

# Discipleship Triangles

## Why on earth are we here?

We don't get to decide our purpose. Our Creator does! And for what does God say He made us? Genesis 1 tells us God created us to rule and reign over the earth with Him. We serve as representatives of God here on the earth, "imaging" Him.

When we defected from that plan (Genesis 3) God made a way back through His crucified and risen Son, Jesus, who initiated the new creation. Through Jesus, we are brought back to our original design as the Good News is proclaimed throughout the world that Jesus is the King. In Christ, His followers can assist in presenting everyone as imagers of God again (Colossians 1.28)! This process is done through what King Jesus calls *discipleship*.

It is evident, then, that discipleship is not an *aspect* of the life of the Christian, it is central to the *entire* life of the Christian. To be a Christian ("little Christs) *is* to be a disciple of Jesus. It ought to be the lens through which we view every aspect of our lives. We were created to be disciples of Jesus, to the glory of the God we image, ruling and reigning with Him forever!

## What is *discipleship*?

- The term Jesus used in the Great Commission of Matthew 28 ("Go and make *disciples*") means "to become a learner" (student). A disciple of Jesus is an apprentice who is with Jesus and learning to be like Jesus ("teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you").
- **A. Be a Disciple**
  - Jesus said to his *disciples*, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." (Matthew 4.19) This verse shows us discipleship involves following Jesus (the head – know Him as Lord and Savior), being changed by Jesus (the heart – becoming like Him, "I will make you") and being committed to the mission of Jesus (hands & feet – fishers of men, making other disciples).
  - Discipleship is becoming like God's Son through the instruction of God's Word by the power of God's Spirit.
  - Dallas Willard said discipleship is "learning from Jesus how to lead my life how He would if He were I."
- **B. Make Disciples**
  - But it doesn't stop there! Part of *being* a disciple of Jesus is *making* disciples of Jesus.
  - The goal of parenting isn't just to have a baby, but to raise a full-grown, mature, independent adult (who can raise children of their own!). Likewise, the goal of discipleship isn't just to see people saved (spiritual babies) but to see mature followers of Jesus who can engage in the same process of disciple-making with others. (2 Timothy 2.2, Colossians 1.28, Ephesians 4.11-16)
- Simply put, a disciple of Jesus is one who makes other disciple-makers of Jesus!

## What is a discipleship triangle?

- We cannot put discipleship into a neat, simple package. It is a lifestyle. Furthermore, it involves sinful, immature humans. Therefore, discipleship is messy, slow and difficult. There is no airtight formula in the Bible. However, the following is a model we use at Peninsula Grace to facilitate contexts for discipleship relationships. It's our plan in encouraging everyone to be a part of what we believe God has called us to do!
  
- **Who is in a discipleship triangle?**
  - Each discipleship triangle is made up of (as you may have guessed!) three people. A fourth or fifth person may be added, depending on the scenario.
  - Discipleship triangles need to be same-sex: guys meeting with guys, girls meeting with girls (for reasons that will become obvious).
  - Each group has a leader that schedules and leads the meetings.
  
- **What does a discipleship triangle do?**
  - A triangle is a group of Jesus' disciples regularly *getting* together, *growing* together and *going* together.
  - Discipleship triangles will not be micromanaged, as each triangle will look different because each group is made up of different personalities! However, each meeting time should have three main goals:
    - Getting in God's Word – this should involve memorizing a Bible passage together, reading Scripture together, and/or reading books about the Bible and the Christian Life (but make sure you're in your actual Bibles, not only reading *about* the Bible!)
    - Growing in Christ's Likeness – this should involve some form of accountability: confessing sins to one another, encouraging one another how to apply God's Word and praying for one other
    - Going in the Spirit's Power – this should involve serving each other (think of physical ways like fixing their car, watching their kids or helping them with a project) your church (like serving in children's or youth ministry, Sunday morning service or building maintenance) and your community (volunteering at Love INC, building relationships with unbelievers, delivering cookies to neighbors)
  
- **How often should a discipleship triangle meet?**
  - Again, this won't be the same for every group. Ideally, once a week provides consistency that allows the group to more easily sustain.
  - However, as weekly meetings may not be feasible, groups should meet at least twice a month.
  - Meetings will probably last 1-2 hours. This may depend on meeting frequency.
  
- Our goal is for every member of the church to be involved in a discipleship. It doesn't *have* to be a discipleship triangle, but these principles are biblical and therefore necessary for every disciple of Jesus!

