

FOLLOWING

JESUS

IN THREES

I know of no other person with such a passion for spiritual friendship as Tan Soo-Inn. His description of the Christian life as “following Jesus in the company of friends” excites me and resonates deeply with my own vision for church in the 21st century. In this little book, Soo-Inn develops his thoughts about the place of triads in spiritual formation, and presents his conviction with biblical appeal, practical wisdom, and spiritual insight. It is a timely gift to the church. Read it, consider it, and practise it.

Tony Horsfall
Charis Training, UK

This book is a tremendous blessing because it is not only theologically sound, but also realistic and based on practical experience. Spiritual friendship formed and developed by being vulnerable in a safe environment, alongside disciplined study, contemplation, sharing, and listening (and eating) has helped me to honestly and better discern and obey what the Holy Spirit is saying. Even after ten years, the insights and fond memories of the time I spent in a spiritual friendship triad with Soo-Inn and Sivin remain a blessing.

Paul Long
Pastor, Kelston Community Church, Auckland, New Zealand

One of my mentors shared with me about the blessing of the friendship with his soul mate. So I decided to seek such friendship for myself. The Lord gave me one soul mate soon and then two more a few years later. We enjoyed our quartet friendship for some years till one was called to be with the Lord. As we are growing older the blessing of our triad spiritual friendship is growing in many ways, as Soo-Inn writes in this book. Occasionally our triad friendship becomes a hexadic friendship as our wives are invited to join us.

Koichi Ohtawa
Director, CLSK, Japan

Soo-Inn writes with passion, ease, and clarity on a topic for which he is a practitioner and a strong advocate. Anyone looking for a clear, simple, biblical, and workable friendship model to disciple one another towards Christ-likeness should read it, take it to heart, and put it into practice, and they will encounter Jesus in their midst on the road to Emmaus.

Rev Dr Chuah Seong Peng
Senior Pastor, Holy Light Church (English), Johor Bahru,
Malaysia

Soo-Inn is a committed believer in “3-2-1” groups. Such groups are similar to the early Methodist Bands. They were first modelled by the Lord Jesus Christ in His relationship with Peter, James, and John, and are safe places for spiritual friendship and accountability. This book is a useful guide on forming and maintaining such groups. I commend it to those who want to travel with others along the journey of life. It takes commitment, openness, and trust to thrive, but may you be blessed as I have been.

Ivan Tan

Pastor, Wesley Methodist Church, Singapore

There is something uniquely life-giving about sitting face-to-face with two friends to share about our lives, and in the process share life together. Every insight in *3-2-1: Following Jesus in Threes* has risen out of biblical truth practised by imperfect vessels desiring to live faithfully in their calling. I trust that the profound simplicity of this book will contribute to more spiritual friendships flourishing, and as a result life-transforming blessings would overflow beyond the triads to the Church and the world.

Rev Sivin Kit

*Lutheran Pastor & PhD Candidate in Religion, Ethics, and Society,
University of Agder, Norway*

Moving to Singapore a few years ago, I was looking for peer friendships for encouragement and advice. I heard Soo-Inn speak about “triads” and I thought, “That’s what I need, and that is a guy I want to be with in a triad!” Since that time, my triad with Soo-Inn and another friend has been one of the great joys of my life.

Doug Erdman

National Director, The Navigators, Singapore

We all need kindred friends who will walk life’s journeys together with us. In *3-2-1: Following Jesus in Threes*, Soo-Inn gives us very practical handles on making spiritual friendships work. It shows us how to intentionally connect with one another at the heart level. Best of all, it is doable. The “3-2-1” meeting forces us to pause in the midst of our overcrowded schedules and recalibrate our hearts with fellow pilgrims in an authentic relational setting. I recommend this book to anyone seeking spiritual friendship.

Lam Kok Hiang

Country Leader, Cru Singapore

In a world that seems to be more connected than ever, there is a growing disconnectedness and a lack of true relationships. *3-2-1* is a timely reminder and a much-needed wake-up call to return to relationships rightly centred around Christ, that the church might be rooted and built up in Him. In clear, simple, and concise writing, Soo-Inn shares both the whys and hows of spiritual friendship. Enjoy the book and begin your “3-2-1” countdown to meaningful times of following Christ with one another.

Rev Henson Lim

*Deputy Senior Pastor, Covenant Vision Christian Church,
Singapore*

Friendship in our broken world brings healing, help, and hope to us all. Soo-Inn’s method of spiritual friendship in a triad provides a wonderful, simple, and fun way to bring God’s Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, following Jesus’ mandate to make disciples of all people.

