

Vital Conference, Talk #1
The Foundational Role Triads and Why They Work
 Saturday, October 6, 2012

Introduction:

Understanding Triads in the context of Q-Place as a strong support group or team.

As I understand the Q place strategy, the triad/or quad serves as the core team for a new Q Place group. It is a place of support, synergy, gift sharing, prayer, and vision. This is a great tool/means/way to provide the essential core around which to build a Q Place group. I have been asked by Mary to speak of the value of the power of a group of 3 in outreach and discipleship. I will confess from the outset that my expertise in this realm is primarily in the arena of discipleship, which I describe as the life-long process of growing together into the image and likeness of Christ. It is the never ending process in this life of dying to self, while allowing the life of Jesus to come alive in us.

I see the evangelistic task of sharing the good news as integral to discipleship, an essential core of the great commission (Jesus, did say "**Go** and make disciples, or even better **as you are going** to all nations make disciples, so "Go" takes on the force of the imperative). So discipleship or making disciples is the overarching concept with 3 components of **going, baptizing** into the name of triune God and **teaching** obedience to all that Jesus commanded.

Let me start with a story of what I consider to be my "ah-ha" discovery as to the power of the groups of 3 or triads in the context of transformation. Perhaps much of our discoveries or breakthrough insights happen to us.

The Foundational Role of Triads and Why They Work

Eric's Story: My ah-ha discovery in ministry: How I stumbled onto the concept of triads and their power in ministry.

I knew that this was a man living the words of the apostle Paul, "**So we do not lose heart. Even though outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day**" (II Cor. 4:16).

When Eric had to go back into the hospital for further treatments I flew to Oregon to pay him a visit. As I walking toward Eric's hospital room, some of his delayed adolescent former high school buddies were leaving. These young men, who could normally make light of anything, were unusually sullen. They said to me, "**You know what Eric said. He said that cancer was the best thing that ever happened to him. Can**

you believe that?" Eric would have obviously preferred it otherwise, but he had come to cast his entire hope upon Jesus Christ, and His Lord and Lover had not let him down.

Let Eric tell his discoveries in his own words, "God is helping me grow closer to Him. It [the cancer] has made me realize who I have to depend on. And I have seen through these experiences that when I do call upon God that He really helps in His way. It may not mean that He will relieve the pain or that He will cure the cancer immediately. It may mean that I die, or live...that does not matter. What is important is that I keep my eyes on him."

Conclusion: As a result of this experience I began to reflect on the power of transformation, the dynamics of the triad, the joy of mutual discipling and it has transformed the way I do ministry and the joy I receive from it. I often say that I never more feel like I am fulfilling the role of pastor than when I am face to face with other men as we are in the trenches together exploring the implications of our faith in the totality of our life.

Transition: Often we move from our experience to our biblical understanding. Our experience helps us to see what was there in Scripture all along. [i.e. Acts 10 with Peter and his vision, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." Nothing is unclean has ever passed my lips. It gave him a different window as to how not only to see the Gentiles, but also how to view the message of Scripture to which he had been blind. Experience opens our eyes to truths that were there before us.]

As we explore the power of a group of 3 or 4, which I will refer to as "micro" groups, let me lay a biblical foundation or basis for the value of these groups of three. I am often asked the question on occasion, "What is the biblical basis for these triad/quads?" Of course, I get this wry smile on my face, and not wanting to be too condescending, say, "Well, may be the Trinity."

Theological Foundations

1. The Trinity

A central element in disciple-making is baptism into the name of the triune God. Matt. 28:18-20.

Step 2 BAPTIZE

*19b Baptizing them **into** [not just in, but into] the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...*

What's getting wet have to do with being a disciple? Why is baptism so central to making disciples?

I don't think we go deep enough here. Baptism signifies many things: 1. Baptism is the sign of **entrance** into the community of faith. It is the **initiation rite** into the community of faith. 2. It is the **confession of our faith publicly** that we identify with the triune God as our God. 3. It is a symbol of **washing of regeneration and forgiveness of sin**. 4. It is the sign of our **incorporation into the death and resurrection of Jesus**.

But what Jesus has in mind here is that through baptism we enter into the life of the community and fellowship that is the triune God. The Trinitarian formula is used here by Jesus. He literally says that we are baptized *into* the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

When I first was taught the doctrine of the Trinity in seminary it was from a dry perspective of Greek philosophy. We coldly learned to make distinctions between the persons of the God wrestling over Greek words such as *homoiousios*, was Jesus like the Father, or similar in essence; or *homoousios*, one with the Father, or same essence. Historically these distinctions are important for it makes a great deal of difference whether Jesus is like God or the same as God.

The Nicene Creed was the product of the Arian—Athanasius debate so distinctions were important.