## What is the purpose of a discipleship triangle?

### - **Relationship.**

- God created us for relationship with Himself and each other. Remember, our purpose as disciples of Jesus is to be *with* Jesus (relationship) and learn to be *like* Jesus (you become like those you spend time with).
- We cannot be a disciple of Jesus without relationship with Jesus. And Jesus modeled discipleship by spending three years in intimate relationship with twelve of his closest followers. Discipleship also involves relationship with other disciples. Remember, a disciple of Jesus makes other disciples of Jesus!
- Relationship takes time. Trust = honesty + acceptance. But that level of vulnerability does not happen overnight!
  - As a group first forms, a great start is for each person to take a meeting to share their testimony
  - A testimony is one's life story of walking with Jesus (before and after!)
- This is all about people, not programs! You should become close friends with your discipleship triangle. So be normal people doing normal friend things together.
- Perhaps gatherings alternate between a purposeful meeting and time simply shared together (sports, hikes, games, meals, time with each other's families).
- There will be conflict, confrontation, tears and growing pains. But there should also be laughter, fun and delight with one another in God's presence!

### - **Reproduction.**

- We said that disciples are, by definition, disciple-makers!
- Therefore, from day one, your discipleship triangle should consider how to multiply.
- For discipleship to flourish, we need multiplication, not addition. This is why we form triangles and not one-on-one situations.
- Ideally, groups would meet for two years before each member starts a new triangle of their own, or perhaps sends out one or two people to start new triangles, and brings in one or two new people to disciple.
- Again, each group will be different, but triangles should consider planting new triangles in about two years. You need time to develop trust, but we also need to remember the point of being a disciple is to make other disciple-makers! (And don't worry, you can still be friends with former triangle buddies)
- Life-long discipleship relationships (friendships) should be formed, so it's ok if your triangle looks like two or three of you discipling one or two other people then sending them out as leaders of new groups. The point is: multiply, don't be stagnant or cliquey.

## What is expected of a triangle disciple?

### - **Disciples need to be FAT!**

- Faithful – Do they follow through? Are they consistent in attendance? Do they want to be a part of the body of Christ?
- Available – Do they have time to meet? (At least 2-4 hours a month) Are they willing to let others into their lives?
- Teachable – Do they listen? Do they ask for help? Are they humble, or a know-it-all?

- **Disciples need to count the cost!** (Luke 14.25-33)
  - Are they willing to give up control? (Luke 9.23)
  - Are they willing to give up comfort? (Matthew 10.34-38)
  - Are they willing to wholeheartedly follow Jesus?

## What is expected of the leader?

- **You must be a disciple of Jesus yourself!**
  - Are you FAT? Have you counted the cost?
  - Are you getting in God's Word, growing in Christ's likeness and going in the Spirit's power?
- **Commit to:**
  - 2-6 hours per month to serve in your leadership role (come prepared!)
  - Pray for your disciple triangle regularly
  - Being ok with working with people who are messy (you must love those you lead!)
  - Seeing others grow in their relationship with Jesus
  - Making disciple-makers!
- **Being a good leader**
  - Listen (don't just think of what you're going to say next, HEAR them!)
  - Dialogue – not debate – is the goal
  - Limit rabbit trails
  - Try to be engaged in the conversation whether or not you are participating
  - Practice encouragement
  - Make eye contact
  - Don't rescue people in conversation; silence is ok!
- Leaders will be trained and equipped by the elders of the church (each leader should have one elder or leader to contact any time regarding questions or concerns about their triangle)

## How do disciple-makers fit in with the mission and vision of Peninsula Grace?

- **Our mission is to “present everyone complete in Christ”** (Colossians 1.28)
  - That means we believe our job is to see as many people as possible become not just saved, but “complete”, mature disciples of Jesus who make disciple-makers of Jesus; worshipping Him, becoming like Him, on mission with Him.
  - Discipleship triangles are a central way of accomplishing this mission
- **Our vision is to be a “Gospel-centered community reproducing disciples of Jesus”**
  - Our task is to reproduce disciples. We do it in community with others, centered around the Gospel (Good News) that Jesus is King!
  - So we have to ask, how would Jesus have us do this?
- **Jesus' model and method**
  - Jesus preached to crowds. (Mark 10.1) He healed crowds. (Matthew 19.2) He loved all people. (Matthew 9.36) (Big circle)

- However, He spent about 90% of his time with 12 men (his disciples). (Mark 3.13-19) That's crazy! (Medium circle)
- He spent even more intimate time with three men in His inner circle – Peter, James and John. (Mark 14.33) (Small circle)
- We believe Jesus modeled for us three sizes of groups for our pathway to discipleship

