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THE SYMBIOTIC NATURE OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION
AND MISSIONAL CONTEXT

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THE SYMBIOTIC NATURE OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION
AND MISSIONAL CONTEXT

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To my wife, Kaylon, thank you for holding me down.

You made a way for this to happen, you were flexible, and you were always in my corner.

I could not have done it without you, my love.

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PREFACE

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Joseph Anderson

Atlanta, Georgia

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the church has sought to contextualize the teachings of a radical first-century Jewish rabbi into Christian lifestyles that are relevant for daily life. Many argue that the New Testament epistles were written to help new believers integrate Jesus's teachings into their everyday experiences.¹ However, as time has progressed, this task has become increasingly challenging. Today, many pastors ask, "How can we guide our congregations to be faithful disciples in the modern world?" Does this call require abandoning one's career to follow a literal Middle Eastern rabbi, as the disciples did when they left everything behind? Or has the call to follow Jesus become less radical, involving little more than saying a prayer and attending church services and small groups? Over-contextualizing the gospel can create an impractical way of life in the modern world, creating barriers for Christians seeking to live out the ways of Jesus as well as a barrier to those who have not yet begun to follow. On the other hand, under-contextualizing the gospel can lower the standard of discipleship to the point of ineffectiveness, hindering both spiritual growth and the ability to reach one's neighbor. A balance must be struck. This thesis aims to offer a model for contextualizing faithful discipleship in the twenty-first century, equipping the church with tools to guide individuals on a spiritual formation journey and fostering deeper intimacy and faithfulness over time as they progressively grow in their faithfulness to Jesus and his mission.

¹ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 92–93.

In the Gospels, Jesus identifies the essence of Christianity as one's love and affection for God, and one's willingness to follow him on mission.² Christians are called to love God with all their heart, soul, and strength (Matt 22:37) and to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19–20). For the purposes of this thesis, the Great Commandment will symbolize spiritual formation, while the Great Commission will represent a missional orientation. The disciplines of spiritual formation and missional lifestyle will serve as key tenets in developing a twenty-first-century contextualization of the Christian life. I will argue for a model that centers on the symbiotic relationship between spiritual formation and mission within contemporary contexts for the sake of modern ecclesiological practice.

Void in the Literature

The previous writings discussed represent but a part of the reservoir of helpful material on spiritual formation and missional lifestyle. For the individual and the church, how to know and love God more effectively, as well as how to engage culture with the gospel, will be topics that will be written on forever. This can be evidenced in the span of time that these books cover, from desert nuns to the modern church growth craze. My aim in the thesis is to present an additional ecclesiastical model that will assist the church in capitalizing on the symbiotic nature of spiritual formation and mission context. My aim, therefore, is to present a framework with ministry structures that assist individuals in both intimacy with God and missional faithfulness. No longer can the pursuits of community, mission, and formation be neatly separated out from one another.³ Powerful are these pursuits on their own, but capitalizing on the symbiotic nature of the two can catalyze the church as it seeks to reengage with culture. This comprehensive approach lays a foundation for the most important tenets of the church's call; namely, to love God

² Hannah Ascol, "Conflating the Great Commandment and the Great Commission," Founders Ministries, March 10, 2023, <https://founders.org/articles/conflating-the-great-commandment-and-the-great-commission/>.

³ Howard, *Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 10, Kindle.

and make disciples. This thesis will recommend a paradigm for churches seeking to help individuals progress by endorsing distinct environments that spiritually form individuals while equipping them to live out their newfound faith in missional spaces for the sake of continued formation.

Thesis Statement

To engage the postmodern West, the church must capitalize on the symbiotic nature of spiritual formation and missional lifestyle. The realities of the postmodern West present a particular difficulty for churches trying to advance the gospel in society. It will take a congruency from the church that requires spiritually formed people. It will also take intentionality from the church to pursue those who are no longer willing to breach the doors of a traditional gathering. This thesis will propose one pathway for helping churches intentionally engage individuals toward spiritual growth. This pathway incorporates the wisdom of select resources in the field of spiritual formation and the insights of select resources related to missional living to aid the church in the particular challenges of ministering to post-modern culture. It will do so assuming phases of spiritual growth as well as categories to help individuals continue to pursue intimacy with Jesus. The goal of each spiritual formation category is to outline standards for intimacy with Jesus, commitment to community, and missional lifestyle.

Familiarity with the Literature

Much has been written on the topics of spiritual formation and missional lifestyles. These works range from focusing on the corporate church to individual Christians. The authors in this space are equally diverse, whether they are pastors, theologians, or Christians seeking to share their wisdom on biblical living or missional lifestyles. This is not surprising, seeing as spiritual formation and missional lifestyle are pillars of the church. Faithful discipleship encompasses both spiritual formation and missional lifestyle. This section will give a general overview of books been written in

each category. Then, I will unpack some books that have been significantly influential to the conversation in both fields.

Spiritual Formation

Literature in the spiritual formation movement often explores the multifaceted, multidimensional realities of the inward journey toward spiritual maturity. It often encompasses the fields and disciplines of theology, psychology, and philosophy, as well as personal dimensions such as mental, emotional, and spiritual health. It unfolds practices and processes working together in the context of community and in the life of the individual for the sake of defining a trajectory for spiritual growth. Authors typically cover the key themes of spiritual disciplines, silence and solitude, cultivating virtues, and the individual's role in uplifting their community. Many sources highlight the necessity of difficulty along the journey as well as the benefits of suffering. Literature in this discipline often draws from a divine source supplemented with science and research to make assertions. Next are a few books that meet the criteria of spiritual formation literature.

In *Mansions of the Heart*, Thomas Ashbrook follows the spiritual formation path laid out by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. He highlights what he calls a well-worn path of spiritual formation, giving a practical application for individuals seeking to develop a deeper, more authentic relationship with God. The seven steps highlighted in this book observe the journey from initial awakening to the reality of God to spiritual maturity described as union with Christ. Ashbrook notes the distinctiveness of each stage in the journey, how one relates to God, and the potential barriers to advancing in one spiritual formation. He emphasizes how important it is for the traveler to be self-aware and willing to surrender to experience the desired transformation. This book invites readers on an inward journey toward God, advancing in spiritual maturity.⁴

⁴ Thomas Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010).

In *Spiritual Practices for Soul Care*, Barbara Peacock highlights forty ways for individuals walking with Christ to deepen their faith. She argues for a life of spiritual disciplines executed in rhythmic intentionality. This comprehensive guide helps the Christian nurture a spiritually healthy lifestyle through deliberate spiritual practices. Her emphasis on soul care for navigating the tumultuous terrains of life gives a unique approach to the discipline of spiritual formation. Throughout the book she presses the reader to develop a deeper connection with one's soul, along with connecting with God and others. Drawing on her extensive experience as a spiritual director, Peacock displays a profound intuition for helping individuals grow in their relationship with God using a plethora of tools such as prayer, meditation, journaling, and contemplative Bible reading. Regardless of where someone is in their spiritual journey, spiritual practices for soul care extend wisdom and guidance that are both useful and accessible.⁵

The Critical Journey by Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich highlights and describes a journey of spiritual formation, relating it to how one responds to God in faith. Hagberg and Guelich cover an assortment of topics ranging from finding meaning and wholeness to healing from difficult religious experiences. Drawing on their extensive research supplemented by personal experiences, they outline six stages of faith development and spiritual process. Their stages follow a path where one starts with a recognition of God and proceeds to a life of love. Throughout the book they highlight catalysts and potential barriers to growing in one's walk with Christ. The critical journey offers readers an awareness of how and why they relate to God the way that they do. This resource is especially helpful to individuals grappling with questions of meaning and spirituality.⁶

⁵ Barbara Peacock, *Spiritual Practices for Soul Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023).

⁶ Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem, WI: Sheffield, 2005).

Move by Greg Hawkins and Callie Parkinson takes a macro approach to spiritual formation within the context of the local church. They expose misguided notions of activities that bring about spiritual formation in the lives of believers and highlight the primary factors that help move individuals along the spiritual formation journey. Using what they call the reveal study, they survey over 1,000 churches and use the data to make assertions about practices that bring about spiritual growth. They commend churches' scriptural engagement, intentional discipleship processes, and a life of service as critical catalysts for moving individuals into deeper intimacy in their walks with God. Their four categories range from exploring Christ to surrendering to Christ. *Move* is a vital resource for the church moving forward as it attempts to assist the global church in moving its members toward sanctification in a meaningful way.⁷

Missional Lifestyle

In recent years, the missional church model has emerged as a response to the traditional models practiced in the Western context. The shifting cultural landscape in the post-Christian West has led many theologians to assert a need for a shift in missional engagement. Theologians have taken a fresh look at biblical ecclesiology to reprioritize ways of engaging the communities in which they reside. This new emphasis on equipping the saints for cultural engagement is essential for bringing about change and reaching unbelievers. The overall emphasis in the literature is a recommitment to an outward focus, making the mission a part of the church's ethos. Influential authors such as Alan Hirsch, Michael Frost, and Leslie Newbigin have made significant contributions to the discourse at hand. The content of the missional church literature explores practical methodologies as well as principles for implementation. Overall, its helpful insights into theological frameworks and intangible case studies provide a symphony of wisdom for those seeking to help their churches be more missional.

⁷ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1000 Churches Reveal about Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

The book *Missional Church* gives a compelling perspective on the role and function of the Western contemporary church in the post-modern society. The authors of this book challenge the traditional methods of the established church, identifying them as a static institution. They seek to argue for a more dynamic approach that is outwardly focused and missionally minded. Emphasizing the theological concept of *missio Dei*, this book challenges the inward-focused tyranny of maintenance mindset. The authors advocate for an outward mission-driven ethos. The primary role of the church is to participate in God's work of redeeming creation and reconciling the world back to himself. Through analysis of Scripture, theological reflection, and practical application, *Missional Church* offers a comprehensive framework for embracing missional identity when engaging the postmodern West. The authors impeccably execute crafting a helpful, thought-provoking resource for the church.⁸

In *Center Church*, Tim Keller aims to comprehensively address the need to strengthen and revitalize the American church in an urban context. He argues for a theological vision that guides the church's theology and practice. His approach is both grounded in Scripture and culturally relevant as he adequately addresses both the opportunities and challenges faced by ministry in the postmodern Western culture. His three sections, gospel, city, and movement, explore the theological foundations necessary for the practical strategy suggested in the unfolding of the book. His theological insights for building healthy urban churches give a compelling vision for what the church could be. Throughout the book is his urgent calling for the church to return to gospel centrality for the purposes of renewal in both the church and the city. His bountiful experience shines through, as well as the practical wisdom offered to both leaders and members of a local

⁸ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998).

church. *Center Church* is an immensely valuable resource to the modern church and a jewel to those who care for the future of the church.⁹

In the book *Saturate*, Jeff Vanderstelt offers a transformative guide to readers who desire to live more missional lifestyles. His call for Christians to immerse themselves in the ways of Jesus is both practical and theological. His mandate that discipleship should not be separated from everyday life but integrated with it gives a distinctively refreshing approach to many models of church discipleship. Building on his own experiences and a theological framework, Vanderstelt offers practical and relevant strategies for cultivating gospel communities and transformative lifestyles. Through compelling stories and thoughtful reflections, the author empowers readers to embrace distinct identities that inform subsequent ways of living. *Saturate* is a superb resource for individuals desiring to bolster their faith and live out their life with Christ in meaningful ways.¹⁰

In *Exiles*, Michael Frost seeks to address the unique challenges and propose solutions that face modern Christians in a secular society. Frost addresses the increasingly hostile relationship between traditional Christian values and modern-day Western culture. His point is that Christians often feel like exiles in their current context. Frost attempts to reframe the Christians' approach, highlighting their opportunities to live as missionaries when engaging culture. He builds his case for embodying the lifestyle of Jesus through love and sacrifice on theological foundations and contemporary case studies. He stresses authentic community, hospitality, and sacrificial service as the foundation for his call to missional living. He concludes by arguing that Christians should embrace, not avoid,

⁹ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

¹⁰ Jeff Vanderstelt, *Saturate: Being Disciples of Jesus in the Everyday Stuff of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

their identity as exiles. The result, he claims, will have a meaningful impact on the lives of nonbelievers and a persistent transformation of the culture around them.¹¹

Writings That Emphasize the Relationship between Spiritual Formation and Missional Context

Several works have been highly influential in shaping this thesis, particularly those that emphasize the powerful integration of spiritual formation and mission. These authors address both individuals and the wider church, emphasizing the necessity of deepening one's relationship with God while living on mission, and vice versa.

In *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Richard Lovelace offers a detailed history of spiritual revivals, overlaying them with biblical principles for formation. In the first half of the book, he overviews spiritual awakenings since the Reformation, giving particular emphasis to revivalist Jonathan Edwards. He identifies the specific elements of revival, handling the preconditions, primary elements, and secondary elements, that contribute to revival. The second part of the book identifies what he calls a sanctification gap, and speaks to the practical issues of revival and renewal in the context of the local church. This book is full of helpful concepts for theologians seeking to integrate revival principles into the spiritual renewal of their people.¹²

In *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, Evan B. Howard examines how Christians can cultivate spiritual vitality through engagement with Scripture, the Holy Spirit, community, and mission. Howard presents a holistic view of spiritual formation in which Christians grow in faith, character, and theological understanding, deepening their knowledge of God. His emphasis on Scripture engagement is both refreshing and practical for believers. Howard also highlights the transformative work of the Spirit in the

¹¹ Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006).

¹² Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979).

Christian's life and underscores the importance of community as a source of shared experience and mutual support. Lastly, he addresses the necessity of mission, where believers live out their faith and learn dependence on God. Howard's blend of practical advice and theological insight provides a valuable framework for churches aiming to foster deep and meaningful Christian formation.¹³

In *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, James Wilhoit underscores the central role of spiritual formation in the church's mission. He argues that this mission should be pursued within the church community for lasting kingdom impact, emphasizing that spiritual formation is a communal, not private, responsibility. Wilhoit highlights the necessity of Christians supporting one another on their faith journeys and presents a model of formation focused on four key areas: receiving God's grace through spiritual disciplines, remembering God's work throughout history, responding with obedience, and relating within genuine gospel-centered communities. His call for churches to create environments that nurture believers' spiritual growth is a significant contribution to the field of spiritual formation. Wilhoit's practical and insightful recommendations make this an essential read for church leaders committed to fostering spiritual development within their congregations.¹⁴

In *Spirituality of the Sent*, the contributors unpack the evangelical commitment to spirituality and mission. Seeking to cast a new vision for missional churches these individuals advocate for a holistic Christian mission that is grounded in the mission given to the church by God. Throughout the book, the authors weave the concept of spiritual formation and missional faithfulness, uniting movements that have historically operated independent of one another. This book brings together variety of experts from evangelical scholarship to combine theology and practice. Using the phrase *missal spirituality*, they

¹³ Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018).

¹⁴ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008)

attempt to foster a culture of spiritual maturity that fuels mission faithfulness.¹⁵

In *The Art of Missional Spirituality*, Jeremy Chambers and Monica Chambers provide thirty-one practices designed to help Christians cultivate authenticity with God that moves them into missional faithfulness. There is a clear undertone of loving God and loving neighbor in this work. The emphasis is placed on a kind of spirituality that does not draw Christians away from their neighbors but instead propels them into the lives of those who need to know the love of Christ. This book functions as a helpful and practical guide for those seeking to draw closer to God while simultaneously progressing in their ability to love their neighbor¹⁶

Definitions

Throughout this thesis I will use the terms kingdom, mission, and spiritual formation. For the purposes of clarity, I will define each of these words in this section.

Kingdom. The kingdom of God represents the sovereign rule established through Christ to bring about righteousness, justice, and transformation in a world broken by humanity, encompassing both present and future realities. The kingdom of God is a present reality breaking in through the distinct lifestyles of those redeemed through belief and repentance. It is God's sovereign rule lived out in his people for his purposes. It has been promised by God the father and proclaimed in the presence of humanity by King Jesus Christ, and will be lived out through the Spirit in the empowering of the church.

Missional. To understand the term missional, one must first understand that God is on a mission. This mission ensues in the first few pages of Scripture. After Adam and Eve's rebellion, God promises to send a Messiah that will redeem the world back to a reconciled relationship with him. Thus, a missional lifestyle is one that is formed,

¹⁵ Nathan A. Finn and Keith S. Whitfield, eds., *Spirituality for the Sent: Casting a New Vision for the Missional Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2017).

¹⁶ Jeremy Chambers and Monica Chambers, *The Art of Missional Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

directed, and intentional in the mission that flows from the heart of God.¹⁷ The mission of God can be perceived throughout the Scriptures in his desire to redeem a rebelled people. However, it is most clearly evidenced in the sending of his son, Jesus. Therefore, mission is God's effort in reconciling the world back to himself after sin, and subsequently the church's mission is to partner with God and that effort tethered to an ethic of love.

Spiritual formation. Spiritual formation, more traditionally known as sanctification, is the act of becoming increasingly intimate with Jesus while becoming increasingly more like him. Dallas Willard defines formation as “the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”¹⁸ Put simply, those who are spiritually formed become like Christ. A close reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus's disciples were marked by a deepening process of spirituality.¹⁹ The disciples transitioned from being consumed with wealth, power, and status into a community of faith, hope, and love.²⁰

A Word on Sanctification

This thesis's perspective aligns with a reformed view of sanctification. Believers are fully justified by Christ the moment they receive his free gift of salvation, and are continually sanctified over time by the Spirit into Christlikeness. Salvation comes by grace alone through faith alone, and God equips believers through his Spirit with the grace needed to grow in holiness. Those who do not bear the fruit of progress must seriously consider whether they have truly experienced the initial grace of salvation. For

¹⁷ Nathan A. Finn and Keith S. Whitfield, “The Missional Church and Spiritual Formation,” in Finn and Whitfield, *Spirituality for the Sent*, 28, Kindle.

¹⁸ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 22.

¹⁹ Timothy M. Sheridan and Michael W. Goheen, “Missional Spirituality and Cultural Engagement,” in Finn and Whitfield, *Spirituality for the Sent*, 95.

²⁰ Anthony L. Chute and Christopher W. Morgan, “Missional Spirituality as Congregational,” in Finn and Whitfield, *Spirituality for the Sent*, 78–79.

those who have, there is an expectation that God will continue the work he began. As Christians work out their salvation, God works within them to accomplish what is pleasing to him (Phil 2:12).

I made clear my stance on sanctification because there are some Keswick elements of sanctification present in the model of sanctification, I will present. My primary emphasis from the Keswick model is the way they distinguish the normal Christian life from the normal Christian experience and their unapologetic call for Christians to be distinct.²¹ However, what feels Keswickian in this model is prescribed firmly under a reformed theological construct. I reject the prescription of a carnal Christian in the ideals of a higher level of spirituality absent of sin and the need for further signification. All Christians are on a spiritual formation journey in which they are being made more into the image of Christ overtime and will arrive at full sanctification only after the resurrection or Christ's return.

Outline of Chapters

Within the pages of this thesis I will focus on the cyclical nature of spiritual formation and missional lifestyle. I will highlight how spiritual formation leads people to lives that conform to the missionary mandate given by Jesus. I will also explore how those who live on mission experience deeper union with Christ as they walk in obedience. As stated, the church must capitalize on the symbiotic relationship. By capitalizing on this relationship, the church will have a unique witness that allows it to engage the postmodern West more effectively.

Chapter 2: The Postmodern West and the Church

In chapter 2 I will explore the plight of the postmodern individual. I will highlight how the Enlightenment set unrealistic expectations for progress and technology,

²¹ J. Robertson McQuilkin, "The Keswick Perspective," in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 162–63.

leaving the postmodern society unsatisfied and hopeless. This chapter will chart the journey from the Enlightenment to postmodernism and make suggestions for the churches re-engagement. There will also be an emphasis on how the Enlightenment has impacted the church and in some ways contributed to the postmodern movement away from Christianity. The conclusion of this chapter will underscore the necessity of the church to be aware of its Enlightenment influences and engage society in ways that combat postmodern despair in plausible ways.

Chapter 3: Gospel Leads to Kingdom

In chapter 3 I will write about the implications of the symbiotic nature between spiritual formation and missional lifestyle on the church in the verbiage of gospel and kingdom. I will make a compelling call for Western churches to return to a robust proclamation of the gospel in both lips and lifestyle. I will draw a thorough line from spiritual formation and missional lifestyle to love of God, one another, and neighbor. I will then resolve the matter with a clear biblical conclusion and highlight what happens when the people of God love God, one another, and their neighbor.

Chapter 4: Phase 1 Spiritual Formation Leads to a Missional Lifestyle

I will begin chapter 4 by laying out an overall summary of the spiritual formation continuum and missional context that will be used to propose an ecclesiological framework for the local church. I will introduce phase 1 and give supporting evidence for why spiritual formation is necessary to produce missional obedience. From there, I will identify four categories of spiritual growth. Many different stages have been identified by sociologists, philosophers, pastors, and spiritual formation experts who studied the spiritual formation journey. The stages of the journey have been classified from a few as two to as many as twelve.²² For the purposes of this thesis, I have narrowed the stages of

²² J. H. Chajes, *The Kabbalistic Tree* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2007), 45.

the spiritual formation journey to four. By using four stages of spiritual formation, I ensure that the categories are broad enough to be valuable on a church-wide scale, while remaining specific enough to be meaningful on an individual level. The four categories that will be used in the thesis are considering Christ, connecting with Christ, committing to Christ, and conforming to Christ. Then, I will identify four distinct categories that surmise an individual's identified stage on the spiritual formation continuum and variables necessary for movement: characteristics, catalysts, barriers, context. Phase 1 will focus on the first two stages, considering and connecting. Phase 1 will also function as a foundation for the Christian life, providing the necessary disciplines and community for individuals to walk with Jesus on the road ahead.

Chapter 5: Phase 2 Missional Lifestyle Leads to Spiritual Formation

Phase 2, which I will write about in chapter 5, will assume the foundation of phase 1. I will give an overview of how missional context creates the environments necessary for spiritual formation in the latter stages. From there, I will write about the later stages of spiritual formation, namely committing to Christ and conforming to Christ, which require missional context for continued growth and depth. Using the same distinct categories, I will highlight how missional context plays a pivotal role in continuing to form individuals on their spiritual formation journey.

Chapter 6: The Intended Outcome of this Discipleship Paradigm.

In the final chapter, I will discuss the desired outcomes for individuals progressing through the spiritual formation continuum. The measurement of each outcome for each segment will be measured through a lens of three variables. Intimacy with Christ, a covenanting to community, and a willingness to live joyfully on mission. Each variable will have distinct external measurements that mark success and readiness for individuals to move onto the next phase. Paired with identifying the outcome for each

segment of the spiritual formation continuum there will be an anticipated outcome at the end of each phase. The thesis will conclude with disciples formed into greater intimacy with Christ while joyfully living on mission in the context of community.

CHAPTER 2

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE WESTERN CHURCH AND POSTMODERNS

The unraveling of Western society’s spiritual and moral fabric has long been documented and lamented by many researchers.¹ Over the past decade, the escalation of religious nones has left many Western churches perplexed and grappling for answers.² A cursory overview of recent history reveals the damage. The deterioration in church attendance from the 1980s to the 1990s paints a picture of unprecedented church decline.³ Consequently, during this time, there was a significant decline in those who considered religion beneficial or essential, as nearly 73 percent of Americans over eighteen report not going to church on a given Sunday.⁴ This shift away from religion produced a drastic drop off in church attendance, especially among the next generation where individuals in their twenties have stopped attending church at nearly 30 percent.⁵ Unfortunately, this

¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1976); Donald Wood, *The Unraveling of the West: The Rise of Postmodernism and the Decline of Democracy* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2003); John Carroll, *The Wreck of Western Culture: Humanism Revisited* (Melbourne, Australia: Scribe, 2004)

² A “religious none” is someone who identifies as having no orthodox religion. Gastón Espinosa, “Nones, No Religious Preference, No Religion and the Misclassification of Latino Religious Identity,” *Religions* 14, no. 3 (2023): 1.

³ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can, Too* (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 17–19.

⁴ Steve Thorngate “Church Attendance on the Decline,” *Christian Century* 113, no. 26 (1996): 843–44.

