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EQUIPPING MEMBERS FOR  
INTERPERSONAL DISCIPLESHIP AT CROPPER  
BAPTIST CHURCH IN PLEASUREVILLE, KENTUCKY

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A Project  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Educational Ministry

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by  
Jesse Lee Huggins  
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**APPROVAL SHEET**

EQUIPPING MEMBERS FOR  
INTERPERSONAL DISCIPLESHIP AT CROPPER  
BAPTIST CHURCH IN PLEASUREVILLE, KENTUCKY

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I dedicate this projective to my loving and supportive wife, the patient membership of  
Cropper Baptist Church, and to God and his glory.

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## PREFACE

This research project began out of a desire to cultivate a community of discipleship at Cropper Baptist Church, and to pursue revitalization and health for the congregation. This project would not have been possible without the help of the church leadership seeing a need, and the project participants willingness to give of their time to see this project completed.

I am thankful that the Lord led me to CBC six years ago and has provided me with godly believers who love one another. The members of the church have been supportive and helpful during my studies. I also want to thank Susan Bryant, Steve Gouge, and Steve Adams for serving on my expert panel and offering their advice and guidance.

The faculty of SBTS has helped to guide me through the research and implementation of this project. First, I would like to thank Dr. Harrod for his willingness to supervise my work. He has displayed patience and godly character throughout this process. Dr. Harrod has served to both challenge and encourage me and I can confidently say that without his guidance the finished product would have suffered. I would also like to thank Dr. Beougher and Dr. Henard for their excellent seminar instruction and expert guidance.

Lastly, I want to thank my family. My children—Tennyson, Wilder, and Ayda—have been a source of encouragement and happiness through this process. Above all, I want to thank my wife, Olivia. Throughout these past years she has been a faithful image of a godly wife, she has carved out time for my studies, sacrificed financially, and supported me when I was ready to give up. Without her constant support and love this

degree would not have been possible. She is a testimony to God's favor in my life.

Jesse Lee Huggins

Pleasureville, Kentucky

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

A church with a long history of faithful service to the Lord offers occasion for rejoicing and thanksgiving. Cropper Baptist Church (CBC) is such a church. The church has proclaimed the majesty of Jesus among residents of rural Shelby County for over a century. The church is thankful for its vibrant history, but this once-strong congregation has entered into a prolonged decline and currently has around thirty-five attenders. This decline has persisted for two decades because of a lack of spiritual depth in the congregation. Many congregants are not learning consistently from the Scripture and seem to have never experienced true life-on-life discipleship. What spiritual growth some members have experienced has been minimal. The result is a church divided into groups, some more interested in serving their own interests than worshipping the God that has sustained them and a small, but faithful contingent of believers that lack the tools to successfully minister to the existing needs of their congregation.<sup>1</sup> There are significant challenges that the congregation is facing, but we know that God is faithful, Jesus gave himself for the church, and the Spirit is moving among us. The members are confident that God will work in their midst once again.

#### **Context**

Over the course of its 119-year history, CBC has experienced alternating

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<sup>1</sup> While the above statements are true, this project has afforded me an additional three years of context and my patience and understanding for the congregation has grown in that time. While many problems continue to exist, I am far more sympathetic to the causes that have led to the struggles of CBC and hope to be a more loving pastor now than before.

periods of growth and decline. The most recent declension has been going on since the late 1990s and has a number of contributing factors, such as ethical failings of former leaders and an internal struggle between members of the congregation leading to church splits and many members leaving the church. The church has not recovered from this controversy.

When CBC called me as its pastor, I found a church that was unhealthy; I was aware of the challenges that lay ahead in developing sound discipleship, evangelism, and worship practices. During my tenure the church has made efforts to improve in these areas, but much work remains. With a desire to see the church revitalize, discipleship is the most significant area of continued reform the church needs.

The lack of discipleship among the members of CBC did not cause their decline, but it has prevented them from restoring their health and a trajectory of growth. With each successive generation, the members experience a drop in the commitment level to their church. The lay leaders of the church are aging. The vast majority of financial support comes from members in their seventies. Many of the younger members are not committed to pursuing spiritual disciplines, and the overall commitment level to spiritual growth through discipleship has reduced to the point that the church now runs the risk of its youngest members completely dissociating with the church. Cropper is now facing the harsh reality that if God does not perform a work to redeem the hearts of the next generation, the church may not survive.

The lack of commitment is not a result of the younger generation abandoning the church, but rather is part of a larger systemic problem that exists. The older generations have not kept their spiritual commitments, and with each new generation, that problem perpetuates. There is liberal theology in the makeup of the church that manifests itself as a distrust for God's sovereignty and a hesitancy to trust and embrace what the

Bible says when it speaks to complicated social issues.<sup>2</sup> Only a small percentage of members seem to be growing toward spiritual maturity. Many members of CBC appear to consider their commitments to Christ fulfilled at conversion as they show very little desire to grow spiritually. Most families do not participate in regular family discipleship (Bible study, prayer, accountability, and encouragement), and attendance at church-based discipleship programs is negligible. Efforts to establish connections with this group have found little success. Over the past three years the church has attempted to reach these members through Sunday school, small groups, and even individual pastoral discipleship, yet all of these approaches have failed.

Despite these challenges, CBC does have a group of faithful, mature believers. They are consistent in their attendance and financial support of the church, faithfully pursuing spiritual development. This group recognizes the need to reach the apathetic members of our congregation, but it lacks the tools to accomplish this goal. The individual members who are mature are not actively pursuing opportunities to disciple those less mature toward spiritual growth.

Generally, CBC's sentiment seems to be that discipleship and spiritual formation are a church's primary responsibilities. Despite this sentiment, however, spiritual formation remains weak among members. CBC's longstanding Sunday school program seems to be ineffective<sup>3</sup> and its Wednesday night Bible study is sparsely attended (and then exclusively by members in their fifties or older). Cropper's Bible study on Wednesday nights has been helpful and encouraged growth among these members; yet these studies rarely have more than ten attendees. The members of our

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<sup>2</sup> This was most prominent in some of the congregations questioning of the authority of Scripture when it came to LGBTQ issues, the roles of women in church leadership, teachings about divorce, matters of sex, as well as general confusion about fundamental Christian doctrines such as the trinitarian nature of God, and the role of faith and works in salvation.

<sup>3</sup> CBC has more classes than mature teachers resulting in a general lack of spiritual growth among participants.

church who most need this instruction are not participating.

While the situation is challenging, the church has several encouraging strengths, including a love and trust for me as pastor, and more notably, a growing openness to change. Organizational change is grounded in the people's willingness to address their weaknesses to promote growth. The mature members of CBC see their decline and recognize that long-utilized, program-driven ministries are no longer effective. Though some prominent members seem unwilling to evangelize the lost within the community, most members realize the error in holding the position that “people know how to find us if they want a church.”<sup>4</sup> As members have watched their children and grandchildren drift away from the church and into sin, they are realizing that the structures that have made up the church membership for generations are faltering. Furthermore, they recognize the frightening prospect of losing the younger generation altogether due to a lack of engagement. This realization has created an opportunity, as it has caused some members to consider the risk that the church may not survive. The membership needs to claim once again the call to teach diligently the words of God to one another (Titus 2:2–12; Heb 10:24–25). If Cropper is to survive as a congregation, it must prioritize genuine, biblical discipleship and spiritual formation.

### **Rationale**

Healthy Christians are those who are growing in spiritual maturity. Though this theme of necessary growth exists across the New Testament, it is a particularly pointed theme of the epistle to the Hebrews.<sup>5</sup> In Hebrews 5:11–14, the anonymous author chastises his readers, calling them “dull of hearing,” “unskilled in the word of

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<sup>4</sup> This is an actual statement used by a prominent member of CBC in multiple conversations about the lack of growth in the church. The sentiment this member is expressing is that our church has existed in the community for 120 years, and if people want to attend a church they know where to find us. This notion and others like it are often used as an excuse not to pursue outreach or evangelism.

<sup>5</sup> Other New Testament passages expecting spiritual growth would include Eph 4:11–15; Col 2:6–7; and 1 Pet 2–3.

righteousness,” and speaking metaphorically of their infantile need of “milk, not solid food.”<sup>6</sup> Those receiving this letter seem to have remained in spiritual infancy and immaturity when they ought to have been progressing in their faith. The epistle’s author expects that Christians will mature in their faith. Like this first-century congregation, CBC needs encouragement to grow spiritually. In Hebrews, such growth is interpersonal; members within the church were to help one another pursue spiritual maturity. This epistle seems especially timely and appropriate for the needs at Cropper.

This project will emphasize a stronger connection between members through interpersonal discipleship. While certainly not the only way in which spiritual growth can occur, Hebrews prioritizes this approach as being an effective means for Christians to help one another to abstain from sin and to grow in Christlikeness. For example, Hebrews 3:13 commands these first-century believers to “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Without regular interpersonal communication between believers, immature Christians are more likely to fall into sinful habits and to stray from their faith. Cropper has experienced this drift, due in part to a lack of interpersonal exhortation. Where accountability is absent, sin flourishes. By reintroducing the responsibility and practices of interpersonal exhortation, this project may foster a shift in the people from sinful self-reliance toward a spirit of repentance and mutual accountability.

Hebrews 10:24–25 implores the readers to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Here fellowship spurs encouragement and growth in holiness. Further, this encouragement is decidedly theological, focused on the eschatological “Day” of Christ’s return. This passage can serve to reorient members’ views from the immediate present to the glorious

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<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

future, and this reorientation, when joined with gospel encouragement, ought to spur desire for spiritual growth.

Cropper's members must remember that the work of discipleship will also be ongoing. Hebrews 8:11 posits that the acts of speaking and teaching each other will continue until the New Covenant is fulfilled in the eschaton. This verse, part of a larger quotation from Jeremiah 31:31–34 in which the new covenant is foreshadowed, describes the fulfillment of the covenant in Christ. One day the need for discipleship will cease because all believers will know the Lord, but until that time, Christians should continue to teach their neighbors and brothers, admonishing them to know the Lord.

By making a more committed investment in interpersonal discipleship, the members of CBC will be able to effectively minister to the needs of the body, specifically in areas of accountability, encouragement, and spiritual formation. Growth in all of these areas is necessary for the vitality and sustainability of the body at CBC. When the hearts of the people are turned in love toward one another, and more significantly in love and obedience toward God, significant steps can be made in other areas of the spiritual life of the church.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to equip lay leaders of CBC to begin interpersonal discipleship within the congregation.

### **Goals**

In order to promote an effective and consistent interpersonal discipleship program at CBC the following goals were necessary:

1. The first goal was to recruit mature lay leaders to participate in interpersonal discipleship training.
2. The second goal was to assess the current spiritual habits, experiences, and confidence levels in interpersonal discipleship among these lay leaders.



3. The third goal was to develop a discipleship model to guide groups engaging in interpersonal discipleship.
4. The fourth goal was to strengthen the spiritual habits and confidence of lay leaders by engaging with them in interpersonal discipleship.
5. The fifth goal was for trainees to identify one younger believer with whom to initiate interpersonal discipleship.

Meeting these goals should equip church members to engage with one another in interpersonal discipleship. These relationships will establish greater spiritual depth among the lay leaders of CBC and promote overall church health and greater levels of participation in the church's ministry efforts by identifying younger believers to engage in interpersonal discipleship among the current membership.

### **Research Methodology**

This project had five goals to accomplish increased levels of interpersonal discipleship at CBC. The first of these goals was to recruit mature lay leaders from the congregation to participate in interpersonal discipleship training. The invitation to participate was only extended to members who are active in the church and show signs of spiritual maturity. This goal was measured by the completion of an agreement card to participate in interpersonal discipleship training.<sup>7</sup> This goal was considered successfully met when five mature lay leaders returned their agreement cards and agreed to participate in training.

The second goal was to assess the current spiritual habits, experiences, and confidence levels in interpersonal discipleship among participating lay leaders. This goal was measured by administering an interpersonal discipleship inventory two weeks before the first training session.<sup>8</sup> This inventory followed a mixed-methods research design and

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<sup>7</sup> See appendix 1. All research instruments used in this project will be performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

<sup>8</sup> See appendix 3.

included several Likert-scale items as well as open-ended interview questions. This goal was considered successfully met once all participating lay leaders completed the inventory and the results were analyzed, yielding a clearer picture of their familiarity with interpersonal discipleship.

The third goal was to develop a discipleship model to guide groups engaging in interpersonal discipleship. An expert panel consisting of three individuals with a background in discipleship utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the discipleship model.<sup>9</sup> This goal was considered met when all criteria met or exceeded the “satisfactory” level. When this benchmark was not met, the material was revised and resubmitted for review until it met this standard.

The fourth goal was to strengthen the spiritual habits and confidence of lay leaders by engaging with them for interpersonal discipleship. This engagement occurred over a three-month period and involved utilizing the discipleship method to allow me to engage with participants one-on-one. This goal was measured by the participation of at least three lay leaders in all official training sessions and the completion of a post-training survey that was administered one week after the last session. This goal was considered successfully met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant growth in habits and confidence to engage with others in interpersonal discipleship.<sup>10</sup>

The final goal was to have each participating lay leader identify at least one other believer to initiate interpersonal discipleship with. This goal was measured through a discipleship commitment card.<sup>11</sup> This goal was considered successfully met when each

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<sup>9</sup> See appendix 2.

<sup>10</sup> See appendix 6.

<sup>11</sup> See appendix 5.

participant identified at least one younger believer to disciple.

### **Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations**

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

*Discipleship.* In Christian contexts, “discipleship” generally relates to the concept of being or becoming a follower of Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup> This becoming a disciple of Jesus is a work of the Holy Spirit that leads the believer to mature in their faith and become more like Christ.<sup>13</sup>

*Spiritual formation.* Spiritual formation is the lifelong process of molding the soul into conformity with Jesus Christ. This conformity is performed as a work of the Holy Spirit in believers as well as through the pursuit of godliness and spiritual discipline.<sup>14</sup>

*Mature church member.* Thabiti Anyabwile refers to a mature church member as a member who is faithful in attendance, maintains peace, builds up the body, admonishes others with the truth, pursues reconciliation, is patient, participates in ordinances, and supports the efforts of the church.<sup>15</sup> Participants of this study are those who generally exhibit these characteristics. This definition also yields a helpful pattern for what their interpersonal discipleship aims to produce long-term. For the purposes of this project mature church members were defined as those who were active in attendance, with longevity in the church, and who had assumed roles of leadership in the body.

The following limitations will apply to this project. First, the accuracy of all

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2005), 136.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Schwanda, “Formation. Spiritual,” in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 452–53.

<sup>15</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 68–70.

survey and rubrics implemented within this plan are dependent upon the accuracy of the responses provided by members of CBC. In order to mitigate this limitation all questions are of the multiple-choice variety to provide a range of possible options. Second, the project was limited by the scope of time. This project did not exceed twenty weeks in length from initial assessment until post-survey. These twenty weeks ensured time to determine the current participation levels of CBC members in discipleship, prepare a discipleship model, determine the current levels of knowledge about discipleship among participants, implement the discipleship model, and conduct the post-survey to determine the effectiveness of the curriculum.

The following delimitation will be placed upon the project. First, those participating in the project were limited to adults eighteen and older. This was to ensure privacy for minors. Additionally, all minors in our church currently attend with a parent or guardian who can participate in the survey and give an accurate depiction of discipleship within the home. Second, this project was limited to only mature church members. Though this project may lead to increased spiritual relationships with inactive members and the unchurched, the project chose to focus only upon developing interpersonal discipleship among individuals who are mature. For a member to be considered mature they must frequently attend church, not currently be under church discipline, and participate in some capacity of lay leadership. Third, this project focused on the implementation of curriculum to encourage interpersonal discipleship among church members. This project does not address any changes that are made to the current discipleship programming or the implementation of any additional discipleship programs.

### **Conclusion**

There is a significant need at CBC for the members to experience their faith in a more profound way. Spiritual growth is an act of obedience and worship toward God that serves as the impetus for church health, growth, and multiplication. In order to be the

church as God desires us to be, it is imperative that CBC make changes to the way we currently are practicing discipleship.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR INTERPERSONAL DISCIPLESHIP

In December 2019 the world experienced the outbreak of a new type of virus, which was given the name COVID-19. This virus quickly began to spread around the globe, putting many people at risk. To slow the spread of the pandemic many countries, including the United States, began to put measures in place that called for social distancing, isolation, and self-quarantine. To follow these measures many schools, businesses, and churches began closing their doors. This was an unprecedented situation that led Christians to separate from one another for a time. Churches still were able to hold services electronically and perform some of the ministries of the church through technology, but vital interpersonal contact was set aside for the safety of individual members. This disruption to the normal fellowship of the church highlighted the value of interpersonal relationships with other believers.

