

Study Day 1: Start as you intend to go on

The first of three study days on “Creating a Culture of Biblical Discipleship: The role of small group Bible Study in equipping believers for everyday life.”

Session 1: The Post Alpha Challenge

- Setting the scene for ongoing systematic discipleship.
- Learning from Alpha
- Are our small groups fit-for-purpose in equipping believers for everyday life?
- How do we provide structure and pathways for ongoing group-based discipleship in the local church?

a. Introduction

Jesus called ordinary people to follow him. From all walks of life, they followed Jesus around as he travelled from place to place. These earliest followers of Jesus are referred to simply as disciples. Jesus was their teacher and they learnt from him day by day. As with any other Jewish rabbi of their day, Jesus taught them to understand and live out the Scriptures in their day to day lives. So, too, each of us who have responded to Jesus’ invitation to follow him, need to learn from him in the company of other disciples.

For many years, discipleship was not an issue that was even discussed in the church in the UK. However, in the last 10 years or so, it has become something of a buzz-word. Where no one spoke about it, now nearly every church sees it as important and even the Church of England has discipleship as a key issue on its agenda. Most Dioceses at least have one person nominated as their key ‘discipleship enabler’ or something similar.

We believe that one of the most significant ways that we can do this is in small group Bible Study. In this series of study days, we will be offering you the opportunity to think through the role of small group Bible Study in equipping believers for everyday life.

Today we will focus on the basics. We will reflect together on the opportunities and challenges that basic discipleship courses like Alpha offer us. We will spend time considering what we mean by biblical discipleship and we will have an opportunity to think through how we make biblical discipleship accessible to everyone.

Let’s start with a working definition of what we mean by discipleship.

A working definition:

Discipleship is a lifelong process of learning what it means to follow God’s call to be his people and to live as he wants us to in every aspect of our lives.

[We don’t have time to explain how we came to that definition, but we can discuss it in a little while.]

b. The strengths and weaknesses of Alpha (discussion)

Over the last 30 years, one of the most significant contributions to discipleship in our churches has been the development and use of simple courses such as Alpha and Christianity Explored. Many of our churches have adopted such courses not only to disciple new believers (which was their original purpose) but also as tools of evangelism to allow people a safe place to discuss the basics of the Christian faith.¹

Today, we are going to start by reflecting on what we can learn from the Alpha course for ongoing discipleship in our churches.

Let's start by looking at what we consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of Alpha as a tool for discipleship.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Fellowship (meal) in a home. Suitable for all denominations. All welcome. Group-based Chance to ask difficult questions. No question is stupid. Facilitated discussion. Role of Facilitator in discussion. Clear 'curriculum' (systematic) Interactive Good content Well-structured Logical and well argued. Professional and clear presentation. Seeks to be objective about facts. Additional resources (e.g., videos and workbook) Emphasis on the Holy Spirit (Day/Weekend) Used worldwide.	What next? Raises expectations about how discipleship works – can these be sustained? Danger of thinking that this is discipleship. Requires a level of cognitive skills which favour the educated and academic. Biblical focus could be stronger. Is it too exclusive? How does it integrate into the life of the church? Role of the facilitator in discussion (if not done well)

Let's keep these things in mind as we go through today and reflect together.

¹ See <https://www.psephizo.com/reviews/what-has-been-the-influence-of-the-alpha-course/>

c. The strengths and weaknesses of small group Bible Study (Discussion)

If those are the strengths and weaknesses of Alpha as a tool for discipleship, what do we think are the strengths and weaknesses of small group Bible study in equipping believers for everyday life.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Focus on Bible. Learn from each other. Opportunities for questions. Fellowship and intimate relationships. Living life together. Opportunities to engage with the reality of day to day discipleship. Everyone (in theory) has something to contribute. Good materials The role of the facilitator	Stuck in a rut/Stagnant Extraverts get to hog discussion – introverts and shy people or those new to faith do not get to contribute. A sharing of ignorance (no preparation). Clique Not focussed on discipleship. ‘Blessed thoughts’. Can be simply about head knowledge. Forget what has been studied. Poor materials – lack of progression and integration with life. Can be inward-looking Not necessarily structured.

d. Ongoing Systematic Discipleship

So, how do we take people on beyond Alpha or Christianity Explored? How do we develop pathways for life-long, whole-life discipleship in the local church? What is the role of group-based Bible Study in this process?

