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INCREASING THE UNDERSTANDING OF DISCIPLESHIP AT
CHICAGO WEST BIBLE CHURCH THROUGH THE
CREATION OF AN INTENTIONAL DISCIPLESHIP
PROCESS AND CURRICULUM

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For the glory of God

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	vi
LIST OF TABLES	vii
PREFACE.....	viii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Context.....	1
Strengths and Weaknesses.....	2
Rationale	5
Purpose	8
Goals	8
Research Methodology	8
Definitions and Delimitations.....	9
Conclusion	10
2. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE PROJECT.....	11
Discipleship and Spiritual Formation in the Old Testament.....	11
Jesus and Intentional Discipleship.....	16
Multiplication: The Fruit of Discipleship	19
Discipleship: The Model for Paul and the Early Church.....	22
The Church: God’s Instrument for Kingdom Expansion and Work	29
3. CONTEXTUAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES RELATED TO THE PROJECT.....	33
Cultural and Generational Diversity	33

Chapter	Page
The Use of Technology.....	37
Christian Consumerism	40
The Impact of Covid-19.....	42
Division and Conflict in the Church.....	46
Trauma in a Context of Violence	50
Conclusion	53
4. DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT.....	54
Summary of Project Goals.....	54
Project Preparation.....	55
Project Implementation.....	58
Project Overview	59
Conclusion	67
5. EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT	69
Evaluation of the Project Purpose.....	69
Evaluation of Project Goals	70
Strengths of the Project.....	72
Weaknesses of the Project.....	74
Things I Would Do Differently.....	77
Theological Reflections	79
Personal Reflections	81
Conclusion	84
Appendix	
1. PROJECT SURVEY RESULTS.....	86
2. PRE- AND POST-DISCIPLESHIP SURVEY	88
3. APPLICATION PACKET FOR DISCIPLESHIP TRAINING.....	90
BIBLIOGRAPHY	93

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EMS Evangelical Missiological Society

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. CWBC pre-survey example	57

PREFACE

This project has been completed in large part due to the loving mercy of Christ Jesus my Lord. His constant grace, love, mercy, and wise counsel has led and carried me through the years and through this project. My attempts to learn and grow in this area of making disciples have allowed me to experience a deeper intimacy with my Savior. For this, I am grateful.

Second, I am thankful for my loving wife who has been a constant source of encouragement, tender love, and grace during our marriage and my education. Her love for Christ has often lifted my heart with the strength and support that I have needed to keep going. She has persevered through the good and bad in my life and I am forever indebted to her. Her consistent gospel witness has made me a better man, husband, father, friend, and follower of Christ.

Third, the Lord has blessed me with many amazing godly men and women who have modeled what it means to walk humbly with the Lord my God. There have been men full of meekness like Pastor Kent Steiner who has served alongside me and spurred on my faith in the Lord. There are godly families like the Pryors who have consistently modeled what a life of prayer looks like in Christ followers. I think of Daniel Trusty, the only man who took the initiative to disciple me when I was young and immature. There are countless others who have spoken truth into my life, held me accountable, and stood with me in challenges and hardships. I am also grateful for all the professors from my bachelor's degree until my doctoral degree who took the time to invest in me.

Fourth, I am honored and humbled to serve the body of Christ at Chicago West

Bible Church. They have welcomed me as a brother in the Lord and have often allowed me the safe space to express myself transparently and authentically. Many have lived out the *one anothers* toward my family and have been a place of joy and care for us. I find it a great gift from heaven to be entrusted to shepherd this flock.

Lastly, I am grateful for my mother who has supported and pushed me to be better my entire life. Her words of encouragement, her financial sacrifice, her long-suffering with my moments of ignorance, and her ability to help me keep my eyes on the goal have all been an enormous gift. She has shown me unconditional love and stood with me through some of my darkest hours. I am a better man because of her. She has been a steady instrument of God's grace to me and has taught me that anything is possible if you are willing to work hard for it.

My hope and prayer is that this project will serve to equip the body of Christ at Chicago West Bible Church and produce mature disciple-makers for the glory and fame of Jesus our God and King.

Jonathan Kelly

Chicago, Illinois

May 2024

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The mission statement of Chicago West Bible Church (CWBC) is to glorify God through the fulfillment of the Great Commission. To attain this mandate, we as a church must preach the gospel to those who are lost and disciple new converts. Presenting believers “mature in Christ” (Col 1:28) is a responsibility entrusted to our elders by Christ and something worthy of full devotion.¹ This project sought to create a curriculum and process for members at Chicago West Bible Church to increase their understanding of discipleship.

Context

CWBC was planted on the West side of Chicago in the Austin neighborhood in March of 2016. Austin is the largest landmass of Chicago’s seventy-seven neighborhoods. It is a predominantly Black/African American neighborhood of close to 110,000 people.² CWBC has been active locally in the community working with other churches, the local 15th Police District, and many Christian non-profits to reach the lost and make an impact for the glory of Christ. The mission statement of CWBC is to “glorify God through the fulfillment of the Great Commission, with hearts led by the Great Commandment.”³ Global and local missions for the glory of Jesus Christ is the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotation will be from the English Standard Version.

² “Austin Neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois (IL) 60644, 60639, 60651, Detailed Profile,” City-Data.Com, accessed March 18, 2022, www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Austin-Chicago-IL.html.

³ “Mission Statement,” Chicago West Bible Church, March 28, 2016, <http://www.chicagowest.church/about>.

primary vision of our church. The focus on local and global mission is what has driven much of the current local outreach done through our church into our community.

The strengths of CWBC are local missions, a welcoming and authentic environment, and a vibrant young adult ministry. The weaknesses have been a lack of structural discipleship, poor intentionality in equipping the saints for the work of ministry, and an undeveloped culture of leadership and multiplication. I will explain each of these further.

Strengths and Weaknesses

CWBC's first area of strength is in local outreach. The depth, frequency, and quality of our community engagement is a strength and has garnered respect from people in the community. CWBC helped launch a ministry with local police officers that serves over one thousand children per year through basketball, baseball, and other activities. CWBC leaders and members have walked the worst corners of the neighborhood to pray with the community and preach the love of Christ for sinners. The church has helped with finding jobs, housing, and providing mentoring for youth on the West side. CWBC created a partnership with Moody Theological Counseling Center staff to bring a permanent biblical mental health counseling center within the church building. These community partnerships stem from the church's strong and constant presence within the neighborhood over the course of its existence. CWBC is always looking for ways to engage the lostness of our community and city with the gospel and practical needs.

A second strength of CWBC is its welcoming, authentic, and transparent environment. Most people who attend or visit the church have made it clear that it is a safe and welcoming place where they feel comfortable inviting others. This flows from the congregation's warm, authentic, and welcoming culture. Also, having a lead pastor who came to faith in Christ while in prison has fostered an environment in which most people feel that they can lower their guard and truly bring their weaknesses to the altar of

God's grace. There are women who attend Sunday services who are coming out of prostitution and drug addiction, young men who are former gang members, and many who are eager to share whatever challenge they are battling in hopes of finding healing in Christ. This authentic and transparent environment has also helped to display the church and the person of Jesus Christ as more relatable to those who are on the streets and in pain. The police department has been vocal in public settings about their love and appreciation for the people at Chicago West Bible Church. These are Chicago West members who are often out on the blocks and in the streets with the police officers as they serve and protect our community.

A final strength would be CWBC's young adult population (between 18 and 35). This energetic group composes about 40 percent of our over 350 members. They are very attracted to social gatherings and service opportunities. They have a hunger for the Word of God and a desire to grow in their knowledge, understanding, and faith. Their energetic social life makes it easy for them to witness to the lost and invite new people to church. It seems like every week the elders are meeting someone new and hearing a humble testimony of how they were loved by someone within the church and invited to a Sunday service, men's breakfast, or young adults' event. While there are many strengths within our church body, there are also three critical weaknesses.

First, there has been a weakness in the area of discipleship or the process in which one Christ follower intentionally and regularly meets with another Christ follower for spiritual formation and spiritual development within the structure organized by CWBC. One would think that this would be our strength since it is in the church's mission statement. But for all the great local missions and outreach conducted by the church, the members of CWBC are weak in intentional discipleship. Though it has happened on a very small scale and in a very organic way, the church had not developed or organized, an intentional system for members to assimilate into. CWBC has received humble critiques from some of the young adults about ways that the church can be more

intentional in the area of intentional discipleship. They are hungry and looking to be disciplined, but there has not been a clear path and structure of intentional discipleship that helps recent converts or believers who are young in intentional spiritual formation and discipleship. Currently, the community groups (some churches refer to them as small groups) are not designed to provide intentional discipleship. Spiritual formation is happening in our groups through the regular study of the Word and practical accountability, but there is nothing within our groups to help individuals go deeper in very specific and intentional ways that would better serve them. Our elders have seen this lack of discipleship reflected in issues among a variety of church members. It appears that the desire to “go and make disciples” has essentially come to mean “go and evangelize.”

A second weakness is in equipping the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4:12). While the assimilation process helps people to become church members, it does not take them by the hand and put them on an intentional path of growing and maturing as a disciple and leveraging and deploying their gifts for service to the church. This is not just for new members, but also for church leaders. Church leaders learned painfully from some of the church members that the church was not doing a good job of equipping them or helping to raise up new leaders. This prompted the creation of a monthly leadership training that focuses on caring for and equipping our leaders to serve the church body more faithfully. Even with the monthly training, there is much room for growth across the congregation.

A third and final weakness within the church is the lack of leadership and ministry multiplication. The lack of intentional discipleship has hindered ministry multiplication, placing more stress on staff, and impeding the deployment of new leaders. Currently, church attendance is growing, but multiplication is not taking place. For example, more people are seeking to join community groups, but community groups are not multiplying due to the lack of qualified leaders equipped to lead. More people are

expressing a desire to join a group, but the church does not have enough groups available or new qualified leaders who are able to start new groups. Therefore, the lack of multiplication, fueled by a lack of intentional discipleship, needs to be addressed if CWBC truly desires to live out the mission statement of fulfilling the Great Commission. CWBC's desire is a culture of discipleship that fuels missions locally within the community and a desire to serve the nations globally. Virtually all the challenges that the church currently experiences can be traced to poor discipleship. Creating a clear and effective discipleship pathway is a major emphasis and focus of this project.

Rationale

CWBC was planted in March 2016 with the glory of God and the fulfillment of the Great Commission in mind. As the church has grown over the years, our elders have noticed consistent challenges that arise from not having an intentional discipleship process built into the fabric of our church body. Discipleship has often happened more organically and on a smaller scale. There are two theological reasons and two practical reasons that were the motivations for this project.

The first biblical reason was the biblical mandate given by Christ and his followers in the New Testament (Matt 28:18-20; 2 Tim 2:2). All Christians are commanded to go and make disciples. Followers of Jesus are to teach new disciples to learn and observe the ways of Jesus and the teachings of his Word. Establishing an intentional discipleship process at CWBC will catalyze the fulfillment of the mission statement of making disciples within the local community and church body. Being able to systematically teach the Word of God in smaller, more intimate settings will allow the leaders to intentionally walk alongside the church body and assist them in their spiritual formation. Intentional discipleship in a smaller gathering over a long period of time was the model set forth by Christ and others in the New Testament (Matt 10:2-4; Titus 2:3).

The second biblical reason for this project was the teaching that spiritual

formation happens in biblical community with other believers around the Word of God (Acts 2:24; Col 1:28; 2 Tim 3:10). The apostle Paul felt the personal responsibility to see to it that the believers under his care were presented as “mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). Intentional discipleship takes place best in the context of the local church. J. T. English writes, “The local church is to be the primary spiritual guide for disciples who are on the journey of growing deeper in the love and knowledge of God. The local church is the place where we are formed, equipped, and sent out to make more disciples.”⁴ It is only through an intentional relationship with another Christ follower that discipleship happens. New Testament believers did not grow in the faith by figuring things out on their own, nor did they outsource discipleship to higher institutions of learning. Jesus trained the twelve disciples, Paul trained Timothy and Titus, and Peter trained Mark. For CWBC to produce mature disciples of Jesus Christ, we had to do more than gather believers around the Word on Sundays. Disciple-making requires modeling what we teach for all to see in a weekly structured format. Robert Coleman states, “It was by virtue of this fellowship that the disciples were permitted ‘to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God.’ . . . Knowledge was gained by association before it was understood by explanation.”⁵ Paul says to the Philippians, “What you’ve learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil 4:9). Faithful and intentional discipleship enables believers to follow the model and example set by Jesus, the apostles, and Paul.

From a practical perspective, the initial reason for this project was the realization that CWBC had been weak in raising up new leaders due to the lack of intentional discipleship. For many churches, it is easy to look for leaders who are already

⁴ J. T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus* (Nashville: B & H Books, 2020), 49.

⁵ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: New Spire, 2010), 38.

developed or hire new staff rather than disciple new converts and raise up new leaders from within the congregation. Over the last few years, CWBC has been growing numerically, and yet ministry is not multiplying. There was no existing discipleship pipeline that produced new leaders for the church's future needs. CWBC has been effective in training members to serve as volunteers but has significant room for growth in helping equip church members to live as mature disciples who are on mission for Christ in their daily context. Developing this discipleship process allowed CWBC to intentionally assist in the spiritual formation of church members, which has resulted in more mature leaders who are available to lead within the church body and live on mission the world. The desire was that this process would raise up a new generation of elders, deacons, community group leaders, missionaries, and potential staff from within the church body.

Secondly, the reason for this project was the realization that a lack of spiritual development and discipleship hinders the overall health of the local church body. There have been numerous examples over the last few years where challenges, problems, and conflicts could have been resolved. Yet, the lack of maturity and deficient discipleship across the congregation has often led to unnecessary barriers to the overall mission of the church. For example, challenges with young couples struggling in their marriage because no one took the time to disciple them on how to live as a godly man or a godly woman. When character issues are compounded by a poor understanding of Scripture and a lack of discipleship, CWBC staff faces more pressure to adequately address these issues. It is far better for the body of Christ to serve one another and live out the *one anothers* in community. Yet, this requires a level of intentional discipleship throughout the congregation. Therefore, the success of this project helped the church body by implementing a structure that served to increase the understanding and maturity of disciples at CWBC.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to increase the understanding of discipleship at Chicago West Bible Church in Chicago, Illinois, through the creation of an intentional discipleship process and curriculum.

Goals

There are three goals that I accomplished through this project.

1. The first goal was to identify and assess 8 to 10 church members from Chicago West Bible Church who would participate in an 8-week discipleship process.
2. The second goal was to develop curriculum that would educate, motivate, and equip Chicago West Bible Church members as disciples of Jesus Christ. The curriculum covered eight essential doctrinal areas.
3. The third goal was to see increased understanding in each participant in the areas covered at the conclusion of the 8-week curriculum.

A specific research methodology was created that measured the successful completion of these three goals. This methodology is described in the following section.

Research Methodology

Successful completion of this project depended upon the completion of these three goals. The first goal was to identify and assess 8 to 10 church members from Chicago West Bible Church who would participate in an 8-week discipleship process. This goal was measured by administering a CWBC pre- and post-discipleship survey tool to all discipleship participants. The discipleship survey tool explored current practices, knowledge, and the areas of weakness of participants as disciples of Jesus Christ. This goal was considered successfully met when all participants completed the survey form and when all inventory had been analyzed yielding a clearer picture of the current discipleship practices among Chicago West Bible Church Members.

The second goal was to develop discipleship curriculum that would equip Chicago West Bible Church members as disciples of Jesus Christ. The discipleship

curriculum covered eight essential doctrinal areas. This goal was considered successfully met when the curriculum content was approved by a collective of elders and pastors.

The third goal was to see increased understanding in each participant at the conclusion of the 8-week curriculum. This goal was measured by using a pre- and post-discipleship survey. Success was then determined by administering a “t-test” to determine a positive increase in understanding.

Definitions and Delimitations

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

Intentional discipleship. This term is used to refer to an intentional discipleship commitment and process between individuals. Sometimes discipleship happens organically without any formal or structural agreement from those involved. Such was the case with men who poured into my life. There was no clear discipleship process, nor did I recognize that I was being discipled at the time. The term “intentional discipleship” implies that there is an initial agreement between two individuals with a process and plan that is based on intentionally meeting together regularly for discipleship purposes.

Leadership. Leadership was viewed through the lens of “Christ-Centered Followership”⁶ and this project utilized Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones’s more nuanced definition:

The Christ-following leader—living as a bearer of God’s image in union with Christ and his people—develops a diverse community of fellow laborers who are equipped and empowered to pursue shared goals that fulfill the creation mandate and the Great Commission in submission to the Word of God. This definition calls Christian leaders—and church leaders in particular—to interact with the people they lead on the foundational basis of their common creation in God’s image. This foundation does not remove the need for leadership, but it does relativize leadership by recognizing our shared identity as bearers of God’s image as well as the supremacy

⁶ I am mainly drawing this understanding of leadership from Michael S. Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones who wisely present Christian leadership as Christ-centered followership. This understanding sees Jesus as the primary leader, with human leaders simply taking their direction from him. See Michael S. Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones, *The God Who Goes before You: Pastoral Leadership as Christ-Centered Followership* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2018).

of Christ over leaders and followers alike.⁷

Leadership areas. This term is used to refer to all spheres of leadership influence that the participant has in their life. The home, job, and community settings are included in this term as compared to leading a particular ministry in a local church setting.

