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Discipleship Today: Facing Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities of Disciple-Making

Jeremy Wallace, DMin¹

Introduction

There we were, sitting in Dr. Christian's office one late Spring Saturday morning in Northwest Oregon. My new fiancé and I had embarked upon a multi-session pre-marital counseling journey, and this session covered the essentiality of communication. I recall being struck by something Dr. Christian said to us: "*Communication is the lifeblood of a healthy, enduring marriage.*" At first, it appeared to me somewhat of an obvious statement, but over time I began to greatly appreciate the profundity of the claim. Although this event occurred nearly two and a half decades ago, there have been times in my marriage when his words would come back to me; naturally, when the source of tension had to do with communication. It was either Dr. Christian's words that would come to mind, or, from time to time, it was the phrase from a well-known scene in the comedic movie *Major Payne* that would be ringing in my ears: "What we have here is a failure to communicate." If you've been married for any length of time, perhaps you can relate. I am grateful for Dr. Christian's wise counsel that day, along with many other nuggets of wisdom provided in the other sessions as well.

Discipleship

Inasmuch as communication is vital for a "healthy, enduring marriage," along with countless others, I would contend that it is equally true that "*discipleship is the lifeblood of a healthy, enduring Church.*" The renowned author, pastor, theologian, and twentieth-century martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once famously penned that,

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“Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”² For Bonhoeffer, there was no severing the nature of Christianity from the practice of discipleship. His words are profound. They remind me of what the prolific, contemporary author on discipleship, Bill Hull, once wrote concerning the character of discipleship as persistent followership of Messiah. In his words,

Jesus taught that faith means to follow . . . Following, however, isn’t short term. Discipleship isn’t a program or an event; it’s a way of life. It’s not for a limited time, but for our whole life. Discipleship isn’t for beginners alone; it’s for all believers for every day of their life. Discipleship isn’t just *one* of the things the church does; *it is* what the church does. It’s not just part of the advancement of God’s Kingdom; the existence of serious disciples is the most important evidence of God’s work on earth. Without enough of these workers, the task languishes and the work remains incomplete.³

Hull’s central claim bears repeating: “*Discipleship isn’t a program or an event; it’s a way of life.*” Christ’s last directive to his disciples was for them to fill the whole earth with disciples, and since that commission the Church has been working toward that end. The way of Jesus is the way of discipleship. It is the ancient way, the sacred way. As Robert E. Webber once put it,

T[he] ancient process of discipleship reflects the nature and mission of the church, which is to raise up a people of God who embody the story of God and witness to the validity of

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 64-65.

³ Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ*, Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 24.

God's work to rescue creatures and creation by living in union with God's purposes for humanity. The church is to disciple this way of life and through that discipleship nourish the spiritual life of its people, young and old.⁴

Indeed, the nature and the mission of the church are embodied in the life of discipleship, and that enduring call to mission is always an enduring call to discipleship. In our Foursquare life and purpose, we will continue to answer that call as we face the sundry challenges and obstacles to it. But in addition to the challenges and obstacles, there are many opportunities.

On May 29, 2024, Foursquare Scholars Fellowship convened in Maryland at Foursquare Connection. Our theme for the meeting was "Discipleship Today: Facing Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities of Disciple-Making." In addition to hearing from Clayton Robinson and Ted Vail, we were grateful to host a panel discussion with participants that included Gary Matsdorf, Gareth Phillips, Angie Richey, Hugo Aldana, Rebeca De Castro, Jennifer Lord, and Juan Vallejo. It was a fruitful and well-attended engagement, and one in which a renewed excitement for the future of FSF was kindled.

Quadrum 6

In this present issue of *Quadrum*, the reader will find it includes four articles and a book review. Three articles address the theme of the 2024 meeting. In Daniel Ruarte's article, "Toward a Practical Conceptualization of Discipleship: Education, the Great Commission, and the Local Church," he points out—among other things—that "disciples should always be learning and growing." Andrew Womack faces the contemporary practice of 'deconstruction' in his, "*Hevel* as a Primer for Discipleship in an Age of Deconstruction,"

⁴ Robert Webber, *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 229.

by suggesting it be viewed through the lens of the biblical concept of *hevel*. Next, Sam Dobrotka's "Discipleship: Is Our Model Complete?" proposes a discipleship model that incorporates the Four-square Global Council's Discipleship and Leadership Training (DLT) discipleship framework with the Hagberg-Guelich model. Finally, in Eric Lopez' contribution, "Is This That? Identity, Traditioning, and the Hoped-for Future of the Pentecostalism in North America," he utilizes Aimee Semple-McPherson's "Death in the Pot" sermon as a useful and stimulating tool to assist scholars in the venture of Pentecostal traditioning. We pray these scholarly contributions will be both enjoyable and helpful to you.

Toward a Practical Conceptualization of Discipleship: Education, the Great Commission and the Local Church

Daniel Ruarte, EdD¹

ABSTRACT:

This article offers a practical framework for discipleship, rooted in extensive pastoral and academic experience, emphasizing its lifelong, communal, and contextual essence within the local church. It addresses challenges like cultural complexity and the post-COVID-19 discipleship gap, advocating for intentional disciple-making aligned with the Great Commission. Drawing on the Foursquare Global Council perspective and a 2022 leadership survey, discipleship is framed as a process of relational growth, transformation, learning, and missional engagement. The integration of formal and non-formal education is proposed as a vital tool for developing disciples and emerging leaders to fulfill the church's mandate to preach the gospel and make disciples.

Introduction

After twenty years pastoring and ten in academia, the need for continual engagement with the core mandate of the church keeps being of outmost importance. It is through my pastoral lens that as an author, I consider it necessary to bring light to this very important topic. In the following pages you will not find a highly theological inquiry, nor a theoretical proposition. This article will present my personal views and considerations based on experience that will begin to unfold a path toward a practical conceptualization of discipleship.

One challenge to discipleship is that it requires context and community. It is there, that new believers and seasoned Christians, create culture, share life, understand the biblical text, think about complex cultural issues, and are technically, *Discipled*. The reason

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I say a challenge is because I hear more and more people talk about discipleship as if it is something people can go through and become. A disciple never becomes; a disciple is! Let me explain what I mean by this, we all agree that our journey into following Jesus starts, the moment we are born again.² Yes, I said, born again, I guess it is dated but it serves its purpose. In that moment, we are supposed to start our walk as followers, as disciples of Jesus Christ. In this journey there will be several lived experiences which include interaction with pastors, leaders, friends, church, events, professors, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly twitter), Tik Tok, Google, TV, books, the Bible, music, family, church programs, small group curriculum, discipleship training, college, seminary programs, political parties, and fill in the blank. There will be many things that will shape your thinking about God and his kingdom.

This is challenging because there is no, one-fits-all way to discipleship. It is highly dependent on who you are, the conversations you have, and the places or programs you attend. The Bible, of course, should be the primary tool for us to understand how to live for and follow Jesus, but the different voices and multiple interpretations could very much make discipleship a complex dilemma. This happens even though we might use the same bible translation, are members of the same denomination, or even attend the same church. Unfortunately, there are multiple views and opinions on how to follow Jesus, think about God, and fulfill his purposes.

Gary Matsdorf and the Global Council of The Foursquare Church³

As Global Education Coordinator for The Foursquare Church, Gary Matsdorf has dedicated his tenure to this very topic. In 2015, they

² John chapter three, Jesus and Nicodemus, born of the Spirit story.

³ The Global Council of The Foursquare Church has sixteen global elders, who are representative from around the world.

conducted a thirty-five nation, National Strategic Assessment (NSA) which yielded valuable data, this included several findings, one of the core findings is tightly related to our topic “the need to become better at making disciples.”⁴ In this article, he substantially discusses discipleship and leadership development. Including a working definition of discipleship which can be useful for our conceptualization.

A disciple is a believer in Christ who, together with others and by the Power of the Holy Spirit, intentionally pursues Jesus, is being changed by Jesus, and is actively engaged in the mission of Jesus.⁵

Dr. Matsdorf, also believes that this definition includes important biblical elements such as the point where discipleship begins “after conversion” similar to what I mentioned, the moment we are born again. It also includes a spiritual component of what God, and the Holy Spirit does in us, and the continual following of Jesus through a lifetime journey of faith in Christ. This working definition helps us set the foundational tone for a Global Foursquare perspective on discipleship.

Educating and Disciple-Making⁶

On a quest to conceptualize discipleship, I was asked to speak on the subject of discipleship during the 2022 Foursquare Education Forum. In fact, the entire forum was dedicated to discipleship, and we were just coming out of the COVID-19 world-wide pandemic. Everyone was quite concerned with the way the church handled

⁴ Gary Matsdorf. “Discipleship & Leadership Training” *WAPTE: Journal of the World Alliance of Pentecostal Theological Education* 8, no. 2 (2023): 187-198.

⁵ Gary Matsdorf, 2023, 190.

⁶ Presentation titled: Education + Discipleship in a Post Pandemic World. (Foursquare Education Forum. San Dimas California. 2022).

discipleship, in particular, as it pertains to following Jesus in the midst of difficulties and in this case a world crisis. The pandemic made us think more deeply about discipleship, Matlock and Kinnaman presenting research on the impact of the pandemic stated, “In many ways, the pandemic built a stronger case than ever for the need to strive toward disciple-making that produces individuals resistant to difficulties, turmoil and chaos.”⁷ Matlock added, “Church has to be more than a sermon, worship and what happens on the stage; that’s where people were seeing the discipleship deficit.” He continued, “I think the pandemic has definitely made everyone think about discipleship (or the lack of it) differently.” These were common conversations during and in the aftermath of COVID-19. Many have now forgotten about this, but I still think it is critical to consider what we experienced and what are we doing differently.

I want to remind our Foursquare and Pentecostal family that if we want to continue to be relevant and valuable for the kingdom, we need to unite in fulfilling God’s mission, which is the Great Commission. This means a renewed focus on evangelism and discipleship. Sister McPherson⁸ had a clear vision for this movement, a balance between evangelism and discipleship, between anointing and instruction, between the local church and world missions. Think about this! She was only 30 years old when the massive Angelus Temple was opened and dedicated. That same year she dedicated a disciple-making training institute, which today is Life Pacific University.⁹ She knew Sunday service was important, but weekly instruction and learning communities were as important

⁷ Mark Matlock & David Kinnaman. *ChurchPulse Weekly Conversations: Mark Matlock & David Kinnaman on Resilient Discipleship Post-COVID*. (Barna, 2021 3).

⁸ Founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (ICFG).

⁹ Formerly known as the Eco Park Evangelistic and Missionary Training Institute, later the Lighthouse of International Foursquare Evangelism (LIFE), then LIFE Bible College, and in 2019 it became Life Pacific University.

to develop disciples. It was a combination of practical ministry, service, training, and a vision to save the lost, make disciples, and develop leaders to be sent into the field that kept the movement going.

We know that discipleship is not a program, a school, or head knowledge. It's a process, a lifelong journey, of following Jesus. It is cyclical and includes things we do—as well as things we learn—and things we-learn-how-to-do—Disciples do not just learn to learn; disciples learn to live according to the Word. It is practical and theoretical, including praxis, the “doing what Jesus did” type of life, and theory, the deep thinking, “learning of and wresting with the Word of God” theology, and doctrine. It could include formal and informal ways of learning. It is doctrinal, theological, cultural, social, and personal. Christian discipleship must be deeply connected to the Bible and even more important to Jesus and the New Testament church. It is relational, the pandemic also made us think more about relationships, Mary Jankey, encourages post-pandemic discipleship by prioritizing “relationships over programs”¹⁰ This was common during that time when people were deprived from close contact with others, and in many cases not allowed to assembly for Sunday church.¹¹

Common Language for Discipleship

In one of their books *Faith for Exiles*, Barna Research attempted to bring common language to discipleship. Some of the core aspects presented were, to develop Jesus followers, who are resiliently faithful in the face of cultural coercion, and who live a vibrant life

¹⁰ Mary Jankey. *Millennials & Gen Z Are Leaving Church. What Can We Do?* (Faithlife, 2021, 8).

¹¹ Every state had their individual regulations, and some countries were more strict than other, nevertheless, everyone experienced a level of impact from the 2020 worldwide pandemic.

in the Spirit.¹² I also worked on research of my own, I sent out a very short survey with the following questions; 1) In one sentence or paragraph, what is your personal definition of discipleship (disciple-making) and why?, and 2) In one sentence or paragraph, what is the role of education in the body of Christ? Or is there any real value in education for the mission of God? The survey was sent to a selected group of high-level denominational leaders in the US Foursquare Church who held key executive roles. This was purposely done to understand how these core group of elected or appointed leaders of the denomination define discipleship. Interestingly, we all have our own ideas and definitions of discipleship, most of these leaders sent a paragraph or two, some sent just a sentence, some were more theological others highly practical. All could be correct to some degree, but it could be confusing for someone to understand what Foursquare means when we talk about discipleship. The following were some common themes I gather from all the data, by analyzing themes and similarities. It was great to discover a pivotal finding, everyone connected discipleship to a process and not a program, which indicates this is something we all agree upon.

Based on this, here are four commonalities to help us bring common language as it pertains to discipleship within Foursquare:

1. Growing in relationship with Jesus and with others.
2. Being transformed into his image.
3. Embarking on a journey of learning and growth.
4. Becoming kingdom focused (missional).

Another question we need to ask is related to the more practical, the how? not the what? How do we promote growth and develop disciples? Is education (learning) important? Is it connected to discipleship? The response is clear; we must be intentional! Jesus was intentional in calling his disciples and working personally on

¹² David Kinnaman, Mark Matlock, and Aly Hawkins. *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon*. (Baker Books, 2019, 33).

their development, growth, and learning. We cannot delegate discipleship! It is not a program we can appoint a pastor to oversee. It is a way of life, a journey with Jesus, and helping others follow him as well. Paul was intentional in developing disciples like Titus, Timothy, and others, you and I must be intentional as well. Pastors, leaders, and churches, should be intentional in making disciples.

Jesus' role as a teacher shows the value of intentional disciple-making in the spiritual transformation of people. One of his roles was in the form of a teacher to train disciples with content and information, but without neglecting the spiritual and supernatural (miracles, signs, wonders). It was both informative and practical; it was learning from Jesus and doing the supernatural work of the Father. Building common language around discipleship is important to bring clarity and direction. As a denomination, there are elements that unite us and keep us focused on a shared path. Discipleship is such a core element of the church and thus we should consider common language at the very least. We might not all agree on how it looks like or how it should be properly done, but we can all agree on common language around discipleship and even more importantly, that it is central to the work of Jesus, the New Testament church, and our Pentecostal movement.

Matthew 28:18-20

These verses encompass the Great Commission, and it has been core to disciple-making throughout generations. Jesus dies on the cross and rises from the dead to then appears to his disciples. He spent forty days with them and before ascending into heaven, he gives them this final mandate. This passage is the basis for thousands of people answering the call to ministry, to go into the ends of the world and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. For some Bible scholars, the Great Commission is the universal mission of the Church. It is the mandate of the Lord for his Church to fulfill his mission. The mission is very clear, preach the gospel and make

disciples.¹³ Moreover, Greenway makes an obvious but powerful observation, stating that each of the four gospels ends with the *Great Commission*. It was so critical for the original writers and for the Holy Spirit to make sure it was included as Jesus final mandate.¹⁴

I believe the main reason we exist as a church is for evangelism and disciple-making. We do not make disciples to establish a church, we establish a church to make disciples. The difference is significant; in the first statement we can fall into the mistake of reaching people and trying to make disciples to maintain a church or gather a group of people. In the second statement, the reason for establishing a church is for the sole purpose of making disciples. One has the individual as its mission, the other has the organization as its mission.

It is common understanding that the mission of the church is to make disciples and not simply to do worship services, meetings, events, etc. However, we place greater emphasis on our Sunday meetings and events than on our formation processes, spiritual development, educational or discipleship strategies. What is your discipleship strategy? How do disciples develop in your church? If you can't answer these two questions, it's because your focus is more on Sunday worship service than on developing disciples, followers of Jesus. The Great Commission must be ingrained in your life. Sunday worship is not the ultimate goal of the church, nor the measure of a congregation's spirituality or maturity.

The Discipleship Intent

Pastors and churches cannot lose sight of the fact that the purpose of their lives and ministries is to fulfill this mandate—To proclaim the gospel and make disciples of Jesus (Followers) in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. For example, Paul was one of

¹³ D.A. Carson, RT, Frans, Alex Motyer & Gordon, Wenham. *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Roger S. Greenway, *Go and Make Disciples!: An Introduction to Christian Missions* (P&R Publishing, 1999).

the great pioneers in the advancement of the gospel to the whole world. His mission-mindset demonstrated the commitment and passion he had to take this message beyond his local church, but Paul was not only an evangelist, apostle, and preacher, he was also great at making disciples, born again believers, followers of the Messiah. Wherever he planted a church, he wasn't just thinking about preaching a sermon or planning Sunday activities to gather a crowd, he was in search of new believers, and people who would begin taking on responsibility in the new established churches. He would appoint elders and train young pastors like Titus and Timothy. He was into developing people and helping them understand this new life, a lifelong journey following Jesus to do his work on earth.

We can also see how even in the letter to Titus, he left him in charge of continuing to establish elders (disciples) to take over his responsibilities. In Titus 1:5, not only did he develop Titus, but he now expected him to develop others. For Paul, discipleship was key as he understood that he would not be in those places for long. This mentality made him quick to identify potential leaders and began a process of discipleship and formation so that when the time came for his departure, these leaders would be ready not only to maintain what he had started, but to continue advancing the work in that region.

Formative Years—A Culture of Discipleship

I do believe the church, the *ekklēsia*,¹⁵ or the gathering of the saints is a powerful place for people to understand their relationship with Jesus and how to follow him. The first few years as a new believer are critical for this new journey. These are the formative years, similar to the time when a child begins cognitive and social development, when new Christians, new Christians are learning the

¹⁵ See Strong's G1577 *ekklēsia* at Blue Letter Bible, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1577/kjv/tr/0-1/>

foundations of their newfound faith in Jesus. I remember a true story of a 16-year-old young man who came with his mom, and both got saved at church. I was a young pastor in my late twenties and full of passion for the Lord. After several months attending Sunday and Wednesday church services, he came up to the front at the end of the service and asked if this was it (going to church). “Is this it?”, “Is this all we must do?”. “Is there anything else?” This crushed me inside; it left me speechless. I knew exactly what he was saying, even at that young age and being a new believer, he asked a very profound question that changed my entire view of what it means to be a Christian. That conversation led me to start all kinds of ways for people to walk their journey. I even wrote a small book for new believers, where I tell his story, as a way to explain that following Jesus is much more than attending church, but unfortunately, that is what we have been unintentionally teaching people that it means. To the contrary, we walk the journey of a lifetime, we follow Jesus, we serve, we respond to his calling, we learn and study, we cultivate a deeper relationship with him, we begin taking on leadership roles, we speak to others about Jesus, we train others into ministry and so much more. It is a way of life!

From Disciple-Making to Developing Leaders in the Local Church¹⁶

The Purpose Driven Church movement in the 1990 claimed to give pastors the tools to have healthy growing churches, and part of the strategy was to have some kind of basic discipleship process, or assimilation process for new believers or church visitors. According to the author, it is an effective way to help people join the church, feel welcome and become part of the new church.¹⁷ Barna Research

¹⁶ Daniel Ruarte, "Liderazgo y Iglesia: Principios Efectivos para Pastores y Líderes Latinos." (Asociación Teológica Hispana, Motebello, CA. 2019).

¹⁷ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Zondervan, 1995).

asserts that effective churches create their own pipelines to develop disciples and leaders.¹⁸ It is important for the church to develop disciples who at one point could begin the process of development into emerging leaders. As we have stated, discipleship is not a program, but a process, and having intentional developmental processes can certainly be vital for the continual emergence of leaders. These processes include education and training, similar to how leadership roles and promotions are given in the business world. One of these tools that can serve as part of a process is, informal education. If well organized in our local communities, Informal trainings and educational opportunities could be one of the quickest mechanism or organic process for the formation and development of leaders. For example, the church where I became a Christian and grew up as a new believer did this very well. Why? Because many people came to Christ during those years, and second because there were many who were given informal educational opportunities. Several people from that medium size church became lifelong disciples and emerging leaders in the church. Fast forward, three decades later, I am one of those leaders, and I know many of the youth and young adults that grew up in that church who are now pastoring, leading worship, serving at different organizations, ministries, and even at the district or denominational level. This was not a mega church, nor did it have a large facility, or many business leaders. God must have been doing something there, and it was evident by the many people turning their life to Christ and willing to follow him.

In addition to having many activities, events, services and ministries, something that caught my attention was the discipleship and training process this church had established. Now I understand this is informal education, but at that time I was just a new believer who wanted to grow and learn more about God and his Word. First-

¹⁸ George Barna, *The Habits of Highly Effective Churches: Being Strategic in Your God-Given Ministry* (Gospel Light Publications, 2000).

time visitors or new converts were encouraged to participate in a class for new members, basic topics were discussed such as for the life of a new believer, salvation, community life, the Bible, baptism, and others. A place where there was dialogue, and we were encouraged to ask many questions. Then, they had the option of continuing to take additional classes at a more advanced level, always on a voluntary basis, systematic growth was emphasized but maintaining a focus on practical topics for the life of a relatively new believer or someone with a desire to become more actively involved in the life of the local church and the Great Commission. We were taught how to use the Bible and a foundational overview of the different books, topics, and characters of the Old and New Testaments. The last step in this process was a structured one-year vocational program, what I personally called a *pre-institute*, it was a church-led program, but it was not called a Bible institute. It was biblical, theological and ministerial training for those who wished to grow deeper in the ministry vocation and service. Unlike the other levels, this last year had a minimal financial cost and required the purchase of additional books in some of the classes. They began to require us to do homework and to be responsible in attendance and participation. This entire process coupled with practical ministry service, was organically used to make disciples, and develop emerging leaders.

