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DEVELOPING A MEMBERSHIP AND ASSIMILATION
PROCESS FOR SUMMERLIN COMMUNITY BAPTIST
CHURCH, LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

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DEVELOPING A MEMBERSHIP AND ASSIMILATION
PROCESS FOR SUMMERLIN COMMUNITY BAPTIST
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I dedicate this project to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who changed my life and, by His grace, has allowed me to progress this far in my academic education.

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PREFACE

One of the cultural traits of twenty-first century America is mobility. For various reasons of work, retirement, or military service, people are on the move. Las Vegas is no exception to this rule. What was a boomtown in Las Vegas from the 1980s to the early twenty-first century came crashing to a halt. Various churches across denominational lines lost 30 percent of their congregants and finances. As Las Vegas continues its slow climb out of the economic downturn, churches have to learn how to adapt and make first-time guests long-term members. It is with this cultural context in mind that this project has been developed.

This project was completed, in large part, because of the many people who supported and encouraged me to finish this project. I am grateful to the Lord Jesus Christ, who saved me and who has allowed me to progress this far in my academic studies; who took the messed up life of a sinner in his twenties, gave me new life, and made me a saint by giving me His righteousness. To God be the glory.

I am thankful for my loving wife, Gayle, and our son, Zachary. They have supported me by letting me invest the time necessary for this project. Their sacrifice does not go unnoticed. Gayle has provided constant encouragement, wisdom, and prayers. The Lord has blessed me with a wonderful and loving family.

The Lord has given Summerlin Community Baptist Church a quality group of elders and a congregation that is supportive of my academic pursuits. The elders are not only supportive, but also willing to cover the pulpit to give me the time necessary to finish this project. I want to thank Ricky Honaker, Dan Welsh, and Steven Wilhoit for their sacrificial service to the kingdom of God. I am thankful for a body of believers who understand and support the need for theological education. It is a pleasure to serve a

group that desires the meat of the Word of God. I am grateful to God to shepherd this faithful congregation.

Lastly, I am thankful to the Lord for The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and the opportunity to finish my D.Min. Project. I am thankful for the faculty and specifically for my supervisor, Dr. Timothy Beougher, who has guided me well through this process.

David Fee

Las Vegas, Nevada

May 2018

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The mission of Summerlin Community Baptist Church (SCBC) is summed up in the simple words: love, grow, and serve. These three words are fleshed out in the actions of loving God and one another, growing in Christlikeness, and serving Christ and each other. An understanding of assimilation and membership in the local church is an integral part of this process. We want to transform first-time guests and regular attenders into long-time members. For this reason, SCBC sought to educate current guests and regular attenders on the importance of commitment to the church in membership.

This project assessed the current understanding of church membership within the congregation and taught them, through a five-week sermon series, the importance of and biblical support for church membership (Matt 16:24-25, Acts 2:42-47; Eph 5:25-30 and Heb 13:17). The intention of this project was to assimilate, educate, and incorporate into church membership those who are so inclined. To see first-time guests become long-term members.

Context

SCBC resides in the suburban context of Las Vegas, Nevada. As of 2014, Clark County and the Las Vegas metropolitan area have a population of 2,102,238.¹ With such a large population, the opportunity for advancing the kingdom of God is vast. To advance God's kingdom, church membership that leads to commitment to the gospel is

¹US Census Bureau, "Population Trends," accessed October 15, 2015, www.lvcva.com/includes/content/images/MEDIA/docs/population-2014.pdf.

essential to effectively reach the un-churched. Conversely church health begins by having a firm foundation concerning ecclesiology.

In 1998, SCBC began meeting as a mission of Red Rock Southern Baptist Church in Las Vegas, Nevada. SCBC is located close to Sun City, a retirement community. In 2001, the congregation purchased 3.75 acres of land, and in 2003, completed construction of a 7,500 square foot facility. However, due to the economic downturn, SCBC is once again like a church plant. SCBC's attendance on a Sunday morning ranges anywhere from 100 to 140 people, including children. SCBC currently has 17 committed families in membership and 20 families that are regular attenders. On most Sundays, approximately 6 visiting families can be captured for the gospel with the proper assimilation and membership process.

SCBC's Assimilation and Membership Process

Admittedly, when considering a proper assimilation process, there is an inherent tension between appropriate follow up and harassing the guest. Where is the proverbial line that must not be crossed? How many points of contact are needed for effective assimilation? What is the proper timing for following-up with a visitor? Does this line of follow-up, that should not be crossed, differ between generations? Is SCBC currently crossing this line of follow up that pushes guests away instead of encouraging them to return? These questions were answered in the course of completing this project.

The current assimilation process is very basic. Guests are encouraged to complete a welcome card during the announcements and to place the card in the offering plate. First-time letters are then sent out to all guests. In this letter, a first impression card is sent for anonymous feedback concerning their visit. Then the guest receives a follow-up call from a volunteer. This is the first and only phase of the assimilation process.

From the first impression cards, the number one comment received is "very friendly people." As a small congregation it is hard not to be noticed when visiting. This

reality of size is a double-edged sword. Guests that come from the mega church six miles away love the intimacy SCBC provides. Other Christians looking for a new church home, for various reasons, are not comfortable in such an intimate setting. Unfortunately, these Christians looking for a “slip in and out church experience,” without much interaction, are missing out on the blessing of church life. The aim of this project is to find a way to encourage interest for consecutive visits that leads to regular attendance and membership.

The second most common response from the first impression card is the preaching. These comments are a positive response about faithfulness to the Word of God. The majority of people that are Christians, which SCBC retains, desire greater biblical depth in the preaching. These people are tired of the shallow topical and man-centered messages and this group usually commits to membership. The rest of the comments are usually personal preference and issues of not enough hymns or programs for children.

The membership process is basic. The current membership process is a four to six-hour class. The class covers the mission, vision, and history of SCBC, church polity, history of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the *Baptist Faith Message 2000*, what SCBC expects from its members (time, talents, and tithes), and what they can expect from SCBC. Since the majority of people who take this class are either unchurched or non-SBC, this class begins to lay a solid foundation. However, the fact that people have taken this class and not joined implies the need for this project.²

As in many churches, the challenges that SCBC faces are interrelated. The first challenge is the transient nature of Las Vegas. Putting aside the extraordinary challenges of the economic downturn, Las Vegas is known for its constant changing population with the exception of retirees. Even though people are moving into the Las Vegas valley, their tenure is often short. There are very few indigenous residents. People come to Vegas with a “gold rush” mentality; people move to Vegas, make as much

²I have often wondered if the emphasis on biblical stewardship is the reason some people still attend but never make a commitment.

money as they can, and then leave. For this reason, it is imperative for SCBC to attempt to move regular attenders to membership, even if their time in the city is limited.

The second challenge is the lack of commitment and outright opposition to membership in the local church. As many people settle in Vegas for their retirement, the focus is upon enjoying retirement and not committing to a local church. Retirees like their freedom. Many people do not see the need for membership. This lack of commitment produces a strain on the committed members and has caused some of the faithful to burnout.

The third challenge is the varied demographic of the area. The population is made up of mostly young to middle-aged families, which SCBC struggles to retain.³ Of the regular attenders, or non-members, over 80 percent fall into the 65 plus age range. Clearly, one issue at hand is a need to assimilate young families into the church—millennials.

The fourth challenge also relates to the current demographic makeup of the church. At this time, since SCBC mainly consists of retirees and they are limited due to physical health. Committed members and regular attenders have the time, but perhaps not the energy. If the church reaches younger families the opposite would be true: they have the energy, but not the time. In many young families both spouses are pursuing careers or one spouse is working two jobs. Time constraints hinder these families.

The fifth challenge is financial. The prior leadership plunged the church into debt with unwise decisions, which hinders kingdom growth because the church cannot hire the necessary staff to provide for the ministry needs of the church. SCBC has a great group of volunteers, but they have other responsibilities and limited time. This project is

³North American Mission Board, “ESRI Demographic and Income Profile Report,” March 13, 2012, accessed January 15, 2013, www.esri.com/ba. According to a North American Mission Board Study (NAMB), the senior adult population—65 to 75 years old—accounts only for 8 percent in a fifteen-mile radius. According to NAMB, the largest age range for this area of Las Vegas is between 25 to 64 years. However, of the church’s seventeen committed families, only eight are in this age range.

to make first-time guests long-term members thus relieving the financial burden and increasing the availability of financial resources for ministries.

The final challenge is regular attenders that are committed yet do not see the need to take the next step to membership. As this project was developed and implemented, the hope was that it would answer the question of what is keeping those who faithfully attend from taking take the next step toward membership.

For these reasons, SCBC is having a difficult time effectively impacting this area of Las Vegas with the gospel. This must change. Despite these challenges, SCBC desires to be a place where people love, grow, and serve.

Rationale

SCBC is committed to the scriptural mandate of knowing Christ and making Him known (1 Cor 2:2).⁴ After a person comes to faith in Christ, SCBC wants to be a place where the new believer can become a mature follower of Christ. SCBC wants to be a light for Christ in a dark valley and to display the glory of God marked by purity in the church. Ultimately, what is at stake is the gospel witness in the Summerlin area. This is why it is imperative to develop a membership and assimilation process that makes the best first impressions while also providing connection points for future positive impressions for guests. While cliché, it is still true that SCBC only has one chance to make a good first impression, and that first impression engenders future consideration for assimilation.

The second reason for establishing a clear membership and assimilation process is to ensure that persons joining the church have an evidence of conversion. A membership process helps discern this reality. A commitment demonstrated through membership to the local church is important for a spiritually healthy and mature church. Membership begins with the membership process. The importance of this issue cannot

⁴Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.

be overstated. At stake is the purity of the church and God's glory. God's people are to be holy (Eph 5: 25-30), and God's people are to be committed to a local body of believers (Heb 10:25).

In order to know Christ and make him known, SCBC has always held to the biblical mandate set forth in Matthew 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Therefore, the next reason for this project is theological in nature. A large part of the mission of the church is to love Christ and others with the gospel—so the church needs to be evangelistic in its assimilation process. The Las Vegas area is largely transient and diverse, yielding many unbelievers with unique spiritual backgrounds as guests each Sunday. SCBC sought to utilize various ways of assimilation that reach out to guests. This project sought to establish the most effective connection points. The need for the gospel is great; the opportunity for the gospel is vast.

SCBC wants guests to experience a glimpse of heaven from their first visit forward, which begins with SCBC being a place where the love of Christ is evident by the agape love displayed to each other. SCBC should be a place marked by selflessness, and a place to experience a people who are sacrificial; a place where believers display the characteristics of the early church as demonstrated in Acts 2:42-47. The church should be so attractive and different from society that the first-time guest will want to return—a place where individuals would sense something missing in their life, evidenced by their visit, and desires to return.

As noted in the context, SCBC is a friendly church with standard follow-up methods. This project sought to discover additional connection points that transition the person from first-time guest to regular attender. According to Jesus, the church is meant to be a light on a hill (Matt 5:14). The vast population of the Las Vegas area makes SCBC an ideal tool in God's hand to attract the unbeliever with the light of the gospel. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. The vision is to have a strategic

process, or points of contact, that leads the first-time guest to become a regular attender and grow spiritually without being overbearing or turning people away.

As stated, the reasons for this project are theological in nature. SCBC holds to the biblical Baptist distinctive of regenerate church membership.⁵ This distinctive is listed in both the *1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* and the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*. *The Baptist Faith and Message* states, “A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel.”⁶ An effective membership process seeks to explain the following three key aspects of the church: (1) the church should be as pure as possible because Christ died for the church, (2) the believer should be committed to the health and growth of the church as they are to Christ, and (3) church membership is a matter of devotion to Christ as the member commits to the headship of Christ and the oversight of the church’s leadership.

A five week sermon series was designed to educate the regular attender, and included objections to membership, the purity of the New Testament church, and the need for commitment and obedience to Christ. The sermon series encouraged and educated regular attenders to the necessity of church membership. How can the pastor or elders of the church shepherd the flock if they do not know who is in the flock?⁷ Leadership needs to know who is committed to the church through membership so that they can care for God’s church, which is one of the many reasons why membership is a matter of obedience to Christ.

⁵1689 Baptist Confession of Faith (Carlisle, PA: Reformed Baptist; Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian, 2010), 56.

⁶Southern Baptist Convention, “Baptist Faith and Message 2000,” accessed November, 27, 2015, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000>.

⁷First Tim 3:5, “He will care for God’s church.”

Last, this project sought to make first-time guests long-term members. This transition is necessary for a continued gospel witness in this area of Las Vegas. By the grace of God, SCBC has weathered many storms and continues to be a lighthouse for the gospel. This project is meant to increase the gospel light (witness) and be as pure as biblically possible as a church for the glory of God.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to develop a membership and assimilation process for Summerlin Community Baptist Church in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Goals

The following goals were designed to be progressive in nature and determined the success of this project.

1. The first goal was to assess the congregation's understanding of church membership and ecclesiology.
2. The second goal was to develop a five-week sermon series that addresses assimilation, regeneration, holiness, commitment, and accountability as they relate to church membership.
3. The third goal was to increase knowledge by preaching a five-week sermon series to increase knowledge, which addressed aspects of church membership and assimilation.
4. The fourth goal was to develop an improved assimilation process to connect with first-time guests.

Definitive research methodology measured these four goals.⁸

Research Methodology

The first goal was to assess the current understanding of church membership by the congregation and regular attenders. This goal was measured by administering a pre-sermon series survey. The pre-survey asked questions pertaining to an understanding

⁸All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in this research project.

of assimilation, the nature of the New Testament church, and commitment in the New Testament church, and accountability.⁹ Last, the survey asked questions discerning common objections or reasons why people do not join a local church. This goal was considered successfully met when 50 percent of the members and regular attenders completed the survey and the data was analyzed showing the participants' understanding of the nature of the church.¹⁰

The second goal was to develop a five-week sermon series. Two elders of SCBC and three community pastors used a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, clarity, and relevance of the sermon series to measure this goal.¹¹ This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level.

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of church membership among members and regular attenders of SCBC by preaching a five-week sermon series. This goal was measured by using the same pre-sermon survey to measure the change in understanding of the participant. This goal was considered successfully met when the *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in congregational knowledge as measured by pre- and post-survey scores. The *t*-test was selected for this analysis as it compares the means of the scores from the pre-survey and post-survey, which measured knowledge concerning the church among the select group of adults.

The fourth goal was to develop a strategic plan to improve the assimilation process to connect with first-time guests. The outreach team of SCBC measured this goal. They utilized a rubric to evaluate the functionality of the plan and action steps.

⁹See appendix 1 for the Church Membership Survey.

¹⁰Fifty percent of the adult members and regular attenders would be approximately 20 families.

¹¹See appendix 2 for the Expert Panel Sermon Evaluation.

This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level.

Definitions and Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms were used in the ministry project:

Church. The New Testament Church may be succinctly defined as “a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home all the way to the group of all true believers in the universal church.”¹² The *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* defines church: “A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel.”¹³ It is this concept of church to a specific group of local believers that this project refers.

Membership. Membership may be defined as a voluntary covenant relationship with other believers. Rainer writes that to be a member of the church is “an expectation and means of accountability.”¹⁴

Regeneration. The SBTS Abstract of Principles notes,

Regeneration is a change of heart, wrought by the Holy Spirit, who quickeneth the dead in trespasses and sins enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the Word of God, and renewing their whole nature, so that they love and practice holiness. It is a work of God’s free and special grace alone.¹⁵

Baptist doctrine requires this reality in a person’s life before membership in the local church. It is in this sense that the church is in a position of holiness or purity.

¹²Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 857.

¹³Southern Baptist Convention, “Baptist Faith and Message 2000.”

¹⁴Chuck Lawless, *Membership Matters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 12.

¹⁵The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, “The Abstract of Principles,” accessed January 6, 2016, <http://www.sbts.edu/about/abstract>.

Two delimitations were placed on the project. First, the project was confined to a seventeen-week timeframe. Second, this project only gave instruction on the biblical need for membership and did not modify the current membership class.

Conclusion

With the foundation for this project established: to strengthen SCBC for the glory of God, I will now complete this project to aid in the ongoing process of assimilating first-time guests to become members. The following chapter focuses on the biblical and theological foundations for this project.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR CHURCH HEALTH AND GROWTH LEADING TO ASSIMILATION AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Introduction

Free-fall! This word sums up society's downward trend with moral values as well as a lackadaisical attitude concerning church membership. Society is rushing headlong into a bottomless abyss consistent with postmodern thought: no absolutes, everything is fluid. Unfortunately, the church is heading in the same direction: loss of a biblical foundation, commitment, unity, and health, an anti-authority attitude, and a lack of influence on society. Instead of the church influencing the culture, the culture is influencing the church.

The homosexual issue is just one example of culture influencing the church. For example, one of many hot button issues is the gay agenda, which a few denominations have embraced, including the Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Mennonite Church, and Presbyterian Church-USA. Holdouts to the biblical footing of Scripture are the Southern Baptist Convention, The Presbyterian Church, and some Pentecostal churches.¹ Another aspect concerning the influence of postmodern thought is evidenced in church membership or the lack thereof: no absolutes equals lack of commitment. The situation is grim. How does the church distinguish itself from the culture for the glory of God? Why is the relationship between assimilation and conversion necessary for

¹Sacred Pauses, "Where Do They Stand—Protestant Denominations and LGBT Members," accessed July 11, 2016, <http://www.sacredpauses.com/where-do-they-stand-protestant-denominations-and-lgbt-members>.

spiritual church health? And why is the doctrine of regenerate church membership key to church health?

Concerning the local church, the debate on church membership rages on. Does the Bible teach that a Christian should be a member of the local church? Is church or religion just a cultural construct to conform the masses for reasons of power as propagated by Karl Marx?² For Marx, humanity has created religion to escape the suffering and pain of society, thus, being an opiate. What benefit do new members receive by assimilating into the church? Added to the secular skepticism of the local church is the inherent skepticism in the church itself with questions like, if a Christian has been united to Christ by faith is his or her reluctance to formally join the local church a sign of disobedience to God? How does the local church stand out as an attractive foil to the culture? These questions need to be answered to show that a healthy church will attract non-believers and also show the necessity of commitment evidenced in membership.

Chapter 1 laid out the necessity of this project with the transient nature of Las Vegas. Thus, it is imperative for SCBC to assimilate, educate, and incorporate first-time guests into committed members. The aim of chapter 2 is to show that the Scriptures describe aspects of a healthy church and the relationship between health, commitment, membership, and assimilation. A healthy church is distinguished from society by an ethic of caring, a deliberate commitment to Christ, accountability to church leadership, and a progressive progress in holiness. The Scriptures used to prove these points are Acts 2:42-45, Matthew 16: 24-25, Hebrews 13:17 and Ephesians 5:25-30.

²Karl Marx writes, “The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make Man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man—state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world.” Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” accessed July 11, 2016, <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/313609-critique-of-hegel-s-philosophy-of-right>.

This examination begins with the continued confusion that abounds as to the true meaning and purpose of the church. To some, the church is a cultural relic of their childhood and nothing more. To other people, without the childhood influence, the church is an organization shrouded in mystery. To some, the church is a puritanical vestige that speaks of a regression unpalatable to society. Even some Christians challenge the very concept of church membership. Also, teaching about ecclesiology, the nature, purpose, and necessity of membership is often relegated to a four-hour new members' class. With such a lack of teaching, no wonder the church struggles with commitment, biblical health, attracting the unchurched, and biblical accountability.

Dever points out that the subject of the doctrine of the church is of paramount importance. Dever explains this when he asks and answers, "What significance does a right ecclesiology have for the church today? A right ecclesiology matters for the church's leadership, membership, structure, culture, and even character. Ultimately, a right ecclesiology touches on God's glory itself."³ A healthy church that exhibits the following scriptural practices will attract new people, as well as keep current non-members and move them toward commitment in membership.

Throughout church history is an understanding that there is one church with two aspects: local and universal. The universal church, or as some call it the invisible church, is defined as all the believers throughout time, both currently living and those that have gone to be with the Lord, that will appear on the last day in glory. The local church is comprised of current saints gathered together in a specific place to worship. The local church is a special creation of God. The local church is part of the universal church as the universal church contains the local church. What exists is not two churches (universal and local), but two aspects of the one true church. The local church is as much of a new creation as a new believer coming to Christ. The church was always in the mind of God

³Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 149.

to bring Him glory through a corporate local body by being a witness to the one true God.⁴
From where does the idea of the New Testament church as the people of God come?

The dominant word used for “church” in the NT is the Greek word *ekklesia*, first found in Matthew 16:18. The most wide-ranging meaning of *ekklesia* as church is all Christians throughout the ages as used by Jesus in Matthew 16:18. However, *ekklesia* functions both in a universal and particular sense. *Ekklesia* is a compound word made up of ἐκ and a derivative of καλέω, combined to mean, “to call out.” The most basic meaning is a called assembly, which could be an assembly of constituents or citizens that make up a social political group or any particular group. In the Christian sense, Peter says the saints are citizens of heaven, pointing to the universal nature of the church, also known as the body of Christ (1 Pet 2:9); the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth and all those who have gone home to be with the Lord. For the purpose of this project, “church” is defined as a local assembly of Christians gathered to worship in a religious meeting.

Therefore, *Ekklesia* by definition is a general assembly and is mainly used, but not always, of persons whom God has assembled to worship either in the Old Testament with the word *qahal* (assembly), or in the New Testament with the church (*ekklesia*). The Hebrew word *qahal*, meaning assembly, is translated as *ekklesia* in the Septuagint. Dever points out, “Since Jesus understood that He was the messiah, his references to His church almost certainly the Hebrew idea of *qahal* or assembly.”⁵ The idea behind *ekklesia* is a gathering of people with a specific purpose. For English translations, the word “church” is the closest match to the concept of an assembly with a purpose. As is generally understood in Scripture, there are many metaphors to describe God’s people both in a

⁴The relationship between the local church as a replacement for God’s people, Israel, and modern day Israel as a nation state is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵Dever, *The Church*, 8, also notes that the Septuagint translates the Hebrew word *qahal* with the Greek word *ekklesia* 77 times.

universal and local sense. Some of these metaphors include the church as the bride of Christ, body of Christ, or people of God, yet no single metaphor encompasses the totality of God's kingdom.

According to Louw and Nida, the word *ekklesia* belongs to the semantic domains of groups and classes of people. One key aspect of their insight of the word church (*ekklesia*) is demonstrated when commenting on 1 Corinthians 1:2,⁶ where they tie together the idea of a general assembly with the concept of membership or belonging when they explain *ekklesia*. In other words, when the Bible says, "To the church of God at Corinth," which implies a select group gathered together for a particular purpose. Louw and Nida write that the church is "a congregation of Christians, implying interacting membership."⁷ However, they put the common definition of "called out ones" in a universal sense into question.⁸ Citing the etymology of the word, the key point made by Louw and Nida is that the term *ekklesia* was used for several hundred years before the Christian era to refer to an assembly of people "constituted by well-defined membership."⁹ In the church's infancy, at this early date, a formal ecclesiastical structure did not exist. The church was *ekklesia* when gathered together for worship. The point is that the local church, or *ekklesia*, is a sub-set of the larger *ekklesia*.

This is where hermeneutics, and more specifically, context, is key. Even if Louw and Nida are correct about the etymology of *ekklesia*, many usages in the NT imply

⁶First Cor 1:2 says, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours."

⁷Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 2:126.

⁸Ibid. Louw and Nida have tried to see in *ekklesia* a more or less literal meaning of "called out ones." This type of etymologizing is not warranted either by the meaning of *ekklesia* in New Testament times or earlier usage.

⁹Ibid.

the idea of a called out-group of people that assemble in God’s name both in a universal and local sense.¹⁰ In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *qahal* is an assembly of people with a wide range of meanings. Brown further explains the wide range of meanings of *qahal* as “an assembly specially called for: civil affairs, war, returning exiles, religious purposes, to hear the words of Jeremiah, feast days, evil counsel and a congregation as an organized body.”¹¹ The Hebrew synagogue indicates a called out group of God’s people that conveys an assembled group by ethnicity; however, “synagogue” can imply either a group of people or a place of gathering as in Revelation 2: 9,¹² not with the purpose of bringing God glory. Thus, although the word synagogue may be used in the New Testament for an assembled gathering, the meaning is significantly different.

With the foundation established for the word “church” in the NT, it is safe to say that the church is one of the crowning jewels of God’s creation for the sole purpose of bringing Him glory. The local church is the gospel made visible. In the NT sense, God has assembled a group of sinners, saved by faith, to gather together in what is called the *ekklesia*: the called out ones gathered as the local church. Now what is this church to look like? What are the church’s responsibilities, characteristics, and mission? In short, what is the nature of the local church?