Scripture calls Christians to pursue fellowship with God and other believers. Hebrews calls each believer to be part of interpersonal disciple-making relationships with other believers to grow in faith. The book of Hebrews focuses on these concepts of interpersonal discipleship by encouraging believers to teach one another the Scriptures (Heb 5:11–14), to exhort one another not to be hardened to sin (Heb 3:7–15), to encourage one another to be faithful and obedient (Heb 10:19–25), and to draw near to God in prayer (Heb 4:14–16).

#### **Introduction to the Book of Hebrews**

To properly understand the message of Hebrews, several important questions must be answered. First, who is the author of Hebrews? Commentators have proposed

several different authors throughout history including Paul, Apollos, Peter, Priscilla, Philip, and others. While theories may abound, the answer must be as James Moffatt suggests, that the author “cannot be identified with any figure known to us in the primitive Christian tradition.”<sup>1</sup> Because there is no certainty who the author is, Hebrews is recognized as an anonymous letter. Whomever the author is, he wrote with a pastoral care for the congregation and a willingness to confront sins issues in their midst and challenge them corporately toward holiness.

It is important to focus as well on the audience to which this letter was addressed. It seems likely that the audience is Jewish, for much of the book deals with their temptation to return to Judaism. The temptation to return to Judaism may have been because of persecution. Persecution would make it vital that the congregation encourage and minister to one another during their suffering. Most commentators believe that the audience is a group of former Judaizers facing persecution while living in Rome before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70.<sup>2</sup>

### **Teaching One Another the Scriptures (Hebrews 5:11–14)**

Hebrews 5:11–14 teaches that the consistent practice of being taught the Scripture helps immature believers grow into discerning Christians. Believers who are mature are challenged to teach others their faith. When believers fail to teach each other, newer Christians are not getting the teaching they need to mature as they should. The author challenges his hearers to look deeply at their spiritual conditions, commit themselves to the things of Christ, and then help each other walk in those things.

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<sup>1</sup> James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), xx.

<sup>2</sup> See William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary 47, (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 47; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964).

## **Dull of Hearing (5:11)**

This section begins by reflecting on what has already been said. The author has explained that Jesus is the great high priest after the order of Melchizedek in 4:14–5:10, a teaching that will continue after this exhortation into chapters 6–8. Though the writer desires to complete his thought, and by his own admission has much to say on the topic, he first recognizes a need in his audience. He understands that the message he desires to teach is complicated. To understand the teaching, the audience needs to have attained a certain level of spiritual discernment that they have not yet reached.

The issue at hand is not one of cognitive understanding; the church can understand what the author is saying on an intellectual level, but they lack the spiritual discernment to grasp the meaning of the message. Donald Guthrie notes that “it is noticeable here that a direct relationship is assumed between spiritual condition and understanding.”<sup>3</sup> The subject matter that they are being asked to examine goes beyond their level of spiritual comprehension. While the argument the author presents is difficult, according to Paul Ellingworth, the author may be tactfully implying that this is “teaching difficult in itself, and therefore doubly difficult for you to understand in your present state.”<sup>4</sup>

The author has judged the present state of the audience to be “dull of hearing.” The message of the gospel has lost its appeal; the audience has stopped listening to it. The reason for this shift is unknown. Perhaps the people were succumbing to persecution, and perhaps some individuals had just grown lazy, but whatever the cause they had become distant to the truth. The readers failed to understand their responsibility as believers in Christ to be obedient to his commands. This is a contemporary problem as

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1983), 133.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 300.



well, as R. Albert Mohler Jr. writes, “We often act as if our biblical ignorance is merely a matter of God’s hiding or withholding knowledge from us. Yet Scripture teaches us that our ignorance of God’s Word is a moral problem, not an intellectual one.”<sup>5</sup>

Of worry to the author is not only that his hearers’ spiritual maturity is not progressing, but that it is actually regressing. David Allen states, “The perfect tense ‘you have become’ indicates the readers were previously in better spiritual condition but now are in a state of dullness.”<sup>6</sup> This reality stands in stark contrast to the effort of Christ that was discussed in the preceding verses who, through prayer, supplications, obedience, and his own death and resurrection, is serving as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

### **You Ought to Be Teachers (5:12a)**

Verse 12 continues this rebuke of his audience, where they ought to be now as Christians (teachers) in contrast to where they are (needing someone to teach them). The converts in the church are not new, they have had enough time to grow beyond the basics of their faith into well-rounded disciples of Christ, but they have failed to do so. The measure that the author uses to determine the maturity of the fellowship is their development into teachers. It is the responsibility of the church to teach its members the truth of the Bible. It is a problem when any church is not properly discipling its members toward maturity. Guthrie comments, “The propagating of an understanding of the Christian message in a fully-developed form depends on those who are mature instructing those who are immature. It is a serious position therefore in any community if its potential teachers are themselves at the immature stage.”<sup>7</sup>

The function of teacher in this passage is not an allusion to the role of elder or

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<sup>5</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews*, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2017), 79.

<sup>6</sup> David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, New American Commentary, vol. 35 (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 335.

<sup>7</sup> Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 134.

pastor in the church. Richard W. Johnson states, “This use of ‘teacher’ is functional rather than titular, indicating a task which all believers should be prepared to undertake.”<sup>8</sup> All maturing members of the church ought to be able to communicate to new converts the truths about the gospel.<sup>9</sup> The reality for the original audience is that they were unfit as teachers, and although they should have progressed in their spiritual maturity, they instead were in need of someone to teach them over again.

The content of what these Christians ought to have known but now needed to have taught to them is described as “the basic principles of the oracles of God.” Luke Timothy Johnson states, “They cannot comprehend the significance of Jesus as a priest like Melchizedek because they have not yet appreciated that God’s living word (4:12) is a call every day to obedient hearing.”<sup>10</sup> Individuals within the church did not understand the basics, and therefore could not understand more complicated matters of the faith. The principles that the author has in mind are summarized in 6:1–2 as “a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement.”<sup>11</sup> What the

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<sup>8</sup> Richard W. Johnson, *Going outside the Camp: The Sociological Function of the Levitical Critique in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 209 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 90. See also Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), 190; Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 302; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Reformation (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 170; and Allen, *Hebrews*, 335.

<sup>9</sup> I agree with Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 134, and Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 190, that the primary audience that the author has in mind is the church. The teaching then is primarily a role of interpersonal discipleship in which members of the church are teaching other members. Chapter 6 stands as a warning for believers not to “fall away” from the faith but to hold strong to the teaching they have accepted. One of the ways to prevent people from turning away from the faith is to maintain a growing and maturing faith. Lane and Simon J. Kistemaker both expand this further to also include the process of evangelism and teaching unbelievers for conversion. Lane, *Hebrews*, 137; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 148. While this may also be in view, and is in line with the rest of Scripture, the primary context seems to be serving and teaching one another.

<sup>10</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 155–56.

<sup>11</sup> This is the suggestion made by Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 171, and Allen, *Hebrews*, 336.

author has in mind truly are the basic teachings of Scripture, but the audience could not articulate to others the gospel of repentance, faith, and hope. The church needed to go back to the origin of their faith and relearn and reapply the fundamental truths of Christianity. While the author reprimands them harshly for their lack of growth, he does not stop his argument to review these basic principles of the faith. The author instead encourages the church with further theological teaching to continue to grow. William L. Lane believes that by not discussing the content of these basic principles but instead teaching them complex Christology, he is presupposing a level of maturity within his readers. The author is instead using irony and rebuke “calculated to shame and to recall them to the stance of conviction and boldness consonant with their experience and hope.”<sup>12</sup>

### **You Are Unskilled in the Word of Righteousness (5:12b–13)**

The author continues his rebuke by comparing the church to babies.<sup>13</sup> He tells them, “You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.” The purpose of this criticism is summarized by Simon J. Kistemaker as a desire to “direct them to a higher level of development. They must realize that growth demands solid food. They will never advance on a diet of milk.”<sup>14</sup> Both milk and meat are necessary phases of human development. Babies spend their early lives existing on a diet of milk, but there would be something deeply wrong with an adult who continued to practice that diet. In human development there is a milk stage, but that progresses into a diet of solid foods as one matures. Likewise, in an

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<sup>12</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 135.

<sup>13</sup> The same rebuke is made to the Corinthian church by Paul in 1 Cor 3:1–3 when he compares them to infants in Christ. Paul ministered to the Corinthians by giving them milk because they were not ready for solid food. The author of Hebrews feels the same about his audience’s level of maturity, but his response is different. Rather than continuing to teach the basics he moves on toward more complex teaching.

<sup>14</sup> Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 149.

individual's spiritual journey there is a time for the basic principles of Christianity, but there is something deficient about Christians who are not maturing beyond the infant stage. Herschel H. Hobbs describes the condition of the Hebrew Christians as having "appropriated only regeneration. Though sanctified they made no effort to progress beyond being babies in Christ."<sup>15</sup> This text should be read as a warning for the church not to remain infantile in their faith. Thomas Schreiner comments, "The author does not believe there is a permanent state of spiritual infancy that believers can occupy. The entire purpose of the book is to warn believers about the danger of falling away."<sup>16</sup> True faith is a faith that is growing.<sup>17</sup>

The mark of Christians who are immature is their lack of skill with the word of righteousness. The term "unskilled" in verse 13 means to be inexperienced or untried. These individuals are not completely ignorant of matters of the faith, but they are not putting that faith to use. The "word of righteousness" that is referred to here is referring to teachings about righteousness that are vital to Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

### **Sharpen Your Powers of Discernment (5:14)**

While milk is intended for the immature Christian, the mature will feast on spiritual meat. The marks of maturity outlined in this passage are those who "have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." The language of training is from the gymnasium—there is constant effort involved. One does not become a world class athlete by accident, but instead through years of toil and

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<sup>15</sup> Herschel H. Hobbs, *Hebrews: Challenges to Bold Discipleship* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 53.

<sup>16</sup> Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 171.

<sup>17</sup> The Scripture instead teaches that Christians will grow in their faith: Eph 4:13–16; Col 1:9–10; 2:6–7; Heb 6:1; 1 Pet 2:2–3; 2 Pet 1:5–8.

<sup>18</sup> This is the conclusion that Hughes comes to (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 191), and I am inclined to agree with him given the context of the passage. For more analysis on possible meanings of "word of righteousness," see Lane, *Hebrews*, 137–38, and Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 306–7.

dedication. The same type of dedication and habit is necessary for a Christian to become mature. Guthrie reminds us that “spiritual maturity comes neither from isolated events nor from a great spiritual burst. It comes from a steady application of spiritual discipline.”<sup>19</sup> Believers who are maturing are those who have devoted themselves to studying the Scriptures, and who practice focus and discipline so that they may reach a level of discernment. The Christian must possess understanding about good and evil; this understanding is found through knowledge of God’s Word. The good and evil that is in view here is not moral or ethical, but should be applied theologically as discernment concerning true and false doctrine.<sup>20</sup> The audience of Hebrews did not display the consistency in understanding the Scriptures that is necessary to become obedient, and as a result the author speaks of this congregation as not having matured past the infant stage. All Christians are expected to practice and apply spiritual discipline to grow in faith. This is further explained by the author’s return to the athletic metaphor in 12:1 where he instructs the entire church, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

Hebrews 5:11–14 serves as a guide for the church to grow toward maturity in Christ. From the text it is evident that every Christian has an expectation and responsibility to progress in their faith. This is accomplished through discipline and study of God’s Word, but the text also explains that while the process of maturing is, in one sense, an individual act, individuals are maturing so that they can become teachers and instruct less mature believers. Kistemaker expands on this:

The corporate responsibility of the church is to formulate the teachings of the Christian faith. The doctrines of God, man, Christ, salvation, the church, and the end of the age belong to the entire church and not merely to a few gifted theologians

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<sup>19</sup> Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 136.

<sup>20</sup> See Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 193.

who have been instrumental in drafting the precise wording of these doctrines. The church as a body of believers is the responsible agent in formulating, adopting, teaching, and defending these doctrines of the faith. Therefore, the individual Christian is exhorted to progress beyond the level of the “elementary truths of God’s word.”<sup>21</sup>

The writer makes his expectations clear: Christians are to be progressing and teaching one another the truths of the faith. The message of the gospel is not entrusted only to a few select leaders, but it is the responsibility of all Christians to communicate. This message is particularly poignant for churches such as CBC that have not properly trained the next generation. There are great truths to still be learned about God; this will not be accomplished individually but involves the interpersonal teaching of believers.

### **Exhortation Prevents Sin (Hebrews 3:7–15)**

Interaction between Christians is vital because it helps to strengthen the faith of each individual member as believers encourage each other to imitate Christ. Hebrews 3:7–15 informs the reader that regular exhortation protects Christians from falling away from the faith and being hardened to sin.

### **An Old Testament Example (3:7–11)**

The author of Hebrews writes to the church to exhort them to hold fast to their faith. To accomplish this purpose, he uses a passage of Scripture from Psalm 95.<sup>22</sup> As an introduction to this quotation, the writer first refers to Scripture’s divine author, “as the Holy Spirit says” (3:7). Within Hebrews many Old Testament references are used, but the pastor does not credit any human with authorship. Instead, it is the Spirit that is described as the ultimate source of Scripture (as in 10:15).

By claiming God’s authorship, the writer of Hebrews is establishing a number of things: he believes that the Old Testament is ultimately authored by God and that

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<sup>21</sup> Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 150–51.

<sup>22</sup> An excellent explanation of the wilderness wandering and its relationship to the church in Hebrews is offered by Lane, *Hebrews*, 89–91.

Scripture is authoritative for his reader’s present context.<sup>23</sup> The author uses the present tense “says” or “is saying” to establish the relevance of Old Testament revelation for the first-century church in Hebrews. As Lane explains, “The witness of Scripture is brought from the past into the present, contemporary with the experience of the readers. What was spoken or written concerning the desert generation centuries before has immediate relevance to the community addressed.”<sup>24</sup> Emphasizing the Holy Spirit’s authorship in the past and authority in the present has, as Philip Hughes describes it, “the effect of demanding the serious attention of the readers and emphasizing the extreme seriousness of the warning contained in the quotation.”<sup>25</sup> The Christians should heed the warnings of Psalm 95 because it is the Word of God and thus is authoritative for their life.

To further emphasize the immediacy of the warning, the author highlights the word “today” in verse 7 as well as in his exhortation in verse 13. The events discussed in Psalm 95 that occurred during the wilderness wandering of Israel were a result of God’s action five hundred years before the Psalm was written and fifteen hundred years before Hebrews was written.<sup>26</sup> God is speaking through those events to believers in the first century, and the Spirit also is speaking through the Word of God to all subsequent generations that have read the epistle. As Kistemaker states, “At no point does Scripture become outdated or irrelevant. . . . God’s word still speaks to us today.”<sup>27</sup>

Because the Scripture is authoritative for the Hebrew church’s immediate context, they understand the severity of the warning contained in the quotation in 3:7b–11:

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<sup>23</sup> See Mohler, *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 85.

<sup>25</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 141.

<sup>26</sup> For analysis of the dates of the exodus and David’s life see Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 83–85, 259–65.

<sup>27</sup> Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 91.

Today, if you hear his voice,  
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,  
on the day of testing in the wilderness,  
where your fathers put me to the test  
and saw my works for forty years.  
Therefore I was provoked with that generation,  
and said, “They always go astray in their heart;  
they have not known my ways.”  
As I swore in my wrath,  
“They shall not enter my rest.”

The events in view by the Psalmist are the lack of faith displayed by the Israelites at Meribah and Massah as described in Exodus 17:1–7 and Numbers 20:1–13. During the exodus, the children of Israel grew thirsty and there was no water. The people quarreled with Moses, demanding he give them water. Their quarrel with Moses was also a testing of God and his ability to provide for his people. The Israelites did not trust God and were in danger of turning away from the promises of a land that God had given them.