This process would take about two to three years, during this time you connected to the local church, served in the local church, experienced community among peer students, and a strong connection to the teachers, pastors and church leaders. There were lots of opportunities to ask questions or make comments, which was not possible during a Sunday morning sermon. At the end of the process, pastors and teachers placed great emphasis on continuing our studies in more formal ways, for example, Bible college or seminary. Personally, I highly benefited from it, and it is the reason I am who I am and do what I do today. I would have not pursued higher education if it were not for the ministry of that local church,

and particularly this disciple-making process. The process continues, it does not end with one class or experience, it is a lifelong process of being a disciple.

Formal and Non-Formal Educational Model

One aspect of discipleship is the notion of learning which is connected to educational processes. Understanding this can help us value the work of the local church in establishing non-formal educational processes to make disciples and develop emerging leaders. These educational pathways can provide the needed framework to support a lifelong journey of discipleship. On the other side formal educational models should also be kept in mind as a way to further and deepened the growth of a disciple. In this section, the formal and non-formal educational model is presented (see figure 1).

This model is important to mention as we think about the relationship between the local church and Bible colleges or theological seminaries. This model has two circles, a large one that symbolizes the large number of individuals who are developed through informal education, similar to the process I shared above in my own personal journey. The small circle refers to those who, after going through non-formal educational processes, wish to continue their development through formal degree programs. According to Dr. Eaton, formal education is that which represents endorsed or accredited degrees that are valid to obtain such certifications by external entities. Degrees from these institutions are recognized and validated by external companies, government institutions, and professional associations that certify the validity of these degrees.¹⁹ Non-formal/informal education and development are more experimental and practical, it is to some extent vocational in nature. This type of education is very valuable and has its place in the

¹⁹ Sarah Elaine Eaton, *Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Learning: The Case of Literacy, Essential Skills, and Language* (Learning in Canada, 2010).

formation of the leader. Every year there are thousands and thousands of intensive seminars, workshops, trainings, conferences, and events that have elements of learning and growth, but at the same time are considered informal education. These in most cases are less expensive and flexible in terms of requirements, demands, and homework. Informal and formal educational processes have been key in the development and growth of individuals for many years. For this reason, in ecclesiastical contexts, we take the time to learn and study the word of God formally or informally. Let’s look at the following (Figure 1) to better understand this concept and then explain it.

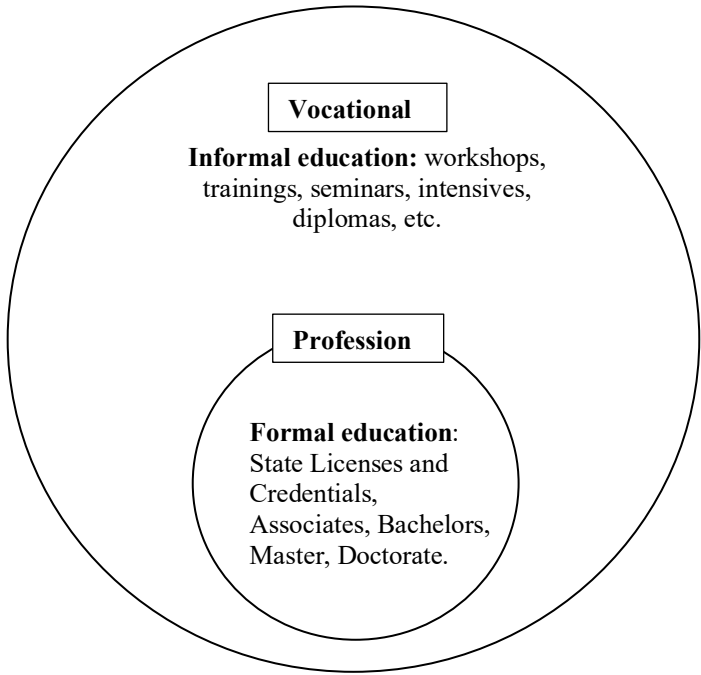


Figure 1. *Formal and non-formal education model*

There are jobs in which employers ask not only for a graduation diploma but for academic transcripts to be certain of the quality of the degree and make sure the student completed the program at an accredited institution. To be a chaplain in a hospital, Navy, Army,

and other institution, most of the time they ask that candidates have a valid master's degree awarded by an accredited institution. In some cases, it is not required but that is not the norm. To teach at a formal educational institution, they ask for academic transcripts from the university where prospective teaching candidates graduated to verify the accreditation of these institutions and the validity of the degree.

The Great Commission requires a commitment to growth, learning, and education. Non-formal education or formal education are simply tools to support the lifelong journey of discipleship. We want to make sure there is continual growth in our life and ministry skills. Either in a formal or informal way disciples should always be learning and growing. Becoming lifelong learners!

Final Thoughts

In our quest toward a conceptualization of discipleship as Foursquare Pentecostal leaders, let us not forget, the Global Council working definition stated by Dr. Matsdorf and the four commonalities gathered in 2022 from some of our top leaders around the nation.

Working Definition: "A disciple is a believer in Christ who, together with others and by the power of the Holy Spirit, intentionally pursues Jesus, is being changed by Jesus, and is actively engaged in the mission of Jesus."²⁰

Common Language: Discipleship is not a program, but a process, and has to do with: 1) Growing in relationship with Jesus and with others, 2) being transformed into his image, 3) embarking on a journey of learning and growth, and 4) becoming kingdom focused (missional).

As we consider the challenges and opportunities this topic brings let us be reminded that discipleship should always be an exciting and

²⁰ Gary Matsdorf, 2023, 190.

relevant topic of discussion for Christians who understand the value of the Great Commission and the importance of evangelism and disciple-making for Jesus and his followers.

***Hevel* as a Primer for Discipleship in an Age of Deconstruction**

Nathan Womack, PhD¹

ABSTRACT:

This article examines the growing phenomenon of faith deconstruction within Christian communities, particularly evangelicalism. The Hebrew concept of *hevel* from Ecclesiastes—often translated as "meaningless" or "vanity" but better understood as describing life's fleeting, paradoxical nature—is proposed as a valuable biblical framework for discipling those navigating faith deconstruction. Rather than viewing deconstruction as a crisis to be feared, the author explores how pastors and church leaders can engage this phenomenon with empathy and humility, creating spaces that can hold complexity and authentic questioning. The study traces the history of faith deconstruction, examines evangelical responses to it, and conducts an in-depth analysis of *hevel* as a lens for understanding the transient nature of human comprehension and the need for discipleship approaches that embrace uncertainty. By moving beyond negative rhetoric surrounding deconstruction, the author presents a way to reimagine discipleship practices that reflect the compassionate heart of Jesus Christ while acknowledging the deeply personal journey of faith transformation.

Introduction

“Deconstruction isn’t questioning your faith or wrestling with things you may have been taught as a kid. It is the walking away from historic Christianity.”

– Alisa Childers, *The Deconstruction of Christianity*

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“What if we accepted that our questions are an integral and beautiful part of our faith journey instead of a threat to it?”

– Esther Joy Goetz, *Wit, Wisdom, and Whimsey* series

Faith deconstruction has become one of the most polarizing practices within Christian communities, particularly evangelicalism, throughout the last decade. Many people have shared their experiences of reorienting, rethinking, or abandoning their faith through podcasts, blogs, and social media. As of December 2024, digital platforms reflect this growing phenomenon:

- 465,000 Instagram posts with #deconstruction
- 158,000 TikTok posts with #deconstruction
- 166,000 Instagram posts with #exvangelical

In addition, studies in 2022 and 2023 reveal that between 27-36% of U.S. Protestant churchgoers have experienced faith deconstruction, indicating a significant shift in religious engagement.² As more people deconstruct their faith, pastors and church leaders need to be equipped to disciple people who are deconstructing their faith and to minister with humility, compassion, and empathy.

There are a variety of books that address deconstruction and discipleship in evangelical contexts. AJ Swoboda’s book, *After Doubt: How to Question Your Faith without Losing It*, offers great insights about how deconstructing with Jesus can lead to a deeper faith. Other authors express their concerns or fears about the deconstruction phenomenon. Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett’s share their critique of deconstruction in their book, *The Deconstruction of Christianity: What it is, Why it’s Destructive, and How to Respond*.

² “Pastors’ Views on Deconstruction,” Lifeway Research, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Pastors-Sept-2021-Deconstruction-Report.pdf>. “Protestant Churchgoer Views on Deconstructing Faith,” Lifeway Research, 2023, <https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Sept-2022-American-Churchgoer-Deconstruction-Report.pdf>.

The growing number of literature, podcasts, and other media regarding deconstruction reveals that is not a passing fad and necessitates deep conversation and reflection.

My experiences in ministry have prompted me to contribute to the conversation around deconstruction and discipleship. Many leaders have shared their thoughts about effective practices for discipleship and deconstruction. However, I find that there is little to no conversation around the concept of *hevel* that is found in Ecclesiastes. I believe that *hevel* can serve as a helpful framework for developing practices for discipleship with those who are deconstructing.

Used frequently in Ecclesiastes, the word *hevel* is often translated as “meaningless” or “vanity.” However, *hevel* is also used to explain the fleeting nature of life and the paradoxes that people experience in life. These translations and interpretations can be a useful guide for people that are deconstructing their faith. Ecclesiastes can be seen as an ancient form of deconstruction where the teacher is making observations about the world around them and drawing conclusions based upon their understanding of their worldviews, including their religious traditions.

Hevel provides a biblical framework for discipleship, helping individuals navigate the complexities of wrestling with their faith in an age of deconstruction. This study begins by exploring the history and development of faith deconstruction. It then examines evangelical responses to deconstruction, focusing on the range of perspectives among pastors and evangelical leaders. The rhetoric surrounding deconstruction, particularly the negative discourse from evangelical figures, reveals some of the limitations in current approaches to ministering to those who are deconstructing, highlighting the need for a shift in thought and practice. Next, I conduct an in-depth study of the term *hevel* in Ecclesiastes and demonstrate how it can serve as a guide for discipleship, specifically for ministering to those in the midst of deconstruction. While this study explores several discipleship practices related to *hevel*, its scope is

intentionally focused, not aiming to provide an exhaustive treatment of discipleship in the context of faith deconstruction. Ultimately, my hope is that this article will serve as a primer for pastors, helping them consider how *hevel* can inform their own approaches to discipleship and engaging with the process of deconstruction.

What is Faith Deconstruction?

Deconstruction originates in Jacques Derrida's philosophical work, which argues that language and meaning are fundamentally interpretative constructs.³ Rather than representing absolute truth, texts reflect individual perceptions shaped by cultural, historical, and personal contexts. This approach challenges the notion of objective meaning, instead revealing how interpretations are influenced by diverse factors.⁴ Historically, the term's theological application emerged in the 1980s. Professor Mark C. Taylor's 1983 work "Deconstructing Theology" first applied the concept to religious thinking, followed by increasingly critical examinations of traditional Christian beliefs throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

In the early 2000s, blogging and social media became popular places for people to interact with one another about their deconstruction journeys. The digital spaces offered current and former pastors opportunities to share about their experiences with deconstruction. In 2006, former pastor David Hayward created his blog called "Nakedpastor" where he continues to publicly address his questions and doubts about faith.⁵ In his biography on his website, Hayward explains how he was introduced to Derrida's works, and he began using the term deconstruction in his blog. By the end of the 2000s and into the early 2010s, authors and pastors like Rob Bell and Brian McLaren gained followers with their works

³ Many of Jacques Derrida's works address deconstruction including *Of Grammatology*, *Voice and Phenomena*, and *Writing and Difference*.

⁴ James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2006), 51.

⁵ You can read David Hayward's blog: <https://nakedpastor.com/>

that deconstructed long held theological concepts such as plenary substitutionary atonement and eternal conscious torment.

Today, deconstruction continues to be a popular topic of discussion, particularly on social media. Sean McDowell explains that deconstruction is not a new phenomenon: “The Scripture talks about people leaving the faith. The idea is not new. What is new is, with social media, everybody’s told, now tell your story and express yourself. So, we’re hearing these stories so much more than we ever have.”⁶ The more people share their stories and the more engagement about deconstruction, more diverse definitions of faith deconstruction emerge. Subby Szterszky writing for Focus on the Family notes,

Despite formal definitions, there is considerable confusion and disagreement over what deconstruction looks like in practice, and the word means very different things to different people. For some Christians, deconstruction is the process of disentangling from harmful and toxic cultural attitudes that have filtered into the church and embracing a purer biblical faith that better reflects the Gospel of Jesus ... But in other cases, deconstruction involves redefining or rejecting core doctrines of the Christian faith to bring it in line with current cultural values.⁷

Social media has transformed how individuals share and process faith deconstruction. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok provide spaces for pastors, scholars, and individuals to publicly explore their spiritual journeys. A notable example is Joshua Eugene

⁶ Greg Koukl, “Social Media has Amplified Deconstruction,” Stand to Reason, November 14, 2022, <https://www.str.org/w/social-media-has-amplified-deconstruction>

⁷ Subby Szterszky, “Deconstruction: A look at a popular and polarizing concept,” Focus on the Family Canada, accessed July 11, 2024, <https://www.focusonthefamily.ca/content/deconstruction-a-look-at-a-popular-and-polarizing-concept>

Harris' 2019 Instagram post renouncing his Christian identity, which sparked widespread discussion about evangelical faith transitions.⁸ The rise of the #exvangelical movement parallels these digital narratives, offering community and validation for those questioning their religious upbringing.⁹

A Spectrum of Thought about Faith Deconstruction

Evangelical responses to deconstruction span a wide spectrum. Some evangelical pastors hold positive views of deconstruction. Pastor Andy Stanley of North Point Church spoke directly to those who were deconstructing their faith:

And I just want to say something to you. If you're in that process, good for you. Mature of you. Honest of you. Because you've been honest enough to acknowledge that a faith or a faith system, or a church or a church system, a faith that can't be questioned, can't be trusted. And now you're trying to figure out what is worth hanging on to.¹⁰

Tim Whitaker, founder of The New Evangelicals, explains that deconstruction can enhance one's personal faith of following Jesus:

For many, deconstruction is simply asking, are the Christian beliefs I was taught absolute truth and are they actually true at all? Now, for some people, this can scare them and that's

⁸ Harris' announcement was covered by mainstream media outlets such as NPR, CNN, The Guardian.

⁹ Bradley Onishi, "The Rise of #Exvangelical," Religion & Politics, April 9, 2019, <https://religionandpolitics.org/2019/04/09/the-rise-of-exvangelical/>.

¹⁰ Andy Stanley, "The Fundamental List Part 1: Fundamental #1" (Sermon, North Point Church, May 8, 2023), July 11, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=of1MpactKNs&list=PLjX09Tk7xvkihPDHaBmExDHH2M4Wm2RsS&index=1>

totally normal and for others, it can make them say, deconstruction is bad but it's actually a very healthy thing. In fact, what is bad is that a lot of us grew up in a framework that didn't make space for any other viewpoint in the Christian faith that the one that we were given. That's not healthy at all. So, as many of us deconstruct, its actually leading us to a freedom, a freedom out of the basement of evangelicalism and into the beautiful house of Christianity where we're able to explore rooms for the first time. Deconstruction can be a beautiful can be a beautiful thing that leads us to follow Jesus more faithfully, not the opposite way around.¹¹

Others view deconstruction as problematic. John Cooper, lead singer and founder of the Christian rock band Skillet made his feelings known about the movement:

I don't hate those deconstructed Christians. I pray for their repentance. But listen, they have divorced themselves from God, and they want to take as many of you people as they can. And it is time for us and your generation to declare war on this idolatrous deconstruction Christian movement.¹²

Pastor Mark Driscoll also shared his thoughts on Twitter about evangelicals deconstructing their faith when he offered his translations of deconstructionist vocabulary:

1. "Spiritual Abuse" → "My pastor told me to stop sinning"

¹¹ Tim Whitaker, @thenewevangelicals 2021, Instagram Reel, November 2021.

¹² Josh Shepherd, "Christian Rocker John Cooper 'Declares War' On Deconstruction, Provokes Controversy," The Roys Report, February 11, 2022, <https://julieroys.com/christian-rocker-john-cooper-declares-war-deconstruction-provokes-controversy/>

2. “Gaslighting” → “My pastor told me Jesus said stop sinning”
3. “I follow Jesus, not Paul” → “I don’t follow Jesus”
4. “Toxic” → “Biblical”¹³

Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett use language like “rebellion against God” to describe the essence and heart behind the practice of deconstruction.¹⁴ They argue, “Faith deconstruction is a postmodern process of rethinking your faith without regarding Scripture as standard.”¹⁵ Deconstruction and doubt are more than questioning ideas but are a rejection of Scripture as the source of authority and objective truth.¹⁶ The appropriate way to address deconstruction is to reform beliefs: “reformation is the process of correcting mistaken beliefs to make them align with Scripture.”¹⁷

There are others who take a more middle ground approach where deconstruction is viewed as both problematic and as a potential space for spiritual growth and discovery. AJ Swoboda writes,

One extreme—reflective of conservative Christianity—wants us to believe that doubt and deconstruction are inherently bad, a pathway inevitably leading to cliffs of apostasy and faith abandonment. This extreme denies that deconstruction can be a legitimate place to encounter the living God.¹⁸

¹³ Mark Driscoll, Twitter, January 11, 2023, 11:27 a.m. <https://x.com/PastorMark/status/1613256351207280641?lang=en>

¹⁴ Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett, *The Deconstruction of Christianity* (Tyndale Elevate: Carol Stream, 2023), 193.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁸ AJ Swoboda, *After Doubt: How to Question Your Faith without Losing It* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021), 14.

Deconstruction does not have to lead to abandoning faith, but it is not without its problems and pitfalls.¹⁹ The goal of deconstruction is to journey through the doubts and questions and allow the process to forge in us the character of God and lead to a deeper love of Jesus.²⁰

Tim Keller offered a similar sentiment to Swoboda. Using the metaphor of a remodeled building, Keller explains, “Thinking along these lines, we can say that Christians can indeed sometimes go through periods of ‘deconstruction’ and yet emerge stronger. We can go through times in which discarding or altering some of our ideas results in an overall strengthening of our Christian commitment.”²¹ Keller and Swoboda both recognize that faith development and maturity can result from deconstruction if guided properly. This requires discipleship where pastors and leaders “take a person from where they are to where they have never been. We help guide them from who they are to who God created them to be.”²²

There are many thoughts about the proper approach to discipleship and deconstruction. Alisa Childers argues that those who are deconstructing need to “conform their beliefs to Scripture,

¹⁹ Ibid., 15. Swoboda juxtaposes the negative conservative views of deconstruction with an analysis of the extreme theological left. He writes, “Still, the extreme of the theological left is as destructive. The ideology and spirit of a good deal of progressive Christianity almost requires us to undo traditional Christianity as a kind of compulsory experience. This is the sign that we’re ‘evolved’ and ‘liberated.’ Emerging from this seems to be a kind of laissez-faire approach to historic Christianity that rejects Jesus as the only way to God while seeming to suggest that doubt and deconstruction are (ironically) the only way to God.”

²⁰ Ibid., 16.

²¹ Tim Keller, “Reconstructing Faith: Christianity in a New World,” *Gospel in Life*, Fall 2022. <https://gospelinlife.com/article/reconstructing-faith/>

²² Jessie Cruickshank, *Ordinary Discipleship: How God Wires Us for the Adventure of Transformation* (The Navigators: Colorado Springs, 2023), 6. Kindle Edition

even if those beliefs are counterintuitive.”²³ Pastor John MacArthur argues people who study the Bible would not deconstruct their faith:

...these defections are not happening because people are studying the Bible deeply and profoundly and digging into the Scripture and finding that, in studying the Bible, they have concluded that Christianity isn't true. That doesn't happen. It isn't happening because they decide to take theology seriously, and they peruse the Word of God, and they study sound doctrine, and their rational approach yields to them again the fact that Christianity's not true. I don't hear anybody saying that: "I studied the Bible and found it not to be true."²⁴

MacArthur implies that a deconstructing person should reject the world and believe that Scripture has all the answers to their questions. Some pastors and leaders point to portions of Scripture such as Proverbs 3:5-6, James 1:5-8, and Jeremiah 29:11 to reaffirm that God has a plan and people need to align themselves with his plan. They acknowledge that there are portions of the biblical narrative that show characters doubting God and wondering when God will deliver them from their afflictions. However, they bridge these texts into the portions of Scripture such as Psalm 23:4, Isaiah 41:10, or Deuteronomy 31:6, which declare that God is with his people in times of hardship and suffering. They point to these Scriptures to argue that deconstruction is a simple matter and can easily be resolved by reading the Bible and trusting that God will bring assurance or clarity.

²³ Alisa Childers, "Why We Should Not Redeem 'Deconstruction,' The Gospel Coalition, February 18, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/redeem-reconstruction/>.

²⁴ John MacArthur, "Christian Deconstruction Part 1" (Sermon, Grace Community Church, May 28, 2023) <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/81-143/christian-deconstruction-part-1>.

While some followers of Jesus recognize the inadequacy of simplistic approaches to faith deconstruction, John Marriot pointedly observes that “Too often the Church has offered simple answers to deep, complicated and troubling questions.”²⁵ These reductive methods are problematic because they fundamentally misunderstand the complexity of spiritual transformation. By reducing deconstruction to mere theological debate, such approaches strip away the profound personal experiences of hurt, trauma, and disillusionment that often underlie faith transitions.

Deconstruction is not a superficial theological exercise, but a deeply intimate journey that challenges an individual’s most fundamental beliefs. It can be a lonely and unsettling process that goes beyond intellectual disagreement, touching the very core of one’s spiritual and emotional identity. Those experiencing deconstruction often wrestle with the erosion of theological certainties, confronting fears of losing long-held beliefs that once provided security and meaning.

Effective discipleship demands more than correction or dismissal; it requires compassionate understanding that honors the complexity of individual spiritual experiences.