⁵ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 97.

trend has continued. As of 2020, 47 percent of Americans regularly attend religious services of any kind, which is down 20 percent from 1999.⁶

These numbers tell researchers that something has gone drastically wrong in the cultural approach to church. In America, many churches are following the path of other Western countries who have seen religion all but disappear. Canada, for example, experienced social revolutions similar to those in America in the 1960s. However, their decline was even more severe, with church attendance rates dropping almost two-thirds in twenty years.⁷ The response of numerous pastors amid this upheaval was to batten down the hatches and seek to maintain the status quo.⁸ This kind of inward focus led to the loss of an entire generation of Canadians. Unfortunately, various main line American churches have not learned from their Canadian counterparts and have taken a similar path with similar results. Richard Lovelace speaks to the dilution of the revivalist movement in the early nineteenth century. Mass evangelism replaced a comprehensive movement toward renewal, impacting the church's ability to engage the surrounding culture as revivalism devolved into fundamentalism.⁹ It is not uncommon for American Christians to withdraw into what John Stott refers to as "closed evangelical monastic communities," an approach that rarely brings success.¹⁰ The attempt to batten down the hatches has come at a significant cost as the church has been forced to turn over the educational and cultural establishments that once resided in Christendom.¹¹

⁶ Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," Gallup, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

⁷ Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1990), 15–17.

⁸ Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 20–23.

⁹ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 27.

¹⁰ John Stott, *Motives and Methods in Evangelism* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1962), 14.

¹¹ Ma Wonsuk, "Global Christianity: Where Are We and How Did We Get Here?," *Pentecostal Education* 6, no. 1 (2021): 41–43.

This assessment of the current cultural climate reveals that society may have advanced into a post-Christian postmodern age. What began with the rejection of Christian doctrine has denigrated into a rejection of Christian morals.¹² Not only have the religious connotations of Christian impact been relegated to the outskirts of culture, but so have the moral implications. Concepts like modesty, family, personal responsibility, and sexual morality have been held under the microscope of modern man and found lacking.¹³

The question becomes then, can the church effectively engage its context in the West with a similar impact of the past? Many Western churches have forgotten the necessity of gospel urgency given by Jesus and exchanged redemptive urgency for religious conference and reformed societal norms.¹⁴ This can be observed in the advent of Constantine and the synchronism of theological frameworks that incorporate the American dream.¹⁵ Theologians argue that the church's religious loyalties are incongruent with how they function in society.¹⁶ So, is there a way for churches to recover their prior central role in forming culture? Is that a role they should desire to recover? Is a position of influence and privilege an advantage to the Western church, and if so, can it be re-attained? It is questions such as these that this thesis will seek to address. However, before delving into the theoretical solutions for societies moving away from religion, it is advantageous to preface this matter with its inception, both as a society and as the church. This chapter will scrutinize the new secular religions that have sought to replaced Christianity in

¹² Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*, 188–91.

¹³ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 181, 258, Kindle.

¹⁴ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 147.

¹⁵ Petter Gottschalk, "The American Dream: Empirical Perspectives on Convenient Deviance," *Deviant Behavior* 45, no. 5 (2024): 675–77.

¹⁶ Lois Barrett, "Mission Witness: The Church as Apostle to the World," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 48.

Western culture. It will observe how these new religions have impacted the postmodern man, examine where the paths of this new religion lead, assess how the church has played a role and been impacted by these new philosophical thoughts, and propose a solution for a path forward.

The Enlightenment

The most profound and influential intellectual movement of modern history happened in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁷ Most refer to this era as the Age of Enlightenment. The primary tenets of today's culture, morally pluralistic, individualistic, private, and subjective, find their roots in the soil of enlightenment thinking. The mind formed by the Enlightenment has migrated from the conventional assertion of absolute truth. Instead, it has attached itself to an archetype of revolution. In enlightenment thinking, the truth is revealed through rational methods and individual discovery. Society's philosophical drift from a more communal and traditional way of thinking to one that is individual and revolutionary represents a watershed movement in human thought.¹⁸

The Enlightenment movement birthed Titan theorists like Darwin and Kant, whose evolutionary ideologies devised a new way to comprehend the human species. Enlightenment philosopher Henry Huxley declares, "In matters of intellect, do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable."¹⁹ This was the language used to launch a full-scale attack on the concept of God. These Enlightenment thinkers believed that a world freed from religion and ruled by reason would lead to the technological and socioeconomic advances that would one day lead to a utopian society.²⁰

¹⁷ Jonathan. K. Corrado, "Thomas Reid, the Enlightenment, and the Refusion of Faith and Reason," *Restoration Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2023): 212.

¹⁸ Peter T. Manicas, *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 11–13.

¹⁹ T. H. Huxley, *Collected Essays*, vol. 5, *Science and Christian Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1894), 246.

²⁰ Corrado, "Thomas Reid, the Enlightenment, and the Refusion of Faith and Reason," 214.

Moving the West from the dark ages of myth and superstition into an enlightened age of reason would undoubtedly solve humanity's problems.

The move away from religion left a cultural void that needed to be filled. The religion of the Enlightenment invited humans to step into the place of God and define purpose for themselves, arbitrary good and evil, and construct rational societies that would do away with suffering.²¹ In the words of Nietzsche "must we not become god's?"²² Faith in God had been replaced with a faith in man's progress and potential.

Early enlightenment philosophies such as these set the stage for the 1960s when the world experienced movement and revolution on a scale that had never been seen before.²³ The Civil Rights movement, sexual revolution, ecology movement, and anti-war movement created a perfect storm that reformed the topography of Western culture. The result was a mixed bag of societal progression and a dissolving moral fabric.

The Postmodern Condition

The position of the postmodern man is not an advantageous one. Instead of a utopian society, this generation exists in a realm of environmental destruction, economic failures, class wars, and nuclear threats. Henri Nouwen sounds the alarm: "This generation is characterized by fatherlessness, inwardness, and convulsion."²⁴ These characteristics manifest themselves in a variety of ways. A prevailing sense of hopelessness exists in the hearts and minds of post-modernists. The hope that was prevalent in modern man, that

²¹ Tom Holland, *Dominion* (New York: Basic, 2019), 101.

²² For reference to the importance of Friedrich Nietzsche's parable of the madman for an analysis of Western culture, see Michael W. Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 321–22; Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen, and David Heemst, *Hope in Troubled Times: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crises* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 36–38.

²³ Bart Wallet, "Introduction: Religion and Revolution, the 1960s and the Religious History of the Low Countries," *Trajecta* 30, no. 1 (2021): 9–13.

²⁴ Henri J. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2014), 31–40.

democracy, individual freedoms, and reason would be the cure to all human ills, has been replaced by anxiety, cynicism, delusion, and despair in post-moderns.²⁵

Statistics bear this out. Even though this is the most comfortable generation ever to exist, with its climate-controlled homes, cars, and endless entertainment, people have been devastated by diseases of despair. They suffer at higher rates than any other generation with depression, addictions, and suicide. Anxiety increased by 39 percent in 2017, and attention spans have fallen by 33 percent between 2000 and 2015.²⁶ So desperate is their plight that life expectancy in the United States fell from 2016 to 2018, setting a high watermark for death that has not been eclipsed since World War I collaborated with the Spanish flu from 1915 to 1918.²⁷ Research indicates that the Enlightenment did not solve societal problems but exacerbated them.

The reasons for these social ills are numerous and intricate. David Levari, a psychologist at Harvard, ascribes the issues of postmodernism to a phenomenon he calls comfort creep. He highlights how many experience fewer problems but are disillusioned with the excess in their lives.²⁸ In essence, the increase in the standard of living has made the most minor of inconveniences sway the perception of one's well-being. What psychologists call comfort creep, theologians call the discontent nature of a sinful heart.

Individuals' inability to find satisfaction in their environment of excess and convenience has led to the hopelessness this generation is experiencing. Not only have technological advancements failed them, but they have intensified their inadequacy by exhibiting their potential for destruction. Compounding this feeling of hopelessness is a ubiquitous experience of loneliness. This experience has been catalyzed by the ideal of the

²⁵ Robert McIlhenny, "The Postmodern Condition as a Religious Revival," *American Theological Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2008): 115–17.

²⁶ Michael Easter, *The Comfort Crisis: Embrace Discomfort to Reclaim Your Wild, Happy, Healthy Self* (New York: Rodale, 2021), 100.

²⁷ Easter, *The Comfort Crisis*, 18.

²⁸ David Levari, in Easter, *The Comfort Crisis*, 21–22.

individual and autonomous self, leading many individuals to fall prey to the trap of isolation. Loneliness has become so pervasive in this culture that the US government has declared a loneliness epidemic.²⁹ This is hard to imagine when there are more than seven billion people on the planet with more ways to interact than ever before. This paradox reiterates the theme of postmodernism. Though there are people everywhere, loneliness is as pervading as ever. Why is that? Unfortunately, in today's society, market values are being applied to the most intimate of relationships. "What can you do for me?" has functioned as a prerequisite for entering and maintaining relationships for the modern man.³⁰ Timothy Keller cites that people "feel free to sever family and relational ties if they are not emotionally fulfilling."³¹

With all the failures of the postmodern movement, including loneliness, depression, and dissatisfaction, the greatest failure may be the fragmented ideology that saturates culture. The Enlightenment thinker's social consensus on morality has proven inadequate. They failed when they sought to define human beings apart from the biblical narrative. The assertion that humans are simply here by chance, with no real significance beyond an accidental existence, removes the validity to argue for an objective moral reality. Logical arguments, in which something is deemed wrong or right, begin to lose their legitimacy from the secular perspective human beings cannot have inherent value or dignity distinct from the rest of creation. From this outlook things cannot be right nor wrong, they just are.³² To follow this path is to do away with human rights and moral standards. This fragmented ideology was on full display in 2002. In Amsterdam, the World

²⁹ Easter, *The Comfort Crisis*, 76.

³⁰ Gregg Henriques, "Does American Society Encourage Selfishness?," *Psychology Today*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-pathways-of-experience/202106/does-american-society-encourage-selfishness>.

³¹ Keller, *Center Church*, 128.

³² Juhem Navarro-Rivera, "Life after God's Tracks," *Secular American Voices*, November 7, 2020, produced by Life after God, podcast, 1:15:48, www.stitcher.com/show/life-after-god/episode/068-what-atheism-cant-deliver-with-christian-smith-59219487.

Humanist Congress affirmed the worth, dignity, and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom.³³ The issue for this group of humanist, however, was that they had no basis on which to make the statement apart from the biblical narrative. The true ideology of secularism is that the weak exist to be exploited by the strong. However, with this ideology being tried and found untenable by postmoderns, there is a longing for the moralism of Christianity without the claims.

Moving from fixed forms of ideology to fluid ones has left individuals fragmented in their beliefs.³⁴ These principles have thus fashioned an urge in people to continuously live in the moment. Whatever is now is privileged as the primary reality and, subsequently, as truth. This dynamic pressures individuals to constantly recreate themselves as they live from moment to moment. With a historical perspective jettison for the here-and-now, postmodern individuals think less about the consequences of their actions, typically leading to a loss of direction and perspective.³⁵ Theodor Adorno speaks to the liquidation of the modern self and how to compensate, asserting that the postmodern man postures with competitive displays of self-promotion while being more disconnected from anything substantive or enduring.³⁶

The need for change in society is evident and pressing. The dislocation of postmodern morality from its former Christian standards has created a broken reality. Unfortunately, society's current standing will not be the apex of despair if it continues along this path. The church must intervene with a logically consistent morality that aligns with its observable way of living. However, before integrating the church into the

³³ International Humanist and Ethical Union, "Amsterdam Declaration 2002," accessed March 10, 2023, <https://humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>.

³⁴ Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 14.

³⁵ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 3–9.

³⁶ Theodor Adorno is referenced in Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1999), 103.

conversation, it is important to observe dangers ahead if society does not course correct. Nietzsche warns about the confusion bound to follow a movement away from religion. He argues that good and evil would become relative and moral codes would drift unanchored, leading to inevitable deeds of massive and terrible violence.³⁷ Next, the dangers of following the path of secularism into the future will be explored.

The Danger of the Enlightenment Path

This section will unearth the final layer of the Enlightenment's failure to deliver on its promise of a utopian society. If followed to its logical conclusion, the assertions of Enlightenment thinkers such as Charles Darwin and Karl Marx lead society down a grim path. According to the social elite of the Enlightenment movement, Christianity valued weakness in a way that led to a degenerate society. In their opinion, valuing the weak and vulnerable would make for a fragile and unsustainable civilization.³⁸ They desired to return to the feral version of humanity that existed before the Christian influence. Virtues such as toleration and gentleness had never been emphasized before the advent of Christianity. In antiquity, rape was permitted, children were abused, and infanticide was seen as perfectly legitimate.³⁹ The belief that God had become a man and suffered the death of a criminal in weakness transformed and reconfigured culture. To do away with religion would be to reinstitute the harsh conditions that existed before the reign of Christendom.

Early Enlightenment thinkers sought to establish a foundation for morality and rightness, not on the traditional pillar of God and religion but on a new foundation supported by human reason alone. Individuals like Marquis de Sade, Marx, and Adolph Hitler emphasize the chilling conclusion of this path. The ideologies of these men lead society to a state of depravity not visited in ages.

³⁷ Holland, *Dominion*, 484.

³⁸ Holland, *Dominion*, 441.

³⁹ Holland, *Dominion*, 406.

Marquis de Sade spent his early years railing against the idea of human dignity. Virtue, he argued, had no foundation. It was merely a way of being that varied based on culture and climate. To Sade, God was a façade. There was only nature that endowed the strong to enslave and exploit their inferiors.⁴⁰ His desire for humanity was for them to live as nature had prescribed. He argued that the inferior class of man could relate more closely to chimpanzees than those in the superior cast.⁴¹

Sade was not the only Enlightenment thinker to have such thoughts. Marx sought desperately to gift his subordinates with emancipation from Christian ideals. He believed that he had scientifically proven communism would be the next evolution of human history.⁴² He thought his discovery to be so profound that the masses would be able to sober themselves from the opioid-like religion on which they had long depended. However, his language betrayed him and his claim to have matured beyond morality. After all, there was no real way to have a class struggle against exploitation and enslavement without morality. His desires for equality and dignity for all people were steeped deeply in a biblical framework. His slogan, “for each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,”⁴³ could have been ripped from various biblical texts. His desire for justice could not be detached from the biblical foundation that gave society standards for right and wrong.

The unfortunate consequence of their Enlightenment ideology found its conclusion with the Nazis and Hitler. Fascist Nazi Germany dragged the violence associated with antiquity into the modern world. Although Hitler was not an enlightened intellectual as many of his predecessors were, he was its natural deduction. His desire to purify his republic from the inferior class via comprehensive euthanasian was opposed by

⁴⁰ Marquis de Sade, *Justine*, trans. John Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University, 2012), 84.

⁴¹ Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove, 1968), 322–23.

⁴² Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1989), 24:467.

⁴³ Holland, *Dominion*, 456–57.

none other than Christian ideals. For Germany to fulfill its superior racial identity, it had to rid itself of what Hitler deemed cancerous compassion.⁴⁴ Hitler used the assertions of Darwin and other Enlightenment thinkers to justify genocide and murder on a historical scale. When articulating his mission, he used Darwin's language "of reality based on the most incisive scientific knowledge, and its theoretical elucidation."⁴⁵

One must understand that the postmodern man's primary ideal, namely in the dignity of the individual being a self-evident truth, is incongruent with the ideological assertions of the Enlightenment. The ideological fragmentation of the postmodern man comes from the desire to maintain Christian morality in the form of human dignity without Christian doctrine. Unfortunately, Christian morality cannot be maintained over the long haul without the doctrine that facilitated its inculcation. Another great Enlightenment thinker, Nietzsche, warned about the consequences of moving away from religion. He predicted the subjugation of good and evil, the drifting of moral codes, and the inevitable violence that would be perpetrated. The Enlightenment project has failed, and the only hope is a genuine return to the source of morality, which is where the church must step in.

The Church and the Enlightenment

One cannot comprehend the pervasive nature of the church's influence over current culture without understanding that the church served as the impetus for the Enlightenment. Before the Age of Enlightenment there was an Age of Reformation. During the Reformation, the Catholic Church morphed from an institution that handed down tradition and objective truth and fragmented into an institution of autonomous revelation.⁴⁶ After the reformation, ordinary men and women could know God for themselves through

⁴⁴ Holland, *Dominion*, 475–76.

⁴⁵ Adolf Hitler, quoted in Dan Stone, *Histories of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010), 160.

⁴⁶ Mark Sidwell, "The Reformation as Revival: The Historical Vision of Jean Henri Merle D'Aubigné," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 28 (2023): 85–86.

the revelation given to them by the Holy Spirit. This was a transformative shift in culture. No longer did the Pope determine the true revelations of Scripture, but housemaids and blacksmiths. This integration of priesthood to all believers was catalytic for spiritual renewal and growth, but also left room for individuals to take liberties. Things once thought sure were questioned, paving a way for even Scripture to count for nothing in the lives of those seeking to free themselves from authority. All that was certain would be in danger of being found movable.⁴⁷ This move away from fixed tradition and unquestioned authority led directly to the Enlightenment. This ironic reality highlights the complexity of the issue, for the church brought about the Enlightenment, and now the Enlightenment has, in some ways, undone the church.

One encounters a significant paradox when considering the church's role and influence in society. The church has had a substantial impact on what people consider moral and just. As discussed, one of the primary tenets of today's culture is human rights, which cannot exist without the biblical narrative. However, there has also recently been a shift away from religion and its assertions around objective truth. Numerous variables have undergirded this move, including political polarization, the sexual revolution, and the belief that Christianity was imperialistic.⁴⁸ This has left society with a fragmented society holding incongruent beliefs. The church has lost the high ground in morality and distinctiveness, and though it has established a new sense of moral norms, it has lost its ability to speak into the intricacies of society due largely to hypocrisy and over-adaptation. The church has lost its way and been overly influenced by the Enlightenment and culture in three primary areas: doctrinal integrity, professional congruency, and mission drift.

The move away from doctrinal integrity in the numerous Western churches has had many unintended consequences. The intentions of the church to contextualize its

⁴⁷ John Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae; Or, The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism Examined* (Lichfield, England: Leon and Oxford 1655), 62.

⁴⁸ Keller, *Center Church*, 255.

culture were pure enough, but its buying into the subjective assertions around Scripture and culture generated devastating effects. Theologians like Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Käsemann argue for a New Testament canon that was more cultural than theological.⁴⁹ They conclude that individuals in a different culture had the privilege of determining what aspects of Scripture fit with their expressions of culture, with the freedom to discard the rest.⁵⁰ Essentially, culture was more authoritative than Scripture. No longer was it God who established morality but the collection of people in a given time and space. George Barna estimates that 62 percent of professing Christians say there is no such thing as absolute truth.⁵¹ Though these realities are more staggering in the overall story of the American church, they are similarly concerning amidst evangelicals. Lovelace speaks to the disintegration of the American evangelical movement in the early twentieth century due to its own internal weakness and lack of commitment to theological integration.⁵² This lack of gospel centrality has in many cases stripped churches of their distinctiveness and effectiveness. Impacted by religious syncretism, the Christianity of the Bible has grown more and more scarce.⁵³ Many postmodern Westerners are left with a form of Christianity that has little power to save people or bring God's kingdom. Without the true gospel and doctrinal fidelity, the church dies. To reestablish itself as the hope of the world, the church must recommit to allowing the whole of Scripture to speak and form culture, not vice versa.

⁴⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1951), 33–34; Michael J. Gorman, *On Being a Disciple of the Crucified Nazarene: Unpublished Lectures and Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 27–30.

⁵⁰ Keller, *Center Church*, 91.

⁵¹ George Barna, *Virtual America* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1994), 83–84.

⁵² Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 150–53

⁵³ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 232–34.

Accompanying many churches' doctrinal infidelity was a redefinition of mission.⁵⁴ This redefinition led several churches to drift from the biblical call of compelling others to Christ. For these churches the mission has largely become organizational, aiming to fill buildings while remaining unoffensive to society.⁵⁵ The theme of God's wrath with sinful man has been substituted for a more palatable communal failure and societal restoration. The church's willingness to preach a partial gospel has miserably deprived these churches' missional identity.⁵⁶

Deeply impacted by the Enlightenment, churches were no longer defined by distinct communities but by individual choice, morality, and self-actualization. The lack of an early state religion contributed to an economic understanding around religious life. Because autonomous choice was so important, religious entities were forced to adapt marketplace structures competing for customer loyalty with religious goods and services. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark state,

Religious economics are like commercial economics in that they consist of a market made up of a set of current and potential consumers and a set of firms seeking to serve that Market. Indeed, they suggest that it is appropriate to use economic concepts such as markets, firms, Market penetration, and segmented markets to analyze the success and failures of religious bodies. In their view, then, the clergy are the church's sales representatives, religious doctrines its products, and evangelism practices its marketing techniques.⁵⁷

This opting into an industrial mindset has led countless churches away from the mission of forming disciples to a consumeristic entity.

⁵⁴ Curtis J. White, "Evangelicals as a 'People': The Church Growth Movement from India to the United States," *Religion and American Culture* 50 (2020): 110–11.

⁵⁵ Robert V. Pietsch, "The Influence of John Dewey's Pragmatism on the Church Growth Movement," *International Review of Mission* 111, no. 2 (2022): 140–43.

⁵⁶ Samuel Schutz, "The Truncated Gospel in Modern Evangelicalism: A Critique and Beginning Reconstruction," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33, no. 4 (2009): 295–99.

⁵⁷ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1992), 17.

These churches' loss of missional identity also contributed to their loss of apostolic identity.⁵⁸ These churches, which were once a people defined by the mission to go and make disciples, have now become a place where religious goods and services are doled out according to preference.⁵⁹ Their communal apologetic and missional responsibility to make disciples and proclaim the gospel has given way in priority to programs and church activities. These churches have been relegated from a people to a place. The "place where" perception of the church has contributed to these churches being identified in society as an organization instead of the distinct people of God.⁶⁰ The issue they face now is the "place where" paradigm is no longer effective in reaching unbelievers at an effective rate in this increasingly postmodern society. Regardless of how attractive services are, and no matter how engaging the preaching or compelling the worship, many non-Christians will simply not make their way into a worship services.⁶¹ Attempts to build larger churches by making the worship services more compelling cannot accomplish the mission given to the church. The church must reengage the biblical mandate to bring the kingdom of God to the places they inhabit by being distinct communities committed to making disciples no matter the cost. If they desire to impact culture, they must return to the mission.

Finally, the incongruity between what the church has professed and the way its members have lived must be addressed. The primary issues with doctrinal infidelity and missional drift are that they have led the church to hypocrisy. In many ways,

⁵⁸ George. G. Hunter, "The Apostolic Identity of the Church and Wesleyan Christianity," in *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage*, ed. George. G. Hunter (Wilmore, KY: Kingswood, 1994), 161–63.

⁵⁹ Kyle Childress, "How the Church Growth Movement Has De-Churched Christians," *Reformed Journal*, July 12, 2023, <https://reformedjournal.com/how-the-church-growth-movement-has-de-churched-christians/>.

⁶⁰ Inagrace T. Dietrich, "Mission Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit," in Guder, *Missional Church*, 51.

⁶¹ Albert Mohler, "Life in Post Denominational America," September 22, 2012, <https://albertmohler.com/2009/09/22/life-in-post-denominational-america/>.

Enlightenment thinkers were not wrong to desire a move away from religion. The history of those who professed a belief in God was marred with savagery and marked by the burning flesh of martyrs. Large sects of Christendom neglected to act like Christians, and the witness of the church lost its persuasive nature. It was Christians who conquered and cannibalized the new world. Neal E. van Deusen speaks to Christians' inhumane actions: "Native Americans were crushed beneath the hooves of Spanish forces, forced into slavery, and savagely tortured. Proclaiming to bring God to a godless world, they instead brought the suffering of hell itself."⁶² So great was their surrender to the Enlightenment way of thinking that they prefaced the sentiments of Hitler and Nietzsche. Finding no biblical precedence for their hellacious behavior, they turned to the philosophical mind of Aristotle: "As the Philosopher says, it is clear that some men are slaves by nature and others free by nature."⁶³ When Native Americans proved themselves to be insufficient slaves, they turned to enslaving Africans. An overwhelming majority of Christians regarded slavery as a brutal but unavoidable fact of life.⁶⁴ The inconsistency between what Christians profess and the way they live still exists and is lamented by the watching world.