Moses cried out to God for deliverance. God told Moses to take his staff and strike the rock of Horeb and water would come out for the people. Moses obeyed and water came from the rock. As a testimony to what had occurred there Moses called the place “Massah,” a word that means “testing” because the people had tested the faithfulness of God, and “Meribah,” a word meaning “quarreling” because the people had quarreled against Moses.<sup>28</sup>

Numbers 20 contains a similar story. Just as the previous generation had denied the provision of God in Exodus, this wilderness generation also tested God. The people again had no water, but rather than trusting God and remembering what had occurred previously among their ancestors when they had run out of water, the people again rebelled against God. Moses prayed again to God and God instructed Moses to go out and speak to the rock and water would come out. Moses, in his anger with the people, disobeyed the word of God and struck the rock. For his disobedience Moses was not

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<sup>28</sup> Exodus 17:7: “And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’”



allowed to enter the promised land. This place also was called “Meribah” because the people quarreled with God. The people on both occasions were testing the faithfulness of God. Hughes states that, “The Israelites put God to the test, not discerning that it was they, not God, who was being tested. They placed judgements on God and did not trust him.”<sup>29</sup>

When the author of Hebrews uses this example in his quotation from Psalm 95, he does not reference Meribah and Massah, instead referring to the “day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years” (3:8b–9). What Hebrews’ author has in view is not only the events at Meribah and Massah, but the consistent testing of God that occurred during the entire exodus.<sup>30</sup>

#### **An Exhortation to Have Faith (3:12–14)**

The warning that is given through the quotation of Psalm 95 is then followed by a word of exhortation to the church, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (3:12). The events that transpired during the wilderness wandering are a warning to the church of Hebrews not to display the same level of faithlessness that the Israelites did. To prevent this unbelief from taking hold, the Christians should examine themselves as well as the credibility of the conversion of those they have joined with in fellowship. The word *ἀπιστία*, translated in verse 12 as “unbelieving,” can also be understood as having or possessing no faith. Hobbs explains, “It (*ἀπιστία*) does not mean to un-believe or to renounce a faith already held. It means not to have faith. It refers not to a past faith

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<sup>29</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 142–43.

<sup>30</sup> Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 103–4, and Hobbs, *Hebrews*, 36–37, both see the lack of reference to Meribah and Massah as an expanding of the text to include the entire wilderness testing, specifically the events of Numbers 13–14 at Kadesh-Barnea. It was here that the spies gave report of all they had seen in Canaan, and the people refused to obey God and the words of Moses, Joshua, and Caleb and enter the promised land. For their disobedience that generation was refused admission to their inheritance and instead wandered for forty additional years in the wilderness.

accepted and then rejected. It means a lack of faith in the future events.”<sup>31</sup> To equate this verse to a warning that the brothers might lose their salvation goes against what the author of Hebrews teaches in 6:18–20 and 13:5b as well as the teachings of the rest of the Bible.<sup>32</sup> The issue is not one of people abandoning a faith truly held, but people accepted into the fellowship of the church that have never believed.

The address of this warning to “brothers” in 3:12 indicates that the author considers those to whom he addresses his letter to be fellow Christians.<sup>33</sup> This does not lessen the impact of the warning not to fall away. The readers must guard themselves against apostasy and pursue righteousness. Schreiner elaborates, “Unbelief, the failure to trust in God and to believe his promises, is the essence of an evil heart that refuses to ‘trust’ in him.”<sup>34</sup> The author is aware that within any faithful congregation there may be those who have not actually believed the gospel in faith. When these individuals do not live up to their faith commitments it is evidence that their faith was never genuine, not that they have somehow lost their faith.

This kind of unbelief is described by the author as having “an evil, unbelieving heart” (3:12). The author uses “evil” and “unbelieving” as synonyms; if an individual is unbelieving, they are evil, as righteousness is only obtained through the application of Jesus’s death and resurrection to the soul. Evil is not merely the actions that a person commits, but rather is a condition of the heart. Richard W. Johnson elaborates, “The symptoms of sin are related not to the violation of an external standard, but to internalized deception, unbelief, and hardening of the heart.”<sup>35</sup> For this reason all persons

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<sup>31</sup> Hobbs, *Hebrews*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> See John 6:39; 10:28; and 1 Pet 1:5.

<sup>33</sup> See Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 145.

<sup>34</sup> Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 126.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, *Going outside the Camp*, 104.

must affirm that they stand before God as evil and unbelieving with no hope apart from the grace of the living God.

To prevent people from falling away from the faith the church is commanded to “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb 3:13). The command to “take care” and watch for signs of unbelief in verse 12 is not intended to be only an individual command, but rather this is part of the responsibility of the entire church. Each group of believers has the responsibility to exhort one another about the dangers of sin and abandoning their confession. The primary means that the church has to assist Christians to withstand the evil of unbelief is by investing in each other. Mohler elaborates that “immersing oneself in the community of the saints, and in the care and watchfulness of the local church, in the preaching of God’s Word, and in the exhortation of fellow believers remedies an evil, unbelieving heart.”<sup>36</sup>

All churches practice a form of exhortation from the pulpit at the very least, but Hebrews desires that this exhortation will be done not only by the pastors or leaders of the church but by individual Christians discipling one another. He commands the entire church as “brothers” in verse 12 to “take care,” and it is this same group of brothers that he calls in verse 13 to exhort one another.

From a practical standpoint it would be difficult, if not impossible, for any one individual or small group of individuals to practice the oversight and spiritual care needed to disciple every member in a congregation. In a system like that it would be easy for people not to receive the help that they need to properly mature in Christ. In the eyes of the author, it is not okay to allow people to fall away because of poor exhortation. The expectation is that “none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” The entire fellowship of believers is responsible for the spiritual development of each individual

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<sup>36</sup> Mohler, *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews*, 52.

believer. Lane comments that “the reflexive pronoun ἑαυτούς, ‘one another,’ which is used here instead of the reciprocal pronoun ἀλλήλους, ‘each other,’ emphasizes the mutual responsibility that each member of the community should feel for the others.”<sup>37</sup>

There is also a clear expectation about the frequency with which such exhortations ought to occur by the author’s repeated use of “today.” Because the exhortation of believers is of vital importance, it must happen frequently. Hughes elaborates, “Mutual concern and encouragement are of constant value in the church, not least in repelling the menace of false teaching; hence the writer’s desire that his readers should exhort one another not just occasionally, or in any particular situation, but every day.”<sup>38</sup> There is a clear expectation of individuals in the church to be constantly helping one another follow Christ.<sup>39</sup> Guthrie states, “It is certainly easier for individuals to be misled in isolation from other Christians than when sharing fellowship with others. The fact that there was a tendency of the readers to forsake assembling with others (10:25) throws light on the present passage. It is impossible to exhort unless one is part of a fellowship.”<sup>40</sup>

Verse 14 contains a general exhortation to practice perseverance. “We are sharing in Christian experience is a conscious fellowship with Christ, and it is solely in recognition of this fellowship that the Blood of Calvary’s cross cleanses the heart from all sin and keeps it blameless before the throne of God.”<sup>41</sup> What Christians are commanded to hold to is the confession that they made at the beginning. These believers are being

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<sup>37</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 87.

<sup>38</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 147.

<sup>39</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 87, sees in the admonition to “encourage one another every day” a possible gathering of the church daily, which would provide opportunity for such interpersonal encouragement.

<sup>40</sup> Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 107.

<sup>41</sup> H. Orton Wiley, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1984), 118.

warned by the apostle not to make the error of moving away from their faith. John Owen states, “When we start with Christ we do so with much love, affection, and courage. If we do not take great care we move away from what we had at first.”<sup>42</sup>

The author has concern for believers not to stray away from their faith and test God with their disobedience as the people did in the wilderness. It is of vital importance to their faith that these believers maintain their faithfulness to Christ. One of the primary ways that this is accomplished is through the assistance of fellow believers who can confront sin and provide warning from sin and encouragement to persevere.

### **Encouragement Strengthens Faith (Hebrews 10:19–25)**

It is vital for Christians to support one another in their spiritual development. Hebrews 10:19–25 instructs the reader that ongoing encouragement and exhortation strengthen faith and obedience.

### **Confidence through Christ (10:19–21)**

Hebrews 10:19–21 begins a new section of Hebrews as indicated by the use of “therefore,” which serves as a summary for the writer’s preceding argument from chapter 8 onward, an argument which explains that Christ is the high priest and the perfect sacrifice of a greater covenant than the Old Testament covenant of law with its temple, priesthood, and animal sacrifices. Christ’s death and resurrection has removed every obstacle that once barred access to God and has provided incentive for every Christian to “draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (10:22a).

Every Christian is expected to take advantage of the work of Christ as Guthrie states, “‘Since we have confidence’ is stated as a fact. In view of what Christ has done

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<sup>42</sup> John Owen, *Hebrews*, The Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 71.

and now is, there is no reason why all believers should not approach with confidence.”<sup>43</sup> What the Christian has confidence to enter in is “the holy place.” The author is using the Old Testament tabernacle typologically as the place where God is, as he explained in 9:24: “For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”

Hebrews 9:6–10 describes how the people could enter the holy place under the conditions of the old covenant. The high priest was given access only once a year on the Day of Atonement. He would take in blood from a sacrifice to sprinkle on the mercy seat for himself and the unintentional sins of Israel. Though the ceremony would be completed every year it, did not satisfy the need of the people to have fellowship with God.<sup>44</sup> Inside the tabernacle was a curtain that separated the most holy place and the presence of God from the rest of the sanctuary. This curtain stood as a stark reminder that even Israel, with its unique place as God’s chosen people, was separated from God. In Hebrews the curtain is being used to show the restricted access that existed in the Old Testament, contrasted with the freedom that exists for the Christian to draw close to God under the new covenant.

This new access is described as a “new and living way.” This way is new because it represents a distinction from the access that existed under the sacrificial system. Arthur W. Pink makes an important observation, however, “this word ‘new’ is not to be taken absolutely, as though this ‘way’ had no existence previously to the death of Christ, for all the O.T. saints had passed along it too. No, it was neither completely ‘new’ as to its contrivance, revelation, or use.”<sup>45</sup> The faith that has been exemplified by Old

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<sup>43</sup> Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 210.

<sup>44</sup> See Leviticus 16 for full explanation.

<sup>45</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, 19th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 588.

Testament individuals was looking forward to the faith in Christ that is now held by those in the church age.<sup>46</sup>

The way that has now been opened is also described as a living way. Schreiner sees “living” as referencing the resurrection of Jesus and his permanent intercession for believers,<sup>47</sup> as Hebrews 7:25 states, “Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” Because Christ is alive and interceding on behalf of his people, the way to God is living.<sup>48</sup>

The curtain is further described as being opened through “his flesh.” The curtain in the tabernacle was a sign of separation, but the way to God’s presence is now open.<sup>49</sup> Schreiner elaborates, “He (the author) is probably saying that access to God is not ultimately granted by passing through a curtain. It is granted by the torn and bloody and dead flesh of Jesus.”<sup>50</sup> The means by which a person is granted fellowship with God is only by the application of Jesus’s death, resurrection, and exaltation through faith on the believer.

Verse 21 also calls believers to draw near to God with confidence because “we

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<sup>46</sup> The author expands this idea by giving multiple examples of Old Testament faith in chapter 11. Their faith is described as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation” (11:1–2). These individuals, “though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” (11:39–40). Hebrews teaches that saving faith for those before Christ’s incarnation was contingent on their belief in God’s promises and that they are made perfect through the same means as believers under the new covenant. This teaching is in line with the rest of Scripture as this concept is explained at length by Paul in Romans 4.

<sup>47</sup> Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 316.

<sup>48</sup> Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, 588, also provides possible reasons the way is “living”: first, because under Judaism the way to God was provided through the death of an animal and death would happen to anyone who entered the presence of God apart from the high priest on the day of atonement. Second, because of its “perpetual efficacy.” And third, because trusting in Christ will lead to life.

<sup>49</sup> At the moment of Christ’s death on the cross Matt 27:51 records, “And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.”

<sup>50</sup> Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 316–17. In agreement with Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 247, and Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 212. See also Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 519–20, for discussion of other possible meanings.

have a great priest over the house of God.” The believer can have confidence that they can enter the presence of God because the one who is there interceding on their behalf is the great priest, Jesus Christ. Because it is Jesus who has gained access on believers’ behalf, they are welcomed. This stands in contrast to the restriction of the Day of Atonement. F. F. Bruce explains that the house of God over which Jesus exercises authority as the great priest is not an earthly temple but is, “the community of God’s people.”<sup>51</sup> Lane agrees:

The assertion that Christ exercises an administration over his own household informs the congregation that the church is the sphere of his activity as high priest enthroned in the presence of God. This statement enriches the conception of the relationship Christ sustains to his people and assures them that their worshipful approach to God will be welcomed.<sup>52</sup>

### **Three Exhortations (10:22–25)**

After giving the basis for the confidence that believers possess in Christ, the author then gives three exhortations for how Christians ought to behave. Christians are called to “draw near” (10:22), to “hold fast” their confession (10:23), and to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” (10:24). Each of these exhortations are introduced by the phrase “let us” to show the connection that exists between the author and the church in Hebrews. This also encompasses the need for future believers to heed these exhortations.<sup>53</sup>

**Let us draw near (10:22).** The first exhortation is “let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (10:22). Believers are called first to draw near,

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<sup>51</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 249.

<sup>52</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 285.

<sup>53</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 282–83, also sees a connection to “the triad of Christian virtues: ‘fulness of faith’ (v22), ‘the hope we profess’ (v23), and ‘the stimulation of love’ (v24).” Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 213, divides these exhortations functionally; the first refers to personal devotion, the second to consistency, and the third to social obligations.



an action that is based on relationship had with God through Christ.<sup>54</sup> With this relationship comes full assurance that believers can approach God. O. Palmer Robertson highlights the importance of the term “assurance,” “(it) may refer to an objective ‘boldness,’ amounting to official authorization, or to a more subjective ‘confidence.’ In either case, it clearly speaks of the Christian’s open approach to God in contrast to the minimalistic approach of the Jewish high priest into the holy of holies.”<sup>55</sup>

The author introduces two clauses in 10:22b. The first, “with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience.” Under the old covenant the high priest would enter the most holy place and sprinkle blood on the mercy seat, under the new covenant believers have been sprinkled with the blood of Christ.<sup>56</sup> What once was an external rite of the priesthood has now become an internal application of Christ’s blood that cleanses the evil consciences of all believers.

The second clause, “washed with pure water,” is also connected with the Day of Atonement as described in Leviticus 16:4b when the high priest is told, “He shall bathe his body in water and then put them (the holy garments) on.”<sup>57</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson sees in both the act of sprinkling and washing “the need to be cleansed inside and outside.”<sup>58</sup> Many commentators see in this washing a reference to baptism.<sup>59</sup> Baptism

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<sup>54</sup> The same exhortation occurs in 4:16. See Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 317, for the full use of “draw near” in Hebrews.

<sup>55</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *God’s People in the Wilderness: The Church in Hebrews* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2009), 86–87.

<sup>56</sup> Lev 16:14–15.

<sup>57</sup> See also the consecration of Aaron as high priest in Exod 29:4, 21 and Lev 8:6, 30.

<sup>58</sup> Johnson, *Hebrews*, 258.

<sup>59</sup> Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 214; Lane, *Hebrews*, 287; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 250–51; and Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 319. While I see the appeal of both views, I believe the answer, due to its ambiguity and context, may be an allusion to both. The ceremonial cleansings of Judaism would not satisfy the requirements needed to reconcile people to God, needing instead the eternal cleansing of Christ’s blood, signified by Christian baptism. However, the immediate context of the Scripture is dealing with the priesthood, law, and sacrificial system in which ritual washings also played a part.

would have a more immediate place in the lives of Christians who have received the rite of baptism as a symbol of Christ's death and resurrection applied to their lives.

**Hold fast (10:23).** At various times in Hebrews, the author emphasizes the importance of holding fast to the work of Christ: “And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope” (3:6); “For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end” (3:14); and, “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession” (4:14). Hebrews 10:23, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful,” connects the believers holding with the faithfulness of the promise. The theme of holding fast and having faith is continued in chapter 11.

The Christian is exhorted to hold this confession “without wavering.” Guthrie explains that this term carries the idea of an upright object that is not inclined to move at all from perpendicular. In his words, “There is no place in Christian experience for a hope that is firm at one time and shaky at another.”<sup>60</sup> Because the Christian's hope is based on the faithfulness of God, it ought to be held tightly and confessed boldly. Luke Timothy Johnson points out that this stalwart faithfulness to the confession is not “a matter of grim determination, but of active and mutual commitment and upbuilding.”<sup>61</sup>

**Stir up one another (10:24).** The final exhortation, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,” highlights the communal nature of these exhortations. If love and good works are going to exist within a fellowship of believers, it requires more than individual effort. Continuous help and exhortation are needed to help the entire body pursue godliness. Believers are told to “stir up” (παροξυσμὸν) one

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<sup>60</sup> Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 214–15.

