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FINDING IDENTITY IN CHRIST AT FIRESIDE BAPTIST
CHURCH IN ELIZABETHTOWN, KENTUCKY

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FINDING IDENTITY IN CHRIST AT FIRESIDE BAPTIST
CHURCH IN ELIZABETHTOWN, KENTUCKY

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To Rebecca, my crown.

To our little children, Buddy, Girly, Bo, Babs, and Obi, keep yourselves from idols.

To my mom, you gave me all the coffee and books a son could ever need for school.

To the Stewart and Raymond families, my fellow laborers.

To all the saints at Fireside, you are my letter of recommendation, written with the Spirit.

To my Lord, at whose feet I will cast all my rewards and crowns, including this project.

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PREFACE

First, a special thanks is deserved by my wife, Rebecca, for her willingness to accommodate me with the time necessary while raising our five children. She gave me an abundance of time and encouragement for this project. I am also grateful to my advisor, Dr. Jamus Edwards, for giving me the patience, guidance, and corrections to make this project most effective.

Finally, I thank my Lord Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate reason for everything in my life, including this project. This ministry project, and church plant that came to be Fireside Baptist Church, was not a result of consideration, planning, and prayers. It was quite the opposite. It was untimely born and forged in the situational fires of difficulty, sufferings, and painful interactions with nominal Christians. However, I am ultimately grateful to God for those providential sufferings because they brought to light the need to address cultural Christianity in an area in an area where the gospel has become encrusted with the traditions of men. The Lord's providential difficulties were means that God used for good to bring about Fireside Baptist Church and the impetus for this project. For that, I am extremely grateful. Like Joseph in Egypt, I am retrospectively thankful for these trials because they worked for good (Gen 50:20), and they were also his sovereign means to be trained for gospel ministry. May he use it to break the shackles that have been put upon the Word of God by all those who oppose its authority.

Post tenebras lux.

Wayne Luna

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Christians have long held beneficial yet divergent perspectives on discipleship, and the divergences primarily correlate with their focal points. Some discipleship models focus on catechisms, interpersonal relationships, or theological and doctrinal teachings, while others focus on spiritual disciplines.¹ This is because effective discipleship methodologies vary according to one's ministry context. The elders at Fireside Baptist Church (FBC) understand discipleship is essential to the local church; however, the most effective methodology for discipleship was not as clear.

FBC's contextual and geographical situation illuminated a path forward. There is a particular danger for cultural idols to stunt Christian discipleship and engender spiritual apathy within FBC's more rural and conservative setting. Contextually, a primary reason nominal Christians would fail to inherit eternal life would be their affinity for contextual idols and ideologies. For this reason, this project sought to help FBC attendees counter some of the most prominent contextual idols and ideologies and help find their identity in Christ. Therefore, an explicitly scriptural, coherent, and comprehensive approach to discipleship is an indispensable tool to bring about formative change in individuals, communities, and the world. For this reason, this project sought to identify a fitting methodology toward biblical discipleship by countering FBC's contextual idols and ideologies and facilitate a culture of biblical identity in Jesus Christ.

¹ Hans F. Bayer, *A Theology of Mark: The Dynamic between Christology and Authentic Discipleship*, Explorations in Biblical Theology (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2012), 1.

Context

Fireside Baptist Church began informally meeting on November 29, 2020, in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. The first unofficial meeting took place around a fire in my backyard, hence the origin of its name. Multiple families were interested in establishing a biblically faithful church amid the most inconspicuous mission field in America: nominal Christianity.² Elizabethtown is situated in a culture in which the local churches are afflicted and beleaguered by nominal Christianity.³ The term *nominal Christian*, colloquially known as *cultural Christianity*,” identifies “those who loosely identify themselves with Christianity” through contextual cultural markers (CCMs) rather than biblical markers.⁴ These cultural markers are conflated with genuine marks of Christianity and include “church familiarity, a generic moral code, political affiliation, or religious family heritage” among other things.⁵ A cultural Christian’s identity is confirmed by his or her unrepentant sinful actions, attitudes, and beliefs.⁶

Kentucky is a case study in cultural Christianity. A Pew Research survey revealed 76 percent of adult Kentuckians profess “absolute certainty” in the existence of God but not specifically Jesus Christ. Of those, only 15 percent attend church on a weekly basis, and 3 percent attend any additional services on a weekly basis.⁷ The statistics are alarming among those who profess specific belief in Jesus Christ: 35 percent of

² Dean Inerra, *The Unsaved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christianity with the Gospel* (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 15.

³ I have chosen to use the term *cultural Christians* over *nominal Christian* because of its precision in diagnosing the problem of cultural identifications and conflating them with faith in Christ.

⁴ Daniel G. Reid et al., eds., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), s.v. “nominal Christian.”

⁵ Inerra, *The Unsaved Christian*, 24-25. Inerra elucidates between the two in that a hypocrite has a faith based on intentional deception, while a nominal Christian has a faith based in confusion.

⁶ Martin H. Manser, *Dictionary of Bible Themes: The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies* (London: Martin Manser, 2009), s.v. “nominal Christian.”

⁷ Pew Research Center, “Religious Composition of Adults in Kentucky,” 2014, accessed April, 17, 2023, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/kentucky>.

professing believers in Jesus Christ do not attend church on a weekly basis; 55 percent meditate on Scripture twice a month or less; and 46 percent read the Bible twice a month or less. Most troubling is, of those who profess to believe in Jesus, only 51 percent believe the Bible should be taken literally; 58 percent derive their morality apart from their faith; and 43 percent do not believe there are clear standards for right and wrong. Also, 30 percent approve of abortion and 35 percent believe homosexuality is acceptable.⁸

This survey manifests the syncretistic religion of Christianity and cultural Christianity and its ensuing errors. Ultimately, the problem with cultural Christianity is that the culture subverts Christ and ultimately jettisons him in favor of the culture. In this aspect, it is not a discipleship problem at all. In fact, cultural Christians are robustly disciplined; they simply are disciplined by cultural idols and ideologies. In doing so, cultural Christians conform more to their CCMs than to Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a persecuted pastor in Nazi Germany, said, “Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”⁹ Bonhoeffer is correct, and Christianity without biblical discipleship is an accurate summary of cultural Christianity.

Church attenders who allow themselves to be disciplined by culture create an idolatrous form of Christianity that produces cultural disciples, makes only cultural demands, requires cultural sacrifice, and identifies with a Jesus who proclaims a cultural gospel. Contra cultural Christianity, genuine Christian discipleship challenges the listener to either side with Jesus or the culture, but not both.¹⁰ The Pew Research survey clearly demonstrates many cultural Christians in Kentucky attempt to straddle that fence while implying spiritual growth is not essential, obedience to Christ is optional, and a person

⁸ Pew Research Center, “Christians Who Are in Kentucky,” 2014, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/kentucky/christians/christian>.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 50.

¹⁰ Bayer, *A Theology of Mark*, 19.

can be a “baby Christian” his or her whole life; all of which are antithetical to the Bible.¹¹ Cultural Christianity views attempts to intentionally and biblically disciple another as an invasive overreach of the boundaries and authority of the local church.

Rationale

It is critical that FBC come to understand contextual obstacles to discipleship. Without germane, intentional, and purposeful discipleship FBC could possibly squander its membership, ministry, and the church could fail to be permanently rooted in Elizabethtown. The local church, which has been commissioned by Christ to make disciples in all the world (Matt 28:19-20), should be equipped to identify contemporary challenges to discipleship, appreciate those challenges, and be trained to address the theological problems of its contextual area.

First, the concept of being a disciple and biblical discipleship is greatly misunderstood. Therefore, a biblical definition of what a disciple is, what the process of discipleship is, and the subsequent demands of discipleship, are crucial for FBC to accomplish the will of Christ and find their identity in him.

Second, FBC is a small congregation with about thirty adults consistently attending. Typically, a church this small is viewed as having limited resources and opportunities, however the potential to forge new leaders is unique. Many who have been foundational to establishing and solidifying the church are looking to be discipled so that they might grow and disciple others in the church. An apropos discipleship theory will lay the groundwork for discipling current FBC leaders and equipping future leaders.

Third, children raised in FBC are the most vulnerable to cultural Christianity and its indoctrination. The membership of FBC consists primarily of middle-aged, married adults with multiple children. The number of children in the church who are still under

¹¹ Bobby Jamieson, *Growing One Another: Discipleship in the Church*, 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 11.

legal custody and care greatly outnumber the adults. If parents are not purposefully disciplined to find their identity in Christ, then it is likely that they will not purposefully disciple their children to do so. In turn, this would have an even greater negative impact on the future of FBC and further propagate nominal Christianity.

Finally, studies have shown that those who were seriously committed to Christianity were primarily interested in churches that were enthusiastically committed to community, biblical teaching, and personal growth.¹² Simply put: no one wants to commit to a church who is not committed to them. This project sought to engender commitment on the part of the leadership to the people at FBC by identifying cultural idols, elucidating how they compete against Christ, and solidifying a deep commitment to FBC via effective discipleship from the elders.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to help the people of FBC find their identify in Christ.

Goals

The project's purpose would be accomplished through three goals.

1. The first goal was to assess the current knowledge of CCMs and the degree of identity association with them among participants.
2. The second goal was to develop an eight-week teaching series on finding identity in Christ.
3. The third goal was to reduce identity with CCMs and increase identity in Christ.

A definitive research methodology was used to evaluate the satisfactory completion of the goals. A defined means of measurement and a benchmark of success were used to assess the achievement of each goal. The research methodology and

¹² Thom S. Rainer and Jess Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* (Nashville: B & H, 2011), 255.

instruments used to measure the success of each goal are delineated in the following section.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this project included the use of a pre-survey and post-survey as well as an evaluation rubric.¹³ The effectiveness of this project depended upon the completion of three goals.

Goal 1

The first goal was to assess the current knowledge of CCM's and the degree of identity association with CCMs among participants. This goal was measured by administering the pre-course CCM survey to the ministry project participants.¹⁴ This goal was considered successfully met when fifteen congregants accepted the terms of participation, completed the pre-course survey, and the results were analyzed to yield a clearer picture of the current CCM knowledge and identity association.

Goal 2

The second goal was to develop an eight-week teaching series on finding identity in Christ. This teaching series was developed around pertinent verses in the Bible, relevant books, applicable discipleship principles, and discipleship tools. The sermon series took place during the Sunday morning worship service to make it most accessible to participants in the project. This goal was considered met when the development of the sermon series was completed.

¹³ All the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

¹⁴ See appendix 3.

Goal 3

The third goal was to reduce identity with CCMs and increase identity in Christ. This goal was accomplished by a preaching series conducted during an eight-week Sunday sermon series. The teaching was offered to anyone who wished to attend; however, the efficacy of the project was measured via volitional participation. This goal was measured through readministering the pre-course CCM survey as a post-course CCM survey after the sermon series was completed. This goal was considered successfully met when the *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a statistically significant difference between the pre-course and post-course survey scores.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms are used in the ministry project to clarify the way they were employed in this project.

Disciple. A *disciple* is a follower of Jesus Christ.¹⁵ The word refers to an adherent of a particular teacher, religion, or philosophical school, and it is the task of the disciple to learn, study, and pass along the saying and teachings of the master.¹⁶

Discipleship. *Discipleship* is the process where one Christian reorients another Christian to reality (Col 1:15-20; 2:8).¹⁷ It occurs when someone answers Jesus' call to learn about him and live like him foremost through his Word and the teachings of other faithful Christians. It results in the disciple becoming the kind of follower who supernaturally conforms to the life and practice of Jesus.

Disciple making. *Disciple making* is the process in which the local church builds and multiplies Jesus' disciples by announcing the gospel, baptizing those who repent and

¹⁵ Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Vine Project: Shaping Your Ministry Culture around Disciple Making* (Youngstown, OH: Matthias, 2016), 64.

¹⁶ Robert B. Sloan Jr., "Disciple," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand et al., (Nashville: Holman Bible, 2003), 424-25.

¹⁷ J. T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus*, Logos ed. (Nashville: B & H, 2020), introduction.

believe in the name of the triune God of the Bible, communicating Jesus' teachings so they obey him, and training them to multiply themselves through making other disciples (Matt 28:18-20). The process of discipleship is multifaceted and never ending.¹⁸

Cultural Christianity. *Cultural Christianity* encompasses an ideology that identifies with Christianity primarily via cultural markers and associations. The term is often used to distinguish between those who are genuine Christians and those who benefit from the social capital of identifying with Christianity. Adherents to *cultural Christianity* are referred to as cultural Christians.

Identity. *Identity* is defined as sameness over time. It is to have “something sustained that is true of you in every setting.”¹⁹

Idol. An *idol* is anything that is more important to a person than God, anything that absorbs one's time and attention more than God, or anything one seeks to give to oneself that can only be found in God.²⁰

Ideology. An *ideology* is an idolatrous system of thinking, or an intellectual god.²¹ While *ideology* simply refers to a set of ideas, I employ the term pejoratively as a set of ideas which are antithetical to biblical principles or teachings.

One limitation applied to this project. The accuracy of the pre-survey and post-survey was dependent upon the willingness of respondents to be honest about their knowledge. To mitigate this limitation, the respondents remained anonymous.

¹⁸ Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 43.

¹⁹ Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: Finding God in the Modern World* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 118.

²⁰ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Riverhead, 2011), xvi.

²¹ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 104.

Two delimitations were placed on this project. The first delimitation was allowing participation among those who are part of the congregation of FBC. A second delimitation was the fifteen-week time frame for which this project was conducted.

Conclusion

Within the context of FBC, a primary reason professing Christians would fail to inherit eternal life would be finding their identity with cultural idols and ideologies. This project sought to bring awareness to the most contextually prominent CCMs and help the people of FBC find their identity in Christ. The following chapters provide the biblical and theological, the historical and sociological research for the ministry project. Additionally, the implementation and results are also presented. The completion of this project proved to be deeply beneficial for the situational awareness of contemporary cultural idols and the proper order of affections for Christ above temporal pleasures. May FBC, through this project, under the hand of God and by the Spirit, strengthen the greater body of Christ.

CHAPTER 2
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS
FOR FINDING IDENTITY IN CHRIST

When Christians come to faith in Jesus Christ, they turn from trusting idols and sinful ideologies to the one true God. However, Christians can inconspicuously carry remaining idols in their hearts and minds. Thus, they are exhorted to turn from them (1 Cor 10:7). This chapter first argues that all humanity is guilty of idolatry (Rom 1:18-32). Second, 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 exemplifies the normative experience of conversion as turning away from worshipping idols to the one true God. Third, 1 Corinthians 10:1-22 argues that God’s plan for discipleship utilizes mature believers helping the church with perpetual probing for inconspicuous idols of the heart and mind. Finally, believers are reoriented to identity in Christ through biblical discipleship (1 Cor 10:1-22).

Exegesis of Romans 1:18-32

It could be argued that the central theological principle in the Bible is the refutation of idolatry.¹ Brian Rosner writes that idolatry is “diabolical, its consequences are hellish, and its origins are satanic. In the Bible, nothing is more soundly condemned than idolatry.”² Of all sins one could commit, idolatry alone provokes God’s holy jealousy.³ Despite this, the problem of idolatry persists from Genesis to Revelation. Even

¹ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1992), 10.

² Brian S. Rosner, “The Concept of Idolatry,” *Themelios* 24, no. 3 (1999): 3.

³ Brian S. Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 3.

those who are believers in Christ are commanded to continually flee from it.⁴ Given the persistent problem of idolatry, it is evident why the apostle Paul indicts the entire human race in one verse when stating, “They worshipped and served created things rather than the creator” (Rom 1:25).⁵ In Paul’s letter to the Roman church, he describes God’s wrath against humanity’s idolatry via three arguments: the natural revelation of God, man’s rejection of this knowledge and refusal to honor him, and God’s subsequent judgement in giving them over to idolatry.

Natural Revelation

In understanding the grievous charge Paul is bringing against humanity, it is critical to understand what is revealed through creation, or nature, itself. What can be revealed about God through nature, even in a limited sense, is called “general revelation” or “natural revelation.”⁶ This is distinguished from what is known as “special revelation,” which reveals precise information about God and would include divine providence, history, the Bible, and Jesus Christ himself.

Natural revelation seems to have existed before the fall of humanity. When Adam and Eve were created in the Garden of Eden, there was a relationship spoken by God (Gen 2:15-17). God used special revelation—his audible voice—with respect to natural revelation—a tree. The special revelation of God’s voice could not be recognized as what it was unless contrasted against the regular way of God’s communication with

⁴ See 1 Cor 10:7, 14, 20-21; 1 John 5:21 for biblical examples where Christians are called to flee from idolatry.

⁵ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 54. I will employ the term *natural revelation* because of its semantic connection with means of revelation: nature itself.

man, which was nature itself.⁷ Thus, when Adam heard God's supernatural voice, he knew who created the natural. Therefore, natural revelation existed from creation, and it has always pointed to the one who created all things, including the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil which Adam and Eve had perceived in the Garden of Eden (Rom 1:20). Therefore, God has communicated to men via natural and special revelation ever since he made them (Rom 1:20). Daniel Estes notes that the pedagogy of the Bible often consists of observations of nature to draw inferences to better understand divine truth.⁸

After the fall of Adam and Eve, natural revelation carries on into the realm of fallen humanity. Natural revelation functions in the same manner by revealing information about God; however, it now takes on redemptive purposes. The natural world is now seen in need of redemption, and it now functions to point to the One who redeems not only nature but all humanity (Rom 8:22-24). Likewise, special revelation now takes on redemptive purposes. Initially, God's voice in the garden did not communicate a need for redemption. Now it does.

The scope and limitations of natural revelation. Now that God has tasked nature to communicate humanity's need of redemption, it is necessary to understand its scope and limitations. Natural revelation reveals three primary truths to humanity about God: the existence of the true and living God, man's sinfulness in idolatry, and God's will that all should turn to him. The most fundamental of these revealed truths is the existence of God. However, natural revelation does not point to any deity, but only reveals the same God who is understood in the special revelation of the Bible. A primary reason God created everything was to declare his existence to the world and to reflect his glory (Ps 19:1-2).

⁷ Cornelius Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. Ned Bernard Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 272.

⁸ Daniel J. Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 88.

All that he has created does not testify to “images resembling mortal man and birds and creeping things” (Rom 1:23). Nor does it testify to Buddhism, Islam, or Taoism, which are antithetical to the message of the Bible. Natural revelation only reveals the one true and living trinitarian God who created nature.