Judith Davids

*Pastoral Counselor, Spiritual Director, and Retreat Leader,
Houston, Texas, USA*

BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Walking with the Risen Christ
Friends in a Broken World
Leadership: A Primer
Making Sense
Spiritual Friendship: A Primer
Thinking on the Run
Travel Mercies

3

FOLLOWING

2

JESUS

1

IN THREES

Soo-Inn Tan

GRACEWORKS

3-2-1: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THREES

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FOREWORD

I call it the “ah-ha” discovery of my ministry. A friend of mine says that “we learn by bumping into things”. Frankly, I bumped into the value and practice of triads or groups of threes almost 30 years ago and I still consider it my most important “revelation”. People grow best in groups of threes (and fours as well).

I have primarily practised triads and quads in the context of intentional discipleship relationships with relational transparency as a key ingredient to processing and applying the foundational truth of God’s Word in our lives. Soo-Inn Tan has taken the same practice and applied it to Christian friendship. You might call what my friend Soo-Inn proposes as “mutual mentoring”. His application of the threes to intentional friendship creates an environment of deep, trusting, safe relationships, which are critical

to our quality of life and an expression of what it means to be created in the image of God.

As I read through this very practical work, a number of descriptive words came to me:

1. **Simple:** We grow together through conversation. One of the first things I noticed in my triad experience was that a group of three was about mutual exchanges, whereas a group of ten would typically require significant leadership training to handle the complexities of group dynamics. We can all engage in meaningful conversation with very simple guidelines (which Soo-Inn provides). I often find myself apologising to those I am teaching by saying, “What I am proposing to you is profoundly simple.” The concept behind 3-2-1 is profoundly simple. Yet that is its genius.
2. **Doable:** Soo-Inn’s “3-2-1” formula of three people meeting two hours, once a month, is doable in the push and pull of urban life. We can actually carve out the necessary time to make this happen. That is no small feat, given the demands on our life with family, work, and the energy of the city.

3. **Necessary:** Unless we have people in our life with whom we can share our soulful longings and deepest regrets, we do not have the environment in which to be transformed into Christ-likeness. The soil or environment in which our lives take shape is the deep mutual interchange with others on the shared journey of following Jesus.

4. **Purposeful:** So often even the best of friendships can devolve into getting together to just catch up and talk about everyday things. It can start to feel trivial. Soo-Inn describes key components that use the two hours in a balanced way to share our joys and challenges, help each other discern God's will for our life, apply our faith to family, work, and society, and to intercede in prayer for one another.

5. **Complete:** After reading *3-2-1*, I thought, "I have everything I need right here to pull off the practice of Christian friendship." Soo-Inn provides both an overview of spiritual friendship, as well as guidelines for maximising these precious two hours every month.

Soo-Inn attributes me as the one who first got him on the concept and value of threes. As one who has been teaching this for years, I am always surprised and pleased as to how my students exceed their teacher. As I read his application to friendship, I found myself saying, “I never thought of just applying the gathering in threes to the mutual mentoring that comes with simple friendship.” I got locked inside my discipleship paradigm, while Soo-Inn opened up my world to the practice of growing friendships intentionally, supporting each other as faithful followers of Jesus. This book has now become a part of my toolbox and I can’t wait to add this option to my life and impart them to my students.

Greg Ogden

Speaker, Teacher, and Writer on Discipleship

INTRODUCTION

I teach on spiritual friendship a lot. I remind people that we need friends, and that followers of Jesus in particular need to follow Him in the company of like-minded friends, i.e. spiritual friends. This message resonates with many in the increasingly lonely world of the Third Millennium.

Invariably, many who hear me teach on this will affirm that they need spiritual friends but they have no time to develop spiritual friendships. How can we practise the discipline of spiritual friendship in today's busy world? I wanted to come up with a doable model for spiritual friendship.

Are you too busy to meet up with friends? Well, we all need to eat. Jesus spent a lot of time connecting over meals. Why not meet up with friends for a meal? Jesus had twelve disciples but He gave extra time to a group of three: Peter, James, and John. In my

readings, I began to see more and more authors suggesting the triad as a basic unit for community.

Three friends meeting over a meal is an achievable way to experience spiritual friendship. “3-2-1” is a simple summary of the concept — *three* friends meeting *two* hours *one* time a month over a meal. “3-2-1” is also an easy catchphrase for people to remember the concept.

This short book contains all you need to understand and practise a 3-2-1 approach to spiritual friendship. It seeks to explain both the whys and hows of 3-2-1 triads. Spiritual friendship is a relationship, not a programme. As such, the material here is not so much prescriptive as it is to provide encouragement, as well as general guidelines.

It is my hope that all of us will journey through life with friends. I trust that this simple book will help.

