

Shapevine

untamed

*reactivating a missional
form of discipleship*

alan hirsch and debra hirsch



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foreword

A generation ago a well-known English bishop ruefully admitted, “In the New Testament, everywhere Paul went he sparked a revolution. But today, everywhere I go, they just serve tea and crumpets!” Sadly, this expresses a fundamental problem in many churches. We’ve become tamed by tradition, captivated by culture, and controlled by our desire to fit in, not make waves, and never offend anyone. We’ve been domesticated instead of being disciplined.

In the Great Commission Jesus commands us to “go and make disciples of all nations,” but we can’t make disciples until we *are* disciples. We can’t make a difference until *we* are different. This requires us to return to the Jesus model of disciple making. Over a three-and-a-half-year period Jesus repeatedly defined the term “disciple” by saying, “You are my disciple if . . .” and “You cannot be my disciple unless . . .” As time passed he continually turned up the heat and called for deeper and deeper commitment.

Thirty years ago, when Kay and I planted Saddleback Church, we began imitating the intentional and sequential discipleship process Jesus used with his Twelve. Like Jesus, we move people from “come and see,” through all of the same stages Jesus used, to “come and die.” Because of our emphasis on radical discipleship, we have baptized over 28,000 new adult followers of Christ, grown them to maturity, and sent over 10,000 of them to serve in all 195 nations of the world. You can’t improve on Jesus!

Surveys and polls reveal that in many countries, the lifestyles of believers are not very different from those of non-believers. Too many Christ followers have settled for living a nice, comfortable, moral, and decent life instead of following the radical and wild adventure of trusting God's promises and obeying his commands. Fortunately, Alan and Debra have written just what needs to be said. *Untamed* is a desperately needed shot of spiritual adrenaline into our mild-mannered and mediocre attempts at following Christ.

The starting point is to get a new vision of who God is, how he acts, and what he expects from us. In *Untamed* you will discover a wild God, a God who loves us so much he dove into humanity headfirst. He didn't play it safe, and he expects you to take risks in faith also.

In these pages you are about to read, Alan and Debra will carefully and clearly lead you to truly transforming discipleship. They lay out the path, expose the pitfalls and obstacles, and show how to stay on the road until you reach the finish line. As you get serious about following an untamed God, you will begin to enjoy the untamed lifestyle of being radically committed to Christ's mission in the world. Your Father in heaven created you for this, Jesus saves you for this, and the Holy Spirit empowers you for this! This is your destiny.

In C. S. Lewis's Narnia stories, the children were worried about their first encounter with Aslan, the great lion who represents Jesus. Susan asks, "Is he safe?" Mr. Beaver replies, "Who said anything about being safe? 'Course he isn't safe! But he's good, and he is the King." Aslan was far from being tamed and housebroken. But he was good, and just, and strong enough to defeat evil. Once the children met Aslan, they began the adventure of their lives.

It is my prayer that the same will happen to you as you read this book. Jesus loves you just the way you are, but he loves you far too much to let you stay that way.

Rick Warren
www.radicalis.com

about the shapevine missional series

The key purpose of Shapevine the organization is to bring the various elements of missional Christianity—namely, church planting movements, urban mission, the emerging church, the missional church movement, the organic/simple church, and marketplace ministries—into meaningful dialogue around the truly big ideas of our time. Consistent with this purpose, the Shapevine Missional Series in partnership with Baker Books seeks to bring innovative thinking to the missional issues of church planting, mission, evangelism, social justice, and anything in between.

We seek to publish both established authors as well as others who have significant things to contribute but have operated largely under the radar.

The series will focus on three distinctive areas:

- **Living—Practical Missional Orthopraxy**

Orthopraxy is what makes orthodoxy worth having. We yearn for the experience and continual flow of living out the gospel message in our day-to-day lives for the sake

of others. The stories and ideas in the Shapevine Missional Series are aimed at providing practical handles and means to wrap our readers' minds around the idea of living as the people of God, sent into the world with the Spirit and impulse of Jesus himself.