The apostle Paul uses the principle of natural revelation, and its post-fall function, to substantiate the universal knowledge of the Trinitarian God, which is manifest through creation (Rom 1:19). This establishes the grounds for Paul’s universal indictment of idolatry. If it can be incontrovertibly demonstrated that all have knowledge of God’s existence through creation itself, then all who do not worship him alone are thus guilty as charged. To be sure, the specific details and description of God are to be found in the special revelation of the Bible, yet nature reveals only this God. So, while natural revelation does not manifest the concept of the Trinity, only the Trinitarian God can manifest himself through nature.⁹ Rejection of this truth would invariably result in idolatry.¹⁰

Of note are the Israelites and their role as God’s people in redemptive history to proclaim the one true God. For them, idolatry was one of the worst sins, if not the worst possible.¹¹ Even though Paul’s audience is certainly comprised of Jews to some degree, it is notable that Paul does not directly charge his fellow Israelites with idolatry.¹² However, his language does underscore that when people reject the knowledge of the

⁹ Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” 266.

¹⁰ Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary Series, vol. 6 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 31.

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *Between History and Spirit: The Apostolic Witness of the Book of Acts* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), 123.

¹² Everett F. Harrison and Donald A. Hagner, *Romans*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, *Romans-Galatians*, ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland, rev. ed (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 49.

Trinitarian God, they have “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom 1:23).¹³

That humanity is justly charged with idolatry establishes the second truth that natural revelation manifests: man, just like nature, needs redemption. Before a man accepts the gospel, natural revelation has already told him that he is sinful. When a man comes to realize that Jesus Christ is the one true and living God, he concurrently realizes he has sinned by not having previously ascribed proper honor and worship to him (Acts 2:37). Therefore, natural revelation confirms idolatry to be innately sinful because it shows not only the existence of God, but that God exists in a broken relationship with humanity. In Romans 1:18, Paul says, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of man.” Man’s unredeemed relationship with God exists in a state of wrath and hostility (Rom 8:7).

Because of humanity’s sin nature, everyone rejects the knowledge of God they innately possess. Two clear examples can be found in the book of Acts. In Athens, Paul’s spirit was provoked by the multitude of idols (Acts 17:16). As he was walking about the Aeropagus, he observed an altar with the inscription: “to the unknown god.” Why did the Athenians built an altar to a god they did not know? It is because idolatry lives off the truth of the one true and living God. Idolatry takes the truth, then distorts the truth, and then opposes the truth from which it was derived. Idolatry is a testimony to the truth of God in its apostate form. In this sense, idolatry is dependent on the revelation of God in its distorted manifestation.¹⁴

Furthermore, when Paul and Barnabas were at Lystra, he healed a man who was crippled from birth (Acts 14:8-11). Seeing this, the crowds believed Paul and Barnabas

¹³ Mark A. Seifrid, “Romans,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 611.

¹⁴ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), 143.

were human manifestations of their own idols, Zeus and Hermes. When the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas, an interesting argument was made. Paul and Barnabas said that they were mere men, just as the people of the crowds, and commanded that the crowds turn from worshipping vain idols to the true and living God. Paul then says God has not left them without a witness to himself: rains, fruitful seasons, and the satisfaction thereof (Acts 14:17). The natural revelation of God, by means of creation, showed to all men that their worship of idols was sinful.

These two examples of the purpose and scope of natural revelation also manifest a third truth to humanity: the essential will of God. Everything seen in nature is inextricably revelatory of the nature and will of God.¹⁵ Natural revelation in itself was enough to bear witness against “vain things” and that the pagans should “turn . . . to a living God” (Acts 14:15). While this revelation is not exhaustive, it is revelatory of God’s will that all should turn away from idols and to turn to him. Luke’s consistent employment of the verbiage “turn” (Luke 1:16-17; 22:32; Acts 9:35; 11:21; 15:19; 26:18; 28:27) is functionally equivalent to a call to repentance.¹⁶ Simply observing creation in the form of the falling rain was enough to elucidate these truths to humanity.

Rejection and result. While natural revelation manifests the existence of God, the sinfulness of man, and the will of God, sinful man misappropriates the knowledge granted through natural revelation. Two primary reasons humanity exchanges the knowledge of God and turns to worship idols are ignorance and enmity.

First, Paul tells the Ephesian church that unbelievers are estranged from the life of God by the ignorance that is in them (Eph 4:18). In other words, their rebellion against the knowledge of God is constituent because of the fall of humanity in the Garden of

¹⁵ Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” 274. While this is true, one must also remember that natural revelation is limited in its revelation of God’s will.

¹⁶ Keener, *Between History and Spirit*, 130.

Eden.¹⁷ It could even be said that human nature itself is at war with God.¹⁸ Humanity does not subsequently reject the knowledge of God after a thorough inquiry into his existence is found lacking. Humanity, by nature, defaults to rejection of the knowledge of God. The research of sinners only furthers the problem, because without the saving “life of God” they are estranged from, men will invariably misinterpret the knowledge given through natural revelation (Rom 8:7-8). Their ignorance is a willful ignorance because they have rejected the knowledge of God due to a hardness of heart, which manifests in idolatry.¹⁹ Despite the fallen nature of man, he is still responsible for his situation.²⁰

This constituent and volitional rejection of the knowledge of God, which is described as ignorance of God, leads to enmity toward God. By nature, man rejects the knowledge of God and declares war on him; no neutrality is possible.²¹ If sinful people do not accept the knowledge of God and live in submission to him, then the only way they can order their lives is a constant and calculated hostility against him.²²

This rebellion is so grievous that it is worthy of death, and this is declared by the judge of the universe (Rom 1:32). The divine death judgement is thrice repeated with the verbiage “gave them up” or “turned them over” (Rom 1:24, 26, 28). Each of the three uses of “gave them up” or “hand over” intensifies the punishment and establishes a direct

¹⁷ Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics*, 139.

¹⁸ Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 26.

¹⁹ S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), 361.

²⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2018), 113-14.

²¹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 511.

²² Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 510.

connecting between sin and its consequence.²³ This refrain in each instance is followed by a reference to their own decision in that “they exchanged.” God effectually confirms the decision they had already made.²⁴

The verb “hand over” or “gave them up” has its origin in the Old Testament, and it is regularly used to describe when God “hands over” Israel’s enemies so that they would be defeated in battle (cf. Exod 23:31; Deut 7:23). Even more interesting is that the same word is used when God hands his own people over to another nation for punishment of sin by being defeated in battle.²⁵ As previously noted, Luke frequently employs the same verbiage in the New Testament. He preserved the record of Stephen, who utilized the same language to describe God’s punishment for Israel’s idolatry (Acts 7:42). Later the verbiage is utilized by Paul to describe those who gave themselves up to sensuality and impurity (Eph 4:19). This explains why God’s wrath is revealed against those who would suppress the truth: idolatry is war against God. God responds to this warfare posture with reciprocal warfare verbiage when he “hands over” idolaters to be conquered by their sin.

Summary

Paul described the guilt of humanity by charging all with idolatry (Rom 1:21-23). In both the Old and the New Testaments, humanity has declared war on God by rejecting the knowledge of him as revealed through natural and special revelation. God then responds to man’s warfare attitude with warfare rhetoric by “giving over” idolaters to their sin. This is critical because to recognize the pervasive idolatrous tendencies of their own culture, Christians must first recognize that fallen humanity possesses an idolatrous heart. This depraved heart is inclined to worship nearly anything except God.

²³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, The Anchor Yale Bible, vol. 33 (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2008), 284.

²⁴ Seifried, “Romans,” 49.

²⁵ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 121.

Without this understanding, Christians can potentially fall into the same error. So, what should man's response be? How can man, and FBC, escape the righteous judgement of God? The apostle Paul points to an example from nearly two millennia ago.

Exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

Paul's philosophy of anthropology can be summarized in that humanity belongs to one binary group: idolaters and worshipers of the true and living God.²⁶ If his letter to the Romans encompassed the clearest description of the former group and the problem, then the first letter to the Thessalonians would be his clearest description of the latter. In the letter to the Thessalonians, he described their appropriation of the solution when he wrote, "You turned from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9). Paul's statement recalls to the Thessalonians what they already knew, and the rest of the world will hear for millennia to come via the Scriptures that turning from idols and to the living God is the manifest experience of every Christian throughout history.²⁷ However, this turning was not something that was simply a new relationship with Jesus Christ; it was also manifest in a new relationship with society and the local church.

The Use of ἐπιστρέφω as Repentance Language

As noted, Luke employed *turn* as a description of repentance, and Paul said the Thessalonians *turned* from idols.²⁸ The word *turn* is ἐπιστρέφω. The use of ἐπιστρέφω is well attested to denote conversion to God or apostasy from God.²⁹ Its meaning is consistent

²⁶ Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Themes (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 11.

²⁷ Jacob W. Elias, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995), 47.

²⁸ Keener, *Between History and Spirit*, 130.

²⁹ Gary Steven Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 72.

through the LXX and is used when Samuel challenges Israel to “turn to the Lord” and “serve him alone” (1 Sam 7:3). It is also employed when Hosea says Israel will not “turn to the Lord” because of their sin (Hos 5:4) and then prophesies that they will “return to the Lord” (Hos 6:1). Joel uses the term three times to describe Israel’s call to repentance (Joel 2:12-14). The Psalms use the same word when all the ends of the earth will “return” to the Lord (Ps 21:28), and Isaiah says even Egypt will “return to the Lord” and heal them (Isa 19:22). Similarly, Jeremiah calls Israel to “turn from their evil” so that the Lord would not bring destruction on them (Jer 18:8).

The same word ἐπιστρέφω is used in the New Testament by James in Acts 15:19 when the Jerusalem Counsel did not want to further trouble gentiles who “turned to God.” Paul utilized the terminology again in Acts 26:18 in his conversion story to Agrippa when Jesus commissioned him to open the eyes of the Gentiles that they “may turn from darkness to light.” Similarly, Paul also used the same terminology in 2 Corinthians 3:16 when one “turns to the Lord,” and in Galatians 4:9 when he asks the Galatian church how they could “turn back” to be slaves of sin.³⁰ The sustained patterns and usage of ἐπιστρέφω affirm the assertion that turning from idols to the living and true God is the experience for all who come to salvation.

The Manifestation of ἐπιστρέφω

While ἐπιστρέφω can denote turning away from God or turning to God, Paul is clearly employing ἐπιστρέφω in turning away from the idols the Thessalonians formerly worshipped. However, not only did they have to put idols down, but they also had to take up their cross (Matt 16:24). In doing so, Paul describes the Thessalonian’s ἐπιστρέφω process in “deceptively simple terms.”³¹ Frankly put, there was nothing simple about

³⁰ Seifrid, “Romans,” 872.

³¹ Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 108.

turning from idols to serve the true and living God in a society where culture, politics, and religious worship were inseparable. Turning away from idols was not the end, but the beginning of turning to the living and true God. It actually was the beginning of a new way of interacting with the culture in which they lived. However difficult it may have been, the Thessalonian Christians were commended by Paul for their faithfulness to do so and their example to the churches in Macedonia and Achaia.

For the Thessalonians, the word *idol* did not merely encompass a figurine they were to remove from their shelf and no longer venerate. In a real way, Paul used the expression “you turned from idols” in a much broader sense to extend meaning into a new social existence for the Thessalonians. The Thessalonian correspondence leaves no doubt that God is concerned with the manner in which his children live out their faith.³² Paul described two incompatible and antithetical forms of social existence, each of which are rooted in two forms of incompatible belief, and he was deliberate in expanding that divide.³³ This new social existence would be manifest not only in their public abstentions, but their new public practices that characterize the New Testament church. Turning to the one true and living God meant turning away, unlearning, and walking a new life which the Thessalonian Christians had never know prior to Paul’s preaching. This is the essence of discipleship, and at times it may be easy to forget that discipleship is not simply learning about Christ, but it is also unlearning all the things Christians formerly trusted, obeyed, and served. When conceived in this way, turning from idols and to God is a “total reorientation to reality.”³⁴

³² Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 21.

³³ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 86.

³⁴ J. T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus* (Nashville: B & H, 2020), 21.

This reorientation to reality would disfavor the Christian community for abstaining from the typical worship and celebration of the Greco-Roman gods. This meant a public and visible refusal in the myriad of ways the Romans gods were honored. In turn, a complete change in their pattern of life would have occurred, which likely included abstaining from public festivals, trade associations, meetings in the temple, or other private celebrations.³⁵ These overt social activities often involved an affirmation of idols, and as such Christians could not participate in them. Such abstentions could be perceived as provoking the wrath of the Greco-Roman gods because they were believed to be the city's patrons. Also, Thessalonica was home to a temple built in honor of the goddess Roma, and unintended as it may be, abstentions could be construed as opposing Rome itself and the emperor (Acts 17:7).

Additionally, Thessalonica was a free city, which was a privilege few held in the region, and that meant military forces did not occupy and establish the government in Thessalonica. The city was unrestricted in directing its own affairs, minting their own coins which deified Caesar, and appointing their own leaders—like the ones Jason was dragged before (Acts 17:6). These leaders were called “politarchs.”³⁶ There were five of these city leaders, and if they did not keep peace and order they would be accountable to the Roman Empire. Their failure could mean being subjected to empirical governing, heavy taxes, coerced quartering of Roman soldiers, and losing their status as a free city. The appointed politarchs were a politically astute group and they had one primary purpose: establishing government policy conducive to preserve the political privileges of the city. Although free, the city was required to give patronage and loyalty to the emperor, and the gospel of Jesus Christ created unavoidable friction between the church and the state.

³⁵ Andy Johnson, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 44.

³⁶ This compound word comes from the Greek words “city” and “ruler.”

Even the verbiage of the Christians created friction. After years of war and turmoil from previous emperors, Caesar Augustus brought peace and prosperity to Rome, and the Romans would often say that Caesar Augustus brought “the gospel” with him, the “good news” of Roman peace. The Caesars who followed him—Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero to mention a few—all continued this verbiage and tradition of emperor worship.³⁷ The essence of the pagan theology was that the emperor was the “universal savior” whose good news should be proclaimed throughout the region.³⁸ Subsequent Christian employment of the term to describe peace between man and God was taken as asserting there is a new king; a new emperor whose demand for loyalty superseded that of Rome’s emperor (Acts 17:7).

Further complicating the situation was the proximity to Mount Olympus, the home of the Greco-Roman gods. Mount Olympus was the tallest mountain in Greece, and it was considered the home of the twelve Olympians who were the principal gods of the Greek world—Zeus, Hera, Athena, and Apollo were among them. It was one of the most sacred sites in all the Greek world, and it was only fifty miles outside Thessalonica.³⁹ There was likely a fear that the gods would observe the Christian’s abstinence from pagan worship and strike the whole city with famine, pestilence, or disaster.⁴⁰ Such social abstentions could be perceived as politically, socially, and economically detrimental for the city, and at most they could be seen as worthy of death (1 Thess 2:14-15). Navigating these difficult social issues was inherent in turning away from idols.

³⁷ James H. Grant, *1 & 2 Thessalonians: The Hope of Salvation*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 24.

³⁸ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 503.

³⁹ Grant, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 51.

⁴⁰ Grant, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 24.

Turning to a New Doctrine of Imitation

Certainly, the Thessalonians were called to turn from imitating the culture, politics, ethics, and religion, which were antithetical to imitating Christ. The established norms of Roman conduct were now turned upside down by the message of the gospel, and that upset many (Acts 17:6). Despite these concerns, the reception of the gospel was with joy, and the Thessalonians did not paint Paul and the message of the gospel as the source of trouble. Rather, because of faith in gospel, they became examples for others experiencing suffering (1 Thess 1:6-7).⁴¹ The believers in Thessalonica had become imitators of the Lord (1 Thess 1:6), but who was their example to do so? With Christ not being bodily present with them, what examples were the new believers to look to so they would imitate Christ in their complicated relationship with their society?

The biblical concept of imitation is principally found in verses like 1 Thessalonians 1:6 where Paul is calling the Thessalonians to imitate him.⁴² However, what is Paul seeking to communicate with this doctrine of imitation? Paul's reasoning of imitation comes from three points he makes in 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5. First, he points to their election (1 Thess 1:4). God has chosen the Thessalonians for salvation because Paul came to Thessalonica and preached the gospel, and some of them believed (Acts 17:4). Despite all the years of secular indoctrination by Roman culture, idolatry, paganism, and sinful living, they trusted in the gospel message. The first work of the Holy Spirit in salvation is to generate belief. Second, Paul was certain of their election because the gospel came with power and conviction. It is the role of the Holy Spirit to convict those who do not believe in Jesus of their sin and to ongoingly do so (John 16:8). Third, Paul then sees the necessary evidence that manifests after the Father's choosing and the Spirit's conviction of sin: imitation of Paul, his fellow workers, and of the Lord (1 Thess 1:6).

⁴¹ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, The New American Commentary, vol. 33 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 62.

⁴² Paul uses this phrase in 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 2:14; 3:9; 1 Cor 4:6, 11:1; Eph 5:1. The same term is also employed in Heb 6:12.

Imitating other mature and faithful believers, such as those in Judea, is principal evidence of turning from idols to serve the true and living God (1 Thess 2:14). The paradigm is as follows: believers receive the Word, they believe the Word, and they follow the example of believers to imitate Jesus.⁴³ A similar call to follow the paradigm would be found in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-9. Knowing that the church has already received the Word and believed in it, Paul calls them to follow the example he has left them. There was also a concomitant warning given not to imitate the wrong people (1 Thess 3:6) and a call to follow Paul (1 Thess 3:7, 9). The paradigm of Christian imitation is a pattern of faith and obedience that can be seen in other Christians, and it is powered by union with Christ.⁴⁴

Summary

The believers in Thessalonica were examples to believers in Macedonia, Achaia, and beyond because the gospel was demonstrated in Thessalonica in both “word and power” (1 Thess 1:6). While demonstration took place in the hearts and minds of the Thessalonians, it did not stay there. The gospel was inextricably manifest in sociological behaviors that did not compromise the message of the gospel and followed the example of mature believers in the church.

Likewise, everyone at FBC is called away from imitating sinful aspects of the culture, along with its idols and ideologies, and called to discipleship by mature Christians. Next, it will be shown that these mature believers help sanctify the church by identifying sinful patterns of thought and behavior and reorienting the church to reality through Jesus Christ. This paradigm is a visible demonstration of what it means to turn from idols and worship the true and living God.

⁴³ Grant, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 46.

⁴⁴ Grant, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 47.

Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 10:1-22

Christians manifest turning from idolatry and toward God by putting away visible images of idols and living in a new state of social existence that is consistent with their newfound reality. Yet, the New Testament is replete with imperatives for believers to avoid, flee from, and reject idolatry. Why then do the New Testament authors command such if believers have already done so (1 Cor 10:7, 14)? This question comes to the church in Corinth. How can Christians who have repented of idolatry then be commanded not to be idolaters?