Several delimitations applied to this project. First, the number of participants for this project was limited to 8 to 10 people. This allowed each participant to give a fair amount of intentional attention and feedback to the project. Second, participants were selected members and current leaders within Chicago West Bible Church. They all completed a pre- and post-discipleship survey and an application packet as a part of this process.

Conclusion

Jesus has clearly commanded his followers to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. The goal of this project was to help fulfill this command at CWBC by creating a process and curriculum that will increase CWBC's understanding of discipleship. The following chapters will show how these resources contribute to the Christian's knowledge, spiritual formation, confidence, and maturity as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Chapter 2 will focus on the disciple of Jesus Christ as his instrument for proclamation, fruitfulness, and the expansion of the kingdom of God on earth. Chapter 3 will focus on the vital role that discipleship plays in developing new leaders within local church bodies. Chapter 3 will also show that the growth of disciples begins with the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines and results in the emergence of new leaders. Chapter 4 will provide the details and description of this project. Chapter 5 will focus on the evaluation of this project.

⁷ Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes before You*, 16.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE PROJECT

Mature, trained, and confident disciples of Jesus Christ are the primary vehicle for the proclamation, fruitfulness, and expansion of the kingdom of God on earth. From Genesis to Revelation, we find example after example of discipleship and leadership development amongst the people of God. God’s redemptive plan has always been to bless the nations by expanding his kingdom on earth and displaying his glory (Gen 12:1-3). He expressed this to Abraham personally and specifically.¹ This plan for kingdom expansion required systems, structures, and a process to teach the people of God how to live holy lives and be a witness to the nations. This chapter will examine the many structural components of discipleship in both the Old and New Testaments, along with examples of individuals who personally modeled discipleship and leadership development.

Discipleship and Spiritual Formation in the Old Testament

The Old Testament provides structures and patterns of discipleship, leadership development, and training in the laws of God. The law of God (the Word) is the foundational centerpiece for training the people of God in righteousness, holiness, and the ways of the kingdom. The law of God was to shape the heart and mind of God’s people and govern how the people of God operated as a nation (Deut 6:1-3). The law is meant to develop a pattern of life in God’s image bearers that displays how a lover of God lives for

¹ Christopher J. H. Wright states, “Blessing is missional and historical. . . . ‘Be a blessing’ thus entails a purpose and goal that stretches into the future. It is, in short, missional. . . . In fact, this is the opening command of the mission of God to restore what humanity seemed intent on wrecking, and to save humanity itself from the consequences of their own wicked folly.” See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 211.

his good pleasure.² It is through the law that the people of God learn personal worship to Yahweh (Deut 29:18), corporate worship to Yahweh (Exod 23:10-17), how to treat one's neighbor (Lev 19:18), how to determine good from evil (Exod 20:1-21), and how to live a holy life (Lev 11:44). As the people of Yahweh walked in holiness, they reflected the holiness (distinctness) of the true and living God to all the pagan nations around them (Exod 19:3-6). Their rituals for worship, what they ate, their festivals, and their devotion to Yahweh were to be a blessing to the nations and a display of the kingdom of God over which God is king. Anyone who would turn to Yahweh, the true and living God, and walk according to his commandments would obtain grace and be welcomed. This principle of bringing the foreigner into the kingdom of Yahweh was expected and a central component of God's plan (Gen 12:2-3). We hear his heart for all (the nations) to experience the joy of knowing him and to walk in his ways when he says, "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer" (Isa 56:6-7a). The people of God and the kingdom of God are meant to be a blessing to the nations by providing access for outsiders to join in covenant with Yahweh.

The Word of God has always been the primary mechanism used for developing the spiritual formation of his people. The notion of training, teaching, and discipleship is taken so seriously, that God established a priesthood (Levites) from among his people who would be responsible for teaching (discipling) his people in the ways of the kingdom (Lev 10:11). Priests like Ezra were fully devoted to practicing, studying, and teaching the

² I am drawing this statement from a helpful insight in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, "The law of God is not a system of merit whereby the unsaved seek to earn divine favor but a pattern given by the Redeemer to the redeemed so that they might know how to live for his good pleasure. Such is the biblical understanding of the place and function of law." See Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker Reference Library, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 675.

law of God in Israel (Ezra 7:10). There is a consistent theme and pattern in the Old Testament in which the spiritual health of the nation is directly connected to their prophets, teachers, and whether they obey the Word of God. When Yahweh is worshiped and his Word obeyed, his people flourish. When he is not worshiped and his Word is not obeyed, his people struggle and perish.

When Israel returned from exile, one of the first things that Ezra did was spend much time leading those returning from exile in the hearing and reading of God's law (Neh 8). He wanted to remind them of their history and covenant with God. The new generation needed to be disciplined and learn the laws of God that the previous generation had forsaken. The law that was given at Mount Sinai was also an expression of the covenant relationship with Yahweh that his people had entered into. Learning the laws of God and practicing them also helped people to thrive in their relationship with and worship of him.³

While corporate teaching and learning were present on a much larger level in the Old Testament, there was regular training in the law of God on a smaller level in homes and the day-to-day family structure as well. Moses exhorts the people of God,

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:6-9)

The idea is that God expected discipleship to happen in the home as well as in the larger corporate structure of his kingdom. He commanded parents to teach their children the Word of God and to talk to them about it all day long. Training children in the ways of

³ The *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* states, "At Sinai God made a formal covenant with the Israelites and provided them with laws and instructions by which they were to order their lives in covenant relationship with him. . . . these laws were to govern the Israelites' relationship to God, with one another, and with the peoples living around them." See T. Desmond Alexander et al., eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity Diversity of Scripture*, IVP Reference Collection (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 630.

the Lord was an expected practice and a natural way of life among his people (Prov 22:6). God does not only desire that his people worship him corporately as a whole, but also as families, households, and individuals. This concept of individual worship is known today as “personal devotion,” and it is at the very foundation and makeup of those within the kingdom of God. The people of God can worship Yahweh corporately because all the individuals within his kingdom worship and obey Yahweh personally. Servants, foreigners, and guests would have been exposed to the teachings and ways of the kingdom of Yahweh as they entered the homes of his followers. Living lives of obedience to God was essential for the people of God to experience fellowship and relationship with God.⁴

The priesthood, the family structure, and personal devotion are not the only examples we see of discipleship and leadership development in the Old Testament. We also see the concept of leadership development (or the need for it) in Exodus 18 when Moses’s father-in-law, Jethro, teaches him the importance of delegation and multiplication in leadership. Frank Gaebelin writes, “Jethro is depicted as an efficiency expert who wisely suggests a modification in Israel’s leadership structure. . . which Moses then adopted with divine permission. Previous to this the people came to Moses for two things: (1) instruction (v.15) and (2) judicial settlements (v.16).”⁵ Jethro challenged Moses to find able godly men who could oversee groups of fifties, hundreds, and thousands. This would then free Moses up to deal with the harder situations rather than devote all of his time trying to serve everyone. Essentially, Jethro challenged Moses to multiply himself by establishing other leaders. This wise recommendation by Jethro

⁴ Robin Routledge states, “God cares for us, is committed to us and wants to have fellowship with us; but this is not a relationship of equals. The proper response of human beings to God is to obey him. . . . The link between covenant and Law indicates that living in relationship with God and fulfilling his purposes in the world requires obedience.” See Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 147.

⁵ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Exodus*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 412.

implies that there needs to be quality followers of Yahweh who are ready to jump in and lead and that there needs to be a system in place to develop and deploy them. At the very least, Jethro's recommendation to practice delegation and multiplication implies that discipleship and development are needed if future leaders will be produced to help Moses shoulder the weight of ministry amongst God's people. The work and life of the kingdom require everyone to use their gifts and roles for the good of all and for the glory of Yahweh.

Moses modeled discipleship personally by spending intentional time investing in the life of Joshua, who would eventually become his successor. He would regularly take Joshua with him up on Mount Sinai into the Lord's presence (Exod 24:13; 33:11). Joshua is referred to as Moses's "assistant" and was trained by him over the course of forty years. As a disciple of Moses, Joshua learned the skills of leading others through war and battle (Exod 17:9-10), how to navigate relational conflict faithfully (Num 13-14), and how to lead the people in living consecrated lives (Josh 3:5). It was Moses who taught a young Joshua how to worship the Lord and to put nothing before him; a heart posture of complete devotion that Joshua would later confess (Josh 24:15). It was while sitting under Moses's leadership that Joshua saw the power of God at work to provide for, protect, and deliver his people. It can be said that Joshua reflected much of the same godly character and leadership as his predecessor Moses. Joshua's process of discipleship and leadership development concluded with Moses laying hands on him and transferring leadership to him.⁶

There is also the example of Elijah and Elisha. We find in 1 Kings 19 that God sends Elijah to anoint a farmer named Elisha to be his prophetic successor. Scripture

⁶ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas state, "Part of the process of investing a person with authority and signifying the transfer of power from one leader to another involves the laying on of hands." See John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *Old Testament, IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 164.

teaches us that Elisha left everything to go and be disciplined by Elijah in preparation for his new role as prophet (1 Kgs 19:21b). During this time of training and equipping, Elisha would see God's power at work in Elijah and learn the importance of walking by faith and not by sight. As a new prophet learning from Elijah, he learns what it means to be fully devoted to the Word of the Lord, not the idolatrous kings that surround him. In this relationship between Elijah and Elisha, we see the same elements of training, discipleship, and succession that are present in the relationship between Moses and Joshua. Both Moses and Elijah chose to teach others the ways of the Lord and modeled living out these ways personally. The book of 2 Kings is a good example of what happens when leaders and kings choose to disregard Yahweh and his Word as their foundation. While there are many more instances of discipleship and leadership development in the Old Testament, there are just as many examples in the New Testament as well.

Jesus and Intentional Discipleship

Intentional discipleship is a model set forth by Jesus the Messiah for gospel proclamation, kingdom fruitfulness, and kingdom expansion. In Matthew 28:18-20 we read of Jesus's command to go and make disciples of all nations. There are two things that Jesus mentions as necessary for discipleship in this well-known passage. It is baptizing new converts and teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded us. There is an expectation that new converts will grow in their faith and their understanding of the ways of God and his kingdom, as they learn the teachings of Jesus. In Matthew 4, we find that Jesus directly connects discipleship with kingdom expansion in his calling of the twelve. His statement of, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" connects discipleship (follow me) with the mission of God and the expansion of his kingdom (fishers of men).⁷ What Jesus is teaching here is that his followers are to "fish" for men

⁷ Eckhard J. Schnabel writes, "The men who have spent their days fishing the Sea of Galilee now are to 'catch' people: they will win people for Jesus' message of the arrival of God's kingdom. . . ."

and women, teach them to obey the teachings of his Word, and then deploy them to go out and fish for others.

This pattern has been the basic model for discipleship and mission since the early church began. Jesus used a process of discipleship that relied upon teaching the Word of God and modeling the Word of God with his disciples present to see and learn. He does not simply teach the truth of God's law, but he also models what living out the law looks like. There is a distinction that we find in the way that Jesus makes disciples as compared to the regular teachers of his day.⁸ To follow Jesus meant learning a new "Way." This term "the Way" became synonymous with being a disciple of Jesus and a kingdom citizen of heaven (Acts 9:2; 19:9-23).⁹ For Jesus, discipleship is not simply learning teachings and obeying them, but also being an active recruiter of new followers as well. Discipleship is directly connected to kingdom citizenship and how to thrive within that citizenship. Eric Geiger and Kevin Peck, in their book *Designed to Lead*, state, "The primary purpose for our leadership mandate is to make known the glory of God by leading others to flourish in God's design."¹⁰ When the people of God fulfill the Great Commission to make disciples, they also simultaneously teach others how to

Discipleship and mission are inseparably linked." See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 1:277.

⁸ Michael J. Wilkins asserts, "The goal of a Jewish disciple was someday to become a master, or rabbi, himself, and to have his own disciples. . . . Discipleship to Jesus was going to be different from what many might have anticipated. It was not going to be simply an apprenticeship program. Discipleship was a life that began in a relationship with the Master and moved into all areas of their experience. This is the beginning of kingdom life." See Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2004), 180.

⁹ Frank S. Thielman says, "Following 'the Way' apparently involved adopting a mental framework for interpreting Scriptures so that they pointed to Jesus (Acts 18:26; 24:14); but it also involved adopting a certain way of living that Jesus himself marked out both in his teaching (Luke 20:21) and in his example of steadfastly following the difficult but necessary path to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), the geographical center of God's saving purpose. His disciples must take up his cross 'daily' and follow him along the demanding road . . . in doing so, they will find that like Jesus, they are being used to God to accomplish his saving purpose." See Frank S. Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2005), 135-36.

¹⁰ Eric Geiger and Kevin Peck, *Designed to Lead: The Church and Leadership Development* (Nashville: B & H, 2016), 62.

flourish in God's kingdom. God is glorified and exalted as disciples of Jesus thrive in character, conduct, and Christlikeness. Tony Evans says, "The goal of discipleship is conformity to the Savior, being transformed into the image or likeness of Christ (Rom 8:29, 2 Cor 3:17-18) in our character, conduct, attitudes, and actions. Discipleship also results in the exercise of his authority through us in the world."¹¹ The goal of discipleship is to be conformed to Christ and to reflect Christ to a lost world that is in darkness. When the people of God reflect the Son of God and his ways, they flourish.

This practice of making disciples requires time, a process, and intentionality to apply God's Word to every area of life. Time is required due to the reality that spiritual growth does not happen instantaneously. Jesus would spend over three years with his disciples. Day after day and month after month he patiently waited and endured as the twelve grew in their knowledge and understanding of God. Along with time, processes and systems are also needed to make disciples. Discipleship requires planning and intentionality. Furthermore, during Jesus's earthly ministry, he intentionally modeled and applied biblical truth to every area of life. He taught the disciples how to worship (John 3:1-8), pray (Luke 11:1), to view money and possessions (Matt 19:22), to treat enemies (Matt 5:44-45), to evangelize (Luke 10:1), and what the blessed life looks like (Matt 5:1-12).

Jesus modeled for his disciples how to live the Christian life in every facet of life. However, he also taught them that the starting point for Christian discipleship always begins with a personal love for God above everything else. The foundational base for discipleship is a genuine personal relationship with God in which we love him with all of our hearts, minds, and souls (Matt 22:37). To know God is to know Jesus. Jesus, as God the Son, reveals to us what God the Father and his kingdom is like. He invites us into

¹¹ Tony Evans, *Kingdom Disciples: Heaven's Representatives on Earth* (Chicago: Moody, 2017), 27.

fellowship with the eternal Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

John Piper states, “Mission is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. . . . the goal of missions is the gladness of the people in the greatness of God.”¹² Piper rightly points out that the primary mark of a disciple of Jesus Christ is that they follow Jesus because they worship Jesus; not simply because they want to learn from him as a good teacher. They learn from him and desire to reflect his glory because they love him and his glory. Michael S. Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones write, “The leader’s pursuit of God always takes precedence over the leader’s positional authority.”¹³ Personal worship of Christ is what drives and fuels all that a disciple does. This is what Jesus was seeking to teach the Samaritan woman: worship is a matter of the heart, not a geographic location. God desires his followers to worship him in spirit and truth.

Multiplication: The Fruit of Discipleship

Discipleship, in and of itself, is not the end goal this side of glory. The fruit of true discipleship is healthy multiplication that produces kingdom expansion and the exaltation of God. Effective discipleship produces replication and multiplication. As someone who is being discipled matures in the faith, they, in turn, begin sharing the gospel with unbelievers and discipling new converts. A careful look again at Matthew 28:19-20 teaches this truth. This command to “go and make disciples” is not only for us to obey but was also given directly to the twelve men that Jesus spent time discipling. He is calling them to go and do the same with others that he has done with them. He says to the twelve that they are to teach new converts all that he has commanded them.

Everything that they know, have seen, and have heard from Jesus, they are to now teach

¹² John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 17.

¹³ Michael S. Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones. *The God Who Goes before You: Pastoral Leadership as Christ-Centered Followership* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2018), 10.

to others. The apostle Paul reiterates this command in his second letter to Timothy when he writes, “and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2).