- **Learning—Solid Missional Orthodoxy**

Jesus both lived and proclaimed a theology of a missional God. His was and is a message of mercy, justice, and goodness toward others. It was this message that erupted into the greatest movement in the history of humankind. The same God who sent his only Son now sends those who follow his Son, in the same manner and with the same message. This is at the heart of a missional theology.

- **Leading—Tools for Missional Leadership**

Our aim is for the books in this series to serve as tools for pastors, organizational leaders, and church members throughout the world to equip themselves and others as they travel the path of faithfulness in the missional life.

As a global interactive forum, Shapevine allows anyone to both learn and contribute at whatever level suits. To learn more, go to www.shapevine.com or contact us at info@shapevine.com.

Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford

series editor's preface

The Shapevine series seeks to highlight the missional significance of its various contributors; this book fits admirably in the purpose of the series. The fact that I am one of the authors of this particular work should not distract from the sheer strategic significance involved in the rediscovery of a vigorous and explicitly missional form of discipleship.

The fact that discipleship in the church is considered a somewhat lost art ought to disturb us profoundly. On the odd occasions we have actually managed to engage in some form of discipleship, we have tended to limit it to issues of personal spirituality (prayer times, Bible study, God's leading, tithing, etc.) and not conceive of it as something that has direct ramifications beyond the individual's privatized religious sensibilities. But discipleship in the way of Jesus is surely much more comprehensive than that. That we have cultivated an attenuated form of "designer" discipleship, a do-it-yourself spirituality that has little to say beyond the confines of the Christian community itself, only highlights the need to recover something a whole lot more vigorous than what we currently have. Again, this unnerves those of us concerned with the health and impact of Christianity in

the twenty-first century because if we fail in this most fundamental of tasks, we must surely fail in whatever ministry that should build upon it. Discipleship—our capacity to lovingly embody and transmit the life of Jesus through the lives of his followers—is the internal “quality control” mechanism inherent in Christianity itself. It is an absolutely foundational activity.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned in the years leading up to the Second World War, a Christianity without discipleship is a Christianity without Christ. And a Christless Christianity is surely an abomination that is likely to do much damage to the world in which it appears. The rise of Nazism within Germany, even among German Christians, only proves his point. We do well to heed the lessons of history in this regard.

This might be the first book in the series that will focus on recovering the loving art of a rigorous, missional discipleship, but it won't be the last.

Alan Hirsch, series editor

why write this book?

We have both walked with Jesus for many years now and know personally just how difficult the path of missional discipleship can be. Following Jesus has a very clear cost. And the cost includes living a life that sometimes runs contrary to the culture around us. Serious believers who want to go deeper in their discipleship must be willing to constantly critique both personal and cultural assumptions for the sake of becoming more like Jesus. This book is about just that. Simply stated, we write to help disciples of Jesus become better and deeper disciples. In order to do this, we have selected from both our personal and ministry experience a number of “obstacles” that, more than others, seem to trip up the people of God. It is these that we write about.

In the course of writing this book, we celebrated our twentieth wedding anniversary *and* our twentieth year of being in “official” ministry, for we started pastoral ministry four days after we were married. In fact we were so keen to get started that we cut our honeymoon short to move into the pastor’s house next door to the church where we were to be the ministers—not something we would now recommend! For us, serving God has always been a partnership. And we see ourselves and our ministries as richer for the different perspectives and passions we each bring. No doubt you will feel something of these passions as you read through the text and some of the stories

we've included. In light of this, and in case you'd like to know a little more about us, we thought we'd share something of our story and some of those passions with you.

Deb's Passion

For as long as I (Deb) can remember, I have identified with the “other,” those that have been deemed different or “outsiders,” those society has generally struggled to accept. Most of my early memories involve my sister (Sharon) and my cousin (Mark), neither of whom quite fit the norm. My sister was born with a physical disability, and my cousin had a distinctly “effeminate” nature; neither were really acceptable in the rough, working-class area we grew up in. At our school, being different or standing out in any way ensured you were the object of ridicule, or even abuse. I can still remember the fights I would get into defending and protecting them from constant bullying. No doubt these experiences were to lay a foundation within me of deep sensitivity to issues of marginalization and injustice, a theme that continues to run through my life.

