

LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

EFFECTIVE DISCIPLESHIP IN CENTRAL VIRGINIA: CONTEXTUALIZING THE GREAT
COMMISSION IN A CHANGING SOUTHERN CULTURE

A Thesis Project Submitted to
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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ABSTRACT

EFFECTIVE DISCIPLESHIP IN CENTRAL VIRGINIA: CONTEXTUALIZING THE GREAT COMMISSION IN A CHANGING SOUTHERN CULTURE

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Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010

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The overall mission of the church is to make disciples of all nations. Gospel Community Church is a church plant that is striving to make disciples in central VA and around the world. The purpose of this thesis is to develop an effective discipleship strategy for GCC. In order to develop this strategy, this thesis first considers the history and culture of central VA, the Biblical mandate and examples of discipleship in the Bible, snapshots of discipleship throughout church history, and current forms of discipleship in central VA churches.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction -----	1
Statement of the Problem -----	2
Special Terminology -----	4
Statement of Limitations -----	6
Biblical and Theoretical Basis -----	7
Statement of Methodology -----	9
Chapter 2: Transformation of Churches and Culture of Central Virginia -----	12
The New South -----	13
Evangelicals in the South -----	13
The Changing South -----	14
Central Virginia -----	17
From Lynch’s Ferry to the City of Churches -----	18
The Quakers -----	19
Economic Growth and the Second Great Awakening -----	19
Lynchburg’s Churches -----	22
Growth and Health of Churches -----	22
Urban Ministry -----	25
The Second Northern Invasion -----	25
The Changing Economy -----	27
Jerry Falwell -----	27
Saturation Evangelism -----	29
Impact on central VA -----	31

Lynchburg’s Culture and Values -----	31
Conclusion and Implications for Discipleship -----	34
Chapter 3: The Call to Make Disciples and How it was Accomplished by Jesus Christ -----	36
Discipleship -----	37
Two Aspects of Discipleship -----	38
Following Christ -----	39
Making Followers of Christ -----	41
The Role of the Holy Spirit -----	43
A Disciples Faith and Conduct -----	45
How Jesus Made Disciples -----	46
Selection -----	47
Association -----	49
Consecration -----	50
Impartation -----	51
Demonstration -----	52
Delegation -----	53
Supervision -----	54
Reproduction -----	55
The Mission and Example of Christ -----	56
Chapter 4: Snapshots in Discipleship in Church History – How it has been done since Jesus Christ -----	57
First Century – Early Church -----	58
Preaching, Growing Together, and Reproducing -----	59

Second through Fifth Centuries – Catechesis and Spiritual Leaders -----	62
Cyprian of Carthage (195-258) -----	64
Ambrose of Milan (340-397) -----	65
Sixth Century – Benedictine Monasticism -----	66
Twelve and Thirteenth Centuries – Humiliati and Mendicant Friars -----	68
Fourteenth Century – Brethren of the Common Life -----	71
Sixteenth Century - Anabaptists -----	71
Surrender to Christ -----	72
Commitment to Community -----	73
Teaching, Love, and Obedience to the Mission -----	74
Seventeenth Century – Pietist Movement -----	74
Eighteenth Century – John Wesley -----	76
Discipleship Begins with Christ -----	77
Wesley’s Method-----	77
Discipleship in Community -----	79
Empowering Leadership and Servanthood -----	80
Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries – Sunday School -----	80
Leadership, Evangelism, and Outreach -----	82
Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries – Small Groups -----	83
Summary of Discipleship Snapshots -----	85
Chapter 5: Current Discipleship Methods in Central Virginia -----	86
Definitions and Understanding of Discipleship-----	86
Forms of Discipleship -----	91

Traditional Churches -----	91
Churches in Transition -----	95
Non-Traditional Churches -----	98
Newer Churches -----	101
Discipleship Challenges in Central VA -----	104
Reflections and Lessons on Discipleship -----	106
Chapter 6: Transformational Discipleship Strategy for Gospel Community Church -----	110
History, Purpose, Vision, and Values -----	111
The Strategy -----	111
Large Group Gatherings – Sunday Mornings -----	113
Small Group Gatherings and Mentoring -----	114
Service and Mission Teams -----	116
Reproduce and Plant Churches -----	118
Final Thoughts -----	120
Appendix A: Questionnaire for Discipleship Interview -----	123
Bibliography -----	124

TABLES

1. Traditional Churches and their Forms -----	91
2. Churches in Transitino and their Forms -----	95
3. Non-Tranditional Churches and their Forms -----	98
4. Newer Churches and their Forms -----	101

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Gospel Community Church Discipleship Model -----	112
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In one of his final moments on this earth Jesus Christ gave his disciples a mission which has become known as the Great Commission. All four Gospels and the book of Acts record various versions of this mission.¹ The most popular account of the Great Commission is found in Matthew 28:18-20:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (ESV)

The authority, *exousia* (official right or power), was given to Jesus by the Father.² With that authority Jesus was empowering his disciples to make disciples of all nations. Since the verb *go* is a present participle, the only command in this passage is to “make disciples.”³

Disciple making has been, and will continue to be, the mission of the church until Jesus Christ returns. Jesus himself left an example of discipleship that has been used in different forms throughout church history. The mission to make disciples remains the same, but the culture around us continues to change. Christians all over the world need to learn to contextualize the message of the gospel and the process of discipleship to the world they live in. Our mission and our message must never change, but the way we

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

² John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament edition* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1983, 2000), 93.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: An Exposition of the New Testament Comprising the Entire “BE” Series* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), 107.

communicate that message and the way we carry out that mission must be adapted to our culture.

Gospel Community Church (GCC) is a church plant that is located in central Virginia in the City of Lynchburg. As a newly formed church, GCC is looking for effective ways to carry out the mission of making disciples. In this seemingly “over-churched” area, GCC desires to have a discipleship model that is first of all Biblical, and second of all, adapted to our ever-changing culture. Straying away from the mission of making disciples and never contextualizing the message of the gospel may be the reasons that some churches become ineffective in their work.

Statement of the Problem

This project, *Effective Discipleship in Central Virginia: contextualizing the Great Commission in a changing southern culture*, will focus on developing an effective discipleship strategy for Gospel Community Church. There are many different types of churches in Lynchburg, VA. Lynchburg has contemporary, traditional, and even some unconventional churches. Most of these churches function independently of each other and have many different programs. Some of their programs are designed to minister to Christians, while others are designed to reach out to non-Christians. It is difficult to see a clear and effective discipleship strategy without a deeper investigation of how all these churches are carrying out the Great Commission. It would be unwise to form a discipleship strategy without also first examining the Bible and other examples of discipleship in church history.

The Gospel has the power to change people as they become disciples of Jesus Christ. People are spiritually dead and only God can bring them back to life through the message of the gospel. Biblical Christians are not called to live safe and comfortable lives, to build elaborate buildings, or to develop multi-million dollar programs. They are simply called to love God, to help people find Jesus, and to help people become like Jesus. In his book, *Radical*, Dr. David Platt says, “The gospel does not prompt you to mere reflection; the gospel requires a response.”⁴ There are Christians that seem to be stuck simply reflecting on the gospel. The reality of the gospel, Christ’s sacrifice, and his call on individual’s lives should prompt Christians to action.

GCC seems to be encountering three different types of people in Lynchburg. The first group of people can clearly be called disciples of Jesus that love God and live on mission. The second group of people, the un-churched, is clearly lost and does not have a relationship with Jesus. The third group of people is known as the de-churched or “social Christians.” This third group of people claims to know Jesus on an intellectual level, but does not seem to have a regenerate relationship with Jesus.

These social Christians have a flawed understanding of salvation and Jesus’ call to discipleship. The non-Christians and social Christians of central VA need churches like GCC to establish effective discipleship relationships with them. There is a need in Lynchburg, and the surrounding area, for churches to strategically and simply make disciples. One reason why so many churches are not healthy and dying is because they are not actively making disciples. The culture around us has changed drastically, yet many churches are not contextualizing the discipleship making process.

⁴ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010), 20.

Special Terminology

The following terms will be used throughout this project:

Contextualization is the process of consciously, and deliberately, adapting the message of the gospel in order to communicate the gospel in a more understandable, and culturally relevant, way. For contextualization to take place, individuals need to become aware of their own inculturation, along with becoming familiar with the customs, culture, and belief systems of those around them.⁵

A disciple is a devoted follower and student of someone. Edward Smither notes Howard Marshall's broad definition of a disciple as "the pupil of a teacher."⁶ Biblically, a disciple is a student and follower of Jesus Christ that receives training and instruction. In the early church a disciple: 1) believed that Jesus was the Christ and 2) accepted, and conducted themselves according to, the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as the "sound teaching" of the New Testament.⁷ Discipleship is the process of becoming a complete and devoted follower of Jesus Christ. It is also the process of intentionally training, teaching, and developing people that have willingly repented and put their trust in Christ. In the words of George Barna, discipleship "is about being and reproducing spiritually mature zealots for Christ."⁸ Being a disciple, and participating in the

⁵ David J. Hesselgrave & Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1989, 2000), 1-2, 4.

⁶ Edward L. Smither, *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 6.

⁷ Ibid, 7-11.

⁸ George Barna, *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Water Brook Press, 2001), 18.

discipleship process, has to do with becoming like Christ and helping others become like Him. In regard to a disciple's life and conduct, Smither writes that:

An early Christian disciple believed in the identity of Jesus as the Christ and cognitively accepted and sought to obey the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus, which stem from the Scriptures. In addition, the disciple imitated the conduct of Christ and others in the community of faith whose conduct conformed to that of Christ.⁹

The Great Commission is the mission Christ left to his follower to make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that He commanded.

The Gospel is the good news that Jesus came to earth, lived a perfect life, died for the sins of the world, but came back from the dead. As a result of his death and resurrection, Jesus restored the broken relationship between God and man and gave all of humanity an opportunity to experience salvation.¹⁰ Salvation is God's free gift to all people that repent of their sins and put their faith in Jesus Christ.¹¹ Regeneration is the process of becoming a new creation through an active relationship with Jesus Christ.¹²

Un-churched refers to individuals that do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ and are not a part of a church family. De-churched/Social Christians refers to individuals that may have a general knowledge of Jesus Christ and may have been a part of a church structure at some point of their lives, but are currently not a part of a church family and do not show any evidence of being a disciple of Christ.

⁹ Smither, 12.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15.

¹¹ Ephesians 2:8-9; John 3:16; and Acts 20:21.

¹² 2 Corinthians 5:17.

Statement of Limitations

Although this project is dealing with effective discipleship in central Virginia, the primary focus area will be Lynchburg and the surrounding counties of Appomattox, Bedford, and Campbell. The research portion of the project will specifically focus on the city of Lynchburg and the three surrounding counties. The contextualized discipleship strategy will also be developed with this specific area in mind.

Lynchburg, and the surrounding area, has a rich history dating back to hundreds of years. This project will focus on the transformation of central VA from 1956 to the present. Thomas Road Baptist Church was established in 1956 by the late Rev. Jerry Falwell and has had a dramatic impact on central VA. The period before 1956 will only be covered briefly in order to gain a deeper understanding of the religious background of central Virginia.

There are many examples of discipleship in the New Testament, but the focus of this project will be Jesus Christ, his call to make disciples, and his example of discipleship. The primary source for this research will be the four Gospels. Since there is a large amount of information on discipleship throughout church history, this project will only highlight specific historical examples of discipleship that will be beneficial for the completion of a discipleship strategy for central VA.

There is a large diversity of churches in central VA. A general search of the word “Lynchburg church” on yellowpages.com produces more than 300 results.¹³ The research portion of this project will only focus on 20-25 pastors and church leaders with

¹³ AT&T Intellectual Property, *Lynchburg Church*, 2010. <http://www.yellowpages.com/lynchburg-va/church?g=Lynchburg,+VA&q=Church> (accessed September 17, 2010).

the following criteria: they live and minister in central VA and they hold similar doctrinal beliefs as GCC.

Finally, it is important to understand that the proposed discipleship strategy that is found in chapter 6 is specifically designed for Gospel Community Church. What may work at GCC in Lynchburg, VA may not work in a different church. It is important for every church, regardless of their location, to develop their own discipleship strategy that can help them accomplish the Great Commission. The strategy of GCC may be particularly helpful for other churches in central VA, but it may not be as useful for churches in other parts of the country.

Biblical and Theoretical Basis

The idea of discipleship is deeply rooted in New Testament writings. It can even be argued that discipleship is not an optional task for Biblical Christians. As one reads the New Testament it is clear that discipleship is the task of every believer and follower of Jesus Christ. While he was on earth, Jesus spent the majority of his time pouring his life into twelve young men. At the end of his time on earth Jesus commanded these men to go and make disciples. In Acts 2 the Holy Spirit came down in a powerful way. On that day the church began to multiply and there is a beautiful picture of discipleship. The followers of Christ “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.”¹⁴ The early believers found themselves in discipleship relationships almost immediately after they were saved.

¹⁴ Acts 2:24 (ESV).

The Apostle Paul is another great example of a man that was committed to the task of discipleship and training up believers. Paul developed discipleship relationships with individuals like Silas, Timothy, and Titus.¹⁵ At the end of his life, in his final letter to Timothy Paul said, “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”¹⁶ Paul wanted to make sure that Timothy would continue to disciple and train others in order to continue the discipleship process.

Paul did not only have discipleship relationships with individuals, but he also developed discipleship relationships with groups of individuals like the new believers in Corinth and Ephesus.¹⁷ He invested large amounts of time teaching and training others to become like Christ. There was no set amount of time for the development of Paul’s disciples; the amount of time Paul invested would always depend on the leading of the Holy Spirit. Paul maintained many of his discipleship relationships throughout his lifetime by writing follow up letters to those churches and individuals with more instructions on how to live godly lives.