As disciples are multiplied and sent out, the church grows and thrives. This process of sending and reproducing has been the model that Jesus established and desires to be replicated. He says, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so, I am sending you” (John 20:21). The Father sends his Son, his Son makes disciples and sends them out, and his disciples are to do the same. Pastor J. D. Greear writes, “Churches that take Jesus’ promises and the Great Commission seriously are committed to sending out some of their best leaders into the mission.”¹⁴

The Great Commission is not mainly fulfilled in the “going,” but in the “making of disciples.”¹⁵ Discipleship within community around the Word and the sacraments is the primary way that God has chosen to equip, develop, and deploy disciples for kingdom work and the expansion of the kingdom of God on earth. The teachings of Christ are foundational and essential for spiritual formation and development. The scope and context of this command to make disciples is “all nations.” This teaches us that Jesus planned for the kingdom of God to expand, influence, and reach all nations and people groups. This also implies that the kingdom of God is a diverse collective made up of men and women from every tribe, nation, and tongue throughout history. Jesus told his followers, “And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

These twelve men from Galilee who have spent much time with Jesus

¹⁴ J. D. Greear, *Gaining by Losing: Why the Future Belongs to Churches that Send* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 112.

¹⁵ Craig A. Evans writes, “The imperative make disciples is the main verb in the commission. What is translated “Go” is in fact a participle, that simply assumes that the disciples will go forth—throughout Israel itself and eventually the throughout the whole world. The commission is not so much fulfilled in going, but in the disciple-making.” See Craig A. Evans, ed., *The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary*, vol. 1, *Matthew-Luke* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2003), 531.

following him and learning from him, are to now go out and cross cultures and languages to engage the lost with the gospel and make disciples. The gospel message and the teachings of Jesus never change, but the cultural context does from location to location and generation to generation. Making disciples across cultures requires an immense need for humility and a full awareness that the kingdom of God embraces all ethnic groups.¹⁶ This is what the Lord sought to teach Peter concerning the Roman centurion, Cornelius. To truly serve Christ requires that we in humility serve others in a different cultural context. Through the cross, Jews and Gentiles can be in fellowship. In the kingdom of God, the Roman, tax collector, Pharisee, and local fishermen can all be family in Christ. Global missions today (and throughout history) are essentially gospel proclamation and disciple-making in action across cultures.

The act of engaging with someone in discipleship also implies that new converts have been made. Therefore, Jesus mentions “baptizing them” in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptism is a disciple’s public declaration that they are now followers of Jesus Christ and kingdom citizens. This is what we find in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. Philip is fulfilling the Great Commission by preaching the gospel to someone of a different ethnic group (the nations) and this individual comes to a saving faith in Christ. The first question from the Ethiopian eunuch after his conversion is, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36). Philip then baptizes him. Evangelism is essential for salvation and disciple-making. One cannot disciple someone who does not believe in Christ. We can teach them his ways, but no true spiritual formation will be done without the Holy Spirit at work in the life of a

¹⁶ Duane Elmer makes a good observation by saying, “For those of us who live in or intend to enter another culture, I suggest we postpone naming ourselves ‘servants’ until the local people begin to use words about us that suggest they see servant attitudes and behaviors in us. Humility requires that we hold off making such an important assumption about ourselves.” What often gets lost in this discussion on discipleship is the true humility that it takes to make disciples, especially of all nations and cultures. See Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 37.

regenerated soul. This call in Matthew 28 to go and make disciples would drive not only the practice of Jesus's disciples but also the heart of the apostle Paul and the New Testament church.

Discipleship: The Model for Paul and the Early Church

Discipling new converts and deploying them as mature believers who proclaim the gospel and advance the kingdom of God on earth was the model followed by Paul and other New Testament leaders. In fact, we find no command in the New Testament to plant churches. What we find instead is Jesus commanding us to make disciples as he (Jesus) builds his church (Matt 16:18). This is what Paul focused on and gave his undivided attention to, the preaching of the gospel and the discipleship of new converts. Peyton Jones argues that much of what we call “church planting” in America, is actually “church starting.”¹⁷ He concludes that there are five areas given by Jesus that we are to give our lives to: (1) make disciples, (2) baptize them in the name of the triune God, (3) teach them to obey Christ's commands, (4) go to all nations, and (5) preach.¹⁸ When looking at these five categories, we find them reflected in the life and ministry of Paul.

Today, there seems to be a disconnect between how church planting in America tends to take place and what Jesus actually commanded us to do in the Bible. The apostle Paul simply would not fit the church planting model of most American church planting networks. Paul gave most of his attention to evangelism and the discipleship of new converts. It is possible for someone to plant churches and not make disciples. The model in the New Testament was to make disciples and then gather them together in new churches. New churches popped up across the region in places where Paul spent time

¹⁷ Peyton Jones states, “The first lesson of church plantology is that planting a church should never be our focus. Christ never commanded his disciples to plant churches, because it's not what he wanted them to focus on. Focusing on the church to be planted leads to church starting whereas focusing on the Great Commission itself leads to church planting.” See Peyton Jones, *Church Plantology: The Art and Science of Planting Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 12.

¹⁸ Jones, *Church Plantology*, 13.

because the gospel was preached, new converts entered the kingdom of God, and disciples were made.

Paul would often enter a new region that had been unengaged with the gospel and then he would enter the synagogue and the marketplace (Acts 13:14). Paul saw these locations as strategic to preaching the gospel to Jew and Gentile alike. At the synagogue, Paul could speak with Jews who knew the Torah and declare to them that the Messiah had come to forgive sins and offer eternal life. In the marketplaces, he could speak with Gentiles and philosophers about the true and living God who is Lord over all creation, not the idols and false gods that were promoted in Greco-Roman culture. Gailyn Van Rheenan and Anthony Parker write, “Paul’s method was to focus his evangelistic efforts on main cities. His view of the world was more regional than ethnic. On his missionary journeys, Paul and his companions stayed in key urban centers and taught in places of public discussion, such as synagogues and markets. He trained and mentored local leaders and followed up these efforts by making pastoral visits and writing letters.”¹⁹

So much of what Paul focused on in the book of Acts and his many epistles is his unwavering commitment to making disciples. When Paul was stoned at Lystra, he had been making and strengthening disciples. Scripture says, “When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples. . . . And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:21-23). Paul and the early church were committed to making and strengthening disciples in various cities across the Roman Empire. As disciples were made and leaders developed, Paul and his missionary teams prayerfully appointed elders to lead the local churches. Paul, in his missionary journeys, models all

¹⁹ Gailyn Van Rheenan and Anthony Parker, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 173.

of Jesus's commands given in the Great Commission. Paul responds to the call to go to the nations, looks for unreached regions, and feels the responsibility to bring them the gospel of Jesus Christ. An example of this can be seen in what is known as Paul's "Macedonian Call." In Acts 16:9-10, we are provided the story of how Paul receives a vision from a man appealing to him to come to Macedonia to help them. Paul concludes "that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."

Paul's understanding of and commitment to the Great Commission of Christ compelled him to not only make disciples but to also invite and involve other churches in the mission through financial giving and prayer. Paul says to the church in Philippi, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil 1:3). The church in Philippi, while birthed out of persecution and suffering, was known for their financial generosity. Paul and Silas had been attacked by the crowds and beaten for preaching the gospel. They were also persecuted for condemning the spirit of divination that plagued the city and culture around them. Yet, a church was birthed by the disciples who were converted and they in turn supported the evangelistic efforts of Paul and his missionary team. It was normal for Paul to depend on the financial giving of others and to work when he had no other option.²⁰ When Paul left Macedonia, no other church was willing to enter into partnership with him financially (Phil 4:15-16). Yet, the church in Philippi was willing to support the Great Commission work of preaching the gospel and making disciples.

The same can be said of the church in Thessalonica. They were supporters of the apostle Paul and experienced severe persecution due to their faith in Christ Jesus.

²⁰ Eckhard J. Schnabel writes, "Paul was willing to accept financial support for himself and his team of missionaries (2 Cor 11:9; Phil 4:18) because additional funds allowed him to focus more fully on his missionary work. . . . The gift from the Macedonian Christians, presumably the Christians in Philippi, meant that Paul no longer was required to earn his living with his own hand, working for several hours during the week. He now was able to intensify and maximize his missionary activities." See Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:1448-49.

What truly testified to the grace of God at work in Thessalonica was that the local disciples there gave out of their poverty and lack.²¹ Paul says, “In a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means . . . begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints” (2 Cor 8:2-5). The disciples and local church in Thessalonica gave themselves to the Lord first, and then to Paul and the other saints in need. The church, made up of local disciples of Jesus, has always been God’s mechanism to serve those in need. Generosity among the people of God is a kingdom principle and theme in Scripture that brings glory to God.²² Many disciples during the early church “were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:45). The local believers were also working for the good of their local community. As needs began to arise, first-century disciples of Jesus Christ were willing to serve one another and those around them. The generosity and care for the poor modeled in the New Testament serve as a reminder to churches today that church planting in America must go beyond Sunday service to fully engage the local community both in and outside of the church body if the desire is for the kingdom of God to expand.²³

The disciple-making command of Jesus is for all people regardless of social class, ethnicity, or gender. The disciple-making command of Christ reaches all

²¹ Craig S. Keener states, “The Thessalonian Christians were mostly poor (cf. 2 Cor. 8:1-2) and did not share some of the Corinthians’ objections to manual labor.” See Craig S. Keener, *New Testament*, IVP Bible Background Commentary, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 585.

²² Timothy Keller writes, “A great majority of the world’s poor live in cities. . . an urban church’s work among the poor will be a significant mark of its validity. It is one of the ‘good deeds’ that Scripture says will lead pagans to glorify God (Mt.5:16; 1 Pet 2:12).” See Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 162.

²³ Bryant L. Myers argues, “Church planting cannot be the final objective of mission, only the beginning. A church full of life and love, working for the good of the community in which God has placed it, is the proper end of mission. Transformational development that does not work toward such a church is neither sustainable nor Christian.” See Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 79.

demographics and demonstrates the true diversity of those who have entered the kingdom of God. The fact that first-century Christ followers (who were Jewish) were willing to preach the gospel in Samaria and to the Gentiles shows that God’s heart is and has always been for the nations. J. D. Payne writes, “In the New Testament, church planting began with evangelism and resulted in new churches. Rather than reorganizing long-term kingdom citizens from one church into a new one, the apostolic work started with disciple-making among unbelievers. As people came to faith, they were gathered together into local expressions of the universal body.”²⁴ This understanding, that the local church is a local expression of the universal church in Christ, is what caused the Philippians and Thessalonians to give generously, regardless of persecution or social status.

In the New Testament readers see not only Paul’s interactions with local churches, but also get a glimpse of his personal walk with others as a disciple-maker. Like Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, Paul personally disciplined men who would later become the future leaders of local churches. One such example is that of Timothy. When Paul first met Timothy in Acts 16, Timothy was already a believer. Paul decided to take Timothy with him on his missionary journeys and began personally discipling him as they traveled. Opportunities to grow in prayer, preach the Word, and make disciples were afforded to a young Timothy through Paul. Timothy was brought into relational community with Paul, Silas, and other workers of the gospel (Acts 17:14; 19:22). Paul’s relationship with Timothy, which began with discipleship, eventually turned into a relationship between a spiritual father and his spiritual son. Paul said to the church in Corinth, “This is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ” (1 Cor 4:17). Paul would publicly communicate these truths about Timothy as well (1 Tim 1:2, 18). Over time, Paul’s epistles began to include

²⁴ J. D. Payne, *Theology of Mission: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 113.

Timothy in the introduction as a fellow co-laborer (Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1).

Timothy would later go on to become a pastor at the church in Ephesus. Paul's letters to Timothy are an extension of his continued discipleship of Timothy—first as a godly man and now as a pastor overseeing a flock.

What drives Paul's passion for discipleship and the mission of God is his love for Christ and the union of all believers to him. When Paul was converted, he met the risen Savior on the road to Damascus and learned the vital truth that to persecute the church is to persecute Christ. The truth and reality of union with Christ shaped Paul's understanding and outlook on discipleship. For Paul, discipleship is the process of being sanctified and conformed to the image of Christ. It begins with dying with Christ in his death and being raised with him a new creation (Gal 2:20). Discipleship is an outworking of God's eternal plan to conform his image bearers to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29) and entails the process of being retrained and renewed in the ways of the kingdom (Rom 12:2). When writing his epistles to local churches scattered all throughout the region, he repeatedly uses the term "in Christ" as the connection point for all his teachings on spiritual formation. Constantine Campbell writes, "Having put on Christ, believers are to be conformed to him. Thus, Christian discipleship means identification with the crucified Lord."²⁵ For Paul, union with Christ must shape actions, identity, and serve as the foundation for all things in the life of a Christ follower. One cannot truly understand Paul's heart and mind for the mission of God without examining the biblical teachings on our union with Christ, and Paul's passion to live out this truth.

Paul's format for teaching these truths and discipling local believers was to spend significant time teaching the people of God within the community of the local church body. Luke writes in Acts, "For a whole year they met with the church and taught

²⁵ Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2012), 387.

a great many people. And in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:26). This text highlights that for fruitful discipleship to take place, it takes the regular teaching and intake of the Word of God in a local community of believers who are living out their faith in Christ together. When considering the qualifications for elders in the local church (1 Tim 3; Titus 1), virtually all that is mentioned refers to the required character of an elder. Only one qualification deals directly with competency: “must be able to teach.” Paul writes, “He must hold firm to the trustworthy Word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). Due to the many false doctrines, satanic worldviews, and false teachers that were saturating the culture of Paul’s day, it was essential that an elder of a local church be trained in the teachings of Christ. Paul says to Timothy, “and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2).²⁶ The importance of God’s Word being known, taught, and lived was the primary form of daily instruction and discipleship. Paul reminded Timothy and those in Ephesus that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). For Paul, the Word of God is the link that flows through disciples from one location to another, and from one generation to another.

When examining Paul’s approach to discipleship, it is easy to lose sight of Paul himself. Paul also grew spiritually in the midst of a local community of Christ-following disciples. Paul spent time with Peter in Jerusalem (Gal 1:18), spent time with Barnabas (Acts 11), and time with disciples in Damascus immediately upon his conversion (Acts 9:19). Paul even returned to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus in order to make sure that

²⁶ Greg Ogden writes, “Paul encouraged Timothy to use a personal style to link the gospel to future generations. . . Paul envisioned an intergenerational chain of disciples linked together through personal investment. Contained in this verse are generations in the discipling network, creating the following path: Paul—Timothy—reliable people—teach others.” See Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 7.

he was preaching the gospel accurately. His heart posture was that of a learner who desired to be faithful and not labor in vain (Gal 2:2). Paul was not perfect and needed Christ to conform his heart as well. In Acts 15, Luke records Paul and Barnabas getting into a sharp disagreement over Mark joining the mission team. Paul's humanity and weakness were seen in the moment. Yet, at the end of his life he wrote, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry" (2 Tim 4:11). Clearly, Paul's perception of Mark had changed, and Paul had grown over time in his walk with Christ and his understanding of biblical love. While Paul was used greatly by God, he also had areas of needed growth as a disciple.

The Church: God's Instrument for Kingdom Expansion and Work

The church, made up of disciples of Jesus Christ, advances and displays the kingdom of God on earth as they operate in their spiritual gifts, live out the teachings of Jesus, and bear fruit through good works as mature disciples. J. T. English writes, "The local church is the visible and situated (place), adopted family of God (people), that is being equipped for mission and Christlikeness (purpose). Deep discipleship in the local church is different because the purpose of the church is different from any other institution on the planet."²⁷ The universal church is made up of disciples of Jesus Christ who are eternal family members and citizens of heaven. They all have been given spiritual gifts to be utilized for the good of the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:1-11). It is the biblical teaching of our union and oneness with Christ that motivates us to serve one another in the body of Christ. Paul uses an illustration of the human body parts and their need and reliability on one another as a picture of the universal church (1 Cor 12:12-31).

²⁷ J. T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus* (Nashville: B & H Books, 2020), 67.

Paul placed the same emphasis on the church in Rome. He wrote,

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, through many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Rom 12:4-8)

What the Holy Spirit is teaching through the apostle Paul is that every disciple of Jesus Christ has a spiritual gift and a role to play for the good and benefit of the kingdom of God. In Paul's day, it was expected that the local body of believing disciples would do the work of ministry. There were no fulltime staff, just the local church body utilizing their gifts under the loving counsel and leadership of local elders. As local church structures have grown over time and cultures, disciples today must be careful not to leave the mission to the local church staff, and local church staff and elders must be intentional about equipping the entire body for the work of ministry and kingdom expansion. Paul says that shepherds and teachers (pastors) are to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:12-13).

Notice that the goal is for everyone (all believers) to attain spiritual maturity and the fullness of Christ. Pastors and elders are to spend the bulk of their time shepherding and equipping. If they fail to do so, they will prove to be poor stewards and unhelpful participants in the kingdom of God's flourishing on earth. Wilder and Jones write, "Too many churches celebrate leaders who are overly busy and who fail to delegate responsibilities. What these churches may not recognize is that, by enabling leaders to live as the congregation's indispensable property, they are not only destroying their leaders, but they are also causing themselves missed opportunities to use the gifts that the

Spirit has given them.”²⁸

This means that pastors are not only to function as shepherds but also as coaches and trainers in modern terms.²⁹ Their calling is to see other believers fully equipped for kingdom service and thriving in their gifts and talents for the glory of God. This not only entails equipping individual believers but entire families as well.³⁰ The concept of equipping the saints is another way of saying discipling the saints for the work of ministry. Good pastors will work hard at creating an environment in which everyone can grow and flourish. This means that systems, structures, and processes need to be established and believers within the local body need to be lovingly walked through them. The need for the people of God to be equipped is not only for the sake of the local church but also to display the goodness and glory of God to others by doing good deeds. Paul says to Titus, “Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful” (Titus 3:14). He tells Timothy to remind those who are rich to “be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share” (1 Tim 18). To the church in Ephesus, Paul writes, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). This truth teaches us that the people of God are fully involved in the eternal plan of God to execute good works that he has already prepared to be done through his people. Christians are to “let our light shine before others, so that they may see your good works

²⁸ Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes before You*, 101.