I found Jesus (or rather, he found me) many years later along with that same sister and cousin. We were in our early twenties, living reckless lives of drugs, sex, and partying. We were active members of the GLBT¹ community and proudly identified ourselves as “gay.” We were seekers, but didn't realize just how lost we were until one of our friends (and drug dealer) became a Christian and shared the message of the gospel with us. In Jesus we found not only great relief from the existential angst we carried, but experienced deep liberation for our souls. Our lives were literally turned around, and all those old clichés became for us a profound reality: we were the lost and now found, we were the blind who could now see.

Part of this “seeing” for me was a realization that my sensitivity for the “other” was actually a gift from God. God loves the outcast, those society has for whatever reason pushed to the

edges. Here my passion met with God's heart. I cannot read the Scriptures without seeing the truth of this. It is to "the least of these," in whatever shape or form—whether transsexual, gay, prostitute, or poor—that I believe I am called, in order that somehow they can come to know that same amazing, transforming grace I experienced all those years ago. And along with that comes the deep burden that we as a church would be better equipped to help these people walk the path of discipleship.

Al's Passion

I (Alan) grew up in a Jewish family and was born and raised in apartheid South Africa until age twenty-two. Having a seemingly natural affinity with black people, I became politically active against apartheid as early as age thirteen. Nothing too hotheaded, but I had already decided that apartheid was profoundly wrong and morally reprehensible. After spending a mandatory two-year stint in the military, where I was first introduced to drugs and then to Jesus, I attended university in Cape Town. I then eventually immigrated to Australia with my family in 1983, shortly after I met my wonderful wife and partner.

Although I was not an observant Jew by any stretch of the imagination, I can honestly say I don't remember a time when I ever doubted God's existence, and I can remember moments of ecstatic worship, even as a very young boy, where God seemed more real to me than my own self. My journey to explicit Christian faith started early, with what seemed to a young Jewish teenager as an illicit fascination with Jesus. As far as I can recall, I had never met a real Christian until I was about twenty, when one of my drug buddies was born again and began to share the gospel with me. For me, coming to Jesus was coming home in every way. I had an overwhelming encounter with God and was totally and absolutely won over. It was the defining moment of my life: I gave my life fully to Jesus and I have never looked back.

As for my passion and my reasons for writing this text, it is important for the reader to know that this book is set within the context of this great love affair that I have with God's people. I really believe in the church: when it is true to its identity and purpose, it is far and away the most transformative force for good in society. It must be, because when it is faithful, it is the most concentrated expression of the liberating kingdom of God.

My calling, and my passion, is to reawaken the missional capacities of the church in the West. In *The Shaping of Things to Come*, and especially in *The Forgotten Ways*, I have attempted to set forth this positive, transformative, and distinctly *apostolic* vision of the church as a Jesus movement. If this book seems somewhat more critical (dare I say prophetic) in tone, then it must be understood that it is set within the broader context of an apostolic (a missionary perspective and drive) vision for the church as a missional movement that can, and will, change the world. I believe that *this* is exactly the form of the church that can reestablish the vitality of Christianity in the West. But through my own struggles and other forms of personal experience and observation, I have come to believe we are never going to be the movement Jesus wants unless we *first* get the issues of discipleship right. This is because the health and growth of transformative Jesus movements are directly related to their capacity to make disciples. No disciples, no movement—it's that simple.

Going South: Submerging into Our City

South Melbourne Restoration Community, the church where we began our first "official" ministry (affectionately called South), was located in an inner-city context and made up largely of people who, in one way or another, were on the fringes of society. From the homosexual to the prostitute, the schizophrenic to the drug addict, our community was full of

people who didn't quite fit the norm. And even though there were some "normal" people (thank God), this was no regular church. Many said of us that we were the first port of call for those on their way into the church and the last port of call for those on their way out. If they couldn't make it with us, they weren't going to make it anywhere!

We led this wonderful community for fifteen years. We lived, loved, cried, and laughed with this bunch of people; and they, more than most, helped define who we are as people. This collection of "freaks" became our family, one little microcosm of the greater family of God. We learned so much throughout these years, and, as is often the case, much more through our mistakes—and they were many!

