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The Identification of and Solution to Commonly Held Evangelical Beliefs and Perspectives That Create Barriers to Spiritual Formation

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THE IDENTIFICATION OF AND SOLUTION TO
COMMONLY HELD EVANGELICAL BELIEFS AND PERSPECTIVES
THAT CREATE BARRIERS TO SPIRITUAL FORMATION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
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for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to those for whom a truncated gospel can no longer contain the immeasurable love of God.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people to whom I would like to express my gratitude. To my lead mentor, Dr. MaryKate Morse, your steady leadership and Christlike character have served as both an anchor and a light on this journey. Words will never be able to express how grateful I am to have your fingerprint on my life. To my faculty advisor, Dr. Shawna Lafreniere, your expertise, friendship, encouragement, and a really cool coffee mug were exactly what was needed to get across the finish line. To the directors of the Doctor of Ministry program, Dr. Loren Kerns and Dr. Clifford Berger, though we protested, your insistence that we do the hard and frustrating work up front made the writing process enjoyable. To my journey partners, Mike, Chris, and Jason, you three have been the unexpected but oh-so-needed blessing of this experience. I look forward to continued friendship in the future. To the LSF2 cohort, I couldn't imagine a better group with whom to laugh, cry, and grow together. No wonder we are MaryKate's favorite.

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ABSTRACT

Transformation into the image of Jesus is central to Christianity. However, many who claim Christ and are active in their local churches fall short of reflecting his character. This dissertation suggests that a contributing factor for such disparity lies in the reality that many Evangelicals embrace certain beliefs that create barriers to spiritual formation. It then identifies and examines three of the most prominent beliefs, all stemming from a truncated gospel. The first is a belief in an angry God. The second, a fixation on entrance into heaven as the goal of Christianity. The third is a distorted perspective of discipleship that focuses on belief and behavior rather than transformation.

After a summary and evaluation of available discipleship and formation resources, a robust (non-truncated) gospel is proposed, upon which a healthy spiritual formation process can be built. The goal of this process is twofold. First, it must help the disciple embrace that there is no limit to God's goodness towards them. Second, it must free the disciple of non-kingdom habits that bind them to a lesser life. A supportive curriculum, which includes awakening desire, knowing oneself as God's beloved, embracing the true self and releasing the false self, and living a life of love, is proposed to achieve these goals.

Though clear goals and supportive curriculum are critical, the environment in which people learn is equally important. As such, an environment that is accessible, integrated in the local church, and takes into consideration brain science and physiological resistance to change is examined and proposed. This study concludes with the proposal and implementation of a practical artifact that takes participants on a year-long spiritual formation journey. Initial results have been fruitful and are noted.

SECTION ONE:

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

“For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”¹ Slow down and allow these words from the Apostle Paul to settle deep into your soul. We are the aroma of Christ. Much as the smell of fresh-baked bread draws a passerby into the bakery, so, too, the smell of a Christ-follower draws a passerby to Christ. Unfortunately, the aroma many Evangelicals give off is far from sweet. All too often, people who claim Christ and are faithful in their church attendance and activities are just as angry, vengeful, judgmental, and condemning as those who do not. Sometimes, even more so.

This unappealing aroma is not just apparent to those outside the church. If Evangelicals were honest with themselves, many would admit the life they are living does not smell much like Jesus. It is a bit stale. It is nowhere close to the abundant life they had been promised. Rather, it is driven by guilt and fear and burdened with legalism. It is no wonder why so few Evangelicals evangelize and why so many have left the church. In many ways, it appears they have bought into something that has not made good on its promise, and therefore they have little motivation to pass it on.

Obviously, this is a significant problem for Christianity. It is neither attractive to the outside world looking in nor is it appealing to many of those who have bought into its

¹ 2 Corinthians 2:15.

Evangelical form. For many, Christianity has lost its substance. It has lost its pleasant odor. For a growing contingency within the United States, Christianity has little attractive to offer or to give away.

A recent study commissioned by The Navigators and conducted by the Barna Group underlines the crisis Christianity is facing. On one hand, the study indicates that most church leaders are clear about the end goal of discipleship. It is to transform people into the likeness of Jesus.² On the other hand, only one percent of church leaders believe they are accomplishing that task well.³ This suggests the great majority of people within the Evangelical church carry the name of Christ yet do not possess his character. It would seem the culture's accusations of hypocrisy within the church are well-founded.

However, the lack of *actual* transformation within the church does not directly correspond to a lack of *desire* for transformation. Seventy-seven percent of those who attend Evangelical churches indicate that spiritual growth, or life transformation, is a high priority.⁴ This disparity between the desire for and the experience of transformation within the Evangelical church is alarming and must be addressed. As such, it is the goal of this dissertation to identify popularly held Evangelical beliefs that stem from a truncated view of the gospel and clarify how those beliefs create barriers to spiritual formation.⁵ After examining other attempts to address the lack of spiritual formation

² The Navigators, *The State of Discipleship* (The Navigators, 2015), 27.

³ The Navigators, *The State of Discipleship*, 100.

⁴ The Navigators, *The State of Discipleship*, 106.

⁵ This paper has adopted Jeffery P. Greenman's definition of spiritual formation: "Spiritual formation is our continuing response to the reality of God's grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith, for the sake of the world." Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis, eds., *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 24.

within the church, this dissertation and artifact will propose a robust, biblical, and pragmatic alternative to these beliefs and practices that will open the way for spiritual formation and the life change Evangelicals long for.

The Origin of the Problem: A Truncated Gospel

When the average Christian is pressed as to what is meant by the “Good News of the Gospel,” an answer such as this will likely be given: “Jesus died for my sins so I can go to heaven when I die.” At first blush, this sounds both pleasant and true. However, as N.T. Wright suggests, if one were to look under the surface of what is said to what is actually believed, it would most likely reflect the following:

1. All humans sinned, causing God to be angry and to want to kill them, to burn them forever in “hell.”
2. Jesus somehow got in the way and took the punishment instead (it helped, it seems, that he was innocent—oh, that he was God’s own son too).
3. We are in the clear after all, heading for “heaven” instead (provided, of course, we believe it).⁶

As disturbing (and likely overstated) as this version of the gospel may be, some form of it is widely embraced within Evangelicalism and its acceptance is not without merit. This small understanding of the gospel is, in fact, based on a particular arrangement of biblical texts found in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Commonly used to teach Evangelicals to share the “Good News of the Gospel,” the “Romans Road” journeys through the following passages: Romans 3:10, 3:23, 5:12, 6:23, 5:8, 10:9, and 10:13. A cursory reading of these verses can easily lead the unsuspecting reader to believe a truncated version of the gospel that many Christians today have confused with the Good News. Humanity sinned, God is

⁶ N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’s Crucifixion* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 38.

mad, Jesus died, and we go to heaven so long as we believe in him. For many, Christian or not, that's the long and the short of it. However, these passages are lifted both out of their specific context in Romans and their broader context in the Scriptures as a whole.⁷ This inappropriate hermeneutic has led many in the Evangelical church to believe in a message that has "Platonized our eschatology" (souls go to heaven when we die), "moralized our anthropology" (sin is a moral issue), and "paganized our soteriology" (saved by appeasing an angry God).⁸

This truncated perspective of the gospel was firmly cemented in the collective mind of the Evangelical church during the spiritual awakening of the 1950s and '60s as ex-candy salesman Bill Bright produced his "Four Spiritual Laws" for sharing the gospel, and James Kennedy created Evangelism Explosion.⁹ Both of these simplistic methods for "sharing one's faith" parrot, in one form or another, an "avoid hell and get to heaven" version of the gospel. In fact, at the heart of Evangelism Explosion is a presentation about "the great transaction" whereby Jesus paid God for our sin and "purchased Heaven for us."¹⁰ Again, the truncated gospel is all about Jesus dying so humanity can go to heaven when they die. Dallas Willard refers to this reductionist understanding as "bumper sticker Christianity"¹¹ because it is both simple to comprehend and easy to share with others.

⁷ For a thorough exposition of Romans, see N.T. Wright's book *Justification*.

⁸ Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 147.

⁹ Harry Lee Poe, "The Gospel Crisis and American Evangelicals," *Southeastern Theological Review* 3, no 4 (2012): 170.

¹⁰ D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), 34.

¹¹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1998), 35.

While this “bumper sticker” version of the gospel is rampant among popular Christianity, it is not confined to the populace. Many twentieth-century theologians have promoted it as well. Wayne Grudem reduces the gospel to the same three simple elements: humanity sinned, sin demands death, and Christ died to pay the penalty.¹² Dallas Willard comments, “When all is said and done, ‘the gospel’ for Ryrie, MacArthur, and others on the theological right is that Christ made ‘the arrangement’ that can get us into heaven.”¹³ Unfortunately, while simplistic and repeatable, this popular version of the gospel, as shall be shown, is also quite dangerous to the wellbeing of the church, to humanity as a whole, and to the planet they inhabit.

While this truncated perspective of the gospel has been popularized by Christian pastors, leaders, and theologians over the past 100 years, its roots go back much further. For better or for worse, it taps into the thinking of the sixteenth-century Reformation. N.T. Wright suggests that, in general terms, the Reformers were “trying to give biblical answers to medieval questions. They were wrestling with the question of how the angry God of the late medieval period might be pacified, both here (through the Mass) and hereafter (in purgatory).”¹⁴ While the Reformers certainly gave biblical answers to these questions, Wright believes that better questions, suggested by the biblical texts themselves, were ignored, which meant that “the Reformers failed to challenge the larger heaven-and-hell framework itself.”¹⁵ In answering the pressing questions that were

¹² Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 694.

¹³ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 49.

¹⁴ Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 32.

¹⁵ Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 33.

placed before them, the Reformers may have overlooked the fact that, in reality, these pressing questions could have been the wrong ones. Therefore, despite the diligent work of the Reformers, many Protestants who follow in their footsteps still see an angry God who needs to punish Jesus if they ever hope to go to heaven when they die. Even though this perspective lines up more with Dante's *Inferno* than Scripture, where humanity spends eternity, and how they get there, is still the filter through which most Evangelicals understand and proclaim the gospel.

It must be noted that most Christians would not articulate the gospel in such a stark way, nor would they embrace every aspect of a truncated gospel. However, various facets of this gospel have been adopted by different Christian cultures and subcultures and the cumulative effect has been the birth of three significant barriers to spiritual formation.

The First Formational Barrier: An Angry God

The first barrier that has grown from a truncated gospel is the belief in an angry God. This commonly held but misguided image of God is driven by three factors: a general confusion about God's disposition toward sin (and therefore sinners), a belief that retribution is necessary if sin is to be remedied, and a simplistic reading of Scripture. All three of these factors must be further explored in order to uncover how they contribute to the image of an angry God and, in so doing, practically inhibit spiritual formation.

A Distorted Perspective of God's Disposition toward Sin

The first contributing factor in creating the image of an angry God is a distorted perspective of God's disposition toward sin. N.T. Wright recounts a time when he was

sitting in the Sistine Chapel next to a Greek Orthodox archimandrite. As they looked at the great judgment scene on the front wall of the chapel, the archimandrite pointed to the image of Jesus on one wall and to the image Moses on the other and said, “These I understand.” Then he pointed to the front wall where the artist depicted God sending people to heaven or hell and said, “This I do not understand. This is how you in the West have talked about judgment. We have never done it this way because the Bible doesn’t do it that way.”¹⁶ The point here is not to debate the final judgment. Instead, it is to acknowledge, as the archimandrite suggested, that the Western church is fixated on the image of an angry God tossing people into hell because of their sin.

During the birth of American Evangelicalism, Puritans and the circuit riders of the Great Awakenings wrote about “the efficacy of the fear of hell to restrain men from sin.”¹⁷ According to George Marsden, these forerunners of our American version of Christianity preached the wrath of God toward sinners in images that “would have done Dante proud.”¹⁸ Arguably, one of the most famous (or infamous) sermons of the day was “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” by Jonathan Edwards. Even if a person knows nothing of the content, the title of this sermon speaks volumes as to how Evangelicals came to view God’s disposition toward sin. He is angry at it. He is disgusted by it. He loathes both the sin and the sinner.

While it is easy to point the finger of blame at those who have gone before, it is important to acknowledge that such a perspective of God’s disposition towards sin is, in

¹⁶ N.T. Wright, “What is Hell Like? Does it Even Exist?” 100 Huntley Street, December 11, 2008, 3:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vggzqXzEvZ0>.

¹⁷ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 119.

¹⁸ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 121.

part, a natural result of sin itself. Sin taints humanity's perspective of God. According to Curt Thompson, a theologian and neuroscientist, shame emerges out of all sin.¹⁹

Therefore, being born into sin, people see everything, including God himself, through shame's filter of self-condemnation.²⁰ As such, feelings of condemnation are projected onto God, as if he were originating them. Sin, and the shame it produces, causes people to see the image of an angry, punitive God, even if that is not true of him.

This is not to suggest that God is unaffected by sin. As N.T. Wright posits, any "suggestion that sin does not make God angry (a frequent idea in modern thought as a reaction against the caricatures of an ill-tempered deity) needs to be treated with disdain. When God looks at sin, what he sees is what a violin maker would see if the player were to use his lovely creation as a tennis racquet."²¹ Sin is fundamentally against God and anti-God.²² At the same time, to "speak of sin by itself, to speak of it apart from the realities of creation and grace, is to forget the resolve of God. God wants shalom and will pay any price to get it back."²³ This suggests that, much like an oncologist's disposition is against cancer yet for the patient, God's disposition is against sin yet for the sinner. If Scripture shows us anything, it is that God is on the side of humanity in their struggle to be freed from sin.

¹⁹ Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 22.

²⁰ Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*, 28.

²¹ Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 132.

²² Christopher Morgan, ed., *Fallen: A Theology of Sin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 142.

²³ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 199.

From the perspective of spiritual formation, the prevailing image of God's anger toward sinners is a non-starter. Healing and freedom from sin can only begin in the presence of God. In fact, even sin itself cannot be seen clearly until it is seen in the light of God mediated through Christ.²⁴ As Theresa of Avila suggests, in the lifelong process of spiritual formation, the beginner must learn to sit with God in the weeds, allowing the Master Gardener to graciously pull them out.²⁵ Ironically, the common Evangelical image of an angry God serves to drive people away from Him rather than sit with Him amidst their sin. As such, healing and freedom will never be found. If Evangelicals are to ever appropriately deal with sin, they must begin by releasing their image of an angry God and trust instead that God's kindness will lead to repentance.²⁶

The Logic of Retribution

A second contributing factor in creating the image of an angry God is the belief that retribution is necessary if sin is to be remedied. As will be shown, this perspective is central to the story told by a truncated gospel. Ted Grimsrud provides helpful language in naming this belief "the logic of retribution"²⁷

While given various names in academia, the logic of retribution is the belief that retribution is God's will. Though disturbing to many, this belief logically flows from a truncated gospel. Specifically, it stems from how the majority of Evangelicals understand

²⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 236.

²⁵ Theresa De Cepeda, *The Life of Saint Theresa of Avila* (Westminster, England: Penguin Classics, 1957), 78.

²⁶ Romans 2:4.

