

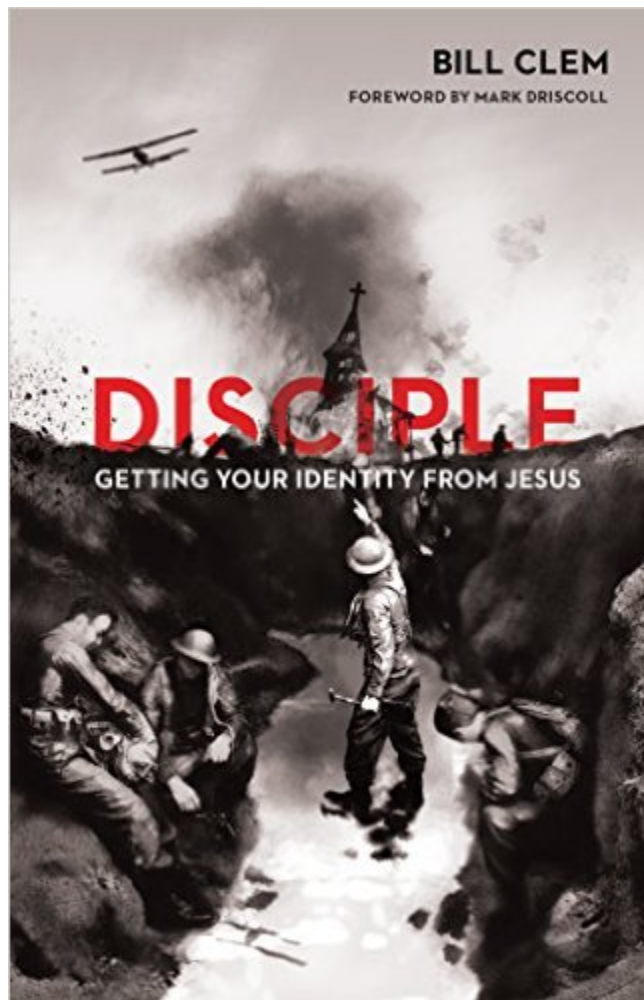
**BOOK REVIEW**

**GETTING YOUR IDENTITY FROM JESUS**

By Bill Clem

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More important than the activity of the disciple of Jesus stands the identity of the disciple of Jesus. This claim grounds the book, *Disciple: Getting Your Identity from Jesus*, whose author, Bill Clem, serves as the campus pastor at the largest campus of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, WA. Clem has a variety of experiences within the church-at-large that has shaped his disciple-making principles. He has worked both from the administrative side of a large parachurch ministry and from the intimate pastoral side of a local church, so his perspective encompasses leaders and church members alike. In the foreword, senior pastor Mark Driscoll claims that this book “serves as the foundation for all of our discipleship at Mars Hill Church” (10). Such weighty claims deserve a close examination.

Contrary to many books, the author does not include an introduction. Therefore, he develops his thesis over the course of the book rather than stating it explicitly in an introduction. Driscoll summarizes the point of *Disciple* as defining the word “disciple” and understanding it and its implications (9). The difference between this book and many others with the same theme lies in how the author stresses the relational, image-bearer way of living with God and with others. Clem argues that God’s redemptive narrative overarches all of history, and their inclusion into that reality is what motivates and transforms a disciple of Jesus. Thus, the author seems more concerned with the “who” of disciple-making than the “how”—even as the “who” naturally leads to the “how.” In spite of Clem simply launching into his discourse, his point remains as the subtitle states regarding living as a disciple: “getting your identity from Jesus.”

In order to understand properly a disciple’s identity, one must first understand God and his story. Clem begins the book with a useful study on the redemptive narrative of history generally and of the Bible specifically, though he argues that the “God of the Bible does not seem as interested in us knowing *about* him as he desires us to actually *know* him” (12, italics in

original). A similar chapter in another book may land as a list of factual information about God and his work, but Clem helpfully regards the narrative in such a way to draw the reader into his concept of God at work redeeming sinners and graciously giving them a part to play in his story of history.