A similar concept to discipleship is the idea of mentoring. Smither says that the concept of mentoring is not really a new idea. He points out that mentoring has been seen in many African and Greek cultures.¹⁸ Smither says that “mentoring in essence means that a master, expert, or someone with significant experience is imparting

¹⁵ Acts 15:40; Acts 16:1-3; 1 Timothy 1:2; and Titus 1:4

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 2:1-2 (ESV).

¹⁷ Acts 18 and 19.

¹⁸ Smither, 4.

knowledge and skill to a novice in an atmosphere of discipline, commitment, and accountability.”¹⁹ In mentoring, a committed novice is trained up with the knowledge or skills of his mentor.

There is a large amount of both biblical and theoretical basis for the concepts of mentoring and discipleship. Churches like GCC need to go beyond simply studying these ideas and begin to live them out. Evangelical churches need to take the knowledge that is available about discipleship and learn to apply it to their individual contexts. Effective and biblical discipleship will help to produce passionate followers of Christ, who in turn will pass on their Biblical knowledge to others.

Statement of Methodology

The purpose of this project is to gain a deeper understanding of the Biblical mandate to make disciples and to design a contextualized strategy of discipleship for Gospel Community Church. This project will take into consideration the religious and cultural background of central Virginia, the Biblical basis for discipleship and how it was accomplished by Christ, what discipleship looked like after Christ, and current discipleship methods of evangelical churches in central VA. Based on all the gathered information, a proposed discipleship strategy will be designed for GCC.

This project is divided into the following chapters:

Chapter 2: Transformation of churches and culture of central Virginia – reflections on the past and present (1956-Present).

The culture and churches in the south have changed and are continuing to change. What has worked in the past doesn't necessarily work in the present. It is important to

¹⁹ Ibid.

understand the history of central Virginia in order to effectively disciple people in this area.

Chapter 3: The call to make disciples and how it was accomplished by Jesus Christ.

The mission that Jesus Christ left his church is to make disciples. Christ himself set the greatest example of what discipleship looks like by developing faithful followers. This is not an easy task and should not be approached half-heartedly. The health of the church depends on the type of disciples it produces.

Chapter 4: “Snapshots in discipleship” in Christian History – how it has been done since Jesus Christ.

There are both good and bad examples of discipleship in church history. Certain individuals and movements have largely impacted how Christians have made and continue to make disciples. Beginning with the early church, this chapter highlights some of these individuals and movements.

Chapter 5: Current discipleship methods in central Virginia.

In order to create an effective discipleship strategy for central VA, it is important to have a general idea of how pastors and church leaders are currently making disciples in central VA. This chapter contains the results from qualitative data that has been collected about discipleship in central VA. John Creswell says:

Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and

the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure.²⁰

Specifically, this chapter makes use of a collective case study. Creswell says that “case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes.”²¹ The primary sources of data for this chapter are 20 interviews with pastors and churches leaders in central VA. Additional resources (e.g. books and publications), specifically related to the topics of discipleship and spiritual growth, may supplement the research interviews. Corroborating literature, copious notes from the interviews, and “member checking” after the interviews assist in validating the data. All of the collected data will be analyzed for areas of similarity and common themes.

Chapter 6: Transformational discipleship strategy for Gospel Community Church.

Based on the information gleaned from chapters 2-5, chapter 6 proposes a contextualized discipleship strategy for GCC. This chapter reflects on how GCC can practically and effectively accomplish the Great Commission in central VA.

²⁰ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009), 4.

²¹ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2007), 73.

CHAPTER TWO

TRANSFORMATION OF CHURCHES AND CULTURE OF CENTRAL VIRGINIA – REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST AND PRESENT (1956-PRESENT)

Central Virginia is a part of the New South. It is becoming more evident that the American South is changing. The demographics, the culture, and even the religious atmosphere are all changing. The way churches have functioned in the past, and what has worked in the past, does not necessarily work in the present. For churches like GCC, it is important to understand the history of the South, and specifically the central Virginia area, in order to effectively disciple people. Recognizing the changes in the South can help churches like GCC be better prepared to effectively disciple people. As more people are migrating into the South, they are bringing with them their cultures and values. At the same time, churches that have been established for many years, but have not changed their approach to ministry, are becoming less effective. Many of these long established churches have beautiful building that serve as a reminder of the “good old days,” but presently lack life, health, and growth.

Central VA is small example of what has happened, and is currently happening, in the South. Nicknamed as the City of Churches, Lynchburg has a rich Southern history and has always been a religious center. The city of Lynchburg has changed drastically since it was established in the late 1700’s. Many of the major changes have taken place in the last 60 years. The Northern Invasion of the 50’s has opened the door of change that is still open today. Through the influence of migrants, businesses like General Electric, and churches like Thomas Road Baptist Church, this quaint Southern town has been transformed into a diverse City of Churches. The following chapter will examine the changing South, along with the history, culture, and characteristics of central VA.

The New South

The new South brings both challenges and opportunities. The South is growing and rapidly becoming racially, religiously, demographically and culturally diverse. The changing landscape of the South is going to dramatically affect how local churches minister and disciples people. These changes are inevitable and Christians must respond appropriately to the changes. How churches respond to the changing South will ultimately affect their effectiveness and relevance in lives of people.

Evangelicals in the South

In an online post entitled, *How do we contextualize the gospel in the Deep South?*, Pastor Tyler Jones summarized important statistics about Southern Evangelicals that were published by the *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*.

- 98% of Evangelicals in the South are “certain” about the existence of God.
- 96% of Evangelicals in the South claim religion is “important” in their lives.
- Only 58% of Evangelical Southerners attend religious service at least once a week, while 28% of Evangelical Southerners only attend religious service a few times a year or fewer.
- Only 41% of Southern Evangelicals believe there is only one true interpretation of the Bible’s teachings.
- One half of Southern Evangelicals believe that differing interpretations of the faith are valid (53%) and that many religions can lead to eternal life (57%).

- Only 36% of Southern Evangelicals believe their religion to be “the one, true faith that leads to eternal life.”¹

If so many Southern Evangelicals believe in God, then why are so few responding to God with their lives? Why are so many not living in Biblical community and fellowship with other believers? While a large majority of people in the South claim to believe in God, many of them have not allowed the gospel to change their lives. Jones says that “the gospel has not motivated them to action.”² By all outward appearance, the lives of many Evangelicals in the South are no different than the unbelievers around them. The fact that so many seem to believe that there are many paths that lead to eternal life is disturbing and unbiblical. Today, more than ever before, the South is filled with social Christians that believe in a gospel that is contrary to the Bible.

The Changing South

The South is changing in a variety of ways. According to the *Institute of Southern Studies*, the South is experiencing a growth of the Hispanic population and a decrease of the Black population.³ The Black population had grown in numbers, but has declined overall, “presumably because of the increase in Hispanic and other minority population.”⁴ These racial changes are becoming more evident and will influence both

¹ Tyler Jones, “How do we Contextualize the Gospel in the Deep South?,” *Advance the Church*, May 13, 2010, <http://advancethechurch.com/2010/05/13/atc-replant-tyler-jones/> (accessed October 4, 2010).

² Ibid.

³ R. Neal, “The Changing Southern Demographic,” *The Institute for Southern Studies*, November 21, 2006, <http://southernstudies.org/2006/11/changing-southern-demographic.html> (accessed October 4, 2010).

⁴ Ibid.

the social and the religious culture. According to some projections, during the 1995-2025 period the Anglo population will be the slowest growing, but about “67% of the 16 million Whites added to the U.S. population will be located in the South.”⁵ The increase in the population, immigration, and internal migration will shape and transform the South. Jones says that “the South is projected to have more births (43 million) and deaths (32 million) in the population than any other region during the 1995 to 2025 period.”⁶

Jones agrees with Tim Keller that:

In one generation’s time, there won’t even be the nominal Christianity in the South that there is now. The mega-churches will flounder and people will just stop going. They are only going now because it is somewhat expected—part of the culture—or as some moral exercise.⁷

Over the next few generations, Southern Christianity will be transformed. Even secular sociologists, like Julie Ardery from the University of New Hampshire, are noticing the religious changes in the South. Ardery’s article has some important observations about the new South.

Ardery points out that although Southerners are traditionally more conservative on social issues like gay marriage and abortion, views and roles are changing as non-Baptists are moving into the South and creating new faith communities that are disaffected with the established orthodoxy.⁸ Already, there are groups of people in the

⁵ Tyler Jones, “The South – Past, Present, and Future,” *Advance the Church*, May 27, 2010, <http://advancethechurch.com/2010/05/27/the-south-past-present-and-future-by-tyler-jones/> (accessed October 4, 2010).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Julie Ardery, “Changing Church in the South: Religion and Politics in Elba, Alabama,” *Carey Institute at the University of New Hampshire*, 2006 http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/IB_changingchurch_06.pdf (accessed October 4, 2010).

South who are not happy with the “narrow way” that is presented by conservative Christian denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention. These new groups of less conservative individuals are simply forming their own communities of faith. Ardery writes about one such group that was formed where social issues like same-sex marriage are never discussed, and phrases like “Biblical inerrancy” are never used.⁹

Ardery’s article explains, that in the South, people are “walking away from institutions where, for one reason or many, they can no longer ‘be comfortable.’”¹⁰ It is truly a sad day when people that claim to be Christians choose “comfortable” over “Biblical.” The appalling reality of the South is that many are choosing the comfortable and wide road to destruction. In her conclusion Ardery explains:

A look around Elba, Alabama, suggests that faith and politics in the South, rather than fused predictably together, may be more open questions...as new residents arrive with their religious heritages and social convictions in tow, and as people increasingly seek welcoming fellowships, the authority of exclusionary institutions like the Southern Baptist Convention is waning.¹¹

Clearly the South is changing and will continue to change. As individuals continue to migrate into the South, they will bring with them their ideas and values that are not always Biblical. Churches in the South need to rethink and possibly even restructure the way they engage this new culture with the gospel. Central VA is a part of this new and changing South. Like the rest of the South, central VA has changed significantly since

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

the city of Lynchburg was first settled in the late 1750's.¹² As the South continues to be transformed, churches need to adapt Biblically and culturally.

Central Virginia

Lynchburg is a unique city that has gone through many changes and different phases throughout history. Before it was settled by colonists in the 1750's, central VA was the home of the Monacan Indian Tribe.¹³ After the French and Indian War, Lynchburg developed a Quakers settlement and later became a tobacco town. Being a rail hub, Lynchburg played an important role during the Civil War and is the burial ground for hundreds of Confederate soldiers.¹⁴ Economically, Lynchburg has gone through cycles of prosperity and depression. As a city, Lynchburg is currently being revitalized with new businesses, restaurants, and even churches moving back into the city. Historically, Lynchburg has been called the City of Seven Hills, but it is also known as the City of Churches.¹⁵

Lynchburg is a diverse city that has experienced a great variety of religious institutions. Colleges such as Liberty University (1971), Lynchburg College (1903), and Randolph College (1891) have brought students from all over the country, and some from around the world, to Lynchburg. Companies such as General Electric (GE), Babcock and Wilcox (B&W), Areva and TRAX-International have also brought a variety of individuals to Lynchburg from all over the world. Like the rest of the South, central VA

¹² Clifton Potter and Dorothy Potter, *Lynchburg: A City Set on Seven Hills* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2004),

¹³ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

has experienced and continues to experience a lot of change. Many of the significant changes, that are relevant to churches, have occurred in the last half a century. Churches serving in central VA should be familiar with significant historical events and how this area has changed, in order to effectively disciple people.

From Lynch's Ferry to the City of Churches

Liz Wiley explains that the history of Lynchburg begins around 1720 when Charles Lynch left Ireland to come to America.¹⁶ Christopher Clark, a wealthy Quaker, paid for Lynch's passage in exchange for his apprenticeship. After the apprenticeship in Louisa County, Charles Lynch settled in central VA. His son John Lynch established a ferry across the James River. As groups of people, like the Quakers, settled in central VA, Lynch petitioned the General Assembly to create a town. In 1786, Lynch's Ferry became a town called Lynchburg.¹⁷ Lynchburg quickly prospered and grew as citizens became involved in the tobacco trade and other produce. According to Darrell Laurant, self-reliance and isolation are two main themes that have always run through the life of Lynchburg. Lynchburg was one of the first communities in the country to install its own municipal water system and was earlier than most cities in getting gas and electricity. On the other hand, due to the deliberate decision of the City Council, Lynchburg is one of only a few standard metropolitan areas in the US that is not served by an interstate highway, keeping it isolated from the rest of the country.¹⁸

¹⁶ Liz Wiley, "A Short History of Lynchburg Churches," *RMWC Alumnae Bulletin*, December 1986, p. 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Darrell Laurant, *A City Unto Itself: Lynchburg, Virginia in the 20th Century* (Lynchburg: Darrell Laurant and the News & Advance, 1997), 269.

The Quakers

The Quakers, the first religious group in central VA, began meeting before 1757. They first came to Virginia because “like the Pilgrims and other groups, they wanted to be able to worship God in their own way.”¹⁹ Land in Virginia was readily available and they were able to worship God freely. The Quakers believed in the value of hard work and chose to live the simple life. They wore simple clothing and symbolically refused to take off their hats to anyone. They believed that special honor should not be awarded to man, instead all honor belonged to God. George Fox, their founder, believed that religion is a personal matter and “one did not need a special building, or music, or even a minister to help him worship God.”²⁰ The Quakers rightly understood that the church should not primarily be focused on buildings or programs.