²⁷ Ted Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement: The Bible's Salvation Story and Our Hope for Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 5.

the atonement, or the means by which God justifies humanity. While scholarly perspectives of the atonement are highly nuanced, among church-going Evangelicals the most popular understanding of the way God made humanity “right with him” follows this line of thinking.²⁸ First, God made humanity in a state of perfection. Second, humanity sinned, thereby offending God’s holiness. Third, an offended God must punish sin in order to be appeased. Fourth, in love, Jesus stood in humanity’s place and received God’s punishment (death on a cross) on their behalf. Finally, with God’s wrath satisfied, humanity is in right standing with him. Though grossly generalized to illustrate a point, this is what is widely known as the penal substitution theory of atonement, and some form of it is consciously or subconsciously embraced by many Evangelicals.

This (albeit oversimplified) depiction points to the reality that many Evangelicals embrace a divine economy in which salvation is achieved by way of violence and retribution. Grimsrud gives the natural outcome of such a belief. “In light of this understanding of the nature of God... the logic of retribution indeed leads to acceptance of ‘justifiable violence.’”²⁹ In other words, if violence and retribution are the way God responds to wrongdoing, then humanity, as his image-bearers, should do the same.

Understandably, this perspective offends the sensibilities of some Christians, but historically, Christianity has had an unsettling relationship with retribution and violence. Throughout the ages, there has been strong support of warfare and violent conquest, often in the name of God. Alleged heretics and other offenders were harshly treated or killed

²⁸ “American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the US,” The Baylor Religion Survey, September 2006, 30, <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/33304.pdf>.

²⁹ Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement*, 7.

for their “opposition.” Punishment, rather than restoration, has been the normative Christian response to lawbreakers. Children were disciplined harshly as an expression of God’s will. While these examples do not make the case alone, there is a growing body of historical analysis that links commonly held perspectives of salvation with the ability to justify violence and retribution.³⁰

However, one doesn’t have to look back in time to see the link between this view of salvation and the ability to justify violence. “Numerous public opinion surveys as well as anecdotal evidence support the impression that in our present time in the United States, being a self-identified Christian makes a person more likely to support warfare, harsh criminal justice practices, and corporal punishment of children.”³¹ In fact, one such survey from the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion reports that in the United States, 63% of Evangelicals supported the war in Iraq compared to only 45% of the general population.³² That means Evangelicals were 18% more likely than the rest of the nation to support retribution and violence as the solution to a problem. It is important to note that this group also holds to an authoritarian concept of God that, while not explicitly identified in the survey, is central to the theory of penal substitution. It seems that for a significant contingency of Evangelicals, the violence and retribution of an angry God are simply a part of the salvific system.

From the perspective of spiritual formation, the acceptance of the logic of retribution creates tremendous confusion for Christians. On one hand, spiritual formation

³⁰ See Jersak, *Stricken by God*; Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement*; and Gorringer, *God’s Just*.

³¹ Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement*, 2.

³² “American Piety in the 21st Century,” 37-38.

is the lifelong process of being formed into the image of Christ, who refused to invoke retribution and violence³³ but instead prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”³⁴ On the other hand, in the same moment Jesus is refusing to use retribution or violence, God the Father is acting with both violence and retribution toward his Son as he punishes Jesus for the sake of others. The Christian who embraces the logic of retribution is thus pulled in opposing directions, caught, so it seems, between two different Gods. Few are willing to fully *embrace* violence and retribution as a way of life because such a way of living blatantly contradicts the model and teachings of Jesus, but few are able to fully *release* violence and retribution as a way of life, either. To engage the formational process of following Jesus and becoming more like him requires the rejection of certain aspects of the God who saved them; aspects, they believe, that are central to eternal life. As a result, many Evangelicals find themselves of two minds. The first tells them that grace and forgiveness is the way of God. The second, often subconsciously, tells them a certain amount of violence and retribution is necessary, too. Unfortunately, as seen by generations of Christians, the second mind is often prioritized.

This choice, though often unconscious, flows naturally when the logic of retribution is embraced. At its most basic level, the thinking goes like this: If God uses fear and punishment to change human behavior, then it should follow that humans, as his image-bearers, can use fear and punishment to change the behavior of others as well. As

³³ In Matthew 26:33, Jesus said, “Do you not think I can call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” He had the ability to choose violence and retribution, but he chose forgiveness instead.

³⁴ Luke 23:34.

N.T. Wright suggests, if God needs to punish, then perhaps we do as well.³⁵ This perspective is further entrenched by the fact that, as broken as it may be, retribution is an effective tool to modify behavior, especially in the short term. Many within the church have come to rely upon on unhealthy and unbiblical “fear” (or terror) of God to hold their behavior in check. Therefore, they believe it should be used to hold others’ behavior in check as well. Entire family systems are built on the illusion of behavioral control through shame, contempt, anger, or some other form of retribution. Dallas Willard calls this a “gospel of sin management”³⁶ that, while successful in altering certain behaviors for a time, is entirely powerless to bring about lasting transformation. As such, the degree to which the law of retribution and the angry God to whom it points is embraced is the degree to which deep spiritual formation will elude the church.

A Simplistic Reading of Scripture

The third contributing factor in creating the image of an angry God is a simplistic reading of Scripture. The first eleven chapters of the Bible can easily paint a picture of an angry and vindictive God to the unsuspecting reader. He kicked Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden for their disobedience.³⁷ He put a curse on Cain for his sin.³⁸ He saw the wickedness of the world and destroyed it with a flood.³⁹ Finally, in an apparent threat to

³⁵ Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 45.

³⁶ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 35-59.

³⁷ Genesis 3:23-24.

³⁸ Genesis 4:11-12.

³⁹ Genesis 6-7.

his omnipotence, God disrupted humanity's ability to communicate to one another and scattered them over the face of the earth.⁴⁰

Along with these stories, and others like them, Scripture confronts its reader with a complex and confusing sacrificial system that is introduced in the Old Testament and becomes the lens through which much of the New Testament understands the death of Jesus. However, as Steve Holmes, professor of humanities at King's College in London, suggests, while "sacrificial images are the central way in which the New Testament talks about the death of Christ, in cultures (such as ours) which have no tradition of sacrificial practice, such imagery seems merely opaque... The cultural problem is that sacrifice no longer means anything to us today."⁴¹ As such, the tendency of most readers of Scripture is to ascribe a modern-day understanding of sacrifice to an ancient Jewish practice. This usually leads to a paganized perspective of the sacrificial system⁴² because appeasing an angry God is the only way the modern mind can interpret the shedding of blood on an altar.

It is not the point of this dissertation to complete an exhaustive study of Scripture as it pertains to its portrayal of an angry God. However, if the image of an angry God is a barrier to spiritual formation, it must be acknowledged that a cursory reading of Scripture can easily lead the reader to perceive God to be both vindictive and angry. This is especially important when dealing with Evangelical Christians because "the Bible has been central to their lives as not only a Supreme authority for belief and practice but also

⁴⁰ Genesis 11:1-9.

⁴¹ Steve Homes, "Can Punishment Bring Peace? Penal Substitution Revisited," *Scottish Journal of Theology* (2005): 109-110.

⁴² Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 147.

the object of their affections and instrument of their devotion.”⁴³ As such, when addressing the factors that contribute to the image of an angry God, a simplistic, *literal* reading of Scripture must be acknowledged as part of the problem, and a comprehensive, *literate* reading of Scripture must be part of the solution.

The Second Formational Barrier: Aiming for Heaven, Missing Earth

The second formational barrier birthed from a truncated gospel is the belief that the primary goal of salvation is to avoid hell and get to heaven after death. Charles Ryrie, whose annotated study Bible continues to have a profound impact on how Evangelicals understand Scripture, taught this very thing. “When one believes, he commits to God. Commits what? His eternal destiny. That’s the issue, not the years of Christian living.”⁴⁴ According to Ryrie, one does “not need to settle issues that belong to Christian living in order to be saved.”⁴⁵ John MacArthur, equipped with his own influential annotated study Bible, famously disagreed with Ryrie. MacArthur defended the view that “saving faith” cannot exist apart from the intention to obey the teachings of Jesus. As such, Jesus cannot be accepted merely as savior. According to MacArthur, Jesus must also be accepted as *Lord*, hence the well-known debate around *Lordship salvation*.⁴⁶ What is ironic, especially in light of this second formational barrier, is that no matter where one lands on

⁴³ Bruce Hindmarsh, “What is Evangelicalism?” *Christianity Today*, March 14, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/march-web-only/what-is-evangelicalism.html>.

⁴⁴ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *So Great a Salvation: What it Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989), 123.

⁴⁵ Ryrie, *So Great a Salvation*, 40.

⁴⁶ John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus: What is Authentic Faith?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 28.

the issue that divided Ryrie and MacArthur, most Evangelicals still agree, as Dallas Willard observes, “that the issue in salvation is only ‘heaven or hell’ ... that being saved is a forensic or legal condition rather than a vital reality or character... [and] that getting into heaven after death is the sole *target* of divine and human efforts for salvation.”⁴⁷ For Evangelicals, the loudest voices shout that salvation is about heaven and hell. Period. Sanctification is another issue altogether.

The background assumption that has allowed salvation and sanctification to be so far removed from each other is the perspective that justification and salvation are interchangeable.⁴⁸ This false assumption found its way into the fabric of Western Christianity beginning with the juridical theology of Augustine and was reinforced by Anselm and the “rule of law” culture of the Middle Ages.⁴⁹ While neither Augustine nor Anselm explicitly taught such a perspective, their theologies amplified justification until it became the focus of salvation. By the time of the Reformation, the ecclesial abuses of indulgences as a way out of hell and the Mass as a way into heaven meant that the focus of the Reformation would naturally be justification, specifically whether it comes by works (indulgences and the Mass) or by faith. As such, “the Reformers failed to challenge the larger heaven-and-hell framework itself (which Eastern theologians challenge to this day) or to think through what new creation and resurrection would

⁴⁷ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 47. Emphasis original.

⁴⁸ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 47; see also page 42.

⁴⁹ Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, eds., *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 486.

actually mean or how they might come about.”⁵⁰ Without this challenge, justification (being right with God thereby going to heaven) became the whole point of salvation.

While the average contemporary Evangelical is unaware of how their perspective of salvation was shaped more by the aforementioned realities than by the Scriptures, one only needs to examine the typical (or stereotypical) Christian testimony to realize that salvation and justification are indeed synonymous in the minds of most Christians. Listen to enough of them and a theme will emerge.⁵¹ “I was *saved* when I was fourteen years old at youth camp.” “After living a pretty rotten life, I found myself at the end of my rope and I met Jesus there. That’s when I was *saved*.” “I prayed to receive Christ with my mom when I was five years old, but I don’t think I was really *saved* until later on in my life.”

By no means should these types of stories be called into question. They are both powerful and sincere. However, it is interesting to note that nearly everyone in the Evangelical church speaks of salvation as *something that happened in the past*. It is a term used to describe the time in life when they first acknowledged Jesus’ death as payment for sin, their damaged relationship with God was restored, and their eternal destiny made secure. Despite the Apostle Paul’s admonition to “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,”⁵² for most Evangelicals, salvation is a “done deal.” So much so that many within the church protest any human effort regarding

⁵⁰ Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 33.

⁵¹ What follows are not actual testimonies but representations of hundreds of baptismal stories I have heard in the past 20 years of pastoral ministry.

⁵² Philippians 2:12.

salvation for fear that it encourages a merit-based soteriology,⁵³ thereby diminishing the work of Christ on the cross. This only betrays how truncated the concept of salvation has become. Dallas Willard's words make an important distinction that the church would do well to pay attention to: "Grace is not opposed to effort, but opposed to earning."⁵⁴

From the perspective of spiritual formation, this truncated view of salvation makes sanctification, which is the lifelong process of being formed into the image of Christ, entirely optional. When this is the case, passivity enters the scene, creating nominal Christians.⁵⁵ N.T. Wright expresses it well: "Life before death is threatened if salvation is about life after death."⁵⁶ According to this line of thinking, the idea of "being saved" has nothing to do with transformation—that is another issue altogether. The average Evangelical Christian, according to Dallas Willard, either consciously or subconsciously has been taught "you can be right with God in ways that do not require transformation."⁵⁷ This perspective inevitably leads to the uniquely Evangelical ability to divorce "being right with God" from "right living." "It seems to me," says Willard, that "adherence to this view of salvation is what accounts for the transformation of Evangelical Christianity into a version of nominal Christianity over the course of the 20th century."⁵⁸

⁵³ Ephesians 2:8-9 is often quoted in this context.

⁵⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006), 166.

⁵⁵ Jeffrey P. Greenman, *Life in the Spirit*, 48-49.

⁵⁶ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 197.

⁵⁷ Dallas Willard, "Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation," accessed November 16, 2017, 2, <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=135>.

⁵⁸ Willard, "Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation," 3.

This incomplete view of salvation is also detrimental to the witness of the Church. It appears that Christianity in the United States has arrived at a tipping point where a significant amount of people have joined its ranks simply for its perceived eternal benefits. This disorientation has come at a tremendous cost. Rather than a community of people who, through the intentional effort of partnering with God, naturally give off the sweet aroma of Christ, our churches abound with those who, because of the complacency encouraged by a small understanding of salvation, smell no different than the culture, with the only distinguishing mark being an eternal benefits package that is better than the rest of the world's. Understandably, this does not sit well with the culture at large. It *should* not sit well. It lacks integrity and smells of hypocrisy.

The Third Formational Barrier: Distorted Discipleship

The third formational barrier to spiritual formation birthed from a truncated gospel is a distorted perspective of discipleship. This distortion flows naturally from the second barrier to spiritual formation. If the gospel is primarily about getting to heaven, then Christians must concern themselves with the two things they have come to understand are necessary to achieve that goal: right behavior and right belief. Willard points out that historically, “these are the very things that have obsessed the church visible—currently, the latter far more than the former.”⁵⁹ When right behavior or right belief become the focus of discipleship, spiritual formation suffers.

⁵⁹ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 320.

Discipleship as Right Behavior

Dr. John H. Coe, the director of the Institute for Spiritual Formation at Talbot School of Theology, has aptly labeled the tendency for Christians to focus on right behavior as the “Moral Temptation.”⁶⁰ It is the unconscious attempt to “do good” in order to “cover bad.” It is a life of trying to “please God in the power of the self as a way to deal with our guilt and shame.”⁶¹ This emphasis on right behavior is rooted in the fall, when Adam and Eve attempted to cover their disobedience, guilt, and shame, hid from God, and blamed others.⁶² Millennia later, the tendency toward moralism had not diminished; the apostle Paul was forced to confront Cephas because he had influenced the church in Galatia to insist on the circumcision of Gentiles.⁶³ The focus on right behavior to cover wrong behavior is the fruit that naturally grows from original sin. It is a universal struggle, shared both by those who follow Christ and those who do not.

What is particularly damaging in the Evangelical context is the conflicting message that gives regarding right behavior. Fundamental to Protestant Evangelical faith is the fact that humanity is saved by grace, not works.⁶⁴ To emphasize right behavior as the means of salvation would contradict the crucicentrism that marks faithful Evangelicalism.⁶⁵ As such, there are no Evangelical discipleship programs that overtly

⁶⁰ John H. Coe, “Spiritual Formation Lecture Series,” (Multi-session lecture and papers presented at the Fullerton Free Church, Fullerton, CA, March 2006).

⁶¹ Coe, “Spiritual Formation Lecture Series.”