Understanding that the pride-soaked American culture has opted instead to invite God into its story, the author reveals the limitations and weaknesses of such a perspective. Clem writes, “Our personal story is actually a distortion of reality and a desire for significance. God’s story is reality, and significance can be ours with even a walk-on bit part, because pleasing and glorifying the Creator is the most significant experience offered to created beings” (15). Giving a person a God-focused perspective on life will enable them to live for something more than their own pleasure and “is the most humanizing act or function a person can perform or experience” (16). Also, when a disciple recognizes the weight of his or her life in the eternal story of God, their worship, and their relationships, their mission in life will change.

Clem then upholds Jesus—not the disciple—as the hero of this story in order to situate which direction identity flows. Jesus is the main character of God’s redemptive narrative, he is the rescuer of sin-dead mankind, and he is the example of the perfect image of God (Col. 1:15). Although mankind was created in the image of God as well, sin has distorted that image. We needed a perfect picture of God to emulate; Jesus becoming fully God and fully man fulfilled that need. Thus, the way Jesus lived in imaging God reveals the way disciples should live in imaging God. Jesus perfectly worshiped God, he perfectly obeyed God, he perfectly lived in community with his disciples, and he perfectly lived on mission in the world. These roles for an imaging disciple reveal God to the world, and “Jesus models for us what it looks like to get our identity from God by living out our role in his story” (44).

Before reading this book, I often heard about imitating Jesus. However, I never tied that concept to Jesus being the perfect image of God we were intended originally to reveal. In that sense, this chapter clarifies the focus of a redeemed follower of Jesus on the discipleship pathway to look more like him as an image-bearer.

Having built a solid, God-centered foundation, Clem begins to explain what he sees as the four main components of a disciple's identity: image, worship, community, and mission. The author presents a helpful format in discussing each discipleship aspect by studying the biblical basics first then identifying how mankind has distorted that characteristic. Identifying potential pitfalls in following Jesus causes this structure to stand as one of the book's main strengths and helps to reveal blind spots in a disciple's life.

Clem's section on "Image" flows naturally from the grounding in the first few chapters of God's story with Jesus as the hero. Even as he upholds Jesus as the perfect image of God, the author avoids resorting to a request of the reader simply to copy Jesus in order to become a disciple. That approach rarely leads to holiness. Rather, Clem argues that the restoration of that common image—though heightened by Jesus—motivates the pursuit of Jesus in a disciple's life. Clem sees that "[o]ur value in God's eyes is not determined by what we can do above and beyond his design for us but in the inherent nature of how we function in relationship to him, others, and his creation" (60). The author includes a moving account of his wife's death to reveal the tension of finding worth in living out of one's identity from God alone or in adding activities thought to please God. We often think we must prove ourselves to God or others by doing big things, but Clem argues that "we are most human when we image God" (64). We were created to glorify God and we best glorify him by reflecting his image to him, to other disciples, and to the world.

One of the most helpful sections in the book speaks of the mystery of bearing the image of God and growing in that image. Many disciples seek a “formula fix” for the Christian journey in order to lead quickly to a higher morality. However, since the Bible reveals the priority of imaging God as a follower of Jesus, “the disciple-making process will be more transformational than an informational set of verses and lessons” (65). Growing in obedience, worship, community, and mission does not happen primarily over a book but in shared life. Somewhat counter to the movement which stresses diligent study and disciplines as the basics of spiritual formation, Clem writes this piercing statement: “I [do not] see how teaching people that they are image bearers of God and asking the question, ‘How will this action or attitude image or distort the God of the Bible?’ could be more basic to the nature of living as followers of Jesus” (66). The author’s argument stands sound as a result of the biblical foundation he proposed in previous chapters.