In many churches today, Christianity is made synonymous with the American way of life that idolizes this material comfort and individual egocentrism. The lack of Christian distinctiveness has led to a society that has moved away from Christian ideals altogether. This negligence has led to such disillusionment with the gospel that postmodern people now find the tenets of the gospel increasingly incomprehensible.⁶⁵ However, the church is not without hope. The church's inconsistency, not its message, has left the

⁶² Neal E. van Deusen, "In the Tethered Shadow: Native American Slavery, African Slavery, and the Disappearance of the Past," *William & Mary Quarterly* 80, no. 2 (April 2023): 372.

⁶³ Aristotle, quoted in Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law, 1150–1625* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 254.

⁶⁴ Earl W. Carter, "Should America Apologize for Slavery?," *Charisma and Christian Life* 23, no. 9 (1998): 79–80.

⁶⁵ Keller, *Center Church*, 182.

postmodern world wanting. If churches return to their doctrine, mission, and lifestyles worthy of the gospel, there may yet be a gospel awakening in North America and the greater church revitalized.

The Chinese characters that communicate the English idea of crisis combine the characters of danger and opportunity.⁶⁶ This excellently describes the current outlook of several modern churches in the West. The Western church at large is in danger of completely losing the previous generation and becoming irrelevant in society. However, an immense opportunity lies ahead. Society has yet to experience the progress promised by the Enlightenment. The untethering of the individual from anything more prominent and enduring than the self has resulted in meaningless existence.⁶⁷ If the church were to present a compelling alternative way of life for the lonely and hurting, if they created communities that reintroduced people to intimacy with neighbors and their God, then they could reestablish an influential role. If they are to take advantage of this opportunity, the church must soberly consider the current infrastructure of their ecclesiology. The church must identify where it has gone astray and adopt new methods that enable it to make disciples in the current climate. The church must take cues from eastern brothers and sisters in India and China who are missional in every aspect of their church lives. To effectively engage the Postmodern West, the church must capitalize on the symbiotic nature of spiritual formation and missional context.

Proposed Solution

Unlike the apologetic of the church that transformed antiquity, this generation's apologetic must reform the fragmented consciousness of postmodernism. The church must do this by reuniting the Christian ethic with the morality desired by this generation. A sober assessment of many Western churches reveals a lack of focus on spiritual

⁶⁶ "Crisis," MDBG Chinese-English Dictionary, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.mdbg.net/chinese/dictionary?page=worddict&wdrst=0&wdqb=crisis&email=>.

⁶⁷ Keller, *Center Church*, 129.

formation and a lack of emphasis on missional context. The first step to reversing this trajectory is to admit that the trajectory exist in the first place.⁶⁸ An opportunity stands before the church, however, because the rapid dechristianization of this society has led many believers to search for evangelistic incarnational contextualized communities.⁶⁹ The church can no longer address the spiritual needs of individuals across the spiritual continuum with a one-size-fits-all strategy.⁷⁰ The church needs more valid biblical models that prepare Christians to live out their every day lives in distinct ways.⁷¹ David Kinnaman argues that individuals are leaving the faith because the church has not done a good enough job making disciples in a way that prepares them for the toxicity of the world.⁷² The proposal of this thesis is thus twofold. First, it will seek to identify distinct categories of spiritual formation that individuals in the local church often fall into. Second, it will explore the unique context that help individuals in these stages of spiritual formation move from one stage to the next.

In the first half of chapter 3 I will call for a return to the gospel while laying out a theological argument that seeks to solve the false dichotomy between spiritual formation and missional context. From there, I will overview the overall framework for spiritual formation proposed in this thesis. In the latter half of chapter 3, I will cover phase 1 of spiritual formation. This will encompass two of four stages on the spiritual formation continuum: those who are considering Christ and those who are connecting to Christ. Chapter 4 will explore the characteristics, catalyst, barriers, and specific context for

⁶⁸ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 236.

⁶⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 257.

⁷⁰ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal about Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 105–7.

⁷¹ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 236.

⁷² David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 21, 28.

movement for individuals in this segment. The inquisition at hand will be how does the church move individuals from one segment to the next for the sake of spiritual formation.

Chapter 5 will focus attention on phase 2 of spiritual formation. Individuals in phase 2 of spiritual formation may be categorized as committing to and conforming to Christ. Again, I will identify the characteristics, catalyst, barriers, and context necessary for movement for individuals in these segments.

This thesis will recommend a paradigm of church that seeks to move people through distinct environments that spiritually form them and introduce them into imperative missional spaces. Each movement can only be fostered through intentional and unique environments created by the church to stimulate spiritual growth.⁷³ This proposal for an ecclesiological structure combines the traditional contextualized way of doing church with an intentional, innovative missional focus, which gives the church the best opportunity to engage those who are familiar with Christianity while pursuing the postmodern society that has abandoned its Christian roots.

The next chapter will explore the theological understanding of kingdom and expand upon how the great commandment, to love and God and neighbor, captures the symbiotic nature of spiritual formation and missional context.

⁷³ Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move*, 16.

CHAPTER 3

THE GOSPEL LEADS TO THE KINGDOM

The previous chapter looked closely at the current state of today's postmodern society. The chapter assessed the decline of the church and concluded that if the church wants to engage the postmodern Western culture, it will need to capitalize on the symbiotic nature of spiritual formation and missional context. This chapter will highlight how this proposed framework will indeed assist the church in the postmodern west through spiritual formation and missional context. Gospel proclamation to the believer and to the unbeliever both forms Christians and sends them on mission. Because this is the case, gospel proclamation must lead to the presence of the kingdom. This is true because comprehensive gospel proclamation leads to formation. The formation of Christians leads to those Christians living obediently on mission. Christians who live on mission are formed in dependency and more effective in their evangelism and neighbor love; Christians who are on mission are more effective in their love for God and neighbor leads to the kingdom. It is also true that gospel proclamation leads to mission leads to formation and leads to kingdom. Gospel proclamation must lead to the presence of the kingdom. A gospel that is proclaimed absent of kingdom realities is foreign in the mind of Jesus.

In Mark 1, the proclamation of the good news, the gospel, was that the kingdom of God was at hand. Therefore, this chapter will seek to define both gospel and kingdom. Then the chapter will observe how loving God, the foundation of formation, is also the greatest impetus for mission. Loving one another, the greatest apologetic of formation, is also a significant source of mission (John 13:35). And finally, loving one's neighbor is the greatest evidence of formation while simultaneously being the greatest form of mission.

The Great Commission and the Great Commandment cannot be separated from one another but work in synchronism for the purposes of the kingdom. Spiritual formation in a symbiotic relationship with missional obedience leads to the kingdom of God that compels postmodern non-Christians to consider gospel claims. This chapter begins, however, with why the gospel must lead to kingdom.

Returning to the gospel with all its implications is the first step to re-engaging the culture. However, unfortunately, for many Western churches it possible to subscribe to gospel doctrines yet not have a ministry shaped by gospel realities. The gospel's implications do not work their way into the fabric of ministry philosophies or applications.¹ Not only have many churches drifted from the orthodoxies of scriptural doctrine, but those who have remained faithful, in many cases, fall prey to practices that mirror religious tradition or synchronous cultural theologies. This presents many issues for the church. A lack of gospel commitment creates an inability for individuals in the church to be transformed in a manner needed to engage the culture in believable ways. An improper orientation of the gospel leads to disordered loves and inappropriate priorities in the lives of Western Christians.² Issues that the gospel promises to solve, such as psychological alienation from oneself, bondage to fear and shame, and ultimately alienation from God, are not presented as remedied in the lives of many who profess Christ.³ Many Christians present like many unbelievers who have no identity outside of their material relationships and production.⁴ Returning to a holistic gospel centrality is crucial if the church hopes to engage the postmodern West. Churches must recover a

¹ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 28, Kindle.

² Samuel R. Schutz, "The Truncated Gospel in Modern Evangelicalism: A Critique and Beginning Reconstruction," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33, no. 4 (2009): 302–5.

³ Keller, *Center Church*, 51.

⁴ Jeff Vanderstelt, *Saturate: Being Disciples of Jesus in the Everyday Stuff of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 125.

biblically rich, careful treatment of the gospel and its implications on churches, lives, ethics, and priorities.⁵

The exaltation of the gospel is necessary because of the way it forms the Christian's life and distinctiveness. Those who trust in the gospel should have a distinct humility about them, knowing that it is not their righteousness nor their sin that defines them, but instead their identity is found in God. Martin Luther unpacks the holistic distinctive of unique prioritization in his treatise on good works.⁶ A call to godward singularity has been the mark of God's people since the beginning. The command to have no other gods before me in Exodus 20:3 and the call to believe in Christ alone for justification are one and the same. The Christian distinctive, then, is not only revealed in their worship but in their dependency. Martin Luther translates "thou shall have no other gods" to "since I alone am God, thou shalt place all thy confidence, trust and faith on me alone, and no one else."⁷ The continual pressing of these gospel realities into the lives of Christians should make them stand out from culture. The proclamation of the gospel to regenerate Christians should result in lives lived in a manner that leads to the kingdom. In other words, the proclamation of the gospel should lead to the spiritual formation of Christians and their living their lives on mission.

The Gospel Leads to Kingdom

As stated previously, the gospel must lead to kingdom. The synoptic authors would not have a framework for their separation. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the gospel is associated with the kingdom. It is the good news, the favorable announcement the *εὐαγγέλιον*. In their context, there can be no more significant news than that of the coming

⁵ Keller, *Center Church*, 51.

⁶ Martin Luther, *A Treatise on Good Works*, trans. W. A. Lambert (London: John C. Nimmo, 1893), 25–28.

⁷ Luther, *A Treatise on Good Works*, 28.

kingdom.⁸ Even the way Christians receive the kingdom is saturated with the gospel. The language given in the Scriptures leaves no room for the autonomous striving that marks current culture. Believers are not called to build or extend the kingdom of God, but in true gospel fashion, they are called to receive it.⁹ Luke 18:17 commands Christians to receive the kingdom of God as a child to enter. Luke also emphasizes this point in chapter 12 when he says, “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom” (12:32).¹⁰ Just as the gospel provides the free gift of salvation and redemption, the gospel gives the gift of the kingdom.

So then, if God gives the kingdom freely, one must ask why there is such a lack of manifestation of the kingdom in the postmodern Western context. As stated in chapter 2, the religious move toward enlightenment and humanism has yet to produce the utopian society moderns hoped for. The even greater indictment, however, is the church’s lack of impact on the surrounding culture. If the church hopes to see kingdom realities play out in postmodern context, they must move away from the status quo. The bride of Christ must distinguish itself from the individualistic and consumeristic ideals that society embodies. The church must holistically embrace the biblical storyline over and against the secular plot of humanism if the church desires to see the gospel produce kingdom.¹¹ The New Testament authors call Christ followers to live as exiles with radically different ways of living, eating, and being. Their primary allegiances must be to the kingdom. Timothy Keller highlights how the Jewish exiles in the Old Testament were

⁸ Robert Yarbrough, “The Kingdom of God in the New Testament: Matthew and Revelation,” in *The Kingdom of God*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 110–11.

⁹ Inagrace T. Dietrich, “Mission Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 54.

¹⁰ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ Timothy M. Sheridan and Michael W. Goheen, “Missional Spirituality and Cultural Engagement,” in *Spirituality for the Sent: Casting a New Vision for the Missional Church*, ed. Nathan A. Finn and Keith S. Whitfield (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 106, Kindle.

called to be a part of the city of Babylon without adopting its culture or losing their distinctive identity as God’s people.¹² He writes,

A missional church must understand itself as a servant community—a counterculture for the common good. For centuries in the West, churches could limit themselves to specifically “religious” concerns and function as loose fellowships within a wider semi-Christian culture. Now, however, becoming a Christian involves a much more radical break with the surrounding non-Christian culture.¹³

So then, it is not enough to simply proclaim the gospel; the church must center their lives around it. Jesus’s call to radical community, joyful sacrifice, and a singular love for God must not find its greatest fulfillment when proclaimed from Christian pulpits. The reality of the current context requires a paradigm shift.

The next section will work through definitions for further clarity. Gospel proclamation must lead to the presence of the kingdom, and this chapter will assess the missing link between the gospel and the kingdom while expounding upon the symbiotic relationship between spiritual formation and missional context. However, before focusing on bridging the gap, this thesis must define kingdom plainly. The aim is to provide a useful definition for what is intended when referring to kingdom and to clarify how spiritual formation and missional context function as a link to the kingdom.

Kingdom Defined

The language of kingdom is frequently used in the New Testament. Matthew’s announcement of the kingdom of heaven and Mark’s announcement of the kingdom of God highlight the coming of Jesus to earth to establish God’s reign. This language is not only present in the Gospels but is carried on by Christians throughout the rest of the New Testament. Philip proclaims the kingdom in Acts 8, Barnabas in Acts 14, and Paul in Acts 19 and 20. The authors of Hebrews, James, Peter, and John all pay homage to the

¹² Keller, *Center Church*, 146.

¹³ Keller, *Center Church*, 273.

kingdom and the reign of God.¹⁴ But what is the kingdom? The kingdom of God represents the sovereign rule established through Christ to bring about righteousness, justice, and transformation in a world broken by humanity, encompassing both present and future realities. Mark's revelation is that the central theme of Jesus's preaching is the coming of the kingdom.¹⁵ Therefore, a close examination of what he preached should illuminate kingdom tenets and help Christians live kingdom lifestyles. The three texts examined for assistance in understanding the kingdom are Mark 11:4–15, Luke 4:21, and Matthew 5:3–11.

Mark 1:14–15

Mark 1:14–15 reads, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’” Mark 1 reveals what was alluded to previously: the gospel's good news is the reality that the kingdom is at hand. It is the central reality from which every other part of Jesus's ministry flows. His call to discipleship, controversial teaching, challenging of tradition, pronouncement of forgiveness, and drawing in the outcast cannot be understood outside the framework of the coming kingdom.¹⁶ The coming of Jesus introduces a paradigm shift and alternate reality, transforming the present into something different and distinct. This coming kingdom is pressing into the present moment as Jesus speaks. Jesus is not predicting some future event but announcing the kingdom's fulfillment. It should be observed that Jesus would be redundant if he were announcing a future kingdom because the prologue in Mark 1 emphasizes John as the forerunner. For Jesus to proclaim a kingdom that is not

¹⁴ Alan J. Roxburgh, “Mission Leadership: Equipping God's People for Mission,” in Guder, *Missional Church*, 68.

¹⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 72.

¹⁶ Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 54.

pressing in on the present would be for him to act also as a forerunner.¹⁷ Jesus's pronouncement of the kingdom fulfilled God's promise to redeem creation and functioned as the final realization of God's saving power.¹⁸ In other words, God's rain was coming like never before in a different kind of power.¹⁹ John's intentionality in linking the gospel with the kingdom highlights that through the person and work of Jesus Christ, God is restoring his gracious and loving rule over all creation and every aspect of life.²⁰

The second component of this text reveals that there is a required response to the kingdom. One's ability to receive the kingdom of God coincides with their willingness to accept the kingdom through repentance and belief. The call to action in this text makes it clear that though Christians receive the kingdom, they do not do so passively. R. T. France is helpful here when he states, "There can be no doubt that the proclamation of the Kingdom is a call to action. the twin verbs *μετανοέω* and *πιστεύω* are without question a call to action and conversion."²¹ Repentance is the act of turning away from sins, receiving forgiveness, and being reconciled back to God. Believing involves trusting that God is willing and able to return people to the relationship with him, the relationship for which they were created. Therefore, one can conclude that the kingdom of God is where God's creation is restored to the right relationship with him through belief and repentance.

¹⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 92.

¹⁸ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 57.

¹⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, 56.

²⁰ Sheridan and Goheen, "Missional Spirituality and Cultural Engagement," 97.

²¹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 93.

Luke 4:21

Luke 4:17–21 reads,

And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, Because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Once again, there is an emphasis on the kingdom’s present nature. The idea of *επλήρωται* (fulfillment) is in its perfect tense, which refers to an existing state of that fulfillment. This, paired with the presence of *πληρόω* (today) and the author’s point is clear.²² The kingdom is incumbent, which also says much about the identity of Jesus. No one other than the reigning king can make such a proclamation about the kingdom. His proclamation of fulfillment inextricably ties him to the kingdom and exalts him as the king.²³

When considering this prophetic proclamation of the kingdom, one must remember that Jesus fulfilled something God promised long ago. The Nazareth incident was the proclamation of the king that “the year of the Lord’s favor” had arrived.²⁴ The Jews waited with great anticipation as an oppressed people to be freed from the tyranny of their oppressor. They longed for a new kingdom, and Jesus came proclaiming good news to the poor, the release of the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom from oppression. He declared it fulfilled in their presence on “this day.” To their surprise, however, no revolution ensued; no call to arms or battle plans were drawn. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed was transcendent. The proclamation of the kingdom was not just to the oppressed Jews but to poor people everywhere. The anointed prophet was sent to proclaim

²² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 412.

²³ Yarbrough, “The Kingdom of God in the New Testament,” 110–11.

²⁴ Lois Barrett, “Missional Witness: The Church as Apostle to the World,” in Guder, *Missional Church*, 52.

good news to all the poor, for they understood their need for divine help and were willing to wait upon God.²⁵ The kingdom is a place where all individuals have the freedom to experience the healing power of God's love. It is a realm of restoration and redemption where brokenness is healed and tangible needs are met. Those in the kingdom no longer need to obsess about material provision and seek strength at the expense of others. To receive the kingdom is to receive good news, liberty, sight, and freedom, all at no cost.

Matthew 5:3–11

Matthew 5:3–11 reads,

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

If Luke 4 is a proclamation of the kingdom to the poor and oppressed, then the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount proclaim blessing to the aforementioned poor.²⁶ The Sermon on the Mount reveals that it is not the presently poor who are blessed and received the kingdom, but in a way it is those who are becoming poor. It is not in their circumstance but in the posture of their spirit. Once again, the kingdom is proclaimed and promised to those who understand their need for it. The kingdom of heaven, comfort, the earth, satisfaction, mercy, sight, and childhood are all promised to the lowly. Kingdom citizens are required to embrace the reversal of societal values, embracing a revolution that does not exalt the victors but brings them low in humility and meekness. To embrace the kingdom is to adopt an entirely new way of life.

²⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (London: J. B. Lippincott, 1978), 183.

²⁶ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 184.

This reality is set before the reader in chapter 6 when it is declared, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matt 6:19–21). The Christ follower’s focus is to be set primarily on the kingdom of God.²⁷ This is just one of the many radical distinct ways of living that Jesus calls his disciples to. However, the kingdom breaks through only in the upheaval of the current established ways.

Summary

The kingdom of God is a present reality breaking in through the distinct lifestyles of those redeemed through belief and repentance. It is God’s sovereign rule lived out in the lives of his people for his purposes. It has been promised by God the father and proclaimed in the presence of humanity by King Jesus Christ. The kingdom is where the lowly are exalted and tangible needs are met by God and his disciples. The kingdom of God reverses the established pillars of this world. Greed is replaced with generosity, pride with humility, self-sufficiency with dependency, and self-exultation with the glory of God. The good news of the kingdom is that God has come to redeem his creation and dwell among them. Therefore, the proclamation of the gospel should lead to the presence of the kingdom.

So then, why is there such a disconnect between gospel proclamation and the presence of the kingdom in current society? Some scholars attribute the lack of kingdom to an eschatological shift that happened in the fourth century. Augustine and other theologians began to focus eschatology primarily on disembodied souls reaching heaven or hell. This was a shift away from the proclamation of the kingdom in which all things would be made right and injustices would be reversed at the coming of the kingdom.²⁸ There is much evidence of the adoption of this hermeneutic. In many North American

²⁷ Anthony L. Chute and Christopher W. Morgan, “Missional Spirituality as Congregational,” in Finn and Whitfield, *Spirituality for the Sent*, 89.

²⁸ Darrell L. Guder, “Missional Structures: The Particular Community,” in Guder *Missional Church*, 73.

churches, the gospel is proclaimed as something to believe, with kingdom lifestyles declared as periphery while the gospel is held central.²⁹ Indeed, many churches proclaim to be gospel centered yet have little impact on the communities that surround them. Fortunately, it can be seen from Matthew to Revelation that the proclamation of the gospel not only announces the kingdom but produces the kingdom. True belief is trusting that Jesus's way of life is worth employing.³⁰ Therefore, to lose sight of the kingdom is to lose sight of the gospel.

What will be proposed in the next section is that the missing links between the gospel and the kingdom are spiritual formation and missional context. The Christian faith not only aims at conforming Christians into the character of Christ, but also conforming their lives to the gospel in the purposes of Christ in bringing the kingdom.³¹ Isolating formation to the periphery of individual fervor and a neglect to call people to live their lives on mission has drained many churches of their influence. Furthermore, the distinction many have drawn between formation and mission have created a dangerous bifurcation contrary to the teaching of scripture.³² These churches must reject the false dichotomy that causes them to divvy their resources between either formation or mission. Instead, these churches must capitalize on the symbiotic nature of spiritual formation and missional contexts. In the coming chapters there will be a focus on the practical stages and context for spiritual formation and missional application. However, to conclude this chapter I will give an overview of how loving God, loving one another, and loving one's neighbor are the very essence of the symbiotic relationship between mission and formation.

²⁹ Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 123–25.

³⁰ Guder, "Missional Structures," 73.

³¹ Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 17.

³² Diane Chandler, "Godly Love," in Finn and Whitfield, *Spirituality for the Sent*, 163.

Mission and Formation as Love of God, Community, and Neighbor

Love of God

This section will go to great lengths to stress the connection between love, mission, and formation. The central requirement of every disciple is love. The great commandment calls Christians to love God with their heart, soul, and strength. This idea of loving God is communicated throughout the Scriptures. The initial request of the Lord's Prayer is for the hallowing of his name. The goal of both formation and mission is the glory of God. This can be unpacked even more in Matthew 6, when Jesus commands Christians to seek first the kingdom of God. Here is a clear mandate to proclaim the good news of the kingdom with the way one lives. The context in this portion of the Sermon of the Mount is revealing. His call is to flee from anxiousness that causes one to store up treasures on earth. The call to seek first the kingdom warns against the spiritual dangers of focusing on acquiring material wealth.³³ It presents an attractive alternative to the intense bondage of an anxiety-ridden life. A lifestyle that invests in eternity gives generously to the poor and redistributes its assets for the good of others, a powerful gospel apologetic. However, the crux of this command is an ever-deepening undivided love for God. Jesus's way, the missional instinct of living generously, is not for the effectual outcome of human flourishing. Instead, he reminds his disciples that they cannot serve two masters, for they will love one and hate the other. Jesus is not giving a literal argument about the impossibility of serving both; the difficulty comes when the servant attempts to love both equally.³⁴ The reader of the Gospel becomes keenly aware that stockpiling treasure reveals a commitment of a heart that does not love God most.³⁵ This reveals then the connection between formation and mission. Love of God brackets the missional lifestyle,

³³ William Hendriksen, *Matthew*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 346.

³⁴ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 303.

³⁵ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 299.

meaning that formation was its motivation and its outcome. The love of God causes an individual to be devoted to him, placing their time, talent, and treasure without boundary at his disposal for his purposes.³⁶ This process of surrender leads to God's subsequent promise that all things will be added (*προστίθῃμι*), leading to deepening trust and greater intimacy.³⁷

This reality is expounded upon in 1 Peter 2:9. The aim of God calling those who were once not a people to be a distinct people, those who once did not receive mercy to receive mercy, was so that they would declare the mighty acts of the one who called them out of darkness into marvelous light. This reveals that self-actualization, or the desire for the salvation of others, is an insufficient motivation for mission.³⁸ Instead, Christian's motivation for mission must be a love for the glory of God. In essence, the love of God motivates the people of God to declare God's love to the lost. This cycle crescendos into more proclaimers of the one who brings from darkness into marvelous light. Loving God supremely is the only true motivation for the love of others.³⁹ One's love for others mirrors God's love for them in that it is others-focused, self-sacrificing, and revelatory of God's character and love for the world.⁴⁰ Thus, to be formed for the mission, one must be keenly aware that they are to reciprocate the love of God back to God then to others.

In conclusion, the foundational and formational act of loving God with all one's heart, soul, and strength is the primary source of being formed into the image of God. However, this love of God compels Christians to live on mission. The desire for the glory of the God they love fuels gospel-driven obedience and a missional lifestyle. At the

³⁶ Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 348.

³⁷ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 315.

³⁸ Guder, "Missional Structures," 75.

³⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 43.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey P. Greenman, "Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective: Classic Issues, Contemporary Challenges," in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 25.

same time, this missional lifestyle exposes areas where Christians need to love God more deeply, as they are challenged in spaces that reveal ungodly preferences and self-protective tendencies. Loving God leads to mission, and mission leads to spiritual formation, creating a cycle that draws followers into deeper love and obedience. Believers' love for God is where mission meets formation. The consistency to which love compels Christians speaks volumes to the watching world.⁴¹

Love of Community

Just as love for God is crucial for spiritual formation and missional lifestyle, similarly, love for community plays a vital role in formation and mission. How Christians behave toward one another either validates or invalidates their claims to be a distinct people. The renewed commitment to being a loving community is necessary if the church hopes to effectively engage the postmodern society in which they reside. The church must reflect God's triune character in the way it lives in genuine community and loves one another.⁴² At the center of the *missio Dei* is the Christian ethic of love that doubles as an apologetic for salvation.⁴³ Deep rich community has the qualities of evangelism because it validates the claims of the gospel.⁴⁴ Francis Schaeffer argues, "Christian relationships with each other constitute the criteria the world uses to judge whether their message is truthful."⁴⁵ Here, Schaeffer doubles down on the words of Jesus: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35 NLT). If the church lives as a community committed to mutual support, love, and self-sacrifice, it

⁴¹ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 199.

⁴² Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 296.

⁴³ Chandler, "Godly Love," 167.

⁴⁴ Keller, *Center Church*, 82.

⁴⁵ Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), 25. Cf. Timothy George and John Woodbridge, *The Mark of Jesus: Loving in a Way the World Can See* (Chicago: Moody, 2005).

will challenge the established orders of independence, self-interest, and private privilege. It is necessary for the church to return to a distinct integrated community senate around the worship of God to see the kingdom advanced in the way the church desires.⁴⁶ The installation of the kingdom comes the way of a new collaborative order marked by interdependence, shared responsibility, and mutual submission, all of which require significant formation in the lives of believers.⁴⁷

The importance of communal lifestyle is clearly seen in Matthew 5 when Jesus declares his disciples to be the light of the world. The church is to live as Christ did in the world, proclaiming with its union with God and one another a tangible example of the transcendent, communal God.⁴⁸ Just as Jesus declares that to see him is to see the Father, in the same way the church must declare with their lives and peculiar community that to see the church is to see the Son.⁴⁹ This means, then, that the formation of the people impacts their ability to live on mission. The only way people can live in this kind of community is to be spiritually formed.

The importance of this communal lifestyle is emphasized in the writings of Paul with his repeated call to love one another. To the Romans, Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians, his call is the same: pursue a lifestyle of love toward one another. The Christian faith defies the individualistic religion of current practice. The New Testament commands Christians to live their lives with and for one another. Romans 12:5 goes so far as to call them to be “members of one another.” The centrality that Christian unity plays in effective mission is plainly observed in the book of Acts. This Christocentric community embodied the upside-down kingdom proclaimed in the

⁴⁶ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 161.

⁴⁷ Darrell L. Guder, “Missional Connectedness: The Community of Communities in Mission,” in Guder, *Missional Church*, 81.

⁴⁸ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 152–53.

⁴⁹ Roxburgh, “Missional Leadership,” 58.

Gospels, a kingdom in which needs were met and love reigned supreme, presented an inherently plausible apologetic for the truths of the gospel.⁵⁰ As they communally committed themselves to the apostle's teaching, prayer, and gathering, their apologetic appealed to their city, and the Lord added to their number daily. The way of one anothering presents an attractive and plausible case for the claims of Christianity.⁵¹

The postmodern pursuit of community emphasizes sameness and comfort while jettisoning differences, conflict, and sacrifice.⁵² These communities maintain a facade of harmony by doing away with anything heterogeneous. Those who are different from them are forced to assimilate or be cast out. Unfortunately, the shallow nature of voluminous Western churches has settled for these "ideologies of intimacy" instead of presuming deep human interaction.⁵³ These churches must evolve into more than a gathering of well-meaning individuals whose self-interests are privately and idealistically defined.⁵⁴ The Western church must break its ties with individualism and commit itself to deep community for the sake of gospel impact and spiritual formation. Keller correctly argues, "In our Western culture, we must be a contrast community, a counterculture. The quality, distinctiveness, and beauty of our communal life must be a major part of our witness and mission to the world."⁵⁵ Succinctly, the strength of individualism's pull in postmodern culture requires a counterbalance of biblical emphasis on community.⁵⁶ This is in no way an emphasis disproportionate to the emphases of Scripture. Galatians 3:27 makes a

⁵⁰ Craig G. Bartholomew, "Spirituality, Mission, and the Drama of Scripture," in Finn and Whitfield, *Spirituality for the Sent*, 49.

⁵¹ David Bosch, *Believing in the Future: Towards a Missiology of Western Culture* (Harrisonburg, PA: Trinity, 1995), 15–16.

⁵² Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 120.

⁵³ Palmer, *Company of Strangers*, 108.

⁵⁴ Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 145.

⁵⁵ Keller, *Center Church*, 259.

⁵⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1983), 23.

radical claim: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The ordinance of baptism draws individuals into a radical new way of relating. Those who were once far off are now drawn into a familial relationship adopted into the body of Christ to live life communally, testifying to the reign of God. Union with Christ means being transformed from the autonomous, competitive, individualistic self, and living in a community defined by self-giving sacrificial love. Discipleship must be more than calling people to intake spiritual truth, it must also embrace the force multiplier of biblical community.⁵⁷ It also means that the church must be more than a vehicle for people to associate with those who are socially, ethnically, and socioeconomically the same.⁵⁸ Homogeneity functions antithetically to the gospel. It will not be isolated individuals but redeemed communities that reconcile God in the world. In the words of Norman Kraus, “The life of the church *is* its witness. The witness of the church *is* its life. The question of authentic witness is the question of authentic community.”⁵⁹ The better the church identifies the distinctions between culture and kingdom and lives into them effectively, the more faithfully they will display the draw of the kingdom and present an alternative way of life to the postmodern culture that has yet to experience fulfillment.

The good news for the church is that this intentional pursuit of community will not only benefit the postmodern West, but it will also benefit the church. Formation happens in the context of community. The New Testament gives a solid foundation for

⁵⁷ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 55.

⁵⁸ Barrett, “Missional Witness,” 41.

⁵⁹ C. Norman Kraus, *The Authentic Witness: Credibility and Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 156.

this statement for the epistles were not written to individuals but communities.⁶⁰ In the birthing of the church, the new Christians were not sent home to study the scrolls but were immediately ingratiated into gospel communities where they broke bread, prayed, and fellowshiped in homes.⁶¹ The discipleship and formation of these new Christians were not left to the whims of the individual, but were pressed home in the context of an enthusiastic community.⁶² One can trust that the outer facade of righteousness was spilled back in the context of community and what was hidden underneath the layers of performance and platitudes was revealed in the furnace of proximity.⁶³ Spiritual formation is a lifelong process of participating in a community that conforms to the ideals and lifestyles of kingdom. Therefore, the church must be intentional about providing time, space, and resources for individuals to grow out of old ways of living and be conformed into the image of God.⁶⁴ When this happens, the church not only gives a powerful witness for the gospel but also forms those individuals who are entering into the kingdom.

Love of Neighbor

The second of the commands in the Great Commandment expound upon the love of God and the love of community which is the love of neighbor. When the lawyer asks Jesus who is my neighbor in Luke 10:29, he tells a parable that expounds the definition of neighbor as far as conceivably possible. He illustrates the definition of neighbor to foreign enemies in the parable known as the Good Samaritan. At its

⁶⁰ Peter Watts and Cindy Lee, *Spiritual Formation Practices That Liberate* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, 2023), 35–36.

⁶¹ Bartholomew, “Spirituality, Mission, and the Drama of Scripture,” 48.

⁶² Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 110–13.

⁶³ Vanderstelt, *Saturate*, 93.

⁶⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics*, rev. ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1995), 210–11.

foundation, the Christian religion only asks two things of the Christian: to love God and to love neighbor, with the definition of neighbor, expanded to the outcast and the socially ostracized. The love of neighbor gives a clear indication of how well one is loving God.⁶⁵ Jesus reveals his love for the Father in the way he welcomed his neighbors who were sinners and outcasts. He invited them to his table, indicating a willingness for an intimate relationship.⁶⁶ His neighbors were prostitutes, tax collectors, Samaritans, and gentiles, and he undisputably loved them all. There is evidence in the life of Jesus for a clear connection between faith and work. The pattern of Jesus's life was one of compassionate response to the needs of others. He was predisposed to be inconvenienced for the sake of someone who was sick or oppressed.⁶⁷ As Jesus proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom, healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, and changed the trajectory of the lives of the broken. When responding to the Great Commission, one must not neglect the call and example of Christ. To "teach them [disciples] to obey all that I have commanded you," including the call toward justice and the move toward the "least of these"(Matt 25:40).⁶⁸

For the church to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, there must be a recommitment to justice. The false dichotomy between justice and the gospel does not find its place in the Scriptures.⁶⁹ Justice is not a New Testament concept but finds its roots in the Torah, the writings, and the prophets. An example of God's heart for justice is found in Leviticus 25 in the year of Jubilee. Jubilee was the year that followed seven sabbath years when freedom was proclaimed to captives, freeing slaves, forgiving debts, and restoring

⁶⁵ Thomas Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart* (Hoboken, NJ: Fortress, 2009), 136, Kindle.

⁶⁶ William H. Willimon, *The Service of God: How Worship and Ethics Are Related* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 133.

⁶⁷ Roxburgh, "Missional Leadership," 58.

⁶⁸ Mea Elise Cannon, "Missional Spirituality and Justice," in Finn and Whitfield, *Spirituality for the Sent*, 200.

⁶⁹ Trevin Wax, *Counterfeit Gospels: Rediscovering the Good News in a World of False Hope* (Chicago: Moody, 2011), 173–78.

land back to its original owners. The implications of Jubilee in ancient times were seismic. Those who fell into hardship would likely have been forced to sell themselves into servitude. The time that passed in half a decade would likely lead to grave socioeconomic disparity. God's institution of Jubilee would rectify the spreading disparity of wealth, limiting exploitation and creating an equitable economy.⁷⁰ God's heart for justice here was on full display. When speaking of charging interest in Leviticus 25:36, he uses the verb *אָכַל*, which can be translated as bite.⁷¹ God's desire for how his people related to one another economically was distinct from that of the world. The redeeming God had purchased his people out of slavery and would not allow slavery to be propagated into perpetuity amongst his people.⁷² Shane Claiborne states that Jubilee was "God's comprehensive unilateral restructuring of the community's assets."⁷³ With this evidence, the implications of Scripture are clear: Christians are called to live in communities that have an alternative set of economics.

From the year of Jubilee to the beatitudes to the sharing of goods in Acts 2, there is an economic justice built on a foundation of each individual receiving what they need.⁷⁴ This is a far cry from the capitalistic way, where wealth disparity only increases with time. Christian communities, then, must be inaugurations of a new societal order bringing the kingdom of God. Distinctions that give advantages, such as race, class superiority, accrual of wealth, and power, must no longer mark the lives of those in the kingdom.⁷⁵ As Christians practice this radically just new way of living, the world will

⁷⁰ Ched Myers, "God Speed the Year of Jubilee!," *Sojourners* 27, no. 3 (1998): 24–28.

⁷¹ Stephen K. Sherwood, *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2002), 83.

⁷² John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 4 (Nashville: Word, 1992), 441.

⁷³ Shane Claiborne, *Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 171.

⁷⁴ Roxburgh, "Missional Leadership," 69.

⁷⁵ Keller, *Center Church*, 47.

experience the kingdom as God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.⁷⁶ If the mission of the church is to align with the mission of God, it must encompass the poor. The poor are not the exclusive representatives of what Jesus identifies as neighbor, however he emphasizes the necessity of them being included in the definition of neighbor.

Scripture reveals that mission to the poor assists with the formation of becoming poor in spirit. James Cone argues that Jesus's story is the poor person's story.⁷⁷ "He became poor so that we might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). In the incarnation, Jesus comes not as a Roman elite but as an oppressed Jew. He is born in the lowliest of places—a feeding trough in a stable.⁷⁸ He is born to a poor family and was raised by a single mother. The call to care for the widow and the orphan literally applied to the savior. Under the reign of Christ, the kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit, and it is the meek who inherit the earth (Matt 5:3, 5). In the kingdom, those who mourn are exalted above those who are satisfied, the poor above the rich, the persecuted above the recognized.⁷⁹ The question, then, is how advantageous it must be to care for the least of these when becoming poor in spirit. Joining Jesus on his mission to the least and the lost are one of the most important practices for one's spiritual growth. Intimacy with the Father is deepened as individuals work alongside him to love their neighbor.⁸⁰ People learn about themselves in the hours they spend in close relationships with those who are different from them and are sanctified in the process.⁸¹ Those who are different often

⁷⁶ Cannon, *Social Justice Handbook*, 20.

⁷⁷ James Hal Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 73–74.

⁷⁸ Watts and Lee, *Spiritual Formation Practices That Liberate*, 47.

⁷⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 46.

⁸⁰ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 139–40.

⁸¹ Keller, *Center Church*, 121.

challenge and subvert what is familiar and comfortable. This often enhances formation and transforms the way one relates to others and to God.⁸²

The transformational nature of loving one's neighbor can be clearly seen in the lives of Jesus's disciples. His invitation for them to follow him in Matthew 4 was quickly proceeded by casting out demons and touching lepers. The call of Jesus was quickly followed by a radical move toward their outcasted neighbors. Jesus taught the disciples the basics of making disciples while on mission to their neighbor.⁸³ Their explorations into hard places revealed their doubt, selfishness, and pride. Their wrong views of God were exposed, and on mission, their facades of self-sufficiency were refined as they were forced to depend on Jesus over and over again.⁸⁴ What happened in the lives of the disciples can be anticipated in the lives of those in the church. As they continuously love their neighbors, the world will see the love of Christ, and they themselves will be formed and conformed into the image of God.

Mission + Formation = Kingdom

As explored in this chapter, a recommitment from the church to live fully devoted to mission and formation will play a critical role in receiving the kingdom of God. In the foundational prayer given by Jesus both formation and mission can be perceived. He calls the church into the most intimate of relationships by giving his disciples the privilege of calling God Father. This is intimacy; this is formation. In the very next sentence, however, he transitions to the tenants of mission. The hallowing of God's name in the coming of the kingdom is the mission of the church.⁸⁵ The two are intrinsically connected and work in concert to bring about God's glory. The reconciliation

⁸² Guder, "Missional Connectedness," 93.

⁸³ Vanderstelt, *Saturate*, 115.

⁸⁴ Vanderstelt, *Saturate*, 117.

⁸⁵ Bartholomew, "Spirituality, Mission, and the Drama of Scripture," 45.

of individuals in intimacy and the reconciliation of the masses to the kingdom are both encompassed in God's holistic mission. In this, formation and mission are working together.

In God's sovereignty, mission and formation are not only prerequisites to the kingdom but are products of the kingdom. The kingdom of God is not a corporate or sociopolitical order. It is a place where money is not made an idol but used to generously serve one's neighbor. The kingdom is a place where the hungry are cared for and the naked are clothed.⁸⁶ In the kingdom of God, money, power, accomplishment, and acknowledgment are redefined in light of God's reign.⁸⁷ Drawing more and more into the kingdom and forming more and more into the image of God is how the kingdom of God will be perpetuated on earth. Those within kingdom communities are transformed inwardly as God is on mission toward them, and those in the watching world will be drawn as they engage with the kingdom of God through his people.

With this foundation laid, the rest of this thesis will seek to engage a practical approach for moving individuals on a spiritual formation continuum while pressing those same individuals into missional contexts that multiply their formation and engage the postmodern West. The coming chapters will focus on identifying specific formational phases and stages in the Christian life and how a church can intentionally introduce practices and environments to move individuals forward, all for the sake of bringing about the kingdom in the postmodern West. This proposed framework aims to bring individuals from considering the claims of Christ to living lives conformed to the will of God in every sphere. With this foundation laid, attention can be turned to phase 1 of the spiritual formation continuum.

⁸⁶ Keller, *Center Church*, 39.

⁸⁷ Keller, *Center Church*, 43.

CHAPTER 4

PHASE 1: CONSIDERING AND CONNECTING TO CHRIST

The previous chapter sought to lay the theological foundation for why gospel proclamation must lead to the presence of the kingdom. Much time was spent observing how love for God, community, and neighbor should perpetuate spiritual formation, and missional lifestyle. Previously, the decline of many western churches' influence was assessed at different levels. Some churches have neglected to preach the gospel while others are misapplying the gospel at varying levels. The chapter concluded that if the church wants to continue to engage the postmodern Western culture, it will need to capitalize on the symbiotic nature of spiritual formation and missional context. This chapter will highlight in more practical terms how the church engages the postmodern West. It will begin by defining terms, such as spiritual formation and missional context. Next, the chapter will give an overview of how spiritual formation and missional context work in tandem to resolve the tension between the two. The chapter will conclude with an overview of phase 1 of spiritual formation, which focuses on the necessity of spiritual formation for those seeking to advance in missional lifestyle.

Spiritual Formation Defined

Spiritual formation, more traditionally known as sanctification, is the act of becoming increasingly intimate with Jesus as one becomes increasingly more like him. Dallas Willard defines formation as “the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”¹

¹ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 22.

Put simply, those who are spiritually formed become like Christ. It is essential for individuals to nurture their conscience and cultivate godly character when seeking build a relationship with God.² A close reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus’s disciples were marked by a deepening process of spirituality.³ They transitioned from being consumed with wealth, power, and status and were transformed over time into a community of faith, hope, and love.⁴ This is seen consistently in the New Testament, as Evan Howard helpfully highlights.

Christians’ use of formation has origins in the writings of the New Testament. In Galatians 4:19, for example, Paul uses the imagery of childbirth to express his intense desire for the Galatian church’s growth, stating that he is suffering “the pains of childbirth” until “Christ is formed in you.” In Ephesians, Paul uses the imagery of a building to communicate the church’s formation in Christ. He speaks of Christ as the cornerstone of this ongoing construction (and formation) project. “In him,” Paul declares, “the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:21–22). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes Christian formation as a development of faith (“Let us draw near . . . with the full assurance that faith brings,” 10:22), hope (“Let us hold . . . to the hope we profess,” 10:23), and love (“Let us . . . spur one another on toward love and good deeds,” 10:24). For the author of Hebrews, our ongoing formation—which entails securing our roots and strengthening our growing connection to Christ—is brought about when we exercise the fundamental virtues of our character: faith, hope, and love. And as we see in these passages, our formation is something that the Spirit works in us through the very life of the church (e.g., “spur one another”). Similarly, 1 Peter uses the metaphors of newborn development (“grow up in your salvation” through “spiritual milk,” 2:2) and construction (“being built into a spiritual house,” 2:5) to communicate this desire for formation into Christ.⁵

This process was not just a New Testament reality. Observed in the Old Testament are men and women who begin one way and over time are shaped into the image of their creator. It is important to note that even Jesus experiences a spiritual formation journey.

² Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 7.

³ Timothy M. Sheridan and Michael W. Goheen, “Missional Spirituality and Cultural Engagement,” in *Spirituality for the Sent: Casting a New Vision for the Missional Church*, ed. Nathan A. Finn and Keith S. Whitfield (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 95, Kindle.

⁴ Anthony L. Chute and Christopher W. Morgan, “Missional Spirituality as Congregational,” in Finn and Whitfield, *Spirituality for the Sent*, 78–79.

⁵ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 6–7.

His spiritual practices were not simply “window dressing” but had an effect on him and his world.⁶ The Christian must take seriously Hebrews 5: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered” (vv. 7–8).

Unfortunately, there is a widening divide in the hearts of those who profess Christ and their spiritual formation.⁷ Today’s culture is experiencing what Chris Armstrong identifies as a “dismal failure of American evangelicals to mature spiritually.”⁸ The attributes of the spiritually mature put forth by Jesus’s preaching are often found lacking in the modern-day Christian. Characteristics like humility, detachment, solitude, and suffering receive a negative connotation and are rarely met with serious consideration in many churches.⁹ The church must recommit itself to forming spiritually mature disciples. This will require the church to call individuals to depth of intimacy with God. A reprioritization is necessary for individuals to embrace daily silent conversation and spiritual formation with the God who loves them.¹⁰ It is especially necessary due to the constant bombardment of messages being pushed in current culture. There can be no satisfaction in the spiritual formation journey without

⁶ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 36.

⁷ E. J. de Kadt, *Liberal Religion: Progressive Versions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018), 173–77.

⁸ Chris Armstrong, “The Rise, Frustration, and Revival of Evangelical Spiritual Ressourcement,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 2, no. 1 (2009): 114.

⁹ R. Thomas Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart* (Hoboken, NJ: Fortress, 2009), 143, Kindle.

¹⁰ The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium* (Sherbrook, Canada: Médiaspaul, 2002), 49.

deep intimacy with God. In the words of Augustine, “God created us for a relationship with him and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in God.”¹¹

Not only is spiritual formation an essential part of the church forming mature disciples, but it is an essential part of the church living out its mission to engage the world with the kingdom. Much has been written about the merits of the contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) in relation to the act of life (*vita activa*), but there is no biblical precedence for dividing the two.¹² To emphasize one or the other is to form disproportionate disciples. Intimacy with Christ is both central and critical to the mission of the church as it seeks to engage the lost.¹³ Without such intimacy and transformation, professing Christians would be poor representatives of the faith they profess. Any attempt to see the church reestablished in its influence void of spiritual formation will be vacuous. Therefore, formation must be a priority of the church as it seeks to engage the postmodern West.

Mission Defined

To understand the term missional, one must first understand that God is on a mission. This mission ensues in the first few pages of Scripture. After Adam and Eve’s rebellion, God promises to send a Messiah that will redeem the world back to a reconciled relationship with him. Thus, a missional lifestyle is one that is formed, directed, and intentional in the mission that flows from the heart of God.¹⁴ The mission of God can be perceived throughout the Scriptures in his desire to redeem a rebelled people. However, it

¹¹ Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Albert C. Outler (New York: Dover, 2002), book 1.

¹² Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 70.

¹³ Craig G. Bartholomew, “Spirituality, Mission, and the Drama of Scripture,” in Finn and Whitfield, *Spirituality for the Sent*, 33.

¹⁴ Nathan A. Finn and Keith S. Whitfield, “The Missional Church and Spiritual Formation,” in Finn and Whitfield, *Spirituality for the Sent*, 28.

is most clearly evidenced in the sending of his son Jesus. Therefore, mission is God's effort in reconciling the world back to himself after sin, and subsequently the church's mission is to partner with God and that effort tethered to an ethic of love.

Scripture clearly asserts that Jesus was sent on mission by the Father. The Trinity, which has been in communion from the beginning, functions as a missions agency, both sending and being sent. In the Gospel of John alone, Jesus is described as having been sent forty-four times.¹⁵ He is, undoubtedly, on mission with the Father and the Spirit. His will is not his own; his words belong to another; his works are those of the Father, as though his entire existence belonged to the one who sent him¹⁶ Jesus is clearly portrayed as a missionary God in the Gospels.

The compelling nature of Jesus's sentness does not reside exclusively in the incarnation, but surpluses in the way it exhibits God's defining characteristic of love. His being and doing constitute what Dean Flemming calls "a mission of love."¹⁷ Jesus reveals the love of the Father in his posture, forgiveness, and healing. He describes himself as gentle and lowly while repeatedly asserting that to see him is to see the face of God. In his mission of love, he does not silo his message to a specific group of people but pursues Pharisees, Samaritans, cripples, and rich young rulers.¹⁸ In Jesus is seen divine love moving toward the broken, reaching toward the hopeless, and giving to those with little to give in return.¹⁹ Scripturally, this love is clearly displayed in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish

¹⁵ J. D. Greear, *Gaining by Losing: Why the Future Belongs to Churches That Send* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 73.

¹⁶ Albert Curry Winn, *A Sense of Mission: Guidance from the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1981), 30–34

¹⁷ Dean Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God: A Biblical Perspective on Being, Doing and Telling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 113.

¹⁸ Diane Chandler, "Godly Love," in Finn and Whitfield, *Spirituality for the Sent*, 170–71.