- **Discipleship pathway:**

- 1) Big circle – Sunday morning gatherings
  - This is our weekly pep rally! Sunday morning is not the game. It is the time to re-center our hearts on Jesus so we can go into the rest of the week on mission with Jesus.
  - From this big circle, we want to see relationships formed into medium circles...
- 2) Medium circle – Community Groups
  - Community groups are the lifeblood of our church. It's where real life happens, like the church looks in Acts 2 – eating together, praying together, getting in God's Word together, sharing life together.
  - From this medium circle, we want to see relationships formed into small circles...
- 3) Small circle – Discipleship Triangles
  - This is where the most intimate, vulnerable, life-changing friendships are formed. Confession of sin, memorization and application of God's Word, and sharing life together.
- Coming alongside those three groups, Ephesians 4.11-13 says the job of the leaders in the church is to:
  - *Equip the saints* (everyone training!) – Bible studies designed to teach men and women how to feed themselves on God's Word
  - *For the work of the ministry* (everyone serving!) – areas of ministry to serve others with our gifts and passions (teaching, leading worship, hospitality, physical labor, etc.)

# Tools for Triangles

*Okay, I want to do this thing! But how do I do it?*

## What does getting in God's Word together look like?

Paul told Timothy (his disciple!) to "present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15). So how can we "rightly handle" God's Word?

**Begin with prayer!** Ask God to do what we can't! (The following are four helpful prayers to read before reading the Bible - <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-do-i-pray-the-bible>)

- Incline my heart to you, not to prideful gain or any false motive. (Psalm 119:36)
- Open my eyes to behold wonderful things in your Word. (Psalm 119:18)
- Unite my heart to fear your name. (Psalm 86:11)
- Satisfy me with your steadfast love. (Psalm 90:14)

## Three Steps to Studying the Bible:

- 1) Observation: What does it say? (What is the passage talking about?)
  - o General Observation: First, simply observe what the text is saying. You're a journalist here, gathering information. So ask the following questions:
    - Who? Who is speaking? Who is the audience? Who are the main characters?
    - What? What is the main theme or topic of the passage? What event is taking place? What is happening?
    - Where? Where did or will this happen? Where was it said? (Geography, location)
    - When? When did or will this happen? When was it said? (What time period, what else was happening at that time)
    - Why? Why did or will this happen? Why was it said? (Cause and effect)
    - How? How did or will this happen? How was it said? (Mood, tone, emotion)
  - o Grammar – I know, I know, you thought you were out of school. But basic grammatical rules and observations are huge to rightly dividing God's Word!
    - Cause and effect – Look for key words like "because", "therefore", "but" or "so" and connect the dots!
    - Parts of Speech
      - Nouns: Who is the subject? Who or what is the object?
      - Verbs: What's the action taking place, who's doing it and who's it being done to? How's it being done? (adverbs)
      - Adjectives: How did the author describe the people, things or events?
      - Prepositions: Often important in connecting ideas – *through, into, in, to*

- Genre – The literary style will change how you read passage. This is very important to note.
  - Narrative – Narratives (stories) are primarily descriptive, not prescriptive. They are telling you *what* happened or will happen, not necessarily directly informing you on what to do in your own life.
  - Poetry – Poetry will use a lot of figurative language (similes, metaphors, exaggeration, parallelism). Poetry should not be read as literally as other genres.
  - Prophecy – Prophecy can be one of the most challenging genres of the Bible! Often a prophecy can be referring to several events (double prophecy), one in the more immediate context and one that will occur later on. Figurative language is often used here as well.
  - Letter – A letter was written from a specific author to a specific audience for a specific reason. It wasn't written to you (You're reading someone else's mail, peering over their shoulder!). Imagine someone discovering a love letter you wrote, a grocery list you dropped, or instructions. Context matters!
- 2) Interpretation: What does it mean? (What does the passage say about what it's talking about?)
  - AIM – Author's Intended Meaning
    - One of the most important keys to interpretation is discovering the author's intended meaning (AIM). Every author had one, and if we don't discover it, we will misinterpret the passage or book!
    - Why did they write what they wrote? What's the one main idea they were trying to convey? What's the purpose of the passage or book?
  - Context
    - Context is king! A lot of wrong interpretation comes from ripping individual verses out of their context, making them say whatever we want, which leads to misapplication.
    - Read every word in light of its sentence. Read every sentence in light of its paragraph. Read every paragraph (or chapter) in light of the whole book. Read every book in light of the rest of the Bible!
    - *After* reading the Bible for yourself, use some study helps to gain important information like cultural, geographic and historical context. See "Suggested Resources for Studying the Bible" below. (Important: don't just rush to the commentaries and study tools, learn to read it for yourself first!)
  - Cross-Referencing
    - A cross-reference is another passage in the Bible that supports, illumines or amplifies the passage you are studying.
    - Many Bibles have cross-references on the margins or bottom of the pages.
    - This is a very important aspect of studying the Bible. The Bible will never contradict itself. So comparing similar passages will help us better understand the idea we are studying.
  - Interpret Scripture with other Scripture
    - If you are reading a passage that is difficult to understand, compare it to other passages on similar subjects that are easier to understand.
    - Let the clearer passages help explain the more difficult passages!