CHAPTER 1

THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

Friendship is one of the basic needs of life. In his book *Vital Friends*,¹ Tom Rath notes the critical importance of friends for things ranging from good health, healthy marriages and personal growth, to work satisfaction and productivity. Rath concludes:

...friendships are among the most fundamental of human needs. The fact is, we are biologically predisposed to this need for relationships, and our environment accentuates this every day. Without friends, it is very difficult for us to get by, let alone thrive.²

THE BIBLE AND FRIENDSHIP

The Bible has always been clear about our need for friends. Its teaching on the importance of friendship is very prominent in the Wisdom books.³ Proverbs 17:17 tells us, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother

is born for a time of adversity”. While friend and brother stand with us through the ups and downs of life, we cannot choose the family we are born into. But we have to choose our friends and choose to commit ourselves to them. The book of Ecclesiastes, perhaps the most realistic book in the Bible, appeals to us to walk through life with friends.

Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:
If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.
Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.
(Ecclesiastes 4:9–12)

Jesus Himself confirms the importance of friendship when He describes His relationship with His disciples as one of friendship (John 15:12–17). Jesus also defines for us the nature of true friendship: “Greater love

has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Jesus then commands His disciples to love each other in this way, to be true friends to each other.

FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE COMPANY OF FRIENDS

Indeed, the Christian life can be described as following Jesus in the company of friends. Jesus calls us to follow Him (Luke 9:23–24). He also takes pains to set up a community (Luke 6:12–16) so that His followers follow Him in the context of community. Friends in Christ help each other in their common journey of following Christ.

In Romans 8:29 Paul tells us that God's people were chosen "to become like his Son" (NLT); to be Christ-like. And verses like 1 Thessalonians 5:11 tell us that we are to "build each other up". Friends in Christ help each other in their common journey towards Christ-likeness. Paul J. Wadell describes such "spiritual friendship" as

a discipleship life, a way in which people who are committed to growing in Christ help one another imitate Christ and grow in gospel virtues.

Spiritual friends, through their life together, learn from one another what discipleship means and how we can acquire and develop the attitudes and virtues of Christ — they help each other become better friends of God.⁴

In other words, spiritual friendship is friendship that is rooted in Christ for the purpose of helping followers of Jesus grow in Christ. But there is one problem. How do we find the time to build and sustain spiritual friendships in the context of the busy lives that most of us live today? We will look at one simple way that will allow many of us to experience the spiritual friendship we need.

CHAPTER 2

GROUPS THAT HELP US CONNECT

Authentic friendships take time to develop and need time to be nurtured. While the tools of electronic media like e-mail and Facebook may help augment face-to-face contact between friends, they cannot take the place of personal encounters. The apostle John understood the power of letters but he was also clear that certain levels of communication could only happen in person.

I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete. (2 John 1:12)

FRIENDSHIP TAKES TIME

God has made us embodied beings and that means that the best human communication takes place when our bodies show up. But such communication takes time. Richard Lamb summarises this reality well—

time is the currency of relationships...No small-group experience, no friendship, has indelible impact immediately, and lasting relationships are built over years full of hours... Building deep friendships...will probably involve time spent on one another's home turf, an openness to invite people into our lives and the willingness to spend even prime time to deepen the friendship.⁵

This then is the dilemma we face. We need spiritual friendships to follow Jesus healthily. But spiritual friendships, like all good friendships, need time to be nurtured. How then are we to find the time we need for this key relationship? By realising that we can only have a few intimate spiritual friends and investing the time we need with these few friends.

In *The Search to Belong*, Joseph R. Myers proposes that people belong to each other in four kinds of groups: public, social, personal, and intimate.⁶ Citing the work of Myers, Jimmy Long explains the nature of the four kinds of groupings.

An example of a **public** space in society would be one of the large sporting events where people come together with one thing in common: rooting for the same team...In the church the large worship gatherings are our public spaces. Even though we may be a diverse congregation, when we worship together, we share a sense of belonging.

The **social** spaces are the places we most neglect in church...These (are) important spaces for informal social interaction, making people feel like they were part of a larger community...In the South, the old Sunday evening potluck suppers were important social spaces in the church.

The small-group community is an ideal **personal** space. Most people who are considering their need to belong to a community will eventually look for some type of small-group community, formal or informal.

The **intimate** spaces are reserved for best friends or spouses. The intimate space is the place where you can share anything and the person will still

love you. While it is appropriate to consider what to share in the other three spaces (public, social, personal), in the intimate space we can share our whole self.⁷

SPIRITUAL FRIENDS AS INTIMATE FRIENDS

Interestingly, Jesus also connected to His community by differentiating between these four types of groups.