⁶² Genesis 3:7-13.

⁶³ Galatians 2-5.

⁶⁴ Ephesians 2:8-9.

⁶⁵ Greenman, *Life in the Spirit*, 29.

suggest right behavior makes us right before God or grants us access to heaven. However, right behavior is clearly understood to be important. Even the brother of Jesus writes, “Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.”⁶⁶ This confusion concerning right behavior plays itself out most often within the Evangelical nuclear family. Whether conscious or not, the family is the primary place where discipleship takes place. Ironically, most evangelicals were parented (discipled) to be moralists.⁶⁷

To understand this reality, it must once again be acknowledged that right behavior is part of the Christian life. It is the fruit naturally born by someone transformed into the image of Christ.⁶⁸ Jesus himself said that his disciples will be recognized by their fruit.⁶⁹ However, fruit grows indirectly and slowly. Willard writes that we must “cultivate and fertilize the tree. We don’t try to squeeze fruit out of the end of its branches.”⁷⁰ At the same time, in a culture that quickly judges others by their fruit—or lack of it—Christians in general, and Christian parents specifically, often lose sight of this reality. Parents want their children to do the right thing because that is the perceived ruler by which both parent and child will be measured. Therefore, when the child does something bad, “the parent cannot endure the bad behavior and becomes condemning, punitive and splits off relationally from the child.”⁷¹ As a result, rather than experiencing the loving,

⁶⁶ James 2:18.

⁶⁷ Coe, “Spiritual Formation Lecture Series.”

⁶⁸ Galatians 5:22-23.

⁶⁹ Matthew 7:20.

⁷⁰ Greenman, *Life in the Spirit*, 56.

⁷¹ Coe, “Spiritual Formation Lecture Series.”

transformative correction of a parent in the midst of their bad behavior, children learn to hide bad behavior and present good behavior in order to avoid parental disapproval and disappointment. In so doing, they become good little moralists who, years later, become grown-up moralists who disciple others, including their children, in the same manner they were disciplined. This pattern has led to Evangelicals “moralizing their anthropology,”⁷² which seems to be “the most common human solution and seemingly effective way to avoid dealing with the problem of sin and guilt before God.”⁷³

From the perspective of spiritual formation, the focus on right behavior leads to legalistic pride in those who in their own strength have managed to behave well, and shame in those who have not. Moralism is a religion of self-effort in which Christ is of little use. It is about “construing a way of life in which [there is] no need for a saving God.”⁷⁴ The apostle Paul notes this very thing when he writes to the church in Galatia, “It is for freedom that Christ set us free. Stand firm, then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised [go back to doing ‘the right thing’], Christ will be of no value to you at all.”⁷⁵ If, indeed, right behavior can cover wrong behavior, then Christ is not needed. Unfortunately, a focus on right behavior apart from a transforming union with Christ leads to frustration and weariness as the Christian’s moral strength slowly dries up and withers in their attempts to be good enough to cover their bad. In the end, “moralistic

⁷² Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 147.

⁷³ Coe, “Spiritual Formation Lecture Series.”

⁷⁴ Eugene H Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 145.

⁷⁵ Galatians 5:1-3.

formation looks good, feels bad, and doesn't work!"⁷⁶ If spiritual formation is the goal, right behavior cannot be the focus of discipleship.

Discipleship as Right Belief

While right behavior is a subtle form of distorted discipleship, right belief is far more overt. In their own words, NavPress "is the publishing ministry of the Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical."⁷⁷ Yet their discipleship series, *Studies in Christian Living*, which was first published in 1964 and is still in print today, is entirely focused on what a follower of Christ should believe.⁷⁸

In *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building your Life in Christ*, Greg Ogden states that this discipleship tool is for the purpose of transformation,⁷⁹ yet the main components of each of the twenty-five chapters are a memory verse study, an inductive Bible study guide, and an extra-biblical reading complete with its own study guide. Again, more information about what a Christian is supposed to believe.⁸⁰ It is also

⁷⁶ Coe, "Spiritual Formation Lecture Series."

⁷⁷ The Navigators, *Beginning a New Life*, Studies in Christian Living (Carol Stream, IL: NavPress, 1981), 2.

⁷⁸ It is not the point to suggest this series is not helpful, nor that NavPress does not have more robust resources. It is simply to point out that their longest-running discipleship series is entirely informational and oriented toward right belief.

⁷⁹ Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building your Life in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2007), 9.

⁸⁰ I have personally used *Discipleship Essentials* and found it to be helpful and even transformative, but only if the leader already has a bias toward spiritual formation as the goal of

interesting to note that both of these discipleship resources, and many others for that matter, do encourage the disciple to obey and put into practice what they are learning. However, void of a discipleship environment where the goal is spiritual formation, this emphasis on right belief and right action can easily reinforce the moralistic distortion previously noted.

While the *point* of discipleship cannot be right belief, it must be stated clearly that information and right belief are important components of discipleship. A disciple must learn that God loves and forgives them if they are ever going to experience that love and forgiveness. They must know about the life and teachings of Jesus and where they fit into God's greater story if they are ever going to understand God's good desires for humanity. However, as Willard suggests, the information they have come to believe most often "does not form a part of their real life. In their bodily and social being they continue to be ready to act as though it were *not* true, even though in their conscious affirmations they accept it."⁸¹

From the perspective of spiritual formation, Willard's observation is where an emphasis on right belief can subtly but significantly prevent real transformation. To say it more succinctly, *proclamation* (that which a disciple *professes* to believe) can be the enemy of *transformation*. The following illustration will help unpack that statement. Many disciples profess to believe they are to love their neighbor as themselves.⁸² They may even go so far as to profess to they are called to love their enemies and pray for

discipleship. In groups where this was not the case, the group devolved quickly into discussions and even arguments about right belief.

⁸¹ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 317. Emphasis original.

⁸² Matthew 22:39.

those who persecute them.⁸³ If given an examination on what they believed, they would indicate loving both their neighbor and their enemy are central. However, when their lives require that they actually love their neighbor, let alone their enemy, what they profess to believe often has little impact on what they actually do. Simply look at social media or a political rally and it is easy to see that these beliefs about love are often irrelevant. Yet this same disciple who fails to live out what they profess about loving neighbors and enemies will continue to proclaim those beliefs as central. They are, therefore, slow or even unable to see their own hypocrisy. Their life is fractured from the beliefs they profess. In so doing, the disciple's focus on professed belief has effectively blocked their transformation. If spiritual formation is the goal, right belief, specifically professed belief, cannot be the focus of discipleship.

Conclusion

This chapter has suggested the reason spiritual formation has eluded the Evangelical church is because it has embraced a truncated gospel. Christianity that is motivated by an angry God, focused on getting to heaven, and consumed with right behavior and belief as its primary boundary markers will struggle to produce people who naturally give off the aroma of Christ.

Being that this dissertation's end goal is to present a solution to the lack of spiritual formation within the evangelical church, it is appropriate to examine how the church is currently attempting to disciple its members and bring about spiritual formation. That is the topic of the following chapter.

⁸³ Matthew 5:44.

SECTION TWO:
OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

A Broad Spectrum of Solutions: Three Major Categories

Prior to his ascension, Jesus commissioned his followers to “make disciples of all nations.”⁸⁴ Since that day, it has been the mission of the church to do just that: to develop the kind of people who naturally live and love like Jesus. This is no simple task. Throughout its two millennia of existence, the church has both succeeded and failed at this mission. In its current iteration, the Evangelical church employs a broad spectrum of solutions to the challenge of discipleship and spiritual formation. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will identify and provide examples⁸⁵ of three categories that represent the majority of energy currently being expended by the local Evangelical church in terms of discipleship and spiritual formation.⁸⁶

The first and most common category of solutions is a small group or classroom approach that focuses on information and education. Two examples are *Studies in Christian Living*,⁸⁷ a six-volume series written and published by the Navigators,⁸⁸ and

⁸⁴ Matthew 28:18-20.

⁸⁵ I have personally used, been engaged with, and have firsthand knowledge of all of the examples cited.

⁸⁶ There are numerous churches throughout the world that are implementing healthy processes for discipleship and spiritual formation. Ekko Church in Anaheim and Oak Hills Church in Folsom are two such examples within my own state of California. While these churches are helpful resources, especially for other church leaders, they are not practically accessible for the average congregant. As local churches, their processes are geared to members and regular attenders. As such, I have chosen not to include other churches as available resources.

⁸⁷ The Navigators, *Studies in Christian Living* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1981).

⁸⁸ The Navigators is a Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development.

Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ by Greg Ogden.⁸⁹ The Navigators series was first published in 1964 and continues to be used today. Ogden's discipleship guide was first available as a self-published work that, years later in 1998, was published by InterVarsity Press and since that time has sold over 250,000 copies. Both resources are deeply anchored in Scripture and educate the participant as to the biblical stories, teachings, and doctrines of the Christian faith.

The second category of solutions is a parachurch, cohort-based approach that focuses on spiritual formation. Two examples are the *Renovare Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation*,⁹⁰ part of Renovare, which was started by Richard Foster, and *Transforming Communities*,⁹¹ part of the Transforming Center, led by Ruth Haley Barton. Both resources require a two-year commitment, have four and nine gatherings, respectively, at a central location,⁹² and focus on spiritual formation through biblically based teachings, experiences, and spiritual practices.

The third category of solutions is a small group or classroom-based approach that focuses on spiritual formation. Two examples are *The Good and Beautiful* series⁹³ by James Bryan Smith, and *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*⁹⁴ by Peter Scazzero. Both

⁸⁹ Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building your Life in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2007).

⁹⁰ "Renovare Institute Homepage," accessed July 18, 2018, <https://renovare.org/institute/overview>.

⁹¹ "Transforming Communities Homepage," accessed July 18, 2018, <https://tc15.transformingcenter.org/#intro>.

⁹² The Renovare Institute rotates its central meeting place to cities around the globe (my wife Michelle was in the London Cohort) while Transforming Communities gathers in the Chicago area.

⁹³ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Series* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

⁹⁴ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Unleash a Revolution in Your Life in Christ* (Nashville, TN: Integrity, 2006).

resources are curriculums in book form and are intended to engage a small group for processing, discussion, and encouragement. *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* is an eight-week curriculum that is supported by video teaching and a Daily Office that corresponds with the week's material. *The Good and Beautiful* series is thirty sessions that can be worked through at whatever pace the participant requires to digest the material. In my experience, a committed group usually requires a year to complete the series.

The Evaluative Grid

Ultimately, a resource for discipleship and spiritual formation should be judged by its outcome. Does it produce spiritually formed people who naturally live and love like Jesus? However, using this question as the only metric is limited due to the myriad of factors that contribute to spiritual formation. Thankfully, a good leader, a willing disciple, and the power of the Holy Spirit can accomplish remarkable things with quite unremarkable resources. However, there are factors that contribute to a given solution's chances of transforming its participants. I have selected five that I suggest are amongst the most critical.⁹⁵ These are in addition to the assumption that the presence and work of the Trinity are central to any solution to spiritual formation.

The first factor is whether or not the resource engages the whole person. This piece of the evaluation puzzle is based primarily on Dallas Willard's understanding of the

⁹⁵ The factors that make up this evaluative grid emerged from a combination of the following: 1. Teaching and studies in the Doctor of Ministry Program, Leadership and Spiritual Formation cohort at Portland Seminary. 2. Personal experience (10 years) directing the spiritual formation of pastoral staff at Monte Vista Chapel. 3. Personal experience (10 years) as the pastor of Monte Vista Chapel shepherding a congregation into a more formational way of living. 4. Listening to Christians share why they had left the church in search of spiritual formation, as well as what they found. All of these factors are considered in the artifact presented in this dissertation.

human system.⁹⁶ Willard illustrates the human system with a series of concentric circles, beginning at the center with the spirit, sometimes referred to as the heart or will. This is the executive center of the human system. While it is true that human life does not run by the will alone, “life must be organized by the will if it is to be organized at all. It can only be pulled together ‘from the inside.’ That is the function of the will or heart: to organize our life as a whole, and indeed to organize it around God.”⁹⁷

The next concentric circle of the human system consists of the mind, out of which flow a person’s thoughts and feelings. Through thoughts, “our consciousness reaches into the depths of the universe, past, present, and future, by reasoning and scientific thinking, by imagination and art—and also by divine revelation, which comes to us mainly in the form of thought.”⁹⁸ Feelings, on the other hand, cause us to move toward or away from things that come before our mind in the form of thoughts. Feelings involve “a tone that is pleasant or painful, along with an attraction or repulsion with respect to the existence or possession of what is thought of.”⁹⁹ Thoughts and feelings are inextricably bound together. A person cannot have a feeling without a thought, and most thoughts bring up feelings.

The third concentric circle of the human system consists of the body. “The body is the focal point of our presence in the physical and social world... it is the point through which we are stimulated by the world beyond ourselves and where we find and are found

⁹⁶ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).

⁹⁷ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 35.

⁹⁸ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 32.

⁹⁹ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 33.

by others.”¹⁰⁰ Outside the body is our social context, which is the fourth concentric circle of the human system. “The human self requires rootedness in others. This is primarily an ontological matter—a matter of *being* what we are. It is not just a moral matter, a matter of what we *ought* to be. And the moral aspect of it grows out of the ontological.”¹⁰¹ The social context consists of personal relationships and interactions with God, family, friends, and even creatures.

The final concentric circle in the human system is the soul. “The soul is that dimension of the person that interrelates all of the other dimensions so they form one life.”¹⁰² It is a higher dimension in that the soul acts upon the other dimensions and they act upon it. When we die, the soul is the repository of who we have become and is what is carried over from this life to the next.

The point in all of this is not to have a thorough understanding of Willard’s human system. Instead, it is to suggest that spiritual formation must include the whole person: the spirit (will, heart), the mind (thoughts, feelings), the body, the social context, and the soul. Each affects and is affected by the other. The will affects thoughts and feelings, but thoughts and feelings also affect the will. The body affects thoughts and feelings and the opposite is true as well. A person’s social context has tremendous influence on all other aspects of the human system. This suggests if a resource is intended to form people into those who naturally live and love like Jesus, it must take into

¹⁰⁰ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 35.

¹⁰¹ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 36. Emphasis original.

¹⁰² Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 37.

consideration the whole person and how the various parts of the person affect the other parts and therefore the whole.

The second factor that will help determine how effective solutions are in developing spiritually formed people is whether or not that solution takes into consideration the science of the brain, specifically, the limbic brain. The base function of the limbic brain is to “monitor the external world and the internal bodily environment, and to orchestrate their congruence.”¹⁰³ In other words, the limbic brain is what enables people to subconsciously evaluate the emotional temperature of another person or a group of people. Are they careless, angry, aggressive, friendly, or dismissive? Once that is determined (usually subconsciously and instantaneously), the limbic brain sends signals to the neocortical brain (the rational brain), causing conscious thought. The limbic brain allows a person who enters a room full of people, even though no words are being exchanged, to sense that there has been a tense argument and immediately know they ought to tread lightly.

The implications of the limbic brain for spiritual formation are far-reaching. Limbic resonance is a “symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals [people, in the case of spiritual formation] become attuned to each other’s inner states.”¹⁰⁴ The limbic system causes people to subconsciously feed off one another’s emotional state. Being that spiritual formation requires change, and change is most often an emotionally unsettling process, it can be a limbic minefield. Unattended, limbic resonance can cause an emotional stampede within a group, leaving those

¹⁰³ Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Random House, 2000), 52.