These are the key questions for our discussion in groups.

Obviously, at GOLD Project, we have some courses and suggested pathways for this and we will share a bit about these later. However, the focus of today is to allow space for us to think about what we might do in our own local church context. Even if you decide not to use GOLD Project courses, we hope that you go away with ideas or, better still, plans to enable small group Bible study to be used as an intentional tool for ongoing discipleship.

e. Discipleship Culture

What do we mean by a discipleship culture?

Culture is what a colleague of mine in India described as ‘the smell of the place’! It is not something that you can see or easily define. But it pervades everything. A good smell, pervades everything, and as anyone who lives in or near Avonmouth will know when the wind is in a certain direction and brings the aroma of the

sewage works into your house, a bad smell also pervades everything. Paul uses this image about us as Christians and especially of the role of the apostles when he says, "We are the aroma of Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:14,15)

- Video (Christopher Watkin): <https://vimeo.com/811080383/4c91cd8336>

So culture is multifaceted: Figures: Anything that rhythms or patterns our sense of existence.

1. Time and Space
2. Languages, ideas, story
3. Objects
4. Behaviour
5. Relationships
6. The structure of reality

So, if we are to talk about creating a culture of discipleship or a discipleship culture, we need to be thinking about how discipleship interacts with all these aspects. Ultimately, we need each of these aspects to be infused with what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We need each of these things to be expressions of our discipleship so that the aroma of Christ is seen in everything we do.

f. Conclusion (Discussion in Small Groups)

Question 1: How do we take people beyond Alpha or Christianity Explored?

(Further suggested questions: What have we found works? What have we found doesn't work? How do we incorporate new believers into the life of the church e.g. small groups?)

Question 2: How do we develop pathways for life-long, whole-life discipleship in the local church?

(Further suggested questions: What have we found works? What have we found doesn't work? How do we encourage our churches to be 'learning communities' i.e. communities of discipleship?)

Question 3: How can we create a discipleship culture that permeates all aspects of our lives?

(Further suggested questions: What have we found works? What have we found doesn't work? How do we pattern our church life to effectively change 'the smell of the place'? Are our small groups 'fit-for-purpose' in equipping believers for everyday life?)

g. Feedback

- Difficult to get people to be members of small groups.
- How can we provide for all the different sets of people coming out of Alpha? Different life and faith stages
- Must provide more opportunities for more study and more service and more social interaction
- Role of facilitators as Mentors
- Need to provide care and training for facilitators.
- Venues – try varying them.

h. Further reading

- Margaret Cooling, *How to Engage With the Bible in Small Groups* (2010) (<https://grovebooks.co.uk/products/b-57-how-to-engage-with-the-bible-in-small-groups>)
- Church of England, *Setting God's People Free* (<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/renewal-reform/setting-gods-people-free>)
- Eeva John, Michael Volland and Robin Barden, *Context-based Learning for Discipleship and Ministry: Introducing the PC3 Approach* (2017) (<https://grovebooks.co.uk/products/p-148-context-based-learning-for-discipleship-and-ministry-introducing-the-pc3-approach>)
- Ian Paul, *What has been the influence of the Alpha course?* (<https://www.psephizo.com/reviews/what-has-been-the-influence-of-the-alpha-course/>)
- Cris Rogers, *Leading and Shaping a Discipleship Culture: Six Essential Shifts for Creating a Culture of Biblical Discipleship* (2019) (<https://grovebooks.co.uk/products/l-36-leading-and-shaping-a-discipleship-culture-six-essential-shifts-for-creating-a-culture-of-biblical-discipleship>)
- Laurence Singlehurst and Trevor Withers, *Making Missional Disciples through Small Groups: Why Small Groups Are Essential for Today* (<https://grovebooks.co.uk/products/mev-136-making-missional-disciples-through-small-groups-why-small-groups-are-essential-for-today>)
- Martyn Snow, *Anglican Discipleship: Everyday Faith and Everyday Witness* (2021) (<https://grovebooks.co.uk/products/id-1>)