Economic Growth and the Second Great Awakening

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Lynchburg had a population of about 500.²¹ At that point, Lynchburg had developed a newspaper, stores, and a few taverns and saloons. Although today Lynchburg is known as the City of Churches, there was not a single church in Lynchburg until 1806. After the town was formed, religion was simply not a priority in light of the quickly growing economy. Religion took a back seat for nearly 20 years as the economy prospered and grew. The nearest church building was the

¹⁹ Dorothy T. Potter and Clifton W. Potter, *Lynchburg: “The Most Interesting Spot”* (Lynchburg: Beric Press, 1985), 24.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ James M. Elson, *Lynchburg, Virginia: The First Two Hundred Years 1786-1986* (Lynchburg: Warwick House Publishers, 2004), 54.

Quaker meeting house five miles outside of the town.²² Most people did not realize there was a problem until Rev. Lorenzo Dow appeared in 1804. Rev. Dow was a Methodist minister who came to Lynchburg to hold religious services because the town did not have any churches. Rev. Dow boldly declared that “Lynchburg was the seat of Satan’s kingdom and a deadly place for the worship of God.”²³ In response to Dow, The Third Street Methodist Meeting was quickly built within two years. In 1815, Presbyterian and Baptist congregations were also organized.²⁴

By 1816, the population of Lynchburg had increased to 3, 087, with one third being slaves.²⁵ The Second Great Awakening played a big role in making Lynchburg known as the City of Churches. Lynchburg was given this title in the summer of 1828 through the extensive revivals that took place in all of the Lynchburg churches.²⁶ In the 1820’s, evangelicalism became a significant and driving cultural force in America and evangelicals adopted the Second Great Awakening as the term they use “to talk of the revivalism and evangelical fervor they found themselves in the midst of.”²⁷ Great revivals were taking place all over the country, including the South. Donald Scott, a history professor at Queens College, says that the Second Great Awakening was a “period marked by a special and extraordinary outpouring of God’s Saving Grace, a

²² Ibid, 51

²³ Wiley, 8.

²⁴ Elson, 53.

²⁵ Ibid, 57.

²⁶ Ibid, 68.

²⁷ Donald Scott, “Evangelicalism, Revivalism, and the Second Great Awakening,” *National Humanities Center*, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/nevanrev.htm>, (accessed October 8, 2010).

period that placed a special burden of responsibility on ministers of God and saved Christians alike to enlist themselves wholeheartedly in the work of extending God's Kingdom.”²⁸ God was moving in the lives of people all over the country and Lynchburg was no exception.

The increase in churches due to the Second Great Awakening led to Lynchburg becoming known as the City of Churches, but it also led to schisms and separations that were not always peaceful.²⁹ Different denominations, like the Baptists and Methodists, were firmly established and developed deep roots in Lynchburg. Churches became more territorial and some even divisive. Nearly two hundred years later the effects of those divisions are still felt today. When Pastor Nathan Brooks moved to Lynchburg from Maryland, in his own words he says he noticed that there was “a social class thing going on – this side of town versus the other side – and it had a hostile edge to it.”³⁰ Today in Lynchburg, many people still primarily identify themselves according to church membership. While it does not seem like people in Lynchburg care about what denomination one belongs to, what church one attends does matter. Laurant explains that “church affiliation identifies a Lynchburger socially and politically as well as theologically.”³¹ Instead of seeing the church and Christianity as a way of life, many nominal Christians in central VA seem to only attend church as a social event.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Elson, 68.

³⁰ Laurant, 258.

³¹ Ibid, 254.

Lynchburg's Churches

When writer Anne Royal visited Lynchburg in 1829, she decided that this city had too many churches.³² Since the 1800's Lynchburg has always had many churches, but it has also always been religiously diverse, "no one denomination has ever held the upper hand."³³ Lynchburg continues to have a large variety of groups that gather together and call themselves a church. Everyone from Unitarian Universalists to conservative fundamental KJV only groups all gather somewhere in Lynchburg. According to Laurant, picking a church in Lynchburg is "like choosing from a menu, deciding if you want your religion hot or cold, liberal or conservative, Bible-based or somewhere out on the philosophical frontier."³⁴ The number of churches can be overwhelming to individuals that might be looking for a faith family. The large amount of churches also allows some individuals to go from church to church for years without ever settling down or investing in a Christian community.

Growth and Health of Churches

Molly Jenkins writes that in 1886 the city's centennial publication listed 21 religious congregations in Lynchburg while the bicentennial committee's "Along the River" listed 104. Jenkins also adds that the telephone directory of Lynchburg and the surrounding counties in 1999-2000 listed "more than 260 religious congregations representing 53 denominations."³⁵ Today, the number of churches and denominations in

³² Ibid, 255.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Molly Roper Jenkins, "City of Churches indeed," *News and Advance*, 18 June 2000.

Lynchburg and the surrounding counties is even higher. Statistically it would seem that a city with this many churches would be reaching and serving everybody in the population. In reality, there are still thousands of people in Lynchburg that need to know about Jesus and need to learn to walk like Jesus.

In her 2008 article, *Dwindling Numbers*, Liz Barry pointed out that, “some of Lynchburg’s oldest churches are struggling to survive in the face of dwindling membership and the high cost of maintaining their historic structures.”³⁶ Simply put, churches are dying. Many older churches in Lynchburg are no longer effectively making disciples. Some of the older churches are losing people and can no longer afford to maintain their buildings. It did not take long after the Second Great Awakening for churches to start focusing more on buildings and programs, than on people. Beautiful and expensive buildings were built for the comfort of their Christian members. Churches became inwardly focused and lost the drive to reach out to lost people. Currently Lynchburg has “more than 30 churches predating 1900.”³⁷ These churches have beautiful historical buildings that serve as a reminder of the days when they were full of life. Many of the congregations, as well as the buildings, have grown old and are dying. The elderly congregations are literally dying physical; some are dying without passing on the faith to the next generation.

One example of this is First Baptist Church of Lynchburg which was founded in 1815. FBC is located in downtown Lynchburg and once held 500 members. In 2008 it

³⁶ Liz Barry, “Dwindling numbers,” *News and Advance*, 9 March 2008, D1.

³⁷ *Ibid*, D1.

only averaged about 50.³⁸ Others, like College Hill Baptist Church, are facing a similar fate. The energy, the drive, and the resources are all drying up. The finances and endowments of these churches are being used to maintain the historic buildings. The buildings only serve as monuments and memories of the past, instead of a movement in the present. It is clear that churches that are not making disciples are simply dying. Rev. Rodney Forest of Court Street Baptist says that attracting more youth has been the biggest challenge to building up the congregation. Forest claims that, “you find the younger generation not being as actively involved in the church as they used to be.”³⁹

It is true that attracting, and retaining, youth can sometimes be a challenge, but the problem is not that the younger generation is not actively involved in the church. The problem is that the younger people and younger Christians do not want to be involved in dying and irrelevant churches. The younger generation of Christians wants to be a part of living and active churches that are experiencing the power of God and creating more disciples. The younger Christian generation wants to be a part of a movement that is Biblical and mission minded. Christian young people all over the South want to be a part of churches that make a difference and leave a legacy. Churches like GCC and One Community Church are a testament that there are young people in Lynchburg who are interested and in love with God.

It is important to point out that not all of the churches in Lynchburg are struggling or dying. There are many churches, like Thomas Road Baptist Church, Heritage Baptist Church, and Brentwood Church, which are thriving. These churches set themselves apart

³⁸ Ibid, D3.

³⁹ Ibid, D1.

as Biblical churches that are seeing the lives of others transformed. They have buildings and programs, but discipleship and reaching others is a bigger priority.

Urban Ministry

In the late 1990's, many churches and businesses nationwide moved to the suburbs. Very few churches remained in downtown areas. Today, things are changing. Downtown areas all over the South are being revitalized. Businesses and young artists are moving back into the city. Churches are also realizing the great potential and need for the light of Christ in downtown areas. Rev. Haywood Robinson Jr., a pastor in Lynchburg, reminds individuals that "downtown in the city of Lynchburg and downtown areas everywhere is where ministry is needed."⁴⁰ The influx of people moving into downtown areas has created more needs and opportunities for ministry. This is an exciting time for mission minded churches like GCC and One Community to bring life to downtown Lynchburg.

The Second Northern Invasion

The city of Lynchburg has been greatly transformed in the last half a century. According to Elson, the Second Northern Invasion began with "the influx of Yankees into the city beginning in the middle 1950's, as cleaner postwar industries began to replace the old 'smokestack' manufacturing of the century's first half."⁴¹ New job opportunities and lower cost of living has brought a large number of Northerners into the

⁴⁰ Christie Richardson, "A City of Churches: Lynchburg's Remain Committed To Downtown Ministries," *News and Advance*, 9 January 1997.

⁴¹ Elson, 389.

South. The Second Northern Invasion, which began with a General Electric building a facility in Lynchburg, restarted the cultural transformation of central VA. Darrell

Laurant describes Lynchburg in the mid 50's as:

A city/town out of Thornton Wilder, all brickness and politeness and orderliness. Politically, it operated under a sort of benevolent oligarchy, gently nudged in the appropriate directions by a rotating panel of businessmen known as City Council. Socially, it was stratified. Racially, it was still largely segregated.⁴²

As companies like GE and the Babcock & Wilcox established businesses in Lynchburg, they also brought with them employees from various areas of the country. When GE built their facility to manufacture mobile communication equipment in 1955, they brought hundreds of employees from Syracuse, NY.⁴³ The Northerners settled down, purchased homes, and established their new lives in the South. Most of the Northerners were college graduates and did not hesitate to jump into civic roles.⁴⁴ These Northerners also brought with them some tension. It took many years for the outsiders to be fully accepted in central VA.

The Second Northern Invasion of the 50's was only the beginning of outsiders moving to Lynchburg. During the last half century, other companies such as Areva, along with Liberty University and Thomas Road Baptist church, have brought thousands of new residents from out of town.⁴⁵ Many have come to study or work in Lynchburg and have decided to stay and establish families and long lasting relationships. The influx

⁴² Laurant, 94.

⁴³ Elson, 390.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 391.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 393.

of culturally diverse individuals has brought further changes in the cultural and religious makeup of central VA.

The Changing Economy

In the late 50's, R.L Pitman transformed the economy of Lynchburg by first building a 64,000 square foot Sears Store and then building the Pittman Plaza. Pittman promised between 50-55 stores that would change Lynchburg's shopping habits forever.⁴⁶ The first 11 stores, which opened in 1959, slowly began destroying the downtown economy. In the 50's, before the Pittman Plaza, most of Lynchburg's shopping was done in the downtown area. Downtown also served as a religious stronghold with many historic churches being located there. Many believe that the Pitman's Plaza actually killed downtown businesses.⁴⁷ As businesses began to die out and people moved out of downtown, churches also began to struggle. In the late 50's and early 60's the attention began to drift away from downtown. This has changed in the last with the revitalization of downtown. More attention is now being focused on downtown as businesses and churches are helping to bring new life and energy to the city.

Jerry Falwell

Jerry Falwell, Thomas Road Baptist Church, and Liberty University have had a profound impact on central Virginia. The history of Lynchburg and the changes that have occurred in the last half a century will always include Jerry Falwell. In central VA,

⁴⁶ Laurant, 156.

⁴⁷ Elson, 397.

Falwell has achieved first-name status; “when you mention “Jerry” in Lynchburg, everyone knows who you’re talking about.”⁴⁸ While many people really like Falwell and what he has brought to Lynchburg, others strongly oppose him; but no one can deny the impact he’s had on central VA. Most people would agree with Laurant that Falwell’s relationship with the community was “generally polite and remote.”⁴⁹

Falwell was born and raised in the South. He got saved in Lynchburg and received his religious training at Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Missouri.⁵⁰ After graduating college, Falwell was planning on starting a church in Georgia, but was asked by a group of 35 Park Avenue Baptist Church dissenters to become their pastor in Lynchburg.⁵¹ Thomas Road Baptist Church launched in the summer of 1956 with Jerry Falwell as their leader. It was a rough beginning because of the split from Park Avenue Baptist Church, but God had great plans TRBC.

Falwell, as an ambitious young man, recounts setting a goal of visiting 100 homes a day. After studying the book of Acts, which talks about the early church being a witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, Falwell says:

I got a map of the city, put a compass point down and drew a 10-block radius from the church. That was my Jerusalem. Twenty blocks away was my Judea, the rest of the city was Samaria, and the surrounding counties were the world.⁵²

⁴⁸ Laurant, 200.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 211.

⁵⁰ Jerry Falwell, *Falwell: An Autobiography* (Lynchburg: Liberty House Publishers, 1997), 127, 151-152.

⁵¹ Ibid, 185-186.

⁵² Laurant, 203.

Falwell always looked for creative and new ways to communicate the gospel to more people. In an effort to reach more people, he bought radio and TV time. Radio and television continued to be a part of his ministry model until he died in 2007. After a humble beginning with only 35 people, TRBC had 864 children and adults at their one year anniversary celebration.⁵³

In 1971, with the help of Dr. Elmer Towns, Falwell started Lynchburg Baptist College. Falwell's dream was to train champions for Christ that would go all over the country and all over the world spreading the gospel. The first year 154 students arrived to attend the new college.⁵⁴ While the college has changed significantly, in the early days, Falwell's students "were often aggressive in their evangelism, mirroring the bulldog attitude of their leader."⁵⁵ Lynchburg Baptist College was later renamed Liberty University. Today LU offers more than 60 accredited programs and has over 50,000 students in their residential and online programs.⁵⁶ As the college and the church grew, so did their impact on the surrounding community.