Discipleship extends far beyond intellectual understanding. As James K.A. Smith articulates, it’s about “re-forming our loves, re-narrating our identities, re-habituating our virtue.”²⁶ Similarly, Jessie Cruickshank emphasizes that true learning transforms one’s entire being—body, soul, and spirit:

True learning is deep and holistic. It affects all parts of us—body, soul, and spirit. We are not transformed by facts and information, but by what we believe in our bones. If our life does not demonstrate it, we have not learned it. So, being a

²⁵ John Marriot, “Found and Lost Christian Deconversion,” accessed July 11, 2024, <https://www.johnmarriott.org/about-me>.

²⁶ James K.A. Smith, “AEFC 2014: Dr. James K.A. Smith,” June 6, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGdhABH1j0Y>

learner in the biblical sense is about apprenticing our lives to Jesus and choosing to live changed by what we learn.²⁷

This holistic approach challenges reductive ministerial practices that treat deconstruction as merely a theological problem. Instead, it calls for a compassionate engagement that acknowledges the deeply personal nature of spiritual questioning. It also comes from evaluating our experiences and feeling our way through life.²⁸

A crucial aspect of discipleship is sitting with people in the muck and the mire of life. People often avoid examining their inner struggles because it is messy and requires vulnerability. Sue Monk Kidd articulates this idea well:

Darting through life at a progressively increasing speed diverts us from deeper realities. Likewise, latching onto easy, quick-fix solutions becomes a way of escaping the slow pain of uncertainty and self-confrontation. It helps us avoid the misery of wading through the inner mire toward change.²⁹

When it comes to doubts or questions about the beliefs and practices of faith, some in evangelical traditions strive for solutions that give a sense of comfort or certainty. They turn to various passages of Scripture to find security when life becomes uncertain.

God's promises are often declared by pastors from the pulpit or from authors of devotional materials. Some people wrestling with their faith cling to their belief that there is a relationship between the

²⁷ Cruickshank, *Ordinary Discipleship*, 4. Kindle Edition.

²⁸ James K.A. Smith explains in his book *Desiring the Kingdom* that we need to move away from a faith built on a Cartesian model of the world—I think therefore I am – and move toward an Augustine perspective of growing through our ability to feel and touch the world.

²⁹ Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), 31.

Bible and the promises of God.³⁰ For them, belief in God's promises is enough to help them navigate their circumstances. However, others find little comfort in the promises from Scripture, and they continue to wrestle with their faith or decide to no longer be part of a faith community. This does not mean that they did not love Jesus at one time or have stopped loving Jesus. What they are looking for is a place that affirms their experiences of doubt, mistrust, while also finding life and salvation with Jesus.³¹

Faith deconstruction represents an existential struggle that demands more nuanced theological approaches to spiritual doubt. The Hebrew concept of *hevel* provides a sophisticated lens for understanding spiritual uncertainty. Where some conservative Christian traditions have typically sought to eliminate doubt through assertions of absolute certainty, *hevel* offers a more complex interpretative framework.

Drawing from the Teacher in Ecclesiastes, this approach recognizes the inherent paradoxes of human spiritual experience. Rather than treating doubt as a threat to be conquered, a *hevel*-informed discipleship model creates a supportive space for genuine spiritual exploration. Individuals can wrestle with profound questions and uncertainties while maintaining their fundamental relationship with Jesus Christ.

³⁰ Search for "promises of God books" in any online search and countless books appear in the search results.

³¹ AJ Swoboda observes that conservative Christianity does a great job of serving people in their success, spiritual growth and victories. Conversely, progressive Christianity has a framework for helping people walk through what he calls "valley experiences." He explains that there seems to be two churches: One type for those who rejoice and one type for those who weep. He acknowledges, "But this sidesteps God's ultimate desires. What we don't need is one church for people who are rejoicing and another church for people who are weeping. Our souls need a space where people can weep and celebrate together. We need churches that follow Paul's command: 'Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn'" (Rom. 12:15). Evangelical other conservative churches need to do better with ministering to those who are doubting, questioning, and hurting (sometimes addressing hurt from the church itself)." *After Doubt*, 31.

Introducing *Hevel*: Meaningless, Meaningless, Everything is Meaningless!

The word הֶבֶל, transliterated as *hevel*, is a foundational term for understanding the core message conveyed in the book of Ecclesiastes. The word is often translated as “meaningless” or “vanity” in English translations of the Bible. However, the word literally means “vapor” or “smoke.” Qohelet, or the Teacher or Preacher, also uses the metaphor associated with *hevel* to depict the fleeting and paradoxical nature of human life.³² Using *hevel* thirty eight times throughout the text, the Teacher uses the term to underscore the transitional and enigmatic aspects that permeate our existence.³³ The word is also found in other texts of the Old Testament such as Psalms 39:4-11; 62:9; 78:33 and Job 7:16 to describe the human lifespan as well as human beings themselves.³⁴

The foundational premise of Ecclesiastes is that despite the inherent goodness and splendor manifested in the world, the ups and downs of life render it unpredictable, likened to a constant pursuit of the wind's currents. This perspective challenges conventional understandings of justice and morality by observing the apparent arbitrariness with which calamities afflict the righteous, while fortune favors those who are not following God. The Teacher works to dismantle the various ways that humanity vainly seeks meaning and purpose apart from the God, revealing their ultimate insignificance when confronted with the inescapable realities of time's march and death's inevitability. This reality is captured well in the opening of the text when the Teacher declares in Ecclesiastes 1:2 “‘Meaningless! Meaningless!,’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaning-

³² John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume 2 Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic) 590-91.

³³ “Guide to the Book of Ecclesiastes,” Bible Project Team, Accessed June 1, 2024, <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-ecclesiastes/>.

³⁴ Choon-Leong Seow, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible Fourth Edition* Ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 937.

less! Everything is meaningless!” In other words, everything is *hevel*.

Hevel is meant to unsettle the reader and make them uncomfortable. People thrive in routine and certainty. They want to believe that the mechanics of the universe operate in a black and white manner. An example of this type of thinking might be that getting a good education will land a person a good paying job. Another might be that working hard will pay off. Or doing the right things in life (whatever one deems as “right”) will lead to good things in life. However, the Teacher in Ecclesiastes offers thought experiments throughout the text that reveal how this type of thinking is faulty. Working hard may only lead to death and those who do evil are often rewarded. The author of Ecclesiastes hopes that the reader will ponder the words of the Teacher and see how their own life reflects the paradoxes of *hevel*.

The poetic prologue and epilogue of Ecclesiastes 1:3-11 and 11:7-12:7 respectively accentuate these ideas with poignancy. The teacher emphasizes that human endeavors, however important or grandiose, are ultimately brief and forgotten, dwarfed by the enduring cycles of the natural world. Death, the great equalizer, nullifies the daily preoccupations that consume us, irrespective of our social standing, wisdom, or wealth. This is often why many English translations of the text translate the word *hevel* as “meaningless” or “vanity” to convey the depth of feeling when one comes to this realization.

Examining various pursuits such as career, pleasure, and even wisdom itself, the Teacher deems them all *hevel*—fleeting and ultimately unsatisfying in providing lasting significance. However, the Teacher does not advocate hedonism or moral relativism, acknowledging the practical advantages of living wisely and in reverence to God. Yet even these virtues are paradoxically *hevel*, as they cannot guarantee a life untouched by adversity or shield one from tragedy's grasp.

The idea of paradoxes is drawn from the meaning of the word itself. *Hevel* means smoke or vapor, and this provides a picture of the nature of paradoxes. We can see smoke rise from fire. We know that the smoke is real and that it is in front of us. But when we try to grasp the smoke with our hands as something that we can tangibly grab, it goes through our fingertips. We might feel and smell the effects of the smoke, but we cannot grasp it – it is beyond our ability to grab and hold. This metaphor is helpful for our attempts to understand God. We think we know God’s ways and plans and then things happen to us or in the world that cause us to honestly question what we know about God. Like smoke, we think we can grasp what God is doing in our lives or in the world. However, when we try to understand the tragedies of the world or reach for God when we cannot feel him, it goes through our fingers, and we are left with more questions and possibly more doubt.

What might a real-world example of a *hevel* paradox look like? Faithful parents devote their lives to raising their child to follow Jesus. They hold to Proverbs 22:6 as a promise that says, “Train children in the right way and when they are old, they will not stray.” They bring their child to church, actively serve in ministry themselves in some capacity, and do their best to model Jesus in all that they do. As the child grows up, the child struggles with believing and following what mom and dad have taught them. Once the child reaches adulthood, they choose to not follow Jesus. This decision leaves the faithful mom and dad devastated and they wonder what they could have done differently. This is *hevel*. The wisdom of the proverbs is sound. Many parents that raise their children in the church see them accept Jesus as their Lord and savior and watch them develop their own faith. However, the proverb is not a guarantee. It is a proverb, not a promise. It can be a paradox where doing the right thing leads to a completely opposite outcome.

What are followers of Jesus to do with the paradoxes of life? The Teacher's resolution in Ecclesiastes lies in embracing *hevel* itself– accepting life's inherent unpredictability and relinquishing

the illusion of control to God. Counterintuitively, this posture of trust enables the genuine enjoyment of life's simple pleasures, such as friendship, family, good food, and nature's beauty. Although life may be unpredictable and tragic at times, it is important to recognize the good things in life and to celebrate them. Ultimately, the Teacher recognizes that even our expectations and aspirations as expressed in Ecclesiastes 1:2, "*hevel, hevel*. Everything under the sun is *hevel*"—fleeting and subject to the limitations of our mortal existence.

At the end of the book, the author's voice reemerges, guiding the book toward its finale. The author of Ecclesiastes impresses upon the reader the imperative to heed the Teacher's profound reflections on reality. The Teacher's words, likened unto a shepherd's staff, may prod at times with discomfiting precision, yet their purpose is to steer the reader toward deeper wisdom.

However, a cautionary note is struck—the author warns against becoming so immersed in the Teacher's existential ponderings that one loses sight of life itself. An obsessive quest to unravel every metaphysical riddle, to devour book after book in pursuit of ultimate answers, is a path that inevitably leads to futility and spiritual exhaustion. Instead, the author offers a more prudent counsel in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14: "fear God and keep his commands; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil."

While the Teacher's words serve a vital purpose in challenging our misplaced hopes and reminding us of the fleeting nature of earthly pursuits in the face of time's relentless march and death's inevitability, true meaning is to be found in the hope of divine judgment. It is the belief that God will ultimately dispel the *hevel* that shrouds our existence and usher in a world of perfect justice and equity. This hope should ignite within us a life of unwavering integrity and reverence before God, even as the mysteries of our fleeting existence may continue to perplex us. Paradoxically, it is by

embracing life's enigmatic nature that can lead us to authentic and genuine peace.

Using *Hevel* as a Primer for Discipling Deconstruction

The fleeting and paradoxical definitions of *hevel* provide a helpful guide for discipling congregants undergoing deconstruction of their faith traditions and beliefs. Like the Teacher in Ecclesiastes, people can (and do) deconstruct longstanding beliefs or assumptions about faith. They may conclude that some (or all) of their beliefs and practices appear hollow or lack substantive meaning. This becomes unsettling for both those who are deconstructing as well as those who are in community with these individuals.³⁵ Family members, friends, fellow congregants, and church leaders may be discouraged or alarmed by the act of deconstruction. Pastors need to be aware of these reactions and recognize that ministry to those who are deconstructing means ministering to a larger group of the community beyond just the individual.

One practice that pastors can use is using affect labeling and incorporating the term *hevel* into regular discourses.³⁶ This helps with normalizing and validating the lived experiences of those grappling with doubt and disillusionment. Preaching is one of the ways that worldview transformation takes place for those who are actively listening to sermons and teachings.³⁷ Grant Lovejoy explains, “Pastoral preaching tends to wounded members of the flock. By addressing felt needs, pastoral preaching heightens the relevance of sermons” and helps people “find genuine help for their

³⁵ Jon Bloom, “What does ‘Deconstruction’ Even Mean?” DesiringGod.org, February 15, 2022, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-deconstruction-even-mean>.

³⁶ MD Lieberman, NI Eisenberger, MJ Crockett, SM Tom, JH Pfeifer, BM Way. “Putting feelings into words: affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity in response to affective stimuli,” *Psychological Science* 18, no. 5 (May 2007): 421–8. Affect labeling is when people articulate their feelings with their words.

³⁷ Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 319-320.

troubles.”³⁸ Sermons allow pastors to engage many people at one time, and they can normalize language about *hevel*, doubt, paradoxes, and deconstruction for the congregation.

Incorporating language about *hevel* also signals the church's openness to engaging deconstruction as a legitimate experience and spiritual process, rather than something to be dismissed or viewed as wrong. It also helps with normalizing deconstruction with the rest of the congregation who may not be deconstructing their faith. Allowing lay people to also humbly engage with those who are deconstructing their faith will position them to develop empathy, compassion, and curiosity about the faith deconstruction in a way that is life-giving and not dismissive.

Pastors can also guide people through the depths and complexities of deconstruction with pastoral counseling and spiritual direction. The intimacy of these settings allows for an exploration and probing of the individual's specific points of tension, uncertainty, and disenchantment, much like what the Teacher does in Ecclesiastes. A helpful way of cultivating these kinds of vulnerable and healing spaces for discipleship is utilizing a framework like psychologist Carl Roger's unconditional positive regard.³⁹ Fostering an environment that is non-judgmental, empathetic, respectful, and warm positions pastors to care for people who are deconstructing their faith. In these spaces, congregants can express their fears, questions, hurts, and other aspects of their deconstruction journey without fear of judgment, retribution, or dismissal.

³⁸ Grant Lovejoy, “Pastoral Preaching,” *Leadership Handbook of Preaching and Worship* ed. James D. Berkley (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 17.

³⁹ Carl R. Rogers, *Client-centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications and Theory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951). I recognize that Rogers' works are foundational for clinical psychology and counseling. However, these principles align with Genesis 1:27 and having a useful framework for seeing people as image bearers in the midst of their existential crisis is crucial for effective ministry and discipleship.

As part of this approach to ministering and discipleship, pastors must resist offering premature reconciliation and simple answers. Their role is to accompany people along their winding path, reminiscent of Ecclesiastes, posing inquiries without always providing resolute answers. By listening and affirming, pastors can demonstrate how to hold faith in tension with doubts and questions.

Effective discipleship also acknowledges that people have experienced real hurt with aspects of evangelical theology and culture. This can offer spaces for genuine conversation and healing. It can be easy to say, “I don’t see how people could be like that” and cultivate a belligerence toward others. Discipleship needs to be grounded in hope that people can be transformed and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

However, addressing the pain associated with deconstruction also needs proper recognition of the underlying reasons for deconstruction in the first place. AJ Swoboda explains:

What underlies so much of this is not a desire to deconstruct Christianity because the claims of Jesus are wrong. Rather, there is deep anger toward Christians. We have been hurt in the ‘name of Jesus.’ We have grown weary of the church. We want to escape the family systems that damaged our hearts. Someone needs to pay for the pain. So we use theology as a front for what is often real emotional pain. Rather than acknowledge the ways we have been emotionally hurt by our pastors or leaders in the church, we use theology to hurt them back. Or, worse yet, we use the pain we’ve received from a particular tribe or particular kind of Christian as a way to assume that all who hold their theological positions must be as unhealthy and sick as they are. But this kind of stereotyping just creates more division and hatred. The end result is failing to confront reality—we use theology as a cover for our emotional wounds. Puffing out our chests, we run to the life of the mind to make a

judgment rather than acknowledge the tears and the hurts that harbor deep within. Perhaps the best thing someone in pain can do is put down the hammer for a while and learn to cry a little.⁴⁰

Swoboda touches on the concept of *hevel* by pointing out paradox of wounding and pain coming from the people who are supposed to be life-giving like Jesus. When one is hurting, the best thing they can do is grieve rather than offer retribution.

The conclusion of Ecclesiastes also expresses this sentiment well: “For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.”⁴¹ God will right every wrong and bring judgment. This truth must be reiterated as pastors counsel those who are deconstructing and who want to project their pain through anger and construct generalized assumptions about others.

Another aspect of using *hevel* as a guide when discipling others is also recognizing and accepting that not all answers about faith will be answered. In his book, *The Message of the Psalms*, Walter Brueggemann declares, “faith does not always resolve life” and he points to Psalm 88 as an example.⁴² Brueggemann says that Psalms like Psalm 88 are important because, “they do not carry with them any articulated resolve of the issue. They leave us lingering in the unresolved, dangling in the depth of the pit without any explicit sign of rescue. That is an important statement to have in the repertoire, precisely because life is like that.”⁴³

Brueggemann says Psalm 88 or Ecclesiastes are examples of “countertestimonies.” Peter Enns argues that Brueggemann’s use of the term countertestimonial is helpful because:

⁴⁰ Swoboda, *After Doubt*, 132-133.

⁴¹ Ecclesiastes 12:14, NRSV.

⁴² Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 78.

⁴³ Ibid.

They challenge the ‘main testimony,’ those parts of the Bible where things are moving along more or less as scripted. We need this countertestimony, as did the Israelites, because no one lives in the scripted places of the Bible all the time, where God shows up as planned, tells us exactly what we need to do, and things work out.⁴⁴

Instead, life is unpredictable or *hevel*. Many platitudes of evangelicalism revolve around the idea that following God means that God will give people what we need if they are faithful. Many deconstructing individuals (and some who are not) find this way of thinking to be problematic because it is not always true.

Is there anything beyond analysis and existential questions about faith? Is deconstruction a means to an end or an end in and of itself? During seasons of *hevel*, is it possible to accept our present reality of not having all the answers? Some people argue that there must be a clear answer when discipling people who have theological and faith questions. What if answers are not the outcome of discipling deconstruction? Sanejo Leonard explains, “it is important to note that the culmination of a faith crisis is not contingent upon the crisis being resolved, but rather the resolution is the acceptance of a new way of viewing our faith.”⁴⁵ Rather than trying to help people find all of the answers to their questions, doubts, and concerns, it is appropriate to help them accept the reality that *hevel* is real and *hevel* is part of following Jesus. We will not know everything, and we will not have certainty in our faith. And this is the crux of faith – that faith is not about certainty at all. Faith is about trust and putting our hope in the work of Jesus Christ.

⁴⁴ Peter Enns, *The Sin of Certainty* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2016), 61.

⁴⁵ Sanejo Leonard, *Shaken Faith: What You Don’t Know (and Need to Know) about Faith Crises and How they Affect Spiritual Growth* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock), 98.

It is also important to recognize that many people who are deconstructing their faith are in the process of grieving a loss (or many losses). This form of grief is what Kenneth Doka identifies as dis-enfranchised grief. He explains, “Disenfranchised grief refers to a loss that's not openly acknowledged, socially mourned or publicly supported.”⁴⁶ For some, they are grieving the certainty they once had in their faith. For others, they are grieving the loss of relationships, such as their church community and perhaps even their families, through their journey of deconstructing. Some people have had their family fracture over their deconstruction journey. Others have lost relationships over their questions, critiques, and differences of theology and praxis. Some are processing the loss of their identity as a follower of Jesus as the deconstructive journey has shaken the familiar and brought about unforeseen changes.

Effective discipleship also entails walking with people through grief and loss. Grief is often a part of the deconstruction process as it brings painful things into the light. Henri Nouwen’s words on grief are helpful:

You cannot talk or act your losses away, but you can shed tears over them and allow yourself to grieve deeply...The world says, ‘Just ignore it, be strong, don’t cry, get over it, move on.’ But if you don’t mourn you can become bitter. All your grief can go right into your deepest self and sit there for the rest of your life...It is better to mourn your losses than to deny them...⁴⁷

Nouwen recognizes that grief and mourning do not go away through mere conversation or logically talking about loss and life. Losses are

⁴⁶ Kenneth Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 1989), 4.

⁴⁷ Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 42.

extremely disruptive. However, allowing oneself to sit in them and to grieve them allows space for acceptance and healing rather than letting bitterness take root and bloom into anger or rage.⁴⁸ Helping people that are grieving their deconstruction can also be ministry of presence where one sits with those who are grieving without giving insights, direction, or answers. Using the theological framework of *hevel* allows pastors acknowledge the losses because life is unpredictable and often paradoxical.

Effective pastoral care also needs direction from the Holy Spirit. It is crucial that people who are ministering to those that are deconstructing their faith listen to promptings from the Holy Spirit. Receiving words of knowledge or other specific insights into what a person is going through is helpful when addressing sensitive topics that often arise in faith deconstruction. Inviting the Holy Spirit to speak into the *hevel* of life and teaching others to listen to the Spirit during their deconstruction needs to be part of pastoral care.

Another practice for discipleship for deconstructing congregants is creating spaces for congregational peers to gather in humble vulnerability to discuss their deconstructing journeys. Facilitated “deconstruction groups” can build community amidst shared experiences of alienation and provide opportunities for dialogue that ushers in a cross-pollination of perspectives, and a capacity to voice undeveloped skepticisms freed from judgement's scrutiny. These gatherings embody the conviction from Ecclesiastes 3:6 that says, “there is a time to seek and a time to lose.” Gatherings allow people to seek answers to their questions, while also embracing the fact that some answers will not be found. The human condition is a paradox. Everyone recognizes that something is fundamentally wrong, yet no one seems capable of rectifying it. Life is challenging, and

⁴⁸ I am not saying that anger is not justified by those who are deconstructing. People who have been abused by church leaders and have experienced injustice have every right to express their anger toward the violation of their being. I believe that Nouwen is saying that anger that is not grieved leads to bitterness in the long run.

following Jesus in these circumstances can be particularly difficult. It is especially challenging for those under the illusion that a higher power's role is to pave a golden path to their dreams. Such expectations often lead to disappointment. Guided gatherings can help temper these expectations and reorient perspectives.

Like the Teacher states in Ecclesiastes 1:18, disciples on this path may “increase learning” while recognizing how “much wisdom leads to much frustration.” Yet the Spirit's peace endures, even as that which is constructed inevitably deconstructs, because “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Grounded in God’s peace, the way of *hevel* through deconstruction can birth a more honest, transformed communion with the living God. As idolized “meanings” are evaporated as vapor, one can experience the restful assurance that Christ's peace remains deeply binding.