The Nature of the Church and the Imperative of Identity

The nature of the NT church concerning membership can be summed up in one

¹⁰This calling out of a new group of people is not to diminish the Jewish people as God’s *ekklesia* or advocate replacement theology, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹¹Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 874.

¹²Rev 2:9 says, “Of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

word: boundaries.¹³ The boundaries of those who make up the church are evidenced by regeneration and faith that leads to life change, commitment to Christ and His church, and accountability to leadership. The need for boundaries implies that not everyone belongs to the church: universal or local. Some people are in and others are out. The significance of membership is identifying one with another for the cause of Christ. This identity is fleshed out in one's life witness, submission to Christ and the church, and commitment to Christ and the local church. When people join the church, they receive the benefits of the church: joining a new family and covenanting together. This covenanting together establishes an earthly witness for God. The nature of the local church identifies the person with Christ, distinguishes them from the world, gives accountability to their sanctification, makes them accountable to each other, and brings glory to God. Membership in the church is the invisible body of Christ made visible. With such blessings, the question remains: why is church membership viewed as optional today?

The main reason to join a local church is to bring God glory by covenanting together for the work of the gospel. A secondary reason to join the church is identity and boundaries that show the non-churched the glory of Christ in conversion. A necessary relationship exists between the individual members of the church and the message of the church. Jesus says in Matthew 5:14-16,

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Not all humanity reflects light. The difference between the Christian and non-Christian is the light of the gospel that marks the identity of the individual Christian and corporate boundaries of the local church. How does the church best communicate the significance of membership other than committing to the Scriptures in values, action, and practice? The called out ones are to be a light to the world, and to do this, the church must have

¹³Beyond the scope of this paper are the reformation marks of the nature of the church: administering the Lord's Supper, baptism, and preaching the Word.

structure. The church must know who is committed to it. The local church member committed to membership is a representation of all God's people in heaven. People might say that drawing concrete boundaries for church membership is, at best, legalistic and not loving, and, at worse, a form of segregation. However, Scripture communicates a need for boundaries that is provided by church membership, which shows God as a loving God by these very boundaries. The truth is that God in His mercy chose to save people and set them apart for His glory. Maybe these very boundaries can entice the non-committal to become committed, or the unregenerate to desire God, just as God did with Israel being a light to the one true God to all the surrounding pagan nations?

The NT church needs boundaries even though the church is both an organism and an organization. The church is spiritual (the body of Christ) and organizational. People that try to draw a clear line of demarcation between spiritual and organizational by emphasizing only the local church as an organism (spiritual with no structure) are denying the organizational structure and necessity of the local church. As an organism and organization, the local church has a spiritual component and organizational structure that give it boundaries and identity. The spiritual boundaries are regeneration and faith and the organizational boundary is the official membership process identifying who is in and who is out. It has been said, a river without banks is a mud puddle. The NT church without the boundaries of regeneration and faith and a formal membership process is chaos. Marshall and Payne show the difficulty of maintaining balance between organizational structure and spiritual health when they write, "There is no doubt that in many churches, maintaining and improving the trellis constantly takes over from tending the vine."¹⁴ The trellis is the organizational structure and the vine is discipleship. They are not discounting the need for necessary structure and boundaries, just caution that organizational processes do not overtake the spiritual aspect of the church. The point is that the local church needs

¹⁴Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias, 2009), 10.

both organizational and spiritual boundaries for identity. Throughout the whole OT is the picture of boundaries—Israel worshiping the one true God amidst the pagan polytheist nations. The new covenant local church mirrors OT Israel in this respect.

Leeman is correct when he comments on church membership, “Membership and discipline are not artificially erected structures. They are not legalistic impositions upon new-covenant grace. They are an organic and inevitable outgrowth of Christ’s redemptive work and the gospel call to repentance and faith.”¹⁵ A true believer is accountable to the local church. Leeman continues, “Someone who refuses to join—or better, to submit to—a local church is like someone who refuses to pursue a life of righteousness. It calls into question the authenticity of his or her faith.”¹⁶ These are harsh but needed and valid words for today church culture. When today’s lackadaisical attitude toward church membership is juxtaposed to the costly realities of membership in the first century, it becomes clear how far the church has strayed from its original foundation. Chambers points this out when he states, “The potential cost of joining a church caused many to stay away Acts 5:13a.”¹⁷ As Ananias and Sapphira discovered, God requires holiness.

The local church is called to display authentic Christianity evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit.¹⁸ When the boundary between the local church and society becomes blurred, the significance of membership is lost and the gospel of Christ is impaired. Hence, the prevailing attitude of secular society is “why join a church, Christians are no different.” There needs to be a clear line of demarcation regarding who is in and who is out. One primary reason for the organization of the church and the necessity of membership is

¹⁵Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offence of God’s Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 16.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷Andy Chambers, *Exemplary Life: A Theology of Church Life in Acts* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 104.

¹⁸Gal 5:22-23 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; against such things there is no law.”

accountability. The leaders of the church must know the souls they are responsible to shepherd, for the leaders keep watch over the member's souls. The local church and its leaders are not perfect, and cases of abuse in authority happen and are unfortunate; however, the need for boundaries and a clear understanding of ecclesiology are imperative in light of the anti-institutional and anti-authority worldview of the twenty-first century. So, how does the local church set itself apart from secular society? How does the church become attractive to the non-believer? Answer: by being Spirit empowered and putting into practice the mandates of Scripture and the radical Christianity of the first-century church.

A Spiritually Healthy Church Will Be Favored by the Unchurched

The biblical support for the local church being an attraction to the unregenerate world is seen clearly in the life change of the first Christians in Acts 2:42-47. After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit there is a noticeable change in the life of the disciples. The result was the first church, *ekklesia*, called out individuals in the history of the world; the beginning of the invisible, universal body of Christ being made visible. Jesus had commissioned His disciples to stay in Jerusalem and await the promise of the Father (Acts 1:8).

Now, Luke describes the first of three pictures of the life of the believer in the infancy of the New Testament church (Acts 2:42-47; 4: 32-35 and 5:12-16). Luke's summary narratives provide a stark contrast to normal first century life. These narratives lay the foundation for an attractive church as they focus more on activity than organization structure. Acts 2:42-47 shows a life of worship, fellowship, and community that resulted in care, unity, and genuine concern for each other. Jesus told His disciples that they are "light on a hill." Acts 2:42-47 is just one example of the fleshing out of this Holy Spirit empowered attractiveness or light. Here a new dynamic was taking place with Jews and Gentiles coming together as one universal body and the local boundaries of the New

Testament Church were being established.

In Acts 2:42-27; Luke gives what should be desired in principle for the Christian church. Acts 2:42-47 is a passage filled with imperfect verbs implying a continuous action on behalf of the new Christians. In this narrative is Luke's theology of church life. These Christians' actions became essential aspects of Christian living, seeing a living witness and comprehensive Christian community life. Luke begins by listing four new commitments the new believers have in Acts 2:42: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The book of Acts usually refers to specific local gatherings of Christians with the word *ekklesia*. As the Holy Spirit was being poured out, more and more, people were being added to the church (Acts 2:47 and 5:14). The Lord adding to the church is a consistent theme in Acts. The key to an attractive church is the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration in the members of the church. These first-century Jews and Gentiles became the true heirs of God's promises.

The key to understanding the attractive nature of the church in this passage begins with the word "devoted." This degree of devotion is only possible by the empowering of the Holy Spirit after the Day of Pentecost. Luke writes, "And they devoted themselves." Luke communicates this consistent life change using the Greek verb *proskarereo*/ προσκαρτερέω, meaning to occupy oneself diligently with something. The imperfect verb tense is used to express the fervor and dedication of the first-century Christians. Commentators such as I. H. Marshall say that Acts 2:42 is a liturgical sequence meant for instruction in the believer's gatherings.¹⁹ Other commentators point out that the summary verses 44-47 confirm that these activities took place at different times and places. David Peterson advocates for a broader application for these behaviors than just in the church setting: "Luke is giving us a description of the ministry of these disciples to

¹⁹I. H. Marshall, *Acts of the Apostles* (Leicester: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 78.

one another in a variety of contexts, not simply telling us what happened when they gathered for what we might call church.”²⁰ The key point in this passage is the consistency and frequency of activities that are indicated with the imperfect verb tenses and past participle’s confirming the ongoing nature of the early church.

Scripture draws the relationship between the local assembly and commitment here in Acts 2:42-47, with the behavior of the Holy Spirit empowered Christians. Dever speaks on this relationship of behavior and commitment: “Christians have congregated regularly in local assemblies and have done so in obedience to God.”²¹ A commitment to follow Jesus includes a commitment to the local church and His people. Healthy biblical Christians gather regularly for worship. These believers shared in each other’s life—they were inseparable. Luke is communicating a new life of devotion that is not a one-time occurrence, but is the start of a way of life. This verb stresses an intentional and serious commitment. The semantic domain of *proskarereo* is to do something intensely or extensively. Louw and Nida describe this action as “to continue to do something with intense effort . . . despite difficulty.”²² This transformation of commitment leading to action is an ongoing state of being rather than a one-time decision. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians committed themselves to these practices as a way of life. This is the same verb used in Romans 12:12 when Paul says, “Be devoted in prayer.” All spiritual activity takes the empowering of the Holy Spirit to be effective.

For the local church to attract the unbeliever, there needs to be a Holy Spirit inspired devotion to the actions and results listed in Acts 2:42-47. Luke is setting the stage for the radical growth of the Jerusalem church due to exemplary behavior motivated by the Holy Spirit in devotion. For SCBC to become a Holy Spirit drawing church, for the

²⁰David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 160.

²¹Dever, *The Church*, 137.

²²Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 663.

unchurched, the congregation must be devoted to these first four foundational actions. The strategy to employ these biblical actions is covered in chapter 4 with hopes of the same response noted in Acts 2:45-47. People inside and outside the church could sense that God was at work.

To have the fruit or results that make a church attractive to the unchurched, Luke lists four foundational actions: apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. These actions and the subsequent results became the common life of the new community. As people became believers, thus disciples, they were incorporated into the new community to learn, build relationships, break bread, and pray together. This Holy Spirit intense devotion will become the foundation that will weave a thread through radical giving, praising God, commitment, holiness, and accountability that sets the believers and the local church apart from society. Direct spiritual activity, fellowship with Christ and other Christians, is a basic ingredient of Christianity.

Teaching is the first essential ingredient to an attractive church. Just as Jesus had instructed the apostles, this new community of disciples was to instruct new Christians. This instruction included, but is not limited to, Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, the Old Testament Scriptures and prophecy, and Jesus' ministry among them. The church believes and stands for something. In a world of postmodern thought, would this not be attractive to the unchurched? Putting the Great Commandment into practice, to "love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves," or to "esteem others higher than ourselves" with fervor and devotion, will attract the unbeliever.

The second activity that the new Christians were devoted to was fellowship. Society today craves relationship, community, and fellowship. Christianity is community living. The Greek word in Acts 2:42 is *koinonia*. According to Polhill, the basic meaning of *koinonia* is "association, communion, fellowship, intimacy and close relations."²³ The

²³John Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman,

semantic domains of *koinonia* include fellowship, sharing, and willing to contribute. Louw and Nida state, “An association involving close mutual relations and involvement.”²⁴ When the Holy Spirit regenerates and there is an anthropological change, there is now a desire to share in each other’s life because of the commonality in Christ. Not only does the new Christian have intense devotion, but also new close relations. Just as Christians are called to have fellowship with Christ²⁵ so too are they to fellowship with each other.²⁶ This fellowship is in the context of prayers, breaking bread, and worship. Some scholars say the definite article before prayers implies keeping the formal prayers in the temple. However, Polhill believes that the usage of prayer, even with the definite article, is much broader to incorporate praying together in private home worship.²⁷ Regardless of the particular view taken of fellowship, a biblically healthy church desires togetherness. This desire of close fellowship spills over and is noticed in the community. Gerhard Kittle comments, “Fellowship with Christ necessarily leads to fellowship with Christians, to mutual fellowship of members of the community.”²⁸

This fellowship or community is not just building relationships for relationships’ sake, but for the glory of God. Local church membership is community with accountability to Christ, other believers, and church leaders. This fellowship mirrors the relational aspect of the Trinity that brings God glory inside and outside the church. The enthusiasm of believers demonstrated their common bond in the gospel and unity with each other.

2001), 119.

²⁴Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 446.

²⁵First Cor 1:9 says, “God is faithful, by whom you were called into fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

²⁶First John 1:3 says, “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you to may have fellowship with us.

²⁷Polhill, *Acts*, 120.

²⁸Gerhard Kittle and Gerhard Fredrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:807.

Enthusiasm is contagious. What makes this enthusiasm and unity different from any other social club is that true fellowship focuses on God, His Word, and the gospel. In Acts, the walls of animosity have been broken down between Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles. This *koinonia* and community between these three demographics are noticed. The sinful preferences of self have been laid aside and they are willing to give up their rights, possessions, and life for the sake of each other: this is true biblical community. Today, social clubs are commonly based on some intrinsic need like relationships devoid of the gospel. This need-based, man-centered construct of fellowship taken to the extreme is just one of many forms of idolatry today. The Jerusalem church was practicing an invigorating way of life that is needed today to combat the pseudo fellowship of social media. Social media that was meant to bring people together only highlights how isolated society has become. The Christian concept of fellowship recorded in Acts is Holy Spirit motivated, and God centered. Thus, wholly different in its very essence is local church fellowship and unity from the common social club. In verse 44, the emphasis is on unity when Luke says, “Were together.” Polhill notes,

ἐπὶ αὐτόν ἔχω ἅπας κοινός has a strong emphasis on unity. . . . Here are two ideals for a community . . . everything held in common and shared equally. It is basically a utopian concept [and] their practice was to sell their property and goods and apportion the proceeds whenever the need arose.²⁹

A healthy biblical community with unity of fellowship and purpose is glorifying to God.

This unity continues in the breaking of bread and prayers. There is debate as to whether the breaking of bread and prayers are in the formal corporate sense or engaged in the homes. The most favored interpretation is that verse 42 is in a formal sense based on the definite article, whereas verse 46 is understood to mean private house to house fellowship meals and prayers. Regardless of which view is taken, the essence of the text is that there is unity in the formal church setting and unity from house to house; there was sincere hearts of single-mindedness. It was unheard of for Jews and Gentiles to worship

²⁹Polhill, *Acts*, 120.

together.

The local church applies such unity and purpose today by having a mixed congregation from every walk of life, ethnicity, and fellowshiping in the gospel. A true dynamic of life change is attractive when rooted in the teaching of Christ. The result was a sense of God's presence, a natural attraction to humanity having found favor with all people as the text says, "the Lord added to their number."

If the fundamentals—teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer—are practiced and attended by the Holy Spirit resulting in meeting needs with radical generosity and pure joy, society will surely take notice. This is the gospel made visible. God's second phase to draw the unchurched is the actions of the Christians. Luke qualifies this to "all who believe." Correct doctrine and right practice go hand in hand. The church having the attitude of "what's mine is yours" is love in action, and is a powerful attraction in an economically and emotionally desperate world. Devotion to the Lord is the aspect of the church that makes it different from any other organization.

It is important to note that the radical giving mentioned in Acts was voluntary as the imperfect verb of selling implies. The new converts in Jerusalem shared all things. This was not a redistribution of wealth but radical care by the believers to each other. A need arose and something was sold to meet the need: this is radical love. Verse 46 should not be taken as normative (day-by-day) in the hectic twenty-first century, but the emphasis is of the desire to be together for fellowship, community, and relationship.

Last, verse 47 confirms the premise that the Holy Spirit induced active church would be attractive to the unchurched. Luke writes that every Holy Spirit motivated church can enjoy favor with outsiders. However, it should be realized that this favor would not last for those whom God is not drawing by His Spirit when they realize the implications of Christian teaching calling for abandoning self and making Christ Lord. The witness of this type of Christianity will leave its mark for God. This favor would give the Jerusalem believer opportunity to give the reason for the obvious transformation in their life.

Would God not honor SCBC by being a light of this magnitude?

All through Acts, with his theology of church life, Luke communicates the extemporary life of the first Christians, which is the same framework God might use in the church today. Luke gives a portrait of what life could be like in the local church. A church characterized by togetherness, joy, God's presence, and radical generosity. The witness of the church is predicated upon the idea and reality of a distinct corporate life evidenced in these former traits and individual lives as well. Would this not make the church attractive today to a confused and hurting society? Hendricksen writes, "What a testimony to Biblical Christianity! These Christians live a life of praise to God and the results are praised by the people . . . they demonstrate the power of the gospel and the presence of the Spirit. Thus they are living witnesses for Christ."³⁰ These biblical ideals still need to be the goal for effective witness. The same enthusiasm, devotion, caring, generously, and unity can increase membership and add to the church today.³¹

A Spiritually Healthy Church Will Have Members Committed to Christ

Moving from attracting an unchurched person to visit the church, how does the leadership assimilate this person from visitor, to regular attender, to church member? Church membership has fallen on hard times in twenty-first century evangelical Christianity. However, church membership is part of discipleship. The essence of discipleship is sacrifice for Christ that is evidenced by commitment. The great paradox of discipleship is that those who gain eternal life evidence this reality by denying to self. Jesus teaching his disciples makes the commitment clear in Matthew 16:24 and 25: "Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever

³⁰William Hendricksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts*, New Testament Community Series (Grand Rapid: Baker, 1973), 114.

³¹Understanding, of course, that the Lord adds to the church.

loses his life for my sake will find it.” If anyone “would come” or as some translations say, “to come” is the present imperfect verb of ἔρχομαι. The implication is a present tense and daily continual coming to Christ that implies life transformation. Mounce explains, “The first two imperatives of this charge (deny and take up) are aorist (a Greek past tense indicating finality) and the third follow is present.”³² In a very practical sense, to come after Jesus is to go His way and to walk with Him, which is the essence of discipleship. A church member evidences this definitive action on behalf of all disciples to commit to Christ.

This standard of commitment is missing in today’s churches. There are exceptions, but many Christians do not see the need for church membership. Discipleship should lead to commitment to Christ and commitment should lead to a formal sense of church commitment. Does the Scripture teach that a Christian is in sin if he does not commit to a church in membership? Or is a Christian in a state of disobedience to Christ? Matthew 16: 24 and 25 shed some light on this dilemma. Jesus is showing the relationship between the sacrifice of the Christian and commitment to Him. Juxtaposed to this idea is the modern conception of God and the church as nothing more than a utilitarian genie—here only to meet needs and help society for the saints good with no strings attached. The truth is that commitment binds a person, and in society’s hedonistic culture where pleasure is king, binding commitments are a threat to perceived freedom. Commitment is missing in almost every venue of life. Cohabitation has become the new standard for marriage. Abortion on demand suggests a fear of the binding commitment of parenthood. The non-committal list is long. No commitment is the new nomenclature.

The first step to a spiritually healthy church is commitment to the local church as guests commit to Christ. Christians are to deny self, take up their cross, and follow Christ. The evidence of a converted life is commitment to Christ and His church. Jesus

³²Robert Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 165.

spoke on the high cost of commitment in Matthew 10:37-39: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worth of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” This level of commitment is consistent with the other gospels, including Mark 8:34-91, “And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, ‘if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’” Mark 8:34, and Luke 9:23, “And he said to all, ‘if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’” This concept of the high cost of commitment is lost in twenty-first century Christianity. In its context, Jesus is espousing values that were contrary to the Jewish concept of the coming messiah: humility, sacrifice, and selflessness. Jesus gives proof of his future glory and now reminds his disciples of what He must suffer and what they must be prepared to suffer. After all, a servant is not above his master (Matt 10:24). Jesus begins to foretell His death. This admonishment in discipleship is right after Peter’s rebuke of the Lord that Jesus should not suffer. Jesus evidenced Peter’s disdain for the cross when Jesus said He must die. Jesus is saying that not only will he suffer, but also all who wish to be his disciples must be ready for the same fate. All followers of Christ should be ready to bear the cross of death. Verse 24 is juxtaposed to Jesus’ rebuke of Peter in verses 21-23. Jesus is saying he must die and so might his follower. Calvin explains how this passage should be interpreted: “If any man would be my disciple, let him follow me by denying himself and taking up his cross, or, let him conform himself to my example.”³³

The heart of discipleship is commitment. What is a disciple? The Greek word for disciple is μαθητής, which means a learner or pupil. Put another way, a person that puts into practice the teacher’s teachings. Continually coming after Jesus takes commitment.

³³John Calvin, *Harmony of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Calvin’s New Testament Series*, vol. 16 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 303.

Louw and Nida comment on this aspect of discipleship: “In many languages appropriate equivalent of ‘to follow’ (in the sense of to be a disciple) is literally ‘to accompany’ ‘or to go along with’ or ‘be in the group of.’”³⁴ These definitions imply the idea of commitment and identification. Not only must church members commit to follow Christ, but they must also deny themselves. Coupled with the idea of following in commitment is to deny self (*ἀπαρνέομαι*), which means to completely disown oneself and then subjecting oneself to Christ. Disciples must refuse to grant their own demands and instead seek God’s will for their lives. For the disciples there is no self-rule. God sets the disciples’ direction not to live for pleasure but usefulness in the kingdom. Scripture is consistent on the idea of commitment as Paul communicates the same truth in Romans 14:7-8.³⁵ Paul communicates the degree of commitment that Christ desires. True disciples are to be imitators of Christ.

Likewise, healthy and committed churches are imitators of Christ. How often does the NT church embrace this idea? How often do Christians disown the old nature that was in Adam and follow Christ with commitment to the church and sanctification of the soul? This three-fold cord of commitment, self-denial, and obedience is missing in many churches today. To deny self is to place Jesus as Lord; Master as well as savior. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is showing concern over who is and is not identified with His name evidenced by the degree of commitment. Jesus is concerned with who on earth represents heaven and what their lives are like. A spiritually healthy and committed church will have members that deny self and have Jesus as Lord in all areas of their lives. Commitment to Christ and commitment to the local church are intrinsically linked. Yet this commitment of membership is not the attitude of many in the local church. Leeman

³⁴Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 470.

³⁵The apostle Paul says, “For none of us lives to himself, and none of dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom 14: 7-8).

laments the transient nature of church membership:

In the West today, individuals and families resign their church membership like they check out of hotels. They make sure they have all their belongings, inform the management, and then go. In fact, many church members don't do this much. People leave and tell no one. I suppose it's only because the hotels have our credit card numbers on file that we afford them that courtesy.³⁶

In Matthew 16:24-25, Jesus turns to His disciples with the concrete absolutes of the Christian life—the cost of discipleship is commitment and sacrifice. Yet, denying self is difficult, because humanity loves self. This core issue of loving self is in need of the regenerating power of the Spirit through the gospel for those outside of Christ. The Holy Spirit is the sanctifying agent of the gospel for those in Christ.

Yet, Jesus is not done because denying to self has to be coupled with an action. The Christian is to follow, deny, and then pick up his cross. To take up his cross is to take up the cross of Christ. That cross is the cross of death. Christ's atonement is of value to the disciple willing to die, suffer, and follow Christ. This metaphor does not mean staying strong in some difficulty in life as often applied. One's cross is not a bad marriage or workplace. The disciple's cross is Christ's cross—one of denying self to follow Jesus.

Last, Jesus gives the reason for this self-denial in Matthew 16:25: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." The great paradoxical principle to preserve one's life is to lose it for Christ. To give up one's life for Christ and the cause of Christ is to find real life—to gain by losing. The key in the verse is "for my sake." The cross of Christ and the Christian's subsequent salvation is the motivating factor for discipleship, commitment to Him and the local church. This new life in Christ is a life that transcends death.

Matthew 16: 24-25 makes clear the commitment to Christ in all areas of life and the local church. The importance of this passage cannot be overstated for discipleship

³⁶Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offence*, 314.

and the implication of commitment with application evidenced in membership to the local church. There are three aspects of this commitment: renounce self, declare allegiance to a crucified Messiah, and be willing to accept the consequences. This is a vivid picture of the cost of discipleship. Jesus is straightforward with the demands of discipleship. The local church (SCBC included) needs to be just as clear about the cost of discipleship in encouraging the congregation to greater commitment. This teaching by Christ may seem counterproductive to SCBC's desire to assimilate and grow in membership, yet, this is the solid perspective written in Scripture. The standard of commitment must be set high.