- Compare translations – Some good word-for-word translations are the ESV and NASB. Some good phrase-by-phrase translations are the NLT and NIV. The CSB is a good mix of both.
- Summarize your conclusions:
  - Does your interpretation fit with the general theme of the book?
  - Does it fit with the context of the sentence, paragraph, book and rest of the Bible?
  - Does it fit with other things the same author said in other books?
  - Does it agree with other biblical truth?
  - Does God’s Word say it, or is it just my idea I’m trying to read into the text?
- 3) Application: What does it mean for me? (What am I going to do about what the passage is saying?)
  - Don’t start with step three! You cannot make correct application without first making correct observations and interpretation.
  - Having said that, don’t stop with steps one and two! Without application, the first two are pointless. We must be hearers of the words, not just doers! (James 1.22-25)
    - Ask the Holy Spirit to do what only He can do (John 16.7-15) and what God promises the Word will do! 2 Timothy 3.16-17
  - Ask yourself the following questions:
    - Is there a **sin** to confess or avoid?
    - Is there a **promise** to claim?
    - Is there an **example** to follow?
    - Is there a **command** to obey?
    - Is there something to be **thankful** for?
    - Is there something to learn (and praise) about **God**?
    - Is there a way this points me to **Jesus**? (Every text, read correctly, will!)
    - Is there an action to take? A thought or belief or attitude to correct?
  - Don’t forget – the point of reading the Bible is to know God through Jesus! (John 5.39) Without that, Bible reading is just head knowledge that puffs up (1 Corinthians 8.1), or outward conformity without heart change. (Matthew 15.7-8, 23.27-28)

## HEAR Journals

- For your discipleship triangle, a great and simple tool to put all this together is called the HEAR Journal (replicate.org)
- H – Highlight
  - After reading the passage of Scripture, highlight each verse that speaks to you by copying it under the letter “H.”
  - Include the book, chapter and verse(s).
- E – Explain
  - At this stage you will explain what the text means. You will ask why it was written, and what the author is trying to say to the original audience.
  - Be sure to pay attention to the context (verses before and after) to help you understand the meaning.
- A – Apply
  - Now it is time to write down how this passage can apply to your life.

- How will this passage change the way you think about God? How will this passage inform your practice as a Christian?
- R – Respond
  - Write down a prayer or an action as a result of what you have just learned.
  - Be specific and carry it out.

## Suggested Resources for Studying the Bible

- Study Bibles
  - These are great helps for background information, cross-references and other contextual clues.
  - Recommended: ESV Study Bible, NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, Key Word Study Bible (Great for Greek and Hebrew understanding)
- Biblical Concordances
  - A concordance is an alphabetical listing of words or phrases found in the Bible and where terms occur throughout all 66 books.
  - These help to see what the Bible says about a certain word or idea (but remember: context is king!)
  - The most popular one out there is Strong’s Concordance (but can find free online ones too)
- Bible Dictionaries
  - “Bible dictionaries are one of the most practical and useful theological reference books available. The combination of definitions and proper names for Biblical words with online verse reference, allows users to define and analyze Scripture. Discover the meaning of words and study them in context to the theological concepts of that specific verse or passage. Many word searches also include the original Greek and Hebrew word with meaning. Popular dictionaries of the Bible include Baker’s Evangelical, Easton’s, and Smiths – named after their well-known theological authors.” From biblestudytools.com
  - Even an English dictionary can be important to understand what words mean.
- Bible Commentaries
  - Other studied men and women have put in a lot of work so we don’t have to reinvent the wheel!
  - However, as mentioned before, don’t rush to the commentaries. First, read the Bible for yourself! It’s the difference of always being fed by someone else and learning to feed yourself!
- Blueletterbible.org
  - This is a great website that combines many of the above tools!
  - Next to each verse, click the “tools” button to find many resources. “Interlinear” lets you look at the Greek or Hebrew word and its definition (very helpful!). It will also show you other translations, cross-references, commentaries, dictionaries, maps and more!
  - Other good websites: biblegateway.com, biblestudytools.com and the YouVersion Bible app!

