

First-Century Youth Ministry  
Exploring Our Jewish Roots to Reclaim Discipleship

By Heather Quiroz  
Foreword by Mark DeVries and Jeff Dunn-Rankin

# First-Century Youth Ministry

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Publisher: Mark Oestreicher

Managing Editor: Sarah Hauge

Cover Design: Adam McLane

Layout: Marilee Pankratz

Creative Director: Dag Felder

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ISBN-13: 978-1-942145-50-9

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Born in San Diego.

Printed worldwide.

## Dedication

Jesus, you are the reason for my existence. You are my purpose in life. This book was birthed out of and because of my relationship with you. I pray that it honors you, gives you glory, and draws others closer to you. To my husband, Rodrigo, thank you for supporting me along this journey. Thank you for sitting with me and listening to me read chapter after chapter as you patiently offered words of encouragement and allowed me to process each one with you. I am so proud of you and of the man you have become in Christ. I can't wait to watch you grow as a father as you love, cherish, and protect our little girl, Adah. Adah, your mom loves you so much. I pray that as you grow, you fall in love with Rabbi Jesus, finding your worth, value, and identity in his love for you. Truly, that is my deepest desire for your life. To my parents, Charlie and Dawn, thank you for investing in me and showing me Jesus. To my sister, Andrea, and my brother, Christopher, thank you for your support in getting this project done. Both of you served me and for that, I am forever grateful.

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## Foreword

With this provocative book, Heather Quiroz makes the case that the stories of the first-century church can (and should) shape the stories of today's church, particularly today's approach to youth ministry. As so many of us in youth ministry find ourselves in the spin cycle, trying our best to reinvent youth ministry with the latest, the newest, and the shiniest, we wonder: Is it possible that the innovative approach we're looking for was given to us 2,000 years ago?

Heather is suggesting a radical realignment of the ways we see youth ministry. Radical, as in starting at the root. And that root, Heather suggests, might just be found in our Jewish heritage—not just in the ways that Jesus led his disciples, but more interestingly, how a young, Jewish Jesus likely learned to follow God.

Everywhere we go, we meet youth workers who are tired of being in the business of program maintenance and behavior modification. They are longing to make disciples.

But the challenge to actually *make disciples* can easily get lost in the juggling act that is part and parcel of the profession of youth ministry. Though our context is worlds away from the one Jesus grew up in, is it possible to harvest from that world an approach to discipleship that goes beyond good theory to effective practice?

After working with over 1,000 churches to help them execute strategies that cultivate lifelong followers of Jesus, we can't miss the fact that the youth ministries that are thriving in America today are the ones that take discipleship seriously. Most youth aren't dying for another program to attend. They have plenty already. They are dying (sometimes literally) for a "rabbi" who will walk with them, live alongside them, and introduce them to a life worthy of their deepest affection.

"One of the biggest tragedies of our day," Heather writes, "is that we have incorporated God into our busy lives, instead of incorporating our lives into God."

## First-Century Youth Ministry

Youth ministry leaders, for decades, have taught that programs must take a back seat to relationships. After his resurrection, Jesus didn't host a cutting-edge rally. He walked with friends and served them a meal. Of course, they experienced gut-wrenching disciple-making in the midst of it all, but the moments were centered around life together.

As Heather writes, “For Jesus and the culture that produced him, discipleship was a way of life. They did life together and incorporated every aspect of their lives into God.”

Churches, of course, don't hire full-time youth pastors to “do life” with twelve young people. So maybe, though Heather doesn't say it directly, the model of first-century youth ministry is not meant to be done by those who get paid primarily for their job as professional youth ministers. Maybe the youth minister's job is also to cultivate a “community of rabbis” who together have the capacity to implement Heather's radical model.

The first century-model places Scripture front and center. The Bible isn't a seasoning. It's the meat and potatoes. The words of Scripture that Jesus learned as a child served as the soundtrack for his life and ministry. Heather suggests that a first-century ministry mindset puts the *Torah*—Scripture—at the center of the life, the teaching, and the culture we are seeking to create.