First, He ministered to the crowds (e.g. Mark 2:13). These were large groups of people who did not know Jesus personally but who were united by their desire to hear His teaching and to receive His ministry. From the crowds He related to a smaller group of seventy-two (or seventy), as mentioned in Luke 10:1. Presumably this group would have more in common among them as compared to the crowds. This was a group that qualified to be sent out for ministry. The third group that Jesus related to was the twelve disciples (Luke 6:12–16). He invested the bulk of His time with this small group. Indeed, the focus of His discipling was the three-year road trip He shared with the twelve. Then there was a fourth group He related to — an intimate group of three: Peter, James,

and John (e.g. Mark 9:2). He spent His most significant time with this last group.

Jesus operated within these different circles of relationships. He did not and could not invest the same amount of time in all the people from these four types of groups, and neither can we. Spiritual friends then are to be found in our equivalents of the small groups and especially the intimate groups of our lives. We cannot connect with all our friends with the same degree of intensity. But there will be those “two or three people, in whose lives we are called to be vitally active and extravagantly loving”.⁸ We need a simple, doable discipline to connect meaningfully with these two or three intimate friends.

ACTIVITIES THAT CONSUME MY TIME ARE...

ENDNOTES

CHAPTER 1

1. Tom Rath, *Vital Friends* (New York, NY: Gallup Press, 2006).
2. *Ibid.*, 15.
3. In the Old Testament, the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes are collectively known as the Wisdom books, books that were written from God-guided reflection on life experience.
4. Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 108.

CHAPTER 2

5. Richard Lamb, *Following Jesus in the "Real World"* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 95.
6. Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).
7. Jimmy Long, *Emerging Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 139–140.
8. Lamb, *Following Jesus in the "Real World"*, 84.

CHAPTER 3

9. Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).
10. Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials*, expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 10–11.
11. Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 146.
12. David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).
13. *Ibid.*, 94.
14. *Ibid.*, 166.
15. *Ibid.*, 174.
16. Andy Crouch, *Culture Making* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 214.
17. *Ibid.*, 239.
18. *Ibid.*, 246.

CHAPTER 4

19. William D. Mounce, “Love,” *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 427.
20. Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, 162.
21. He assures those grieving over the death of loved ones not to grieve as those who have no hope, on the basis of the truth that Jesus will come again and all His followers will be reunited.
22. Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, 58.

CHAPTER 5

23. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1954, 1993), 113.
24. Thomas R. Hawkins, *Cultivating Christian Community* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2004), 36.
25. *Ibid.*, 37.
26. Daniel Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1996), 120.
27. Roberta Hestenes, *Using the Bible in Groups*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983), 96–97.
28. Larry Crabb, *Soul Talk* (Nashville, TN: Integrity, 2003), 149.

CHAPTER 6

29. Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 83.
30. Christine Pohl, *Making Room* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 74.
31. Gordon T. Smith, *Courage & Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 258.
32. Madeleine L'Engle and Luci Shaw, *Friends for the Journey* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1997), 49.
33. For a more recent treatment of this traditional understanding of the parts of prayer, see Gordon T. Smith, *On the Way* (Colorado Springs, CO: Nav-Press, 2001), 74–77.

CHAPTER 7

34. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 133–134.
35. Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God* (Gresham, OR: Vision House, 1995), 119.
36. Smith, *Courage & Calling*, 10.
37. Ibid., 68–69.
38. Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, 128.

CHAPTER 8

39. Paul refers to some key areas of life in his letter to the Ephesians.
 - Church (Ephesians 4:11–16)
 - Family (Ephesians 5:21–6:4)
 - Work (Ephesians 6:5–9)

CHAPTER 9

40. Smith, *On the Way*, 110.
41. Ibid., 130–131.

CHAPTER 10

42. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 174.
43. Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*.

EPILOGUE

44. Bronnie Ware, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2011, 2012).
45. Ibid., 138.

46. Brother John of Taize, *Friends in Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 124.
47. *Ibid.*, 130.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since 1985, Soo-Inn has been journeying with people through his ministry of preaching/teaching, writing, and mentoring. He is a director of *Graceworks*, a training and publishing consultancy committed to promoting spiritual friendship in church and society. He runs this ministry in partnership with his wife, Bernice. They have four sons.

Originally trained as a dentist at the University of Singapore, he answered God's call to go into full-time church-related ministry in 1981 and obtained his Master of Theology from Regent College, Vancouver, Canada, in 1984. In 2006, he obtained his Doctor of Ministry from Fuller Theological Seminary, California.

He has worked as a dentist, has pastored two churches and served in a number of parachurch

organizations. He also serves as an adjunct lecturer in various seminaries in Singapore and Malaysia and has authored eight books.

His primary passions include connecting the Word of God to the struggles of daily life, and the promotion of the discipline of spiritual friendship. He has supported Arsenal Football Club since 1971 and his favourite movie is Star Wars 4.