As sinners are prone to do, we distort our identity as the image of God. Clem’s work as a counselor shines brightly in this chapter on “Identity Distortions.” Again, the focus of the book stands in the disciple’s identity as an image-bearer of God. Distortions come when the disciple believes lies such as “I am what I do” (both in success and failure), “I am what has been done to me,” or “I am my relationships, roles, and responsibilities” (76–87). These distorted truths steal a disciple’s value and worth away from what God says about them to what the world says about them. An honest person will understand the occasions they slip into believing these statements, and Clem argues that in believing these lies we become sub-human. He writes that

Jesus lets us see humanity as God envisioned it through how he lived—without sin and in right relationship to the Father. Jesus lived the perfect humanity. The next time you think or say, ‘I’m only human,’ ask yourself where you got your paradigm of humanity. More than likely, it came less from humanity designed and more from humanity fallen. (86–87)

A disciple, then, aligns their thoughts with the truths of God—in spite of the lies of the enemy—and lives as a result of finding worth and value in their identity as the image of God.

As Clem moves to examine a disciple's identity as a worshiper, he explains that living out of the image of God means all of life is worship for the disciple. He rightly claims that worship is a “grace-filled response to a divine encounter...[and] is responding to God for who he is, what he has done, and what he is doing” (91–92). This concept harks back to Genesis 1:27 where God creates mankind in his own image, meant to reflect like a mirror God's character to the world. Worship, then, is passionate about which things God is passionate—especially his glory. Clem studies the Israelites' treatment of God's glory and concludes their pride and attempts to shield that glory from the world kept them from worshiping rightly. He writes that God, “wants his glory to be the overarching factor in decisions, relationships, and lifestyle, not for the sake of *protecting* the glory of God but rather for *displaying* the glory of God” (102, italics in original). Since God jealously seeks to display his glory, we, as his image-bearers, should seek to display his glory as well. This revelation happens best through living a lifestyle of worship as a priority, but our pride steals our hearts away to worship other things, thereby distorting what is reserved for God alone.

Clem continues as he relates the truth of the Trinity of God to his claim that every person was created to live in community as well. He upholds the importance of disciple-making relationships by saying a, “community of believers following Jesus can image God in ways that an individual simply cannot” (124). I agree with this statement, but as Clem exposit Acts 2:42–47 he stretches the somewhat descriptive nature of the early church and makes it prescriptive—even by adding elements that are difficult to find in the text, such as identifying the early church's relationships as focused on “belonging” (130–34). None of the elements of community

he includes are necessarily wrong or sinful—each component actually encourages biblical community—but his argument would stand more firmly if not importing good ideas into a specific text. Regardless, the principles and Scriptures Clem uses to support the nature of biblical community reflect how the nature of the Trinity and how Jesus interacted with mankind give us a picture of what community looks like in our lives.

Churches and individual believers, seeing the significance of biblical community, nevertheless selfishly distort these vital relationships. Clem draws from his vast experience to show how community can drift to therapy, where “a group centers on a problem rather than on the gospel” (142); or to network, where each person seeks what they can get from others; or to program, where meetings simply become events to attend; or to exclusively Christian, where no unbelievers can see the gospel communicated through biblical community. Even as these problems seem to show up mostly in larger, suburban, American churches that have a network of small groups, these contrasting pictures give helpful feet to the truth that a disciple’s image involves them in a story much bigger than themselves. So, even in seeking community, the disciple should live outward-focused in God’s Kingdom rather than selfishly to build their own kingdom.

The final component of Clem’s definition of a disciple is mission. Looking back at the redemptive narrative of Scripture, one can see that God has been working from before time began to rescue and redeem sinners. Sin marred his image in mankind; now he is at work clarifying that image of Jesus in his disciples. Clem places believers squarely in the middle of this redemptive story as a result of God’s grace and because he values us, “the people of God are precious to God not just because we are useful to him but because he loves us and shares life-giving purpose with us as image bearers” (155). Inclusion in the mission of God means a

disciple's identity is found in more than temporary pleasures. Rather, value and worth for a disciple come from the eternal ramifications of declaring God's glory and reconciliation with sinners. God has saved us for a purpose, and that mission reflects the created order for which God originally intended us.