## What does it mean to walk in the Spirit’s power?

- While this could never be boiled down “easy steps”, John Piper offers a very helpful and practical acronym:
  - **Admit** you can do nothing without God (John 15.5)

- **Pray** for help (Psalm 50.15)
- **Trust** a specific promise (2 Chronicles 20.20)
- **Act** (Philippians 2.12-13)
- **Thank** God for His provision and goodness (Psalm 106.1)
- For more info: <https://www.desiringgod.org/a-p-t-a-t>,  
<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/practical-help-for-praying-for-help>

Troubleshooting Common Discipleship Issues  
(Adapted from *Off the Wall's Discipleship Manual*)

## 1. What do you do when you have someone who dominates the conversation or when someone is really quiet?

- First, pray! Don't just react from anger or frustration. Act in love. (This goes for all the troubleshooting issues!)
- For the "talker":
  - When emotions aren't high, pull the "talker" aside and express your concerns. Use "I feel" statements, and sandwich critical feedback with affirmation. "I appreciate your openness, but sometimes I feel the others in the group don't have a chance to share. Thank you for being a part of our group!"
  - Ask them to help you draw out the quieter ones in the group.
- For the "non-talker":
  - Address questions to specific people. "It's been good to hear from others. Johnny, how are things going in your life?"
  - Ask open ended questions to help the quiet person develop confidence in answering, and ask follow-ups.
  - If that's not working, maybe chat with them one-on-one, and ask if there is a reason they are not sharing. Maybe they are uncomfortable, unsure of what to say, or not wanting to get into something with the group, for various reasons. Maybe it's another person in the group. (Maybe it's you, and another member needs to chat with them!)

## 2. What if the relationships aren't working?

- Read Matthew 18:15-17.
- Talk to the person individually. If they are not responsive, bring another member of the triangle with you. If they still aren't responsive, it is time to talk to the elder or triangle leader you are working alongside.

## 3. What do you do when you feel you have taken them as far as you can spiritually?

- Seek wise council. (Your "Paul", or elder/leader you correspond with)
- Ask the individual if there is anything you can do to help.
- Have the conversation with them that maybe they should seek out another group who can take them to a deeper level. That's ok!

## 4. What do you do as a leader if it's time for a meeting, and you really just want to stay home?

- Evaluate why you want to stay home. Are you tired, busy, lazy? Are you in a bad place?
- Pray for discernment in motives.
- We will all have times in our lives where we need a break, or can't make it. However, don't make it a habit. It will set the precedent that others don't need to be faithful, or that you may not be reliable.
- Communicate! Let your triangle know what's going on in your life, and ask them to help pray for you.

## **5. What do you do when your group becomes too social?**

- This is one of those most common issues. It is easy to drift into socializing, which is good, but not the central point of the group.
- We do not want to be overly rigid with our format, but we also need to stay on task!
- Review the goals of the group (read through the Discipleship Triangle Guide above) and ask the group how you might best refocus.
- These things take time! And sometimes, there will be a meeting where one person really needs to work through something and takes a majority of the time. But let those be the exception, not the rule

## **6. What do you do when dynamics change (because of a life stage change)?**

- This could involve getting married, having a baby, getting a new job (shift schedules especially) or moving.
- Let the group know about the life change
- Talk about how it might affect the person and the group
- Encourage the person that is going through life change

## **7. How do you know/what do you do when your group is too big?**

- The group feel more like a class
- When conversations tend to be mostly about general topics and rarely personal
- When you see the group forming cliques
- This is why it is important to generally have 3-5 members in a "triangle"

## **8. How do you bring someone else in?**

- Ask your group how they feel about bringing others in
- Ask them if they would pray about the right person
- Talk openly about the people you are considering (but avoid gossip or judgment!)
- Invite the person to just come check out the group with no expectations

## **9. Is it ok for someone outside of Peninsula Grace to join your triangle?**

- Absolutely! We are making disciples of Jesus, not of Peninsula Grace!
- However, it would be wise to make sure they are theologically on the same page enough to have biblical unity with the group, and have the same enough mindset for the principles of the triangle
- Go through the same process as above (How do you bring someone else in?)