Saturation Evangelism

Falwell is well known for his model of "Saturation Evangelism," using every means possible to reach as many people as possible for Christ. Elmer Towns says that

⁵³ Falwell, 233.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 330.

⁵⁵ Laurant, 212.

⁵⁶ Liberty University, *LU Quick facts*, <https://www.liberty.edu/index.cfm?PID=6925> (accessed October 15, 2010).

Saturation Evangelism is the secret behind the growth of TRBC.⁵⁷ Through the various ministries of TRBC and LU, Falwell literally saturated central VA with his message. Almost since it was started, TRBC has been on the cutting edge of the mass media world. Towns explains that the members of TRBC were mobilized to reach Lynchburg and the surrounding communities; every available technique was used to reach every available person.⁵⁸ In *Capturing a Town for Christ*, Towns lists 15 principles that TRBC used to reach people for Christ in the earlier days:

- Pastor-led evangelism.
- Television evangelism.
- Radio evangelism.
- Cassette and record evangelism.
- Sunday-school bus evangelism.
- Telephone evangelism.
- Promotion evangelism.
- Printing evangelism.
- Camp evangelism.
- Deaf evangelism.
- Alcoholic evangelism.
- Prison ministry.
- Education evangelism.

⁵⁷ Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns, *Capturing a Town for Christ* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1973), 86.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 85.

- Financial evangelism.
- Commuter evangelism.⁵⁹

Impact on central VA

Lynchburg has been saturated by TRBC. Some, like Billy Price, believe that TRBC has had a great impact on the city. Price gives credit to the television and radio ministries of TRBC for allowing many people to hear the gospel in Lynchburg. Other churches in the area have also been inspired by the model of TRBC to reach more people for Christ.⁶⁰ Not everyone agrees with Price. In 1981, Frances FitzGerald wrote that TRBC “has had almost no impact on the life of the city...Falwell and his people have stood apart from city politics and from community projects of all sorts.”⁶¹ In recent years, TRBC has been more intentional about being a loving part of the community.

As a result of Jerry Falwell’s ministry “the church, the schools...are one of Lynchburg’s largest employers.”⁶² LU and TRBC have not only helped to shape the religious atmosphere of Lynchburg, but have also strengthened the economy of the city by becoming one of the largest employers in the area. Laurant also recognizes that many of the ministers, Christian school teachers and waves of people in secular Lynchburg occupations have been trained at LU.⁶³

⁵⁹ Ibid, 87-98.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 73-74.

⁶¹ Laurant, 211.

⁶² Elson, 393.

⁶³ Laurant, 311.

Lynchburg's Culture and Values

It is somewhat difficult to pinpoint the exact culture and values of Lynchburg. With its more than two hundred year history and unique development, Lynchburg is a melting pot of many different cultures. Lynchburg is a town “rich in history and diverse in culture.”⁶⁴ Ever since it was founded, Lynchburg has always attracted a variety of individuals. In a phone interview, Mayor Joan Foster confirmed that the culture of Lynchburg has changed drastically since the 1960's and has become more diverse.⁶⁵ The Second Northern Invasion played a large role in creating the new culture. Many unique groups seem to coexist comfortably in Lynchburg. It is not surprising to see people embracing ideas from different religious groups. This makes it very important for evangelical churches to have a strong, Biblical foundation. Any discipleship strategy in Lynchburg needs to be grounded in God's absolute Word.

According to the city website, Lynchburg “is a city which remembers its past while focusing on the future – a vibrant central city fostering a strong sense of community.”⁶⁶ The city of Lynchburg values the past, but it is also taking big steps into the future. When asked about the values of Lynchburg, Mayor Foster replied, Lynchburg values “family, moral values (being a city of churches), marriage, and a sense of community.”⁶⁷ Even though GCC has not been around for a long time, it is already realizing that “community” is a big value for the city of Lynchburg. People know each

⁶⁴ The City of Lynchburg, *About Lynchburg*, <http://www.lynchburgva.gov/Index.aspx?page=14> (accessed November 6, 2010).

⁶⁵ Mayor Joan Foster. 2010. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. November 9.

⁶⁶ The City of Lynchburg, *About Lynchburg*, <http://www.lynchburgva.gov/Index.aspx?page=2> (accessed November 5, 2010).

⁶⁷ Mayor Joan Foster. 2010. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. November 9.

other in this town and desire to spend time with one another. The citizens of Lynchburg watch out for each other within their communities. The City Council is seeking to create stable, productive, and inspired families that are integrated in the community environment.⁶⁸ Since community is so important to the city, churches must emphasize the true community and stability that is only found in Christ. Churches will also need to develop long lasting and intentional relationships with different members of the community. Churches must also look for ways to be involved in the community.

In Lynchburg, it is not enough to simply knock on someone's door and tell them the gospel. Through the efforts of great churches like TRBC, many of the doors have already been knocked on. Discipleship in this city needs to be a long term commitment. As mature Christians develop long lasting relationships, making disciples will be more natural and effective. A good number of the people that GCC interacts with claim to believe in God, but for one reason or another are not living out their faith. Churches, like GCC, can use the seeds of faith that have been planted in people's hearts to help lead individuals into deeper and more meaningful relationships with Christ.

Another important aspect of the city's culture is the revitalization of downtown. Lynchburg's downtown "is regaining its position as the heart of the region's economic, cultural, and social life."⁶⁹ It is important for churches to become a part of this revitalization. Churches in Lynchburg are presented with great opportunities to be active

⁶⁸ The City of Lynchburg, *About Lynchburg*, <http://www.lynchburgva.gov/Index.aspx?page=2> (accessed November 5, 2010).

⁶⁹ The City of Lynchburg, *About Lynchburg*, <http://www.lynchburgva.gov/Index.aspx?page=14> (accessed November 6, 2010).

in the cultural and social life of the city. The downtown region needs gospel centered churches with a strong emphasis on discipleship.

The citizens of Lynchburg embrace and even celebrate diversity.⁷⁰ This diversity can be a blessing and a challenge. People in Lynchburg are open to the gospel and to Christ's teachings. Some people are more cautious about letting others into their "community" too quickly because they have seen many individuals and churches come and go. Love and service go a long way in helping to breaking down barriers, allowing individuals to be accepted, and to build long lasting relationships.⁷¹ As deeper friendships are formed, effective and authentic discipleship can take place.

Conclusion and Implications for Discipleship

Central VA has a strong religious history and is the home of hundreds of churches, but it is still a mission field where many people need to meet Jesus and learn to live like Him. Central VA, along with the rest of the South, is continuing to change rapidly. Businesses and educational opportunities are bringing new migrants, along with their culture and values, to the South. Churches need to contextualize their ministries to the new culture and religious atmosphere of the South. It is vital to understand that the ministries and discipleship strategies that have worked in the past might not be as effective in the present. The Northern Invasion of the 50's and the influence of churches like Thomas Road Baptist Church have transformed central VA. Along with having a strong Biblical understanding of discipleship, churches in central VA need to understand their history, identify the changes around them, and build contextualized discipleship

⁷⁰ Mayor Joan Foster. 2010. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. November 9.

⁷¹ Mayor Joan Foster. 2010. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. November 9.

strategies in order to remain spiritually healthy and to produce healthy disciples. The uniqueness of Lynchburg's culture and values presents some great opportunities for lasting discipleship relationships.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CALL TO MAKE DISCIPLES AND HOW IT WAS ACCOMPLISHED BY JESUS CHRIST

Jesus spent roughly three years teaching, preaching, healing, and serving people. One of His biggest investments during that time was the twelve disciples that followed Him. At the end of His earthy ministry, Jesus paid for the sins of the world by dying on the cross and three days later He came back to life. As He was leaving this earth, the mission that Jesus Christ left His church was to make disciples. The concept of discipleship is one that is very familiar to the evangelical church. Many churches talk about discipleship and have discipleship programs, but not everyone seems to be producing healthy and effective disciples. Discipleship is a twofold process that has to do with first, following Christ, and second, making followers of Christ. Christians must learn to follow Christ (be disciples) before they can help make healthy disciples. The Holy Spirit was sent to empower the church and plays an extremely important role in the discipleship process. Discipleship cannot be accomplished without the Holy Spirit.

Christ himself set the greatest example of what discipleship looks like by developing faithful followers. Jesus spent the majority of His earthly ministry pouring His life, and time, into the group of men that would lead the church when He left. Jesus personally selected these men, developed them, and sent them out to reproduce themselves. The task of making disciples is not easy, but God's Word, the example of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit provides everything the church needs to carry out its mission effectively. The following chapter will explore the Biblical concept of discipleship and examine Christ's example of discipleship. The health of the church depends on the type of disciples it produces.

Discipleship

Discipleship is undoubtedly one of the most important aspects of being a Christian. There are far more resources available on the topic of discipleship today than ever before, but fewer people seem to understand what it truly means and what it looks like. Most in the evangelical church are very familiar with the terminology, but few seem to truly practice all aspects of authentic discipleship. Christians need to understand that “discipleship is not about reading books or storing up knowledge.”¹ Instead, discipleship is about following Christ and training others to follow Him.

The early church seemed to understand the concept of discipleship, and the mission that Christ left them, because they obediently lived out their faith. George Barna writes that:

The early disciples were sold out to Jesus and to carrying on His teachings through their words and deeds. The early church was not about specialists employing foolproof techniques; it was about sinners receiving grace, committing to change, and living in concert with the wisdom imparted by their faith resources – the Scriptures, the lives of fellow sojourners, and the leading of the Holy Spirit.²

Many of the early believers were ordinary and common men and women of faith.³ What set them apart from the rest of the world was the fact that they were fully devoted followers of Christ. They were intentional about living out the mission that Christ left them. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the early church continued to become like Jesus and actively helped others become like Him.

¹ Barna, *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ*, 15.

² Ibid, 14.

³ Acts 4:13.

In the New Testament, there are a variety of words that are associated with the concept of discipleship. Some of the most important words are, “‘make disciples’ (*matheteuo*), ‘teach’ (*didasko*), ‘train’ (*didaxo*), ‘be sound’ (*hugiaino*), and ‘follow’ (*akaloutheo*), as well as... ‘disciple’ (*mathetes*), ‘teacher’ (*didaskalos*), ‘imitator’ (*mimetes*), and ‘training’ (*didache*).”⁴ All of these words are related to being trained, following the example of someone, and training others. Both aspects of discipleship, being a disciple and making disciples, were an active part of the early church. The authors of the first five books of the New Testament dealt extensively with the concept of discipleship. Discipleship was clearly important because the noun “disciple” (*mathetes*) is found 264 times in the five books of the New Testament, occurring 239 times in the plural form.⁵

Two Aspects of Discipleship

Jesus Himself put a high value on discipleship. When He was leaving this earth, He told His disciples to follow His example and do with others what He had done with them.⁶ While the idea of discipleship is reasonably straightforward, it is important to note that it consists of a few different parts. There are two distinct and equally important aspects of discipleship. The first has to do with following Christ and the second has to do with making followers of Christ. Before anyone can make disciples of Christ, they themselves need to be actively following Christ. Being an active and fruitful disciple of

⁴ Smither, *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders*, 5.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Robert E. Coleman, *Master Plan of Discipleship*, (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1998), 9.

Christ will naturally lead to making disciples. As people “learn of Him and follow the pattern of His life, they will invariably become disciplers, and as their disciples in turn do the same...the world will come to know Him.”⁷ The two aspects of discipleship, following Christ and making followers of Christ, should be the primary focus of the church today. It seems logical, and Biblical, for the church to focus their efforts on discipleship. The church needs to look for ways to become more like Christ and to help others become like Him. As individuals learn to follow Christ personally and passionately, they will seek to live on mission and help others become like Christ.

Following Christ

The call to become a disciple comes long before the call to make disciples. Barna says that “in the original biblical texts, the term used for *disciple* refers to someone who is a learner or follower who serves as an apprentice under the tutelage of a master.”⁸ The first part of biblical discipleship has to do with learning from, and following after, Christ. Christ is the master teacher that has modeled the life that Christians need to live on earth. The very heart of discipleship has to do with learning from the master teacher. Chuck Lawless explains that “a disciple was – and is – first a student.”⁹ A disciple is someone that strives to replicate their life after their teacher; someone that desires to become like their teacher. Biblical disciples are people who model their lives after Christ and learn from Him.

⁷ Ibid,10.

⁸ Barna, 17.

⁹ Chuck Lawless, *Discipled Warriors: Growing Healthy Churches That are Equipped for Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002), 45.

The call to follow Christ is not an easy one. Jesus' seemingly simple call to His disciples in Matthew 4:19 and Mark 1:17 contained drastic implications. In asking them to follow Him, He was calling them to give up their comforts and all that was familiar to them.¹⁰ Jesus was asking them to leave their careers, families, and homes behind in order to walk with Him and learn from Him. David Platt says that Jesus was calling his disciples to literally abandon themselves for His glory.

They were leaving certainty for uncertainty, safety for danger, self-preservation for self-denunciation. In a world that prizes promoting oneself, they were following a teacher who told them to crucify themselves. And history tells us the result. Almost all of them would lose their lives because they responded to his invitation.¹¹

The first century men and women that responded to the call to follow Jesus understood that discipleship is costly. Following Jesus meant complete surrender, with many of them losing their lives because they became disciples of Jesus.

Today, the invitation to follow Christ is still open to everyone, but not everyone that calls themselves a follower of Christ is really a disciple. In Luke 9:23 Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." If someone truly desires to be a disciple and follower of Christ, they must first surrender their selfish ambitions and choose to follow Christ daily. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death...when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."¹² Disciples need to be willing to abandon their comfort, possessions, security,

¹⁰ Platt, *Radical: Taking Your Faith from the American Dream*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 12.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 89.

and sometimes their very lives for Christ. In a world that prizes comfort and security, true Biblical discipleship can be a difficult concept to grasp. As individuals learn to surrender and truly follow after Christ, then they can be effective at making disciples.