²⁹ George Cladis highlights what innovative churches do in our day: they replicate the ministry practices of the early church. Cladis says, “One of the marks of highly innovative and life-filled churches today is the giving away of ministry to the people in ways that resemble the ministry of the early church. Clerics in these churches function as coaches, giving advice to, equipping, training, and encouraging those in the front lines of ministry: the people.” See George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 124.

³⁰ Willie Richardson lays out a compelling argument that churches in urban areas (and in general) should be extremely intentional about discipling entire families. He asks, “What institution will come forward and have a positive impact on families and their problems?” See Willie Richardson, *Reclaiming the Urban Family: How to Mobilize the Church as a Family Training Center* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 25.

and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:16).

The kingdom of God is seen and expanded when the gospel is preached, disciples are made, and good works are being done. The concept of developing leaders who love the Lord and are equipped for kingdom service has been a biblical principle in both the Old and New Testaments throughout the history of the church. This model has been instituted by God, modeled by men like Moses and Elijah, and is the pattern that Jesus lived and taught his followers as well. Pastors and elders have the responsibility to train, equip, and cultivate an environment in which the people of God flourish, the world hears the good news of Jesus Christ, and in which people glorify God the Father for our good works. These things will take place only if followers of Jesus obey the command to go into all the world and make disciples.

CHAPTER 3
CONTEXTUAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES
RELATED TO THE PROJECT

In every generation and local context, there are challenges to fulfilling the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. This chapter will examine six contextual issues and barriers related to this project. They are (1) cultural and generational diversity, (2) the use of technology, (3) Christian consumerism, (4) the impact of Covid-19, (5) division and conflict in the church, and (6) trauma in a context of violence. In each section, I will highlight current and practical challenges that have some degree of impact on this project within our local church body and the church in America in general.

Cultural and Generational Diversity

Miguel was raised in Mexico City for most of his life and did not come to faith until his early twenties after he moved to America to live with a relative in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago. His cultural upbringing taught him the value of people over tasks. Growing up, Miguel would often spend countless hours with friends and family discussing the regular issues of the day, often surrounded by food and much laughter. Time and structure did not matter as much as people and relationships. His highly relational approach to friendships shaped how he saw the church and excited him about the potential for engaging others within the community of his new church family in Chicago.

Brad was raised in Manhattan by a father who worked in the financial district and a mother who worked as a schoolteacher. Brad came to faith in Christ while at youth camp and moved to the city of Chicago after college to take a job at the Chicago Board of Trade. For much of his life people were important, but not as much as tasks and work.

Brad grew up in an environment that required him to get to the bus stop on time or be late for class. He was raised in a home that was highly structured with a demand for precision of tasks, respect for roles, the obeying of rules, and not disrupting order.

When Brad and Miguel both showed up to the same church seeking to be disciplined in their faith, Miguel felt that the church was too structured in its approach to discipleship via classes and courses for training. Brad was excited about the discipleship class format since he could work them around his busy work schedule. While Brad sought community with other men within his men's discipleship group, he struggled to connect with Miguel's constant request to hang out, and Miguel struggled to keep pace with Brad's rigid timeline and structured format for discipleship and community. Calendar invites, emails, short phone calls, and Friday night availabilities did not work for Miguel. Miguel was used to talking on the phone without feeling rushed. He did not naturally schedule lunch using a calendar invite, was not used to a lack of relational proximity, and he was just as interested in learning from the people in his men's discipleship group (Brad included) as much as the content that he was learning.

Situations like this happen all the time at CWBC and have been a barrier to overcome as the leaders think through the best way to implement training and equip the saints for ministry at our church. CWBC is about 55-60 percent African American and about a 40-45 percent mixture of a variety of nationalities and ethnic groups. One of the challenges that CWBC faces is in seeking to make disciples and equip the saints for ministry in a diverse cultural format and environment. The diversity across the church impacts every facet of our ministry. For example, there is a diverse worship team, some come from a background where music is taught by ear (normal in the black community) while others were taught how to read music and chord progressions (normal in the white community). These cultural differences in learning and execution can often make practicing as a group very difficult, and at times frustrating for all involved.

Yet, this contextual and cultural struggle is not new. It is felt around the world

in many cross-cultural settings. In her book entitled *Foreign to Familiar: A Guide to Understanding Hot- and Cold-Climate Cultures*, Sarah Lanier describes the difference between “hot-climate” and “cold-climate” cultures. These terms help categorize how different groups approach life, tasks, and relationships. Those representing the hot-climate culture are often relationship based, while those of the cold-climate culture are task-oriented. Lanier writes, “The ‘cold-climate’ structure and the ‘hot-climate’ flexibility also affect the ways we get things done. The ‘cold-climate’ societies have a goal of being efficient, getting the job done, even planning the job in advance. ‘Hot-climate’ people tend, instead, to be responders to what life brings rather than trying to plan life.”¹

The impact of culture is so shaping and formative for individuals, that missionaries who serve overseas can often have a difficult time adjusting upon their return.² An individual who has spent a decade immersed in a context that moves at a slower pace in a rural setting may find it extremely difficult to transition into a large American city filled with constant noise and congested traffic. In Western American culture, people often underestimate how much a person’s cultural makeup not only shapes how they see and approach the world around them but also how it impacts the way they learn and receive information. Paul Gordon Chandler states, “Latin American Christians are keen to tell the tales of their experience of God. They are dynamic conversationalists, natural storytellers who relate their stories to the story of Jesus. . . . Their church services can be filled with more than two hours of music, singing and

¹ Sarah A. Lanier, *Foreign to Familiar: A Guide to Understanding Hot- and Cold-Climate Cultures* (Hagerstown, MD: McDougal, 2021), 105.

² Neal Pirolo states, “New beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors have become a part of your returning friend. Perhaps he has adapted to a culture with a slower pace, a more relaxed atmosphere. Or perhaps, he has lived in an environment of continually being on guard for some kind of danger. Maybe his Christian activity had to be covert. The cultural differences that your friend may try to hold on to are innumerable. When schedules and attitudes of the people back home don’t allow for them, he needs you to help him process his feelings.” See Neal Pirolo, *The Reentry Team: Caring for Your Returning Missionaries* (San Diego: Emmaus Road, 2000), 41.

testimonies.”³ This can explain why Miguel’s approach to church, community, and discipleship is vastly different from Brad’s. Their cultural upbringing is different and so is the way that they seek to be discipled in community.

There is also a generational gap that exists in the church that makes it challenging for leaders to provide a discipleship format that works for everyone. For example, those who tend to transition away from our church to another church in the city are often younger and under the age of thirty. This made sense given the fact that those who are older and have a family tend to seek stability for their children (school, church, friends, etc.) as compared to those who are younger and have more flexibility. It becomes hard to train and equip those who are always on the move as compared to older saints who tend to embrace more stability. CWBC reflects both those in the city and families from the suburbs. Those from the suburbs tend to be more stable, with the only exception being summer travel when their kids are out of school. Many who live in the city (especially downtown) often travel far more throughout the year. It becomes very challenging to assimilate someone from the city into a consistent discipleship process when they travel and move so often.

What also makes matters more complex is that Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z all see the world differently and prioritize different things. A 2018 Barna report on Gen Z states, “Today’s teenagers are not growing up in their grandparents’ or their parents’ world—not even in their twentysomething cousin’s world. Rapid change in technology, communication, science, law, and worldview are creating a world for teenagers that leaves many parents, church leaders and other mentors feeling flummoxed.”⁴ Since culture is so shaping, those from a large variety of generational

³ Paul-Gordon Chandler, *God’s Global Mosaic: What We Can Learn from Christians around the World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 68.

⁴ Barna Group, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* (Ventura, CA: Barca Group and Impact 360 Institute, 2018), 103.

backgrounds and age ranges often speak different cultural languages when in the same church setting. They simply do not see the world the same way. A recent example of this is that an older woman in our congregation had an issue signing into her laptop. Much of her challenge was based on her lack of technological awareness and desire to learn. Yet, her issue would have been quickly resolved if she had a willingness to move on from her flip phone and get a phone that could receive text messages. This would allow her to get email account confirmations from Microsoft, but she was resistant to any change. This is a small example that simply highlights some of the cultural and generational barriers that currently exist in the church.

As CWBC works to build a foundation for discipleship within the church body, pastors and leaders must be sensitive to the contextual issues that may arise. The goal is to provide the people of God with a healthy biblical framework to guide them through the cultural challenges that they might face. The younger generation at CWBC are focused on issues such as immigration, racial injustice, and issues of gender inclusion and authenticity. The older members in the congregation are often more concerned with preserving truth, shunning technology, and preserving the moral fabric (or what is left of it) of American society. The gospel of Jesus Christ and the Bible, not our culture, must shape how we understand the world around us. Cultural behavior and ideas change, but the gospel and biblical truth always remain the same. Our goal is to disciple the people in our congregations by ensuring that they are shaped by the Bible and not by the culture. These challenges also show up often in another area: technology.

The Use of Technology

When CWBC launched the church app, the staff and team celebrated what many believed would be a huge win and step forward in making the discipleship systems more clear, accessible, and easy to navigate. The app was easy to download (especially with our QR code), gave clear sign-up and registration points to all the church ministries,

provided an easy way to give, simplified connecting with a pastor, and more. Pastors and leaders repeatedly encouraged the congregation to download the app. However, what became apparent to the church leaders was that there was a significant diversity in how the congregation related to and utilized technology. Some were very comfortable with technology and others were not. The leadership team struggled to help the older saints transition from the traditional format of doing everything by hand. No matter what event was promoted, the older members were only going to register by hand, not through a cell phone app.

When it came time to think about how to deliver content and teaching for spiritual formation and discipleship, I began to realize that some people in our congregation simply would not adjust to learning online or through web-based tools. Prior to planting this church, I served as a family pastor at a 13,000-member multisite church with 7 locations in the Chicagoland area. It was normal to watch sermons on the screen, work through apps, and use technology to effectively do ministry and live in community with one another. Many within the current congregation that I serve would find it hard to join such a church that relied so much on technology.

Much of today's world operates primarily through their cellphone, which is often a smartphone. Emails, text messages, news updates, fitness apps, Bible apps, social media sites, and even the ability to see someone face-to-face are all available. Never in history has the local church had to think about discipleship in such a context and with such resources available at one's fingertips. Prayerfully discerning how to best steward these opportunities has become something that every local church must face and consider. It is normal to see a local church today that has a website and a social media page (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc.). Thinking about how to best use social media platforms for spiritual formation has led many to move from an "informational" presence (event updates) to a more "edifying" online presence. At CWBC, virtually all of the Instagram posts are sermon clips and teachings that are designed to encourage and

edify believers.

At CWBC, we have thought more strategically about how to use these platforms for discipleship and spiritual formation. Rather than let technology be a barrier to discipleship, we have sought ways to make it a useful tool for discipleship. In her book on smart church management, Patricia Lotich writes, “Churches are often laggards when it comes to technology trends. Learn to take advantage of the available social platforms to improve communications with members and your community. Ten years ago, few churches had a plan for communicating through social platforms, but that has all changed. An estimated 60 percent of churches now use some social media to share information.”⁵ What Patricia identifies is that social media and technology in general is a means of communication to be utilized and stewarded well. When considering what was the best format to teach the 8-week curriculum for this project, I had to consider if this is something that I want to record or stream from the classroom for those who cannot attend in person.

With the arrival of Covid-19, there came a fresh pool of Christians who were now being forced to watch Sunday services on platforms like YouTube and Facebook Live, and who needed to be open to holding Bible studies on Zoom. Post-Covid lockdown has now opened the door for CWBC to think about ways of creatively using online technology as a means for effective discipleship. The women’s ministry recently launched an eight-week discipleship and leadership development course for women in our church. This 8-week course is 100 percent web-based. Leaders can track where someone is in the material and can even tell if they are spending time online in the material. Church planting networks and Christian leaders are now offering “master classes” online with the sole purpose of equipping Christ followers in a particular area,

⁵ Patricia Lotich, *Smart Church Management: A Quality Approach to Church Administration*, 3rd ed. (Monee, IL: Bowkers, 2020), 59.

such as leadership or effective communication.

The reality is that most people in America use technology for learning. Often when one is struggling to repair something around the house, they do not buy a book to help them. Instead, it has become common in our culture to search YouTube and look for a quick video with a visual to help solve the problem. This is common behavior for the current generation when looking for help or information on something. The same is true in the church as it relates to discipleship and spiritual growth. W. Jay Moon and Craig Ott write, “This learning-preference shift provides an opportunity for evangelists to learn and teach churches effective communication approaches from this ‘oral renaissance.’ Digital tools provide creative ways to share the gospel through images, videos, symbols, etc., in ways that were unimaginable in the twentieth century.”⁶ Embracing and leveraging technology for discipleship will be an ongoing priority for CWBC.

Christian Consumerism

There may not be a more difficult challenge to discipleship in America than the consumeristic mentality that exists both inside and outside the church. Many attend church with a “what do you offer me and my family” approach. People often treat joining a church like they treat deciding which college to attend or which cell phone provider to use. When describing the challenges of the suburban Christian, Albert Hsu states, “The problem lies in the larger systemic forces of consumer culture. Modern consumer culture has made it virtually impossible to do anything but consume.”⁷ While Hsu’s focus is on those within the suburban setting, I believe that the same can be said of American culture as a whole.

Churches often cater to this consumeristic bent. For example, the concept of

⁶ W. Jay Moon and Craig Ott, eds., *Against the Tide: Mission amidst the Global Currents of Secularization*, EMS 27 (Littleton, CO: William Carey, 2019), 60.

⁷ Albert Y. Hsu, *The Suburban Christian: Finding Spiritual Vitality in the Land of Plenty* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 76.

being a “seeker-friendly church” uses marketing and meeting a consumer need as a strategy to bring new people in.⁸ The intention here is not to unnecessarily condemn those who embrace this model or insinuate that they have malicious motives. In fact, I believe that they are seeking to do the opposite: do what they can to get people inside the church and then give them the gospel. Yet, one must be careful where the seeker-friendly strategy can lead. My family visited a church like this once and I was shocked to hear what my children experienced during their time in the children’s ministry. The children’s ministry setup had arcade games, rock climbing, and much more! It sounded like a trip to Dave and Buster’s on Sunday morning. Our two youngest sons have compared our church’s children’s ministry to that experience ever since. This is an attractive but deceptive strategy. It panders to the consumerism culture that is already rampant. When people are more attracted to the church coffee and setup than they are to Jesus, it does not produce healthy disciples.

This consumerism mentality presents a problem in churches across North America. Before we can make disciples, we often must break through the deep-rooted consumerism that causes people to only make Sunday morning the point of the Christian faith and community. We preach the Word so that people can turn to and worship Jesus. We desire to see a congregation that is consumed not by their own desires but by the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ and motivated to live on mission for him.

The church is filled with people who know the Bible very well and have walked with the Lord for many years. Yet, many of those same people have struggled to make disciples and very rarely share their faith. To do such things requires them to “give” and not “receive,” and to be focused on others and not themselves. This has been the

⁸ In describing the “seeker friendly” church, Timothy Keller states, “One of its fundamental premises was the assumption that we cannot reach both Christians and non-Christians in the same gathering. So Willow Creek designed weekend ‘seeker services.’ These were not intended to be Christian worship gatherings but were considered outreach events; Christians were encouraged to worship at the midweek services.” See Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 301.

most difficult challenge for me to work through in this project. Christians do not naturally value and desire discipleship. They often just want an encouraging word from the Lord to help them make it through the week. The work of the pastor is to help them see the need for more than what they are settling for.

One interesting trend in helping to foster discipleship and break down this consumeristic mentality is the starting of new churches and campuses. A Barna Group report released in 2016 on the impact of launching multisite church campuses across America found that “many churches using various growth strategies confirm that launching a new location fostered increased discipleship.”⁹ It seems that forcing churches to be more missional by reproducing new church locations (multisite campuses) caused congregants to replace consumerism with intentionally reaching the lost. At CWBC, we have learned that the more we regularly engage our community with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the more it creates a hunger for discipleship within our church body.

