

Chapter 3: Prioritize Discipleship

From [Jesus the Verb](#) by J.H Klaas



We can't do everything so pick the best verbs

In the last chapter we looked at the patterns in the discipleship process and suggested that using the 5 verbs of social learning would be a useful tool to build the “being with Jesus” pattern into the DNA of the church. This chapter will look at these verbs in further detail.

In Spanish, Jesus is called “the Verb” so John 1:1 it is translated as “In the beginning was the verb...”. In English we use the noun, “The Word” in this passage which may turn our thinking to something unhelpful. We can practice some contrary actions when we think of discipleship only as a noun.

Traditionally we have made discipleship very info-centric. We often think we need to study a course or book or something printed. While these tools can be helpful, they can dangerously separate truth from relationship, or theory from application. We can amass knowledge which becomes an end in itself. We study about discipleship whereas Jesus commissioned us to teach others to obey what He taught. There is a big difference.

If we can only move from the noun to the verb, we will reframe the pattern. Instead of adding discipleship as the 1000th thing to our overcrowded plate of stuff, we will prioritize a few actions that will make our learning central to our spiritual life. We will engage differently, especially by connecting with others and taking action. We will measure these actions by the Scriptures and we can celebrate the results.

Imagine: People are inquisitive with wonder, curiosity and interest

Imagine is the process God used when He made us in His image. All obedience and faith starts in our imagination then involves our will in carrying it out in actions. It is easier to be passive and let others imagine what God wants for us. It is asking ourselves, why are we here? How does Jesus want to change the world through us?

The process starts in our minds, in our imagination. This does not mean we 'make stuff up', but God sows thoughts, gives us the sketch and then asks us to fill in the details. In Genesis chapter 1, it says He made humanity in His image (*imago dei*). Image is the building block of imagination. It is fascinating to see the first task God gave Adam was to name the animals. He asked him to use his imagination. God could have easily told him the names but He wanted to see what Adam would come up with.

And so today, God impresses us with a verse. He moves our heart. He prompts us to pray. Imagination is the domain where we process these raw materials and from where action is born. We need to unlearn the effects of too much information. We have consumed it like fast food and it dulls the ache for a while. But our hearts are not engaged. We become passive and bored. Our imagination is yearning to be set free to imagine what God might do, as we pray and take risks in that direction. This is so much bigger than learning a set of facts.

Jesus engaged the imagination of the blind man when he asked him "What do you want me to do for you?" Surely Jesus knew the answer but he wanted the man to imagine the possibilities and activate his faith. He engaged the imagination when he told parables, which were not easily solved and people had to think. He used cryptic speech to challenge people's mindset, like with Nicodemus who wondering how a person could enter again their mother's womb.

One friend said she spent months thinking about the question "What do you want me to do for you?" It seemed so simple but the longer she wrestled with it, the deeper it penetrated her dreams and hopes.

Imagine is fueled by stimulation, incubation, permission and protection. God can use anything as a point of stimulation: a word, an event, a curiosity, a failure, a verse. This is mixed with time for incubation where thoughts are processed, combined and reconsidered. Permission is necessary to know that as a community we will provide both the freedom to fail and protection from losing our way. Imagination without community can be dangerous.

A fascinating verse on imagine is Ephesians 3:20,21:

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

I am struck by the limitlessness of God's power, the fact that it is working within us and that it addresses imagination directly. Imagination is found at the intersection of God's power and His glory. We need to spend time in this neighbourhood and then meet others there which leads us to is our second verb, to connect.

Connect: Learning happens through connection with God and others

Connect is the process that gives us life. It is not good to be alone. We build connection and have the amazing reward of God's presence demonstrated in a powerful way (Matt.18:20). The pathway of connection is God's plan for us to escape from the loneliness of individualism that marks our culture.

The Gospel is about connecting or reconnecting. It starts with reconciliation and being bought back to God by the blood of Christ. This reconciliation reaches outward to people as we (re)connect with others and even with ourselves.

Forgiveness is an essential component of connection but it doesn't stop there. It builds into collaboration: "Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed." (Ecclesiastes 4:9 NLT). We become fellow workers with God (1 Cor.3:9) and with others (3 John 8).

"None of us know as much as all of us" is a helpful saying. The sooner I connect what comes from my imagining with another person in prayer, sharing ideas and resources, the quicker I will learn. New possibilities become visible, plans are refined and previous experiences are engaged. Different gifts are expressed. Ideas, even incomplete ones, are combined to become something dynamic. We offer what we are good at and don't have to be perfect in everything. We are stirred up to greater love and action. This is one of the central purposes of fellowship (Hebrews 10:24,25).

Connection needs willingness to change and willingness to contribute. The first contains items as drastic as repentance, a surrender and change based on God's authority. But also it implies an ongoing willingness to learn, a holding loosely of what we know, a letting go of our pet ideas, to embrace new perspectives. A willingness to contribute implies, while not possessing all the answers, we freely give what we have. We offer the best we have, as imperfect as it may be. God uses the "two fish and 5 loaves" to feed multitudes.

Connection is integral to discipleship as demonstrated by the 54 verses of "one-another" commands in the New Testament, half of them expressing in some form "love one another". Without meaningful connection, this commandment can only be theoretical. As the saying goes, "Loving God and the world isn't as difficult, it is my next door neighbour that I can't stand".

Risk: Faith applied with uncertain outcomes

Risk is faith applied with uncertain outcomes. Faith is more than the acceptance of certain theological statements. It is to live for and obey God, guided by the Scriptures, to bring God's love to a hurting world through our service, prayer and generosity. Failure from a human perspective is entirely possible.