At times, contemporary Christians can feel distant from the temptations to worship idols such as inanimate figurines, or even political figures, and relate to Christians who have historically dealt with such issues. However, contemporary Christians would likely only feel such a way if idols were simply inanimate figurines or people that were visibly venerated. Two critical categories of idolatry must be grasped to properly understand this call for Christians to flee from idolatry: degree and direction.

Degree and Direction of Idolatry

It must be first noted that to be a Christian one must turn from unbelief in Christ to belief in him. In this sense, there are degrees of idolatry in the same way there are degrees of all sin.⁴⁵ All Christians have turned from the first degree of idolatry: unbelief. Paul affirmed the turn from first-degree idolatry in his greeting to the Corinthians when he addressed them as sanctified, as saints, and those who were called to Christ Jesus (1 Cor 1-3). So, while the Corinthians had turned from unbelief, they were nevertheless commanded not to be idolaters (1 Cor 10:7). Thus, Christians are called to turn from residual idols, which is a lesser degree of idolatry. This degree of idolatry does not prohibit a relationship with God but inhibits it. This inhibition is manifest by causing believers to

⁴⁵ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 623-24.

defile or wound their conscience, become a stumbling block, destroy one another, and cause believers to sin against one another (1 Cor 8:7-12).

It is notable that Paul does not charge the Christians in Corinth with overt, manifest idolatry. At this point, a plain observation is in order: attending a feast or eating food at a banquet was not overt idolatry (1 Cor 8:4-6). The Corinthians did not worship or venerate the idols; they simply attended the feast that did so. They did not worship the meat; they simply ate it. Even so, Paul exhorts them not to be idolaters and to flee from idolatry (1 Cor 10:7, 14). They were not to be “accessory to idolatry.” John Calvin said Paul “intimates that no part of idolatry could be touched without contracting the moral pollution of idolatry, and those who accept the outward forms of idolatry and defile themselves will receive the just punishment of God.”⁴⁶ Paul makes the correlation with the Israelites, not in worshipping the golden calf, but of “rising up to play” (1 Cor 10:7). Hence, feast and meat were accessories to idolatry because Israelite and Gentile culture held feasts and sacrifices as part of worshipping the divine.

Paul’s correlation between idolatrous feasts and idolatry is critical in understanding his language and metaphoric function in that Paul’s rhetoric in calling them from idolatry, and it highlights a relationship rather than an action. So, while the Corinthians could have argued against Paul in that they were not committing first degree idolatry, Paul’s prohibition is in participating in what the feasts would incite; it is the “direction” in which idolatry happens. This is the motive for the reference to Baal-Peror (1 Cor 10:8). Balaam, a pagan sorcerer who tried to curse the Israelites, visited each of Baal-Peor’s sites, from Bamoth-baal (Num 22:41) to the heights of Peor (Num 23:28), yet Balaam had completely failed to curse God’s people. However, through their

⁴⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 1:324.

association with the women of Moab, the Israelites accomplished it easily enough.⁴⁷ Ian Duguid asserts it was “the intimacy with the strange women which led to participation in the idolatrous feasts, not vice versa” (Num 25:1-2).⁴⁸ Paul’s forceful address of the issues seemed to be provoked by the Corinthians naïve mindset (1 Cor 10:20-22). Fornication preceded idolatry with Baal-Peor, and Paul sees pagan feasts in Corinth preceding idolatry and the potential tragedy in history repeating itself with God’s judgement on his people (1 Cor 8:8-10).

The potential tragedy of history repeating itself leaves the Corinthians open to the charge of being accessory to idolatry. Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer write that it “puts a species on a level with its genus . . . lusting after evil things is the class, of which idolatry and fornication are the instances . . . and implies that [this degree of] idolatry is a new class.”⁴⁹ The reason Paul is calling the Corinthians to abstain from pagan feasts is that the danger of actual idolatry is closer than the Corinthians think (1 Cor 10:12). Participating in feasts that are intended to worship idols may be distinguishable from worshipping them, yet they are on moral par with the first-degree form of idolatry and could lead believers to apostasy.

Furthermore, it seems Paul’s concern was not primarily individual but corporate. Three different times Moses wrote that “the people” and “Israel” worshiped Baal-Peor and sacrificed to their idols (Num 25:1-3). In the same way, it is likely Paul’s concern was not limited to a few outliers in the congregation but was directed to the entire covenant community in Corinth. Such “participation with demons” could damage and destroy the entire Christian community, as with the Israelites in Shittim.

⁴⁷ Iain M. Duguid, *Numbers: God’s Presence in the Wilderness*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 292.

⁴⁸ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 204.

⁴⁹ Robertson and Plummer, *First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 203.

Paul is not calling the Corinthians to turn away from their idolatrous belief in fictional contrivances of the minds of men (1 Cor 8:4-6). This first-degree idolatry would prevent genuine relationship with God the Father. Nor is Paul calling them from a manifest worship and veneration of figurines and images. Paul is calling on the Corinthians to abstain from a secondary degree and form of idolatry via participation in and association with various acts and events which are tantamount to the first degree and form of idolatry. The command is warranted because Paul believes the Corinthians did not seem to believe they would go so far as to worship idols (1 Cor 10:12). Paul's clear and present concern is that they could become idolaters because of the direction they were headed.⁵⁰ This leads to ask how a behavior or attitude that is not overtly idolatry can lead to it? How does this procession toward the prohibition begin? Most importantly, how can Christians recognize this direction so as to not become idolaters? Two principles of idolatry must be considered: fluidity and feelings.

Discerning the Direction of Idolatry

Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit note that it is something of a conundrum that the prohibition of idolatry "is supposed to be the firmest and strictest of all . . . [yet it exhibits] an astonishing fluidity."⁵¹ While this observation is made in view of both first-degree and second-degree idolatry, it is the second degree that concerns the Corinthians. These second-degree idols could be anything from careers, family, material possessions, wealth, education, or a political view. It is exchanging the true and objective identity in God for a false, autonomous, and subjective identity in oneself or an image, hence the limitless potential of transgressing the second commandment.⁵² From money to motherhood, the idols of the human heart are myriad. An idol competes with the loyalty

⁵⁰ Robertson and Plummer, *The First Epistle of St Paul to The Corinthians*, 203.

⁵¹ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 250.

⁵² Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 35.

and affection that belong to God alone and blurs the line between the Creator and what is created.⁵³ In other words, it is not the object itself but the inordinate direction of affection toward that object that explains the fluidity of idolatry. Whatever someone honors and admires above God then makes it an idol.⁵⁴ This is why John Calvin said, “The human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols.”⁵⁵ In this sense all Christians continue to battle various second-degree idols that war with the affection and devotion rightly due to God alone.

Augustine, one of the foremost of the Church Fathers, sought to explain this direction of idolatry by employing the terms *use* and *enjoy*. He said that to *enjoy* something is defined as resting with satisfaction in the thing for its own sake. To *use* something is to employ whatever means to obtain what one desires.⁵⁶ Augustine asserts the failure to observe this results in sin in that “every human evil or vice consists in seeking to enjoy the things which are to be used, and to use the things that are to be enjoyed.”⁵⁷ In the strictest sense, only God is to be enjoyed, because things were created to be used for the enjoyment of God (Col 1:16).⁵⁸ In other words, idolaters seek to glory in things which were made to glorify God. Paul’s concern is that participating in the feasts would lead the Corinthians to cease glorifying God and find glory in illicit sex (1 Cor 10:21, 31).

⁵³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 187-88.

⁵⁴ Brian S. Rosner, “Idolatry,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 571.

⁵⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 1:128.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 2 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1887), 523.

⁵⁷ Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, trans. David L. Mosher, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 70 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1982), 30.

⁵⁸ Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry*, 28.

Conclusion

Paul called the Corinthians to biblical discipleship by setting an example to follow through various teachings and charging them to live accordingly.⁵⁹ All of this was grounded in Paul's fatherly maturity in Christ, which was contrasted against childish guides.⁶⁰ He ends his instruction with the imperative: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). This is strong evidence of Paul's paradigm of mandatory Christian discipleship where mature believers set the example for the church to follow (1 Cor 4:15-16). The examples of mature believers are rooted in conformity to Christ, and they function to warn the church of the direction of idolatry. They then reorient the church to reality through conforming to the true and living God rather than following the direction of dead idols. However, since the days of the ancient church in Corinth, the concept of identity and idolatry has proliferated and evolved. The examples set by mature Christians in the faith have had to adapt and overcome to counter the cultural idols that have arisen throughout history. The following chapter will survey the evolution of identity and idolatry throughout the ages.

⁵⁹ The issues addressed by Paul in 1 Cor were avoiding divisions (3:1-23), not judging one another (4:5), not associating with the sexually immoral (5:1-12), not suing one another (6:1-11), fleeing sexual immorality (6:12-20), in marriage and singleness (7:1-40), meat offered to idols (8:1-10:22), and finally, calling them to do all to God's glory (10:23-33).

⁶⁰ Mark E. Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, New American Commentary, vol. 28 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2014), 125.

CHAPTER 3
IDENTIFYING IDENTITY: A CONCEPTUAL
EVOLUTION OF IDENTITY AND
FBC'S RESPONSE

Discipleship is critical for the membership of any church to flourish, and a primary task of discipleship is to free a church from idols.¹ Thus, discipleship requires pastors to teach their people to love God with the heart but also their minds (Mark 12:30-31). Kevin Vanhoozer astutely observes that discipling encompasses both biblically teaching and liberating believers from “false ideologies, metaphors, and stories that govern a people’s way of life.”² I would add identity to that list as well. Today, identity can fit into every one of the false categories mentioned. The concept of identity has become a subject of unprecedented importance, and its vernacular usage has increased six-fold in the last century.³ With this popularity has come manifold false individual, communal, social, political, and sociological ideologies by which to establish an identity. James Fearon notes the popularity explosion in elite academic institutions where identity plays a “central and ongoing role in nearly every subfield of political science.”⁴

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 8.

² Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 8.

³ This statistic was determined using Google *Ngram*.

⁴ James D. Fearon, “What Is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?” Stanford University, Department of Political Science, November 3, 1999, <http://www.web.stanford.edu/group/fearon-research/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/What-is-Identity-as-we-now-use-the-word-.pdf>, abstract.

Academia has seen research on the phenomena of identity experience an exponential increase in the last forty years.⁵

The contemporary fascination with identity is cause for reflection and consideration for FBC to understand identity with a biblical lens. Jesus Christ is the only perfect source of enlightenment and intelligence, and he has revealed himself through his perfect Word. Therefore, all sound knowledge and understanding come via the Bible, and Jesus has demarcated in his Word genuine parameters for concepts of identity. Considering this, FBC needs to be disciplined to comprehend biblical concepts of identity and combat ideologies which are antithetical to Christianity. To address this, I will survey the philosophical problems, the etymological problems, the contemporary complexity, and what FBC can learn from the development of the phenomenon of identity.

Primary Philosophical Inquiries

The philosophical inquiries regarding individuation and identity arise primarily from ontological and epistemic perspectives. From an ontological perspective, individuals have four general features that are the occasion of four philosophical questions concerning complexity, threshold, individuation, and change as it related to identity.⁶

The first philosophical problem that arises is that an individual, whether animate or inanimate, is by nature complex.⁷ The complexity arises from someone possessing various attributes that make them distinctive from someone else. Shape and color are the most fundamental; however, cognitive and social attributes also distinguish individuals. Relation to others, personality, careers, hobbies, nationality, group affiliation, and even

⁵ Fearon, "What Is Identity," 1. Between 1986 and 1995, the study of identity in dissertations grew at a rate of almost three times faster than the rate for all abstracted dissertations.

⁶ Kenneth F. Barber, introduction to *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Kant*, ed. Kenneth F. Barber and Jorge J. E. Gracia (Albany: State University of New York, 1994), 3-4.

⁷ Jonathan Landry Cruse, *The Christian's True Identity: What It Means to Be in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2019), 2.

life achievement are ways that constitute the complex identity of an individual. So, the question arises as to how attributes individuate one individual from another?

Second, the question arises as to the necessity of a threshold of attributes to establish genuine individuation. Exactly how many attributes are required to distinguish one individual from another? Who or what is the authority for determining the number of attributes needed to distinguish one individual from another?

Third, for an individual to genuinely be distinguished, there must be a distinction from all other individuals within a visual field. An example would be when someone observes identical twins. There are two siblings in a visual field who, on first observation, are indistinguishable. However, identical twins are never completely identical. There are simply more subtle distinguishing features which are needed to individuate the twins. Thus, for an individual to be such, each must have a distinguishing attribute(s) from all other individuals. What attribute would that be?⁸

Finally, and most perplexing, the very attributes that make an individual distinct can also undergo change. For example, an individual may be distinctly different from all other individuals due to hair color. However, if through the process of aging, the hair color that once individuated them now may now resemble the same gray color as many other individuals who have aged. So, if attributes can change, are they able to bear the weight of individuation or identity?⁹

Truly, these problems deserve substantive answers for individuation and identity questions. Despite the number and complexity of the philosophical inquiries, solutions have been proposed to provide a satisfactory answer to the problem of individuality and identity.

⁸ Maren Behrens, *The State and the Self: Identity and Identities*, Off the Fence: Morality, Politics, and Society (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 1-3. For a materialistic society such as America, an individual's identity comes down to their social security number. This a fascinating story about a man who was found in a Burger King dumpster after he experienced severe retrograde amnesia. Since there was not a record or recollection of his past, he was unable to have a legal identity without a social security number.

⁹ Behrens, *The State and the Self*, 5.

A satisfactory account for individuation could be accomplished by locating at least one part of an individual that is not shared with any other individual. Also, a satisfactory account for identity could be achieved by locating a part of that individual that does not change through the history of that individual.¹⁰ Today, despite the enduring nature of the discussion, no clear consensus satisfies these criteria.

Barber lists the problems that come from an epistemic perspective in asking how a person can “know, perceive, and apprehend the complexity, unity, difference, and continuity through time of individuals?”¹¹ In an ideal world, a perfect marriage would exist between ontology and epistemology. However, given that humans are fallen creatures who have inherited a sinful nature, the matrimony between ontology and epistemology often bears domestic disputes. The relationship between them must be raised because in medieval philosophy, ontology dominated the discussion while epistemology followed. Furthermore, Barber notes the ontological assumptions, beginning with God, “are given as are the categories available for their analysis.”¹² In other words, the existence of God was assumed to be true, and God led the epistemic discussion. God no longer leads that conversation in contemporary culture and the consequences are massive for FBC and society at large. Today, the sociological rules of identity are so well established that many Christians scarcely question them. Society employs terms and verbiage to describe identity without much thought of how they came to be. However, a historical survey of its conceptual development will bring lucidity to a complex idea.

¹⁰ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 281-83. Parfit argues that not a single plausible criterion comprises the enduring of an individual’s attributes that follow the same reasoning that constitutes identity. In the Christian view, it is the enduring presence of Christ in a believer’s life which satisfies that criterion.

¹¹ Barber, introduction to Barber and Gracia, *Individuation and Identity*, 4.

¹² Barber, introduction to Barber and Gracia, *Individuation and Identity*, 5.

A History of Individuation and Personal Identity

From the perspective of biblical Christianity, personal identity is first and foremost defined by Christian identity.¹³ While contemporary semantics of personal identity are relatively new, the concept has been discussed in its various understandings for centuries in church history. Semantically, the word “identity” originates from the Latin root *idem*, which means “the same, or sameness,” particularly a similitude over time and space. It has been used in English since the sixteenth century in mathematics and anthropology to describe psychosomatic philosophy.¹⁴

Philip Gleason observes the term was originally used in a material and physical sense connotating attributes of “permeance amidst manifest change, and of unity amidst manifest diversity.”¹⁵ In other words, the term was only used to describe the visible and physical attributes that a person or thing continually possesses despite environmental changes.¹⁶ This has been called the “common-sense” meaning of the term identity.¹⁷ The survey of the concept also brings forth the anachronistic nature and historicity of personal identity. In its prototypical stages, the concept was utilized in the “common sense” meaning. The axiomatic nature of identity in ancient times was based primarily on a physical conception. However, the Christian tradition also incorporates profound metaphysical considerations.

¹³ Phillipe Theron, “Devastating Grace: *Justificatio Impii* and I-identity,” in *Christian Identity*, ed. Eduardus Van der Borght, *Studies in Reformed Theology* 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 33.

¹⁴ Philip Gleason, “Identifying Identity: A Semantic History,” *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 4 (1983): 911.

¹⁵ Rogers Brubaker and Cooper Frederick, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 2.

¹⁶ While there are certainly earlier discussions about the constituent nature of man, the subject of identity, as currently understood, is an anachronistic term. Its contemporary usage was simple.

¹⁷ Brubaker and Frederick, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” 10.

Identity via Faith, Hope, and Love

Aurelius Augustinus (354-430), better known as Saint Augustine, is regarded as one of the most significant theologians in church history. His writings influenced the development of Western society and philosophy for over a millennium, and they continue to influence Christianity to this day. When considering the concept of identity, Augustine expressed what is contemporarily understood as identity in Christ through a ternary lens of faith, hope, and love. Few theologians made this tripartite theme so essential to their own theological thoughts as Augustine, and these characteristics fundamentally determine his view of Christian identity.¹⁸

In Augustine's view, faith is the "departing point" where one starts to leave the doctrines and beliefs of the world and beings to find the locus of their anthropological and identity understandings through faith in Christ.¹⁹ Thus, he believed people were unable to understand their true personal identity without a knowledge of God. However, Augustine conceived of faith much more than simply a willingness to give a vocal affirmation of belief in Christ. His concept of faith is found in the Trinitarian God of the Bible, and he argues that Trinitarian faith is the consistent and universal teaching of Christianity.²⁰ Consequently, the faith of those who follow the teaching espoused by Arius, namely modalism, is rejected by Augustine. Further, he believed identity in Christ also included belief in salvation by grace and a biblical understanding of sin.²¹ Thus, Augustine argues that faith which illuminates the Christian to self-identity is rooted in biblical trinitarianism and anthropology.

¹⁸ J. H. Van Wyk, "Christian Identity: Augustin on Faith, Hope, and Love," in Van der Borght, *Christian Identity*, 92.

¹⁹ Van Wyk, "Christian Identity," 93.

²⁰ Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, trans. Arthur W. Haddan, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1887), 20.

²¹ Van Wyk, "Christian Identity," 95.