We know that in many contexts, memorizing Scripture can be seen as “so 1950s,” but Heather is all about bringing it back. If a young teenage Jesus could memorize entire chapters and books of the Bible, is it crazy to think that our own teens could benefit from memorizing ancient truths that were designed to be a “lamp to my feet and a light to my path?” (We both happen to have at least that one verse memorized!)

Be forewarned. *First-Century Youth Ministry* raises the stakes for the youth worker. Like most innovative ideas, Heather's recommendations will increase the complexity before it is simplified. Elevating the work of discipleship while at the same time navigating

church politics, managing required programs, and developing volunteer leaders will not simplify our work. But it may give us the kind of focus that aligns all the disconnected pieces into a single, passionate vision.

To understand Heather's passion, it might help to know that she has been a take-the-hill athlete all her life. In fact, her epiphany came on a basketball road trip through Israel with Athletes in Action. So, when she confronts us with a question like, "How bad do you want it?" she's a player on the court, exhorting her teammates.

We first met Heather while we were leading a workshop at a youth conference. She leaned in, took notes, and asked a lot of questions. From time to time, she would summarize: "So I hear you saying ..." Her summaries were so clear that we could see little light bulbs blink on for the other youth workers in the room. She was sort of the SparkNotes for that workshop. That very day, we invited her to join our Ministry Architects team.

You will notice immediately that Heather has done her homework for this book. Listening, studying, and asking the right questions. But she isn't offering this life-meddling advice from the safety of an academic classroom or a consultant's laptop. She is a passionate, boots-on-the-ground youth worker from the Midwest. This book is loaded with humble, endearing anecdotes about her own struggles while seeking to do ministry like the community that raised Jesus did.

We love that Heather has no qualms about rattling our cages a bit. Someone cared enough to turn her youth ministry life upside down in 2011, and she's willing to do the same for us.

If you want to keep doing normal youth ministry, put this book down.

If you're looking for a quick fix or a few hot ideas, look elsewhere.

If, however, you are longing for an approach to ministry that slakes your thirst for something deeper and more authentic—for your youth

and for yourself—find a comfy chair and see if you don't hear the echoes of our Rabbi's voice in these pages.

Jeff Dunn-Rankin,  
Executive Vice President, Ministry Architects  
Mark DeVries,  
Founder, Ministry Architects, Co-Founder, Ministry Incubators



## Introduction

Not too long ago, a friend of mine who had a garden invited me to pick some of her lettuce because it was growing so fast that she couldn't use it all. She said to bring a pair of scissors so I could cut it for myself. When I got to the garden, there was a huge, beautiful, bright bed of lettuce. I started to cut off some, but it was taking longer than I had hoped, so instead of continuing to use the scissors I began to use my hands.

Using my hands made things go a lot faster, but the problem was that I started pulling out the roots. After a few seconds, it dawned on me: *Wait, if I pull out the roots, nothing more will grow!* I quickly stopped and later called my friend to apologize.

I have heard youth leaders across the country say it time and time again: "We've been doing discipleship all wrong. Students just aren't growing as disciples. We've got to do something different." I couldn't agree more! I've come to the realization that American evangelical church culture focuses more on programs than on people. As youth leaders, we are being challenged to ask ourselves some hard questions about how we've done discipleship. I think there's a better way, one found by unlocking our biblical heritage.

Is it possible that discipleship has been lacking in our culture because we inadvertently pulled up our Jewish roots? I believe we can find the answer to that question if we start to look back, asking God to reveal what lies underneath the surface of our faith.

If you've been plagued by a deep desire to see disciples made within your church setting, then this book is for you. It is for youth pastors, senior pastors, parents, youth leaders, and anyone else who cares deeply about guiding young people as they grow into disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In these pages you'll learn a number of Hebrew words, gain a deeper understanding of Jewish practices—in particular, the Sabbath—and meet some great people like Billy, Katy, Zac, Ray, Lori, Cassidy, and

two women named Jeanne! The interviews I conducted with these folks will help us see how discipleship can be applied in real life. The book will also provide practical tools to help you build a culture of discipleship in your youth program. Many of these concepts could even be applicable for a senior pastor hoping to deepen discipleship with adults.