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, *Hebrews*, 259.

another, a striking term meaning incitement, as Guthrie adds, “it seems to suggest that loving one another will not just happen. It needs to be worked at, even provoked, in the same way as good works.”<sup>62</sup>

The writer sees the need for the church to deepen the love that they have for each other. By encouraging them to pursue love he is also imploring them to pursue good works. Lane describes these good works as “tangible expression of caring love.”<sup>63</sup> It is vital for any community of believers to express love and good works for each other because they are an expression of the love and good work that God has shown to each believer.

After describing how Christians ought to act toward one another, the apostle goes on to explain the context in which such love is fostered, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (10:25). It is impossible for believers to stir one another to practice love and good works in isolation from one another. The setting in which this stirring is to occur is in the fellowship of the local church. Guthrie elaborates, “The New Testament lends no support to the idea of lone Christians. Close and regular fellowship with other believers is not just a nice idea, but an absolute necessity for the encouragement of Christian values.”<sup>64</sup> The failing of Christians to meet, as had become the habit of some in the church, is a failing of love for one another. Hughes remarks, “He who does not love his fellow Christians fervently from the heart feels no compelling need to associate himself with them.”<sup>65</sup> When members abandon one another it weakens the

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<sup>62</sup> See Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 320, and Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 526–27, for a discussion of grammar. The term is more commonly used in a negative sense (as in Acts 15:39), but here it is used positively to highlight how seriously Christians ought to be helping one another. See Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 253; Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 215.

<sup>63</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 289.

<sup>64</sup> Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 216.

<sup>65</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 415.

corporate life of the church, prevents members from practicing effective exhortation and confrontation of sin, and makes it easier for individuals to fall away from the faith all together. Because the author has rooted his exhortations in the work of Jesus in 10:19–21, failing to meet together is more than lack of love for fellow believers but is also, as Lane states it, “a catastrophic failure to appreciate the significance of Christ’s priestly ministry and the access to God it provided.”<sup>66</sup>

Rather than abandoning their fellowship, Christians are commanded to encourage each other. A community’s consistent encouragement helps to prevent the breach of love, lack of exhortation, and belittling of Christ’s sacrifice that leads people to apostatize. This encouragement is vital because of the approaching day of the Lord. The approaching eschaton is a reminder to Christians that this present age will pass away. Therefore, Christians ought to invest in Christ and his kingdom because it will last eternally.

#### **Draw Near in Prayer (4:14–16)**

Believers may draw near to God in interpersonal prayer because of the work of Christ. Believers are given two exhortations in this passage: “let us hold fast our confession” (4:14b) and “let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace” (4:16a). These exhortations are grounded in the work that Christ has accomplished in his exaltation and in his incarnation.

#### **Hold Fast Our Confession (4:14)**

The exhortation in 4:14–16 is similar to the one in 10:19–25. The exhortation to hold fast from 4:14 mirrors that of 10:23. The exhortation to draw near from 4:16 likewise mirrors the exhortation of 10:22. A further similarity is that the exhortations in chapter 10 are grounded in the accomplished work of God, just as the exhortations from

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<sup>66</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 290.

4:14–16.

The church is commanded to hold fast because “we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God” (4:14). The writer of Hebrews is making several statements about Jesus. First, that he is a great high priest. This stands in contrast to the lesser high priest that served in the temple in Jerusalem. Kistemaker explains, “The adjective ‘great’ indicates that Jesus is superior to earthly high priests and shepherds. He is the great high priest, not the one who entered the Most Holy Place once a year and sprinkled blood to atone first for his own sins and then for those of the people.”<sup>67</sup> Jesus is greater because the sacrifice of his own body that was offered at the crucifixion only needed to be offered once for all eternity.

Second, this passage describes Jesus as the one who has passed through the heavens. Hughes describes how “through the heavens” is “not a spatial journey but rather is a journey of transcendence.”<sup>68</sup> This transcendence is based on a previous action that Christ has accomplished, namely his sacrifice.<sup>69</sup> Jesus at his ascension returned to heaven where he is now seated at the right hand of the Father, gloriously exalted. The result is that believers can also have confidence that they, too, will one day be glorified and dwell in the presence of God.

The third statement that we see about the great high priest is his name, “Jesus, the Son of God.” Many commentators see Jesus, the Son of God, as a reference to both Jesus’s human and divine nature.<sup>70</sup> Mankind cannot be united with God apart from the

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<sup>67</sup> Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 124.

<sup>68</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 170.

<sup>69</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 303. “The translation ‘gone through’ renders a perfect participle functioning attributively and indicated a state resulting from a previous action.” The action that Allen is referring to is the ascension. However, while the ascension is the means by which Christ returned to the Father, it is the entire work he accomplished in the incarnation (perfection, complete obedience, sacrificial death, resurrection, and ascension) that makes Christ worthy to be in God’s presence.

<sup>70</sup> Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 121; Allen, *Hebrews*, 303; Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 170; Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 152.

work of Christ, a work that he accomplished in his humanity as well as his divinity.

The confession that believers are commanded to hold fast to in 4:14b is the high Christology laid out in Hebrews: the priesthood of Jesus, his perfection, his sacrifice for the world, his transcendence, and the divine sonship. The core beliefs of the Christian faith are of vital importance and every believer should hold fast to them. Hobbs explains, “The word rendered hold fast (κρατῶμεν) means to seize or grasp with power. Its resultant sense is to hold on and not let go.”<sup>71</sup>

### **Draw Near to the Throne of Grace (4:15–16)**

The apostle continues explaining the priesthood of Jesus in verse 15, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Jesus can sympathize with the struggling believers in Hebrews. Although Christ had ascended, he knows what it is like to be human. Jesus is both fully divine and fully human, and as such he was subject during the incarnation to the same pains and temptations that are common to the human experience.<sup>72</sup>

The author points out one critical distinction between Christ and the rest of humanity: though he was tempted, he did not sin.<sup>73</sup> Christ’s temptation was not different from that of any other human, as the author of Hebrews states, “in every respect he has been tempted as we are.” Christ did not rely on the power of his divinity to withstand these temptations.<sup>74</sup> Instead, as Hobbs states, “He was tempted in his humanity; he

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<sup>71</sup> Hobbs, *Hebrews*, 48.

<sup>72</sup> Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 124–26, treats this subject well.

<sup>73</sup> This subject is treated at length by Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 535–39. See also Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 122–23.

<sup>74</sup> See Lane, *Hebrews*, 114–15, against the claim that Jesus must have sinned in order to have fully shared in the human condition.

resisted in his humanity. Not once did he call on his divine power to resist the devil. He depended upon prayer and meditation, a complete dedication to God's will, the Scripture, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Each of these is available to every Christian."<sup>75</sup> The author's claim that Jesus was perfect is not exclusive to him but is in line with the rest of the New Testament.<sup>76</sup>

The encouragement that believers are given about their high priest in verse 15 is then followed by an exhortation to draw near to him in prayer. Because believers have a high priest in Jesus that empathizes with the human condition, they can now approach God through Christ. Under the old covenant the presence of God was a place where only the high priest could go, and his entrance into the most holy place occurred only once a year, but now all believers are encouraged to draw near with confidence.<sup>77</sup> The Christian draws near to God to receive mercy and grace to help in time of need. Christians can boldly ask for forgiveness and strength to live sanctified lives before God.<sup>78</sup>

### Conclusion

Hebrews offers for its readers a high Christology and deep theology with practical exhortations to read the Scripture, exhort and encourage one another to keep the faith, and draw near to God. While these exhortations are important on a personal level for believers, the author frames these exhortations in such a way that Christians are encouraged to provide this help for one another. The Christian life is not designed to be a

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<sup>75</sup> Hobbs, *Hebrews*, 48.

<sup>76</sup> Explicitly stated in Luke 23:41; John 7:18; 8:46; 14:30; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 1:19; 2:22; 3:18; 1 John 3:5.

<sup>77</sup> Some commentators (including Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 86, and Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 270), see in the throne of grace a reference to the mercy seat that was sprinkled with blood on the Day of Atonement. Others, such as Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 126, see in the throne of grace a reference to Jesus's kingship.

<sup>78</sup> Both Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 154, and Allen, *Hebrews*, 306, discuss the differences in grace and mercy. Mercy is needed for forgiveness of sins committed, whereas grace applies to needed strength to face temptations.

life in isolation, but rather a life where believers are walking with one another in obedience.



### CHAPTER 3

#### PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL SUPPORT FOR INTERPERSONAL DISCIPLESHIP

It is a worthy endeavor of any local church to fulfill Christ's command to teach disciples to obey all of Christ's commands. This teaching and training of disciples is commonly referred to as discipleship. The ways that Christians may pursue discipleship are numerous, and the discipleship methods that are utilized should vary from church to church. Some churches may find that a programmatic method works well, for others small groups and Sunday schools fit their needs, for yet others a more organic, interpersonal method serves best, and some churches require a blending of methods to effectively reach every member of the congregation. While the specifics about the discipleship method may change from group to group, models that prioritize Scripture and biblical ecclesiology are always applicable.

Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, and Philip Nation, in their book *Transformational Discipleship*, rightly point out that the fundamental reason Jesus's disciples exist is to fulfill the Great Commission by making other disciples of Christ, and while many churches have excelled in other areas of ministry, "to be deficient in your core reason for existence is always unacceptable."<sup>1</sup> Colin Marshall and Tony Payne similarly remark about the Great Commission in *The Trellis and the Vine*, "The commission is not fundamentally about mission out there somewhere else in another

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, Philip Nation, *Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow* (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 10–11.

country. It's a commission that makes disciple-making the normal agenda and priority of every church and every Christian disciple."<sup>2</sup>

Discipleship is vital to fulfilling the church's purpose for existence. The way that churches choose to put discipleship into practice varies from congregation to congregation. CBC has relied on a programmatic discipleship method for most of its existence. The primary means for church members to grow in their faith is from the instruction provided from the pulpit or from training programs. There have also been failed attempts to begin a small group model in the past.<sup>3</sup> The church has struggled making disciples for several years. Some members of CBC are eager to grow in their faith but struggle with the church's current discipleship model<sup>4</sup>. For these members implementing a plan to grow in their faith using interpersonal discipleship will benefit them as they mature in their faith.

The financial principle of compounding interest allows even very small investments like a penny over time to accrue into millions of dollars over time. In discipleship a similar principle is at work: small progressions over time yield great transformation. It is tempting to attempt to reach and disciple an entire congregation at once, but in many contexts, it just is not possible. There are some who are willing to participate and who desire to grow in their faith, and others who are not. Classes on discipleship and spiritual formation are vital for a church, but it is also necessary to meet people one-on-one to invest in them on a personal level.

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<sup>2</sup> Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-Shift That Changes Everything* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2009), 13.

<sup>3</sup> These small groups were part of a previous pastor's efforts to disciple the church. When that pastor resigned, the church reverted back to what they were comfortable with. In conversations to have them explain why they stopped, the response was a lack of teachers, sparse attendance, participation by the same core group without reaching those who were unbelievers or spiritually immature.

<sup>4</sup> Some members struggle to fit their schedules to the service times that are offered, and other members do not feel comfortable engaging with the more formal and structured nature of CBC's current programs.

There are aspects of church discipleship where members are encouraged to grow first in knowledge, but the church also has the responsibility not to neglect its membership's growth in community. Meeting together is necessary, but with these meetings must come discipleship. J. T. English writes, "Community is indispensable to discipleship, but community is not discipleship. We cannot be disciples of Christ outside the context of community. However, we can be in community that is not teaching us to be disciples of Christ."<sup>5</sup> While this discipleship model may appear painfully slow at first, over time it will reach throughout the church in the same way as the penny that compounded into a massive sum.

In their attempts to influence discipleship practices toward something more personal and less programmatic, Marshall and Payne use the example of a trellis and a vine.<sup>6</sup> A trellis is a support structure for a vine to grow up and around, and the vine is of course a living and growing plant. For the plant to truly flourish it needs the support that the trellis provides, however a trellis that exists without a vine is not fulfilling its true purpose. In their metaphor, Marshall and Payne use the trellis to describe the programs, committees, and administration that support discipleship, and the vine as the personal work of discipleship. They argue that "structures don't grow ministry any more than trellises grow vines, and that most churches need to make a conscious shift—away from erecting and maintaining structures and toward growing people who are disciple-making disciples of Christ."<sup>7</sup> Mark Dever agrees, "Churches don't need programs so much as they need cultures of discipling, cultures where each member prioritizes the spiritual health of others."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> J. T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus* (Nashville: B&H, 2020), 83.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 8–9.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall and Payne, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016),

CBC has focused primarily on structure and programs to grow disciples without focusing on the inefficient but necessary act of interpersonal discipleship to make disciples. Interpersonal discipleship, while slow, emphasizes at least five key areas for emphasis: establishing a meeting, reading Scripture together, having spiritual conversations, confession, and praying together.<sup>9</sup>

### **Establishing a Meeting**

Discipleship does not typically occur between members unless it is intentional, but intentional does not have to mean difficult. A simple approach seems to be the best way for Christians to get started. Choose a person in need of discipleship, set a time and place to meet, and begin reading, praying, and talking together. David Helm goes so far as to state that, “Any committed Christian is capable of initiating a good conversation on a biblical text.”<sup>10</sup> According to Helm, the reason why Christians do not engage in these conversations is because they focus too much on their inabilities and shortcomings without considering the work of the Holy Spirit, and because they lack belief in the power of God’s Word.<sup>11</sup> While those concerns factor into Christians’ and churches’ lack of discipleship, other reasons also inhibit growth. The members of CBC demonstrate that fear, apathy, and busyness can also be major hinderances to discipleship.

Robert Coleman describes the process of disciple-making as an easy and natural one. In describing the discipleship practices of the early church, he states, “To mold the life of their members, they simply got learners and teachers together in natural

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<sup>9</sup> Discipleship is more encompassing than five areas, but these areas are grounded in Scripture and appear frequently in literature on discipleship cited throughout this chapter because of their importance.

<sup>10</sup> David Helm, *One to One Bible Reading: A Simple Guide for Every Christian* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2011), 24.

<sup>11</sup> Helm, *One to One Bible Reading*, 24.

settings where they lived and worked every day.”<sup>12</sup> While Coleman’s approach overlooks the presence of intentional catechetical teaching common among pastors and bishops, it does highlight the place of natural relationships between Christians. For discipleship to happen, mature Christians must take an interest in the spiritual growth of other Christians and invest time to help younger believers grow in their faith. Jerry Bridges comments, “This [community] cannot be done sitting in pews, row upon row, listening to the pastor teach. It can be done only through the mutual interchange of admonishment and encouragement.”<sup>13</sup> English adds, “In the local church the formation of the whole person and the whole family (sons and daughters of God) matters. Each member of the family is indispensable to the growth of the rest of the family. The family members need one another.”<sup>14</sup>

Discipleship need not be complicated, but it must be intentional. Definite goals ought to direct Christians when they meet to disciple each other. Greg Ogden states that the goals of discipleship are relational vulnerability, the centrality of truth, and mutual accountability.<sup>15</sup> Discipleship occurs when individuals live in honest relationships with each other centered around biblical truth and the ability to encourage and rebuke when needed in a Christian’s life.

The themes are common among Christian authors as they tend to discuss the aim of discipleship around these same concepts. Dever states, “Discipling involves transmitting the knowledge of God and his Word through every moment of life.”<sup>16</sup> In the

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Spire, 1998), 62.

<sup>13</sup> Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012), 62.

<sup>14</sup> English, *Deep Discipleship*, 59.

<sup>15</sup> Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ*, rev. and exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2018), 7–8.

<sup>16</sup> Dever, *Discipling*, 28.

eighteenth century, Welsh Calvinist minister William Williams explored the idea of community by stating, “As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend. Fellowship is very effective in stimulating us to good or evil; and what better means of maintaining liveliness than to gather together to pray together, to sing together and to declare the goodness of God to one another.”<sup>17</sup> And in the twentieth century, German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer commented that “in confession the break-through to community takes place.”<sup>18</sup> True discipleship occurs when Christians build up other Christians to encounter brotherly love, practice of the disciplines, and accountability for sin.