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 63.

involved hurt and confused. However, when it is well-tended, limbic resonance can be leveraged by mixing people who are more spiritually formed with those who are growing, leading to limbic regulation¹⁰⁵ and eventually limbic revision¹⁰⁶ as the disciple literally feeds off of the calm disposition of the leader.

A general understanding of neurotransmission within the brain is also helpful for spiritual formation.¹⁰⁷ Neurons are what make up and make possible our memories and patterns of thoughts. This being the case, it is important to understand “neurons that fire together once tend to do so again as they become bound to one another with increasingly close ties.”¹⁰⁸ This tendency of neurons firing along known pathways is what makes change so difficult. Close-mindedness and hard-headedness are physical, not just emotional, realities. Add to this reality the fact that deeply ingrained links between neurons can easily overwhelm weaker information patterns, forming what is known as a neural attractor. Neural attraction is what makes it seem that people only hear what they want to hear. What is more accurate is that, due to neural and/or limbic attraction, people hear what they are accustomed to hearing. Fortunately, though resistant, neuropathways can change¹⁰⁹ as new experiences and habits literally rewire the brain.

Again, the point of all of this is not to have a comprehensive understanding of the science of the brain. Instead, it is to understand that there are physiological realities

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 85.

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 144.

¹⁰⁷ While not quoting directly from his book, Curt Thompson’s *Anatomy of the Soul* is a helpful resource and can be found in the bibliography of this dissertation.

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 128.

¹⁰⁹ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 100.

within the brain that affect how people change. Therefore, a resource that is intended to form people into those who naturally live and love like Jesus will take these realities and their implications into consideration.

The third factor that will help determine how effective solutions are in developing spiritually formed people is the extent to which they encourage and engage in personal and corporate spiritual practices. While silence and solitude, meditation on God's word, celebration, self-examination, and other practices will not, in and of themselves, ensure healthy spiritual formation, they are a necessary ingredient. Given the complexity of the human system and the brain's physiological resistance to change, spiritual practices take advantage of the brain's neuroplasticity and are critical for transformation. Employed correctly, they open the spirit (will / heart), mind (thoughts / feelings), body, social context, and soul to God's grace. Therefore, if a resource aims to bring spiritual formation, it must include the appropriate use of personal and corporate spiritual practices.

The fourth factor that will help determine how effective solutions are in developing spiritually formed people is accessibility. When Jesus called people to follow him, he said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."¹¹⁰ Jesus' words remind us that discipleship and spiritual formation are costly. No matter how it is approached, spiritual formation requires a great deal of effort from the one who desires to be shaped into the image of Christ. For some, that cost is simply too great. That has been the case since the time of Jesus.¹¹¹ At the

¹¹⁰ Luke 9:23.

¹¹¹ In Luke 18:18-30, the rich young ruler found that following Jesus required too much of him.

same time, resources intended to facilitate spiritual formation must take into consideration that they may limit accessibility not due to the cost required by Jesus, but by other barriers that may intentionally or unintentionally exclude people from participating. A few examples are: meeting time and location, financial requirements, time requirements, childcare needs or other “season of life” complications, cultural barriers, and diversity / inclusivity issues. All of these and more must be taken into consideration if a resource is going to be accessible to all who desire to participate.

The fifth and final factor that will help determine how effective solutions are in developing spiritually formed people is its ability to be integrated into the local church. Jeffrey Greenman states that “the necessary result of spiritual formation is active participation in serving God and sharing in God’s work in the world.”¹¹² A significant way God works in this world is through the local church and, as such, resources for discipleship and spiritual formation must partner with the local church, not replace it.

Evaluating the Three Categories

With an evaluative grid established, it is now possible to examine each of the three categories, beginning with small group or classroom approaches that focus on information and education. When it comes to engaging the whole person, this educational and informational approach focuses primarily on the mind. More specifically, it focuses on what a person is to think or believe about their Christian faith. From my experience, these resources often portray feelings as unimportant and even encourage them to be disregarded. The body and social context are rarely addressed except as to how a person

¹¹² Greenman, *Life in the Spirit*, 27.

is to act in regard to what Scripture says about them. There is also little consideration regarding brain science, as this approach is usually quite prescriptive, adopting a simplistic perspective that correct professed belief is all that is needed to change.

Many of these small group resources employ spiritual practices, but those practices are limited to those that engage the intellect. Inductive Bible study and Scripture memorization are usually the practices of choice. Ogden's *Discipleship Essentials* has a weekly memory verse and a weekly inductive Bible study. *Studies in Christian Living* only uses inductive Bible study, although the Navigators are well-known for encouraging their disciples to memorize Scripture. While Bible study and Scripture memorization are valuable tools in spiritual formation, these solutions often limit themselves by choosing such a narrow focus. To be fair, many of these approaches focus on a limited view of discipleship that is usually not concerned with spiritual formation.

The benefit of this approach is that the resources employed are highly accessible. This is part of what makes them so attractive. They are highly flexible in terms of when and where the group can gather. There is minimal financial investment required, and groups are usually open and will welcome anyone who would like to participate. There are also few requirements in terms of leadership. Being that the focus is on right information, the leader simply needs adequate answers to the questions given, which are often times provided by an included or accompanying leader's guide. The high level of accessibility these resources provide make them great candidates for partnering with the local church. They can be quickly incorporated into a small group or Sunday school structure and require little energy outlay on the part of church leadership.

As a whole, this category of resources can, at their best, lay a solid biblical foundation for discipleship and spiritual formation. This is a necessary step that other approaches often do not take as seriously. At the same time, being so limited in their focus, these resources fall short in actually producing people who naturally live and love like Jesus. The fact that there is a serious gap in spiritual formation within the Evangelical church despite the abundance of small group studies within the church suggests that something more is needed.

The second category, parachurch, cohort-based approaches that focus on spiritual formation, lands on the opposite end of the spectrum from the first category. These resources, specifically *Renovare* and *Transforming Communities*, are designed to develop the whole person. In fact, both have utilized Willard's outline of the human system in teaching and practice. This focus on the development of the whole person is seen in how they engage not only the intellect, but the heart, will, feelings, physical body, and social context so that all the parts will be formed into the image of Christ. This is done through the use of various spiritual practices, including examen, centering prayer, imaginative reading, lectio divina, and healing prayer, which together present the whole person before God so he can do his transforming work.

There is also a high level of intentionality about who can be a part of the cohort as well as how groups are formed within the cohort. While I am unaware if this reflects an underlying knowledge of the science of the brain, the combination of more formed and less formed people within the same group certainly facilitates limbic regulation and revision. These programs also require engagement with spiritual directors and other highly formed leaders who can provide limbic stability. Finally, there is a clear

understanding that transformation is a slow process, so certain disciplines and practices are encouraged to be repeated over a significant duration of time. This is remarkably helpful in the formation of new neuropathways.

I know many and have spoken to numerous other people who have participated in either *Renovare* or *Transforming Communities* and it is evident that deep spiritual formation occurs through engagement with these resources. Their development of the whole person, emphasis on a broad range of spiritual practices, and utilization of the science of the brain make for an excellent environment for transformation. However, where they excel in growing people who naturally live and love like Jesus, they fall short in terms of accessibility and partnership with the local church.

One of the most significant drawbacks of this solution is the financial resources needed to participate. The cost can easily swell to \$20,000 or more per person depending on where a participant lives in relationship to the location of the cohort gathering. This means that these resources, which are very formational, are only available to the wealthy. In my interactions with both *Renovare* and *Transforming Communities*, it is clear that these resources are taken advantage of primarily by a wealthy white populous. A glance at photos of graduating classes will substantiate that claim. This is not to suggest it is inappropriate to charge this amount. Retreat centers, travel costs, and full-time faculty are expensive. However, one must acknowledge that the accessibility to these programs is greatly hindered by the financial resources needed to participate.

A second shortcoming of this category of solutions is their tendency to unintentionally estrange participants from the local church. In a recent gathering¹¹³ with over one hundred participants and alumni of *Transforming Communities*, this theme was evident. It happens this way: The participant is longing for something they are unable to find within their local church. As such, they discover a place of deep spiritual growth, community, and life transformation within the cohorts. Unfortunately, every time the participant returns to their local church, they find there are fewer and fewer who understand them. Over time, they feel increasingly alone in the new way of life to which God has invited them. Many indicate their church attendance dropped significantly, and others were so discouraged with their local church that they were looking for something else. Unfortunately, this leads to some of the most formed people exiting the context where their formation is needed most, and the local church suffers greatly. This tendency seems to be more pronounced in *Transforming Communities* than it does in *Renovare*.¹¹⁴ I suspect it is because *Renovare* only has four face-to-face cohort gatherings within two years while *Transforming Communities* has nine. It seems reasonable to assume that increased face-to-face contact with the cohort increases attachment to the cohort and highlights the lack of deep spiritual community within the participant's local church.

As a whole, this category is remarkably successful in developing people who naturally live and love like Jesus. However, its lack of accessibility and the difficulty

¹¹³ Becoming a Transforming Church Conference, Mundelein, IL, September 11-13, 2017. This conference served as my field research project for the Spring 2018 semester.

¹¹⁴ Life with God Conference, Santa Barbara, CA, May 15-18, 2018. This conference was hosted by The Dallas Willard Center and also served as a reunion for *Renovare* alumni. As such, I was able to enquire with many participants about their experience with *The Renovare Institute* and the local church.

integrating it into the local church, while natural outcomes of this solution and impossible to eliminate, create limits to its effectiveness.

The third and final category, small group or classroom-based approaches that focus on spiritual formation, falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. Like the category that focuses on information and education, this third category is both accessible and easily integrated within the local church. The resources require minimal financial investment, are flexible regarding group meeting times and places, and are open to anyone who would like to participate. Both *The Good and Beautiful Series (GBS)* and *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality (EHS)* require formed leaders, which means, unlike the educational and informational model, only certain people are able to facilitate the use of these resources. Like the first category, these resources can easily fit within a small group or Sunday school structure and therefore are easy for most churches to integrate. *EHS* has the added benefit of local church support through web-based resources and leadership training as well as face-to-face conferences.

This category of solutions also excels in terms of developing the whole person. *GBS* begins by addressing the physical body through rest and the spiritual practice of sleep. It addresses the entire human system from thoughts and feelings to the social context by providing teaching and spiritual practices to engage the various aspects of the person. This is not surprising, being that James Bryan Smith was commissioned by Dallas Willard to develop *GBS*. *EHS* also focuses on developing the whole person, but, as the title suggests, it is especially focused on emotional health. The last session, which develops a Rule of Life, is specifically aimed at developing the whole person.

When it comes to understanding the science of the brain, this category of solutions certainly considers how the brain changes, but is limited in its ability to take advantage of the limbic system. Both *EHS* and *GBS* acknowledge that change is a difficult and slow process that comes about through repeated experiences and practices that present the whole person to God. This is consistent with science's understanding of neural attractors, neuroplasticity, and the forming of new neural networks.

However, both *EHS* and *GBS* struggle in taking advantage of the limbic brain to facilitate change. Practices and exercises are introduced but are not practiced in community, which can provide the limbic stability needed to hold people in that space and allow the Trinity to transform them. It is also not possible for these resources to ensure there are enough formed people within a specific group to provide limbic resonance, regulation, and revision for those who are in the unsettling process of change. There seems to be a direct, inverse correlation between how accessible and easily integrated into the local church a specific resource is and its ability to take advantage of the limbic system. The more accessible and most easily integrated resources are the least able to take advantage of the limbic system, while the less accessible and least easily integrated resources are the most able to take advantage of the limbic system. This makes sense, considering a resource that is structured so it can be accessed by many and integrated into various churches has no control over the limbic makeup of the groups that use its resources.

Finally, this category of solutions faithfully employs various types of spiritual exercises and practices. *EHS* focuses primarily on a Daily Office that includes a few minutes of silence and solitude as well as reflections on the topic of the week. In the most

recent revision, Scazzero encourages the Daily Office to be practiced corporately at the beginning of the weekly meetings. (I understand this to be an acknowledgement of the power of the limbic brain.) In my experience of leading hundreds of people through *EHS*, those who engage in the Daily Office are the most impacted. *GBS* encourages a wide range of practices and exercises, and, in my experience, those groups who have practiced them corporately at least once a week have benefited most.

Of all three categories of spiritual formation explored here, it is my opinion that this one provides the most hope for spiritual formation within the average local church. Certainly, the addition of corporate experiences that would take advantage of the limbic system would be a helpful addition, but that cannot be facilitated by such an accessible and easily integrated resource. However, as the local church, from leadership to the lay person, engages these resources and a few people are deeply transformed, like yeast in the dough, those formed people can, in time, provide the limbic environment needed to facilitate significant transformation.

Conclusion

Resources such as *EHS*, *GBS*, *Renovare*, and *Transforming Communities* have made great strides in developing people who naturally live and love like Jesus. However, each of them falls short in different ways, leaving room for a more comprehensive solution. In order for that solution to be effective, it must first propose a robust gospel that serves as a corrective for the truncated one that has been embraced by much of Evangelical Christianity. Then, it must provide an accessible process, connected to the local church, through which that gospel can be absorbed into the whole person (will, mind, body, social context, soul). This absorption will best occur if the process takes into

consideration the science of the brain as well as utilizes both personal and corporate spiritual practices. A solution that meets these criteria is the subject of the following chapter.

SECTION THREE:
A GOSPEL THAT IS TRULY GOOD NEWS

It has been established that the lack of spiritual formation within the evangelical church is largely due to the widespread embrace of a truncated gospel. This being the case, the first step in opening the way for greater transformation is to offer a more robust, biblical portrayal of the gospel. Unlike the truncated version, it is impossible to summarize the biblical gospel in a few simple points. Even the apostle Paul could not fully explain the depths of the gospel and its glorious implications, which is why he often referred to it as a mystery.¹¹⁵ However, a summarized, re-tellable, and robust gospel would serve the church, and through them the world, both as a corrective and as an invitation to participate in a story that is truly Good News. What follows is an attempt at such a summary.

It has always been God's desire to establish an "all-inclusive community of loving persons with God himself at the very center of this community as its prime Sustainer and most glorious Inhabitant."¹¹⁶ God's intention was that this good, just, and loving community be ever expanding as he worked with, in, and through humanity. This is why God told Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that

¹¹⁵ Paul speaks of this mystery seven times in the book of Ephesians alone.

¹¹⁶ Richard J. Foster, ed., *The Life with God Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), Genesis 1-11, introduction, lines 1-3. This is a printed quote of a phrase originated and often used by Dallas Willard.

moves on the ground.”¹¹⁷ Though God could have established this community (or kingdom) in numerous ways, he chose humanity as partners in his divine plan.

It must be noted, however, that the universe in which humanity was placed was one that already consisted of two kingdoms.¹¹⁸ One was the kingdom of God; the way of love, grace and truth. The other, the kingdom of the world; the way of selfishness, hatred and retribution. One brought life. The other brought death.