Inviting Jesus into *Hevel*

Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher states that one might as well just enjoy good food and drinks since we cannot control the comings and goings of life most of the time. However, at its conclusion, Ecclesiastes pulls back the curtain, suggesting that this mortal life is not the entirety of existence. The author concludes in Ecclesiastes 12:13, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments, for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.” The author believes that every decision and action matters, though perhaps in ways not immediately apparent. The reasons for life’s hardships may remain elusive, but this does not negate the presence of meaning.

Perhaps the real challenge for those who are deconstructing is recognizing that the God they want may not be the God who is. It is crucial to correct oneself of distorted practices and beliefs that lead to ideas about the divine that set people up for disillusionment. Tim Mackie uses the phrase “myth of religious fulfillment” as part

of the message found in Ecclesiastes.⁴⁹ The myth of religious fulfillment reverses individualistic spiritual narratives that are often commonplace in evangelical (as well as non-evangelical) spaces today. Instead of individuals playing a role in a grand divine story, it positions the divine as a participant in personal narratives, and the divine is expected to ensure favorable outcomes for the individual. When this does not occur, it can lead to anger and blame. Instead, pastors and leaders can help those who are experiencing *hevel* in life to find hope and peace that God is at present in the comings and goings of the world, including the paradoxes.

Discipleship requires helping those who are deconstructing to invite Jesus into the *hevel*. Jesus knows the paradoxes of our lives and knows first-hand of the injustices and abuse that have plagued human history. Inviting Jesus into the *hevel* reflects the Apostle Paul's insights about the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25:

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than

⁴⁹ Tim Mackie, "Ecclesiastes P1: Hevel," Exploring My Strange Bible Podcast, August 28, 2017.

human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

The good news is a paradox that challenges the minds and hearts of those who look at the world and question where God could possibly be. The paradox of the Gospel is not to be taken lightly nor is it meant to be applied in a simplistic way to our lives. We are invited to allow Jesus to rule and reign in our lives and live in ways that are a paradox to the way things are: to love our enemies and to demonstrate that true power is not demonstrated by physical force or demonstrations of wealth but rather by self-sacrificial love.

Inviting Jesus into the *hevel* of life is also reflected by the story in Mark 9:14-29 where a father of a mute son who is afflicted by a spirit asks Jesus to heal his son. During his interaction with Jesus, he cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" The father wants to believe but the circumstances of his son and the longevity of those circumstances have clearly shaped his response. When ministering to individuals who are deconstructing their faith, it is important to mirror Jesus and allow for responses that seem to contradict themselves. Belief and unbelief are not mutually exclusive but can reside together. Jesus does not condemn the father but actively engages by healing his son. This healing comes after years and years of watching his son struggle through his affliction. There are also others who never received healing during the time of Jesus' ministry. Inviting Jesus into the *hevel* does not mean that everything is going to work out, or all questions will be answered. Instead, *hevel* is about living in his presence and allowing him to sustain us in a world that is unjust and backwards.

Guiding people to invite Jesus into their deconstruction journeys also reveals an important discipleship point for pastors and leaders as well. Pastors encounter *hevel* in both their personal faith and in their vocational ministry contexts. If we are honest as pastors and leaders, each of us has moments where our faith fluctuates, and we live as both believers and unbelievers of what God is doing in

the world. People who are deconstructing their faith are often asking hard questions in good faith. They legitimately want to know if theologies and cultures they have once embraced have led to power structures that have perpetuated abuse, injustice, and hurt. Inviting Jesus into those questions and the process of wrestling through deconstruction may lead pastors to realize that the communities of faith that they are a part of may actually be missing the mark and not living up to the ethics and teachings of Jesus. Embracing members of the community who are deconstructing their faith and want to remain in the church community means listening to their voices and hearing their stories. By inviting Jesus into *hevel*, we can be challenged to deconstruct our own ways of making God fit our stories rather than living in the reality that we play small parts in his cosmic and grand narrative.

By embodying the teachings of *hevel*, the church must embrace an ethic of grace, dignity, and hope. Deconstruction, despite its disorienting dynamics, can also lead to a reconstruction of a more vital, resilient faith. The way of *hevel* reminds us that even when beliefs appear as “vapor,” Jesus continues to abide. Brennan Manning’s words appropriately capture this idea:

When I get honest, I admit I am a bundle of paradoxes. I believe and I doubt, I hope and get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty about not feeling guilty. I am trusting and suspicious. I am honest and I still play games. Aristotle said I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer. To live by grace means to acknowledge my whole life story, the light side and the dark. In admitting my shadow side I learn who I am and what God's grace means.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Multnomah Books: Colorado Springs, 1990), 11.

Conclusion

The rise of faith deconstruction is not a passing trend but a profound theological moment that demands serious attention from Christian communities. As traditional structures are challenged, increasing numbers of individuals are navigating complex spiritual landscapes characterized by doubt, questioning, and a deep hunger for authenticity. This phenomenon represents more than a crisis of belief; it is a critical invitation for the church to see discipleship as a journey of genuine spiritual within historically held theological frameworks.

At the heart of this movement lies a fundamental desire for spiritual spaces that can hold complexity—communities that create room for profound questioning and transformative doubt. The traditional church model, often structured around certainty and unquestioning compliance, has increasingly become disconnected from the lived experiences of those asking thoughtful and honest questions. By not providing spaces that allow for people to meaningfully engage doubt, churches risk marginalizing individuals who are desperately seeking a more authentic relationship with Jesus. Understanding and engaging the concept of *hevel* offers a critical theological lens through which we can begin to reimagine discipleship as a humble process that recognizes the vapor-like, transient nature of human understanding.

Amid faith deconstruction, a key biblical idea remains certain—the need for a peace that transcends all human comprehension. As cherished beliefs and practices are critically examined and broken apart, one can experience deep loss, pain, and anger. Yet Paul's exhortation in Philippians 4:6-7 offers an enduring promise: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” This peace that surpasses understanding appears as a divine salve for those who are battered from their deconstructing journey. When human rationales and traditions prove as fleeting as vapor as echoed in Ecclesiastes

1:2, disciples can find peace in the presence of God. As the Teacher mourns in Ecclesiastes 3:11, “He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” In moments where certainties are dismantled and shattered, we are reminded that the fullness of God's purposes ultimately transcends our finite comprehension. Pastors and leaders must continue to teach others that being a disciple of Jesus means to hold our theological frameworks with humility and open hands.

Faith deconstruction is not something to be feared but rather needs to be engaged with by pastors in an empathetic and life-giving manner. Using the language of *hevel* and engaging with doubt, fear, power structures, and wounding can normalize deconstruction and encourage faith reconstruction. *Hevel* reveals how deconstruction can be part of both the biblical tradition and Church history.⁵¹ Engaging with those who are deconstructing their faith through sermons, pastoral care, and counseling also allows for pastors to sit and listen to the doubts, questions, and critiques of the Bible, theology, and the faith community. These also become opportunities for pastors to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and receive words of knowledge or other insights to care for those in

⁵¹ Swoboda, *After Doubt*, 113. Swoboda offers helpful insights from Dallas Willard about this reality. He states, “These are what Dallas Willard called ‘the hard questions that smother faith.’ Many of these questions are old questions. But what’s new is our inability to sit and be refined by the questions over an extended period of time. Reading the saints of Christian history, we discover how many of them asked the same questions we have—issues of theology, injustice, spiritual difficulties, doubts, even deconstruction. What is different is that they often took an entire lifetime to wrestle with them. Our obsession with the quick fix and immediate response does not permit us to ask the big questions over a long period of time. Patient reflection is gone. Rather than going deep, we go wide. In our fervor to scratch our soul’s itches, we rush to the podcast, YouTube channel, or favorite celebrity to help ease the pain of the unanswered questions. We opt for quick answers to our hard questions rather than hard answers that result from long, difficult, toilsome reflection. We’ve traded the wise for the quick.”

their care. Community groups focused on faith deconstruction can also help people who are looking for a like-minded community. Incorporating teachings and discussion around *hevel* and deconstruction can help participants adopt new language into their vocabulary and create identifiers for feelings they have about their faith.

My hope is that this article contributes to the larger conversation of discipleship approaches to deconstruction by offering *hevel* as a unique lens through which we can understand and engage with those experiencing faith transformation. I have sought to move beyond the often negative and reactive rhetoric surrounding deconstruction within evangelical circles. I encourage pastors and ministry leaders to adopt more nuanced, empathetic approaches when discipling deconstruction. I hope that *hevel* provides an invitation for pastors to reimagine discipleship practices for those navigating the challenging landscape of faith deconstruction. Through the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, I am confident that pastors will continue to carve out spaces that reflect the compassionate heart of Jesus Christ—spaces of genuine understanding, patient listening, and profound love that recognize the deeply personal journey of having a relationship with Jesus.

Is This That? Identity, Traditioning, and the Hoped-for Future of Pentecostalism in North America¹

Eric Lopez, PhD²

ABSTRACT:

Pentecostalism has matured since its pre-WWI context and scholars and practitioners have attempted to tackle challenges of discipleship and traditioning in order to identify and pass on its unique contributions. This article, while no means comprehensive, reviews and categorizes some of these activities and puts them in contact with anthropological and theological insights garnered from scholars of other traditions concerning discipleship and Christian identity. Finally, utilizing these insights, the article analyzes a sermon by Aimee Semple McPherson in order to sketch out important questions Pentecostals and Foursquare in particular can intentionally engage the process of discipleship and traditioning.

Introduction

As Pentecostalism has matured from its pre-WWI context to the present day, Pentecostal scholars and practitioners in North America have been engaged in a process of clarifying distinctives and identifying key theological loci and practices as a means of traditioning their communities and responding to changes in society. This article reviews and categorizes these activities and explores Anthropological and theological insights garnered from the process of discipling. Finally, the article's final section analyzes a sermon by Aimee Semple McPherson as a site where the dynamics of these activities and insights can be observed and used to generate important questions about how Pentecostals and Foursquare

¹ An earlier form of this article was presented as a paper at the 45th Annual Meeting of the Society of Pentecostal Studies.

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specifically can continue to engage in the processes of discipleship and traditioning.

Part One: Identity and Traditioning

To start, I will begin with a brief *sample* of attempts to tackle Pentecostal identity and traditioning from modern theologians and practitioners. This sampling is by no means meant to be an exhaustive review of all relevant literature but nevertheless indicative. I begin with one practitioner deeply embedded in the Foursquare movement.

Sam Rockwell in his PhD work at Fielding University explored the organizational dynamics of traditioning in the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel by doing qualitative research on what he calls the “congruence of denominational identity and ministerial identity.”³ To translate, this means exploring whether there is an identifiable culture across the movement, and if not, how The Foursquare Church could pass on what it means to be Foursquare within the process of leadership and especially ministerial training. One of his three main conclusions was, “it is advisable to nurture a compelling and distinct Pentecostal theological identity by framing a deeper and broader Pentecostal ‘ethos’ and resist a narrowly defined and doctrinaire Pentecostalism.”⁴ Rockwell, in this short phrase, highlights several ways that traditioning happens: the *ethos* of a group *and* the belief systems. *Ethos* in this sense is analogous to culture specifically community or organizational culture. In this case, he favors the *ethos* over a rigid belief system. He suggests the *ethos* be “deeper and broader.”

This work suggests that Pentecostalism, Foursquare in particular, has within its own histories and experience more to draw on than what has tended to be emphasized in its formal processes of

³ Sam Rockwell, *Denominational Identity and Ministerial Identity: Congruence within The Foursquare Church* (PhD diss. Fielding University, 2013).

⁴ Rockwell, *Denominational Identity*, iii.

ministerial training or its more informal passing on of Pentecostal/Foursquare spirituality. It is important to notice that Rockwell does not suggest Pentecostals abandon beliefs but suggests a way of *holding* certain beliefs, and not even beliefs core to historic Christian faith, but beliefs related to being a *Pentecostal* or *Foursquare* Christian. What might also be called denominational or family distinctives. Rockwell's list of a variety of distinctives (e.g., people, practice, purpose, theological and program) within Foursquare confirms this. Among the theological distinctives he lists three: *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues), along with physical healing and present-day miracles although Spirit-baptism is not mentioned alongside speaking in tongues.⁵ Later in the work he suggests deepening "the concept of what it means to be a Holy Spirit-filled person by creating, or at least introducing, a more comprehensive brand of Pentecostal identity."⁶ Rockwell will go on to suggest aspects of worldviews pulled from a variety of Pentecostal authors as well as delineate how denominations function in communicating theological identity to local congregations that could be adopted.⁷ While Rockwell approaches his task from an organizational and systems perspective, he nevertheless is adept at understanding the role of theology and praxis in the formation of ecclesial identity.

In 2017, an anthology of essays edited by Rockwell was published by the Foursquare denomination entitled *Identity Keystone: What Makes Us Foursquare*.⁸ While many of the essays draw upon a broad Pentecostal history and the writing and sermons of Foursquare's founder, Aimee Semple McPherson, there are also

⁵ Ibid., 58.

⁶ Ibid., 91. This includes enlarging "Pentecostal tradition with a richer and more intellectually compelling theology as preparation for the future of the Foursquare church," 91.

⁷ Rockwell, *Denominational Identity*, 93.

⁸ Rockwell, Sam, ed., *Identity Keystone: What Makes Us Foursquare* (Los Angeles: The Foursquare Church, 2017).

other materials drawn upon within the Foursquare movement such as the declaration of faith and a set of historical narratives constructed to locate the keystones within Foursquare's historic practices. Additionally, several of the essays note McPherson's simultaneous identification with and distinction from Pentecostalism as a means of avoiding what she saw to be extremes in other Christian traditions.⁹ Thus, this work emphasizes locating beliefs and practices that are meant to be perpetuated within the movement's own historic practices, beliefs and preaching tradition underscoring both its continuity and distinction with other Pentecostal and Christian groups.

Simon Chan, in his 2000 work entitled *Pentecostal Theology and Christian Spiritual Tradition*, explored how Pentecostals can learn from the broader Church's spiritual tradition stating, "it is when Pentecostals come to see their distinctives as part of a larger tradition that they can preserve them and maintain their integrity."¹⁰ He goes on to highlight several problems faced by Pentecostal communities, one of which is a dogmatism that is similar to evangelical fundamentalism.¹¹ He then identifies *glossolalia* and baptism in the Spirit as Pentecostals' distinguishing marks and explores how the broader Christian tradition may help give a richer and deeper understanding of Pentecostal faith and experience.¹² In this instance, Chan highlights how a richer and deeper faith can be achieved by exploring how the broader Christian tradition might help expand Pentecostal understanding of what he deems to be its own key distinguishing marks. What is noteworthy here is that Chan

⁹ This is especially the case as it related to the issues of *glossolalia* (tongues) understood as *the* initial evidence of the baptism of the Spirit (Aaron Friesen, "Chapter 4 Foursquare's Distinctive Ethos," 82-105), the practice of the gifts of the Spirit/manifestations of the Spirit (Steve Overman, "Chapter 6 Moderation," 132-55) and social action (Leah Payne, "Chapter 2 Integrated Mission. . .," 44-57).

¹⁰ Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and Christian Spiritual Tradition*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11-3.

sees resources *outside* of Pentecostalism as useful to the task of refining Pentecostal identity. This is different than Rockwell who seeks to avoid dogmatism and create a robust *ethos* by looking within the Foursquare tradition or within Pentecostalism.

Theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, in a short piece, notes how difficult it can be to arrive at even a clear answer to the question: what is Pentecostal identity? Similar to Chan and following Walter J. Hollenweger, he suggests the distinctiveness of Pentecostalism or what constitutes its identity is the kind of spirituality it espouses. He argues it is a spirituality centered not on Pneumatology but rather Christology as articulated through the five-fold or full Gospel language common to many early Pentecostal movements. He is referring to the common affirmation of Jesus Christ as Savior, Healer, Baptizer in the Holy Spirit, Sanctifier and Soon-Coming King (cf. Foursquare's version Jesus Christ as Savior, Healer, Baptizer in the Holy Spirit and Soon-Coming King). Kärkkäinen follows the observations of Donald Dayton's *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* and noticeable again is the emphasis on distinctives found in spirituality and theology that distinguish Pentecostal movements from other Christian denominations.¹³

Another significant piece is by theologian Frank Macchia's *Baptized in the Spirit*. His work not only tackles the important question of whether Spirit-Baptism *is* central to Pentecostalism globally but also questions recent work that attempts to pull away from it as a distinctive. Macchia spends most of the second chapter tracking the in-and-outs of not only the diversity of understandings associated with the phrase across North American and Global Pentecostalism but also the ways Pentecostal communities have understood its importance to their identity. He essentially concludes that despite various understandings and recent attempts to move away from it, historically and globally, Spirit-baptism is still a

¹³ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Pentecostal Identity," in *Pentecostals in the 22nd Century: Identity, Beliefs, Praxis*, edited by Corneliu Constantineanu (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 14-22.

central Pentecostal distinctive and advises it should not be so easily abandoned. He argues that to do so means Pentecostals may not have much to offer in ecumenical engagements and agrees that while certain understandings of it should not be made dogmatic, it needs to be broadened and explored as a key theological topic and hermeneutical lens by which Pentecostals can view and accent other Christian theological themes. He then proceeds to do exactly that in the remainder of his book.¹⁴

Finally, there looms in the background a question of the relationship between Pentecostals and Evangelicals. My own experience in Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations or independent church's as well as their educational institutions bears out that many in our communities often assume that Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism are not only interchangeable but often identical. While theologian Amos Yong has done work articulating many areas of Pentecostal theology especially attempting to be attentive to global voices, he revisits questions explored earlier by Donald Dayton concerning the relationship between Pentecostals and Evangelicals.¹⁵ Yong suggests that part of the difficulty of addressing this relationship has to do with the contested nature of the terms "Pentecostal" and "Evangelical" themselves. The significance of his piece in relation to our topic is found in the honest way he portrays how people in each category may or may not want to be identified with one another based on their respective theological views and priorities. It shows why assuming Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism are identical is historically and contextually problematic.

¹⁴ Frank Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit*, 19-60.

¹⁵ Amos Yong, "Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Charismatics: A Difficult Relationship or Promising Convergence?" in *Fuller Magazine*, Issue 2 (2015), 56-59.

Within or Without?

To summarize: I have attempted to note the emphasis of each of the authors I have reviewed so far concerning Pentecostal identity. Some emphasized looking *within* at “what is there” as a kind of anthropological, organizational but mostly descriptive exercise focusing on commonalities while recognizing some variance within Pentecostalism. Others sought to highlight what is distinct about Pentecostalism *in relation to* other Christian traditions and still others sought to explore and expand a key theme or method as a *hoped-for* way of exploring other themes in Christian theology and thus shaping Pentecostal identity. It is noteworthy that these attempts to formulate identity are accomplished by a selected reading of the movement’s past and present, but also by expressing its hoped-for future. At base these are historical and aspirational approaches. I have also noted some of the challenges of determining Pentecostalism’s relationship with modern Evangelicalism. The next section moves on to research done by Colleen Mary Mallon who has looked at the Roman Catholic tradition through an anthropological lens in the hopes of informing the process of traditioning and discipleship. Mallon’s work will be supplemented by the work of Catholic theologian Medi Ann Volpe. My hope is that these will provide language and categories to use in an analysis of a sermon by Aimee Semple McPherson in order to pose probing questions about traditioning and discipleship.

Colleen Mary Mallon’s Work and an Anthropological Study of Traditioning and Discipleship¹⁶

Theologian Colleen Mary Mallon is an Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Aquinas Institute of Theology and a Dominican Sister whose research has focused on discipleship and missions. In her work *An Anthropological Study of Traditioning and*

¹⁶ Colleen Mary Mallon, *Traditioning Disciples: The Contributions of Cultural Anthropology to Ecclesial Identity*, American Society of Missiology Monograph Series 8 (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010).

Discipleship she reviews three main anthropological approaches to religion which she then critiques and supplements with insights from other scholars and critical theories. Her task is to bring to bear anthropological insights on the traditioning and discipleship of Roman Catholics as a means of better interpreting the Christian tradition and its function in Christian discipleship.

Three aspects are important to her understanding of how tradition functions in discipleship which she has adapted from anthropological studies and insights on tradition, ritual and the formation of social identity. The first is “the Christian tradition’s constructed practices of remembrance.” This first idea is looking at a common feature of all individual and communal identity construction. In other words, every person and community has practices that bring to remembrance moments of the past through history, story, and ritual and function as a means of continually shaping identity. This process is common to all individual and communal identity construction.

Secondly, is “the context for exploring provocative polyvalency of its symbol system” which, for the sake of brevity, I will refer to as PPSS. The PPSS is the liminal space where multiple kinds of diverse but nevertheless “harmonious expressions” of Christian discipleship can occur. This hints at the idea that part of the function of the PPSS is to provide Christians examples to aspire toward, inspire, and imitate. While she does not necessarily make this explicit in is nevertheless is entailed in her argument and examples. Translation: Every human community, religious or otherwise, has a range of acceptable and unacceptable ways and examples of both living within that community and making sense of the world through that community’s stories, symbols, and practices. Mallon is exploring the proper context for determining the range of possibilities and limitations for Christian disciples.

Thirdly, there is “the need for a world church to develop a practice of juxtaposed thick description of its various expressions of Christian discipleship, extending and expanding the cultures con-

tributing to theological discourse on Christian revelation.”¹⁷ Translation: There are a lot of Christians in the world and ways that they express their faith practically, theologically, and culturally. If, as a global community, the Church, wants to succeed at discipleship then it ought to strive to have a rich understanding of each other’s expressions within their cultural context and allow them to inform one another’s understanding of the Bible and the theology and practice derived from it.