Session 2: What is Biblical Discipleship?

- The role and importance of the Bible in discipleship.
- Is there a place for memorising scripture in the 21st Century?
- The basic skills of observing, explaining and applying God's word

a. Introduction: What is the role of the Bible in Discipleship?

I started the last session by suggesting that 'discipleship' has now become a 'buzz-word'. Everyone wants to talk about discipleship. Everyone wants to talk about what it means to follow Jesus. And of course, organisations such as LICC have been at the forefront of challenging the church to think through issues of 'faith on the frontline' – what it means to be a disciple in every day life. The work of LICC fed into the Church of England report on 'Setting God's People Free' and Dioceses within the Church of England have taken this up in their diocesan strategies. Likewise, there have been a lot of resources looking at everyday faith such as Holy Habits and 365 prayer. So far so good!

Now for three key questions:

- What is the role of the Bible in Discipleship?
- What role do small groups play in Discipleship?
- What is role of small group Bible Study in Discipleship?

b. The role of the Bible in Discipleship

Let's begin by asking what is biblical discipleship? First of all we will look at discipleship in the Bible and then we will look at how small group Bible study can play a significant part in this.

In the light of our definition above, I would suggest that most of Bible is about discipleship. Here is a whistlestop tour of how I think the Bible speaks about discipleship.

i. Discipleship in the Old Testament.

Disciple and discipleship are not really terms that are used in the Old Testament. In the NIV the term only occurs in Isaiah 8:16 and 19:11 (where it translates the Hebrew word *limud* – לָמַד [one who learns] – see also Isa 50:4; 54:13 and two occurrences in Jeremiah 2:24; 13:23 which refer to being accustomed to doing something). So, if the term is so rare in the Old Testament, can we really refer to 'discipleship in the Old Testament.'

Here we need to remember that there is an important difference between the occurrence of a 'word' and the occurrence of a 'concept' in the Bible. For example, the word 'Trinity' doesn't occur in the Bible at all. Nevertheless, the concept of God revealing himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is very clear in the pages of the New Testament and can also be argued to be present in the Old Testament.

So, if we are looking for the term 'disciple' or 'discipleship' in the Old Testament, we may be disappointed, but if we are looking for the concept, we can find it in many places. The idea of being taught by God and learning to obey him is a concept that runs through the Old Testament

- The verb *lamad* – לָמַד [to learn/teach] occurs about 90 times and is a particular focus of Deuteronomy e.g. Deut 4:10 *lamad* = learn and teach the fear (reverence) of God.
- Similarly the idea of responding to God's call in life-long obedience to his grace is seen from the earliest pages of the Bible.

The Call of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3)

- a call with implications for the whole family (v.1, 4,5)
- 'Leave' (v.1 cf. Matt 4:19,22)
- Missional – blessed to be a blessing (to the whole world).

Exodus 19

- A call into relationship with God based on his grace and provision v.4
- Obedience to the covenant v.5
- A holy people to declare who God is in the world vv.5-6;
- Missional – priests – representing God to the world and the world to God
- Community based – a nation.

Leviticus

- Called to be a holy people.
- How being God's people affects every area of our lives.
 - How we worship
 - What we eat
 - What we wear
 - How we treat our fellow human beings
 - How we treat our animals
 - How we treat the land
- All demonstrating that we are God's people and we are called to live differently among the nations.