Unfortunately, in their innocence (perfect but not yet mature),¹¹⁹ Adam and Eve were deceived by the primary agent of the kingdom of the world. They believed Satan’s lie about the nature and character of God and, as a result, chose to trust someone else. Their life-giving union with God now fractured, Adam and Eve were unable to access the divine resources that were essential for living as they were intended to live. Their decision to turn away from God bound them, and the entire created world, to a cycle of sin that spiraled further and further away from God into chaos and death.

But God’s desire didn’t change. He still wanted to establish his kingdom through humanity. He still desired an all-inclusive, loving community oriented around and sustained by his goodness. So God began again with Noah. He gave him the same commission he gave Adam and Eve: to partner with God so God could establish his good, just, and loving kingdom in and through Noah and his offspring.¹²⁰ Hundreds of years

¹¹⁷ Genesis 1:28.

¹¹⁸ It is important to note that kingdom of the world is a counterfeit kingdom that is in rebellion to the kingdom of God. As such, they are not two equal powers. The victory of the kingdom of God was never in question.

¹¹⁹ Irenaeus of Lyons taught that humanity’s sin was primarily caused by their immaturity. C.S. Lewis picked up this theme in the three books that comprise *The Space Trilogy*.

¹²⁰ Genesis 9:7.

later, the pattern was repeated as God blessed Abraham so Abraham could bring God's blessing to the world.¹²¹ Generations later, through Moses, the same purpose was given to the Israelites. They were to be a chosen nation who, living as people of the Temple¹²² and Torah,¹²³ would partner with God so he could establish his good and beautiful kingdom in and through humanity. As Israel floundered in its mission, the judges and monarchs were expected to lead them back to their divine purpose. Yet despite the prophets' warnings and their various attempts to point God's people back to their intended purpose, it would not be so. In every case, humanity chose the way of the kingdom of the world over the kingdom of God.

That is, until Jesus. The second Adam.¹²⁴ The first truly faithful Israelite.¹²⁵ He would be the king and the prophet who would do what no one else could. Setting aside his divine rights and becoming fully human, Jesus would be the one through whom God would finally establish his good, just, and loving kingdom. And that is exactly what he did. Despite intense and repeated temptations to do otherwise, united with the Father, Jesus faithfully chose the ways of God's kingdom. Again and again, at great personal cost, he chose the way of love, grace, and truth in all things. In time, such profound love, such unsettling grace, and such penetrating truth became a threat to the kingdom of this

¹²¹ Genesis 12:1-3.

¹²² The Temple was an image of God being present with his people.

¹²³ The Torah was a picture of God's good, just, and loving ways.

¹²⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:45.

¹²⁵ N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 105.

world. How could the Empire¹²⁶ stay in power if they could no longer manipulate through retribution and oppression? How could the temple leaders and the teachers of the law¹²⁷ stay in power if they chose love over legalism? And, more poignantly, how can we stay in power if we choose the way of love? Make no mistake. Love is the greatest threat to the kingdom of this world. So much so that the kingdom of this world took all the hatred, anger, and violence it could muster and hurled it at Jesus, culminating in a Roman crucifixion where he willingly took on death, the greatest specter of the kingdom of this world. So, it was not God who killed his Son.¹²⁸ It was the hatred, anger, and violence of the kingdom of this world (including yours and mine) that put Jesus to death. And in that moment, it seemed as if hatred, anger, and violence won.

But only for a few days. Only until the resurrection. When Jesus rose from the grave, not only did he conquer sin and death,¹²⁹ he also proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that, while it may look otherwise in the moment, the ways of the kingdom of God always win. Which means today, as we look at Jesus, two things become crystal clear. First, we are reminded of the true character and nature of God that was called into question in the Garden of Eden. Only perfect love would give his life for another. Therefore, when God's goodness is called into doubt, Jesus reminds us of what is

¹²⁶ The Roman Empire used power, oppression, and manipulation in order to maintain control over the masses.

¹²⁷ The religious leaders abused the scriptures and the law in order to maintain control of their followers. Jesus calls them to account for this in Matthew 23 among other places.

¹²⁸ Marcus Borg, "Executed by Rome, Vindicated by God," in *Stricken by God*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 161.

¹²⁹ In Romans 6:1-10, Paul speaks about the efficacy of Jesus' death and resurrection for those who are united with Christ. Much could be said and has been said by others about the mechanics of the atonement, but, in the end, it is still a mystery.

ultimately true. Nothing proclaims the love of God more than the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Second, when we look to Jesus, we are we are reminded that the good, just, and loving ways of God's kingdom always win. This means that we, as followers of Christ with the Holy Spirit living in us, can give ourselves wholeheartedly to the lifelong mission of partnering with God so he can establish his kingdom in and through us. Like Jesus, we can choose love, grace, and truth in all things. That is the way to the abundant life Jesus offers. Though that life is often difficult and filled with struggle and pain, it must be remembered that we are not alone. In fact, at this very moment, Jesus is seated on the throne at the right hand of God the Father, actively ruling his kingdom of love, grace, and truth. Therefore, when we choose to live in line with his kingdom, Jesus, our present and ruling king, will release all the kingdom resources needed. He will give us all the love, all the grace, all the truth, all the forgiveness, all the faith, all the courage, and all the comfort that is needed to establish his kingdom in and through us. The more we avail ourselves of those resources, the more we, the body of Christ, become who we were intended to be in the first place: an all-inclusive community of loving persons with God himself at the very center of this community as its prime Sustainer and most glorious Inhabitant. That is the good news of the gospel.

Two Necessary Goals

As life changing as this good news is, it would be naïve to suggest that the telling of a more robust gospel is enough, in and of itself, to lead to the transformation that the church so desperately needs. However, this story does open the door to what Dallas Willard suggests are the two fundamental goals of transformational discipleship.

According to Willard, the first goal of discipleship is to “bring apprentices to the point where they are dearly loved and constantly delight in that ‘heavenly Father’ made real to earth in Jesus and are quite certain that there is no ‘catch,’ no limit, to the goodness of his intentions or to his power to carry them out.”¹³⁰ The second goal is to “remove our automatic responses against the kingdom of God, to free the apprentices of domination, of ‘enslavement’ (John 8:34; Rom. 6:6), to their old habitual patterns of thought, feeling and action.”¹³¹

As these two goals are pursued over time, they will naturally erode the three barriers to spiritual formation¹³² erected by a truncated gospel. When Willard’s first goal is pursued, it will, in time, break down the barrier of an angry God, replacing the image of a vindictive God who is against sinful humanity with a loving God who is, in all things, for their redemption and restoration. When Willard’s second goal is pursued, it will, in time, break down the barrier of aiming for heaven and missing earth; it turns the focus of salvation from a future heaven to the present working out of a disciple’s salvation.¹³³ Finally, as both of Willard’s goals are pursued together, they will break down the barrier of distorted discipleship by turning the focus of discipleship from right belief and right behavior to a lifelong transformation process that allows the disciple to increasingly embrace God’s love, while at the same time finding greater and greater freedom from their broken, sinful habits.

¹³⁰ Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 321.

¹³¹ Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 322.

¹³² The three barriers are the focus of section 1 of this dissertation.

¹³³ Philippians 2:12.

Supportive Curriculum

While a robust gospel and clear goals lay a solid foundation for spiritual formation, it is easy for them to remain vague and lofty theories. As such, it is necessary to flesh out these theories through a clear and supportive curriculum. While it is beyond the scope of this section to develop a detailed curriculum (a representative example is provided in section five), there are four foundational principles that must be included in a formational curriculum if it hopes to achieve Willard's goals and embody a robust gospel that will lead to transformation. These principles, which will be expanded one by one, are as follows: awaken desire, know oneself as God's beloved, embrace the true self/release the false self, and, finally, live a life of love.¹³⁴

Awaken Desire

It was at the pool of Bethesda where Jesus asked a peculiar question of a man who had been lame for thirty-eight years. "Do you *want* to get well?"¹³⁵ He asked a similarly odd question of a blind beggar who cried out for mercy while Jesus was walking on the road to Jericho. "What do you *want* me to do for you?"¹³⁶ Though it was obvious as to what the two men *needed*, Jesus understood that what they *wanted* was even more critical. He knew their *desire* was important. It seems this is why Jesus taught that those who "*hunger and thirst for righteousness*"¹³⁷ are the ones who will be filled.

¹³⁴ While never directly quoted, it must be noted that Sheryl Fleisher, who has been my mentor and spiritual director, has had a profound impact on my understanding of the process of spiritual formation.

¹³⁵ John 5:6. Emphasis mine.

¹³⁶ John 18:41. Emphasis mine.

¹³⁷ Matthew 5:6. Emphasis mine.

Janet Ruffing helps us understand why Jesus may have been so concerned about uncovering desire.

Our desiring already originates in God’s desiring us. Too often we approach [life] as if we want something and God most likely wants something else... I propose that all our desires ultimately lead us to God... Our desires, our wants, our longings, our outward and inward searching—when uncovered, expressed, and recognized—all lead to the Divine Beloved at the core.¹³⁸

If the church hopes to grow disciples who live and love as Jesus does, they must embrace the reality that a person’s deepest desires are the fuel that will get them there.

Unfortunately, many Christians have been taught that their desires are wrong. They have been led to believe desire must be suppressed or it will lead to all sorts of evil.¹³⁹ This a subtle but terribly misguided concept, as the evil comes not from the desire itself, but from what a person does with the desire. Spirituality, as Ronald Rolheiser suggests, is not about suppressing our desires, but rather, “what we do with desire.”¹⁴⁰ John Eldredge makes an important observation as he asks the question, “How can we hunger and thirst after righteousness if we have ceased hungering and thirsting altogether?... The greatest enemy of holiness is not passion; it is apathy. Look at Jesus. He was no milksop. His life was charged with passion.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Janet K. Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 11.

¹³⁹ I believe this perspective has its roots in a twisted understanding of the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity. If humanity has nothing good in them, then it must follow that their desires could only lead to evil.

¹⁴⁰ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for A Christian Spirituality* (New York: Image, 2014), 7.

¹⁴¹ John Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire: Searching for the Life You’ve Always Dreamed Of* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2016), 56.

Therefore, if we are to engage in spiritual formation, we must begin not by suppressing our desires but by awakening them, and trust that, when well-tended,¹⁴² they will lead us to the heart of God. As C.S. Lewis so famously expresses,

It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because she cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹⁴³

Know Oneself as God's Beloved

Once awakened and well-tended, our desires will lead us to what is most true: that we are beloved sons and daughters of God. Scripture is filled with this truth. In one of the best known of all biblical stories,¹⁴⁴ Jesus speaks of a son who, despite dishonoring his father, squandering his inheritance, and making a mess of his life, is welcomed back with open arms by his father with all the rights and privileges that come with being a son. The disciple John writes, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”¹⁴⁵ The apostle Paul states, “The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘*Abba, Father.*’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”¹⁴⁶ Over

¹⁴² Spiritual practices of surrender, as well as understanding and entering into the process of grief, are extremely important in tending desires and allowing them to find their fulfillment in God rather than in lesser, broken and sinful things.

¹⁴³ C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” *Theology* 43, no. 257 (November 1941): 263.

¹⁴⁴ Luke 15:11-32.

¹⁴⁵ 1 John 3:1.

¹⁴⁶ Romans 8:15-16. Emphasis mine.

and over, scripture reminds us of what God thinks of us. Henri Nouwen sums it up well. “We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved or wounded us. That’s the truth of our lives... That’s the truth spoken by the voice that says, ‘You are my Beloved.’”¹⁴⁷

However, as was discussed in section one of this paper, sin has tainted humanity’s perspective of God. Like Adam and Eve, we have bought into the enemy’s lies and, as a result, our image of God is shattered.¹⁴⁸ As such, reclaiming our status as beloved children means exposing the lies we believe and allowing them to be replaced with the truth that sets us free. Those lies tend to fall into three major categories: pride, shame, and fear.¹⁴⁹

The lies told by pride suggest that we are self-sufficient; that we are better off relying on ourselves. Pride makes us uncomfortable with our natural human need and unaware of our natural human limitations. Pride leads us to believe that our perspective, insights, and opinions are superior to those of others, even God. Underneath pride, shame tells us the lie that we are not enough; that we are unlovable, undesirable, and unworthy of love. Shame drives us to search for the approval of others rather than embrace the divine approval that has been given to us from before the foundations of the earth.¹⁵⁰ Finally, underneath shame, fear tells us the lie that God is not enough. We must achieve

¹⁴⁷ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 36.

¹⁴⁸ If you pay attention to Genesis 3, the lies Adam and Eve believed become evident.

¹⁴⁹ An entire dissertation could be written about how these three lies weave their way all through the stories of scripture.

¹⁵⁰ Psalm 139:15-16.

and accomplish in order to feel good about ourselves. We, rather than God, must have money, knowledge, and certainty to feel safe and secure.

The cumulative effect of embracing the lies of pride, shame, and fear is the inability to accept ourselves as who we truly are: beloved children of God. Spiritual formation requires that we enter into the process of reclaiming our belovedness. Again, Henri Nouwen sums it up well when he writes, “Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the ‘Beloved.’ Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence.... *Becoming the Beloved means letting the truth of our Belovedness become enfleshed in everything we think, say or do.*”¹⁵¹

Embrace the True Self/Release the False Self

“Then [Jesus] said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.’”¹⁵² It is clear from this passage that following Jesus requires an ongoing exchange of one life for another. In Romans 7, the apostle Paul speaks of the difficulty of this ongoing exchange as he laments that the good he desires to do he doesn’t do, while the evil he doesn’t want to do is the very thing he ends up doing. Though the terms are never used in Scripture, both Jesus and Paul are speaking of what has come to be known in both secular and sacred circles as the true and false self.

¹⁵¹ Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, 33, 45. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵² Luke 9:23-24.

For a disciple of Jesus, the true self is simply who God has created us to be. This includes our mystical union with God (God in us),¹⁵³ our identity as sons and daughters of God (the beloved),¹⁵⁴ our unique self, including the distinctive qualities (personality, likes and dislikes, etc.) that make us an individual; and, finally, our physical bodies.¹⁵⁵ This true self is the life we will “find” as we “take up our cross daily” and follow Jesus.

The false self is the antithesis of the true self. David Benner writes,

Everything that is false about us arises from our belief that our deepest happiness will come from living life our way, not God’s way... Early on in life most of us learn to take care of our own needs and satisfactions. We develop what Thomas Keating calls a personal emotional program. This is our plan for coping with life and achieving happiness. It is our best guess about what we need to do in order to feel good about our self. It is our strategy for meeting our basic needs for love, survival, power and control.¹⁵⁶

The longer we live out of these broken patterns, the less we are able to be our true selves. As such, Sue Monk Kidd proposes the “spiritual journey entails confronting these hardened patterns that we’ve spent a lifetime creating, patterns that oppose the life of the spirit and obscure our true spiritual identity.”¹⁵⁷ Any curriculum that hopes to bring about spiritual formation must address the false self.

At the same time, it is important to note that embracing the true self and releasing the false self is not a matter of self-effort. Any such work will only strengthen the false self. Paul suggests this very thing when he says of himself, “I have been crucified with

¹⁵³ John 14:20.

¹⁵⁴ Ephesians 1:5.

¹⁵⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:7.

¹⁵⁶ David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 75-76.

¹⁵⁷ Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life’s Sacred Questions* (New York: HarperOne, 1990), 52.

Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”¹⁵⁸ Like Paul, our responsibility is to partner, in faith, with Christ, whose own death and resurrection will fuel the death of the false self and the resurrection of the true self. That partnering is aided by spiritual practices of healthy engagement (confession, vulnerability, meditation, welcoming prayer, celebration, etc.) and healthy detachment (fasting, centering prayer, silence and solitude, simplicity, etc.)

Live a Life of Love

Awakening desires, knowing ourselves as God’s beloved, and embracing our true self and releasing our false self open the way for an outward turn that will fulfill the second greatest commandment: to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.¹⁵⁹ While this movement toward a life of love is often natural, it is just as often overlooked, giving rise to the commonly held (and sometimes justified) perspective that spiritual formation is self-centered. It is for this reason that healthy definitions of spiritual formation always include this outward turn. Jeffery Greenman gives us such a definition: “Spiritual formation is our continuing response to the reality of God’s grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith, *for the sake of the world.*”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Galatians 2:20.

¹⁵⁹ Matthew 22:37-40.

¹⁶⁰ Jeffery P. Greenman, *Life in the Spirit*, 24. Emphasis mine.

The apostle Paul holds a similar perspective as he writes, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”¹⁶¹ Good works, as the flow of this passage indicates, are the natural response to the saving grace¹⁶² of God. When Jesus (whose desires were fully awakened, who knew himself as God’s beloved Son, and who lived entirely out of his true self) began his public ministry, he did so by quoting the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoner and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”¹⁶³ If this outward love for others was the aim of Jesus’ life, then it must be the aim of his disciples’ lives as well.

As such, a curriculum for spiritual formation must intentionally engage a life of love that includes radical hospitality, inconvenient justice, service of others, and deep care and appropriate action for those who are in need. It is important to understand that while a life of love is the fruit of a formed life, intentional engagement in the above-listed areas also serves as a catalyst to awaken desire, to experience belovedness, and to expose and release the false self. Therefore, intentional engagement in a life of love is a necessary ingredient throughout the formation process.

¹⁶¹ Ephesians 2:8-10.

¹⁶² As is suggested in the robust gospel earlier in this section, “saving” is far more than an action that gets someone into heaven. It is the lifelong work of God that helps us know ourselves as the beloved and freely live as God intended us to live.

¹⁶³ Luke 4:18-19.

Supportive Environments

The Need for Something More

While a robust gospel, clear goals, and supportive curriculum are critical for spiritual formation within the local church, on their own, they will fall drastically short. Clarity about *what* content is needed for spiritual formation is only half the battle. *How* that content is delivered and assimilated is another issue altogether. Unfortunately, too few church leaders pay attention to this reality. They simply insert the content into existing forms and assume transformation will occur. When transformation does not occur, they often assume the congregants just don't want to be transformed. Both of these are dangerous assumptions. As noted in section one of this paper, seventy-seven percent of those who attend Evangelical churches indicate that spiritual growth, or life transformation, is a high priority.¹⁶⁴ Many of these people want to enter more deeply into the process of spiritual formation. They want to change. That is why so many people continue to faithfully attend Sunday morning services, participate in small groups, listen to podcasts, and go to seminars. Unfortunately, these forms, while familiar to most Christians, cannot provide the necessary environment for intentional spiritual formation.

Ruth Haley Barton, the founder of Transforming Communities, suggests that “people change incrementally over time with others in the context of spiritual practices, experiences and relationships that keep us open and available to God’s transforming work. To that end, a transforming community [cultivates and embraces] sacred rhythms

¹⁶⁴ The Navigators, *The State of Discipleship*, 106.

of spiritual practice that they engage in alone and together.”¹⁶⁵ For the past twelve years, this is the environment staff and a few lay leaders have experienced at Monte Vista Chapel.¹⁶⁶ Four hours a week are dedicated to some type of intentional engagement, individually and in community, resulting in significant and noticeable transformation. However, this type of environment is not available to the majority of the congregation, who work nine-to-five jobs. Few people can take three or four hours out of the middle of their work week, so they attend what is available when they are available: Sunday services, small groups, and maybe a seminar here or there. Those who are most serious about their own spiritual formation often look for it, and find it, outside of the local church.¹⁶⁷

All this being said, the issue that needs to be addressed flows from the dichotomy between the available time, energy, and resources that a typical congregant has to invest, and the fact that spiritual transformation requires, as Barton suggests, “experiences and relationships that keep us open and available to God’s transforming work.” The forms and structure that have historically been made available to congregants, and to which congregants are now accustomed to attending, accommodate one of these issues (available time) but not the other (experience and relationships). Even if Sunday services and small group gatherings are led from a formational perspective, they are structurally

¹⁶⁵ Ruth Haley Barton, “What Is a Transforming Community?” (lecture, Saint Mary at the Lake, Mundelein, IL, September 11, 2017).

¹⁶⁶ Monte Vista Chapel is a non-denominational church in central California of which I am the senior pastor.

¹⁶⁷ In my experience as a pastor, most ministries that focus on spiritual formation are para-church, and most people I know who are seriously pursuing spiritual formation are doing so outside of their local churches.

unable to hold people in a communal space where, over a long period of time, the mixture of time together, spiritual practices, and God’s transforming presence do their work.

Something has to change.

An Environment Integrated in the Local Church

As noted already, the majority of forms historically utilized by the local church are not optimal for deep formation. As such, most of the spiritual formation movement tends to be individualistic and detached from the local church. There are countless stories of people whose first deeply renewed encounter with God happened at a monastery or a personal retreat far away and removed from their local congregation.¹⁶⁸ Unfortunately, when this newly inspired person returns to their local church, they often report that that something just does not “feel” right about their corporate experience anymore. They have changed, but the environment to which they return has not, so despite re-entering the same community, they begin to feel displaced. This phenomenon becomes understandable once the incredible power of the limbic brain is understood.¹⁶⁹

Adults remain social animals: they continue to require a source of stabilization outside themselves. That open-loop design means that in some important ways, people cannot be stable on their own—not should or shouldn’t be, but can’t be. This prospect is disconcerting to many, especially in a society that prizes individuality as ours does. Total self-sufficiency turns out to be a daydream whose bubble is burst by the sharp edge of the limbic brain. *Stability means finding people who regulate you well and staying near them.*¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ I have personally heard these stories from those who have participated in *Renovare, Transforming Communities*, and the cohort I have participated in as a part of my doctoral studies.

¹⁶⁹ In order to refresh your understanding of the limbic system, it may be helpful to read section two, page 30 of this dissertation, beginning with the final paragraph and continuing through the final full paragraph of page 32.

¹⁷⁰ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 86. Emphasis mine.

According to Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, the limbic brain is subconsciously looking for likeminded people to bring stability. However, in the above-mentioned example, spiritual transformation took place outside of the person's normal community, meaning limbic resonance, which "is the door to communal connection,"¹⁷¹ has been short-circuited. The transformed person returns to their local church only to find they have no limbic home. They have changed, but nobody has changed with them. If this is the case, it follows that the best way to sustain transformation within the local church would be to ensure that spiritual formation happens within a sub-community (a cohort) of that local church. Limbic resonance, and therefore limbic stability, would be the natural outcome of a local community who transformed together.

Not only would a formational cohort within the local church provide limbic stability for those who are in the process of formation, it would also serve as a way to leverage limbic resonance, thereby affecting the entire church. Jesus himself said that the "Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough."¹⁷² Without straining the metaphor too far, the question begged of Jesus' teaching is, "How much yeast is necessary to impact the dough?" While the answer to that question will vary from congregation to congregation, the transformational potential of a local congregation that contains a percentage of spiritually formed, limbically settled participants (yeast) would be significantly greater than that of a congregation that has no formed participants serving as a source of limbic stability.

¹⁷¹ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 64.

¹⁷² Matthew 13:33.

An Environment that Facilitates Transformation

While limbic stability is critical, insight into the limbic brain is not just about creating a stable community once transformation has occurred. It is essential for creating change itself. Limbic revision is collaborative¹⁷³ and we must harness that to our advantage. The difficulty inherent in spiritual transformation cannot be overstated. It is unsettling and can often be frightening, as new ideas and concepts are introduced that threaten previous ways of thinking and being. Time and time again, I have witnessed fear bind people to what Daniel Kahneman calls System 1 thinking.¹⁷⁴ Rather than accepting an invitation to silence and solitude or the encouragement to meditate on scripture as something positive and helpful, a person's confirmation bias¹⁷⁵ equates silence, solitude, and meditation with Eastern mysticism and the protests begin!

Rob Westervelt, the Chief Innovation Officer for George Fox University, who has led an established university through significant transitions, speaks of the unsettling process of change.¹⁷⁶ It begins with comfort, where people (and limbic brains) want to stay. When new systems or processes are introduced, the next stage is denial, as people (and the brain's Attractors) want to ignore that which is new or unsettling and return to a place of comfort. The necessary work is to hold the issue that needs to change in front of people long enough that it begins to lead to the third stage, confusion. Only then, in the

¹⁷³ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 162.

¹⁷⁴ Eric Johnson, "Book Summary: *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman," 1. System 1 thinking is the immediate, reactionary response that originates in the subconscious stem of the brain. This is the same area of the brain that causes the "fight or flight" response.

¹⁷⁵ Johnson, "Book Summary: *Thinking Fast and Slow*," 3. Confirmation bias is the tendency to interpret things (teaching, experiences, interactions) in ways that confirm what a person already believes.

¹⁷⁶ Rob Westervelt (lecture, George Fox University, Newberg, OR, October 30, 2017).

space where the known past is released but the future is still unknown, can the fourth stage of breakthrough occur. This process is unsettling, to say the least. It is a limbic minefield! Without a group of people to bring stability, the mind quickly rejects vital practices for spiritual formation simply because they are new and different. The limbic brain ensures that these new ideas and thoughts “fight an uphill battle against the patterns already ingrained, because existing Attractors can easily overwhelm and absorb moderately novel configurations.”¹⁷⁷ The well-known saying “change is hard” is much truer than most of us would like to believe.

At the same time, as Westervelt suggests, a certain amount of tension is necessary, or change will never occur. The key is to understand how much tension a person or group can withstand before they disengage the process of change and opt for the comfort of the familiar. Ronald A. Heifetz proposes that leaders of any change process must learn how to “modulate provocation.”¹⁷⁸ In other words, there needs to be enough discomfort to dislodge people, but not so much as to overwhelm them. The image of shooting a rubber-band from one’s finger is helpful here. Too little tension and the band will not launch. Too much tension and it will break. Modulating provocation is an environmental art that must be learned if transformation is going to occur.

Despite the difficulty of change, many of barriers to spiritual formation should be able to be minimized through a cohort that is intentionally seeking spiritual

¹⁷⁷ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 164.

¹⁷⁸ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 207.

transformation together over a period of time. As a group of thirty to fifty people¹⁷⁹ enter a weekend retreat, or another extended time together that is free from distraction, the mind can settle and more easily integrate System 2 thinking, lessening the tendency to jump to conclusions.¹⁸⁰ New insights and perspectives that could easily trigger Attractors or reactive System 1 thinking can be stabilized as they find harmony in the activity of nearby limbic brains.¹⁸¹ The limbic brain tends to shrug off insight brought to it through the neocortex, but it will “yield to a different persuasion: the force of another person’s Attractors reaching through the doorway of a limbic connection.”¹⁸² This seems to suggest that while sermons and education have their place, deep change requires enough time and space for limbic resonance, regulation, and revision. If those who are more Christlike can be in the same space, practicing the same practices and encountering the same Holy Spirit as those who are entering the process, spiritual formation will happen. This scientific reality has already proven itself to be true in the staff at MVC, in *Renovare* and *Transforming Communities*, and in the DMin cohorts at Portland Seminary. Additionally, after the completion of one retreat, it seems to be proving itself true through my proposed artifact as well.

¹⁷⁹ There are numerous reasons I would advocate for a group this size, provided it is able to be divided into small groups of 5-6, each with a developed leader. First, it allows the group to be large enough to experience a sense of momentum (i.e., look at all these people doing the same thing I am doing). Second, it is also large enough that a limbically unsettled person will not have a disproportionately negative impact on the whole group. Third, the intensity that is experienced in small formational groups can be balanced by less-intense times of teaching and celebration within the larger group.

¹⁸⁰ Johnson, “Book Summary: *Thinking Fast and Slow*,” 1. System 2 thinking is non-reactive and allows both the limbic brain and the neocortex to be engaged. Both System 1 and System 2 thinking are always at work. Awareness of a bias toward reactive System 1 thinking can help people make decisions that engage System 2 thinking.

¹⁸¹ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 170.

¹⁸² Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 177.

An Environment that is Accessible

A process for spiritual formation, no matter how well-thought-out and effective, is of little use if it is not readily accessible to the average congregant. If attendance at *Renovare* or *Transforming Communities* is any indication, spiritual formation is much more accessible to church/ministry staff members or the wealthy because they either have the time and resources built into their jobs, or they have means to free up the time and purchase the resources required for spiritual formation.¹⁸³ I have witnessed this in my own ministry context as well.

Over the past decade, Monte Vista Chapel has committed significant resources to the formation of staff, interns, and a few key lay leaders.¹⁸⁴ Initially this decision was made because formation must begin with those who are leading the church. However, as time passed, it became clear that the staff and key lay leaders had unknowingly adopted an “unlimited goods” perspective of power.¹⁸⁵ In other words, being that staff and a few select lay people were able to access resources for spiritual formation, it was assumed that the congregation should be able to do the same. Unfortunately, in nearly all church environments, the staff and ministry leaders have control over the church’s time and resources and, if not well-tended, those resources can be made available only in ways that

¹⁸³ While there is no hard evidence to support this claim, my interactions with both *Renovare* and *Transforming Communities* (as well as with the DMin cohort at Portland Seminary) suggest that church / ministry staff or the wealthy (especially wealthy white people) have a significant advantage when it comes to accessing spiritual formation resources.

¹⁸⁴ Personal time, weekly corporate spiritual practices, spiritual direction, and regular access to other staff members for spiritual conversations are considered part of their job.

¹⁸⁵ MaryKate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership: Power, Space and Influence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 133.

are not easily accessible for the average congregant. Though unintended, this is a damaging misuse of power.

If this is going to change, churches must develop a “limited goods” perspective of power. This perspective acknowledges that power is not equally distributed, and those who have it must use it as Christ would: to “extend hospitality to others...to invite everyone to the table... [and to] preserve and care for everyone else in the group.”¹⁸⁶ This being the case, church and ministry staff must genuinely interact with the congregation to discover how formational activities can best fit into their life circumstances.

At Monte Vista Chapel,¹⁸⁷ those interactions have led to two very important conclusions. First, concerning time, in a given year congregants are willing to attend one three- to four-hour gathering per month and two to three weekend retreats per year,¹⁸⁸ provided all dates are given to them a year in advance. Books, daily offices, and organic interactions between those monthly gatherings are also welcomed, provided they are used in moderation.

Second, costs must land between \$250 and \$500 per person for the entire year. Anything more prevents a significant number of people from even considering the possibility. For Monte Vista Chapel, financial resources that have previously been used for internships and staff development must be redirected in order to offset the cost for congregational spiritual development. Other contexts will have to wrestle with how to

¹⁸⁶ Morse, *Making Room for Leadership*, 133.