While faith was the initial departure from the world, hope was a direct result of faith. Augustine did not undertake a particular treatment of hope in the Christian life. However, those who wish to know more about his theme of hope in this world should take up his work *The City of God*.²² The book is divided into two sections. The first, books 1-10, argues against those who blamed Christianity for the fall of Rome in 410. The second part, books 11-22, contains a metaphor of Christianity via two cities: the city of God and the worldly city. He explained the two cities' beginnings (book 11-14), their growth (books 5-18), and their purpose (books 19-22).²³ The principles that divide these two cities can be characterized by love, but they are also divided by a difference in what they hope for. In the worldly city there is a false hope, while in the city of God there is a genuine hope in God. Thus, his book is essentially a theology of hope.²⁴ It is essential, in Augustine's view, to define what a Christian is because the believer's hope for the city of God relativizes all trust and security in earthly and worldly kingdoms while opening the Christian's eyes to the domain of this secular world. Consequently, hope was ultimately a goal in Augustine's view, and that was realized in keeping one's fixation on the city of God while living in the worldly city.²⁵ While Augustine's particular description of faith illumined a person to understand God and their own nature, it was hope that allowed a person to trust in the world to come under the rule of Christ.

While faith in the Triune God led to hope in the city of God, love informed a Christian how to live in this world while awaiting the city of God. While last in his order of identity, it is the zenith of Augustine's identity for a Christian. To Augustine, love was

²² See Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dodds, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace, Series 1, vol. 2 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1887).

²³ Van Wyk, "Christian Identity," 96.

²⁴ Augustine, *The City of God*, 19.

²⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, 97.

the most important aspect of Christian identity, saying a “Christian without love is tantamount to a square circle,” even asserting that love served as the proper hermeneutic to interpret Scripture.²⁶ This claim is solidly backed by Scripture, in which the apostle Paul writes while faith, hope, and love remain in the world, the greatest of them is love (1 Cor 13:13). Therefore, Augustine’s semantic verbiage of faith, hope, and love was the locus in which he placed Christian identity. In Augustine’s view, a professing believer lacking in any of these characteristics was to not have a genuine identity in Christ.

Identity via Knowledge of God and Self

John Calvin (1509-1564) followed in the footsteps of Augustine and his predecessor, Martin Luther, in that God led the discussion in personal identity. Calvin continued to assert that one must know God to know themselves, and he described the concept of personal identity as “self-knowledge.”²⁷ He argued that man, being a fallen and sinful creature, will always have a false understanding of himself. He wrote that the evidence for his argument was obvious in man’s self-righteousness and pride. Only when God convicts a man of his sin will he begin to understand himself by first referencing the person of God. God then informs man of his true nature and identity. In this sense, the identity of man must then be revealed to him by God.²⁸ Once man has a revelation of himself, he then realizes his guilt before God and need of justification.

This is where man finds his identity: a sinner who is guilty before the God of the universe. From the perspective of the Reformation, personal identity is expanded to be forensic in nature because it centers on the doctrine of justification.²⁹ Man’s identity

²⁶ J. H. Van Wyk, “Christian Love as the Center and Zenith,” in Van der Borgh, *Christian Identity*, 99.

²⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 48.

²⁸ Theron, “Devastating Grace,” 34.

²⁹ Theron, “Devastating Grace,” 33.

has changed from one who is self-sufficient to one who is dependent, one who is self-righteous to condemned, and one who now sees himself as blind and needing a new vision and understanding of the world. Calvin pointed to biblical examples of those who attained self-knowledge when they stood in the presence of God. Therefore, a proper concept of self could only be attained with a proper concept of God.³⁰ Thus, for Calvin, personal identity centered heavily on biblical anthropology and justification. The knowledge of God and the self-knowledge of man is bound to a proper order, which “requires we treat the former in the first place, and then descend to the latter.”³¹

Identity in Body, Soul, or Both?

John Locke (1632-1704) was an English philosopher who greatly influenced Western thinking regarding social contract theory, politics, and epistemology. Like his philosophical predecessors, he too found God leading the conversation on matters of personal identity. Locke contributed to the philosophical understanding of identity in his second edition of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke sought to explain the idea of *principium individuationis*, or the principle of individuation, which focuses on what individuates, or makes distinct, a thing from others of the same kind.³² In other words, how do we know what makes one person different from every other person?

His interest seems to center on the doctrine of the general resurrection. He believed the problem was significant because it sought to answer questions about identity over time in relation to moral accountability. If a person at one time is the same person later in time, then he should be held responsible for past actions. When framed from the opposite direction, the statement becomes poignant. If a person at one time is not the

³⁰ Cf. Jdgs 13:22; Isa 6:5; Ezek 1:28; 3:14; Job 9:4; Gen 18:27; 1 Kgs 19:13.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 50.

³² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding: With the Second Treatise of Government* (Hertfordshire, England: Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, 2015), 27.1.

same person later, then he should not be held accountable for past actions. Therefore, from a Christian perspective, it is significant to understand what makes someone the same individual over time since the Bible teaches that man will give an account for his sins while in the body (2 Cor 5:10).

This question can have significant importance regarding biblical anthropology in that a human creature is a psychosomatic union of an infinite soul and a finite body. Yet, at the resurrection, the very same finite body that perished will be resurrected so that each individual soul will receive appropriate rewards and punishments for what each did while in that body. Considering these doctrines, Locke believed what makes an individual soul, person, human, or body, at one time or over time is important to understand how humanity will be eternally judged.³³ In other words, identity is intrinsic to accountability.

The question of the transfiguration or transubstantiation of the earthly body an individual possesses centers on what substantive changes it would undergo to be suitable for eternal judgement. This brings the question which asks, “can our physical bodies alone bear the burden of personal identity?” Locke questioned if the physical body could bear such a burden because, according to the Bible, it is going to change at the resurrection. If identity should be placed primarily in the physical body, then would the resurrected individual be the same individual who lived? Locke finds the physical body unable to bear such a burden alone and he seeks to ground personal identity in something else; something metaphysical. He looks for something that is not dependent on a material substance but something that can survive a change of substance.³⁴

Locke believed the body insufficient for personal identity because it would not

³³ Joanna K. Forstrom, *John Locke and Personal Identity: Immortality and Bodily Resurrection in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Continuum Studies in British Philosophy (London: Continuum, 2010), 7.

³⁴ Forstrom, *John Locke and Personal Identity*, 17.

endure eternal punishment, seemingly taking an annihilationist point of view.³⁵ In an unpublished essay “Resurrection et Quae Sequuntur,” he explicitly states that not all bodies are immortal. He makes clear that “the wicked shall not live forever in hell because the mortal body will burn out.”³⁶ While the relationship between body and soul is not meticulously delineated in Scripture, the questions raised are necessary because they are indispensable aspects of final judgement.

These concepts should be especially important to all Christians who understand Romans 6:6 to be speaking to identity and accountability. Christians have a previous identity, referred to as “the old man,” that has died. Because of that, Christians are “set free” from the judgement of God and are a “new self” (Eph 4:24). This identity change frees the Christian from the judgement of God.³⁷ Ultimately, the relationship between the soul and identity is necessary for FBC to consider because contemporary culture predominantly holds to a materialistic view of anthropology. The materialistic view of identity does not sufficiently consider the metaphysical soul in personal identity, and it is critical that FBC not make the same mistake.

Identity via Conscious Thought

Augustine, Calvin, and Locke started their philosophical deliberations of identity with God. What had been the Western tradition for 1,600 years began to change in 1641 with René Descartes (1596-1650).³⁸ Descartes is referred to as the father of modern

³⁵ For a fuller treatment of this view and critiques of it, see John G. Stackhouse Jr., “Terminal Punishment,” in *Four Views on Hell*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Preston Sprinkle, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 61-95.

³⁶ Forstrom, *John Locke and Personal Identity*, 18.

³⁷ For a biblical account, see Rom 6:6-11.

³⁸ While there were some earlier philosophical discussions of identity, the seminal work on identity in early modern philosophy is Descartes’ *Meditations*.

philosophy and is known for his mantra, “I think, therefore, I am.”³⁹ In his search for certainty about personal existence, his conclusion was a fundamental answer to human identity that shaped the rest of history.

His inquiry is recorded in the opening paragraphs of *Meditationse*. Descartes presents the contents of a diary he wrote in while on a retreat. In it, he described a thought process in which he seeks to suspend all belief in accepted truths and authorities and seeks to come to knowledge “not through authority, not through tradition, not through common sense, but through the rational interrogation of the world we now think of as natural science.”⁴⁰ His hope was that his personal intellectual journey would be assumed by his readers and, like Descartes, they would use their own native intelligence to decide for themselves who they are.⁴¹

He asserts that the traditional claims of ontological thoughts must now be set aside, including the existence of God and ideas of the self, and must now be subject to a rigorous epistemological scrutiny. While this may seem like a noble endeavor on its face, it was hardly genuine because he veiled his subversive intentions. Descartes believed the religious authorities and the entirety of their intellectual tradition were nothing more than “ignorance dressed up in fancy intellectual clothes” and “supported bigotry and superstition.” Descartes was not seeking to achieve objectivity, but revolution.⁴²

With the writing of *Meditations*, Descartes successfully inverted who led the conversation in personal identity. Barber writes that a new model replaced the old model, and the new model led the discussion regarding individuation where “ontological claims

³⁹ R. C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas: Understanding the Concepts That Shaped Our World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 86.

⁴⁰ Richard Francks, *Descartes' Meditations: A Reader's Guide*, Continuum Reader's Guides (London: Continuum, 2008), 11.

⁴¹ Francks, *Descartes' Meditations*, 10.

⁴² Francks, *Descartes' Meditations*, 10.

concerning the existence . . . of God . . . must be subject to the most rigorous epistemological scrutiny before one is entitled to accept those claims.”⁴³ He also wrote that the impact of such a reversal was immense, because the solutions that were once accepted without question are now “puzzling, incomprehensible, or in conflict with new ‘truths’ that have been discovered.”⁴⁴

With epistemology, and the inevitable multiplicity of variants, leading the way in the discussion of individuation, the stage for various concepts of individuation and identity was set. In a revolutionary manner, all thoughts are presented as having the same validity and authority as the Creator’s. For Descartes, personal identity could no longer be found in God; it was now found in conscious thought. Consequently, he believed the intellect functioned in a very distinct manner in that it is not simply a faculty by which a person can ascertain knowledge, but, as Emily Grosholz explains, it “confronts its own existence as well as that of the divine Other.”⁴⁵ Grosholz then concludes that Descartes effectively “sought to elicit scientific knowledge from the self’s intuition . . . which threatens the individual human spirit with dissolution in God.”⁴⁶ In other words, if Descartes’s own intuition did not conclude God was real, then God was not. If God did not exist, then God did not have any input regarding personal identity.

While Descartes did not have an orthodox view of Christianity, he did have an incredible influence on the church and philosophy. His philosophy paved the road for the Enlightenment and liberal Christianity. Identity could now be led by a person’s own thought, which was the sole standard for individuation and identity.

⁴³ Barber, introduction to Barber and Gracia, *Individuation and Identity*, 5.

⁴⁴ Barber, introduction to Barber and Gracia, *Individuation and Identity*, 6.

⁴⁵ Emily Grosholz, “Descartes and the Individuation of Physical Objects,” in Barber and Gracia, *Individuation and Identity*, 53.

⁴⁶ Grosholz, “Descartes and the Individuation of Physical Objects,” 56.

Identity via Id, Ego, and Superego

If Descartes was the father of modern philosophy, then Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was a dear son. Freud was an Austrian neurologist and has been referred to as the father of psychoanalysis, a process in which mental disorders are treated by examining the interplay between conscious and subconscious thoughts. This process brings forth repressed trauma and facilitates healing by the “energetic expression” of those events.⁴⁷

Freud advanced Descartes’ secular concept of identity by not only keeping God from leading the conversation but removing him from the discussion altogether.⁴⁸ With God discarded from his mind, he famously conceived of personal identity in three ways: the *id*, the *ego*, and the *superego*. The *id* comprised the primitive instincts of a person that encompasses the unconscious or subconscious urges and impulses. He conceived of personal identity as the *ego*, but there was the ideal *ego* or *superego*. The concept of the *superego* came from exterior social norms that were imposed upon the *ego*, and he claimed the *super ego* is the internalization of all the restrictions to which the *ego* must conform. In this sense, the *super ego* is always in competition with the *ego* to express its true self. This fundamental understanding of personal identity successfully completed the shift of human anthropology away from any supernatural components, such as the spirit or soul.

In shifting away from the supernatural, Freud shifted toward the sexual. He is known for proposing the five stages of psychosexual development in children: the oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital stages. Gleason notes that the term *identification* was

⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, “The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 11, no. 2 (1910): 184. Freud describes the process of retrieving traumatic incidents from a patient’s past via hypnosis and giving “free vent” to such memories. This “energetic expression” of this recollected trauma caused her symptoms to “vanish permanently.” This accurately summarizes the process of what has come to be called psychoanalysis.

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage), 1967. Months before his death, Freud showed his disdain for God and the Bible in his book *Moses and Monotheism*. In the book, he posited Moses was an Egyptian, not a Hebrew. He believed Moses was a priest for Pharaoh Akhenaten and proposed that Moses fled after Pharaoh’s death and continued teaching a pagan monotheism. He wrote Moses was later murdered by “savage Semites” who venerated Moses via reaction formation, a psychoanalytic behavior in which a murderer copes with guilt by worshipping the victim. All this was Freud’s hypothesis, which undermined God’s veracity and the Bible’s authority.

first utilized by Freud to “designate the process by which an infant assimilates to itself external persons or objects.”⁴⁹ In this psychosexual development, Freud employs the term *identification* as the earliest expression of an emotional and sexual association with someone, even if ambivalent.⁵⁰ His concept brought a particularly sexual nature to identity, especially genital pleasure.⁵¹ By this psychosexual analysis, Freud eventually changed the way Western society understands the self and personal identity, even providing Western culture with what has become the intuitive means by which to understand what it is to be human.⁵² Carl Trueman writes that Freud “provided a compelling rationale for putting sex and sexual expression at the center of human existence and all its cultural and political components in a way that now grips that social imaginary of the Western world.”⁵³ This set the stage for sexual autonomy and orientation to become a primary means by which secular culture proffers to FBC for finding identity and acceptance. This Freudian development will be valuable for FBC to understand just how contemporary culture arrived at the concept of a self-determined gender identity.

While Freudian ideas regarding identity and psychology were revolutionary, the concepts and practical application of them were confined to academic elites during his lifetime. Just a few years before his death, the original *Encyclopedia of the Social Science*, published in 1930, contains no entry for *identity*, and the entry headed

⁴⁹ Gleason, “Identifying Identity,” 915.

⁵⁰ Stuart Hall, introduction to *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), 3.

⁵¹ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of The Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 203.

⁵² Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of The Modern Self*, 205.

⁵³ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of The Modern Self*, 203.

“identification” references fingerprinting and methods of criminal investigation.⁵⁴ The emancipation from academia to the common household came from the perceived intellectual aura through technical vocabulary of psychology and the social sciences, which was pioneered by Freud.⁵⁵

In due time, Freud’s influence on the concept of personal identity in the Western world exploded in popularity. In the following decades, American culture became so enchanted with the concept of personal identity that academics developed an aversion to elucidate a clear definition because of the “sacredness” of the concept in society. Fearon asserts that those in the academy could find themselves in trouble if they surmise a meaning in conflict with present usage, and from a scholar’s point of view, he “hesitates to define the sacred, the ineffable, or the complex.”⁵⁶

The Current State of Identity in American Culture

This brief historical survey of the evolving nature of the usage of identity may illuminate the term’s current plight and what FBC is up against. Even a cursory survey of the historical concept and development of identity helps FBC understand the layers of conceptual and philosophical problems that accompany it. Given the historical debate and contemporary popularity of personal identity, it may come as a surprise that the modern understanding of identity is in its infantile stages. The topic of identity is “of unprecedented interest,” and the terms “personal identity” and “identity formation” were hardly used before 1960.⁵⁷ Those at FBC may not know otherwise because the value and pervasiveness of personal identity has made it puzzling to imagine otherwise.

⁵⁴ Edwin R. A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1930-1935), 573-74.

⁵⁵ Gleason, “Identifying Identity,” 922.

⁵⁶ Fearon, “What Is Identity?,” 2.

⁵⁷ Brian S. Rosner, *How to Find Yourself: Why Looking Inward Is Not the Answer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 15.

An even greater cause for consideration is the term's ubiquity is only superseded by its ambiguity.⁵⁸ Despite the historicity of the concept and the increase in common usage of the word, a clear and concise definition has proven elusive. Academia has only contributed to the perpetual problem with scholars, political scientists, and professors having "remained laggards" when it comes to defining identity.⁵⁹ Amazingly, Stuart Hall, a professor of sociology in the United Kingdom, offers further confusion with a Foucauldian, deconstructionist proposal in which the term "identity" is still to be used, but he no longer sees anything distinctive or true about the term. He argues it should be put "under erasure," wherein the term is "no longer serviceable."⁶⁰ However, since there is not a newly conceived word that succeeds the old term, Hall asserts the old term is still utilized in a "detotalized" or "deconstructed" form without the original meaning, and that the "line that cancels them, paradoxically, permits them to go on being read."⁶¹ Hall continues to describe identity as a "an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all."⁶² To borrow the phrase of John Calvin, such reasoning demonstrates "not one sound particle of brain."⁶³

The indiscriminate usage can be so confusing that some prefer abolishing the term in favor of more specific terms, arguing that the proliferation of meanings and subcategories causes the term "identity" to "lose its analytical purchase" so that it is "hopelessly ambiguous."⁶⁴ Clearly, the broad nature of a single word cannot bear the

⁵⁸ Gleason, "Identifying Identity," 1.

⁵⁹ Fearon, "What Is Identity?," 1.

⁶⁰ Hall, introduction to Hall and Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1.

⁶¹ Hall, introduction to Hall and Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1.

⁶² Hall, introduction to Hall and Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 2.

⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 379-80.

⁶⁴ Brubaker and Frederick, "Beyond 'Identity,'" 1.

semantic burden placed upon it.

An especially difficult factor in common usage is the *variable self*. From birth, secular culture would seek to place upon each person the weight of determining issues they were never meant to decide, such as which gender they are.⁶⁵ Some have gone so far as to determine their own species.⁶⁶ This phenomenon was unfathomable a generation ago, and the speed of the identity revolution has led to the inevitable result that makes many feel they cannot genuinely identify with their “parents, family, or place in society.”⁶⁷ Lacking true identity in Christ, and in order to secure a novel personal identity, John Kleinig asserts a type of exclusive tribalism has arisen that “includes them in the company of others who identify as they do and excludes those who do not share the same identity.”⁶⁸ The result is an increasingly eponymous identity that is increasingly defined by a singular characteristic and ends up dividing it from society, and in the end divides society.⁶⁹ This is not a novel problem, and Jesus anticipated such rapid changes in identity would have its collateral consequences (Matt 10:36). Even so, Jesus teaches this rapid and total identity change would be meaningful if found in him, not a new gender or species.