The chapter on "Mission" also included a concerning principle, though. Much recent discussion has centered around living a "missional" life in the culture in such a way as to "embed ourselves in what is right about our culture that people would weep if we as the people of God were removed from it" (167). I understand this concept as it encourages love and justice and service in the community, and the culture may appreciate these merciful acts, but the core message of the gospel—alienation from God because of sin, and the need for a Savior—will offend many, "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life" (2 Cor. 2:15–16 [ESV]). Thankfully, Clem follows up this chapter with his "Mission Distortions" and addresses this issue correctly (175–76), but in the moment the earlier comment could lead a reader astray. Hopefully no one argues that we, as Christians, are to avoid the world, but a more balanced view on the mission of God—that faithful living will experience hardship—would help the reader understand the nuances of this mission.

Clem specifically addresses, in his chapter on "Plan", a few hurdles to following Jesus as his disciple. Many disciples feel stuck because they pursue sin, have wrong priorities, or harbor distorted truths. No disciple-making method or plan of action will overcome these hang-ups. However, Clem argues that remembering one's identity as a disciple of Jesus aids the defeat of these hurdles (185). Unfortunately, though, as Clem attempts to stay above a step-by-step process of making disciples, he distracts through lists and "compasses" and "quadrants" (189–



202). I fear that a reader would get overwhelmed by the terminology and miss the well-defended principles of shepherding another disciple.

The final chapter, “Multiplication,” weakly ends the book with a few principles on obeying Jesus’s command to make disciples in Matthew 28:18–20. Clem seemingly selects arbitrary commands and skills to teach to a fellow believer—some of which, such as “A Visionary Mindset,” stretch the Bible to fit the author’s ends. Along with the other concluding chapter, “Plan,” I hoped for a more substantial base of application from which to implement helping a disciple find their identity in Jesus. However, this concern also stands as a potential strength. Clem gives little practical instruction on how to implement his four discipleship characteristics into a person’s life. His final two chapters address a personal plan of action and a strategy to multiply these concepts, but these chapters look at the disciple-making process from the air rather than from the ground. However, Jesus tended to avoid prescriptive processes or how-to manuals as he made disciples as well. Thus, Clem garners from Jesus an understanding that the disciple-making process is often messy and not linear, even as the disciple’s identity shapes their activity. For example, Clem writes, “Life seems to defy the formulaic and bleeds from neat categories into a messy mosaic. For this reason, relational connections outweigh functional connections when it comes to transformation and discipleship” (190). Clem’s chapters on planning and multiplication may leave some readers wanting, but this lack of emphasis results from the general thrust of his book.

*Disciple* fundamentally reads as a discipleship book that is not about discipleship. Rather than revealing a step-by-step procedure for creating disciples as learners—as most other discipleship books do—Clem’s book primarily reveals the lifestyle qualities, characteristics, and attitudes of a disciple. This understanding of finding identity in Jesus as the hero of God’s

redemptive story enables us to image God more effectively to the world around us. Recognizing that God is re-creating a better, Christ-like image in us as disciples motivates obedience and sparks worship. Though the book purposefully limits its practical application and includes some confusing graphs and terminology, *Disciple* gives any follower of Jesus a handle on their new identity and includes them in a story much bigger than themselves. Clem purposefully sets up his book for disciple-making relationships by including further study and assignments at the end of each chapter, which small groups or one-on-one mentoring could implement easily. Also, his use of ample biblical instruction and narratives stands as an additional strength of this book. I would utilize this book as a foundational tool in my disciple-making, but I would include additional books to fill in the gaps practically.

The basic claim of Clem's book—that a disciple of Jesus gets his or her identity from Jesus to image God as a worshiper in community on mission—will stand as shockingly new material for many mature believers. The book's concepts and principles challenged me to think how every aspect of my life images God or distorts the image I was created to reveal. Clem seeks to establish a foundation of “being” a disciple prior to “doing” discipleship.

In a context with many young adults and many former or current addicts, this concept of identity in something and someone greater will aid transformation. Also, Clem's four components of a disciple could transfer easily into a church's vision statement as checkpoints for its members. I believe that all ministers, seminary students, and church members would benefit from this book as it will lay a foundation for them from which to live personally and to minister publicly.