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

But all of these distinctions, though quite important theologically, can leave you quite cold. What I missed in those distinctions was seeing the Triune God as family, community, a being in fellowship. We are first introduced to the nature of God in the book of Genesis. Interestingly enough, we find God speaking about Himself in the plural.

- Genesis 1:26,27—In what form did God exist? "Then God said, 'Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, after *our* likeness...' Here we have this strange self-description of the plurality of God, but with a singular verb. To whom was God speaking? Angelic beings who assisted in creation? Simply speaking as the plural of majesty? No, the singular God as a self-existent being who relied on nothing was having an internal conversation. Insights from later revelation tell us that the plurality of God is actually the Trinitarian God.

What does this plurality tell us about God in His essence and therefore what it means to be created in His image?

- The one God exists from all eternity as a being-in-fellowship or relationship.
- plurality—"us" and "our" though singular verb, "make"

The love relationship between within the Trinity serves as the initiative of creation. Before there was anything there was God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit existing in perfect love and in fellowship as a Triune being.

- John 17:5—Jesus self-consciousness of a prior eternal relationship to which he was longing to return.
- Mark 1:11—"You are my beloved Son"

The Trinity can be viewed as a circle in which the members of the Godhead see each other. No one is left out. All are interconnected.

In the 7th Century John of Damascus, a Greek theologian, described the relationship of the Trinity as a *perichoresis*. Literally means *circle dance*. *Choros* in ancient Greek referred to a round dance performed at banquets and festive occasions. *Peri* emphasizes the circularity of the dance: round about or all around. Therefore the image shows the 3 persons of the one God in constant movement. A circle implies intimacy, equality, unity yet distinction, and love. Shirley Guthrie writes, "The oneness of God is not the oneness of a distinct, self-contained individual; it is unity of a community of persons who love each other and live together in harmony." (see George Cladis, *Leading the Team Based-Church*, p. 4-5).

God created not to make up for some deficiency, loneliness, but out of fullness. There was never a time when God was not complete in Himself and satisfied with all that God is. "And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:25). Out of the fullness or overflow of love; Meister Eckhart said that God created out of the laughter of the Trinity. Love seeks a product upon whom to bestow love. Love is not satisfied to keep it to oneself.

Illus: My wife and I are children of the 60's. Marriage with maximum freedom. No free love or exchange of marriage partners. But freedom from—debt, to travel, pull up stakes and go at moment's notice. Especially freedom from children. After 5 years of marriage and no kids we met unwelcome inquiries about when we were going to have children with altruistic sounding cover-ups for selfishness. Nuclear specter; another mouth to feed in a hungry world. Yet secretly, unbeknownst to each other, our desire grew to have a child. We wanted someone to love who was a product of our love. Then

we suspected Lily was pregnant. Still we were remiss to admit our change of heart to each other.

Off to the doctor to confirm our suspicions. The report came back negative. We were crushed. We admitted to each other that we truly wanted to have this child, and even in the anticipation a love had grown for this promise of hope. Together we wanted someone on who to bestow our live—our together love.

In baptism we are being welcomed into the family who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The way I see it is that the circle of the Trinity has been opened and we have been welcomed in. This is what Jesus says to his disciples in the final prayer and exhortation and that it is his deepest longing to include them and us in the love relationship that he shares with the father. We get to participate in the overflow of that love. John 17:24, 26. "Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you love me before the foundation of the world...I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

What does this say about discipleship?

Discipleship is about community in which Jesus is at the center. The greatest discipleship strategy is to cultivate a community that lives its life out of the heart and life of the triune God. Love in community is the soil of discipleship rooted in the everlasting and first community, God, the Father, God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit. You can't be a disciple of Jesus without throwing yourself into the community whose life is rooted in the being of a God whose essence is a fellowship of love. There is no discipleship apart from the church in whom Jesus dwells. The early church had a saying, "A Christian is one who has God as his Father, and the church as his mother." Therefore relationships with other believers as our first family are integral to growing as a follower of Christ. Simply put, following Jesus and having our lives intertwined with other believers is inseparable.

What a great team a little triad makes as the foundation for doing ministry together. Chuck Miller used to say, "We need to be the people of God before we do the work of God." I change one word in that sentence, "We need to be the people of God **as** we do the work of God." In other words, ministry is rooted in community. We do ministry out of the community that is formed. We minister to each other as we share in a mission that is bigger and beyond ourselves.

2. Relational Support: the Relational Strength of Threes

Of course the most well known Scripture that speaks of the strength of three is found in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12: (The Message)

9-10 It's better to have a partner than go it alone.
 Share the work, share the wealth.
 And if one falls down, the other helps,
 But if there's no one to help, tough!

The *Talmud* says, "A man without a companion is like a left hand without the right."¹

11 Two in a bed warm each other.
 Alone, you shiver all night.

12 By yourself you're unprotected.
 With a friend you can face the worst.
 Can you round up a third?
 A three-stranded rope isn't easily snapped.

v. 12 is about protection. You have each other's back. You are standing together. We understand that when we are in the territory of taking others from darkness to light we have entered into hand to hand combat with the enemy. We need to stand with each other; be fully aware that Satan will attack to get at us at our points of weakness and need to be at each other's side.