David Helm lays out just such a structure. He states that the general pattern of these meetings will consist of prayer and Bible reading, followed by conversation about the text that was read and its application, concluded by another time of prayer.<sup>19</sup>

Bonhoeffer states that “every common devotion should include the word of Scripture, the hymns of the Church, and the prayer of the fellowship.”<sup>20</sup> Marshall and Payne state that “unless Christians are taught and trained to meet with each other, to read the Bible and pray with each other, and to urge and spur one another on to love and good works, the small-group structure will not be effective for spiritual growth.”<sup>21</sup>

Each of these plans have commonalities and differences. A discipleship meeting can consist of many things, but at the very least it should consist of prayer, Scripture reading, discussion, and opportunity for confession. To keep these meetings

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<sup>17</sup> William Williams, *The Experience Meeting: An Introduction to the Welsh Societies of the Evangelical Awakening*, trans. Mrs. Lloyd Jones, 2nd ed. (Vancouver: Regent College, 2003), 13.

<sup>18</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper One, 1954), 112.

<sup>19</sup> Helm, *One to One Bible Reading*, 27–30.

<sup>20</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 44.

<sup>21</sup> Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 100.

short and replicable, the meetings at CBC will focus on these things while providing freedom for discipleship partners to participate in other spiritual activities as they are led.<sup>22</sup>

The final issue to be considered when thinking about meeting together is whom to select to participate in discipleship meetings.<sup>23</sup> It is impossible at the early stages of interpersonal discipleship to select everyone. To do so would lead CBC back to the programmatic model that has not been effective in the past. The church can strategically start with a small number of members who will have the most impact on other members of the congregation moving forward. Marshall and Payne advocate for a similar strategy: they believe that if a pastor gives in to the desire to devote all his time to struggling members and those on the periphery, the result is “ministry becomes all about problems and counselling, and not about the gospel and growing in godliness.”<sup>24</sup>

The purpose of one-to-one discipleship is to develop spiritually maturing and faithful Christians to work alongside the pastor in developing other disciples. All Christians need to be growing in their faith. By training more mature Christians to disciple others, eventually this training also includes those who are more immature in their faith. As Marshall and Payne state, “As this cycle of training continues, a workforce of disciple-makers starts to form – people who labour alongside you to help other people make progress in ‘gospel growth.’”<sup>25</sup>

For the purposes of this project and the needs at CBC, there will be three

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<sup>22</sup> Other activities partners might practice include worship through the singing of spiritual songs, the reading of Christian creeds, spending time journaling and meditating through a text, performing acts of service, or evangelizing the lost together.

<sup>23</sup> Many authors put careful consideration into what type of persons would be best served by discipleship. The most thorough treatments are by William Williams (*The Experience Meeting*, 34–36) and Mark Dever (*Discipling*, 74–81). In these sections they discuss a variety of characteristics and qualifications that ought to be considered when deciding who to disciple.

<sup>24</sup> Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 111.

<sup>25</sup> Marshall and Payne, 147.

criteria considered in selecting members to participate: they must be believers, they must be mature or maturing in their faith, and they must be able and willing to disciple others. Only believers will be considered because Scripture states that “the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14). Having spiritual conversations with unbelievers is important, but it is not discipleship. The thrust of those conversations ought to be evangelistic because a person cannot be discipled to Christlikeness if they do not have Christ. Bridges states “spiritual fellowship with one another presupposes fellowship with God. If we are not having communion with God and learning from Him, we will have nothing to share with others. In addition, if we are not learning directly from God, we will not be alert and perceptive enough to learn from others.”<sup>26</sup>

Maturity is a second factor to be considered when choosing participants. This project will focus on members who demonstrate marks of growing in their own path of discipleship in hopes that this project develops Christians who are able to continue the cycle of discipleship with other believers. Coleman points out that this was partly how discipleship spread in the New Testament: “It is clear that in his deepening relationships Paul was conscious of a priority in spending time with persons training for leadership in the church.”<sup>27</sup> As mature believers are equipped to do the work of discipleship, they will be encouraged to then take other less mature believers and begin to disciple them. As the penny compounds to millions of dollars, so also discipling will compound and spread till it reaches every believer in a congregation and beyond.

Along with spiritual maturity, this project will also focus on those who are able to disciple others. Each member of CBC has unique giftings and talents, and some are

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<sup>26</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship*, 61.



more likely to participate in ministry of this sort than others. Many members are happy as consumers. Other members are more naturally social while others are introverted. There are members who are faithful attenders but are not active participants in the outreach of the church. The gifts and talents of some members of the congregation make them well suited for establishing a discipleship program of this sort, while others will be slow to embrace it. Coleman offers this advice, “Whatever the apparent gifts and abilities of people, we must look for those who want to move for Christ. Life is too short to expend excessive time and energy upon apathetic people.”<sup>28</sup> It is important for the health of the congregation that this opportunity is offered to those who will use it to in turn help others. Helm writes that one-to-one discipleship (or in his case Bible reading) is helpful for

committed Christians who need to be trained for ministry rather than merely being asked to fill gaps in their church’s programs. If every ministry in the church should be Word-based ministry, then training someone who could assume ministry leadership will not only be a great encouragement to them, but also an effective way to multiply leaders who can bear more weight for the gospel.<sup>29</sup>

### **Reading Scripture Together**

Once the purpose, aim, and focus of the meeting have been established, discipleship partners need to practice certain activities as they meet with less spiritually mature believers. Reading Scripture together is of first priority. To grow as a disciple requires knowledge from the teacher, in the case of the Christian this knowledge is gleaned from the Bible. One helpful way that this knowledge is transmitted is when Scripture is read together in the believing community. Marshall and Payne put it this way, “The heart of training is not to impart a skill, but to impart sound doctrine,” and later,

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<sup>28</sup> Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship*, 45–46.

<sup>29</sup> Helm, *One to One Bible Reading*, 18–19.

“Good biblical training results in a godly life based on sound, health-giving teaching.”<sup>30</sup> Bridges states it like this, “This is true fellowship: sharing with one another what God is teaching through the Scriptures, and this is an important part of true community.”<sup>31</sup> Discipleship always requires a reading and understanding of the text. The Christian cannot grow in Christlikeness apart from the Word of God shaping their doctrine and conduct.

No faithful Christian would deny that there is value in reading God’s Word with other believers, but a discipling relationship with spiritual growth as its focus must go beyond a simple surface reading of a text. Seventeenth century German Pietist Philip Jacob Spener stated, “The Word of God remains the seed from which all that is good in us must grow. If we succeed in getting the people to seek eagerly and diligently in the book of life for their joy, their spiritual life will be wonderfully strengthened and they will become altogether different people.”<sup>32</sup> English states, “It is simply impossible to grow as a follower of Christ without being a student of his Word, yet we find that there are so few students of the Word. We lack deep disciples because we lack deep meditation on the Word. Biblical illiteracy is devastating to discipleship.”<sup>33</sup>

The goal of interpersonal discipleship is not just that members will read Scripture together just to fulfill a requirement, but rather that they will allow the reading of that text to grow their knowledge, shape their lives, and grow their walk with the Lord. Joanne Jung observes, “One can have Bible knowledge without transformation, but there is no transformation without knowledge of the Word of God. Biblical knowledge is a

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<sup>30</sup> Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 71.

<sup>31</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1964), 91.

<sup>33</sup> English, *Deep Discipleship*, 110.

precursor but not a sufficient indicator of Christian living.”<sup>34</sup> As Geiger states, “The end result of discipleship is not merely the knowledge of all Jesus commanded but the obedience to all Jesus commanded.”<sup>35</sup>

How to read together, and what to look for in this reading, are practical aspects that must be considered. This process need not be complicated. Scripture must remain approachable, so participants are not overwhelmed. Some discernment is necessary when dealing with difficult theological passages, controversial texts, or complicated genres. While texts such as these should not be overlooked, the speed at which they are covered may change.

The overall goal of spiritual growth necessitates at times that challenging texts be examined. One way to approach this challenge is to read passages consecutively, rather than pulling chapters at random. Bonhoeffer suggested, “Because the Scripture is a corpus, a living whole, the so called *lectio continua* or consecutive reading must be adopted for Scripture reading in the family fellowship.”<sup>36</sup> While it is not necessary to cover a whole book, keeping the reading consistent with a topic, book, or theme will be helpful to develop a complete understanding of the text.

The interpersonal discipleship model that will be implemented at CBC would require participants to study through 1 John. This book was chosen because it is not so long as to overwhelm those unused to the study of Scripture, because 1 John does not contain controversial teaching that could draw attention from the meeting’s purpose, and because the text of 1 John and its message of love for God and fellow Christians will inspire participants to show their love through discipling others.

The process of reading the text itself is not complicated. Helm’s suggestion is

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<sup>34</sup> Joanne J. Jung, *The Lost Discipline of Conversation: Surprising Lessons in Spiritual Formation Drawn from the English Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 70.

<sup>35</sup> Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, *Transformational Discipleship*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 53.

that when approaching a text each person should look for three things: a light bulb, a question mark, and an arrow.<sup>37</sup> A light bulb is anything in the text that grabs one's attention, like the proverbial light bulb going off. A question mark is anything in the text that sparked a question in the reader's mind. An arrow signifies the points of application from the text, or how the text speaks directly to a person's life. Because of its simplicity and replicability this will be the method incorporated in this project.<sup>38</sup>

Spener suggested that when people meet to increase their knowledge of God, they "take up the Holy Scriptures, read aloud from them, and fraternally discuss each verse in order to discover its simple meaning and whatever may be useful for the edification of all."<sup>39</sup> In simple terms, the goal is to take the text, read it together, and talk about it. During the course of the discussion on the text, participants will look to grow in knowledge as well as find ways to apply the text to their lives.

### **Talking Together**

After each participant has had time to think about the text and determine any light bulbs, question marks, and arrows, the participants will then spend time in conversation together about those items in the text that require deeper reflection. One of the primary reasons for these conversations is the growth in knowledge that occurs when groups of people share thoughts and ideas. Bridges states, "Two Christians sharing the Word together can learn more than the two of them studying individually. They stimulate one another."<sup>40</sup> Dever believes that "at its core, discipling is teaching. We teach with

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<sup>37</sup> Helm, *One to One Bible Reading*, 44. Helm states that this way of reading the Bible is not his own invention but "was apparently popularized by Ada Lum, a staff worker with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students."

<sup>38</sup> Helm also suggests the COMA method in which a person looks in the text for context, observation, meaning, and application (*One to One Bible Reading*, 46–48). Ogden similarly suggests that the best way to study a text is to focus on observation (what the text says), interpretation (what the text means), and application (what the text means to me) (28–30).

<sup>39</sup> Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 89.

<sup>40</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, 61.

words. We teach all the words that Jesus taught his disciples, and all the words of the Bible.” He goes on to say, “Teaching occurs as people learn to have spiritually meaningful conversations with each other.”<sup>41</sup>

This transfer of knowledge cannot be one way. Each participant must be engaged in helping the other. For the more immature believer this may mean overcoming fears and lack of experience to engage with their discipleship partner. The more mature believer must encourage their brother or sister in Christ to participate freely and make an atmosphere where it is easy to do this. It is necessary for Christians to put aside any prideful urges to make this exercise about themselves and their ability to teach, and they must recognize that interpersonal discipleship is about helping each other grow.

Helm offers this helpful rebuke, “Nothing will kill reading one-to-one faster than when one of the two partners monopolizes the time by pontificating on the text. The remedy, of course, is to be as good a listener as you are a speaker. Your reading partner will not be challenged or helped if you talk at them rather than with them.”<sup>42</sup> It is vital that each participating member is willing to listen to the text and their fellow Christian. Bonhoeffer stated:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God’s love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So, it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him.<sup>43</sup>

Time spent with fellow Christians in conversation is vital to spiritual growth. Within these spiritual conversations, relationships are built. Coleman makes this observation of the early church, “Reading the book of Acts, one gets the impression that the Christians just enjoyed doing things together. In these casual relationships, probably

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<sup>41</sup> Dever, *Discipling*, 38.

<sup>42</sup> Helm, *One to One Bible Reading*, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 97.

more than in their gathered meetings, they learned what it meant to follow Christ in the daily routine of life.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, he goes on to say that “the spiritual life of the Christian community clearly is interwoven with their continuous interpersonal association.”<sup>45</sup> Though first-century Christians held diverse occupations and social standings, they may indeed have been in closer proximity to one another as Coleman suggests, a proximity that may not be true for contemporary American members, especially in rural communities. Because many believers do not work or live in close proximity to their fellow church members, Christians must be intentional about building relationships with other Christians.

Williams spoke of the importance of relationship building among the Welsh Societies, small groups that he oversaw for the purpose of spiritual growth outside the weekly church services, as well. In answering a question about the profitability of these gatherings he replied:

The church of God need only keep at a distance the one from the other, and lack of love will grow like a root, and from it will come every sorry, miserable branch, and none can destroy it save God alone. But on the other hand, what love, what concord, what good intentions, what security, and what protection there is for the members of the church who do not neglect the gathering of themselves together.<sup>46</sup>

Investing in the lives of other believers is still important in the modern context as it provides an example, influences Christians toward holy living, creates vulnerability and transparency, allows one Christian to share in the life of another, and gives a means for one Christian to help another.

Interpersonal discipleship at CBC requires a mature believer helping and teaching a less mature believer, sometimes by way of didactic teaching but also by way of living example. This relationship benefits their conversation because one member will

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<sup>44</sup> Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship*, 57.

<sup>45</sup> Coleman, 58.

<sup>46</sup> Williams, *The Experience Meeting*, 14.

help provide an example for the other. The process of discipleship is not just about the things that Christians say to one another, but the way that their lives show their devotion to Christ. Discipleship partners learn through watching how mature Christians handle adversity, disappointment, and their own sinfulness. Marshall states that “trainees likewise need to see into the heart of their trainers – the sins and confessions, the fears and faith, the visions and realities, the successes and failures. The life and ministry of the trainer is a model for the trainee – not of perfection but of godly desires in an earthen vessel.”<sup>47</sup> Dever agrees:

We communicate not merely with our words but by our whole lives. And what happens in a discipling relationship requires more than classroom teaching. It requires the kind of instruction that occurs through an apprenticeship at a job, or with a personal trainer or coach. An apprentice learns by listening and watching and participating.<sup>48</sup>

The goal of interpersonal discipleship goes beyond learning biblical facts but involves one Christian learning how to walk as a Christian from another believer. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” A mature believer can provide evidence from their own walk with Christ that a less mature brother or sister can follow. Mature Christians ought to influence others, and by spending time with less mature Christians they ensure that they will. Coleman says:

In time we transmit what we are to those about us. The closer the association, the more powerful our witness becomes in shaping the lives of others, either for good or ill. What a staggering responsibility! Whether or not we like it, the very fact that we live in such a society calls us to a life of sainthood. Any compromise in our dedication to Christ invariably has adverse repercussions upon others. By the same criterion, we have in our fellowship the awesome opportunity to give an exemplary testimony to the transforming power of the Gospel.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 76.

<sup>48</sup> Dever, *Discipling*, 39.

<sup>49</sup> Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship*, 118–19.

## Confession

The fellowship that Christians have together in discipleship provides opportunity for believers to help one another to resist sin and temptation. Bridges writes that “two people together can help each other up when they fall or even when they are in danger of falling. One of the many advantages of fellowship is the mutual admonishing or encouraging of one another in the face of temptation or an attack of Satan.”<sup>50</sup>

Confession of sin between Christians among Protestants seems lacking. Many Christians may fear that if they tell their brother or sister their sins that they will be shunned rather than helped. Others have never seen this practice modeled or have been raised in social contexts where sins are not to be spoken of outside the home. For this reason, many continue to struggle with their sin without accountability, and without the strength that comes through the prayers of others on their behalf. Bonhoeffer approached this problem, saying:

Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother still a brother, with whom I, too, stand under the Word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together – the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.<sup>51</sup>

Struggles with sin are common to man, and through helping one another with these struggles we glorify God for his forgiveness.

It is possible for Christians to meet together frequently, pray together, serve in ministry together, and read Scripture together, but still exist in spiritual isolation because of fears that their sins will be discovered. To experience growth in faith requires the repentance of sin and conforming to the Spirit, but many remain trapped and isolated from the fellowship of believers by their sin. Bonhoeffer provides this helpful reminder,

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<sup>50</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, 61.

<sup>51</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 28.