These three aspects can be seen as an attempt to be attentive to both the sameness and difference inherent in human social identity but also aspects of continuity and discontinuity in social change. Thus, the first two: practices of remembrance and the PPSS focus on how human social identity is formed within contexts where individuals and groups seek to understand how they fit into the drama of human history and how the symbols within their rituals both resonate with that drama but also provide the means of understanding one’s place in the community and the world by marking out the range of acceptable and unacceptable possibilities. The “provocative” part of the definition is meant to register how *within* a system there are both the seeds of harmony and disharmony or continuity and change. Finally, the last aspect is meant to recognize that within any given description of social identity one must attend to “sameness and difference, symmetry and asymmetry, accord and discord, compatibility and incommensurability,” to avoid ignoring or overlooking differences in the name of unity or sameness but also to avoid reductively classifying all cultures as incommensurable and thus providing little to no possibility of community, understanding, or communication between them.¹⁸ Translation: It is important for individual Christians and communities to hold those aspects of their identity that unite them and those which make them distinct from others in a manner that avoids embracing a unity and becomes a

¹⁷ Mallon, *Traditioning Disciples*, 175.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

suffocating uniformity that denies biblically supported diversity or espousing differences that become divisive and deny biblically supported unity.

In the second part of Mallon's book, she focuses on Congar Yves, a Catholic Dominican priest and theologian as a case study to explore the anthropological insights she has uncovered. She hopes to examine Yves' desire to understand "how the requirements of individual discipleship might be applied to the church as an ecclesial community."¹⁹ Congar suggests that ecclesial communities must focus their practical activities of discipleship on three practices: communion, reconciliation and solidarity. In the final third of the book, Mallon integrates directly the insights from the first two parts.

In sum, for Mallon, the Church as a human community must recognize that it constructs practices of remembrance, in other words it is selective in what it remembers. However, in order to avoid the idolatry of thinking they are above historical contingency, they must commit to what she calls the "counterintuitive hermeneutical task" of fostering the "dangerous memory of Jesus."²⁰ This memory of Jesus disallows complacent acceptance of what is and always pulls the community of faith into the future and toward the kingdom of God. Secondly, she suggests that there be a critical process of traditioning which means that the Church, since it engages in a process of selective memory, should choose to remember those things that "nurture the community's self-understanding through a transformative encounter with the Spirit."²¹ This encourages a sense that, while the revelation of Jesus is complete, human understanding is partial and thus must remain open to the transformation of the Spirit to critically engage itself and its tradition to "most effectively communicate the saving Presence of God. . ."²²

¹⁹ Ibid., 223.

²⁰ Ibid., 221-2.

²¹ Ibid., 233.

²² Ibid., 233.

Moreover, for Mallon the PPSS speaks directly to the character of religious traditions and their theological task. Authoritative aspects of a tradition function not only to conserve but also to innovate in new circumstances. In so many words, those aspects of a movement that are seen as authoritative essentially function as a kind of canon. Citing Delwin Brown's work *Boundaries of Our Habitations*, Mallon suggests that, in relation to social identity, canons do not establish unity as much as they "establish the play within which social identity is negotiated."²³ Toward the end of this section she suggests that within the process of traditioning and disciple-making, what should be sought is not sameness or exact uniformity but how individuals and communities resonate the canons of their tradition within their lives.²⁴

Finally, Mallon proposes that the local voices of churches and individual Christians should be given due attention through what she earlier called "juxtaposed thick description." Again, in so many words, this means that Christians be attentive not only to their own context but to other voices because while each voice is contextual it can nevertheless transcend its context and contribute to a range of potential ways in which the canons of a tradition are successfully lived out. Not all attempts will be successful, nor should they be, but this understanding has the potential to avoid both a dogmatic and suffocating uniformity and an anything-goes diversity. An example she gives is the very way communities think about tradition. Mallon suggests that rather than understanding tradition as simply a force that resists change, common in some Christian communities, or tradition as ideology as commonly caricatured in many academic disciplines, tradition, as it actually exists in many human communities, practically serves as a means of

²³ Ibid., 239.

²⁴ Mallon, *Traditioning Disciples*, 241. Mallon gives the example of how the early church saw the relationship between Scripture and the rule of faith noting that "tradition and canon are dialogue partners within ever-changing historical circumstances," 240.

creating culture which is open to connecting new experiences with the past. When aligned with the dangerous memory of Jesus and the transformative power of the Spirit, Christian tradition becomes not just a matter of preserving core truths but a creative means of living out those truths. To use a music metaphor: once one musician learns their scales and modes then they can successfully improvise songs. They now have the tools and skill to create a distinctive style with accents and riffs while nevertheless resonating the key features of a song and resolving dissonant notes.

Mallon's book has clearly brought together an impressive amount of work and given deep interdisciplinary attention to the way in which cultural anthropology, especially that which has looked at religion, can contribute to Christian discipleship. Also, in a way somewhat uncommon to this discipline, she is much more sensitive to the positive roles of theology, authority and an encounter of the presence of God highlighted in her own thick description of Congar Yves' theology. While her study could use some additional refinement and clarification in terminology, as well as more awareness of how various aspects of a person's life play into their identity (intersectionality), her analysis of how tradition functions to shape social identity and how understanding this process is important to making disciples yields helpful insights.

For example, Mallon's insight helps us understand some of the attempts of the earlier works I reviewed. Each author selectively drew upon aspects of either contemporary memory or more distance memory to identify and explore distinctive elements of Pentecostalism in an effort to understand a Pentecostal "canon" or range of play where unity and difference can play out within Pentecostal communities. This practice, as I have said, and Mallon and others have highlighted, is done by every human community and must be done if it is to have recognizable and distinct identity. Some of the earlier authors reviewed highlighted the tensions between doctrinaire and dogmatic approaches and attempted to go beyond them by selecting other memories, either from within Pentecostalism or

from the broader Christian tradition, to produce a more dynamic traditioning. These activities can now be seen as attempts to employ a broader PPSS to avoid calcification or a deadening uniformity. I think this could be furthered by focusing less energy responding to dogmatism and instead proactively looking for and holding out as examples different ways in which people engage their vocation, giftings and context that resonates with the “canons” of the Christian faith, especially those of Pentecostalism and the Foursquare family.

From a practitioners’ perspective, Mallon’s work highlights how tradition and traditioning inspires not only continuity in a community but can also inspire change and imagination. Tradition is more than just content or practices that must simply be parroted or jettisoned in order to achieve renewal or change. This depends not only making use of the vast experiences and “canons” available within Pentecostalism and Christianity in general but also on the work of the Spirit to enliven our imaginations and lives by putting us in the presence of God through those resources and relationships of the faith.

Additionally, Pentecostals can appreciate Mallon’s call to discern by the Spirit how the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ and God’s work through his Son and Spirit can continue to challenge our complacency and comfort by prodding us to be active agents in his already-but-not-yet kingdom. This eschatological feature is especially appealing. As Peter’s sermon implies, from the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 onward, Christians see themselves as already in the last days when God will pour out his Spirit. Pentecostals especially have highlighted how we live in a Spirit-empowered in-between time where Christians are to actively participate in his work.

Dr. Medi Ann Volpe's *Rethinking Christian Identity*²⁵

Catholic theologian Medi Ann Volpe is the Director of Research with the Wesley House at the University of Cambridge. Her study, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, is more theologically oriented than Mallon's but takes seriously aspects present in Mallon's Anthropological analysis of Christian discipleship which are distilled through the work of other authors. In fact, much of what Mallon discusses finds echoes in Volpe's review of fellow theologians and her own account of Christian discipleship. Above all is the necessity of discernment and developing the process of discernment within disciples. For Mallon, this means training disciples how to understand, resonate, and innovate on the basis of the PPSS expressed through the canons of one's tradition, and more broadly Christianity, being attentive to their practices of remembrance through the "dangerous memory of Jesus," the assistance of the Holy Spirit, and listening to voices within the global Church. Yet several pieces of Volpe's study stand out and identify a weakness in the work of several of the key theologians she reviews (Kathryn Tanner, Rowan Williams, and John Milbank and by extension George Lindbeck).²⁶

Sin's Effect on Human Perception and Desire

There are many insights from Volpe's study that are worthy of further exploration, but I want to focus on two. The first insight concerns sin and its effect not just on the human story but its continued effect on human perception and desire. If discernment is a key process to discipleship and Christian identity and it determines how successful we are at living out Christian identity, then one must take seriously how human perception of the ways things are and the

²⁵ Medi Ann Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

²⁶ Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 1-44. This is essentially the function of the first three chapters.

way they are intended to be are shaped or misshaped. Volpe's critique lays bare the problem of modern accounts of Christian formation that do not take seriously the effects of sin on the ability of human beings to exercise discernment. As she labors to point out, many accounts assume Christians or human beings in general will properly judge what is good or bad and pursue the good. Here she draws on an early Christian voice, Gregory of Nyssa, to not only explain the effect of sin on human perception and discernment but also to provide a diagnosis of the problem and trajectories for a prognosis.²⁷ Ultimately, the problem lays with human desire and here it would benefit us to explore this since much of our contemporary framework for conceptualizing desire is reductively cast as a product of sexuality.

For Gregory as for many early Christian ascetics and theologians, desire is basic to human nature. We perceive something, judge it as "good" —a thing of value to engage or possess— and orient our intellectual and bodily activities toward it. Given this definition, desire is not solely or even primarily a function of sexuality but a natural response of creatures who are dependent on things they need, and which often requires them to go outside themselves to live and find fulfillment. Already in Genesis we see this take place. Eve (with Adam at her side) listens to the serpent, perceives the fruit, judges it to be "good" and of value, and they take it to eat it. It is significant that the serpent appeals not to human sexuality but rather to be like God "knowing good and evil." It is also significant that the categories used "it is good for food," "a delight to the eyes" and "to be desired to make one wise" were not inherently evil. Food is to be enjoyed. Beauty is a celebrated feature of none other than God himself, wisdom calls out to fools, and even being like God are all either given (image and likeness of God) or pursued (wisdom) or called for within the framework of God's design. They are not cast exclusively as in and of themselves

²⁷ Ibid.

problematic. What is problematic is the deception that leads Adam and Eve to engage in a prejudiced process of discernment in direct contradiction to God regarding whether an activity (taking and eating the fruit) in reality is good or bad based on their *own* assessment (influenced by a lie), whether it is worthy of their desire (even though forbidden), and how they attain it (mistrusting God and pursuing it instead). It is prejudiced because it calls into question God's intent so that they engage in a re-examination of the value of eating the fruit which already suggests the lie has led to mistrust and suspicion rather than innocuous curiosity. As a result, many early Christian theologians diagnose the problem of the human condition not reductively to the various manifestations of sin nor that human beings have desire but human judgement concerning what is good or bad and the subsequent pursuit of intellectual and bodily desire toward it by means that do not trust God but ignore his instruction.

As a consequence, a main goal of Christian life and discipleship is not just learning about traditions (preeminently Scripture, but also history, doctrine, theology), practicing certain activities (spiritual disciplines, service, imitation, gifts), or seeking memorable experiences (baptism, communion, worship, Spirit-baptism), but creating the relational space with God and others for the transformation and the ultimate transfiguration of the whole human being—body, desire, imagination, and will. Behavioral change from this perspective is not, by itself, enough to shape Christian identity and bring about genuine discipleship. Such change must be rooted and sprout from the redirection of desire toward those things that are pleasing to God and that desire then turned into sustained and embodied mindsets and disciplines in everyday life.²⁸

²⁸ For Volpe, this is the role of tradition and especially doctrine and Scripture. It is to shape and mold the imagination so as to reorder desire and encourage proper discernment concerning God's will—what is good and pleasing from God's perspective. Doctrine and Scripture assist in the purification of the soul and therefore allow one to see things as they really are. This encourages hope. Volpe discusses this role of doctrine and Scripture in Gregory of Nyssa

The only way to redress the problem of prejudiced discernment is reorienting human attention, trust and desire on God by the Spirit. This allows believers to discern things as they truly are and pursue them in a manner pleasing to the God who has created all. Only a surface treatment of the human condition is satisfied to point out sin and believes more strongly stated commands or laws will rectify its disease. Sin must be continually brought to our awareness and struggled against to be successful at discipleship. This means attention, trust, and desire must be healed which requires both an unknowing of old ways of perceiving, knowing, and judging and a continual redirection of attention and desire toward those things that God desires (loving God above all, then neighbor, and enemies).²⁹ This sets the stage for reshaping the imagination, memory, proper discernment, and the will. Tradition (Scripture and doctrine), practices, and experiences are valuable because they assist in creating space for the presence of God to make sense of and allow one to live within and from this transformation. The irony of the Genesis story is that Adam and Eve ultimately reach for something they already had in God himself or in their relationship with him: truth, provision, beauty, wisdom, and his likeness.

Identity as Gift and Discipleship as Active Reception

Secondly and as hinted at above, Volpe highlights positive aspects of modern and ancient theologians which recognize that much of human and Christian identity is not something we create solely by means of human striving but rather is received as a gift and is shaped

(*Rethinking Christian Identity*, 183-221) and then in relation to modern formation of Christian identity and discipleship (*Rethinking Christian Identity*, 222-241).

²⁹ More could be said here concerning the how doctrines concerning the incomprehensibility of everything about God and his infinity create everlasting desire within the human heart that will sustain human attention and desire throughout eternity. One of the many images Gregory uses to depict this can be seen in his interpretation of the Song of Solomon and the imagery of the bride's pursuit of the bridegroom. See Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 200-207.

by grace.³⁰ Thus, another key aspect of discipleship and an area of discernment is actively receiving, exploring, and responding to this gift and God's grace. This is in contrast to a contrived striving, grasping or proving to oneself or others what one already has in Christ or pursuing things by means that do not follow the law of Christ (love) in response to the Spirit.

Volpe broadens the scope of the voices listened to concerning the topics discussed by including the early church and historic Christian theologians (Gregory of Nyssa) which demonstrates an important way the PPSS can be enriched. This move is significant since reducing the PPSS to contemporary voices has the liability of historical and cultural myopia which can lead to an anemic personal or corporate identity. Additionally, she is much more sensitive to both the communal and individual responsibilities of discipleship and correlates this not only with discernment but with addressing what often hinders good discernment—disordered desire resulting in sin. Finally, her study also deals with the often inherent yet problematic assumption within discipleship that construction of Christian identity will just happen.

Her work can be extended to a robust critique that confronts any process of human development or discipleship that assumes, believes, or asserts that human identity or Christian formation is *purely* a human endeavor managed and curated as a means of self-creation or reduced to a technology, psychology, or social science. This critique should not be interpreted as a stricture against intentionality in strategy or responsiveness nor as an out of hand rejection of technology, psychology, or social sciences but a recognition that the most important aspects of Christian identity are a gift that await discovery and expression through a process of Spirit-empowered discernment and life.

Additionally, it is a critique that challenges the temptation to treat human identity and Christian formation individually or com-

³⁰ Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 113-117, 123-130.

munally as a mechanism made efficient and perfected through social engineering rather than an intentional yet messy and sometimes unpredictable interaction between God and human beings. This highlights perhaps a third insight she garners from Rowan Williams concerning “spending time.” If hurry is the disease of our age, impatience is a correlative dis-ease in Christians, churches, and their leaders. Discipleship of individuals and communities takes relational space and time to truly form human beings. The possession or development of discernment cannot be assumed but must be intentionally developed and by necessity has a relational quality. It is a continual process, ultimately an interplay—initiated by God—of divine-human response (personal and communal) that shapes the desires and practices of the entire human person. As Volpe points out scriptural examples and stories of other Christians often show us that discipleship entails struggle and failure even while developing faithfulness and hope.³¹ Human beings and human community only mature and are fruitful when one consistently walks and is led by the Spirit, and these take intentional time to develop within a historic and present community.

Part Two: *Is this That?*

In the latter part of this piece, I will first give an overview of the flow and dynamics of one of Aimee Semple McPherson’s sermons and connect her portrayal of the Pentecostal movement in it to aspects of Mallon’s and Volpe’s analyses. My ultimate goal is to use this work to incite curiosity and exploration about how Pentecostals not only determine their identity but also how they might tradition themselves.

³¹ Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 237-241.

McPherson's "Death in the Pot"³²

McPherson's sermon, "Death in the Pot," like other early Pentecostal sermons, is strikingly similar not only in how it explicates what could be deemed as the plain sense of Scripture but also the way in which the scriptural text, really the scriptural world, is used to create a rich set of intertextual relationships and metaphors through which biblical truths are explored, contextualized, and applied to the audience. In this sermon, she attempts to locate Pentecostalism in relation to other traditions while also dealing with internal and external criticism.

McPherson's sermon is a complex set of metaphors and literary connections woven together in order to fit the Pentecostal Movement into salvation history for the sake of dealing with real tensions she is experiencing in her context. To do this, several scenes from the Bible are used. The primary text is 2 Kings 4:38-41 where Elisha arrives at Gilgal amidst the sons of the prophets and performs a miracle in the midst of a famine or "dearth." He commands that a great pot be put on a fire and vegetables be thrown in. However, someone finds a wild vine and deposits wild gourds into the pot without anyone's knowledge. After the porridge is served, they cry out there is "death in the pot!" Elisha tells them to pour it back into the pot, commands meal to be mixed in and then reserves it. As a result, there is no longer "harm in the pot."

McPherson's preaching cycles through this text several times and in every cycle she correlates historical events, places, and actions to the story in order to draw out themes and practical insights. McPherson's initial review is of Old Testament history and focuses on stories surrounding the city of Gilgal. She starts with the Israelites arrival from the wilderness to the Promise Land in Joshua 5 where in a previous event at Gilgal the Lord appeared to Joshua as

³² Aimee Semple McPherson, "Death in the Pot," in *This is That: Personal Experiences, Sermons and Writing of Aimee Semple McPherson* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009; originally published by Los Angeles: Echo Park Evangelistic Association, 1923), 745-60.

Captain of the Host. Samuel and his anointing of Saul then enters the picture from 1 Samuel 10:6-9. This time Gilgal is where Saul is meant to “tarry” until 1) the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him, 2) with signs which will, 3) turn him into a new man. A few transitionary statements show how this story as well as the other references to Gilgal will then connect with Acts 2:

What a wonderful type of Pentecost! Later Samuel said to the people:

“Come, let us go to GILGAL and renew the kingdom there,” even as the early apostles had returned to Jerusalem for fresh anointings of the Spirit.³³

These Gilgal stories are used to narrate Israelite history, but eventually she returns to 2 Kings and the dearth in the land which intimates a cold, lukewarm and backslidden state of affairs among God’s people. The same references to Gilgal now serve to help narrate the history of the New Testament up to Acts 2. Jesus is Captain of the Host and the days of Samuel and Saul are seen as the days just previous to Pentecost where the apostles tarry for the Holy Spirit. This part of the sermon quickly builds and there is a comparison of the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles in which the Israelites’ double journey through the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan are connected to the apostles’ experience of salvation and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This section of the sermon climaxes in the recognition of a general truth for all humanity: neither salvation nor the baptism of the Holy Spirit is accomplished by human effort but rather by the Lord.³⁴

In the next section, she continues her narrative of salvation history, now reviewing the days after the disciples and apostles up

³³ Ibid., 746.

³⁴ Ibid., 747-48.

to her own day. A brief fall narrative is given of the early Church that is interrupted with quotations from Joel 2 about former and latter rain and the pouring out of the Spirit in the last days.³⁵ The implication is that Acts 2 is the former rain but there remains another downpour. Revisiting the 2 Kings text, the promise of Joel 2 is aligned with the arrival of Elisha who comes again to Gilgal where he observes the great dearth. This time the “dearth” is the absence of the old-time power just before the years 1905 and 1906 when the Church and the saints were crying out. The Church and the saints for McPherson are not just those at Azusa Street but a broad swath of Christians including Methodists, the Salvation Army, Holiness movements and many others who “sang and prayed.” She interjects that many did not recognize the answer God gave to these cries, much like the unexpected coming of the Lord as a baby in the manger. Yet God did answer, and here she reiterates how this fits Joel’s description of God’s response of blessing to the people’s desire and devotion.³⁶

Elisha’s coming to Gilgal in the midst of the dearth is again correlated with the 120 disciples in Acts 2 but now also with the hungry saints of various traditions during her day. Elisha’s command to set up a great pot invites additional historical and metaphorical interpretation. The Holy Spirit is the fire, and the wood is the prayer and praise of the Christians of her era. The pot is the *entire* Pentecostal movement and the hungry saints each bring a contribution to the pot.³⁷

In the next section, the metaphor is extended even further, and this time focus is laid on the pot and what it contains as a means of recognizing the great variety now feeding into the movement. As she states:

³⁵ Ibid., 748.

³⁶ Ibid., 748.

³⁷ Ibid., 748-49.

Perhaps there is not another movement on earth made up of such a varied assortment of teachings, creeds and organizations, yet all melt and blend into one when put into the WATER of the Word and boiled over the fire of the Holy Spirit.³⁸

Just like the Pentecost of old led to the immediate conversion of thousands of people so, “with lightning rapidity the Pentecostal revival has encircled the world; thousands and thousands of hungry souls have been filled with the Spirit.”³⁹

What is striking up to this point is not the restorationist attitude common not only to Pentecostals but many Protestants, nor the latter rain theology but the manner in which she characterizes history, Pentecostalism, and other traditions. Clearly, McPherson is narrating a selective history, akin to Mallon’s selected practices of remembrance. McPherson narrates not only victory but also failure on the part of God’s people; a pattern she sees play out in the Old and New Testaments, in the Ancient Church, and in the events closer to her own day. The victories are not simply military (Joshua 5) but instances of dynamic divine action. By focusing on Gilgal and seeing it as a place that serves as a type of encounter with God, she approximates a significant aspect of traditioning highlighted by Mallon which was to remember in such a way as to value the transformative presence of the Holy Spirit.

There is some subtlety in her narration of history though. Rather than paint all other contemporary movements as apostate they are cast as hungry, crying out, and even contributing to the Pentecostal pot. Again, while in the next section she notes a cooling of the old-time faith and power, her stronger accusation of apostasy and falling away is removed to the distant past in Church history. There is a clear recognition of the diversity of Christian streams and

³⁸ Ibid., 749.