¹⁹ Also see Barry D. Jones, *Dwell: Life with God for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 59.

but have eternal life.” The love of the Father compelled him to both send and give his son. The mission of God starts in the collaborative eternal love of the triune Godhead. His persistent disposition toward mankind is one of loving salvation.²⁰ The Greek parses this out. In a major escalation, God transitioned from giving the law to giving his one and *μονογενής* (only) son. *οὕτως* (so), emphasizes the intensity of God’s love for the world, and it is exemplified in his willingness to send the Son.²¹ Consequently, David Bosch concludes, “There is mission because God loves people.”²²

Hence, Scripture readers must infer that the call to live missionally is less a mandate and more a response to having been loved by a generous God. Mission should not be a burden but a joy; it does not fall into the category of law but of gospel.²³ The church lives on mission because, in love, Jesus journeyed on mission to the church. The mission of God reveals his very character—that he is indeed loving in his essence.

So then, what does this mean for the church? It means they are to, in the same way as Jesus, be sent out into the world in love. John records the words of Jesus: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (John 20:21). This means that Christians are to be a reciprocal of God’s fountain of sending love participating in the mission of Christ to call a people for himself. The church receives the privilege going with and proclaiming Christ.²⁴ Bosch aptly states, “There is church because there is mission, not vice versa.”²⁵ The church’s mission is to discern where God is moving in the world and join in on it.²⁶

²⁰ Chandler, “Godly Love,” 169.

²¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 129.

²² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniv. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 400.

²³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 116.

²⁴ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 460.

²⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 400.

²⁶ Chandler, “Godly Love,” 168.

If the Western church desires to be a part of unveiling God's kingdom into the world, there must be an emphasis on equipping its people to join in on the move of God. A transition away from spiritual consumerism is vital if the church is to engage the existing postmodern culture.²⁷ Every church must prioritize every Christian participating in the mission. If the church is to engage the postmodern West, then it must exist as a community committed to proclaiming the kingdom of God, motivated by the love of God and sacrificing joyfully to participate in the move of God in the world. Mission is God's activity in the world to redeem a chosen people back to himself. The church's role is to participate with God through proclamation and missional lifestyles.

Solving the False Dichotomy between Mission and Formation

With the definition of kingdom, spiritual formation, and mission firmly set, one should now dispel the false dichotomy between spiritual formation and mission. The two are certainly not at odds, but instead form a symbiotic bond that advances both individuals and the church toward the kingdom. As this thesis asserted previously, the mission belongs to God. This truth must be viewed as both internal and external, with God working *in* Christians to draw them near to himself and *through* them to draw in the world. Spiritual formation and mission can be considered wheel and axle, working and turning in perfect unison to form kinetic energy for kingdom advancement. The spirituality of the church is the fuel to the mission, while the mission of the church reproduces spirituality.²⁸ One cannot be had without the other.

This reality is exemplified in the keynote declarations of Jesus in the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. They can be seen as two sides of the same coin in God's mission to redeem the world.²⁹ The command to love God and neighbor

²⁷ Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 258, Kindle.

²⁸ Chute and Morgan, "Missional Spirituality as Congregational," 81.

²⁹ Chandler, "Godly Love," 172–73.

and the command to make disciples function as a call to spiritual formation and missional lifestyle. The Great Commission is framed by the *missio Dei* and, therefore, cannot be separated from God's love for mankind, which compels the response of the Great Commandment, namely, loving God. The love of God for mankind that sends him on mission to man is the same love that compels the command to make disciples. God's command to live on mission is, at its essence, a command fueled by his love and desire for intimacy with his creation. In short, God's love compels him to demand Christians to love one another. Hence, the command to make disciples cannot be carried out without the formation of the proclaimers, who must, prior to proclaiming, experience the depth of God's love and intimacy. Those who seek to make disciples must be simultaneously giving and receiving the gospel. To teach other disciples to obey all that Jesus commanded, the original disciples must also be in the process of being formed.³⁰ It can also be observed that Jesus's promise to be with them (the intimacy that develops with formation) is expressed in the context of the mission.

This loving and being loved is seen in the life of the disciples. Jesus's call to come and follow, the crux of spiritual formation, was preceded by his promise to make them fishers of men (Matt 4:19). To follow was to fish. Discipleship and mission are inextricably linked to one another. This way of life, discipleship, is to be lived following Christ and inviting others to participate in the kingdom.³¹ Any argument to detangle the thread of spiritual formation and mission is untenable, for they weave and spiral into each other, nourishing one another, ever reproducing themselves and the other.³² If one is walking with Jesus, he should expect to be called into mission, and while living on mission, he should expect to be drawn into deeper fellowship with God. M. Robert

³⁰ Bartholomew, "Spirituality, Mission, and the Drama of Scripture," 47.

³¹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, *Jesus and the Twelve* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 272–79.

³² Chute and Morgan, "Missional Spirituality as Congregational," 84.

Mulholland observes, “No healthy spiritual formation in Christ is possible apart from mission with Christ. Similarly, no transformative mission with Christ is possible apart from formation in Christ.”³³ To live on (external) mission, then, is to reproduce one’s own spirituality in others as they learn to depend on God for his (internal) mission in them. Because of this, the church must intensify its focus. Asking the question, how can the church form its people overtime, and how can it send them on mission for their good.

Overview of the Spiritual Formation Continuum

The symbiotic nature between spiritual formation and missional lifestyle has deeply formed this framework for church. Tim Keller speaks of the linchpin between doctrinal beliefs and ministry practices as theological vision.³⁴ The desire here, then, is to meld the theological conviction that disciples must be formed over time through formational practices with the insertion of practical context that helps bring about formation. Human experience flows in a given direction through stages.³⁵ The attempt of this model is to simultaneously form Christians while enabling the western church to have what Leslie Newbigin calls a “missionary encounter with western culture.”³⁶ It is essential for formationally-minded churches to have a clear and simple understanding of their primary goals for formation.³⁷ By integrating key characteristics of missional churches, service to the community, the pronouncement of the kingdom to the lost, and equipping the saints, with characteristics of the traditional church, engaging the masses,

³³ M. Robert Mulholland, “Spiritual Formation in Christ and Mission with Christ,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 11.

³⁴ Keller, *Center Church*, 18.

³⁵ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 47.

³⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, “Can the West Be Converted?,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 1 (January 1987): 3.

³⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 320.

and impactful Sunday morning experiences, the hope is that deep formation and missional impact can be accomplished simultaneously.

In this section, there will be significant interaction with the Reveal Research study. This study surveyed 1,000 churches and their congregates across different denominations and church sizes to identify the most significant factors to moving individuals forward in their spiritual formation.³⁸ This study, along with other research, was essential to informing the assertions of this thesis.

One key motivating force for this church framework of a spiritual formation continuum was Reveal Research illuminating that 250,000 congregants expressed a desire to be helped in developing a personal relationship with Jesus.³⁹ The research highlights that people long for churches to help them engage God in deeper ways.⁴⁰ The structure of many churches in the West does not meet their profound desire to know and love God more deeply. The research tells that there is a sincere hunger for spiritual formation and a longing for individuals to become spiritually mature.⁴¹

Unfortunately, research also reveals that church activity, often encouraged by churches, such as serving on a Sunday or joining a small group, does not lead to spiritual depth. In fact, increased participation in church activities “barely moved” people toward love of God and neighbor.⁴² According to the data of the Reveal Research, this led to many in the church being dissatisfied and ready to move on.⁴³ The Reveal Research went on to identify that 20 percent of congregants surveyed as long-tenured, spiritually

³⁸ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1000 Churches Reveal about Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011)

³⁹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 71.

⁴⁰ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 34.

⁴¹ Steven L. Porter, “The Future of Christian Spiritual Formation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 16, no. 1 (2023): 6–8.

⁴² Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 13–14.

⁴³ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 14.

immature, and unwilling to progress. These results do not even account for the large majority of individuals who identified as dissatisfied with the church or stuck in their faith.⁴⁴ This quote from Cally Parkinson is telling: “Church activities do not predict or drive long-term spiritual growth. More precisely, increasing church attendance and participation in organized ministry activities do not predict or drive spiritual growth for people who are in the more advanced stages of spiritual development.”⁴⁵

This model aims to form Christians over time, not only through church activities but also through equipping in a missional context. To quote the early church father Tertullian, “Christians are not born, they are made.”⁴⁶ If one were to revise the quote, one might say, Christians are not only born but also made. In this model, the church’s role is to create energy for movement in the early stages and equip Christians to sustain that movement in the later ones. Some theologians, such as David Fitch, suggest a move away from any semblance of an attractional model altogether.⁴⁷ I am not arguing for that. This is not a move away from the method the church established in the West over the decades, as David Finch would encourage. Those in his camp argue that the post-Christian context hinders non-Christians from comprehending Christian claims in a traditional setting.⁴⁸ This thesis assessment, however, is that this is an overestimation of the impact of post-Christian culture. There is still a great need to engage those who would entertain the claims of the gospel while simultaneously equipping the saints to take the gospel to those who would not breach church doors.

⁴⁴ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 27.

⁴⁵ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 15.

⁴⁶ Marianne Meye Thompson, “The Gospel of John and Early Trinitarian Thought: The Unity of God in John, Irenaeus and Tertullian,” *Journal of Early Christian History* 4, no. 2 (2014): 163–64.

⁴⁷ Missio Alliance, “What Is Missional? Can a Mega-Church Be Missional?,” Missio Alliance, July 10, 2013, <https://www.missioalliance.org/what-is-missional-can-a-mega-church-be-missional/>.

⁴⁸ David Fitch, “What Is Missional? Can a Mega-Church Be Missional?,” accessed February 17, 2012, www.reclaimingthemission.com/what-is-missional-can-a-mega-church-be-missional/; Keller, *Center Church*, 276.

For this procedure to be accomplished, leaders must be wholly devoted to supporting and equipping their people along their spiritual journey. This intentionality, combined with the power of the Holy Spirit, provides a path for Christian formation. The journey of spiritual formation requires the patience and diligence of the leadership due to its rigorous nature and inconsistent progress. On the path of spiritual formation, people may find themselves stuck or even regressing, but a local church committed to the journey can provide direction and catalysts that help move individuals forward.⁴⁹ Churches that choose the path of spiritual formation must be committed to a journey, though they will not be the first to travel it. Many saints of old have labored down this path toward spiritual formation. Believers like Augustine, Aelred of Rievaulx, Julian of Norwich, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Francis of Assisi, and Ignatius Loyola all spoke bountifully of their journey to become more like Christ.⁵⁰ The aim of this model is simple: form disciples who are intimate with Jesus, committed to community, and joyfully on mission. These kinds of disciples will engage the Western context.

Within this model, two primary phases exist in the believer's journey. Phase 1, consisting of considering and connecting to Christ, has a primary objective of helping new believers belong and believe. Believers in this segment are often being formed into a new set of external principles and worldviews.⁵¹ For churches to develop believers in phase 1, there needs to be an overt emphasis on the basics of spiritual formation.⁵² In phase 1, churches must focus on the varied proven methods that assist new believers in becoming established in their faith. Critical decisions need to be made in the early stages of spiritual formation. It is the church's role to equip new Christians to make these

⁴⁹ Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 2005), 4, Kindle.

⁵⁰ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 6.

⁵¹ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 11.

⁵² Tom Schwanda, "Growing in Christ: Glorifying and Enjoying God through Reformed Spiritual Disciplines," *Reformation and Revival* 10, no. 1 (2001): 23–27.

necessary decisions to help them progress.⁵³ Therefore, the church must take seriously its role in helping individuals make choices that lead to intimacy with God as they become fully committed disciples.⁵⁴ In the book *Move*, Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson insinuate that the church serves as a “spiritual matchmaker” in the early stages, providing a meeting place and next steps to accommodate people’s need to learn and believe core Christian beliefs. The role the church plays in these initial stages of spiritual formation is critical because without the church those considering Christ never move beyond their considerations.⁵⁵ Darrell Guder is helpful when he writes,

Becoming a citizen of the reign of God does not come naturally. It is different from just being civil or being a good person. It requires a new loyalty to a new ruler. It demands that we acquire the new habits of a new culture. New people need to become “naturalized” citizens of the reign of God, and teaching is part of the naturalization process.⁵⁶

This reasoning leads one to infer that one of the primary logical initial steps in spiritual formation is to naturalize new believers with biblical engagement and gospel community.

Biblical engagement is overwhelmingly the most effective strategy for spiritual transformation.⁵⁷ Churches that engage their people with Scripture and help them participate with the Bible outside of large gatherings see the greatest consistent movement along the spiritual formation continuum.⁵⁸ A commitment to “embedding Scripture in everything” revealed by research is a best practice for moving Christians forward.⁵⁹ No

⁵³ Philip Cairns, “Foundational Discipleship, Education and Training,” *Word and Deed* 9, no. 1 (2006): 56.

⁵⁴ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 60.

⁵⁵ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 73.

⁵⁶ Darrell L. Guder, “Missional Connectedness: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 76.

⁵⁷ “How Bible Engagement Impacts Children’s Behavior,” Center for Bible Engagement, April 6, 2024, <https://www.centerforbibleengagement.org/post/how-bible-engagement-impacts-children-s-behavior>.

⁵⁸ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 10.

⁵⁹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 17.

other catalyst comes close. Individuals who devote personal time to reflecting on Scripture see far and away the most spiritual growth.⁶⁰ Second Timothy 3:16–47 says, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (CSB). Scriptural engagement is imperative because what someone does flows from what they believe about God and his Word.⁶¹ Research also bears this out. What someone believes about God functions as a catalyst or a hindrance in their spiritual journey. Those who believe in the basic doctrines of the Trinity or salvation by grace have a better opportunity to move from the considering Christ quadrant to the connecting to Christ quadrant.⁶² Because weak beliefs inhibit spiritual growth, a church that helps its members engage the Scriptures well will be more effective in their task of forming believers. Keller speaks of the necessity of gospel resurgence:

Most of our problems in life come from a lack of proper orientation to the gospel. Pathologies in the church and sinful patterns in our individual lives ultimately stem from a failure to think through the deep implications of the gospel and to grasp and believe the gospel through and through. Put positively, the gospel transforms our hearts and our thinking and changes our approaches to absolutely everything.⁶³

After Scripture, the next powerful catalyst for new believers in phase 1 is biblical community. It is often said that people need to belong before they will believe, and indicators bear this out.⁶⁴ Seeing individuals who have lived out their faith with commitment and joy is essential for the plausibility of the Christian faith. Churches engaging individuals in phase 1 need to work with diligence to not only engage them but also plug them into the community. The ability to cultivate deep relationships in which

⁶⁰ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 37.

⁶¹ Jeff Vanderstelt, *Saturate: Being Disciples of Jesus in the Everyday Stuff of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 125.

⁶² Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 63.

⁶³ Keller, *Center Church*, 51.

⁶⁴ McGlone, St. Joseph Sr. Mary M., “A Culture of Encounter,” *National Catholic Reporter*, April 28, 2023, 19.

trust and honesty are established is essential for continued sanctification. Spaces, where people can bring their authentic selves into grace-filled non-condemning biblical communities, play a pivotal role in the early portions of the spiritual formation continuum.⁶⁵

This thesis will use four identifiers for each segment of the spiritual formation continuum to provide a biblical, helpful framework for spiritual formation and the context that coincides with movement. These identifiers are characteristics, catalysts, barriers, and context. Figure 1 depicts the four segments and the categories of formation. The first of two segments in phase 1 of spiritual formation is the segment of those considering Christ.

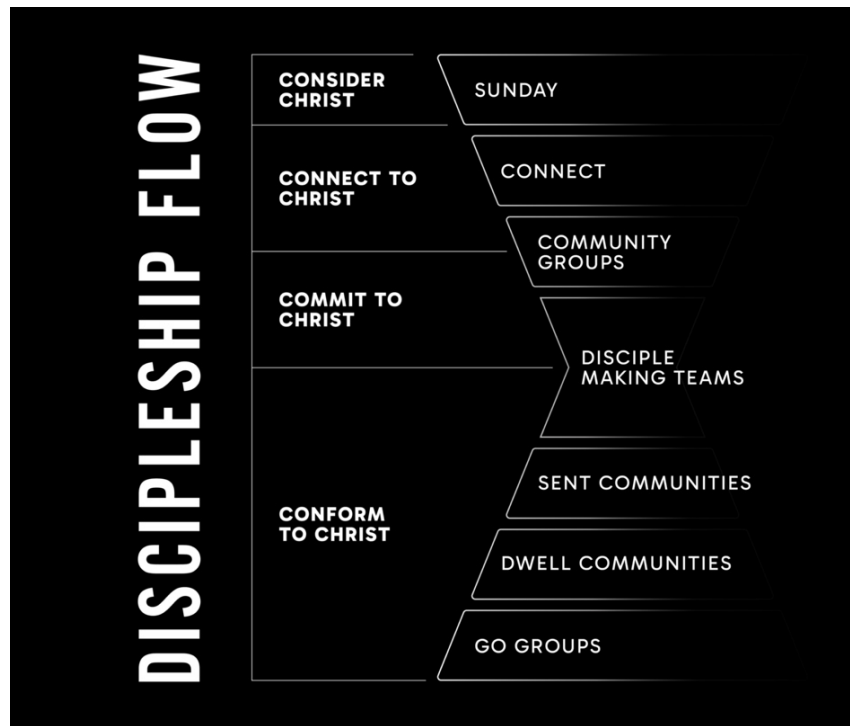


Figure 1. Formation and context diagram

⁶⁵ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 64.

Consider

In chapter 2, this thesis highlighted the reality of the church's decline in the West. However, a large contingent of individuals is still willing to be engaged on some level by the church. These individuals are nonbelievers who are intrigued by the Christian message but have not fully bought in. Churches that seek to be missional must engage these individuals and anticipate them being in many of the environments they cultivate for spiritual growth.⁶⁶

Characteristics of individuals in this segment of the spiritual formation continuum often cover an array of individuals. These individuals may be de-churched, new to the church, or have existed in the church context for a long time. It is important to identify and engage individuals in this segment because spiritual formation begins even before an individual is a Christian.⁶⁷ Individuals in the considering Christ segment often have a basic belief in God but are unsure about his overall authority over their individual lives and autonomy.⁶⁸ These people often find themselves on the periphery of the church, seeking to evaluate whether Christianity's claims are worth wholeheartedly embracing. Something compelling draws them in, but they are not ready to commit.⁶⁹ The Reveal Research shows that 66 percent of these individuals find it unnecessary to be members of a local church, which leads 75 percent to be uninvolved in activities that do not happen on Sunday morning, such as small groups or serve teams.⁷⁰

Another key characteristic of individuals in the considering Christ segment is that they take little issue with mainstream worldviews.⁷¹ This segment has a high desire for syncretism, seeking to combine the doctrines of the world with the doctrines of God.

⁶⁶ Keller, *Center Church*, 274.

⁶⁷ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 54.

⁶⁸ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 15.

⁶⁹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 20.

⁷⁰ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 25.

⁷¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 45.

Individuals in this segment often wrestle with the less popular doctrines of gender in sexuality and typically have questions around more difficult doctrines like the Trinity in the incarnation.

Finally, individuals in this segment often lack spiritual disciplines. To them, if there is a God, he seems distant and inaccessible.⁷² Rhythms like Sabbath, prayer, and Scripture reading are often an afterthought and go unprioritized in their daily lives. So then, how does the church move individuals from simply considering Christ to connecting to him? This pivotal question is addressed in the next section on catalysts.

The question of catalyst is pivotal for this segment. To state the obvious, the considering Christ segment is the most dangerous of all segments in which to remain stuck. This is compiled with the reality that many nonbelievers who attend church for long periods of time decrease in their likelihood of ever accepting Christ. The research shows an inverse connection between the length of time nonbelievers attend church and their willingness to accept Christ.⁷³ This inverted relationship makes the catalysts for moving individuals out of the considering segment imperative. So, what are these catalysts?

Gospel clarity is the first of the catalysts that help individuals move from considering Christ to connecting to Christ. Richard Lovelace identifies the proclaiming of the gospel in depth as the most important condition of the renewal of the church.⁷⁴ Individuals moving from considering to connecting are searching for truth and the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. This sounds simple, but many in the church who exist beyond the considering Christ segment are unsure of the gospel, and still there are scores

⁷² Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 37.

⁷³ Aaron Earls, “Churches Are Open but Still Recovering from Pandemic Attendance Losses,” *Lifeway Research*, November 8, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/11/08/churches-are-open-but-still-recovering-from-pandemic-attendance-losses/>.

⁷⁴ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 145.

more inside of the considering segment. Gospel clarity is a primary catalyst for those seeking a meaningful relationship with Christ. Keller states,

Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives. Many . . . have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for justification . . . drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. Few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther's platform: you are accepted, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude.⁷⁵

Helping individuals in this segment understand the foundational truths of the gospel is, without question, one of the most powerful catalysts. The good news is that there is a pattern to how these basic gospel truths are embraced. Before individuals in this segment understand the incarnation or God's sovereignty, they typically first understand salvation by grace.⁷⁶ In this trust-building phase, establishing firm spiritual beliefs and attitudes is critical.⁷⁷

One of the most impactful ways to establish these crucial foundational beliefs is to help individuals develop spiritual disciplines.⁷⁸ Even for those who do not openly profess faith in Christ, a challenge to read the Scriptures for a period of time and reflect on how they impact their life can be life-altering. Being taught the Scriptures and taught to engage them is an essential first step to gaining intimacy with God.⁷⁹ Intellectually understanding who God is often an essential first step in grasping one's spiritual

⁷⁵ Keller, *Center Church*, 64.

⁷⁶ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 63.

⁷⁷ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 16.

⁷⁸ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation*, 45.

⁷⁹ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 63.

formation journey. Knowing about God, when coupled with community and the Holy Spirit, can move to a knowing of God in the biblical sense.⁸⁰

If churches want to see individuals in this segment advance into spiritual maturity, they must provide both support and challenge. Challenging these individuals to serve, or to explore for themselves the claims of Christianity, are powerful best practices found in churches that see individuals move from considering Christ to connecting to Christ.⁸¹ Offering forums to answer questions that keep individuals in this segment from believing the basic doctrines is also helpful. The aim is to force individuals in this segment out of their comfort zone, relaying to them that the church will not stand idly by and allow them to show up to church once a week without progressing toward wholehearted devotion. Churches who preach the gospel, equip members to engage Scripture, and intentionally create space and challenge those in the considering Christ segment should expect to see those individuals move over the course of time.

Because this continuum is about spiritual formation and not just systematic growth, spiritual warfare should be expected. This leads to the discussion of barriers. The primary barrier for movement in this segment is deception. Many in this segment, 74 percent to be precise, would confirm that the God of the Bible is the one true God, with many more saying they love God very much. Yet, the same group of people would also say that Jesus is not very important in their lives.⁸² The delusion that one can be a Christian without following or loving Jesus is a significant barrier in moving individuals from considering Christ to committing to Christ. The unfortunate reality around this delusion is that it hardens over time. It is worth reiterating that the longer someone attends church without making a decision to follow Christ, the less likely they are to ever make that decision.

⁸⁰ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 64.

⁸¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 27.

⁸² Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 22.

The second major barrier for individuals in this segment is their busy schedules.⁸³ Because they often embrace the worldview of achievement and hurry, it is often more difficult for them to set aside time to invest in their own spiritual lives. The principle of sowing and reaping applies here: little investment equals little return. This is why the catalyst of gospel centrality is so important: there is a direct correlation between a low interest in spiritual practices and weak beliefs.⁸⁴ If the church is to overcome the barriers of delusion, disinterest, and busyness, it must continue to proclaim the gospel and call individuals of the considering Christ segment higher.

When speaking to context, the general assertion is that believers need to be in missional contexts to pursue depth in spiritual formation. However, within the paradigm of those in the considering Christ segment, the context within which they will be moved along a spiritual formation continuum is the one in which they can be reached. For the purposes of this paradigm, the church begins not with those who are disinterested in the claims of Christ but with those who are intrigued yet skeptical. Therefore, the initial context within which individuals in the considering Christ segment will need for spiritual movement is the Sunday morning gathering.

The church as an organized institution is essential to the growth of individuals in the early stages of spiritual formation. Those in the considering Christ segment are seeking to determine whether the claims of Christianity are true, and the church plays a pivotal role in building trust in the claims of Christ. A high priority for formation-oriented churches must be to provide clear and compelling foundational Christian beliefs.⁸⁵ The context that is best suited for this trust-earning endeavor is the Sunday morning gathering. Along with being the most accessible context to those considering Christ, the Sunday morning gathering provides a bevy of opportunities to bring contextualized truth within

⁸³ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 98.

⁸⁴ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 99.

⁸⁵ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 73.

earshot of those who are still unsure. For this opportunity to be maximized, churches must commit themselves to gospel-centered, biblically-rich preaching.