“You can hide nothing from God. The mask you wear before men will do you no good before him. He wants to see you as you are, he wants to be gracious to you. You do not have to go on lying to yourself and your brothers, as if you were without sin; you can dare to be a sinner. Thank God for that; he loves the sinner but he hates sin.”<sup>52</sup>

Likewise, the one helping the offender ought to approach their ministry to the sinner as an act of obedience to God. Bridges adds, “It is just as true today that believers who offend us by their words and actions, and who we may feel are a reproach to the name of Christ, still belong to God. And because they belong to him, they belong to us as well. If God does not reject them but instead seeks their restoration, we should do the same.”<sup>53</sup> When an opportunity arises to hear confession, Christians ought to seek to help, encourage, and restore the offending one to right fellowship with God and other believers. Williams remarked, “It is a good thing for the saints to come together to search out, and to enquire, and to seek to recognize the temptations that have snared the weak, and to resort to earnest prayer to free their feet from the fetters.”<sup>54</sup>

The ultimate goal of discipleship is Christlikeness. Some may object that the standard of Christ is impossible to obtain. As human beings we are sinful creatures and cannot obtain the perfection of Christ. Because of this, going through the uncomfortable practice of confessing sin to other believers is unnecessary. While it is true that sin is common to all, and that perfection will not be achieved in this life, obedience demands that Christians confess and repent. To those who raise such objections Spener replied:

First, we are not forbidden to seek perfection, but we are urged on toward it. And how desirable it would be if we were to achieve it! Second, I cheerfully concede that here in this life we will not manage that, for the farther a godly Christian advances, the more he will see that he lacks, and so he will never be farther removed from the

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<sup>52</sup> Bonhoeffer, 111.

<sup>53</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, 55–56.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, *The Experience Meeting*, 14.

illusion of perfection than when he tries hardest to reach it.<sup>55</sup>

As a believer grows closer to God, they do not become perfect, but instead become more aware of their sinfulness and continual need for forgiveness.

In pursuing Christlikeness, it is important that Christians practice accountability with other Christians. However, that does not require confession to all Christians. It is wise to practice confession with those who are mature and trusted by the confessor. Bridges states:

Successful teaching and training cannot occur on such a close personal level unless there is a mutual trust, openness, concern, and accountability. The person being disciplined must be accountable to the discipler; otherwise the whole discipling process is futile. But the discipler must also be willing to open his life to the other person in order to build rapport and gain confidence.<sup>56</sup>

Spener contributed:

For the sake of Christian growth in general, it may be useful if those who have earnestly resolved to walk in the way of the Lord would enter into a confidential relationship with their confessor or some other judicious and enlightened Christian and would regularly report to him how they live, what opportunities they have had to practice Christian love, and how they have employed or neglected them.<sup>57</sup>

Within the act of confession is the need for the more mature believer to correct the sin that they see. Because sin is deceptive, a person is not always able to recognize the spiritual destructiveness of their actions. The discipler must with love show the faltering brother or sister through God's Word the true nature of their sin. Calling out the sins of others is uncomfortable for many believers who do not wish to offend or ostracize their fellow believer. To this Dever remarks, "You must fear God more than man by being willing to correct others when necessary, and risk their rejection of you for it."<sup>58</sup>

Confession is meant to lead to reconciliation and faithfulness with God, and confession

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<sup>55</sup> Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 80.

<sup>56</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, 67–68.

<sup>57</sup> Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 97.

<sup>58</sup> Dever, *Discipling*, 39.

and small corrections in a believer's life will help prevent their sins to compound and avoid the discipline of God and his church. Dever continues, "The vast majority of correction in a church should occur in the private context of discipling relationships."<sup>59</sup>

The practice of accountability and confession has the potential to make some Christians uncomfortable, but through recognition of sin, the pursuit of Christlikeness, and the careful selection of individuals with which to remain accountable, the Christian can grow and gain victory over their sinfulness through interpersonal discipleship.

### **Praying Together**

A final requirement of interpersonal discipleship is that Christians pray together. Prayer is often viewed as something individualistic and personal, and so for many Christians it seems unnatural to pray with others outside the regular church meeting. It is only in the privacy of a prayer closet that they feel free to pray the deepest desires of their hearts. Scripture does emphasize the need for personal prayer, but there is also clear example to pray with other believers. Charles Lawless emphasizes this point: "Jesus taught his disciples how to pray in the context of relationship. He didn't just lecture to them as a professor who teaches one day and then doesn't see the students again until the next class. Though Jesus had private times of prayer, his disciples were often with him when he prayed."<sup>60</sup>

The act of praying together will serve as bookends for the discipleship meeting. As discipleship groups meet, they will begin their meeting with prayer. This prayer will request the moving of the Spirit to teach the Word and ask for the Christian love between believers to build each other up. The final action during the interpersonal discipleship meeting is that participants will once again pray together. The purpose of this

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<sup>59</sup> Dever, 39.

<sup>60</sup> Charles E. Lawless Jr., *Serving in Your Church Prayer Ministry*, Zondervan Practical Ministry Guides (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 80.

prayer is to bring the requests to God for the needs that have been discussed during the meeting, for continued strength to flee temptation and resist sin, that the Word of God that has been studied would be beneficial, and that God would continue to grow each participant in their knowledge and practice of Christianity.

Bonhoeffer stated that “where Christians want to live together under the Word of God they may and they should pray together in their own words. They have common petitions, common thanks, common intercessions to bring to God, and they should do so joyfully and confidently.” He went on to say, “It is in fact the most normal thing in the common Christian life to pray together.”<sup>61</sup> Donald S. Whitney states, “Praying regularly with others can be one of the most enriching adventures of your Christian life. Most of the great movements of God can be traced to a small group of people he called together to begin praying.”<sup>62</sup> Timothy Keller adds, “As much as we can, we should pray with others both formally in gathered worship and informally. Why? If the substance of prayer is to continue a conversation with God, and if the purpose of it is to know God better, then this can happen best in community.”<sup>63</sup>

The act of praying in community has several benefits in the lives of believers. Through praying together, the body is instructed, encouraged, and gives an example of the Christian love that believers have for one another. It is important that during these meetings all participants pray. Some Christians are unaccustomed to praying out loud, and in those instances the more mature believer should offer encouragement. Prayer is conversation with God and does not have to be eloquent. Believers should be cautious that they are praying to the Lord and not to be heard by men. All participants will be

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<sup>61</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 62.

<sup>62</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), 77.

<sup>63</sup> Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 118–19.

required to pray because a mark of growing Christians is that they pray, and it is often the case that a person learns by doing. Furthermore, Christians learn to pray by observing others. Listening to prayers as they are uttered by believers helps to instruct and teach other Christians how to pray. The prayers of believers provide insights into how other believers also should pray. Through prayer, knowledge of God and reverence for his majesty are communicated.

Another vital aspect of prayer in community is its ability to encourage and strengthen our faith. John Onwuchekwa states:

We want to put the greatness of Jesus on display by asking for big things in his name. Sometimes, in his providence, God answers “no” – and through that we grow together. But we’ve also made great requests of God and seen him respond above and beyond all we could ask or think. Either way, our faith is strengthened as a family when we ask God for his help.<sup>64</sup>

As Christians grow, so too do their prayer lives. Believers need to pray consistently and personally, but interpersonal discipleship requires another type of prayer, prayer done in community. This type of praying helps to remedy the individualistic tendencies that many Christians have, and shift focus from what God is doing personally to what God is doing corporately. Bridges states it this way, “I should be as concerned about the other members’ growth as I am about my own. There is no need for self-absorbed individualism in the New Testament concept of fellowship.”<sup>65</sup> The desire of the church should be the growth of all of its members. The isolation that many Christians experience will be overcome as Christians pray with and for one another. Through the act of prayer believers are encouraged by the growth that they see in their lives, and by the faithfulness of God to be present in moments of distress.

Prayer among believers also demonstrates the love that brings them together.

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<sup>64</sup> John Onwuchekwa, *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 86–87.

<sup>65</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, 56.

During interpersonal discipleship meetings, believers will find themselves being open and vulnerable with other Christians. As people's victories, burdens, and failings are laid bare to others it provides opportunities for Christians to show true care for one another. Onwuchekwa encourages, "We care for each other best as we lean on God together."<sup>66</sup> Prayer is perhaps the greatest demonstration of Christian love as prayer is bringing the needs of another before God. What struggling believer cannot help but be encouraged when the God of the universe is petitioned on their behalf.

Because the act of prayer is a sign of spiritual growth and carries with it many benefits, believers in interpersonal discipleship will be challenged to pray deeply and routinely with and for each other. This action is necessary because it is instructive for immature believers, because it encourages participants, and because it shows true care and compassion for brothers and sisters in Christ.

### **Conclusion**

The type of discipleship described here is not without its objections. Some may argue that this type of discipleship is very slow, especially when compared to a type of discipleship that reaches and engages the entire church at once. While it is true that this is not the fastest form of disciple-making, it does provide a framework for making lasting disciples. Many Christians do not participate in discipleship because they are not receiving the encouragement and accountability that interpersonal discipleship provides. The goal of this form of discipleship is to have Christians building community and growing in faith alongside other believers. This method is slow at its inception, but as more and more disciples of Christ begin to disciple others the number quickly grows.

Another possible objection is that this type of discipleship requires participants to engage with one another in ways that may make participants vulnerable or

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<sup>66</sup> Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 96.

uncomfortable. Just because something makes a person uncomfortable does not mean that it is not worth doing. It is a positive thing when believers become uncomfortable and shamed by their sin. Many people are naturally more resistant to such openness with other believers, but the command of Scripture is clear that believers are to confess their sins to one another.

One final objection that someone may have is they feel they are not mature enough in their own faith or equipped to instruct another believer. The plan for interpersonal discipleship that is presented in this project is not a complicated one. This discipleship plan is constructed of simple, replicable steps and does not encourage the teacher-learner dynamic. Instead, this discipleship plan calls for two believers to help each other grow in their faith. A great deal of human capability is not necessary to complete this discipleship, just a commitment to be faithful and diligent in doing life with another believer.

To be obedient servants of Jesus Christ, Christians should be growing and maturing in their faith. The way that churches help members to accomplish this task may vary, but there is wisdom in prioritizing meeting together, studying Scripture, building community, confessing sins, and prayer.

## CHAPTER 4

### IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MINISTRY PROJECT

This chapter explains the implementation of this project. The purpose of this project was to equip the lay people of CBC to begin interpersonal discipleship within the congregation. This purpose would be accomplished through fulfilling five goals for this project: (1) recruiting mature lay leaders to participate in interpersonal discipleship training, (2) assessing the current spiritual habits, experiences, and confidence levels in interpersonal discipleship among these lay leaders, (3) developing a discipleship model to guide groups engaging in interpersonal discipleship, (4) strengthening the spiritual habits and confidence of lay leaders by engaging with them in interpersonal discipleship, and (5) asking trainees to identify one younger believer to initiate interpersonal discipleship with. The project began on October 17, 2021, and ran through January 23, 2022.

#### **Summary of Project Goals**

The first goal of this project was to recruit mature lay leaders from the congregation to participate in interpersonal discipleship training. Five participants indicated that they would like to participate, however one individual decided after their initial agreement to participate not to continue and complete the training.

The second goal of this project was to assess the current spiritual habits, experiences, and confidence levels in interpersonal discipleship among participating lay leaders. A pre-mentoring survey and interview were used to gather data. This mixed-method approach to gathering information helped provide a clearer picture of participants' spiritual histories, discipleship experiences, and abilities to engage with others in interpersonal discipleship.



The third goal of this project was to develop a discipleship model to guide groups engaging in interpersonal discipleship. This model emphasized discipleship principles like prayer, Scripture reading, encouragement, and confession. A panel of three experts analyzed the model using a rubric and marked all criteria with a “satisfactory” grade.

The fourth goal of this project was to strengthen the spiritual habits and confidence of lay leaders by engaging with them in interpersonal discipleship. This goal was measured by three lay leaders participating in all training sessions and completing a post-mentoring survey. A t-test for dependent samples should show a positive, statistically significant growth in spiritual habits and confidence to engage with others in interpersonal discipleship.

The fifth goal was to have participating lay leaders identify at least one other believer to initiate interpersonal discipleship with. This goal was measured by the return of a discipleship commitment card indicating the name of a believer that each participant agreed to engage in discipleship with.

### **Goal One Implementation**

The first goal of this project was to recruit mature lay leaders from the congregation to participate in interpersonal discipleship training. I invited these members because of their active participation in the fellowship of CBC, their spiritual maturity, and perceived ability to also lead others in discipleship. These criteria made the pool of possible participants deliberately small.

The recruitment process began with engaging selected members that met the criteria in conversation to gauge their interest in participating in discipleship of this kind. This recruitment began a month prior to distributing agreement cards and surveys. I invited five members, and all five members verbally agreed to participate. A

“Participation Agreement Card”<sup>1</sup> was distributed to these five members on October 17, 2021, along with their pre-mentoring survey assessment.

The following Sunday, October 24, 2021, four members signed and returned their agreement cards. After providing an additional week for the final member to consider signing the agreement card, that individual decided that they could not participate in the project at this time, though they did show interest in participating in the future. The training commenced with the four individuals who had provided agreement cards rather than pausing to recruit another individual that met the necessary criteria.

### **Goal Two Implementation**

The second goal was to assess the current spiritual habits, experiences, and confidence levels in interpersonal discipleship among participating lay leaders. This goal was completed during weeks one and two of the project through a pre-mentoring survey and interviews. The findings of these interviews and surveys assisted in the development of the discipleship program.

The primary focus of this project was to engage members of CBC with a type of discipleship that would require them to meet one-on-one with other believers rather than rely on a large-group program. The pre-mentoring survey results showed a commitment to the importance of discipleship. This result was expected considering the pool of participants was representative of mature members of CBC. The participants also showed consensus that Bible reading, prayer, and spiritual conversations are all actions that help believers grow spiritually. The pre-mentoring surveys also showed that despite the belief in the importance of discipleship, members did not feel that they were actually growing in their faith. The results also showed that some participants lacked confidence to take on discipleship roles. These results were also not unexpected given the

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix 1.

discipleship deficiencies of CBC.

The pre-mentoring surveys did show a general confidence among participants to talk with fellow church members about their sin. I found that result surprising as I expected the sensitive and sometimes complex nature of accountability to be a place where participants were uncomfortable. Participants also surprised me with their lack of strong agreement in areas where I assumed most Christians would be in strong agreement. The results showed that most participants agreed about the importance for them to disciple another church member, but they would not go so far as to say that they strongly agreed. The results of the pre-mentoring survey confirmed that CBC members believed that discipleship is important, but responsibility for that discipleship was not felt by the individual members of the congregation.

The focus of the interviews was to determine the history of discipleship of each participant and their beliefs about the current state of discipleship at CBC.<sup>2</sup> When asked how they would describe CBC's current model of discipleship each respondent agreed that the current program-driven model was not producing disciples. When asked to describe the effectiveness of the current discipleship model every respondent replied that it was ineffective. The reasons for this are varied, with some participants believing it is an issue with church leadership, others with teachers, and some consider it to be an issue with their time availability.

Participants were also asked how they had been discipled in the past. Those who have been members of CBC for their entire lives continued to speak of programs: Sunday school, training unions, and Bible studies. Alongside these programs though, respondents also spoke of the influence of parents, teachers, and pastors who went beyond a curriculum and encouraged them to pursue Christ. The participant who did not attend CBC as a child, but instead grew up in a unique blend of Mormon and Catholic

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<sup>2</sup> For full list of interview questions see appendix 4.

teaching, spoke of discipleship as indoctrination. When asked where the greatest amount of spiritual growth had been experienced, this participant referenced the mentorship and friendship that they had received with other believers.

The interviews that I conducted with members helped to confirm what I already suspected, namely that the members of CBC were not connecting well with the church's current model of discipleship and that this program-driven model was only truly helping participants grow when they engaged with other Christians outside of the classroom. Cropper's members seem to only know one way of doing discipleship, and while this traditional way has its merits, and the church will continue to do some program-based discipleship, it is vital for the health of the church that discipleship goes beyond the classroom and into interpersonal relationships.

### **Goal Three Implementation**

The third goal of this project was to develop a discipleship model to guide groups engaging in interpersonal discipleship. A preliminary plan for the discipleship model was created by October 1, 2021. This model focused on spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, exhortation, and confession that were to be done through an interpersonal meeting.

A group of three individuals were chosen to serve as a panel of experts to evaluate the discipleship model. This group consisted of the associational mission strategist for CBC's Baptist association. He has years of pastoral experience with a familiarity in church revitalization as well as a knowledge about CBC's history and current needs. Also participating was a former denominational leader for the state of Kentucky's Women's Missionary Union who lives in the Cropper community and has a knowledge of CBC. The final member was a local pastor who holds a master's degree and has years of pastoral experience with one of CBC's sister churches. This individual is also familiar with the membership of CBC.