3. The Model of Jesus

We are aware that within the 12 disciples, Jesus apparently targeted 3 in whom he invested more fully: Peter, James and John.

Jesus allowed these three to be present on special occasions:

1. The raising of Jairus's daughter: witnesses (Mark 5:37)

37 He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. 38 When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. 39 He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." 40 But they laughed at him.

¹ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ec 4:9). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. 41 He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). 42 Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. 43 He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

2. The Transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:2-13)

2 After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. 3 His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. 4 And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

5 Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." 6 (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

7 Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

8 Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. 10 They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant.

11 And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"

12 Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? 13 But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him."

3. The Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-41)

32 They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." 33 He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 34 "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

35 Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 36 "Abba,[a] Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

37 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour? 38 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

39 Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. 40 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

41 Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners.

What conclusions can we draw for the reasons that Jesus exposes the inner circle of three to these intimate moments of his ministry: they witness his power over death; his glory revealed; and his anguish and submission to the will of His Father. Certainly key windows into the person and power of Jesus!

Why didn't Jesus include them all; why the need to focus even on the few?

1. Even Jesus was limited in his incarnation with his influence. If we was going to transform and have an impact, even he needed to focus.
2. Perhaps Jesus needed to have his inner circle of support as well. We often don't think of Jesus as needy. He was self-sufficient. He had his intimate relationship with the Father. That was all that he needed. But perhaps in his incarnation as fully human, he needed an inner circle upon who he could rely. He needed trusted companions upon which he would set his focus.
3. He staked the future of his ministry upon these 3. After all it is these three that we know the most about and from which have received the greatest legacy.

Peter: Mark's gospel are considered the memoirs of Peter; the two letters of Peter; the confession of Peter; the leader in the church in Jerusalem; the bridge between the Jewish and Gentiles community even if in Paul's eyes he was a little wobbly at times.

James: the first martyr among the apostles as recorded in Acts 12.

John: "the beloved disciple", as he liked to refer to himself; certainly a gospel, three letters and the book of Revelation attributed to him. In addition, he is the only one who apparently died a natural death vs. being martyred for the faith.

What do we know about Andrew, Thomas, Bartholomew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, etc. We have some legends about where they went and how they died, but really no biblical data.

So this is the biblical data that serves as a window into the value of what I have come to call "micro" groups vs. the traditional small group of 8-12.

Transition: Another angle of the value of these very small groups comes from a sociological perspective provided by Joseph Myers in his book, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups*. He says we need to make room for 4 kinds of spaces in our ministry.

The Need for Various Kinds of Spaces in the Church

Levels of Belonging: The need to provide various kinds of space.

Public Space: Ways we publicly identify with institutions. This is my place. Not very intimate. Worship. My church. My institution. I am a UCLA basketball fan having attended UCLA during the Wooden national championship years.

Social Space: Finding people like me. It could be similar life stage; common interests through hobbies; people we serve with. We refer to this as chemistry; something works that provides attraction and glue to create a sense of synergy.

Personal Space: We are starting to focus in on a regularity of meeting face to face; we are moving into the circle, the one another of the faith are being practice in relationship: forgive, forbear, love, serve, live in harmony, do not judge, etc. It is personal, but not naked space. Just learning to share your life and faith with one another. This space is extremely important because it may be the first time people start to articulate their faith to another. Our faith does not become our own or a part of us until we have put it to words. This is why sitting in a pew on Sunday morning will never provide the context where our discipleship becomes central.

Intimate Space: Now we are getting to the place where we are removing the outer trappings and are letting people come inside of our deepest thoughts, intimate emotions, the doubts and questions of life. We are creating non-condemning, non-judgmental, grace filled space. This is the come as you are. I love with all of your strengths that draw me to you, and I embrace you with all of your warts.

Now we are in the place of triads/quads. Size matters. What you can do in a smaller unit to create trust which must be the foundation of your life, simply cannot and will not happen in a larger group.

Transition: Let me go from the comparison of a traditional small group to a micro group, to the other direction. When we think of discipling, we tend to think of a one to one relationship. This is the stamp perhaps that the Navigators have placed upon us. To disciple another is to have the one to one, Paul-Timothy relationship.

The difference between the traditional Understanding of the One to One Discipling Relationship and groups of 3 or 4.

The Usual Biblical Model (Paul and Timothy)

When it comes to a biblical paradigm or relationships that serves as the basis for our understanding of discipling, what is brought forth as exhibit A? Paul-Timothy. These two are linked together as the proto-typical unit. Preachers regularly urge every *Paul* to have a *Timothy*, or even more commonly for every Timothy to seek out a Paul who can be their mentor.