Making Followers of Christ

Based on the teachings of the New Testament, discipleship seems to be God's plan for taking the gospel to the world. It is a slow and intentional process "that involves every one of his people sacrificing every facet of their lives to multiply the life of Christ in others."¹³ Making disciples cannot be boiled down to simply developing programs or planning events. Instead, making disciples has everything to do with building meaningful relationships with people in order to help them become like Christ. Every one of God's people is called to be involved in the discipleship process (following and making followers). Discipleship is not an optional aspect of Christianity. Robert Coleman believes that making disciples should be the priority around which our lives are oriented.¹⁴ Some Christians seem to develop their priorities based on the world's values instead of the New Testament.

Shortly before leaving this earth, Jesus gave his followers the Great Commission. Five New Testament passages record the fullness of the Great Commission: Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 16:14-18, Luke 24:44-49, John 20:19-23, and Acts 1:4-8. Aubrey Malphurs makes some helpful and important observations about the Great Commission passages. Malphurs says:

¹³ Platt, 104.

¹⁴ Coleman, *Master Plan of Discipleship*, 9.

- The passages are addressed to the disciples as the future leaders of the church.
- The passages are imperatives that spell out Christ's mandate for his church.
- The passages emphasize evangelism as the church would preach the good news.
- The passages emphasize proactively participating in the discipleship process.
- The church was to go to "all nations" and there were no geographical limitations.
- In the power of the Holy Spirit the church was to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins and then baptize, and teach, those who respond.¹⁵

The bottom line of the Great Commission is the fact that the church should be proactively making disciples. This mission is not optional and should not be passive. Along with seeking to become more like Christ, all believers should be actively participating in the process of making disciples.

Sometimes Christians wrongly assume that evangelism and discipleship is exclusively the responsibility of the "clergy." These types of Christians think that only pastors and missionaries have to go and make disciples. Malphurs insists that Christ "expects his entire church (not simply a few passionate disciple makers) to move people along a maturity or disciple-making continuum."¹⁶ Coleman also strongly believes that, Biblically, the mission of making disciples is an obligation that is "incumbent upon the whole community of faith."¹⁷ It does not matter the type of training someone has or what one does for a living. Whether the job is "secular" or ministry related, all Christians should be committed to living disciple making lives.

¹⁵ Aubrey Malphurs, *Strategic Disciple Making: A Practical Tool for Successful Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 19.

¹⁷ Coleman, *Master Plan of Discipleship*, 10.

In Acts 1, before Jesus left this earth, the disciples were asking Him about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. Although they seemed very concerned about the kingdom of Israel, Jesus did not answer their question. Instead, He told them in verse 8, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Jesus turned the attention of His disciples to the power they would receive in order to be His witnesses. Jesus promised them that they would receive a special kind of power and this power would then equip them to go out and be His witnesses.

Beginning in Jerusalem, the followers of Christ were to go out into the whole world and make more followers of Christ. The book of Acts describes how the early church adopted and carried out the mission of making disciples. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the mission that Christ gave them became a reality and changed the world. Christians today should still be actively participating in that mission. The work is not done; there are still people in this world that need to hear about Jesus and learn how to become like Him.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The role of the Holy Spirit in the call and process of discipleship is very important and easily overlooked. Christians frequently talk about God the Father and God the Son, but God the Holy Spirit seems to be neglected, or even forgotten, in some circles. Jesus understood that His followers would not be able to accomplish His mission on their own. That is why He promised His followers that they would receive power to help them accomplish the mission. The Holy Spirit would provide everything that they needed in

order to be effective witnesses. In the words of Coleman, the Holy Spirit is “the enabling Agent of the Kingdom, communicating and effecting the will of God.”¹⁸ The Holy Spirit is the one that equips believers to carry out the will of God.

Acts 1:8 was not the first time that Jesus talked about the Holy Spirit. Jesus told His disciples in John 14:16 that He would send “another Counselor.” He even told them that it was to their advantage that He leaves so that the Counselor could come.¹⁹ At the end of Acts 1, the disciples were waiting and praying for the power to come. In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit’s power was unleashed in an incredible way. On that day Peter preached the gospel and promised that the Holy Spirit is available to everyone who believes. As a result of Peter’s message, and the power of the Holy Spirit, thousands of people decided to become followers of Christ.

The Bible teaches us that Holy Spirit works in conjunction with the Father and Son. He convicts people of sin, draws people to the gospel, and equips followers of Christ to accomplish God’s purposes.²⁰ The Holy Spirit helps Christians to carry out their mission and, according to Romans 15:13, fills Christians with joy and peace. 1 Corinthians 12:7 says that every follower of Christ is given a manifestation of the Holy Spirit for the common good. Christians should desire to use their Spiritual gifts to be a blessing to others in the body of Christ. In his book, *Forgotten God*, Francis Chan says, “The Spirit desires to use us when our hearts are aligned with this vision, when we are filled with genuine love for the church, and when we desire to see the church grow in

¹⁸ Ibid, 101.

¹⁹ John 16:7.

²⁰ John 16:7-11, 1 Thess. 1:5, Rom. 8:26, Eph. 3:16-19.

love for God and others.”²¹ The Holy Spirit uses Christians in powerful ways when they submit to His leading and choose to live on mission for the gospel.

A Disciple's Faith and Conduct

Based on the Bible, and church history, it is clear that Christians are called to be disciples of Christ and to make disciples. It is also important to understand what a disciple believes and how they must conduct themselves. Barna suggests that a follower of Christ:

- Must be assured of their salvation by grace alone.
- Must learn and understand the principles of the Christian life.
- Must obey God's laws and commands.
- Must represent God in the world.
- Must serve other people.
- Must reproduce themselves in Christ.²²

Smither advocates that a disciple must believe that Jesus was the Christ and also accept “the moral and ethical teachings of the Hebrew scriptures, as well as His updated teachings like that contained in the Sermon on the Mount.”²³ The most important belief of a disciple has to do with the identity of Jesus. The Gospels identify Jesus as the Christ, “one who would atone for sins through His death, burial, and resurrection.”²⁴ The early

²¹ Francis Chan, *Forgotten God: Reversing our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 85.

²² Barna, 20-23.

²³ Smither, 8.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

Christians were often persecuted and killed because they believed and proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ. The early Christians also strongly emphasized scripture and sound teaching.²⁵ It was important for a disciple to know and understand God's word, and also to pass on that knowledge to others.

Ultimately, a disciple needs to look and live like Jesus. According to 1 John 2:4-6:

Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

If a person claims to be a disciple of Christ, then they must live according to Christ's commandments and word. In order to be identified as a disciple of Christ it is important to walk as he walked. This type of lifestyle is not easy but the church has a clear example found in Christ.

How Jesus Made Disciples

With all the information that is available about discipleship, sometimes it is difficult to know which models to follow. Churches with successful discipleship programs can serve as great examples, but it is even more important for Christians to learn about discipleship from the source – Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate, and greatest, example for life and conduct. In the book of Philippians, Apostle Paul challenges Christians to imitate Christ. Gerald Hawthorne believes that Paul was calling "on Christian believers to focus their whole attention on Jesus Christ and to make Him the supreme model for both their overall attitude toward life and their conduct in day-to-day

²⁵ Acts 17:2-3; 2 Tim. 2:2; also Smither, 9.

living.”²⁶ Christian’s should seek to imitate Christ in all aspects of their lives, especially when it comes to discipleship. Robert Coleman’s book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, which was first published in 1963, is one of the best books on of how Christ evangelized and made disciples. Coleman’s eight guiding principles (selection, association, consecration, impartation, demonstration, delegation, supervision, and reproduction) of the Master’s plan will serve as framework for the rest of this chapter.

Selection

Jesus’ plan to reach the world with the gospel message began with Him choosing a small group of men to follow Him.²⁷ Oswald Sanders says that, “The initial call of Christ to the men with whom He planned to associate in His purpose of world evangelism was a call to discipleship.”²⁸ Jesus selected teachable men that He Himself could disciple. These men followed Him and learned to be like Him. He gathered men who would be able to bear witness about His life and continue the work on earth after He would leave. There was nothing outwardly special about the men He picked; they were willing to follow Him and later testify about Him in this world. Craig Blomberg says that “Jesus took the initiative to command people to follow him...unlike the prophets who pointed people to God, Jesus pointed people to himself.”²⁹ In John 14:6, Jesus boldly proclaimed

²⁶ Richard N. Longenecker, *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 167.

²⁷ Luke 6:13-17; Mark 3:13-19.

²⁸ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Discipleship* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 7.

²⁹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 234.

that He was the way, the truth, and the life. People could, and should, follow Him because He is the way to the Father.

Instead of pouring out all of his energy on the masses, Jesus strategically, and intentionally, decided to focus primarily on twelve men. He did not neglect larger crowds, but the majority of his time was devoted to the twelve men that He selected to train. He concentrated on the twelve, allowing them to see aspects of His life that no one else saw. It would have been easy for a rabbi to get distracted by the masses, but Christ knew that the small group of men that He was training would become the leaders of His church.

Based on Christ's example, and that of the early church, it can be observed that discipleship in early Christianity took place in community and in the context of a group.³⁰ Along with Smither, Malphurs also points out that Jesus did not seem to disciple very many individuals. In order to reach more people, Jesus ministered to the crowds, but spent the majority of His time discipling the Twelve.³¹ Following the example of Christ, mature Christians should carefully consider and select groups of individuals that they can disciple.

Association

After selecting His disciples, Jesus intentionally spent time with them. Jesus was never too busy for His disciples and He made Himself available to them. The disciples were not enrolled in any formal training programs; Jesus simply asked them to follow

³⁰ Smither, 13-14.

³¹ Malphurs, 59.

Him and “be with him.”³² Spending time with Jesus was one of the primary ways that the disciples gained knowledge and wisdom. Robert Coleman explains that “knowledge was gained by association before it was understood by explanation.”³³ As Jesus’ ministry progressed, He spent increasingly more time with His disciples. The less time He had left on earth, the more time He spent with the Twelve. Jesus continued to minister to the crowds, but Malphurs says, Jesus “reached a point where he shifted his ministry away from the crowd and focused primarily on the Twelve (see Mark 9-16) to prepare them as apostles for their leadership ministry in the church.”³⁴

Association was a great way to train the disciples. The benefits of spending time with Jesus clearly impacted the disciples and their future ministry. In Acts 4, when Peter and John were arrested and stood before the Sanhedrin, their accusers recognized that Peter and John had spent time with Jesus. Acts 4:13 says, “When they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished...they recognized that they had been with Jesus.” The disciples were trained, and equipped for their ministry, by spending time with Jesus. Jesus gave His disciples one of the most important commodities, time. This is an important principle for the church today. Any discipleship program or structure in the church must give younger believers in the faith opportunities to spend time with older and more mature believers. Reading books about spiritual growth and discipleship can be beneficial, but it is even more beneficial to spend time with people who are clearly walking with the Lord.

³² Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13.

³³ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1993), 34.

³⁴ Malphurs, 58.

Consecration

Jesus taught, and expected, His disciples to obey Him. He expected them to give up their lives and to dedicate themselves to Him. Jesus wanted to create in them a lifestyle of consecrated obedience. The disciples demonstrated that they trusted Christ when they obediently followed Him. Jesus' disciples dedicated their time, resources, and energy to following Him. They gave up their careers, families, and security to become followers of Christ. Following Christ is a call to complete surrender and wholehearted consecration. Not everyone is willing to pay that price. While Christ was on earth, many different people followed Him for a time, but not everyone dedicated their lives to Him. Few remained when things became difficult and many abandoned the faith when Christ was crucified.

Jesus clearly taught his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."³⁵ Obedience to Christ is one of the most important aspects of being a disciple. Coleman says:

Obedience to Christ thus was the very means by which those in his company learned more truth. He did not ask the disciples to follow what they did not know to be true...Jesus did not urge his disciple to commit their lives to a doctrine, but to a person who was the doctrine, and only as they continued in his Word could they know the truth (John 8:31-32).³⁶

As disciples consecrate themselves and obey, they learn more about Jesus and how to be like Him. It is impossible to be a disciple of Christ without surrendering to Him and

³⁵ John 14:15.

³⁶ Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 48.

living in obedience to His commands. It is disappointing to see individuals that label themselves as Christians, but who do not live in obedience and submission to Christ.

Impartation

Jesus gave himself away to His disciples. He imparted His life and knowledge on the disciples. Jesus told the disciples in John 15:15 that He had made known to them everything that He had learned from the Father. He gave the disciples peace and joy.³⁷ Jesus also shared with them His glory and the Holy Spirit.³⁸ Jesus literally gave His disciples everything they would need in order to accomplish the mission He left them. By following Christ, the disciples were given truths that outsiders did not receive (Mark 4:14-20; 7:17-23). Blomberg also adds that the disciples received special privileges and promises about the future (Mark 14:28; 16:7).³⁹ As Jesus spent time with them, He sacrificially poured His life and knowledge into their lives. This is a good lesson for mature Christians to learn. As they follow Christ, they must find less mature Christians to pour into. Followers of Christ should look for opportunities to impart what they have, and know, onto others. In authentic discipleship relationships, there should be a transfer of godly wisdom and character.

One of the most important things that Christ gave to his disciples was the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that empowered them to live out their lives for the glory of God. Coleman rightly says, “It is only the Spirit of God who enables one to carry on the

³⁷ John 16:33; John 15:11.

³⁸ John 17:22; John 16:7.