¹⁸⁷ In order to get this information, a group of twelve leaders spoke with five congregants each who are interested in spiritual formation. While this is not necessarily a scientific sampling, it was telling how similar the responses of nearly ten percent of our adult population were.

¹⁸⁸ The weekend retreats would take the place of the monthly gathering rather than be an addition to them.

free up resources in such a way that time and finances are not a significantly limiting factor for spiritual formation. While the restructuring of a local church's resources will require a significant amount of work and sacrifice on behalf of staff and leadership, it will result in a much better stewardship of power, making spiritual formation accessible to the greatest amount of people possible.

A Word About Buy-in

It is one thing to create an accessible and functional process for spiritual formation. It is another thing to get a local congregation to participate in that plan. To address this issue, it is critical to understand that, by and large, human behavior is driven by two things. "At the end of the day a person asks, 'Can I do what's required?' and, 'Will it be worth it?' The first question simply asks, 'Am I able?' The second, 'Am I motivated?'"¹⁸⁹ If a congregation is unable to answer "yes" to both of these questions, all the effort put into creating an accessible and functional process for spiritual formation will be for naught.

Helping a local congregation say "yes" to an intentional formation process is particularly difficult because much of spiritual formation requires people to engage in behaviors that do not necessarily feel good (silence, solitude, self-examination, vulnerability), while at the same time refraining from other behaviors that do feel good (distraction, numbing out, denial). Consideration of the following non-manipulative tactics can help people choose to do things that otherwise they might not want to do.

¹⁸⁹ Joseph Grenny, Kerry Patterson, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler, *Influencer: The New Science of Leading Change* (New York: McGraw Hill Education, 2013), 69.

They are: allow for choice, create direct experiences, and tell meaningful stories.¹⁹⁰ This means when inviting people to join an intentional spiritual formation process, leaders must be careful to avoid communicating that “everyone *must* to do this!” When something begins to feel mandatory, resistance naturally begins to grow. Open-handed, judgment-free invitation is the best answer. Second, it is helpful to provide and encourage people to engage in a few “taste and see” experiences before participants commit to a longer, more involved process. An hour of directed silence or a twenty-minute engagement in a helpful spiritual exercise can create space for a meaningful encounter with God that will reduce fear and increase anticipation for a longer, more in-depth process. Finally, meaningful stories must be told. There is little more motivating than a story of genuine life change. Utilizing various means to tell these stories and connecting them to an intentional process of spiritual formation will give people a vision of how their live might be different if they choose to engage.

While creating buy-in may seem like something that can wait until the process for spiritual formation is fully developed and ready for implementation, wisdom and experience suggest otherwise. Creating buy-in takes time. Tending this reality will prevent a well-thought-out, effective, accessible process for spiritual formation from becoming another great idea that never caught on.

Conclusion

Developing a solution to the lack of spiritual formation within the evangelical church is complex, and each solution will express itself differently within its local

¹⁹⁰ Grenny, Patterson, Maxfield, McMillan, and Switzler *Influencer*, 81.

context. At the same time, any solution, if effective, must begin with a robust gospel that lays a solid foundation upon which to build. This foundation, along with clear and concise goals for discipleship and spiritual formation, will go a long way toward breaking down the barriers constructed by a truncated gospel outlined in section one.

However, a robust gospel and clear goals are not enough. Supporting curriculum is necessary to help systematically move a participant from awakening their desire for God's love to becoming the kind of person who naturally extends that love to a broken world. The difficulty of this type of formational movement cannot be overstated. As such, a supportive environment that is integrated in the local church, facilitates transformation, and is accessible to the general congregant is also critical if the five evaluative criteria from section two are going to be satisfied.

Finally, all of the work put into a solution that has potential to bring about spiritual formation will be for naught if no one will participate. As such, a great deal of intention must be directed toward non-manipulative tactics that encourage buy-in from local congregants. As all of these factors are considered, the slow, transforming work of God will be facilitated and local congregations, and maybe even the greater church, will be changed.

SECTION FOUR: ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The artifact that has emerged from my dissertation research is a year-long discipleship and spiritual formation cohort called The Journey. The Journey is intended to function within a local church¹⁹¹ and consists of ten four-hour gatherings and three weekend retreats that combine teaching, individual and corporate spiritual practices, and small group interaction. Reading, engagement in regular spiritual practices, and organic small group gatherings are expected between monthly gatherings. The optimal size for a cohort would range between thirty-five and seventy, broken into small groups of five, each with a qualified leader.

The content of The Journey, which is specifically outlined in the next section, moves the participants from awakening desires, to knowing oneself as God's beloved, to embracing the true self and releasing the false self, to, finally, living a life of love. The arc of this curriculum is designed to provide the necessary information to move toward the two goals of spiritual formation proposed in the thesis. Though content alone will not lead to spiritual formation, certain foundational truths are necessary in order to break down the barriers to spiritual formation discussed in section one as well as open the way for participants to embrace the more robust gospel presented in the thesis. The Journey will provide these foundational truths.

As important as the curriculum itself is the *way* in which the curriculum will be delivered and received. This reality cannot be overstated. Books and lectures are effective

¹⁹¹ While this artifact can easily be adapted to various local contexts, it was developed specifically for Monte Vista Chapel in Turlock, California.

ways for the presenter to convey their information; however, they often do not take into consideration the complexity of transformation. As such, they tend to overlook the important role environment plays in the process of spiritual formation. This is where I believe The Journey will be uniquely effective.

First, The Journey is designed to be integrated within the local church. The small group leaders are not outside experts, but people from within the congregation who have done the intentional work of partnering with God to be formed into the image of Christ. This will provide the participants, from the same church, with ongoing limbic stability as they work through their own process of formation. The lack of a limbic home base that often results from non-church-based cohorts will be minimized and the likelihood of participants remaining in their local church and eventually becoming agents of transformation is greatly increased. Being based within the local church, The Journey also ensures that the church itself is prepared for the dynamics and difficulties inherent to spiritual transformation. The vision for a process such as this, as well as the leadership it will require, can only occur if the church is already being drawn in the direction of spiritual formation.

Second, The Journey has been designed to utilize formational environments. The right combination of short lectures, corporate and individual spiritual practices, experiential learnings, small group processing, and extended times on retreat take into consideration both the slow process of change as well as the important role the limbic brain plays in that process of change. Necessary, but often unsettling, information introduced in lectures or practices can set off a limbic reaction that could cause an individual, if left to themselves, to walk away from the transformational process. Even

worse, their limbic instability could create a resonance that causes an emotional upheaval within an entire group of people. However, when it is well-tended in an intentional environment such as the one provided by The Journey, the limbic resonance created by a mixture of people who are more spiritually formed along with those who are growing, within the same small group, will not only lead to limbic regulation, but limbic revision as well. In this way, The Journey will allow less-formed individuals to literally feed off of the limbic stability of those who are more formed.

Third, The Journey is designed to be accessible to anyone within the congregation who has a desire to participate. The first cohort of The Journey, which is taking place at Monte Vista Chapel (MVC) in Turlock, California, requires financial and time commitments that are not prohibitive to the vast majority of the people who attend the church. Being that there are two competing calendars at MVC (the school calendar and the agricultural calendar), a decision was made to accommodate the school calendar (two retreats in fall and one in the spring) for the first cohort (which began in September of 2018) and the agricultural calendar (two retreats in winter and one in the summer) for the second cohort (which will begin in January of 2020). As other churches engage in The Journey, financial and time requirements will have to be tailored to their specific contexts in order to make it as accessible as possible.

The Journey uniquely combines the foundation of a robust gospel, clear goals for spiritual formation, supportive curriculum delivered in various ways, and transformational environments all within the context of a local church cohort. I firmly believe this combination not only meets the five criteria of the evaluative grid in section two of this dissertation (considers the whole person, considers brain science, utilizes

spiritual practices, is integrated in the local church, and is accessible), but that, as a practical incarnation of the thesis of this dissertation, The Journey will provide the local church with a significant opportunity to help its members experience spiritual formation that results in their members naturally giving off the aroma of Christ.

SECTION FIVE:
ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

Artifact Goals

The goal of The Journey is to facilitate spiritual formation within the local church. The desired outcome for the participants of The Journey is to become better lovers of God, of self, and of others. Though The Journey offers a thorough process of spiritual formation, it must be understood that spiritual formation is a never-ending reality. As such, The Journey will help participants identify where they are in the process of spiritual formation and give them specific practices and tools that will meet them there and then move them one step closer to Christlikeness.

These goals will be measured and monitored in various ways. After every monthly meeting, the facilitators will assemble to evaluate how the gathering contributed, or could better contribute, to the goals. There will be a quarterly questionnaire sent out to the participants to solicit their input on how The Journey is helping, or could better help, them love God, themselves, and others. The final gathering has a built-in evaluative tool, in the form of a Rule of Life, that will help assess whether or not The Journey has prepared the participants for the next season of spiritual growth. Finally, a focus group will be conducted upon completion of the first cohort of The Journey.

Audience

The general audience for The Journey is the local church. The specific audience is Monte Vista Chapel, a fifty-year-old, non-denominational, Evangelical church serving 1,000 people in the Central Valley of California. The Journey is designed for those who

desire a deeper relationship with God, a better understanding of themselves, and a greater ability to love one another and advance God's kingdom. The Journey is not intended for skeptics or for those who need to be convinced that spiritual formation and discipleship go hand in hand.

Scope and Content

The Journey is a holistic approach to spiritual formation. The individual parts build upon one another and lead the participants toward the above-stated goal. What follows is an outline of the thirteen gatherings that comprise the bulk of The Journey. The first four, which include a weekend retreat, will be outlined thoroughly in order to give a clear picture of the content, practices, experiences, and methods of engagement and interaction in The Journey. The remaining nine will give only the main topic, the main idea, and the scriptural anchor.

The Journey: Gathering 1 (on campus)

Main Topic: Vision

Main Idea: To experience a taste of God's goodness through scripture, words, stories and practices that will be a pattern for the coming year.

Scriptural Anchor: Ephesians 3:14-21.

Content and Flow:

1. 3:00 – 3:15pm: Introduction to the Journey.
 - Ken's personal story – come away and die (personal) bring them to me (church) – and how the seeds of The Journey began to grow out of that story.
2. 3:15 – 3:30pm: Small Group discussion answering the following question. What drew you to The Journey and what are you hoping for?
3. 3:30 – 4:00pm: Introduce and practice the Listening Exercise.
4. 4:00 – 4:15pm: Share about the Listening Exercise in Small Groups.
5. 4:15 – 4:20pm: Quick Break.
6. 4:20 – 5:35pm: Teaching: Experiencing the Love of the Trinity.
 - a. Sheryl Fleisher – introduced by Ken.
 - i. Childlike Wonder: Hand Motions to Father I Adore You.
 - ii. Choosing to Follow: Exercise from 1 Corinthians 13.

- iii. Invited to Belong: Visualize being invited into the Trinity/belonging.
- iv. Invited to Dance: Imaginative Prayer.
- v. Invited to Stillness: Psalm 46:10, Be still and know that I am God – drop off a word each time through.
- vi. Invited to Oneness/Union: Breath Prayer (Breathe in [your love] Breathe out [is here]).
- b. Small Group response to teaching—discuss where each person is at with the Trinity.
- 7. 5:30 – 5:45pm: Small Group Covenant
- 8. 5:45 – 6:00pm Summary/Homework/Dinner logistics.
 - a. Summary: Moving in and out of groups to experience the truth of Ephesians 3:14-21.
 - b. Homework: Listening Exercise—individually once a week—and times to practice it in community.
 - c. To practice as a group, 10 minutes of silence daily for the entire year. Even if you have to sit in your car to find the space.
 - i. First chapter of Sacred Romance: The Lost Life of the Heart.

The Journey: Gathering 2 (Retreat – Jesuit Retreat Center, Los Altos, California)

Main Topic: Desire

Main Ideas:

1. To understand and experience the importance of desire in our love relationship with God.
2. To experience safe vulnerability in our small group communities.

Scriptural Anchor: Proverbs 4:23.

Content and Flow:

Friday

1. 5:00 – 6:00pm: Arrival and Registration.
2. 6:00 – 7:00pm: Dinner/Instructions for retreat.
3. 7:30 – 8:00pm: Worship.
4. 8:00 – 8:15pm: Lectio Divina on Matthew 11:28-30 from The Message.
5. 8:15 – 8:30pm: Small group sharing—response to exercise.
6. 8:30 – Guide into silence until breakfast. Break silence with “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Saturday

1. 9:00 – 9:30am: Facilitate body scan (body with gratitude), breath prayer (Your love/is here), surrender visual (sitting on the dock).
2. 9:30 – 10:15am: Dare to Desire, part 1.
 - a. Why is desire so important?

- b. What does the Bible say about desire?
 - c. How can our desires connect us to the heart of God?
3. 10:15 – 11:15am: Collage exercise (magazines) and small group sharing.
4. 11:15 – 12:00am: Break.
5. 12:00 – 1:00pm: Lunch.
6. 1:00 – 3:00pm: Break with optional movement (1:30 – 2:30 walk, labyrinth, stretch).
7. 3:00 – 6:00pm: Small group—Awakening Desires/Deeper vulnerability.
 - a. Four categories:
 - i. Achievements, Losses, Masks, Hopes/dreams – put them on large (3 ft. by 4 ft. sticky paper) and share them with your small group.
8. 6:00 – 7:00pm: Dinner.
9. 7:30 – 8:30pm: Q&A with the large group.
10. 8:30pm: Guide into the Great Silence, which will begin at 11pm and go through breakfast. Encourage them to celebrate/have fun together until 11pm.

Sunday

1. 8:00 – 9:00am: Breakfast.
2. 9:00 – 9:30am: Practices (determined by what they need).
3. 9:30-10:15am: Dare to Desire, part 2.
 - a. How do we live in the midst of unmet desires?
 - b. What is the healthy process to follow with our desires?
4. 10:15 – 11am: Small group reflection and discussion.
 - a. What is the one thing you want to remember?
 - b. What is the one thing you want to practice?
 - c. Large group—sharing together—have a few share with the whole group.
5. 11-11:15am: Summary and Homework.
 - a. Read Life of the Beloved—Pay attention to what they feel drawn to and where they feel resistant.
 - b. Practice the one thing they have chosen to practice.
 - c. Group gatherings will practice Lectio Divina.
6. 11:30am: Free to go home.
7. 12:00 – 1:00pm: lunch with facilitators—at monastery—review.

The Journey: Gathering 3 (on campus)

Main Topic: Belovedness

Main Idea: To know of and experience belovedness as a child of God

Scriptural Anchor: Romans 8:15-17, The Message

Content and Flow:

1. 3:00 – 3:15pm: Welcome; practice of surrender and Imaginative Reading on Mark 10:13-16.
2. 3:15 – 4:00pm: Small Group.