In linking Paul and Timothy as *the* biblical model, assumptions are made as to what this kind of relationship should entail:

- Older person with a younger person (like a father-son relationship)
- More spiritually mature with less spiritually mature
- Teacher-student relationship (learned with the unlearned)
- More experienced with the less experienced
- One in authority over one under authority

The Usual Practical Model of Disciple-making (One-on-One)

Because of the imprint of the Paul-Timothy model, when it comes to discipling we unquestioningly assume the *one-on-one* relationship as our reference point. Why did I have ample data in my life experience to confirm the popular definition of insanity? Why was I so persistent with the one-on-one model when it was not getting the results that I wanted? My paradigm blinders had limited discipling to the one-on-one relationship. By definition discipling in my mind was a more mature believer nurturing one who was less mature.

Now with the hindsight of well over 2 decades of practicing discipling in a triad/quad format, the following are my reflections on the some of the limitations of the one-to-one discipling dynamics I experienced:

1. **In the one-on-one the discipler carries the weight of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of another.** The discipler is like the mother bird that goes out to scavenge for worms to feed to her babies. With their mouths wide open, the babes wait in their nest for the mother bird to return. The discipler is cast in the role of passing on their vast knowledge to the one with limited knowledge.

2. The one-on-one relationship sets up a **hierarchy** that tends to result in **dependency**. As appreciative as *the Timothy* might be, the one in the receiving position will more often than not, not be able to see themselves in the giving position. After all, the dynamic created is that they are the young, immature one being taught. They are there to receive from the fount of wisdom of the one who has walked longer

in the faith. The gulf between *the Paul and the Timothy* is only exacerbated when the relationship is between pastor and parishioner.

3. One-on-one limits the **interchange or dialogue**. I liken the one-to-one discourse to a ping-pong match. It is back and forth, with the discipler under pressure to keep the ball in play. The conversation and dialogue must constantly progress to some higher plane.

4. The one-on-one also creates a **one-model approach**. The primary influence on a new disciple becomes a single person. This in itself can be very limiting and tends to skew the development of the disciple. The parameters of the discipling experience are defined by the strengths and weaknesses of one individual.

5. Finally, and of vital importance, the one-on-one model **generally does not reproduce**. If it does, it is the rare. Only self confident, inwardly motivated persons can break the dependency and become self-initiating and reproducing.

In my opinion we have inadvertently held up a hierarchical, positional model of discipling that is non-transferable. As long as there is the sense that one person is over another by virtue of superior spiritual authority, however that is measured, very few people are going to see themselves as qualified to disciple others. We may tout this as a multiplication method, but in actuality it contains the seeds of its own destruction.

As a result of the experience with Eric and Karl, (and now years later with who knows how many micro groups) I propose a non-hierarchical model that views discipling as a mutual process of peer mentoring. In order to avoid the dependency trap, the relationship needs to be seen as side-by-side, rather than one having authority or position over another.

The Alternative Practical Model of Disciple-Making (Triads/Quads)

I would propose as the alternative to the one-on-one model, a 3 or 4's that I simply call a *triad or quads*, as the ideal size for a disciple-making group.

Here is my best take on why triads/quads are energizing, joyfilled and reproductive and how the dynamics are fundamentally different from the one on one model.

1. There is a shift from **unnatural pressure to natural participation** of the discipler. When a third person is added there is a shift from the discipler as focal point to a group process. The discipler in this setting is a fellow participant. Though the discipler is the convener of the triad, they quickly become one of the three on the journey together toward maturity in Christ. This creates a far more egalitarian, everyone is important and has something to contribute, similar to the Trinity dance.

2. There is a shift from **hierarchical to relational**. The triad naturally creates more of a come-alongside mutual journey. The focus is not so much upon the discipler as it is upon Christ as the one toward whom all are directing their lives. I found even as a pastor that though the relationship may have started with a consciousness that I was the “Bible answer-man” because of my title and training, that within the first few weeks the threesome allows me to another disciple with fellow disciples who are attempting together to follow Jesus.

3. There is a shift from **dialogue to dynamic interchange**. In my initial experiment with triads, I often came away from those times scratching my head saying to myself, “**What made that interchange so alive and dynamic?**” The presence of the Holy Spirit seemed palpable. Life and energy marked the exchange. As I have come to understand group dynamics, one-on-one is not a group. It is only as you add a third that you have the first makings of a group.

4. There is shift from **limited input to wisdom in numbers**. The book of Proverbs speaks of the wisdom that comes from many counselors (Proverbs 15:22). To this end I have often found it life-giving to have people at quite varied maturity levels. It is often those who may be perceived as younger or less mature in the faith from which the great wisdom comes or a fresh spark of life.