⁶⁵ Monica Hesse, “Was Their Child a Boy or a Girl? Naya’s Parents Wanted to Let Naya Decide,” *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-boy-or-a-girl-the-parents-of-one-young-child-let-the-child-decide/2018/09/18/18c0ec68-b6a4-11e8-a7b5-adaaa5b2a57f_story.html.

⁶⁶ Benjamin Lynch and Hannah Mackenzie Wood, “Teen Girl Who ‘Identifies as Cat’ Allowed to ‘Act Like a Feline’ in School,” *Daily Record*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/teen-girl-who-identifies-cat-27810580>.

⁶⁷ John W. Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021), 54.

⁶⁸ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 55.

⁶⁹ Jesse Washington, “Deion Sanders’ Exit from Jackson State Shows Why HBCUs Keep Struggling,” *Andscape*, December 5, 2022, <https://andscape.com/features/deion-sanders-exit-from-jackson-state-shows-why-hbcus-keep-struggling/>. Notice the racial division that is highlighted while forgoing any encouragement of unity between the two because they are both made by God, in his image, and for his glory. The racial identity that was the unifying trait has now become. The writer of the article, who shares an ethnic identity with Sanders, is now writing a scathing article against Sanders, even accusing him of thinking “the white man’s ice colder than ours.”

Though, in the midst of such confusion and complexity, some consistent uses in society and the academy provide rudimentary concepts and explanations, even if there is no necessary connection between them.⁷⁰

1. *Political impetus*. When identity is thought of in political terms, it then becomes the reason for individual and collective socio-political action without concern or regard for the interests of any larger political group. In contemporary terms, this has been referred to as *identity politics*.
2. *Communal sameness*. When conceived as a communal phenomenon, it denotes an essential and significant sameness in those of a particular group or category. This may be understood both objectively, such as unchanging physical attributes, and subjectively, such as autonomously determined social concepts.
3. *Invariable self*. When conceived of as a fundamental attribute of *self* or social being, the word is invoked to affirm or solidify an indispensable and core physical, mental, or social attribute, as opposed to those attributes which are temporal and fluid.
4. *Variable self*. When conceived as a temporal and tenuous product of competing ruminations, introspection, and social concepts, the concept of identity is invoked to describe the evanescent self.⁷¹

Between these uses of a single term—"identity"—there lies continuity, discontinuity, and contradiction. It is used to define permanent and enduring attributes of a person, while at the same time used to deny that such permanence endures for any reason, or no reason at all. It can describe collective solidarity within a group, or it can describe a person's individualistic and disjointed conception of self within a group with whom they share similarities. Dictionaries, academia, and vernacular continue this confusion.⁷² Consequently, while FBC is in a society where knowing identity has never been more important, it has also never been more difficult.⁷³

⁷⁰ Fearon, "What Is Identity?," 2. Fearon cites fourteen different definitions of identity from scholars.

⁷¹ Brubaker and Frederick, "Beyond 'Identity,'" 6. This list is a summary of the most consistent employments of the term today.

⁷² Fearon, "What Is Identity?," 6. While there is significant overlap among social scientists' definitions, the historical dictionary definitions of identity shares almost no overlap with social scientist until very recently.

⁷³ Rosner, *How to Find Yourself*, 13.

What Is FBC to Do?

How then is FBC to understand and utilize a biblical concept of identity in contemporary culture? Fearon noted the monumental challenge in utilizing identity when the multiplicity of varying, even contradictory, definitions “seem to evoke a recognition, so that none of them seem obviously wrong despite the diversity.”⁷⁴ In 1964, George Orwell offered advice to utilize the English language as an instrument for clear lucid communication. He argued that the “meaning should choose the word, and not the other way about.”⁷⁵ This describes the plight of “identity.” The word has been forced to take on too many meanings to be meaningful. If identity can mean anything, then it means nothing.⁷⁶ FBC could learn from Orwell’s wisdom by sifting through the biblical data and allowing the term “identity” to have the meaning which can be derived from the Bible.

A primary danger of the contemporary understanding of identity is that it places all of one’s “identity eggs in one or two baskets.”⁷⁷ FBC would make a significant error if it reduced any individual’s identity to one or two attributes. To think otherwise is to reject the manifold attributes that comprise one’s biblically grounded and holistic identity. While society is currently enduring a collective identity crisis, the Bible brings sustainable clarity, coherence, and unity that is able to lead FBC to find a genuine and settled identity in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit achieves this by applying the truths of Scripture in the hearts of those at FBC regarding humanity’s origin, identity with Christ, and his body in a local church.

⁷⁴ Fearon, “What Is Identity?,” 6.

⁷⁵ George Orwell, *A Collection of Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 168.

⁷⁶ Brubaker and Frederick, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” 1.

⁷⁷ Rosner, *How to Find Yourself*, 35.

Ultimate Identity: The Image of God

It is quite difficult to exaggerate how important a biblical view of anthropology is to identity in Christ. Theologian Anthony Hoekema observed nearly forty years ago that “people today are no longer much interested in questions about ultimate reality or ontology, but they are vitally interested in questions about man.”⁷⁸ Questions “about man” are framed today as questions of “personal identity,” and as “belief in God becomes more rare, belief in man is taking its place.”⁷⁹ While it is becoming more difficult for the secular person to ruminate over the Bible’s profound anthropological claims, it is becoming easier to talk to secular people about personal anthropology. Accordingly, FBC can help people understand their identity in Christ by leading evangelistic conversations with people’s favorite topic: themselves.

Disciples of Jesus Christ, via the revealed truths of the Bible, understand that all people have common ancestors in Adam and Eve who were created by God and in his image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27). All have the same father and mother, common ancestors that join humanity under a unified identity. The Bible informs humanity of a true anthropology and identity, which are given to humanity by God. In other words, human identity is not determined by man, it is revealed to man.

Identity Politics: The Gospel Impetus

Albert Mohler elucidated a recent sociological development in American culture commonly known as identity politics. He described it as a political philosophy that “expansively designates identity by race, social background, or gender, at the expense of other identities.”⁸⁰ In other words, identity politics regards political views as a predictable

⁷⁸ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 1.

⁷⁹ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 1.

⁸⁰ R. Albert Mohler, “The Power of the Gospel and the Meltdown of Identity Politics,” February 12, 2019, <https://albertmohler.com/2019/02/12/power-gospel-meltdown-identity-politics>.

result of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or other identities. Therefore, political views would be a result of identity markers, and it is antithetical to the gospel in that it “establishes human identity in differences rather than a commonality shared amongst all humankind.”⁸¹ In Christianity, political goals are predictable because they are based on eternal and unchanging truths; upon an anthropology that informs the identity and purpose of humanity in Christ. With that identity in place, the motive for political logic and action comes from God’s law, which is the Bible. Yet, while those at FBC are responsible for exercising political rights and cultivating a political culture in accordance with the Scriptures, there is a recognition that Christ is the ultimate political entity in which FBC place its trust. FBC should find allegiance, ethics, security, and political impetus in the gospel before civil politics (Acts 5:29). If this is accomplished, then identity is not found in politics but in Christ.

Communal Identity: The Local and Universal Church

Some sociologists note that when a society adapts to a secular concept of identity it comes with a dangerous byproduct: divisiveness. Hall concludes, “Identities can function only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out,” and render other identities “abjected.”⁸² Laclau concluded similarly when he said, “an identity’s constitution is *always* based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles.”⁸³ Contra a self-determined and divisive tribalism, the local church unites humanity in the shared identity of being made in the image of God. His people find their sociological identity in a unifying gathering: the local church. Some

⁸¹ Mohler, “The Power of the Gospel.” Not only this, but it also finds identity in anything other than Jesus Christ.

⁸² Hall, introduction to Hall and Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 5.

⁸³ Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, Phronesis (London: Verso, 1990), 33, emphasis original.

view this gathering of the body of Christ as simply that: a gathering. However, it is more than a simple gathering because a local church is essential to a Christian's communal identity.⁸⁴ Even so, there is also a universal identity through the universal, sometimes referred to the invisible, church throughout all ages. Jesus Christ unites his people from "every tribe, and language, and people, and nation" (Rev 5:9-10). Therefore, the local church provides true for sociological and communal identity in Christ.⁸⁵

Invariable Self: Identity by Glorifying God with the Body

Physical bodies are an indispensable part of human identity. Bodies place people in a specific set of concrete circumstances: time, space, society, family, marriage, and even a local church such as FBC. From the moment of birth to the deathbed, the physical body greatly affects one's pattern of life. It can enable a person to be a professional athlete, limit employment opportunities, or permanently confine one to a wheelchair or bed. Gregg Alison writes that the experience of life is mediated through the physical body, and the body is "the material aspect of human nature."⁸⁶ This extensive influence tempts those at FBC to find identity in their corporeal appearance and experience. John Kleinig has warned that Christians, such as those at FBC, could be tempted by secular culture to confuse how they look with who they are; to identify their bodies with their purpose.⁸⁷ In Christianity, true corporeal identity is found by utilizing the body to glorify Jesus Christ (1 Cor 6:20). Kleinig argues that biblical anthropology demonstrates people are psychosomatic creatures, and "since spiritual life is produced by

⁸⁴ Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 133.

⁸⁵ Cruse, *The Christian's True Identity*, 75-92.

⁸⁶ Gregg R. Allison, *Embodied: Living as Whole People in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 9.

⁸⁷ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 4.

the Holy Spirit for people with bodies, Christian spirituality is embodied piety.”⁸⁸

Finding identity in Christ is done not only by avoiding sin but also actively utilizing the body to bring God glory and honor.⁸⁹

In the Bible, the local church body is identified as “the temple of God,” and the owner of the temple of God is, in fact, God. Therefore, God is the sovereign who tells believers how to understand and utilize the body he has given them. Corporeal Christianity means Christians should be pursuing the use of bodily characteristics, ethnicity, nationality, gender, family of origin, or bodily age to glorify God.⁹⁰ If FBC can grasp the true purpose of the physical body, they can then find biblical identity in the body given to them.⁹¹

Variable Self: The Embodied Soul

The concept of a self-determined identity is not without its biblical basis. While the novel term “personal identity” does not have a precise correlating word in Hebrew or Greek, the concept does exist in many facets within the canon of Scripture. However, several words in the Bible specifically communicate the concept of identity or the personal self.⁹² Words such as “spirit,” “mind,” “heart,” “life,” and “soul” are among the words that can be translated as “identity.” These concepts are not material, not concrete. Therefore, they are the pliable and variable portions of identity in the sense that the heart and spirit (Ezek 36), mind (Rom 12), and the soul (1 Thess 5:23), are *variable*. These variable

⁸⁸ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 4.

⁸⁹ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to The Corinthians*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 129.

⁹⁰ Brian S. Rosner, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, ed. Jonathan Lunde, Biblical Theology for Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), chap. 3.

⁹¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 476. Thiselton rightly argues that the context means Christians are called to a higher level of slavery to Christ. However, this is also an anachronistic way to conceive of identity.

⁹² Rosner, *How to Find Yourself*, 58.

identities can be affected, and each individual at FBC should understand the volitional agency and responsibility in bringing about effect in themselves.

The Bible represents two paradigms in which FBC can accept or reject this responsibility: Adam and Jesus.⁹³ In Adam's initial rebellion against God, Brian Rosner stresses that Adam represented all humanity when he "asserted his personal autonomy and independence from God."⁹⁴ Essentially, Adam rejected his identity as God's son (Luke 3:38). In Matthew's Gospel, Satan's first two temptations of Jesus are predicated upon Jesus accepting his identity. Satan says, "If you are the son of God" (Luke 4:3; Matt 4:3) as a preface to his first two temptations. Parallels have been observed that indicate identity in both situations: (1) both accounts deal trusting the Word of God. Satan asks, "Did God actually say" and Jesus said, "It is written"; (2) both reveal the identity of the ones being tempted: Adam and Eve as those who doubt their Father and Jesus as one who trusts in his Father's word and will; and (3) both are paradigms for human identity: Adam sets the path to expressive individualism and death; Jesus sets the path for a new identity in him and eternal life.⁹⁵

The diabolical truth is that current culture tempts those at FBC to look to themselves as ultimate and to look inward, not upward, for personal identity. Current Western notions of freedom and fulfillment are diametrically opposed to the biblical understanding and application of identity.⁹⁶ By accepting the biblical data regarding identity, FBC can be alleviated from the social and cultural pressure of finding personal identity if they realize it is a mystery that needs to be revealed from God.

⁹³ Rosner, *How to Find Yourself*, 61.

⁹⁴ Rosner, *How to Find Yourself*, 62.

⁹⁵ Rosner, *How to Find Yourself*, 64-65.

⁹⁶ Rosner, *How to Find Yourself*, 66.

Conclusion

The philosophical issues regarding human identity are as old as humanity itself. Throughout the centuries, a multitude of different theories have been proposed to understand human identity. The conceptual history of identity and the lack of consensus makes any meaningful definition exceedingly difficult within any culture. Despite this, the biblical truths about identity are not absolved because.⁹⁷ The theoretical constructs of identity must ultimately conform to God's Word because God is the standard for truth and identity. Therefore, the entire basis of Christianity involves facing God's judgement about unbiblical and self-constructed identities.⁹⁸ In this sense, one could think of the entire story of the Bible as a critique of the self-made self.⁹⁹

Contra secular theories, human identity is a dialogue between God and humanity, and ultimately God is authoritative in the dialogue. This means that FBC can have confidence in Christ who assigns identity to his people despite the myriad of theories throughout history. The following chapter details the ministry project that sought to illuminate the riddle identity to FBC by placing it under the light of Jesus Christ.

⁹⁷ Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 36 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 19.

⁹⁸ Theron, "Devastating Grace," 40.

⁹⁹ Rosner, *How to Find Yourself*, 60.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

In the second letter which bears his name, Timothy was exhorted by the apostle Paul to remind the people he was shepherding that they were not to fight over the meaning of words, which leads to their ruin (2:14). To fulfill this, Timothy was to “rightly handle the word of truth” (2:15). This charge by Paul could be particularly applicable regarding how FBC discusses identity, individuation, and its application to the Christian life. This chapter describes the development, implementation, goals, and results of my ministry project to be found faithful to this ancient charge.

The purpose of this project was to help the people of FBC find their identity in Christ. To fulfill this purpose, I developed and implemented an eight-week preaching series. This project had three primary goals. The first was to assess the current knowledge of CCMs and the degree of identity association with them among participants. The second was to develop an eight-week sermon series on finding identity in Christ. The third goal was to reduce identity with CCMs and increase identity in Christ.

Project Development

In my initial ministry context, I had chosen to pursue a degree concentration in Practical Theology with the intent of developing a ministry project that focused on biblical church membership. However, after enduring a third ministry context in two years I came to realize the deeper and prevailing contextual barriers to gospel ministry. While biblical church membership was lacking within central Kentucky, a meager grasp of ecclesiology was merely a manifest symptom of a bigger problem—a lack of discipleship.

After living two years in central Kentucky and visiting multiple churches, I concluded that many who identified as Christians had an idolatrous concept of Jesus Christ, his church, and his word.¹ This gave rise to the impetus for the final project's focus and evolution throughout my time in the PDS program. Consequently, the novel concept of identity and its ancient relationship to idolatry came to the forefront of my studies to give shape to the paradigm of the ministry project. In turn, the change affected my purpose for the project. I initially aspired to implement a perpetual discipleship program at FBC. However, through the duration of my studies, I came to believe it was not so much a program but a philosophy which was most needed. This philosophical change would be realized through FBC attendees finding their identity in Christ.

Determining Parameters for Participants

For the philosophy to be successfully embedded at FBC, a significant commitment would be needed. Goal 2 of this project required thoughtful and sustained participation over several weeks. After that, a thoughtful response with the post-survey would be required. Therefore, a focus group who was able to meet these requirements needed was chosen to ensure the integrity and success of the project. This agreed upon commitment established clear expectations to complete the surveys and attend all the teaching sessions. Therefore, the project participants consisted of those who attended FBC, agreed to complete the pre-survey, listened to all the sermons in the series, and completed the post survey.

Situations, Spectators, and Songs

The situation of FBC at its inception was precarious. I honestly did not know if FBC would endure long enough to be afforded a ministry project. At the time of our first informal meeting, I had already completed my first seminar and was working on project

¹ After my first ministry context, I visited over a dozen churches. Several of them did not have a pastor at the time I visited. Not all of them were built upon a biblical model of a plurality of elders.

methodology. Everything was changing for the project in rapid succession—the ministry context, ministry project, venues, attendees, elder responsibilities, and goals. All this contributed to the project’s continual evolution until it was implemented. At the time of the implementation of the project, FBC was in its seventeenth month of existence. It had moved from a firepit in my backyard, to a rural home that permitted gatherings during COVID, to my basement, to renting a World War II era theater in downtown.²

Enhancing Education Environments

While I was thankful for every venue where FBC could gather, each location had its pros and cons which I had to work with to facilitate learning. Michael Lawson notes that everything about a teaching environment, including “its architecture, furniture, decorations, and policies,” affects the learning atmosphere. Furthermore, learning environments that are “more humane and stimulating” facilitate accomplishment of educational goals.³ The development of this project was again affected by the teaching environment in which it was implemented.

During the implementation of the ministry project, FBC did not have a nursery while meeting at the theater due to logistical and situational circumstances. Because of this, children of all ages sat with their parents, and the children needed a stimulating leaning environment. The room FBC rented at the Historic Downtown Theater consisted of a single gathering area with twenty-five-foot ceilings and the south wall painted solid white. By God’s gracious providence, I had met a total stranger in a coffee shop one block away from the Historic State Theatre who was giving away audiovisual equipment.⁴ Included in this donation was a twelve-thousand-dollar projector. I believed that

² At the time of writing this chapter, FBC had moved again to a hotel in Elizabethtown.

³ Michael S. Lawson, *The Professor’s Puzzle: Teaching in Christian Academics* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 122.

⁴ This gentleman was a non-commissioned officer in the Army who was responsible for reallocating audiovisual equipment to non-profit organizations when the government deemed it obsolete.

incorporating a large 15x25-foot projection screen on the south wall would make the experience more humane for the parents who needed children to be stimulated by the preaching. The preaching format would now include a PowerPoint and real-time annotations of relevant biblical texts projected in a massive display on the wall. These considerations greatly affected the development of the project. Whereas preaching is traditionally auditory, the sermon series would be a combination of audio and visual aids to facilitate retention and recall of the ministry project.⁵

Enabling Participation for the Project

At the inception of the project development, Fireside had four corporate services that consisted of the Sunday school, the Sunday sermon, small groups that met on Sunday evening, and a Wednesday evening service. The Wednesday evening service was well attended and chosen as the context in which to implement the ministry project. All the corporate gatherings were well attended, and this was encouraging. However, throughout the calendar year attendance for the Wednesday evening service would wax and wane. In retrospect, the elders noticed two primary contributors to the declining attendance on Wednesday evening.