- a. Check in – give two or three words that describe how you are coming in.
- b. How was the Exercise?
- c. Concerning the reading (Life of the Beloved), what did you notice? What were you drawn to and where did you notice resistance?
3. 4:00 – 4:30pm: Teaching: Being and Becoming the Beloved.
 - a. Being the Beloved.
 - i. Identify where we “make our home” or find our identity other than the love of God.
 - ii. Explore what scripture tells us about being loved by God.
 - b. Becoming the Beloved.
 - i. Pray—ask God to help us know and experience His love.
 - ii. Understand that God’s desire for love, intimacy, and oneness with us is the strongest, deepest desire within us!
 1. It has been placed there by God.
 2. We already have all of God’s love in us—we don’t have to work to get more of it.
 - iii. Reveal barriers that keep us from experiencing God’s love.
 1. Lies we believe.
 - a. Pride.
 - b. Shame.
 - c. Fear.
4. 4:30 – 5:00pm: Individual Exercise: The Lies We Tell Ourselves—after the practice, instruct them to return to group in silence.
5. 5:00 – 5:10pm: – Visio Divina on Rembrandt’s *Prodigal Son*.
 - a. Wrap up visio with song *Love Me* by JJ Heller. Set up the song with Psalm 139:7-12.
6. 5:10 – 5:55pm: Small groups share what they experienced in the exercise and how God might have met them.
7. 5:55 – 6:00pm: Summary and Homework.
 - a. Practice: send them home with a small image of Rembrandt and have them do a Visio Divina once a week.
 - b. Corporate Practice will be Imaginative Reading.
 - i. Week 1: Ephesians 1:4-5 in The Message.
 - ii. Week 2: Romans 8:15-16 in The Message.
 - iii. Week 3: Song of Songs 2:10-13, Jerusalem Bible.
 - iv. Week 4: Zephaniah 3:17.
 - c. Read a chapter from Jan Johnson (When the Soul Listens – Cultivating a Listening Heart).
 - d. Listen to Brene Brown’s Ted Talk on Shame.
8. 6:00 – 7:00pm: Dinner.

The Journey: Gathering 4 (on campus)

Main Topic: Listening to God.

Main Idea: To understand and experience the many ways we can listen to and hear God.

Scriptural Anchor: Ephesians 1:17-19a.

Content and Flow:

1. 3:00 – 3:20pm: Welcome and then guide into corporate silence. Use the Immanuel Journaling exercise, which ends by writing a prayer.
2. 3:20 – 3:50pm: Small group gathering to read prayer to one person.
 - a. Check in... what have you been drawn to and where did you notice resistance?
3. 3:50 – 4:20pm: Teaching: Ken will teach on listening and discerning God’s voice.
 - b. Four Keys.
 - i. Pursuing a love relationship with God.
 - ii. Becoming still, silence, presence.
 - iii. Opening our hearts.
 1. Ask God to enlighten the eyes of your heart (Ephesians 1:18).
 2. Ask daily, “Is there anything you want to show me or say to me?” A heart that is humble, open, and teachable is better able to hear God’s voice (1 Samuel 3:4-10).
 - iv. Tuning in to God’s voice.
 1. Characteristics of God’s voice.
 - a. It has a certain clarity (Matthew 7:28-29).
 - b. It has a certain character (James 3:17).
 - c. It has a certain content (John 16:13).
 2. A few words of caution.
4. 4:20 – 5:20pm: Experiential stations where they can practice hearing God—as many or as few as they like *but at least* one they feel drawn to and one that may stretch them. Introduce the experiential stations with Louis Schwartzberg’s Ted Talk video (last five minutes, from where little girl speaks). The purpose of the video is to help them become present in this moment—because that is the only place we can meet God. We cannot meet him yesterday or tomorrow—though He is there. We can only meet him in this moment... then it’s gone. When we become present, we can hear God in so many ways. These are the probable experiential stations.
 - a. Creation/nature (video).
 - b. Art (music, painting, poetry).
 - c. Written word—selected passages in creative displays.
 - d. Cell phone—look through your pictures or address book and listen for what God may say.
 - e. Color/paint/sculpt.
 - f. Silence and solitude.
 - g. Communion—fresh-baked bread/wine.
 - h. Animals—feel the joy of God.

5. 5:20 – 5:55pm: Small groups: Share about how the experiential stations impacted them.
6. 5:55– 6:00pm: Summary and Homework.
 - i. Practice: send them home with a card that says, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” (1 Samuel 3:10) and have them place it where they will see it early every morning.
 - j. Corporate time—four different exercises that will help us listen to God.
 - i. Creation/Video.
 - ii. Jesus coming to visit exercise.
 - iii. Imaginative reading of scripture.
 - iv. Silence.
 - k. Read *The Gift of Being Yourself* by David Benner.
7. 6:00 – 7:00pm: Dinner.

The Journey: Gathering 5 (on campus)

Main Topic: Listening to Self / Self Awareness.

Main Idea: To have a kind, realistic awareness of what hinders and helps a person live in the unforced rhythms of grace.

Scriptural Anchor: Matthew 11:28-30, The Message.

The Journey: Gathering 6 (on campus)

Main Topic: Listening to Others.

Main Idea: To increase a person’s capacity to be present with another person’s soul.

Scriptural Anchor: James 1:19, Romans 12:15.

The Journey: Gathering 7 (Retreat, Jesuit Retreat Center, Los Altos, California)

Main Topic: True Self/Introduction to False Self.

Main Idea: Experiencing our true self in God and becoming aware of our protection mechanisms (false self) that hinder God’s love flowing through our unique soul.

Scriptural Anchor: 2 Corinthians 4:7, Romans 8:1-17.

The Journey: Gathering 8 (on campus)

Main Topic: False Self.

Main Idea: Learning to embrace, welcome, and release the false self.

Scriptural Anchor: Romans 7:15-25.

The Journey: Gathering 9 (on campus)

Main Topic: The Grief Cycle.

Main Idea: Allowing the heart and will to let go through the process of grief.

Scriptural Anchor: Matthew 5:4, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

The Journey: Gathering 10 (on campus)**Main Topic:** Conflict Resolution.**Main Idea:** To move away from “either-or/black-white” thinking and be a non-reactive presence that brings shalom in the midst of conflict.**Scriptural Anchor:** Matthew 5:23-26, Colossians 3:13-14.**The Journey: Gathering 11 (on campus)****Main Topic:** Uncomfortable Activism.**Main Idea:** To understand, engage, and experience justice as a means of bringing God’s kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven.”**Scriptural Anchor:** Micah 6:8, Isaiah 58:6-8.**The Journey: Gathering 12 (on campus)****Main Topic:** Radical Hospitality.**Main Idea:** To understand, engage, and experience radical hospitality as a way of expanding God’s kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven.”**Scriptural Anchor:** Luke 14:12-14, Leviticus 19:33-34.**The Journey: Gathering 13 (Retreat, Jesuit Retreat Center, Los Altos, California)****Main Topic:** Developing a Rule of Life.**Main Idea:** To celebrate what God has accomplished in the past year and establish a plan for continued growth in the coming year.**Scriptural Anchor:** Hebrews 12:1-3.**Budget**

The total budget for 72 people to participate in The Journey is \$93,600. The great majority of the budget (all but \$7,500) is attributed to the three weekend retreats. In order to make The Journey accessible for everyone, each participant is only required to contribute \$250, leaving a \$77,000 deficit. Monte Vista Chapel has set aside \$60,000 seed money for The Journey, with the understanding that the cohort will be made aware of the actual financial cost and be given opportunities to contribute as they feel led in order to seed the next cohort. I am also in contact with The Lilly Foundation about possible grants available for the local church.

The financial stability for future cohorts is an area that will continue to need development. Possible options are: 1) raise the price per participant to the actual \$1,300 cost and provide scholarships to those who cannot afford it; 2) eliminate off-site retreats; 3) fund it from the church's general budget; or 4) rely upon donors who have either experienced The Journey or realize the value of a program such as this. However, each of these options has shortcomings.

Finally, if The Journey were to be offered to other churches, the above financial considerations would need to be addressed within their own context.

Post-Graduate Considerations

Concerning the future of The Journey, both its local expression at Monte Vista Chapel and the possibilities of expansion beyond MVC must be considered. As far as its local expression, the current plan is to offer The Journey to the local congregation until the demand for it subsides. At this point, we believe there is enough interest for at least three cohorts; however, it is difficult to see that far into the future.

As far as expanding The Journey to other contexts, there are significant issues that need to be addressed. As The Journey is not simply information that needs to be conveyed, publishing it as a curriculum will likely dilute it into something that is no longer effective. Like discipleship and spiritual formation, it is something that must be caught as well as taught. As such, the current plan is to invite other churches (preferably staff first) to be a cohort within the cohort. They would participate in The Journey alongside the members of Monte Vista Chapel, but they would do so within their own small group. This small group would serve as a seed that could grow within their local context. Those who participated could become small group leaders for their own church's

cohort. For the first year or two, outside speakers could be brought in to help with the gatherings and, in time, The Journey could be run internally, just as it is at Monte Vista Chapel.

In order to see how this might work, there is one small group in our current cohort operating in this fashion. Four people from Morro Bay, California are being led by a former staff member of MVC who has moved out of the area. The staff member hopes to replicate The Journey in her local context within the next few years. This will provide valuable information about how The Journey may be scalable.

Standards of Publication

Outside of attending the actual functions that make up The Journey, the primary way to engage it for the sake of evaluation is through the website. What follows are step-by-step instructions to do so.

In order to see the promotional material for The Journey, go to www.mvcturlock.org/thejourney. This page offers a promotional video as well as information as to what The Journey is and who it is for. It also includes pre-requisites and a place to express interest in the next cohort. I encourage you to read this thoroughly, watch the video, and follow the hyperlinks in order to catch a vision for The Journey.

In order to see how the facilitators and cohort interact with the material, again, go to www.mvcturlock.org/thejourney. From there, scroll to the bottom of the page and click the “log in.” (It is intentionally not very obvious, so look for the white writing on the black background on the bottom of the page.) The username is “facilitator” and the password is “cohort2018”. This will bring you to the page that the small group facilitators access. It is designed to have the most recent information on the top. This means you

must scroll to the bottom and begin there, reading each successive section as it was added. I would encourage you to click on the hyperlinks in order to get a better understanding of what the participant might experience.

The cohort participant has a different log in and, as such, does not see the schedule for the gathering. Instead, they only receive the summary that goes live after the gathering. This summary has all the links they will need in order to complete the month's work. The reason for less information is that it prevents the participant from presuming what will happen based on the schedule, and instead allows them to stay present in the experience they are participating in. Any instructions or communication with the cohort needed between the gatherings is done via email. If you would like to see the cohort page, simply log in with the user name "cohort" and use the password "cohort2018". In all cases, please do not modify any user preferences, as all facilitators and participants have the same user profile.

SECTION SIX:

POSTSCRIPT

The artifact (The Journey) has been completely developed and was launched September 9, 2018. The first cohort consists of 72 people, including 57 participants, 12 small group facilitators, two teachers, and one director/coordinator. As of this writing, the first three gatherings outlined in section five have taken place, including the first off-site weekend retreat. The dates have also been confirmed for cohort two, which will begin January 2020 and end January 2021. Funding for the next four years of The Journey is currently being pursued through a grant from the Lilly Foundation.

While still early in the process, the decision to develop a local church cohort model for spiritual formation is bearing fruit. The first feedback form,¹⁹² sent out after the weekend retreat in October, indicated the vast majority of the cohort has already discovered something significant about themselves and/or about God that will positively impact their Christ-following and/or Christlikeness. A great majority also indicated they have encountered and experienced God through both corporate and individual practices in ways that are fresh and life-giving. This seems to suggest that The Journey is moving participants beyond the accumulation of information common in other discipleship processes and into relational transformation.

After three gatherings, there has been a high level of participation. A total of three absences, all due to sickness, indicate the participants have assigned a high priority to

¹⁹² The feedback form was delivered through MVC's online database (Planning Center) and consisted of the following four questions. 1. Of the whole retreat, what was most helpful for you personally? 2. What were the strengths or best parts of the retreat in general? 3. If you are willing, share an encounter with God from the retreat that you had. 4. Is there anything you can offer as a means of improvement, for either the retreat or your total experience with The Journey thus far?

The Journey. Nearly every small group has organically decided to meet once a month between the regularly scheduled gatherings. This is encouraging, being that other cohort models not based in the local church tend to draw people away from the church rather than increase their engagement. There have also been a significant number of inquiries about the next cohort, which indicates the current participants are encouraging those within their sphere of influence to attend as well.

The fact that a cohort-based process can positively take advantage of the limbic brain was illustrated on the first weekend retreat. After giving instructions for an exercise that would require a significant level of vulnerability within their small group, a quiet but audible “oh, hell no!” was heard from one of the participants. As a leader, I could feel the tension in the room rise as the exercise triggered the natural fight-or-flight mechanism in a number of participants. At the same time, there were enough leaders and participants in the room who were not unsettled by the exercise, and their non-reactive responses settled the room in a matter of minutes. In the end, the feedback forms indicated this exercise was very helpful for nearly all of the participants. It was fascinating and encouraging to witness the roles that limbic resonance and stability play in spiritual formation.

The ultimate gain from The Journey (a congregation that gives off the aroma of Christ) is still years away. However, with over ten percent of the church’s adult population involved in the first cohort and the probability of another ten percent in cohort two, there is significant potential for movement in that direction. As of now, the greatest gain is a critical mass of people, within a single local church, intentionally pursuing spiritual formation together. How that impacts the church’s culture over a long period of time is yet to be seen.

One of the greatest lessons up to this point is the important role small groups play within The Journey. The initial thought was that small groups would serve as containers for people to process their individual interactions and experiences with God. While this is certainly the case, people are equally encountering and experiencing God through the interactions of the group. As such, the small group is not only a place to process spiritual practices; it *is* a spiritual practice in and of itself. This being the case, more time is being dedicated to small group interaction.

A second area of learning is the need to prepare participants for a process that moves faster than the heart can develop. The curriculum of The Journey is designed to provide a map of the life-long process of spiritual formation, as well give practical and accessible tools so the participants can engage that process. However, spiritual formation does not move forward at such a neat and predictable pace. This means participants will experience the need to stay with a specific topic or issue for much longer than the month provided within the context of The Journey. Though this reality cannot be avoided, it is important to continually give permission for each individual to be right where they are in the process of spiritual formation, even if the cohort is focusing on a different topic for the month.

With the first cohort of The Journey well underway, new questions are surfacing that will require focused attention. What will be the next step for participants after they complete The Journey? How will we foster connections that have been made in small groups and still honor those who no longer have a need or desire to meet together? Is there value in occasionally gathering the entire cohort after The Journey is complete? Will people be encouraged or allowed to participate in The Journey again? How will we

develop new leaders for upcoming cohorts? The current plan to address these questions, as well as others that surface, is to hold a workday with the small group facilitators in the summer of 2019 to both raise and address these “next step” issues.

A final consideration for The Journey is to assess how this process might be accomplished in smaller groups. The large cohort size of the current structure is intended to maintain the integrity of the content as well as build momentum within an established church. However, smaller groups would allow for greater scheduling flexibility as well as open up smaller and less expensive facilities for the off-site retreats. There has already been a request to bring The Journey into an existing small group that, due to life circumstances, is unable to meet the ridged scheduling demands of the current model. If and how this will work will largely depend upon equipping leaders who are able to bring the heart and soul of The Journey into a smaller context without diluting its content or impact. Being that the actual structure of The Journey plays a significant role in its effectiveness as a tool for spiritual formation, any structural modification will require a great deal of intention. At the same time, such modification, if well-thought-out and executed, could allow the impact of The Journey to extend far beyond its current context.

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