Deuteronomy

- Learning to obey God in the family - Deuteronomy 6
- Remembering and passing on
- Learning to follow God's laws
- Knowing and obeying the word of God is key to discipleship – Deuteronomy 8.

The Historical Books (Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles)

- The obedience or disobedience of God's people to live as he intended and the consequences of obedience and disobedience for his people.

Psalms

- Joy, sorrow, anger, praise are all appropriate responses of disciples to the realities of life.

Proverbs

- Memes for disciples?

The Prophets

- Much the same as Historical Books
- Also more explanation of who God is and his grace as well as his judgement.

ii. Discipleship in the Gospels.

Disciple, a word used in the Gospels and Acts 272 times to translate the Greek word *mathētēs* (μαθητής) which refers to a student, pupil. In Judaism, a disciple was the student of a Rabbi, and so the word implies that the person is learning from a teacher. In Judaism, the Rabbi would be a teacher of the law, interpreting the Torah to his disciples. Likewise, Jesus teaches his disciples what it means to obey God's law (e.g. Matt 5:17-20). In this respect, being a disciple of Jesus is similar to being a disciple of any other Rabbi.

The process of discipleship

- Calling - E.g. Matt 4:18-22; Matt 9:9
- Experiencing – E.g. John 1:39
- Following/Being with Jesus
- Learning from Jesus – Take my yoke upon you and learn from me (Matt 11:29)
- Learning together – disciple (apart from 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' in John) is only used 10 times in the singular (6 in the Gospels and 4 in Acts). It is used approximately 260 times in the plural. Being a disciple is to be part of a group of Jesus' followers.
- Commissioned by Jesus – Matt 10:1-42 (cf. Luke 9:1-9); Luke 10:1-24; Matt 28:19,20 – John 20:19-23; John 21

The content of discipleship – Learning from Jesus

- Most obviously summed up in the Sermon on the Mount
- A radical lifestyle that affects the whole person and the whole of life
- Thoughts, Words and Deeds
- An upside down lifestyle.

The cost of discipleship

- Foxes have holes... (Matt 8:18-22)
- Take up your cross (Luke 9:22-24)

iii. Discipleship in the rest of the New Testament.

The term disciple continues in Acts but is missing almost entirely from the rest of the New Testament. However, I would argue that, if we are happy with our definition of discipleship, then the concept continues throughout the Letters of Paul.

Paul's Letters are the instructions to believers on "*what it means to follow God's call to be his people and to live as he wants us to in every aspect of our lives.*" Paul focusses on the outworking of this for particular churches in specific contexts. To adopt the language of LICC, Paul's letters are about 'fruitfulness on

the frontline' (see Mark Greene, *Fruitfulness on the Frontline* - <https://www.abebooks.co.uk/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=31496649472>

Likewise, the epistles of Hebrews, Peter, James and John.

iv. Summary

If the whole of the Bible is about discipleship, then I believe that the whole of the Bible has something to say to us today. Let me summarise, a few key features that I think that the Bible teaches us about discipleship. In the Bible, discipleship is:

- Always personal but never individual.
- Based on grace but calls for obedience.
- Involves the whole person (Head, heart, hands – know, be, do – educationally = knowledge, attitude, skills/competencies)
- Involves the whole of life – every aspect of human identity and relationships
- Is life-long.
- Requires devotion (in community) – Acts 2:42 teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer.

To quote the famous verses in 2 Timothy 3:

¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

c. The role of small groups in discipleship

We have already touched on the significance of courses such as Alpha and Christianity Explored in discipleship. But the question for our discussions is what role do small groups have in this life-long process of process of learning what it means to follow God's call to be his people and to live as he wants us to in every aspect of our lives? Are we intentional in the way that we set up our small groups to enable this process?