This journey of exploring the Jewish roots of the Christian faith began for me in 2011 when I spent three and a half weeks in Israel on a discipleship tour with Athletes in Action (AIA), which is the sports ministry of parachurch organization Cru. AIA seeks to use sports as a vehicle to share the gospel across the United States and the world. Each morning of our discipleship tour, my fellow athletes and I would hop on a giant bus and explore Israel. It was awesome. We had no idea what each day would hold. We were asked to trust our teacher and trip leader, John, and go wherever he would take us. John is an expert in understanding Jewish life and culture from a biblical perspective. He's on staff with Athletes in Action and is also the founder of "Walk the Story," a ministry that takes individuals through Israel, visiting biblical sites as they watch God's story come to life. John's goal in leading these trips is to help participants understand what it might have been like to follow a rabbi as first-century disciples. During my short time in Israel, John taught me so much about faith that I hope to share with you in this book. You'll see me reference him quite a bit in my personal anecdotes.

After three and a half weeks in Israel I was deeply convicted that prior to this trip I had largely ignored the Old Testament. To my shame, I realized I had considered it just that: old. My experience gave me a renewed sense of love for the Old Testament and a passion to explore my faith's Jewish roots. This trip was the catalyst that sent me into a deep dive of study, reflection, and application. Once I returned home from Israel, I was so hungry to know more that I couldn't wait to get my hands on as much information as possible to keep growing in my understanding. Since then, I have read a number of books and listened to countless podcasts, videos, and teachings on first-century Jewish faith, life, and culture. I've had many conversations with friends who are experts in this area. I've also applied much of

what I've learned within my youth ministry setting. All of my study has aided in shaping my philosophy of how I do youth ministry. I joke with my husband that I have a crush on Ray Vander Laan, the founder of That the World May Know Ministries, who is a true expert on the Jewish faith and culture of the first century and before. Through the study of all of this I feel like I've found a great treasure. I'm still exploring the depth and riches of what understanding the Jewish roots of the Christian faith can offer us in the twenty-first century.

As part of the trip, all of us participating played a two-week tournament on different basketball teams in either Bethlehem or Jerusalem. Between that and everything I was learning, plus the daily encouragement to reflect on and even experience some of what it might have been like to be a first-century disciple, that trip was unlike anything I've ever experienced. As we traveled throughout Israel under the hot desert sun, John would often ask us, "How bad do you want it? How bad do you want to be a disciple of Jesus? How bad do you want to follow him? How bad do you want to give up everything to make him known?" I'm going to ask you the same question. When it comes to the teens in your ministry growing as disciples, how bad do you want it? If you're desperate to see it happen, like I am, I promise that what you find here will motivate and encourage you to help make discipleship a reality for your ministry. If discipleship is already happening in your ministry, I believe you'll find some challenging ideas and useful tools to apply to your setting as well.

If we want to see real spiritual fruit in our youth ministry programs lived out in discipleship, we need to study the life and times of Jesus and the people he belonged to. We need to understand the people and biblical accounts that came before his time on earth. I'm hungry for teenagers and families everywhere to have a deeper walk with Jesus, to understand him more and live in greater obedience. Some of what you'll read in this book may feel alien, but as you read, ask God to help you understand your faith's Jewish roots and show you how to start applying this knowledge in small ways. After all, those Jewish roots nourished Jesus. Sometimes the best way to look forward is to look back, especially when things just aren't working.

I'm not trying to pretend that this book is going to fix all of your discipleship problems, but what I can promise is that if you journey through these chapters with me, you will be challenged and convicted. Make sure to strap on a good pair of sturdy sandals, because we're going on a walk with Rabbi Jesus (or as he's better known in Hebrew, *Yeshua*). We'll take a long, hard look at first-century Jewish life, culture, and practice to see just how he and his Jewish community did discipleship. You'll be encouraged to think about discipleship from a first-century perspective, you'll gain a greater understanding of the Jewishness of Jesus, and you'll be better able to start—or continue—instilling a culture of discipleship in your youth ministry setting.