First, during the spring and summer months, the Wednesday night service suffered low attendance. During the winter months, Wednesday evening service had great attendance. This pattern of turnout coordinated with the more rural constituency of FBC needing additional time during the warm seasons to work with their land and animals. Second, the component makeup of FBC is 40 percent adults and 60 percent children. Many of those children are under the age of ten. The Wednesday evening service started at 6:30 p.m. and lasted until 8:00 p.m. Families with young children were not able to participate given the evening format. Howard G. Henricks said, “The mind cannot absorb

⁵ Larry Richards and Gary J. Bredfeldt, *Creative Bible Teaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2020), 203.

what the seat cannot endure.”⁶ Parents’ brains were unable to absorb information because little children’s bottoms could not endure sitting during the hours in which they needed sleep. Given the fall season and evening venue when the project was to be implemented, it was decided that the best venue would not be the Wednesday evening service but the Sunday sermon. While the change of venue would facilitate the greatest amount of participation, it also required a change from a teaching format to a preaching format.

Sound Theology Produces Doxology

Theology is merely the study of God, and orthodox theology is indispensable to the health of a local church. A result of faithful and biblical theology is doxology, which is an expression of praise to God. God designed theology to lead to doxology. In other words, genuine worship of God is always a biblical response to God’s Word.⁷ They are inextricably connected. Orthodox doxology is intrinsically involved in this project because it is the invariable result of orthodox theology. Therefore, Christian worship is the proper response to the revelation of God.⁸

In developing and implementing this project, a holistic approach was taken to bring about a significant statistical change in knowledge. So, while not explicitly outlined in the methodology, coordinating the music with the project was deeply considered to incorporate additional means of teaching the truths posited in chapter 2. The coordination consisted of the worship team leading the congregation in three songs which oriented the congregation to the main point each week prior to the sermon. After the sermon, a song was sung which corresponded with the sermon’s call for response to the sermon.

⁶ Howard G. Hendricks, quoted in Lawson, *The Professor’s Puzzle*, 175.

⁷ Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 91.

⁸ David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 26.

Promotion, Dissemination, and Interpretation

Promotion for the project formally began on July 1, 2022. An announcement was made on each Sunday morning thereafter that a sermon series was going to be taught that addresses the issue of cultural Christianity and its concomitant idols. The promotion made the participants aware they were engaging in a doctoral project which involved empirical research. While I initially thought this information would deter participation, many said it piqued their interest in participating because it would be helpful to see the results of the survey and how the church would be affected by it.

The sermon series sought to address cultural Christianity and was titled “Identity and Idolatry: We Resemble What We Worship.” The series title was from Richard Lints’s *Identity and Idolatry*, and the subtitle was a summary from G. K. Beale’s *We Become What We Worship*. The primary theme Beale’s volume is that “we resemble what we revere, either for ruin or restoration.”⁹ On July 17, 2022, the pre-survey was disseminated electronically to the congregation via Google forms with instructions to complete the survey by August 6, 2022. Two reminders to complete the survey were sent out to the congregation to facilitate timely submission.

All attenders at FBC were encouraged to participate; however, there was not a mandate or expectation that everyone at FBC must participate. By the August 6 deadline, 24 participants had agreed to the conditions of participation. The sermon series started on August 7, 2022, and it was completed on September 25, 2022.

Weeks 1-2: Promotion and Dissemination

The ordering of topics within the sermon series took place in a four-week period between July 1 and July 29. This allowed the worship team adequate time to select and practice the music around the main point of each sermon and to choose a song that was an

⁹ G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 22.

appropriate call to response to facilitate a deeper impact of the preaching series. Psalm 135:18 and Psalm 115:8 were the primary texts that guided the series. The subject matter of every sermon in the preaching series was grounded in a particular author’s work on the subject preached that week. Details of each sermon were delayed until the pre-survey results were received and interpreted, which allowed the series to be influenced by the pre-survey results for maximum effect.

Next was an interpretation of the data. As anticipated, the data from the pre-survey was critical in refining the final sermon series. The pre-survey data affected the fine-tuning of the project in three primary areas: understanding discipleship, cultural Christianity, and the most common cultural idol FBC struggles against.

What is discipleship? One of the most striking data points revealed in the demographics portion of the pre-survey was the participants’ differing conceptual framework of discipleship. All participants clearly exhibited a knowledge of what discipleship is, but they did not have a shared definition of what discipleship is. Some operate with a strict sense of discipleship while others operate within a more robust understanding.

Table 1. Participants’ concept of discipleship

Item	Yes	No
1. Are you currently being disciplined by someone at Fireside?	8	11
2. Have you been regularly attending a Going Deeper Group?	19	0

A disciple is simply a follower. In a broad sense, everyone is a follower of something or someone, whether biblical or secular. Within a biblical context, a disciple is a follower of Jesus. However, many participants seemed to operate with a narrow sense of the word. In essence, many responses exhibited an understanding that discipleship only happens on an individual basis, which was manifest when 100 percent (19/19) of participants reported that they regularly attend a Going Deeper Group (GDG), where a

focused discipleship takes place. It is focused in that there is a smaller group of people than the group that attends the Sunday sermon. Each GDG examines the Sunday sermon and is led by an elder of FBC. The attendees bring questions, discuss prominent points of the sermon, and are exhorted to make personal application of the text that was covered that morning. Even with 100 percent attendance, 42 percent (8/19) responded they are not “currently being disciplined by someone at Fireside.” Consequently, while participants have unanimous attendance in discipleship groups, more than half do not believe they are being disciplined. This demonstrates the participants seem to believe that discipleship does not, or cannot, happen in a communal environment.

This vital piece of data, if left unaccounted for, could undermine the project itself. The reason for the potential undermining would be that the very purpose of this project was to combat nominal Christianity, which is exemplified by professing belief in a biblical truth and not conforming to that truth. Therefore, if a definition of discipleship was not delineated, then it could be perceived that this project is strictly emphasizing one-to-one discipleship and not actually practicing it, thereby inadvertently facilitating the nominal Christianity this project sought to counter.

Additionally, this narrow understanding of discipleship could lead those who attend a GDG to fall into a latent understanding that these groups are primarily about fellowship, and not discipleship. If this were the case, then GDG attendees may neglect mental and spiritual preparation to participate in the GDG discussion or fail to participate altogether. Accordingly, a definition of discipleship that captures the biblical scope and utility of the word was incorporated into the sermon series.

What is cultural Christianity? Another critical interpretation of the pre-survey data was properly assessing the participants’ conceptual grasp of cultural Christianity. This was essential because, like discipleship, terms and definitions needed to be well

defined to facilitate clear communication. The pre-survey revealed critical information needed for precise and effective communication.¹⁰

Table 2. Participants’ understanding of cultural Christianity

Item	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
9. I understand what “cultural Christianity” is.	0	1	2	4	4	8

Of participants, 36 percent (7/19) only “agree somewhat” they understood the concept of cultural Christianity, while only 63 percent were confident enough to agree or strongly agree with the statement. This indicates that the term or concept, or both, may be new to more than a third of participants and therefore needed a clear explanation. Another factor to consider is while a majority express agreement with understanding what cultural Christianity is, it is not a guarantee that they possess the same definition. Unless there is a consensual definition to work with, there cannot be unity in a solution to the issue. A concise, clear, and precise definition was critical to avoid confusion and enable the success of the project.

The idol of control, expressed in sinful anger. The pre-survey also indicated that the idol of control was the most culturally respectable or acceptable sin, and therefore indicative of what idol had a foothold in the lives of those within FBC. It is not surprising that anger is a culturally acceptable, or a “respectable sin,” that is tolerated because it is so prevalent.¹¹

¹⁰ For table 2 and the following tables, “SD” stands for “strongly disagree,” “D” stands for “disagree,” “DS” stands for “disagree somewhat,” “AS” stands for “agree somewhat,” “A” stands for “agree,” and “SA” stands for “strongly disagree.”

¹¹ Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007). See chap. 15 for Bridges’s assessment of anger.

Table 3. Participants' knowledge about the idol of anger and control

Item	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
29. Anger hinders a person's ability to understand the Bible.	2	4	0	8	2	0

When analyzing the data from the pre-survey, I was surprised that those who participated did not connect the sin of anger to idolatry and an inability to understand the Bible. Of the 19 participants, only 11 percent (2/19) agreed in full that the sin of anger hindered a person from understanding the Bible. This was surprising to me, mainly because, in general, sin innately inhibits understanding God.

Biblical data teaches that sinful anger is the manifest expression of wanting to be God. In other words, sinful anger is the idolization of self-will. How can a person who wants to be God truly understand him when comprehension of him entails submission to him and not a desire to be him? The entire premise of Christianity is submission to the will of God, not self. The pre-survey indicates that anger is a cultural idol that may have a foothold at FBC. Therefore, it was even more pertinent that clarity be brought to what anger really is: the visible expression of a desire to be God.

The results may be attributed to what the word "understand" is meant to convey in item 9. Contemporary meanings of *understand* could simply be taken as an intellectual ascent or mental affirmation of what the Bible claims. Biblically speaking, understanding does not simply mean a mental grasp of conceptual ideas which the Bible presents, but must also accompany a moral conformity to those ideas.¹² When someone understands the Bible, they obey it. It seems that 73 percent (14/19) of participants were unconvinced of this. The pre-survey allowed me to analyze this data and address the issue of what "understanding" the Bible means.

¹² Daniel J. Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 68-69.

Utilizing the data from the pre-survey. The pre-survey was effective in identifying potential misconceptions and miscommunications about discipleship and cultural Christianity. Once identified, the potential hinderances were mitigated. It also indicated what is the most prominent cultural idol might be. These data points were taken into consideration and the preaching series was adjusted accordingly. When these adjustments were made, the preaching series was ready to commence.

Week 3: Cultural Christianity

The title of the sermon in week 3, which was the same as the sermon series, was “Identity and Idolatry: We Worship What We Revere, whether for Ruin or Restoration.” I primarily utilized Beale’s *We Become What We Worship* as the principal resource material in the formation of the sermon.¹³ The sermon had three objectives: establish the definition of cultural Christianity, establish the problematic nature of cultural Christianity, and establish how these problems personally apply to people at FBC.

The first objective was accomplished by highlighting Moses’s explicit description of the infamous narrative at Mount Sinai and the golden calf (Exod 32). To elucidate the first objective, I provided historical context regarding why Aaron fashioned a golden calf as opposed to any other creature. In the ancient near east, and particularly in Egypt, a calf was a common medium by which a deity could be contacted. Three main cults in Egypt utilized calf imagery to communicate with their deity, and the Israelites were very familiar with them after four centuries of living in Egypt. Thus, I framed the worship of the golden calf at Mount Sinai as the first explicitly biblical instance of cultural Christianity. Israel simply took cues from Egypt on how to communicate with God by fashioning a calf as a representation to communicate with God. I posited that American Christians are susceptible to the same principles in that we take cues of how to

¹³ Beale, *We Become What We Worship*.

conceive and worship God from American culture, and those principals warrant the same label Moses gave them: idolatry.

The second objective was accomplished by using the biblical author's description of false worship and its effects throughout Scripture. The problems in the ontological and unethical nature of cultural Christianity were apparent in Moses's assessment: it is a sin worthy of death. However, Scripture elucidates idolatry's effects on the fallen human heart. Idolatrous humans resemble what they revere. Therefore, if idols are false, then humans "become false" (2 Kgs 17:14-15). If idols are dumb, deaf, and blind, then idolaters are spiritually dumb, deaf, and blind (Ps 135:15-18; Rom 1:21-23).

The third objective was accomplished by giving an invitation to carefully consider the origins regarding their conceptions of God, his church, and his Word. In the pattern of Moses, I sought to place the Word of God before the people so they could decide who they were going to follow—God's Word or cultural conceptions about God?

Week 4: Expressive Individualism

In week, I titled the sermon "The American idol: Expressive Individualism." To craft this sermon, I utilized *How to Find Yourself: Why Looking Inward Is Not the Answer* by Brian Rosner.¹⁴ Rosner posits that Western culture has invented expressive individualism as a psychologically acceptable way to idolize the self. Americans, in turn, make themselves and their wants their idols. This sermon had two objectives: (1) describe the concept of "expressive individualism" as a socially acceptable, culturally psychologized, repackaged idolization of the self; and (2) establish manifest symptoms of expressive individualism for FBC's discernment and self-examination.

The first objective was accomplished first by describing the natural state of unredeemed humanity in scripture (Gen 6:5; Jer 17:9; Heb 3:12; Jas 1:13-15). In this

¹⁴ Brian S. Rosner, *How to Find Yourself: Why Looking Inward Is Not the Answer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

unredeemed state, humanity's sinful heart is inclined to develop identities that are hostile to God and his Word. American culture perpetuates this sinful ideology through the pervasive perpetuation of expressive individualism via cultural mantras such as "be true to yourself," "follow your heart," "be yourself," and, the most recent and hippest version, "you do you."¹⁵ Biblically, identity is revealed from God. When God regenerates a person's heart, he regenerates their identity as well (2 Cor 5:17; 1 Pet 2:9; Col 3:3). Christians are not to seek individualistic ways of self-expression, but Christocentric ways to express the truths of the gospel. The second objective was accomplished by describing manifest symptoms of expressive individualism that Christians intentionally or unwittingly imbibe.

These symptoms are expressed cognitively thought ideas and beliefs such as:

1. The best way to know your personal identity is to look inward.
2. Happiness is the ultimate goal in life.
3. Morality cannot be objectively grounded; it is an opinion or emotion.
4. You are the ultimate authority in life.
5. Personal freedom is essential to societal progress.
6. Individual choices and freedoms must be celebrated by others.
7. Sexuality, gender, economic, and ethnic aspects are most fundamental aspects to establishing personal identity.¹⁶

Each of these points in their own fundamental way is incompatible with the regenerate identity God has revealed to his people. Therefore, God's people are not to look inward for their identity, but are to look upward, toward God. At the end of the sermon, Psalm 135:18 was read with a reminder that if FBC attendees resemble what they worship, then Sunday worship is a critical time of the week to worship Christ so that they resemble him rather than themselves.

¹⁵ Rosner, *How to Find Yourself*, 23.

¹⁶ Rosner, *How to Find Yourself*, 23.

Week 5: Feminism

The sermon for week 5 of the project was “Feminism: The Contemporary Ideology for Women.” This may have been the most controversial ideology in the project, and I took care to note that while ideology is focused on women, its affects are felt across the culture. The focus of the pulpit teaching was on the history and development of this ideology. Mary Kassian’s *The Feminist Mistake: The Radical Impact of Feminism on Church and Culture* was utilized to provide a historical and philosophical framework of feminism and its rise in popularity in American church and secular culture.¹⁷ The sermon was constructed with three objectives: (1) establish the definition of feminism; (2) establish secular origins of feminism; and (3) establish feminism’s secular logic.

The first objective was accomplished by utilizing Kassian’s definition of feminism as an idea that “proposes that women find happiness and meaning through the pursuit of personal authority, autonomy, and freedom.”¹⁸ It was crucial to establish that this definition was not in reference to any happiness or meaning at all, but the happiness and meaning humanity is designed to find in Christ. The second objective was accomplished by utilizing influential figures in feminism and their stance toward the Bible. Simone De Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Shulamith Firestone, and other notable feminists were among those identified in the sermon. Their shocking and biblically antithetical worldview was manifest by using numerous quotes from their published writings. These women, along with their communicable ideology, are wholly opposed to biblical Christianity.

The third objective was accomplished by establishing the demands of feminism and how they are antithetical to the Bible. Specific demands of feminism referenced were liberation from biblical gender roles of women, being a wife, motherhood, church, traditional sexuality, and female biology itself. The logic of feminism would invariably

¹⁷ Mary A. Kassian, *The Feminist Mistake: The Radical Impact of Feminism on Church and Culture*, rev. ed (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).

¹⁸Kassian, *The Feminist Mistake*, 1.

lead to a rejection of God, his Word, and the local church. After the objectives were accomplished, a call to response was given utilizing Psalm 135:18. The call was a reminder that if FBC attendees resemble what they worship, then they must respond by reverently worshipping the God who created the two sexes, the biblical roles assigned to those sexes, and a repudiation of ideologies that are antithetical to God and his Word.

Week 6: Greed

The sermon title in week 6 of the project was “Greed: The Idol of Wealth and Possessions.” To construct the sermon on week six, I primarily utilized Brian Rosner’s *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of the Pauline Metaphor* to elucidate the connection between greed and idolatry.¹⁹ I also utilized Craig Blomberg’s *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* to help convey how to actively worship God with wealth and possessions.²⁰ This sermon sought to accomplish two objectives: (1) establish the Pauline language in Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5 as metaphorical; and (2) establish Paul’s metaphorical condemnation via inordinate trust, devotion, and affection toward money and material possessions.

The first objective was accomplished by noting that the readers of Paul’s letter were not overt idolaters. A distinction of “degrees of idolatry” was made during week 3 and was reinforced here. The greater degree of idolatry prohibits a relationship with God. That is, those who conspicuously worship a graven image or a deity of money as a pattern of worship are not Christians. Neither are those who do it inconspicuously within their heart. However, Paul affirms the readers at Colossae and Ephesus as believers (Eph 1:1; Col 1:1). Even so, Paul dealt with idolatry in both Ephesus and Colossae because it still impacts Christians in that it inhibits a relationship with God. This lesser degree of idolatry

¹⁹ Brian S. Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007).

²⁰ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015).

is what Paul metaphorically warns of, and it affects contemporary American Christians more than is perceived. Being a lesser degree, Christians are still commanded to repent of it, or the punishment ascribed to the greater degree of idolatry will result (Col 3:6). This ultimate punishment is merited because lesser degrees of idolatry become first degree idolatry in the heart if continued.

The second objective was accomplished utilizing other texts of Scripture to substantiate the metaphorical claims of Paul. Love of money keeps one from trusting, serving, and obeying God (Luke 16:13; Gal 4:8; Heb 13:5; 1 Tim 6:10; 2 Tim 3:2; 1 John 2:15). After the sermon, a call to response to worship God over money was given to the congregation. Jesus said that no one can worship both God and money. Those who try to do so will fail to glorify God in this life and receive condemnation in the next (Matt 6:24).

Week 7: Anger—Control and Anger

In week 7, I sought to address the culturally acceptable idol of control, which is manifest in sinful anger. The sermon was titled, “The Heart of Anger: Not Your Will, but Mine.” To construct this sermon, I utilized Christopher Ash and Steve Midgley’s *The Heart of Anger: How the Bible Transforms Anger in Our Understanding and Experience* to explain the link between anger and idolatry.²¹ This sermon had two objectives: (1) define anger and then differentiate between sinful and righteous anger; and (2) name and describe degrees of culturally acceptable anger, but still demonstrate they are all varying degrees of wanting to be in the place of God. In short, any degree of sinful anger is idolization of self-will over the will of God.