Forging New Paths

Throughout our time at South, we were privileged to be able to plant other communities of faith, and help in initiating various outreach agencies and missional orders. On top of this, Al was also involved in leadership of our denomination and Deb led a ministry to gays, lesbians, and transsexuals, and also served the poor through her work with the Salvation Army.

Our passion to see others come to know Jesus has always been a constant throughout our ministry. The outworking of this passion, among other things, was pioneering Forge Mission Training Network, an agency devoted to developing missional leaders for incarnational forms of mission in Western cultural contexts. Forge now has networks in Australia, Canada, and the USA, with the possibility of a European one in the future. One of our great joys has been to see Forge become a significant grassroots movement God has used to influence the way the church both sees itself and responds to its context.

We say this here not from any notion of personal achievement, rather because we have a great sense of having been

graced to be able to experience firsthand what missional church in the untamed way of Jesus can be. But we can say this: looking back on our various experiences, particularly our many failures, most could, at root, be traced back to failures in discipleship. If discipleship involves our life in Christ and his life in and through us, then we think that many problems can be traced to breakdowns in this connection. For whatever reasons (and we now have a few clues about this) Jesus's "software" was not properly downloaded into our lives. This applies to issues from deformed Christian identity to narrow understandings of the family, and everything in between. If we failed at mission, it was because we failed to ground a sense of obligation to Jesus's lordship in everything we did. If we failed in generosity, it was because we hadn't rooted out the love of money and status that forms the basis of our consumerist culture. Likewise, if we failed in areas of personal morality and social responsibility, it was because we didn't pay enough attention to what it means to walk in the radical way of Jesus.

We believe our own experience only mirrors the experience of so many in the Western church: these various issues present significant cultural and theological fault lines in Western expressions of Christianity, and given the strategically significant situation of the church in the West, we must find a way to once again become the robust, untamed, transformative movement God has designed the church to be.

In writing this book, we not only hope to identify some of these flaws in our scripting, but also to provide some lively clues as to how we may, in the power of the Spirit, overcome them. And we write not as judges (God forbid), but rather as fellow travelers personally committed to increasingly becoming the untamed people we are called to be. We do believe that whatever direction you or I should take, we should somehow be taking it with Jesus. And so it is our deep hope that we can, with you, authentically live out the radical, grace-saturated life of Jesus and become more like the One we love.

the first word

(introduction)

The disciple must face the world fully aware of the desire of the Darkness to pervert and destroy the witness of the Light.

—Gene Davenport

To believe means to be so rooted in Christ that he becomes the foundation of one's existence, the beginning and end of the movement known as life, its measure and source and strength. The extent to which we succeed depends on our loyalty and on our power of sacrifice. Hence the believer does well to say not that he is a Christian, but that he is becoming one.

—Romano Guardini

For the disciple of Jesus the stage of discipleship is not the first step towards a promising career. It is in itself the fulfillment of his destiny.

—David Bosch

One day long ago, over the hot sands of a Middle Eastern country, a white skylark flew in joyous loops about the

sky. As she swooped near the earth, she heard a merchant cry out, “Worms! Worms! Worms for feathers! Delicious worms!” The skylark circled about the merchant, hungry at the mention of worms, but puzzled about what the merchant meant. Little did the skylark know that the merchant was the devil. And seeing that the skylark was interested, the devil motioned her nearer. “Come here, my little friend. Come! See the lovely worms I have!”

Cautiously, the skylark landed and cocked her head to the merchant. “Come! Taste the juicy worms!” The skylark became aware that she was, indeed, quite hungry. And these worms looked bigger and tastier than any she had ever dug for herself out of the hardscrabble ground of the desert. The skylark hopped closer and put her beak up close to the worm. “Two worms for a feather, my friend. Two worms for merely one!”

The skylark was unable to resist. And she had, after all, so many feathers. So, with a swift motion she pulled out a feather—just a small one—from beneath her wing and gave it to the merchant. “Take your pick, my little friend . . . any two, your heart’s desire!” The skylark quickly snatched up two of the plumpest worms and swallowed her meal with delight. Never before had she tasted such wonderful worms. With a loud chirp, she leapt into the air and resumed her joyful flight.