These panelists examined the discipleship model and used a rubric to determine its viability. This rubric contained criteria that reviewers used to evaluate the biblical foundations of the model, its relevance, perceived benefits, and practical focus. A minimum score of “3” on a four-point scale was required for each section of the curriculum. Any score lower than the minimum would result in revisions and resubmission to each member of the panel of experts until the minimum score was reached. Each member of the panel evaluated the discipleship model using the rubric and the minimum score was reached or exceeded in each category.

Table 1. Curriculum evaluation rubric

Criteria	Insufficient	Requires Attention	Sufficient	Exemplary
This model is biblically sound.	0	0	0	3
This model is replicable for various ministry contexts.	0	0	1	2
This model is relevant to discipleship.	0	0	0	3
This model is beneficial for the church.	0	0	0	3
This model is practical to use.	0	0	1	2

#### Goal Four Implementation

The fourth goal of this project was to strengthen the spiritual habits and

confidence of lay leaders by engaging with them in interpersonal discipleship. The preliminary survey had shown a disparity between the spiritual convictions and the spiritual habits of participants as well as a lack of confidence in leading others in their spiritual growth. This goal required that each participant complete eight individual discipleship sessions with me where we would read through the book of 1 John and implement principles of discipleship. Two participants chose to meet with me together. These meetings began on November 2, 2021. Each participant had the freedom to mold the appointment time and length of these meetings to their own schedule. Each session lasted from 60 to 90 minutes.

Each participant also had the ability to direct the session toward topics that they found most beneficial. These meetings followed the same procedure each week: we would begin with prayer, read the text, discuss the content and implications of that text, and close in prayer. To encourage this discussion each participant was asked to look for questions that they had of the text, big ideas of the text, and points of application.<sup>3</sup> This approach allowed the meetings to encourage interactions between participants and to resist the tendency that CBC has displayed in the past to make discipleship primarily a teacher/student interaction.

The following tables summarize the details of each discipleship meeting.

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<sup>3</sup> This followed the example laid out by David Helm, *One to One Bible Reading: A Simple Guide for Every Christian* (Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2011), 44. This project adopted Helm's terminology of question marks for matters the participants had questions about, light bulbs for the big ideas of the text, and arrows for points of application.

Table 2. Summary of sessions with participant 1

Date	Time	Text	Key Insights and Discussions
11/2/2021	90 min.	1 John 1	<p>How can modern Christians experience the same level of intimacy with God that John expects (1 John 1:3) without the benefit of knowing Jesus personally as John did?</p> <p>Confession of anxiety and feelings of being “used.” Commitment to pray and extend grace toward those who have angered us in the past.</p>
11/9/2021	90 min.	1 John 2:1–14	<p>John expressed a familial bond to the Christians he was writing to (1 John 2:1, 7). How can the same type of love be demonstrated in the way that members of CBC care for each other?</p> <p>What does propitiation mean? What is the nature of the old and new covenants (1 John 2:7–9)?</p> <p>Confession of a disagreement with another person and how they were sinful in how they reacted. Prayer for reconciliation with the offended was requested.</p>
11/16/21	105 min.	1 John 2:15–27	<p>Discussed the nature of the antichrist (1 John 2:18–22), with a focus on those who deny Christ (2:22) rather than an eschatological figure.</p> <p>Participant expressed desire to obtain more knowledge of spiritual things to be better equipped to share their faith with others.</p> <p>Confession of desire to feel that they have earned God’s blessings and their finding worth in their works.</p>
12/2/21	120 min.	1 John 2:28–3:10	<p>Our identity is found in Christ and not in society (1 John 3:1–2). What is the role of Satan in the world and how have they been destroyed by Christ (1 John 3:8)?</p> <p>Confession of their own prejudices and their habitual sin of anger.</p>

Date	Time	Text	Key Insights and Discussions
12/9/21	60 min.	1 John 3:11–24	<p>What is the nature of hate, and what does it mean that “everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15)? What is the difference between hate and anger?</p> <p>Believers have received the love of God and this love manifests itself in love for others.</p> <p>Participant confessed a desire to be more generous (1 John 3:17).</p>
12/14/21	150 min.	1 John 4	<p>What does it mean to test the spirits (1 John 4:1)? How do you test whether or not something is from God? Why should I desire good for someone who has hurt me?</p> <p>Confession that there are areas in which this participant is withholding forgiveness.</p>
12/28/21	180 min.	1 John 5:1–12	<p>Discussed each member of the body of Christ’s responsibility to participate in faith, ministry and discipleship. Reflected upon the nature of eternal life and the confidence that Christians have when facing death (1 John 5:11–12).</p> <p>What does John mean by “water and blood” (1 John 5:6–8)?</p> <p>Participant expressed a desire to transition into more of a teaching/discipling role. They were encouraged to begin praying about someone they could engage in discipleship with.</p>
1/5/22	90 min.	1 John 5:13–21	<p>What does John mean by sins that do and do not lead to death, and why should we not pray for sins that lead to death (1 John 5:16–17)?</p> <p>Participant stated, “At times it is easy to take salvation for granted and I lose the desire to wrestle with what I don’t understand.” This remark showed maturity.</p> <p>Expressed a desire to wrestle with Scripture that they do not understand and not become satisfied with believing the Bible without knowing what it teaches.</p>



Table 3: Summary of sessions with participant 2

Date	Time	Text	Key Insights and Discussions
11/9/21	90 min.	1 John 1	<p>Participant expressed appreciation for the straightforward nature of John’s writing, but while it is easy to understand it can be challenging to obey.</p> <p>Confessed a dissatisfaction in the ebb and flow of their Christian walk. There was often a difference between what they said and what they did.</p> <p>Expressed excitement at brainstorming ways to recenter their focus from themselves to Christian service.</p>
11/16/21	105 min.	1 John 2:1–14	<p>Why did John change his writing style in this passage (1 John 2:12–14), and why was it repetitive?</p> <p>First John 2:2 led to a discussion about the dangers of taking Scripture from its context and the danger of building a worldview on one verse apart from the entirety of Scripture.</p> <p>Confessed a struggle to get along with certain other Christians (1 John 2:9–10) and let go of their resentment toward those who have caused hurt.</p>
11/29/21	90 min.	1 John 2:15–27	<p>What kind of anointing is John talking about in 1 John 2:26–27?</p> <p>Mentioned a number of “antichrists” that hold sway in the membership of CBC and how politics, traditions, and finances are sometimes obstacles that distract us from our true purpose. Discussed the need to be winsome.</p> <p>Confession of a lack of urgency to fulfill the commands of Christ, despite living in the “last hour” (1 John 2:18). Participant also confessed a need for CBC to corporately reconcile with some of its neighbors.</p>

Date	Time	Text	Key Insights and Discussions
12/2/21	90 min.	1 John 2:28–3:10	<p>Habitual sin alienates us from God and is a sign of unbelief (1 John 3:6). Participant recognizes that they tend to minimize their sin.</p> <p>Advice to those struggling with habitual sin: agree with God’s Word that their actions are sinful, stop participating, repent, seek accountability.</p> <p>Confessed that their life is often not lived with eternity and Christ’s return in mind, asked for accountability to focus more on spiritual things.</p>
12/6/21	90 min.	1 John 3:11–24	<p>What is meant by “hate,” and who is meant by “brothers” (1 John 3:15)? If our human relationships are broken, our relationship with God will struggle as well.</p> <p>Confessed that he is holding grudges against those who have wronged him, and desires to seek reconciliation.</p>
12/28/21	90 min.	1 John 4	<p>How can someone claim to love and know God and not love the church or the people of God (1 John 4:20)? How can we better reach people in our church who are in danger of falling away?</p> <p>There is a direct connection between belief and action. Participant expressed a desire to practice thankfulness for the love of God in their life and be purposeful about showing that love to others.</p>
1/4/22	135 min.	1 John 5	<p>Participant found chapter 5 more difficult to understand than previous chapters. What is the nature of “blood and water” (1 John 5:6–8)? What are sins that do not lead to death (1 John 5:16–17)?</p> <p>Participant appreciated the rigorous study required to understand complicated texts but expressed frustration with those who show blind faith without working to understand hard teachings from Scripture. Summed up 1 John as love God, obey him, and love each other.</p> <p>Confessed a need to do more to inspire other believers to grow in their knowledge of the Bible.</p>

Table 4: Summary of sessions with participants 3 and 4

Date	Time	Text	Key Insights and Discussions
11/11/21	120 min.	1 John 1	<p>Believe that the fellowship John mentions (1 John 1:3) has been lacking at CBC for some time. Expressed frustration with current discipleship levels.</p> <p>What does it mean to “make him a liar” (1 John 1:10)?</p> <p>Confessed struggles with worry and doubt as well as their need to be intentional in sharing Christ with members of their household.</p>
11/30/21	105 min.	1 John 2:1–14	<p>Commenting on the authority John writes with, participant 3 stated, “None of us are beyond that authority; this message is for you.”</p> <p>What are some practical ways to read Scripture more deeply and consistently? How can I engage others in my family in a study of God’s Word?</p> <p>Confessed a desire to learn to abide in Christ and worry less about their worldly troubles.</p>
12/2/21	120 min.	1 John 2:15–27	<p>There is danger in loving the things of the world (materialism, influence, self) rather than God. Participant 3 discussed their habit of trying to read Scripture from three points of view: as a mature believer, a new Christian, and an unbeliever. This helps them to speak of the Bible in a way that is accessible to all.</p> <p>What does John mean by “last hour” (1 John 2:18) and how do we understand it given the large span of time from then till now?</p> <p>Confessed a lack of intentionality in engaging with spiritual things in their own lives and with others.</p>
12/7/21	90 min.	1 John 2:28–3:10	<p>How does God deal with lawlessness? What is the standard for believers (1 John 3:6)? Is that a fair standard for God to hold believers to? Why does God act in creation the way that he does?</p>

Date	Time	Text	Key Insights and Discussions
12/16/21	120 min.	1 John 3:11–24	<p>Confessed a lack of trust in God when he works in ways that are difficult to understand. Desire to become more disciplined in the time they spend in the Word to understand why God acts as he does. There is a relationship between the condemnation of the heart (1 John 3:20–21) and the command to care for others (3:16–18). Participant 4 stated, “God is not going to bless our church until we bless other people.”</p> <p>How am I being a blessing to others? How do we know we are praying according to God’s will?</p> <p>Confessed their lack of looking for opportunities to show brotherly love to others.</p>
12/29/21	120 min.	1 John 4	<p>John is returning to previous themes of the book: do not love the world, watch out for antichrists, love God, love brothers and sisters in Christ, but he is adding new emphasis as he does so. There is peace in learning to trust God. Christians should desire to walk in the power of the Spirit.</p> <p>What is the relationship between love, fear, and punishment in 1 John 4:18? What does it mean that believers who do not love the brothers cannot love God?</p> <p>Confessed a need to trust Christ more fully and resist the urge to react without abiding in the Spirit.</p>

Date	Time	Text	Key Insights and Discussions
1/10/22	105 min.	1 John 5	<p>Spoke of the difficulty of sharing the gospel and their fear that if evangelistic conversations go poorly, it could affect the relationship with the unbeliever. Resist the urge to follow God out of sense of obligation but out of joy in being obedient (1 John 5:3).</p> <p>What does John mean by “water and blood” (1 John 5:6–8) and “sins that don’t lead to death” (1 John 5:16–17)? Why is 1 John 5:7 so different in my translation (King James Version)?</p> <p>Participant 3 desired to grow their comfort level in having spiritual conversations with others and let that lead to opportunities to discuss their faith. Participant four expressed a desire to share the gospel with a family member.</p>

Goal four was completed when each participant completed a post-mentoring survey. This survey was distributed on January 16, 2022, and returned January 23, 2022.

### **Goal Five Implementation**

The fifth goal was to have participating lay leaders identify at least one other believer to initiate interpersonal discipleship with. Each participant was provided a commitment form to be completed and returned at the conclusion of the project.<sup>4</sup> Two participants returned their commitment card with at least one name. Two participants chose not to do so. As reason for this decision, they cited their anxiety at engaging with others due to their own struggles, and a lack of confidence to be able to lead in these types of spiritual discussions.

### **Conclusion**

The implementation of this project helped to provide the members of CBC

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix 5.

with another tool to disciple its membership. This project met a number of challenges before its conclusion. Anecdotally the project was effective as participants showed excitement at their spiritual growth throughout this process. The t-test results however did not show the expected statistical change. The pre-mentoring surveys showed the discipleship practices of members of CBC clearly and highlighted the disparity between their beliefs about discipleship and their practice of it. The participation commitment cards were effective in recruiting members, and the four individuals who committed to participate completed the process. The evaluation rubric was effective in ensuring that the project method was adequate to meet the discipleship needs of CBC. Unfortunately, the final goal of continuation was only partially met as some of the participants did not feel ready to engage with others in discipleship.

## CHAPTER 5

### MINISTRY PROJECT EVALUATION

In this chapter, I perform an evaluation of this ministry project through an analysis of the purpose, goals, strengths, and weaknesses of this project. I then describe the changes that I would make to this project from this analysis. Finally, I offer a series of theological and personal reflections on this project and a few concluding remarks about the discipleship model that has been implemented at CBC.

#### **Evaluation of the Project's Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to equip the lay people of CBC in Pleasureville, Kentucky, to begin interpersonal discipleship within the congregation. This purpose came from the evaluation of the current ministry context of CBC that revealed a lack of consistent spiritual growth among member of the congregation through the current program-driven discipleship model. The inconsistency of the laity to flourish under the current model, coupled with the belief that discipleship is commanded and expected of all believers, resulted in the choosing of interpersonal discipleship as the topic of this project.

This project aimed to assist the congregation of CBC to regain a biblical focus on discipleship. The Bible offers a broad range of commands concerning discipleship and examples of how discipleship was encouraged in Old Testament Israel as well as the New Testament church. This project is delimited to only those types of discipleship that are interpersonal in nature while affirming that there are other equally biblical and effective models that could be utilized. Scripture presents interpersonal discipleship as one way to perform discipleship by encouraging believers to teach one another the Scriptures (Heb

5:11–14), to exhort one another not to be hardened to sin (Heb 3:7–15), to encourage one another to be faithful and obedient (Heb 10:19–25), and to draw near to God in prayer (Heb 4:14–16).

### **Evaluation of the Project Goals**

The goals of this project were aligned with the purpose of the project to equip the laypeople of CBC to engage with each other in interpersonal discipleship. The project included five goals: (1) recruit mature lay leaders to participate in interpersonal discipleship training, (2) assess the current spiritual habits, experiences, and confidence levels in interpersonal discipleship among these lay leaders, (3) develop a discipleship model to guide groups engaging in interpersonal discipleship, (4) strengthen the spiritual habits and confidence of lay leaders by engaging with them in interpersonal discipleship, and (5) see that trainees identify one younger believer to initiate interpersonal discipleship with.

#### **Goal One**

The project's first goal was to recruit mature lay leaders to participate in interpersonal discipleship training. An invitation was extended to five mature lay members of CBC. While all five verbally indicated they would like to participate in the project, only four returned their agreement cards and agreed to participate; therefore, this goal was only partially met.

#### **Goal Two**

The second goal of the project was to assess the current spiritual habits, experiences, and confidence levels in interpersonal discipleship of these lay leaders. Each of the four participants completed a pre-mentoring survey at least a week prior to our first meeting. The feedback from these pre-mentoring surveys offered further confirmation that members of CBC believed that discipleship was important, with all participants



agreeing that it is important to be disciplined by another believer (mean score of 4.75). Participants were also in agreement that it is important for them to be discipling another believer (mean score of 4.75). The participants also agreed in their methodology, agreeing that interpersonal Bible reading (mean score of 5.5), prayer (mean score of 5.25), and confession (mean score of 5.25) were all aspects of discipleship that help Christians grow spiritually. Despite the participants' belief in the importance of discipleship and how discipleship is conducted, there was a disconnect when it came to practice; only half of the participants thought they were growing spiritually in the present (mean score of 3.25), and no participants showed strong confidence in their ability to disciple other believers (mean score of 3.25).

In addition to the survey, each participant was asked a series of interview questions to help me better understand their current beliefs about discipleship as well as the process that led them to hold these beliefs. These questions explored their discipleship histories as well as how they felt about the current discipleship practices of CBC. Every participant expressed a dissatisfaction in their current growth, though many looked back fondly on their early life at CBC, and each participant also expressed their belief that the current discipleship model of the church is struggling or ineffective.