³⁹ Ibid., 749-50.

that they have contributed to Pentecostalism. There is also a kind of unity based on a desire and expectation that is then transformed into a great stream that is “as though they had never been divided,” “a great flame of love and devotion.”⁴⁰ This unity is brought about by the Word and the Holy Spirit transforming the variety of distinct gifts (vegetables) into “a rich, nourishing food, whose appetizing and inviting fragrance was wafted to all about upon the vapor of praise and testimony which arises from the dancing, joyful mixture within.”⁴¹ This is significant. It is not just the desire and devotion for unity that makes the diversity brought to the pot a rich and nourishing “praise and testimony” but desire and devotion to Christ and a transformation of the offered diversity through the Word and Spirit.

In her next section, she extends the metaphor of the Pot and its contents further by including an imagined dialogue between someone guarding the pot and one of the “endless procession of people” who come to bring their contributions to it.⁴² She then follows a repeating pattern of question and answer. The questions are, in so many words, “Who are you?” and “Where do you come from?” Once these are satisfactorily answered the last question is essentially, “What do you bring?” The first three contributors; the Methodist, the Baptist and the Salvationist, are given focused attention and contain aspects that are unique to each movement such as specific teachings.⁴³ Yet another common theme comes to the fore: while each has a unique contribution based on their own experiences of faith and God’s power; they eventually experienced a kind of limitation, stagnation, or had resorted to human means of achieving divine goals.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 749.

⁴¹ Ibid., 749.

⁴² Ibid., 750-55.

⁴³ Ibid., 750-53.

After these first three, others are named but only in brief, many being reminded of the faith and power their movements once experienced as a result of smelling the pot. Finally, toward the end of this section is the Sinner who is encouraged to eat of the Pot.⁴⁴

The Fire of the Spirit, the Water of Life, the Meat of the Word, and Salt produce a change so that walls created as a result of differences, creeds and forms are forgotten and praise bursts forth in love. She ends the section,

Then as the fire still continues to burn and the pot to boil, each vegetable and fruit, in melting, has lost its own identity and has so united and merged itself into the other broken melting hearts round about it, that 'tis hard to realize they ever were divided.⁴⁵

The latter part of the sermon revisits the 2 Kings narrative and highlights a character who goes to the field to gather herbs and gourds from a wild vine. His contribution, however, is no good and there ensues a cry that there is death in the pot.

McPherson riffs off this cry to highlight the internal and external challenges of the Pentecostal movement.⁴⁶ She revisits the earlier rhetorical form of question and answer to explore the man in the 2 Kings narrative. She casts him as deceptive, seeking to deposit poisonous gourds which she calls variously “False Teaching,” “Error,” “Doctrinal Issues,” “Lover of Power and Recognition,” “Self-Righteousness,” “Formality,” “Preconceived Ideas and Teaching,” “Fear of Manifestations,” “Flesh,” “Fanaticism,” “Lack of Brotherly Love,” “False Reports,” “Harsh Criticism,” and “Tale Bearing.”⁴⁷ Even though there is an attempt to stop him, he evades

⁴⁴ Ibid., 753-54.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 754-55.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 755-58.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 756.

capture and deposits his gourds in the pot and thus, once again, ensues the cry. Turning now to her audience, McPherson connects this to the Pentecostal movement. Men and women, she says, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly bring these horrors into the movement thus leading to cries to throw out the whole thing. She gives several examples of such gossip and alarmist responses and rebuts them with further examples of when something was mostly good but undue focus is put on aspects that are bad.⁴⁸

She returns now to the imagined scene and points to someone who comes quickly to the pot bringing a sack of meal which correlates again with the Word of God. She connects this with Elisha's command to bring meal and put it in the pot so that it can become edible. Finally, she returns to addressing her audience directly calling on them to imitate Elisha. Rather than toss the whole pot out and leave those with "empty plates and hungry faces" with nothing to eat, she encourages that they test actions and words with the Word of God, , admonishing that "instead of being the one who cries 'there is death in the pot,' be an Elisha with a sack of meal; receive Ye the Holy Ghost; let God make you to measure up to the Word."⁴⁹

There is much in this sermon that reflects McPherson's own time. There are the aforementioned restorationist and latter rain attitudes. An anemic understanding of the early Church reflected in her short fall narrative of apostasy and eventually a mild critique of each movement that she reviewed suggesting that each had at some point and for some reason ceased to experience the faith and power of old—meaning that faith and power seen in the New Testament. Despite these features, her understanding of the spiritual origins of the Pentecostal movement is that it is not the result of a break from or fissure within a previous movement nor something completely new but rather a movement that was the result of the prayers, praise

⁴⁸ Ibid., 756-58.

⁴⁹ McPherson, "Death in the Pot," 758-59.

and expectations of other traditions. Each of these other traditions brought not only their own unique contributions but also their longing for a faith and power, akin to the NT, that each possessed at one time but was eventually lost. This longing resulted in divisive forms of difference and cold forms of uniformity being transformed by the Holy Spirit and the Word into praise and ultimately love. Pentecostalism thus was not a break in tradition and is not necessarily a break with the “canons” of other Christian movements but an opportunity for renewal through an encounter with the God that had already broken into their experience. Earlier, I described how Mallon recognized that traditioning includes delimiting space for diversity and unity to play out within the canons of a tradition. Additionally, Volpe’s discussion of desire and Mallon’s work help make sense of how disordered desires expressed through the divergent visions of doctrine and practice could be transformed when a more powerful longing for God’s dynamic power and life interrupted it. Pentecostalism in McPherson’s eyes recognizes the availability of God’s Spirit as renewal and empowerment to all regardless of Christian tradition and regardless of all the categories listed in Joel 2 and yet resonates with each movement’s desire and longing for a renewed encounter with God. As McPherson highlighted and as the spread of Pentecostalism and Charismatic spirituality throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century has showed, this availability had and has global significance.

Also noteworthy is the last section of the sermon where she calls her audience to active participation and discernment. This idea is an extension of something she echoes throughout the sermon, the interplay of the Spirit and the Word. More work would need to be done to understand whether she is appealing in parts of the sermon to the activity of the Spirit and the Word—meaning the Son—Jesus Christ or to the Word as Scripture or both. Regardless, the idea that it is the activity of the Spirit with the Word that takes the unique contributions of each movement and brings them into a unity of worship is notable because it highlights unity can be understood as

a transformative gift. It is not just a matter of human exertion, ingenuity, and technology but a work of God responding to longing prayer and actively bringing one's gifts, experience, and difference into the presence of God.

Toward the end of the sermon and in light of the internal and external criticisms and struggles the Pentecostal movement experienced, McPherson exhorted her audience to experience the Holy Spirit and exercise discernment utilizing the Word which in this case clearly indicates Scripture. Her call is to align with God through direct experience but also to exercise discernment utilizing the external and normative authority of Scripture simultaneously. This call for recognizing that discernment is something that must be exercised intentionally especially in the heat of internal and external criticism echoes Volpe's study that good discernment is not automatic. Instead, good discernment requires attention to personal and communal desire and repentance in the presence the Holy Spirit and in light of the story of the Scriptures in order to produce wisdom rather than rash response.

This call, it seems to me, is an unobserved and a theologically underdeveloped aspect of Pentecostal lived reality. From the beginning of their movements, Pentecostals were required to exercise discernment not only because of impulses from within the movement but also because of concerns from without (i.e., other Christian and non-Christians). In the midst of anticipating direct experience of dynamic divine action and empowerment, there were simultaneous calls for and invitations made for discernment. This has meant that Pentecostals have had to participate in a kind of appreciative inquiry and interpretive activity that may not have been as critical and self-aware as was necessary to calm criticisms but was nevertheless present. It is surprising that this aspect of Pentecostal life has not made the list as a central distinctive or at least a corollary distinctive to Spirit-Baptism and the spiritual gifts. Such an emphasis on this distinctive might give space for further theological and practical reflection highlighting the need for critical

engagement, self-awareness, and encouraging an openness to dealing with the complexities of spiritual authority with the goal of service and love rather than the extremes of authoritarian leadership and facile obedience or deconstruction, fault-finding, and grandstanding criticism. Additionally, reframing intellectual development and even the pursuit of education as acts of sharpening one's discernment for the purpose of service, love and transformation rather than just attaining information or positional qualification may have the double benefit of helping break barriers of anti-intellectualism within our churches and provide a basis for what many educational institutions now recognize is necessary for producing good students—holistic formation.

McPherson hints at how previous Christian identities were built on separation based on forms, creeds and differences but in turn these were lost in favor of a passionate expectation and fulfillment that culminated in the experience of renewed faith and power. Pentecostalism, then, like Pentecost was fulfillment not simply restoration. In this sermon, the Pentecostal movement was not a split with some previous tradition over doctrine or practice nor based solely on an emphasis on Spirit-baptism but was the result of God's answer to the expectation of faithful Christians from a variety of movements seeking renewal. This expectation that God would pour out his Spirit on all and usher in a renewed faith and power as lived daily experience is at the center of her understanding of the Pentecostal movement.

While McPherson observes that many traditions united in prayer and desire for the old-time faith and power, such unabated unity would not last the increased scrutiny and criticism that followed the early days of Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism in North America would eventually be affected by the same ills of society and fundamentalist evangelicalism—ethnocentrism, racism, classism, cultural retreat, and an expansive theological dogmatism in reaction to classic liberalism. Yet as Yong's earlier comments hint at, Pentecostals have rarely fit comfortably within evangelicalism

even after their acceptance by moderate evangelicals in the 1940s and 50s exactly because of those areas that seemed to characterize its pursuits—the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Spirit-baptism, and an unwillingness to disallow anyone from receiving and utilizing them for ministry.⁵⁰ The Charismatic movement, along with some Holiness examples, displays the appeal Pentecostal expectation and spirituality has enjoyed and demonstrates additional paths opened by Pentecostal movements and denominations. Likewise, the expectation that God would supernaturally and dynamically renew and empower his people understandably has had great appeal to non-Western cultures which, unlike Western cultures, are not predisposed to treat the sacred, supernatural, or divine activity as ahistorical, myth, and superstition.

McPherson is then, in one sense, a product of her time, yet her understanding of how the Pentecostal movement relates to other traditions is not a straightforward narrative of how other traditions categorically failed or that nobody got it right until Pentecostals arrived to supersede everyone after Azusa Street. Rather it recognized the contribution of other movements and how Pentecostalism fulfilled many expectations and prayers.

⁵⁰ The history of Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism is not nearly as simple as is often understood. Modern Evangelicalism is sometimes portrayed as starting with the Reformation because of the use of the title “evangelical” to by early Reformers. While there is some theological continuity between them, the history of modern Evangelicalism as a movement is more properly seen as sourced in the Second Great Awakening. Additionally, the terms “traditional,” “fundamentalist” and “conservative” are often used interchangeably but this would not hold in every case. This would be similar to assuming classical liberalism, neo-liberalism, and post-liberalism are interchangeable because of *some* common features. It does not help that these terms, in addition to ecclesial and theological standings, also connote moral, political, and economic views which may often be identified or coalesce around theological categories but not always or even uniformly. To presume as much would be to ignore the diversity present within the movements and persons of Evangelical and Pentecostal communities.

McPherson's sermon demonstrates other features that Mallon highlights in her work. Firstly, McPherson attempted to create a way of understanding how the Pentecostal movement can be understood in relation to 2 Kings, church history, and her own historical context. The very manner in which she preaches her sermon is a demonstration of PPSS and how she draws on a vast set of biblical symbols and historical events to set the stage for how her audience ought to understand the Pentecostal movement, and how it ought to go forward in the midst of internal and external criticism. Secondly, she highlights the range of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors discussing not only a doctrinal and practical range but also an affective range. The latter is expressed in the aspiration and desire of folks from various traditions' expectant prayers and desire for the "old-time power." It is important to notice also how the Scriptures are not used as a reference book in her sermon, nor provides "steps" or "points" in an attempt to deal with common modern anxieties although attentive listeners would surely walk away with practical action (Be an Elisha!). Instead, her engagement with Scripture provides the narrative space within which McPherson interprets the Pentecostal movement and how to respond to internal and external challenges. While modern biblical interpreters may cringe at some of the connections she makes, her approach is not so distant from imaginative and intertextual approaches to reading and applying the Bible and demonstrates how the biblical narrative affects change by inviting listeners into its universe to meditate and develop wisdom rather than requiring it answer all our questions directly.

Likewise, McPherson recognizes, as does Volpe, the reality of sin and challenges within both Christian history and within Pentecostal circles. In this sermon, she does not explore whether she sees this an indication of inevitable decline (e.g., organizational decline), but suggests that the way forward is active participation ("be an Elisha") by all, by means of the Word ("with a sack of meal) and the Spirit (be ye baptized) to discern the various personalities, theologies, and activities at play in her context. Her phrase, "let God

make you to measure up to the Word” seems to suggest that despite this call for active participation there is also a yielding to transformative divine activity.

Postlude

This section raises issues about formulating Pentecostal identity and traditioning. Rather than review what I have already said I would like to conclude by positing a set of questions and observations. As it relates to Pentecostal identity, McPherson’s sermon raises interesting horizons for how Pentecostals can understand themselves beyond simply appealing to doctrinal or even practical differences with other traditions.

What does one make of her understanding that there are unique contributions of other movements to the Pentecostal pot? And that a kind of unity of devotion and expectation can take those diverse contributions, offer them to God, and by means of the Spirit and Word, they can be transformed it into a glorious and robust mixture of testimony and praise? Is this perhaps what fed her distinctive emphasis on interdenominational evangelism within the Foursquare movement? More broadly, what does it mean for Pentecostals to tradition themselves in light of this understanding? Could it mean that what is passed on are practices and doctrinal understandings that focus on giving space and time to the unique contributions or character of other traditions while also encouraging the desire expressed through devotion, expectation and openness to transformation, renewal, and empowerment framed as a fulfilment of Joel 2 and a reenactment of Act 2? Can this be explored in a manner that takes seriously the insights of Volpe’s study concerning the nature of Christian formation, identity, sin, and the transformation of desire? Is this how Pentecostalism can go beyond itself and resonate with the canons of other traditions while also establishing its own? Can all of this be captured by the Spirit-Baptism and *glossolalia* rubrics? Is part of Pentecostalism traditioning this openness and invitation, a kind of co-laboring in prayer and

expectation for salvation, trans-formation, and empowerment? Does this mean that Pentecostalism not only has a means of making room for thick descriptions of voices within their own movements but also from other traditions that have different ways of going about things?⁵¹ Does this mean that not only do other Christian traditions then “lose their identity” as they melt into praise, love and devotion but Pentecostals must be willing to lose forming their identity on distinctives that separate them rather than invite others?

If forming Christian identity and discipleship depends on historical narratives that are by nature selective, how do Pentecostals do so intentionally and responsibly? How can the dangerous memory of Jesus empowered by the dynamic work of the Spirit help bring renewal into our experience? How are we taking time with the resources of our faith to shape individuals and communities intentionally and not simply for ministerial preparation?

Finally, if as McPherson’s narrates, every movement has had their own experience of faith and power but eventually reaches an impasse, what does that mean for Pentecostalism as it enters its second century of existence? Do Pentecostals pretend there is not a similar liability for their denominations and movements or is there a kind of eschatological hope that can help sustain, renew, and transform them? In McPherson’s terms, can and in what way can Pentecostalism continue to be that which was spoken of by the prophet Joel:

⁵¹ A work by Pentecostal theologian Wolfgang Vondey, which I do not have the space to review, hints in this direction, essentially proposing that Pentecostalism has at once a means of giving space to a global theology and also going beyond itself. See, Wolfgang Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism: The Crisis of Global Christianity and the Renewal of the Theological Agenda*, Pentecostal Manifestos (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010). Amos Yong the editor in which Wolfgang’s work appears also explores these themes, see Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Baker Academic, 2005).

And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and daughters will prophesy . . . and upon my servants and my handmaidens I will pour out, in those days, of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.⁵²

Pastoral Summary

Contemporary Pentecostals have attempted to tackle the challenges of discipleship and traditioning in order to see Pentecostalism's unique contributions continue into the future. These attempts have focused on identifying practices and beliefs observable in their past, or in relation to other Christian traditions. Helpful studies in theology and social anthropology show how the process of Christian formation and discipleship requires intentional and sober reflection on not only the sources of our faith (Scripture, history, practices, traditions) but on human desire and the realities of sin on our relationships and ability to discern God's will. A sermon by Aimee Semple McPherson serves as an example of how these various approaches and insights can be seen and raises specific questions intended to help us think more intentionally about Pentecostal traditioning.

⁵² McPherson, *This is That*, iii.

Discipleship: Is Our Model Complete?

Sam Dobrotka, PhD

Abstract: In this article, the current state of church-based discipleship is examined and a brief history for how we arrived at this point is provided. The Hagberg-Guelich six-stage model for discipleship is examined, particularly stages 4-6, which are not usually part of most contemporary discipleship models. A new working model that incorporates the Foursquare Global Council's Discipleship and Leadership Training (DLT) discipleship framework with the Hagberg-Guelich model is proposed.

Introduction

Like many in our movement, I came to Foursquare later in life. I grew up in, and was ordained by another Pentecostal tradition, so the transition was fairly easy to make theologically. There were a few governance and polity elements to work through, but, all in all, I am very glad to be part of this faith family. One aspect of our movement I found to be awkward was our name. For the past 50+ years, the label of 'square' has not been a positive one. A 'square' person is considered socially awkward and/or out-of-touch with contemporary standards. As with many words in the English language, meanings and usage change over time. Such is the case with Foursquare. Back in the day, Foursquare had a completely different meaning: "that which is equally balanced on all sides, established and enduring."¹ Thus, Sister Aimee and other leaders at the time considered our movement as representing a balanced, complete Gospel: Foursquare. I like that. That being said, while our Gospel—Jesus as Savior, Healer, Baptizer, and Soon-Coming King—is complete and lacks nothing, I am not so sure the same can be said for our typical working model of discipleship.

¹ "What We Believe," Foursquare Church, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.foursquare.org/about/beliefs/>.

To be fair, this is not just a Foursquare issue. Nor is it just a Pentecostal one. It is my position that, across denominational lines, a new working model for discipleship is needed. I must also acknowledge the significant efforts of many within our movement who are already working hard to address this issue. For example, a 2015 Global Council assessment identified four areas within Foursquare that needed improvement, one being “the need to get better at strategically making disciples.”² The resulting Discipleship and Leadership Training (DLT) seminars resulted in the identification and implementation of a discipleship framework that includes both formal (program) and informal (personal) means of discipleship. But even within this framework the question remains, what should the discipleship process look like at the local church level? It is at this level that I believe we need a new model—the way we organize our thoughts and actions around the concept of discipleship.

Discipleship. One would be hard-pressed to find a Foursquare pastor or church leader today who does not have discipleship front of mind. While the same is probably true for most pastors in other Christian traditions, Pentecostal traditions like Foursquare have found discipleship embedded in its DNA from the beginning.³ At the same time, when one asks, “What does discipleship look like?” the conversation becomes somewhat mottled. The difficulty begins with the fact there are two perspectives of discipleship. The first vantage point gives attention to the *individual*. Every Christ-follower is called to a life-long journey of discipleship.⁴ Associated with this perspective is the understanding that the individual is responsible for how they live as a disciple of Jesus.⁵ The second

² Gary Matsdorf, “Discipleship and Leadership Training,” *Pentecostal Education*, 8, No. 2 (Fall 2023), 187.

³ Aimee Semple McPherson, *The Holy Spirit* (Chaplain Publishing Company, 1931).

⁴ Matthew 9:9; Mark 1:17; John 21:22 (New International Version, 2011).

⁵ J. M. Boyce, *Christ’s Call to Discipleship* (Kregel Publications, 1986).

vantage point of discipleship gives attention to the *disciple-maker*. Jesus fully expected his followers to make disciples after he left them and returned to heaven.⁶ And that *Great Commission* has continued to this day. Over the past 2,000 years, significant time, energy, and resources have been expended across the Christian continuum for the purpose of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

The distinction between these two perspectives is important and both will be discussed in greater detail later. For now, attention is given primarily to the disciple-maker, collectively referred to as the Church. How, then, should the Church understand the disciple-making process? While many definitions of discipleship are helpful, the overly simplistic, yet focused words of Waggoner will serve as the impetus for this article. Discipleship is understood as “a deliberate process of moving Christians forward spiritually.”⁷

Moving Christians Forward Spiritually. Burggraff posited the Church in the U.S. has not been doing well in this regard.⁸ As evidence, he cited three concerns. First, there appears to be a decline in biblical literacy among Christ-followers. They are not able to think biblically about life, especially in the face of adversity. Second, there appears to be an exodus of Christ-followers from our churches. Rather than embracing Christian community found within a local church, they prefer to live out their faith independently. And third, there appears to be an acceptance of inactivity among far too many Christians. They have not developed the appropriate behaviors reflective of someone committed to the lifelong pursuit of Jesus Christ. Individually, each concern is troubling. Together, these three

⁶ Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:19-23; Acts 1:4-8.

⁷ Brad J. Waggoner, *The Shape of Faith to Come: Spiritual Formation and the Future of Discipleship* (B & H Publishing Group, 2008), 14.

⁸ Andrew Burggraff, *How Did the Early Church Disciple New Believers?* (Shepherds Theology Seminary, n.d.). <https://shepherds.edu/how-did-the-early-church-disciple-new-believers/>. Accessed on Sept. 28, 2024.

concerns present a bleak picture of the current state of discipleship taking place (or not taking place) within American churches today.

