn't about that. It's about the beauty of discipleship. There are many things we know are good and right that we don't do. I know that leafy greens are good for me, but I will choose a Popeyes biscuit over a spinach salad anyway because fat and salt on bread is beautiful. Jesus' discipleship calling is a command that is good and true, and it's also beautiful because following Jesus equals following beauty and truth. When we engage people with the good news of the gospel, we should remember that people are drawn to what is beautiful before they care whether it's true or not. Reason comes in afterward. On this topic, philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote, "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of. . . . We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart."² The road to making disciples goes through heart transformation, and we engage people's hearts when we illustrate the sufficiency and beauty of Jesus and the kingdom of God as a beautiful, coherent way of life. Many people are

²Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1958), 77, 80.

hesitant to make disciples because they've fallen out of love with Jesus. In this book I want to engage your heart as we look at Jesus in the Gospels, rediscover His beauty and in doing so reignite a zeal for the beauty of discipleship. In the pages to come, I want to cast a vision for the beauty of Jesus' discipleship calling by exploring how making disciples of Christ is a way to participate (right now) in the abundant life Jesus calls us to.

The Spirit-filled community of the King is the foundation of discipleship. Discipleship is a corporate expression of obedience to God and love for neighbor that allows people to see what Jesus' love looks like in practice. When Christians prioritize discipleship in community, we make Jesus easier to see. The greatest commandment (love God and love people) empowers us to fulfill the Great Commission (make disciples of all nations). In the book of Acts, we see Spirit-filled communities continue the ministry of Jesus as they proclaim the good news of the gospel and embody the love of Jesus. Those communities are an attractive witness of the power and presence of Jesus because their lives make visible "the abundant life" that Jesus promised. Communities have the power to form (or deform) and shape us. The past ten years have shown me the great harm and heart (de)formation that happens when professing Christians fashion Jesus in their own image to gain power and then frame that wanton pursuit of power as discipleship. In this book I will discuss how healthy Spirit-filled Christian communities proclaim the good news of the kingdom by appropriating God's love and grace into the life of the believing community and then bending it out into the world.

I will also put my business in the streets and describe how different faith communities have shaped my own discipleship journey and spiritual formation (for better or for worse). At the



core, I will provide practical tools for anyone who wants to take Jesus' discipleship call seriously—whether you're a new Christian, pastor, college campus minister, or lay leader in a local church.

My disciple-making philosophy is simple. Imitate Jesus as you're empowered by the Holy Spirit. Our ability to make disciples is directly related to how we imitate and participate in the divine life that Jesus invites us into. In John 21:1-22, Jesus appears to the very disciples who deserted him to commission them to follow in his footsteps and “make disciples” of all nations. Jesus doesn't ask why they deserted him, and he doesn't scold them. In fact, before Jesus commands Peter to “feed his sheep,” he feeds them breakfast.

Jesus knows it's impossible for the “most problematic inhabitants”³ of creation (a.k.a. humanity) to make disciples of Christ apart from being disciples of Christ. After denying Jesus, Peter had to experience Jesus as a forgiving shepherd before he could shepherd anyone himself. Peter had to experience Jesus as a grace giver before he could testify about the power of God's grace. And the same is true for us. On that beach, Jesus fed his disciples (physically and spiritually) before sending them out to make disciples. In the same way, Jesus empowers us by the Spirit to make disciples because he knows that we can't continue his story in our own strength.

WHAT TO EXPECT

This book is divided into three parts. In part one (chapters two through four), I'll explain how to make disciples by examining Jesus' discipleship strategy as revealed in the New Testament Gospels. Jesus always demonstrates what he asks his disciples

³Colin Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 33.

to do as he empowers us to do it. I'll also take a medium dive into some ugly moments in recent American history to diagnose how idolatry has created a discipleship problem in the United States. But before you get too discouraged, in chapter four, I talk about how Jesus exposes the idolatry in his own cultural context (which is surprisingly similar to ours) and demonstrates a new way of living. In part two (chapters five through eight), I use baking metaphors to describe how to make disciples by following the cruciform recipe of Jesus' life. I also dispel some discipleship myths by exposing the awful evangelism tactics that I used years ago, so that you won't. I'll also talk about how the Christian hip-hop community, a local church Bible study, and how three years of seminary helped me to apply Jesus' discipleship calling to my urban context of NYC. Finally, in part three (chapters nine through twelve), I'll explain practical ways to establish discipleship relationships, structure discipleship meetings, and depend on the Holy Spirit so that you don't burn yourself out.

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