The Impact of Covid-19

It may take another decade or two of examination and research to see the full effects that Covid-19 and the subsequent “lockdown” have had on our country and culture. One of the effects of Covid-19 on the church was that it diminished the very thing that is essential to the local church: the ability to gather together in person around the Word of God and practice the ordinances. For the first time ever, Christians in America had to resort to gathering for church on a screen in their local homes. For those who chose to continue gathering in person, there was conflict about masks and social distancing. Many churches fell into conflict and disagreement over what should be done in response to Covid-19. Seminary training had not prepared pastors for how to lead during a pandemic in a politically tense environment. Up until March 2020, CWBC had

⁹ Barna Group, *More than Multisite: Inside Today's Methods and Models for Launching New Congregations* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2016), 38.

been meeting in a Chicago Public School. Once the lockdowns started, we immediately lost our ability to meet in person. Any opportunity for gathering, even for prayer, was now gone. I watched as church after church closed. Any church without its own building was forced to lose their meeting space. Churches like ours were not ready to operate solely on online services.

This scenario put CWBC in a difficult position. With each passing day and live streams constantly buffering and freezing, it became easier for people to fall away into isolation. In his book *Reorganized Religion*, Bob Smietana states, “March 2020 did change the religious landscape. It broke, at least in the short term, the habit of churchgoing for many people. For the first time in years, people who usually could be found in church pews like clockwork found themselves with new choices of what to do with their Sunday mornings. They could turn on their computers, phones, or tablets and watch services online—many did just that.”¹⁰ Many Christians decided to sleep in and watch the service later, watch the service in bed in their pajamas, go to the gym, travel, meet a friend for breakfast, or view a Sunday service at another church anywhere in the country that had better video quality.

This became a challenge for CWBC. For the first time, many Christians realized that they had other options instead of viewing church online. The gift of technology allowed them to bring church with them wherever they went. Why get up early when you can listen to the service later in the kitchen as you make dinner? Sunday service as a community was not just lost, but also any organized online activity. Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Zoom, and Vimeo all allowed an option for playback recording for any live streamed event. This allowed viewers to choose between watching something live or watching it later. This option of joining now or later gave church members

¹⁰ Bob Smietana, *Reorganized Religion: The Reshaping of the American Church and Why It Matters* (New York: Worthy Books, 2022), 68.

flexibility and gave pastors and leaders more challenges in trying to gather people together online. As the lockdowns and social distancing measures of the pandemic went on, people began to get tired of looking at a screen. They sat in front of screens all day for school, work meetings, phone conversations, small group gatherings, Bible studies, and church. For many, screens got old quick.

Over time, CWBC was able to acquire a facility and get back to some level of normal functioning. While the church was able to transition back into a routine as a church body, many of the people coming back into the local body were not the same. Covid-19, repeated lockdowns, calls for social distancing, a tense presidential election that resulted in a riot on Capitol Hill, and the racial tension surrounding the murder of George Floyd left many deflated, depressed, and deeply scarred. Any thought of discipleship within the church was diminished in terms of priority. The mental health of a depressed, highly anxious, and emotionally exhausted group of people became the priority. This all led to CWBC starting a counseling center within the church building. Some were too depressed to think about anything beyond getting through their day and were on edge about things that previously would not have shown up on their radar. The impact of these things still affects this discipleship project to this day. Everyone in the church body is at a different place. Some are ready to be equipped and some are just not there yet.

Every month that has followed has resulted in many people coming to our church after not being in a church setting since March 2020. Four years after Covid's arrival, many still struggle to find their way back. There are also many more who have no desire to return to an in-person church gathering. Peter Dehaan wrote the book *Visiting Online Church* during the days of the pandemic. He researched and took notes in real time during some of the most stressful moments of Covid-19 from the beginning. After studying many online services and in-person gatherings, he concludes, "Regardless of which path the future takes, never forget that some people, for varying reasons, cannot or

will not attend church in person. For them, online is the only option. Don't forget these people; continue to seek ways to minister to them."¹¹ Peter brings up a good point and a challenge that this project faced: how do you disciple people who no longer see meeting in person as vital, necessary, or good for their spiritual health? And how do you disciple many whose mental health reflects the lingering impact of all that happened during the pandemic? As a pastor, I have never previously had to think through discipleship in such a challenging context.

In his book *The Post-Quarantine Church*, Thom Rainer identifies six urgent challenges and opportunities that he believes will determine the future of local congregations in America: (1) gather differently and better, (2) seize your opportunity to reach the digital world, (3) reconnect with the community near your church, (4) take prayer to a new and powerful level, (5) rethink your facilities for emerging opportunities, and (6) make lasting changes that will make a difference.¹² As elders and leaders of the flock entrusted to us, we have had to think through all of these categories and see the opportunities for mission and discipleship in them. For Rainer, great leaders adjust and adapt to the times for the glory of Jesus Christ and the good of his people. I have learned that instead of waiting for things to “normalize” again, I need to lead and disciple people through these issues and challenges. The process of discipleship does not pause and wait for difficulty to end; rather, the process of discipleship is what happens during difficulty and hardship. It could be argued that many of the weaknesses that we see in the American church during times of conflict and suffering stems from many Christians not being disciplined in the context of adversity and challenge.

At CWBC, we are slowly seeing excitement as people within the church body

¹¹ Peter DeHaan, *Visiting Online Church: A Journey Exploring Effective Digital Christian Community*, Visiting Churches (Grand Rapids: Rock Rooster Books, 2021), 225.

¹² Thom S. Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 11-111.

are eager to get back into a church that is healthy, local, missional, and authentic in loving one another and pursuing Christ. What is left for the leaders to work through is the new landscape of a post-Covid world in which technological efficiency matters more than four years ago. In this era, online church options, a good social media presence, communication flexibility, and practical ministry to our neighbors is more important to many people than it was four years ago. If we are to fulfill the Great Commission at CWBC, we must not use these troubled times as an excuse to shrink back from our calling but must boldly and humbly harness those challenges as motivational fuel to lead God's people in discipleship and spiritual formation.

Division and Conflict in the Church

Something emerged in 2020 that brought about a change in how ministry is done in America. For a long time, trouble had been bubbling under the surface and it completely exploded during the pandemic's early days. The change was the overwhelming sense of distrust that many people expressed towards organized institutions. Regretfully, churches were not immune to this reality. Coinciding with Covid-19 was a heated presidential race in which the phrase "fake news" was regularly invoked and every institution (media, businesses, schools, churches, etc.) was looked at with scrutiny and suspicion. People did not know who they could trust in the midst of the pandemic.

The notion of mistrust as it related to churches across North America was exasperated during this time. For a season of time, it seemed that one Christian leader after another was being exposed for sin and not living above reproach. This was damaging the reputation of Christ across the country. The impact on the younger generation of Christians seemed to be felt most acutely. Many were frustrated by several noted leaders, and the general sense of hypocrisy evidenced in the church. Regardless of one's political stance, these public situations left many heading for the doors and

questioning the integrity of every pastor, church, and denomination.

Bob Smietana writes, “Many leaders find themselves in a position of authority, with the ability to make decisions that can change the course of institutions, at exactly the time when titles no longer matter—and where relationships and influence mean more than authority.”¹³ Smietana refers to this time as “the trust revolution.”¹⁴ I have seen this up close and personal as a pastor. Between 2017 and 2020, five churches in the Chicago area either closed down or fell apart due to a scandal connected to its senior leader or leaders. Two were extremely large megachurches with memberships ranging from 13,000 to 25,000; others were smaller yet respected churches in the city. For three years, there was hardly a month that passed without someone from one of these churches walking into our Sunday service. They were often weary, deeply discouraged, and lacked any trust for a pastor or elder. If they came from a church in which the pastor was accused of stealing money or shady financial practices, I was questioned intensely along those lines. If they came from a church in which there was some abuse of power, they were hypersensitive to my tone, body language, and conversations. Even Tweets, Instagram, and Facebook posts were analyzed and scrutinized.

These challenges helped me to become a better pastor and leader and helped us as elders to make sure that we had healthy practices and accountability in place. It caused us to be very intentional in transparency with finances for everyone to see publicly. It forced us to think through best practices for accountability, rest, and stewarding power and authority. While these adjustments were good for us, it still left us with many Christ followers who have trust issues with those in authority. Verbal, physical, and emotional abuse perpetrated by church leaders is a real thing and all too common. I have encountered it with my own eyes and ears. Even among Southern Baptists, the report of

¹³ Smietana, *Reorganized Religion*, 91.

¹⁴ Smietana, *Reorganized Religion*, 94.

instances of abuse in churches has left a damaging stain on the church and has left countless victims wounded, traumatized, and rejected.

In his book entitled *Bully Pulpit*, Michael Kruger identifies four spiritual effects that abuse from spiritual leaders inflicts on victims: (1) doubts about the church, (2) doubts about Christianity, (3) doubts about God, and (4) doubts about oneself.¹⁵ This does not include the physical impact that the abuse has had on their body, along with the emotional effects like depression, fear, anger, and post-traumatic stress disorder. It is all too easy for these victims to suffer in silence. When they walk into a new church (which takes great courage), they are almost instantly triggered. When looking at Kruger's four categories of spiritual effects of abuse, they are all areas in which people need to be disciplined and equipped. The challenge for spiritual abuse victims who enter the church is that they must flesh these things out in view of what has happened to them by the very leaders that they are to humbly submit to. That is a tough ask.

Their doubts about the church are real. At some point in the past, the community that they once knew as loving had turned against them, violated them, and shamed them. To trust again takes a deep work of the Holy Spirit and a willingness to subject themselves to the potential for trauma all over again. They avoid community because of their genuine fear based upon previous experience. The concept of entering relationship with people and pastoral leaders sends them right into a depressive state. It is easier for them to stay away, sit in the back, not join a small group, not serve, and not trust the pastors of whatever new church they choose to attend. It takes great courage for them to meet with pastors and share their story at the risk of seeming like a gossip or coming across as a slanderer.

Not only are there challenges due to church abuse, but also conflict and

¹⁵ Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 106-108.

disagreements. As previously stated, Covid-19 created a lot of tension points for pastors and congregants. Over the past four years, church members across the country got into arguments about whether and when to wear masks and who to vote for. I have spoken to countless pastors who grieved with tears as they were publicly slandered and shamed because they said it was okay to wear a mask (or not). There are many Christians who left their church simply because they did not like a decision that the pastors and leaders made during Covid-19. Some left their church because they felt that their church did not make a stand during the George Floyd incident. They left to find a church that was more vocal about the issue of police brutality and racial discrimination. Some left their church if they felt that all the talking points of President Trump and American conservatism were not embraced. Anything outside of Republican support was seen as embracing the agenda of “the radical left.” It was a season of distrust and disunity in many of the churches across the city of Chicago.

Between avoiding church gatherings for four years or leaving a church to look for a new one due to previous relational conflict, people are heading back into local churches hurt, on edge, and cautious. This creates a different context and challenge for discipleship and equipping Christ followers. The diversity of our church invites all of these complex categories into one meeting place to be discipled. There are Republicans, Democrats, young and old, suburban and city dwellers, police officers and minorities, and an extremely large variety of ethnic groups all in one church. Rather than avoiding the tension, we have leaned into it as an opportunity to disciple God’s people through the challenges and leave the results with the Lord.

Seeing the challenges of loving those who have experienced church abuse and relational conflict has caused me to realize my need (our leaders as well) for better training in these areas. Many pastors are not trained in how to navigate and respond to abuse in the local church. Often, mistakes are made out of ignorance, rather than a malicious and unconcerned heart. Leading well in this area requires continued training

and resources for pastors, and the courage to make a stand for the sake of the victims within our local church bodies. These challenges have also strengthened my zeal for godly character over talent and gifting. Spiritual abuse happens when humility and a life led by the Spirit is not present in the local elders, pastors, and leaders. It is all too easy to walk proudly in the flesh. I do not believe that it is God's heart for our brothers and sisters who have experienced church abuse to be left out and forgotten. Their path to healing and freedom may be long and they may not fit our nice and neat discipleship structures, but they are worth walking with for the glory of God and the good of their souls in Christ.

Trauma in a Context of Violence

One of the many challenges to this project and implementing a structure for discipleship within CWBC is the reality of our local context in Chicago. CWBC resides in an environment steeped in crime (including shootings and murders at rates that are among the city's highest) as well as severe drug abuse and addiction. I cannot recall the last time I went a week without walking alongside someone in our church body stuck in a serious pattern of substance abuse and addiction. Getting men and women to enter the discipleship process becomes a challenge for those battling addictions because making it through the day sober without relapsing becomes their main goal. This has taught me to look for other potential opportunities to help and equip those who struggle. Currently, our church leaders are prayerfully considering partnering with Celebrate Recovery with the hopes of offering a Christ-centered support system for those navigating serious addictions that often impede discipleship.

In addition to substance abuse, other areas of need and trauma: gun violence, victims of crime, abusive homes, and sexual abuse create real and practical challenges to the relationship structure necessary for discipleship and community. In discussing survivors of sexual abuse, Diane Langberg describes how trauma that is years old can feel

fresh daily for the clients that she counsels.¹⁶ This reality is something that I have encountered repeatedly. A person can be so consumed with what happened to them (and its effects) that they cannot focus on the task, object, or person in front of them. Trauma can truly hinder a person's ability to function.

Keith Eitel, when referring to doing missions in a context of violence, wisely states, "In cultures of violence, we are to be reminded that what the church body looks like may be quite different than what we in the West are accustomed to seeing. Relationships must take priority over organizational structures. This concept can be quite freeing for those who will accept the ambiguity of a loose group of individuals who in their networking locally have the essence of a church body."¹⁷ While this assessment may be true internationally for missionaries and church planters, I believe that the same could be said for many communities plagued by violence in America. One evening a few weeks ago we had a family from our community hold a "balloon release" in our church parking lot. The balloon release celebrated the life of a fifteen year old young man who recently had been gunned down and murdered. How do you disciple people and get parents who are grieving into a discipleship process at the church when they are still lamenting the murder of their child?

I have come to realize that this project and the structure that I am calling for often implies a reasonable level of mental, physical, and emotional stability. It implies that there is a certain order to the daily lives of those we seek to disciple. Increasingly, I am finding that the Western structural setup for ministry—one that I am accustomed

¹⁶ Diane Langberg writes, "What does one do with horrific memories, either always remembered or just recently recalled? Such memories often overwhelm to the point of interfering with a person's ability to function. The past intrudes again and again into the present. As one client put it, 'What happened to me twenty years ago seems more real than what happened this morning.'" See Diane Mandt Langberg, *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, AACC Counseling Library (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2003), 123.

¹⁷ Keith Eugene Eitel, ed., *Missions in Contexts of Violence*, EMS 15 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2007), 148.

to—often does not work in our church’s setting. Instead, practices that are implemented in hard international settings frequently are more useful than the highly organized structure of large churches. One of the main reasons is that most churches in America do not have a regular framework for grief and lament woven into their structure. Every Sunday, we call on members to sing joyfully regardless of what they have experienced that week. Most Sunday school classes, discipleship classes, Bible studies, and other events do not have a place for grief to be processed outside of counseling or a small group.

H. Norman Wright states, “In our society, we have denied a very large group the right to grieve, to be recognized as people in grief, to assist them and to walk with them and give them their proper place—and this group encompasses all of us.”¹⁸ Woven into the Old Testament was the freedom and place to lament, to clothe yourself with sackcloth and ashes, and to mourn. We even have an entire book in Scripture known as “The Book of Lamentations.” It seems that many have taken the gospel message to mean “no longer cry.” Instead of waiting on people to get healing from their trauma so that they can be discipled, we need to disciple them through their pain and trauma. It has taken me a long time to realize this. Discipleship does not have a pause button. There is hardly an issue that a Christian encounters that is not related to some form of needed discipleship to help them navigate their challenges as Christ would seek for them.

One of the challenges that I faced in this project is that grief and trauma do not fit nicely and neatly into the structural framework that I am used to. This does not mean that I should not teach classes on discipleship or build out structural frameworks for discipleship. It means that I need to better consider how to strengthen these classes and supplement our discipleship process with resources and systems that can minister to

¹⁸ H. Norman Wright, *The Complete Guide to Crisis and Trauma Counseling: What to Do and Say When It Matters Most!*, rev. ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2011), 275.

everyone, regardless of their situation. No one should be left out of spiritual formation and intentional discipleship as a result of their trauma, their experience with church abuse and conflict, or their consumeristic nature. While these discipleship classes and this eight-week curriculum will be the spinal cord that equips our church body, building more structures and support systems is essential for the holistic care and discipling of God's people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the five challenges that this project had to navigate were, (1) cultural and generational diversity, (2) Christian consumerism, (3) the impact of Covid-19, (4) division and conflict within the church, and (5) trauma in the context of violence. Although most of these challenges are still present, this project proved to be contextually sensitive and fruitful in increasing the understanding of discipleship at CWBC.

CHAPTER 4

DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

This chapter describes the preparation, implementation, and overview of the ministry project. The purpose of this project was to increase the understanding of discipleship at CWBC in Chicago, Illinois, through the creation of an intentional discipleship process and curriculum. The project had three goals: (1) to identify and assess 8 to 10 church members from Chicago West Bible Church who will participate in an 8-week discipleship process, (2) to develop curriculum that will educate, motivate, and equip Chicago West Bible Church members as disciples of Jesus Christ, and (3) to see increased understanding in each participant in the areas covered at the conclusion of the 8-week curriculum. Implementation of the project began on May 17, 2023, and continued through July 26, 2023.