Ken was perhaps the least likely source of spiritual inspiration in one of my triads. After all, his other two partners were myself, a pastor and Glen, an ex-Baptist pastor, whose knowledge of Scripture exceeded mine. Ken, a retired dentist, had come to a warm relationship with Christ well into his 60’s, but lacked confidence, especially in his knowledge of Scripture. In the first weeks of our sessions, Ken sat slumped in his chair and head bowed with the bottom edge of discipleship workbook propped up on his lap hugging his chest as if he was afraid for anyone to see what he had written. He reminded me of a third grader who did not want to make eye contact with the teacher in order to avoid getting called on.

Only a few weeks into our relationship Ken was diagnosed with cancer and had to begin week-long in-hospital regimens of chemo-therapy, every third week. So every third week our discipleship sessions shifted from my office to the chapel on the hospital floor where Ken was receiving his treatments. Far from this adversity setting Ken back, it seemed to open up a surge of God’s grace flowing into his life. The once insecure neophyte now was eagerly teaching us about how God’s presence was available in times of testing. It wasn’t long before Ken had become the unofficial chaplain on the hospital floor, moving from room to room pulling his drip bag behind him. His demeanor radiated the warmth of Christ’s love. The teachers (myself and Glen) were now being taught. We were sitting at Ken’s feet, hearing a man speak wisdom beyond his Christian years.

5. There is a shift from **addition to multiplication**. For me there is no greater joy than to see a Christian reproduce. All the above adds up to the empowerment. For the

better part of two decades, I have observed an approximate 70% reproduction rate through the triad model of disciple-making.

In summary, a triad encourages multiplication because it minimizes the hierarchical dimensions and maximizes a peer-mentoring model. By providing a discipleship curriculum specifically designed for this intimate relationship, it creates a simple, reproducible structure, which almost any growing believer can lead. Leadership in these groups can be rotated early on since the size makes for an informal interchange and the curriculum provides a guide to follow.

Transformation: Three Necessary Ingredients

Without question the setting where I have experienced the most accelerated transformation in the lives of believers has been in triads or small reproducible discipleship groups. I call them the “hot-house” of Christian growth. Hot houses maximize the environmental conditions so that living things can grow at a rate greater than would exist under normal circumstances. In a recent trip to Alaska my wife and I heard stories of 500-pound pumpkins, and zucchinis the length of baseball bats. We gaped at daffodils the size of dinner plates. During the summer months in Alaska the sun almost never ceases to shine. Though the growing season is quite short (May through August), the conditions are ripe for accelerated growth. This is what happens in a triad. Progress in living the Christian life up may have been steady and incremental throughout a believer’s life, and then all of a sudden it moves to warp speed in a discipleship group.

Why is this? What are the climatic conditions in a discipleship group of three or four that create the hothouse effect? There are three ingredients when exercised in a balanced way that release the Holy Spirit to bring about a rapid growth toward Christlikeness: This can be summarized in the following Biblical principle: *When we (1) open our hearts in **transparent trust** to each other (2) around the **truth** of God’s word (3) in the spirit of **life-change accountability**, we are in the Holy Spirit’s hothouse of transformation.*

Let’s look at what is contained in each of these three environmental elements that makes for accelerated growth and reproduction:

Climatic Condition #1—Transparent Trust

Intimate, accountable relationships with other believers is the foundation for growing in discipleship. But what kind of relationship? The atmosphere to be fostered in a triad is an ever-increasing openness and transparency between one another. Why is this a necessary condition for change? ***The extent to which we are willing to reveal to others those areas of our life that need God’s transforming touch is the extent to which we are inviting the Holy Spirit to make us new.*** Our willingness to enter into horizontal or relational intimacy is a statement of our true desire before God of our willingness to invite the Lord to do His makeover in our life.

You could offer a rebuttal to this relational challenge by saying that you already have a transparently honest relationship with God. Your life is an open book to the Lord. I have nothing to hide, you might say. In your relationship with the Lord you regularly invite the Lord to expose the secrets of your heart and you hold nothing back from his piercing gaze. Therefore it is nobody else's business what my struggles are with my dark side along as I am not deceiving God.

Therein lies the problem. Deception. I would counter that human beings have an almost infinite capacity for self-deception and self-justification. The prophet Jeremiah captured the mystery of the human heart, "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it" (Jer. 17:9).

The IRS received the following note: "Gentlemen: Enclosed you will find a check for \$150. I cheated on my income tax return last year and have not been able to sleep every since. If I still have trouble sleeping I will send you the rest. Sincerely,"² This man was willing to be honest up to a point... just enough to help him sleep. What we say we can handle between ourselves and God, most often we cannot. We minimize those areas of our life which continuously thwart us by tending to dupe ourselves into thinking that with a little more effort I will stop that behavior or pattern of thought this time, or if I ask God for forgiveness just this one last time, then I will stop. As long as the struggles in our Christian growth remain locked inside our spirit only known to God, then patterns or strongholds of besetting sin will defeat us.