Perhaps the most systematic and sustained thinking about the role of small groups in discipleship has been among those who have adopted a 'cell church' model, where each small group meeting is based around the 4 W's of Welcome, Worship, Word and Witness. Broadly modelling the early church in Acts 2:42, the structure of each meeting is meant to have an outcome in terms of our witness in the world. We can discuss this and other models of how small groups can focus on intentional discipleship in our groups.

d. The role of small group Bible Study in discipleship

One of the problems we identified earlier about the role of small group Bible Study is that it is often not very systematic and is not very focused on discipleship.

One of the key things that makes Small Group Bible study around the world effective as a tool of discipleship is the very simple method of inductive Bible Study that focusses on three issues:

Observation: What does the passage actually say? (Not what I think it says or what an expert tells me it says, but what does it say?)

Explanation: What does it mean? (Here there is a fundamental reformation principle that is often used, which is what God said in Scripture, he says today. Therefore we need to try and really understand what the Scriptures were saying to their original readers to know what they are saying to us today. However, there is also the issue of what John Stott called double-listening. That is trying to understand our own situation clearly so that we can hear how the Scripture speaks to us today.)

Application: Observation and Explanation are of no use in discipleship unless we ask so what? – This is the step that is often missing in our small group Bible Study. However, it cannot be done effectively without the first two. If we try to apply the message of the Bible without observing the text and explaining it clearly, we are like doctors who prescribe medicine without finding out the symptoms or their causes.

e. Conclusion (*Discussion in Groups*)

Question 1: What is the role of the Bible in Discipleship?

(Further suggested questions: Are we convinced that the whole of the Bible is about discipleship? If not, why not? If so, what implications does this have for discipling people in our churches? What other factors play a significant part in discipleship?)

Question 2: What role do small groups play in Discipleship?

(Further suggested questions: How far is discipleship key to our small groups? Is there a tension between the ideal role of a small group and the actual role? How do we make our small groups more intentionally discipleship focussed?)

Question 3: What is the role of group-based Bible Study in this process?

(Further suggested questions: What have we found works? What have we found doesn't work? How do we encourage intentional discipleship through the study of the Bible together?)

Question 4: Do you want to revise our definition of Discipleship?

Discipleship is a lifelong process of learning what it means to follow God's call to be his people and to live as he wants us to in every aspect of our lives.

(Anything we want to add, change, remove?)

f. Feedback

- Focussing on the Bible is transformative – need to be passionate about this – God's word has the power to transform us when applied to our lives

- Bible is living and active, a handbook and reference for discipleship – need to make people aware.
- Need to look at the Old Testament and its significance for everyday discipleship
- Discipleship is like Continuing Professional Development – continuing training in lifelong learning and application

g. Further reading

- Margaret Cooling, *How to Engage With the Bible in Small Groups* (2010) (<https://grovebooks.co.uk/products/b-57-how-to-engage-with-the-bible-in-small-groups>)
- Andrew Ollerton, *A Theology of the Bible* (2021), (<https://grovebooks.co.uk/products/b-100-a-theology-of-the-bible>)
- Ian Paul, *How to Interpret the Bible: Four Essential Questions* (2017) (<https://grovebooks.co.uk/products/b-86-how-to-interpret-the-bible-four-essential-questions>)
- Ian Paul, *Refreshing Bible Study* (2004) (<https://grovebooks.co.uk/products/b-31-refreshing-bible-study>)
- Joe Warton and Lyn Weston, *Sustaining Whole-life Disciplemaking Church: Key Ingredients for Lasting Change* (<https://grovebooks.co.uk/collections/discipleship/products/id-6-sustaining-whole-life-disciplemaking-church-key-ingredients-for-lasting-change>)

Session 3: Simple yet profound

- The need for a level playing field in group discussion – not just for extroverts and academics.
- An introduction to the simple TEE Method of personal study, group discussion and practical application as a means for discipleship.
- An introduction to accessible, interactive learning such as Abundant Life and Pure Gold
- Examples from the Pure Gold course of the engaging with the Bible.

a. Introduction

One of the dangers of Group Bible Study is that it can disempower those with limited education, those who lack confidence and those without a voice because it is easily dominated by those who are educated (or think they are), those who are confident (and extrovert); and those who already have a voice (e.g., the Group Leader – or those who are dominant in society). The challenge is

- How do we make Group Bible Study accessible to such people?