Summary of Project Goals

The first goal of this project was to identify and assess 8 to 10 church members from Chicago West Bible Church who would participate in an 8-week discipleship process. This goal was considered successfully met when a group of 9 participants were selected for case study and successfully attended and completed the entire 8-week doctrinal study.

The second goal was to develop curriculum that would educate, motivate, and equip Chicago West Bible Church members as disciples of Jesus Christ. This goal was accomplished by developing an 8-lesson doctrinal curriculum. This goal was considered successfully met when the curriculum content was approved by a collective of elders and pastors.

The third goal was to see an increased understanding in each participant in the doctrinal areas covered at the conclusion of the 8-week study. The measure for this goal included a post-training survey, and the goal was met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant difference between pre- and post-training survey scores: $t_{(8)} = -6.531, p < .0001$.

Project Preparation

Promotion for this project started in early January 2023. During our “Vision Sunday” church service our main theme was the importance of discipleship and equipping our church body. I laid out a variety of different ways that CWBC intended to build a “discipleship culture” within our church, and implementation of this 8-week project was one of key focuses. Although my project was designed to have 8 to 10 participants, I soon realized that it would be hard to implement such as project without inviting our entire church body, which has a size of 400 people. If CWBC held an 8-week discipleship class, many would hear about it and would likely ask to attend. This led me to promote this project in the form of an 8-week Wednesday night doctrinal study rather than a project. I decided to name this 8-week summer study “Faith Foundations.” CWBC created graphics and designs over the next few months and promoted this summer study all spring. There was open registration for signups on the church app and at the church information counter.

In April, CWBC printed out high quality 8x10 promotional cards that had the Faith Foundations graphic on one side and the 8-week doctrinal lessons to be covered on the opposite side. Each doctrinal lesson to be covered also had the date on which it would be covered so that those in attendance could plan accordingly and have a clear timeline. I explained to our church body during Sunday services the importance and significance of Christ followers knowing the foundational doctrines of the faith that has been passed down to us. I repeatedly emphasized that the entirety of how we live as disciples and

witnesses for Christ in this world, is directly rooted in our understanding of the Word of God and the doctrines of the faith. It is impossible to fulfill the Great Commission and make disciples of all nations if we are not trained in the doctrines of the Christian faith that have been handed down from generation to generation within the church.

My first goal was goal was to identify and assess 8 to 10 church members from Chicago West Bible Church who would participate in this 8-week discipleship process. I hand selected a small group of people out of all registered participants which I could use as a case study. The criteria for admittance into this group was church membership, a commitment to the entirety of the 8-week classes, participation in filling out the surveys, a background that is diverse from others within the group (socio-economic, geographical, age), and a desire to grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Eighty-seven people officially registered, along with many more who showed up to the Wednesday study as unregistered. In total, there were between 110 and 120 total participants. From this pool, I selected 9 individuals from different backgrounds, age ranges, gender, and levels of theological understanding. All 9 participants were handed a pre-training survey. This pre-training survey was designed to show their level of understanding of the eight doctrines to be taught in this project, their ability to defend the eight doctrines, and their understanding of the doctrines importance to discipleship prior to taking this 8-week study (see example below).

Table 1. CWBC pre-survey example

Question	Survey Response				
I feel equipped in my understanding of God’s Word and the doctrines that it teaches.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I feel that I am equipped and able to defend the Word of God to those who would reject it.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I feel that knowing and understanding Bible doctrines are a crucial part of discipleship.	SD	D	N	A	SA

Question	Survey Response				
I spend time studying doctrinal topics as found in Scripture.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I have a clear understanding of what that the Bible teaches about God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).	SD	D	N	A	SA
I have a clear understanding of what that the Bible teaches about Jesus Christ.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I have a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit.	SD	D	N	A	SA

I chose to draw all my material from Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*.¹ This allowed me to have a textbook resource that I could use to supplement the doctrinal teaching that participants could use for deeper personal study if needed. My reason for choosing this resource was twofold. First, this resource was the primary textbook that I used for all my systematic theology courses at Moody Bible Institute while I was a student there. I am very familiar with it. Second, I felt that Grudem’s work in this resource is clear, simple to understand, has solid doctrinal outlines, and is easy to teach from. While the textbook covers many doctrinal topics, I chose to narrow down my study to eight doctrinal areas that I felt were foundational to discipleship and the Christian faith: (1) The Doctrine of God: Theology Proper, (2) The Doctrine of Christ: Christology, (3) The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit: Pneumatology, (4) The Doctrine of the Word of God: Bibliology, (5) The Doctrine of Man: Anthropology, (6) The Doctrine of Redemption and Salvation: Soteriology, (7) The Doctrine of the Church: Ecclesiology, and (8) The Doctrine of The Last Things: Eschatology.

The second goal of this project was to develop curriculum that would educate, motivate, and equip Chicago West Bible Church members as disciples of Jesus Christ. As stated, all the curriculum for this project came from Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic*

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

Theology. I created outlines for each doctrinal topic by summarizing the chapters from Wayne Grudem's work into a workable outline that could be taught and followed easily by participants. I often used Grudem's terms and definitions when defining doctrines and topical categories such as the church, sin, the Word of God, and redemption. I made sure to give Grudem credit for all works cited. Drawing all the content from this textbook allowed me to create my outlines and teaching notes faster and in a more organized way. I also used Moody's *Handbook of Theology* as a supplement as well for definitions and terms.²

Project Implementation

Since this project was introduced to our congregation as an 8-week doctrinal Bible study on Wednesday nights, I decided to add a one-hour prayer meeting to the study for anyone who would come. My hope was that this would help strengthen the discipleship process by teaching prayer and learning in community simultaneously. Prayer began at 6:00 p.m. and ended at 6:50 p.m. to give those in attendance time to use the restroom and take a quick break. The doctrinal Bible study began at 7:00 p.m. sharp. I always opened the lesson by stating the doctrinal topic to be studied, its importance for the believer, the church, the world, and provided a summary for the teaching goals for the night. The teaching time was from 7:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., followed by breakout group discussions from 8:00 p.m. to 8:45 p.m. The focus on the teaching time is always informational (what to know) and applicational (what to do). I wanted to avoid doctrine simply being "head knowledge," but also something that fuels personal worship, personal holiness, and missional living. I concluded every teaching time with a Q & A and allowed participants to ask three questions related to the topic discussed. I sought to answer questions to the best of my understanding and if there was something that I was

² Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 2014).

not sure of I simply stated that I did not know and would investigate it. Each night upon arrival, participants received a handout that had all the teaching notes for them to follow, along with 4 to 5 group discussion questions for breakout time.

For group discussion time, I broke the participants into groups of 4 to 5 people each. Each group had a mixture of men and women. Some of the small groups in our church chose to utilize this 8-week study for their small group gathering by participating in the learning and group discussion time. The discussion questions that I created were both informational and application. It was vital for me to emphasize the need for grace and charity in group discussions. I knew that we had a mixture of people in the group and many new members and visitors. I suspected they all would not see eye to eye on all points of theology. Although our church is complementarian, I understood that some may have strong opinions on the role of women in the church and I wanted to protect against unhelpful dialogue. I regularly communicated that disagreements in discussion were welcomed if they were charitable and gracious with the goal of seeking better understanding. The goal of having 45-minute group discussions was to allow the participants time to process and apply the doctrinal teaching that they just learned within community. It was normal to see some with tears as they talked about the grace of God and often groups would pause and pray for one another. The teaching time was live streamed to our YouTube channel for those in our church who could not be in attendance. While I know that there were many viewers watching our live stream, I did not do a good job of tracking how many were online with us, and I did not think of a way for them to participate with us via the Q & A time. Logistically, I also had to consider childcare for those who desired to attend but had young children.

Project Overview

In week 1, May 17, 2023, participants were introduced to “The Doctrine of God (Theology Proper)” through a one-hour lecture systematically covering what the

Scriptures teach about the doctrine of God. The goal for this lesson was to cover who God is so that we may better know him intimately. The content focused on the existence of God and how we know for certain that he exists. We examined three arguments for God's existence: cosmological, teleological, and moral. Time was given to the ways that God reveals himself to us, particularly through both general revelation and special revelation. I taught on the character of God as expressed through his incommunicable attributes (eternality, independence, etc.) and his communicable attributes (knowledge, love, holiness, etc.).

I spent a significant portion of the lesson covering the Trinity. I walked through a vast variety of passages that teach this doctrine and articulated the centrality of this doctrine to the Christian faith. We had many who entered our church with very little distinction between the Godhead and some even spoke using modalism terminology without understanding or recognizing it. The breakout group discussion questions were centered around the incommunicable and communicable attributes of God. Questions like, "What is the difference between general revelation and special revelation?" were asked, along with applicational questions on the Trinity.

In week 2, May 24, 2023, participants were introduced to "The Doctrine of Christ (Christology)" through a one-hour lecture systematically covering what the Scriptures teach about the doctrine of Christ. The main summary and goal of the lesson was that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man in one person and will be so forever. I opened the teaching time showing that Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses acknowledge Jesus, but do not believe that he is God. This allowed me to practically highlight the importance of getting right who Jesus truly is. My lesson began with us focusing on the humanity of Jesus. We looked at Luke 1:35, the virgin birth, and the importance of the incarnation of Christ. We looked at Jesus's human weaknesses and limitations (he had a body, emotions, got tired and hungry, etc.). I touched on the fact that Jesus was sinless (Luke 4; John 18:38; 2 Cor 5:21) and what this means for the cross and our salvation. We

also examined why it was necessary for Jesus to be fully human. I introduced Christ as our representative and substitute for sacrifice, and our mediator.

I spent the second half of our teaching time focusing on the deity of Jesus Christ. I showed that he is all powerful (Matt 8:27; John 11; Heb 1:3), that he is eternal (John 8:58; Col 1:15-20; Rev 22:13), that he has all authority and is worthy of all worship (Phil 2:9-11). In summary, participants learned that Jesus is more like us than we think. Yet, he is unlike anything or anyone that we have ever known, and he is worthy of our praise. The breakout group discussion questions focused on ways that Jesus can relate to our daily struggles and weaknesses (our great high priest) and practical ways that we can trust his divine power in our lives and circumstances.

In week 3, May 31, 2023, participants were introduced to “The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit (Pneumatology)” through a one-hour lecture systematically covering what the Scriptures teach about the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Due to the prevalence of the false teaching of the prosperity gospel in our context and the overemphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, via tongues, I felt it necessary to spend much more time on this lesson. I have gotten more theological questions on the role and works of the Holy Spirit as a pastor than any other subject. The goal of this lesson was to define who the Holy Spirit is (God, not an energy) and what are the distinctive activities of the Holy Spirit through the history of the Bible. I opened the teaching time providing our church’s doctrinal teaching on God the Holy Spirit and read our doctrinal statement. I then started with creation and looked at the ways God the Holy Spirit was active in creating this world (Gen 1:2). We studied how he gives physical life (Ps 104:30) and spiritual life (John 3:5-6). I taught on the ways that he empowered people for service in the Old Testament (Joshua, David, Judges, and the prophets). We looked at Old Testament Scriptures that prophesied about his New Testament coming and work. I also taught on how he inspired the writings of Scripture (2 Pet 1:21).

Given that so many people speak of God the Holy Spirit as if he is an “it” or a

“force,” I felt the need to spend much time on his personality. The Word of God taught us that he can be grieved (Eph 4:30), blasphemed (Matt 12:31), resisted (Acts 7:51), and lied to (Acts 5:3). I closed out the last half of the teaching time showing his role in the life of the church and believer. He indwells (John 14:16-17), seals (Eph 1:13), teaches (John 14:26), testifies (John 15:26), guides (John 16:13), convicts (John 16:8), intercedes (Rom 8:26), and gives spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12). I gave much attention to the spiritual gifts and walked through all the gifts as mentioned in Scripture, giving historical context and clarity to them. The breakout group discussion time had practical discussion questions centered around walking in the Spirit, not grieving the Spirit, spiritual gifts, and the personality of God the Holy Spirit.

In week 4, June 7, 2023, participants were introduced to “The Doctrine of the Word of God (Bibliography)” through a one-hour lecture systematically covering what the Scriptures teach about the Word of God and its importance. The goal of this lesson was to answer: “What is the Word of God? How did we receive the Word of God? And what books belong in the Bible?” I opened by illustrating how Protestants, Catholics, and Jews all refer to the Bible, and yet have different conclusions about the Bible. For Protestants, the Bible is the sixty-six books that we currently hold to. For Catholics, the Bible includes the apocrypha; and for Jews, Bible is just the Christian Old Testament. Before I began the teaching, I gave definitions for the following: canon of Scripture, Bible, Scripture, inspiration, inerrancy, infallible, and sufficiency. I gave an overview of the entire Bible, it is sixty-six books, and why they are broken into Old Testament and New Testament. I spent the first portion of the teaching covering the Old Testament canon. I walked through the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Writings showing from Scripture how they were divinely inspired by God. I taught on the reliability of the Old Testament and the accuracy of the transmission of the Old Testament through history. I used the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 as a key example of textual faithfulness.

The second half of the teaching time was given to the New Testament canon. I explained the importance of the role of the apostles in the development and protection of the New Testament writings under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. We covered the first-century challenges that they faced, such as false apostles and false letters that were circulating at the time. I highlighted details such as the amount of money that would be spent on supplies and labor costs for writing an epistle such as Romans or a Gospel account like Mark. I have a replica of an ancient Greek manuscript of a section of the Gospel of John. I brought it to the lesson so that participants could see what an original manuscript would have looked like up closely. I closed out the lesson by teaching the canonical timeline of the New Testament and how the church historically concluded which books were authoritative. We even spent time discussing the church fathers and the “Council of Laodicea.” This all gave assurance to our participants that what we have today is truly the Word of God and its necessity for life physical and eternal. All the breakout group discussion questions centered around defending with Word of God, personal study, and applying the Word of God daily.

In week 5, June 21, 2023, participants were introduced to “The Doctrine of Man (Anthropology)” through a one-hour teaching systematically covering what the Scriptures teach about the doctrine of man. Given the current topic of gender decisions and LGBTQ rights, I felt the need to address them as I taught on this doctrine. The goal of this lesson was to answer questions like: “Why did God create us? Why did he make two sexes instead of one (male/female)? What is the distinction between men and women? What does it mean that we were created in God’s image? And where did sin come from and what did it do to us?” I worked through each of these questions providing biblical references, insights, and application. I began with the fact that God created us in his image to love, know, worship, glorify, and enjoy him forever. We spent time studying the fall and how sin brought death to us and our relationship with God. I showed how the death and resurrection of Christ not only forgives us of sin, but also restores our

relationship with God and brings a complete restoration of God's image in us at Christ's return.

I gave much attention to God creating male and female, equal in his sight and yet with different roles. I knew that there would be some who found distinctions in roles controversial, but I clearly showed from Scripture passages that support distinctions. This provided me an opportunity to articulate the difference between "complementarianism" and "egalitarianism," and our church's conviction for complementarianism. I then taught on the physical and spiritual nature of man (body and soul). The last portion of the teaching was given to sin and its effects on man. I provided a brief definition for sin and taught on the origin of sin. We learned about our inherited guilt from Adam (Rom 5:12; 18-19), our inherited corruption (Ps 51:5), and how sinful people stand before God. It was a moving time that led many to shout for joy for the redemption that we have in Christ. The breakout group discussion questions focused on the need for seeing one another as image bearers, growing in holiness in body and spirit, and the need for the gospel to be proclaimed.

In week 6, June 28, 2023, participants were introduced to "The Doctrine of Redemption and Salvation (Soteriology)" through a one-hour lesson systematically covering what the Scriptures teach about redemption and salvation. The goal of this lesson was to answer: "What are the undeserved blessings that God gives to all people, and what are the blessings that those saved in Christ receive?" I began the lecture by highlighting God's common grace that is experienced by all humanity and I provided a definition from Wayne Grudem for it. I then taught on the doctrine of election and predestination. I also provided a definition for the concept of election, along with many passages to support the doctrine. I gave a lot of attention to this and even paused for question and answers during this time as I knew many commonly struggle with the concept of election and free will. I regularly reminded the participants that we must give room for divine mystery. There are doctrines that are true, yet hard to understand.

Election and free will are two of them. It is a great mystery how God works in his sovereignty to save those who have been predestined from the foundation of the world, yet they come to Christ through their free will as he draws them.

I then taught on the gospel call, effective calling, and regeneration. I realized as I was teaching that although many knew that we “must be born again,” they had never meditated on what it means to be regenerated and the practical implications of new affections. I spent the latter part of the teaching time focusing on conversion, faith, and repentance. I provided definitions from Grudem’s textbook for these terms as well. I concluded the lesson by teaching on justification, our adoption as children of God, and sanctification. I showed from the Scriptures the doctrinal teachings and provided ways that these realities can be applied to our daily lives. The breakout group discussion questions were centered around election and predestination, the evidence of regeneration and the new birth in our lives, and how justification impacts our daily walk with God.