Having been the pastor of CBC for five years, these results were not surprising to me. The membership of CBC understands what they are commanded to do as Christians; where they struggle is the application of these commands. The pre-mentoring survey provided validation that even the most mature members of CBC lacked the necessary skills and confidence to engage with others in discipleship.

### **Goal Three**

The third goal of this project was to develop a discipleship model to guide members participating in interpersonal discipleship. The results of the pre-mentoring survey helped to drive the development of the discipleship model for this project by

causing me to focus on a model that was easy to grasp, built confidence, and was easy to replicate for the participants.

A panel of three experts examined the discipleship model and completed a rubric that measured the biblical faithfulness, replicability, relevancy, practicality, and benefit of the proposed discipleship model. Each participant filled out their rubric and offered suggestions that were helpful in creating the interpersonal discipleship model. Each member of the expert panel showed their wisdom and commitment to the church, and I am thankful for their feedback and suggestions.

#### **Goal Four**

The fourth goal of the project was to strengthen the spiritual habits and confidence of lay leaders by engaging with them in interpersonal discipleship. The results of the pre- and post-mentoring surveys were analyzed using a t-test for dependent samples, which demonstrated no positive statistical change. The t-test for dependent samples showed  $t_{(3)} = -0.151329982$ ,  $p = 0.444659404$ .<sup>1</sup>

To understand the results, it is necessary to remember that there is the possibility that the lack of change among some participants had to do with inflated responses on the pre-test. To add some insight, one of the participants did share with me that as they learned more, it only highlighted the depth of what they did not know. As a result, participants may have recorded some results based on how they were currently feeling rather than in relation to where they were prior to the interpersonal discipleship meetings. This could help explain how participants could believe they were growing spiritually before the project and differ after. At times people want to show themselves as positively as possible. While the surveys were administered anonymously, due to the small sample size it is possible that people simply did not devote as much attention to

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<sup>1</sup> For full t-test results see appendix 6.

their answers as they might have.

The results of the post-mentoring survey also show that one participant showed significant decreases in their responses (-4 points overall). Other participants showed the same scores or increases in their scores. This individual's responses greatly influenced the results of the t-test based on the small sample size.

While the results of the post-mentoring survey were not as positive as I would have liked, each participant at some point during the project stated how much they enjoyed doing discipleship in this way and how beneficial it was for them. One participant went so far as to state, "I feel like I am growing spiritually for the first time in a long time." These positive acknowledgements give me confidence that this project was beneficial for the participants, and therefore a success.

### **Goal Five**

The fifth goal of the project was for participants to identify one other believer in our church to initiate interpersonal discipleship with. This goal was not successfully met as only two of the four participants supplied the name of an individual to pursue discipleship with. The other two participants refused to supply a name despite being given several suggestions of persons who would benefit from this type of discipleship. The reasons they supplied for refusing to participate was their lack of confidence and discomfort at engaging with another person. These results were disappointing, but there is the possibility that with more instruction these individuals would gain the confidence necessary to disciple another believer.

### **Strengths of the Project**

Chapter 2 examined ways in which Christians are called to assist each other in pursuing a growing faith. This style of interpersonal discipleship proved beneficial for the members of CBC in many ways. The primary strength of this project was the sheer amount of time participants spent engaged with Scripture. The Bible was the only text

required of participants to engage with, although supplementary tools such as Study Bibles and commentaries were utilized on occasion. This project was designed to get participants to spend many hours thinking through 1 John.

A second strength of this project was the freedom it gave participants to focus on different aspects of Scripture. The traditional method of discipleship for members of CBC has been focused on instruction given by teachers to students. This project helped to change that dynamic. Each participant was able to take the teachings of 1 John and focus on those that were most applicable to them. As a result of this flexibility each participant was able to help guide the discussion in the way that was most helpful for them and resulted in different topics being discussed from the same passage of Scripture. As the conversations progressed and participants became more comfortable discussing the text, they began looking for deeper areas of personal reflection.

A third strength of this project was its simplicity. Participants were instructed to spend their time focusing on prayer and the information and application of Scripture. This simple approach was a departure from other methods of discipleship that members of CBC have engaged with in the past. There were no additional texts to examine, no homework to do, no preparation required to be ready for the session, and the meeting could be done whenever it fit the schedule of the participant. The project was intentionally designed in this way to make it more accessible. I did not want participants to let the burden of preparation keep them from participating. Additionally, the end goal of this project was to see this type of interpersonal discipleship continue with these original participants engaging with other members of the congregation. I believed that a key to participants having confidence to lead these discipleship meetings lay in developing a method that was simple to grasp and easy to lead.

The final strength of this project was that it grew my personal relationship with the participants. This was never set as a goal of the project, but as their pastor I was encouraged that over the course of this project the participants showed increased levels of

trust in me. They were willing to let me share in their struggles and rejoice in their triumphs, and I was able to share with them mine as well. I gained a better understanding of how to pray for these participants and how to encourage them in their spiritual walk going forward.

### **Weaknesses of the Project**

As much as I would like to say that this project was carried out without any problems and displayed no weaknesses, that would be false. But while the project was not perfect, the weaknesses that came to light will help to guide me and other members of my church as we engage in this type of discipleship in the future.

The first area for improvement was the tendency of the meetings to get distracted. While this did not happen often, there were a few occasions in which the participant focused on church matters rather than their own personal growth. Those matters are certainly worth discussing, but they led us at times away from the project's stated purpose of interpersonal discipleship. At its extreme, there was one meeting in which the discussion trended more toward topics I would consider gossip, and it took concerted effort to return to the topic at hand. Losing focus is a risk of meeting without set topics to discuss, but in my opinion the rewards of freedom to talk through the text and its application to pertinent issues in the participants' lives far outweighs that risk. It is, however, something to be considered and could become a large problem if the meeting initiator is not able to curtail this issue.

A second weakness of this project is that it tried to cover too much. I originally thought each meeting would last an hour to an hour and a half, but the meetings usually lasted closer to two hours. Part of the explanation for these extended meetings was the sheer amount of material that I tried to cover. Some of the passages that were discussed had multiple topics that were worthy of discussion and time constrained us to only talk about some of them. Because this project focused on 1 John, a relatively simple book,

this problem was not as large as it would have been with other sections of Scripture. Participants are being encouraged to expand their discussions beyond 1 John and engage with other books of the Bible as well. If they choose a more complicated book the number of verses that they discuss per meeting must come down.

A third weakness of this project was the somewhat vague rubric that I provided to my panel of experts. The rubric should have been more detailed to allow for more feedback to be given. The improvements that the panel of experts provided were helpful, and I wish there had been more suggestions. A more detailed rubric may have helped guide the panel of experts to give feedback on additional areas of weakness with my project.

A final weakness of the project was my own tendency to lead our discussions as pastor and not as a peer. I felt the urge to try to answer every question rather than let participants wrestle with the meaning of texts, and I found myself at times trying to make application for the participants because I wanted them to see what I saw in the text rather than allowing them to engage with the text for themselves. I do not want members of my church to feel dependent on me to interpret Scripture for them, and as I became aware of myself doing this through the course of this project, I tried to curtail it.

### **What I Would Do Differently**

This project is intended to be continued. Each participant, as well as myself, are encouraged to find another person to engage with in interpersonal discipleship. To make these meetings as helpful as possible for all participants, several changes could be implemented to improve the experience. First of these changes would be to limit the number of people that are meeting to two. I met with participants both one-on-one as well as with two individuals together, and the quality of interaction was better one-on-one. When three people met together, there was a tendency for one person to do all the talking and the other to just agree with the first. At these times it felt like one of the individuals

was only spectating rather than truly engaging in discipleship. There was also less consistent application of the text as the couple was more likely to focus on what *we* need to do rather than what *I* need to do. Additionally, honest confession of sin occurred less with the larger group. I assumed, wrongly I believe, that a married couple would be comfortable broaching subjects of personal sin with each other, but upon further reflection I think they would have been more comfortable and better served meeting with me alone.

A second change that I would make would be to set a time to meet every week and try to stick with it. From the beginning I had one meeting scheduled for Tuesday mornings and another for Tuesday evenings and we were able to stick closely to that schedule with only minor changes being made. The other meeting times had to change from week to week. This made it difficult to be consistent; some weeks we would meet twice in a week, and at other times not at all. This also meant at times that discipleship was something that we tried to fit in rather than making it a vital part of our routine. For some with inconsistent schedules it will not be possible to set a specific time to meet, but whenever possible in the future I will insist on a consistent routine.

The final thing that I would change about the project is I would give the less mature participant opportunity to lead the discussion. This model of discipleship should be simple enough to be led by any believer, but participants looked to me as their pastor as the natural leader of our discussion. This is helpful in the early stages, but as more meetings are held, the other participants should become more and more comfortable with leading in discipleship. The participants that did not wish to find someone else to meet with expressed that it was their lack of confidence that held them back. I must remember that what seems simple to me may not necessarily be easy for others, and leading a discussion is one of those things that some find very challenging. It would be helpful if participants took a more active role in leading discussion so that when they are the leaders, they will feel more comfortable.

## **Theological Reflections**

This project, as I suspect is often the case with doctoral students, has done as much to help me to grow as a Christian as it has those participating in the project. The study of discipleship in Hebrews that was performed in chapter 2 helped me to discover a new way of doing discipleship. Just like the members of my church, my understanding of discipleship was heavily influenced by programming within the church and a focus on individual growth through Bible reading, prayer, and meditation. This type of discipleship did a lot to teach me, and I am thankful for it, but it is not the only way that discipleship can be performed. The important thing is that believers are growing, and the Bible teaches a number of ways for that growth to be accomplished. The discipleship methodology utilized in our churches ought to be varied to maximize the growth of people across the church body. Were it not for this project, this type of discipleship and all its benefits may not have been something I would have explored. As a result of this project, I have learned more about the importance of Christian community. I have always been introverted and have practiced discipleship and outreach as individual activities. This project has seen my desire to pull others into these activities with me grow significantly.

This project has also greatly changed the way that I communicate from the pulpit. The Scriptures are full of doctrines and information to be learned, but God's Word also focuses strongly on what people ought to do because of that information. I have historically been much more comfortable preaching the informational side of a text and leaving the congregation to make application for themselves. However, through the growth that I have seen in participants of this project I have seen the deep need for Christians to be challenged directly with the Scripture to make changes to their lives. As a result of this my preaching has a renewed focus on application and has become more challenging for the congregation, as they are left each week with concrete things they can do during the week to look more like Christ.



This project has also done a lot to teach me a biblical way to handle disappointment. The expectations that I had for this project were not met. Many of the goals that I had for participants were also not met. After receiving the results of the post-survey and seeing the refusal of half of the participants to continue this exercise I was despondent. I ceased all work on this degree for a season, and it was a large contributing factor to taking a leave of absence from my church. This was by far the low point of this project and the closest I came to quitting both the pursuit of a degree and ministry at my church. During that season though I found comfort in Scripture, particularly 1 Peter 5. While this passage is full of biblical truths, I was reminded that my service in the church is a service to God, and even when the church does not acknowledge my service, God does. I was also reminded from this passage that I am shepherding the church not out of compulsion but willingly (5:2). Most importantly I learned to a deeper degree what it means to cast my cares on God (5:7). This reliance on God's Word has helped me to see the benefit of the work that is happening at my church and has grown my sense of devotion and love to the people I serve.

### **Personal Reflections**

Pursuing an advanced degree was never something that I set out to do. It was not until one of my professors during my Master of Divinity studies suggested it that I began to consider it. Mostly though it was my church that led me down this path. I pursued work in church revitalization because it such an obvious area of need for my church and thousands of others like it. These seminars, books read, friendships made, and this project have all been invaluable in helping me to become a stronger and more capable pastor.

That does mean that this journey has always felt rewarding. At times it was quite the struggle. I have never undertaken an academic exercise remotely like this before. It has required some long hours, moments of deep self-reflection, and a burden on

me and those I love. I have always struggled with anxiety and bouts of depression, and at times this work has exacerbated those issues, but for each moment of struggle I can with confidence say that God's grace is more. He has remained faithful to me through this journey and provided me with blessings too numerous to count.

### **Conclusion**

This project did not turn out as I expected, but I still consider it to be at least a partial success. My church is still clearly a work in progress, but this discipleship model has breathed new life into some of its participants and helped stagnant Christians to begin growing again. This project has also greatly benefited me. I am a more compassionate pastor because of this project. I have a greater sense of unity with other Christians and a greater desire to see the Word of God flourish in the lives of other believers than ever before. It is my heartfelt desire and prayer that others who use this model of discipleship in the future would receive from it the blessing of God that I have.

APPENDIX 1

PARTICIPATION AGREEMENT CARD

As part of my project for my Doctor of Educational Ministry degree, I am developing a model to aid participants in developing interpersonal discipleship skills. By participating in this project, you will be given tools and instruction that will grow your faith in Christ as well as give you the tools that you need to build significant discipling relationships with other members of your church. By developing these relationships, the members of our church can grow deeper in their spiritual commitments and developing healthy Christian practices for all members.

Participation in this project will require the completion of a pre- and post-survey as well as participation in all teaching sessions. The findings from this project will be recorded, but your participation will be anonymous. If you agree to participate, please complete this form and return it me at your convenience.

Thank you,  
Jesse Huggins

Name

---

Phone Number

---

Email Address

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APPENDIX 2  
CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

_____ Evaluation Tool					
1= Insufficient 2=Requires attention 3=Sufficient 4=Exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
This model is biblically sound.					
This model is replicable for various ministry contexts.					
This model is relevant to discipleship.					
This model is beneficial for the church.					
This model is practical to use.					

APPENDIX 3  
INTERPERSONAL DISCIPLESHIP INVENTORY

Directions: Answer the following questions using the following scale: DS = Disagree Strongly, D = Disagree, SD = Slightly Disagree, SA = Slightly Agree, A = Agree, AS = Agree Strongly; please circle the appropriate answer.

1. I am confident in my ability to disciple another believer.

DS            D            SD            SA            A            AS

2. Personal accountability between believers aids spiritual growth.

DS            D            SD            SA            A            AS

3. I feel comfortable talking to fellow church members about sin.

DS            D            SD            SA            A            AS

4. It is important for me to disciple (train, help, guide) another believer.

DS            D            SD            SA            A            AS

5. It is important for me to be discipled by another believer.

DS            D            SD            SA            A            AS

6. Reading the Bible with other believers helps Christians grow spiritually.

DS            D            SD            SA            A            AS

7. Praying with other Christians helps believers grow spiritually.

DS            D            SD            SA            A            AS

8. Talking openly with other believers about sin helps Christians grow spiritually.

DS            D            SD            SA            A            AS

9. I believe I am growing spiritually.

DS            D            SD            SA            A            AS

APPENDIX 4  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

These questions are to be asked of each participant to gauge their discipleship history as well as their current discipleship practices.

1. How have you been discipled in the past?
2. How effective do you believe that discipleship was?
3. How would you describe Cropper Baptist Church's current model of discipleship?
4. How effective do you believe that discipleship model is?
5. Where have you experienced the most growth in your own spiritual walk?
6. What do you believe are the greatest hindrances to your own growth in discipleship?
7. What practices have helped you experience the most growth in your path of discipleship?
8. What do you see as your role in promoting discipleship in Cropper Baptist Church?

APPENDIX 5

DISCIPLESHIP COMMITMENT CARD

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have found another member of my church that I want to begin a relationship of discipleship with using the tools and method gleaned from this course.

Name of other participant: \_\_\_\_\_



APPENDIX 6  
T-TEST RESULTS

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	Pre-Test Results	Post-Test Results
Mean	41	41.25
Variance	26.66666667	30.91666667
Observations	4	4
Pearson Correlation	0.812636055	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	3	
t Stat	-0.151329982	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.444659404	
t Critical one-tail	2.353363435	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.889318808	
t Critical two-tail	3.182446305	

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## ABSTRACT

### EQUIPPING MEMBERS FOR INTERPERSONAL DISCIPLESHIP AT CROPPER BAPTIST CHURCH IN PLEASUREVILLE, KENTUCKY

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022  
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This research project developed a mode of interpersonal discipleship to be practiced among the members of Cropper Baptist Church in Pleasureville, Kentucky. Chapter 1 describes the ministry context of the project and the rationale behind its implementation. Chapter 2 examines the biblical and theological support for interpersonal discipleship. Chapter 3 explores the practical and theoretical for interpersonal discipleship. Chapter 4 describes the preparation, implementation, and conclusion of the project. Chapter 5 evaluates the goals of the project and offers reflections of the projects strengths and weaknesses as well as reflections of a theological and personal nature.

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