³⁹ Blomberg, 120.

redemptive mission of evangelism.”⁴⁰ In Acts, the Holy Spirit also gave the disciples the ability to bring glory to God by performing miracles. Today it is just as important to teach followers of Christ about the Holy Spirit and what He does in a believer’s life. Christians are powerless and cannot properly accomplish their mission without the Holy Spirit. It is the responsibility of Christians to impart themselves and their knowledge as they make disciples.

Demonstration

Oswald Sanders points out that Jesus did not only prescribe a certain lifestyle for His disciples, but He also demonstrated that lifestyle.⁴¹ Jesus showed the disciples what it looks like to follow God and to serve others. He gave them the ultimate model of disciple making. Jesus prayed before them, met the needs of the poor and the sick, and had compassion on the multitudes. Jesus lived the type of life that He wanted to reproduce in His disciples. Coleman points out that “more than twenty times the Gospels call attention to Jesus’ practice of prayer.”⁴² Jesus showed the disciples that He relied on the Father. Jesus always took time to meet people’s physical and spiritual needs. In this, He showed the disciples that ministry is about people.

In John 13, Jesus surprised everyone when He washed His disciple’s feet. Jesus performed the task of the lowest servant in order to demonstrate for His disciples how they were to live. Jesus said:

⁴⁰ Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 57.

⁴¹ Sanders, *Spiritual Discipleship*, 8.

⁴² Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 116.

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.⁴³

Christ always served His disciples and challenged them to serve each other. He confidently told His disciples to follow His example.

In Philippians 2, Paul also challenged Christians to follow Christ's humble example. Paul wrote that Christ humbled Himself, took on the form of a servant, and gave His life for others. Paul believed that Christians should have that same mind. Paul was a dedicated follower of Christ and was himself able to boldly proclaim, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."⁴⁴ It is very important for all Christians, especially those that are training others, to practice and live out what they teach. A personal and passionate walk with God is an important factor in developing godly leaders. A godly life sends a powerful message and example to others.

Delegation

Christ's disciples were not just passive observers of His example. Jesus gave them many opportunities to actively participate in the ministry. Jesus developed the disciples by delegating ministry responsibilities. As they learned to follow Him, Jesus gave them real ministry opportunities. There came a time in the discipleship process where the disciples began to practice what they had learned. One example of this is found in Matthew 10 when Jesus sent the disciples to the lost sheep of Israel. Their responsibility was to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. As they went out, Jesus gave

⁴³ John 13:14-15.

⁴⁴ 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1.

them His authority and power (Mark 6:7; Matt. 10:1; Luke 9:1). Another time Jesus sent out seventy others with similar instructions.⁴⁵

Sometimes, Jesus gave them simple ministry tasks, such as finding food and preparing for the Passover meal. At one point of Jesus' ministry, thousands of hungry people gathered to hear Him teach. The disciples wanted Jesus to send the crowd away, but Jesus told the disciples to give the crowd something to eat.⁴⁶ The disciples brought back five loaves of bread and two fish, which Jesus multiplied in order to feed the multitude. The disciples were challenged to express their faith and participate in the ministry. Coleman believes that one of the best ways to challenge disciples to express their faith is "to give practical work assignments and expect them to be carried out."⁴⁷ Based on Christ's example, some Christians today may need to rethink how they delegate spiritual responsibilities to those whom they are discipling.

Supervision

Jesus supervised His disciples, and kept them accountable, because supervision is an important aspect of discipleship. The disciples reported to Jesus when they returned from their ministry trip. Mark 6:10 says that when the disciples returned, they "told him all that they had done and taught." Coleman explains that Jesus:

Kept after them constantly, giving them increasingly more attention as His ministry on earth came to a close. No matter what they did, there was always more to do and to learn. He rejoiced in their success, but nothing less than

⁴⁵ Luke 10:1.

⁴⁶ Mark 6:36-37.

⁴⁷ Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 79-80.

world conquest was His goal, and to that end He always superintended their efforts.⁴⁸

Jesus empowered and gave the disciples opportunities to act, but He also supervised them and held them accountable. Christians today can also help the individuals they are discipling by giving them opportunities to minister, and by patiently supervising them as they carry out those responsibilities.

Reproduction

Jesus expected and even commanded His disciples to reproduce. Jesus did not desire to form an exclusive social club. That is one of the reasons why He challenged the disciples to bring others into the family of God. He gave His message, and mission, to the disciples so that they would reproduce themselves and make disciples of all nations.

Bill Hull says:

Reproduction takes place when the apprentice becomes a model. To become a model means the student has reached a point in his development where others can follow him, and they, too, will take on the characteristics of Christ.⁴⁹

Every Christian should be actively, and passionately, pursuing Christ and becoming more like Him. Once this is happening, then they should reproduce their Christ like characteristics in others.

In John 15:16-17, Jesus challenged the disciples to love one another and bear fruit. In addition to this, He gave the disciples the Great Commission commanding them to reproduce themselves. Hull believes that “until the church reproduces both on a

⁴⁸ Ibid, 85.

⁴⁹ Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Church* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1990), 141.

widespread individual basis and at the corporate level, the church remains incomplete.”⁵⁰ It is not enough to simply follow Christ; followers of Christ need to be actively making disciples. The Christian movement was born as the early disciples obediently reproduced themselves. As the Holy Spirit empowered them, the early church carried out the mission of making disciples. Today, Christians need to be equally committed to reproducing themselves in others, in order to make more disciples of Christ.

The Mission and Example of Christ

The New Testament church is called to follow wholeheartedly after Christ. The church is also called to select, train, and send mission minded disciples of Christ who will be able repeat the process of discipleship. While on earth, Jesus’ ministry consisted of teaching, preaching, healing, and serving people. Jesus spent the majority of His earthly ministry pouring His life, and time, into a group of men that became the leaders of the church when He left. He personally selected, developed, and sent them out to reproduce themselves. The mission He left to them, and to His church, was to make disciples. It is important to view discipleship as a twofold process: 1) following Christ and 2) making followers of Christ. As Christians learn to follow Christ (be disciples), with help from the Holy Spirit, they can reproduce healthy disciples (make disciples). Jesus Christ is ultimately the model and example of what discipleship looks like. The church is equipped to be healthy and to carry out the Great Commission through God’s Word, Christ’s example, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 55.

CHAPTER FOUR

SNAPSHOTS IN DISCIPLESHIP IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY – HOW IT HAS BEEN DONE SINCE JESUS CHRIST

The ultimate example of discipleship is found in Jesus Christ, but discipleship did not end when Jesus Christ left this earth. While on earth, Jesus poured Himself wholeheartedly into His disciples. Christ commissioned them and the Holy Spirit empowered, and enabled, them to accomplish the mission of making more disciples. In addition to Jesus' example, a lot can be gleaned from various forms of discipleship and individuals that influenced discipleship in Church history. Beginning with the early church, various individuals and movements have been great models of discipleship.

Catechesis became an important form of spiritual training after the first century. During those formative centuries, spiritual leaders like Cyprian of Carthage and Ambrose of Milan also made disciples as they passionately followed Christ personally and intentionally trained others. They were followed by Benedictine Monasticism, in the 6th and 7th centuries, with its commitment to community and spiritual growth. Later, the Humiliati and mendicant monks of the 12th and 13th centuries learned from the monks, but used their community to engage the world with evangelism, preaching, and teaching. In the 16th century, the Anabaptists greatly emphasized discipleship as a part of their ministry philosophy. These were followed by the Pietist movement, which in turn influenced John Wesley, in the 18th century. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the Sunday school movement influenced both children and adults to know Christ, grow spiritually in Christ, and reach out to others. Most recently, the small group movement of the 20th and 21st centuries has helped to develop disciples in smaller communities of faith within the church. This chapter briefly highlights snapshots of these individuals and movements.

First Century – Early Church

Discipleship has been the mission and life of the church ever since it began in the book of Acts. The disciple making church began in Jerusalem, after the Holy Spirit came down, and rapidly spread around the world. The rapid expansion and growth of the church can only be explained by the fact that “the apostles followed the lessons they learned from Jesus.”¹ By the power of the Holy Spirit, almost immediately, the church began to make disciples. On the day that the Holy Spirit came down, Peter preached the gospel and three thousand people made decisions to become disciples of Christ.²

The early church understood that discipleship:

Is not one of several programs of the church; it is *the program* of the church. All the activities and programs of the church work together to make disciples. It is not a ministry in which a few dedicated disciple makers work with a limited number of people who want to mature in their faith. It is a ministry of the church that seeks to make disciples of all its people.³

When discipleship is viewed as simply one of the activities or programs of the church, it is easily lost among all the other activities and ministries that sometimes become more important. The twenty-first-century church appears to understand that discipleship is important, but sometimes the importance of discipleship seems to be downplayed because it is not always seen as the primary mission of the church. The church understood their mission and followed the example of Christ, actively bringing others into the family of faith.

¹ Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Church*, 51.

² Acts 2:40-41.

³ Aubrey Malphurs, *Strategic Disciple Making: A Practical Tool for Successful Ministry*, 67.

The following observations about discipleship in the early church are adapted from Richard Longenecker's *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*. We learn from the early church that:

- 1) Discipleship needs to be dependent on God and submissive to his will, therefore prayer is important.
- 2) Discipleship must always recognize the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.
- 3) Discipleship is to be involved in prophetic proclamation, with the proclamation focused on the work of Jesus.
- 4) Discipleship is to be committed to a lifestyle of complete allegiance to Jesus.
- 5) Discipleship is to be concerned for the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, and the oppressed.
- 6) Discipleship is to follow the examples of Jesus and the apostles, in matters of service, prayer, and cross-bearing.
- 7) Discipleship is to be a life of development in both one's faith and one's practice.⁴

In one way, or another, these different aspects of discipleship are seen in the early church. In the early church, discipleship took place as the church preached the gospel boldly, shared life and built community sacrificially, and reproduced themselves intentionally.

Preaching, Growing Together, and Reproducing

Pastor Mark Driscoll points out that “the church is to be an evangelistic people on mission in the world, passionate to see lost people meet Jesus Christ as Savior, God, and

⁴ Richard N. Longenecker, *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, 75.

Lord.”⁵ The early church made disciples by first engaging individuals with the gospel message. Peter set the precedent when he preached the gospel in Acts 2 and challenged the crowd to repent and be baptized.⁶ His example is followed by others, like Philip, Barnabas, and Paul.⁷ The early Christians were wholeheartedly committed to scripture; they followed Christ and taught others about the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Christ. They also challenged individuals to repent (turn away from their sins) and follow after Christ. As the gospel was preached, and individuals put their faith in Christ, they became a part of the discipleship process. Acts 2:47 summarizes what God was doing among the early church as they preached the gospel, “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

The Lord was adding to their numbers daily because the church was obedient to the mission of being, and making, disciples. The early Christians also shared life with each other and naturally developed in community. Developing as disciples and reaching new discipleship happened as the church stayed committed to: scripture (Acts 2:42), one another (Acts 2:42, 44, 46), prayer (Acts 2:42), praise and worship (Acts 2:43, 47), and Outreach (Acts 2:45-47).⁸ Due to their genuine commitment to Christ, each other, and the mission, the early church “had favor with all the people of Jerusalem and more and more people joined them.”⁹

⁵ Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 312.

⁶ Acts 2:38.

⁷ Acts 8 and Acts 13.

⁸ Hull, 64.

⁹ Driscoll and Breshears, 306.

In the early church, discipleship seemed to primarily take place in a group context. There are some examples of one-on-one discipleship relationships (Acts 9:26-28; 18:26), but it seems that group discipleship may have been more effective and definitely more prominent. The Christians ate, sang, prayed, celebrated, and spent time together. The early church met predominantly in medium and small groups. Malphurs says that “these house churches likely ranged in size from a medium-sized group of forty to fifty people to a small group of ten to thirty people.”¹⁰ For the early church, discipleship was a daily process that took place in the community of faith. It was not just a program or a meeting that took place only once a week.

Reproduction was another important aspect of the discipleship process. The early church was not an exclusive club. They allowed, encouraged, and invited others to participate in the discipleship process. Paul explained the process well when he told Timothy, “be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”¹¹ The early Christians did not simply fill themselves with knowledge, but they also passed on what they learned about Jesus, and spiritual growth, to others. This principle of reproduction is seen even during times of persecution. In Acts 8:4 it says, “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” The church grew, and disciples were developed, as faithful men and women modeled the Christ centered life and invited others to become like Him.

¹⁰ Malphurs, 70.

¹¹ 2 Timothy 2:2.

Second through Fifth Centuries – Catechesis and Spiritual Leaders

Discipleship continued to be an important part of the church beyond the first century. Faithful Christians continued to train, equip, and help individuals grow spiritually. Clinton Arnold says, there was a “rigorous plan and commitment by church leaders in the first four centuries to ground new believers in their Christian lives.”¹² Pre-baptismal discipleship (catechesis) and the development of spiritual leaders helped form the way discipleship looked in the second through sixth centuries.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, “second-century sources indicate a period of moral instruction, prayer, and fasting prior to the baptism.”¹³ This was a special time set aside for newer believers to be instructed and taught to listen to God’s word. This practice of training new believers was called catechesis. Catechesis comes from the Greek word *katecheo* meaning to “teach.”¹⁴ Catechumenate is another term that is used to describe the process, or when referring to an individual going through the process. Catechesis most likely took place before the baptism, although some “post canonical sources indicate both pre and post-baptismal instruction.”¹⁵ The immediate preliminaries to baptism usually included a period of prayer, fasting, and a time of repentance. Everett Fergusson also adds that catechesis included “doing good works.”¹⁶

¹² Clinton E. Arnold, “Early Church Catechesis and New Christians’ Classes in Contemporary Evangelism” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47/1 (March 2004): 39.