In week 7, July 12, 2023, participants were introduced to “The Doctrine of the Church (Ecclesiology)” through a one-hour lesson systematically covering what the Scriptures teach about the church, Christ’s body. I began the lesson focusing on the nature of the church, the marks of the church, and the purposes of the church. We looked at the scriptural teachings on both the local and the universal church. I took the time to focus on missions, our global partnerships, the International Mission Board, and the persecuted church while teaching on the universal church. I pointed out the importance for us individually and collectively to have a global and kingdom perspective. I recommended apps like Joshua Project, Global Christian Relief, and different podcasts on the global church. It was encouraging to see everyone’s excitement. I covered the power and unity of the church, highlighting Jesus’s desire that we would be one (John 17).

The second half of the teaching time was given to church government. This was also important to cover for a variety of reasons. First, it gave the biblical basis for our form of governance with biblical elders. Second, it helped to answer the question of

why different denominations have different structures of governance such as the Episcopal, Anglican, and Presbyterians. I taught on the office of elder/pastor and deacons and what each office requires for someone to qualify. We also answered questions like, “Can a woman be a deacon or an elder?” The final portion of time was given to the means of grace that God has given to his church: the teaching of the Word, baptism, the Lord’s supper, prayer, worship, giving, spiritual gifts, fellowship, and mission. The breakout group discussion questions centered around the global church, mission, God’s means of grace, and support for biblical leadership.

In week 8, July 26, 2023, participants were introduced to “The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)” through a one-hour lesson systematically covering what the Scriptures teach about the return of Christ and the end times. I realized that everyone believes that Jesus is returning, but they tend to differ on how his return will play out. Amillennialism, pre-millennialism, pre-tribulation, post-tribulation, rapture, dispensationalism, and covenant theology are views that are held by orthodox Christians around the world and throughout history. With that in mind, I wanted to teach the different viewpoints that fall within conservative orthodoxy, our church’s position, and allow participants to study and come to conclusions for themselves. I began by showing from Scripture that there will be a sudden, personal, visible, bodily return of Jesus Christ. The return of Christ is physical and literal, not an imaginary concept. I articulated that this understanding should cause believers in Christ to eagerly long for his return. While we long for his return, we do not know when Christ will return. I gave examples of false predictions throughout history and the importance of staying away from such teachings (Matt 24:44; 25:13). We studied the signs that precede Christ’s return: the gospel’s declaration to the nations (Mark 13:10), the great tribulation (Mark 13:19-23), false prophets working signs and wonders (Mark 13:22), and salvation amongst the Jews in Israel (Rom 11:12, 25-26).

I spent the second half of the lesson focusing on three areas: the millennial

views, the final judgment and eternal punishment, and the new heavens and the new earth. I showed that there are biblical arguments for the three different millennial views (amillennialism, pre-millennialism, and post-millennialism) and provided a summary for each. I reminded our participants that many orthodox, Bible-believing Christ followers hold to all three throughout history and that a difference in view is not worthy of breaking fellowship or rejecting someone as heretical. I used this time to read our church's doctrinal statement on the return of Christ and I had it placed in the notes as well. It brought us all much joy thinking about the new heavens and the new earth and meditating upon God finally wiping away every tear from our eyes. The thought of us seeing him face to face in our glorified spiritual bodies birthed a time of praise and worship in the room. The breakout group discussion questions focused on the different millennial views, living for this world versus living for eternity, and living with expectation of Christ's return.

Conclusion

The implementation of this ministry project trained participating members of Chicago West Bible Church in the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith and increased their understanding and confidence in the faith entrusted to the saints. Their growth as disciples of Jesus Christ was evidenced by the increase that the post-survey results displayed. The goals of this ministry project were not only met, but also exceeded the expectations established.

The previous understanding of the foundational doctrines was clearly displayed through the pre-test survey. The format of a weekly Wednesday night doctrinal study that incorporated prayer, teaching, Q & A, and breakout group discussions was effective in providing the right structure for collective discipleship training. The final goal used a t-test that compared the post-test survey results of the nine participants at Chicago West Bible Church. The goal was met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a

positive, statistically difference between pre- and post-training survey scores.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

The goal of this chapter is to evaluate the project. This evaluation will provide a six-step analysis. First, the purpose of the project is examined. Second, the three goals of the project are analyzed to see which goals were met. Third, the strengths and weaknesses of the project will be covered. Fourth, considerations of what could be done differently will be identified. The fifth section will provide theological reflections on the project. The sixth section shares personal reflections learned during the project. The chapter is then concluded with closing thoughts.

Evaluation of the Project Purpose

The purpose of this project was to increase the understanding of discipleship at CWBC in Chicago, Illinois through the creation of an intentional discipleship process and curriculum. It is my belief that this purpose was achieved upon the conclusion of this project. The purpose of this project was viewed as valuable and successful for our church body based upon two factors: (1) the project results, and (2) the discipleship systems that has come out of this project.

Comparisons between the pre-project survey and the post project survey showed not only a significant increase in doctrinal learning and understanding in those who participated, but it also made clear that the teaching and curriculum was needed for those who participated. The results showed that the project was fruitful and successful. Discipleship requires that one increases in their understanding of Jesus Christ and the faith entrusted to the church as God's people. There is no spiritual growth in Christlikeness that does not require an increase in understanding of Scripture and living

according to the ways of Jesus.

The success of this project has led to CWBC developing a longer curriculum that runs over the course of two years which church members can take as their schedule permits. This longer curriculum not only utilizes the 8-week doctrinal curriculum of this project, but also adds many more topics such as Bible study methods, apologetics, spiritual gifts, global missions, and intentional disciple making. This discipleship process is now known as our *essential faith track*, and it runs in the fall and spring every year. This track is taught by trained communicators within our church and the curriculum for it was developed by them as well. The classes all have church members in attendance and allows for the purpose of this project to continue in the life of our church body.

CWBC's desire is that as disciples are made and grown in community, the discipleship process within our church structure will birth a healthy sending base for global and local missions. Our leaders plan to evaluate this new two-year curriculum, making tweaks to it in the first few years as we see fit.

Evaluation of Project Goals

My first goal was to identify and assess 8 to 10 church members from Chicago West Bible Church who would participate in this 8-week discipleship process. This goal was considered successfully met when a group of nine participants were selected for case study and successfully attended and completed the entire 8-week doctrinal study. These selected individuals were from different backgrounds, age ranges, gender, and levels of theological understanding. The diversity of the group allowed for me to see if the project would succeed across different demographics. Some in the group were highly educated and some were not. Some had been walking with Christ for multiple decades and some were new to the faith. While the sample group results came back successful, it may have been better to draw from a larger sample size of 20 to 30 individuals.

The second goal was to develop curriculum that would educate, motivate, and

equip Chicago West Bible Church members as disciples of Jesus Christ. This goal was accomplished by developing an 8-lesson doctrinal curriculum. This goal was considered successfully met when the curriculum content was approved by a collective of elders and pastors. The curriculum was educational in that it taught Christ followers doctrines that were essential to the Christian faith. Many expressed how helpful it was to dive deeper into topics like ecclesiology and eschatology. Participants were not only educated, but also motivated to learn more and were better able to defend the faith. The curriculum's focus on not just knowing the doctrines but living them out and defending them in a fallen world proved to be a helpful emphasis for motivating disciples. Drawing the content from Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* allowed for a useful resource that participants could utilize for deeper study and further examination of doctrinal teachings.¹ The weekly implementation of practical application in everyday situations brought the doctrines to life and allowed for students to flesh out their beliefs in real time. This made the class very practical instead of intellectual alone.

The third goal was to see an increased understanding in each participant in the doctrinal areas covered at the conclusion of the 8-week study. The measure for this goal included a post-training survey, and the goal was met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant difference between pre- and post-training survey scores: $t_{(8)} = -6.531, p < .0001$. This t-test shows that the 8-week teaching curriculum had a significant impact on the participants. When answering the question, "I feel equipped in my understanding of God's Word and the doctrines that it teaches," the comparison between the pre- and post-training survey showed a 44 percent increase in the participants understanding of God's Word and Doctrine after completing the 8-week curriculum. When answering the question, "I feel that I am equipped and able to defend

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

the Word of God to those who would reject it,” the comparison between the pre- and post-training survey showed a 55 percent increase in the ability to defend God’s Word in those who attended the 8-week curriculum and were surveyed. This result shows that more than half of those surveyed felt better equipped to defend their faith amongst non-believers in their day-to-day lives after attending the doctrinal classes.

When answering the question, “I spend time studying doctrinal topics as found in Scripture,” the comparison between the pre- and post-training survey showed a 44 percent decrease in those who were surveyed. This reveals that many who thought that they gave themselves to doctrinal studies came to realize that they were deficient in this area after taking the 8-week curriculum. This is helpful as it can reveal that we often score ourselves higher in our scriptural understanding than we truly are. Those who took the 8-week curriculum training left feeling a stronger desire to study the great doctrines of the faith. When answering eight survey questions related to specific doctrines (ecclesiology, the Trinity, redemption, eschatology, etc.), the comparison between the pre- and post-training survey showed a 66 percent increase in knowledge and understanding of the eight essential doctrines taught in the 8-week curriculum. This implies that a large portion of those who were surveyed walked away from the 8-week curriculum with a better understanding of doctrines that are essential to the Christian faith. When examining the pre- and post-training surveys, the results showed that 100 percent of those who answered neutral or lower (disagree or strongly disagree) on survey questions, all had an increase after taking the class. All who answered neutral or lower, checked one to three answers higher on the post-survey questions. This result strengthens the conclusion that the goal of the project was met and fruitful.

Strengths of the Project

The first strength of the project was having Bible doctrines as the foundation for discipleship. Virtually every issue in our world is connected to doctrine in Scripture.

The Bible is to be what informs our lives and decisions. Choosing to focus on key doctrines that are essential to the faith was a great strength and helped to shape our commitment to the Word of God in discipleship. Originally, I had considered teaching on topics like prayer, spiritual disciplines, evangelism, and how to study the Bible. What I realized was that teaching all these potential topics implied that those learning already have a healthy understanding of sound doctrine. What this project taught me is that this assumption is not always the case. The pre-training survey results showed that many did not feel adequate and equipped in their understanding of God's Word and the doctrines that it teaches. The results also showed that many did not feel equipped to defend these doctrines either. Having doctrinal teaching as our foundation for discipleship was a crucial strength of this project.

The second strength of the project was the diversity of the people who attended, both the nine individuals who participated in the survey and the dozens of others who attended. Those who attended the 8-week class came from a large variety of ethnic, social, geographical, and educational backgrounds. There was a broad range of ages and stages of life. This allowed the project to be examined across many contexts and fleshed out in diverse settings. The diversity of backgrounds led to healthy discussions, questions that stretched the group, and doctrinal application beyond everyone's normal comfort and settings. Some in the group grew up overseas, some were widows, some were wealthy, some were facing financial hardship, some lived in the city, and some lived in the suburbs. The feedback that we received was that this greatly helped the group discussion time. The group discussions were filled with charitable discourse between Christ followers who held to different doctrinal views on the return of Christ or spiritual gifts. The strength of diversity was not simply for diversity's sake, but to see if the doctrines, teachings, applications, and project is effective across different boundary markers. I believe that this proved to be the case.

The third strength of the project was its format. The schedule encompassed 2

to 3 hours every Wednesday night. The first hour was focused on prayer from 6:00 p.m. to 6:50 p.m. for anyone who desired to attend. There was never a week in which the prayer hour was empty. There was no record keeping on who attended, nor a survey question on its impact. The beauty of opening in prayer is that it cultivated the prayer muscle that all disciples need, and it contributed to the class's organic rhythm of genuine community. Many who attended the 8-week class were first introduced to others at the prayer gathering. Meeting on Wednesday nights appeared to work with everyone's schedule. Many churches hold Bible study on Wednesday nights, so the idea of having doctrinal classes as a Bible study worked well for everyone.

The question-and-answer time allowed for helpful discussion between me and the students. It allowed me to see how they were processing the information, what the points of tension were, and a space for me to get feedback in real time. Having breakout group discussions after the teaching portion was good for assisting participants in articulating what they believe and dialoguing about questions and tension points. The group discussions strengthened community as I recommended not gathering with the same group each week. This forced everyone to connect with someone that they did not know prior. My wife and other women found it helpful to be in these breakout groups with godly men as she was used to regularly being in groups with other women.

Weaknesses of the Project

The first weakness of the project was my unawareness of how many of the nine survey participants were of one gender. Of the nine who were surveyed, only one was male. All else were female. This was a huge miss on my part, as it did not allow me to examine how the 8-week curriculum impacted men and women comparatively. I did not realize this until I began examining my post-project data. My attempts to find survey participants was so focused on other areas such as level of biblical understanding, age, social class, and geographic location that I did not realize that a strong male

representation was lacking in the surveys.

This reality also points to the fact that it would have been better to have 20 to 30 survey participants than 9 survey participants. One of the main problems that I encountered as I attempted to do this project was that I needed individuals who could commit to the entirety of the 8-week class. I did not feel that I could get an accurate picture of the results if those filling out the survey were not present for all the classes. Surveyors who were not full participants would not be helpful for the project's data. While many men were present for the class, it simply played out that most of the committed surveyors were women.

The second weakness of the project was the class size. Although I had selected nine surveyors for the project, the class total averaged between 80 to 120 in attendance every Wednesday night. While it was helpful for our church body at large to learn in a Bible study format, it hindered the intimacy of the project. Nine people learning in a home, or a small classroom setting is different than learning in a large sanctuary with over 100 people. There are many forms of discipleship, yet it seems that the smaller the group, the better. The breakout group discussions were very vibrant, and I wonder if the larger group were smaller, would the results be different. When a group is smaller, it allows for the teacher to deliver the content in a more specific manner according to the needs of students. My original plan was to have 8 to 10 participants alone, but CWBC members desperately needed a Bible study, and this doctrinal study was seen as a helpful way to alleviate the need.

The third weakness of the project is that it was highly informational. Although efforts were made to make it as applicable as possible and to provide some sense of community through prayer and breakout groups, the bulk of each class was informational teaching. The class was more educational and focused on cognitive learning than transformational development. While the data shows that the class made a significant impact in the participant's understanding, knowledge, and ability to better defend the

faith, there is no metric or goal that evaluates if an individual has changed inwardly via sanctification. Discipleship is more than what one knows. One can know all the great Bible doctrines, and yet not have love or display the fruit of the Spirit.

The strength of this project is that it helped to give a solid foundation for what we believe, but it does not have a way of taking people from “what we believe” to “what we do” and “who we are” in our everyday life. It can be argued that much of the problem today in America is not how much Christians know, but how little they live a crucified life that is reflective of the risen Messiah Jesus within them. If the class would have been smaller, it may have allowed for the group to connect more throughout the week for prayer, meals, and encouragement. This level of connection could have assisted in observing more overall transformational growth than informational growth.

The fourth and final weakness of the project was that its size created more logistical problems. Allowing the overall group to be larger than the nine surveyors forced us to have to think through weekly childcare for participants and the need to offer the teaching online via livestream on YouTube. The benefit of childcare was that it allowed some to attend who probably could not otherwise. Single parents who desired to join the study could attend and have someone watch their child. Finding someone to do childcare each week became a logistical strain and was something that I didn't think through all the way.

The live stream experience brought another set of issues. When I created the project, I never considered how someone joining the class online would experience the training. Due to Covid's arrival a few years back, it is common for many of our church members to join us online or join a meeting via Zoom. Many joined the 8-week class both in person and online. All of the nine surveyors joined in person for all classes. The challenge for the livestream was that those online could not participate in the Q & A, the breakout group discussions, or the prayer gathering. It was too challenging for us logistically to figure out a way to get online viewers involved in the Q & A. There was

also a lack of intimacy that was experienced by solely watching online due to the relational distance.

Things I Would Do Differently

The first thing that I would do differently is make the project smaller with a 10 to 20 individual capacity limit. This would be an invite only with everyone signing a participation commitment form. Although the t-test results show that the 8-week curriculum had a significant impact on the surveyors, I believe that it would have had an even greater impact if the class size was smaller. A smaller format was my original design, and I did not stick to it. The lack of adequate male representation amongst those taking the pre- and post-training survey would have been more obvious to me in a smaller setting. This format would have also allowed us to have a more intimate time in prayer and an opportunity to spend 10 to 15 minutes sharing how we are doing personally before studying God's Word each week. Entering each other's lives would have provided a greater level of comfortability to the community. There would be more depth, vulnerability, and discipleship within the gathering. The smaller gathering size would have eliminated the need for the 45-minute breakout group discussions and would have provided more time for us to dialogue and interact on the curriculum being taught each week. During the last week, we would have been able to share a meal together and spend time discussing how the Lord has grown us during the 8-week class.