The small size of a triad says that this is going to be intimate. There is no place to hide with three people. A three-some is to be an exploration of intimate community that fosters trust and in so doing creates the context to assist each other in Christian growth. Though I have already jumped into the deep end of the pool by hinting that mutual confession is the ultimate destination for the kind of intimacy that is necessary for transformation, let me suspend discussion on this aspect of transparency until later. I will get back to this subject and make a case for it being the missing ingredient in our transformation process in the church today. But before we are ready for the deep end of the pool, transparent trust is built by wading slowly into the shallow end to see if the waters are safe.

What are the elements of transparent trust that will allow us to move gradually into the deep waters of transformation?

- Affirming one another through encouragement
- Walking with one another through difficult circumstances
- Being a reflective voice that assists one another to clarify God's guidance in life's complexities

² Charles Swindoll, *Come Before Winter* (Portland OR: Multnomah Press, 1985), 91.

- Confessing our sins to one another that we may be healed

Affirmation Through Encouragement

In essence, the people with whom we share the discipleship journey need to convey the attitude of unqualified desire that we be all that God intended us to be, primarily through the affirmation of our uniqueness and value to the Lord. Jesus began his public ministry with this affirmation of His father, **"You are my Son, marked and chosen by my love, pride of my life"** (Mark 1:11, *The Message*). This is the same message that we need to convey to one another.

Gordon McDonald in his book *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion* comments on the cleansing and purifying power of rebuke by saying, **"One solid and loving rebuke is worth a hundred affirmations."**³ I have often turned the intent of that statement around and focused on the affirmations by saying, **"A hundred affirmations for every rebuke is just about the right ratio."** The problem is that most of us are not living with a hundred words of encouragement to every word of correction. Prior to entering the sanctuary for public worship some time ago, I ducked into the restroom. Standing side by side at the sink was one of the singers who often performs solos as well as participates in worship leadership with our worship band. I took the opportunity to say, **"Chris, I just want to thank you for the way you bless us in worship. When you sing it is obvious that it is to the Lord and your singing takes me to the place of praise where I need to be. The Lord bless you for what you do for us as a worshipping community."** You would have thought that I told him he had won the lottery. With emotion he said, **"Thank you sooooo much. You have just made my day!"**

We are starving for honest and meaningful affirmation in a world that knows better how to beat us up, than build us up. In the intimacy of a triad we have the opportunity to observe the formation of the unique creations God has made each other to be and to affirm what God is birthing.

Walking With Each Other in Difficult Circumstances

When you enter a covenantal relationship that will stay together for the better part of a year or longer, you can bet that you will have the opportunity to address life's high and lows. Paul states the rhythm of relationships in the body, **"If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together"** (I Cor. 12:26). This is especially true in a triad/quad. The nature of life is that there are circumstances over which we have no control that can have a devastating impact upon us. One of the privileges of this intimate relationship is to be able walk with one another when life goes south. Paul encourages the Thessalonians with these words: **"Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore what is**

³ Gordon McDonald, *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 191.

lacking in your faith" (I Thes. 3:10). We learn trust through the faithfulness of partners who sustain us in times when the bottom has fallen out.

- **Grant:** A personal injury attorney who battles the demons of debilitating fear. He has his own business. He runs right up to the edge, wondering if he will make payroll and can support his family.
- **Chuck:** a very affable man in his 60's who loves the Lord, but was keeping a secret. Unbeknownst to his wife, who had been a corporate executive, he had been running up credit card debt to the tune of \$50,000. He would buy things, have the bills, sent to his workplace rather than home. Juggle the numbers. Finally, he knew that it was all coming home, and had to admit to her what he had done. There was not joy in that home. We have walked with Chuck through this when in the first few days, he was not sure if his marriage would last. You see this was the 4th time he had done this.

Being carried by the faith of others is often the way to learn to trust God. I have often said to people whose life has come crashing down, "Let my faith carry you for a while. Some day you will be in a position to return the favor." This is exactly what discipleship groups can do as it builds toward transparent trust.

Being A Reflective Voice To Hear God's Guidance In Life's Complexities

Being reflective listeners is not easy for us as men. All of us think of ourselves as good listeners, right? Wrong? I have been with a new group of three of the men the last 10 weeks or so. I have been watching carefully the pattern of communication. These men don't know how to listen. We will risk with each other to the extent that we are tended to. I have had enough this last Wednesday morning. One of the men was sharing that after 26 years of living in the same location, he and his wife were feeling a nudge from the Lord to sell their house and begin an adventure of following Jesus in a less encumbered way. This particular individual, in his early 50's, retired now from the fire department has a sense that he is making up for lost time. For the past 25 years, the Lord did not have his attention. He was immersed more in his career than the Lord or his family. The other two men, did not seem to know how to stay with the deep stuff that Mark was letting us in on. I broke in a said, after two deflecting comments were made. "If we are going to develop trust, we must convey to Mark we want to go deeper with him; to hear with him what the Lord is saying to him. Follow up; ask questions; become discerning ears along with his."