While Burggraff was speaking to the broader evangelical Church, personal observation and experience suggest his assessment is applicable to Foursquare churches, as well.⁹ For many pastors and leaders, the recent COVID pandemic and the current social and political environment forced us to accept that many of the people in our churches we thought were spiritually mature were not. People gave every appearance of being a mature Christ-follower, but their true spiritual maturity (or lack thereof) emerged when pressure was applied. As pointed out by Kinnaman and Matlock, “We’ve done well making disciples for good times, but less so disciples who are resistant to difficulties, turmoil, and chaos.”¹⁰

There is also growing empirical evidence to support Burggraff’s assessment. Packard and Hope concluded that spiritually mature church members and ministry leaders have become the fastest growing demographic leaving churches today—the *de-churched*.¹¹ Surprisingly, they concluded their results were not influenced by the participant’s theological alignment. Whether mainline or Pentecostal, the dechurched are not leaving faith, but rather, they are choosing to leave the organization. These leaders had given much of their lives to service within the local church. What Packard and Hope discovered, however, was that they were active and involved because their activity was “central to their pursuit of God. They didn’t know any other way to be a Christian.”¹² Barna and Kinnaman similarly discovered that the manner in which

⁹ I had the privilege of serving as the Assistant Supervisor in the former Southeast District a few years back. This role gave me a unique perspective of the pastors and churches within the District, as well as of numerous churches in other Districts.

¹⁰ D. Kinnaman and M. Matlock. *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Baker Books, 2019).

¹¹ J. Packard and A. Hope. *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People are Done with Church but not their Faith* (Group, 2015).

¹² Packard and Hope, *Church Refugees*, 21.

churches engage their members can inadvertently lead them to “stall out on their journey toward deep, transformative faith.”¹³

An Historical Progression of Organizational Disciple-Making

The current state of affairs for discipleship is quite surprising since the collective Church, particularly in the U.S., has not lacked for discipleship content. For decades, discipleship resources have been available to help churches make disciples of Jesus Christ. That being the case, how did we get here? Before addressing the question, we must first acknowledge the disreputable side of human nature itself. Even the Israelites struggled to stay faithful to God, despite the fact He dwelled among them.¹⁴ We must also acknowledge that the call to follow Jesus is not a path paved with ease and comfort. Do any of us aspire for the hardships experienced by Paul because of his ardent pursuit of Jesus?¹⁵ When it comes to disciple-making, the adage rings true, you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. The path of discipleship is not a popular one. Still, what else might be going on?

The New Testament Church

There is a distinct difference between *individual* disciple-making and *organizational* disciple-making. Individual disciple-making asks, ‘How can I disciple you?’ Organizational disciple-making asks, ‘How can we disciple them?’ Jesus is the ultimate example for how individual disciple-making best occurs. Spend as much time as you can with a few people and invest your life into each one. Discipleship occurs when the leader replicates the intended knowledge, behaviors, skills, and values into their followers. We have an unassailable biblical model for individual disciple-making in the example of Jesus.

¹³ G. Barna and D. Kinnaman. *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Tyndale Momentum, 2014).

¹⁴ Numbers 14:1-27.

¹⁵ 2 Cor. 11:24-28.

And yet, even though Jesus directly impacted thousands with his life and teaching, he never attempted to group people into clusters of faith communities. Our first glimpse into biblical forms of organizational disciple-making can be seen in Acts. Immediately after Pentecost, Christ-followers began to meet together daily and they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”¹⁶ Luke tells us they also “sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.”¹⁷ Heady intense days to be sure. But, aside from a few snapshots into the lives of the first New Testament Church members, we know very little about their day-to-day affairs. What we can infer from Acts about their organizational disciple-making process is that it was not sustainable.

A case can be made that the Apostle Paul was the first to engage in disciple-making from within an organizational context. Here, too, we know very little about the actual disciple-making process utilized by Paul. Acts 19 lets us know he spent almost three years with the people in Ephesus. But what did that look like? Did they meet daily? A few times a week? On what topics did Paul teach? What does it mean when he “strengthen[ed] all the disciples?”¹⁸ How did he “persuade them about the kingdom of God” for three months?¹⁹ What did Paul talk about for two years such that “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”²⁰ Some insight to these questions can be gained from Paul’s pastoral letters in which he addressed very specific circumstances among the people. While reasonable, one can only assume the instructions and guidance found in the letters were a carryover from his in-person talks while he was with them.

¹⁶ Acts 2:42.

¹⁷ Acts 2:45.

¹⁸ Acts 18:23.

¹⁹ Acts 19:8.

²⁰ Acts 19:10.

The lack of a clear biblical organizational disciple-making model forced the Church to adapt its disciple-making process over the centuries. This is probably a good thing. Attitudes and behaviors of people have certainly changed over the centuries, not to mention the subjective differences that exist from one culture to another. While the Bible may give us minimal information about the organizational disciple-making process, we have significant amounts of information left to us by Church leaders in the years immediately following the death of the Apostles.

The Early Church

In fact, by the second century CE, the organizational disciple-making process had become fairly well defined. In order to *form* and *shape* new Christ-followers, an intentional training program (*catechesis*) was developed. Burggraff pointed to four stages in a *catechumenal* process that took almost three years to complete.²¹ Stage 1 was a precursor to *catechesis*. Sufficient time was given for the individual to demonstrate that they had, indeed, been converted to faith in Christ. Once convinced, local church leaders allowed the individual to enter Stage 2, the catechesis period, which lasted two to three years. During this time, individuals were taught a variety of theological and biblical topics, as well as moral instruction. Because illiteracy was high among the general population, most of the *catechesis* content was provided orally. Some argue that over the three-year period, the entire Bible was read and commented upon by the teacher.²² Stage 3 was marked by intensive teaching that lasted up to three hours a day for seven weeks.²³ Stage 4 consisted of the days leading up to baptism, usually the week before Easter. This time was marked by prayer, fasting, and ritual baths. Baptism

²¹ Burggraff, *How Did the Early Church Disciple New Believers?*

²² Burggraff, *How Did the Early Church Disciple New Believers?*

²³ M. L. McClure and Charles L. Feltoe, *The Pilgrimage of Ethoria*, (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919), 91-92. Accessed October 4, 2024, <http://www.ccel.org/m/mcclure/etheria/etheria.htm>.

marked the end of the catechetical process, and the individual was now a member of the Church.

One aspect about the catechetical process in the early Church that stands out was its emphasis on behavior. People were expected to behave in biblical ways. An assessment was made at the end of each stage, and an individual's progression would be halted unless they could demonstrate a life committed to Christ through both their words and deeds.²⁴ One account of such an assessment reflects the level of priority given to behavior. "Let them be proved and investigated first, how they have lived while catechumens, if they have honored widows, if they have visited the sick, if they have walked in all meekness and love, they have been earnest in good works. But let them be attested by those who bring them."²⁵

Burggraff's stages are but one form of the catechetical process. Other forms certainly existed, and these undoubtedly used varying content. Wiebe rightly points out that the catechetical process was developed over a few centuries, and no single process seems to have been adopted across the Roman Empire until the fourth century.²⁶ However, by the fourth century, we have a fairly consistent approach to the organizational disciple-making process.²⁷ And contrary to what one might think, the rigorous disciple-making process employed by early Church leaders did not negatively affect its growth. In fact, an argument could be made that the rigor of the process aided the growth of the Church in the midst of perilous times. During these first few centuries, the Church which began as

²⁴ Burggraff, *How Did the Early Church Disciple New Believers?*

²⁵ Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, (Fortress Press, 2002), 105.

²⁶ Tim Wiebe, *What Did the Early Church Include in their Training of Believers? 9 Categories of Catechetical Content*, (The Brookside Institute, May 19, 2016). Accessed October 5, 2024, from <https://www.thebrooksideinstitute.net/blog/what-did-the-early-church-include-in-their-training-of-believers-9-categories-of-catechetical-content>.

²⁷ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*, (Baker Academic, 2016).

a “minor mystery religion from the eastern Mediterranean—marginal, despised, discriminated against—grew substantially, eventually supplanting the well-endowed, respectable cults that were supported by the empire and aristocracy.”²⁸ With reference to Burggraff’s assessment of the contemporary disciple,²⁹ one can surmise that the people who completed the *catechumenal* process knew how to think biblically in the face of adversity, they embraced life from within the Christian community, and they developed the appropriate behaviors reflective of a follower of Jesus Christ.

The Post-Reformation Church

The disciple-making pattern utilized and developed by the Church in the first few centuries would last for more than a millennium. It was not until the sixteenth century Reformation period that we begin to see changes in the process. And yet, these changes remained on the periphery of the organizational disciple-making process. While their practices were contextualized, the Reformers continued to utilize similar variations of the earliest forms of organizational disciple-making.³⁰ Time and intentionality were given priority for making disciples. The same can be said for the revivalist movements that would come later. For Wesley, even though his view of the Church was not the same as the Early Church Fathers, and his theological views were not the same as Luther’s, his organizational disciple-making process remained rigorous.³¹ As documented by Stetler, in addition to attending the Sunday service each week, Christ-followers were also expected to meet at least once a week

²⁸ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 1.

²⁹ Burggraff, *How Did the Early Church Disciple New Believers?*

³⁰ Dayton Hartman, *Church History for Modern Ministry: Why Our Past Matters for Everything We Do*, (Lexham Press, 2016).

³¹ Rupert E. Davies, ed., *The Works of John Wesley: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, (Abingdon Press, 1989), 77-78.

(and be on time) in a Band Society group.³² During the Band meeting, each person was expected to share the true state of their souls, listing both their faults and temptations. And like his predecessors, Wesley required behavioral proof of salvation (sanctification) *before* one was admitted into a Band Society group. To this point in time, it appears the organizational disciple-making process had remained rigorous, and Christ-followers were still expected to think biblically, be deeply involved in Christian community, and behave in ways appropriate for a follower of Jesus Christ.

The Industrial Revolution, the Church Growth Movement, and the Contemporary Church

The industrial revolution had a profound effect on the organizational disciple-making process. Beilharz succinctly summarized its impact:

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, [the] values of the industrial revolution were seeping out of the factory and into wider society. The most “successful” factories were those that utilized highly specialized, systematized, and efficient processes to create useful products at the other end. The industrialization of discipleship contributed to a focus on programmatic practice[s] in the church. The value of programs is that they can be efficiently produced and implemented. It allows the discipleship “experts” (i.e., vocational ministry staff) to organize a church’s ministry with age and stage appropriate engagement....³³

³² Darrell Stetler, *John Wesley’s Understanding of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, (Oct. 19, 2023), Accessed Oct. 5, 2024, from <https://holyojoys.org/wesley-discipleship-formation/>.

³³ Tim Beilharz, *When We Say, “Discipleship,” They Hear, “Programs,”* (May 31, 2023), Accessed Oct. 5, 2024, from

The multi-year high-relationship disciple-making process that focused on the individual's biblical knowledge and which reinforced behaviors appropriate for a Christ-follower was increasingly being replaced by efficient programs that focused more on the knowledge of content than on the transformation of the recipient. While significant attention was given to discipleship content, less and less attention was being given to the *quality* of the disciples being made.

The transition to a program-based form of disciple-making was accelerated with the arrival of Church Growth movement in the 1960s. Efficiencies were maximized. The thinking went something along the lines of, '*If we can improve the quality of our programming and weekend services, people will come. If they come, they will then grow in their faith.*' It was assumed that discipleship would occur naturally by attending weekend services and classes, and by participating in church-based programs. And while many '*seekers*' did find their way into a local church, spiritual growth was random, even haphazard. One of the unintended consequences of the Church Growth movement was a realignment of priorities—physical growth in numbers became the measuring stick for the health of the church. Staff members were hired to create programs and events people would attend. The attractional model of doing church had arrived.

To be fair, the Church Growth movement became something quite dissimilar from the original vision of Donald McGavran, the father of the movement.³⁴ It's important to remember that McGavran was born and raised in India and spent the greater part of his life as a missionary in that country. His seminal work, *The Bridges of God*, was based on sociological observations of people movements

<https://www.timbeilharz./blog/when-we-say-discipleship-they-hear-programs>.

³⁴ I was a student at Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission in the late 1980s while McGavran was still alive. During that time, I had the opportunity to serve as C. Peter Wagner's Teaching Assistant for his course, *Understanding Church Growth*.

within the collectivist culture of India.³⁵ Furthermore, even when brought to the western individualistic culture that is the U.S., McGavran posited that Church Growth was an *evangelism* theory, and not a substitute for discipleship.³⁶

Unfortunately, the Church Growth movement did not have its intended effect. Broadly speaking, the Church in America did not grow. While conservative evangelical and Pentecostal churches tended to do somewhat better than Mainline churches, the Christian Church in the U.S. shrank as a percentage of the general population. Masking the decline was the fact that numerous individual churches did, in fact, grow. But they often did so at the expense of smaller churches, many of which ended up closing their doors. While some churches were growing, their growth was largely *transfer* growth. People left one church to attend another. New disciples were not being made. And by the turn of the new millennium, it became evident that even many existing disciples in our churches had stopped growing in their faith.³⁷ The result of these changes is that our churches today have far too many people who are not able to think biblically, have little substantive involvement in Christian community, and do not behave in ways appropriate for a follower of Jesus Christ.

The Shifting Paradigm of Discipleship

As one might expect, the changes did not occur overnight. Even so, I believe the changes can be traced to two paradigm shifts related to our thinking about discipleship. The shift in thinking affected the Church's approach to discipleship, which, in turn, affected the behaviors of the people in our churches.

³⁵ Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, (World Dominion Press, 1955).

³⁶ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 6.

³⁷ G. L. Hawkins and C. Parkinson, *Follow Me: Where Are You?* (Willow Creek Resources, 2008).

First, there was a paradigm shift in how one views the purpose of the Church. Instead of asking, “How do we make disciples?,” pastors and church leaders found themselves asking, “How can we make our church grow?” Even if only at the subconscious level, the shift in thinking was widespread.³⁸ Instead of a means to a greater end (personal transformation), organizational growth became an end in and of itself. The Sunday morning divine encounter was slowly and methodically replaced by a crafted experience that appealed to one’s senses. Because of the experiential component of their faith, Charismatic and Pentecostal churches were particularly susceptible to this shift. The resulting drive for Sunday morning *excellence* consumed both time and resources. Today, one is often hard pressed to distinguish between a Southern Baptist service (i.e., non-Pentecostal) and a Foursquare service. The irony is that pastors and church leaders acquiesced to this shift under the pretext of reaching more people for Jesus. The thought was that if social barriers were reduced, if not outright removed, then more people would attend church. And if they were in church, they would be discipled.³⁹ While the thought process was reasonable, the reality was quite different. And what subsequently occurred was far more consequential.

The second paradigm shift being felt in our churches today is a reshaping of the average Christ-follower. Instead of making new disciples from outside the faith, the Church unwittingly created a “theology of individualistic consumerism” which has fundamentally changed those on the inside.⁴⁰ For evidence, one needs to look no further than the rising incidents of *church-shopping* among church

³⁸ S. P. Dobrotka, “Measuring Clergy Effectiveness: The Development and Validation of the Clergy Effectiveness Scale” (PhD diss., Regent University, Virginia Beach, 2018). ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (2038561662).

³⁹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Follow Me: Where Are You?*, 2008.

⁴⁰ Jon Austin, *How the Church Growth Movement has De-Churched Christians*, (Reformed Journal, May 1, 2023), Accessed Oct. 5, 2024, from <https://reformedjournal.com/how-the-church-growth-movement-has-de-churched-christians/>.

members. Looking for a new church is no longer just for those who have recently moved into a new community but is now for anyone who is dissatisfied—for any reason—with their current church. In response to the question, ‘Is this your home church?’, one person was recently overheard to say, “I have three home churches. I attend one depending upon how I feel when I wake up Sunday morning.” Austin further summarized the transition to individualistic consumerism:

What was once a gathering of God’s people together has largely shifted to a group of individual consumers in proximity to each other. Evaluating the experience was key: the definition of good worship was based on what was witnessed. Did the worship band bring us into the “presence of God”? Was the pastor thought-provoking, funny, and practical? Did the video make us feel something? Did the greeter team shake every new hand? Was the coffee good? In other words, did Sunday morning meet my expectations? Everything is judged. Everything is done to make the individual consumer think something or feel something. The goal of the church staff is to please its consumers.⁴¹

One result of these two paradigm shifts is that our churches are filled with too many spiritually immature Christ-followers who are ill-equipped to deal with the adversities that come with life. When a crisis comes, people often do not have the theological understanding, nor the relational depth to help them weather the storm in a biblically healthy way. They tend to be spiritually shallow, and do not know how to respond when confronted with a crisis of faith. They grow very little beyond their initial understanding of what it actually means to be a Christ-follower. In short, we have created

⁴¹ Austin, *How the Church Growth Movement has De-Churched Christians*, 2023.

disciples who, too often, do not know how to think biblically, are not deeply involved in Christian community, and do not behave in ways appropriate for a committed follower of Jesus Christ. The discipleship efforts being used by churches today, while genuine in their intent, have fallen short of the desired objective. Is it possible the problem rests not with a lack of resolve or effort, but rather, on an incomplete model of discipleship?

Understanding Models of Discipleship

Toward the beginning of this article, a distinction was made between two perspectives of discipleship. One perspective focuses on the disciple, while the second perspective focuses on the disciplemaker. They are two sides of the same coin. Both perspectives must be in view with our discipleship efforts—efforts built on a discipleship *model*.

Fowler's Stages of Faith

J.W. Fowler was one of the first to empirically understand the development of faith within the life of a person.⁴² As seen in Table 1, six stages of spiritual growth and development were identified. The basic theory can be applied not only to those in traditional faiths, but to those who follow alternative spiritualities or secular worldviews as well. Because the stages are determined by age, a discipleship model based on Fowler might develop a discipleship strategy that is aimed at the various age groups within a church. However, this model would be limited as spiritual growth is not generally predicated on one's age. Furthermore, discipleship models from a distinctly Christian perspective are readily available.

⁴² J. W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (HarperOne, 1981).

Table 1: Fowler's Stages of Faith

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5	Stage 6
Intuitive-Projective	Mythic-Literal	Synthetic-Conventional	Individualistic-Reflective	Conjunctive Faith	Universalizing Faith
Early Childhood	Childhood	Adolescence	Young Adulthood	Adulthood	Later Adulthood
Spirituality defined mostly by parental behavior and attitudes. Fantasy and reality often become confused at this stage.	People begin to think logically but tend to understand the stories of their faith community in extremely literal ways.	People find it difficult to think outside of their religious "box." They tend to accept the authority of their faith tradition absolutely.	People begin to critically examine and question their beliefs. During this stage, they often become disillusioned with their religious traditions.	People begin to recognize the limits of logic and accept paradox. They often return to sacred stories, but with an appreciation for mystery.	Those who reach this final, rare stage are able to fully integrate their faith into their lives, serving others and valuing community over self.

The Willow Creek Spiritual Growth Model

One such model would be the revised discipleship model developed by Willow Creek.⁴³ An early proponent of the Church Growth movement, Willow Creek (WC) realigned their discipleship model from one that was church centered to one that was Christ centered after reevaluating the effectiveness of their discipleship efforts.⁴⁴ As seen in Table 2, the WC model provides church leaders with a road map for making disciples by defining the movement from stage 1 to 2, stage 2 to 3, and from stage 3 to 4. The strength of this model is that it reveals the need for varied discipleship inputs from the church. In other words, the content for discipleship looks different at each stage. In Movement 1, the church provides content and experiences that influence the knowledge, values, and behaviors of their people. Generally, most churches carry out Movement 1 quite well, even if they are unaware of the model. Classes, groups, sermons, events, and service opportunities are all part of this Movement. In some cases, the entire life of a church is comprised of Movement 1 activity. The focus of Movement 2 is much narrower, giving attention primarily to spiritual disciplines. Within this movement, teaching is provided on the topic, as well as invitations are given to be involved in group activity (e.g., "We're all going to

⁴³ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Follow Me: Where Are You?*, 2008.

⁴⁴ G. L. Hawkins, C. Parkinson, and E. Arnson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Willow Creek Resources, 2007).

engage in prayer and fasting for the next 21 days”). While Movement 3 identifies a deepening of spiritual maturity, very little definition is offered. The implication is that one will ultimately reach this stage if they continue engaging in the activities of movements 1 and 2.

Table 2: Willow Creek Spiritual Growth Model as described in Hawkins and Parkinson (2008).

Stage 1 Exploring Christ	➡	Stage 2 Growing in Christ	➡	Stage 3 Close to Christ	➡	Stage 4 Centered in Christ
Have a basic belief in God, but unsure about Christ and his role in their lives.	Movement 1 Build a firm foundation of spiritual beliefs and attitudes.	Have a personal relationship with Christ. Begin to learn what it means to be in relationship with him.	Movement 2 Develop routine of spiritual practices that feed growing intimacy with Christ.	Depend on Christ daily for their lives. Turn to him for help and guidance for issues they face.	Movement 3 Spiritual growth is stoked internally.	Relationship with Christ is most important relationship in their life. Fully surrendered to Jesus and his agenda.
Four categories of spiritual catalysts that advance the 3 movements are: Spiritual beliefs and attitudes, Organized church activities, Personal spiritual practices, and Spiritual activities with others						

It’s important to note that the distinction between Stage 3 (Close to Christ) and Stage 4 (Centered in Christ) seems to be one of degrees. One’s experience with Christ appears to be somewhat deeper in Stage 4. While that would be a very good thing in the life of the person, it’s a challenge to describe and quantify these stages in the model. As a result, it’s difficult for a church to know what to do to in Movement 3 to facilitate spiritual growth and development that helps a person move from Stage 3 to Stage 4. Whereas the church has a strong proactive role in Movement 1, a *come alongside* role in Movement 2, it seems to have no role whatsoever in Movement 3. Looking at it another way, the individual appears to be on their own when it comes to their ongoing discipleship growth once they arrive at Stage 3.

Hagberg and Guelich’s Stages of Faith

A more detailed model of Christian discipleship, developed by Hagberg and Guelich,⁴⁵ can be seen in Table 3. One uniqueness of their model is that it describes what goes on within a person during each faith stage. While spiritual growth is not linear, nor is it predictable, the stages help one identify where they might be at that point in time—a snapshot of where one is today. And while the model reflects a linear progression, Hagberg and Guelich acknowledged there is some movement between stages depending upon life circumstances. ‘My stage’ is the one which feels most like a home base at this time.