Day after day the skylark returned. And always the merchant had wonderful worms to offer: black ones and blue ones, red ones and green ones, all fat and shiny and iridescent. But one day, after eating her fill, the skylark leapt again into the air—and to her horror, she fell to the ground with a thud. She was unable to fly!

All at once with a shock she realized what had happened. From eating the delicious worms she had grown fatter and fatter; and she had plucked her feathers one by one, first her body, then her tail, and finally her very wings had grown balder and balder. Horrified, she remembered how, slowly,

imperceptibly, day by day, it had been getting harder and harder to fly, and how she had told herself it was no matter. She could always stop before it was too late. Now suddenly here she was, trapped on the ground. She looked up and saw the merchant looking at her. Was that a small, sly grin spreading across his face? He grabbed the now helpless bird, put her in a cage, and walked away laughing.¹

The Cage of a Thousand Compromises

We start with this parable because, like all bargains with the devil, it mirrors so many processes that make up human life and, for the purposes of this book, the nature of the Christian walk gone wrong. Tragically, like the formerly wild skylark, little by little we give up our freedoms in Christ, only to end up in a cage made of a thousand little compromises. This of course need not be so. A way is set out for us that not only delivers us freedom to be who God has made us to be, but also helps us to maintain our freedom.

Slip Sliding Away

In C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, Wormwood commits the novice tempter's error of being overeager to report "spectacular wickedness." But Screwtape reminds him that the only thing that matters is to "separate the man from the Enemy [God]." In fact, "murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."

When we try to take shortcuts to costly discipleship, we end up with a domesticated existence that is far from the liberated, untamed life Jesus calls us to. Much of what we write here is about exposing some of the personal and cultural issues, and

the idolatry so often associated with them, that in the end undermine our capacity to experience full, Christlike lives. If some of what is set forth in these pages seems strange to us, then it might well be because we have become too domesticated, accustomed to being featherless, and have now lost the

art of flight. Perhaps it is because we have forgotten what it really means to follow the untamed, revolutionary Jesus. We must now remember in order to reactivate the journey.

In your hands is a book on what we call “missional discipleship.” In many ways it contains ideas and a call to live a lifestyle that should be normative for Jesus’s people. But *we* know all too well from personal experience and observation that following Jesus doesn’t always come easy. And being involved in various expressions of missional Christianity has given us an appreciation for just how hard it is to be consistent followers of our Lord and Savior. To be a truly radical disciple does require a relentless evaluation of life’s priorities and concerns, together with an ongoing, rigorous critique of our culture, to ensure we are not adopting values that subvert the very life and message we are called to live out.

We sincerely believe discipleship has become a frontier issue for the people of God at this time in history. And most commentators would agree that in sincerely seeking to appeal to the prevailing consumerist culture, the Western church has all but lost the art of discipleship.² This causes, for instance, Southern Baptist prophet Reggie McNeal to conclude that “church culture in North America is a vestige of the original [Christian] movement, an institutional expression of religion that is in part a civil religion and in part a club where religious people can hang out with other people whose politics, worldview, and lifestyle match theirs.”³

If this is indeed the case, we should be clear this is *not* what the church is called to be, and is, in fact, a failure in discipleship. And it must be addressed if we are to give faithful witness to our century. Therefore, rediscovering what it means to radically follow Jesus is an area of strategic, *missional* concern. The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of the world (Rom. 1:16), and God wants to redeem the broken and lost world around us. He has chosen to do this through us. Our lives, individual and corporate, play a vital role in

the unfolding of the grand purposes of God. More is at stake in discipleship than our own personal salvation. The gospel cannot be limited to being about my personal healing and wholeness, but rather extends in and through my salvation to the salvation of the world. To fail in discipleship and disciple making is therefore to fail in the primary mission (or “sent-ness”) of the church. And it does not take a genius to realize that we have all but lost the art of disciple making in the contemporary Western church. No wonder Dallas Willard calls our systematic failure to disciple “the great omission” in his book by that name.

The Structure of *Untamed*

We have divided the book into four sections. Following our approach of removing impediments to discipleship, we have identified three areas where problems in discipleship locate themselves: theology, culture, and personal issues.

