

## Surprise The World

Week 7 ~ Chapter 8: (DNA ~ Discipleship, Nurture, Accountability)

This chapter was short and sweet. Let's begin with some questions...

- *What is a good habit you have? What is a bad habit you have?*
- *What is a new habit you'd like to add to your life? What is an old habit you'd like to break? What is your plan for adding/subtracting these habits?*
- *What is the most recent habit you've incorporated into your life? What is the most recent habit you've broken (or are in the process of breaking)?*
- *When it comes to habit forming or habit breaking, what role do you allow (or are you willing to allow) other people to play in helping you?*
- *Who are you accountable to in your life? (A boss or spouse, if applicable, is a given. What other accountability have you sought out and implemented into your life?)*
- *We've talked a lot about habits and rhythms this year. We've encouraged a number of experiments and exercises. How has all this impacted you and your life? Which exercises/practices have "stuck" with you?*
- *Michael Frost recommends a "triad of accountability" which he describes as "a microgroup of three people that meets weekly to hold each other accountable. Have you ever been a part of any kind of "accountability group". If so, what has been your experience with them?*

Please allow me to share my personal experience. I have been part of some form of accountability group or another for about 30 years now. I can attest that these relationships have been more formative than any other practice, and a big reason why I'm such a big proponent of formation being as much, if not more so, a communal endeavor as an individual one. And the people I've been in these relationships with are some of my truest, deepest, dearest friends. We have walked through thick and thin with each other.

Groups that I have been a part of have ranged from more formal and structured to less formal and more fluid. There is a commitment to meeting regularly; asking each other tough questions; being honest. Sometimes there's been a reading goal in mind, other times not. As a little group of spiritual friends we agree on our goals and focus. Some of the groups I've been a part of were designed to grow and multiply, others groups not. But it is important to have an understanding of expectations.

Frost outlines what he calls DNA groups (standing for Discipleship, Nurture, and Accountability.) In the groups that I have been a part of, DNA would be a good way to frame what they've been about, although our goals/practices haven't necessarily been B.E.L.L.S. (Bless, Eat, Listen, Learn, Sent) as Frost advocates. If being part of an accountability group is new to you, B.E.L.L.S. is as good a place to start as anywhere. But the larger, overall goals of Discipleship (strengthening our relationship with Jesus), Nurture (caring for and supporting one another), and Accountability (a safe place to confess failings or shortfalls, along with the encouragement to keep moving forward) are pretty standard.

The real power and beauty of a DNA group is that it allows us to know and be known. We are primarily social, relational creatures...we deeply desire to be connected to other people. This is what DNA groups foster.

Interestingly, groups like this are nothing new...they are not the latest fad. They are a time-tested approach to discipleship and spiritual formation. In fact, they are observable in the ministry of Jesus and have been adapted and implemented by various people and movements throughout Church history.

In the ministry of Jesus we see that He ministered to a variety of different group sizes. Applying today's vernacular, we could say that He ministered to the Crowds (multitudes), the Cell (the Twelve), and the Core (Peter, James, and John). (A case could be made for a fourth group/category between the Crowds and the Cell. To stick with "C" words, let's call it the Congregation—approximately one hundred twenty or so.)

What is important to notice is that as the group size gets smaller, the commitment level, the expectation level, the responsibility and accountability level increases. In other words, if healthy spiritual formation is the goal, hiding in the crowd won't get the job done.

The ministry of John Wesley reflects this phenomenon as well. As an itinerant preacher he would preach to Crowds (he labeled them "Societies"). His hope was that preaching would be a catalyst for change, whereby those who responded positively were organized in smaller groups that he called "Classes", and then into even smaller groups that he called "Bands". Similarly, as the group size got smaller, the commitment, expectation, responsibility, accountability increased. This is how Wesley went about making disciples, following the pattern of Jesus. (I use Wesley as an example because we are a Methodist congregation, and his "methods" were wildly successful. But it is important to know that others have followed similar patterns, before and after him, with reasonable success as well.)

The key question, though, is what do we consider "success"? Incidentally, and just FYI, this has been the primary question our Governance Board has been considering this year, as they have gone through the book *Renovation of the Church* together.

Unfortunately, with the typical American "Bigger is better" mindset, over the last fifty years or so the measure of "success" for congregations has often been the size of the crowd they draw to a Sunday morning service. But we need to remember that the larger the group size the lower the

commitment, responsibility, and accountability. To say it another way, disciples aren't made in the Crowd. When the cost of following Jesus goes up (as it naturally does for those who would be His disciples/apprentices) the Crowd dissipates. Our goal, our calling, is to make disciples. With that, we need to recognize what various group sizes and dynamics bring with them...both their strengths and limitations.

All that to say, discipleship/spiritual formation happens best in smaller groups. That being the case, it only makes sense that more of our time, effort, energy, and resources go into those practices and activities that are geared to accomplish our stated goal/mission.

Additionally, discipleship/spiritual formation is not a solo project. It's not just a "me & God" endeavor. God is making us into a Family. The measure of discipleship is Love...love of Jesus and love of others (even if the "other" is an enemy). I've gotten on my soap-box before, but it's worth doing it again...typical American consumerism and individualism also work counter to healthy discipleship/spiritual formation. In a DNA group such counter-Kingdom values and principles can be confronted and worked through. In a DNA group we open ourselves up to penetrating, heart-level questions. As we allow our lives to be shared with, and examined by, trusted spiritual friends, keeping Jesus as the center, the focal point, the leader of the group, we can help each other **become** the people we are meant to be.

To say all of this another way, a healthy, transforming Rule of Life\* is composed of both individual/personal practices AND communal practices. Something like a DNA groups is an important communal practice.

- *While B.E.L.L.S. are good practices/habits, they are far from the only ones we may want to cultivate in our lives. If you were going to be part of a DNA group, or an "accountability triad" (or whatever you prefer to call it), what goals and practices would you want accountability around?*
- *How open would you say you are to being in a DNA group? Or, if you're in something like it, what benefits and/or challenges have you experienced from it?*
- *If you were to be part of a DNA group, what kind of deep, penetrating questions would you want to discuss with your spiritual friends? (What questions would help you to know and be known, and that would aid in following Jesus?)*

The last thing I want to say about DNA groups: they are on YOU to form and organize/coordinate. Personally, I think this is one of the strengths of such groups. Church leaders don't program and implement them. We just (strongly) encourage them and can offer a little coaching. If this is something you are interested in, then it's up to you to work it out. Find a friend or two (three, at the most) and make it happen.

\*Rule of Life—think back to the book we started 2024 with, *Sacred Rhythms* chapter 9 by Ruth Haley Barton, and *The Good And Beautiful Community* chapter 9 by James Bryan Smith (along with the workshop he led for us back in November of 2022).

## Soul Training Exercise ~ Consider Forming a DNA Group

First, ask yourself if this is something you are interested in and want. If so, chances are there are others who want it too. A good place to start is within your Table Group. If not, please don't feel any pressure to do it or shame for not doing it.

However, if you do find yourself not interested or resistant to the idea, it is at least worth your while to ask yourself why that is.

Once you've identified a friend (or two or three), hash out your goals and expectations. When and where do you want to meet? How frequently? What will your time together look like? What do you want to discuss or ask each other? What do you want to hold each other accountable to? You can follow what Frost suggests in the back of the book (B.E.L.L.S.), or if you want some other ideas or possibilities I'd be happy to offer suggestions...just contact me.

Then...commit. Don't allow it to be something you easily blow off. Protect it and make it a priority.