The first objective was accomplished via various Scriptures that demonstrate righteous anger by showing it was a characteristic of God (Ps 7:1), that one can be angry and not sin (Eph 4:26), and that Christians who are entirely void of anger are in sin (Ps

²¹ Christopher Ash and Steve Midgley, *The Heart of Anger: How the Bible Transforms Anger in Our Understanding and Experience* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

97:10; Rom 12:9). Therefore, righteous anger occurs when a Christian observes an offense against God and exhibits anger in accordance with the will of God (Exod 32:19; 1 Sam 11:5-6; Acts 17:16; Matt 3:7). However, the anger that is most dealt with on a daily basis in the life of a Christian is sinful. This sinful anger manifests when the will of the sovereign God of the Bible does not align with his creature's will. From rebellious children, insubordinate co-workers, to weather patterns, people manifest sinful anger when circumstances are not what they desire, and they want to control them. Therefore, the utilized definition of sinful anger was an unholy anger that manifests when the human will and the will of God do not accord.

The second objective was accomplished by describing various emotions that can grow from the same root of anger: resentment, bitterness, irritation, grumbling, competitiveness, sarcasm, indifference, envy, and even depression. In various ways, these various degrees and expressions of sinful anger are touted as socially acceptable from American culture, and each of these have the potential to be borne out of a desire to be in the place of God. After the sermon there was a call to put away anger by submitting to the will of God, which is a rudimentary definition of what it means to be a Christian.

Week 8: Spiritual Adultery

Week 8 brought the topic of spiritual adultery with the title of the sermon being “Spiritual Adultery: Desiring both God and Idols.” The sermon drew upon Raymond Ortlund’s *God’s Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery* to establish how sin is related to spiritual adultery.²² I also utilized Brian Rosner’s article “The Concept of Idolatry” to detail the relationship between idolatry and spiritual adultery.²³ This sermon had three objectives: (1) define spiritual adultery; (2) reveal the biblical purpose of

²² Raymond C. Ortlund, *God’s Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

²³ Brian S. Rosner, “The Concept of Idolatry,” *Themelios* 24, no. 3 (1999): 117.

marriage; and (3) establish the spiritual parallel of infidelity to committing adultery against God.

The first objective was accomplished by employing Ortlund's definition that spiritual adultery consists in "the lingering wish to retain the world's favor even as one also wishes to enjoy the benefits of redemption."²⁴ I expanded upon this definition to include trying to retain the practices of the world as well.²⁵ The second objective was accomplished by utilizing texts of Scripture that utilize infidelity language when Christians desire to retain friendship with the world (Deut 1:35; 32:5; Matt 12:38-39, 16:4, Mark 8:38; Lk 9:41; Acts 2:40; Jas 4:4-5).

The second objective was accomplished by an exegesis of Ephesians 5:31-32. In this text, fidelity to God is lived through the exclusive nature of the marriage relationship. Violating the marriage covenant by bringing a third party into the relationship is adultery. While this is apparent, its spiritual parallel is often neglected.

The third objective sought to explain how affection for anything that supersedes the affections due to God are sinful and inordinate. This sinful and inordinate affection was labeled as spiritual adultery. The teaching closed with a call to worship Jesus so that the people at FBC resemble Christ more than the culture in which they live in (Ps 115:8; 135:18).

Week 9: Finding Identity in Christ

The final two sermons in the project turned the focus from the problem of cultural idolatry to the ordinary means to counter it: biblical discipleship. The primary resource utilized in the formation of the teaching was *Deep Discipleship: How the*

²⁴ Ortlund, *God's Unfaithful Wife*, 143.

²⁵ It is important to make such a distinction. I personally would like to enjoy the benefits of redemption and retain the favor of my secular government. However, to do so through illicit behavior is altogether different. Ortlund does expand upon this, but it is not included in his definition.

Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus by J. T. English.²⁶ The sermon was titled “How to Find Identity in Christ: Biblical Discipleship,” and it sought to achieve three objectives: (1) to establish the definition of discipleship; (2) describe attributes of a biblical disciple; and (3) describe how the efficacy of discipleship produces deep change.

The first objective was accomplished by utilizing English’s definition from *Deep Discipleship* when he describes discipleship as one Christian completely reorienting another Christian to reality via the Word of God (Rom 12:2; 1 Pet 1:14).²⁷ These Scriptures and their implication were expounded upon the sermon.

The second was accomplished by utilizing Scripture to enumerate explicit attributes of a disciple such as having a teachable heart (Prov 1:8-9; 12:15; 15:5), having a teacher (Heb 13:17), pursuing biblical knowledge with all their being (Matt 13:45-46), and assimilating knowledge (Luke 6:46; Matt 15:7-9).

The third objective was accomplished by pointing to Scriptures that describe the effectual means by which discipleship happens (Jer 31:31; Ezek 36:25-27). I then described biblical means of discipleship as the process of the Holy Spirit applying the promises of God in the life of every believer. Subsequently, a call was given to each person in the congregation to examine their lives and see if they are a true believer of Christ or the culture.

Week 10: Identity in Christ via His Body

In the series finale, the sermon focused on the ordinary means by which discipleship is administered: the local church. The sermon was titled, “Finding Identity in Christ through His Body: The Local Church.” The primary source for structuring this

²⁶ J. T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus* (Nashville: B & H, 2020).

²⁷ English, *Deep Discipleship*, 21.

sermon was Bobby Jamieson's *Growing One Another: Discipleship in the Church*.²⁸ This sermon sought to establish a healthy local church as the divinely ordained means of biblical discipleship. I sought to do this through two objectives: (1) establish the context in which the New Testament portrays discipleship taking place: the local church; and (2) establish the local church members' responsibilities that they are charged with to facilitate genuine discipleship.

The first objective was accomplished by demonstrating the biblical charge to the local church elders to guard the truth of God's Word, guard the flock, and guard the integrity of the church (Acts 17:11-12; 1 Tim 3:14-15; 4:6; 6:20-21; 2 Tim 2:1-12, 13-14). This demonstrates the consistent view of the New Testament where biblical discipleship is inherently seen as being under the care and protection of biblically qualified elders. Since elders are the overseers of a local congregation, and not simply individual believers, biblical discipleship must take place under the care of elders who guard the congregation from false teaching. The second objective was accomplished by highlighting pertinent passages of Scripture where certain responsibilities are placed the local congregation to hold the church members accountable for their teaching and obeying (1 Cor 5:13; 2 Cor 2:5-11; 1 Tim 4:6).

After the conclusion of the sermon series, the post sermon series survey was distributed electronically to project participants. Each participant was reminded to choose a PIN, which made their survey responses completely confidential. They were given a deadline is October 9 to have the survey filled out in its entirety.

²⁸ Bobby Jamieson, *Growing One Another: Discipleship in The Church*, Healthy Church Study Guides (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

Post-Survey Results

When the post-survey results were received, nineteen participants successfully fulfilled all the requirements to be included in the results. The *t*-test revealed a statistically significant growth from those who participated in the ministry project.

Table 4. Results of the *t*-test

	Sample 1	Sample 2
Mean	199.6842105	218
Variance	451.7836257	507.7777778
Observations	19	19
Personal Correlation	0.783521214	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	18	
t Stat	-5.522341052	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.000015205	
t Critical one-tail	1.734063607	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.00003041052	
t Critical two-tail	2.10092204	

The mean scored from the pre-survey raised an average of 18.7 points in the post-survey, and the absolute value of the *t*-stat was greater than the *t*-critical value. This change was a definitive indicator that the participants' increased score on the post-series was due to the sermon series and not happenstance.

Particular Efficacy

While the general efficacy of the project was demonstrated through the *t*-test, a few items demonstrated noteworthy growth and merit further attention, with two items increasing more than a full point.

Table 5. Areas of significant increase

Item	Pre-survey	Post-survey	Change
41. Every person in the world is a disciple.	3.89	4.42	0.53
28. I understand the connection between anger and idolatry.	4.68	5.52	0.84
33. It is a positive and good thing for God to be characteristically jealous.	4.47	5.73	1.26
29. Anger hinders a person's ability to understand the Bible.	2.84	5.47	2.63

I was pleased to see such growth regarding 41 because it brings awareness that FBC is always going to follow something or someone. Thus, it brings an awareness to the binary choice of discipleship: Jesus or something else. With item 41, the growth indicates a conscious and volitional choice to identity with Jesus, much like Joshua did when he said, “And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh 25:15).

Item 28 was also significant in that the pre-survey indicated this was a cultural idol that the participants likely dealt with. The post-survey results are encouraging because they indicate genuine progress in conformity to Christ and not the cultural idol of control. I cannot help but think that anger is such a common sin in the lives of believers that the initial willingness to affirm the connection to idolatry seemed like a bridge too far. However, the sermon proved effective in helping FBC make the correlation between an inordinate want for circumstantial control, which is desiring to be in the place of God. The data is indicative of not simply an intellectual ascent to the data, but item 29 demonstrates a recognition of the effects of anger.

Regarding item 33, if anything about God's nature and character is often lacking or misunderstood, then it would be an understanding of his jealousy. The biblical concept of God's jealousy is viewed in a positive sense because the one who is jealous desires exclusiveness in the relationship. A lack of jealousy would be condoning idolatry. The increase of more than a full point is indicative of comprehension of how their

identity should be found ultimately in Christ. The increase was more than a full point, and that was encouraging because it showed FBC's willingness to follow the Bible's teaching on the subject.

Conclusion

This project was constructed in four distinct stages: development, situational considerations, promotion, and implementation. Most importantly, the research was constructive for the participants who were faithful to invest their time and effort to participate to benefit from this work. While this project required an exceptional amount of time and energy, its benefits and rewards proved worthwhile. The project had its strong points, and there are certainly areas of improvement which could have strengthened it. The following chapter delineates the statistical results, strengths, weaknesses, personal and theological reflections, and concluding thoughts regarding the project.

CHAPTER 5

MINISTRY PROJECT EVALUATION

This chapter presents an evaluation of the efficacy of the ministry project, starting with the achievement of its purpose. Each of the three goals that guided this project were successfully fulfilled. These goals were assessing the church, developing a sermon series to preach through, and creating a statistical increase in Fireside finding its identity in Christ. Subsequently, I offer insights regarding strengths and weaknesses of the project to be helpful in possible implementations in other local churches. A conclusion follows with theological and personal reflections regarding the impact this project had upon myself, my family, and FBC.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to help FBC members find their identity in Christ. This project was proposed three years ago when FBC was first planted. At the time, I was stepping into a newly appointed elder position that carried responsibilities predominantly regarding discipleship and education. The impetus of this project arose from an observation among Christians and churches who were primarily influenced by CCMs and practices over and against biblical norms and obedience. This lack of biblical grounding, which in large part is due to a lack of discipleship, resulted in churches and Christians failing to be Christocentric. Instead, they are predominantly centered in CCMs and practices. To discharge my duties as an elder in the church, I sought to research and address the most pertinent obstacles that inhibit finding identity in Jesus Christ in FBC's ministry context.

Evaluation of the Project Goals

Three goals were proposed to accomplish and measure the efficacy of the purpose of the project. Each goal was chosen as a particular step by which the purpose could be accomplished. As one goal was successfully completed, the next goal commenced until the completion of the project.

Goal 1: Assessment

The first goal of the ministry project was to assess the current knowledge of CCMs and the degree of identity association with them among participants. FBC. This goal was considered fulfilled when nineteen congregants accepted the terms of participation, completed the pre-survey, and the information was analyzed to yield a clearer picture of the current CCM knowledge and identity association. This goal commenced on July 17, 2022, and concluded on July 31, 2022. The pre-survey asked specific questions regarding current participation in discipleship, conceptual understandings of discipleship, idolatry, cultural Christianity, and the role of the local church in discipleship.

What is discipleship? One of the most striking data points revealed by table 1 in the demographics portion of the pre-survey was a strict conceptual framework of discipleship which the participants possessed.

A disciple is simply a follower. In a broad sense, everyone is a follower of something or someone, whether biblical or secular. Within a biblical context, a disciple is a follower of Jesus. However, many of the participants operated with an extremely narrow sense of biblical discipleship. In other words, many participants exhibited an understanding that discipleship only happened within a one-on-one context.

This strict concept was manifest when 100 percent (19/19) of participants reported that they regularly attend a Going Deeper Group (GDG), where a focused discipleship takes place. Yet in the pre-survey they noted they were not being discipled. Each GDG is led by an elder of FBC and examines the Sunday sermon. The attendees

bring questions, discuss prominent points of the sermon, and are exhorted to make personal application of the text which was covered that morning. Even with 100 percent attendance, 42 percent (8/19) responded they are “not currently being disciplined.” Consequently, while all participants attended discipleship groups, more than half do not believe they are being disciplined. The survey revealed that the participants’ framework of discipleship does not, or cannot, happen in a communal sense.

There could be several reasons for this narrow view of discipleship. First, it is possible the leadership of FBC has not sufficiently explained the concept of discipleship prior to implementing the project. In the New Testament, discipleship happens from the pulpit (Acts 14:21), in small groups in homes (Acts 2:46; Matt 11:1), in individual settings (Jn 4:7-27), or when parents teach their children (2 Tim 1:5). While both a broad and narrow sense of discipleship was covered during the ministry project, often it takes repetition of a concept before it becomes internalized. A second reason could have been the verbiage used in the survey, which asks if they are currently “being disciplined.” Completing the survey already required the participants attend Sunday morning service, where preaching occurs. Therefore, discipleship would be understood as something different from sitting under preaching. This unintended distinction may be a reason why participants would see preaching or teaching as communal and discipleship as individual.

Finally, a reason for a narrow understanding could be a false concept of tiered levels of disciples. This belief asserts various levels, or tiers, of the Christian life. There could be a “Carnal Christian” and a “Spiritual Christian” who is disciplined (1 Cor 3:1).¹ In common vernacular, this is often explained in terms of one being a “non-practicing” and “practicing” Christian who is an active disciple of Christ. Other terms describing the same phenomenon include “Christian” and “Spirit Baptized Christian.”² Participants

¹ Ray E. Baughman, *The Abundant Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 52-57.

² See Ralph Del Colle, “Spirit Baptism: A Pentecostal Perspective,” in *Perspectives on Spirit Baptism: Five Views*, ed. Chad Brand (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 47.

could have made a subconscious distinction between being a disciple of Jesus who attends church and a disciple of Jesus who attends church and receives individual mentorship. The latter would be a higher level of Christianity that involves individual mentorship. In my experience, this concept is a prevailing view of Christianity in FBC's geographical and spiritual context. While these details may not have been consciously weighed when completing the survey, it could have been a latent manner of thinking that influenced responses.

In any regard, the participants seemed to have made a distinction that discipleship only happens on an interpersonal level. This vital piece of data that, if left unaccounted for, could undermine the project itself. The reason for the potential undermining would be that the very purpose of this project was to combat nominal Christianity, which is exemplified by professing belief in a biblical truth and not conforming to that truth. Therefore, if a definition of discipleship was not delineated, then it could be perceived that this project was strictly emphasizing one-to-one discipleship and not actually practicing it, thereby inadvertently facilitating the nominal Christianity this project sought to counter. Additionally, this narrow understanding of discipleship could lead those at FBC who attend a GDG to fall into a latent understanding that these groups are primarily about fellowship, not discipleship. If this were the case, then GDG attendees may neglect mental and spiritual preparation to participate in the GDG discussion or fail to participate altogether. Accordingly, a definition of discipleship that captures the biblical scope and utility of the word was incorporated into the sermon series.

What is cultural Christianity? Another critical portion of the pre-survey was properly assessing the conceptual grasp the participants had of cultural Christianity. This was essential because terms and definitions needed to be made clear to facilitate clear communication.

Of participants, 36 percent (7/19) could only “agree somewhat” that they understood the concept of cultural Christianity, while only 63 percent of participants

were confident enough to agree or strongly agree with the statement. This indicates that the term or concept, or both, may be new to more than a third of participants and therefore needs clear explanation. Another factor to consider is while a majority express agreement with understanding what cultural Christianity is, it is not a guarantee that they possess the same definition. Unless there is a consensual definition to work with, there cannot be unity in a solution to the issue. The data indicates that a concise, clear, and precise definition is critical to avoid confusion to enable the success of the project.

The idol of control, expressed in sinful anger. The sermon series covered multiple idols and ideologies throughout the implementation of the project. The pre-survey indicated that the idol of control was the most culturally respectable or acceptable sin, and therefore indicative of what idol had a foothold in the lives of those within FBC. It is not surprising that anger is a culturally acceptable or a “respectable sin” that is tolerated because it is so prevalent.³

When analyzing the data from the pre-survey I was surprised that those who participated did not connect the sin of anger to idolatry and an inability to understand the Bible. Of the 19 participants, only 11 percent (2/19) could agree in full that the sin of anger hindered a person from understanding the Bible. This was surprising to me, mainly because the biblical data teaches that sinful anger is the manifest expression of wanting to be God. In other words, sinful anger is manifest idolization of self-will. How can a person who wants to be God truly understand him when comprehension of him entails submission to him and not a desire to be him? The entire premise of Christianity is submission to the will of God, not self. Given that the data indicates the participants did not understand the connection between idolatry and anger, it is even more pertinent that clarity be brought to what anger really is: the visible expression of a desire to be God.

³ Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins* (Colorado Spring: Navpress, 2017), chap. 15.

The results may be attributed to what the word “understand” is meant to convey in item 9. A contemporary understanding could simply be taken as an intellectual ascent or mental affirmation of what the Bible claims. Biblically speaking, understanding does not simply mean a mental grasp of conceptual ideas that the Bible presents, but it must also accompany a moral conformity to those ideas.⁴ When someone understands the Bible, they obey it. Of participants, 73 percent (14/19) seemed to be unconvinced of this. The pre-survey allowed me to analyze this data and address the issue of what the biblical concept of understanding conveys.

Summary. The pre-survey was effective in identifying potential misconceptions and miscommunications about discipleship and cultural Christianity. Once identified, the potential hinderances were mitigated. It also presented a helpful assessment of the concept of discipleship and illuminated how to address the narrow concepts of discipleship that many participants held. It also helped to identify the most prominent cultural idol that I would address during the implementation of the project. All data points were taken into consideration and shaped how the project was implemented.