Section one: Untaming (our idea of) God

The church has always believed that our most fundamental problems in discipleship have their roots in faulty views of God. If not properly addressed, these distorted views deeply impact our effectiveness as disciples and missionaries in our world. The first section therefore will look at some foundational theological issues related to our understanding of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Although we have tried to write this in a very accessible manner, some readers might find this section somewhat abstract and feel impatient to get to the “practical” issues. But nothing is more important than a right perception and experience of God. So, our advice is to slow down, and seriously examine your heart and engage your mind here. In probing issues relating to God, it is hard to avoid dealing with concepts in one form or another. But real theology is more than a series of ideas; rather, we are dealing

with what must be our most defining Reality—something that must not be avoided.

Section two: Untaming our culture

Culture is the context we all swim in. We can't help but be deeply informed by it at every level of our human life—individual as well as social. Culture is a complex jungle of ideas, history, language, religious views, economic systems, political issues, and the like. Culture forms the basic way in which human beings communicate and share life and meaning together. But not all of it fits nicely with reality as God defines it. The problem is that most of us are unaware of these issues because we simply assume that our culture is right. If we are not careful, then, the culture rather than God actually gets to define reality. This is the core of many problems in discipleship.

This section will explore the power of money and status, our understanding of the family, and (yes) the church. We put issues of church here because the church, as a human agency, must always express faith culturally. But it is often more conditioned by culture than it is by the gospel. For instance, how does the culture of consumerism affect our experience of the church? Is the church challenging society here, or are we being co-opted to a larger cultural agenda?

Section three: Untaming the self

On a more distinctly personal level, there are numerous obstacles to discipleship that are part of our own scripting (or software) as individuals. While theology and culture do impact us personally, the issues explored here are felt *within* our own psyches. How we understand who we are (self-image) and how we understand sexuality has everything to do with how we follow Jesus and engage the world. We cannot avoid these issues. In this section we will explore the discipleship implications of what it means to be made in the image of

God and how sexuality connects with our spirituality . . . or doesn't.

Section four: Untaming the mission

As people captivated by the incarnation, we couldn't finish the book without suggesting some practical ways of implementing untamed discipleship based on the life of Jesus. And so the final chapter is exactly that: a simple guide to incarnational mission. This chapter, based on six principles of incarnational living, includes a number of examples of individuals and communities doing just that in their local contexts. Nothing too heady, just some simple clues to going deep into culture based on the life and example of Jesus.

Practices and group discussions

At the end of every chapter is a set of practices along with some questions for group discussion. The practices are designed to be suggestions the reader can adopt in order to activate a more untamed version of following Jesus. By applying them you can *act* your way into a new way of thinking. As for the group discussion, we really do believe that community is the best context for discipleship and the right place for accountability and the pursuit of truth. Don't do this alone. Discipleship is never a purely individual quest: we suggest that a few friends read each chapter together and discuss possible outcomes.

Signature Themes

If the book is structured around theology, culture, psychology, and mission (in that order), the reader will also discern that consistent themes pervade the entire book. Each chapter is spiced with four distinctive motifs or themes that, taken to-

gether, will create a certain vibe, or atmosphere, in the book. They are . . .

Jesus-shaped discipleship

It seems crazy to say it, but the first thing we can say about missional discipleship is that it must take Jesus with utmost seriousness. Whatever place “Yahweh is Lord” had/has for Israel, “Jesus is Lord” has for us as disciples. Every single aspect of the way we live out our lives needs to be re-aligned around the person of Jesus and his lordship. A dynamic, vital, living reality and response to Jesus in every moment of our lives is *our most fundamental truth*, and we have forgotten it to our great peril.

N. T. Wright notably states that the longer you look at Jesus, the more you will want to serve him—that is, of course, if it is the real Jesus you are looking at.⁴ Because Jesus defines our concepts of God, getting it wrong *here* means getting it wrong *everywhere* (as we shall see in chapters 1 and 2). And because Jesus defines and models for us a perfected humanity, he shows us the way of true holiness. We will present to you a holiness more akin to a gutsy, inclusive, gritty faith than to the moralistic, exclusive, sterile version Christians have come to be known for.