Scott is a high school fine arts teacher, who loves to coach football on the side. True, this is not your usual combination. When I invited Scott to join a triad, he was still reeling from the sting of having been released as the Frosh-Soph coach of the high school team by an apparently jealous and threatened Athletic Director. Scott's teams had gone undefeated while the Varsity was not fairing as well under the Athletic

Director. As I listened to Scott share his pain about this dismissal, it was obvious that there was a hole in his heart. He was wired to invest in kids as a coach. This was God's call upon his life. Yet Scott was trying to do the balancing act that all busy and capable people must do. He was married with three children ranging from the teens to infancy (oops). He was also a conscientious teacher, whose job never ends. In addition, he also had been asked to serve as an elder at the church, of which I was pastor. This was a role for which Scott was eminently qualified and frankly I drooled at the possibility of having him on my team.

Yet there was something obviously missing in Scott's life. Scott was torn between the "shoulds" of his life and this call to coach. He missed the investment in these young lives; the opportunity to influence and disciple them toward godly character; the team spirit and to work for goals that only could be accomplished together. The Athletic Director, now a little more mature and secure, had seen his error and asked Scott again to become the Frosh-Soph football coach. Scott was reticent. He wasn't sure he wanted to set himself up to be hurt again. Then there was issue of pride. Did he really want to give this man the satisfaction of Scott saying, "Yes." Time would not permit Scott to be both an elder in the church and the coach of a football team. The "should" from the church was clashing with the call of God. What a joy it was for me to help Scott see how God had wired to serve him. The call of God on Scott was to invest in the lives of these kids and families at this juncture of his and their journey. The call to be an elder could wait. As the senior pastor of the church, this was unusual direction for me to be steering Scott. Sheer self-interest said that I would love to have a man of Scott's ability and godly character as a partner in church leadership. Yet for those of us in the triad our responsibility was to help Scott become aware of the hand of God upon his life. He chose coaching.

Confession of Sin and Addressing the Addictions of the Heart

The deep end of the pool of transparent trust is the water of mutual confession of sin and addiction. To get to the deep end we must go through the shallower waters of the affirmation of encouragement, support through life's difficulties, and prayerful listening in order to help our partners hear God's voice in life's decisions. Only then are we likely to venture in over our heads by confessing our patterns of besetting sin to one another.

My experience tells me that few believers either have the regular habit or the safe context in which we can reveal to another human being what lurks inside the recesses of our hearts. Until we get to point where we can articulate to another those things that have a hold on us, then we will live under the tyranny of our own darkness. James admonished his readers, "**Confess your sins to another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed**" (James 5:16). James makes a direct connection between confession and healing. In this context healing appears to be of a physical nature. Yet James believed that the health of one's spirit directly affected the health of one's body. Much bodily illness is related to spiritual or emotional sickness. Modern

psychology would certainly agree. If transformation into Christlikeness is related to being free from the darkness that can drag us down, then confession is a necessary means to free us from the bondage to sin and addiction.

In my quad that I just completed in September we decided to go deep with each other. What was the besetting sin; what is the stuff that hides in the recesses of our heart, that until we get it out, it will not be changed.

Jim: an attorney said frankly, he has an anger management problem; "my wife tells me I am angry much of the time."

Greg: the CEO unemployed; I don't know how to love; I lack a tenderness that bothers me.

Carl: I have a constant "to do" list in my brain, but am not willing to be interrupted for people. I need to shift from my task and program orientation and pay attention to my inner world.

Greg: I won't tell you what I shared because I am not in covenantal relationship with you.

What is the connection between confession and freedom? Bringing the shame of our guilt into the light before trusted members of the body of Christ can in itself have a liberating effect. Once something is admitted before others, it begins to lose its power to control. Sin loves the darkness, but its power weakens in the light.

Mutual confession is a major missing ingredient today in the process of Christlike transformation.

To learn to swim in the deep waters of transparent trust is a necessary element for accelerated growth in the Christian. Learning to swim can be a scary experience, especially when you are over your head. But once you learn to trust the water to hold you up, you can relax and experience its refreshment. Relational transparency is a necessary condition for transformation.

Climatic Condition #2 Truth in Community

The second of three environmental elements that create the conditions for the hothouse of accelerated growth is **the truth of God's word**. Why is this? There is no better summary of both the nature and the value of the word of God than Paul's statement to his son in the faith, Timothy, "All Scripture is inspired of God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient for every good work" (II Tim. 4:16, 17).