Goal 2 Results

The second goal was to develop an eight-week teaching series on finding identity in Christ. The interventions created for this project were shaped by theological and philosophical data, as outlined in chapters 2 and 3. The preliminary sermon outlines were conceived prior to the pre-survey being completed by the participants. Each specific sermon was written after receiving and analyzing data from the pre-sermon series.

The primary premise of chapter 2 was that all people are, by nature, idolaters. Christians, although possessing new hearts which have turned from idolatry to worship Jesus Christ, continue to struggle with idolatrous tendencies. These idolatrous tendencies

⁴ Daniel J Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 68-69.

work against believers by the temptation to find their identity and purpose through cultural identities, activities, and associations. The biblically prescribed means to mitigate these sinful tendencies and facilitate turning away from idols and to Christ is discipleship.

Furthermore, in chapter 3, the concepts of identity proved to be numerous and even contradictory. The Bible is the ultimate standard of truth, and it speaks to all issues that humanity wrestles against. Therefore, while the secular world may struggle to find consistent philosophical and ontological meanings for the concept of identity, the Bible experiences no such issue because God has actively revealed his creature's identity to them. It is the duty of the church to receive identity from God.

The topic of each sermon was selected by careful consideration of contextual idols and ideologies. The primary topics addressed were expressive individualism, feminism, greed, control, and spiritual adultery. After the cultural idol and ideologies were presented, two biblical means were presented to help FBC find identity in Christ. They were biblical discipleship and the local church. With this foundation in place, the preaching series was developed. The goal was considered met upon completing the sermon series.

Goal 3 Results

The third goal of the project was to reduce identity with CCMs and increase identity in Christ. This goal was accomplished by producing an increased statistical change in knowledge comparing the participants' pre-sermon surveys and post-sermon surveys. This change was a definitive indicator that the participants' increased score on the post-series was due to the sermon series and not happenstance. A *t*-test revealed a statistically significant growth from those who participated in the ministry project.

The mean scored from the pre-survey was raised an average of 18.7 points in the post-survey, and it also showed that the absolute value of the *t*-stat was greater than the *t*-critical value. While the general efficacy of the project was demonstrated through

the *t*-test, a few items demonstrated noteworthy growth and merit further attention, with two items increasing more than a full point (see table 5).

Item 41: Everyone is a disciple. I was pleased to see such growth regarding this survey item because it brings awareness that FBC is always going to follow something or someone. Thus, it brings awareness to the binary choice of discipleship. The choice is simply Jesus or something else; not both. This forces a conscious and volitional choice, much like Joshua did when he said, “and if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh 25:15). Thus, Joshua rightly makes the assertion that those not choosing to be discipled are choosing “evil.” By God’s grace, may this not simply be the answer FBC affirms but also the daily choice FBC members make hereafter.

Item 28: The connection between anger and idolatry. I cannot help but think that anger is such a common sin in the lives of believers that the initial willingness to affirm the connection to idolatry seemed like a bridge too far. However, the sermon proved effective in helping participants make the correlation between an inordinate desire for circumstantial control, which is desiring to be in the place of God. The data is indicative of not simply an intellectual ascent to the data, but a Spirit-led desire to conform to it. May God empower FBC to do just that.

Item 33: God’s jealousy. If anything about God’s nature and character is often lacking or misunderstood, it would be an understanding of his jealousy. The biblical concept of God’s jealousy is viewed in a positive sense because the one who is jealous desires exclusiveness in the relationship. A lack of jealousy would be condoning idolatry. The increase of more than a full point is indicative of comprehension of how their exclusive identity in Christ is a direct correlation to their fidelity to him. The increase of more than a full point was encouraging because it showed that participants are willing to study and accept a biblical concept with which they are less familiar.

Item 29: Anger hinders biblical comprehension. The largest growth indicated in the post-survey was how the sin of anger affects biblical comprehension. This item received more than a two-and-a-half-point increase. I postulated from the pre-survey results on item 29 that there was a shared cognitive dissonance when answering this question. If sin keeps a person from knowing and understanding God, then why would anger be any different? I prepared the sermon to explain why anger hinders someone from internalizing biblical imperatives and principles. In the post-survey, participants agreed with God's Word that anger, in its most primitive form, is idolatry. Anger is idolatry made manifest, because it is a visible and emotional expression of opposition to his power and providence. Therefore, those who oppose God do not comprehend him, nor do they submit to his will. If identity is an agreeable association with someone or something, then Christians must be agreeable to the providential circumstances in daily life. The increase indicates there is major increase in identifying with Christ in his providence in the participants' daily lives.

Summary. The goals of this project were accomplished as they helped participants find identity in Christ. As the project progressed from week to week, the ministry project also served to bring a stronger unity in identifying with Christ's body, Fireside Baptist Church. Those at Fireside who were not participants in the survey also expressed a greater unity in understanding identity in Christ and his body, which facilitates unity because the congregation has solidified communal doctrinal beliefs.

Strengths of the Project

The success of the ministry project was not due to any single factor. However, among all the synergetic factors to produce the desired results a few were primary to accomplishing the project's purpose. These were the germane methodology within FBC's context, internal and external approach utilized, and the value placed on God above idols.

The Correlation to FBC's Context

The project's greatest success was the philosophical focal point of the purpose. Cultural values affect every aspect of our lives, even though many may not realize it. Cultural Christians, by definition, are unaware why their own culture is antithetical to the Bible itself. However, even those who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit after being indoctrinated by CCMs are often unaware of the cultural values or doctrines they hold which contradict Christianity. Discipleship consists not only of learning about Christ, but continually unlearning the sinful aspects of a culture they exist within. James Pleuddeman gives an excellent illustration:

Two young fish are swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way. The older fish says, "Good morning, boys, how's the water?" The two young fish swim on for a bit, and then one of them eventually looks over at the other and asks, "What is water?" An old Chinese proverb says, "If you want to know about water, don't ask the fish."⁵

The greatest strength of the project was pulling FBC out of the cultural waters in which they had been swimming and letting them take a deep breath of exegetical air. Many at FBC expressed wonder at the idolatrous waters they have been inhabiting their whole lives. My hope is that God would continually use the foundation laid by this project to give FBC discernment and discipleship to live faithfully in a crooked and perverse generation (Phil 2:15).

The Philosophical Approach

When I initially chose discipleship as the focus of my doctoral studies, I envisioned implementing a discipleship program that could be perpetually utilized in the church. Through my studies, I came to believe the most needed aspect of discipleship was not a program but a philosophy. So, while the correlation to FBC's context would be cultural Christianity, the philosophical approach of CCMs and idolatry was a strength of this project. The strength lies in the repulsiveness of a Christian being associated with

⁵ James F. Plueddemann, *Teaching across Cultures: Contextualizing Education for Global Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 39.

idolatry. Idolatry was considered one of the worst sins imaginable. This is confirmed by the death penalty being the legal punishment for such an infraction through the entirety of the witness of scripture (Exod 22:20; Rev 21:8). However, just like idols in Israel, the pull of cultural idols on the hearts and minds of believers at FBC is unnoticed and continuous. Though, when believers were made aware of idols within their context, they often demonstrate a sincere repentance because the Spirit convicts them of their grievous nature. This is a significant strength in the efficacy of the project.

The Value of God versus Idols

Finally, an implied theme throughout the entire sermon series was the unjustifiable value of idols posited by culture. They are worthless (John 2:8; Jer 10:1-10; Isa 44:9-11). Whether it be the value feminism places on corporate success, or greed places on material possessions, the church has often failed to understand what is true and valuable (Rev 2:9, 17). With the implementation of the project, the congregation received manifold reminders to rightly value God over what culture proffers, and by the Spirit the church received the truth of the pecuniary assessments of cultural idols.

Weaknesses of the Project

This project had several strengths, but it also had weaknesses. While many weaknesses could be acknowledged, I will address those that could have been corrected. These weaknesses are foremost found in my own failings with creating a better survey and a failure to implement a sermon evaluation rubric.

Improve the Survey

First, the survey should have been better prepared. The development of items, wording of the items, avoiding confusing language, framing the language in a similar manner, differentiating between questions and items, and placement of the answers were all information I did not utilize in the formation of the survey. While there were not any

fatal flaws that invalidated the survey, it could have enhanced the assessment of goal 1 to bring about a greater efficacy in the survey and the entire project.

Second, the survey was too long. I included fifty total survey items in the survey. With such a large number of questions, participants may have experienced mental fatigue from trying to thoughtfully engage each question, which may have affected the accuracy of the participants' responses and thus affected the efficacy of the project.

Third, the demographics could have been structured in a manner more supportive of goal 1. I asked participants' age, yet that information was not relevant in the assessment of FBC's overall concept of identity and idolatry. Also, I asked how many years the participants have been attending church, and I was unable to utilize this information to make the ministry project more effective.

Finally, while item 29 received the largest increase of any items within the survey, it also could have been due to the item needing an improved wording. Nuances to the question could have been clarified within the item itself, and this may have changed the post-survey result. Specifically, the word "understand" could have been changed to "obey." While item 29 is still a valid question, a revised wording could have produced a different result.

Evaluation Rubric and Applied Empirical Research

A significant weakness of the project was not utilizing an expert panel to evaluate and improve the sermon series. While this ultimately did not compromise the integrity of the project, it was a significant failure to utilize available resources to improve the project. This was affected foremost by the sequence of the courses I took while in the DEdMin program. Had I given closer attention to how each course is planned in correlation with the ministry project, I would have taken the class earlier to help me better develop the ministry project. While I will not know with any certainty just how much the project could have been improved, I believe the project certainly would have

experienced improvement had I utilized a panel to provide multiple perspectives and constructive criticism.

What I Would Have Done Differently

Hindsight is 20/20, and from this perspective I would change a few things if I were to implement this project again. This is the first ministry project in Fireside's short history, and there was a steep learning curve in its implementation. However, the three primary things I would have done differently include a written curricula with the sermon series, incorporate additional research, and extend the sermon series to address additional cultural idols.

Developing a Written Curriculum

Had I the opportunity to do this ministry project again, I would include a written study guide to accompany the sermon series. While this would add a significant amount of effort into the project, I believe the return on investment could increase the statistical change to an even greater degree. The advantage is more time to consider over the sermon material prior to each Sunday morning. This additional time would afford deeper contemplation and application of the material covered and would allow for reviewing the material for anyone who wished to go back and re-familiarize themselves with what was covered. It could also be adjusted for future considerations or cultural issues which Christian identity would be affected.

Additional Research

Second, I would like to have researched the concept of identity as it related to consummation in the heavenly realm. I became aware of the concept much too late into the project to incorporate it, but it seemed an intriguing concept. In short, there is a biblical theology which sees Christians being incorporated into the family of God in the heavenly realm as the final consummation of Christian identity. This was particularly fascinating to me because it brings closure to the concept of identity. Most of my research

and reading specifically addressed identity in this life. However, I found little research regarding identity in the life to come. It may help to avoid thinking along widely accepted errors such as believing that humans become angels when they get to heaven.

Extended Project Implementation

The number of idols that the human heart creates are myriad. This project could have easily addressed twenty or more cultural idols. When a culture desires to make Christianity in its own image, the number of idols that replace God are staggering. I would have included more teaching sessions on the contextual history of idols that are prominent in American history. American Exceptionalism and pragmatism are two concepts I would have liked to incorporate into the ministry project.

I was introduced to American Exceptionalism when I took church history, and it helped me understand why Americans are instinctively prone to identify American with Christianity. Many churches in the context of Fireside seem to equate being patriotic with being a Christian. Also, pragmatism was an interesting topic I wished to cover in the sermon series, and I believe it is a primary culprit in the spread of cultural Christianity.

Theological Reflections

I did not begin this project with a focus on identity and idolatry, I simply wanted to make disciples at FBC. Although I had a theological foundation of how I conceived of identity from a biblical perspective, I was quite unaware of the nuances and controversy associated with the concept of identity. Through this ministry project, my understanding of Christian identity has been enhanced exponentially. Idolatry is foremost an activity of the heart, not the hands. Thus, the fidelity of the soul's devotion of thoughts and affection to the Lord Jesus Christ cannot be overstated. Jesus values this more than anything else among his creatures made in his image. If believers have an inordinate affection toward anything else, they are valuing the gift over the giver. The inordinate affections and devotions are the reason the jealous wrath of God is coming (Col 3:5-6). In short, the

focus of the Christian life must be vertical, not horizontal. Christians must focus their thoughts and affections not on what is invisible but on what is invisible (2 Cor 4:18).

Personal Reflections

While this project came with a great deal of theological reflection, it has also caused a great deal of introspection. Each sermon in the project brought to light areas of consideration for me as well. During the development of this project, numerous things did not go as I had planned. Everything from writer's block, fatigue, responsibilities with my five children, additional responsibilities with the church, having a bi-vocational status while in the DEdMin program full-time, and just dealing with my own sin kept me from making the progress and product I would have wanted. In the midst of it all, I struggled with the idol of anger. When things did not go my way, several times I expressed frustration and manifest anger. The project greatly helped me resist coveting the power to control all circumstances in life, and it greatly helped me be content with the stresses and difficulties of life. As Job said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). The narrator then reveals Job's heart when writing, "In all this, Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (Job 1:22). This project helped me grow in a manner similar to Job. May I be able to let go of the idol of anger and control, and not sin against God or charge him with wrong.

Conclusion

The completion of this project represents the foundation on which discipleship will be built upon for the coming seasons of Fireside Baptist Church. This project facilitated identity with Christ and helped in unifying the church by strengthening a communal identity in his body. While this project presented a specific purpose with clear and measurable goals, my hope is it is used by the Lord to continually make disciples who, from one degree of glory to another, find identity in Christ (2 Cor 3:18).

APPENDIX 1
RISK ASSESSMENT AND INFORMED
CONSENT GUIDE

The following agreement informed FBC attendees of expectations and requirements to participate in the ministry project.

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate in designed to help you find your identity in Christ. This research is being conducted by G. Wayne Luna for the purposes of a research project. In this research, you will participate in a survey in which you will give basic demographic information and answer questions regarding culture, personal beliefs, and life practices. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

I agree to participate

I do not agree to participate

APPENDIX 2

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE FOR MINORS

The following agreement form was given to parents of participants who were under the age of eighteen years.

Agreement to Participate

You are being requested to give permission for a minor or member of a venerable population under your legal supervision to participate in a study designed to help them find their identity in Christ. This research is being conducted by G. Wayne Luna for the purposes of conducting a research project. In this research, a person will fill out a survey and provide basic demographic information and personal views regarding culture, faith, and lifestyle. Any information will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will a person's name be reported, or a person's name identified with his or her responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary, and the person you are giving approval to participate in this study is free to withdraw at any time.*

By signing your name below, you are giving informed consent for the designated minor or member of a venerable population to participate in this research if he or she desires.

Participant name _____

Parent/Guardian Name _____

Parent/Guardian Signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX 3

CCM KNOWLEDGE AND IDENTIFICATION SURVEY

The following survey was used to assess participants' knowledge of CCMs and their degree of identity association with CCMs.

Section 1: Demographic Background

The first section of this questionnaire will obtain some demographic information.

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

1. Are you currently being disciplined by someone at Fireside?
 Yes
 No
2. Have you regularly been attending a Going Deeper Group?
 Yes
 No
3. How many years have you been a believer?
 0-5
 6-10
 11-15
 16-20
 21 years or more
4. What is your age in years?
 14 or less
 15-17
 18-24
 25-30
 31-35
 36-40
 41-45
 46-50
 50-55
 56 years and older

Section 2: Biblical Foundations

Directions: Answer the questions and statements below using the following options:

(1) place a check by multiple-choice answers, and (2) based on the following scale, circle the option that best represents your agreement with the statement:

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, DS = Disagree Somewhat,

AS = Agree Somewhat, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.

1. Idol worship is a major problem in America.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
2. I have committed the sin of idolatry.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
3. From time to time, I fight the sin of idolatry.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
4. I understand what idolatry is.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
5. I understand what “cultural Christianity” is.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
6. In pain, suffering, or trials – I look inside myself to find peace and strength.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
7. From time to time, my heart is inclined to my own wants and desires above what God wants.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
8. Striving after self-centered wants and desires is idolatry.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
9. I understand how my life is “hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3)	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
10. Following my dreams, goals, and aspirations will bring me fulfillment.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
11. I understand the idea of feminism.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
12. Feminism is compatible with Christianity.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
13. I am comfortable with explaining the origin and logic of feminism.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
14. Feminism helps women to be bold and confident.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
15. I am comfortable explaining the differences between “complementarianism” and “egalitarianism.”	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
16. I am greedy.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

17. From a material perspective, I am rich.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18. Material wealth makes my life easier.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
19. When Paul says, “greed is idolatry” (Col 3:5; Eph 5:5), he is saying greedy people are literally worshipping a false god.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
20. I understand how the Bible directs me to steward my wealth and possessions.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
21. Anger is a serious sin.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
22. From time to time, I struggle with frustration, anger, or rage.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
23. I understand the connection between anger and idolatry.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
24. Anger hinders a person’s ability to understand the Bible.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
25. It matters that people think well of me.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
26. When I think of God, I think of his jealousy.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
27. From time to time, I provoke the jealousy of God.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
28. It is a positive and good thing for God to be characteristically jealous.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
29. I am comfortable in my understanding of why God would be jealous.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
30. I am comfortable explaining the differences between human jealousy and the jealousy of God.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
31. I highly regard church membership at Fireside.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
32. The idea of church membership is clearly in the Bible.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
33. Fireside must have church membership to be a healthy and flourishing church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
34. Becoming a member at Fireside is vital for my personal growth with Jesus.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
35. Membership at Fireside means there is a significant difference in my participation in the responsibilities of the church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

36. Every person in the world is a disciple.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
37. I want to disciple others.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
38. I am comfortable explaining the connection between the local church and effective discipleship.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
39. I am comfortable explaining the process of discipleship	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
40. I want to be discipled by someone at Fireside.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
41. I am comfortable explaining the connection between church membership and effective discipleship	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

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ABSTRACT

FINDING IDENTITY IN CHRIST AT FIRESIDE BAPTIST CHURCH IN ELIZABETHTOWN, KENTUCKY

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023
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This ministry project was designed to equip the congregation of Fireside Baptist Church in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, to counter cultural idols. The purpose of equipping was to help the congregation find their identity in Christ. Chapter 1 explains the context, rationale, purpose, goals, and methodology of the project. Chapter 2 describes the biblical and theological concept of idolatry based on exegesis of Romans 1:18-32; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; and 1 Corinthians 10:1-22. Chapter 3 reviews the historical development of the concept of identity while providing a Christian framework by which to understand it. Chapter 4 describes the implementation of the ministry project from conception to analysis of statistical results. Chapter 5 presents an assessment of the purpose, goals, strengths, and weaknesses of the project. It concludes with personal and theological reflections and suggested changes.

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