A Spiritually Healthy Church Will Be Accountable to Church Leadership through Membership

In conclusion the biblical support for Acts 2:42-47 and Matthew 16:24 and 25, and showing one way to become an attractive and assimilating church and need for commitment in membership, it is imperative for the church to be educated on the importance of church leadership. The context of Hebrews 13 concerns various pastoral exhortations as the writer connects all this with honoring church leaders: to be loving, hospitable, desire purity, contentment, to follow the leaders, and to be bold. These exhortations and imperatives are in relation to the Christian's behavior to God and leadership. God has chosen church leaders to exercise His spiritual rule through the Holy Spirit, employing men to lead His church just as God established His rule in secular society (Rom 13:1).³⁷ God establishes the realm and order of all authorities. God has taken the time to choose men (elders) to oversee His church, implying the need for these leaders to know whose souls they care for and watch over. The importance of formal church membership is necessary for accountability purposes: who is in and who is out. Kittle writes, "The community is obviously divided into those who lead and those who

³⁷Paul says, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom 13:1).

are led.”³⁸ Church leaders should teach the Word of God and have faith worthy of following in order to be honored. Church leaders rule as servant leaders knowing that they do not lead out of selfish gain but they lead for God (1 Pet 5:2-3).³⁹

Hebrews 13: 17 states, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls.” The imperatives of obeying and submitting to leadership come out of concern for recent troubles and divisions where church leaders have lost sheep. Pastors and church leaders have a God-given responsibility to protect the flock (Acts 20: 28-29).⁴⁰ The writer of Hebrews is addressing some division from wolves that have entered the fold, as indicated in Hebrews 13:9: “Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings.” In response to this oversight, the members of the church should, as Brown explains, “offer responsive obedience, respectful submission and loving cooperation.”⁴¹ Leaders keep watch as shepherds caring for the souls of the sheep. Here is rich imagery of the active duty of the leadership of the church. Congregations need to understand the taxing nature of church leadership. Dever sums up the relationship of identity and the importance of church membership for the leadership: “If Christians expect their pastor to fulfill his biblical responsibilities, church members must make themselves known to him.”⁴² In humility, these men of God determine the direction of the church, teach, exhort, and rebuke, all for the glory of the gospel. These tasks are not easy. To do this ministry effectively and with joy, a congregation must understand the weight of

³⁸Kittle and Fredrich, *Theological Dictionary*, 3:907.

³⁹First Pet 5:2-3 says, “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”

⁴⁰Acts 20:28-29 says, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.”

⁴¹Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1982), 264.

⁴²Dever, *The Church*, 43.

responsibility for leaders. If either the humble servant leadership or a submissive congregation is missing, the church is off balance. Church membership gives leadership the formal authority to shepherd the flock.

The writer of Hebrews begins with the word “obey,” from the root of *παίθω* as an imperfect passive verb. This verb has various nuances: from conforming to a person’s action, putting ones confidence in, to assenting to follow in another’s direction. Here the idea seems to be to obey in following the leaders lead in direction with confidence based on their adherence to Scripture. In Hebrews 13:7, the Christian is to render or imitate, and in verses 17 and 18 they are to obey and pray.⁴³ One note of caution, the writer of Hebrews is not advocating blind obedience to everything a leader says as the writer couches obedience in the context of biblical teaching as seen in verse 9 when he says “those who spoke the Word of God.” The point is obedience to biblical teaching then submission to leaders as overseers as called by God. The parameters of the leaders functioning are the Words of Scripture. Therefore, the general directives to obey and submit are related to the leaders that function with proper teaching (1 Thess 5:12-13; 1 Tim 5:17).⁴⁴ Christians are not called to obey heretics. With proper teaching comes the respect to come under leadership. Leaders labor in the Word. This is the writer of Hebrews final exhortation; yet, the exhortation for church members to obey their leaders is a common theme in the NT.

Coupled with obedience is another word that brings disdain to twenty-first century society, and that is to submit. The need for leadership and submission to authority is imperative for unity in the NT church. Yet again, the writer of Hebrews is not

⁴³Heb 13:7 says, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”

⁴⁴First Thess 5:12-13 says, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, (13) and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” First Tim 5:17 says, “Let the elders who rule well be worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

suggesting blind submission, just as he is not suggesting blind obedience. Spiritual leaders are not infallible or perfect. The congregation is justified in objecting to issues, ideas, or concerns in church life. Schreiner explains this aspect of submission: “The author assumes in giving this command that leaders teach and live in accord with the theology articulated in the letter. Hence the call to submit to the leaders is not universal. The readers should not submit if the leaders deviate from the gospel.”⁴⁵ Submission strikes fear in the Christian community, and justifiably so, with so many past abuses.⁴⁶ Obedience and submission are not artificial structures or legalistic hindrances, but are part of church membership in bringing glory to God.

The true believer submits to local church leadership. The verb used for submit is a present active imperative used only here in the NT. This command is to be followed in the life of the believer. Non-submission does not imply that someone who does not submit or refuse to join the local church is a non-believer, but at the very least it calls into question the quality of his or her discipleship. Biblical authority, obedience, and submission have fallen on hard times. There is a current desire to be anti-institutional in the church and focus more on community and less on authority. In a church culture that is rapidly becoming anti-institutional with no boundaries and anti-authority, the need for teaching biblical authority and membership is imperative. The tension between church leaders and the congregation must be resolved for a healthy church environment.

The writer of Hebrews then gives the rationale for why obedience and submission to authority is necessary in the local church: for they are keeping watch over souls, as those who will give an account. Hebrews 13:17 says, “Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” This is the essence of

⁴⁵Thomas R. Schreiner, *Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation Commentary Series (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 424.

⁴⁶Some examples include the spiritual abuses of authority as Jim Jones and the Branch Davidians in Waco, TX, or the Heaven’s Gate cult to name two. It is no wonder that the Christian questions submission, obedience, and authority.

the weight of leadership in the church. There is a sobering responsibility to care for the spiritual condition of the congregation. The congregation often does not understand this responsibility. By instructing the church in doctrine, the leaders watch over and care for the souls of the congregation. The reality is, every person is accountable. Leaders are accountable to God and at the same time accountable to the members of the congregation, and the congregation is accountable to the leaders, God, and one another in mutual submission.

To watch over, ἀγρυπνέω, conveys the idea of being sleepless and watching. This metaphor has the idea of being spiritually alert or wide awake in the Christian life as used elsewhere in Scripture.⁴⁷ Just as Christians are to remain awake watching for the coming of the Lord, so are they to keep awake in prayer. Thus, the leadership of the church is called to watch over, as a shepherd must remain awake and alert exercising great care for the care of sheep. The danger of not watching is evidenced when, according to Hagner, “These particular readers, given their inclination to abandon their Christian faith and return to Judaism.”⁴⁸ Accountability through oversight by the leaders is good for the sanctification and discipleship of the congregation. At the same time, leaders do not enjoy unlimited power, as Scripture says they will give an account of their ministry to God.⁴⁹ To deny self and place oneself in commitment and covenant with the church in terms of membership is for the Christian’s good and God’s glory. The implication of this verse is that disobedience and insubordination can put the Christian at risk. God has called certain men to servant leadership that will give an account. The motivation for compliance

⁴⁷Mark 13:33a says, “Be on guard, keep awake.” And Eph 6:18 says, “Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all saints.”

⁴⁸Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 247.

⁴⁹Jas 3:1 says, “Let not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” As leaders, the elders primary calling is teaching thus leaders will be held accountable in their watch-care and teaching.”

in membership is three-fold: leaders keep watch over the members' souls, leaders will give an account, and lastly it will benefit the church. The result is a unified joyful congregation.

In conclusion the biblical necessity for accountability to church leadership and the results of this cooperation—a spiritually healthy, joyful congregation and leadership—the question remains, does the NT teach church membership? While there is not any clear didactic reference, it is clear that church membership is implied. This passage advocates discerning obedience and intelligent submission. Admittedly, extreme caution must be taken when implementing any level of authority in obedience and submission, as the church is no stranger to leadership abuse. Church leaders are servants first—then leaders. Their authority is based on their labor in the Word. Leaders should be trusted and their authority should be respected because they recognize their place within the structure of authority that is accountable to God. Church membership is important because Christians were withdrawing themselves from each other, and isolation leads to spiritual weakness. Leaders watch over souls so that this does not happen. Without an official system of membership, leaders do not know to whom they are to be accountable to God: membership matters.

A Spiritually Healthy Church Will Have Regenerate Church Members

The biblical methods in Acts 2:24-27 examined for attracting the unchurched and teaching them the necessity of understanding commitment from Matthew 16: 24-25 and biblical authority from Hebrews 13:17, the next phase is implementing biblical discipleship and growth in sanctification. The application of Ephesians 5:25-30 is critical for the new church member to understand. It all begins with the biblical, Baptist distinctive of regenerate church membership. If a person desires to formally identify with the local church, he must be truly converted. Hence, the relationship between assimilation, commitment, and regeneration are imperative. The NT church must attract the unbeliever, and educate them in the necessity of commitment, authority, and regeneration. An

individual should have a testimony and consistent reality of the fruit of regeneration; this circumvents a host of issues that will harm the spiritual health of the church. Issues of spiritual health, unity, and vision are at risk. In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul says, “For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?”

The Importance of Holiness and Conversion in Church Membership

One of the benefits of church membership is the privilege to be part of the bride of Christ. The general context of Ephesians centers on the new regenerate humanity as God’s divine creation. Paul writes of the saving grace of God in redemption in the relation to Christ. The concept of purity and holiness are key concepts in Ephesians 5.

As context determines interpretation, Paul begins chapter 5 with exhortation that the Christian is to imitate God (vv. 1-14). The Christian has been transformed from darkness to light. The immediate verses leading up to Ephesians 5: 25-30 deals with the subject of mutual submission in the body of Christ. For a Christian to accept authority, he needs the submissive nature that comes from a regenerated spirit. This theological truth is consistent with the Baptist doctrine of regenerate church membership. Paul illustrates the necessity of a submissive spirit, purity, and holiness with the analogy of marriage.

The basis for this submission, purity, and holiness is the love of God supplied by the Holy Spirit in and through regeneration. Paul sets up the need for a submissive heart in church life (membership) by comparing the self-sacrificing love of Christ for the church as a pattern in the marital relationship. Hodge notes, “As the married relationship is analogous to that which Christ sustains to the church, the one serves to illustrate the other.”⁵⁰ Paul says in Ephesians 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” His point is that the church is a bride for whom

⁵⁰Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 181.

Christ died. Paul makes a clear connection between the church as Christ's body. Clearly this principle of submission should characterize the life of the Christian in every area of life, especially in marriage and the church. The cost to Christ was high—His life. Membership in the church should not be taken lightly. As the husband is to sacrifice self for his wife, so the congregation must sacrifice for Christ. Paul fleshes this out with the example of the sacrifice of sanctification in purity and holiness. Regrettably, many members of the church do not understand the need to sacrifice but think the church is a commodity to be consumed. Many today view Christianity as a buffet line with each church offering a different menu item to pick and choose for their spiritual needs. Christians go to one church for the worship, another for the preaching, another for the children's ministry and so forth. However, Paul notes here the specific and significant nature of the corporate church. This formal gathering is like a marital relationship that has its existence, and an authority, that the Christian does not have individually. As Aristotle said, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Paul continues in verse 26 of the salvific work that Christ has done to the individual so that, corporately, verse 27 is a biblical truth. Christ has sanctified and is sanctifying the church through the Word. The bride (church) is cleansed before being presented to the bridegroom (Christ). Paul says in Ephesians 5:26, "That he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word." F. F. Bruce explains that the believer is passive in this cleansing: "But here it is not the believers who cleanse themselves, but Christ."⁵¹ God regenerates the believer and unites him or her to Christ. Paul teaches that the marital relationship illustrates the nature of the spiritual union between Christ and the church. What is true of the church collectively is true of the church members individually: union with Christ.

Paul continues to explain the picture of a regenerate church membership by

⁵¹F. F. Bruce, *Epistles to Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 386.

explaining the necessary action of Christ in saving and sanctifying the church with the “washing of the Word.” The glorified church with perfected character is the goal of discipleship and one of the benefits of church membership—so that the church may be “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.” Cleaning the church with the washing of the Word is a figurative expression for spiritual purification in uniting with Christ in justification. Greek scholars Louw and Nida put this theological truth simply: “To cause something to become clean.”⁵² The Word of God preached washes the soul by faith.⁵³

When Paul links “that he might sanctify her” with “having cleansed her,” he is implying the initial act of regeneration and sanctification so that God sees the individual and church both cleansed and sanctified. So there is the ongoing work of progressive sanctification in the life of the Christian and church. Church members need to be converted by the Spirit in regeneration and continually sanctified to have a healthy church.

In the last four verses, Paul concludes with their implications and applications. Paul is communicating the headship of Christ over the church. The church’s head is the bridegroom—Christ. Church membership is about the Christian’s relationship to Christ. The Christian’s relationship is the reality of being united to Christ, as the church corporately is united together in Christ. Christ died for the church for a purpose—that the church would be holy and blameless. This is only accomplished through the blood of Christ that cleanses from sin. If the Christian loves his own body, then they should love their wife and the church. When attenders refuse to covenant together in membership, they are conveying the degree of their love for the church. They may like the church, but not enough to covenant together with the church. It is a never-ending engagement without a solid commitment. Last, Paul explains in verse 30 that Christ’s bride and body are one and the same, driving home the point of regenerate church membership: a Christian is a

⁵²Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 699.

⁵³Paul makes this point abundantly clear in Rom 10:8-17.

member of his body. The application is simple: when a person identifies with Christ and is united to Christ, then sacrifice, submission, holiness, and purity should become the new way of life.

In conclusion, citing some of the biblical support for a healthy church, from assimilating the unchurched to the necessity of church membership, I now direct attention to the state of church membership today, understanding and reaching millennials, the common objections and issues relating to the church, dechurched, and unchurched concerning membership, and developing an assimilation process based on the biblical data and research.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES

The biblical and theological support for church membership was examined in chapter 2; it is now important to examine the current theoretical and practical issues facing the church. Although the issues in this chapter are not comprehensive, the research confirms a disturbing trajectory for the New Testament church of today. While Scripture occupies the highest position of authority in the church (or at least should), the church is not immune to the generational, social, and perceptual realities of culture. For its survival, the local church needs to address several concerns that rise to the surface. This chapter, painting with a broad brush, highlights a few primary concerns. I summarize the overall state of the church today, reasons why regular church attenders are reluctant to join the local church in membership, a general overview of generational divides, and the most common objections to church attendance. These discoveries apply not only to SCBC but also to many contemporary churches that desire to thrive in the twenty-first century. Two of the goals in this project are for 80 percent of the members and committed non-members to serve in a viable ministry, and to convince 50 percent of the committed non-members to become members. The following research is invaluable to reach this end.

The State of the Church Today

Membership today, if one were to compare the church in twenty-first century America to nineteenth-century America, what would this person find? Would they find a stronger or weaker commitment in membership to the local church? For the purpose of this chapter, the “church” being examined is the Protestant church, with all its varied nuances: evangelical, charismatic, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Southern Baptist,

and so forth.¹ As the state of the church is examined in terms of growth, there is some general agreement and some disagreement. Some paint a dark picture of decline for the twenty-first century church while others paint a more stable picture. For example, The National Council of Churches USA communicates a stable picture of growth and decline: “Churches which have been increasing in membership in recent years continue to grow and likewise, those churches which have been declining in recent years continue to decline.”² Continuing on in this report, Linder sheds a little bit of good news: “The rates of both growth and decline have generally slowed in comparison to recent years.”³ According to this research, the majority of churches that show a decline are liberal in theology. For example, Presbyterian Church USA, The Episcopal Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church are listed, which are down in membership between 2 and 3 percent. Admittedly, this research on theologically liberal denominations is not too concerning to me; however, theology conservative, evangelical churches and denominations are beginning to experience the same membership decline.

To some degree, the religious landscape in America is changing. It appears that the days of rapid church growth are gone, placed on the shelf of antiquity. According to an article entitled “Christian Church Membership in the United States: 1960-2002,” The Southern Baptist Convention went from 9,732,000 in 1960 to 16,248,000 by the year 2002, ranking it the second largest denomination in America, outside of Roman Catholics, with a 67 percent increase.⁴ To add insult to injury when shifting

¹Cults and Roman Catholic churches are not included in this research.

²Eileen Linder, “Trends Continue in Church Membership Growth or Decline, Reports 2011 Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches,” National Council of Churches USA, accessed January 26 2017, <http://nccusa.org/news/110210yearbook2011.html> This research concerning membership is based on 2009 reports.

³Ibid.

⁴World Almanac and Yearbook of American Churches, “Christian Church Membership in the United States: 1960-2002,” accessed January 26, 2017,

from membership to Sunday attendance, the religious landscape in America is growing darker. Writing on church attendance, Shattuck notes the startling reality that “less than 20 percent of Americans regularly attend church—half of what the pollsters report.”⁵ The standard notion of 40 percent attendance is really closer to 18 percent. SCBC is no exception to this reality. The polls are only as reliable as the information communicated. This discrepancy is known as the halo effect, meaning it is the difference of what is told to the pollster and what people actually do. Shattuck explains, “Americans tend to over-report socially desirable behavior like voting and attending church.”⁶ People like to present themselves in a better light than what is their actual behavior. The point is that 40 percent of Americans attend church, just not on any given Sunday. The new reality is that Americans are not consistent in church attendance. Today’s culture is increasingly resistant to joining a religious institution as well as consistent attendance.

The statistics on Evangelical churches vary based on the study. According to the Pew Research Center, “Evangelical Protestants make up 25 percent of the religious landscape.”⁷ *Christianity Today*’s report on Pew Research is titled “Evangelicals Stay Strong as Christianity Crumbles in America.”⁸ The premise of the article is that the

<http://www.demographia.com/db-religusa2002.htm>.

⁵Kelly Shattuck, “7 Starting Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America,” accessed January 26 2017, <http://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html/2>. Shattuck continues, “While Gallup polls and other statisticians have turned in the same percentage—about 40 percent of the population—of average weekend church attendees for the past 70 years, a different sort of research paints quite a disparate picture of how many Americans attend a local church on any given Sunday.”

⁶Ibid.

⁷Pew Research Center, “Religious Landscape Study,” accessed January 26, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

⁸Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “Pew: Evangelicals Stay Strong as Christianity Crumbles in America,” *Christianity Today*, May 11, 2015, accessed January 26, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/may/pew-evangelicals-stay-strong-us-religious-landscape-study.html>.

method of measuring faith is flawed, referencing the halo effect. The information gathered depends on the truthfulness of the person. Researching from 2007 to 2014, the report claims that evangelicals have remained stable and lost less than 1 percent, falling to 25.4 percent from 26.3 percent.⁹ One could compare the stability of evangelicals to the almost 4 percent drop for mainline denominations, and evangelicals seem to be holding steady. Of particular concern is the religiously unaffected that gained 7 percent. These are the modern day “Nones”—no religious affiliation. Evangelicals constitute the largest single tradition.

Evangelicals have added 2 million adherents to 62.2 million in 2014, but is this gain enough to offset rapid population growth? The research states, “As a result, evangelicals now constitute a clear majority (55%) of all US Protestants.”¹⁰ Even with this seemingly good news, the overall religious landscape in America is on shaky ground when compared to keeping up with population growth. The population is growing in numbers and is more ethnically diverse, yet the church finds itself in a plateaued or declining position. This issue is of particular concern for the Southern Baptist Convention that, according to the Pew Research Center, is 85 percent white.¹¹ It is imperative that all evangelical churches, and especially the Southern Baptist Convention, adapt to the changing ethnic landscape.

Baptists lead the way in church attendance. According to Olson, “They have

⁹Zylstra, “Pew: Evangelicals Stay Strong.”

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Michael Lipka, “The Most and Least Racially Diverse U.S. Religious Groups,” July 27, 2015, accessed January 26, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>.

more than twice as many attendee as any other identified Protestant family”¹² However, from 2000 to 2005, roughly 3,800 churches closed their doors and 4,000 new churches have opened, showing a net gain of only 200 churches, but that is not enough churches to keep pace with the rising population.¹³ The Southern Baptist Convention has an almost equal new church growth to decline rate, making it one of the few-plateaued denominations. The results are clear: for any denomination to survive, church planting must be a priority. All evangelical churches (of which the Southern Baptist Convention is classified) have before them a daunting future unless they discover the correct methodology for church growth in the twenty-first century. The key to church growth appears to be three fold: continue aggressive church planting; embrace church revitalization, and reach the dechurched, unchurched, and Millennials.

Will church attendance and membership keep up with the rising secular population? Only time will tell, but the first step to rectifying any issue is admitting and recognizing the issue exists. Shifting from the state of the church in America regarding attendance and membership, attention is now turned to why Christians attend church weekly, yet fail to commit in membership.

The Challenge of Church Membership for the Christian

So often when a church leader talks about attendance and membership, what the congregation hears is how big the church is in terms of numbers. The word growth can be a controversial word. A church can grow in numbers of members and yet the truth of the gospel may be compromised, making the church a large and unhealthy church. A false premise in some churches is that a large congregation means the church is a healthy church: bigger is better. The success of the mega church has brought with it a sense of

¹²David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of over 200,000 churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), loc. 1357, Kindle.

¹³Ibid.

defeat for smaller churches. Must a church be large to be healthy? No. The growth and health of the church is the effect of the gospel working in the lives of the congregation. A healthy church is faithful to the Scriptures and the gospel of Christ.

Although the secular world and Christianity differ in many ways, they do have areas of similarity basic to humanity. The four primary issues that appear to hinder a regular attender from becoming a member are a lack of perceived value for joining the church, priorities, poor discipleship, and lack of perceived ownership.

The Issues of Value and Priority

The first issue for church attenders not becoming members is perceived value. When people value something it becomes a priority. In order for a church attender to commit to membership in the local church, he or she needs to understand the value of joining the church. If the Christian does not see the value in the church, then he or she will not join the church in membership much less make attendance a priority. Here is a great paradox for the Christian: lose life to save it. Jesus said in Matthew 16:25, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” To save life, a person commits to Christ and His church. Most Christians understand the value of once a week corporate worship, but to extend that commitment any further, today’s mindset is that the church must prove its value. The paradox is obedience to Christ and His church in which the person loses his life only to truly find life.¹⁴

Life’s responsibilities are demanding more and more time. With less time to accomplish the necessities of life, including work, and raising children, commitment to the local church often takes a back seat to life. The effect of minimal commitment to church life can lead to nominal Christians. Add to this the reality that society is getting more and more narcissistic, and church membership becomes a hard sell. Many come to

¹⁴However the essence of this paradox is recognized by the mature Christian that understands the Christ is life and must have priority, thus there is inherent value in the church.

church with the attitude of “what can the church do for me.” “How can the church fix my marriage or my parenting issues?” These are valid concerns of society not to be swept under the rug. Yet, the attitude missing from many church attenders today is, “what can I do for my church?” This consumer mentality bleeds over from secular society. Dawson suggests that the church is broken, but he does not stop there: “We must take a step back and grasp that the church is broken because people are broken.”¹⁵ Because the church is broken and because people are broken, the need for the preaching of the gospel and discipleship are imperative for showing the value of the local church, with the goal of learning that the church is a spiritual family. There is value in Christ and value in the church family. The gospel fixes brokenness.

The Issue of Discipleship

Another challenge of church membership today can be traced back to poor discipleship. Poor discipleship leads to a lack of commitment in membership, as noted in chapter 2. Christians have a misunderstanding of the concept of membership. America in general has a country club, consumerist mentality, which has infiltrated the church. Leadership must communicate that membership matters. Dever accurately notes, “In today’s world the concept of membership makes one think of clubs and other voluntary associations.”¹⁶ The issue today is that the body of Christ understands membership in a local church as voluntary rather than an aspect of obedience to Christ—this is a discipleship issue. Society is made up of all different types of members. For example, biologically, a person is born into a family so he or she is a family member. As humans, people are members of humanity. If a person is born-again, he is a member of the body of Christ and so forth. Yet, the challenge of membership or consistent attendance is nothing new

¹⁵K. Paul Dawson, *The Broken Church: Defining the Narrative of Today’s Church* (Mustang, OK: Tate, 2016), 114.

¹⁶Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 39.

in the twenty-first century. As Wellborn acknowledges in 1955, when he writes, “Christ and his church need committed men and women more than anything else.”¹⁷

The challenge of church membership for the Christian is surrendering to Christ leading to commitment to Christ with membership in the local church. Christians understand the significance of Christ for their salvation, and being a part of the body of Christ, but many do not understand the significance of the local church. Committing to church membership and regular attendance is a bridge too far for some Christians. The issue today is that many Christians do not have an understanding of the meaning and purpose of the church. Wellborn notes, “They fail to see the challenge of New Testament membership and its place in everyday living.”¹⁸

One way for church leadership to know who is a member is to list those who have officially joined a local church. Dever points out that lists of members may have existed in the early church: “Physical lists of members may well have existed in the earliest Christians Churches.”¹⁹ In today’s free-spirited, non-committal society, being on a list implies commitment. Christianity is an individual and corporate matter and this involves a level of formality evidenced with record keeping. The average church attender expects the church to be there in a time of crisis, yet these attenders are indifferent when the church calls for loyalty. Christians need to be instructed before joining the church of the need for total commitment of their time, talents, and finances: God first. This new attitude should come with new life in Christ, hinged with the new attitude and a new motivation. These two sides of the same coin reflect a converted soul. Christ desires unconditional surrender of all Christians, which applies to all of life: home, employment, and church.

¹⁷Charles Wellborn, *The Challenge of Church Membership* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1955), 30.

¹⁸Ibid., 2.

¹⁹Dever goes on to say, “Clearly, the keeping of lists was not unknown in churches. The early church kept a list of widows 1 Tim 5:9. God himself keeps a list of all who belong to the universal church in his book of life Rev 20:12.” Dever, *The Church*, 40.

Non-commitment for the Christian is a discipleship issue and maybe even a regeneration issue.

Is the lack of commitment a reflection of unconverted members and a violation of Baptist doctrine of regenerate church membership? The saved soul should be motivated, to some degree, for church life and God's glory. For the converted Christian, his new attitude fosters a new framework of responsibility—a responsibility that should include membership. Wellborn gets it right when he explains,

The general consensus is that about ten percent of church members do ninety percent of the actual church work. . . . Ninety percent who are on the fringe of the church constitute Christianity's biggest problem. . . . A good church member is one who recognizes that his church is worth working in and for.²⁰

In other words, a good church member is one that understands the value inherent in the church for which Christ died. Now, SCBC is no stranger to the reality of having more attenders than members. SCBC currently has 26 committed members and 50 committed non-members. A committed non-member is a person who is involved, serving, and attending every Sunday, but has not become a formal member. SCBC also has about 50 sporadic attenders with guests. The need to educate committed non-members in the value of membership is imperative.

As mentioned, with the challenge of church membership, many times to today's members of the congregation membership means leadership is overly concerned with numbers and money: nickels and noses. One aspect of a spiritually healthy church is a growing church membership. Spiritual health and numerical growth are two sides of the same coin. What needs to be communicated in a new members' class is why church membership is significant to understand the value of church.

There are many reasons why people attend but never join the church: the transient nature of society, the idea of being spiritual but not religious (not needing to join

²⁰Wellborn, *The Challenge of Church Membership*, 54-55. He continues, "Imagine an army that only 10% do any fighting." The point is well taken. Everyone in the military is required to fight. Every member in the church is required to participate in ministry.

a church to worship God), a prior bad experience, the person believes membership is not biblical, or simply the person has never been encouraged to move toward membership. The latter is a failure of leadership.

To address the first issue, one way to connect a committed regular attender into membership is to show them the value in the spiritual life of the church with true community. Scripture abounds with the virtues of value when joined to a church, including “Bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2); “Count others more significant than yourselves” (Phil 2:3); and “and all who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44). After all, the church is a spiritual family. The challenge is convincing regular attenders that they need to belong, which will bring value to their life and the life of the church. To belong in an official sense by covenanting to the community of believers brings a sense of value to the person and the church community, making church life a priority. From personal church life experience, when people feel that there is a genuine sense of care for them, then they are more likely to move from regular attender to member. Membership matters and relationships that foster the sense of a person’s value are key to retention. Charles Arn writes, “Research has shown that over 80 percent of the people who leave a church do so within the first six months of their membership.”²¹ Members who have few relationships and responsibilities in the church find little reason to stay. Relationship building is imperative. Relationships enhance the sense of belonging for both members and committed non-members.²² It is up to the leadership and congregation to help new people feel that they belong and that their attendance matters. Lawless paints a dark picture for the church when he reports on a study done in 2001: “In one of the largest studies of congregations ever done in the United States it showed that

²¹Charles Arn, quoted in Chuck Lawless, *Membership Matters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 45.

²²The methodology used to improve relationships leading to membership for committed non-members is discussed in chap. 4.

10 percent of the people sitting in pews on Sunday morning were not members of any congregation.”²³ For SCBC, the statistic is much higher, at 25 percent.

The church is not made up of lone wolves but of a cohesive spiritual body working together for the glory of the gospel, as the writer of Hebrews warns, “Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some” (Heb 10:25). The reality is that the regular attender does not understand the ultimate biblical value for joining, which is being a part of God’s redemptive plan and bringing Him glory by committing in membership. Church leadership must assess where each person is spiritually, then move them along to the deeper values of church life: corporate worship, the fellowship of faith, and the joy of belonging for the cause of the gospel.

The Issue of Ownership

The third issue that needs to be overcome for people to understand the significance of church membership is to give them a sense of ownership through serving. Again, from personal church experience, if a person does not feel needed, then he or she will not move toward membership, or even consider it. After a person feels valued and accepted in the church community, the next desire the attender will look for is an avenue for service. At SCBC, where there are many ministry needs, the leadership encourages service as soon as possible. At SCBC, as of March 28, 2017, 80 percent of the current members are active in some form of ministry, compared to 42 percent of the regular attenders. At SCBC, 30 percent of regular attenders are members.²⁴ Therefore, one third of regular attenders are doing 80 percent of the ministry. How can the leadership of SCBC flip this equation so that 70 percent of regular attenders are doing 80 percent of the ministries? The answer is to create a sense of ownership by providing a pathway for

²³Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 94.

²⁴See appendix 3 for member information. Many regular attenders like the church and attend every week but have not taken the next step to membership.

service. Seeking God's wisdom is critical in this process. Placing a person in the wrong ministry, just to fill a need, can cause more damage than good. Wisdom dictates creating ownership with regular attenders and members in different ways. A two-tier system works best. For example, at SCBC, a member can become involved in front-line ministries, which includes leading or overseeing various ministries or other public ministries, like being on the worship team. Regular attenders that have not yet committed to the church can help in behind the scene ministries, such as sound and audio, teacher's assistants, and building and grounds maintenance. Above all, people must feel valued and accepted for who they are and not for the service they are completing. This is easier said than done as church leadership can become consumed with the work of the ministry. At times, leadership sees the forest but not the trees. Leadership must always remember that ministry is about people, not programs. When a congregational member or attender begins to serve the church, and relationships with other members are built and discipleship takes place, they find ownership and value in service. At the same time, people want to serve a worthwhile cause; they want a cause that benefits the community and makes a real difference. The practical application of the gospel is that cause. In the gospel, the Christian is called to love their neighbor, care for the poor, orphans, widows, and carry each other's burdens all bringing glory to God.

In conclusion, having examined the state of the church and assessed the challenge of moving an attender to become a member by addressing the issues of value, priority, discipleship and ownership, then describing the significance of belonging to the church by having a sense of ownership, attention now turns to understanding the Millennial, dechurched, and unchurched mindset.

Generational Identities

From the early twentieth century to the current day, each generation has been assigned a name that best sums up the essence of that generation. Every generation is shaped, to some degree, by the cultural context and values of its time. Understanding

these generational differences is necessary for the cause of the gospel and kingdom growth. Concurring with the importance of understanding generational differences, the National Church Life Survey explains, “The Old Testament, the ancient Greeks, philosophers, poets, historians, and sociologists through the centuries have described life in terms of the ebb and flow of generations. It has been called the most important conception in history.”²⁵ The ebb and flow of generations is important to understand when trying to reach a particular generation. Every generation is shaped by family values, faith or non-faith, and the secular nomenclature of their time. SCBC needs to know and understand these differences in order to be effective in reaching each generation with the gospel. For example, the Builder generations, also called the Elders, were born in 1942 and earlier. This generation is the Great War generation. Generally speaking, builders attend worship services weekly, lean toward more traditional worship, and have a devotion to their denomination.

The next generation is called Boomers. They were born from 1946 to 1964. Until recently, this generation was the largest generation at 76 million. They were an outcome of the baby boom after World War II. The Boomer generation rebelled against their parents’ values and the church as they were looking for meaning in life. It was a time when institutions started to break down from the family, to the political and the church. If and when the Boomer comes back to church, they are looking for a more subjective experience in church with upbeat music and practical advice for life. This generation is less committed to denominational titles concerning church and, like Millennials, want to make a difference in the world with the time they have left. This generation, which was 76 million at its peak until recently, is just starting to retire and is a mission field for the church. After the Boomers come the Busters, also known as Gen-

²⁵Ruth Powell and Kathy Jacka, “Generations Approach Church Differently,” NCLS January 11, 2008, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=6267>.

Xers, born between 1965 and 1983 and they are 51.5 million strong. Last, Millennials also called Mosaics, born between 1984 and 2002 and are now the largest population segment at 77.9 million.

According to a demographic report completed on March 13, 2012, by the North American Mission Board (NAMB), SCBC has roughly 5 percent Builders, 33.5 percent Boomers, 37.9 percent Gen-Xers, and 26.4 percent Millennials within a ten-mile radius.²⁶ The projected population by NAMB was 873,509 people by 2016 in a ten-mile radius.²⁷ Even taking into account that 50 percent of 873,509 people might be infants, or committed to a mainstream denomination and unwilling to switch loyalty, that still leaves 436,754 potential prospects for the gospel. This means, according to NAMB statistics, taking Gen-Xers and Millennials, as roughly 60 percent, there are 262,052 potential prospects for the gospel. Although it is incumbent for SCBC to reach Boomers with a population of 33 percent demographic, the combined demographic of Gen-Xers and Millennials equals over 50 percent of the population in a ten-mile radius. Capturing these two population demographics for the gospel gives the church anywhere from 30 to 60 years of committed service to the kingdom.

Understanding the Current Cultural Landscape

Gen-Xers, also known as the MTV generation, grew up in a time of emerging technology. As one article stated, “Whereas computers were the size of whole buildings for the Traditional Generation and whole rooms for the Baby Boomers, the computer now became a desktop appliance.”²⁸ This generation spent less time with their parents and

²⁶See appendix 4. North America Mission Board, “ESRI Demographic and Income Profile Report,” March 13, 2012, accessed January 15, 2013, www.esri.com-demographic-and-income-profile-report-march-13-2012/.

²⁷North America Mission Board, “ESRI Demographic and Income Profile Report.”

²⁸Value Options, “Generation X,” accessed April 4, 2017, http://www.valueoptions.com/spotlight_YIW/gen_x.htm.

became known as latchkey children—they were tasked with taking care of their siblings as their parents worked. Parents became their equals, as older friends. These circumstances in their Gen-Xers’ upbringing led to a fiercely independent generation, that is accustomed to change and more willing to adapt to economic and social change. Whereas the Boomers motto was “live to work,” Gen-X’s motto was “work to live.”

In 2015, the first of the Gen-Xers’ turned fifty. They are the leaders of today as the Boomers head toward retirement. This generation is raising young children while caring for aging parents. How can the church, and more specifically SCBC, use this knowledge to reach this dominant demographic? In *Time* magazine, LaMotte writes, “According to AARP, in 2012, 42 percent of Generation X had a financially dependent child along with a parent over 65.”²⁹ The amount of stress Gen-Xers experience is a prime opportunity for the church to reach out to care for their souls, build relationships, and share the gospel.

This generation, also known as the lost generation, is the missing generation in churches. This is the first generation to grow up in the post-modern world—a world that believes everything is relative and one of its highest virtues is tolerance. Christianity and the gospel can be viewed as intolerant, making this generation difficult to reach. They see themselves as spiritual, yet not religious, and the idea of going to church, much less joining one, is just something they do not think about. Add to this other negative perceptions listed by Herman, “The church is out of touch with the real world, being money hungry, and spending money on itself. They regard the church as irrelevant to the real needs in society.”³⁰ Overcoming these perceptions is the subject of chapter 4.

²⁹Susan S. LaMotte, “Forget Millennials. Gen Xers Are the Future of Work/Time.com,” accessed April 4, 2017, <http://time.com/3456522/millennials-generation-x-work/>.

³⁰Harvey Herman, Jr., “The Missing Generation in Our Churches,” accessed April 4, 2017, <http://ag.org/top/church-workers/evang-cultr-generationsx.cfm>.

Millennials have identifying characteristics similar to both Boomers and Gen-Xers. In a way, Millennials are hybrids, shaped by the generations that have gone before them. For example, Millennials have distrust for institutions, although not as strong as the Boomers that distrusted all institutions (thus rejecting authority), and the Gen-Xers that experienced institutions failing them. The two institutions at the top of their list of distrust are government and the church. A healthy distrust of government is beneficial, even wise, but when that distrust affects other institutions, like the church, it becomes that much more challenging for the church to reach Millennials. At the same time, after seeing the continual failure of politicians that are out for themselves, and numerous moral failures of religious leaders, who can blame them? Of course these generalizations do not apply to every Boomer, Gen-X, or Millennial, for there are always some people who do not fit the preconceived stereotype.

At the same time Millennials have significant differences to be admired. They are more educated and optimistic than previous generations. Their guiding virtue of tolerance leads them to respect all people, being peacemakers; it is almost as if the Millennials are implementing the utopian ideals of their anti-authority, hippie, 1960s grandparents or parents. What their grandparents dreamed, the Millennials are trying to bring to fruition. They hold to more traditional family values. They are against divorce learning from the heartbreak of their childhood.

Of particular significance is that Millennials have a desire to make a difference in the world. Millennials are the utilitarian generation. They are unlike Boomers who wanted to free themselves from authority and society, and Gen-Xers, who were just trying to make it through life. It is this optimism of the Millennials that is different, and even refreshing, that the church can capitalize on to reach them with the gospel. Millennials, too, are realists with their optimism. Rainer and Rainer note, “The Millennials tend to be upbeat, positive, and happy. But they are realist as well. They

know not all is well with the world.”³¹ One of the dominant traits of Millennials is the value they place on relationships. Their need for solid relationships goes beyond the biological, to friends, coworkers, and society at large. Unlike the Boomers that held to the motto “to live is to work,” Millennials value relationships over work, money, or climbing the corporate ladder. Their motto is “life is too short not to have fun.” Where Boomers desired the best possible position at the best possible pay, Millennials value freedom in their work schedule over compensation. Spiritually, Millennials are agnostic toward God and church. As Rainer and Rainer point out, “This generation is not just agnostic to God as revealed in Jesus Christ. They are agnostic toward all matters religious.”³² Millennials are a mission field for SCBC. Millennials have grown up in the maturing of America’s melting pot, so they are comfortable with diversity. Diversity is their nomenclature. Many Gen-Xers and Millennials fall into the category today called “Nones,” which are the unchurched, believing a variety of things yet adhering to none.

In order for SCBC to reach Gen-X and Millennials, both groups need to see the value in the church. Christians that attend need to see the value of the church. For Gen-Xers and Millennials, the issue is philosophical—they need to understand the inherent metaphysical essence of the church. In contrast, for the attender but not yet member, the issue is more practical in nature. Leadership needs to provide a pathway to service so they see the value of the church and feel a sense of ownership in the church. These are just some of the key characteristics of Millennials that SCBC leaders need to take note of if they want to reach Millennials for the glory of God.

³¹Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America’s Largest Generation* (Nashville: B & H, 2011), loc. 401, Kindle.

³²*Ibid.*, loc. 474.

Who Are the Dechurched?

The third descriptive aspect of today's American culture is comprised of persons who were actively involved in church at one time but have now dropped out. They are affectionately known as the dechurched, church refugees, and churchless.³³ In Nevada, Christianity is not cultural as in other parts of America. The dechurched are people that are done with church but not their faith. Their motto is "I'm spiritual but not religious," which translates to "I still like Jesus but not the church or organized religion."

The question is, why do these people leave the church? The answers are many and varied. There are personal reasons, such as children growing up in church or a religious home only to go off to college and stop attending due to their newfound freedom. Or in America's transient society, a person relocates because of employment and never finds a church, so they stop looking. Or, there is a divorce and the person stops going to avoid the former spouse, or the church rekindles bad memories. All of these scenarios call into question the reality of true conversion.

Society and the church have also contributed to this issue. The televangelist and clergy abuses of the 1980s have caused distrust between clergy and society. Rebuilding that trust is monumental if the dechurched are going to be reunited with the church. In any relationship, if trust is broken, the relationship deteriorates. There was a time when the pastorate was held in high esteem—not anymore. The pastorate as well as the church has fallen out of favor in this ever-increasing secular society. Pastors, church leaders, and the church have a perception problem. Is the rise of the dechurched the proverbial canary in the coal mine? Is this a sign to come?

In addition to the fact that society has become more secular, Sunday, which used to be a time of worship, is now competing with sports leagues. When the routine gets interrupted, sometimes it is hard to reestablish the habit. Packard and Hope sum up

³³NAMB's demographic report does not include church attenders or non-attenders, but Nevada is considered a frontier state, so the population of non-church attenders is high.

the underlying thinking of the dechurched: “The church, not God, is the problem.”³⁴

Many of the dechurched were the movers and shakers in the church that let the organizational aspect of the church drain them spiritually.³⁵ The dechurched can become the churchless. The dechurched as well as the unchurched are important segments of society that the church needs to capture and recapture for the glory of God. This is a challenge as culture is changing faster than the church can adjust. The overall attitude of society is changing. Barna and Kinnaman note in their research that attitudes toward the church are changing; going to church is no longer mainstream:

Churchgoing is slowly but incontrovertibly losing its role as a normative part of American life. In the 1990s, roughly one out of every seven-Unchurched adult has never experienced regular church attendance. Today, that percentage has increased to one quarter.³⁶

What underlying causes bring about this dire situation? ³⁷

Today’s Post-Modern Ideology

In trying to reach Gen-Xers, Millennials, unchurched and dechurched, it is necessary to understand the root cause of the cultural context in the twenty-first century—mainly post-modernism and consumerism. The modern church pumps money into church planting, books, and conferences trying to reach the next generation. However, will these efforts have sustaining effect or burn out like so many varied attempts in decades past? Are church leaders, pastors, and denominational authorities willing to become cross-cultural? The chasm widens as culture loosens from its spiritual

³⁴Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2015), 16.

³⁵Although this spiritual draining comes down to a discipleship issue, it is incumbent on church leadership to provide a healthy organizational versus spiritual dynamic for all ministry workers. Developing a way to keep faith fresh in the routine of ministry is easier said than done.

³⁶George Barna and David Kinnaman, *Churchless: Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2014), loc. 59, Kindle.

³⁷The ideal answer for the church to turn the tide is a God sent revival, but until then, the church has to accomplish what it can by the grace of God.

moorings into a more pluralistic society. How can the church engage the culture to engage Gen-Xers, Millennials, the unchurched, and dechurched?

To engage these groups with the gospel the church must do three things: understand their thinking, understand what motivates them, and learn how to become cross-cultural. Gibbs and Bolger explain, “The church is a modern institution in a postmodern world.”³⁸ Learning to deal with the new post-modern nomenclature is the challenge for all church leadership, especially SCBC leadership. For example, Las Vegas is one of the most post-modern, post-Christian, and anything goes cities in America. A Barna group study ranked Las Vegas number 26 out of 96 American cities for post-Christian cities.³⁹ Many of the top ten post-Christian cities reside in the Northeast. The world has changed, like it or not, and the church needs to adapt if it wants to be effective for God.

Society is suffering from an infectious disease called post-modernism. Grenz, Guretzki, and Nordling define post-modernism:

A term used to designate a variety of intellectual and cultural developments in the late-twentieth-century Western society. The postmodern ethos is characterized by a rejection of modernist values and a mistrust of the supposedly universal rational principles developed in the Enlightenment era. Post-Moderns generally embrace pluralism and place value in the diversity of worldviews and religions that characterize contemporary society.⁴⁰

The idolization of tolerance has led to people thinking there are no moral absolutes. Overcoming this post-modern mindset of Gen-Xers, Millennials, and dechurched is the challenge. Sanders notes this reality: “People are hesitant to make ethic, moral, or theological stances because they have lost their frame of reference. Having taken the

³⁸Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in a Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 17.

³⁹The Barna Group, “The Most Post-Christian Cities in America,” accessed April 7, 2017, <http://cities.barna.org/the-most-post-christian-cities-in-america/>.

⁴⁰Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, eds., *The Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 1994), 93.

view that every view is right—except an intolerant one—postmodern society moves with whatever idea is fashionable at the time.”⁴¹ To reach those with the post-modern mindset and to stay true to the Scriptures requires distinguishing between practical methodologies and non-negotiable scriptural truths.

The Consumer Mindset

A second and equally destructive influence bearing down on the church today is a mindset of consumerism. With the loss of America’s agrarian society and the development of the Industrial Revolution came the byproduct of more choices and convenience thrust upon culture in the evolution of society. The attitude of having anything the way anyone wants has led to the unintended consequence of consumerism. This pervasive attitude of consumerism has affected every area of society, and the church is not immune to consumerism influence. Millennials and the dechurched want church done their way, modeling their beliefs or they do not want any part of the church.⁴²

Consumerism has affected the church attender in a different way. With the plethora of different churches, the choices are endless. Church consumers look for the church that is going to meet the majority of their preferences. They come with their list checking off the pros and cons of each church they visit. Many people treat today’s American churches like a buffet. They go to one church for the worship music, another church for the teaching, and a different midweek church for the children’s programs while committing to none of them. The overarching mindset of the purpose of the church is “what can the church do for me,” or “how can it serve me.” Instead of committing to the church and jumping in and serving the church to make the church better for the glory

⁴¹Phil Sanders, *Adrift: Postmodernism in the Church* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 2000), loc. 208, Kindle.

⁴²This mindset is a substantial hurdle to reach these two demographics. In matters of methodology, the way ministries function, there is room to modify. In matters of Scripture, some truths come against the very values of Millennials and the dechurched are non-negotiable. God’s truth cannot be watered down.

of God, the attender with this mindset looks only for the benefits. SCBC is no exception to the consumer mentality.

The contemporary Christian desires an anemic gospel that does not address the human heart. A church that always loves and never judges and keeps them entertained. Jonathon Leeman quotes David Powlison when he writes, “These are today’s significant felt needs that the gospel is bent to serve. Jesus and the church exist to make you feel loved, significant, validated, entertained, and charged up.”⁴³ This sums up the depth that society has become truly narcissistic and self-focused. The key phrase is the “gospel is bent to serve.” The gospel is not to serve but to change humanity at its core. The gospel is to save and the church is to serve. I have heard this consumerist mindset every time a new family with children visits SCBC. The first the first thing they ask is “what do you offer for my children.” It is not wrong to want quality programs for children, but this should not be the primary criterion for choosing a church. Changing the consumerist mindset is a large challenge for all churches.

What Are Gen-Xers, Millennials, and the Dechurched Looking for in a Church?

Millennials, like Gen-Xers, do not place a high value on spirituality. Rainer and Rainer note,

The shocking reality for us is that only 13 percent of Millennials considered any type of spirituality to be important in their lives. We feared that this generation might be anti-Christian. In some ways the responses were worse than our fears. At least someone who opposes Christianity has our beliefs on his or her radar. Most Millennials don’t think about religious matters at all.⁴⁴

This is not to say that Millennials do not have issues with the church when it does cross their mind—they do.

⁴³Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offence of God’s Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 49.

⁴⁴Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*, loc. 444.

The first challenge for the church is to get noticed. The church needs to become a blip on the Millennials and Gen-Xers radar screen. Setting aside preference issues Millennials and the dechurched have three primary perceptions about today's church: they want community, but think the church is all about judgment; they want an active cause to change society, but think the church is bureaucracy; and they want meaningful conversation, not doctrine. To attract and keep both Millennials and the dechurched, the church must offer community, conversation, and meaningful activity. At the top of the list for what they want in the church are relationships. Rainer and Rainer's research makes this abundantly clear: "The best way to get a Millennial involved in a service, activity, or ministry is through relationships."⁴⁵ Relationships are the motivating factor in reaching Millennials. These relationships must develop into community. For the dechurched, these relationships must develop into community, which for them means experiencing God together. A sense of community in the church is important, but Millennials have elevated it, making it an idol.⁴⁶

The dechurched desire relationships and community that is not superficial. Many churches do not produce deep spiritual community. The dechurched are not angry at the church; the church has just plateaued in helping them, as they desire deep transforming faith. There is nothing wrong with wanting deeper spiritual community, but lack of it is no reason to leave the church. Many churches are spiritually superficial, which is the result of the consumer mindset. Why not develop avenues for deep faith discussions? Most church leadership would welcome the help. I know the leadership at SCBC would. Meaningful conversation develops relationships that build community.

Last, both Millennials and the dechurched want to change the world for the better. They want not only a cause they believe in, but also one that makes a difference

⁴⁵Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*, loc. 1583.

⁴⁶I struggle with the emphasis placed on community by Millennials when many churches provide small groups as a venue to build relationships and enjoy community.

in the world. Both groups have a utilitarian perspective. Agreement can be reached balancing the organizational aspect of the church with meaningful service to society. Not repeating the errors in church history, the church must always incorporate the gospel while caring for society. Structure can stifle the church. Packard and Hope point out, “Bureaucracy takes over, and much activity in the organization ends up being geared toward its survival.”⁴⁷ The church can get so focused on doing church, meetings, and committees, that they quit being the church.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the theoretical and sociological issues that apply to this project and SCBC. The need to understand the state of the church today, addressing the challenge of church membership for the Christian, and evaluating the different generations to try and overcome the churches decline in attendance and membership. Chapter 4 attempts to teach and challenge non-members (but regular attenders of SCBC) through a sermon series to understand the value in the church by creating a sense of ownership. The sermon series explained the need to join the church as a matter of discipleship, and the benefit to understanding the generational differences in this melting pot called Las Vegas. Understanding the underlying causes of society in regard to its aversion to church membership; a post-modern ideology and consumer mindset is imperative to reaching people with the gospel for the Glory of God. SCBC must address the concerns of the Gen-Xers, Millennials, and dechurched without becoming pragmatic. Where accommodations can be made, let them be made. Where the desires go against Scripture, Scripture rules the church. Thomas Jefferson once said, “In the matter of style, swim with the current. In matter of principle, stand like a rock.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷Packard and Hope, *Church Refugees*, 54.

⁴⁸Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia, accessed April 7, 2017, <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/t/thomasjeff121032.html>.

With the biblical foundation laid for church membership, and the theoretical and practical issues examined, this project turns to the seventeen-week project. Chapter 4 integrates the Scriptures to educate, assimilate, and incorporate regular attenders while reaching the various demographics.

CHAPTER 4

DETAILS OF THE PROJECT

In August 2017, I began this ministry project to educate, assimilate, and incorporate regular attenders and guests into becoming members of SCBC. This three-phase project is foundationally set on the biblical values of love, growth, and service, based in Acts 2:42-47. The project is fleshed out in strategy using Scripture. With the transient nature of Las Vegas, as stated in chapter 1, a process or plan to make first-time guests a long-time member is imperative. Without a clear assimilation, education, and incorporation strategy, the church degenerates into firefighting the day-to-day battles—the tyranny of the urgent. Malphurs explains the imperative nature of strategic planning:

The typical church in North America is like a sailboat without a rudder, drifting aimlessly in the ocean. As if that is not bad enough, the winds of change and the currents of postmodernism are relentlessly blowing and pulling the church even farther off course.¹

The winds of change for SCBC are the constant turnover of the makeup of the church. There are many factors contributing to the reality of drifting churches: short-term pastorates, lack of church staff, congregations resistant to change, or no clear pattern of leadership development and so forth. Setting a course for church health and growth starts with connecting with the unchurched, assimilating the first-time guest, educating the current membership, and incorporating all who God is drawing to covenant together.

Contained in the following pages are the steps and strategy to make first-time visitors long-time members. The seventeen-week project was broken up into three phases: educate, assimilate, and incorporate. The first phase was to instruct the current members and regular attenders on the biblical nature of church membership. To gauge a

¹Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 9.

“before and after” understating of church membership, a pre- and post-sermon survey was conducted. Following the pre-survey of the educate phase, a five-week sermon series on ecclesiology was preached. The second phase of assimilation was to outline a strategy to attract the unchurched, dechurched, and Millennials to attract them to visit the church. The third phase was an outline of methods and motivations to incorporate people into membership.

Pre-Sermon Survey

Before the project could move forward, an assessment was made of the congregation members and regular attenders’ understanding of ecclesiology. Another area of assessment was to examine the assimilation process of SCBC. Week 1 started the evaluation process of the assimilation process with an elders’ meeting to review the process. The current assimilation process was simple. A guest was encouraged to fill out a welcome card and to place the card in the offering plate at the end of service. SCBC receives one to four welcome cards per Sunday. After that Sunday, a first-time welcome letter is sent, and if a person checks off interest in a certain ministry the leader of that ministry team is contacted to reach out to the individual. Finally, the guest’s information is forwarded to a person in the same age bracket to be contacted. No other assimilation is employed.

In August, the pre-sermon survey was distributed to a random sample of twenty-three persons (see appendix 1). The pre-sermon surveys were handed out to some congregation members and mailed to others for the recipient to bring back before the sermon series began. The main goal of the survey was to assess the church members’ and attenders’ understanding of the church, its organization, and if the person has committed to membership. The results of the pre-survey were fascinating. The data showed that 100 percent of the 23 participants believe they are Christians. Of this group, 44 percent were 65 years plus and 22 percent were between 45 years and 54 years old. These were the two biggest age demographics. Of the participants, 76 percent surveyed

strongly believed church attendance is a priority, 78 percent strongly believed commitment to the church is important, and 86 percent strongly agreed or agreed that the elders are responsible for the oversight of the church. In addition, 65 percent strongly agreed or agreed that the congregation is accountable to each other and the elders, and 91 percent either strongly agreed or agreed that they had confidence in the leadership of SCBC. When asked what they were looking for in a church family, the answers were varied: 41 percent were looking for love, acceptance, and fellowship; 36 percent were looking for Bible teaching; 5 percent were not looking for a church; and 9 percent said the size of the church attracted them or they had no comment. When asked why they stayed at SCBC, 65 percent said for the teaching. When asked to rate the ministries, preaching came in at number 1, worship at number 2, and prayer at number 3, followed by missions and children's ministry. When asked if they were currently involved in a ministry, 43 percent said yes, 52 percent said no, and 5 percent did not comment. When asked how they got involved in a ministry, 26 percent said by personal initiative; 34.8 percent said they became involved because of a personal invitation; 17.4 percent said from an announcement from the pulpit or bulletin; and 17.4 percent had no comment.

Phase 1: Educate

In August, the ten-week process of the development and preaching of sermons started. In keeping with the narrative to educate, assimilate, and incorporate, the sermon series' aim was to educate the congregation on these three concepts. The series was titled, "God's Gifts: A Study in Ecclesiology." The first sermon was titled, "A New Spiritual Family." Emphasis was on the correlation between the spiritual family of the church and the biological family of the home. The greatest institution in the world is the family; the second greatest institution is the church. The aim was to show the beauty of the church as a family once again as demonstrated in the book of Acts.

Sermon 1. In the first sermon, the congregation learned that Christ is the foundation of the church and that the church is both a universal and local gathering of believers. The church is a new spiritual family as opposed to a biological family. The sermon addressed whether church attendance or membership was a priority. The sermon explained that to be a part of the church is a privilege. First Corinthians 1:2 was expounded to show the sameness yet difference between the universal and local church. Acts 11:26 was expounded to show the church as a local family. If the church is the gospel made visible, the question was asked, how is our gospel presentation? To be part of the church is a privilege, so by application, the local church is a place to belong. Next, I explained that Jesus is the head of the church according to Matthew 16:18. The last point in the sermon explained that Jesus is the owner and builder of the church. To show this biblical truth, 1 Peter 2:4-7 was expounded. The sermon wrapped up with some challenges: Do you belong to Christ? Do you belong; are you a member of the local church? The significance implied in the sermon was that simply attending the church is not entering into the church family.

Sermon 2. The second sermon in the series was titled, “God’s Gift of Structure in the Church Family.” The sermon communicated the structure of the church by linking church structure to the character of God, because God is a God of order. Acts 6:1-4; 20:28-30, Titus 1:5, and 1 Peter 5:1-4 were used to demonstrate this truth. The correlation was made between a spiritually healthy family and a healthy biological family. The point was that no one wants to be a part of something that is dysfunctional, either at home or in the church. Structure and order is imperative in both venues. In His wisdom, God has established church leaders and membership to give the church structure, order, and security. The major point explained that families, as well as churches, need boundaries. The aim of the sermon was to show the value of structure in relationship to the local church family. The prepositional statement made in the sermon was that the absence of leadership breeds disunity, tension, and organizational floundering. Structure and

boundaries are necessary for every organization. Organizations do not run effectively without either. Without structure and boundaries these organizations, the church included, will drift aimlessly like a river without banks. The question was asked, why does the church need structure, boundaries, and leadership? The answer is that God has ordained leadership to bring structure. Structure begins with God, is maintained with leadership, and applied with membership.

The first point of the sermon was that biblical leadership produces order, and was supported by Acts 6:1-4; 20:28-30, Titus 1:5, and 1 Peter 5:1-4. God's gift to the church of structure is accomplished through leadership. By way of application, the point was made that one of Satan's favorite tricks is to create dissention and disunity in the church. Dissention and disunity begin when people do not feel cared for and respected. The best way to feel cared for at SCBC is to get involved in a life group. Life groups are developed on the philosophy of caring, connecting, and teaching. A second point in the sermon was that biblical leadership produces security. The emphasis here was on biblical leadership. One of the functions of biblical leadership is keeping the doctrinal purity of the church, just as Paul instructed the elders at Ephesus when he warned them to keep watch over the flock (Eph 20:28-31). The sermon concluded with the application of why the church needs structure. Some of the reasons for structure are that leadership identifies problems and finds solutions, it keeps the church focused on its mission and vision, and it guards against false teaching. Church membership is critical in these areas, as the leaders need to know who is committed to the church.

Sermon 3. The third sermon in the series reached the heart of the issue for long-time regular attenders who have not taken the next step toward membership. The title was "God's Gift of Membership for the Church Family." The question was asked, is church membership biblical? To tackle this often-controversial issue, membership was addressed also as accountability. The point was that God gave the church the gift of membership for accountability in the church family. The propositional statement was made

that church membership for believers is scriptural.² Church membership is not a person's idea or an issue of wanting to control others, but is the natural outworking of God's redemptive plans. This sermon set out to clearly define the three-fold accountability found in Scripture: (1) believers are accountable to Christ; (2) believers are accountable to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ; and (3) believers are accountable to the leaders God raises up in the local church. Along with addressing the question of church membership, I asked, why join a church and why does church membership need to be discussed. The text for this sermon was Matthew 16:18.

The first point was to show that church membership is necessary because the church is God's frontline witness for the gospel. The gospel witness is stronger when believers covenant together.³ A formal commitment to a local church through membership is continued evidence of a growing commitment to Christ. Commitment through church membership is part of discipleship. Next, the meaning and etymology of the word *church* was discussed. The church is one of the crowning jewels of God's creation for the sole purpose of bringing God glory—why do church members treat the church as second rate? The church needs membership because the church needs boundaries. I raised the question, how is the leadership or overseers of the church supposed to shepherd the flock if they do not know who is committed to the church? It is ridiculous to think that every church overseer or elder is to oversee every believer in Christ apart from mutual accountability as brothers and sisters in Christ.

To respond to the question of whether church membership is biblical, the point was made that even if the word *membership* is not in Scripture (the number one argument against membership) the concept is implied. Various concepts from the Old Testament

²In keeping with the Baptist doctrine of regenerate church membership, an official member of the church should be a born again believer.

³This is not to diminish the necessity of individual faith sharing but looking at a corporate united witness for Christ.

were used to support this point. The sermon concluded with two key reasons why joining a church is imperative: joining a local church brings God glory by covenanting together as a spiritual family, and structure and boundaries show the non-churched the glory of Christ in conversion. A necessary relationship exists between members of the church and the message of the church. As covenanting together (membership) is a continued evidence of a growing commitment to Christ, a challenge was given in the sermon to pray about becoming a member with the church family of SCBC. Emphasis was laid on the word *devoted* in Acts 2:42 to bring out the dichotomy of first-century Christianity and twenty-first century Christianity. People today lack commitment and church is not a priority, as David Olson points out when comparing population growth to church attendance.⁴ Today a lone ranger Christian is common, but not biblical. “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together” (Heb 10:25) comes against this modern attitude that once or twice a month church attendance is sufficient. To apply the idea of devotion, I asked additional questions: Where does devotion to gathering together as a church fall in our priorities of life? Is the church relegated to second or third string on life’s scene? Scripture, and more specifically Acts 2:42, draws a relationship between a local assembly and commitment.

The sermon concluded with the twenty-first century cultural reality of church schizophrenia. Christians go to one church for the worship, one church for the sermon, and another for the programs and so on. Devotion and commitment to a local church is imperative for the life of the believer. God has loved the believer enough to provide the believer with a local church for spiritual growth and accountability. Last, the challenge was given: how does our life match up to the commitment of First Century Christians?

⁴David T. Olson. *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), loc. 581, Kindle. Olson writes, “While this robust growth in the number of Americans as taken place, no growth in church attendance has occurred! In 1990, 52 million people attended worship each week—in 2006 the number remained unchanged. However, because of the sizable population growth, the percentage of Americans who attend church is declining.”

On a scale of one to ten, where do you fall? (one being the most committed and 10 being the least). What needs to change for you to move toward “one” on the scale?

Sermon 4. The fourth sermon in the series switched gears from the theological to the practical. It was titled, “The Care Effect: God’s Gift of Attraction or Influence, Part One,” and the main text was Acts 2:42-47. The seven dominant spheres of influence in American culture opened the sermon: media, arts, entertainment, education, family, business, politics and government, and the church. Each sphere of influence was evaluated for its impact on society. The question was asked, how could Christ followers be involved in shaping each sphere of American culture? The proposition was made that actions speak louder than words. The relationship between actions and beliefs was examined. Actions are based on beliefs, what one believes impacts actions, and actions can influence. The church is here to be salt and light (Matt 5:13-14), and to influence society; the church must be noticed by the unchurched. How can SCBC become an influential church? The twenty-first century church faces a missionary challenge. The church has forgotten how to relate to the surrounding culture.⁵

The aim of this sermon was to communicate that God wants to change the Las Vegas valley and use SCBC to change it. SCBC can make an impact in the community through caring for believers inside the church and caring for people outside the church, in other words, to flesh out the virtue of unconditional love. To accomplish this goal, SCBC must be people of the Scriptures (Acts 2:42). The church’s foundation starts with a standard of biblical truth. SCBC needs to be a church of biblical convictions. Acts 2:42 says, “They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching.” The congregation needs to know that membership, commitment, and caring for each other and society are not man-

⁵I am not advocating watering down the truth of Scripture or becoming seeker sensitive, but instead letting the love of Christ break through uninterested culture, through concrete actions, to influence.

made rules but God breathed directives. In a post-modern, no absolutes world, one would think that a concrete standard would be attractive. To illustrate the lack of concrete standards in the world today, the Nashville statement was explained.⁶ Next, a shift was made to discuss the current generations of Gen-X's and Millennials since these are the most prominent generations today. The sermon concluded with the truth that for SCBC to reach the next generation, they must first become a church of biblical conviction based on Acts 2:42-47.

Sermon 5. The fifth and last sermon in the series was a continuation of sermon 4. The aim of this sermon was to show the need for a caring community and the effects that church community can have on society. If the local church is employing first-century biblical principles, then it will reach diverse demographics. The local church today can make an impact. The life change of the first-century Christians exhibiting extraordinary generosity and care made just such an impact. People inside and out the church could sense that God was at work. The Scripture text for this sermon was Acts 2:42-47 and Philippians 2:3-5. The first point made was that the church should to be a people committed to community. The relationship between community, commitment, and membership was discussed. This relationship is not to say a person cannot be committed to community without being a member, but membership is further evidence of his or her commitment to community. For example, some issues that keep people from committed community are busyness and apathy. A biblically healthy church desires community. The tag line for the sermon was “we go to church, to be the church, because we are the church.” Within this community, the second point was that this community must exhibit extraordinary generosity.

⁶The recently signed Nashville Statement upholds the sanctity of marriage as between one man and one woman as well as other cultural issues. The Nashville Statement, accessed September 17, 2017. <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/>.

The enemy of community is today's mindset of consumerism; consumerism destroys community. People conditioned by American modernity expect to be served rather than serve. Yet, if the local church puts into practice the first-century Holy Spirit-induced extraordinary generosity that will reach society. Through extraordinary generosity people will notice that God is at work. For SCBC to reach all demographics, the principle of excessive generosity exhibited by the first-century church must become the norm both inside and outside the church. This is how SCBC will reach its community with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Post-Sermon Survey and Evaluation

At the conclusion of the sermon series, the post-sermon survey and sermon evaluations were distributed. The sermon titles were "God's Gift of a New Spiritual Family," "God's Gift of Church Structure in the Family," "God's Gift of Membership for the Church Family," "The Care Effect: God's Gift of Attraction or Influence Part 1," and "God's Gift of Impact, Part 2."⁷ Consistent with the transient nature of Las Vegas, some participants that completed the pre-survey were not available for the post-survey. For example, one person was deployed and unable to take the post-sermon survey. Four people left the church shortly after the sermon series started or near the end. Church membership being a controversial issue could have been the reason, but no reason was given. Two participants moved with no forwarding address. One participant missed the sermons and does not have computer access to listen to the sermons, and two people did not return the post-survey. This being said, the results that came in were enlightening.

When the first sermon survey was sent out, SCBC had 26 committed members, 50 committed non-members, and about 30 occasional attenders and visitors according to the record keeping. When the post-sermon survey was sent out, SCBC had 38 committed members and 26 committed non-members. There was a 49 percent drop in the committed

⁷See sermon outlines in appendix 6.

non-members with 12 of them committing to membership. However, the large reduction in the number of committed non-members emphasizes the transient nature of Las Vegas and the need for this project. Once again, and consistent with the pre-survey, 100 percent of the recipients considered themselves Christians. The age range from the post-survey dropped by 10 percent from the 65-year old plus category, making the results more balanced in all age ranges.

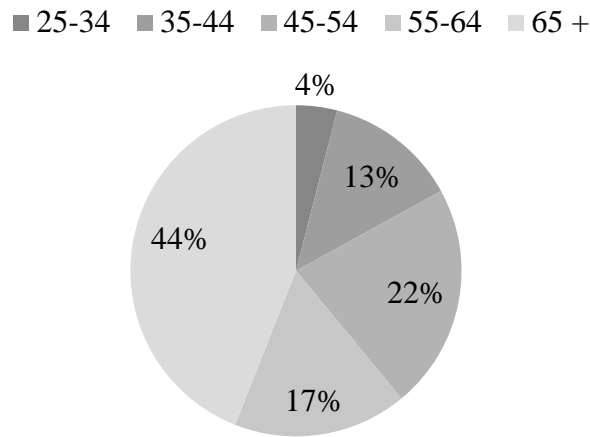


Figure 1. Pre-sermon series participants' age

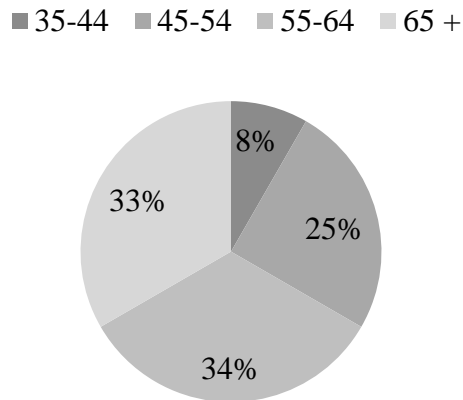


Figure 2. Post-sermon series participants' age

Participants that strongly agreed that church attendance is a priority increased from 76 percent to 92 percent.

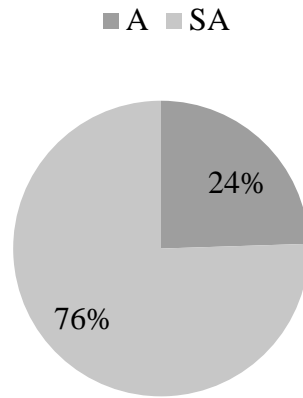


Figure 3. Responses to pre-sermon series statement 6: "I consider church attendance a priority"

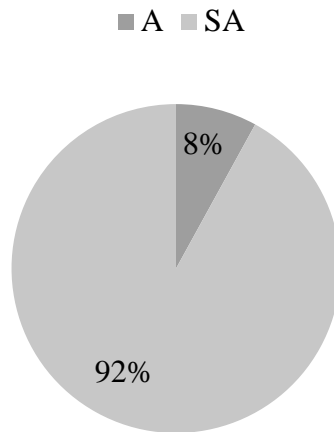


Figure 4. Responses to post-sermon series statement 6: "I consider church attendance a priority"

Participants that believe the church is the body of Christ fell by 3 percent.

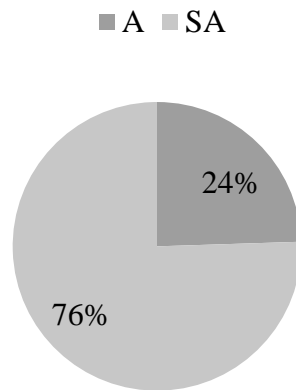


Figure 5. Responses to pre-sermon series statement 7: “The church is the body of Christ”

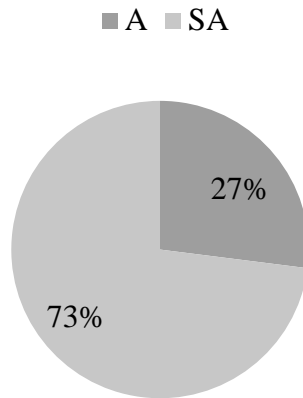


Figure 6. Responses to post-sermon series statement 7: “The church is the body of Christ”

Participants that believed that commitment to the church is important increased by 6 percent. It is interesting to note that the importance of church attendance rose to 92 percent, yet commitment to the church did not keep pace or increase by as wide a margin. Participants believe going to church is important, or at least that is what the data shows, yet when it came to committing to the church the western individualistic mindset is still a hurdle the church has to overcome. The halo effect (wanting to present yourself in a

more favorable light than reality) might be one reason for the disparity of these two questions.

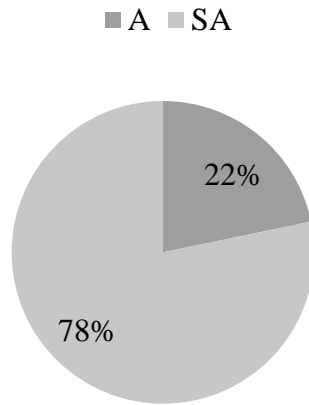


Figure 7. Responses to pre-sermon series statement 9: "I consider commitment to the church important"

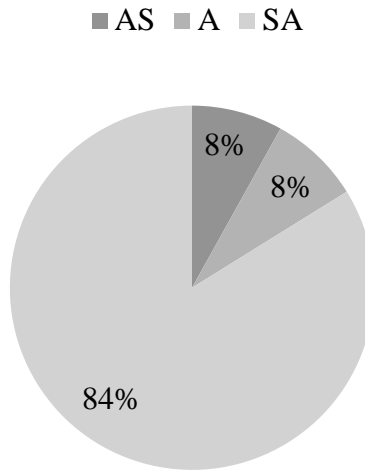


Figure 8. Responses to post-sermon series statement 9: "I consider commitment to the church important"

Participants increased their belief that elders are responsible for the oversight of the church by 8 percent.

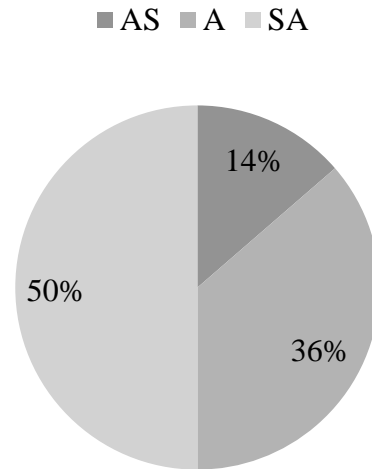


Figure 9. Responses to pre-sermon series statement 10: “The elders are responsible for the oversight of church”

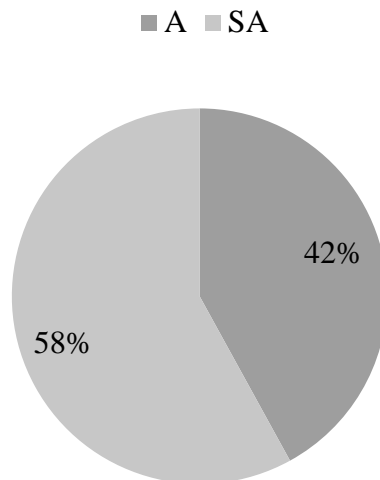


Figure 10. Responses to post-sermon series statement 10: “The elders are responsible for the oversight of church”

The congregation being accountable to each other and the elders of the church evened out a little more with 58 percent strongly agreeing and 42 percent agreeing. It appears that the sermon series helped move the congregation to understand the mutual accountability and leadership's responsibility.

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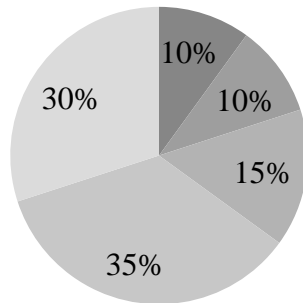


Figure 11. Responses to pre-sermon series statement 13: “The congregation is accountable to each other and the overseers of the church”

■ A ■ SA

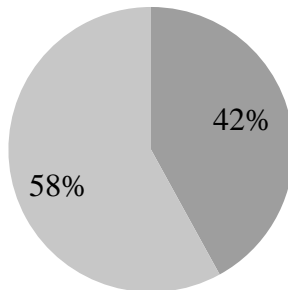


Figure 12. Responses to post-sermon series statement 13: “The congregation is accountable to each other and the overseers of the church”

It is interesting to note that as the congregation's understanding of mutual and leadership accountability went up, confidence in SCBC leadership, in the degree of confidence, went down. The strongly agree category fell by 15 percent. The congregation still has confidence in SCBC's leadership, but it is just not as strong as in the pre-survey. The result is a 50/50 split.

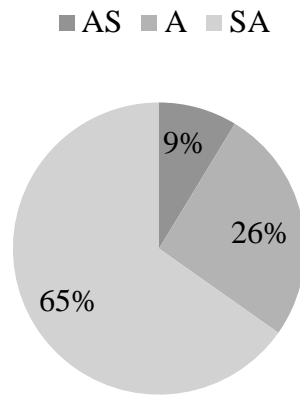


Figure 13. Responses to pre-sermon series statement 15: "I am confident in leadership of SCBC"

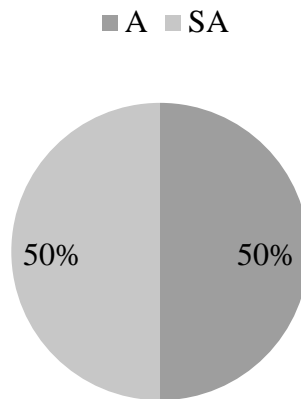


Figure 14. Responses to post-sermon series statement 15: "I am confident in leadership of SCBC"

When asked if the participant served in a ministry, the post-survey results were a 50/50 split.

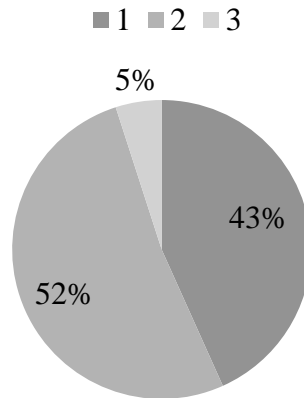


Figure 15. Response to pre-sermon series statement 24: “Are you currently involved in serving in a ministry?”

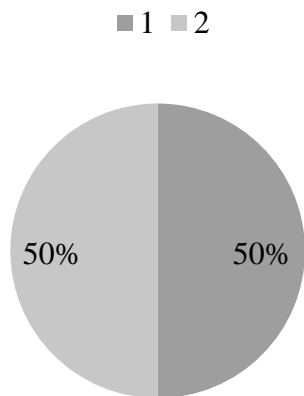


Figure 16. Responses to post-sermon series statement 24: “Are you currently involved in serving in a ministry?”

Last, when asked how the participant was integrated into the ministry, 62 percent in the post-survey said by the bulletin and announcements from the pulpit. The second biggest response for how a person became involved in the pre-survey was from a personal invitation.

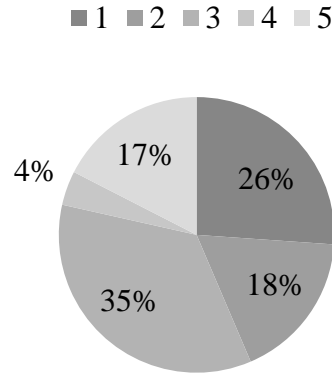


Figure 17. Responses to pre-sermon series statement 25:
“How did you get involved in your first activity?”

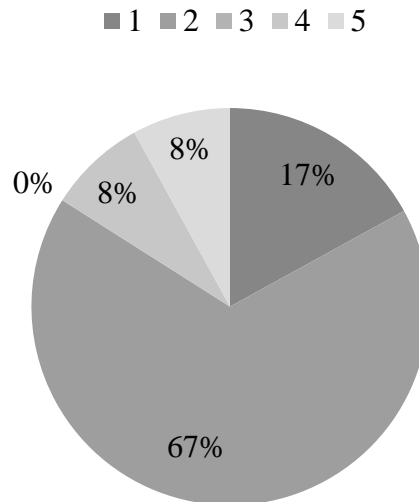


Figure 18. Responses to post-sermon series statement 25:
“How did you get involved in your first activity?”

In summary, the data from the surveys confirms progress in some important areas. The age demographic evened out with the post-survey as the ages balanced out to thirds. Church attendance is considered a priority and commitment to church ranks in the 90th percentile. Church as a priority and commitment are the very values that need to be transferred to millennials, the unchurched, and the dechurched. For ecclesiology and church polity to increase by 8 percent in the understanding of elder oversight is significant.

A 50 percent split regarding ministry involvement shows that there is work to do to create pathways so people acquire a feeling of ownership in church life. To understand that most people become involved in ministry because of a response from the bulletin or announcement from the pulpit confirms that bulletins are still valuable in this digital age. The most enlightening discovery was the increase in membership just because they were asked why they had never joined the church. A simple verbal invitation propelled some people to consider membership and join.

Post-Sermon Evaluations

After preaching the five sermons on ecclesiology two elders of SCBC and three other SBC pastors evaluated the sermons. The sermon evaluations were mainly positive. The rubric was made up of eight statements:

1. The sermon is clearly relevant to the issue of church membership.
2. The sermon is faithful to the Bible's teaching on one of the following topics: regeneration, conversion, holiness, commitment, or accountability.
3. The material is theologically sound.
4. The thesis of each sermon is clearly stated.
5. The points of the sermon clearly support the thesis.
6. The sermon contains points of practical application.
7. The sermon is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.
8. Overall, the sermon was clearly presented.

The evaluation scale was (1) insufficient, (2) requires attention, (3) sufficient, and (4) exemplary. The post-sermon evaluations are found in appendix 5.

The SCBC church elders marked exemplary (4) for all sermons in all eight categories. The third reviewer, a pastor from an SBC church in Maryland, marked that sermon 1 was sufficient (3) for statements 1, 2, 6, 7, and 8. Sermon 2 received sufficient (3) for statements 6 and 8. Sermon 3 received a sufficient (3) rating for statements 1, 2, and 4. Sermon 4 seemed to fall from grace—he marked two sufficient (3) and one

requires attention (2). The last sermon received sufficient (3) for statements 1, 5, 6, 7, and 8. All other statements on all evaluations were exemplary (4).

The fourth reviewer was a pastor from Henderson, Nevada. For sermon 1, he marked two sufficient (3) and the rest exemplary (4). Sermon 2 received all exemplary (4). Sermon 4 received exemplary (4), except for statement 2, which was sufficient (3). Sermons 4 and 5 seemed to fall from grace. Sermon 4 received sufficient (3) for statements 1, 2, 6, and 8, and requires attentions (2) for statements 3 and 7, and then the rest were exemplary (4). Sermon 5 received sufficient (3) for statements 1, 2, 5, and 8; and requires attention (2) for statements 3 and 7; the rest were exemplary (4).

The last sermon review was from a SBC pastor in North Las Vegas. He marked exemplary (4) for all sermons and statements. Overall, the sermons received 83.5 percent exemplary, 14 percent sufficient, and 2.5 percent requires attention. For more detailed information, see the post-sermon evaluation charts in appendix 5. This concludes phase 1 of this three-phase project, consisting of the first thirteen weeks.

Phase 2: Assimilation

One rule of evaluation is having data to measure SCBC against. It was necessary to understand what other growing churches implemented for their assimilation process. During weeks 14 and 15, I conducted phone interviews, personal interviews, and follow-up email correspondence with five of the largest churches in America. I asked the same questions to each church.

1. Do you have a system in place or way of tracking regular attenders that have never stepped up to join the church?
2. How long do you let a person attend before asking when they are going to take the membership class?
3. What is the follow up process once a person visits the church?
4. How many times do you follow up with a person and over what length of time?
5. What have you found as the best way to incorporate someone into the church--to plug them in and create a sense of ownership.

The first church I contacted to glean insight into their assimilation process was Shadow Hills Baptist Church, also known as Shadow Hills Church of Las Vegas (SHC). Immediately one wonders if the word Baptist is removed from the church name to not place a stumbling block before the unchurched.⁸ Shadow Hills Church averages 2, 781 in attendance on Sundays and is the ninety-fifth largest church, according to Thom Rainer.⁹ Shadow Hills' assimilation process consists of filling out a connect card and when attendee hands it in; he receives information about the church and a complimentary drink at the church's coffee shop. Guest information is sent to a ministry leader depending on the questions asked about certain ministries. SHC tries to reach out two to three times the first week. To incorporate someone into the church, SHC either get the first-time guest serving or plugged into a community group. This is the totality of their process.

The second church contacted was Shadow Mountain Community Church in El Cajon, California (SMCC). According to Rainer, Shadow Mountain Community Church is the eighteenth largest SBC as of 2014.¹⁰ I spoke with the connections person to get the specifics of their assimilation process. Their process was surprisingly simple. First, they have welcome cards (like most churches) that are available. If a guest checks off any ministry interest, then the welcome card information is sent to that ministry lead. Second, SMCC sends a first-time letter. On Tuesday nights, SMCC visits the guests home thanking them for visiting and go door knocking in that neighborhood. The connections pastor said these are cold calls. Last, those who would like to join the church attend a one time, hour and one-half membership class. In this class, the potential member is given a spiritual gifts test. This is the totality of their assimilation process. For such a

⁸The current issue of keeping or leaving Baptist in the church name is beyond the scope of this paper but should be researched to understand if it does affect church growth.

⁹Thom S. Rainer, "Largest Churches in the SBC," July 12, 2014, accessed October 16, 2017, <http://thomrainer.com/2014/07/2014-update-largest-churches-southern-baptist-convention/>.

¹⁰Ibid.

simplistic process, Shadow Mountain Community Church is doing well to be the eighteenth largest SBC churches.¹¹ To contextualize, their process to SCBC, the seven-mile radius is worth focusing on, but the Tuesday door knocking would not work due to the amount of gated neighborhoods around the church.

The third church examined was Rosena Church (RC). This new church plant is in a growing area of Rosena Ranch, CA. Considering that the culture of Southern California is similar to Las Vegas (a good percentage of Las Vegas is made up of transplants from California), the assimilation processes could mirror each other. I contacted the assimilation director at the church, who is also the Administrative Assistant at the Gateway Theological Seminary for President Jeff Irog. RC does use a program called Planning Center as their database for registering visitors and tracking attendance.¹² First, they gather information from the connection cards then they have a six-week follow up process of phone calls, personal visits, postcards, and a Friday email and Saturday text. They have different leaders for each contact. Second, they have a “get to know you” fellowship, which is a two-hour Saturday morning brunch. Several ministry team members are present to eat, meet, and greet. Any questions about the church are entertained. RC’s leadership team clearly point out the next steps and membership class procedure, which is a three-hour class on another Saturday. The leadership team is present to explain the church’s purpose, mission, church constitution, ministry structure, expectations of members, and the assimilation process. Fourth, RC allows visitors to assist with non-leadership roles. Once a person becomes a member, they take the PLACE ministries assessment test and attend a one-hour coaching session.¹³ The results of the PLACE test

¹¹However, their size could be due to the sheer size of the population in Southern California and not necessarily a result of their assimilation process.

¹²Planning Center Church Management Center, accessed November 5, 2017, <https://planning.center/>.

¹³Place Ministries is an intentional process to connect church members into purpose-driven ministry. “About Place,” accessed November 15, 2017, <https://www.placeministries.org/>

determine where a person is best suited to serve. This is RC's follow up and assimilation process.

The fourth church examined was the Summit Church of Homestead Heights (SC), in Durham, North Carolina. According to Rainer, Summit is the twenty-sixth largest SBC church with a weekly attendance of 6,518.¹⁴ Pastor Danny Franks detailed Summit's assimilation process. He describes the initial process to coming onto a freeway on-ramp:

We focus on providing on-ramps for our first-time / newer guests. These are "as you are ready," understand that many people are intentionally flying under the radar for a time until they're comfortable enough to make themselves known. However, we try to make those on-ramps clear and compelling, so we're ready when they're ready. Our primary on-ramp is definitely our first-time guest tent.¹⁵

These on ramps are ways for first-time guests, or as they say FTGs, to make SC known. This first link on the web page asks, how many on ramps are necessary? The question is never answered directly, but a comprehensive assimilation process is outlined.¹⁶ Summit Church takes the "no pressure, when you're ready we will connect you attitude." An additional point Franks made was not using the words *membership class*. It is his view, "We don't call it a "membership class," because that tends to have negative connotations to people who didn't grow up in church or were in a church where membership was just a box to check off."¹⁷ At Summit, they continually point guests back to what they call the starting point of the on ramp. Once a person visits, he or she receives six verbal or written

about-place.html.

¹⁴Rainer, "Largest Churches in the SBC."

¹⁵Email correspondence from Danny Franks, November 2, 2017.

¹⁶Danny Franks, "Connective Tissue: Two-Ply for your Noggin," accessed November 2, 2017, <http://dfranks.com/2017/09/20/qa-many-ramps-provide/>.

¹⁷Email correspondence from Danny Franks.

invitations to the starting point within the first week.¹⁸ The rest of their process is simple and three fold: a Monday email, a Monday or Tuesday phone call, and a Wednesday or Thursday follow up call. The purpose for this process is to thank them for coming, ask them about their experience, point them to the starting point, and ask if they have any questions.¹⁹ Where Summit church and SCBC intersect is on question 4: How many times do you follow up with a person and over what length of time? It is here that Summit stalls. Franks explains,

This is where our current struggle is. Right now, the week after follow up is our primary thrust. There is no direct contact with a guest again until they come to Starting Point, sign up for a small group or service team, etc. We have talked about a month later follow up, three months later, etc., but have not done so yet.

This is the end of SC process of assimilation. The only metric they have for measuring if a person is incorporating into the church is small group ministry, joining a ministry team, and giving.

The fifth and last church is a non-denominational church called Calvary Chapel Spring Valley in Las Vegas (CCSV). Calvary Chapel is a church of roughly 2,000-3,000 people on a Sunday. On November 1, 2017, I met with the assimilation pastor, Pastor John. This hour-long meeting was insightful. They are transitioning from traditional welcome cards to a paperless system. CCSV is encouraging first-time visitors to download the church app on their first visit. They still have welcome cards available and the cards that are filled out are put on a spreadsheet. A call, text, or email is sent inquiring for any prayer requests. They receive anywhere from 25-50 cards per week and the follow up calls can take anywhere from four to eight hours with one person. This is the extent of Cavalry's follow up system.

¹⁸Franks, "Connective Tissue."

¹⁹Danny Franks, "What Happens on Mondays?" accessed November 2, 2017, <http://dfranks.com/2013/03/29/what-happens-on-monday/>.

Contextual Strategies for Assimilation

In keeping with the research mentioned in chapter 3, SCBC will use the following two virtues, to love and serve, in hopes to attract and assimilate people to the church in the coming year. Aside from the church caring internally for each other, carrying one another's burdens and so forth, the context of Las Vegas needs a more aggressive approach for the church to get noticed and to attract the unchurched. This more aggressive approach is based on the research noted in chapter 3. For example, Gen Xers' consider themselves spiritual but not religious, and do not think about church, and when they do, their perception is negative. Millennials have a desire to make a difference in the world. Millennials should be easier to attract because they have a utilitarian mindset. An assimilation strategy that has a strong desire to change the world and quality relationships should attract all generations but especially Millennials. Certain social ventures should attract Millennials. To reach the dechurched, the church must get noticed for its positive contributions to society. The dechurched have already been involved in the church; therefore, they need to be reacquainted with the good the church can accomplish. The common denominator for both generations, Gen X and Millennial, is that they want to make a difference in the world. The Christian church has always desired to make a spiritual and social difference in the world. Making a difference in the world is a value alignment of both these generations that SCBC needs to develop. A process that incorporates unconditional love and service is the answer.

For SCBC, the methods to attract and assimilate these groups must not be too complex. The old saying K.I.S.S. applies here: Keep It Simple Stupid. The more complex the assimilation process is, the more it is possible that the process will not to be utilized due to complexity. In these actions of unconditional love and service, the uniqueness and originality of Jesus will be unveiled to a lost and hurting world.

Chapter 2 of the exposition of Acts 2: 42-47 shows the church becoming attractive to the unchurched by becoming selfless. Selflessness is a powerful tool for attraction. The most likely way to attract and assimilate both Gen Xers and Millennials is

service and community or another way to say this is relationships and a social cause. The church must confront the answer to the question, would SCBC be noticed if the church closed its doors? The church must also internally evaluate its own values: self or selflessness? As authors Rusaw and Swanson make clear, “Two items clearly reveal the truth about what matters most to us: our checkbooks and our calendars. Regardless of what we claim, how we spend our money and our time exposes what truly matters to us.”²⁰ The old saying goes, the proof is in the pudding, or in this case, our purses, checkbooks, and calendars. In order for SCBC to impact the community it must first get noticed.

Step 1: Get Noticed

Step 1 is to get noticed in the community through selfless service or compassionate causes. To reach the next generation with the gospel, SCBC must become an outwardly-focused church. This outward focus must become the new nomenclature. Outreach in terms of service must become part of SCBC’s DNA. The congregation of SCBC must be the church that leaves the church. Rusaw and Swanson write,

We need to be like Jesus. Like him, we need to be out in our communities, connecting with people through acts of amazing love . . . while connecting them to a God of amazing grace.²¹

The following action plan will make SCBC a light for the gospel in the community.

Form an outreach team. The outreach team name will be #Serve Vegas. After the horrific tragedy of October 1, 2017, where a lone gunman shot and killed 58 persons attending a country and western concert, gracious donors gave funds to SCBC to reach out to first responders to bless them for their service. Out of this tragedy came an outpouring of love and mercy from many Las Vegas churches. It was the spark that caused SCBC to say, “What can we do?” The purpose of this outreach team will be to

²⁰Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004), forward, 12.

²¹*Ibid.*, 7.

build lasting relationships within the community, share Christ when appropriate, and perform acts of mercy with “no strings attached.”

Community service day. The outreach team will organize a yearly community service day called “Make a Difference Day.” The service day will allow the church to team up with a local business to perform a community service project.

Bless a non-profit day. The outreach team will organize a “Bless Another Non-profit Day.” This will be a day where the church helps another non-profit in need. The needs could be physical maintenance projects or helping them carry out their mission for a day.

Outreach to people with service. The outreach team will rotate each quarter visiting hospitals, fire stations, and police departments thanking them for their service and passing out fast food restaurant gift cards. With these gift cards will be an invitation to SCBC and information about Christianity through a ministry called Truelife.org.²²

Communicate with city leaders. The outreach team will meet with city leaders to understand the needs of the city and how SCBC can help the community. SCBC is in an exclusive area of Las Vegas where the needs are minimal. However, the needs in the city proper are abundant. After evaluations of the most pressing needs are discussed, one of the needs will be selected for a Loving Las Vegas Day, developed by SCBC. It is the hope that this venture will build relationships between the church and the city.

Participate in Safe Families. SCBC will team up with a ministry called Safe Families, which is an organization reaching out to families in crisis. This ministry is a

²²Truelife.org is an evangelistic tool that I discovered at the 2017 Southern Baptist Convention. The web site contains short videos that answer life’s hard questions while inviting someone to your church. Truelife.org, accessed November 5, 2017, www.truelife.org.

joint venture between the City of Las Vegas and churches. Church members would become temporary foster parents while families work through their issues. The families in crisis would have total access to their children and host parents. This ministry is an opportunity to build relationships with families that are hurting in the community and need to experience the love and grace of God.²³

Sell something day. In keeping with Jesus' words in Luke 12:33, "Sell your positions and give to the needy," and Matthew 25:35-36, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me," SCBC will have a "Sell Something Day." The idea is to encourage the congregation to sell something in their home between \$25-50 dollars and find someone that fits the scriptural description above and bless them. The hope is to teach the congregation to become selfless.

Implementing these seven ideas is not a comprehensive list, but is a start to change the relationship between the church and community: to get noticed, and to change the essence of the congregation to become an externally-focused church. Success has to be measured by the impact on the community and the relationships built. SCBC needs to learn the value of impacting the community, which leads to genuine relationships that may lead to salvation of souls.

Another area to be developed to reach the millennial generation is that SCBC needs to make improvements in the use of technology. To this end:

1. SCBC is updating its web site.
2. A welcome video and different ministry videos will be added.
3. A church app will be developed.

²³Safe Families Ministries, accessed November 5, 2017, <http://safe-families.org/>.

Step 2 of Follow Up

After SCBC has attracted Millennials, the unchurched, and dechurched, by getting the church noticed in the community, how does SCBC encourage repeat visits? Also, how many times should SCBC reach out before it becomes a form of annoyance? The research from five fast growing or large churches shows a surprisingly simple process of assimilation. Most of these churches focus on the first week with two additional contacts made. Considering the research, SCBC would be ahead of the curve by contacting the first-time guest a total of seven times over a period of six months. If the first-time guest has found a new church home other than SCBC, they would be removed from the prospect list. If after seven attempts to connect with the first-time guest there is not any response, they would be removed from the prospect list.

The keys to assimilating first-time guests, to regular attenders, to family members for today's generations, are love expressed in community and service. There needs to be an overwhelming sense of community expressed in loving people, where they are at spiritually, and a process for them to serve. When a person is serving in the church they have a sense of ownership in the church that keeps them coming.

Phase 1 of Follow Up

An assimilation team will be created, which will access the current congregation to evaluate how many current members and attenders live within a five-mile radius of SCBC. This is what I am calling the Push Pin Project. Simply mapping out where everyone lives will help SCBC to understand how well we are reaching or not reaching its community. Next, this team will make sure welcome card information is stored in a database with the date the person visited. A purchase of Planning Center, which is used by RC, might be in order. Then, on the first week of the visit a welcome letter will be sent, an email on Tuesday, and a phone call made from the pastor on Friday thanking them for their visit.

A second phone call will be made from someone in the same age range as the attendee in the second week. Like other churches, if someone has checked off interest in a ministry, their information will be forwarded to that ministry leader. A month later, the pastor will contact for a fourth time to see how the first-time guest is doing and if they have found a church home. If SCBC is doing any special events during this time (VBS or Ladies Christmas Tea) the visitor will receive a call or email notifying them of the event. In the second month, all first-time guests will receive an invitation to a get to know you brunch. This process equals four connections within the first month. After this, the guest will be alerted to any special events happening for a period of six months. If after six months the first-time guest has not returned or has found a new church home, they will be removed from the prospect list.

Phase 2 of Follow Up

Phase 2 is to create an overwhelming sense of community. It is imperative for SCBC to be dripping with hospitality from the minute a family pulls into the parking lot of the church. The old adage is true, “you don’t get a second chance to make a first impression.” The landscaping, signage, and greeters should have a welcoming persona. The key to community is that church is not just meeting on Sunday morning, but is living life together. SCBC’s model for community is Acts 2:42-47. Ideas to develop authentic community include the following:

1. Monthly dessert fellowships at rotating homes.
2. Intentionally taking the time to sit and talk with first-time guests before the service starts.
3. Start a connection point ministry where groups sign up for like interests: golf, football, scrapbooking, etc.
4. Cast vision for community through website, videos, and newsletters to get the word out about the connectedness of the congregation.
5. Promote an Invitation Sunday on Christmas, Easter, and Mother’s Day thereby building community by inviting friends.

To promote an invitation Sunday, Farr, Anderson, and Kotan explain, “Special Sundays give people a reason to invite.”²⁴ Promotion should begin four weeks before the special day. On the first Sunday, blank index cards will be in the bulletin for people to write the names of three people not connected to the church on the card. The second Sunday will be a reminder to everyone to continue praying. On the third Sunday, ask for a show of hands for all who have been praying and if they have invited anyone to church. This process will foster prayer, a need to be thinking about the unchurched, and accountability.

This list is not a comprehensive, but a start to turn SCBC around to be more community focused. Dustin Willis points out, “We are more connected technologically than we have ever been, yet at the same time we are as isolated personally than we have ever been.”²⁵ Society is craving genuine community in a world that is over connected yet disconnected. What better way for SCBC to attract and assimilate first-time guests than authentic community?

Phase 3: Incorporate

The last piece of the attraction and assimilate puzzle is to incorporate repeat attenders to move toward membership. Whereas in the assimilation process the guest was given avenues to enter community, this phase is to get the guest cemented in community. The desire is to go from guest to friend to family. If the attraction, assimilation, and incorporation prove to be successful, this strategy will require SCBC to change. Change in the reputation of the church to the outside world from perfect holier than thou to, as Willis writes, “Outsiders who come into community do not need to experience a group that seems perfect, but rather a community where grace abounds.”²⁶

²⁴Bob Farr, Doug Anderson, and Kay Kotan, *Get Their Name: Growing Your Church by Building New Relationships* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 23.

²⁵Dustin Willis, *Life in Community: Joining Together to Display the Gospel* (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 11.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 81.

Of the three aspects of the process, incorporation will be the least complex. Surprisingly, two answers as to why people have not moved toward membership come from the survey answers: time constraints and never being asked to join.

1. Develop a road map on the website of next steps that paints a clear pathway from first-time guest to church membership.
2. When a person is consistent in regular attendance for more than six months, invite him to join.
3. Record parts of the membership class on DVD or encrypt them on the website to view. The survey revealed that many people have not taken the Discovery Class due to time constraints. The purpose of a video would be to allow potential members to study the material and come with questions for clarity or correction. This would allow the potential member the freedom to watch the class at their leisure and give more time for community building when the class meets.
4. Repeat “God’s Gift to the Church” sermon series that highlights the need for church membership every three years to keep the idea of membership fresh to the congregation.
5. Following the assimilation idea of RC, have a “Get to Know You” fellowship. Not only does this fellowship build community, it also clearly communicates next steps.
6. When a person is consistent in regular attendance for three months, invite them to the senior pastors house for dinner.
7. Encourage non-members to get plugged in to non-leadership positions.
8. Add the PLACE Ministries to the Discovery class.
9. Team all new members up with a seasoned ministry leader for constant reproduction and leadership development.

To encourage a person to go from regular attender to member, there must be avenues of community building and ownership through service. Since the current generation value community and cause, the processes outlined in this chapter should help SCBC get noticed and become an attraction that leads to ownership in the church. Chapter 5 offers a reflection and evaluation of the project.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

With the project now completed, the chapter will evaluate and reflect on the undertaking. The reflection and evaluation are based on six key questions: (1) did the project accomplish the purpose? (2) were the project goals met? (3) what were the strengths of the project? (4) what were the weaknesses of the project? (5) what did God show me through this project? and (6) how has God motivated me through this project?

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

To evaluate any organization's progress, it is imperative to measure the progress of the organization to the organization's purpose. The intention and motivation of this project to assimilate, educate, and incorporate into church membership those who are so inclined and motivate those who were less inclined and seek to make them more inclined. Purpose and mission go hand in hand. Malphurs explains, "Mission dictates the ministry's direction. It provides a compelling sense of direction. It serves to focus the churches' energy."¹ The purpose of this project is aligned with the mission of SCBC. Scripturally, the mission of SCBC is "to know Christ and make Him known." At SCBC we flesh this out more specifically with what is called the five "E's": Exalt God in worship, Evangelize those outside of Christ, Equip the church for ministry, Encourage each other in community, and be an Example to the world. I like to say our purpose is to be the people of God on mission with God, or put another way, to love God and others, grow in Christlikeness, serve everyone, and go on mission: Love, Grow, Serve and Go.

¹Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 258.

As noted, in chapter 1, an understanding of assimilation and membership is essential to carry out the mission and purpose of the church. I want first-time guests to move from guest, to regular attender, to member. To accomplish this objective, the purpose of this project was to educate the current regular attenders on membership and devise a strategy to make SCBC known in the community and assimilate new people: Educate, Assimilate, and Incorporate.

To accomplish the purpose of educating, the first form of evaluation was to give the current members and some regular attenders a survey to assess their current understanding of ecclesiology. Next, a five-week sermon series was preached on membership, assimilation, and impacting the community. The purpose of educating the current congregation was successful for the following reasons. First, as noted in chapter 4, those who committed to membership went up by twelve persons, which is an incredible increase in a five-week period. Because of the membership increase, there was a corresponding drop in committed non-members—some of the committed non-members became members. It is significant that the sermon series challenged some regular attenders to consider the issue of church membership and motivated them to join. Second, the sermon evaluations came back mainly positive, showing that the sermons did inform the congregation on ecclesiology.

The efforts of assimilation and making SCBC known and noticed in the local community were a little more difficult to evaluate. The true results of this project's labor will be more apparent in six months to a year as the ideas from the outreach team take hold and hopefully become effective. The desire of becoming an attractive church to the unchurched, and the start of a mindset shift of the church to an externally focused church, is proof of a successful purpose. The same wait and see attitude goes for the assimilation process outlined in chapter 4. After evaluating the assimilation processes of five other churches, it appears that seven connection points over a span of six months is sufficient follow up if the guest is going to make SCBC their home church. Most of connection

points would come in the first two months. Any more than seven connection points, I believe, would become borderline harassment. Over time, the outreach team and leadership of SCBC will fine-tune this process to maximum efficiency.

The last purpose was to develop a methodology of incorporation and to have a clear path to membership and a process of serving, thereby creating a sense of ownership in the church. Time constraints of this project do not allow for a simple yes or no answer as to if the purpose has been met. However, the simplified process of executing the Discovery Class, along with the development of a Next Steps process, should accomplish this purpose. This project laid the foundation and strategy to accomplish the purpose of turning first-time guests into long-term members. Only time will tell the true results of this project.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

The first goal was to assess the congregation's understanding of church membership and ecclesiology. This goal would be considered successful if 50 percent of the members and regular attenders completed the survey. For SCBC, this equaled roughly twenty families. This goal was met when twenty-three families were evaluated.

The second goal was to develop a five-week sermon series that addressed commitment, accountability, assimilation, and church membership. This goal would be considered met with a 90 percent sufficient evaluation of sermons from other pastors using the sermon rubric. The total sermon reviews resulted in a 98 percent combined sufficient and exemplarity sermon rating. This goal was met.

The third goal was to preach a five-week sermon series to increase the knowledge of the congregation pertaining to church membership and assimilation. Four survey questions zeroed in on church commitment, accountability, and assimilation in order to evaluate an increased understanding of the congregation. After the sermon series concerning church attendance, there was an increase of 16 percent in those who believe attendance is very important. Congregational members and attenders that strongly

considered commitment to the church important increased by 6 percent, to a total of 84 percent post sermons. The biggest increase in understanding accountability came with an understanding of church membership. There was a 28 percent increase for those who strongly agreed. This increase alone is proof of the success of this goal. The last question sought to move a guest from regular attender to member through an understanding of serving. This question was evaluated by measuring current ministry involvement. The result was a 2 percent decrease in ministry involvement, which is most likely from the resulting transitioning of persons that either left the church (possibly because they did not agree with church membership) or relocated before taking the post-survey. Goal 3 was met as a better understanding of membership and the need for assimilation increased.

The fourth goal was a 90 percent sufficient ranking of the new assimilation and outreach process from the outreach team. I put together a Power Point presentation for the outreach team. At the end of the presentation, the process was evaluated. This goal was met with a 90 percent agree and strongly agree rating.

There were four main goals for this project. I tried to accomplish the project goals in the order of educate, assimilate, and incorporate. Data from the pre- and post-surveys and information from the outreach team show all goals were sufficiently achieved.

Strengths of the Project

In the development and implementation of this project, several strengths became evident. The first strength was, and is, the project itself. The step-by-step structure made the project workable. To have a project of this size broken down into bite sized components, instead of trying to break it down myself, is the only reason I made it this far.

The second strength was the motivation from the project to think through the issues facing SCBC. So often in ministry, all that seems to be accomplished is putting out the proverbial fires. An intentional plan was needed to assess what needed to be done to keep SCBC moving forward. This project enlightened the leadership and other key

members of the congregation to SCBC's critical needs. The framework of educate, assimilate, and incorporate is not perfect, but is a stepping stone in the right direction. An unintended strength of this project was the awareness and discovery to evaluate other areas of church ministry, namely, discipleship and leadership development. The PLACE ministry test will ensure that the right people are on the "right seat on the bus," or as Malphus says,

A third decision concerns those who will be assessed. Probably everyone should be assessed. This sends a clear message to all that the church desires that "every member be a minister." There are people who've never been very active in a church ministry who will be motivated to service as the result of a good assessment program.²

Once PLACE is implemented, the leadership of SCBC will be able to plug people into ministry if their spiritual gift is needed. Instead of plugging people into a ministry based on what they think is their giftedness, there will be more data to analyze to make sure the person is being used to their fullest ministry potential. If a ministry does not exist where the person can be plugged in, a database will be developed until the need arises.

A third strength was the implementation and data from the surveys. Generally speaking, I was preaching to the choir. However, there were a few occasions where the survey prompted immediate conversations about church membership. When asked why a person has never joined, he or she would respond that they were never asked. This was an aha moment. I would have never thought that people thought they needed to be asked. In the future, once someone has been a regular attender for six months and they seem to be committed, an invitation to take the Discovery Class will be issued.

A fourth strength was the knowledge gained learning about the mindsets of the younger generations. All the research comes down to two major desires of human nature: the need for community and a cause. It is my hope that focusing on these two desires to will make a difference for the kingdom here in the Las Vegas Valley.

²Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 159.

A fifth strength of this project was the excitement generated from starting to shift to an externally-focused church. The sermons played a part in creating a sense of excitement to reach the community, and purchasing the TrueLife.org witnessing cards increased the excitement. Passing out the True Life cards is one of the easiest ways to bridge conversations to the gospel. With the formation of an outreach and assimilation team, the excitement is only building.

The sixth strength was the opportunity to converse with some of the pastors in the area. I am the only paid staff at the church, so my time is limited, and meeting new pastors is difficult. The project, and more specifically the feedback from the pastors, was encouraging. Having the opportunity to hear what is working for assimilation in other churches was insightful. The last strength of the project was evaluating the current Discovery Class. After the evaluation, it was determined to add the PLACE test to the class and to improve the vision statement.

Each of these seven strengths has already made an indelible mark on the life of SCBC. The motivation to address certain issues has unearthed other issues to be studied in the future. The survey data showed that the project was “preaching to the choir,” yet caused others to evaluate their relationship to SCBC. The generational knowledge gained in this study will benefit church growth for years to come. The biggest benefit from the project is the excitement and paradigm shift to become more externally focused. The friendships formed or strengthened with other pastors will provide long lasting dividends. These strengths coalescing together should start to bear fruit in 2018.

Weaknesses of the Project

The weaknesses of this project were few while the strengths were many. The first weakness was the implementation of the survey. As noted throughout this project, the looseness or free spirit nature of Christianity made the implementation of the survey difficult. Aside from the small number of committed members, the regular attenders are not consistently regular. I often say, “if I preach the same message for three weeks in a

row then everyone would hear the sermon.” Even if I passed the survey out at the end of a service, with the sporadic nature of attendance, the chances of getting the survey back are minimal. And trying to get people to fill out the survey before they leave would not work either. To state the obvious, Christianity is not cultural in Vegas. Mailing the surveys would take more administration. I am not sure what type of data connection tool would work; I just know that this process was difficult. The result was that I administered the survey to some of the core members and the steady regular attenders. I am thankful for the participation, however limited.

The second weakness of this project was the lack of focus on prayer. The first component of this project should have been prayer. The framework should have been prayer, educate, assimilate, and incorporate. While reading *Ten Steps to Breaking the 200 Barrier* by Bill Sullivan, in his chapter called “Intensify your Praying,” he recounts Jesus’ necessity of prayer:

One of the remarkable realities of Jesus’ life was His dependence upon prayer. His ministry appeared to be based on His prayer life. Repeatedly we are told that Jesus went alone to pray. Before He selected His 12 apostles, He spent the night in prayer. Prayer was an important part of Jesus Ministry.³

As Jesus ministry was built on prayer, this project would have benefitted with a foundation of prayer.⁴ I did solicit prayer from the congregation from time to time, but a concentrated time of prayer would have been more beneficial. At the very least, as people prayed together for the different aspect of the project (biblical foundation, theoretical and practical issues) asking for prayer could have opened opportunities for much more discussion of church membership, assimilation, and incorporation.

³Bill M. Sullivan, *Ten Steps to Breaking the 200 Barrier* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1988), 24.

⁴This is not to say that I did not personally pray through this project—I did.

What I Would Do Differently

One of the things I would do differently is structural in nature. I would make chapter 4 progressive throughout the project, starting after chapter 1 is complete. The reason for this is simple. Instead of having a separate chapter of week 1, 2, and 3 of the project (which is hard to accomplish when dealing with people), I would start the implementation of chapter 4 of this project during the research phase of chapter 2 and 3. To be able to work on these chapters congruently would lessen the stress of trying to get certain things accomplished in one week's time.

The second thing I would do differently is spend more time researching and writing chapter 3. The amount of research on assimilation processes and generational differences and what the church can do to improve in these areas is staggering. As with any realm of study there is always more to be explored. Of the *Five Guiding Principles of Effective Ministry* espoused by Gary McIntosh, this project in chapter 3 covered three of those five principles. For example, I covered the principle of human resource, open doors, and incorporation. SCBC has invested more resources in outreach and is creating opportunities for people to enter the life of the congregation and improving pathways to incorporation and ownership. What was not covered is the principle of visionary leadership and finance.⁵

The last thing I would do differently is incorporate personal interviews with the members and regular attenders of SCBC. This might be a more effective way to gather data if (and it is a big if) I can get people to set aside the time. As noted in chapter 1, many families are working two jobs to make ends meet. With work, kids' school, and sports, trying to squeeze in one more meeting is a challenge.

⁵For the specifics of these five principles, see Gary L. McIntosh, *One Size Doesn't Fit All* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 80.

Theological Reflections

I gained a great deal of knowledge completing this project. The process from start to finish beginning with the research phase, to gathering data from surveys and personal interviews, to developing a contextual plan was personally enriching. One of the greatest benefits of this project was what the research accomplished for chapters 2 and 3. As I was working through these chapters, God stoked the fires of my heart for the local church. I tried to convey this passion in the sermon series. The greatest blessing was seeing God start the fire in the hearts of some congregation members for outreach. Theologically, I gained a clearer understanding of the difference of the church as the body of Christ and a local group of believers covenanted together for the gospel, which is the essence of ecclesiology. The church universal is the body of Christ. A local church is the called out ones that gather together in some form of membership. American Christianity has a firm grasp of the church as the body of Christ and not a firm understanding of the local church. The church suffers from church hoppers and shoppers and the lack of commitment. Whereas, a born-again believer is recognized as being in the universal body of Christ by faith and symbolically recognized as being part of the universal body of Christ by water baptism, the born-again believer is recognized as part of the local church by church membership as each local church defines and implements its process of membership.

If I had to narrow down the three books that shaped my understanding of church membership and assimilation they would be Mark Dever's *The Church: The Gospel made Visible*, Jonathan Leeman's *The Church and the Surprising Offence of God's Love*, and Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson's *The Externally Focused Church*.⁶ My favorite quote of Leeman speaking in the context of God's love and the need for

⁶Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H, 2012); Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offence of God's Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004).

membership was, “The church that hesitates to draw sharp membership borders or to practice church discipline because those things don’t seem loving needs to know that it’s been duped into a man-centered caricature of love.”⁷ God’s love necessitates borders or boundaries contrary to secular inclusive thought. God protects the people He loves. My favorite comment from Dever speaking about the nature of the church was simply the title of his book, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*. His title is the best one sentence summary of the essence and purpose of the local church. My favorite quote dealing with vision and the need for the church today to be outward focused from Rusaw and Swanson was, “Selfless service gets everyone’s attention.”⁸ In a nutshell, these authors are saying that if the church wants to get noticed, it should start serving like Christ. These three simple yet profound truths are forever etched in my mind.

A sociological and theological reflection would be the truth that even though different labels have been put on different generations, the core longing of every generation remains the same. For example, the human need for community, cause, and significance never changes. All generations share these common desires. Each generation has its different nuances (for Gen-Xers it was survival and for Millennials it is technology) but the human heart with its God-designed needs and desires stays the same.

Another reflection, not necessarily learned but reinforced, would be instead of thinking mission, thinking missional. It is easy for the people in the church to think mission without thinking missional. In reaching the next generations, a theological paradigm shift needs to happen at SCBC. The book *The Externally Focused Church* helped me in processing through the mindset shift, as well as a strategy to change the mindset, and thus, change the culture of SCBC. One key point made in the book was instead of the church trying to market itself the church should refocus on just being the

⁷Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offence of God’s Love*, 101.

⁸Rusaw and Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church*, 61.

church and serving like Jesus. Selfless service promotes trust to society and invites ownership for regular attenders. When SCBC focuses on putting Acts 2:42-47 into practice, God will do the rest. This paradigm shift is consistent with changing the church to become externally focused and puts it in line with reaching younger generations.

Personal Reflections

This project included the most studying, working, reading, and writing I have ever done, it has been one of the most rewarding, enlightening, and beneficial projects I have ever accomplished. I have enjoyed this project immensely. I should have started it ten years ago for SCBC. I tried to make this the best project and paper I have ever written for the sake of SCBC and the gospel. My heart's desire is to more effectively operate the church for the sake of the gospel here in the Las Vegas Valley. As I progressed through this project, I began to realize God was changing, developing, and ministering to me the glory of the church and a renewed passion to lead SCBC to become more outwardly focused. I also saw God beginning to change the congregation. The fruit of this project on the congregation will be evidenced in the months to come, my only concern is that it may be too late. God is sovereign and His will be done, but SCBC is running low on finances and still has a heavy debt load from the prior administration. Here are four personal reflections:

First, this project has broadened my horizons on how to tackle any issue in the church through planning and organizing. The method of identifying the issue, searching the Scripture for a biblical foundation or solution, researching current society's influences, and developing a process to overcome the issue is of tremendous value. In a more general sense, the project has helped improve my overall planning and administration of the church. I have a better grasp of how to see the big picture. For me, having to plan meetings, interview individuals, gather data, evaluate data, and plan a process has always been one of my weaknesses. Follow through with administration has also always been a weakness of mine. Over the years I have been to many conferences with great content

and ministry ideas only to come back to church and continue on as usual. The layout of this project with the bite sized processes has tremendously helped me improve in planning and organizing.

Second, this project has opened my eyes to a world of new material and authors on the subject of membership and assimilation through the research. Membership, assimilation, and church revitalization will continue to be a subject of study. The processes of membership, assimilation, and incorporation will be fine tuned as I continue to learn and grow in these areas. This project has also helped me fine tune my process of research. In the opening seminar at Southern Seminary the illustration was used of cooking and gathering all your ingredients together before beginning the study. For some reason, this illustration stuck with me throughout the process and helped me a great deal.

Third, I developed in my writing skills. I have never been and always struggled with writing. English has never been my strong suit, yet after all this writing, editing, and proofreading, I think I have learned a few things. Not only have I always struggled with the process of writing but also the desire to write. In some ways, I think the Lord has sparked more of a desire to want to write. Little is the operative word here; nevertheless, I will continue to improve my writing skills.

Fourth, the Lord gave me perseverance and determination. The Lord has shown me through the process of this project to rely totally on Him. The process has been long, but God has enriched me every step of the way. For example, each chapter had its highlights and heartaches from diagnosing the issues and context of SCBC in chapter 1, to an in-depth study and biblical foundation of the local church in chapter 2, to outside influences that need to be understood in chapter 3, to the process to implement in chapter 4. Each chapter had its God-given challenges in determination. These challenges are magnified by the continual weight of daily ministry. Managing my time and finding the time to complete this project has taken determination and perseverance.

What Did God Show Me through this Project?

First, this project opened to me the world of podcasts. Before this project I listened to two podcasts: The Briefing by Albert Mohler, and Rainer on Leadership. In the course of researching chapter 3, I inadvertently stumbled upon so many great podcasts on the subjects of leadership and church growth. I am now a podcast enthusiast. I now listen to sixteen podcasts per week (if I can fit them all in). I listen to NAMB, Your Church on Evangelism, Social Media podcast, The Un-Seminary podcast, Vanderbloeman Leadership, 9 Marks Interviews, Church Talk with Bob Franquiz, Preaching and Preachers with Jason Allen, 5 Minutes in Church History, Revitalize and Replant with Thom Rainer, 5 Leadership Questions, SBC the Week, The Unstuck Church Podcast with Tony Morgan, Lead on Podcast by Dr. Jeff Irog, and the Carey Nieuwof Leadership Podcast: Lead Like Never Before. The wealth and experience of these leaders through their podcasts is invaluable. This discovery is just the beginning in the continual process to be a lifelong learner.

Second, I am now more aware of the world of websites and apps available for church growth, leadership, and organization. The amount of information, forms, processes, and training videos is staggering. Future research on my radar includes Trainedup.org, Ministry assistance.com, City data.com, Leadership University by Dr. Henry Cloud, Ministry Grid.com at Lifeway, Planning Center, Splice.com, and The Hardy Group.Org. One app to assist with preaching is Top Notes.

Third, God showed me that by trusting Him I could read so many books and articles. I love reading and this project continues to stoke the fire of reading in my heart. I have a list of fifteen to twenty more books on this subject to read, including *Fusion*, *Lasting Impact*, and *Breaking 200 Without Breaking You* by Carey Nieuwof, *The Community of Jesus* by Kendell H. Easley and Christopher W. Morgan, *Comeback Churches* by Ed Stetzer, *Shift: What It Takes to Finally Reach Families Today* by Brian Haynes, *Family Ministry Field Guide* by Timothy Paul Jones, *The Conviction to Lead* by

Albert Mohler, *No Silver Bullets* by Daniel Im and Thom Rainer, *Jesus for a New Generation* by Kevin Graham Ford, *Culture Marketing* by Andy Couch, *After the Baby Boomers* by Robert Wuthnow, and *The Forgotten Jesus* by Robby Gallaty.

This project may be ending, but my study on this subject of church culture and assimilation is far from over. As with any topic in church life, there is always more to study.

How Has God Motivated Me through This Project?

This project has motivated me to study many other different areas of need for SCBC ministries. The project methodology is a perfect template to address other areas of need. As the senior pastor, my time is limited so I am going to use a shortened version of this project methodology or what I call mini projects. The process will look something like this: one or two pages assessment of a current ministry issue, one or two pages of biblical support with the possibility of one or more sermons to cast vision to the congregation, one or two pages of any theoretical and practical issues, and one or two pages of methodology to overcome the ministry issue, complete with check lists and follow up schedules. This mini methodology will help me and the other ministry leaders stay on task as we work through the current ministry issues.

Currently, thirteen more issues need to be resolved to make SCBC more effective. The first ministry that needs to be improved, as mentioned earlier, is prayer. Prayer helps for a paradigm shift, for the church to become an outwardly-focused church, as well as developing a well-rounded prayer ministry. As Farr, Anderson, and Kotan make clear in *Get Their Name*, “This prayer team is outwardly focused. They are praying for the leaders in the community: the police, the fire personal, principals, teachers and superintendents, as well as those unconnected who are lost and searching for a better life.”⁹

⁹Bob Farr, Doug Anderson, and Kay Kotan, *Get Their Name: Grow Your Church by Building New Relationships* (Nashville, Abingdon, 2013), 94.

The second mini project, in terms of importance, is vision. SCBC needs to revamp its vision to be in line with an outward focus that dovetails with the mission of the church. Again, as Farr, Anderson and Kotan point out, “a good vision tells us how an individual church is going to carry out the mission of the church.”¹⁰ What goals can SCBC implement this year that will move the church toward the vision and to stay faithful to the mission? Promoting vision is one of the keys to growing excitement and stirring a desire for ownership in the congregation. Organizational vision is imperative.

The third mini project in terms of importance is volunteer and leadership development. As noted throughout this project, Las Vegas is a continually changing landscape and there is constant need for volunteer and leadership development. These are the mini projects for 2018.

For 2019, the first mini project is discipleship development for new members. The second mini project would be studying new ideas to raise funds for ministry so that ministry leaders can accomplish ministry. The third mini project would be a capital campaign and stewardship project for substantial growth.