Table 3: Stages in the Life of Faith (Hagberg and Guelich)

Stage 1 The Recognition of God	Stage 2 The Life of Discipleship	Stage 3 The Productive Life	Stage 4 The Journey Inward (The Wall)	Stage 5 The Journey Outward	Stage 6 The Life of Love
• Journey begins • Filled with awe & wonder of God • Humbled by his love • Our life is orchestrated by God, and we trust people implicitly • Almost superstitious belief we will have success if we live by God’s rules.	• Hungry to learn • Desire belonging & fellowship • Develop a theology & worldview • We want to be led and taught; to be disciples • Excited by new sense of belonging to ‘my tribe’ • Learn basic tenets of the faith; Spiritual gifts	• Faith = working for God • Using our gifts to serve • Recognition for what we do in the world for God • Who we are becomes useful for God; people look up to us; we help others on their journey • Everything is going well	• Journey becomes intensely personal (e.g., Peter, Elijah) • Path is vague and uncertain • Often precipitated by a crisis of faith THE WALL • Disillusioned, feelings of failure, disconnected, broken, shattered dreams • Searching/not finding (“Dark night of the soul”) • Solitude needed to think, feel, and reflect to get through the wall (not effort).	• Renewed sense of calling • Integration of soul & role • Finished building my kingdom • Content with a more hidden life in God for the world • Convinced God loves us as we are, we stop striving to ‘become’	• Deep, vibrant inner life • Dispenser of grace & mercy • Abandoned to the providence of God • Union with God • We give our all without feeling we are sacrificing • We trust God without working at it
Humbled	Grounded	Rewarded	Unsettled & Unmasked	Transformed	Transcended

The Missing Element

In a number of ways, Hagberg and Guelich (HG) and Willow Creek (WC) are comparable models. Stage 1 and Stage 2 in both models have very similar characteristics. And Stages 3 and 4 in the WC

⁴⁵ Janet O. Hagberg and Robert E. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (2nd ed.) (Sheffield Books, 2004).

model have parallels to Stages 5 and 6 in the HG model. The HG model is unique in its identification of Stage 3, The Productive Life. Few would disagree that finding personal meaning and purpose in God's redemptive kingdom, expressed through one's gifts and abilities to the body of Christ, is an important component of discipleship. However, the feature of the HG model that separates it from all other discipleship models is the identification of Stage 4, The Journey Inward.

A few months before the oldest of our three children was to leave home to attend university, some friends told me about their experience when their oldest child left home. The child's departure fundamentally changed the family dynamic for my friends and their children still at home. The family they knew and loved was never the same. My friend's insights significantly helped me be emotionally prepared for the day when our oldest would leave. And when it came, I was ready. It was still hard, but I understood the process of change my family was going through. And I think we managed quite well. Unfortunately, no one prepared me for what happens when the youngest child leaves the home. I was completely blindsided and ill-equipped for the emotional impact that child's departure had on me. I love being a parent. So much so, a good bit of my identity as a person was wrapped up in that role. When the oldest child left home, the family dynamic changed, but I was still a day-to-day parent to the two children who remained. When the youngest child left, the family dynamic changed yet again. But this time, the day-to-day role of parent—a good bit of my identity—also left with him. It took a few days for me to regain my emotional equilibrium.

Kids growing up and leaving home is a natural part of parenting. It's healthy, the way things are supposed to be. Yet, because I was unaware of what was coming, I was unprepared when our youngest child left. And when he did, I struggled. One might say that my understanding of parenting—my model—was incomplete. The model I had served me well, but only to a point. I believe the same is true with most of the traditional models of discipleship.

What we have may serve us quite well, but only to a point. Hardship and adversity are important components in the life of discipleship. Yet, a discipleship model that does not include such things is incomplete. Unfortunately, the implications for an incomplete discipleship model are far more dire than my parenting analogy. Even though I struggled when our youngest child left home, I was still, and would always remain, a parent. Someone with an incomplete paradigm of discipleship may feel lost and abandoned by God when adversity hits, and tragically, walk away from faith altogether. Understanding Stage 4, *The Journey Inward*, is important to forming a complete model of discipleship.

Comer deftly summarized the value of adversity in the journey of a disciple: “The most difficult moments in our lives—the ones we fear and avoid at all costs—are our crucibles. They have the most potential to forge our souls into the shape of Jesus.”⁴⁶ Adversity is an integral tool in God’s discipleship toolbox. To reinforce his point, Comer pointed to three New Testament writers who saw, not just value, but the necessity of adversity for spiritual growth:

- James: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1:2-4)
- Paul: “. . . We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Romans 5:3-4)
- Peter: “In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your

⁴⁶ John Mark Comer, *Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus. Become Like Him. Do as He Did* (Waterbrook, 2024), 112.

faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” (1 Peter 1:6-7)

It is my contention that Stage 4, The Journey Inward, is the missing element in most discipleship models. It recognizes, and gives definition to a difficult, yet common, season in the life of the Christ-follower. It is imperative that pastors and church leaders prepare their people emotionally, biblically, and spiritually for this discipleship reality. Admittedly, there are limitations in how one can proactively help somebody move into Stage 4. The impetus for the transition into this stage is usually a crisis of faith and is personal to each individual. The loss of a job, death of a loved one, or a dire medical diagnosis are just a few examples of adversity that can move a person into Stage 4. Because of this, it would be human nature to try to avoid this stage altogether. In other words, no one signs up for Stage 4. One day, often without notice, a person just finds themselves in it. Their life, and their faith, are in crisis. Preparing people for the reality of Stage 4 does not diminish the pain. It does, however, help them know how to think biblically as a disciple of Jesus as they navigate their way through it.

Why is Stage 4, The Journey Inward, a necessary part of disciple-ship? Unfortunately, time and space do not allow for the full development of a response. Simply put, we can only experience the fullness of God through adversity. One can know God as healer only if they are sick. They can know God as provider only if they are in need. They can know God as comforter only if they are in distress. It is in these seasons of adversity that we fully experience God’s love, grace, and mercy. Spiritual maturity does not come cheaply. There is often significant cost along the way. However, those who go through such a season of adversity often find themselves closer to God as a result (Stages 5 and 6). They do not regret the journey.

What Might a Complete Discipleship Model Look Like?

One of my objectives with this paper is to align my thoughts with others within Foursquare. Thus, as seen in Table 4, I am excited by the way the Hagberg-Guelich model naturally fits within the discipleship framework currently being presented in the Discipleship and Leadership Training (DLT) seminars around the world. Practically speaking, what might a complete discipleship model look like within a local church? With reference to the stages identified by Hagberg and Guelich (HG),⁴⁷ and considering the discipleship patterns of the early church,⁴⁸ the following model is proposed:

Table 4: The Hagberg and Guelich Model within the DLT Framework

Program Lane (What we do in groups)			Personal Lane (What we do in individual settings)		
Stage 1 The Recognition of God	Stage 2 The Life of Discipleship	Stage 3 The Productive Life	Stage 4 The Journey Inward (The Wall)	Stage 5 The Journey Outward	Stage 6 The Life of Love

Stage 1: The Recognition of God

The call to discipleship must be clear. Jesus was unequivocal in what the call to discipleship was about. “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”⁴⁹ Calling someone to ‘invite Jesus into their heart’ is insufficient. Too often, we’ve called people to the wrong thing. We’ve influenced people into making a decision in a moment of personal crisis instead of challenging them to surrender their life to a lifelong pursuit of

⁴⁷ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 2004.

⁴⁸ Burggraff, *How Did the Early Church Disciple New Believers?*, 2024.

⁴⁹ Matt. 16:24.

Jesus.⁵⁰ Regardless of the means used to gain the attention of people, the call to a lifetime of discipleship must be clear.

Stage 2: The Life of Discipleship

This stage is the heart and soul for discipleship content. It is at this stage where a church can be the most proactive, have the most influence, and offer the greatest guidance to those who want to grow spiritually. Three questions should drive the development of discipleship content: (1) What knowledge do we want people to have? (2) What values do we want people to embrace? And (3) What behaviors do we want people to engage? As observed in the early church, biblical literacy must be a priority. The delivery of this content is most effective via church determined programs: sermon topics, study groups, and even one-on-one discipleship dyads. Church leaders choose the programs based upon their answers to the three questions. Of note, some classes/groups like Divorce Care and Embrace Grace may also be part of the church's response to how it responds to people in Stage 4: The Journey Inward.

Related to the matter of discipleship content is the need for people to learn the value of, and necessity for spiritual self-feeding. As part of our church's teaching team for the membership class, I tell each group, "This church is NOT responsible for your spiritual growth. YOU are responsible for your spiritual growth. We will do all we can to support and encourage you along the way. We will even provide resources to you from time to time. However, you are responsible to set the course for your spiritual growth." We then discuss ways for them to grow on their own through Bible reading plans, books, podcasts, etc. While the spiritual input that people receive in weekend services and large-group church gatherings is important, it should be supplemental to what they receive throughout the week. People who engage in consistent spiritual formation

⁵⁰ To be clear, the pursuit of Jesus is lifelong not because he is illusive, but rather, because there is always more of him to experience.

activity on their own will grow exponentially stronger than those whose rely solely on their church for their spiritual growth.

Moving people into groups is critical at this stage, be it Life Groups (homes), Study Groups (classes), or Affinity Groups. As already discussed, developing faith within a community context was central to the disciple-making process in the early Church. Group participation also helps to set expectations for future behavior among church members. Desired values and behaviors are modeled and reinforced by the other group members. Group identity is crucial for getting through Stage 4. However, the value of group life is established here in Stage 2. As described by Friesen & Wilder, when faced with a crisis, the brain chooses a response based on three criteria: (1) What is the least harmful response? (2) How do the possible responses make me feel? or (3) What do “my people” do under these conditions?⁵¹ If “my people” are non-Christian family/friends or members of other antithetical groups, whatever discipleship lessons they have learned will be quickly discarded and they will resort to non-disciple behaviors. Group identity matters. By being part of a group with fellow Christ-followers, transformation has a greater chance to take root as “my people” are doing what Jesus did.

In addition to content delivery and group identity, a third feature of the model at this stage must include engagement with the Holy Spirit. I am encouraged by the fact that this aspect of discipleship is among the six Global Distinctives that define The Foursquare Church: “As a Spirit-filled movement, we will consistently minister the baptism with the Holy Spirit, and teach and encourage believers to fully express the gifts of the Spirit in their daily lives. We totally submit ourselves in obedience to the Spirit’s use of our lives and his miraculous works in our day.”⁵² Toward this end, the provision of sound Pentecostal theological content must reach across all com-

⁵¹ J. Friesen & E. J. Wilder, *The Life Model: Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You* (Shepherd’s House, 2000).

⁵² “Global Distinctive #5: Spirit Empowerment,” *The Foursquare Church*, Accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.foursquare.org/about/beliefs/>.

munication continuums: sermons, classes, written and online media, etc. But making disciples who engage with the Holy Spirit must include more than just teaching and content. Three things come to mind. (1) We need to help our people learn how to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Most would agree that such an endeavor is an acquired skill. The clarity of his voice becomes clearer with time and experience. And yet, our days are typically filled with non-stop activity and noise. How are we to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit within such an environment? In a word, practice. (2) We need to give our people opportunity to practice their interactions with the Holy Spirit. Whether alone, in small groups or large, do we provide our people with safe environments to grow and develop their ability to hear God's voice? Do pastors and church leaders model for their people how to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit? (3) We need to engage with the Holy Spirit within our corporate gatherings. As previously mentioned, too many Foursquare churches have services and corporate gatherings that do not provide opportunity for Holy Spirit engagement. We have achieved excellence . . . power, not so much.

At this stage, people must be taught how to think and behave biblically in the midst of adversity. They must be made aware of Stage 4, The Journey Inward. Awareness of the concept will help people be emotionally prepared if/when a life-crisis occurs. This aspect of disciple-making cannot be over-emphasized. While God is inherently good,⁵³ and He wants nothing but good for his children,⁵⁴ life is difficult and full of hardship and challenges. We pursue Jesus because of who he is, and what he has done for us, regardless of life's circumstances. I have heard too many accounts of someone giving up on their faith because God didn't provide their desired answer.

⁵³ Psalm 34:8; 84:11.

⁵⁴ Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 8:28; Matthew 7:11.

Lastly, we need to teach our people how to disagree and work through relational conflict. We also address this matter our membership class. I tell each group, “If you’re around this church long enough, it is not a question of ‘if’ someone will say or do something to offend you, it’s just a matter of ‘when.’ And when that happens, you need to make two assumptions. First, you need to assume ‘positive intent.’ Assume the person tried to do the right thing, they just made a mistake. Things tend to spiral downhill quickly when we start to assign motivation to someone’s words or actions. And second, assume there is information you are missing. There may be circumstances influencing the other person’s words and/or behavior of which you are not aware.” I also tell them it is their responsibility to graciously address the matter with the other person should such a situation arise. Carrying an offense in silence is not helpful for anyone; and leaving the church is a terrible alternative. It has been my experience that if one makes both assumptions, they are able to have an honest conversation with the other person without making them feel defensive, resulting more often than not in healing and reconciliation.

The Caution of Stage 2: Life of Discipleship

A church can proactively help people move into The Life of Discipleship (stage 2) by providing spiritual growth opportunities through teaching and training (e.g., sermons, classes, groups, etc.). In fact, most churches have already been doing this effectively for years. Providing opportunity for spiritual growth and understanding is a good thing. Of concern, and reflective of the discussion above, too many Christ-followers become content to stay at this stage. They attend weekend services and may even join a group, but do not engage beyond attendance. Financial giving, if any, is minimal. They are not interested in finding a place to serve. They become “spiritually obese.”

Moving people to Stage 3: The Productive Life becomes the challenge for church leaders. Simple answers are not easily found.

And guilting people into service may work in the short-term; however, doing so is contrary to establishing a culture of service within the church. Rather than focusing on the tasks at hand, church leaders need to see service as a means to a greater end—as part of the relationship-building, disciple-making process.

Stage 3: The Productive Life

Opportunities to serve are essential for spiritual growth and development. They're also a key component in the development of leaders. A church can proactively help people move into Stage 3 by providing opportunities for people to use their gifts and abilities in the service of others. For the most part, our churches do rather well engaging people at this stage. At the same time, most of the energy is given to service within the church (i.e., parking, greeters, ushers, refreshments, safety, children/youth volunteers etc.), or to church sponsored outreach activities and programs. Our churches do not do as well when it comes service outside the sphere of its influence. We can do a better job encouraging our people to engage the community around them via local non-profit organizations.

The Caution of Stage 3: The Productive Life

It is at this stage where ministry challenges often come to light. Because the movement into Stage 4: The Journey Inward is generally predicated on a ministry challenge or the onset of a life crisis, a gifted leader might choose to never leave Stage 3. To avoid the conflict, they just find another church! As often happens, such a leader takes offense by something, or someone, in the church. While the circumstances might make this perception reasonable, they misunderstand God's activity within the disruption. As such, the leader perceives others as the problem (usually church leadership) and finds a different church where they are appreciated for what they can offer. Since God wants to draw the leader into a deeper relationship with himself, the problem usually repeats itself after a few years. Changing churches becomes a pattern.

Stage 4: Journey Inward/The Wall

As a concept, most Christ-followers are unaware of Stage 4. They are often spiritually and emotionally unprepared for adversity. When it comes, they become disillusioned, and a crisis of faith ensues. How a church prepares its people for these times will significantly influence the trajectory of their faith journey. As previously mentioned, discipleship content should be created that informs and educates people about the stages in order to better facilitate their journey of faith. Have you ever observed someone experience a life crisis and subsequently turn their back on God, angry He did not resolve the crisis as they thought He should? In contrast, have you ever observed someone face the exact same life crisis and instead of turning away from God, lean more deeply into him? What made the difference? Certainly, the church should be an influence in a person's life at this time. Part of the content in Stage 2 should teach about the paradoxes of faith. God loves his children and wants what is best for them. At the same time, life is hard and often painful. God never promises us life will be otherwise. He does promise to be with us through the hard seasons, never leaving or forsaking us.⁵⁵ Similarly, we will never know the long-term impact of our pain on ourselves, our loved ones, and even on those not known to us.⁵⁶ In those dark seasons, is God alone sufficient for us?

At this stage, the role of the church transitions from proactive programming to responsive encouragement and support. The individual is the initiator of Stage 4. If they are already engaged in community life, they have natural relationships to give them encouragement and support. One way the church can be responsive is to provide mentors/coaches to help people move through their season of hardship. The difference between disciple-making and mentoring is, 'Who sets the agenda?' In stages 1-3 (disciple-making), the church determines the content to be taught. In stages

⁵⁵ Deut. 31:8.

⁵⁶ Gen. 15:13-16.

4-6 (mentoring), the individual determines the content. The mentoring process can take the form of a group, like Divorce Care, where multiple individuals are experiencing a similar life crisis at the same time. Relationships are the key for navigating this faith stage. Without them, a person is apt to leave the church, if not faith altogether. Truthfully, we need more examples of churches who have embraced Stage 4—either knowingly or unknowingly—to serve as models for other churches to emulate.

Stage 5: The Journey Outward and Stage 6: The Life of Love

People in Stages 5 and 6 are often an untapped resource in the life of the church. Typically, they are older and may not be interested in serving as an usher or helping to park cars. In fact, leaders who have experienced Stages 4-6 on their own often come to feel disconnected from their church since its focus generally remains on Stages 1-3. Hence, the growing number of dechurched leaders discussed earlier. This is unfortunate since their spiritual maturity and life experience have given them significant capacity to help others on their journey of faith. These individuals make great teachers of content for Stages 1-3, and are wonderful coaches/mentors for people going through Stage 4. Churches would do well to engage these individuals and enlist their help in meaningful ways. As with Stage 4, we need more examples of churches who have a handle of Stages 5 and 6 to serve as models for other churches to emulate.

Concluding Thoughts

“[Jesus] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, *so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ*. To this end [we] strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in [us].”⁵⁷ For Foursquare pastors and church leaders, these words from Paul succinctly encapsulate the heart for discipleship. The goal is not the accumulation of biblical

⁵⁷ Col. 1:28-29, emphasis added.

knowledge, but rather, the transformation of the individual into the image of Christ. The two are vastly different. “Information may add to the knowledge base of a person but does not necessarily result in that person’s transformation. Information refers to what we know, while transformation involves *the way we know*.”⁵⁸ Accordingly, like the early church leaders, we need to see discipleship as a lifelong journey and not the latest 8-12-week curriculum. And like our predecessors, our disciple-making efforts should be thorough and rigorous. The lives of our people depend on it. May the words of Paul ring true for each of us: “So we have not stopped praying for you since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ R. Kegan, “What Form Transforms? A Constructive-Developmental Approach to Transformative Learning.” In Mezirow J., & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (Jossey-Bass, 2000).

⁵⁹ Colossians 1:9-10.

BOOK REVIEW

Organizational Behavior in Christian Perspective. By Franklin A. Markow. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024. 256 pages. \$27.99

Reviewed by Sam Rockwell, PhD

Franklin Markow has written a new book entitled, *Organizational Behavior in Christian Perspective*. It lands a knockout punch to tired organizational assumptions and predispositions. He builds a witty and engaging case that our organizational experience might have latent potential for new vitality and even joy. He has a knack for helping readers enter his genuine curiosity—making organizational behavior (OB) accessible to both scholars and general readers.

His book originated from many interviews over many years with senior-level executive leaders, including those who lead large and medium church staffs, as well as leaders of smaller not-for-profit agencies. His relatable anecdotes throughout reveal a facility for getting beyond the surface banalities of organizational life to dirt-under-the-fingernails realities and yet-uncovered possibilities.

The brief stories and quippy dialogues are augmented with cogent scriptural and theological integration to help Christian readers make a connection between their broader worldview and the field of OB. Each chapter includes practical leadership review questions, case studies, and “current issue sidebars.”

An unstated yet persistent theme is that organizational leadership is surprisingly fascinating. He provides the lens to see it.

The book’s unifying strand is that each chapter builds on a scaffold progressing from the individual, the interpersonal, the group, the organization, and to the interorganizational. He creates bridges between these that help the reader make sense of the organization’s different components, seamlessly creating a logical and coherent framework. This elegant feature bypasses much ex-

planation and technical organization-speak typical of most OB primers.

So, each chapter builds from this framework and each of these integrating perspectives to introduce the leading and most influential OB theorists and concepts. Because each of these big ideas is contextualized as described, it reads easy and has immediate concrete meaning. Typically, these concepts feel exceedingly abstract and theoretical. Markow's thoughtful (and a bit subversive perhaps) design which underlies the robust content is what gives the book a lasting shelf-life, so to speak.

For instance, chapter five introduces family systems theory by presenting its relevance to individuals, groups, and organizations, with an eye toward finding a new point-of-view in emotionally fused environments. Again, this intellectually challenging theory that also has some unconventional spins to it to boot, is laid-out clearly. Positioning it as a bridge and integrating element between how an individual negotiates her way through an organization, how groups function in an organization, and how these all manage to describe what an organization is holistically, is the masterstroke. To conclude the chapter Markow uses one of his original research pieces (*An Exploratory Study of Leader's Expression of Love and Followers' Perceptions of Satisfaction and Engagement in the Workplace*) to "operationalize" how love is interpreted and experienced at the managerial level. These theories unpacked in this order walks the reader through macro, meta, and personally intimate applications of systems theory giving language and accessibility to complex ideas. Moreover, Markow helps his readers comprehend commonly unspoken realities lurking under the surface of organizational experiences.

Organizational Behavior will serve as a solid text for undergraduate and graduate students in a Christian context. More importantly, it works as an accomplished translator who understands the message to be communicated in all its original nuance, but also delivers it in a meaningful, memorable, and friendly vernacular.