Imagination and connection prepare us for risk. Risk is faith applied and creed demonstrated by action. Just as love is impossible without connection, faith is impossible without risk. It is choosing to trust the promises of God instead of variable circumstances or luck. You can't do anything by faith without taking a risk. Risk is taking action, even though we may fear failure,

abandonment or the unknown. It is reaching out in love without being loved back. It is giving, serving, taking initiative, persevering, and labouring until Christ is formed in the other and in us. Chapter 2: Prioritize Discipleship

The story of the four friends taking their paralyzed friend to Jesus (Luke 5:18-20) is a beautiful risk case study. It started in the imagination of one who suggested it to his friends: "What if we could only get our friend to Christ?" Imagining what Jesus could do, led to connecting on a number of levels. They went carrying their friend but the house was packed with people and they couldn't get in. The risk price tag suddenly inflated. They hadn't come with ropes and ladders nor with the intention of breaking through someone else's roof. They cobbled together a plan, used what they had, got themselves and others very dirty in the process and caught Jesus' attention. Seeing *their* faith, he healed the paralyzed man.

There was no formal teaching on how to do this, no previous example of ministry strategy. Not even any official permission that this act of destruction of property was worth the cost. We would never allow this today. We have become risk adverse instead of risk agile. We would see the Lord doing greater things if we could increase our risk tolerance. Taking risk in community is wonderfully exhilarating and our souls long for this kind of engagement with God and others.

Reflect: The Scriptures, the Holy Spirit and the community as guides

Reflect is the second event in every learning process after the experience itself. To reflect is to bring all our experiences and relationships, hopes and disappointments back to God and listen for His guidance. The Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures, events and other people to teach us.

This process of imagination-connection-risk requires reflection. How are the Scriptures, the collective wisdom of the community of faith and the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit guiding the process? Every faith interaction allows us to learn during the event itself and then thinking about the event afterward. It involves private reflection through our regular devotional times and corporate involvement, probably best through small groups sharing and in discipleship two's and three's.

Of course reflecting can start the imagination process. A verse from Scriptures or a teaching can initiate a faith adventure. In reality there is no linear sequence. Imagination, reflection, connection or risk happen in seemingly spontaneous order, with one action provoking others almost simultaneously. During a time of prayer it may occur to us to invite someone else into the adventure, or a promise from the Scriptures comes to mind. Or someone shares a thought that is impressed on our heart. Risk, connection, imagination billow around us as we practice this and we need to find moments of quiet to hear the 'still small voice' of God speaking into our situation.

This reflection needs to be made intentional as busy-ness will rob us of this time. Start simply with something like 7 minutes with God where you pray, read a short passage, reread it, pick a verse that stands out and pray. Do it with someone else. An interesting variation, by Neil Cole, is to agree ahead of time on which passages to read during the week and if either of the

partners fail to complete the readings, both repeat the readings the next week. This accountability can be very motivating. Cole also suggests increasing the goal to stretch us to something like reading 5 chapters a day. This gives a magnificent overview of Scriptures and becomes a major spiritual objective.

Journaling can be a helpful part of the reflecting process especially with review of the journal monthly or annually. We see repeated themes and the varied way God gets our attention. Journaling need not be only word-based. Drawings and photography can capture the emotion and feelings as a record of our journey.

Celebrate: Responding back to God through the discipleship experience

Celebrate is the act of worship as we experience Him and His will in this world. We celebrate through sharing food and time together, telling our stories and in the practice of the Lord's Supper. We declare our thankfulness for our journey as an act of praise in the experience of knowing Him.

When discipleship becomes a verb there is much to celebrate. Especially as people respond to God's grace, the stories of transformation are inspiring. Because they often 'just don't happen' without some kind of stepping out in faith, some may be left wondering why their spiritual life seems so sterile. They have been spectators for so long that they don't know how to become participants.

While celebration is the fruit of the practice of the other verbs, it can also be a starting point. "Sing O barren one..." (Isaiah 54:1) is a great place to start for those longing for but not yet experiencing having spiritual descendants. This is a wonderful promise to claim that "the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married."

Imagine a faith community practicing these verbs and coming to celebrate together, testimonies shared and new ideas spawned. New connections are made as others are inspired to become engaged in Kingdom activity. It garners a life of its own with the potential of 'going viral'.

Equipping the church with these verbs

"So what do you really want to learn?" is a very important question. Motivation is one of the essential ingredients for making learning happen. Think of your devotional time as a place where God speaks to your imagination through His word. Make it something more than a religious exercise.

Keep your connecting antennae up. You never know when the next person you meet will play a key role in God doing some Kingdom activity and view celebration to include God working amongst His people.

“Big breakthroughs happen when what is suddenly possible meets what is desperately necessary”(Thomas Friedman). Imagine the impact of this verb-oriented discipleship if it could help mobilize the people of God?

We need to view teaching in a different light from the traditional telling/instructional process. Consider this definition: **Teaching is the process of modelling, curating resources¹, instruction and coaching in application.” It looks at outcomes and not just the process.** It is setting up an experiential learning environment and not just telling the answer.

There is one more step needed to be understood before we get to your action plan. In the next chapter we will propose a **systematized approach** to learning these verbs.

¹ Curating may be difficult to understand, because that is what happens in an art show or museum as to how the items are arranged. In our information-rich culture, curating becomes essential to provide the right resources at the right time. Because of technology, this is suddenly possible as well as desperately needed.