The church's greatest contribution in the first movement is teaching, encouraging, and persuading those considering Christ of the trustworthy nature of Christian beliefs.⁸⁶ This happens most plainly through the preaching of the Word. More effective than any other approach, teaching the Word of God in a large gathering is effective for formation.⁸⁷ The continued detangling of the false dichotomy between deep discipleship and the most important context for new believers is necessary here. There has recently been an emphasis on engaging the curious in the name of deep discipleship. However, the end goal of disciple making through sending is heavily dependent on this engagement. Andrew Hopper speaks to the foundational nature of church growth for sending.⁸⁸ This is important because sending is essential to formation. Therefore, it can be concluded that engaging those who desire to be engaged and forming them to engage those who do not is an essential way for the church to engage the postmodern west.

There are a couple of things to consider at this point. Effective preaching must be done with the awareness of non-believers present to move individuals out of the first segment. Non-contextualized sermons will not engage those seeking to adopt a new worldview. The church must labor to intentionally overlap the beliefs of secular culture with the beliefs of Scripture highlighting both similarities and discrepancies for the sake of persuading the listener.⁸⁹ Every culture asks a set of similar questions with assumed

⁸⁶ Robert B. Ives, "The Importance of Expository Preaching," *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 32, no. 2 (2009): 308–9.

⁸⁷ John R. Yeatts, "A Response to Biblical Illiteracy: The Importance of Preaching and Teaching the Bible," *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 33, no. 1 (2010): 222–24.

⁸⁸ Andrew Herrington, Andrew Hopper, and Bobby Harrington, "The #1 Thing That Has Led to Growth," *Breaking Barriers*, March 18, 2024, produced by Mercy Hill Church, podcast, 35:00, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/s1e002-the-1-thing-that-has-led-to-growth/id1735348234?i=1000649553624>.

⁸⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 123–24.

answers. Contextualized gospel preaching must address these questions with gospel answers.⁹⁰ The beauty of gospel preaching is that it engages both the established Christian and those in the considering segment. Awareness of the non-believer does not equate to the disillusionment of current Christians. Keller explains,

My thesis is that the weekly worship service can be very effective in evangelism of non-Christians and in edification of Christians if it does not aim at either alone but is gospel centered and in the vernacular. Of course, there will be a need for other, more intense experiences of learning, prayer, and community to help Christians to grow into maturity, just as there will be a need for more specifically evangelistic venues and experiences where non-Christians can have their questions and concerns fully addressed. With an awareness of the need for these additional experiences, I believe it is possible for the weekly worship service to be the core of both evangelism and edification.⁹¹

Working to make Sunday morning an experience in which both those considering and those in the other segments can progress in spiritual formation is a best practice of formationally-focused churches.

One final note on Sunday morning gatherings. Churches seeking to engage those who are considering Christ must remember that the individuals who show up are choosing to attend. These individuals are actively exploring the issues of faith and the church must take the opportunity to issue gospel challenges clearly and compellingly to this segment. The church must refuse to allow those in the considering segment to remain in a comfortable, sedentary state.⁹²

Two additional contexts outside of the Sunday morning gathering are worth mentioning: jump-start programs and connect groups. A seemingly unconventional method of formationally-focused churches engaging those in the early stages of spiritual formation is a process of assimilation. Instead of offering a wide-ranging menu of ministry opportunities, best practice churches funnel newcomers into a focused non-negotiable

⁹⁰ Keller, *Center Church*, 108.

⁹¹ Keller, *Center Church*, 301.

⁹² Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 27.

pathway designed to jumpstart an individual’s spiritual formation journey.⁹³ One of the most effective ways to avoid the stagnation barrier that keeps individuals from moving from considering to connecting is a focused next step. Helping individuals get plugged into the life of the church provides important clarity and community for progressing Christians. Showing this next step as a nonnegotiable high priority incentivizes those in the considering Christ segment to increase their engagement, which helps their continued progression in phase 1.⁹⁴

Finally, a helpful context for individuals in the considering Christ segment are large affinity connect groups. Giving individuals an opportunity to belong in the early stages pays astronomical dividends. Science backs this up, identifying a group of roughly one-hundred-fifty people as an ideal community.⁹⁵ Groups such as these address a key factor for those in the considering Christ segment—loneliness. Many in the considering Christ segment are indeed considering Christ because they have found themselves hurting and alone. One of the primary reasons people begin to pursue a relationship with God is out of a sense of need.⁹⁶ Connect groups create a context for authentic relationships to be formed and can function as a powerful tool in spiritual formation.⁹⁷

Connect

The next segment in the spiritual formation progression is the segment of connecting to Christ. This is the segment that individuals enter once they have accepted Christ. Here, individuals are transitioning from a casual relationship defined by a setting,

⁹³ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 120.

⁹⁴ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 122.

⁹⁵ Roger Bretherton and R. I. M. Dunbar, “Dunbar’s Number Goes to Church: The Social Brain Hypothesis as a Third Strand in the Study of Church Growth,” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 42, no. 1 (2020): 63–64.

⁹⁶ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 34.

⁹⁷ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 65.

like a Sunday morning gathering, to a personal friendship where communication is increased and life is shared outside of the original meeting place.⁹⁸ The top desire of individuals in this segment is to continue to develop a relationship with Christ, closely followed by the desire to understand Scripture.⁹⁹ Individuals in this segment do not desire to be coddled, but long to be challenged as they grow in their walk with God. Seventy-five percent in this segment say it is of the utmost importance that their leaders challenge them with Scripture and incite them to conform their lives to the truth they have heard.¹⁰⁰ If handled with intentionality and care, individuals in this segment are well on their way to a vibrant relationship with Christ.

When identifying the characteristics of individuals in this segment, it is crucial to understand that data concludes this to be the largest contingent of the local church. Those who are connecting to Christ represent 38 percent of the individuals surveyed.¹⁰¹ These individuals in the adolescent stages of their spiritual formation experience significant emotional and intellectual changes as they learn to function with new beliefs.

Those in the connecting to Christ stage of spiritual formation can best be characterized as learners. Most of their experiences are first-time experiences, and they are learning what it means to belong to a community and walk with God. One should expect individuals in this segment to begin progressing in prayer, praying about day-to-day issues, and seeking help from God in seasons of strife.¹⁰² There is often an awareness of one's inexperience, leading to a lack of confidence in what one believes and how one can continue to progress in one's spiritual journey.¹⁰³ Because of this reality, these

⁹⁸ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 62.

⁹⁹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 35.

¹⁰⁰ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 30–31.

¹⁰¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 28.

¹⁰² Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 37.

¹⁰³ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 56.

individuals often find solace with more mature believers adopting their ideals and practices. This eagerness to adopt leaders' ideals can sometimes lead to a dogmatic holding of non-essential doctrines and lends itself to legalism.¹⁰⁴ However, a high level of buy-in amongst these individuals needs to be shepherded for momentum into the next segment.

Because of the high level of buy-in, this segment is also particularly active in church activities. There is a significant movement in service between the considering Christ segment and the connecting to Christ segment. Fifty percent of individuals in this segment serve the church at least once a month, nearly double the number in the previous segment.¹⁰⁵ With this being true, it is imperative to remember that church activity does not necessarily equal spiritual formation. A danger for churches is to assume that this increased activity solidifies continuation on the spiritual formation continuum. It does not. When assessed, those in the connecting to Christ segment consider themselves progressing in their spiritual journey at an untenable pace.¹⁰⁶ Although intellectual knowledge has been attained, there is still a discrepancy between profession and behavior. Typically those in this segment segregate their lives into secular and sacred dimensions.¹⁰⁷ Although they are eager students and active participants they rarely experience or express their faith outside of church gatherings.¹⁰⁸ There is still a significant opportunity for spiritual growth for these individuals.

There are many catalysts for assisting individuals in the connecting to Christ segment's progress toward committing to Christ. The catalysts of spiritual disciplines, intentionality with community, and sacrifice mark a major shift in the progression of

¹⁰⁴ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 62.

¹⁰⁵ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 29.

¹⁰⁶ Beata Zarzycka and Pawel Zietek, "Spiritual Growth or Decline and Meaning-Making as Mediators of Anxiety and Satisfaction with Life During Religious Struggle," *Journal of Religion and Health* 58, no. 4 (2019): 1073.

¹⁰⁷ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 45.

¹⁰⁸ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 32.

spiritual formation. The catalysts in this segment are typically those that take the most initial effort. These catalysts characteristically push individuals out of their comfort zone and into new rhythms that help formulate transformation.¹⁰⁹ Teresa of Avila speaks of them as first water times, concluding that unlike rain or aqueduct systems, the catalyst in this level of spiritual formation is similar to the high-intensity labor of hauling water from a well.¹¹⁰ Starting new spiritual disciplines, living in community, and embracing sacrifice represent the proverbial hump that must be overcome for continued spiritual formation.

Much of an individual's ability to cultivate a personal relationship with God hinges upon developing a rhythm of personal spiritual practices.¹¹¹ The equation here really is simple: the more time individuals spend with God the more they grow in their relationship and ability to know God. Teaching and equipping individuals to read their Bible and pray regularly is an indispensable responsibility of churches seeking to form their people. Research essentially shows that one of the primary keys to breaking through the barriers of spiritual dormancy is scriptural engagement.¹¹² In this segment, the frequency and intensity of communication with God must increase significantly. The good news is it typically does for those who are progressing.¹¹³ Belief in a personal God begins to take root and drive individuals to relate to God more intimately. This belief in a personal God often leads to seeking God's guidance daily, reflecting on Scripture frequently, and even broaching spiritual conversations with non-believers.¹¹⁴ Individuals who embrace the spiritual catalysts of spiritual disciplines have a much higher likelihood of progressing in their spiritual journey.

¹⁰⁹ Len Hjalmanson, *The Art of Missional Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 24.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Dubay, *Fire Within: St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and the Gospel-On Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 80–81.

¹¹¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 16.

¹¹² "How Bible Engagement Impacts Children's Behavior."

¹¹³ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 81.

¹¹⁴ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 63.

The second catalyst to move individuals in this segment is community. Progressing in this journey phase without including others is exponentially more difficult.¹¹⁵ A strong support group is pivotal because it provides mentorship, modeling, and accountability. At this stage, it is essential that individuals are disciplined, taught, and nurtured by more mature believers for continued progression.¹¹⁶ The spiritual formation journey was never meant to be taken alone. Introducing community, in this phase specifically, allows for a continued growth trajectory. Individuals who feel like they belong to a faith community are much more likely to progress than those who are isolated. Who one makes the spiritual formation journey with determines who journeyers learn and experience God to be.¹¹⁷

The final major catalyst I will address for movement from connecting to Christ to committing to Christ is the catalyst of embracing sacrifice. For progression, the sacrifice of carving out time to spend time with God must be embraced. Another sacrificial catalyst that helps individuals progress in their spiritual journey is embracing the sacrifice of giving financially. Experts assert that individuals who give grow.¹¹⁸ The importance of teaching people to lead their hearts by giving their treasure cannot be overstated. Individuals who give up their time by serving the church and others in the church also progress at a more efficient rate than those who do not.¹¹⁹ Finally, one must embrace the sacrifice of neighbor love that produces spiritual growth. Taking risks in this area often leads to the discovery of spiritual gifts for the building of the church, which is a key step in spiritual maturity.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 53.

¹¹⁶ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 46.

¹¹⁷ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 53.

¹¹⁸ Jamie Viands, "Prosperity through Tithing? An Examination of the Application of Mal 3:10 for the Church Today," *Trinity Journal* 43, no. 2 (2022): 149–152.

¹¹⁹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 82.

¹²⁰ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 66.

Research has also proven that taking one's faith from personal to public is a powerful catalyst for growth.¹²¹

Because progression from this point to the next is viewed as one of the most difficult, one should expect a vast array of barriers. As alluded to previously, movement in this segment is more difficult for the Christian than any other segment. This challenge is increased due to the reality that many in this segment are long-standing Christians with superficial spiritual attitudes and behaviors.¹²² However, the challenge of moving these individuals forward is a worthy one and it is principal that churches prioritize movement in this segment.

The first commonly engaged barrier for churches is the over emphasis on doing, and the under emphasis on being. Many churches are prone to give greater importance to things like activity, attendance, and participation, assuming these things will lead to continued formation. But this “doing over being” mentality, has led to many individuals stalling in the church. Western culture has an obsession with productivity and deeply struggles to slow down and focus on becoming. The first order call of loving and knowing God has largely been assumed with an emphasis placed on serving the local church in productivity.¹²³ It is essential that the church give an appeal for its congregants to slow down and be with Jesus. The number one contributor to lack of progression and spiritual stalling is a lack of prioritizing the simplicity of being with Jesus in the Word and in prayer.¹²⁴ Western churches would benefit from a slight deemphasis on church activities and inserting balance between challenging individuals to participate and calling them to invest in time spent alone with God. Special attention must be given to the unintentional notions that are communicated to the congregation in what it means to grow spiritually and

¹²¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 82.

¹²² Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 78.

¹²³ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 30.

¹²⁴ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 101.

be faithful. This may look like a call to Sabbath rhythms in comparable proportion to the call for serving on Sunday. Balanced invitations to both serve and slow down are critical for the formation of individuals in the connecting to Christ segment.¹²⁵

Individuals in the early stages of faith often struggle with doubt and insecurity. The struggle intensifies when they are reintegrated into the normal networks of their everyday lives that teem with challenges to their faith.¹²⁶ The barrier here is teaching new Christians to exercise their faith in new environments that will surely challenge them. The feeling of failure in this stage can be pervasive, and it is easy for Christians in the stage to forget the love of God and fall into repetitious cycles of shame due to sin and failure. There is a propensity to believe that God and others have expectations for them that are unattainable.¹²⁷ Individuals in this segment consistently feel guilt and shame for their behavior and struggle to remember the truth of the gospel, that the Spirit does give the power to change, and that Christ's blood purchased forgiveness. This reality can present local churches with a litany of difficulties for those who exist in the stage. Not only do these individuals have low self-esteem, but it often leads them to be unforgiving and graceless toward others. Those in the segment tend to have a narrow view of what is acceptable and live with rigid standards. This rigidity often manifests itself in legalism, arrogance, and judgment, which are counterproductive to spiritual progression.¹²⁸

The final barrier for individuals in this segment is their willingness to transition from groups that are not meeting their immediate needs. Twenty-nine percent of individuals leave their church for what are considered third tier issues every year.¹²⁹ Many

¹²⁵ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 35.

¹²⁶ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 33.

¹²⁷ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 43.

¹²⁸ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 62.

¹²⁹ Leonardo Blair, "This Is the Main Reason a Majority of Churchgoers Changed Their Church: Study," *Christian Post*, November 9, 2023, www.christianpost.com/news/the-main-reason-a-majority-of-churchgoers-changed-their-church.html.

of those individuals exist in the connected segment of spiritual formation. Those in this segment can become critical and disillusioned with their local church if their perceived needs are unmet. There is a tendency to accuse the group that initially introduced Christ to them of changing or not being who they originally presented themselves to be. It must be acknowledged that some local churches do not meet the needs of individuals in this segment. This is not a condemnation of those who transition. However, research does show a higher propensity for individuals in this segment to spend a great deal of their time in this stage, switching from one group to another and never progressing in their spiritual walk.¹³⁰

Three essential contexts help individuals in the connecting to Christ segment advance to committing to Christ. These contexts are affinity groups, serve teams, and community groups. These spaces serve as on ramps onto the highway of spiritual formation and help create environments that accomplish the essential catalyst of formation in the connecting segment.

Affinity based connect groups give individuals who are getting to know Christ an opportunity to engage with Christian community on their own terms. Groups, such as young married, young professionals, or interest-based groups, offer new believers the opportunity to see Christians being Christians in their every day lives. The size of these groups, smaller than the entire congregation but significantly larger than a community group, give people the opportunity to be known without the intimidating factor of immediate intimacy. This midsize group provides the ideal community size for someone learning to live in community.¹³¹ Affinity-based connect groups also provide a powerful antidote to the epidemic of loneliness experienced by many congregants, especially those

¹³⁰ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 63.

¹³¹ Michael Easter, *The Comfort Crisis* (New York: Harmony/Rodale, 2021), 68, Kindle.

in the segment of connecting to Christ.¹³² A group within a group can help individuals in this segment gain a stronger sense of belonging, which increases the capacity for formation.¹³³ These groups can serve the purpose of catalyzation in a variety of ways. They can serve as an on ramp into community groups through relationships that are typically built, and their rhythms of monthly gathering do not compete with other more frequent rhythms of the church.

The second vital context for individuals seeking to progress toward commitment to Christ is the context of serve teams. Churches that have a clear pathway to serve in the local church often see progression in their members. It is essential to remember that serving the local church is a key catalyst to progression. Therefore, churches that make it easy for individuals to serve and identify areas of gifting see a higher rate of spiritual progression than churches who do not.¹³⁴ This vital context gives individuals opportunities to both identify their gifting and give of their time and talents for the sake of building the body, both of which have been previously identified as powerful catalyst.

The final context essential for those seeking to progress from connecting to Christ to committing to Christ is the context of community group. This context is particularly vital for the growth process as it provides a primary context for forming friendship and mentoring relationships that assist in spiritual progression.¹³⁵ Community groups should be hyper focused on equipping individuals to engage in spiritual disciplines on their own, as well as teaching individuals to prioritize community. In community groups, Bible engagement should be applicable, accessible, and consequential with one of

¹³² Paul Siladi, “Loneliness, Solitude, Community: Insights from the Apophthegmata Patrum,” *Religions* 14, no. 3 (2023): 1–2.

¹³³ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 55.

¹³⁴ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 135.

¹³⁵ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 100.

the major goals being to equip individuals to be self-feeders.¹³⁶ These environments should also place a high priority on prayer while modeling for those in the connecting to Christ space the reality of God’s nearness. Finally, these groups need to provide places of safety and vulnerability that help individuals learn how to live out biblical truths in both formal and informal spaces.¹³⁷ Placing a high priority on safety, openness, and vulnerability accelerate the learning of biblical truths. These relationships function as an essential buffer between spiritual growth and new believers’ propensity toward self-condemnation. Saints who have traveled this familiar path can often see the enemy’s line of attack and help interpret new experiences.¹³⁸ Creating space for those in the committing to Christ segment to have access to biblical community as an on ramp for spiritual practices is a best practice for many formationally-minded churches.

Outcomes for Phase 1

At the conclusion of phase 1 in the spiritual formation continuum individuals should have a firm understanding of gospel truths and should have experienced deep connection with other believers. In other words, at the end of phase 1, these Christians should believe correctly and belong convictionally. Certain metrics should be true of these Christians preparing to advance into the committing to Christ segment—they should be advancing in their intimacy with Jesus, commitment to community, and willingness to joyfully live on mission. At this stage there should be a comprehension of the gospel that frees believers from projecting images of competence and righteousness. Pursuing authenticity before God and one another should erode the compulsion toward pretense.¹³⁹ Individuals who are preparing to advance into the committed stage of spiritual

¹³⁶ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 125.

¹³⁷ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 64.

¹³⁸ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 82.

¹³⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 81.

formation should have been equipped to experience a daily time of intimacy with the Lord. They should also be committed to gathering weekly with community and growing in awareness of their spiritual gifts and using those gifts both inside and outside of the local body for the advancement of God's kingdom.

The foundational nature of phase 1 cannot be overlooked or marginalized by churches that hope to see individuals advance to spiritual maturity. However, phase 1 is not the culmination of spiritual formation, but simply the starting point. Formational churches must reject the tendency toward knowledge as discipleship. The mastery of Christian doctrines and ethics do not flow uninhibited into spiritual maturity. A shallow view of spiritual formation devoid of suffering and surrender eventually catches up with parishioners and disillusion can set in on the spiritual formation journey.¹⁴⁰ It is necessary that as individuals progress in their spiritual journey, and that emphasis must be transitioned from right thinking and believing to right relating.¹⁴¹ In phase 2, God starts to break the patterns that new Christians are used to when relating to him. After believers learn to believe and belong, they must learn to surrender and live on mission. Many challenges are still ahead in the journey toward spiritual maturity and churches that desire to see their congregation progress, must maintain their intentionality and diligence beyond phase 1.

¹⁴⁰ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 8–9.

¹⁴¹ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 11–12.

CHAPTER 5

TRANSITIONING TO PHASE 2

As stated in the previous chapter, it is of exponential importance to lay a proper foundation for Christians who are beginning their spiritual formation journey. However, it is a mistake to presume that once that foundation is laid individuals will continue to progress into spiritual maturity, absent of intentionality. These early stages of spiritual formation have only laid the groundwork for deep excavation. Here in phase 2, Christians should expect to move beyond doing right things, such as spiritual disciplines and participating in moral behavior, into a dynamic personal transformation marked by complete and total surrender to the Spirit.¹ In phase 1 of the spiritual journey, individuals seek to adhere to a set of external standards. These standards are necessary for initial progress. However, in phase 2, individuals begin to do the deep inner work of transformation that often requires a rediscovery of themselves and God. Discipleship at phase 1 is incomplete.² The data bears out that many parishioners long for a church that transitions them from phase 1 discipleship to phase 2 discipleship. Of active and committed church members, 63 percent were discouraged with their local churches' ability to support them in their faith journey. Many of these individuals were so discouraged that they considered leaving their church.³ Many parishioners are starving for the local church

¹ R. Thomas Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart* (Hoboken, NJ: Fortress, 2009), 10, Kindle.

² Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Sheffield, Sheffield, 2005), 11, Kindle.

³ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1000 Churches Reveal about Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 74.

to address their relationship with God in deeper ways. They want to advance from performing for God to being with God and to knowing his love more profoundly.⁴

As the local church transitions individuals from phase 1 to phase 2 of their discipleship, another shift occurs simultaneously. As the church transitions its parishioners, there is a greater emphasis on equipping the saints for the work of ministry and the church functions less as an institution and more organically in the life of maturing believers.⁵ Replicate Ministries refers to this transition as debunking the engagement myth, emphasizing the importance of migrating people from the organizational gathering and engagement to impacting their sphere of influence through personalized ministries.⁶ This is not a move away from the traditional church but admonishment to hold the tension between the church gathered and the church scattered. Individuals in phase 2 of spiritual formation need a church that equips their saints to live on mission when scattered for the sake of proclaiming the kingdom, resulting in continued spiritual formation and growth. In doing so, local churches will both assist their congregants in their spiritual formation journey as well as impact their community through incarnationally meeting their needs. The church that equips and sends blesses their community at the same time.⁷

Churches serious about pursuing phase 2 discipleship should be aware of the difficulties of this path. Deep soul level discipleship is inefficient and requires significant resources. Individuals who journey in phase 2 must learn to face the trauma of their

⁴ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 34.

⁵ John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 428–29.

⁶ Robby Gallaty, “Box and Circle,” Replicate Ministries, January 15, 2024, YouTube video, 8:58, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHw2ATwXsm4&list=PLoemWa19gcePuz2skufVBISH93wI3rpm9&index=6.

⁷ Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 265, Kindle.

story.⁸ Difficult times lay ahead for phase 2 voyagers. These difficulties have often been described as the dark night of the soul, the dip, or the wall. Those who progress into deep, spiritual maturity often experience an arduous season of God seeming distant. Churches that desire deep spiritual formation for their people must be ready to engage those experiencing pain and equip them to continue along the journey.

The Great Barrier

There is a significant barrier for those seeking to transition from phase 1 to phase 2 in their spiritual formation journey. St. John of the Cross referred to this period of time as the dark night of the soul. In the field of spiritual direction, this experience of spiritual rigor has been referred to as the wall. This is the primary means of spiritual warfare for individuals in the advanced stages of spiritual formation.⁹ Despite its many names, several scholars agree that this season of spiritual desert is necessary for advancing into deep intimacy with God.¹⁰

Though unpleasant, this experience of the wall is necessary. Many find themselves comfortable and self-sufficient in phase 1 of spiritual formation. They grow pleased with their ability to produce and be fruitful as they discover their gifts and learn to walk with God as a natural consequence of progressing through phase 1. Left to one's own devices, individuals rarely feel a need to pursue deeper intimacy and connection with God beyond their current experience.¹¹ In phase 1, the investment in biblical knowledge and exercising faith produces tangible growth and results in spiritual satisfaction.¹²

⁸ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 65.

⁹ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 182–83.

¹⁰ Susan Muto, “Embracing the Dark Night of the Soul: The Wisdom of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Calcutta Can Help Pastors Uncover the Truth of Their Essence in God,” *The Priest* 76, no. 8 (2020): 26–27.

¹¹ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 94.

¹² Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 8–9.