In this session, we are unashamedly going to offer TEE as a model for this. This is the method that we use in the GOLD Project. It is a method that has been used and refined over more than 50 years around the world. It is based on some basic educational ideas. Here are some of them.

People learn best when

- They learn in small appropriate steps;
- They receive immediate feedback on their learning;
- They learn at their own pace;
- Their learning is interactive;
- Their learning is tested;
- Their learning is applied;
- What they learn is repeated (muscle memory);
- They learn from peers.

TEE has developed a simple methodology to enable such learning:

Interaction between Personal Study, Group Discussion and Practical Application forms the basis for Transformation. Theologically, this should be rooted and grounded in the local church. TEE is a tool, to equip and empower believers in their local church setting for discipleship, mission and ministry.

GOLD Project Windmill video: https://youtu.be/AG_0JQnssY0

Increase Association TEE Video: https://youtu.be/kU_GcBuBifY

SEAN TEE Video (English): https://youtu.be/aBbsead_YZY

SEAN TEE Video (Spanish): <https://youtu.be/5KDnRQUDCSg>

b. Making Group Bible Study Accessible – the example of TEE

i. Personal Study

Courses materials are set up to empower:

- those with limited education
- those who lack confidence.

– easy, simple and repetitive questions build confidence and embed learning, rooting Scripture in people’s minds and lives.

ii. Group Meetings

Group meetings are designed to:

- Reinforce what has been learned – Review of work
- Discuss the meaning and implications of what has been studied
- Give a voice to each member – they have already prepared their lesson and all have something to contribute.
- Think through issues of discipleship and application

iii. Practical Application

At the end of each meeting there is an opportunity to think together about the practical application of what has been studied. At the beginning of the next meeting there is an opportunity to reflect on how they got on. This is accompanied by prayer for each other in applying God’s word to everyday life.

iv. The importance of trained and gifted facilitators

The TEE Method is dependent on people coming prepared to the group meeting and contributing to the discussion. It is also dependent on a suitable leader who is trained to facilitate group discussion. This involves:

- Encouraging and empowering those without a voice;
- Enabling the group to be more than the sum of its parts;
- Allowing people to ask their questions and responding appropriately;
- But focussing on issues of life transformation rather than theological red herrings;

c. A Lesson from Pure GOLD – Lesson 1B

10 minutes to work on your own

d. Conclusion (Discussion in Groups)

Question 1: How do we make Group Bible Study Accessible?

(Further suggested questions: Who are the people who are excluded from our traditional models of Small Group Bible Study? How can we seek to include them? How do we train our small group leaders to be aware of the need to enable such people to contribute?)

Question 2: What reactions do you have to the TEE Method suggested?

(Further suggested questions: What do you like/not like about the method? Do you have any better suggestions for including people of all abilities and dispositions?)

Question 3: What three key things are you going to take and apply from today's Study Day?

f. Further reading

- David Burke, Richard Brown and Qaiser Julius (eds), *TEE for the 21st Century: Tools to Equip and Empower God's People for His Mission* (<https://langhamliterature.org/books/tee-for-the-21st-century>)
- Margaret Killingray, *Encouraging Biblical Literacy* (2011) (<https://grovebooks.co.uk/products/b-6-encouraging-biblical-literacy>)
- Hanna-Ruth van Wingerden, Tim Green and Graham Aylett (eds), *TEE in Asia: Empowering Churches, Equipping Disciples* (<https://langhamliterature.org/tee-in-asia>)
- Programmed Learning: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Programmed_learning
- The Accessible Bible (<https://www.biblicaeurope.com/resources/accessible-bible/>)
- The Bible Project (<https://bibleproject.com/>)