It is particularly important in our day that a disciple has the opportunity to cover the essential teachings of the Christian life in a systematic and sequential fashion. We

are living at a time when the average person has little memory of the Christian faith. A generation ago I recall clearly the warnings of Francis Schaeffer and Elton Trueblood, who said that we were one generation away from losing the memory of Christian faith in our culture. They underscored that this by prophetically saying that we were living in a "cut flower" society. This is a graphic image. When you cut a flower from its roots and place it in a vase, it can still look healthy for a short period of time, but then it droops. Our culture, they said, has been severed from its Judeo-Christian roots. They warned that we were then living off of a memory that would vanish by the next generation. We are that next generation!

The Tonight Show with Jay Leno is an unlikely place to find evidence for this loss memory. One night Leno took to the streets with microphone in hand asking people questions about their biblical knowledge. He approached two college age women with the question, "Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?" Quizzical and blanks looks led to this reply, "Freedom of speech?" Then Leno turned to a young man, "Who according to the Bible was eaten by a whale?" With confidence and excitement, he blurted out, "I know, I know, Pinnochio!" The memory of Christianity has been lost.

Mike Pope Story:

One of the participants in a discipling triad that I led was woman about ten years my senior who had been raised in the home of a congregational pastor. After we had completed our time together, she said to me, "Greg, I have something to confess. When you asked me to join this group, I didn't think I had a whole lot to learn. After all I had been studying the Scriptures all of my life having been raised in a home where the Bible was central. But I discovered as we covered the faith in a systematic and sequential order, that my understanding was much like a *mosaic*. I had clusters of tiles with a lot of empty spaces in between. This approach has allowed me to fill in all those places where tiles belong. I now see in a comprehensive fashion how the Christian faith makes sense of it all." The Scripture is profitable for...teaching.

Climatic Condition #3 Mutual Accountability

The third environmental element that will contribute to creating just the right climatic conditions for accelerated growth is **mutual accountability**. In other words, the relationship between those on the discipleship journey together is covenantal. What is a covenant? **A covenant is written, mutual agreement between 2 or more parties that clearly states the expectations and commitments in the relationship.** Implied in this definition is that the covenantal partners are giving each other authority to hold them to the covenant to which they have all agreed. Accountability has then been defined as "a willing decision to abide by certain standards and a voluntary submission of oneself to a review by others in which one's performance is evaluated in light of these standards."

Here is the rub. To willingly give others authority to hold us to accountable to what we said we would do is for most Westerners a violation of what we hold most dear. I referenced earlier Robert Bellah's study on the search for the core of the American character recorded in his ground-breaking book, Habits of the Heart. He found that freedom from obligation defined the center of what it is to be an American. Raised as we have been with the spirit of radical independence, almost everything in us rebels against mutual submission. We want to keep our own counsel. We want to be in control of our own choices, life direction, character formation, schedules, etc. Now you are telling me that mutual accountability is a necessary ingredient to transformation in Christ.

Peter, Paul and Mary Story: Magazine titles.

The covenant of mutual agreement.

The General Value of Micro Groups of 3 or 4:

- 1. Simple logistics:** It is easy to get together a small team. Scheduling is much simpler than a group of 5 or more.
- 2. Shared wisdom and perspective:** Each of us has our own reality and perspective which frankly is limited. Whether it is how we experience another person, or process the dynamics of a Q place group, reality is the sum of people's perceptions, not just our own. It is the mutuality of humility that is important here. We learn from each other as we hear and take in the perspective of another.
- 3. Complementary Gifts:** some are administrators—create a well oiled machine; others feelers with a great ability to process the dynamics of a group; others with an ongoing passion for evangelism—reaching the lost; still others are teachers—able to articulate concepts with a clarity.
- 4. Simplified communication:** When 3 or 4 are together you are simply having a conversation. It requires almost no training in small group dynamics; or the need to have some sophisticated understanding of communication theory.
- 5. Basic building blocks:** The strength of a triad for creating a simple structure of support and multiplication of the building blocks for future growth and development.
- 6. Inseparable bonds:** When you are on a shared mission together you will form bonds with others that will tie you together for life. Think of those people with whom you have a shared heart commitment, whom you have trusted with your life. I know that the people closest to me over a period of 4 years or the almost 10 years we were in Chicago were those with whom I shared life and ministry in the context of a micro group.

7. Mutual Upbuilding: There is an egalitarian nature to this kind of dynamic. We mutually defer to each other, even at the same time we are free to contribute what we have to offer.

8. Common battle: We have each other's back in a ministry where we are trying to take people from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of our Father's beloved Son. We pray for each other. We are aware of our susceptibilities to Satan's attack. Each of us has an Achilles heal and Satan seems to know what to go for. For me, it can be discouragement, whether it is not moving fast enough, or getting down on myself. Many have identified the allure of money, sex and power, as the way Satan gets to us. Ralph Winter has said that living the comfortable life in the West is the greatest enemy of the Great Commission. In this image of the 3's it is not so much as the 3 facing each other, but the 3's with their back to each other in an outward facing circle, as a sign that you have each other's back.

Conclusion: