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FORMING CHRISTIAN DISCIPLES AT THE VILLAGE
CHURCH IN FLOWER MOUND, TEXAS

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FORMING CHRISTIAN DISCIPLES AT THE VILLAGE
CHURCH IN FLOWER MOUND, TEXAS

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This project finds completion only with the sacrifice of my family. I am thankful for the support of my wife, Carly, and the constant calls to come play from our children, Piper, Sheppard, and Posey. Time with you is precious to me. I pray we are a home looking to the God of the Bible, with our hope in the Son, ever shaped by the Spirit. I love you more than you know.

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PREFACE

Joining The Village Church Institute has been a kind gift from the Lord. My colleagues, J. T. English and Jen Wilkin, have changed the way I thought theological education was possible in the local church, and I am thankful for their determination to see the Bride of Christ flourish. This project is, in many ways, a testimony to J. T.'s understanding of the responsibility of the church in training up disciples, and the opportunity of a formal education space like the Training Program.

In the writing of this project, I have become indebted to Dr. Jonathan Pennington, my doctoral supervisor, for his work surrounding Christian virtue and human flourishing. His work here has helped give clear textual language to how I desire to pursue and teach formation within the church. Also, his partnership with the Training Program has been a cherished gift, as he brings scholarly expertise with the heart of a pastor in his annual lectures.

Lastly, this work was written as part of the Executive Leadership cohort under Dan Dumas. This program under Dan's leadership has been a delight—as well as a needed challenge. I am grateful for my time with these men.

Mason King

Flower Mound, Texas

May 2019

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to assess the discipleship environment of The Village Church Institute Training Program and address potential areas of growth for the continued formation of disciples at The Village Church (TVC).

Goals

The goals of the project were as follows: (1) To assess the discipleship learning outcomes of the Village Church Institute Training Program. This was measured through a survey of graduates who have returned to serve as Cohort Leaders within the program. (2) To complete a SWOT analysis of the Training Program, identifying pathways forward to strengthening formation of disciples at The Village Church. This resulted from the survey results and interdepartmental discussions, then evaluated by J. T. English and Jonathan Pennington. Conclusions are presented as an appendix. Finally, (3) to present a modified curriculum targeting needed areas of growth and development for Christian disciples. This took the form of a Christian Formation curriculum, an amended program syllabus, and modified learning outcomes.

Ministry Context

History

In the years 2002-2012, The Village Church in Flower Mound, Texas, experienced a decade of growth at one thousand new attendees per year. The influx of people put a stress on the philosophy and systems of ministry within the church. In an

effort to accommodate the numbers and help people move toward participating in the community of the church, Home Groups were identified as a prime opportunity for community and discipleship.¹ The lacuna between supply and demand left many new attendees without groups to receive them. A reach to match demand put many under-equipped disciples in places of leadership, which led to greater issues of unhealth.

In addition to the response to accommodate growth, there was an increase of events being hosted and facilitated by TVC on a regular basis. The calendar was stacked with events that originated from TVC Ministries, and then other third party ministries that asked TVC staff to help facilitate. The burden on the staff and the complexity of the calendar became a tiresome endeavor. It was simply too much to think the church could continue to try and be all things to all people. It needed a change in strategy.

Since the church had grown at an exponential rate, trying to remain healthy while matching the influx of people, and stewarding personnel, caused the leadership to ask and answer the question, “How does the church make disciples?” In this move there was also a need to give clear expectations of a maturing faith to the membership.²

Within discussions around the need to re-center the mission of the church, a conversation around a “Simple Church” model gained clarity and traction among the leadership. Eric Geiger popularized the ministry philosophy in his book *Simple Church*, which aims to “strip away the complexity of church systems and focus on the mission of

¹Joshua Rice Patterson, “Leveraging The Multi-Site Church Approach As A Long-Term Church Planting Strategy At The Village Church in Dallas-Fort Worth” (D. Min project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 5: “The church was numerically large and only getting bigger, but the maturity of the church was developmentally behind. The church offered small groups as a means of growth and community but did not have enough groups to accommodate the amount of people. This reality proved strenuous for people who wanted to take the next step in the life of the church. Their next point of connection, groups, was another traffic jam In an effort to alleviate this tension, many immature believers were placed in roles of small group leadership, thus leading to unhealthy groups and compounding complexities.”

²Jared Steven Musgrove, “How Should We Then Make Disciples? Theology Unleashes to Drive Ministry Philosophy and Practice At The Village Church” (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 3.

the church aligning with the valuable message of the church.”³

The leadership team adopted this philosophy of ministry in 2012, which became known in TVC vernacular as “The Shift.” It meant that the church consolidated support of ministries into a finite number of lanes, thereby lessening the strain on volunteers and staff, as well as focusing the momentum of the church into specific avenues. The church focused on providing oversight to the Sunday gathering, and mid-week ministries (such as Steps, Recovery, and Student Ministries). The major emphasis within adult ministry was upon Home Groups, which were to be seen as the center of the Christian community apart from the corporate gathering. All other ministries (lay run, affinity, or third party) were encouraged, but not supported by staff or facilitated by TVC at large. The calendar was simplified. A central result was that adult education was left to the Sunday gathering and Home Groups.

For the next three years, TVC pursued the formation of disciples in a simple church philosophy under a new mission statement: *The Village Church exists to glorify God by making disciples through Gospel-centered worship, Gospel-centered community, Gospel-centered service, and Gospel-centered multiplication.*

The clarity of the mission statement was intended to provide both a picture and a process of the Christian life for disciples to grow along in maturity. The categories of the mission statement helped with explanation, but the simplification unintentionally communicated to a Christian that their greatest thing the church could meet was their need for community—a people to do life with, a place to belong. The four quarters of the mission statement were often seen as distinct compartments within the Christian life, instead of growth factors that worked in interdependent and integrated fashion.

After three years, the Group-centric model proved strength in connecting

³Musgrove, “How Should We Then Make Disciples?,” 3. Also, minutes of The Village Church executive meeting, March 14, 2011.

people into relationships, but insufficient for all the various dimensions of life it was being asked to support. With the predominant demographic of the church being young families, home groups that were once 10-15 adults and 3 children within this time frame quickly became as 10-18 adults and 30 children. The idea of a formative discussion or study taking place in this atmosphere is ideal and unrealistic. While the home group can meet a need to connect and form relationships, it cannot bear the totality of Christian formation.

Another conviction began to form within the leadership team: the structure was restricting discipleship rather than encouraging flourishing. Lifelong discipleship, Bible literacy, spiritual formation, and evangelism were each limping in different ways within the life of the church, most notably because transformational environments for adult education were nonexistent. With a felt need to address biblical illiteracy and actively plan for the educational formation of adult disciples at TVC, a new department was formed in mid-late 2014: The Village Church Institute (TVCI). Groups continue to serve the connecting and community needs of the church, while TVCI intends to address the needs of adult discipleship by providing a scope and sequence for lifelong theological learning and development.

The Village Church Institute

TVCI exists to make the Bible and theology accessible to everyone through transformative learning environments in the church. The department operates with the goal to make distinctly Christian disciples who are growing in Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation. It is believed that one's love for God and knowledge of God are inextricably intertwined. Therefore, TVCI seeks to create learning environments that are accessible to all members and yet have a trajectory that encourages each member to continue pursuing growth in their love and knowledge of God.

Within the local church, the false dichotomy of the mind and heart living at

odds for true faith is alive and well. TVCI looks to integrate the mind and heart, communicating that the *Bible is for Everyone* and that the members of TVC are Christian theologians who are doing the work of theology *together*. Their development into the image of Christ is a joint work with the Holy Spirit, and they are invited by God to actively participate in the journey. It is important they be equipped to do that work in a way that is full of love for God and their neighbor.

Each learning environment is designed to weave three particular strands throughout the curriculum:

1. **Christian Story:** The grand narrative of the Bible is taught in order for covenant members to know the story of redemption. In doing so, each member is reminded that they are invited into The Story, not just as observers or storytellers but also as participants.
2. **Christian Belief:** A clear teaching of doctrine is paramount for members to know what the Bible teaches and to be aware that they are being formed by some kind of doctrine, whether distinctly Christian or of the surrounding culture.
3. **Christian Formation:** Seeking to apply the truth of Scripture and doctrine to their daily lives, members are encouraged to participate in formational rhythms and practices. It is the continual shaping as individuals and a corporate community through formational rhythms that helps each member grow in godliness.

The Institute is comprised of tiers, which visually represented below in an inverted pyramid, with the widest audience at the top and narrowing progressively downward:

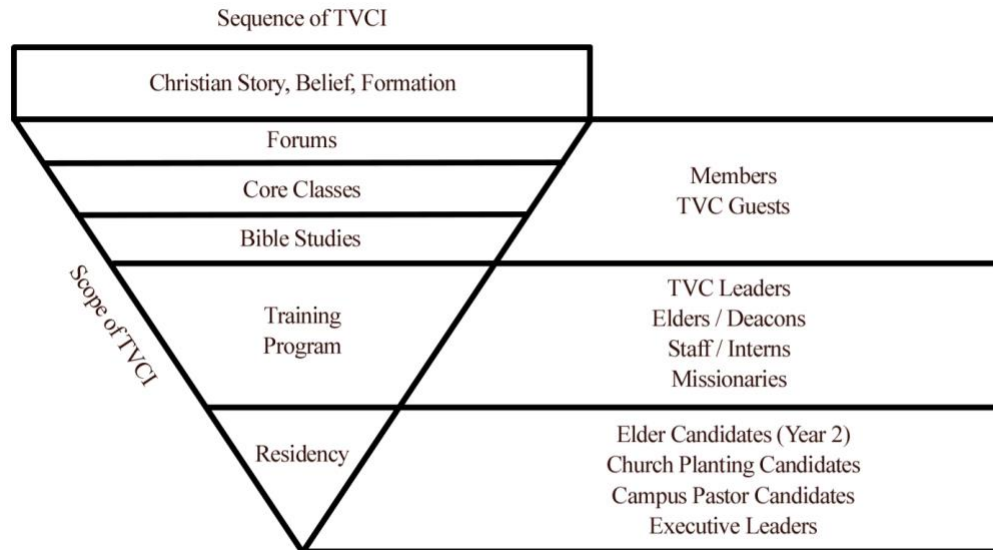


Figure 1. The Village Church Institute learning environments

Tier 1: Forums and classes. Tier 1 of TVCI consists of two components: forums and classes.

Forums are the entry point for TVCI events. These are regularly offered topical events with guest speakers, available church-wide to all members and attendees. These forums address important intersections of theology and culture and also foster biblical literacy throughout the congregation.

Classes run for eleven weeks in the fall and spring semesters. There are Men’s and Women’s Bible Studies, as well as Core Classes, which focus on Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation. These Core Classes are prerequisites for membership as well as ongoing alternatives to those who want to rotate through instead of a Bible Study for the semester. Forums and classes seek primarily to promote biblical formation.

Tier 2: The Training Program. The Training Program is a one-year intensive program where the leaders and future leaders of the congregation study together, doing

theology in community. Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation are woven together in one curriculum helping to create a strong theological framework. The Training Program seeks primarily to promote theological formation.

Tier 3: The Residency. The smallest tier of the Institute, the Residency is for Ministry and Marketplace leaders for whom TVC provides a graduate level type of cohort discussion. The work focuses on the three strands of Christian Story, Christian Belief and Christian Formation—primarily centered on the formation of Christian Identity. The Marketplace track is designed for the integration of faith and work among lay members. The Ministry Leader track is for future elders, pastors, and executive level leaders within the congregation. It is an integrative and holistic approach to leadership development, focusing on theological development, emotional health, and self-awareness. The Residency seeks primarily to promote Identity Formation.

When the Institute launched the first iteration of the Training Program, the initial expectation was a response of 10-15 applicants. When registration closed, there were over 400 applications submitted. The Training Program had hit a vein. The desire for theological education in the church was evident. People want to know their Bibles, and we had removed formal Bible study environments from the church. In four years, the Training Program has received and sent out close to one thousand members of The Village Church, training them in the biblical narrative of redemption through a blend of biblical and systematic theology presented in conversational lecture format with real time cohort discussion. It is the work of theology, done in community, taught in the local church.

The response to these diverse learning environments has been overwhelming. In the fall of 2018, Bible classes launched with over one thousand women and two hundred men in Flower Mound. There are 263 Training Program participants coming in from every campus, with cohort leaders who have returned every year to work through

the material and foster the environment for others to learn. The testimonies from members in their fifties and sixties is regularly a word of life change and a bewildered, “Why has no one told me this before?”

Rationale

There has been dissonance within Evangelicalism regarding how the church makes disciples. The challenge felt in 2012 for TVC is common for the church in whatever circumstance it finds itself. In this era the church is also asking questions of differentiating between morality and real transformation. Leaders find themselves wondering, ‘How do we address the need of Christian formation in light of repeated failures, abuse, and deception from Christian leaders? What can be done at a local level to pursue the whole person—integrating head and heart—and work toward Christian formation that distinguishes itself from morality as day from night?’

The growing biblical illiteracy rates among church-going Christians are frightening.⁴ The confidence and comfort of a church member in handling their Bible has waned as evangelical culture has shifted toward trusting experts and personalities to communicate the attributes and character of God to them. However, God reveals himself in order to be known by his people, and the existence of the canon in the common tongue is a grace to Christians. He can be known; it is a matter of desire and discipline to grow in familiarity and ability to understand the metanarrative of the Bible and God’s plan in redemption. Church-based training environments that champion biblical formation are working to put the Word of God within its members to such a degree that their hearts are able to behold Christ and love what their minds previously did not know. In championing

⁴LifeWay Research, “2018 State of American Theology Study,” last modified October 2018, accessed December 14, 2018, <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Ligonier-State-of-Theology-2018-White-Paper.pdf>. The survey polls on specific doctrines and heresies to test biblical literacy. The survey has been conducted three years in a row, thus the 2018 results have comparative analysis for the previous two years, which evidences to some disturbing trends.

theological formation, the Training Program aims to shape these same hearts by exposing them to the history of Christian doctrine, the metanarrative of Scripture, and calling them to lifelong journey as disciples of Jesus.

This work exists to assess the how the Training Program is performing toward these ends, and to identify areas of needed improvement. This environment has borne fruit, and TVC leadership desires to see it continue to form Christian disciples who love God with all their mind, heart, and strength and love their neighbor as themselves.

Limitation and Delimitations

Regarding the formation of Christian disciples at TVC, the research of this project had one significant limitation and two delimitations.

As a limitation, the research was based upon the subjective responses of the surveyed population. Their experiences, biases, engagements, and anecdotes all contributed to the integrity of the research, which had a corresponding dependency on the surveys completed with accurate material.

Delimitations involved two primary issues. First, this project dealt with the single learning environment of the Training Program, which is housed within TVCI. The project did not deal with discipleship implications within the weekend gathering, home groups, or children's ministry. The adult education ministry of TVCI was the primary target audience.

Second, the research was confined to two parties, the cohort leaders, who were repeat participants in the Training Program, and the paid staff, who oversee the Training Program. The cohort leaders differ from current participants given their completed experience of the whole program, and their re-entry into the learning environment as a leader.

Population

The target population of this survey consisted of cohort leaders at the Flower

Mound campus of The Village Church. Most of these leaders have all participated in the Training Program and then returned for one year or more to serve as a cohort leader. Demographics and ages vary, as well as membership or employment at The Village Church.

Research Methodology

The effectiveness of this project was measured by the completion of three goals centered on the formation of Christian disciples.⁵

The first goal was to assess the learning outcomes of The Village Church Institute Training Program and the efficacy of the program through surveying participants who returned to both repeat the program and to serve as a cohort leader for first time participants. Questions were designed to target three areas of focus: Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation.

The second goal was to collect additional information identifying pathways to strengthen the formation of disciples by executing a SWOT analysis of the Training Program and holding interdepartmental conversations. This goal served as a storming process for the survey data and departmental planning.

The third goal was to present a modified curriculum of formational exercises to be used within the Training Program, targeting needed areas of growth and development for Christian disciples. This took the form of a set of exercises focused on the cultivation of godly habits and character.

The project was designed to assess what was taking place within the Training Program, and then target the next iteration of discipleship courses to supplement the formation of the whole person as a Christian disciple.

⁵ All 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 the ministry project.

Definitions

Christian *discipleship*. The target of TVCI is to create Christian disciples. The departmental definition of Christian disciples is: followers of Christ who are growing in their knowledge of God and knowledge of self. These disciples live under the great commandment and great commission. They are individuals who are growing in understanding of Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation. These disciples are on the journey of apprenticeship with Jesus which will last their whole lifetime, and they are actively partnering with the Holy Spirit in the progressive formation of their whole being to reflect the image of Christ in the world. The goal of TVCI learning environments is to help these individuals grow in their discipleship at every level within the community of the local church.

Whole person. This term refers to the totality of personhood—the mind, affections, and embodied actions.⁶ This definition is borrowed from Jonathan T. Pennington’s *Sermon on the Mount*, where the role of virtue in the formation of godly character is described as to engage the entirety of personhood: the mind, affections, and embodied actions.⁷ The pursuit of biblical flourishing is to grow in virtue as a whole person, and by the power of the Spirit, being formed through them into the image of Christ. With a cultural level of skepticism for discipleship that focused on either the head or the heart at the expense of the other, Evangelicalism has found itself leaning toward an information-based discipleship, and information alone is not transformative. It is necessary for transformation to take place within relationships that provide circles of trust, and that address the whole person present in that relationship. To integrate as a disciple means to bring one’s whole being into the process of transformation, growing in

⁶Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 33. Throughout this work, the three categories of mind, affections, and embodied actions are cited as the qualifiers for formation that affects a whole person.

⁷ Ibid.

knowledge of God and knowledge of self while giving one's whole self to the long process of inner work. It is the incorporation of the lesser desired, shameful, or ignored parts of believers' lives that they bring into the presence of Christ and look for parts of themselves, as well as their gifts and abilities to be transformed by the grace of God.

CHAPTER 2

A BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK OF CHRISTIAN STORY, CHRISTIAN BELIEF, AND CHRISTIAN FORMATION

Christian Disciples are individuals who are growing in their knowledge of God and self, formed through the increasing apprehension of Christian Story, Christian Belief and Christian Formation. A church-based learning environment for the formation of disciples is able to focus on cultivating each of these dimensions and linking them to daily practice in the life of the church with near frictionless application and integration. These individuals are maturing in their understanding of and participation within the Christian Story, are training for godliness within Christian Belief, and are maturing in their individual and corporate identity through Christian Formation. This chapter serves to ground each of these three categorical dimensions within the life of a Christian disciple who is participating in the local church.

Christian Story

The Christian story is a continuation of man's relationship with God east of Eden and into the New Jerusalem. It is a faith that looks backward to find its moorings, while looking forward in hope. With one eye on the family tree and another on the horizon, Christians wake up into God's narrative and must learn where they have come from and where they are headed. The Christian story is imperative for life as a disciple: we must know the Scriptures. Only the whole narrative can form the whole person, therefore Christians must be increasingly familiar with their story, which is the story of God's people revealed in the Scriptures.

Dwelling, Dominion and Dynasty

In teaching through the canon, the Training Program has used the terms of Dwelling, Dominion, and Dynasty to narrate the work of God demonstrated in the Scriptures.¹ It is both a lens and a checkpoint for teaching through the life of God's children in relationship with their Father, and his work to restore what has been lost between them.

God desires to dwell with his people as in Eden and is pursuing the re-Edenization of the world in order to restore this relationship. It is the story of God dwelling among his people also to bring about dominion of the earth through the dynasty of his chosen nation. Christian disciples are those who live their lives in response to the reality that they are to dwell with God, to enact dominion by fulfilling the cultural mandate, and live as God's children within his dynasty through their adoption in Christ. This dwelling, dominion, and dynasty is all partially realized until the return of Christ, where God will dwell among his people in the new city, his kingdom will come in fullness, and there will be no end to his dynasty (Rev 21-22). This lens is the way in which the Training Program seeks to help students keep continuity as they look at the metanarrative of Scripture. The three themes are reinforced throughout each lecture, built upon progressive canonical revelation and application.

Learning the Christian Story: Biblical Formation

There is deep value in rehearsing the story of God. It is a formative exercise and experience to remember God's character, his actions, and his mercy, to then respond in praise and faithfulness. God has long been about the identify formation of his people,

¹Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion And Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies In Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013). Dempster's work has articulated the first two terms used in the Training Program, and within the program curriculum, J. T. English paired the Dwelling aspect with Dempster's work to round out the framework. With each progressive lecture, instructors within the Training Program build upon these themes to show how they are consistent throughout the Bible.

working to help them receive their true identity in faith and put off the sinful identity inherited from Adam and Eve. God has set rhythms of rehearsal in motion to serve as a formative pattern among his people. Where Old Testament Israel practiced many traditions and feasts in order to rehearse their history with God, the Passover stands out as a remembrance that transfers to the Christian, as the Lord's Supper is a continuance and greater realization of God's work in the blood of the Lamb.

To practice the Lord's Supper and grasp its historical significance, both on a doorpost in Egypt and a cup in the Upper Room, is to participate in the Christian story—it is to be formed by the care of God for his people. A look at the institution of the Passover and the observance of the Lord's Supper will illustrate the prescribed formational rhythms of remembrance in the life of Israel and New Testament Christians.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exod 13:3-10). When Israel went through the night of Passover, God protected and delivered his people that he might dwell among them. After this salvific event, the LORD instituted the Feast of Unleavened Bread, an annual tradition for Israel to remind themselves and each other of their deliverance from Egypt, thereby cementing their heritage and instructing the next generation in their identity as God's people.²

The feast is an act of obedience, an act of participation for successive generations in the story of their people—a pedagogical tool for their participation in a life of God.³ Israel rehearses this story of their identity in order to maintain a grasp on who

²Iain D. Campbell, *Opening up Exodus*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster, MA: Day One Publications, 2006), 52.

³John Calvin and Charles William Bingham, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 1:471. Calvin comments on the role of generational instruction in the feast, that “parents ought to be voluntarily disposed to educate their children in the fear of God ... [and] that the memory of their deliverance should be annually renewed lest it should ever fade away, since religion is easily neglected unless men are diligently exercised in its study.” Ibid.

they are: where they have come from,⁴ who they are in relationship with, and what is ahead of them in participating in the dynasty of God.⁵ With each successive observance of the feast, it was a testimony to God's graciousness to them in the past and in the current moment, fulfilling covenant with their fathers.⁶

Israel's participation in the feast was a directive toward and marker of gratitude to the Lord, a sign of their identity being rooted in life with God. With humanity's amply demonstrated ability to forget instruction and gratitude, the rhythmic observance helped to form and maintain an identity for the fledgling people of God.⁷

Do this in remembrance of me (1 Cor 11:23-26). The Lord's Supper is the continuation of this Passover participation in the history of God's people. God's Pascal Lamb was sacrificed once and for all as the mediator and bringer of a new and better covenant.⁸ The rhythm of partaking in the Lord's Supper—"as often as you gather"—is an identity forming and maintaining practice, as it forces reflection of Christ's sacrifice and a covenant member's dependence upon him as Redeemer and Lord.⁹ Modernly observed

⁴John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary 3, Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 178. Durham points that the Hebrew goes farther to call Israel's exit from the House a literal exit from the "non-status of slaves." Juxtaposed with their current status, it is a humble beginning for certain.

⁵Ibid. Verse 5 tends to the future celebration of the exodus, which is a "reference to the promise of land to the fathers, a promise now about to be fulfilled and so mentioned here as a confessional link with both the past and the future." Ibid.

⁶Campbell, *Opening up Exodus*, 52.

⁷Kline Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 203. Snodgrass introduces the language of identity maintenance and formation regarding the corporate gathering of the church. The practices of Word and sacrament shape the identity of believers by maintaining what has already been formed, and forming what has yet to be established. The concept serves well here for the role of feasts in the life of Israel.

⁸Christ's words here in v. 26 declare that he is bringing a new and better covenant than the previous covenants, and that he is the Pascal lamb to be sacrificed. In 1 Cor 5:7 Paul explicitly refers to Christ as "our Passover Lamb, [who] has been sacrificed."

⁹Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 458-59. The very admonition from the Lord that the meal would be done "in remembrance of me" is an identity shaping practice, as it cannot be observed

within the corporate gathering of the church, it serves as testimony to Christ's completed work on the cross, a Christian's present union with him, and a forward look to their eschatological hope. In addition, the meal being observed in the corporate context of the church prevents the community from excluding brothers and sisters from the table due to prejudice, bias, or discrimination. The nature of right practice for this ordinance reinforces the nature of the Christian community.¹⁰ The event itself is a memorial and participation by faith in Christ's sufferings that brought about the new covenant.

A canonical view. These two passages show a canonical view of the importance of knowing the arc of God's plan through dwelling, dominion, and dynasty found in the Scriptures. Christians participate in the plan of God that has been at work for millennia, and they are able to see into the mystery of God that was hidden for ages and made clear in the revelation of Christ (Col 1:26). For the **Christian** disciple, awareness of Christ but ignorance of the single, contiguous metanarrative of the Scriptures is the state of an immature or young believer, and one who will grow in reciprocal worship and admiration of the triune God as they learn of redemptive history and their participatory role in Christ. Then the formational rhythm of the Lord's Supper takes root at a deeper level in their lives with a clear view to the work of God through all the lambs slain by Israel, and the final Lamb of God. Thus as the Body of Christ participates in the Lord's Supper, there are three glances each member can take in receiving the ordinance: (1) a look back at the Passover and the Cross, recognizing God's provisional work, (2) a look around at the other Christians at the table with them, recognizing the unity of the Body in which they are a member of, eschewing modern individualized faith and grasping a

apart from reflecting upon Christ in relationship to his suffering and our redemption. The event since it "has to do with one of the most fundamental touch-points for their community experience and self-understanding." Ibid.

¹⁰Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 551.

scripturally informed view of the community of faith, and (3) a look forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19, a final and full realization of Christian hope.¹¹

Christian Story for Narratival Creatures

Humans are narratival creatures, and being able to locate themselves in the larger circumstance of events brings an anchoring effect to the inherent longing for participation in something greater than themselves.

In opposition to the stories of the world, the Christian story is the supreme story. The Hebrews spent centuries under the whip of Egypt as slaves, and God reconstructs their identity as he delivers them out of bondage. Their mental bondage to the state of servitude and oppression is purposed for rewiring into a relationship of love and response in faithful obedience to their God. The same is true for Christians, awakened from spiritual death and blindness by the grace of God, there is a necessary state of unlearning and learning identity in order to walk in the fear of the Lord. The learning takes rehearsal and reinforcement—humanity is prone to rehearse and reinforce all kinds of things better left unlearned, where a better story is needed. The story of God that believers are welcomed into is the true and greater story, a truer and greater exodus into dwelling with God, in his dominion, and as part of his dynasty.

Christian Belief: Theological Formation (1 Tim 4:6-10)

Building upon biblical formation, a familiarity with the Christian story needs familiarity with Christian belief, the doctrines of the faith. Without a clear understanding of essential doctrines, Christian disciples are in danger of being swayed by plausible

¹¹ Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Lord's Supper as the Sign and Meal of the New Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 88. Waters uses a twofold glance of the Lord's Supper, describing the look back and ahead in hope. The look back, look around, and look forward language is an improvisation by the author of this work upon his statement.

arguments and half-truths. A maturing grasp of Christian belief is a necessity for life within a fallen world bent on selling contrary beliefs, false stories that undermine the true story. It is paramount to learn doctrine as training for godliness, which is “of value in every way, in this life and the life to come” (1 Tim 4:6-10), and doctrine itself is “one of the primary means God uses to build up his church.”¹² Within Paul’s instruction to Timothy, the importance of being trained in doctrine and the “words of faith” is a vital endeavor for the Christian disciple to begin and unceasingly continue along their journey. Where Paul is exhorting Timothy to both feed the body and continue to nourish and train himself for godliness, it is evident in verse eleven that the same type of individual training is important for every maturing member of the church, not merely the ministers.¹³

Paul exhorts Timothy to combat the spread of false creation doctrine within the church by the continual refutation of lies with the beauty of the truth. Constant dwelling on Christian doctrine is the best means of spiritual nourishment, as it trains the heart to meditate on the beauty of God, forming a schema for the individual to rely upon as they combat false teaching in daily life.¹⁴ True doctrine is lifeblood for belief, and a sure means to strengthening the soul against a fallen world.¹⁵

As Timothy learned doctrine from Paul, and is himself has been shaped by it, he is to nourish others by serving this knowledge and helping them train themselves to

¹² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 29.

¹³ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New American Commentary, vol. 34 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 134.

¹⁴ Donald Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 14 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990), 108.

¹⁵ John Peter Lange, Philip Schaff, and J. J. van Oosterzee, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: 1 & 2 Timothy*, trans. E. A. Washburn and E. Harwood (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 51.

possess *theosebeia*, a reverence for God.¹⁶ It is the outworking of godliness that godly people have a love mingled with fear of God—which grows reciprocally as they understand more of him from the Scriptures. Timothy is to protect the church by teaching them how to discern truth from falsehood, to ignore those who have wandered into myths and speculations (1 Tim 1:4). It is his charge to guard himself for his own sake, and for that of his hearers, as “moral and doctrinal rectitude are the inseparable twins of the Christian life.”¹⁷ His witness is a testimony to the beauty and veracity of doctrine taught, and the maturation of the body is a testimony to the work of the Spirit through the witness of a faithful minister.¹⁸ It is doctrine applied. Therefore, doctrinal formation for the body must be a high priority.

The local church is the primary institution to disciple believers in the knowledge of Christian doctrine. There is a unique stewardship of the words of faith placed upon the body, and a unique circumstance for individuals to grow in their godliness through formation in the local church.¹⁹ The charge upon Timothy is not simply to impart knowledge, but it is to teach the script of the Christian life to the Body of Christ in order that they might learn their role in God’s story.²⁰ Vanhoozer declares, “Christian doctrine directs us in the way of truth and life and is therefore no less than a prescription for reality...[and it] is necessary for human flourishing: only doctrine shows us who we

¹⁶John R.W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 117.

¹⁷Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 141.

¹⁸Ibid. “The preacher’s model of perseverance builds the same trait in his flock. The stumbles and fumbles of a wandering spiritual leader will infect a congregation with a variety of spiritual sicknesses.” Ibid.

¹⁹This concept is further developed in the next section on Eph 4 and Christian Formation.

²⁰Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 18. Vanhoozer presents the concept of doctrine as a drama in which Christians are actors performing a script that must be learned and rehearsed, even to the point of improvisation. This script is laid out within Christian doctrine and requires the community of faith to help instruct, rehearse, and perform on a daily basis.

are, why we are here, and what we are to do.”²¹

Learning Doctrine as a Means to the Good Life

Within the Training Program, a primary concept for participants is the notion of false narratives within the world.²² These stories are common cultural scripts for daily belief, habit, and reward. Each gives a unique definition of the good life and where it can be found. Examples of these false narratives include Romanticism, which defines the self through emotions, and the good life through authenticity; Consumerism, defining the self through possessions, and the good life through the attainment of valued things.

Participants are introduced to the concept of false narratives and invited to discern which narratives they have believed upon outside of the one true narrative presented in the Scriptures. Throughout the year, this concept is built upon to demonstrate the pervasive secular discipleship that requires active un-learning of culturally reinforced identities in order to rightly put on Christian identity shaped by the one true narrative of Scripture.

This means of pedagogy highlights the importance of doctrine within the Christian life. By equipping Christian disciples to analyze which false narratives—or dramas—they have been participating in, and then inviting them to take up their true roles in the Drama of God (Theo-drama²³) it is Christian doctrine that sets the play in action. It is Christian doctrine that resembles the “stage directions for the Church’s performance of the Gospel.”²⁴

²¹ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, xii-xiii.

²² A list of these false narratives can be found in appendix 1.

²³ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 17. Vanhoozer cites Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theatrical metaphor, “Theo-drama,” which “calls attention to the action of God (e.g., creation, redemption) in which the church finds itself caught up.” Ibid.

²⁴ Gerard Loughlin, “The Basis and Authority of Doctrine,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42, and Vanhoozer,

Using Vanhoozer's evaluation, "the main purpose of doctrine is to equip Christians to understand and participate in the action of the principal players (namely, Father, Son, and Spirit). Theatrical beholding overcomes the theory/praxis dichotomy then, when it insists on audience participation."²⁵ Thus the learning of doctrine is a foundational invitation to order life according to God's definition of the good life. As Ellen Charry notes, the drama of doctrine has historically been taught in order to "shape Christians as excellent persons."²⁶

However, it is not the rote recital of doctrine that the Christian disciple must learn, as not all knowledge is knowing, and facts do not equate behavior transformation. It is the sustained diet of doctrine that forms the Christian identity and creates a type of fluency with the script which enables performance of the drama. Vanhoozer describes this as the ultimate goal of theology:

[the ultimate goal of theology is] to foster creative understanding—the ability to improvise what to say and what to do as disciples of Jesus Christ in ways that are at once faithful yet fitting to their subject matter and setting. The church continues to perform the same text in different contexts, despite the different centuries, cultures, and conceptual schemes, by 'improvising' with a canonical script.²⁷

Thus the Training Program views the teaching of Christian doctrine as a primary means of formation.

Training Program participants are required to write and submit sixteen doctrinal statements, formulated from their lecture notes and biblical reflection. These statements are continually the most intimidating assignments, only to be heralded as the most impactful due to the labor required to clarify and distill one's beliefs. The doctrines covered in lecture, and thereby written statements submitted by each participant, are:

Drama of Doctrine, 18.

²⁵ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 16.

²⁶ Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 234.

²⁷ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 32.

Trinitarianism, Creation, Providence, Revelation, Imago Dei, Original Sin, Total Depravity, Christology, Atonement, Christ's Resurrection, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, Baptism, Communion, the offices of Elder and Deacon, and Eschatology. Each statement is limited to five hundred words, which means each participant labors over eight thousand word choices to communicate their understanding and practice of Christian doctrine. The writing shapes their understanding of the key players in the drama, it also invites them to see themselves as more than learners, but as active participants putting their hand-copied scripts into action. It is doctrine that helps Christian disciples understand how their roles in the Theo-drama "coincide with their true identities as persons made new 'in Christ.'"²⁸

Christian Formation: Identity Formation (Eph 4:11-16)

Within the letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes about the importance of the unity of the body—that there is “one body and Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all.” The importance of the unity of the body then points to the gifts Christ gave to the body for his purposes for the body. Paul describes the different members of the body as having been given different graces by God for the work of ministry (v. 7). Each member performs a different function by means of a different grace, each to a unified end. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones remarks that even the parts of the body that seemingly have no function may at last be found to have the greatest function, making the case that at his time of writing modern science thought the appendix to be without purpose, while it really meant the true purpose given by the creator was unknown.²⁹

Then there are specific gifts that exist in the various offices of the church and their purpose in the health and wholeness of the body of believers. Where several of the

²⁸ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 399.

²⁹ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1–16* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 170.

gifts and offices named are temporary in nature within the church, the shepherds and teachers are given a remaining charge for the maturity of the body, the perfecting of the saints.³⁰ Where apostles, prophets, and evangelists existed in the era New Testament church, some scholars argue that the office of pastor/teacher has primarily carried forward in the life of the church.³¹ Here, Lloyd-Jones also says that the office can be seen as the same or different gifts, as they overlap and often run parallel in gifting. The gifts might be seen in the same person, and they might be given in different measures to different individuals. It is a common belief that while all pastors are teachers, not all teachers are pastors.³²

The Office of Shepherd (Pastor, Elder, Overseer)

The shepherd, or pastor, is the leader of a congregation who exercises oversight through nurture, care, and guidance.³³ Where the noun pastor is found in its singular New Testament usage in this passage, the derivative “to shepherd” is a common

³⁰Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity*, 192. Lloyd-Jones comments on the list of offices, separating them into two categories, the first being temporal and extraordinary (prophets, apostles, evangelists), the second pastors and teachers. Regarding the definition of evangelism, Jones cites an individual who was commissioned by an apostle unto an itinerant ministry. He is advocating a strict New Testament usage of the term, not a modern appropriation—which he would suggest calling “exhorters.” See also F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 347. While Bruce and Lloyd-Jones differ on the definition of “evangelist,” their end use of the term in conversation with the office and role of Pastor/Teacher is the same. Bruce writes, “If the ministry of the evangelist is not exercised “in the church” it is certainly exercised *for* the church; but for the evangelist’s ministry, the church would speedily die out.” Ibid. Therefore, if the arc of the passage is the establishment of churches and the progressive maturation of localized congregations, the durative gifts within this passage are the ones of Pastor/Teacher.

³¹Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42, Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 249. Lincoln and Lloyd-Jones agree here on the temporary, or rather established and completed, work of the offices of apostles, prophets, and evangelists. Lincoln writes, “It appears that for [Paul] the period of [the prophets’] significance was in the past, and the development whereby prophets became increasingly marginalized in the Christian movement as their leadership role was taken over by the more stable teaching and ruling ministries is one that fits in with the theological emphasis of this passage.” Ibid.

³²Hoehner, Lloyd-Jones, Bruce, and Lincoln would all agree with this statement.

³³Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 251.

New Testament usage, and usually refers to elders and overseers (*presbyteroi*).³⁴ Lloyd-Jones gives a powerful picture of the role:

A pastor is a man who is given charge of souls. He is not merely a nice, pleasant man who visits people and has an afternoon cup of tea with them, or passes the time of day with them. He is the guardian, the custodian, the protector, the organizer, the director, the ruler of the flock.³⁵

Pastors hold a special oversight and accountability for the flock as an overseer that is not explicitly inclusive of the teaching role, while at the same time there can be pastoral tones to teaching—especially within the church.

A distinction here between the pastor/teacher offices would be the office of overseer or elder being set aside for men, while teaching in the local church—apart from the office of overseer, and outside of the preaching of the Word from the congregational weekend gathering—is open to both qualified men and women.³⁶ The nature of caring for, giving thoughtful attention toward, and exercising concern over the spiritual development of believers in the life of the local body is not set aside specifically for pastors. It is also be a concern for all teachers who are under the authority of the elders, given that the elders are charged with responsibility for the oversight of the body at large.

The Office of Teacher

Lloyd-Jones defines the teacher as the individual who “gives instruction in doctrine and truth,” as a primary function for the edification of the body unto maturity.³⁷ The most common embodiment of this role is found within the pastor who is the lead or

³⁴Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 347.

³⁵Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity*, 193.

³⁶“The Role of Women at The Village Church,” accessed December 15, 2019, <https://thevillagechurch.net/Content/ExternalSite/Documents/Beliefs/Institute%20-%202017%20-%20The%20Role%20of%20Women%20at%20The%20Village%20Church%20-%20Condensed%20Version.pdf>.

³⁷Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity*, 193.

sole teacher of a congregation. He incarnates both of these offices. However, in varying traditions there are spaces where a church has ruling or teaching elders—overseer office inclusive of the teaching office—and also finds spaces for teachers within the body who are not overseers. Again, this implication of a teaching office that is apart from the office of overseer, and can be apart from the corporate gathering, one has to consider where the Scriptures give freedom for male and female teachers to operate within differing ministry contexts in the local church. Learning environments, audience demographics, and content all can help guide, but there should be a clear recognition that the sameness of status as divine image bearer comes into play before the difference of gender—and that there are scenarios where men can learn from women in the local church in a complementarian manner, and should.³⁸

Therefore, one could reasonably read the text and conclude that Christ gives gifts to the church in the various forms of offices and gifted people in those offices. These individuals are given for the building up of the body of Christ, which is dealt with in following paragraphs, and two primary offices that handle this internal educational and formational focused ministry are the shepherds and teachers. There are scriptural guidelines to determine who does what where, and the driving purpose of these gifts is for the building up of the body of Christ.³⁹

³⁸For the complete view of The Village Church, see “The Role of Women at The Village Church,” [https://d1nwfrzxhi18dp.cloudfront.net/uploads/resource_library/attachment/file/937/Institute - 2017 - The Role of Women at The Village Church-Long-Paper.pdf](https://d1nwfrzxhi18dp.cloudfront.net/uploads/resource_library/attachment/file/937/Institute_-_2017_-_The_Role_of_Women_at_The_Village_Church-Long-Paper.pdf).

³⁹“The Role of Women in Ministry,” The Village Church, last accessed December 17, 2018, <https://thevillagechurch.net/Content/ExternalSite/Documents/Beliefs/Institute%20-%202017%20-%20The%20Role%20of%20Women%20at%20The%20Village%20Church%20-%20Condensed%20Version.pdf>. “Third, we affirm that equal involvement in the church between men and women does not entail interchangeable involvement. Although men and women are portrayed as equals throughout Scripture, we believe the Bible reserves the office of elder/pastor specifically for qualified men.1 Scripture calls elders to lead the church (1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet 5:1-2), preach the Word (1 Tim 3:2; 2 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:9), protect the church from false teaching (Acts 20:17, 28-31; Titus 1:9) pray for and visit the sick (Jas 5:14; Acts 20:35), equip the saints for ministry (Eph 4:11-12) and use proper judgment in theological and doctrinal matters (Acts 15). In shepherding, overseeing, leading, caring for and praying for the local church, elders practice sacrificial male headship. Therefore, although we encourage all men and women to actively participate in the life of the church, we reserve the office of elder, and the

Educational ministry in the local church at every level and life stage is an imperative for the development of the whole person into flourishing as a child of God and within the body of Christ.

The End Goal of these Offices

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Eph 4:11-13 ESV)

Christ gave these offices to the church for this end goal—the building up of the body for the work of ministry. The church is not meant to be a body of believers dependent upon its paid members to fulfill the work of ministry.⁴⁰ It is a default position of the immature believer to simply consume services while in infancy, while the maturing believer seeks ways to be fit for service as their understanding and perspective of their role develops. It is the purposed end of overseers and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to see each individual member grow into a complete man or woman, a “perfect man” as the text suggests. This “perfect man” idea from the text is the picture that believers must grow into “adult maturity in order to resist all the adverse forces that threaten its health and effectiveness.”⁴¹ The language here is the same as setting bones

responsibilities unique to it, for certain qualified men within the church. Apart from the role of pastor/elder, we believe the Bible explicitly encourages and assumes that women will be involved in the ministry of the church.” “The Role of Women in Ministry,” The Village Church.

⁴⁰R. C. Sproul, *The Purpose of God: Ephesians* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1994), 103. Sproul engages this idea helpfully: “Somehow, somewhere, an idea emerged and became very popular in the Christian community; so popular in fact, that it has now become almost an iron-clad tradition. It is that the ministry of the church is to be done by the paid, professional, theologically-trained clergy. According to this view, the whole purpose of the laity is to receive the benefits of ministry, in terms of preaching, counselling, comfort, and those other things that we seek to provide in the church. But the reason why certain gifts are given for leadership is to equip the believers for ministry. The church is to be a mobilized army.” Ibid.

⁴¹Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 350.

back into place, or fitting body parts into their reasonable alignment for healing and service to the whole.⁴²

The unity of the faith and the knowledge of God are inseparable goods for the health of the body of Christ. Progressive unity is found in a collective pursuit of maturity and participation within the body for the corporate good. It is a flourishing atmosphere, where, as the Apostle describes later, the body builds itself up in love.

Unity of the knowledge of God, coupled with unity of the faith brings the body together—but immaturity of the knowledge of God quickly hinders, rends asunder, and prevents the unity of the faith. It has caused division, distrust, and heartache throughout history where believers lacked proper understanding of the Scriptures, and either wandered into myth, followed a false or chose their own interpretations over the meaning of the text. R.C. Sproul adds,

How desperately sad is the fact that the church is known by schism, not unity; ignorance, not knowledge; and indecisiveness rather than maturity. How it must break God's heart to see us continue in such a poverty stricken condition in light of what he has done, stands ready to do, has the resources to accomplish, and has defined as our calling in Christ.⁴³

What is the means of development, of pursuing maturity that Christ has given through these offices and to the local church? It is the teaching of his Word, Scriptures, and the applied understanding of doctrine that forms the mind of the believer and propels them into maturity. It is, according to Paul, what moves the body from being children tossed around by the waves, to adults, swimming against the current to safety.

No Longer Children: A Diet of Doctrine

The image of a child within the waves is a helpless one, and a parental nightmare. It is a frantic, unguided, and reactive experience for the child who is without

⁴²Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity*, 199.

⁴³Sproul, *The Purpose of God*, 104.

support and at the mercy of the current. A foothold, a railing, some firm step or grasp is the immediate need.

For the Christian, the Scriptures and doctrine within are the firm step and unending grasp of the Christian life. A maturing understanding of Christian doctrine is a key formational exercise for the move into adulthood. Given the earlier discussion of the formational importance of doctrine, and the enduring offices of shepherd and teacher, it is the teaching of the canonical script that falls to these offices within the local church. Lloyd-Jones adds that “this is the protein and the iron which give strength. The great doctrines of the faith must be the basis of the Christian diet.”⁴⁴ The application and life integration of doctrine then, is the responsibility of each member as they grow out of childhood and into their full participation within the body of Christ.⁴⁵ There is a need for both faithful teaching and faithful learning, an environment of mutual responsibility and edification that has to be cultivated within a church. Sproul laments the current state of evangelical congregations when he says,

One of the greatest obstacles encountered in a teaching ministry is this idea, pervasive in the Christian church, that there is no benefit to be had by the laity in serious study of the Word of God or in the study of theology. We have elevated to the level of an ideal the idea of having a simple, childlike faith. We find people saying, ‘I want my faith to be simple and childlike, I don’t need to know any theology. All I need to know is Jesus.’ That sentiment is a childish sentiment and, I

⁴⁴Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity*, 205.

⁴⁵Lloyd-Jones expounds upon the diet of believers, connecting it with the passages dealt with in 1 Timothy and Christian Belief: “Furthermore, this diet that builds up must not only be unadulterated and appropriate, it must also be full and it must be balanced. This can be illustrated by what is true in the natural realm. We read in the newspapers about the importance of having a balanced diet of protein, fat and carbohydrates, and also vitamins. One of the great discoveries of this present century, and especially during the Second World War, was the importance of having a balanced diet. People are often ill, not only because they are not taking sufficient food, but also because their diet is not balanced. This is equally true and vital with respect to spiritual food. It must be a balanced diet, as our quotations have told us. It is to consist of teaching and doctrine. This always comes first: ‘Give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine’ says the Apostle to Timothy (1 Tim 4:13). And again in the same chapter: ‘Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine’ (v. 16). Unless we are established in the doctrine of the Christian faith we cannot possibly grow.” Ibid., 204.

suggest to you, it is a sinful sentiment.⁴⁶

It is doctrine, Timothy's charge, both the shepherd's and teacher's charge, that must be put before the body for hopes of their maturity—because it is doctrine that is “the bridge between the gospel as Theo-drama and theology as gospel performance.”⁴⁷ If the church is not explicitly teaching the treasure of God's formative Word and how it is applied to the life of the believer, the believer is left exposed to the winds and waves of immaturity, false teaching, and their own interpretation or tickled ears. Maturity brings the ability to discern between different types of teaching, between what is true and what is false.⁴⁸ Hebrews 5:14 characterizes maturing believers as those whose “perceptions are trained by practice to discern both good and evil.” This is a progressive, lifelong learning for the believer—which means that education within the church must have both a scope and sequence as to provide a trajectory of progression in the mind of the learner. Calvin agrees when he writes,

We must persevere in this course till all our deficiencies are supplied; that we must make progress till death, under the teaching of Christ alone; and that we must not be ashamed to be the scholars of the church, to which Christ has committed our education.⁴⁹

There are corporate learning environments and individual formation responsibilities, where the offices of the church equip the saints for the work of ministry and the saints further apply and integrate their equipping into their lives, both for their existence within the body and their individual walks as a Christian. Doctrine taught is not doctrine applied, and the ways in which doctrine must ultimately be applied will be incorporated by the thoughtful outworking of individual members in their lives.⁵⁰

⁴⁶Sproul, *The Purpose of God*, 104-5.

⁴⁷Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 22.

⁴⁸Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 351.

⁴⁹John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 282.

⁵⁰Lloyd-Jones offers a caution here: “I would emphasize the intimate relationship of these to

Therefore it is incumbent upon the church to step into the arena of Christian Formation, which this text defines as the building up of the body of Christ, the unity of the faith and knowledge of God. It is the ministry of forming each individual part and setting the bones of the body in place that the body might mature and grow, building itself up in love as it grows into him who is the head: Christ. It seems that Paul is placing a unique burden upon the church, one of overseeing the maturation and welfare of its members for the good of the body at large, and for every soul overseen by the elders.

A Cord of Three Strands: Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation

The story of God’s redemptive work throughout history is one that must be told time and again. It is to be celebrated, meditated on, and passed on from generation to generation—how God has sought a people for himself, rescued them from their sin and provided for them time and again when they proved unfaithful. It is the faithful God who has kept his covenants at great cost to himself, and it is his story that believers work to remember in formative ways as his people.

As God has revealed himself to his people through the Holy Scriptures, everything about him that his children need to know for life and godliness has been made clearly known by his hand. God has revealed himself and his actions toward humankind. Therefore, to know God is to know his name, to know his actions, and to fear him—all of

each other—the faith and the knowledge. Faith alone may puff us up; but this knowledge builds us up. There is a kind of knowledge, says Paul, that ‘puffeth up’; but ‘charity, love edifieth’ (1 Cor 8:1). We must spend our time studying the doctrine, we must attain unto ‘this unity of the faith of the Son of God’. The revelation is in God’s written Word, and the Spirit is given to help us to understand it. I must give myself with diligence to its study; and it is the business of pastors and teachers to inform their people concerning these things and build them up. But we do not stop at that, for it is meant to bring us to this full knowledge of the Son of God—‘That I might know him’—namely this intimate, personal, subjective, experimental knowing of Him, rejoicing in Him, and receiving Him as our life, and drawing from His fullness, and being filled with His fullness.” Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity*, 219. The church must teach and help apply doctrine, which has a goal of helping believers know how to incorporate and apply the implications of doctrine to their daily decisions and responses to experience.

which require the experiential learning of his own self-revelation. To withstand the evil in this world, believers must be increasingly literate in the Bible, having their faculties transformed by the Spirit in order to discern truth from falsehood and to honor God in the world. Knowing what one believes is the guiding path for decisions and interruptions in daily life. Doctrine is essential.

The three strands: Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation, are less sequential elements in the development of Christian disciples as they are an interdependent and interactive environment. Doctrine originates from wrestling with Scripture; therefore, belief is making sense of the story. An increasing understanding of the story influences and refines belief. Maturing belief sends the reader back into the story with greater clarity, causing further refinement of belief. An inherited identity in Adam—born into a particular place, particular enculturation, and particular time—requires both an un-learning of a culturally-disciplined identity and the active putting on of the new identity in Christ (Col 3). The very act of forming a Christian disciple is then a result of increasing belief in the story which rightly orders one’s sense of self—it is the learning of the script and participation in the Theo-drama. An increasingly formed Christian disciple is sent, time and again, back into the story with greater desire, clarity, and conviction as their life reflects the true narrative of Scripture.

It is the local church that has been charged to help retell the story, teach belief and then see it applied in actively shaping ways. Following Vanhoozer’s metaphor of drama, “to build up the church is to enable it to display the drama of redemption in its corporate life.”⁵¹ Through engaging in active learning environments, historical Christian disciplines, and rhythms of community within the local church, the believer is increasingly matured into the image of Christ, seeing their inner person transformed by the unity of faith and knowledge of God. As a result, the Body of Christ is equipped “to

⁵¹Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 400.

build itself up in love.” (Eph 4:16)

CHAPTER 3

DECLINING FORMATION AND THE NEED FOR WHOLE PERSONS

Through a decline in biblical, theological, and identity formation, American Evangelicals find themselves with an impaired and malnourished understanding of life-long Christian discipleship. Dallas Willard said that a great scandal of the twentieth century was the Evangelical emphasis on evangelism, which created converts but not disciples. Willard characterizes the last few decades of the Western church as having failed to require discipleship for entrance or ongoing fellowship in a local congregation.¹ When those converts remain in spiritual infancy until physical adulthood, they have limited resources within themselves to train the next generation in their home or the church. If believers lack an understanding of the Bible as a unified, contiguous metanarrative, if they fail to understand the doctrines of the faith, and they lack a vision for life as an apprentice of Jesus—what grows them into spiritual adulthood? They are infants raising infants in the church.

This chapter highlights three cultural trends within American Evangelicalism, and then proposes a way forward for the local church in the education of their people, training converts into disciples.

The three trends explored are the declining rates of biblical formation, theological formation, and identity formation. Biblical and theological formation are examined through a brief analysis of third-party surveys, while identity formation is discussed by a look at virtue formation as the path toward cultivating Christian identity.

¹Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 4.

A church-based theological training program is a key ministry for local churches to engage congregations toward growth in their holistic formation—mind, affections, embodied actions—resulting in the pursuit of Christian virtue, flourishing, and greater love of God and neighbor.² It is a vital piece of catechesis for the local church, a means of training their people in formational knowledge and practice for holy living.

Biblical Formation

The American Evangelical church is facing a crisis of biblical formation within local congregations, leaving their members open to lingering immaturity and a lack of clear pathways for growth in the Scriptures. A growing understanding of God’s purpose and redemptive arc for humanity is a necessity to grasp the revealed Christian Story of the text. One way to evaluate biblical formation is to gauge biblical literacy, as it takes knowledge of the Word to be shaped by it.

Biblical literacy as Jill Nelson says, “is the ability to rightly read and understand the Bible, using the proper tools of study, thereby becoming well acquainted with the Bible’s character (innate qualities) and content.”³ It is the beginning and sustaining action to discover the content of faith. If God has revealed himself in his Word, it is his Word disciples must know. If Christ is revealed through the Bible, to be ignorant of the Bible is to be ignorant of Christ, for “the heart cannot love what the mind does not know.”⁴ There must be exposure to and comprehension of the truth of God’s Word for the heart to respond to God’s self-revelation, the history of his people, and the promise of the Gospel.

²Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 2018, 33.

³Jill Nelson, “The Importance of Biblical Literacy for the Next Generation,” accessed December 18, 2018, http://www.childrendesiringgod.org/documents/events/2011/nelson_biblicalliteracy.pdf.

⁴Jen Wilkin, *Women of the Word: How to Study the Bible with Both Our Hearts and Our Minds* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 2014, 31.

The lifelong church attendee has often grown up hearing disconnected Bible stories taught primarily as morality tales. Even the new believers are taught these stories as fragmented pieces of a whole so, trying to fit these stories into a plotline can prove quite difficult. If one asked current college-aged believers to place biblical events into the correct historical timeline, they would struggle to know which events happened in right order, betraying a lack of clarity around the history of God’s people, and an unfamiliarity with the metanarrative of God’s redemptive purposes for humankind.⁵

What is at risk with the declining rates of biblical literacy? Theologian David Wells illustrates the threat when he says,

Every study on the internal life of the churches shows that they are becoming increasingly less literate biblically. With that, our ability to judge where our culture is intruding upon our souls is diminished. A church that is merely mimicking the culture, rather than offering a biblical alternative to it, is on its way to oblivion.⁶

R. Albert Mohler adds,

We will not believe more than we know, and we will not live higher than our beliefs. The many fronts of Christian compromise in this generation can be directly traced to biblical illiteracy in the pews and the absence of biblical preaching and teaching in our homes and churches.⁷

A lack of biblical literacy is a lack of exposure to the content of saving faith, a lack of defense against the formational discipleship of the world. It is a compromise of God’s design and standard for living, thereby producing a less than human life. These are the consequences of Christians not knowing their sacred text, and this is the current trend in American Evangelicalism. According to the 2018 Barna “State of the Bible” Study, about half (48 percent) of Americans are Bible users—meaning they engage with a Bible

⁵Gary Burge, “The Greatest Story Never Read,” *Christianity Today* (August 9, 1999), accessed January 24, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/august9/9t9045.html>.

⁶David F. Wells, “The Soul Shaping Reality of the Gospel: An Interview with David Wells,” accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/soul-shaping-reality-gospel-interview-david-wells/>.

⁷R. Albert Mohler, “The Scandal of Biblical Illiteracy: It’s Our Problem,” accessed January 2, 2019; <https://albertmohler.com/2016/01/20/the-scandal-of-biblical-illiteracy-its-our-problem-4/>.

in some form through listening to, watching, or praying with a Bible three to four times a year.⁸ This number has remained fairly consistent since 2011 polls, also showing that out of 48 percent of Americans who are Bible users, 14 percent read daily, 13 percent a few times a week, 8 percent once a week, 6 percent once a month, and 8 percent three to four times a year. A Gallup Poll from 2000 shows readership of the Bible to have decreased from 73 percent in the 1980's to 59 percent. Asking one thousand people the simple question, "How much of the Bible have you personally read?," a 2017 Lifeway Research poll garnered notable responses that 11 percent had read the entire text, 15 percent completed almost half, 30 percent had read several passages or stories, and 10 percent had read none of it. Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research, commented on these results saying, "Most Americans don't know first-hand the overall story of the Bible-because they rarely pick it up. Even among worship attendees less than half read the Bible daily. The only time most Americans hear from the Bible is when someone else is reading it."⁹

Revisiting the definition of literacy from earlier, it is the "ability to rightly read and understand the Bible, using the proper tools of study, thereby becoming well acquainted with the Bible's character (innate qualities) and content."¹⁰ What if the declining rates in readership of the Bible and regular interaction with its contents are partially because church leaders have assumed that church attendees have the requisite literacy to be able to interact with their sacred text? Bible teacher Jen Wilkin argues that an over-estimation of general literacy leads to a failure of the local church to equip its people in the "proper tools of study," thereby equipping them for becoming well

⁸"State of the Bible 2018: Top Seven Findings," accessed January 5, 2019. <https://www.barna.com/research/state-of-the-bible-2018-seven-top-findings/>.

⁹LifeWay Research, "Lifeway Research: Americans are fond of the Bible, Don't Actually Read it," accessed January 5, 2019. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2017/04/25/lifeway-research-americans-are-fond-of-the-bible-dont-actually-read-it/>.

¹⁰Nelson, "The Importance of Biblical Literacy for the Next Generation."

acquainted with the Word and to do the work of ministry. Wilkin adds,

While the Bible is more than just a book, it is not less. It deserves to be accorded at least the same level of respect we'd give to the works of Shakespeare or even the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. No serious student of Shakespeare would read his works the way many of us read Scripture. We don't get to approach the Bible or any other book according to our whim. Books yield their treasures to those who search earnestly for the meaning the author has placed there. That requires observing a process, one most of us learned at some point in English class.¹¹

Increasing biblical literacy involves learning how to study 'our sacred text' as well as actually studying the text itself.

The church is in an uphill battle for the attention of its own people. In trying to capture the imagination and re-inscripturate it, the church battles an ever-increasing culture of distraction and instant gratification bent away from deep work and reward through discipline. A key task facing the church is to help the mind understand the world of Scripture and be held by its detail and beauty more than flickering pixels on a screen. Humankind is given to triviality, and, as Neil Postman observes, "America is engaged in the world's most ambitious experiment to accommodate itself to the technological distractions made possible by the electric plug."¹² Postman identified this sad state early on, spotting that Americans have come "to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think."¹³

If one were to correct this course, the selling point would have to be, according to Greg Thornbury, "to really teach the gospel as the biblical story and not just disassociated biographical studies, facts, and events."¹⁴ Timothy George, when

¹¹Trillia Newbell, "Bible Literacy for All: A Conversation With Jen Wilkin," *The Gospel Coalition* (November 22, 2016), accessed January 24, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-literacy-for-all-conversation-with-jen-wilkin/>.

¹²Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 156.

¹³*Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁴Collin Hansen, "Why Johnny Can't Read the Bible," *Christianity Today* (May 24, 2010), accessed January 24, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/may/25.38.html>. Thornbury is quoted by Hansen in this piece as part of an interview.

describing his aims at Beeson Seminary says, “We’re trying to be sure that students don’t just have a superficial knowledge of Scripture but can explain the Bible as a connected story. Just knowing facts and names would be an improvement, but it’s not what is needed.”¹⁵ Just knowing facts and names would be *an improvement*. The needed piece beyond facts and names? Seeing the Bible as God’s self-revelation, and as a unified whole. David Platt believes churches “have lowered the bar for biblical and theological literacy by treating it as something for professionals. Equating serious biblical engagement with seminaries rather than the local church has impoverished both institutions.”¹⁶ Seminaries receive a fraction, a specific minority of congregations as their students, and they have the opportunity to form these students over years of graduate level work that is unavailable to the average churchgoer due to life circumstance, cost, location or employment. If the local church relegates the deeper work of biblical literacy to the seminaries, then the same local church is dependent and waiting upon that literacy to return with the professional and be dispersed in a consumeristic framework of professional to layperson, rather than training their people how to read, study, and understand the Bible together or on their own. Seminaries and churches work together, while the day-to-day formation of the overwhelming majority of churchgoing believers falls into the hands of the local offices of shepherd and teacher.

And these shepherds and teachers must cultivate the biblical literacy of their congregations by teaching the requisite skills of literacy to read the sacred text. Overall, the stats of Bible usage for the last 50 years show a steady decline, while the numbers for the last decade have shown fractional change around daily to weekly engagement. Which is to say that the same amount of people are using the Bible and the same percentages

¹⁵Hansen, “Why Johnny Can’t Read the Bible.” George is quoted by Hansen in this piece as part of an interview.

¹⁶Ibid.

remain illiterate to the content of faith revealed in God’s Word. When Lifeway polled the statement, “Churches must provide entertaining services if they want to be effective,” it was Americans aged 18-34 who agreed the strongest, at about 50 percent of those polled.¹⁷ Sadly, it was this same demographic that disagreed to the tune of 66 percent that “God is a perfect being and cannot make a mistake.”¹⁸ Clearly there is a trend toward being a consumer of entertainment rather than a learner of divine revelation.

With the recent numbers of engagement reaching a familiar outcome, the truth of the matter is that people will continue to interact only superficially with the Scriptures until they are convinced that a better life awaits them inside of God’s divine Word. When people understand the metanarrative of the Bible, that God pursues and cares for his people, and that understanding is met with the doctrines of the faith that speak to how Christians interact with the Triune God—they perceive value in knowing what the Bible says because it can change one’s whole way of living. The Bible is far from boring, and failing to teach the Bible, and how to read the Bible, is to make difficult what God has made plain through the giving of his Word. The job of the shepherd and teacher is to teach the Word and equip how to read the Word. As the Reformation made plain, God’s people are not to be kept wholly dependent upon the shepherd to make known the Word of God. Churches are responsible for helping equip the saints to read God’s Word rightly. Each congregation must ensure it is teaching the Bible to their people in a way that enables increasingly familiarity and confidence in handling the text. At each stage of life, the church must lay out the content of saving faith as revealed in God’s divine Word and call people forward into holiness.

Churches need to prioritize teaching in ways that increase the overall literacy

¹⁷LifeWay Research, “2018 State of American Theology Study: Research Report,” <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Ligonier-State-of-Theology-2018-White-Paper.pdf>, 19.

¹⁸Ibid., 7.

of their people for the whole Bible. In its children's material, *Desiring God* presents a helpful four-fold character of this kind of teaching, which translates to every educational environment of the church. Teaching that increases Bible literacy approaches the Bible from the perspective of chronological Bible stories, teaching the Old and New Testament with key themes; biblical theology, addressing the main storyline of the Bible: God's redemptive purposes through the person and work of Jesus; systematic theology, teaching key doctrines of the Bible; moral instruction, teaching the Bible's moral commands, instruction and guidance; and finally, the Gospel—explicitly teaching the essential truths of the gospel.¹⁹

Of the three types of formation addressed in this work, biblical formation is powered by biblical literacy, and it is foundational. Familiarity with 'our sacred text' is a precursor to theological formation, because true theological formation is rooted in Bible literacy. One must begin with the world of the text, must be a frequent traveler to the land of the Bible before filling the shelves of the mind with doctrine. Doctrine divorced from the Bible will begin to look less like divine revelation and more like the image of the teacher. Knowing about God without knowing God himself is a recurrent problem for each generation, as the desire for facts often outpaces the desire for relationship. The goal of biblical formation is not simply greater knowledge, but deeper relationship with the God of the Bible, and a deepening relationship with him draws disciples to value theological formation in ever increasing fashion.

Theological Formation

If American Evangelicals are increasingly unfamiliar with the content of their sacred text, then they are even less familiar with the implications of the text. The doctrinal understanding of American Evangelicals has been declining in a way that shows

¹⁹Nelson, "Importance of Biblical Literacy," 1-2.

a trust in the goodness of the ‘Good Book,’ but a lack of apprehension to what the ‘Good Book’ actually says about their faith. The American Evangelical church is facing a crisis of theological formation, where confessed believers have decreasing knowledge of basic orthodox doctrines of the faith. Regular, progressive teaching of Christian belief in the local church helps combat secular formation, as well as give the direction and border of daily experience and decision making within the confines of Christian doctrine.

Many want to learn theology, but when one says to learn theology is to learn doctrine, a fear comes in that doctrine will dry out affections for God. To learn theology is to learn about God, and to learn about God is to learn of humanity’s Creator. As his creatures, people submit to his ordering of life, and the revelation of his wisdom in the Bible. If the Bible lays out God’s ways for life as his creatures and what it means to flourish under his provision and direction, then doctrine is the learning of theological flourishing as a Christian in the life of the church. This theological formation is drawn out of continual and increasing Bible literacy, it is a dependent leaning upon the text, because doctrine divorced from the text takes on a character different than the Creator. If doctrine is introduced with a lack of Bible literacy, then believers are open to false teaching, changing interpretations, and contextual compromise of God’s direction for life.

The category of theological formation is larger than just learning doctrine, because it entails the lifelong process of learning God’s revelation of himself in the Bible in various presentations (systematic, historical, biblical), but it is not less than learning doctrine, because doctrine itself is, “a summary of the Bible’s teaching that is both faithful to the Bible and useful for life.”²⁰ What is more helpful for daily living as a child of God than to know what the Bible says about how a believer should spend their days? As this work surveys the state of doctrinal literacy among American Evangelicals, it aims

²⁰Bobby Jamieson, *Sound Doctrine: How a Church Grows in the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 17.

to point to a lack of theological formation as a whole. A declining grasp of a summarization of the Bible’s teachings on life is the ‘canary in the coalmine’ about an even further danger of lost understanding of theological knowledge based upon the text.

In 2014, 2016, and 2018 Ligonier Ministries commissioned a survey from LifeWay Research called “The State of Theology,” with the aim of helping Christians understand today’s culture and equip the church with insights for discipleship.²¹ The 2018 survey polled 3,002 Americans and focused on six key doctrinal issues, which allowed the researches to measure the current theological awareness of doctrine and heresy present in the church.²²

The survey results were met with a lot of cultural commentary among American Evangelicals, and for purposes of this work, several of the key findings are explored.

In regard to beliefs about God: 70 percent of respondents affirm “there is one true God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.” Evangelicals make up the majority of those affirmative responses.²³ Juxtapose this positive response with the statement, “The Holy Spirit is a force but not a personal being,” which had 59 percent agreement from all respondents (63 percent of whom were evangelical).²⁴ Ligonier notes the affirmation percentage regarding the Holy Spirit is significantly higher than the 2016 poll (up three points). American Evangelicals affirm the Trinity but are confused over the personhood of a member of the Trinity. There is a

²¹Nathan W. Bingham, *The State of Theology: What Do People Really Believe in 2018?*, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/state-theology-what-do-people-really-believe-2018/>.

²²LifeWay Research, “2018 State of American Theology Study: Research Report,” <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Ligonier-State-of-Theology-2018-White-Paper.pdf>, 3.

²³*Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 10.

lack of clarity as to how their–lack of–grasp of the Bible plays out in their day-to-day interaction with their God.

Responding to the statement, “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God,” there was affirmation by 57 percent of all respondents, near 80 percent of those affirmations Evangelical. Ligonier notes the Evangelical affirmation rate was up seven points from 2016, while the overall affirmation increased five points in the same time frame.²⁵ Many scholars who have interacted with these results have noted the functional Arianism in the American and Evangelical church. B. J. Oropeza notes that he finds it ironic American Evangelicals line up with the early Christian creeds around the nature of the Trinity, but then embrace a heresy that the writers of the same creeds opposed.²⁶ Fred Sanders gives a bit more of an empathetic reading to the results, believing it is a display of “zeal without knowledge” in an effort to give Jesus honor in response to the question.²⁷ Sanders adds,

It’s touching to see them try to praise Jesus this way. But it’s mostly disheartening, because it indicates such a low level of theological formation that they couldn’t tell they were doing the opposite of what (if I’m right) they intended. The need for some form, almost any form, of catechizing is acute.²⁸

A few more results help give dimension to the lack of theological formation found in the results: The first statement is “God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam,” was met with 66 percent overall agreement, half of which were Evangelical affirmations.²⁹ The second is, “Even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation,” met with 21 percent affirmation, half of which were

²⁵LifeWay Research, “2018 State of American Theology Study: Research Report,” 9.

²⁶Caleb Lindgren and Morgan Lee, “Our Favorite Heresies of 2018: Experts Weigh In,” *Christianity Today* (October 26, 2018), accessed January 3, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/october/evangelicals-favorite-heresies-ligonier-theology-survey.html>.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹LifeWay Research, “2018 State of American Theology Study: Research Report,” 8.

Evangelical. While the overwhelming 79 percent *disagreement* with this statement is a sad—and condemning—misunderstanding regarding the holiness of God, the affirmation rate is actually a five point increase from 2014, and a four point increase from 2016. Taking these statements in hand, half of Evangelicals affirm pluralism, and half of Evangelicals disagree about the holiness of God and sinfulness of humanity. There is a lack of understanding regarding the base doctrines of the faith.

In response to statements specifically centered around the definition of Evangelical belief, Ligonier/Lifeway asked four statements and considered only those who responded with “strongly agree” to be considered evangelical. The four questions, and the Evangelical affirmation rates were as follows: The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe: 37 percent; It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior: 29 percent; Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin: 42 percent; Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation: 37 percent.

The response rates to all of the statements addressed in this brief overview display a lack of theological formation among the American Evangelical church. It is perhaps these final four that most clearly illustrate how this dearth of theological formation translates into a lack of understanding about day-to-day life as a redeemed child of God.

There is a great need for the catechizing of American Evangelicals in the doctrines of their faith, and in the development of their theological formation for the betterment of their lives as God’s creatures. A continued decline of theological formation will lead to a greater and varied acceptance of heresy like that of the early church. Paul’s charge to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4, to “put these things before the brothers, serving as a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed,” is the call of the shepherd and teacher within the local church:

train the saints in the words of faith and of the good doctrine.

A theological training program in the local church serves to promote theological formation in two direct ways: First, it provides the learner to construct a mental theological framework of the Bible and its interpretation through a blend of biblical, systematic, and historical theology. Second, it catechizes adult believers in the doctrines of the faith, rooting their understanding of doctrine in the metanarrative of the Scripture, and connecting the importance of belief to daily action.

Bible and theological formation inform the individual about who God is, what he is doing, and how he is accomplishing his purposes. The final type of formation now to be addressed is identity formation, which is the formation of the Christian: their character, virtue, and identity as a child of God. Correct understanding of one's identity is integrally dependent on a deepening grasp of the Bible and Christian theology.

Identity Formation

This final form of formation to be addressed is concerning Christian virtue. The American Evangelical church must lead its people in the way of identity formation, which is the way of virtue formation. Christians live in resistance to the discipleship of the world that denigrates virtue rather than cultivating it. Teaching Christian Formation through modeling historical rhythms and practices helps develop biblical habits of living, starting with the individual and moving to the community.

The goal of cultivating virtues found in identity formation is to promote Christian character through habit in order to train the heart in the ways of godly love, forming a whole person, who walks in increasing unity of desire and action by the power of the Spirit.³⁰ A theological training program that teaches biblical formation and theological formation must integrate the formation of Christian identity, because the

³⁰Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount*, 305-7. This statement is a synthesis of Pennington's explanation of virtue formation in the Christian life.

Bible and the study of God do not terminate in the mind, but form the heart for love of God and neighbor. The *telos* of Christian virtue is the heart-directed action of self-sacrificial love, living in the pattern of the self-emptying Jesus. A heart living in this pattern, growing in abiding conformity to the image of Christ, begins to flourish in a truly human sense as they walk in a quality life intended by their Creator, even as a full sense of flourishing awaits fulfillment in the eschaton.³¹

It is important to note now that the idea of flourishing through the attainment of virtue is not a singularly Christian ideal, but one that finds its roots in both Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures.³² Pennington describes this Greco-Roman tradition among classical philosophers, chiefly noting Aristotle, that the “only hope for the flourishing that all humans long for is to pursue virtue—practiced and developed wisdom—over a long period of time.”³³ It is believed that the lifelong cultivation of character, of becoming a virtuous being, is the means of attaining true blessedness, or flourishing. In addition, flourishing necessitates wholeness, a type of integral soundness between desire and action, interior and exterior alignment. The Aristotelian ideal of wholeness is the quality of character where “both the desiring and judging parts of the soul (exist) in harmony.”³⁴ For beginning purposes, noting the philosophical and secular pursuit of virtue as the development of identity and attainment of the good life is important in regards to the cultivation of character. Moreover, as Pennington notes, one must understand the Jewish and Greco-Roman ideals of wisdom and virtue ethics to meet their match in Christ, as he is the “true Philosopher-King,” teaching formation of Christian virtue as the means of

³¹Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount*, 295.

³²*Ibid.*, 36.

³³*Ibid.*, 31.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 33.

walking in wholeness under the wisdom of God.³⁵ Snodgrass adds here that, “being human is entirely a gift of grace, but with grace comes responsibility, and the primary responsibility is to become human. The purpose of the gospel is to make humans fully human. Jesus came to reveal the character of God, yes, but just as much he reveals to us the character of being human.”³⁶ He elsewhere adds that the Bible teaches, “What counts is life with God and an identity shaped by God, both now and eternally.”³⁷

The church is in the business of teaching Christian identity, and her faithfulness to teach an accurate picture of a Christian disciple shapes the formation of her members. A limited understanding of who God calls his people to be, of their participation in God’s story, and how daily actions form identity are all threats to human flourishing. The church can help diminish this threat through clear teaching and shepherding of its members. Christian virtue is a framework for living morally before a holy God, without which a distinctly *Christian* character fades.³⁸ The world is teaching anti-virtues and forming people in the image of God’s enemies rather than his children. In postmodern culture, a generation of Christians struggle to distinguish the importance of critical habit formation and pursuit of a virtuous character over building a commodified and packaged self. A brief discussion of the decline of virtue, the loss of biblical mooring for the self, and the rise of the autonomous individual will help to illustrate the need for the church to focus on identity formation among its people.

Values over Virtue

In his work *Losing Our Virtue*, David Wells traces the loss of moral compass

³⁵Ibid., 36.

³⁶Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are: A Christian Understanding of Identity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 33.

³⁷Ibid., 9.

³⁸David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 16.

from the eighteenth century into postmodernity. Wells argues that virtues were classically taught as the appropriate character for communal life and flourishing, and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries talk of the virtues corporately fell prey to Enlightenment ideology. Christian virtues in particular took the heavier assault, beginning to hold a lesser place in communal discourse.³⁹ Where communities began to diminish in importance, virtues came to stand apart from their classical roots, leaving the virtues in a new realm of definition—one of social standing (e.g. rules of etiquette and classism), now privatized rules for reputation rather than formation of moral character.⁴⁰

American civic virtue has come to be expressed through the rise and evolution of individualism. Where the nineteenth-century individualist sought virtue as being guided from an internal compass of inherent values and ethics, the twentieth century individualist seeks freedom from the values and ethics of the previous generation. Virtue for this individual is freedom from constraint and guiding principles that are not of their own choosing.⁴¹ Wells concludes that the expressive individualism of American society has brought about the erosion of communal civic virtue, which are actions performed for the public good.⁴² It is the loss of thinking and acting for the communal benefit over the individual good that “melts the bonds between people, erodes the sense of responsibility for society, and makes us a law unto ourselves.”⁴³

Among the most striking of Wells’ observations in regard to this loss of virtue is the shift from a formation of character to a construction of personality. The nineteenth century, with its civic and ethical values shaped largely by biblical teaching, held a great

³⁹Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 15.

⁴⁰Ibid., 15.

⁴¹Ibid., 67.

⁴²Ibid., 69.

⁴³Ibid.

interest in character and believed that happiness, or flourishing in a common sense, came through “moral limitation, self-sacrifice, and self-control.”⁴⁴ The second half of the twentieth century saw a rapid increase of the pursuit of personality, of a self that was unburdened by the limitation of communal virtue, finding fulfillment in “unlimited self-expression, self-gratification, and self-fulfillment.”⁴⁵ The self, unhinged from communal responsibility, has been sold the alternative lifestyle of consumerism, and of therapeutic self-healing through attending to one’s felt needs over the needs of the greater good. In a world of relativism and postmodernity, morals have succumbed to individual belief. If one carries Wells’ thinking forward from the publication of his work in 1998, the following twenty years demonstrate the increasingly commodified self, an expressive individualist whose primary value is “individual freedom, happiness, self-definition, and self-expression.”⁴⁶

Two final notes from Wells on this topic before moving on. First, Christians struggling to grasp the moral dimensions of a virtuous life have a hard time sensing a holy God as someone other than a being that presses in upon them with deadly seriousness, demanding their attention. In turn, a therapeutic pursuit of self-focused healing and wholeness makes more cultural sense than the self-denying acceptance of God’s moral order.⁴⁷ The expressive individualist is trading classical virtue and identity shaping character for the gain of self-focused values. Second, this pursuit of self, this abandoning of classical virtue and received biblical identity (both in its framework for flourishing and call to self-denial), has led to a hollowing out of personhood, a

⁴⁴Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 99.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 99.

⁴⁶Trevin Wax, “Expressive Individualism: What is It?” *The Gospel Coalition* (October 16, 2018), accessed January 15, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/expressive-individualism-what-is-it/>.

⁴⁷Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 16.

diminished view of identity and real human flourishing. Wells' conclusion is haunting, "we have built a morally indifferent culture in which virtue almost inevitably perishes."⁴⁸

The indifference to morality in today's American culture is evident in every news outlet, social media platform, and shopping interface. The message is self-fulfillment through attainment of experience, goods, and recognition.⁴⁹ The loss of communal responsibility has fed civic discourse and shaped the American character. Many are more defined by their possessions than their virtues, more known by their social media personas than their character in the embodied community. The terrifying thing is that for many, this is the cultural education of pursuing the good life. This is the message many have come to embrace for lack of understanding the waywardness of this moment in time related to the greater scope of history, and greater yet, where everything is ultimately heading.

There are two items left to address before concluding the discussion over identity formation, a look at the Christian's eschatological hope that dethrones the false narratives of the world, and a discussion of Jesus' teaching on virtue with the end goal of living into a Christian's identity in him, individuals in community for the flourishing of the whole.

Eschatological Hope

The loss of moral center in light of postmodernity and progressivism has led to a willful ignorance of the scope of history, and loss of clear perspective toward the future. The world asks the question, "If life has no objective meaning, then what true future is there to live in light of?" The Christian must answer with their eschatological worldview,

⁴⁸Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 115.

⁴⁹Snodgrass describes the American condition this way: "Much of society's message is 'You are what you possess and the status you have.' Identity is based on what we can purchase and put on display, especially houses, clothes, cars, and unusual experiences, or it is based on our accomplishments and how busy we make ourselves look. It is all external image rather than internal and substantive identity." Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are*, 5.

that this moment in time is lived in light of a moment to come. Christian identity is formed by answering the question of ‘what story we find ourselves a part of,’ which gives clarity of ‘who we are to be.’⁵⁰ The narrative cues Christians into their roles as bit players on God’s stage, and they see the small space in history that they occupy. The narrative also instructs believers to live in light of the end of the story. Trevin Wax defines eschatology away from the common definition of solely concerning the end times to “encompassing the Christian vision of time and the destiny of the world.”⁵¹ Only in light of the Christian vision of time and the destiny of the world can the Christian answer the question, “What am I to do?,” and moreover, “Who am I to become?”

Wax clarifies his definition with a three-tiered framework of Christian eschatology. These three views are to be held in tension by the Christian, all of which inform each other: a personal, collective, and cosmic view of time and the destiny of the world.⁵² Personal eschatology is therefore the “hope in eternal life with God that will outlast physical death”; collective eschatology is the “hope in a bodily resurrection and unending fellowship with God and other believers”; finally, a cosmic eschatology is the “regeneration of the universe and establishment of the new heavens and the new earth.”⁵³ If one considers Wells’ argument that the expressive individualist has moved from objective truth, unhinging themselves from responsibility for societal welfare, the eschatological worldview in their narrative is a personal existence without meaning or consequence. It is without hope after death, in a world that is bent on self-debasement

⁵⁰Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN; University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 216. Original quote reads “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I do to?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” Ibid. Also see Trevin E. Wax, *Eschatological Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2018), 34.

⁵¹Wax, *Eschatological Discipleship*, 28.

⁵²Ibid., 32.

⁵³Ibid.

through using powers given for self-preservation.⁵⁴ Without the true orienting Christian story, the questions of “What am I to do?” and “Who am I to become?” are left to the contingencies and evolutions of human thought, rather than divine revelation of a Creator to his creatures.

However, Christian eschatological hope gives clarity to life in the here and now. It directs the cultivation of identity in light of God’s purposes for humanity. It restores the pursuit of true virtue, of identity formation. It means, “Christian living in the present consists of anticipating this ultimate reality through the Spirit-led, habit-forming, truly human practice of faith, hope, and love, sustaining Christians in their calling to worship and reflect his glory into the world.”⁵⁵ Through the practice of the chief virtues of faith, hope, and love, Christians are formed into their identity as participants in God’s story. They are led in this pursuit by the Spirit and into habit formation that sows into eventually reaping godly character. How these practices integrate into a theological training program is addressed at the close of this chapter and in the next.

As Wax’s work centers around the impact of an eschatological worldview in discipleship, his definition of discipleship is a helpful addition here:

Eschatological Discipleship is spiritual formation that seeks to instill wisdom regarding the contemporary setting in which Christians find themselves (in contrast to rival conceptions of time and progress) and calls for contextualized obedience as a demonstration of the Christian belief that the biblical account of the world’s past, present, and future, is true.⁵⁶

This is a good place to be reminded how this work has defined a Christian disciple at TVC, which is as a follower of Jesus who is growing in their knowledge of God and knowledge of self, living under the great commandment and great commission.

⁵⁴Josef Pieper, *A Brief Reader On the Virtues of the Human Heart* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 31.

⁵⁵N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 67. See also Wax, *Eschatological Discipleship*, 32.

⁵⁶Wax, *Eschatological Discipleship*, 41.

The Christian disciple is growing in their understanding of Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation. They are apprenticing to Jesus throughout their whole lifetime, actively partnering with the Holy Spirit in the progressive formation of their whole being to reflect the image of Christ in the world.

Christian disciples answer the question of “Who am I to become?” by locating themselves in the Christian story, growing in Christian belief, and seeking Christian formation. The Christian eschatological worldview is imperative for this to take place; it is an orienting compass in identity formation.

Through restoring an eschatological worldview, the church can combat the disorienting stories of the world. The intentional exposing of false narratives, their treatment of the good life is key. Highlighting the true Christian narrative, along with the role of virtue and identity formation in light of the destiny of the world, are targeted weapons against false narratives of the good life. Modern culture has diminished the societal reward of virtue, replacing it with the currency of influence and power. This has shaped a specific kind of identity in people, one that is out of step with God’s intended purposes for humanity. It is incumbent upon the church to educate about the important of Christ’s teaching on virtue, and why he would call his followers to a new and different way of life. It is Christ alone who has modeled and instructed the world in true human flourishing.

Virtue Formation

The cultivation of character and attainment of the good life is the flourishing that all humans seek. In this cultural moment, it could be said that it is the *appearance* of character and the *image* of the good life is the flourishing that humans seek. Cicero was right: “Few are those who wish to be endowed with virtue rather than to seem so,” and when Stephen Colbert inverted the statement during his run of The Colbert Report to read, “To seem rather than to be,” He lit upon the cultural moment, lampooning the

decline of the virtuous ideal.⁵⁷ To seek the appearance of virtue without the character to support it is not a new malady, it is simply a way to represent the issue Jesus faced when he preached the sermon on the mount. Speaking to religious leaders who sought exterior conformity to God's law while remaining a walking contradiction internally, Jesus knew about the lack of wholeness present in those he addressed.

Earlier it was briefly mentioned that the Aristotelian idea of flourishing is predicated upon the existence of wholeness within the character and action of an individual. This concept addresses the interior desires and exterior actions of an individual, wherein they exist in unison and harmony, that the individual is integrally sound. There is a learned wisdom in the life of this individual, where they not only know what to do in obedience to the laws of society and morality, but they know how to respond in the moment when they are called upon. Their reactions are shaped by their integral character, and they are able to respond with virtue. Thus, a virtuous action is something that “includes all of who we are as humans—reasoning, affections, and embodied actions—the whole person.”⁵⁸

This understanding is important when addressing the development of identity from a Christian perspective. Wax described the need of an eschatological discipleship, and he further defines discipleship as, “a timely application of moral wisdom that is cultivated through growth in Christian character, immersion in the grand narrative unfolded in the Scriptures, and reliance upon the Spirit's guidance.”⁵⁹

Speaking to the modern individualist culture, Snodgrass reminds the reader that identity is “not an individual affair; it is a social construct. We are not who are by

⁵⁷Amy Pastan, “The Image of Truthiness: Colbert Comes Back to the National Portrait Gallery,” *Face to Face* (blog), National *Portrait Gallery*, n.d., accessed March 31, 2019, <https://npg.si.edu/blog/image-truthiness-colbert-comes-back-national-portrait-gallery>.

⁵⁸Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount*, 33.

⁵⁹Wax, *Eschatological Discipleship*, 38.

ourselves.”⁶⁰ He argues that the church’s primary role is identity formation and maintenance, and that this communal formation is dialogical.⁶¹ Snodgrass continues,

We have to keep doing identity maintenance in our communities, but individually we have to take responsibility for our own learning. What will you do to ensure your learning? You cannot flourish in the ongoing process of change without a serious learning program, and serious learning will involve honesty, deeper thinking, study, and investment in the right kind of experiences.⁶²

Snodgrass is pointing to a learning program with the end goal of becoming different than one already is, being re-educated into the way of God through the re-humanizing process of sanctification through true identity formation.

Where Christian’s virtue ethics find their biblical roots and distinction from philosophy is the belief that God has made humanity, redeemed humanity through Christ, and is partnering through his Spirit with redeemed humans to form them into the image of his Son. In describing this reality, Snodgrass acknowledges that for humanity, there is the self, which one currently is, and there is the self that God desires one to become, which he labels the “summoning self.”⁶³ This summoning self “is created in the image of God and responsible to God,” therefore a life in pursuit of Christian virtue is the goal of discipleship.⁶⁴ This is a pursuit of biblical formation, theological formation, and the Spirit guiding into identity formation.

The call of the Christian is to lay down one’s life to follow Christ, in doing so finding true life. The call of denying oneself, of putting off the old man and putting on the new, of living in a manner worthy of one’s calling, these are all calls to discipleship: to living into a new identity as an apprentice of Jesus. They are a call to virtue formation,

⁶⁰Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are*, 13.

⁶¹Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are*, 203.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 203.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

to begin a lifelong process of becoming, rather than seeming. They are the call to be holy as Christ is holy, which Pennington suggests is a call to become integrally sound, to live as a whole person, willing one thing in desire and action, just as Jesus does.⁶⁵ It is only by the Spirit's power and presence that the believer can do so, as the Apostle echoes through history reminding Christians of the need for deliverance from double mindedness and the power of the Savior alone to deliver (Rom 7:21-25).

Christians are to be known for being the type of person who does the things that Jesus commands of them and wants to do them because of their love *for* him. Because of their grasp on the encompassing Christian vision of time and the destiny of the world, Christians discipline themselves in desire and action unto God in a life-long pursuit of Christian virtue formation. It is the daily practice of living out their identity in Christ as resistance to the world, choosing habits of virtue formation over habits of self-indulgence. Identity formation is the ongoing pursuit of Christian virtue through the development of habits and disciplines that train the heart, affections, and embodied actions—whole persons—to respond to the current moment with biblical wisdom for the glory of God.⁶⁶

Conclusion: A Way Forward

The Training Program within TVCI seeks to form Christian disciples through the pursuit of biblical formation, theological formation, and identity formation. Through teaching the grand narrative of Scripture and application of core doctrines, the program addresses the first two categories primarily through lecturing and cohort discussion over a thirty-week span. Cultivating Christian virtue is an individual and communal process, as

⁶⁵See Jonathan T. Pennington, "Christian Psychology and the Gospel of Matthew," *The Journal of the Society of Christian Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2009): 39-48.

⁶⁶Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount*, 33.

the virtues have a vertical and horizontal nature to them.⁶⁷ Christians are meant to embody and enact the virtues for their walk with God and others, not solely their own personal betterment, as they do not exist as individuals in the body of Christ. Individual members are set aright for the alignment and flourishing of the whole body. Wax critiques pietism rightly when he points out that a sole emphasis on personal transformation apart from the common good is a mistake.⁶⁸ Therefore, a goal of the Training Program is to cultivate habits of character, to invite participants to practice spiritual disciplines as a means of beginning—or continuing in an increased capacity—the lifelong pursuit of Christian formation.⁶⁹ To quote Willard, it is to become, “one who, intent upon becoming Christ-like and so dwelling in *his* ‘faith and practice’, systemically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end.”⁷⁰ The Training Program wants to illustrate and invite participants into the journey of identity formation. While this chapter has dealt with these three types of formation in separate discussions, they are interdependent and interconnected, as referenced at the close of chapter 2. Biblical formation is necessary for identity formation, for Christian virtues cease to be Christian outside of divine revelation in the Bible. Theological formation is served and deepened by biblical formation, anchoring divine truth in its primary text. Finally, identity formation is served by theological formation, as disciples can answer the question of “Who am I to become?,” with accuracy because they know what story they are a part of,

⁶⁷Ibid., 310.

⁶⁸Wax, *Eschatological Discipleship*, 209-10.

⁶⁹James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 18-19. Smith builds out these two categories as principles for virtue formation. One imitates the virtue because it is worthy of emulation, and then one practices the virtue in order to grow the ability to perform the action with less required exertion of conscious effort as time goes on. It is the habituation of virtue that Smith points out as the way forward into forming Christian identity. Pursuing Christian disciplines and practices then is a means of both imitating saints from history and practicing tried methods. When one does this, they are practicing virtues consistent with those of Christ. The New Testament repeatedly instructs believers to clothe themselves with virtues such as these (Col 3, Phil 2).

⁷⁰Willard, *The Great Omission*, 7. See also Wax, *Eschatological Discipleship*, 204.

and where they are headed.

This type of theological training in the local church is a way forward in the formation of Christian disciples. The legacy of church-based Christian education hinges on the cultural storytelling ability of the local church, on how well it can act out the Theo-drama. Ted Newell argues that education is a “situated practice,” and that learning operates, “within the ecology of a family, church, and broader social supports.”⁷¹ If the church cannot reclaim the true narrative of the good life and adequately instruct its members in the story of which they were created to be a part, the wholistic formation of Christian disciples will fail to competing narratives with more immediate temporal rewards.

In describing a forward looking vision for theological education, Justo L. González declares the first step to be a “return to theological education in its proper place, which is at the heart of the church—particularly of the church in its local expression, the congregation.”⁷² In the formation of a local body of Christian disciples, González adds, “the best learning takes place in community. But this is not primarily a community of students and teachers, as it was in the very notion of ‘seminary’ that developed in the sixteenth century, but rather the community of faith into which every student and faculty member is grafted.”⁷³ It is the role of the local church to form its members, to set the bones aright and see the body built up in love. It is the role of the community of faith to see distinctly Christian disciples formed. Vanhoozer aptly cites the issue at hand when he says, “in an increasingly complex world, the church needs members who are able to draw on cruciform wisdom to make the right judgements as how to continue the way of Jesus Christ. Viewed against this backdrop, the church is less

⁷¹Ted Newell, *Education: A Student's Guide* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 124.

⁷² Justo L. González, *The History of Theological Education* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2015) 127.

⁷³ Ibid.

the cradle of Christian theology then its crucible: the place where the community's understanding of faith is lived, tested, and reformed."⁷⁴

In an increasingly post-Christian society, it is the duty of the local church not to invent a new type of Christian education, but to take up an old responsibility recently forgotten. The next chapter surveys responses of participants in the Training Program as to the learning outcomes within Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation. The testimony of the participants makes a strong case that this way forward is not only possible, but effective in forming Christian disciples.

⁷⁴Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 25.

CHAPTER 4

AN ANALYSIS OF THE TRAINING PROGRAM AT THE VILLAGE CHURCH AND ITS LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The two previous chapters have sought to lay a foundation for the infrastructure and pedagogy of the Training Program at TVC. Through the lenses of Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation, the Training Program seeks to develop Christian disciples who are growing in biblical formation, theological formation, and identity formation. Each lecture during the thirty-week program aims to weave these three threads together. No material is presented solely as Christian story or formation, just as each type of formation addressed in chapters two and three do not mature in isolation. They are integrated and dependent upon each other's growth for health and maturity. This chapter analyzes the efficacy of the Training Program in reaching its objective by surveying responses from lay leaders within the program and concludes by presenting a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis of Training Program at large within TVC. The information displays that the Training Program is meeting its learning objectives and is facing opportunity for targeted growth to iterate and pursue continued education. Specifically, the Training Program is facing the opportunities of continuing education for its alumni, and expanded instruction regarding virtue formation in the Christian life.

Cohort Leader Survey

The first phase of this project consisted of a written survey submitted to a pool of twenty Cohort Leaders within the Flower Mound Training Program. These leaders are alumni of the program, some having returned for a third and fourth year to both lead a

table of new students and take another pass through the curriculum themselves. This means that the target year of experience surveyed was the last full completed iteration of the Training Program in 2017-2018. Cohort leaders were given a month to respond to the survey, and then the submissions were collected and analyzed through a SWOT framework for common themes. Ten questions were included that covered each of the dimensions of teaching (Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation) and their influence upon the individual's daily life. The remainder of the questions focused upon (1) personal expectations the course met or did not meet, (2) perceived weaknesses and opportunities for the Training Program, (3) the perceived benefit of theological education in the local church, and (4) stories that the Training Program has contributed to that should be shared with the body of TVC. The questions are as follows:

1. As a result of participating in the Training Program, how would you describe your growth in understanding the Christian Story?
2. As a result of participating in the Training Program, how has your understanding of Christian doctrine developed?
3. How have the Christian formation lectures and assignments influenced your daily walk with Christ?
4. Were there any topics or areas of interest that you expected to address in the Training Program and did not?
5. What topics or areas of interest were you exposed to in the Training Program that you want to learn more about?
6. How has the experience of the Training Program influenced your service and leadership within our local church?
7. What areas of growth and discipleship are you still seeking in your walk with Christ?
8. What do you think are the particular benefits of this model of theological education in the local church?
9. What weakness/areas of improvement/lacking topics with the Training Program have you noticed? How would you suggest we address them?

10. What stories and successes can you share that will help us celebrate what God is doing in the Training Program?

The SWOT analysis and survey responses are addressed through the lenses of Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation, which guides the next section of discussion. The description of each lens deals with a brief SWOT of the impact and administration of the topic within the learning environment. After these sections, there is a brief SWOT of the Training Program as a whole to close out the chapter. The strengths of each lens received a larger percentage of responses than weaknesses, opportunities, or threats. These last three categories are less testimony driven from the surveys, and benefit from a departmental SWOT along the same parameters.¹

Christian Story

Strengths. In addressing the topic of Biblical formation, the Training Program seeks to educate its participants in the metanarrative of the Bible. In chapter 3 it was noted that the stories of the Bible are often told in segmented, individual tales of morality. This approach keeps Christians from viewing the Bible as a cohesive story of God's work in history, and as history in which they also participate. The individualized nature of instructing the Bible has led to individual histories instead of a corporate identity as God's people, connecting with the Old Testament and into the New Testament. Through the language of dwelling, dominion, and dynasty, the story of God's work is taught from creation to the second coming of Christ. A framework to connect themes to throughout the cannon has given new horizons of understanding to the Training Program participants.

¹This combined SWOT, which includes points from survey responses and a departmental analysis, is included in appendix 4.

A mirror for the teaching of the Christian story is to educate the participants on the false narratives that the world presents as stories of the good life.² Individuals have default narratives of society that they pursue daily as a means to their perception of flourishing, of the good life. An awareness of the tenants of these stories contrasted with the true story of the Bible is a starting point for participants in placing the pieces of Scripture together and placing themselves into the true narrative of Christianity.

Regarding the impact of the Training Program upon a grasp of the Christian story, the consistent theme is an acknowledgment of participants' pre-existing lack of understanding that the Bible is a cohesive story. The segmented appropriation of stories through time in church had built a segmented view of God's interaction with his people. Participants noted that the lack of cohesiveness in the way that Bible stories were taught in their past had bred in them an apprehension regarding stories in the Old Testament, and a failure to see how God has graciously dealt with his people throughout history.

Concerning the Christian story and their false stories of choice, participants expressed increasing clarity in their daily life as to the impact of seeing a unified Scripture upon their decision making and actions. Participants also reported an increased ability and confidence in their ability to articulate the narrative of the Bible when given the opportunity. Their grasp of God's redemptive work is no longer tied to the gospel narrative alone, but how the gospel is the fulfillment of God's work across the history of interactions with his people.

The final major theme present in responses is that a new understanding of the Christian story has helped to articulate the character of God presented in the Scriptures. Segmented stories present segmented pieces of God's character, and the track record of

²The false stories of the world that are presented consist of: Romanticism, Consumerism, Rationalism, Pragmatism, Hedonism, Fatalism, Individualism/Egotism, Nationalism, Progressivism, Postmodernism, Secularism, and American Civil Religion. This list and brief descriptions appear in the appendices.

his dealing with his chosen people presents a consistent character that is to be relied upon. One participant noted that this realization has increased their reverence for God, and led them to engage the trials of life with a mantra that “because God is good, and he is accomplishing his purposes while loving his people, the way to trust him in this scenario is. . . .” This is biblical formation ‘on the pavement,’ impacting and shaping the way God’s children turn to him in moments of need, because they have hidden divine revelation in their hearts and been formed by studying it.

Weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The physical environment of the Training Program in Flower Mound is an issue that appeared in the survey responses. Participants sit at round tables in cohorts of eight to eleven people, while the tables comfortably seat six to eight people. This year the program added two tables of participants due to demand, but the impact upon the room can be seen in the responses of survey participants: it is too loud and too cramped, which hinders the level of communication in the room. While this is a physical hindrance, it came up multiple times within responses centered upon Christian Story, which lends credibility to the fact that while participants are trying to follow along in lecture and participate in cohort discussion, they are impaired in their synthesis due to their physical environment. The decision to include more people in the program this year has hurt the quality of participant experience.

With the breadth of the canon to be covered, another weakness—while some might call it a strength—is the sheer volume of information that is communicated in each lecture. It is not so much fatigue that is communicated by participants’ as it is being overwhelmed at trying to process it all when so much of the narrative structure is new.

An opportunity for Christian Story within the Training Program is the cultural moment that has seen a resurgence in the value of stories. The prominence of Donald Miller’s Story Brand is one example of how marketing and public speakers have tapped

into the power and qualities of narrative to communicate ideals.³ The storying of the Bible, led by an instructor that communicates the participants' role in God's redemptive plan as they journey toward flourishing, is a profitable method of retention, and one to be explored for greater use. The responses show a high impact of the storying nature of the lectures.

Another opportunity is possible partnership with The Bible Project. The Bible Project is a non-profit animation studio that produces short-form animated videos to, 'make the Bible story accessible to everyone, everywhere.'⁴ Pursuing Tim Mackie as a weekend seminar lecturer would be a possible step forward. The Training Program utilizes videos produced by The Bible Project to illustrate themes and passages of Scripture through the program, as their work is top notch and ever expanding. It takes storying to a visual platform and communicates really complex passages of the Christian Story in simple terms.

Finally, the items that threaten the Christian story are those that threaten a devaluing of the Bible. To embrace the Christian story is to embrace God's revelation in his word. Therefore, a cultural abandonment of the inerrancy of God's Word is a real threat as people outside and within the church doubt the veracity of the canon. Also, intimidation of the Scriptures is a real threat to people even enrolling in the Training Program. Many respondents spoke of their intimidation of learning the Bible and wanting to be so much farther along in their understanding of Scripture. A consistent refrain comes instructors in lecture to ward off this threat, and that is the truth that everyone begins somewhere, and God call believers forward to learn his Word—because he wants to be known, and can be found by those who seek him. The shame felt by participants, or

³"Lessons from StoryBrand." *City Current*, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://citycurrent.com/blogdetails/243/Lessons-from-StoryBrand>.

⁴"About." *The Bible Project*, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://thebibleproject.com/>.

even the story of perfectionism is a hindrance to learning the true Christian story.

Christian Belief

Strengths. Building upon Biblical formation, the core doctrines of the Christian faith are taught in order of canonical revelation, allowing participants to tie their understanding of doctrine to the Scriptures as they learn the Christian story. Each participant writes ten personal doctrinal statements over the course of the program, assisting them to put learning into practical application on the page. One participant noted his thankfulness for this assignment, as it provided a written record of his personal faith that can be kept by his children in the years to come.

Major themes in the survey responses show a lack of clarity or complete unfamiliarity concerning doctrine before participating in the Training Program. Aside from two seminary-trained participants, eighteen participants reported a clarifying and encouraging interaction with Christian belief as a result of the Training Program. Participants noted unhealthy interactions with doctrine in previous churches, where the presentation of Christian belief was made with a lack of pastoral sensitivity, causing a running from the topic of doctrine rather than toward the truth of it. Intimidation of learning something viewed as to be an accompaniment to Scripture kept others from engaging the topic. An integrated learning of Christian Story and Christian Belief has helped to show where doctrines originate in Scripture, and why the clear articulation of what is believed to be true for all time and for all people is a blessing for daily life. Participants noted that the learning of doctrine has given them a secure boundary to operate freely within while they grow in their understanding of who God is. Doctrine has moved from being an intimidating topic reserved for seminary-types and religious professionals to being held by stay at home moms and local law enforcement as the

boundaries for daily living, articulated in clear synthesis from the Bible. The desire to know God for participants communicated as learning who God is—and is not—from his own revelation, acknowledging how the church has wrestled with questions of doctrine throughout history and benefitting from the work of those before them. The awareness of church history and the importance of doctrinal thought is contributing to a firmer grasp upon Christian Belief.

Weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Weaknesses for Christian Belief were a little harder to isolate among survey responses. Some responses concerned an instructor-participant discussion that turned into a philosophical devil’s advocate dialogue, leaving many in the room feeling out of the loop, discouraged, and checking their phones in disengagement. The management of the ongoing style of Q&A practiced throughout the lecture can be cumbersome, especially when dealing with hobbyhorses or pet doctrines of participants—and instructors—that arise during lecture.

An interesting trend from the respondents that presents an opportunity was in reaction to the question, “What topics or areas of interest were you exposed to or would like to learn more about in the Training Program?” Given that these same respondents earlier talked about their lack of familiarity, intimidation, or avoidance of doctrine upon entering the training program, their desire for increased study is encouraging. Top responses asked for more in class discussion around Trinitarianism—which currently occupies two full weeks of curriculum, Christology –also two full weeks, Covenant—one to two weeks, Ecclesiology—one week and Evangelism, which is woven through the program itself. The appetite for learning doctrine has been stirred by the experience of the Training Program, and it is evident in the doctrines requested here, which are anchored to daily interaction with God, through his Son, among his people and fulfilling his redemptive purposes.

Thinking how to capitalize upon this desire to learn doctrines in greater detail,

the possibility of offering live question and answer sessions to Training Program participants and alumni is on the table. TVC has previously utilized social media and hashtags to collect questions and then respond to them in recorded videos, which is also an option. Given that the church produces several podcasts in house, it would not be infeasible to record a few select episodes for distribution among those involved in the Training Program and its alumni.

Another opportunity presented in the survey responses was the necessity of further tying doctrinal development and use by the church to church history past the early church creeds and confessions. Many participants lack an understanding of church history at large, and some type of forum or supplemental resource might help give greater clarity outside of the weekly curriculum.

A threat to Christian Belief is the lack of biblical formation, as individuals who embrace doctrines without the underlying biblical knowledge can quickly run into error or excess, walking away from orthodoxy.

Another threat to the apprehension of Christian Belief is the tendency of participants to delay their doctrinal statement assignments to the end of the semester. It is not a unique problem to the Training Program by any means, it is quite human to procrastinate, but it does create a press on synthesizing Christian Story and Christian Belief into doctrinal statements that can focus on finishing the product rather than appropriating the material. Participants are encouraged every few weeks during lecture announcements to be working on their doctrinal statements, as history has proven this tendency—and threat to their learning.

The preexisting disposition toward doctrine held by the participant upon their entry into the Training Program is a final threat to Christian Belief. In some cases, as one response spoke directly of, the Training Program melted their disposition toward doctrine and its past abuses. However, this is not always the case, and as a threat is something outside of the control of the organization, the disposition and starting point of each

participant in the program is a mixed bag that can affect their learning and the learning environment itself.

Christian Formation

Having grown in understanding of the Christian Story and clarifying doctrinal stances through gaining Christian Belief, participants in the Training Program also participate in lectures and assignments that target their Christian Formation. The last section of chapter 3 dealt with identity formation, which is the life-long cultivation of Christian virtue. These virtues have historically been pursued through habits and disciplines that, through time, imitation, and repetition, train the whole person (mind, affections, and embodied actions) to live out of their new nature in Christ.⁵ It is training to live in the way of Jesus as if it were second nature.⁶

During the Training Program in 2017-2018, participants engaged in four formational assignments that were additional to course lecture and reading. These four exercises are designed to introduce and invite program participants into the journey of identity and virtue formation. The exercises are listed below with a brief description:

1. *Practicing Storytelling: Life Stories.* During the first weekend seminar, and just three weeks into the program, Participants prepare and present a ten to twelve minute creative representation of the default story they find themselves living in, and how the Christian story reorients their default narrative. Individuals are encouraged to think through what doctrines and practices their false narrative encourages them to live by, and then use whatever means of creativity they find appropriate to convey the story of God's work in their life. Presentations to date have included everything from spreadsheets to spoken word performances, paintings to flowcharts.
2. *Practicing the Sovereignty of God: Sabbath.* Participants are encouraged to practice an active trust in the sovereignty of God in daily life by engaging God in solitude and silence. Two of the most foundational spiritual disciplines, these two are also the most attacked by our current culture. This assignment requires each participant to spend two to three hours of uninterrupted time in solitude with only a Bible and a

⁵Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount*, 33.

⁶Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 17.

journal. Participants report this is one of the more difficult assignments for them, as detaching from technology is an uncommon and difficult practice for many. The participants prepare a one-page summary of their experience and how they might incorporate this practice into daily life.

3. *Practicing the Presence of God: Prayer.* Coupled with a study of the Psalter, participants are encouraged to practice writing out a carefully worded and premediated prayer of a specific genre. Examples of prayers of thanksgiving, praise, confession, and others are provided for reference. These prayers are shared among their cohort, and then submitted to be printed in an annual publication, *The Training Program Book of Prayers*, which is presented as a gift to the class as a true work of liturgy.
4. *Practicing Mission: Evangelism.* Following the great commission, participants are assigned the task of sharing the good news of the gospel with a non-believer in their life and to make an appeal for them to place their faith in Christ and repent of their sin. This practice of evangelism takes place over seven-week period of time. Each week, a prayer for the individual and an interaction with them is suggested, and as a means of accountability, to both be recorded in a provided journal. As evangelism is one of the more intimidating and daunting practices for many Christians, this exercise is a means of demonstrating the way to thoughtfully engage non-Christians and share the Gospel. Consistently this is an exercise where participants are engaged to overcome their personal fears and join in the work of sharing about Jesus. The reports in these journals, and the subsequent occurrences of God redeeming his children through a Training Program participants newfound practice of evangelism has been an immediate and celebrated fruit in the last five years. This exercise has resulted in people coming into the Kingdom!

Strengths. When asked, “How have the Christian Formation lectures and assignments influenced your daily walk with Christ?,” the responses were widely encouraging. Many responded that the aspect of practicing these disciplines in community meant greater accountability and success to their good intentions, where previous efforts on their own had failed to establish habits in their daily life. Others noted that the exercises called them to listen to God, talk with God, and share God with others in a way that they did not intentionally plan for of their own accord.

The lectures and exercises combine to encourage and reinforce the importance of God’s revelation in his Word. A drumbeat through the program is the necessity of looking to Christ and the Bible for revelation from God. Respondents said the emphasis

upon the Word has given birth to a deeper love for study and reading it together in community. One response shared that a group of alumni join monthly to read whole books of the Bible out loud in community as a discipline together. They are a people being shaped by the Word read aloud—and this is of their own desire, a fruit of their time together in the Training Program.

Weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. With all the encouraging responses to the Christian Formation exercises, there were numerous responses around the difficulty of sustaining the desired habits once the accountability deadline had passed, or a new exercise was introduced and the previous one was supplanted. One respondent said they loved the exercises; the only problem was the Training Program stopped over the summer and they lost their accountability to practice habits with their cohort. This is a predictable and common reality, as the establishment of habits is a strenuous effort and not for the tourist in the land of virtue.

For the last two years of the Training Program, the Christian Formation exercises have been in flux, and when the author of this work was hired onto the departmental team, these exercises were delegated as a targeted focus of attention. In the following chapter, this work presents a suggested next iteration of exercises and lecture topics to more fully develop the concept of virtue formation for the individual and community. Understandably, the treatment of opportunities for Christian formation waits until then.

Threats to Christian Formation are many, for there is much that influences habit that is out of the realm of control for the Training Program. Individualism poses a threat to the apprehension of the vision that the pursuit of Christian virtue is not only a path to flourishing, but one designed by the Creator himself. The humility required to submit to a rule of life for the development of virtues within a moral code necessitates the eschatological vision that what lies ahead is more valuable than the pain of what comes in

the journey, or the momentary pleasure of what is left behind.

Modern culture is a large threat to Christian Formation. The work of identifying false stories done within the Training Program is an integral piece to help descale the eyes of participants to the ways in which they are being disciplined by the world, how they are being formed by their affections. Numerous neurobiological studies of the last decade have demonstrated the ramifications of omnipresent technology and the habits of the heart that accompany a customizable ‘world in your pocket.’ The user is placed in an pseudo-omniscient, omnipresent, and omniscient position as they design their interface, fact check any story, and communicate with contacts around the globe instantly.⁷ It is a destabilizing notion to the creature who is finite in capacity, knowledge, and geography who must discipline themselves to not be ruined by their own appetites.

Summary

The strengths of Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation and their efficacy within the Training Program have been drawn out in order to illustrate the ways in which the goal of building up biblical formation, theological formation, and identity formation are being realized. The author would suggest that there are distinct wins and gains in each of these three areas, as the testimonies from the survey responses indicate. The intent and the impact of this formal theological active learning environment in the local church is evident in the words of the survey participants. Below is a sampling of responses highlighting the effect of the Training Program on survey participants:⁸

⁷See Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011); Tony Reinke, *12 Ways your iPhone is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017); Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2016), and Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic, 2017). These publications deal with the addictive ramifications of media upon neurobiology, interpersonal relationships, the family, and society at large. They are sobering, thorough, and frightening when one considers the impact of technology use on the development (or lack thereof) of virtue that is other centered or for the civic good.

⁸ Although the reader may not find it necessary to read every testimony below to experience the force of the data, the responses compound upon each individual’s experience to demonstrate the personal and varied impact of this program. Questions and responses in their entirety may be found below

[Question 1, Participant 6]: Before the Training Program I knew many stories from Scripture. I believe I had a strong understanding of the New Testament, but the Old Testament was intimidating. I now feel I have a wonderful foundation on which I can continue to build on my understanding of the Christian Story. Before, I had nothing to build on, so each story was isolated. Now, I know the grand story of Scripture, which empowers me to study Scripture rightly. My growth has been significant!

[Question 1, Participant 10]: The Training Program has helped me to understand that the Christian Story is cohesive from Genesis to Revelation, in that God is re-establishing His kingdom on Earth. I grew up in a tradition that viewed the biblical narrative as highly segmented, and somewhat unrelated. I also believed that the Old Testament, while useful for values and history, was not necessary and ultimately obsolete. The Training Program helped me to see that Creation, Fall, Re-creation after the Flood, the Birthing of Israel, the Davidic Kingship, the Exile, the Coming of Christ, and the Birthing of the Church are all the same story: God enacting and fulfilling his covenants with his children.

[Question 1, Participant 13]: Simply put, the Training Program has been one of the sweetest gifts The Lord has given to me over the course of my life. He has used it to sweep me up into the Christian story. 99% of the time I am overwhelmed by His kindness and grace as He draws me into deeper and deeper depths of understanding His story, and then 1% of the time I shudder that my heart and head lived for so many years apart from that understanding. I can't fathom a life apart for the richness and mercy He has lavished upon me in it. He has used that understanding to reorient all other facets of the life He has given me. Deeper understanding of the Christian story has transformed my marriage, the discipleship of my kids, my interactions with broader family, my participation as a member of the body, and life at my workplace. What The Lord has been so kind to show me I cannot un-see. It overflows now into the spheres and domains He has placed me in. And even after 3 years of participation in the Training Program, the fluency of my understanding of the Christian story keeps developing in its richness. What a gift that it is to be able to participate in God's story!

[Question 1, Participant 16]: I would describe my growth in understanding of the Christian story as a complete rebuild from before completing the Training Program. Growing up in church and hearing all the same stories from Scripture, I was often confused about their apparent association with one another. Never had it been explicitly explained to me that the whole of scripture tells the one narrative of redemptive history. This has led to a passion in re-reading parts of the old testament which before had been daunting and apparently unrelated to the gospel.

[Question 2, Participant 1]: This is my third year of participating in the Training Program. The first year was overwhelming. There was a lot of vocabulary I wasn't familiar with, and the learning process was slow. Each year I am able to soak in more and more as I have a broader base for learning. The doctrines that have spoken to me the most thus far are trinitarianism (gaining a greater understanding of the Triune God always having been a Father and the implications of this as well his immanence and transcendence always working in tandem), Providence, and Christology. I have truly enjoyed learning about all of the doctrines, but these are

in appendix 5.

the ones that have formed me the most over the last few years.

[Question 2, Participant 4]: I honestly now can make doctrinal observations and form thoughts and opinions because I know the story of scripture so much better. I didn't think doctrine was very important before the training program- the truth is that I had doctrinal opinions but I didn't know why! Now I have the confident knowledge that comes with an informed viewpoint and I am so grateful for that.

[Question 2, Participant 7]: In a past church experience, I was taught church doctrine with such a lack of love that I would shudder at the word doctrine. Being in the Training Program has really melted away my cold feelings and has helped me to see doctrine as a beautiful way to think about and communicate what Scripture says. Writing my doctrinal statements has given me an anchor during trial and has given me a written record that I can give to my children about what I believe and where it is found.

[Question 2, Participant 9]: Honestly, I knew nothing about doctrine or the importance of it prior to the Training Program. It has shown me that a right knowledge of God is the most practical thing there is. To love God well is to know God. I have found doctrine to be super important to me know.

[Question 2, Participant 16]: Before the Training Program, Christian Doctrine seemed boring and not extremely applicable to my daily life. After having excellent teachers of the word draw doctrine out for me, with passion and wisdom, I now view it as not only essential for my spiritual formation but beautiful in its application. Doctrine has given me a secure boundary in which to operate freely within as I grow in my understanding of who God is and my part in His amazing plan.

[Question 3, Participant 3]: Although I know I have a lifetime of growth to come, the Training Program has changed me completely, especially in Christian Formation. I now fully understand the practices we do as a church such as communion and baptism, and more importantly, I now cherish them and long for a seat at the table with Christ. My prayer life feels less forced and more like a continual conversation, my Bible reading habit has dramatically changed, and even the way I encourage others in their relationship with the Trinity has changed. This has massively impacted me.

[Question 3, Participant 4]: There is nothing more beautiful to me now than reading scripture- whether I am reading alone in my room, listening to scripture while I drive or do dishes, or even reading entire books of the bible out loud with friends over extended dinners (yes, a group of training program graduates do this monthly! We are currently in Numbers- we started back in June 2018!). To know scripture is to know Christ- he is the Word!

[Question 3, Participant 6]: The Christian Formation lectures and assignments have put important Christian practices before me. Before the Training Program I felt lost regarding spiritual disciplines. I had a vague understanding of some basic practices, but the formation lectures and assignments gave me specific practices to use in order to incorporate Christian Story and Christian Doctrine practically into my life for the sake of the Kingdom.

[Question 6, Participant 11]: [The Training Program has] completely changed the way I think about working in Kid's Village. Christian Story, Christian Belief and

Christian Formation need to be a part of what we do and while some of it is really well done, there is room to be more deliberate. I pray differently, I talk about narratives differently and I explain doctrines differently. It has really energized me for the work I do there.

[Question 10, Participant 3]: My marriage and friendships have been deepened due to my learnings in the Training Program. I have been able to boldly come alongside family with Truth in really tough situations of addiction in particular. I have ultimately been freed to enjoy the fullness of the Trinity, and I have been able to put checklist Christianity to death.

[Question 10, Participant 12]: The Training Program has blown up my world, in the best way. I've always been more keen to learn with my mind over my heart, so the dive into theology was food for my soul. But the unexpected gift was the community, the people, who showed me a different way to learn and live. To hear from other's perspectives, to hear their questions and hiccups, and see how they saw the love of the Lord has been encouraging and growing. I now have people I can grab coffee with to talk theology, who meet monthly to read the Word aloud together, who listen to podcasts together and meet up with nothing but questions. I am so grateful for the world and depth the Training Program has begun for me.

[Question 10, Participant 20]: There are so many ways that I see the Lord using the TP but one example is in my marriage. With both myself and my husband in the class, it has provided an avenue for theological discussion and conversations that would be a lot less likely to happen if not for our constant learning, growing, and studying together. When we got married, most areas of our lives meshed and came together pretty effortlessly--however sharing spiritual growth and being vulnerable when it came to my walk with Christ was one of my harder areas of transition so it's been a blessing to have this common ground and platform for continued growth in spiritual intimacy within our marriage.

[Question 1, Participant 3]: Oh if I could only find a way to measure. This program has changed me inside and out. So much so, that my friends have asked me what I've been doing because it is so evident. The Christian story now pours out of me, and I don't even realize it! I feel more confident approaching the Bible, and in turn, I now can articulate the Christian story confidently, which allows me to share the gospel without fear and make disciples. The more you know, the more you love, and I wish I could articulate my experience better in order to explain how much this has changed me and those around me.

This last quote from Question 1, Participant 3 is the response of a mother of four—educated, equipped, and discipled by her local church on a weeknight, and sent back on mission into her home and surrounding community. The testimonies of the participants speak for themselves—this kind of environment is forming Christian disciples and equipping them for the work of ministry.

The Training Program within The Village Church

As explained in chapter one, TVCI exists within TVC as an umbrella to multiple programs: forums, core classes, Bible studies, the Training Program, and the Residency. Following the Sunday Gathering, the Training Program is the second most effective adult educational discipleship avenue within TVC. This is largely due to the thoughtful setup of the learning environment and curriculum, which is structured, accountable, and predictable. Participants know what to expect and how to orient themselves within the program week to week. They are held accountable to their learning commitments through assignments and cohort participation. These are the guiding rhythms thought the yearlong learning community.

The Training Program finds itself in an interesting position as the life of TVC is bringing change to the overall organization structure. The timing of this work serves a departmental SWOT as the team is reassessing how to take decisive action regarding next steps. Therefore, a brief SWOT of the Training Program at large is presented here for clarity around how the program can iterate for what is ahead.

Strengths

The Training Program is in a strong position. The departmental staff has been developed over the last two years through strategic hires, and the team has clarity of direction and conviction regarding adult discipleship in the church. Two members of the team have significant—internal and external from TVC—opportunities to point to the convictions of biblical and theological formation that undergird the departmental mission. The people of TVC routinely hear from Matt Chandler that he desires every member of the church to go through the Training Program, which is a substantial covering and vote of confidence from the lead pastor of the church. After five years of existence, there are nearly a thousand alumni who have completed the program, hundreds of which are routinely asking for some sort of continuing education—many of whom have returned as cohort leaders in the meantime—repeating the cycle multiple years in order to help others

through the learning process. The curriculum and lectures are largely set, allowing for iterative changes and continued refinement without having to completely rebuild each year. The environment is bearing fruit, and a good percentage of the people of The Village Church desire to participate in the Training Program. So much so, there is current discussion about the necessity of opening up a second course in Flower Mound on another night of the week.

Weaknesses

With all those strengths, the Training Program is not without its weaknesses. It was noted earlier that the demand upon the program caused the department to accept an additional twenty-five people this year, putting an environmental strain upon the participants. The physical space of The Village Church has reached space limitations for multiple ministries, to where there are active discussions of building a new space, the first ground-up construction of the church in the last twenty years.

The Village Church is also currently in a five-year movement, entitled ‘Multiply,’ with the aim of transitioning all of its campuses off into autonomous churches.⁹ This means that the Training Program, which has serviced all five campuses will have to decide how it will handle applicants from outside of TVC, and from those churches that were former campuses. The weakness here is the scope of the Training Program applicant will diminish, but there are inherent opportunities that accompany such a move as well.

In regard to the Training Program curriculum and schedule, there are several notable weaknesses. The program is a one-year iteration, with no current continuing education for alumni. The amount of content and condensed schedule often shorts the allocation of time for cohort discussion within weekly meetings, which was noted on

⁹For more information on Multiply, see <http://multiply.thevillagechurch.net/>.

multiple survey responses and instructor observation. This cohort time is ‘the bread and butter’ of the Training Program, as participants actively synthesize what they are learning in real time with their cohort. To consistently sacrifice this time for the sake of content is going against desired learning outcomes. Alluded to earlier is the packed nature of the calendar. The program was shortened by two weeks for the current year, and the shuffling of lecture content has proven that it was a backwards step. Next year will hopefully see a regaining of those weeks and letting the material breathe a little. The two-week cut caused several lectures to have multiple key doctrines presented in the same evening, which means neither is presented well, or one is significantly cheated.

A known weakness within the program is the low rate of ethnic and gender diversity among the reading material and quoted within lecture. The team of instructors that teaches within the Training Program is both gender and ethnically diverse, and there is desire to be intentional about the voices invited in for the lectures and other TVCI environments such as forums, which are open to all church members. Sourcing appropriate diverse theological material is an endeavor since many known and familiar sources are those presented within seminaries attended by the curriculum writers, which were primarily white males. There are active steps to increase the diversity of material and lecturers within the Training Program.

Opportunities

Opportunities abound for the Training Program. It is not a lack of opportunity, but the decisive choice of the right ones that is most necessary at this juncture. There are multiple requests a week for a type of ‘201’ or ‘301’ program for alumni, for one-off deep dives into specific doctrines, and different avenues of continuing education. The weakness of the one-year iteration for the Training Program is also an opportunity to expand the program and increase the education level. The demand for the Training Program from members of the Flower Mound campus alone could constitute an

additional section of the program on a different night of the week, and the department is trying to decide if and how to meet the demand, and if scaling the Training Program is necessary at this point.

With the track record of the last five years and large alumni base, the opportunity to publish the departmental philosophy of doing theological education in the church on this scale is an eminent possibility, as well to create resources in-house that build into desired formation through Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation. The back edge of all this opportunity is the possibility of mission creep, therefore the department is trying to carefully decide which steps to take and in what order. There is a core mission to make Christian disciples, and the desire to stay true to this and protect the learning outcomes is central.

Threats

Threats facing the Training Program have primarily to do with cultural factors like those listed for threats facing Christian Formation. The Training Program works because people at The Village Church want to be discipled and are looking for a clear lane to grow in their understanding of God, the Bible, and their daily life in Christ. To a large degree, the program currently benefits from a church culture that values learning and study. If the culture shifts within the church, if the philosophy of ministry shifts and the program no longer enjoys the top-down support that is currently does, then all the previous opportunities begin to cease being part of the conversation.

Currently the wider staff of the Flower Mound campus have an awareness of the Training Program, but apart from those who have completed the program or sat in on a lecture, the full scope of what is accomplished in the program is unknown to many. This creates some friction when interns—who are required to participate in the Training Program—count their weekend seminar hours into their workweek, and supervisors feel the rub more in the cost to them than the benefit to the intern. Without a consistent and

clear articulation of stories of what God is doing through the ministry of the Training Program, it could lose the support of the wider staff through a lack of awareness of the fruit being borne. This is unfortunate, as a high number of graduates are actually propelled into the service of the church with greater desire and burden to serve faithfully in the ministry of the church. One survey respondent mentioned that last year's Vacation Bible School curriculum was written by a team of Training Program alumni who are actively leading in the children's ministry and were intent on seeing the curriculum point to the whole of Scripture and help connect the stories to the one overarching story.¹⁰

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to illustrate that the Training Program is experiencing success in its learning outcomes regarding active formation of Christian disciples through the lenses of Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation. This was demonstrated by survey responses from veteran participants in the Training Program, and departmental discussions. A SWOT analysis of the Training Program communicated the need for decisions around opportunities of scale and continuing education. The SWOT analysis of the pedagogical lenses revealed a needed next iteration of the Christian Formation assignments and lectures, which will be presented in the next chapter, along with an evaluation of this project as a whole.

¹⁰For an example of this curriculum, a video that presents the major events of the Bible in historical order for children to memorize as they learn the story of the Bible is available at <https://vll.ge/Godsgreatbigstory>.

CHAPTER 5
CHRISTIAN FORMATION CURRICULUM
IMPROVEMENTS AND PROJECT
EVALUATION

In this concluding chapter, the aim is threefold: the first is to propose a set of three new additional Christian Formation exercises to the existing four within the Training Program, coupled with amendments to lecture topics and calendar structure. The second purpose is to suggest strategies for interacting with opportunities currently facing the Training Program. Finally, to conduct a brief evaluation of the project, its purposes and execution.

Christian Formation Iterative Improvements

The language of iteration is purposeful in the suggested improvements below. The Training Program believes in iterating every year as it refines its assigned readings, lecture set, and calendar. The goal for TVCI is achieving learning outcomes, not removing annual work. Therefore, the suggestions below are meant as steps for the next iteration of the Training Program, to see if they might serve the objective of building into biblical formation, theological formation, and identity formation. As mentioned in chapter 3, none of these are independent—and the goal of these exercises and lectures are to help ‘drive home’ that God is who he says that he is, which helps Christians know that what he says about his children is true. That foundation helps Christians work to make their bodies and dispositions a “reliable ally and resource for the Christian life,” through the formation of virtue.¹

¹Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 354.

Lecture Suggestions

The overarching realization through the SWOT was that the Christian formation lens is in need of a more direct representation in the lecture material. The airtime for Christian formation in direct lecture in the Training Program is limited in scope compared to Christian Story and Christian Belief, as the communication of the canon and doctrine take the bulk of the curriculum. It gives introductory treatment to the role of habit in formation and the interplay of spiritual disciplines, but it does not adequately deal with identity and virtue formation. A clarifying vision of the *telos* and means of Christian Formation could be bolstered. An actual storying of Christian virtue ethics is necessary to illustrate why ‘we are what we repeatedly do,’ and the Training Program could improve upon repeatedly inserting throughout the year how living like Christ is not an accident, but a Spirit driven habit acted out of a new heart.²

Specifically, two opportunities to deal with Christian formation in greater detail are (1) in the first lecture of the program, which deals with orienting participants to the lenses of Christian Story, Christian Belief, and Christian Formation, and (2) by inserting a lecture later in the spring, near the end of the program that specifically covers the ongoing process of identity formation in the Christian life. A previously mentioned theme present in the survey data was the desire for ongoing cultivation of habit and accountability in community, therefore an entire lecture around the role of identity formation is a large step forward. One of the suggested additional exercises partners with this lecture, to help participants create a rule of life that incorporates both individual and community practices.

Suggested Changes to Existing Christian Formation Exercises

It is evident from the survey data that the existing Christian Formation

²Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Great Philosophers of the Western World* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005), 87.

exercises are bearing fruit in the lives of participants and those in their community. From the repeated testimonies of salvation through the evangelism exercise, to the confessed struggle of solitude and silence and addiction to noise, the exercises are helping Training Program participants to order their daily lives around the way of Jesus.

There is one suggested improvement to these exercises, but it is purposeful. The exercise of *Practicing the Sovereignty of God: Sabbath*, should have its focus shifted to solitude and silence. Given the target and execution of the assignment, it is a first step into solitude and silence before God, which are two of the foundational disciplines in order to make space for interacting with God in daily life.³ Confusing it with the practice of Sabbath muddies the water for what it means to practice Sabbath among the community. The individual practice of solitude and silence is an important practice, one that survey respondents said was an eye-opening experience to help them feel their inability to sit still before God. The language within the exercise description can be bolstered to illustrate the two disciplines and how they function in the space of identity formation.

Suggested New Christian Formation Exercises

The existing Christian formation exercises introduce and invite participants to practice storytelling—of their false narratives interacting with the true Christian story, engaging in solitude and silence, writing out a genre specific prayer, and engaging in evangelism.

The three suggested new Christian formation exercises center around practicing the hospitality of God, practicing a rule of life for identity and virtue formation, and a second storytelling assignment centered around communicating the metanarrative of the Scriptures. Each of these will be described in greater detail below,

³Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 357.

along with copies of all the assignments, current and suggested, available in the appendix.

Practicing the hospitality of God: Loving your neighbor. This exercise will coincide with the Advent season and stretch into the new year. The purpose of this exercise is to introduce and invite participants into practicing hospitality as God has been hospitable to them by inviting them into his family and making a way home through the incarnation. By engaging in this practice, Christians can, as Adele Ahlberg Calhoun suggests, “incarnate the welcoming heart of God for the world.”⁴

Therefore, participants are invited to consider how they might practice hospitality in their homes and communities throughout the holiday season. Such examples include inviting others over for holiday meals and reaching out past physical family to include strangers, friends, and those without family present. Another example is to open one’s home throughout the season as a place for friends to gather to wrap presents, decorate cookies, or retreat from the stress of the season. It is the thoughtful cultivation of a hospitable environment that communicates the focus is on the guest and not the perfection of the experience. The goal of the exercise is to become a safe person and hold a safe space for people can enter and experience the hospitality of God through the Spirit in and among Christians.⁵

Practicing a rule of life: cultivating virtuous habits. As noted above, the Christian Formation exercises and lectures have lacked a direct and extended treatment of identity formation. In alignment with the suggested topical lecture, this exercise will introduce and invite participants to the concept of a rule of life. A rule is a trellis for daily living that helps give structure to intentional habits both of abstinence and engagement

⁴Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 162.

⁵Adapted from Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 161.

for the purpose of cultivating Christian identity and virtue. The exercise ‘gives feet to’ Dallas Willard’s philosophy of carrying good intentions to executable actions. Willard argues that when one begins a pursuit of Christlikeness, they must have a sustaining *vision* of what the end goal is, then they *intend* to reach that goal, endeavoring to isolate and commit to the necessary *means* of attainment.⁶

A rule is to be flexible and sustainable; it is the cultivation of habits not the saddling of unattainable goals. A rule is iterative in and of itself, because it is comprised by disciplines. The nature of discipline is to one day be able to do something that one cannot presently do.

The schema of a rule of life presented to program participants is a mixture of philosophies presented by Peter Scazzero and Justin Whitmel Earley.⁷ The exercise entails having participants decide upon individual habits for virtue formation, and then communal habits to be practiced alongside specific individuals. The exercise is purposed to develop a rule and extend accountability past the Training Program, should participants consider their cohorts as those to practice their communal rule. This exercise pursues habits practiced with the goal of virtue formation, cultivating Christian identity individually and corporately.

Practicing storytelling: The story of the Bible. This is a capstone formation assignment, to be completed toward the end of the Training Program. As noted in the SWOT of Christian Belief, there is a distinct opportunity in the cultural emphasis upon story, and recognition of the powerful influence of narrative. The survey data testified to

⁶Dallas Willard, *Living a Life a Transformed Life Adequate to Our Calling*, accessed January 17, 2019, <https://belairpres.org/Content/Documents/Living%20A%20Transformed%20Life%20Adequate%20To%20Our%20Calling.pdf>.

⁷Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015). See also Justin Whitmel Earley, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose in an Age of Distraction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019).

the impact—and necessity—of helping people see the Bible as a unified story and not individualized narratives of moral imperatives. Participants will articulate the story of the Bible in seven to ten minutes, highlighting the major events (creation, fall, Abrahamic covenant, the Exodus, etc.) and major doctrinal points (Trinitarianism, imago Dei, total depravity, providence, etc.) as they appear in the context of the Bible story, all through the lens of dwelling, dominion, and dynasty. Participants are able to contextualize the story for whatever ministry they serve within, or as if they were sharing with their children, friends, or a neighbor. The goal is for synthesis of material and narrative in a way that can be taught to another individual.

This exercise is a step toward deeper comprehension of the biblical narrative and helping participants wrestle through how to articulate all they are learning in the Training Program into simple concepts and everyday terms. It is a known method among educators that learners retain up to 90 percent of the material presented if they have to teach it in turn teach it to someone else, as opposed to retaining 10 percent if the learner simply listens to material taught in lecture.⁸ This formation exercise is working the story of the Bible into the heart of participants, which is fertile ground for meditation and application. In addition, it is a ready skill to be able to share the story of the Bible in a genuine and interpersonal manner.

Suggested Calendar and Supplemental Readings

Given the survey data, the curriculum should return to its expanded thirty-week time frame, creating two extra weeks within the program to strategically utilize. One of those weeks can meet the tension felt during the shortened year and give compacted lectures ‘room to breathe,’ the other reclaimed week is recommended to be

⁸“The Learning Pyramid,” *Educator’s Corner*, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://www.educationcorner.com/the-learning-pyramid.html>.

utilized at the end of the fall semester by pulling the incarnation lecture from the beginning of the spring back before Christmas and into early December. This creates room in the spring and is strategic to introduce the incarnation and the *Practicing the Hospitality of God* exercise.

Two texts are recommended to trade into the set of required reading. As these supplemental texts are re-evaluated each year, these two suggestions are for an iteration to test with the new exercises.

In alignment with the Practicing Hospitality exercise, the participants are recommended to read Rosaria Butterfield's work *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*.⁹ It is recommended the book be assigned in the fall semester at the beginning of November, a month before the exercise window opens up.

In considering the *Practicing a Rule of Life* exercise, it is recommended that participants read Justin Whitmel Earley's work, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose in an Age of Distraction*. Given Earley's work centers around habits that shape individual life and life together, it could serve as a starter trellis for participants to think through intentional cultivation of habits as both virtue formation and resistance to the false narratives of the world.

Training Program Suggested Recommendations

The SWOT of the Training Program within the TVC organization in Chapter 4 helped to elucidate the strategic decisions in front of the TVCI staff right now in regard to the future of the Training Program. Given that the author of this paper is the Director of the Training Program and one of two primary instructors for the course, the following suggestions are an ongoing discussion between the author and the director of TVCI. Therefore, the following suggestions are a possible way forward for the department in the

⁹Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a Housekey: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

next iteration of the Training Program.

For the 2019-2020 class of the Training Program, it is recommended there be four events/resources offered to alumni and current participants. In the fall semester, a live Q&A with general topics of discussion. In the spring, a deep dive into a doctrine or biblical narrative of choice. The alumni and current participants can be pooled ahead of time to select the topic, and the Training Program staff can then prepare for an evening of in-depth teaching over the topic. In the summer, two events that are media based. The first is a live hashtag-based Q&A on Twitter. The second is a crowd-sourced topic of choice deep dive on a topic, presented in a forty-five minute audio recording of a conversational teaching between Training Program instructors. Given the departmental demands on staff, this is a significant, but doable undertaking to help meet the desire for continuing education and processing of material for Training Program participants.

Also, in the 2019-2020 program year, it is recommended the Training Program staff begin development of a '201 curriculum.' The 201 offering can be held once a month concurrent with the Training Program calendar, running January to April, and August to November. This offering of continuing education would allow the department to gauge the audience and reception of another learning environment within the church membership.

Based on survey data, it is recommended that for the 2019-2020 Training Program class, the number of accepted applicants is decreased by 10-15 percent, and that the one of the two extra tables in the room for the current year be removed. Also, it is recommended that cohorts be limited to eight individuals. The number of survey responses citing the difficulty of hearing and inability to be comfortable in the environment necessitates the limiting of accepted applicants and protecting of space.

Conclusion of Suggested Recommendations

The recommended iterations to both the Christian Formation curriculum and

Training Program are born out of a desire to see the participants and alumni of the Training Program continually be shaped into the image of Christ by the renewing of their minds. The ongoing education of the saints is a call to train for godliness, and also the work of pastors and teachers in continuing to build up the body, as dealt with in chapter 2. The remainder of this chapter deals with an evaluation of the project.

Project Evaluation

The coalescing of a topic for this project took some time. At the beginning of my degree plan, I served as the interim lead staff at one of our campuses after an unexpected change in leadership occurred. I originally planned on writing on cultivating flourishing staff cultures, as much of the work I was doing at that point was interpersonal coaching and culture setting among a bruised staff. In the spring of 2018, I was approached regarding the position of Training Program Director within TVCI at the Flower Mound campus. I accepted the new position, started two weeks later, and my family's life changed rapidly as we relocated within a matter of two and a half months. The change in environment and job responsibilities gave a new orientation to my project, and I began to settle in on the Training Program and how to iterate upon a learning environment with a five-year track record of successful disciple making within the Flower Mound campus. Departmental conversations quickly revealed different gift sets and orientations towards topics of study, and I knew my presence on the team was a strategic move toward formation and pastoral application within the learning environment.

Assessing the success of the Training Program and seeing how I might be able to contribute to the curriculum has been a driving factor for my time on the departmental staff thus far. It has made both the research and the writing of this project a real joy. Each of the following sections are an evaluation of this process.

Project Purpose

The purpose of this project was to assess the discipleship environment of The Village Church Institute Training Program and address potential areas of growth for the continued formation of disciples at The Village Church. I believe the project has remained in line with this purpose and met the assessment with conclusive data and needed iterative recommendations.

Project Goals

The goals of this project were three-fold. First was to assess the discipleship learning outcomes of The Village Church Institute Training Program. This was measured through a survey of graduates who returned to serve as Cohort leaders within the program. Second was to complete a SWOT analysis of the Training Program, identifying pathways forward to strengthen formation of disciples at The Village Church. The SWOT resulted from survey data and departmental discussions. The third and final goal was to present a modified curriculum of formational exercises within the Training Program, targeting needed areas of growth and development for Christian disciples at The Village Church. The goal was measured by the creation of a set of formational exercises for the cultivation of godly habits and character.

In regard to assessing the learning outcomes of the Training Program, I believe the survey provided clear data that the Training Program is meeting its objectives in forming Christian disciples. Chapters 2 and 3 served to establishing clear categories of desired learning outcomes in biblical formation, theological formation, and identity formation. The survey data in chapter 4 not only affirmed that these types of formation are active among participants, it also highlighted keys areas of potential growth.

This leads to the second goal, where through a SWOT analysis in chapter 4 I have made suggested recommendations in order to iterate upon needed corrections and present opportunities to further pursue the formation of Christian disciples. This process has given both increased conviction and clarity as to the mission of TVCI and steps

forward for the Training Program.

Lastly, the clarified learning outcomes and SWOT in chapter 4 also helped to identify needed areas of improvement within the Christian formation exercises. I have met the goal of presenting a modified curriculum by recommending three new exercises as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Also, I have recommended changes to the course calendar, lecture structure, and required reading to accompany the goal of increasing identity formation.

Weaknesses

This project set out with three clear goals and was able to meet those goals with success. However, in the process of executing this project, I identified no fewer than two weaknesses.

First, I would have preferred to record survey data from an entire participant pool of the Training Program, rather than relying upon cohort leaders experience from previous years. I believe the sample set was more than adequate, as these respondents are among the most ardent supporters of the Training Program and are lay leaders in the ministry. Their continued participation gives them sharp lenses to the strengths and weaknesses of the environment, curriculum, and course structure. However, a full class would have given roughly five times more responses to cull data from.

Second, I would have liked to administer some sort of quantitative assessment at the beginning and close of the year. I believe it would have helped augment the findings and provide closer results as to rates of literacy before and after completion of the program. The creation of such an assessment has been in discussion among the departmental staff. It was past the beginning of the course when my focus upon this topic narrowed with enough clarity to realize it would be helpful, but not be feasible in the given timeframe.

Strengths

I have recognized several notable strengths in this project. First, while I would have liked to pool a larger sample size by utilizing the entire Training Program, I do believe the pool of cohort leaders for this project was also a particular strength. Their ability to articulate nuances from their years of experience in the program was a great asset, as I have not completed the program myself and am teaching through the curriculum for the first time this year. They are showing me the fruit of the last five years and the impact of the work week to week.

Second, the survey data pointed to something I knew, but began to appreciate at a new depth during the writing of this project, which is the developed body of work I have stepped into. J. T. English has done an incredible job putting together a learning environment that not only blends so many strains of theological education, but strongly desires to see the work of theological formation happen in the local church. The last five years of work have consisted of his faithful sowing into the ministry, and this project benefitted from his labor. The survey field was ripe for harvest, as this project was the first assessment of its kind conducted within the Training Program. The timing has helped also, having five years of experience to pull from within the survey pool.

Thirdly, the departmental conversations around biblical, theological, and identity formation have pushed this project forward by leaps and bounds. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my colleagues Jen Wilkin and J. T. English who have labored with me to clarify and strengthen the treatment of the departmental formation learning outcomes. This project has benefitted from their expertise and thoughtful provocation.

Lastly, while I think it is only a beginning treatment, I think one of the strengths of this project is the treatment of identity literacy as Christian virtue formation. Admittedly, I feel like it is a merging of taxonomy, where I have a deeper knowledge base with spiritual disciplines and the power of habit, and here I engaged with classical philosophers, New Testament scholars, and the language of virtue formation in a new

way, which at times, felt out of my depth. However, within the Training Program, the clarity that came from this endeavor in chapter 3 has served to influence the recommended iterative changes and has given me greater conviction toward our departmental outcome of identity formation. I am thankful for the wrestle that was present in the writing as I interacted with Pennington's work on virtue formation.

What Would I Do Differently?

As mentioned in the recognized weaknesses of the project, I would start the survey period at the beginning of the course and administer different elements throughout the year. Specifically, I would develop a quantitative and qualitative mixture of assessments and use them to provide a closer look into the efficacy of the program in meeting departmental learning outcomes of formation.

Also, I would expand chapter 2 in order to include a treatment of the Sermon on the Mount under the topic of identity formation. Once I got into the literature in chapter 3, I realized that I could either expand chapter 2 and 3 by fifteen pages each, or I could treat the issue of Christian virtue ethics in an introductory fashion in order to communicate the necessary details of identity formation. I felt like I treated the topic fairly, but admittedly recognize there is much left unsaid, and that the argument could be bolstered in ways that are beyond the scope of this project. I felt myself wanting to get off course and write more and more on this topic, which is perhaps another project later down the line.

Theological Reflections

The categories of biblical formation, theological formation, and identity formation are the lenses in which I have been praying and preparing lectures with for the participants of the Training Program. It is the Lord's grace to let me teach theological education in the local church on a consistent basis, aiming for the formation of whole persons, encouraging them to live toward flourishing in Christ. I am more convinced than

ever of the need for formal theological education in the local church as a result of the survey data and personal experience this last year.

Specifically, these three lenses have now shaped the way I see Christian discipleship. The Bible is one unified story, which holds truths that have been communicated throughout history in clear terms by doctrine. The Bible and these doctrines are meant to set the direction and border of our life with God, as he has created humans for flourishing in relationship with him and in his world. Individuals are to be formed to the image of Christ by ‘the renewing of our minds,’ and it is a Christian’s great joy to pursue God’s mission in and among a new family, united in Christ.

Personal Reflections

Where the project has given clarity and conviction for the TVCI department, and our collective focus, I am immensely thankful. The sustained thought along the lines of identity formation has reignited some personal long-standing interests, desires, and knowledge bases that have lain dormant the last few years while tending to other things. In researching the passage from Ephesians 4 from chapter 2, the ‘good doctor’ Lloyd-Jones spoke of the image of setting bones in place, and in some sense this project has felt like a re-awakening and setting aright of pastoral pursuits to some degree. I have been marked by my study and writing, which I would conclude goes along with the statistic that one retains 90 percent of what one learns while teaching to someone else. I am thankful for the kindness of the Lord in the process and completion of this project, which has been a service to both my personal ministry and that of The Village Church Institute.

Conclusion

The goal is to make Christian disciples. Forming whole persons—mind, affections, embodied actions—into the image of Jesus. There is no one perfect means of accomplishing this goal, because people are varied in their experiences, temperaments, and wiring. However, the God-given means of his self-revelation in Christ and the Word,

the articulation of our faith from church history, and the ability to partner with the Holy Spirit in our apprenticeship to Jesus are all means of grace to be received, explored, and acted upon by those seeking to live as Christian disciples. Where The Village Church Institute and the Training Program have landed around language of biblical formation, theological formation, and identity formation, these are merely a set of tools to articulate the narrative of God's grand design and his means to accomplish his ends. God is bringing about the restoration of all things, and he longs to dwell with his people. May we, as pastors and teachers, partner with him in this endeavor, until we give back the gift of breath given to us in the beginning.

APPENDIX 1

THE FALSE NARRATIVES WE LIVE IN

“I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” - Alasdair MacIntyre

Below is a list of the false narratives in which many of us live. As mentioned during week 1’s lecture, this list is not exhaustive, but it does reflect the persuasive narratives commonly found in our culture.

- *Romanticism* - The story that says, “You are your emotions.” The more intense the emotion the more authentic it is. *The good life is authenticity.*
- *Consumerism* - The story that says, “You are what you have.” Worth is based upon the value and quality of what belongs to me. *The good life is having great things.*
- *Rationalism* - The story that says, “Whatever seems reasonable to you must be true, despite emotions or religious belief.” Only our own reason or experience can be trusted. *The good life is using my mind as the arbiter of what is true and good.*
- *Pragmatism* - The story that says, “Whatever works must be true.” *The good life is productivity, functionality, and practicality.*
- *Individualism/Hedonism* - The story that says, “You are at the center of all things.” Autonomy is prized over all things because the self and its pleasure is the goal of this story. *The good life is the authority of the independent individual.*
- *Progressivism* - The story that says, “Things are continually getting better.” Advancements in science, technology, economics, etc., are constantly improving the human condition. *The good life is the belief that through human ingenuity, we are better today than yesterday and we will be better tomorrow than we were today.*
- *Relativism* - The story that says, “There is no meta-story, because all experiences and stories are equally valid.” *The good life is skepticism and doubt.*
- *Secularism* - The story that says, “There is nothing beyond the natural world.” Religious belief in God is seen to be one option among others, and is both contestable and contested. We must shift our attention only to worldly concerns of

human flourishing. *The good life is human experience.*

- *Perfectionism* - The story that says, "You must be perfect in order to be accepted." *The good life is found in success.*
- *American Civil Religion (Moral Therapeutic Deism)* - The story that says, "Christianity should be palatable and to modern sensibilities." *The good life is "Pleasantville," a society with no discomfort and no suffering.*

APPENDIX 2
CURRENT CHRISTIAN FORMATION PRACTICES

Practicing Storytelling

The goal of this assignment is to help you think through how your life story is shaped by the stories of our time that we live into and how your story is being rewritten by The Christian Story. This goal is made more difficult by the fact that these stories that shape us don't seem like stories: rather, they appear to simply be our reality.

Assignment

Anticipate spending between one and three hours on this project, depending on how you choose to share your story.

Step 1: Write out your life story

Step 2: Identify the doctrines/practices of your story

Step 3: Creatively synthesize your story

Step 4: Present to your cohort

Step 1: Life Story

Do an initial sketch of your life story. Jot down the major people, places, events that come to mind. Think about the major disappointments and high points along the way. Imagine your life as a book, a movie, a play: who are the characters? What are the chapters or scenes? Describe the setting. Don't worry too much about all the chronological details. A few questions to get you started:

- How would share your life story with a stranger?
- What would you say to a long-lost friend?

These reflection questions may help you think through which story you most closely identify with. The aim of reflecting on these questions is to help you see other important aspects of your story that you may initially be blind to. This will take some soul searching, so give yourself space to do that. Pray and ask the Lord to help you see yourself accurately. You may even want to invite friends, your spouse or your children to speak into these questions.

What do I worry about most?

What, if I failed or lost it, would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live?

What do I use to comfort myself when things go bad or get difficult?

What do I fantasize or daydream about?

Of what am I the proudest? By what do I want to be known?

What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me unhappy?

What is my hope for the future?

How do you want to be remembered by your family?

How do you want to be remembered by your coworkers?

Picture yourself in fifteen years. What do you see?

What do you most often lie about? In what circumstances?

Step 2: Doctrines/Practices

Take your life story, your answers to the reflection question and the notes from the first night of the Training Program (regarding the stories we live in). What would be the core “doctrines” and “practices” that make up your story?

1. Identify 2-3 “doctrines” that you live by. What are the false doctrines in your story? For example, a doctrine of the story of romanticism may be, “My feelings are trustworthy and will guide me to truth,” or a doctrine of the story of perfectionism may be, “I am not worthy unless I am perfect.”

2. Identify 2-3 “practices” that have strengthened these doctrines. What are the formative practices of your story? For example, a practice of the story of romanticism may be, “I am constantly doing an internal inventory of my emotions,” or a practice of perfectionism may be, “I am constantly revising things to make them better if they don’t meet my expectations.”

Step 3: Synthesize Your Story

Tell your story in whatever format most appeals to you: if you’re a painter, paint it; if a writer, write it. If you like spreadsheets, make a flowchart. Bullet points, PowerPoint, a big piece of paper, spoken word poem: however you want to tell it, be prepared to take between 10 and 12 minutes to present it to your cohort.

Step 4: Present to Cohort at the Barry Jones Seminar on Saturday afternoon

Practicing the Sovereignty of God

But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray. – Luke 5:16

“Ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it.” – John Calvin

Jesus perfectly lived into the Christian Story and we are called to imitate his way of life as his disciples. One of the hardest ways to do that is by practicing the sovereignty of God. Sovereignty is not just an esoteric category, but a doctrine that reminds us that God is in control of all things. Jesus understood this and we see him pattern his life accordingly.

Assignment:

Over the next 5 weeks spend 2-3 hours uninterrupted with God at one specific time and place.

Expectations:

1. Choose an environment with no distractions (electronics, advertisements, people, etc.)
2. You cannot go with anyone else. You must be by yourself.
3. The only two things you can have with you are a Bible and a journal.

Other than that we have no expectations of what your time will look like. In order to keep track of how this goes, and to hold us all accountable, we are asking that you complete a one-page paper summarizing your experience. Use the questions below as a guide for your summary:

- Was this assignment difficult? Why or why not?

- What did you learn about God and about yourself?
- How can you incorporate this spiritual discipline into your everyday life?

You will have some cohort time in the coming weeks to discuss your summary paper. We hope this time will be an opportunity to be reminded of your freedom in Christ, that you are not God, and that the one God who does exist is sovereign.

Practicing the Presence of God: Prayer

The Psalmists realized that prayer cannot be just thought, but must be spoken.

- Walter Brueggemann

One of the richest ways for us to engage our both our doctrine and affections in the Lord, rightly view ourselves and effectively love our brothers and sisters is through prayer. Prayer is a multi-faceted practice; there is room for both intimacy and reverence, individual and community focus, communion with the Lord and requests for the kingdom. In our casual culture, however, we heavily weight individual intimacy and often forget that when we pray, we are ushered into the very throne-room of God (Heb 4:16). The reigning King of all creation bends his ear toward us, his children. *We are strong in spontaneous prayer and yet unpracticed in careful, theologically sound prayer.*

Assignment

In order to strengthen our understanding of prayer, we are each going to carefully craft our own written-out prayer. Read through the attached prayers. Pick a genre and topic of prayer and carefully craft a prayer to be shared in your cohort. You'll have time in class next week (Dec. 4th / Dec. 5th) to work on this assignment, and an opportunity to share with your cohort on the last day of the semester. We will compile some of the prayers into a Training Program book of prayers that we will use throughout the Training Program and in the Sunday liturgy.

Our hope with this assignment is that you would pause, examine your prayer life, and exercise different muscles than you are used to. Additionally, like the Psalms, we want you to begin thinking about your prayer from an individual perspective, but in a

way that can benefit the community and used together in a gathering of the saints, whether that's with a few friends or in the Sunday service.

Expectations

- Spend time reading through the example prayers and give careful and intentional thought to writing your prayer.
- Pick a genre (Praise, Confession, Thanksgiving, Confidence, Lament, Remembrance, Kingship)
- Pick a topic (Creation, providence, salvation, peace, work, parenthood, anxiety, marriage, the Lord's Supper, Baptism, missions, benediction, etc.).
- Keep it to a paragraph at most; it can even be just a few sentences. Work on an economy of words - few, but rich.

Examples of Prayers

The Psalms themselves are perhaps our best example. Consider, for example, Psalm 51 as a prayer of confession, Psalm 150 as a prayer of praise, Psalm 91 as a prayer about and through the Word, or Psalm 44 as a prayer of lament. In addition to examining the Scriptures themselves, below are a few examples of various types of prayers:

Prayer of Praise

From the Valley of Vision

THREE IN ONE, ONE IN THREE, GOD OF MY SALVATION,
Heavenly Father, blessed Son, eternal Spirit,

I adore thee as one Being, one Essence,
one God in three distinct Persons,
for bringing sinners to thy knowledge and to thy kingdom.

O Father, thou hast loved me and sent Jesus to redeem me;

O Jesus, thou hast loved me and assumed my nature,
shed thine own blood to wash away my sins,
wrought righteousness to cover my unworthiness,

O Holy Spirit, thou hast loved me and entered
my heart, implanted there eternal life,
revealed to me the glories of Jesus.

Three Persons and one God, I bless and praise thee,
for love so unmerited, so unspeakable,
so wondrous, so mighty to save the lost
and raise them to glory.

O Father, I thank thee that in fullness of grace
thou hast given me to Jesus, to be his sheep,
jewel, portion;

O Jesus, I thank thee that in fullness of grace
thou hast accepted, espoused, bound me;

O Holy Spirit, I thank thee that in fullness of
grace thou hast
exhibited Jesus as my salvation,
implanted faith within me,
subdued my stubborn heart,
made me one with him for ever.

O Father, thou art enthroned to hear my prayers,

O Jesus, thy hand is outstretched to take my petitions,

O Holy Spirit, thou art willing to help my
infirmities, to show me my need,
to supply words, to pray within me,

to strengthen me that I faint not in supplication.

O Triune God, who commandeth the universe,
thou hast commanded me to ask for those
things that concern thy kingdom and my soul.

Let me live and pray as one baptized into the
threefold Name.¹

¹Arthur Bennet, *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 3.

Prayers of Confession

From the Book of Common Prayer

Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep,
we have followed too much the devices and desires of our
own hearts,
we have offended against thy holy laws,
we have left undone those things which we ought to
have done,
and we have done those things which we ought not to
have done.
But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us,
spare thou those who confess their faults,
restore thou those who are penitent,
according to thy promises declared unto mankind
in Christ Jesus our Lord;
and grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake,
that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life,
to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.²

Prayer of Thanksgiving

From the Book of Common Prayer

Almighty God, Father of all mercies,
we thine unworthy servants
do give thee most humble and hearty thanks
for all thy goodness and loving-kindness
to us and to all men.
We bless thee for our creation, preservation,
and all the blessings of this life;
but above all for thine inestimable love
in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ;
for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.
And, we beseech thee,

²Episcopal Church, *The Book Of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 41.

give us that due sense
of all thy mercies,
that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful;
and that we show forth thy praise,
not only with our lips, but in our lives,
by giving up our selves to thy service,
and by walking before thee
in holiness and righteousness all our days;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom, with thee and the Holy Spirit,
be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen.³

Prayer for Rest

From the Book of Common Prayer

Almighty God, who after the creation of the world rested from all your works and sanctified a day of rest for all your creatures: Grant that we, putting away all earthly anxieties, may be duly prepared for the service of your sanctuary, and that our rest here upon earth may be a preparation for the eternal rest promised to your people in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*⁴

Prayer for Wisdom

From Clement of Alexandria

O Educator, be gracious to thy children, O Educator, Father, Guide of Israel, Son and Father, both one, Lord. Give to us, who follow thy command, to fulfill the likeness of thy image, and to see, according to our strength, the God who is both a good God and a Judge who is not harsh. Do thou thyself bestow all things on us who dwell in thy peace, who have been placed in thy city, who sail the sea of sin unruffled, that we may be made tranquil and supported by the Holy Spirit, the unutterable Wisdom, by night and day, unto the perfect day, to sing eternal thanksgiving to the one only Father and Son, Son and Father, Educator and Teacher with the Holy Spirit.⁵

³ *Book of Common Prayer*, 125.

⁴ *Book of Common Prayer*, 99.

⁵ Clement of Alexandria and Simon P. Wood, C.P., *Christ the Educator, The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 23 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

Practicing the Mission of God: Evangelism

“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” (Rom 10:14-15)

Sharing the gospel can be one of the most intimidating aspects of the Christian life. And yet, the Lord has called us to do the joy of proclaiming the gospel to people who have not yet believed upon Christ Jesus.

Assignment

Over the next 7 weeks we are asking that every Training Program participant explicitly share the gospel with a non-Christian in their life. By “explicitly share the gospel” we mean that you *explain to them the good news of Christ Jesus and make an appeal to them to repent and place their faith in him.* This non-Christian could be a friend, co-worker, family member, neighbor, or someone you providentially encounter going about your days.

In order to keep track of how this goes, and to hold us all accountable, we are asking that you will record one prayer and one intentional interaction with this person each week. We are providing you with a workbook that you can use. We strongly encourage you to practice presenting the gospel with a person in your cohort before trying this with the non-Christian person you hope to share it with.

We also have some suggested resources that may help you as you prepare to share the gospel with this person in a way that is both concise and compelling.

Suggested Resources:

- Two Ways to Live
- The Story
- The Bridge Illustration

Evangelism Journal Workbook

Your Name:

Person You Plan to Share Gospel With:

Why you are burdened for this person:

Where do you normally see this person:

What do you know about them (interests, family, fears, personality):

What have you talked about with them previously:



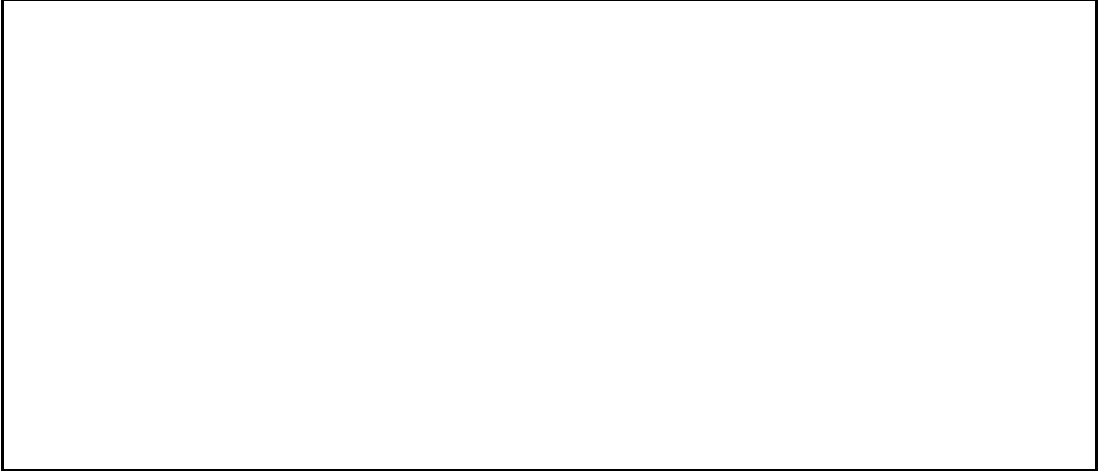
Sample of Weekly Entries

Prayer:

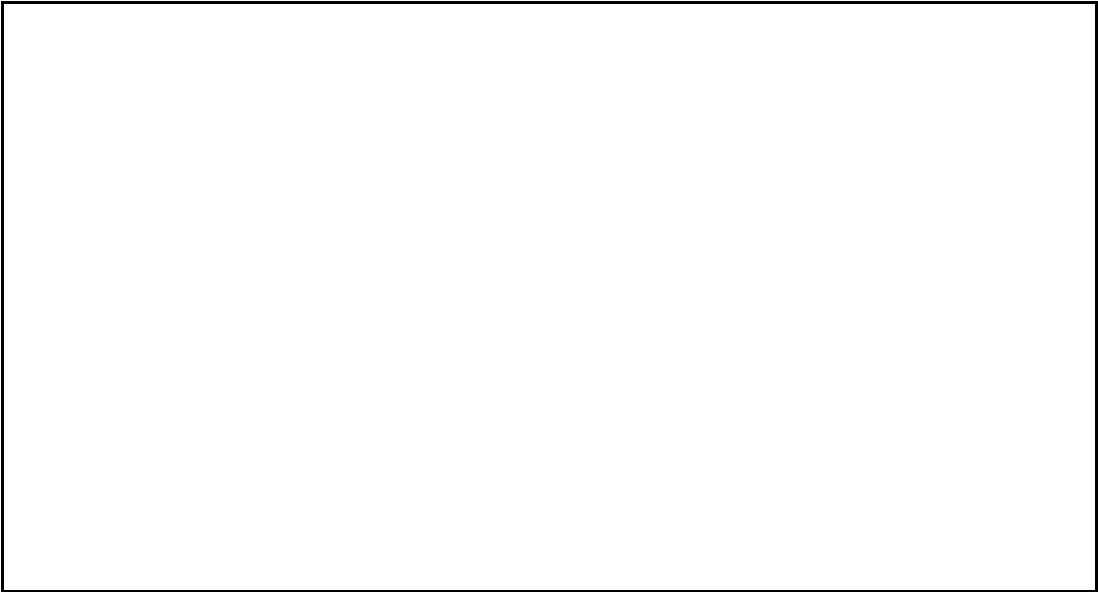


I plan to interact with this person in the following way this week:





How did that interaction go:



APPENDIX 3
RECOMMENDED NEW CHRISTIAN FORMATION
EXERCISES

**Practicing the Hospitality of God: Loving Your
Neighbor**

Counterfeit hospitality comes with strings; Christian hospitality comes with strangers becoming neighbors becoming family of God and gathering in the great expectation of God's coming world. - Rosaria Butterfield¹

God has extended ultimate hospitality to us in the Incarnation, as he dwelt among us that we might dwell forever with him. Our response in turn is to extend hospitality to our neighbors in ways that display the love of God for them where they are, with no strings attached.

During the next two months, the calendar lends itself to opportunities to extend, invite, and cultivate hospitality. From Advent and into the new year, The purpose of this exercise is to practice hospitality with as much freedom as you can muster, because we all start somewhere. It is in the practice of hospitality that Christians can “incarnate the welcoming heart of God for the world.”²

In line with your reading from Butterfield's *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*, your assignment is to consider how you might practice hospitality in your home and community throughout the holiday season.

Examples include inviting others over for holiday meals, and reaching out past

¹Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway: 2018), 215.

²Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 162.

your physical family to include strangers, friends, and those without family present. Another example is to open your home throughout the season as a place for friends to gather to wrap presents, decorate cookies, or retreat from the stress of the season. A thoughtful cultivation of a hospitable environment communicates the focus is on the guest and not the perfection of the experience. The goal of the exercise is to become a safe person and hold a safe space where people can enter and experience the hospitality of God through the Spirit in and among Christians.

So have fun with it! Meet your neighbors where they are at, and in what interests *them*. Practice being interested in other people, and sharing your life with them. Look around for who might need a friend, and consider them more highly than yourself. Take stock of the felt needs in your community, and be the one who is looking out at others rather than at themselves.

At the close of the assignment window, you will submit a two-page reflection over the different ways you practiced hospitality, what you experienced in the process, and what fruit, if any, you have seen from entering into the lives of your neighbors.

Practicing a Rule of Life: Cultivating Virtuous Habits

Every day, our habits shape who we are becoming. Large or small, we are formed by the things we repeatedly do. The pursuit of becoming more like Christ is a joint process, between you, the Spirit, and the people of God. It is a life of habit, virtue, and identity formation, because habits are anything but neutral.

In his book, *The Common Rule*, Justin Whitmel Earley lists eight habits for individual and corporate practice. They deal with the focus of our attention throughout the day, and life together as a body of believers. From prayer to fasting, sabbath to fellowship, these habits are a means of becoming—and the goal is to become more fully human in Christ.

For the next month we are encouraging you to select and practice a rhythm of

daily and weekly habits, both individually and with other people. **Choose another person or group of people** (your cohort, your spouse, roommates, or friends) and **settle upon a group of habits that you desire to practice together**. These habits are not meant to terminate on you, but to propel you, a child of God, into the world you inhabit. Then practice these habits together for a month, checking in with each other along the way.

There are two tangibles for this assignment to be submitted via Canvas: (1) A list of chosen practices and start and end dates to the period of commitment, signed by each participant. (2) A one page written reflection on the experience of practicing daily individual and corporate habits. What was your experience?

Earley's list is below, and we encourage you to read more at thecommonrule.org. Read his description of each habit, and choose which (if not all) habits you would like to engage.

Habits from the Common Rule³

There are daily and weekly habits to be considered. Within each, there are individual and communal aspects of practice.

Daily Habits:

1. Kneeling prayer three times a day.
2. One meal a day shared with others.
3. One hour with your phone off.
4. Going to Scripture before your phone first thing in the morning.

³ "The Common Rule," accessed January 14, 2019. <https://www.TheCommonRule.org>. Since one of the suggestions in this project is to provide Earley's work as a required reading, this exercise relies upon the public material made available on his website, as the book is forthcoming in spring 2019. At the time of writing this project, I was reviewing a manuscript of the book and believed the step of including this list is appropriate footing for an invitation to practice formational disciplines.

Weekly Habits:

1. Observing a full day of sabbath each week.
2. One hour of intentional conversation with a friend.
3. Fasting from something for 24 hours.
4. Curating your media intake to a set time and space within your week.

Practicing the Story of Scripture

“I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” - Alasdair MacIntyre

“He who tells the best story wins.” - Bobette Buster

The goal of this assignment is for every Training Program student to be able to articulate the story of the Bible in 7-10 minutes. This storying assignment will highlight the major narrational and doctrinal points that we have covered in the Training Program. We want to know the story, share the story, and be participants in the story.

Assignment:

Each student will prepare a 7-10 minute, comprehensive presentation of the story of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Throughout the presentation, you will highlight both important events from the Bible (Creation, Fall, Abrahamic Covenant, The Exodus, etc.) and important doctrines as they appear (Trinitarianism, Imago Dei, Total Depravity, Providence, etc.) through the lens of dwelling, dominion, and dynasty.

You are free to practice telling the story in a way that best fits your current context or ministry. For example, practice telling the story as if you were speaking to an unbeliever. If you serve in Little Village, practice telling the story as if you were teaching to one of the children in your classroom. If you are a parent, practice telling the story as if you were discipling one of your own children.

Guide:

Below is a story guide to help you think through the story of Scripture as you prepare your presentation and a rubric to help you include all of the important stories, doctrines, and themes that we study in the Training Program.

Passage	Event	Doctrines/Themes	Helpful Questions
Genesis	Creation	Trinitarianism, Revelation, Creation, Image Bearing, Providence	Who is God? Who are God's image bearers and what mandate does He give them? Providence helpful question: What is his relationship to creation now?
	The Fall and Exile	Original Sin, Total Depravity	What are the implications of the fall for the nature of humanity?
	Choosing a People	Abrahamic Covenant, Election	What does God promise in his covenant with Abraham (Think 3 Ds)?
	Egyptian Exile	God's People Back in Exile	How does Genesis end?
Exodus	Saving His People	The Exodus, Deliverance	What is life like in Egypt and how does God rescue his people?
	Forming His People	Mosaic Covenant/Law	What does God promise in his covenant with the Hebrew people? What is the purpose of the Law?
Leviticus - Esther	Establishing a Kingdom	Conquest, Davidic Covenant	What is promised in the Davidic Covenant, especially in terms of

			the 3 Ds?
Job - Song of Solomon	Living in Exile	Division of the Kingdom, Exile	What does the Wisdom Literature teach God's people?
Isaiah - Malachi	Prophetic Voices	God Speaks to His People, Hope in Exile	What are some of the overarching themes of the Prophetic Literature?
Matthew - John	The Incarnation	Christology, Hypostatic Union,	Who is Jesus Christ?
	The Kingdom of God	Jesus' Ministry	What is Jesus' message?
	Death and Resurrection	The Atonement, Crucified King,	What is accomplished by the atonement, especially in terms of the 3 Ds?
Acts	The Church's Birth	Ecclesiology, Pentecost, Mission	What is the mission of the church? Who empowers our mission?
	The Church's Power	Pneumatology	What is the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer and in the church?
Romans - Jude	Living in Exile	Ecclesiology, Elders, Deacons, Membership	What does it mean to live as the Body of Christ in exile? What does it mean to be committed to a local church, a colony of the Kingdom, while in exile?

Revelation	Kingdom Consummation	Eschatology	What does Christ's return accomplish, especially in terms of the 3 Ds?
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Rubric

Content/Events/Doctrines/Themes

- Trinitarianism
- Revelation
- Creation
- Image Bearing
- Providence
- The Fall and Exile
- Original Sin
- Total Depravity
- Abrahamic Covenant
- Choosing a People/Election
- Egyptian Exile
- The Exodus
- Saving His People
- Forming His People/Mosaic Covenant/Law
- Establishing a Kingdom/ Conquest
- Davidic Covenant
- Division of the Kingdom & Exile
- The role of the Prophets
- Wisdom Literature
- The Kingdom of God

- The Incarnation
- Christology
- Hypostatic Union
- The Atonement
- Crucified King
- Resurrection & Ascension
- The Church's Birth/Ecclesiology
- The Church's Power & The Spirit
- The Church's Structure: Elders, Deacons, Members
- Living in Exile/Mission
- Kingdom Consummation

Presentation

- Compelling (Is this a story you would like to listen to?)
- Creative (Is the story told 'in your own words'?)
- Clear (Is the story understandable to your intended audience?)
- Comprehensible (Is the story clear and does it flow well?)

APPENDIX 4

SWOT ANALYSIS OF TRAINING PROGRAM

The following SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, threat) analysis was conducted through resulting survey data and departmental discussions. The results were then taken into consideration for the recommended pathways forward addressed in chapter 5.

Performance Criteria	Training Program	Christian Story	Christian Belief	Christian Formation
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear staff objectives • 5 year record • Capable and diverse staff • Lead Pastor Support • Visibility of leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tracing biblical metanarrative • Reversing Evangelical Bible teaching trends • Equipping participants with language to tell the story of the whole Bible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Correcting false assumptions about doctrine • Helping articulate doctrine • Applying doctrine to everyday life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evangelism assignment is bearing fruit of salvation! • Habits coupled with accountability. • Desire for continued formation
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Space constraints • 1-year iteration • Multiply ramifications • Content / Cohort balance • Diversity in curriculum / speakers • Length of program (too packed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volume of information • Unlearning & relearning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge of varied audience • Student tendency to delay work • Pace of curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assignments end with TP calendar • Lack of clear virtue formation teaching
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing Education for Alumni (201, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural emphasis on stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased CF curriculum

	<p>Q&A, Deep Dives)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing diversity of content / teachers • TP Print Resources • Expanding calendar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bible Project partnership • Expanded themes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanded curriculum schedule • Church history and specific doctrines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summer guide for CF exercises • Hospitality, Rule, Storytelling Exercises
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost: financial / time • Consumerism • Unclear TVC philosophy of ministry • TVC staff understanding of TP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural devaluing of inerrancy • Intimidation or confusion over the Scriptures • Apathy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching lacking pastoral sensitivity • Mishandling class time • Participant mental presence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individualism • Head/Heart divide • Indiscipline • Disordered loves

APPENDIX 5

TRAINING PROGRAM COHORT LEADER SURVEY RESPONSES

Volunteer Cohort Leaders were given a survey of the following questions regarding the learning outcomes of the TVCI Training Program. Responses were grouped by question and are provided below in order to show the supporting data of the conclusions drawn in the final chapters of this project. Responses have been recorded as submitted by participants and labeled according to the participant's assigned number.

Question 1: How would you describe your growth in understanding the Christian Story?

Participant 1: We have an assignment where we identify our false story, and over the last few years it has been a fruitful experience taking time to hone in on lies I am believing and false stories that I am living in. Although I continue to struggle drifting into false stories, learning about the true Christian story alongside identifying my false stories has helped me to recognize more quickly when I am in need of re-orienting.

Participant 2: It has been enhanced for sure. I have been a pastor and have an M. Div so nothing has been that different from what I have concluded in my own studies personally. This is encouraging though. My independent study has lined up with the idea of understanding Christian story and I am glad TVCI is teaching it this way because it will connect so many theological and biblical dots for believers and unbelievers alike.

Participant 3: Oh if I could only find a way to measure. This program has changed me inside and out, so much so, that my friends have asked me what I've been doing because it is so evident. The Christian story now pours out of me, and I don't even realize it! I feel more confident approaching the Bible, and in turn, I now can articulate the Christian

story confidently, which allows me to confidently share the gospel without fear and make disciples. The more you know, the more you love, and I wish I could articulate my experience better in order to explain how much this has changed me and those around me.

Participant 4: I would say I now understand humanity's role in the Christian story more in depth in terms of God dwelling with us, our role in taking dominion over the Earth as God's image bearers, and our dynastic role as his elect. Before, I had a bird's eye view understanding of the Gospel in order to be in Heaven with God- but now I understand that we are to live in the manner of the Kingdom now on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Participant 5: Significant. I've traditionally studied the Christian Doctrine systematically rather than historically or biblically and it has been a great benefit to me personally to see the Bible as one unique story and to dive deeply into specific books and covenants that gave me greater context for the whole story of the Bible.

Participant 6: Before the Training Program I knew many stories from Scripture. I believe I had a strong understanding of the New Testament, but the Old Testament was intimidating. I now feel I have a wonderful foundation on which I can continue to build on my understanding of the Christian Story. Before, I had nothing to build on, so each story was isolated. Now, I know the grand story of Scripture, which empowers me to study Scripture rightly. My growth has been significant!

Participant 7: My understanding of the Christian story has grown exponentially. I find myself thinking of all the other parts of Scripture when I read through smaller texts. I am constantly trying to remind myself "Because God is good, and He is accomplishing His purposes while loving His people- then how should I consider this or that." The themes of covenant have really shaped how I read and consider as well.

Participant 8: I think the Training Program has helped me to connect the stories of the Bible into the larger narrative. It has helped me to understand the importance of the

stories I grew up with, not as individual stories, but as one story, one message.

Participant 9: I feel that the Training Program does a great job in giving us the overarching view of the Christian Story. It has helped me understand that knowing the "right" story (Christian) will orient me to the truth so that I might participate in that story each day.

Participant 10: The Training Program has helped me to understand that the Christian Story is cohesive from Genesis to Revelation, in that God is re-establishing His kingdom on Earth. I grew up in a tradition that viewed the biblical narrative as highly segmented, and somewhat unrelated. I also believed that the Old Testament, while useful for values and history, was not necessary and ultimately obsolete. The Training Program helped me to see that Creation, Fall, Re-creation after the Flood, the Birthing of Israel, the Davidic Kingship, the Exile, the Coming of Christ, and the Birthing of the Church are all the same story: God enacting and fulfilling his covenants with his children.

Participant 11: The biggest change in my thinking around Christian Story, is seeing it as 'my story'. I could have given the timeline of Israel but never really connected it to a broader narrative of what God is doing in history and how that it is more than just the 'where did Jesus come from' story, but an story that show how God has worked in my history to bring redemption to me and my family.

Participant 12: Seeing the story through covenants was a point of new learning for me originally. It has helped me better connect the stories of scripture with the purpose of God, bringing us back to himself through his covenant. And the one-sidedness of his covenant to us as been freeing. I've always known salvation was a gift, of no merit of our own, but to see that same unmerited gift being given from the beginning reflects so much more of God's character.

Participant 13: Simply put, the Training Program has been one of the sweetest gifts The Lord has given to me over the course of my life. He has used it to sweep me up into the

Christian story. 99% of the time I am overwhelmed by His kindness and grace as He draws me into deeper and deeper depths of understanding His story, and then 1% of the time I shudder that my heart and head lived for so many years apart from that understanding. I can't fathom a life apart for the richness and mercy He has lavished upon me in it. He has used that understanding to reorient all other facets of the life He has given me. Deeper understanding of the Christian story has transformed my marriage, the discipleship of my kids, my interactions with broader family, my participation as a member of the body, and life at my workplace. What The Lord has been so kind to show me I cannot un-see. It overflows now into the spheres and domains He has placed me in. And even after 3 years of participation in the Training Program, the fluency of my understanding of the Christian story keeps developing in its richness. What a gift that it is to be able to participate in God's story!

Participant 14: Incredible growth. I don't think I saw the Bible as one grand story, but a random collection of stories that ended with the ultimate story of Jesus coming to earth. Understanding how the Christian story is connected from beginning to end has given me tremendous understanding and reverence of God, seeing how he has worked through history.

Participant 15: I have grown tremendously in my understanding of the true story of how God has made himself known to us and written the story of our reconciliation to Him. I knew that Jesus was the way He did that but I never understood how every narrative of the Bible was about God returning us to relationship with Him. Also, seeing how my false stories blind me to reality and keep me from walking closely with the Lord has changed my day to day life. It has also helped me have compassion for other people when I realize that they are living in their own false story and mine is neither worse nor better.

Participant 16: I would describe my growth in understanding of the Christian story as a

complete rebuild from before completing the Training Program. Growing up in church and hearing all the same stories from Scripture, I was often confused about their apparent association with one another. Never had it been explicitly explained to me that the whole of scripture tells the one narrative of redemptive history. This has led to a passion in re-reading parts of the old testament which before had been daunting and apparently unrelated to the gospel.

Participant 17: It has grown immensely. I feel like I understand the Bible as one story and our place as exiles in this world as we wait with expectation and eager longing for the Lords return

Participant 18: I have grown tremendously in understanding the Christian Story. Without this program I would not have truly understood the Bible as one complete book and I would not understand how to communicate that story to others.

Participant 19: I came into the Training Program with no language for Christian Story outside of the creation/fall/redemption arc. I feel comfortable speaking about the Scriptures as one, cohesive story now with appropriate language.

Participant 20: My understanding of the Christian Story has expanded since being in the TP. I have always known the stories of the bible but never had a clear understanding of how they fit together. I now have a much broader understanding of the bible narrative as a whole and how that impacts my life in Christ. I feel much more confident in being able to share the biblical narrative and helping someone understand the major themes of scripture as well.

Question 2: How has your understanding of Christian Doctrine developed?

Participant 1: This is my third year of participating in the Training Program. The first year was overwhelming. There was a lot of vocabulary I wasn't familiar with, and the learning process was slow. Each year I am able to soak in more and more as I have a

broader base for learning. The doctrines that have spoken to me the most thus far are trinitarianism (gaining a greater understanding of the Triune God always having been a Father and the implications of this as well his immanence and transcendence always working in tandem), Providence, and Christology. I have truly enjoyed learning about all of the doctrines, but these are the ones that have formed me the most over the last few years.

Participant 2: It has not developed much but refreshed in some areas. But I can see how great the program has been for those younger in the faith who have not had theological training. There has been some refresher but I have lived in the theological world so long this is the one area training program has not developed me personally that much.

Participant 3: In short: I am no longer fearful. I have a confidence in my Christian knowledge and foundation, and I feel more bold to share this with others. I am able to approach theological articles, books, and podcasts without feeling like it's not for me, and I am now able to tie Sunday sermons, classes, and Bible studies to Doctrine.

Participant 4: I honestly now can make doctrinal observations and form thoughts and opinions because I know the story of scripture so much better. I didn't think doctrine was very important before the training program- the truth is that I had doctrinal opinions but I didn't know why! Now I have the confident knowledge that comes with an informed viewpoint and I am so grateful for that.

Participant 5: It's challenged me to think more historically than literally in regards to the Bible. There have been several things I don't agree with but it's put me in a position to wrestle with the points made that has sharpened me as a person.

Participant 6: My understanding of Christian Doctrine has been formed and polished because of the Training Program. I had a vague understanding of Christian Doctrine before, based on experience and broad reading. My understanding of Christian Doctrine is now significantly more sound and based on Scripture. I still feel I have much to learn,

but my understanding now has a helpful framework.

Participant 7: In a past church experience, I was taught church doctrine with such a lack of love that I would shudder at the word doctrine. Being in the Training Program has really melted away my cold feelings and has helped me to see doctrine as a beautiful way to think about and communicate what Scripture says. Writing my doctrinal statements has given me an anchor during trial and has given me a written record that I can give to my children about what I believe and where it is found.

Participant 8: The Training Program has helped me to take ownership of my beliefs, to articulate doctrine and to understand why doctrine is important.

Participant 9: Honestly, I knew nothing about doctrine or the importance of it prior to the Training Program. It has shown me that a right knowledge of God is the most practical thing there is. To love God well is to know God. I have found doctrine to be super important to me know.

Participant 10: Today I have a more robust understanding of the foundational doctrines of Christianity. My knowledge was far more "factual" and "historical" than it was doctrinal. For example, I believed in Trinitarian theology, but only after the Training Program did I understand the foundational and primary nature of that doctrine in relation to all other Christian doctrines.

Participant 11: I knew a lot of the doctrines of the church before starting the training program, but the added depth and precision have added to my understanding. Additionally, it has made me more gracious rather than dogmatic.

Participant 12: This area has increased exponentially as each week passes. I knew phrases, topics, names of doctrines, and even some basic explanations. But in no way could I articulate the importance or impact of most doctrines until the Training Program. It has opened a whole new rabbit trail of exploration on how to more deeply understand

and talk about Christian Doctrine. And I love it.

Participant 13: The Lord has used the Training Program to help me see the infinite facets of beauty He has cut into the splendor of who He is. Apart from growing in my understanding of doctrine, I would have been spending my life gazing at only a few parts of who He is. I never knew how much I didn't know about why I believed what I believed prior to my participation in the Training Program. Doctrine is awesome. While my love for The Lord had some strength prior to participating in the Training Program, that love was seemingly more based on feeling and surface level knowledge than on truth. Doctrine has helped to put solid ground beneath my feet to stand on to grow my trust, fascination, and yearning to know The Lord more deeply for who He is (and isn't) based on who He has said He is (or isn't) rather than on who I perceived Him to be over years of more passive learning and eclectic study.

Participant 14: More incredible growth. Growing in deeper understanding of certain doctrines about who God is, and who I am, has created a greater love in me for the triune God

Participant 15: I became a believer at a young age and have been involved in church since that time so I was saddened to realize how shallow my doctrine understanding was. Now I realize how much I have to learn but am greatly encouraged by my growth already. I can rest in enjoying the learning instead of seeing it as a goal to accomplish right away.

Participant 16: Before the Training Program, Christian Doctrine seemed boring and not extremely applicable to my daily life. After having excellent teachers of the word draw doctrine out for me, with passion and wisdom, I now view it as not only essential for my spiritual formation but beautiful in its application. Doctrine has given me a secure boundary in which to operate freely within as I grow in my understanding of who God is and my part in His amazing plan.

Participant 17: I feel like I can define and articulate the doctrines as well as give biblical support. Prior to this class I could not define them and certainly would have struggled to find biblical support for them. I still have much more to learn though.

Participant 18: Oh my word... I didn't even really know what the word doctrine meant before I started in the training program last year. :) I have a much more thorough understanding of doctrine and can talk much more intelligently about what I believe and what we as a church believe.

Participant 19: It has only been reinforced with some new ideas added (lament). I received a BA in Biblical Studies, so the Christian Doctrine component was already there.

Participant 20: There was nothing in the program that "floored" or "surprised" me as far as doctrine. Each topic we covered I felt like I agreed with and understood each one, however, prior to the TP I wouldn't have been able to explain or expound on the topics. The TP has helped me to articulate the doctrines more clearly which has in turn broadened my understanding.

Question 3: How have the Christian Formation lectures and assignments influenced your daily walk with Christ?

Participant 1: I LOVE all of the assignments that we have been given and they have all been huge in growing my relationship with the Lord. The one that has been probably more formative than the others is the scripture memory assignment. When I first learned of this assignment I definitely thought there was no possible way I could memorize an entire chapter of the Bible. I had a hard enough time memorizing one verse. But I was introduced to an app to help with this, and it was the tool I needed to make it happen. It began a new joy in me of memorizing scripture, calling on it when I need it, trusting that I can share what these chapters are saying to someone else in need of it without

misquoting what it was saying, etc. I called on what I had memorized significantly in one of our assignments where we were to share the gospel with someone and call them to follow Jesus. She received what I was saying (which was mostly verbatim from Scripture) and has since placed her faith in Jesus. Having the scripture at the ready has greatly increased my confidence in sharing the gospel because I know what scripture says and I'm not as worried about saying the wrong thing, etc.

Participant 2: This has been so great connecting story and the themes of Dominion Dwelling and Dynasty have given me another tool in explain God's story and has gotten my heart and soul to wrestle with more intricate parts of the story as in the Psalms which often seem disconnected to the story but are actually telling the story! This has been such a great blessing!

Participant 3: Although I know I have a lifetime of growth to come, the Training Program has changed me completely, especially in Christian Formation. I now fully understand the practices we do as a church such as communion and baptism, and more importantly, I now cherish them and long for a seat at the table with Christ. My prayer life feels less forced and more like a continual conversation, my Bible reading habit has dramatically changed, and even the way I encourage others in their relationship with the Trinity has changed. This has massively impacted me.

Participant 4: There is nothing more beautiful to me now than reading scripture- whether I am reading alone in my room, listening to scripture while I drive or do dishes, or even reading entire books of the bible out loud with friends over extended dinners (yes a group of training program graduates do this monthly! We are currently in Numbers- we started back in June 2018!). To know scripture is to know Christ- he is the Word!

Participant 5: It's specifically given me greater insight into the Bible's narrative and helped me read the Bible more clearly and it has given me some language to my emotions and how the Bible is full of sorrow. There are some particular lectures that

have helped me more fully understand my own humanity.

Participant 6: The Christian Formation lectures and assignments have put important Christian practices before me. Before the Training Program I felt lost regarding spiritual disciplines. I had a vague understanding of some basic practices, but the formation lectures and assignments gave me specific practices to use in order to incorporate Christian Story and Christian Doctrine practically into my life for the sake of the Kingdom.

Participant 7: The formation assignments are vital in putting the knowledge into action. So often I'm not sure how to live with all the information I'm getting. The formation assignments help me to do that. They are practical and while some are more easily done during certain seasons, all are valuable.

Participant 8: Each of the formation assignments has given a specific way to apply the things learned. There has been focus on listening to God, talking to God, telling others about the Lord, they each have been a way to actively practice and live out the Christian life.

Participant 9: I think the formation assignments have influenced me in a number of ways. I find that I make God part of my day that I wasn't doing prior. I am in the word everyday and praying constantly. I got a better sense of how to build a relationship with the Lord by these lectures.

Participant 10: The Christian Formation lectures and assignments provide an excellent framework for practically living out what we are learning, such as Sabbath and Communion with God, telling the story of Scripture (evangelism), practicing written prayer, etc. Honestly, I still struggle to implement them on an ongoing basis. I love the idea of them, and I love doing them when I do them. But if I'm honest, I struggle to consistently practice them outside of class deadlines.

Participant 11: These have challenged and pushed me to change old habits and rhythms. It has me looking at the things we do together more deliberately. I think the theme of 'rehearsing' our story really sticks with me.

Participant 12: I yearn for more of this. One of the hardest parts of the Training Program is that it stops over the summer. And I feel like my rhythms slowly dissipate as well. The parts of the Training Program where the rhythms of life and assignments are given are so helpful and needed, but they are so hard to implement in a sustainable way when there is already such a firehose of information during the year. Community has been vital for me in this point. Finding like-minded people within the Training Program to encourage me and help me be accountable to these patterns of life are what have brought it into daily living for me.

Participant 13: The doctrinal statements were a huge gift as they created a venue for the speed of my learning to slow down and force an applied articulation of what I actually learned. Things get real when you have to put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard). The evangelism journal though has been the one that each year has most stirred my affections for The Lord. Engaging in the community of the Training Program and hearing the stories people share of how God is rescuing people in our midst is breathtaking. With each passing week it brings both tears to my eyes and a smile to my heart amidst all the joy that flows from the tenderness of The Lord. Aslan is on the move! In the daily grind, it is so easy to lose sight of what really matters. The stories during the evangelism journal reorient my heart to eternal things. Also, I see Training Program participants get transformed in the process. People who have never shared the gospel with another person get awakened to this invitation The Lord has made for them to come and play with Him and it is beautiful to watch Him ignite something extraordinary. The assignment has also created a deeper intentionality in my relationships and has given me new eyes and a new heart to see His children in need of

His truth. This has especially played out in my workplace over the past 2 years where I have connected with 2 team members around the truth of who God is.

Participant 14: They have helped me greatly to lead me through the Bible. The written prayer has been especially helpful and one that I hope to continue doing periodically, and praying through others written prayers.

Participant 15: Each assignment has led me to a deeper love for the Lord, specifically the scripture memorization. I have tried to get into the habit before but having a specific goal and accountability has really encouraged and helped me.

Participant 16: After hearing the lectures on Christian Formation I discovered that these practices are absolutely necessary in order that our hearts not wonder from the truths of scripture. If there's one thing to learn from reading about Israel the nation, its that we act the exact same way. We constantly forget what God has done for us and need to be re-oriented to the correct narrative. Maybe the most impactful thing that has changed in my daily walk is my realization for the need to begin my day in prayer and reading God's word. Before, I knew prayer and scripture reading were "good", now I don't know how I could get through a week without incorporating these practices into my daily regimen. One practice that has also changed my daily walk, which may seem a bit silly, is I will rinse my face three times each morning before I begin my day. During this time I will ask myself whose image I bear. I'll then answer that I bear the image of the triune creator of the universe, and so does everyone I come into contact with today. This ritual reminds me who created me, reminds me that I am loved, reminds me that I am not a creator, and prompts me to speak to and treat people with a level of dignity and respect that is often absent in many social encounters.

Participant 17: So much more excited about being in the Word and discovering more about the Lord. I get excited as I grow and understand and have a desire for the Word to read it more than ever. And a desire to read more chunks at a time rather than just small

pieces

Participant 18: Yes, I particularly felt the first assignment regarding the false story we have grown up believing had the biggest impact on my personal growth. They have all been wonderful tools used to develop my personal walk with the Lord.

Participant 19: The solitude assignment was particularly challenging for me. All of life is Coram Deo, but the idea of being alone before God, without music or without a screen is a scary one. This challenged me to pursue silence/solitude regularly.

Participant 20: The assignments have ranged from really easy for me and some that are more challenging. I have loved the scripture memory assignments because I see the value and necessity in knowing scripture, however I'm much more driven to make it happen when there is the accountability of the assignment. The hardest assignments for me are the written prayer and the practicing the sovereignty of God but I appreciate that the TP pushes me to do things that grow me and challenge me and are something I've tried to carry over into my daily life.

Question 4: Were there any topics or areas of interest that you expected to address in the Training Program and did not?

Participant 1: I cannot think of any.

Participant 2: The Theodicy question has not been addressed yet I may have missed a lecture we talked on providence and God's sovereignty but I don't think the theodicy question has been address in much depth but it is so essential to preaching a clear and complete gospel

Participant 3: I didn't realize it until it was incorporated this year, but I am looking forward to Habit Formation in the Spring. I would also love to walk through identity formation, but I do realize this is a huge piece of the Residency, so maybe I need to look

there!

Participant 4: Not that I can think of- this is my 3rd consecutive year in the Training Program, and each year has been unique while also covering many topics of interest. I also feel like our teachers do a great job of answering questions that arise in class, and even meeting with students outside of class to dive deeper into particulars that class time may not afford.

Participant 5: Not really, I missed some cause I was sick so can't say exactly.

Participant 6: No

Participant 7: Since this is my 3rd year, I pretty much adjusted my expectations and can't really remember any areas. My cohort ladies have mentioned that they were hoping for more tools on how to study the Bible. I'm not exactly sure if they were hoping for a teaching on how to use a word study or a commentary, etc., but they are intimidated to study on their own and get their questions answered.

Participant 8: I don't believe so. Maybe more in depth on eschatology.

Participant 9: I really did not know what to expect from the Training Program so I would say there were not any topics that weren't addressed.

Participant 10: I expected more discussion on eschatology. It feels like there was some avoidance to dig in to this topic because of the controversial and varying beliefs.

Participant 11: Not really.

Participant 12: Not that I can think of, but a little more time on Providence would be helpful.

Participant 13: While it would be a topic that would require great thought and grace in approach and dialogue, wading into the waters of some of the most dynamic social issues may benefit the Christian walk of many students. The Training Program helps to re-story us in so many ways, but as that story extends into the daily life in broader

family contexts, friend groups, at work, and around the neighborhood, students find themselves in contexts where additional training, seasoning, and wisdom would be beneficial as we serve as salt and light to those around us. It would be a helpful gift to learn how to thoughtfully step into the relationship among God's word, orthodoxy, grace, and compassion as we serve and care for those around us.

Participant 14: Not that I can think of

Participant 15: I wasn't sure what to expect so honestly I was pleasantly surprised at how much information is covered in the amount of time available.

Participant 16: All topics that I expected to hear were addressed. I would have liked to hear a little more on eschatology. Even though its not my favorite of the topics, I would like to be aware of the different, even opposing, view points. I would also like to have studied some eschatological heresies that have deviated from orthodoxy, why, and the implications.

Participant 17: Maybe Calvinism more specifically

Participant 18: Actually no... because I didn't really have an expectation. I honestly feel like I learned more than I originally expected... especially about the Trinity!

Participant 19: I did not expect to understand the Psalms as a story. I always looked at the wisdom literature as separate from the story of the Bible - it isn't!

Participant 20: I anticipated more discussion on Heaven and thought there would be more explanation of Calvinism and alternative beliefs

Question 5: What topics or areas of interest were you exposed to within the Training Program that you want to learn more about?

Participant 1: Pneumatology. I would love to learn more in depth about this topic.

Participant 2: Ecclesiology TVCI should tackle this as the church has a structure most

are not familiar with they should also look at the historical elements outside of the Bible that are still God's story . i.e. Church History, modern History, ideas like colonization and slavery are part of God's story

Participant 3: All of them (I wish I was joking). If I must be more specific, I would love to lean more into the Trinity, the Psalter, and Christology.

Participant 4: Trinitarianism, Mission of God, New Heaven and New Earth, Total Depravity

Participant 5: Psalms lecture and being a whole person.

Participant 6: All of it. . . but if I had to pick: Ecclesiology, Christology (particularly Union with Christ)

Participant 7: I just want to learn more and more, I don't have anything specific...

Participant 8: I think study of the covenants in more detail would be awesome.

Participant 9: All theology! I have a deep desire to know theology and know it well. If I had to pick a couple that really peak my interest I would say Trinitarianism and Christology.

Participant 10: I want to learn more about the doctrine of Providence, Original Sin, and Total Depravity. I have a Pelagian background, so I considered these three doctrines heretical for most of my life. I embrace them now, but these doctrines are the primary source of strife with our family members who still hold to Pelagianism. I want to learn all I can about the topic so I can have more effective answers to my family's many questions and accusations.

Participant 11: Covenant

Participant 12: More on the rhythms of life and spiritual formation would be great (but I think there is more planned for this year than the past).

Participant 13: I want to continue to get more and more swept up into the story of

scripture. Kingdom through covenant has captivated me. With each passing year, the story gets more sweet, more real, and more unified.

Participant 14: Not sure. It has been really good

Participant 15: Everything! I have been thinking a lot about what it means to live well in exile and now I am seeing that idea everywhere I look. Embracing that concept has truly changed how I think, feel, and act every day.

Participant 16: Ecclesiology. Not only the doctrines around the topic, but how it plays out on a day to day basis.

Participant 17: Justice. How we live as citizens of the city of God while we are currently in the city of man

Participant 18: This year I got more of a sense of who God is in relation to how He "feels"... how we put human terms on who He is. I hope that makes sense. This has been huge for me in terms of how He 'feels' about me. I would love to learn more about this as I think it is huge in truly understanding who I am to Him.

Participant 19: I want to continue to learn more about the "why" behind evangelism. I have always been driven toward it because I've always understood it as a natural part of the Christian life as a result of the ministries I participated in in high school and college. I wonder why it seems 'lost' at the local church level - why do we farm out so much of evangelism to other ministries?

Participant 20: Some topics that I would want to continue to learn about are the Sovereignty of God in relation to evangelism, if there is an age of accountability, more on God's providence

Question 6: How has the experience of the Training Program influenced your service and leadership within our local church?

Participant 1: I would say first I seriously love it so much that I am compelled to invite others to participate in it. There are several that I have invited to take it that didn't know about it until I shared about it. I would not have the opportunity for this type of education at this phase in my life without this class. I am a mother of 5 children and it would be extremely difficult for me right now to attend seminary. I am in year three, and I barely recognize the person I was before beginning the Training Program. I have grown so much in my learning and have made some amazing friends that continue learning with outside of class. I've also been given the space to grow in my giftings - giftings that were murky at best a few years ago. The Lord has been incredibly gracious to allow me this opportunity. I am beyond grateful.

Participant 2: Help me know more people and it has allowed me to lead in service, sharing and in others' lives

Participant 3: I feel like I belong. Before I served out of guilt, but now I serve to walk alongside others in their journey and to cheer them on. Serving also keeps me in community and keeps my eyes fixed. It's no longer a "have to" it's a "desperate need to" in order to be walking with community. It brings life now.

Participant 4: Honestly, for me it has narrowed my focus and encouraged my heart toward diving deep and serving is one particular area versus having what feels like a part time job at the church, serving in multiple areas. I also believe that being in the Training Program and leading in the Training Program has propelled my voice forward in a number of conversations with those who have influence on staff regarding particulars of ministry, including missions and care for singles in the absence of a singles' ministry.

Participant 5: Given me greater insight into the people that make up TVC.

Participant 6: It has significantly influenced my care for people as a counselor. My understanding and ability to navigate and apply Scripture to the lives of hurting people

has increased exponentially.

Participant 7: It really hasn't changed. I am still serving in Little Village and VBS. The Training Program did help me with planning our crafts for VBS, in communicating the truths with accuracy.

Participant 8: I think it gives confidence to serve in leadership areas. I feel more confident in leading others, especially within the Training Program, not because I have it all figured out, but because I've gone through it myself and understand what they may be feeling.

Participant 9: Since being a part of the Training Program I have begun to serve in Little Village and have come back a second year of the Training Program as a cohort leader. I feel that the Training Program has equipped me with a better understanding of Christian Story and Christian Belief that I am better to serve the body of Christ, that I am able to better understand the importance of serving others with what I have learned.

Participant 10: I've been able to use what I've learned in the Training Program in Kid's Village (elementary education) and as a home group leader. While the complexities of what we are learning don't always translate well to children or to immature believers, the Training Program has taught me how to understand and communicate complex theology in a way that anyone can understand.

Participant 11: Completely changed the way I think about working in Kid's Village. Christian Story, Christian Belief and Christian Formation need to be a part of what we do and while some of it is really well done, there is room to be more deliberate. I pray differently, I talk about narratives differently and I explain doctrines differently. It has really energized me for the work I do there.

Participant 12: My desire to have Truth abound in every context has sprung up more than I expected - in worship, pointing our choir to the truths of the lyrics; in Worship

Academy, trying to teach the what of our worship is more important than the how; in home group, refocusing our conversations on what the Word says, even when we don't fully understand it yet; and within the Training Program, trying to better model and be the type of program that truly inhibits and reflects our cultural mandate.

Participant 13: It has stirred great passion for service in the Training Program itself. I have found deep community and transformative relationships that are a gift to be able to be a part of. I was blessed to be able to serve as a cohort leader last year and then a cohort leader again this year as well as a coach. It is a total joy. I am also privileged to be able to participate in the Residency Program this year as well. The combo platter of those two programs has created a fulness and richness for this year, so next year I hope to be able to plug into continued service in the Training Program (if they might still have me for another year) and then I would also love to see if there might be an opportunity to serve in men's bible study as a table leader.

Participant 14: Has helped me to understand better how service and the leadership function in church and how God works through the church to accomplish His purposes in the world

Participant 15: It has given me the confidence to serve in places such as Membership Classes because I feel that I have a much better understanding of foundational doctrines and practices and have some language to place around them.

Participant 16: I am loving every minute of serving as a group table leader. I thoroughly enjoy getting to know the participants in my group, watching them learn new topics, and discussing questions they bring to the table.

I can say that service and leadership to my church is more important to me and my family than my career, which could absolutely not have been said before participating in the Training Program.

Participant 17: Has made me a better listener more full of grace and a desire to help

others grow in the ways that I have.

Participant 18: It has given me more confidence in my leadership roles.

Participant 19: I am a minister at The Village Church - Southlake. I'm better at my job (serving middle school and high school kids) because of my participation in the Training Program. Student's 'loves' are just out of order - the Training Program has helped me to reorder them.

Participant 20: It has helped me to feel more equipped to lead and engage with others.

Question 7: What areas of growth are you still seeking in your walk with Christ?

Participant 1: The area I am really desiring to grow in right now is in prayer. I began asking the Lord many years ago to allow me the opportunity to minister to more women wherever they were in life as I genuinely love ministering to women, and he has answered in abundance. There are many prayers being brought to me and I want to be more consistent and disciplined in lifting these prayers up. I am currently working on adding a prayer wall in my laundry room where I can keep prayer requests hung until they are answered (providing the visibility I need to continue praying), record the answered accordingly, and store them all in a book where I can go back and review the Lord's faithfulness to us.

Participant 2: Talking more about Abiding and the Holy Spirit's role in this story.

Participant 3: Identity. Now that I am able to see God rightly, I am still working on where I fit in that. I know I am His and beloved, but knowing and believing are vastly different.

Participant 4: I need the Spirit to intervene between my heart and mind and allow me to apply the truths I've learned to my own actual life. It is still so easy for my flesh to forget the faithful promises of God. For this reason, the Training Program are my

favorite 3 hours of the week (I like to get there early!). There is nothing more life giving that sitting under gentle, solid, loving teaching. It is life changing.

Participant 5: Bold evangelism and confidence with humility.

Participant 6: Evangelism, spiritual disciplines.

Participant 7: Ministering in my neighborhood as well as in my husband's work environment, I'm always wanting to grow here. I have gone forward with more confidence in talking to people randomly, inviting them to church, etc. but always needing to grow.

Participant 8: I think I always want to desire more. I don't want to finish the Training Program with a check mark, but instead finish with the desire to know the Lord more. I think also making sure that the head knowledge affects my heart and my walk and not just terminating on knowledge acquisition because that is my bent, to attain knowledge. Now I need to put it to action.

Participant 9: As a second year student in the Training Program I have opted to do the seminary track this year. This is leading me into going to school to hopefully receive my MDIV in the future. I am excited to continue to grow in my knowledge of truth about our God.

Participant 10: I am lacking in the areas of evangelism and spiritual disciplines.

Participant 11: I still struggle with regular rhythms and practice on a daily basis.

Participant 12: I will always seek to grow in prayer, both in scope and frequency.

Participant 13: Everything! Each year I learn with a freshness and passion that sparks more fervor and desire to continue to grow in knowledge and love for The Lord. I have found so much truth in the reinforcing cycle of the more you know The Lord the more you love Him, and the more you love Him, the more you want to know Him, and then the more you know Him, the more you love Him (and round and round you go). Prayer

and Habits of Grace are areas that I perhaps especially want to continue to journey deeper on as that is an everyday experience and expression of that love and knowledge in action.

Participant 14: Growing in prayer, greater biblical study and understanding.

Participant 15: Sharing the gospel, prayer, replacing lies with God's truth, reframing my false stories. with the one true Christian story.

Participant 16: Fatherhood is proving to be very difficult during my current season in life. I most definitely need more growth with my ability to be patient with my children. I desire to, as accurately as I can, demonstrate to my children to love of Christ but I frequently become irritated and angry...which accomplishes the opposite.

The day to day seemingly monotonous work of fatherhood is so extremely important, and I feel I need to better understand just how important it is in order to perform better for my children and wife.

Participant 17: Generosity and participating in justice.

Participant 18: There are many areas of growth I am still seeking. I am asking for growth in humility. I am seeking growth in the gifts as well as walking out in those gifts... among others!

Participant 19: Still continuing to grow as I pursue solitude/quiet before the Lord. This has been a great challenge for me.

Participant 20: Continuing to work on implementing the disciplines from the TP such as consistent scripture memory and continuing to grow in my prayer life. I also want to continue to have intentional evangelism as a part of my daily routine.

Question 8: What do you think are the particular benefits of this model of theological education in the local church?

Participant 1: Learning in community and especially within your local church community is so very rich. Relationships are formed as we are learning together and they extend beyond the classroom environment. Pursuing the Lord with others who are also passionate about Him is essential to continued growth in Him and in staying the course when life throws you curveballs. Also as you spend several hours together each week and through this you get to know each other better, walls come down and create the fertile ground that is needed to grow in your knowledge of, understanding of, and relationship with the Lord. We need to know ourselves in order to be in a place to learn about the Lord.

Participant 2: It really can develop immature and mature believers in the same environment and still be effective.

Participant 3: In my mind, this is a non-negotiable. Every church needs this program, and they need it NOW. There is no way all of this can be communicated in an hour and a half service on Sunday's, and this is crucial to the life of the church.

Participant 4: It's cost effective, it allows for discipleship to flourish in the church through knowledge of God into friend groups, families, home groups, and on and on. A beautiful gospel ripple through the church.

Participant 5: I think it exposes lots of people to needed theology.

Participant 6: Theology in community (cohort), the majority of the participants are seeking ways to implement the material immediately into their service in the church.

Participant 7: It is accessible and gets rid of obstacles of finances and location. It's also a fun environment. All established churches should desire this, even if they aren't able to pull off something as large in scale or depth.

Participant 8: Accessibility is number one, it allows those who might not be able to go to seminary the opportunity to learn more. I think it also shows that the church is interested

in depth and not just surface level belief. It's an investment in your church members that hopefully bears fruit through the participants leadership, service, and discipleship of others.

Participant 9: I think it is absolutely essential to the Christian. I believe that theology should be common knowledge for the common Christian. I grieve the fact that this is a rarity in the Christian church instead of the norm. I think it is vital that we know the truth of our God. I believe that there is nothing better than having a firm foundation for what we believe.

Participant 10: The local church needs theological education opportunities. Not everyone has the ability, time, ambition, or the money to go to seminary. This makes theology accessible. The year long program, the structure of weekly readings and assignments, keeps participants engaged and helps us to keep building on what we are learning. Most importantly, the Christian Formation lessons and assignments give us opportunity to practice what we are learning. If it terminates on us, it is a waste of time.

Participant 11: I love having a common foundation with people I know have been in the training program. I know that we can talk about ministry from a common starting point. This really frees us up to get very tactical fast and not spend time dancing around doctrines and trying to understand what each other's understanding is.

Participant 12: It's vital to the life and depth of the church. Having a place to be disciplined by the church seems intuitive, but surprisingly lacking in most church contexts. To discipline its members in the doctrine, story and formation ensures that the body is like-minded and allowed a place to ask questions, seek answers, and wrestle through the truths of the Bible. Members are much more likely to pour back into the place that has feed them so richly. If a church is expecting their leaders to be able to speak truth to its community, it should have an avenue to ensure those leaders have access to developing and deepening their understanding and ability to explain such

truths.

Participant 13: Doing theological training in the local church combines deep community with venues for immediate and ongoing application. That loving togetherness enables a richness of community that can be done in humility, vulnerability, and charity. There is a yearning for learning that infuses that growth and development directly back into the community itself. Overtime, that reinvestment strengthens the community and fuels greater discipleship, engagement, and multiplication in compounding ways. As that theology becomes more deeply rooted, it is then also able to be worked out in beautiful ways in the body itself across its various ministries, both inside and outside of the church. Lastly, doing theology in the local church enables students to know and be known by the pastors who are shepherding them through the process of discipleship.

Participant 14: The cohorts are great, giving us a small group to walk with for a year and learn from each other, instead of a classroom setting that would not encourage interaction with others

Participant 15: Invaluable way to make theology accessible and less intimidating to members. This program is my favorite area of ministry at TVC because I feel like it strengthens and enhances all the other areas.

Participant 16: This list could go on for a really long time....

Instead of a comprehensive list of the benefits, I'll say that the consequences of not doing this are glaringly obvious, as it has not been being done.

A lack of orthodoxy has led to a lack of not only orthopraxy, but also ortho-doxology.

This is a terrible thing, especially in times of apparent comfort, and, especially for white middle-class suburban evangelicals in America.

Participant 17: It is discipleship within the body. We are connected to a local body to engage and serve one another rather than potentially promoting individualistic intellectualism or private religion

Participant 18: There are huge benefits! More people in the church are getting educated on the Bible as a whole and are being equipped to be more missional with that new education. I think there are huge implications in the growth and maturity of the body but also how that can impact the areas that we live.

Participant 19: So few have access to seminary education - the benefits of this are so clear in the local church. It equips others, at the very least, to know doctrine and story, and it equips some to even lead others as they pursue it.

Participant 20: I am established in my career and there isn't a ton of overlap between Healthcare and theological training so seminary isn't something that I would have ever pursued. This model allows me to gain valuable theological knowledge and training within the church body to further my personal growth and love the for Lord and be more equipped to serve within the church body. It's also just continued to highlight the importance of evangelism and sharing our faith and knowledge of God through our daily interactions--whether I've been to seminary or not.

Question 9: What weaknesses / areas of improvement / lacking topics within the Training Program have you noticed? How would you suggest we address them?

Participant 1: The discussion questions have generally been tough for me. We are generally introduced to the topic that week and I am still processing and taking it all in when we are asked to discuss it. I'm usually not ready with any coherent thoughts about it. We do have the readings to help - but often it still feels forced. I'm not sure how to improve this - and maybe it is just part of the struggle we need to feel in the learning process.

Participant 2: Theodicy, History tied to the biblical story,

Participant 3: Ongoing education. After year one, there is a group that comes back to lead and continue to learn, and I think we can build out a program to support the cohort

leaders. There is also a large group that either does not come back to serve or cannot come to serve due to the time commitment. I would love to build out a program to support alumni.

Participant 4: In particular, I feel like it is too crowded. This lends itself to a host of issues: the room cannot comfortably hold the number of participants. This makes logistics difficult- walking across the room to the bathroom, check in weekly, having enough space at the table weekly for note taking. It is also extremely loud during breaks and it's hard to accomplish meaningful cohort discussion when you can't hear the person across the table. Another thing that is tough is the pacing. Each year parts improve, while other areas of pacing lack. This year, adding to the schedule post syllabus is causing confusion among cohort members. We haven't have many cohort discussions which makes fostering community more difficult- when most of class is sit and listen, without ample time to "exhale"- especially for people who are not seminary track people- that's tough. Having a large chunk of time for discussion prior to the lecture is especially unhelpful- not enough new learning to talk through since lecture hasn't started yet.

Participant 5: I think at times it's too much like a seminary. There are moments where devil's advocate discussions can happen that are beneficial just seems more about stirring up discussion but some of the more immature disciples in the room could be confused by what's being discussed.

Participant 6: It would be nice to be able to continue to go deeper into these topics (Christian Story, Belief, and Formation). There seems to be a wide range in the participants regarding previous exposure to these concepts. I would love the Training Program to be able to continue to go deeper (maybe even closer to a graduate level). The seminary track has been a really nice way to continue to go deeper, but it does feel more separated from the Training Program as a whole.

Participant 7: The lack of cohort discussion time is probably one of the greatest obstacles for our group. The women have so many questions and they are faithful in doing the readings and assignments, but we rarely get enough time to chat. Also as we go through topics so quickly, my ladies are often back thinking on something that was said and they miss what is being taught as we keep going along.

They have also mentioned the amount of quotes and various authors on the slides, which can be so helpful to restate a difficult concept, but sometimes it is too much. They don't know the authors and so they are at times not sure why we hear from them more than we hear from our primary teachers.

As a cohort leader, our group has gotten together outside of class in an effort to bridge the lack of cohort class time, but at certain times it's impossible to get together on another night.

I wonder if there would be a way that folks could ask questions like we had with #AskTVC a little while back..., but for the TP, you could just address questions through some online platform on a monthly basis or something?

Participant 8: I think diversity in the authors of the reading material, though I have seen a genuine effort toward this aim.

Participant 9: One topic that I think would be good to learn about is the person of the Father. We learn about the Trinity, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The Father would feel like we complete the topic of God himself.

Participant 10: Time is always an issue. There is so much to fit into 28 weeks, and some topics feel rushed. For example, this year, the topic of Providence was combined with the topic of Creation. Creation got 2 hours of the class time, and Providence got about

15 minutes. I would also say that for seminary track students, it would be great to have more opportunity to discuss the reading assignments with an instructor in a cohort. When I did the seminary track the first year, much of the curriculum was self-taught, and it's easy to get things wrong when you're self-taught.

Participant 11: I would love a 300-400 level class offering. Maybe a deep dive into a specific doctrine. Maybe a train the trainer type offering where people could get tools to share and disciple others in TP content.

Participant 12: Time - it's already so hard to fit the curriculum in the weeks allotted, so adding a few weeks back may be helpful.

Also, more short blocks to process and talk with cohorts during lectures would be helpful. I could be wrong, but it seems these blocks have decreased in number, and having one mid-lecture as well as the beginning was always helpful to talk through questions and revelations from the lectures.

Participant 13: Goodness, I am not sure! The Training Program gets better and better with each passing year. Content wise, year 3 for me has been even more rich and fruitful than years 1 and 2. The only area of improvement that I might suggest is that the atmosphere of the room has changed slightly this year over recent years as a result of size. It is a great experience to praise God mightily over in that there are so many people who are thirsty to seek and savor The Lord, but the depth of community and connection in a room as full as the current room with tables as full as the current tables is more challenging than in years prior when there may be 2 less people at a table or only 1 leader at a table.

Participant 14: Lack of ethnic diversity in readings, speakers. Having a speaker of different ethnicity speak to lament, imago Dei or other issues would be great. Reading Soong Chan Rah's prophetic lament was great. Would like to read the whole book. I support more female speaking as well. More on social justice and the gospel.

Participant 15: I don't have any to offer except that the room gets really loud when everyone is talking. I absolutely love the Training Program and am so thankful for it and all of the people that make it happen.

Participant 16: I have not noticed any lacking topics or notable areas of improvement.

Participant 17: The lack of diversity in reading materials and speakers. Most all are white. I suggest bringing in people of color for seminars or teaching.

Participant 18: Hmm... maybe some teaching on walking in the gifts?

Participant 19: N/A

Participant 20: Some of the weaknesses I see are out of your control. (ie: you can't force people to participate fully in the program) I think that the teaching is definitely important and people enjoy it--but I think that it is important to have the cohort time to really open up about questions or share personal growth related to the topics and have that discussion time. I think that sometimes the cohort discussions get shorted when time is short.

Question 10: What stories and successes can you share that will help us celebrate what God is doing in the Training Program?

Participant 1: It's spreading outside of our walls constantly. There are so many who truly value this learning experience and are ready and excited to share it with others. Even the other day I was having a tough time understanding a particular topic, and I played the lecture back for my son. He explained it differently to me after listening, and he is now able to articulate this theological concept. He loves to hear what I am learning about. The TP has resourced us so much and so we have many ways to continue learning on our own (and I frequently share these resources with others!). Two of my favorites are the author and theologian A.W. Tozer whom I would have never read otherwise (because I was not

familiar with him or his writings), and the organization The Bible Project (huge resource of so many things around biblical and theological literacy).

Participant 2: God has connect me with so many folks that are like mined and I have been so encouraged

Participant 3: My marriage and friendships have been deepened due to my learnings in the Training Program. I have been able to boldly come alongside family with Truth in really tough situations of addiction in particular. I have ultimately been freed to enjoy the fullness of the Trinity, and I have been able to put checklist Christianity to death.

Participant 4: The way I have personally been able to minister and be ministered to has been incredible. From the ability to receive compliments as an image bearer (which before there was too much trauma and shame to allow that) all the way to inviting three different ladies from my cohorts in two different years to live with me and press into what a healthy home looks like- the Training Program has absolutely expanded my mind and my heart for the deep, true, rich things of God.

Participant 5: It's been a great space for the men in my cohort to learn more about theology and be challenged to think critically about what they already know as well as grow in new areas.

Participant 6: The things I have learned have directly influenced my counseling with clients, and the Lord has provided breakthrough in special ways directly connected to my use of what I have learned in the Training Program.

Participant 7: Our ladies have enjoyed the readings for the most part and often feel excited about what they are learning and practicing through the formation practices. It's fun to hear how it's impacting they daily lives.

Participant 8: Being a part of the Training Program as a participant and leader gave me confidence to pursue the seminary track through the Training Program. Without it, I don't

think I ever would have really considered it. It has made it accessible, and more than that, I feel like I have people in my corner cheering me on. In addition, it's given me more confidence to talk to others about God, I may not always present the gospel from start to finish, but I feel less and less awkward speaking about the way the Lord has moved me, encouraged me, and taught me.

Participant 9: Last summer I lead a theology study in my home for 11 women. It was a great experience and I loved being able to share with others all that I learned. They enjoyed it as well. I hope to do another one in this coming summer.

Participant 10: The Training Program has helped me understand the overarching story of scripture and the nature of God's covenant with us. It has brought a lot of peace in my spiritual life, knowing that God is doing the work, and it's not up to me. I also went through a season of depression related to my job, and the lesson on the cultural mandate and the "sacred ordinary" of our lives helped to alleviate some of the hopelessness I was feeling at work. I was able to share that with my coworkers as well.

Participant 11: I think the VBS curriculum has been directly impacted by the TP both from a direction and leadership perspective as well as in specific lesson development. I am working with a group of TP graduates and attendees to build out the lessons.

Participant 12: The Training Program has blown up my world, in the best way. I've always been more keen to learn with my mind over my heart, so the dive into theology was food for my soul. But the unexpected gift was the community, the people, who showed me a different way to learn and live. To hear from other's perspectives, to hear their questions and hiccups, and see how they saw the love of the Lord has been encouraging and growing. I now have people I can grab coffee with to talk theology, who meet monthly to read the Word aloud together, who listen to podcasts together and meet up with nothing but questions. I am so grateful for the world and depth the Training Program has begun for me.

Participant 13: Last year in our cohort there was a woman who had some uncertainty and anxiety around the evangelism journal. She had never shared the gospel with anyone before and had never experienced The Lord completing transforming work first hand in the life of someone close to her. She didn't know what to expect with the assignment. A few weeks into the assignment, The Lord raised up several people in her life that out of the blue, reached out to her to initiate gospel conversations. Most notably, her neighbor connected with her one day in her backyard to begin talking about "church stuff" and "God". In the weeks that followed, she was able to have several conversations with her neighbor, which God used to awaken that neighbors' heart to the truths of who God is and what He accomplished through His Son. The neighbor came to church, engaged her husband (and children) in new relationship, asked if she could get help in learning to study The Bible, and then ultimately came to celebrate Jesus as King. It was amazing! What was just as amazing was to see The Lord work in the heart of this cohort member as He invited her deeper and deeper as a participant in His story. It fueled so much joy and was a contagion for our entire cohort. Yay God!

I have also had the huge privilege of getting to see The Lord take some of the learning from the Training Program and translate the power of story and false narratives into the atmosphere of my workplace. He has been kind to cultivate a space where we have even been able to integrate that learning into our own worldviews and mission as we seek to be reoriented to a more transformative story that aims to shape culture for the good of others.

Participant 14: Greater racial understanding. Someone in our cohort confessed sin to spouse due to God's drawing them in while being in TP. Did not want to come to TP before, but now is excited every week.

Participant 15: I have seen people last year and this year blossom in their confidence of

God's plan for His people and how they fit into it. I myself have been able to have conversations with friends that I probably would have avoided before. My walk with the Lord is deeper, sweeter, and more consistent without a doubt.

Participant 16: I had the opportunity to share the gospel with a co-worker the other day and I just felt so adequately prepared to give an account for the hope that I had. I've never been able to say that before.

Recently, I have been able to establish a relationship with a guy that works at a store I frequently visit and we've had a few talks about theology. He is a non-practicing Muslim from Egypt. The Lord has just really placed him on my heart, so to speak, so I invited him to Christmas dinner at our home and he accepted the invitation. I was able to clearly and intentionally explain to him that in our family we practice a feast at Christmas to celebrate not only that Jesus came to save us from our sin nature, but He's coming again to swallow up death forever, and dwell with us for eternity. I told him we will be reading stories from the Bible and proclaiming truths about who God is and what he does for us. And he still said he'll come, so I'm really excited about it.

During these two occurrences, what's most shocking and telling to me is that there was absolutely no apprehension in sharing who Christ is and what He's done for me. Before, evangelism was almost seen as a chore, as embarrassing as that is to say...its true. Now, I feel equipped and excited to share my faith whenever I can and the payoff is a joyfulness without compare.

Participant 17: More opportunities for evangelism and a confidence and freedoms in sharing! My neighbor came to faith as a result of sharing last year!

Participant 18: I have been able to articulate what I believe more clearly with my mother as well as with people I am coming in contact with. The program helped me to prioritize memorizing scripture which is having a huge impact on my own growth. There are many

successes to celebrate, I wish I had the time to communicate these via this survey, but I would rather share in person where it is easier to communicate.

Participant 19: As a result of the evangelism seminar last year, I evangelized a friend of mine who became a Christian and is now a regular attender at TVC. My wife has done the same with a coworker.

Participant 20: There are so many ways that I see the Lord using the TP but one example is in my marriage. With both myself and my husband in the class, it has provided an avenue for theological discussion and conversations that would be a lot less likely to happen if not for our constant learning, growing, and studying together. When we got married, most areas of our lives meshed and came together pretty effortlessly--however sharing spiritual growth and being vulnerable when it came to my walk with Christ was one of my harder areas of transition so it's been a blessing to have this common ground and platform for continued growth in spiritual intimacy within our marriage.

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ABSTRACT

FORMING CHRISTIAN DISCIPLES AT THE VILLAGE CHURCH IN FLOWER MOUND, TEXAS

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019
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This project presents a biblical and theological case for Christian discipleship through the trifold lens of biblical formation, theological formation, and identity formation. This lens is used to complete an evaluation of the Training Program at The Village Church in Flower Mound, Texas. By surveying lay leaders in the Training Program, this project helps identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing the execution and development of ministry. Through recommended improvements to program curriculum, structure, and circumstance, this project aims to provide pathways forward for the Training Program for years more of fruitful formal theological training in the local church.

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