Shema spirituality

The Shema (Deut. 6:4–9) is considered the most important confession in the Old Testament and in Judaism, and is confessed three times a day by every orthodox Jew. The word *shema* itself stems from the first word of this text and simply means “listen!” or “take heed.” “*Hear*, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

But its defining influence extends through the New Testament to each one of us. Jesus confirms the absolute truth of the Shema:

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ *There is no commandment greater than these.*” (Mark 12:28–31, italics ours)

Jesus explicitly places the Shema at the epicenter of what it means to be a true disciple—to love God, to love others, and to live this out authentically in God’s world. We believe that we must simply take Jesus at face value here; he is saying that “Shema spirituality” is core to the outworking of our discipleship—our life under God. Actually, when we look into this, there are thoroughly good reasons for it. We suggest that Shema spirituality helps us do the following:

- Rediscover the true nature of worship (we must love one God, not many—no idols and images, please)
- Learn what it means to love God in and through the whole of life (with intellect, passion, family, culture, money, sexuality, and so on)
- Understand our relationship to the world and our obligation to “the other” (we can never come to a true discipleship in isolation from the love of people)
- Recover an authentically monotheistic worldview, out of which we can rightly interpret our world (operating with a unified worldview around the kingship of God)

Loving the one true God with all that we are, and loving others as ourselves, is as simple as it is profound. We have discovered that this core truth can indeed provide the answer to the obstacles we encounter on the road. In its simple but

profound summation of the law and prophets, we find something of an antidote to the various forms of deceptive thinking and living. We have, therefore, coined the phrase “Shema spirituality” and use it consistently throughout the book.

No mission, no discipleship

We take the missional agenda of the church with utmost seriousness. You simply cannot be a disciple without being a missionary—a *sent one*. For way too long discipleship has been limited to issues relating to our own personal morality and worked out in the context of the four walls of the church with its privatized religion. In doing this, we have severely neglected our biblical mandate to go and “make disciples.” We have narrowed the gospel message to just being about us. Please hear us here: we don’t want to neglect issues of personal morality. To strive for holiness and maturity in our own personal lives is extremely important, but it is only half the picture; the other half is our God-given responsibility to the world around us. The fact is that you can’t be a disciple without being a missionary: no mission, no discipleship. It’s as simple as that.

The mission we are all called into will, to varying degrees, involve an active engagement with the poor and the marginalized. The Scriptures are clear about this. One cannot read the Bible without being confronted with God’s heart for outcasts of all varieties. While we have no specific chapter that deals explicitly with this, issues of justice and care for the poor will be found in many of the stories we share and are implied throughout the whole book. We are also conscious of the fact that many books have been written on this very subject, and we encourage the reader to explore them.

Of prophets and idols

We don’t believe what we are saying is in any sense new, but rather that it represents a contemporary restatement of the ancient, *prophetic*, call to faithfulness that has been a

constant part of the church's calling in every age. In many ways, the prophetic challenge to the church is part of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in seeking to sanctify the people of God, and the world through them. The Nicene Creed rightly states that Christians believe that the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets. We sometimes fall into thinking that the prophets were simply speaking into a past era, but the truth is that the same Spirit still speaks through the prophets and those called to extend their challenge in the life of God's people. And because we as humans are prone to sin, safety, and self-concern, we need the prophetic ministry in order to be true to our calling. For a whole host of reasons, we all stray from our radical calling to change our world by *working out* the life of Christ in us (Phil. 2:12–13). In fact, at least a third of Scripture is dedicated to the ongoing integrity of God's people. God's people in every age need correction—ours no less. Without claiming to be prophets ourselves, we hope to draw deeply from this abidingly relevant prophetic tradition, of which Jesus is the complete and most perfect representative.

So Here We Go . . .

Join with us now as we journey into issues of discipleship. And please know that when addressing the issues we cover in this book, we do not do so dispassionately. We are deeply involved with this material. We struggle with every element on a daily basis, and our stories, which are woven throughout the text, are as yet incomplete. We, like you, have sold some of our feathers, and we yearn to retrieve them. We yearn to be more and more like Jesus because we believe the purpose of our lives can only be found in becoming eternally conformed to the image of God's Son (Rom. 8:29). It must become something of a holy obsession! We invite you to join us in being obsessed with becoming more like the One we love.