The second thing that I would do differently is to be clearer in my communication with the nine individuals who provided input in the pre- and post-training survey. I did not give them the clearest instructions outside of asking them to fill out the surveys and explaining that it was for my doctoral project. I could have met with them further in advance and explained in greater detail how their insights would contribute to this project. I would have the surveys, curriculum evaluation, and all paperwork prepared for them in advance. This would allow for better clarity and protect me from missing

steps such as forgetting to hand out the curriculum evaluation forms.

The third modification that I would make to this project is extending the classes from 8 to 12 weeks. While we covered much ground in examining key doctrines of the faith, there were many more that we could have covered. Having four added weeks would allow us to not only explore more doctrines but to be more intentional about spiritual formation in the life of a disciple of Christ. After learning about the doctrines, participants could then focus on the spiritual disciplines and living out the teachings. When I taught on the sufficiency of Scripture and how we received the 66 books of the Bible, it occurred to me how very little our church members knew about church history. My assumption is that many Christ followers in American churches know very little of how the faith has been handed down to us from the days of Christ to the present day. In explaining how the church identified what books were to be held as divinely inspired, I felt the tension of not having enough time to cover church history. Our participants were very interested in this topic to my surprise.

The fourth and final modification that I would make is to add homework and reading assignments in-between weeks. Because of the vastness and weight of the doctrines, it was a lot of information to absorb per class. Learning such a large amount of information is hard to retain without giving intentional time to reflect upon it and slowly processing the information received. Small articles or homework might have been more helpful for students than simply listening to a lecture for an hour. I could have given three to four key passages to study on a particular doctrinal topic each week that would have helped the participants to study the Word of God in more depth and wrestle with the text for themselves. Upon returning the next week, participants could then spend 10 to 15 minutes discussing what students learned from studying the text. When studying eschatology for example, I could have given students the three different millennial views (pre-millennial, amillennial, and post-millennial) and had them study the key passages used to support each. Allowing them time to study and then providing a space for healthy

dialogue would have made our discussion time richer and more engaging. Looking back, I did not consider ways to assist the participants in retaining the information throughout the week, how I could get them to study for themselves, and I underestimated how easy it is to forget something recently learned.

Theological Reflections

As CWBC participants reflected upon God, what came up repeatedly was the great mystery of God. There were many occasions in which we all were speechless or sat with an inability to comprehend the depth of a particular biblical truth. When considering how God predestined salvation from before the foundation of the earth, and yet, all who accept him or reject him has done so of their free will, is a mysterious and glorious truth to ponder. I found myself regularly saying to my students, “We have to leave room for mystery.” It is truly incredible to consider the Trinity and yet know that there is only one God. These eight weeks allowed us to see and explore the depths of God in ways that are hard to comprehend, but simultaneously stirs worship and awe.

One thing that was clear to us all was God’s redemptive plan in history. Everything about human history and God’s plan of redemption makes complete sense when one steps back and objectively studies the Scriptures. The idea that there is a loving God who created our world in beauty and holiness makes perfect sense. Our world being cursed by sin through the fall that led to the destruction and decay that we see today makes perfect sense. God, in his infinite wisdom knowing and predetermining to save lost souls through the eternal atoning blood of Jesus (God himself in the flesh) makes perfect sense. A coming day when he will judge the earth and create a new heaven and earth in which righteousness dwells, makes perfect sense. During this 8-week project, I explained this unfolding of history to an unbelieving skeptic, and they admitted that it all makes perfect sense. Reflecting upon God and what the Scriptures teach us about the creation and history of this world, makes perfect sense and has strengthened our faith in

God and his Word.

A second theological reflection is the reality that God advances his Word through his people, the church. As we sat in our class week after week, it occurred to me vividly, that it is the people of God who have stewarded and handed down the faith from generation to generation. While I have always known this truth, it was eye-opening to see it playing out in real-time as we all gathered to study the great doctrines of the faith that we hold to. It is not only the shepherds, elders, and evangelists who must guard and teach the faith but all of God's people who have been redeemed. This truth only reinforces the purpose of this project and the need to make disciples of Jesus Christ. As I taught these classes, I felt the weight of assisting the participants in truly grasping the truths that we were studying. It was not just a class or a doctoral project to me, but a sacred act of equipping the saints in the eternal Word of God. Paul says to Timothy, "And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:2). This concept of learning truth and entrusting that truth is God's design for reaching the lost, sanctifying his people, and training them in righteousness.

It is all too easy to focus on church programming more than discipleship. Churches can easily get into an unhealthy rhythm of event planning and hardly take any time to consider how these events are making disciples. Christians being in community with one another without the centrality of God's Word guiding and shaping them will only produce people who are directionless with little to no knowledge of their faith and how their faith strengthens them. They will not pass along God's Word to the next generation, but something foreign to the kingdom. The importance of this project assessing the participants ability to defend the faith is not mainly about apologetics, as much as their ability to teach others the truths that they themselves believe. Healthy discipleship does not conclude with what one knows but rather concludes in one's ability to train others in the knowledge of the faith. Discipleship is a process of multiplication. If

healthy disciples are not being multiplied, then the faith entrusted to us in greatly impacted.

A final theological reflection is the importance of the Holy Spirit illuminating biblical truths in the hearts of the people of God. Jesus told his disciples, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). It is a helpful reminder for any teacher of the Word that unless God the Holy Spirit gives insight and works through the communication of the declared Word of God, no true transforming work will be done. It was tempting for me to rely upon my outline from Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*, the practical applications that I created within the lessons, and the simplicity of the content delivery.² I soon realized by the first class that unless the Holy Spirit worked in the heart of the participants and made these doctrines real and precious to the souls of the hearers, this project would be nothing more than a cool Bible study. Our church does not need another cool Bible study; they need men and women to be gripped by the beauty of God’s Word and transformed by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

We need the Spirit to give us both head knowledge and heart knowledge. Knowledge and insight into the deep truths of Scripture and hearts that are melted by those truths. This reality is what led to the prayer focus for one hour before each class. It was an opportunity for us all to confess sin, worship Christ, and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we prepared to study the Word. I can say beyond a doubt that we all sought the Lord and was dependent upon the Holy Spirit for guidance every Wednesday night that we met.

Personal Reflections

I have learned that making disciples of a large group of people is far more

² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*.

difficult than it appears. It is one thing to personally walk with a few men and disciple them. It is another thing to build an entire structure and process for discipling hundreds of people. Discipleship requires close relational proximity, a long length of time, the Word of God, and an opportunity to share life together within community. There are many ways that this can be done, and figuring out the right way has proven more difficult than I originally thought. There are no simple quick fixes for deep spiritual formation. Opportunities to serve and develop spiritual gifts, small groups, Bible studies, mission trips, the Sunday gathering, and doctrinal classes all play a role in making a disciple of Jesus Christ. I have come to realize that it is a collection of resources that disciples a large group of people, not just a new program.

A part of creating this discipleship process is spending more time with our leaders. As I prepared the doctrinal curriculum, I asked myself, “How many leaders within our church could teach this class?” I soon realized that I need to do a better job at leadership development and raising up teachers who can lead us in the deep truths of Scripture and Bible doctrine. I think it to be good for all ministers of the gospel to grade their effectiveness based upon their absence. Would there be a zeal for discipleship, mission, and the Word of God if I were not the main voice championing these things? Would there be faithful leaders ready to step in and faithfully communicate the Word of God if I were no longer present? I am reminded of Jethro’s wise advice the Moses in Exodus 18 that he should multiply faithful leaders who can help carry the weight.

This project and these thoughts have led me to consider the many areas that I can develop and grow as a leader. As our church has grown numerically, it has required me to think more as an organizational leader than I have been used to. I am learning that caring for the flock personally is greatly impacted by my ability to shepherd the flock organizationally. This requires a variety of skills and muscles that I must continue to build. Some, that I confess I am weak in. I am sensing that our church’s ability to grow in discipleship collectively is directly connected to my ability to grow as a leader

organizationally.

A second personal reflection that I am considering is that I can pray more for the church. As I prepared the 8-week curriculum for this project amid a busy schedule, a family to care for, and other duties as a pastor, it occurred to me that though I pray often, I do not pray as often for the church as I should. Both the global church, the local churches in our city, and the church that I am privileged to serve. It is easy for me to become swallowed in tasks and deadlines and offer very little prayer to these things. Yes, I pray; but do I pray as I ought? Are my prayers full of desperation and pleading with God to do a great work in his people? I am not as confident of this. If there is any major improvement in my walk with Christ that was helped by this project, it is that I pray far more. Especially for the church that I serve and decisions that I need to make day to day. I have learned from my time given to this project that creating structures for discipleship is a long and hard process. It is not just a great program, plan, or classes. It requires the Holy Spirit to do a sanctifying work amongst Christ's followers. This entire act is one hundred percent dependent upon prayer. Every decision and act should be bathed in prayer.

One final reflection I have considered is that fruitfulness requires faithful obedience to a task over a long period of time. As much as I desire to see disciples made and missionaries sent out to the ends of the earth, I am learning more and more that building this culture within our local church body takes time. We live in a day in which everyone wants instantaneous results. That is not reality. I am understanding more and more that many of the things that I desire to see in our church body may require a decade or more of faithfully building one brick at a time. Eugene Peterson called it a long obedience in the same direction.³ If God wills, I may spend much of my life helping to

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, IVP Signature Collection (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021).

build a disciple making, missionary sending, and church planting culture on the Westside of Chicago. Not seeing the results right away, but prayerfully placing one brick on top of another for the glory of God and the good of his people. Seeing the challenges of leading has caused me to reflect upon faithfulness and longevity in ministry. I have grown to admire pastors who have served faithfully in one place for a long period of time. The challenges that our churches face cannot be solved with a quick fix. They can only be solved through prayer, the Word of God, and faithful servants who seek the glory and honor of Christ alone over a long period of time. Our church is in its eighth year. We are small infants with much more to learn and do. I am seeing that moving slower and steadier one task at a time is the way to go.

Conclusion

This project is evidence that God is at work building his church. Chicago West Bible Church stands in a long line of faithful believers who are seeking to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ and guarding the faith handed down to the saints. The goal of this project was to increase the understanding of discipleship within Christ followers at Chicago West Bible Church. The t-test, along with the pre- and post-survey evaluations, provided clear evidence that this project was effective in reaching its goals. Evaluation of the project overall revealed a few blind spots that can be corrected, along with clear opportunities for growth and effective discipleship with our church body.

This project has already produced a two-year discipleship curriculum at Chicago West Bible Church that is already bearing fruit in making disciples. The 8-week doctrinal class of this project proved to be foundational to the creation and development of the discipleship process and culture within our local church body. The beauty of this project and its goals is that it can be replicated in other local churches and church planters can utilize this process and study for the discipleship and development of their own local church bodies.

As I reflect on this project, I am extremely grateful for the privilege that I get to serve as the lead pastor and an elder of Chicago West Bible Church, and the joy that I get to experience in shepherding God's flock into a helpful discipleship process. My prayer is that our church will become a healthy environment for discipleship and spiritual formation which produces a culture of sending out missionaries and church planters both locally and globally for the glory and fame of Jesus Christ.

APPENDIX 1

PROJECT SURVEY RESULTS

This section covers the comparison between pre and post survey results. It shows any increase or decrease in the participants understanding of bible doctrines and the goals of the project, along with results for which answers did not change. The results from all twelve questions are covered. Below are the post-survey results.

Question #1: Five of the nine participants showed an increase between pre and post survey answers. One participant showed a decrease. Three answered the same on both surveys.

Question #2: Five of the nine participants showed an increase between the pre and post survey answers. Four participants scored the same on both surveys. One showed a decrease.

Question #3: All nine participants answered the same for both surveys.

Question #4: Four of the nine participants showed an increase between pre and post survey answers. Three participants showed a decrease. Two answered the same on both surveys.

Question #5: Six of the nine participants showed an increase between pre and post survey answers. One participant showed a decrease. Two answered the same on both surveys.

Question #6: One of the five participants showed an increase between pre and post survey answers. One participant showed a decrease. Seven answered the same on both questions.

Question #7: Five of the nine participants showed an increase between pre and post survey answers. One participant showed a decrease. Three answered the same on both surveys.

Question #8: Five of the nine participants showed an increase between pre and post survey answers. Zero participants showed a decrease. Four answered the same on both surveys.

Question #9: Five of the nine participants showed an increase between pre and post survey answers. Zero participants showed a decrease. Four answered the same on both surveys.

Question #10: Two of the nine participants showed an increase between pre and post survey answers. Zero participants showed a decrease. Seven answered the same on both surveys.

Question #11: Four of the nine participants showed an increase between pre and post survey answers. Zero participants showed a decrease. Five answered the same on both surveys.

Question #12: Five of the nine participants showed an increase between pre and post survey answers. One participant showed a decrease. Three answered the same on both surveys.

APPENDIX 2

PRE- AND POST-DISCIPLESHIP SURVEY

This survey instrument was used to establish a baseline regarding the perceived understanding of CWBC members who entered the 8-week Discipleship Curriculum. These questions are designed to quantify the understanding and experiences of the respondents' ministry and life in general. Following the 8-week discipleship curriculum, the same survey was deployed to the members who had participated.

Chicago West Pre- and Post-Discipleship Survey

This survey is to assess your understanding and experiences of Bible Doctrines and the role they play in Discipleship. The information you provide will be held strictly confidential and your name will not be shared or connected to your responses. Your honest feedback is greatly needed and appreciated.

Please provide a unique 4-digit personal identification number. It may be the last four digits of your phone number, your birth month and date (MMDD), or any other 4-digit number you choose. This number will be used to match up responses to any future leadership training participation surveys.

Personal Identification Number _____

Reflecting on the most recent experiences, give your honest response to the statements below using the following scale: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree. Please select only ONE answer that is most appropriate.					
I feel equipped in my understanding of God's Word and the Doctrines that it teaches.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I feel that I am equipped and able to defend the Word of God to those who would reject it.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I feel that knowing and understanding Bible Doctrines are a crucial part of Discipleship.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I spend time studying doctrinal topics as found in Scripture.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I have a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).	SD	D	N	A	SA
I have a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about Jesus Christ.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I have a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I have a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about the Word of God.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I have a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about the Doctrine of Man.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I have a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about Redemption and Salvation.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I have a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about the church.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I have a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches on the return of Christ (Last Things).	SD	D	N	A	SA

APPENDIX 3

APPLICATION PACKET FOR DISCIPLESHIP TRAINING

The following packet describes the personal cost and weekly commitments associated with the Chicago West Bible Church 8-week Discipleship Training via Doctrinal Classes and the application form which may be administered in writing or during a personal interview.

Your Personal Cost and Commitment Inventory

Jesus taught us to “count the cost” (Luke 16:25-35) to determine if we have what it takes to complete the commitments we are about to make. Chicago West Doctrinal Classes involves a cost on your part (though it promises many benefits). Please prayerfully weight these costs.

Training Time Commitment

1. In-Class Training Time

Chicago West Bible Church Discipleship Training and Doctrinal Curriculum is eight weeks long. We will meet once each week on a Wednesday night for 3 hours. The first hour is devoted to prayer and the final two hours are focused on learning and group discussions. Consistent attendance is vital, so it will be necessary for you to be in attendance at least 90% of the times that we meet.

Ministry Time Commitment: Everyone who completes the training will be asked to continue their training by taking the Chicago West Bible Church “Spiritual Development Classes” and will be expected to invite others to participate in these discipleship classes.

Your Personal Commitment Form

If, after carefully considering your commitment and availability, you decide that you want to commit to our 8-week Doctrinal Class, then the next steps in your process will be to:

1. Sign and date this Personal Commitment Form.
2. Complete the Discipleship Training Application Form.
3. Return these two documents to jkelly@chiwestBiblechurch.org by _____ (due date).

My Commitment to Chicago West Bible Church Doctrinal Training

I have carefully read all the information. Having weighed the benefits and costs, I am willing to commit myself to fulfilling all my commitments and attending the CWBC 8-week Discipleship Training.

(Signature)

(Date)

I also grant Chicago West Bible Church my approval to perform a background check.

(Signature)

(Date)

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ABSTRACT

INCREASING THE UNDERSTANDING OF DISCIPLESHIP AT CHICAGO WEST BIBLE CHURCH THROUGH THE CREATION OF AN INTENTIONAL DISCIPLESHIP PROCESS AND CURRICULUM

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024
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This project seeks to increase the understanding of discipleship among the members of Chicago West Bible Church. Chapter 1 presents the history and ministry context of Chicago West and the goals of this project. Chapter 2 provides exegesis of Matthew 28:18-20 to show the biblical mandate to make disciples of all nations and its implications for us today. Chapter 3 shows how the cultivation of spiritual disciplines produces leaders. Chapter 4 describes the project itself, recounting the content and teaching methodology of the specific course curriculum. Chapter 5 evaluates the efficacy of the project based upon completion of specific goals. Ultimately, this project seeks to increase the understanding of discipleship among Chicago West Bible Church members in hopes of producing mature disciples and participating in the Great Commission.

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