¹³ Everett Ferguson, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity, Volume 1* (New York: Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1997, 1999), 160.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 316.

The development of organized catechumenate probably derived from the second part of Jesus' Great Commission "where he enjoins his disciples not only to proclaim the gospel and baptize the new believers, but also 'teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.'"¹⁷ In the first few centuries, the church seemed to shift away from the apostolic practice of baptizing immediately after a profession of faith. Due to a concern for the sincerity of the conversion, candidates were allowed to be baptized "after substantive training, mentoring, and preparation."¹⁸ This type of training would usually take place over a three-year span, which was motivated and rooted "in a desire to foster solid spiritual formation and to protect these new believers against sin, heresy, and apostasy."¹⁹

New believers were instructed in scripture, doctrine, and moral teaching. Instructing newer believers in scripture was at the heart of the catechumenate. Spiritual leaders would also teach and explain the central doctrines of the faith.²⁰ The catechumenate was a time of spiritual and moral formation; church leaders would "carefully examine the occupations and practices of the new believers."²¹ Sometimes candidates would be asked to change certain kinds of behaviors, lifestyles, and professions if they were deemed inconsistent with the faith.

¹⁷ Clinton E. Arnold, 43.

¹⁸ Ibid, 42.

¹⁹ Ibid, 44.

²⁰ Ibid, 46-47.

²¹ Ibid, 49.

Arnold says many early church leaders devoted themselves to the task of teaching new believers.²² Two of the leaders that Arnold specifically mentions are Cyprian of Carthage (195-258) and Ambrose of Milan (340-397). These men present examples of discipleship and spiritual development of leaders in the third and fourth century. Dr. Edward Smither explains that these men have made a “significant contribution as leaders and mentors to the Christian movement of the third and fourth centuries.”²³ While there are some variations in the way these men trained others, there are also some striking similarities. Each man continued to grow individually as a disciple, invested into others, empowered others, and placed an emphasis on sound doctrine.

Cyprian of Carthage (195-258)

Cyprian, who was born into a prominent family, converted to Christianity in 246 and was ordained bishop of Carthage two years later.²⁴ He initiated, and actively participated, in important councils. He also wrote many letters, some having to do with the councils and others simply instructing the church. Cyprian used letters “to resource the clergy by answering questions on practical church matters, giving practical instructions for ministry, exhorting the clergy to faithfulness and ministry, at times disciplining the clergy, encouraging them, dealing with doctrinal issues, or simply communicating church-related information.”²⁵ Cyprian:

- 1) Viewed the group as essential for training, support, and accountability.

²² Ibid, 44-45.

²³ Smither, 24.

²⁴ Allen Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

²⁵ Smither, 30.

- 2) Showed that he was a continual disciple and learner by humbly looking to his clergy for advice on important issues.
- 3) Believed that the bishop must teach and lead through his example.
- 4) Placed an importance on sound teaching.
- 5) Involved the clergy under him in ministry.²⁶

Ambrose of Milan (340-397)

Ambrose was born into a wealthy family and was educated in Rome. Before surrendering to the ministry, Ambrose was involved in politics and served as the governor of Aemilia-Liguria in northern Italy.²⁷ He was unexpectedly appointed bishop of Milan after the bishop there died. Many believe that he became the greatest bishop Milan had ever seen. His authoritative leadership and influence was felt throughout Italy.²⁸ Much of his career was spent defending Nicene orthodoxy in Milan. Ambrose:

- 1) Continued to grow spiritually and intellectually, being an example to his disciples.
- 2) Maintained a balance of authority, discipline, and grace with his clergy.
- 3) Demonstrated, encouraged, and prescribed peer mentoring.
- 4) Strongly committed to sound doctrine.
- 5) Entrusted clergy with different levels of responsibility and resourced them through letters and books.²⁹

²⁶ Smither, 36-39.

²⁷ Bryan M. Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 222.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 223.

²⁹ Smither, 82-90.

Sixth Century – Benedictine Monasticism

Benedictine Monasticism was founded by Benedict of Nursia, who was born in Italy around AD 480.³⁰ As a young man Benedict spent three years living as a hermit in a cave. This time of solitude was followed by a “period of extreme asceticism, as he sought to overcome the temptations of the flesh.”³¹ His fame grew and eventually attracted a large group of disciples that began to follow him. Benedict, along with his disciples, eventually moved to Monte Cassino where they built a monastery. Three major areas of focus for Benedictine monks were: self-discipline, prayer, and hard work.³²

Benedict’s greatest impact on his followers, and the world, was the *Rule* he gave to his community. The *Rule* was a document that shaped the lives of the Benedictine monks, but it also went on to shape monasticism as a whole for many centuries to come.³³ The *Rule* insisted on physical labor which was shared by all the monks. All the monks had to take turns in the different tasks, no matter what their background was (rich or poor).³⁴ In the monastery, no one received special treatment, and all of the monks shared equal priority. The *Rule* was so successful that it eventually spread to Rome and England.³⁵

Gonzalez explains that two very important aspects of Benedictine life had to do with permanence and obedience. These elements were crucial to Benedictine living. The

³⁰ Edward Cuthbert Butler, *Benedictine Monachism: Studies in Benedictine Life and Rule* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1919), 1.

³¹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 1* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 239.

³² Butler, 29.

³³ Gonzalez, 239.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 240, 242.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 242.

monks were not free to go from one monastery to another. Each had to remain at the monastery that he initially joined, unless he was reassigned by the Abbot. This provided for stability, longevity, and accountability.³⁶ Obedience was another very important aspect of life. All of the monks had to willingly obey the *Rule* and the Abbot. An explanation had to be presented to the Abbot if a command could not be carried out by a monk. While the monks had to obey, the Abbot was not allowed to be a tyrant because he “was subject to God and to the *Rule*.”³⁷ In this way the Abbot would lead by example and submit himself to the same discipline as the monks.

Prayer was at the core of the Benedictine life. The monks had to gather eight times a day (seven during the daytime and once in the middle of the night) to pray.³⁸ Sometimes prayer was private, but devotions were regularly held corporately in the chapel. Along with prayer, Benedictine monks dedicated themselves to study. Study was also one of the main occupations of Benedictine monks. The monks spent a great deal of time copying the Bible and other books. They did this in order to preserve them, as well as to further their study. Their houses “became teaching center”, especially for children that were placed under their care.³⁹ The spiritual growth principles of the Benedictine monks (discipline, hard work, prayer, study, and training) have left a great impact on the Christian world.

³⁶ Ibid, 239.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid, 241.

³⁹ Ibid.

Twelve and Thirteenth Centuries – Humiliati and Mendicant Friars

Influenced by monastic origins, the Humiliati arose during the 12th century “answering the desire of lay people for active Christian discipleship”⁴⁰ The Humiliati were a devout penitential fraternity, with many different lay preachers. This movement was inspired by “the primitive community” described in the book of Acts.⁴¹ They believed that the true Christian life was not about withdrawing from the world, as the monks did, but engagement with it. The movement was voluntary and built around “poverty modeled on the poverty of Christ, mission to the unconverted, and service to the poor.”⁴²

The Humiliati were groups that were organized by lay people that “combined a devout life of prayer and ascetical discipline with work of charity.”⁴³ In 1184, they were condemned by the pope and the emperor as heretics because they preached outside of the authority of “the church” and because they did not take oaths.⁴⁴ They were frowned upon by the pope and the emperor because they preached without authority or license of prelates. Some described them as rough and illiterate, doing manual work and preaching, accepting the necessities of life from their believers.⁴⁵

In the 13th century mendicant (“begging”) friars sprang up due to the influence of the Humiliati. These friars also rejected the monastic idea of enclosure in order to

⁴⁰ Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh S. Pyper, *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 433.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Frances Andrews, *The Early Humiliati* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 41-42.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 42.

actively preach and evangelize among the people. Mendicants went on to be established in almost every European town and were usually welcomed by the rulers and townspeople. They showed that “it was possible for a committed disciple of Christ to be in the world, but not of it, that the proper condition of those who aspired to spiritual perfection was one of voluntary poverty, and that the imitation of Christ involved an active mission of evangelization either by preaching or personal witness and service to the poor.”⁴⁶ The friars did something that had not been done before; they ushered in a new style of sermons that were addressed to the spiritual needs of different classes and occupations.⁴⁷

In a time when spiritual education, and development of spiritual leaders, was scarce, the friars made a huge contribution to the church by educating individuals in spiritual matters. Adrian Hastings notes that, “every friary had a classroom, where the brethren were taught by a lector and practiced the art of disputation.”⁴⁸ Individuals disciplined in the classrooms, but were also sent out to teach others and to meet practical needs.

Fourteenth Century – Brethren of the Common Life

William Estep calls the Brethren of the Common Life “a grass-root attempt at spiritual renewal within the Roman Church.”⁴⁹ The formation of the Brethren was the result of Gerhard Groote (1340-1384), who, after spending some time in a Carthusian

⁴⁶ Hastings, Mason, and Pyper, 433.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ William R. Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 46.

monastery, was ordained as a deacon. Groote “became a wandering preacher proclaiming a gospel of repentance to both laypersons and clergy.”⁵⁰ The Brethren were founded with an initial group of twelve disciples that followed Groote. They devoted their time to serving others, reading, preaching, sharing life together, and educating others. During the last few years of his life, Groote translated portions of scriptures and hymns into the vernacular to provide spiritual resources for his movement. Eventually the Brethren became involved in the cathedral school in Deventer because of Groote’s emphasis on educated clergy. Their devotional writings (*devotio moderna*) later helped to shape the Renaissance in North Europe.⁵¹

The Brethren were distinguished from other groups by their evangelical character, along with “their devotion to the study of scripture and the active work of education, as well as almsgiving and visiting the poor and sick.”⁵² S.E. Frost called them “the most active and influential educational force” of their time period, as they reached into the religious and scholarly life of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁵³ Their simple lifestyle, spirit of soberness and faithful self-denial, and extended beneficence made them a powerful influence.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² John Tulloch, *Leaders of the Reformation* (Edinburgh, UK: William Blackwood and Sons, 1860), 42.

⁵³ S.E. Frost, *Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Western Education* (Columbus: Merrill Publishing Company, 1966), 175.

⁵⁴ Tulloch, 42.

Many of the Brethren spent their lives multiplying and diffusing copies of Scriptures, and teaching the young.⁵⁵ The movement continued to move forward, even after the death of their founder. At one point they had to formally defend their right before the church to live in community and to use the Scriptures that had been translated into the vernacular. The Brethren's emphasis "upon the Scriptures in the vernacular and their commitment to lay education set them apart from the mendicant orders."⁵⁶ Knowledge of the Bible, and learning to follow Christ's example, was strongly emphasized in their spiritual education.⁵⁷ They went on to greatly influence men like Erasmus and Luther.⁵⁸

Sixteenth Century – Anabaptists

In January of 1525 a small group of Ulrich Zwingli's disciples left Zurich, and baptized each other, pledging to be "true disciples of Christ to live lives separated from the world and to teach the gospel and hold the faith."⁵⁹ Seeking to live according to the pattern of the New Testament, this group formed the earliest church of the Swiss Brethren. These early Anabaptist had strong convictions about the authority of the New Testament and true Biblical discipleship. Believers' baptism became an important part of

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Estep, 47.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 45.

⁵⁹ William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975, 1996), 14.

their view of discipleship and the church.⁶⁰ Anabaptists quickly set themselves apart from other Christian groups and were persecuted for their convictions. The concept of discipleship was “the most characteristic, most central, most essential and regulative concept in Anabaptist thought.”⁶¹ For Anabaptists, discipleship was the essence of Christianity. They emphasized the authority of scripture, love, and community, viewing the church as a brotherhood of committed believers.⁶²

Surrender to Christ

For Anabaptists, discipleship, first and foremost, “meant that the Christian life is modeled on the life and teachings of Jesus.”⁶³ One Anabaptist leader, Michael Sattler, defined the members of Christ “as those who follow his teachings and imitate his life.”⁶⁴ Anabaptists understood, and taught, that imitating Christ is what discipleship is all about. Discipleship is a total and complete commitment to Jesus Christ. The type of discipleship that the Anabaptists proclaimed had to do with bringing the whole life of an individual under the Lordship of Christ.⁶⁵ Only a life lived in submission to Christ could be transformed by Christ. Baptism was seen as an essential step in the discipleship process. To the Anabaptists, baptism was a public proclamation of complete surrender to Christ. The Anabaptists continually stressed the relationship between baptism and

⁶⁰ Ibid, 20.

⁶¹ Harold Stauffer Bender, “The Anabaptist theology of discipleship,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24, no. 1 (January 1950): 27.

⁶² Ibid, 25.

⁶³ J. Denny Weaver, “Discipleship redefined: four sixteenth century Anabaptists” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54, no. 4 (October 1980): 255.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 261.

⁶⁵ Bender, 29.

discipleship. For them, baptism was a deliberate and voluntary act of a committed disciple of Jesus Christ.⁶⁶ Baptism was a way to unite with Christ and also with the community of faith.

Commitment to Community

For the Anabaptists, “baptism was not only a symbol of individual discipleship, but of corporate discipleship as well.”⁶⁷ The Anabaptists view of the church was one of corporate discipleship.⁶⁸ Discipleship became a corporate experience “with the introduction of believers’ baptism.”⁶⁹ Anabaptists participated in the body of Christ by giving themselves to each other.⁷⁰ Balthasar Hubmaier, an Anabaptist leader, taught that believers should surrender to each other and serve each other in love.