Other mini projects for 2020 would include marketing, internships, policies and procedures and administrative infrastructure, social media and the best way to launch a new ministry. To say this project has not motivated me is an understatement. This project is one of the most rewarding undertakings I have ever undergone. I have learned a great deal in many areas and discovered more resources than I will ever be able to utilize. I am forever grateful. To God be the glory.

¹⁰Farr, Anderson, and Kotan, *Get Their Name*, 72.

APPENDIX 1

PRE-SERIES AND POST-SERIES SURVEY ON CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The following survey sought to assess the understanding of membership by the congregation and regular attenders. The pre-survey asks questions pertaining to an understanding of assimilation, the nature of the New Testament church, commitment in the New Testament church, and accountability. Lastly, the survey asks questions discerning common objections or reasons why people do not join a local church.

PRE-SERIES AND POST-SERIES SURVEY
ON CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the current understanding and practices of church membership of the participant. David Fee is conducting this research for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, you will answer questions before the project and you will answer the same questions at the conclusion of the project. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

Directions: Answer the following multiple-choice questions by placing a check next to the appropriate answer.

Part 1

1. Do you consider yourself a Christian?
 A. Yes
 B. No
2. Have you repented of your sin and trusted in Jesus Christ alone for salvation?
 A. Yes
 B. No
3. Are you married?
 A. Yes
 B. No
4. Do you have any children age 18 or younger living in the home?
 A. Yes
 B. No
5. What is your age in years?
 A. 18-24
 B. 25-34
 C. 35-44
 D. 45-54
 E. 55-64
 F. 65 and over

Continue to next page

Directions: Respond to the following statements and questions by (1) placing a check by multiple-choice questions or (2) circling your opinion based on the following scale:
 SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, DS = disagree somewhat,
 AS = agree somewhat, A = agree, SA = strongly agree

- | | | | | | | | |
|-----|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 6. | I consider church attendance a priority. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 7. | The church is the body of Christ. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 8. | Christ died for the church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 9. | I consider commitment to the church important. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. | The elders are responsible for the oversight of the church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. | The purpose of the church is to glorify God. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 12. | The purpose of the church is social justice. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 13. | The congregation is accountable to each other and the overseers of the church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 14. | I enjoy the worship at SCBC. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 15. | I am confident in the leadership of SCBC. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 16. | How many times did you visit SCBC before committing in membership (circle one) | | | | | | |
| | ___ A. One to four weeks | | | | | | |
| | ___ B. Four to eight weeks | | | | | | |
| | ___ C. eight to twenty four weeks | | | | | | |
| | ___ D. One year | | | | | | |
| 17. | What were you looking for in a church family? _____ | | | | | | |
| | _____ | | | | | | |
| | _____ | | | | | | |
| 18. | What was happening in your life when you came to SCBC church? | | | | | | |
| | ___ A. Spiritual crisis | | | | | | |
| | ___ B. Geographical move | | | | | | |
| | ___ C. Financial crisis | | | | | | |
| | ___ D. Health crisis | | | | | | |
| | ___ E. Marriage | | | | | | |
| | ___ F. Birth of a child | | | | | | |
| | ___ G. Other | | | | | | |
| 19. | What originally attracted you to SCBC? _____ | | | | | | |
| | _____ | | | | | | |
| | _____ | | | | | | |
| 20. | Why do you stay at SCBC? _____ | | | | | | |
| | _____ | | | | | | |
| | _____ | | | | | | |

21. Has any experience with this church made you feel uncomfortable, awkward, or “put off”? Yes No

If yes, what caused this feeling? _____

22. Rate the following ministries in terms of importance from 1 to 5. (One being the most important and five being the least)

- Worship
 Preaching
 Children’s ministry
 Missions
 Prayer

23. Besides Sunday worship, in which church programs or activities did you first become involved?

24. Are you currently involved serving in a ministry? Yes No

If not, why not? _____

25. How did you get involved in your first activity?

- A. Personal initiative
 B. Response from the pulpit or bulletin
 C. Response from a personal invitation from a church member
 D. other: _____

26. Does SCBC do a good job of making its ministries and programs known to new members?

- A. Yes
 B. No

27. Have you taken the membership class? Yes No

If not, why not? _____

28. As you evaluate SCBC, how important is the Sunday worship experience?

Unimportant Very important
1 2 3 4 5 6

29. I would like to see SCBC focus more on _____

30. Is there anything the leadership of SCBC can help you with on your spiritual journey? _____

APPENDIX 2

EXPERT PANEL SERMON EVALUATION RUBRIC

Sermon Evaluation Tool					
Sermon _____					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The sermon is clearly relevant to the issue of church membership.					
The sermon is faithful to the Bible's teaching on either regeneration, conversion, holiness, commitment or accountability.					
The material is theologically sound.					
The thesis of each sermon is clearly stated.					
The points of the sermon clearly support the thesis.					
The sermon contains points of practical application.					
The sermon is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.					
Overall, the sermon was clearly presented.					

APPENDIX 3
MEMBERS VERSUS NON-MEMBERS
ACTIVE IN MINISTRY

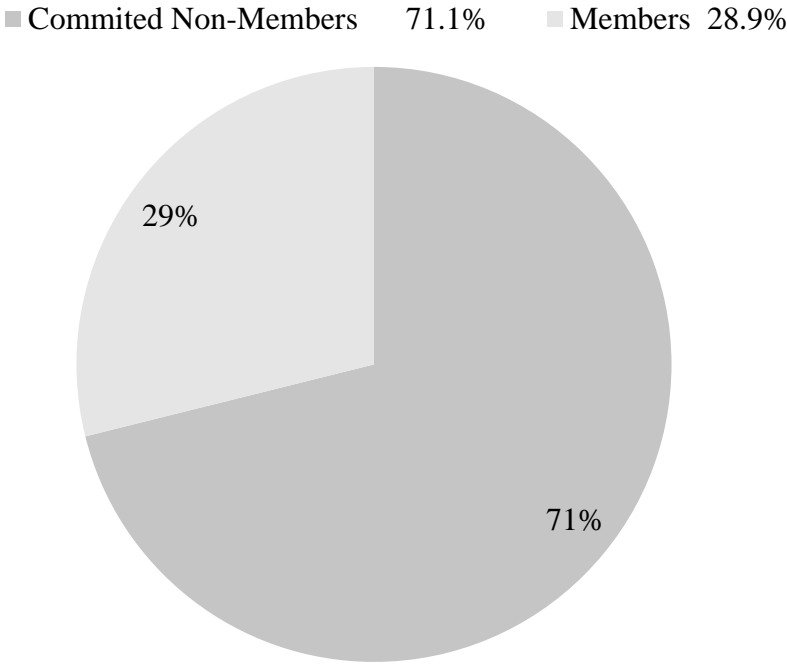


Figure A1. Members versus non-members active in ministry

APPENDIX 4

2016 POPULATION BY AGE GROUP FOR
TEN-MILE RADIUS OF SCBC

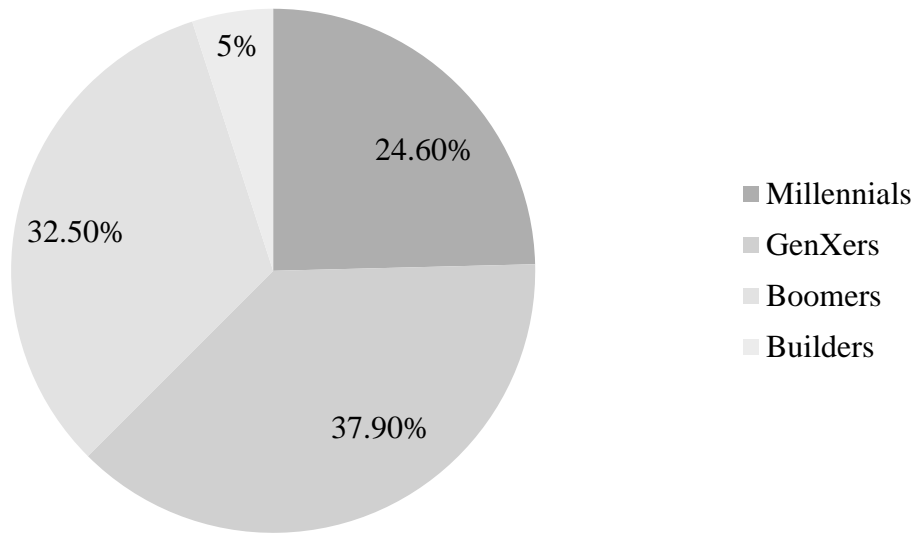


Figure A2. 2016 population by age group for ten-mile radius of SCBC

APPENDIX 5
EXPERT EVALUATIONS RESULTS
FOR SERMONS 1-5

This appendix provides the results of the sermon evaluations. The options available for each item were “insufficient,” “requires attention,” “sufficient,” or “exemplary.” Each figure shows the combined responses (across seven areas) for each sermon.

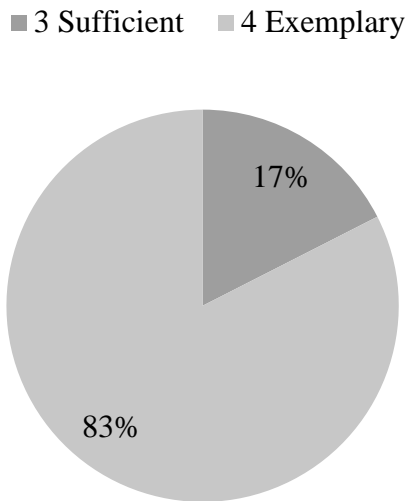


Figure A3. Evaluation of sermon 1

■ 3 Sufficient ■ 4 Exemplary

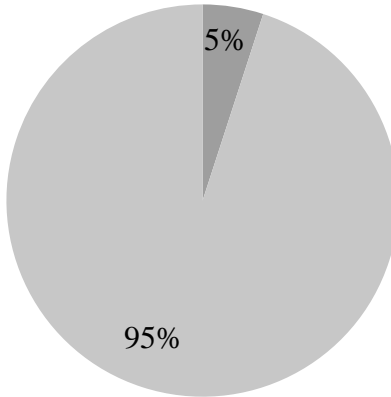


Figure A4. Evaluation of sermon 2

■ 3 Sufficient ■ 4 Exemplary

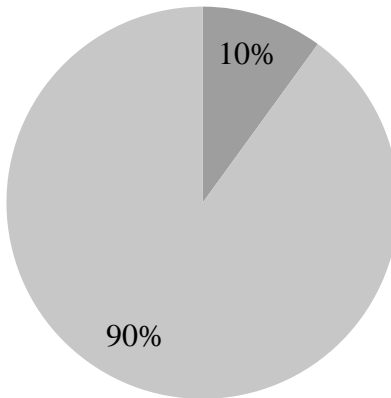


Figure A5. Evaluation of sermon 3

■ 2 Requires Attention ■ 3 Sufficient ■ 4 Exemplary

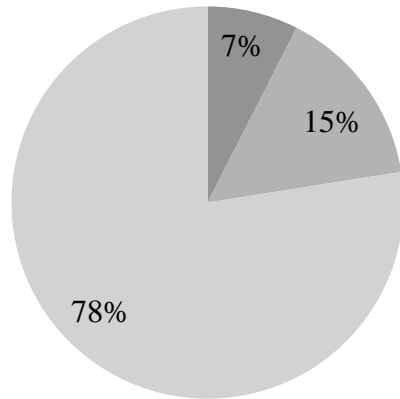


Figure A6. Evaluation of sermon 4

■ 2 Requires Attention ■ 3 Sufficient ■ 4 Exemplary

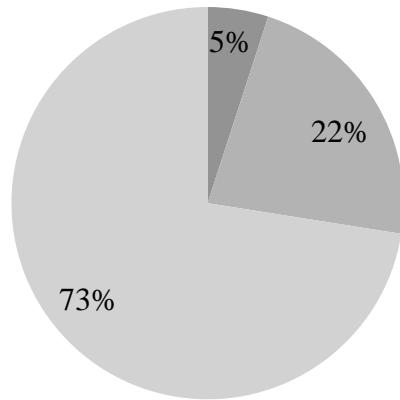


Figure A7. Evaluation of sermon 5

■ 2 Requires Attention ■ 3 Sufficient ■ 4 Exemplary

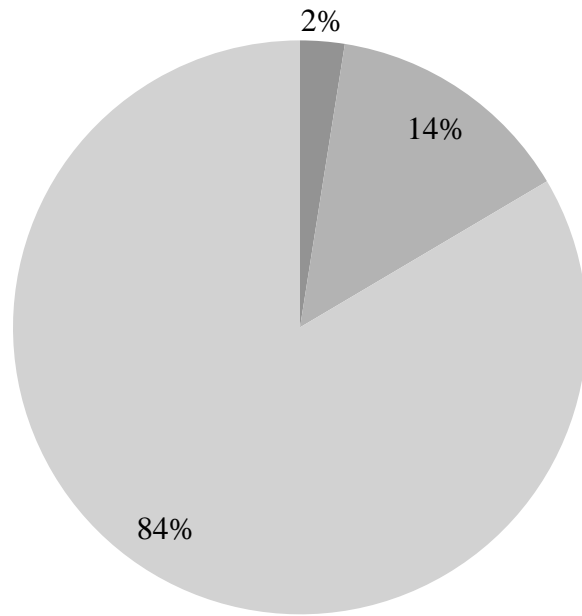


Figure A8. Total of all sermon evaluations

APPENDIX 6
SERMON OUTLINES

Sermon 1 Outline

Text: 1 Cor 1:2 & 12:27, Acts 11:26. Matt 16:18

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" Rom 12:15

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 Jn 1:9

"For by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many were made righteous" Rom 5:19

God gives us the gift of family, church family.

Today I want us to see a few things about this family:

- (1) The Churches foundation is Christ.
- (2) The nature of the church is universal & local.
- (3) The structure of the church is orderly (God is a God of order).

If someone asks to ask you to describe the church the church what would you say?

The church is the gospel made visible Mark Dever

The church represents the gospel, and the world needs the gospel

Title: A New Spiritual Family

Point I: To be a part of the church is a privilege.

"The local church is part of the universal church as the universal church contains the local church."

Paul outlines the Nature/ essence of the church:

- The church universal is made up of those persons sanctified in Christ.
- The church is called to be holy.

"Holiness in the positional sense is not a matter of good works, of holy living. As Christians we should live holy lives, but holy living does not make us holy. To the extent our living is holy, it is because, in Christ, we are already holy & have the power of His Holy Spirit" John Mac Author

- The church is a local Family.

The local church is as much of a new creation as a new believer coming to Christ.

The local church is the gospel made visible.

The church represents the gospel, and the world needs the gospel.

The church as God sees it: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 1 Pe 2:9*

The local church is the gospel made visible.

How is our gospel presentation?

Faith & Life meet/ truth for today: As a Christian there is a universal bond of brotherhood, a bond of sisterhood

1). The local church is a place to belong.

How is the church to be structured?

The Head of the church is Christ: *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Matt 16:18*

Jesus is the Builder.

Jesus is the Owner.

Turn too: 1 Pe 2:4-7

Conclusion: The greatest institution in the world is the family and the 2nd is the church.

To be a part of the church is a privilege.

The Head of the church is Christ.

Jesus is the builder of the church.

Jesus is the owner of the church.

The church is a place to belong.

The church is the gospel made visible.

The church represents the gospel, and the world needs the gospel.

As the worship team comes forward:

The questions are do you belong?

2nd, Are you committed to a local body through membership?

Sermon 2 Outline

Scripture Reading: 1 Tim 3:1-8

“According to the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, 20 of 23 studies find a link between family structure and delinquency, affirming that kids from broken homes are much more likely to enter lives of crime. 90% of the increase in violent-crime rates can be attributed to the change in the number of out-of-wedlock births. The single most important variable in whether or not a child joins a gang is family structure.”

Aim: To show the value of structure in relationship to the local church as a family.

Propositional Statement: The absence of Biblical leadership in the church breed's disunity, tension, & organizational floundering.

Why do we need structure and leadership in the church?

Leadership is how God brings structure:

- Structure begins with God.
- Structure is maintained with leadership.
- Structure is applied with membership.

Title: God's gift of structure in the church family.

Acts 6:1-4, Acts 20:28-30, Titus 1: 5, & 1 Peter 5:1 &2

Point I: A biblical leadership structure produces order.

God's gift of qualified leaders brings order to the church. (Acts 6:1-4, Titus 1:5, 1 Pe 5:1-4)

Faith & life/ truth for today: We need to confront or tell the leaders of the church the next time we hear a person going person to person complaining and criticizing.

But how often do we do this?

- The best way to feel cared for at SCBC get involved in one of the church sanctioned life groups, Bible studies or ministries of the church.

Why does the church need structure and leadership?

Point II: A Biblical leadership structure produces security.

God establishes overseers (elders) to keep the church moving forward in doctrinal purity. (Acts 20:28-30, Titus 1: 5, & 1 Pe 5:1 &2)

Matt 7:15 & 20 Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. (20) Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. 1 Tim. 1:20

And ---You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes. 2 Tim. 1:15

I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. Jude 3

For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. Jude 4

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—

“The church must recognize that we are in the midst of a cultural revolution and that 19th Century (or older) forms of church do not communicate clearly to 21st century cultures”

Faith & Life Meet/ Truth for Today

A proper leadership structure should be able to identify problems and figure out a solution.

A proper leadership structure should be able to keep the church focused on its mission and moving forward in vision.

Proper leadership structure should guard against false teaching.

God is a God of order.

Why do we need structure and leadership in the church?

A biblical leadership structure produces order.

A Biblical leadership structure produces security.

God has given the church family the gift of structure.

Sermon 3 Outline

Scripture Reading: Acts 2:42-47

Text: Matt 16:18

God requires Christians to be accountable.

“God’s Gifts Series”

God’s gift of family in the church.

God’s gift of structure in the church.

Why do we need church membership?

Why join a church?

Is church membership Biblical?

Aim: To you to see the beauty in the NT church once more.

Title: God’s Gift of Membership for the Church Family.

Text: Matt 16:18, 24, & 25

Point I: The N.T. Church is the Front Line Witness for Christ.

Mark Dever, pastor of Capital Hill Baptist church points out that the subject of the doctrine of the church is of paramount importance.

“What significance does a right ecclesiology have for the church today? A right ecclesiology matters for the church’s leadership, membership, structure, culture, and even character. Ultimately, a right ecclesiology touches on God’s glory itself.”¹

The main reason to join a local church is to bring God glory by covenanting together for the work of the gospel.

A secondary reason to join the church is identity and boundaries that show the non-churched the glory of Christ in conversion.

Matthew 5:14-16--*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

- We are called to be lights individually and corporately.

“Membership and discipline are not artificially erected structures. They are not legalistic impositions upon new-covenant grace. They are an organic and inevitable

¹Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 149.

*outgrowth of Christ's redemptive work and the gospel call to repentance and faith."*²
Leeman

Is church membership Biblical?

The implications of a committed, covenanted group of people is "littered" all throughout Scripture.

Acts 1:15 in those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120)

Acts 2:41 so those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Acts 2:47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 5:13 none of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.

Acts 9:26 and when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

These Scriptures don't make sense if there is not a system of church membership.

Heb 13:7 remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Heb 13:17 obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

1 Thess 5: 12 & 13 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, (13) and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

1 Pe 5: 1-3 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: (2) shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; (3) not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Being local, committed members of a church is expression of the body of Christ.

Every letter in the NT assumes Christians are members of local churches.

Faith & Life Meet/ Truth for Today

1). A formal commitment to a local church is continued evidence of a growing commitment to Christ.

"Living without church membership is not healthy. Independence—the desire to choose

²Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offence of God's Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 16.

for yourself what's right and wrong—is at the heart of sin. You [we] need humilities lessons of submitting to flawed elders. You [we] need the encouragement of sharing victories with your church. You [we] need the fellowship of sharing sufferings with your church”

2). Church membership is for our benefit.

- 1 *Thess 5:14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.*

Conclusion: God has given us the gift of church membership. It God's plan that persons would belong to the local church.

Challenge: If you are not committed to a church in official membership start the process today.

Sermon 4 Outline

Text: Acts 2:42-47

Title: The Care Affect: God's Gift of Attraction or Influence pt.1

Scripture Reading: 2 Peter 3:1-18

Propositional Statement: Actions speak louder than words.

Propositional question: If you wanted to make a list of ways to change the world, what would it start with?

How can the church become attractive to the unbeliever?

How can the church influence society?

How can SCBC be the kind of church God wants us to become?

Do you know what the biggest turn-off today is to the unchurched or the de-churched?

- Not practicing what we preach.
- Failing to live out the faith we profess.
- Lack of authenticity.

Society may not agree but they notice.

If we don't stand for something, we will fall for anything.

Aim: To see the value of Biblical convictions, caring for each other and community as aspects of the mission of the church that attracts the unbeliever.

Title: God's Gift of Attraction or Influence to the Church.

Text: Acts 2:42-47

Step 1: The first step in influencing society is having a standard of truth.

Pont I: We are to be people of the Scripture. (vs42)

Why do we need conviction in Scriptural truths?

First, in our rapidly changing, postmodern era some people crave stability.

Second, I don't think we realize how far Christians have drifted from the truth of God's Word.

John 8:31

When Jesus commissioned His disciples what did he say?

Matt 28:20

The church believes and stands for something.

Society is confused.

The Nashville Statement.

Gender Identity.

George Barna “Competing World Views Influence Today’s Christians.”

Society is a mess because it has shut God and His Word out of everything.

We are to be people of the Scriptures.

Life Lessons:

For SCBC to become a Holy Spirit drawing church, for the unchurched, the congregation must be devoted to these first foundational actions.

The church has to first BE a mission before we can be ON mission.

We need Scripture to:

Rid us of wrong ideas.

To enable us to make godly decisions.

To grow us in the grace & knowledge of Christ.

Conclusion: If we don’t stand for something, we will fall for anything.

Challenge: Through prayer and by the grace of God we become people of the Scripture.

Sermon 5 Outline

Scripture Reading: Eph 2:13-22

Actions speak louder than words...

Video

If we don't stand for something, we will fall for anything.

God's Holy Spirit induced care in the church is noticed outside the church; caring for those outside the church encourages those inside the church.

The life change is extraordinary generosity, care and community.

How do we grow our church family in the 21st century?

How do we show the unchurched that the church has value?

People inside and outside the church could sense that God was at work.

God's Gift of Impact Pt. 2

Text: Acts 2:42-47

Phil 2: 3-5

Point I: We need to be a people committed to community.

“God is faithful, by whom you were called into fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” 1 cor 1:9

Faith & Life/ Truth for Today

The focus in our text is on a life together—living AS community.

“We go to church to be the church because we are the church.”

Point II: We need to be a community of extraordinary generosity.

Faith sharing is demonstration & proclamation.

Phil 2: 3-5

Faith & life meet/ Truth for Today

- 1). Consumerism destroys community.
- 2). Correct doctrine and right practice go hand in hand.
- 3). We need to be the people of God by being a loving community.

God's Holy Spirit induced care in the church is noticed outside the church; caring for those outside the church encourages those inside the church.

4). We need to be engaged in our community.

What can we do in this community to show the love of Christ?

How do we broaden our outreach focus?

What can we do that would cause people to marvel & say, "God is at work."

What will reach the younger generation?

Conclusion:

Our challenge is to intentionally love to each other and our community like we see in Acts 2 & Phil 2.

How would this change us?

How would this change the community?

"We go to church to be the church because we are the church."

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING A MEMBERSHIP AND ASSIMILATION PROCESS FOR SUMMERLIN COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH, LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018
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The purpose of this project was to assimilate, educate, and incorporate first-time guests so they would become long time members. Chapter 1 details the context of SCBC, rationale, goals, purpose, research methods used, and limitations for this project. Chapter 2 establishes the theological foundation for assimilation and membership in the New Testament church by providing an exegesis of four passages of Scripture (Matt 16:24-25; Acts 2:42-27; Eph 5:25-30 and Heb 13:17). These Scriptures show the biblical reality that church members are to be converted, committed, unified, and accountable. Chapter 3 addresses the theoretical and practical issues related to assimilation and church membership. Chapter 4 addresses the scope and sequences of this project. Last, chapter 5 evaluates the design and effectiveness of this project.

VITA

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EDUCATIONAL

B.S., State University of New York, 1996

M.Div., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004

MINISTERIAL

Pastor, St. Stephen's Church, Columbus, Georgia, 1996-2000

Senior Pastor, Glen's Creek Baptist Church, Versailles, Kentucky, 2002-2006

Senior Pastor, Summerlin Community Church, Las Vegas, Nevada 2006-

ORGANIZATIONS

The Evangelical Theological Society