However, to continue in the spiritual formation journey is to experience the inevitable difficulty of the Christian life. Crisis and trial reprove the faith of those who journey onward. These experiences of difficulty must be interpreted as the invitation of a gracious God to go deeper.¹³ Individuals who enter phase 2 of the spiritual formation journey find that there is much more to experience of God, and the wall often initiates the journey's turn toward greater intimacy. The formula of faith many grow accustomed to begins bearing less fruit.¹⁴ This leads to a realization that God will not fit in the box that many phase 1 Christians have created for him. There is a danger here for those preoccupied with security and solace. Many Christians get stuck at this stage of the journey or even revert to the comforts of phase 1.¹⁵ Therefore, the wall functions as a catapult into intimacy. The difficulties of the wall help develop, forming Christians from a posture of knowing to a posture of seeking.¹⁶ At the wall, the spiritual experience goes through a metamorphosis as individuals are transformed into those who surrender to God.

So, what is the wall? The wall is a place of transformation and surrender. It is the experience of feeling like God is distant to know he is near. The wall is a place of deep discovery where individuals learn pivotal truths about their selves and God. The wall is the planes of Penuel where Jacob wrestled with God. It is also erected in the tent of Job, where he lamented his suffering before God. The wall is a place of loneliness, desperation, searching and not finding, grief, and intense loss.¹⁷ The wall is a place of intense confusion. Even so, the wall is necessary. Based on the individual's personal need for healing and

¹³ Romans 5:3–5 says, “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

¹⁴ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 84.

¹⁵ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 98.

¹⁶ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 97.

¹⁷ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 120.

renewal, the wall takes on distinct nuance.¹⁸ At the wall, façades of self-reliance and self-dependence are stripped away, and those who desire to pursue God beyond the wall must relent completely to God's will.¹⁹ Individuals are subjected to a deep vulnerability. They are often faced with a profound reality of their sin and forced to navigate the darkness of their soul.²⁰ Spiritual formation experts say it is impossible to advance beyond the wall without recognizing the portions of psychological and spiritual need for healing and transforming.²¹ In essence, the wall produces the vulnerability needed for true intimacy with God. In the words of Janet Hagberg, "If we let the change or crisis touch us, if we live with it and embrace it as difficult as that is, we are more likely to grow and to move eventually to another stage or spiral in our journey. When we are most vulnerable, we have the best chance to learn and move along the way. In the midst of pain there is promise."²²

Churches that intend to help people progress beyond the wall must be particularly intentional when dealing with individuals facing questions and pain. There must be a long view strategic implementation of empowering people to be the church to one another.²³ Navigating this season of life often requires structures and human guides who have journeyed further.²⁴ I advocate for an intentional environment for individuals crossing from phase 1 to phase 2 that teaches them to navigate waiting on the Lord while simultaneously equipping them to interpret their spiritual journey through spiritual direction. This deep discipleship environment can function like a stop start gap for

¹⁸ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 115.

¹⁹ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 114.

²⁰ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 103.

²¹ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 120.

²² Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 13.

²³ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 129.

²⁴ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 84.

individuals intentionally seeking to move forward. Replicate Ministries speaks to a dip that many Christians experience as they continue their spiritual journey and propose intentional environments that help individuals process and advance along their spiritual journey.²⁵ The proposal here is that as individuals transition from phase 1 to phase 2, there will be an extended spiritual formation experience that will help individuals delve deep into their story and equip them for future ministry. This disciple making intensive gives individuals the space to process with travelers who have journey beyond them. The communal aspect of the space is essential. In this intensive environment, God’s means of restoration is brought about through those who are committed to loving maturing Christians amid their brokenness as the secret part of those individuals are revealed in the furnace of intentional community.²⁶ This space is also ideal for equipping and empowering Christians to progress in their journey toward God and toward the ministry he has set apart for them.²⁷ This intentional emphasis on equipping individuals for lay ministry is central for advancement into phase 2. Equipping parishioners to actively bring their Christian example and faith into the spaces they occupy will propel these individuals into spiritual formation and greater ministry impact.²⁸ For those who advance beyond the spiritual difficulty of the wall, greater intimacy with Jesus is on the other side.

The next section will continue explaining the journey of spiritual formation. Having covered the first two stages of Considering and Connecting, this chapter will now delve into the realities of those who are Committed and Conforming. Once again, the

²⁵ Robby Gallaty, “Disciple’s Journey,” Replicate Ministries, April 13, 2024, YouTube video, 10:45, www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGoqSA1cKTg&list=PLoemWa19gceOEbxDSq5SbPhYbEC7f5B3t&index=2.

²⁶ Jeff Vanderstelt, *Saturate: Being Disciples of Jesus in the Everyday Stuff of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 94.

²⁷ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 129.

²⁸ Keller, *Center Church*, 280.

characteristics, catalyst, barriers, and context will be cover for each, beginning with those in the Committed to Christ quadrant.

Committing to Christ

Those who find themselves in the Committing to Christ quadrant have typically been walking with the Lord for a significant amount of time. This is the quadrant of maturing spirituality. There is an increased dependency on God and a focus on seeking him for guidance and assistance when overcoming the day-to-day struggles of life. There is a synergy about the way these individuals carry themselves as they begin to identify as followers of Jesus primarily.²⁹ For these mature Christians, Christ has become vital to their every day, and they have learned to love, depend on, and seek him. Jesus has become a friend.³⁰ The benefits of phase 1 are beginning to pay dividends. The closely held theology that they belong to God and are loved by him begins to fuel a mutual affection that has implications for their every day. This deeply personal faith begins to overflow to those around them. Individuals in this segment are well on their way to becoming like Christ.

One of the ways this newfound depth with Christ plays itself out is in a tangible caring for others. This awareness of God's love for them, as well as their reciprocal affection, leads individuals in this phase to go public with their faith. As a result, they are more prone to sharing their faith and participating in outreach activities aimed at reaching the lost and hurting.³¹ As those in this segment walk more closely with Jesus, they grow in humility, realizing more deeply the truths of the gospel. An understanding begins to form that to be faithful one must follow Christ's pattern of drawing near to the poor, lost,

²⁹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 35.

³⁰ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 54.

³¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 36.

marginalized, and needy.³² There is a growing realization that to love Christ is to love those he loved.

Coinciding with an increased evangelism in this segment is also an increase in spiritual disciplines. The desire for individuals in this segment to spend time with God through daily Bible engagement and prayer increases significantly. As individuals journey into phase 2, an ownership for their progression and spiritual things begins. Research shows that 80 percent of individuals in this segment read and reflect on Scripture, pray for guidance, and confess their sins to other Christians multiple times a week. Individuals in this segment also begin to progress toward more forming practices such as silence and solitude. Prayer also increases for individuals in this segment. The desire to be near to God to commune with him increases to the point where individuals often find themselves in a running dialogue.³³ All in all, this increased desire to be near God is a natural consequence of being with him. The hunger and drive for more of God leads these individuals to create patterns and disciplines in their life that result in the joy that keeps them coming back.

Given that individuals in this segment are more loving toward their neighbors and have increased spiritual disciplines, it is unsurprising that they function as a backbone in the local church. This is because individuals in this stage often find their value and worthiness in doing for God.³⁴ More than any other segment, individuals in this segment's beliefs align with their actions.³⁵ The reason is twofold: (1) their beliefs have progressed to a point where they impact the way they live and (2) their beliefs have not become radical beyond the point of practicality. Nevertheless, the activity in this phase of spiritual formation is pivotal for the church and the formation of the individual. As individuals in

³² Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 98.

³³ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 37.

³⁴ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 73.

³⁵ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 39.

this phase discover their gifts, they are fed while they serve. Often, individuals discovered gifts and talents given to them by the Lord as they serve in tangible productive ways.³⁶ Confidence and self-awareness builds as they become aware of the reality that they were created for good works and can be used by God. As God interweaves individual stories, passions, and gifting into his service, the wounds of the past often begin to heal as pain is given purpose.³⁷

Even with all this, there is still significant growth to be had for individuals in this segment. Even for those who are Committed to Christ, there is still more of Christ to be had. Though their faith is on a shortlist of high priorities for them these individuals still do not fully find their identity in Christ the way those who are Conforming to Christ will.³⁸ There is still a need for individuals in this segment to continue transitioning from an activity-based faith to a deeper more personal spiritual journey. As they progress, these individuals will need to get out of the driver seat and allow Christ to influence every area and direction of their life. As they continue along their spiritual journey, the values that compete with their allegiance to God will slowly begin to digress as they continue to press into intimacy with their creator.³⁹

Unfortunately, this is the quadrant of arrival for many Christians, with far too many parishioners never advancing beyond it. For travelers to continue to advance, there must be an intentional emphasis on self-awareness, mission, and healing. This thesis discussed the many difficulties of progressing into more profound spiritual formation earlier when referring to the wall, and these realities must be kept in mind. Progress at this phase of spiritual maturity can be difficult. However, progress can be made with a great awareness of the barriers and the catalyst.

³⁶ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 74–75.

³⁷ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 81.

³⁸ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 38.

³⁹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 41.

Catalyst

For churches seeking to intensely form individuals in the committing to Christ segment there must be a deep understanding of these individuals and their priorities. These churches are no longer dealing with individuals who are Considering, nor in the beginning stages of Connecting to Christ. Understanding that these individuals have now placed their relationship with God on a short list of essential priorities is crucial. They have engaged the essential element of their volition, desire, and will in their pursuit of intimacy with God.⁴⁰ The church that understands this reality will be able to catalyze these individuals into a force for continued formation. Churches who can leverage the deep desire of these individuals to be intimate with God will be most successful in facilitating deeper intimacy. The clear catalyst here is embracing the freedom to challenge these individuals to radically obey Christ and all he commands, conforming every aspect of their lives to his life and teaching, and call them to make disciples with every resource they have at their disposal.

Willow Creek Church, the conductors of the Reveal study, located in the suburbs of Chicago, uses the platform of the weekend service to highlight the gap between those are committed and those who are conforming.⁴¹ This is an example of an effective practice for catalyzing movement. Not only does using the Sunday morning platform help individuals continue to progress, but it is also what they desire. When individuals in this segment were asked about their expectations for their church leaders, 80 percent answered that they wanted to be challenged to take personal responsibility for their own spiritual growth.⁴² The call to surrender everything and live a life fully devoted to Christ is crucial for those seeking to proceed along this spiritual journey.

⁴⁰ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 37.

⁴¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 51.

⁴² Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 36.

The next catalyst for individuals in this segment of spiritual formation is a familiar one. Once again, Scripture reading and reflection are prevailing catalysts for individuals seeking to advance. In phase 2, this means of grace is twice as catalytic than any other factor identified as an accelerant for growth in spiritual formation.⁴³ Part of the church's role in this space is to resource and assist individuals prioritizing time in the Word of God. As congregants in this phase progress toward their complete identity being formed and shaped by their union with Christ, there will need to be a wholehearted commitment to personal spiritual practices that sustain their intimacy. The accumulative emotional depth of maturing believers is built upon the foundation of intellectual conviction in core Christian doctrines. These can only be established in depth with the disciplines of spiritual practices.⁴⁴

The final catalyst for individuals in this segment is empowering and equipping parishioners to lead in their gifts. An intentional blurring of the lines between laity and pastor leadership accentuates the biblical principle of the priesthood of all believers. Calling these individuals higher and placing the burden of leadership on them in safe spaces is essential for their maturation.⁴⁵ Empowering members to embrace the ministry God has given them by using their God-given gifts is key when assisting individuals' continuation on their spiritual journey.⁴⁶ Robert Banks writes on the necessity of using one's gifts:

The practice of communal decision making assumes a community of giftedness. Through baptism and faith in Jesus Christ all have received gifts of the Holy Spirit for the edification, encouragement, and consolation of the entire body. Therefore it is important that all be involved in discerning what God requires of them. Paul continually insists that every member of the body of Christ has the responsibility to share the particular insights she or he has been given. All are called "to instruct one

⁴³ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 67.

⁴⁴ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 87.

⁴⁵ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 75.

⁴⁶ Carol Perry, "Mary and Martha: Use Your Gifts Whatever They May Be," *Sojourners*, July 16, 2013, <https://sojo.net/articles/scripture-mary-and-martha-use-your-gifts-whatever-they-may-be>.

another” (Rom. 15:14), to speak God’s word “so that all may learn and all be encouraged” (1 Cor. 14:31), to “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom” (Col. 3:16), for it is through “speaking the truth in love” that they are to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15). Thus the most characteristic setting in which the community receives guidance is when Christians assemble to share and evaluate the gifts given to them. Here in a variety of complementary ways guidance is conveyed through each to all, and through all to each.⁴⁷

With this empowerment comes intentional equipping that will help individuals succeed in their gospel undertakings. Much like a coach, the church equips and empowers these individuals to make disciples in their everyday life, giving them additional confidence to trust God as they see his impact in the world around them. When pressed into authentic ministry that opens their eyes to the realization that their plight is not much different than those they are seeking to serve and reach, formation happens.⁴⁸ As the church willingly releases individuals to serve with progressive exclusiveness in the space of their ministry sweet spot its parishioners become more enthusiastic about God’s mission, and subsequently about God.⁴⁹ To say it plainly, living on mission is a powerful catalyst for maturing believers.⁵⁰ As individuals engage in the experiential knowledge and power of God and as they depend on him for the transformation of others, they themselves are transformed.⁵¹ Cally Parkinson and Greg Hawkins are helpful here when they say,

We would say that evangelism is both a “cause” and an “effect” of spiritual growth. Evangelism is certainly an output—an effect—of a growing heart for Christ. But we would also argue that the practice of evangelism (defined as “having six or more meaningful conversations with non-Christians in a year”) is also a *cause* of spiritual growth—a catalytic experience.⁵²

⁴⁷ Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 141.

⁴⁸ Keller, *Center Church*, 81.

⁴⁹ Danny Franks, *People Are the Mission: How Churches Can Welcome Guests without Compromising the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 26–27.

⁵⁰ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 146.

⁵¹ Franks, *People Are the Mission*, 36–38.

⁵² Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 68.

Individuals' interaction with different cultures and people leads them to ask questions that form and shape. This experience of living on mission also impacts the way they approach the Scripture, which presses them outside their culturally bound perspective and creates space for a more robust spiritual intimacy.⁵³ Finally, best practice churches must hold their people accountable to the ministry to which they have committed. Knowing that their labor contributes to the mission of the church helps them maintain a commitment that brings spiritual formation to the individual.⁵⁴

Barriers

One of the most prominent barriers in progressing from Commitment to Christ to Conforming to Christ is the dramatic nature of such a shift. Here, individuals go from an intellectual acceptance of the doctrines and realities of God to an up close and personal intimate relationship with him.⁵⁵ In this transition, individuals will be forced to remove their hands completely and relinquish control of their lives, submitting all that they are to the Lordship of Jesus. Though much progress has been made in the journey to this point, there is still a significant pull from worldly temptations. The call to total surrender is a difficult one, but it must be embraced by voyagers who seek to advance into the most progressive realms of spiritual formation.

Besides the inherent difficulty of crossing over from Committed to Christ to Conforming to Christ, three primary barriers keep maturing Christians from taking their *final step*⁵⁶ of maturation. The three barriers are church structure, a fixation with productivity, and fear.

⁵³ Keller, *Center Church*, 102.

⁵⁴ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 129.

⁵⁵ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 78.

⁵⁶ I italicize final step here because there is no real final step in pursuing intimacy with Jesus and spiritual formation

The unfortunate reality is that many churches are structured exclusively for the first phase of spiritual formation. Weekend services, small groups, and volunteering on Sunday mornings often consume a large majority of these churches' resources and attention.⁵⁷ These key pillars are integral in driving spiritual formation for those in the early stages; however, if these functions of the church receive a lion share of the resources and support, it can often leave those seeking the latter stages of their spiritual formation under supported, resourced, and challenged.⁵⁸ This is a travesty because the segment with the most potential for kingdom impact are those on the latter stages of their journey. This unintentional neglect causes challenges not only for the individuals in the segment but also for the church at large. Churches with the desire to see the kingdom of God established in their local communities could make significant progress if shifting a portion of their resources to care for those in the later segments. Thinking of this significant segment of the church would help church leadership form and equip these individuals to live on mission in their city for the sake of the kingdom.

Another difficulty encountered by voyagers at this point on the spiritual formation journey is the barrier of finding one's worth in their production. At this point individuals have typically embraced the catalyst of identifying their gifting and using them for building the kingdom. However, the pitfall to this catalyst is the propensity for those in this phase to find their identity in what they are producing for God. Here parishioners often equate work for God with relationship with God. A crucial mistake many make along this journey is thinking hard work for God is synonymous with deep relationship with him.⁵⁹ This misconception practically works itself out when individuals' passion to serve eclipse their commitment to spiritual disciplines and they

⁵⁷ Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville: B & H, 2006), 63.

⁵⁸ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 56.

⁵⁹ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 99.

prioritize human doing over human being.⁶⁰ There is a kind of inverse relationship that happens. As they become more productive, they are also more tempted to self-reliance, self-centeredness, and even self-worship as they identify themselves as indispensable to the congregation.⁶¹ Unfortunately, pastors represent a large portion of the segment's offenders. Research shows that a large percentage of pastors confess seeking acceptance and approval through their role and admit to needing to be successful at church.⁶² This reality is difficult, especially for those seeking to experience deep spiritual formation. It is unlikely that a pastor will be able to lead individuals further along the spiritual formation journey than he has progressed. Furthermore, the ill-fated reality is this pattern often leads to burnout. Research shows that 42 percent of volunteers confess to having experienced or currently experiencing burnout.⁶³ Being over doing forms a significant barrier to progression, and therefore churches must emphasize the truth of the gospel; namely, Christians are lavishly loved before they produced anything.

The final barrier that holds people back from experiencing conformity is fear. There is often a fear of losing control, a fear of losing influence with those closest to them that makes individuals hesitant and cautious to proceed. In many cases, it is easier to settle for a status quo relationship with God as opposed to abandoning oneself to the desires of Jesus.⁶⁴ Oftentimes, progression demands a pressing inward into the trauma and devastation of one's past. Fear of facing the realities of brokenness can frequently

⁶⁰ Joe Sanok, "Human Being vs. Human Doing," Practice of the Practice, April 12, 2021, <https://practiceofthepromise.com/human-being-vs-human-doing/>.

⁶¹ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 82.

⁶² Mildred D. Williams, "From the Pastor's Desk: A Quantitative Analysis of African American Pastors' Leading with Congregants Experiencing Mental Health Issues," *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 12, no. 1 (2022): 85–86.

⁶³ Patrick Lencioni, "Patrick Lencioni on Building a Healthy Team Culture, Activating Your Volunteers, and Employee Retention in the Church," Barna, July 3, 2023, <https://www.barna.com/episodes/104-patrick-lencioni-on-building-a-healthy-team-culture-activating-your-volunteers-and-employee-retention-in-the-church/>.

⁶⁴ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 101–2.

cause individuals to cease progressing or derail from the journey altogether.⁶⁵ The unknown and uncontrolled is a place that few formation travelers explore. After all, humans have spent the entirety of their existence seeking to tame, control, and standardize their experience. Robert Guelich concludes, “It seems to me that, for educated persons in an industrialized society, our intellectual defenses and material allegiances are too well developed for us to be able to just to let go and let the dynamic Spirit of God cleanse and renew us from within. We have not been conditioned to a simplicity of heart.”⁶⁶ Individuals seeking to press further along the formation journey must jettison the social constraints placed upon them by society and trust God to move them beyond their fears. The question then becomes, how does the church place its people in contexts that enables them to pursue the Lord in this unabandoned way?

The context prescribed for individuals seeking to transition from Committing to Christ to Conforming to Christ is one in which Christians can be surrounded by like-minded, similarly resolved, mission-focused Christians. Unlike a community group within which individuals seek to learn the foundations of the Christian faith, these groups exist for the sake of mission. The assertion is this: to progress into deep, spiritual maturity, Christians must find themselves on mission with Christ. In this space the church goes from being something a person does to someone a person is.⁶⁷ In this space, ministry extends far outside the bounds of the church’s four walls and into the lives of those who desperately need the gospel but would not consider the formal space. In doing so, the lives of those doing ministry would be transformed as they have a front-row seat to the power of God, saving those in profoundly dark places. These groups meet regularly for mutual edification while simultaneously taking responsibility for the neighborhoods they

⁶⁵ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 106.

⁶⁶ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 126.

⁶⁷ Vanderstelt, *Saturate*, 24.

occupy.⁶⁸ In these groups, everyone has an opportunity to participate in ministry by exercising their unique gifts. These spaces will provide a place of belonging for Christians to find themselves at the epicenter of cultural creation, seeking to be gospel salt and light.⁶⁹ The mission-focused space proposed by this thesis is coined Kingdom Groups.

The first defining factor of a Kingdom Group is the reality that the ministry of its people marks it for the mission of God. Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren insist that these individuals consistently ask, “What is happening in the lives of my neighbors?”⁷⁰ Jeremy and Monica Chambers call for Christians to have a mission sentence that reconnects them with their vision and calling, bringing them back to how God has led them to use their gifts for the sake of the kingdom.⁷¹ There is a communal burden to manifest the gospel from the Scriptures. The New Testament gives a clear expectation that every Christian will take the gospel into the unique spaces they occupy. This is exemplified in Colossians 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 1, Hebrews 3, Romans 15, and 1 John 2:20. One can conclude then that the burden of Christ’s mission to make disciples of all the nations falls squarely on the shoulders of every believer. In this space, Christians are encouraged to live out their God given mission. This model is distinct in that it is not calling Christians to do this in isolation but provides a context of community. The call, then, is to bring the gospel into the staggering settings of the human condition, expressing hope in the face of its neighbor’s despair, and being distinctly hospitable in a culture that

⁶⁸ Keller, *Center Church*, 281.

⁶⁹ D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (New York: Oxford University, 2007), 173–75.

⁷⁰ Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Become One* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 93. Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile state that a missional theology calls the church to “reciprocity, mutuality, and vulnerability.” Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 133. They explain that this is because the Trinity is seen as a nonhierarchical, mutual community of persons, the missional church must have a reciprocal, open, and dynamic relationship to the world (110).

⁷¹ Jeremy Chambers and Monica Paredes Chambers, *The Art of Missional Spirituality* (Richmond, VA: 100 Movement, 2023), 56.

honors isolation.⁷² Embodying these virtues will not only proclaim the gospel in word and deed, but also form Christians in unique communities. In Kingdom Groups, individuals learn that their time, money, and unique abilities should be maximized to serve those who are part of the church and those in their city. Formationally focused churches will use this context to cultivate missiologists who exegete their neighborhoods to understand the gospel needs of their city.⁷³ The force of community will culminate in a mindset that relinquishes everything to Christ. Jeff Vanderstelt states,

Jesus didn't come to earth, take on human flesh, live among people as the Servant of all, suffer, and die so that we could just 'go to church' for a couple of hours a week. . . . No, he wants it all. He wants all of our lives all of the time. He wants to fill every place with his presence through his people. He wants *every* person in *every* place doing *everything* to glorify God.⁷⁴

This is the kingdom—Christians on mission in every space they occupy so that all may know and worship God.

The other distinctive given to Kingdom Groups is their deep and intentional community. Beyond programs, follow-up, and small groups, exist friendships, embodied experiences, and community.⁷⁵ By this point in the model, the church has intentionally cultivated a practice of covenanting to others in community. Here, relationships with others are seen as a primary need as opposed to an obligation. Kingdom Groups create space for organic, interpersonal, Christ centered relationships.⁷⁶ This context provides a space where parishioners are surrounded by others who assume personal responsibility for the health and quality of their relationships. This authentic community offers a space for people to understand their spiritual formation journey and be affirmed along the

⁷² Lois Barrett, "Missional Witness: The Church as Apostle to the World," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 45.

⁷³ Keller, *Center Church*, 175.

⁷⁴ Vanderstelt, *Saturate*, 94.

⁷⁵ Keller, *Center Church*, 57.

⁷⁶ Keller, *Center Church*, 280.

way.⁷⁷ Even more profoundly, this kind of community functions as an attractive carrier of the gospel.⁷⁸ Simple friendships, offering a modeled way of life to a watching world, make the gospel compelling to the lonely. Keller attests, “My experience has been that when at least 20 to 25 percent of a church’s people are engaged in this kind of organic, relational gospel ministry, it creates a powerful dynamism that infuses the whole church and greatly extends the church’s ability to edify and evangelize.”⁷⁹ The ability to love one another is a primary catalyst for seeing those far from God reached by the gospel.⁸⁰

Finally, and most importantly for this thesis, the space of intentionally missional community forms believers in maturity. In this space, Christians more tangibly experience the fullness of the Christian life.⁸¹ God created a world in which social interaction and intentional community bring about flourishing. The healing properties of community are brought to bear on the brokenness of the human soul when mutual grace is exchanged and focus shifts from keeping records of wrongs to a missional focus. Depths of intimacy with Christ cannot happen in the throes of isolation. Being on mission in community functions like an exponential multiplier for spiritual growth. The example of Jesus’s disciples is pivotal for this point. In Matthew, the call to discipleship was contingent upon their willingness to become fishers of men. Therefore, it must be observed that it was on the journey, in the following, or on mission with him and others that they became trained disciples and disciple makers. In other words, Jesus made disciples in community or on mission.⁸² This paradigm of transformation in the context of communal mission has not changed—it is effective for forming disciples.

⁷⁷ Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, 184.

⁷⁸ Keller, *Center Church*, 278.

⁷⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 280–81.

⁸⁰ Vanderstelt, *Saturate*, 143.

⁸¹ Darrell L. Guder, “Missional Connectedness: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit,” in Guder, *Missional Church*, 76.

⁸² Vanderstelt, *Saturate*, 115.

Conform

At last is a place of conforming. Romans 8:29 says, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” The predetermined destination for every Christian is to be conformed into the image of Jesus. Yet, those arriving in this stage have not arrived at a place of complete sanctification but instead realize their need to be sanctified all the more. At the stage of Conforming to Christ, the value scales have finally tipped from secular to Christ-centered.⁸³ Even for those committed to Christ, there is still a significant pull from worldly aspirations unyielded to God. However, many of these desires for recognition, wealth, and comfort have been determined inferior to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. One of the significant characteristics of individuals in the Conforming to Christ segment is a desire for quietness of soul in prayer.⁸⁴ Hunger to be quiet and still in the presence of God now permeates the very being of these individuals.⁸⁵ Those who have progressed to this point of the spiritual formation journey have concluded that God is enough. Three virtues most accurately describe those in the Conforming to Christ segment: awareness of weakness, of being loved, and evidence of surrender.

Those in the Conforming to Christ segment have now experienced and passed through the wall. This experience has led them to a profound awareness of weakness. There is a keen consciousness of one’s faults paired with a deep desire to please and be with God. There is a relinquishing of control, entrusting oneself to a wiser, transcendent being.⁸⁶ In this stage, weakness begins to be detached from insecurity and instead produces humility, patience, obedience, and an ability to love others amid their weakness. There is a realization that spiritual maturity is not an arrival at a place of strength but instead an

⁸³ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 49.

⁸⁴ Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 141.

⁸⁵ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 140.

⁸⁶ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 133.

awareness of weakness and a delight in dependency. This profound awareness of weakness teaches those in this segment the importance of waiting on God while discovering the beauty and simplicity of being a sheep to the good Shepherd. Simply put, at this stage holiness looks like weakness and trusting that when a person is weak, then they are strong (2 Cor 12:10).

One of the reasons accepting weakness is so profoundly important in this space is because it removes one's posturing and pretense before God. Weakness is indeed the state of every human being. However, simultaneously being aware of one's weakness and being aware of God's love has a profound impact on the human soul. A key evidence for progression is seen when individuals are aware of their weakness, and yet are equally aware of God's love despite that weakness. Few things are more freeing than knowing that one is loved in the midst of their humanity. There is a realization that God's love is indeed unconditional and the cross becomes glorious all the more.⁸⁷ It is true, then, that those in this segment comprehend that God will never leave nor forsake, and that distance from God for the Christian is an illusion for which they are primarily responsible.⁸⁸ This knowledge that the Christian is now and has always been loved unconditionally compels those in the segment to love God and frees those in the segment to love their neighbor. Love is the primary motivation for surrender and obedience. This is why individuals move from a quasi-independent commitment to Christ to a fully surrendered and transformed life conformed to the image of Christ.⁸⁹ Love, both vertical and horizontal, are distinctive markers of those in the segment.

The final characteristic of those in the Conforming to Christ segment is their remarkable willingness to surrender. In this final stage, individuals have removed themselves from the driver's seat and become content to go wherever the Lord steers.

⁸⁷ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 134.

⁸⁸ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 135.

⁸⁹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 86.

There have been levels of surrender up to this point, but now the call is to surrender to things unknown. In the conforming stage, individuals arrive at a place where nothing is off limits for God's leading in their life. The awareness of God's character for those in this segment has advanced to a level where their surrender is often unbegrudging. There is a comprehension that God does indeed know best. Individuals in this segment live differently and work differently, longing for God's plan and God's glory in every area of their life no matter how minute.⁹⁰ Even with this level of surrender, there is no sense of arrival. Those in this segment grow in humility as they grow in awareness of their humanity. The surrender here is grounded in an understanding of their own propensity to be misled.

Because conforming is not a place of arrival, there are still significant catalysts to help individuals in the segment advance into deeper intimacy with God. Three catalysts that will be addressed here are a call to deeper communion, a continued challenge to surrender their lives, and an emphasis on releasing them into ministry.

Research reveals that a daily immersion in personal spiritual practices is still one of the most significant catalysts for drawing individuals deeper into intimacy with Christ. In the conforming space, there is a need for more time spent with God, more Scripture meditated upon, and more emphasis on prayer, not less. Even though there is a greater intentionality around living on mission and embracing one's specific ministry, the words of Jesus ring true: "You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary" (Luke 10:41–42). At the latter stages of the spiritual formation journey, this reality is profound. Truly, only being with Jesus is necessary. It is essential, then, that churches who seek to assist in the progression of those in the conforming segment insist upon a robust daily immersion in silence, solitude, and spiritual practices.

⁹⁰ Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Śrī Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2008), 34–37.

Alongside calling individuals in this segment to a deeper communion with Christ, churches who desire to be a catalyst for individuals in the conforming segment must challenge them to a consistent surrender. In the life of the believer, surrender is never a one-and-done process. Individuals in this segment must be challenged to re-surrender their will and desires just as much as those in the earlier segments.⁹¹ This is true, because the surrender for those in the conforming to Christ segment is often a challenge to more of an unknown reality, a reality that challenges conventional and secular wisdom. It is also important that churches seeking to assist conformers on their spiritual formation journey have a leader modeling a surrendered life. Often, clergy are unable to lead the spiritually mature because of their level of spiritual maturity. Churches who seek to cultivate a robust contingent of conforming to Christ Christians must prioritize in their leadership their own formation and take seriously their call to surrender their lives to all that Scripture commands.⁹² This commitment from clergy solidifies a churchwide commitment to surrender, which is a powerful catalyst for those seeking intimacy with Christ.

The final catalyst for churches seeking to assist conforming Christians in their spiritual formation journey is a willingness to release those individuals to serve in the unique ministries for which God has designed them. This goes beyond giving a call for members of the local church to serve and takes the additional step of releasing individuals into their unique ministries that often have no benefit to the church's bottom line.⁹³ The practice of individuals stepping out and being led by the spirit into personalized ministry is a powerful catalyst for movement.⁹⁴ Research shows that churches with consistent

⁹¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 52.

⁹² John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville: B & H, 2013), 68–69.

⁹³ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 86.

⁹⁴ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 90.

occurrences of outreach, once a month or more, empower their people for growth and evangelism at a significantly higher rate than those who do not.⁹⁵ However, other research shows that it is important to empower individuals of significant spiritual maturity to identify the unique ministry call the Lord has given them.⁹⁶ In essence, service in general is necessary for spiritual growth but best serves as an onboarding into the unique works God has set aside for everyone before the foundations of the earth (Eph 2:10). The cycle of formation then is this: individuals are led by the prompting of the Spirit increasingly to lead and serve outside of official church ministries, and as they progress in surrender and obedience, they are formed more deeply.

Although the Conforming to Christ segment is not a place of arrival, many of the barriers used by the enemy to prevent spiritual progression have been overcome by this point. Even so, the primary barrier at the stage of spiritual formation is remarkably similar to the barriers in the prior stage. While the barrier of fear and obsession with productivity have largely subsided, the barrier of church structure and lack of like-minded community often still remains. It is an unfortunate reality that most of the ministry activities for many churches are still crafted for individuals in phase 1. To overcome this barrier, churches must proportionally focus their energy and resources on maturing believers, assisting them to take personal responsibility for their spiritual growth. Unfortunately, few churches do this, and many in the conforming segment find themselves dissatisfied with their local churches' ability to help them progress.⁹⁷ Churches who remove the barrier of focusing exclusively on early phases of discipleship will find themselves increasing in disciples in both quality and quantity.

⁹⁵ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 93.

⁹⁶ Robby Gallaty, "Discipleship Blueprint & Ministry Model," Replicate Ministries, October 30, 2021, YouTube video, 1:52, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOBqp94Q_S8.

⁹⁷ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 86.

The context for continued formation at this point largely depends on the Holy Spirit leading in the lives of each believer. The desire of this spiritual formation model in the context of the local church is to move individuals from considering Christ to full-fledged missionaries in the space God calls them. The idealistic conclusion of this model is for individuals to occupy unique spaces in their city for the sake of the gospel and the kingdom. These groups would be called dwell groups, and they would choose their space of living based upon proximity to other believers and opportunities for gospel impact. Individuals in these communities would intentionally do life in community and do life on mission. Their presence will transform the local schools and parks. They would occupy space with great intentionality as a part of a church that does not seek to build its own tribe, but indeed seeks the prospering and peace of its community.⁹⁸ All the while these individuals will be conformed more deeply into the image of their creator. In choosing spaces that need the transformation of the kingdom they will discover and rediscover the power of the gospel in fresh ways. This is played out in the book of Mark 1 when Jesus calls his disciples. He calls Simon, Andrew, James and John. Immediately after follows a whirlwind of activity, casting out demons, healing the sick, and touching a man with leprosy. The disciples learned their inadequacy when they were on mission in the places of greatest darkness and the most profound need. The same is true today. In these places of intentionality Christians will be exposed for their assumptions that some are beyond salvation only to be reminded that salvation is achieved through the means of grace. They will be pressed into the reality that they have not been saved by their virtue or their merit, and therefore all are only a short distance from salvation. When speaking of how cities filled with brokenness assist in one's spiritual formation, Keller writes, "For our own, continuing spiritual growth and well-being, we need the city, perhaps more than the city

⁹⁸ Keller, *Center Church*, 250.

needs us.”⁹⁹ Christians seeking to experience intimacy with Christ at its deepest levels must be in contexts where they must depend on him for the work he calls them to do.

Outcome of Phase 2

The desired outcome for phase 2 is laid out clearly in Scripture. The space of conforming Christians should have a redefined identity based on their relationship with Christ.¹⁰⁰ The pursuit of holiness should lead them to replace secular self-centered ideologies with a Christlike worldview that causes them to live from a place of self-sacrifice. Christians should arrive and re-arrive at a place of healing, holiness, trust, and humility. Repeatedly conforming Christians should day after day re-surrender their will to God’s will as their innermost being is made new (Eph 3:16). The outcome of phase 2 discipleship should be both spiritual and psychological, experiencing the wounds of one’s past healed by the love of Christ in differentiated layers. At this place of surrender the wills and the egos of the conforming Christian are released and submitted to the will of God. As mentioned, these individuals are deeply aware of their weakness, egocentric nature, and propensity toward self-confidence, and therefore they long to depend on God all the more.¹⁰¹ Acceptance is a pivotal outcome of those who have entered into the conforming segment in phase 2—acceptance that control is an illusion, acceptance that total dependency on God is necessary, and acceptance that they are only but human and need God for salvation. However, the decisive and most profound outcome is that these individuals are marked by love. The scale has been tipped, and God is no longer at arm’s length—these individuals are fully surrendered to the love of Christ. This love frees them to reciprocate that love back to God and freely love their neighbors as themselves.

⁹⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 168.

¹⁰⁰ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 86.

¹⁰¹ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 107.

The previous five chapters have described four distinct spiritual formation quadrants with their characteristics, catalyst, barriers, and context for movement. This method of discipleship forms, disciples, and engages the lost. There is an emphasis then on engaging those who desire to be engaged and forming them so that they can engage their neighbors who have no such desire. The final chapter will discuss how this framework for spiritual formation moves individual in three key categories: their intimacy with God, their covenanting to community and their life given joyfully to mission.

CHAPTER 6

DISCIPLESHIP METRICS

The previous chapter discussed the characteristics, catalyst, barriers, and context of phase 2 discipleship. This final chapter will dive into practical quantifiers for moving individuals along a spiritual formation continuum. When seeking to capitalize on the symbiotic nature of spiritual formation and missional context for the sake of engaging postmoderns, the churches clear mandate here is what it has always been: to make disciples. The overall thrust of this thesis is to assist the church in making and equipping disciples who engage the rough terrain of the postmodern West. This model prioritizes engaging those who want to be engaged, forming them over time, and commissioning them to engage their neighbors who do not want to be engaged. The model propounds this idea by properly prioritizing different catalysts and contexts for moving individuals into deeper maturity with Christ. In other words, this model attempts to strategically make disciples who make disciples.

For the purposes of this thesis, a disciple is defined along three measurable metrics: one who is intimate with Jesus, covenanted in community, and joyfully sacrificing on mission. This final chapter will seek to lay out the practical quantifiers in each segment of the spiritual formation continuum identifying the measurables for each metric of a disciple in their respective segments, beginning by measuring individuals' intimacy with Jesus.

The move desired for individuals converting from considering Christ to conforming to Christ in the intimacy with Jesus metric is a move of transitioning from lonely to lover. The metric here is the objective measure of time and the subjective measure of intensity. For those in the considering segment, their intimacy with Jesus is

nonexistent. As formation minded churches seek to transition individuals into the connecting segment, the desired measurable is a ten-minute devotion provided by the church five days a week. Individuals able to keep this rhythm should be understood as moving beyond considering the claims of Christ into the inaugurations of a connecting relationship in the metric of intimacy. The belief here is that discipline will lead to delight overtime. As new Christians transition into the committing segment, not only will with time spent with the Lord transform overtime, but the intensity of which they pursue him will change as well.

The time metric in the committed segment is an average minimum of thirty minutes a day spent in the Word and prayer. The church is no longer responsible for providing the entirety of the resources for individuals in this segment. Intrinsic motivation is a part of the subjective measurable. Though hard to measure, it becomes obvious who desires to spend time with God and who does not.

Finally, when seeking to measure the intimacy of those conforming to Christ, one should move beyond measuring how much time is spent and observe other practices that reflect a pursuit of Love. Disciplines such as fasting, silence and solitude, and extended prayer begin to consume the lives of those in the final segment of intimacy. The table below shows the progression in visual form.

Table 1. Progressing in intimacy

Lonely to Lover	Consider	Connecting	Committing	Conforming
Intimacy With Jesus	Non-Existent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First 10 minutes 5 days a week • Material provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A minimum of 30 minutes daily • Intrinsically motivated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of deeper disciplines such as fasting, silence, and solitude

The next characteristic of a disciple that provides a measurable metric is the congregation’s willingness to covenant in community. The community for those in the considering Christ segment is best described as superficial. If these individuals do have community, it is often based upon mutual benefit and typically homogenous. The desire for formation-minded churches in the metric of community is to move individuals from consumers to covenanters. Again, the measurable metric is time. The metric of covenanting to community overlaps with distinct contexts more than any of the other metrics. As individuals transition from considering to connecting, the church should desire to see them move from Sunday morning exclusivity to connecting in community on a monthly basis in affinity-based groups. One can assume the individuals are connecting well if they are showing up to the spaces where they can belong in a group of believers intentionally.

From there, individuals should progress toward a weekly community typically provided in the context of a city group. The frequency increase should reveal that they are beginning to commit to Christ. Finally, as individuals progress from monthly community to weekly community, the final step would be an informal lifestyle of community. In these spaces congregants would live in intentional proximity to other Christians in strategic areas for the sake of kingdom advancement. The context for this kind of community are the previously mentioned kingdom, groups, and dwell groups referred to earlier. Table 2 offers visual comprehension of this process.

Table 2. Progressing in community

Consumer to Covenanter	Consider	Connecting	Committing	Conforming
Covenanted to community	Superficial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect groups • City groups • Monthly - Weekly commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City groups • Kingdom groups • Weekly commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kingdom groups • Dwell groups • Lifestyle commitment

The final characteristic to be measured is one’s willingness to serve joyfully on mission. Time and context are the primary measurables for determining where someone is on the spiritual formation continuum regarding their service. Those in the considering segment are typically self-serving and the aim of formationally-minded churches is to transport them to being servants. The first step for someone seeking to move from considering to connecting is to begin serving in the context of the local church. Sunday service is pivotal for clothing individuals with the Christlike attitude of service. Individuals who serve monthly in the context of the local church can be considered connecting to Christ in the service metric.

As individuals transition into the committing segment, it is important that they identify their unique spiritual gifts and begin leading in the spaces that the Lord has uniquely gifted them. In many congregations, those who make up the committing segment are typically the leaders who have identified the ministries they are passionate about. Finally, when measuring individuals who are in the conforming segment there needs to be evidence of individuals following the prompting of the Lord into unique ministries that fit their gifts, passions, story, and spaces of influence. These spaces are typically not dictated to them by the church but are birth from their own desires. Table 3 offers an explanation.

Table 3. Progressing in sacrifice

Self-serving to Servant	Consider	Connecting	Committing	Conforming
Joyfully sacrificing on mission	Self-serving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly service on a Sunday 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership in areas of their passion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unique ministries unfacilitated by the church that are part of their daily lives.

This thesis has explored the difficult realities of the postmodern West. The assertion was made that the gospel must lead to the kingdom, identifying spiritual

formation and missional context as the proverbial bridge. In this thesis, I laid out two phases of spiritual formation, the first being foundational, where knowledge of God leads to mission obedience, the second being catalytic where mission obedience leads to deeper intimacy with God. In the previous chapters I laid out the characteristics, catalysts, barriers, and context for individuals traveling along a spiritual formation journey that takes them from considering Christ to conforming the Christ. Finally, I concluded with quantifiable metrics that assist churches in identifying where individuals are and the characteristics of a disciple. All of this has been to prove the necessity of capitalizing on the symbiotic nature of spiritual formation and missional context. Therefore, I assert once more that for churches to engage the postmodern West they must capitalize on the symbiotic nature of spiritual formation and emotional context.

APPENDIX 1
CITY GROUP GUIDE

A City Group Guide is designed to help new believers practice the spiritual disciplines of Bible engagement and prayer. The content is structured so that a new Christian can pick up the Bible, ask essential questions for understanding and application, and conclude with prayer modeled after the Lord's Prayer found in Matthew 6. The purpose of this guide is to encourage individuals to bring their reflections on Scripture and prayer to a City Group meeting once a week, where they can be mutually edified by other Christians as they learn and grow in these foundational disciplines.



city·group·guide

noun

a foundation for the daily practices of
scripture engagement & prayer.

DATE: _____

Day 2 (Scripture) _____

1. Where does this text show my need for God?

2. How should I respond? (repent/ rejoice/ confess/ depend)

3. What about the character of God should lead you to worship in this text?

4. What questions does this text bring up in you?

Day 2 (Responding Prayer)

- Once you have identified how to respond, spend time responding to God and prayer. (feel free to look at today's prayer prompt)
 - (Ex- God, instead of relying on myself for... I depend on you)

DATE: _____

Day 3 (Scripture) _____

1. What is the gospel truth in this text/ how is it different than what culture claims as truth?

2. Where does my life align with the gospel truth?

3. Where does my life align with the cultural truth?

4. Where do I need to surrender?

Day 3 (Requesting Prayer)

- After identifying the distinct truth, ask God to help your heart align with his truth.
 - Spend some time asking God for whatever you need. (feel free to look at today's prayer prompt)

DATE: _____

Day 4 (Scripture) _____

1. What else does the Bible say about the main idea of this text? (text provided)

2. What is the main idea of our new text?

3. What are the parallels in this text?

4. How does this text interpret our first one?

Day 4 (Readying Prayer)

- Please take a look at the scripture from earlier in the week and the scripture and identify with the text says about the spiritual battle in front of us and the spiritual resources. God has given us.
- Spend some time in prayer for spiritual victory in our lives for the coming week. (feel free to look at today's prayer prompt)
 - (Ex- God, because you've conquered death, would you conquer... in my life today?)

DATE: _____

Day 5 (Scripture/ Extended Prayer) _____

1. Take either text and pray through the 4 x 4 movement of prayer

1.Reverence

2. Response

3. Request

4.Ready

DATE: _____

Day 6 (Optional Scripture) _____

1. Summarize the text in your own words.

2. What does this text reveal about the character of God?

3. What about the character of God should lead you to worship in this text?

4. What questions does this text bring up in you?

Day 1 (Reverent Prayer)

- After you have identified what characteristics of God are worthy of worship in the text worship him. (feel free to look at today's prayer prompt.)
 - (Ex-God, I praise you because...)

DATE: _____

Day 7 (Optional Scripture) _____

1. Where does this text show my need for God?

2. How should I respond? (repent/ rejoice/ confess/ depend)

3. What about the character of God should lead you to worship in this text?

4. What questions does this text bring up in you?

Day 2 (Responding Prayer)

- Once you have identified how to respond, spend time responding to God and prayer. (feel free to look at today's prayer prompt)
 - (Ex- God, instead of relying on myself for... I depend on you)

APPENDIX 2

THE DMT BRIDGE PATHWAY

The Bridge Pathway is a ten-week, cohort-style intensive designed to help individuals transition from phase 1 to phase 2 of discipleship. During this cohort, participants are encouraged to identify their spiritual gifts, solidify their practices, dream for their ministry, and deepen their relationship with God. This is an ideal space for those already in phase 2 of the discipleship pathway to interact with and mentor individuals in phase 1 who are seeking to grow and progress.



The DMT Bridge

Progressing from phase 1 to phase 2

Week One

Members of the group will share their testimony

Week Three

Members will do the my ministry Sweetspot workshop

Week Five

Share spiritual autobiography

Week Seven

Sabbath workshop
• Homework- Fast for 24 hours

Week Nine

Silence Silence and solitude workshop



Week Two

Members of the group will do a personality and gifting assessment

Week Four

Seek the Lord in prayer about unique ministry
• Homework- Write out spiritual autobiography

Week Six

An evening of Lament
• Homework- Sabbath

Week Eight

Fasting workshop
• Homework-24 hours of silence and solitude

Week Ten

Spiritual formation retreat

APPENDIX 3

KINGDOM GROUP COVENANT FRAMEWORK

This framework guides Kingdom Groups in their activities and engagement. Kingdom Groups will define what spiritual formation, care, community, and service will look like for their members. The aim of this covenant framework is to provide flexibility for Kingdom Groups to utilize the unique gifts of individuals within the group to address the specific needs of their community, while maintaining a standard for ongoing spiritual formation and care.



KINGDOM CITY CHURCH

KINGDOM GROUP COVENANT FRAMEWORK

Spiritual formation

- What would it look like to hold one another accountable for spiritual practices?
 - Prayer
 - Reading the word
 - Fasting
 - Silence and solitude
 - Sabbath

Care

- What would it look like for us to care for one another physically, spiritually, and emotionally?
 - How will we meet needs?
 - How will we create space to listen?

Uncommon Community

- How will we create a distinct community and live life on life?
 - Eating
 - Curating entertainment
 - Rhythms of friendship

Serving

- Who will we identify in our community to serve, intentionally for the sake of the Kingdom
 - Who will we serve?
 - How often
 - How will we identify their needs?
 - How will we create space to share the gospel?

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ABSTRACT

THE SYMBIOTIC NATURE OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND MISSIONAL CONTEXT

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To engage the postmodern West, the church must capitalize on the symbiotic nature of spiritual formation and missional context. Chapter 1 explores existing literature in the field and identifies the gaps that needed to be addressed. Chapter 2 examines the current state of the postmodern West and how the church has contributed to individuals' lack of fulfillment since the Enlightenment. Chapter 3 addresses the myth of the paradoxical relationship between spiritual formation and mission. Chapter 4 focuses on the first phase of spiritual formation and its foundational aspects. Chapter 5 covers the second phase of the spiritual formation continuum, with an emphasis on introducing a missional context. Finally, chapter 6 discusses metrics and measures to ensure churches can effectively track the progress of their congregants. Together these chapters offer a framework for capitalizing on the symbiotic nature of spiritual formations and missional context.

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