According to Hubmaier, it is this attitude of self-giving and loving of the neighbor which characterizes the one who is "in the true fellowship of Christ, a member of his body and a co-member of all blessed (*gotseligen*) persons." Hubmaier thus clearly envisions the church as a community bound together by Christ, in which the members together share the love of Christ and participate in each other.⁷¹

Clearly following the Biblical pattern, Anabaptists viewed discipleship, and the church, as a corporate experience.

⁶⁶ Estep, 211.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 238.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 237.

⁷⁰ Weaver, 273.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Teaching, Love, and Obedience to the Mission

The Anabaptists were strongly committed to Biblical authority. Teaching God's Word and obeying it are two aspects of discipleship that they carried out fervently. In every area of their lives, the Anabaptists believed that "to be a disciple meant to teach and to observe all things whatsoever the Master had taught and commanded."⁷² Love motivated them in their discipleship and obedience. William Estep says,

The undergirding motive of life for Anabaptists was love. It dictated their views of Christian discipleship, the basis of fellowship in the church, and the missionary vision.⁷³

Love not only motivated their discipleship and fellowship, but also their vision to reach out. The missionary heart of the Anabaptists may be the direct result of their personal commitment to Christ and their view of discipleship.

Seventeenth Century – Pietist Movement

Pietism was an important movement, mainly within the Lutheran churches, that arose in the 17th century stressing practical and inward religion rather than dogmatic theology.⁷⁴ The Pietists reacted to the cold and formal Lutheranism in Germany, wanting to get back to simple piety. Pietism pressed for the individualization and internalization of religious life, developing new forms of personal piety and social life.⁷⁵ They

⁷² Bender, 31.

⁷³ Estep, 254.

⁷⁴ D. Michael Henderson, 51.

⁷⁵ Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity: Volume 4* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 218.

emphasized “personal character and charitable works, and they showed little interest in, or sympathy for, systematic theology and classical learning.”⁷⁶

One of the early influencers of pietism, Johann Arndt, insisted that Christianity is not really about doctrinal disputes but “about a personal relationship with Christ that changes the way you live your life.”⁷⁷ Arndt recommended that every Christian spend time everyday simply meditating on Jesus. The Pietists took the emphasis “away from doctrine and toward lifestyle, away from a corporate concern for the church as a whole and towards individual.”⁷⁸

The term “Pietist” was initially used in the 1670’s for the followers of Philipp Jakob Spener who was inspired by Arndt. Spener is known to have “established home study groups for the pursuit of serious Christianity, which he called *collegia pietatis*.”⁷⁹ These groups (colleges of piety) functioned much like present day-Christian cell groups. They provided an opportunity for regular and personal expression of faith, encouraging members to be committed to each other and Christ. The colleges of piety were later merged into the church and incorporated into Lutheran Pietism. Spener encouraged “intensive Bible study (e.g., in the *collegia*), the practice of spiritual priesthood, a reduction of polemics, the training of theologians in piety, and edifying preaching.”⁸⁰

⁷⁶ D. Michael Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley’s Class Meeting* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1997), 51.

⁷⁷ Jonathan Hill, *Zondervan Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 325.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Henderson, 51.

⁸⁰ Fahlbusch and Bromiley, 220.

Pietists put a huge emphasis on education and spiritual training. They strongly “felt that their ideal of living in the light of Christ meant trying to improve education, for education was seen as the training not only of the mind but of the character.”⁸¹ After Spener died, his friend August Francke, combined Spenner’s emphasis on small groups with practical charity, forming orphan homes, charity schools, and eventually created a publishing company.⁸² Francke was also an important figure in setting up Pietist missionary expeditions overseas.⁸³ The Pietist movement went on to influence Methodism and John Wesley’s model of spiritual development.⁸⁴

Eighteenth Century – John Wesley

John, along with his brother Charles, Wesley were two leaders in the eighteenth century that launched a movement of renewal that transformed the Church of England. John Wesley’s “techniques for nurturing and training Christian disciples not only brought personal transformation to tens of thousands of individuals working-class believers, but a moral reformation to the nation as well.”⁸⁵ The movement became known as “Methodism,” because the foundation of the movement was a powerful and effective educational method.⁸⁶ John Wesley was concerned about Christian discipleship, always looking for ways to help different people grow spiritually. In Wesley’s model:

⁸¹ Hill, 326.

⁸² Henderson 51.

⁸³ Hill, 327.

⁸⁴ Henderson, 51-52.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Everything begins with the message of God's good news in Jesus Christ, the story of his death and resurrection. The experience of the gospel immediately draws us into a community where we can learn how to love. In the context of this new family, those who learn of Christ receive the discipline that is necessary for them to be nourished and grow in their faith. All Christians, however, find their ultimate purpose in servanthood.⁸⁷

Discipleship Begins with Christ

According to Wesley, Christianity "is not so much a religion as it is a relationship...discipleship begins with God's offer of relationship to us all."⁸⁸ Without Christ, there is no discipleship. In order to be a disciple, one needs to first be involved in an active relationship with Christ. The gospel message formed Wesley's foundation of discipleship. Wesley believed that the gospel brought people into community with God and with each other. He taught that God's love is the foundation of that relationship. According to Wesley, "God's love, in its multiple dimensions, is the only proper foundation for discipleship in Christ."⁸⁹

Wesley's Method

Wesley's method of discipleship combined several group techniques, giving all sincere Christians an opportunity to grow in spiritual maturity.

The "rungs" on Wesley's ladder of Christian discipleship were small interactive groups – the class meeting, the band, the select band, the penitent band, and the society. Each

⁸⁷ Paul Wesley Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesley's Vision* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004), 21.

⁸⁸ Chilcote, 20.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 15.

group within the system was designed to accomplish a specific developmental purpose, and each group had its own carefully defined roles and procedures to ensure that the central objectives were accomplished.⁹⁰

At the heart of Wesley's system were the "class meetings." They met together on a weekly basis for intentional accountability and spiritual growth. The classes, and bands, of the early Methodist movement initially served a practical function when John Wesley divided the community in Bristol into groups of about twelve members in order to help pay the debt of the chapel building. The classes quickly became an avenue for discipleship and the "spiritual heartbeat of the movement."⁹¹

Within Wesley's method, there were five different types of groups. The first type of group was called the Methodist society. The society was a larger group and the hub of all other functions. All other groups came under the jurisdiction of the society. The second type of group was the class meeting. The class meetings were a tool for education and altering of behavior. The third type of group was the band. The bands were voluntary cells of people who desired to grow in love, holiness, purity, and accountability. The fourth type of group was the select society, which was limited to a handpicked group of men and women. The select society was used to train leaders about the doctrines and methods of Methodism. The fifth type of group was the penitent band. This group was designed for individuals that were not able to be a part of the mainstream Methodist society. Penitent bands were basically rehabilitation groups that helped

⁹⁰ Henderson, 11.

⁹¹ Chilcote, 50.

individuals develop will power and personal discipline in order to be a part of the Methodist society.⁹²

Discipleship in Community

John Wesley believed that Christian discipleship began with a relationship with God. He also believed that discipleship was “extended by means of fellowship or shared experiences with the community of faith.”⁹³ Chilcote says, “Wesley’s disciples were ‘enthused’ because they lived their lives in partnership with one another, discovering the ‘form and power’ of godliness in mutually accountable relationship of love.”⁹⁴ Wesley recaptured the idea of Biblically community and included it in the structure of his model. He helped to build community by establishing smaller groups within the churches. Meeting in smaller groups “provided an opportunity for intense personal introspection and rigorous mutual confession.”⁹⁵ Henderson explains that the smaller groups “encapsulated several of the key principles of New Testament Christianity: personal growth within the context of an intimate fellowship, accountability for spiritual stewardship, ‘bearing one another’s burdens,’ and ‘speaking the truth in love.’”⁹⁶

⁹² Henderson, 83-126.

⁹³ Chilcote, 20.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 50.

⁹⁶ Henderson, 14.

Empowering Leadership and Servanthood

Leadership development was an important aspect of Wesley's discipleship structure. Wesley's small groups provided an empowering environment for the participants. Chilcote argues that "Methodism was essentially a small-group movement of empowered laypeople."⁹⁷ The different small group environments allowed gifted people to assume position of leadership within the structure. This allowed Methodists to create leaders from within. Another equally important aspect of discipleship for Wesley was servanthood. Wesley believed that, "The breadth of compassionate witness is the fruit of discipleship, expressed through mission and service in the life of the church."⁹⁸ Chilcote says, "Everything in the Wesleyan portrait of the Christian life points ultimately to servanthood that is rooted in love."⁹⁹

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries – Sunday School

Robert Raikes and other evangelicals first pioneered the Sunday school model during the 1780's in Great Britain.¹⁰⁰ During the Industrial Revolution many kids were sent to work in the factories and were not able to attend day school. Raikes "set up and organized groups for children to go to school in the homes of their teachers on their day off to learn to read and for religious education."¹⁰¹ The teachers would use the Bible as

⁹⁷ Chilcote, 50.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 21.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven: Yale University, 1988), 6.

¹⁰¹ Steve R. Parr, *Sunday School That Really Works: A Strategy for Connecting Congregations and Communities* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2010), 29.

the reading text and many children came to know Christ as a result of being exposed to the gospel. Within the first four years more than 250,000 children enrolled in Sunday school and attendance grew to more than 400,000 within thirty years.¹⁰²

In America, Sunday school's for children began to be established around 1785. Individuals like Samuel Slater organized Sunday schools for children that were prevented from attending a regular school. When they first began, these Sunday schools were not a part of the organized work of local churches; instead they were conducted by other professionals and individuals. The children were taught "basic reading and writing (and sometimes arithmetic) by hired teachers who used the Bible as their text."¹⁰³ Although these schools were not run by churches, the understanding that children should be educated in matters of faith still served as a motivating factor for the schools.

By the early 1820's, "Sunday schools with paid teachers were gradually eclipsed by the free day schools and new evangelical Sunday schools."¹⁰⁴

The new evangelical Sunday schools differed fundamentally from the First Day schools...Although all Sunday schools provided an education centered on Christian belief, the founders of the evangelical schools placed paramount emphasis on the religious aspects of teaching, which they defined in a specifically evangelical Protestant manner. For them, teaching reading and writing was only a means to a greater end, not an end in itself. That greater end – an evangelical interpretation of the Bible – was to be achieved by teaching students to read the Bible, familiar them with its contents, and leading them to interpret it as their teachers did.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Boylan, 6.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

The goal of the evangelical Sunday schools was to teach children about God and help them grow spiritually, while at the same time helping the children learn how to read and write. The teachers and founders were “intimately involved” in the operation of the schools.¹⁰⁶ The primary focus of the evangelical Sunday schools was to first bring salvation to others and then help them grow in their understanding of scripture.

Evangelical Sunday schools experienced remarkable growth and geographical dispersion in the early 1800’s. While the Sunday schools would primarily attract children, they were also used as a tool to reach the parents.¹⁰⁷ Sunday schools were a means to convert children, but would also bring many non-religious adults to church. Eventually, by the late 1800’s, Adult Sunday school classes were incorporated in order to disciple adults.¹⁰⁸

Leadership, Evangelism, and Outreach

The Sunday school movement became more organized and intentional in the early 1900’s. Systems and goals were put in place “regarding such matters as grading, enrollment, leadership training, teachers' meetings, use of the Bible, church control, use of Baptist literature, and regular sessions.”¹⁰⁹ It was in the early 1900’s that Sunday schools became a vehicle for evangelism, outreach, and leadership training.¹¹⁰ Steve

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 10.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 13.

¹⁰⁸ Parr, 30.

¹⁰⁹ Lynn E. May, “The Sunday School: a two-hundred-year heritage” *Baptist History and Heritage* 15, no. 4 (October 1980): 7.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 11.

Parr, a strong believer of in the Sunday school model, thinks that Sunday school may still be an effective tool for evangelism and assimilation today.¹¹¹ For Parr, “Sunday school that works is one that equips and challenges the classes or small groups to move beyond the church walls and into the community, working together to share the gospel and bring people to Christ.”¹¹² Sunday schools have been, and may still be, an effective tool for engaging people with the gospel, helping them grow, and teaching them to reach out.

Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries – Small Groups

One final example of discipleship is the recent small group movement. The modern small group (life group/journey group) initiative in the church was launched in the 1970’s.¹¹³ Small groups seem to be an effective tool for allowing people to experience authentic community and in depth discipleship. Small groups offer opportunities for people to build relationships, have fun, and learn about God. Scott Boren says that “one of the primary purposes of most small groups is to encourage and facilitate spiritual growth.”¹¹⁴ While there are many different types of small groups within the church, ultimately their purpose is to encourage and facilitate spiritual growth.

Jeffrey Arnold also confirms that “the goal of a small group ministry is discipleship; the foundation is leadership, and the structure of small group ministry is

¹¹¹ Parr, 17-18.

¹¹² Ibid, 23.

¹¹³ Gareth Weldon Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrative Approach*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 11.

¹¹⁴ M. Scott Boren, *Small Group Ministry in the 21st Century* (Loveland: Group Publishing, Inc., 2005), 130.

community.”¹¹⁵ Small groups typically create a great environment for discipleship because people learn best when they are a part of a caring and committed community. Small groups can help individuals to develop a deeper knowledge of God, deeper knowledge of people, and a greater passion for outreach. Arnold says:

Small groups help them (people) grow in relationships and stimulate them to make a difference in their families, church and world. Once formed into small family-like groups of partners-in-discipleship, people begin to know themselves and others better. They move past surface conversations and the preliminary fears of opening themselves up to others, and they begin to experience real fellowship.¹¹⁶

In small groups, people learn together, have opportunities to get to know it each other, pray for each other, help each other with practical needs, and reach other to others.¹¹⁷ Arnold believes that in order for small groups to take root and grow, discipleship must be intentional, disciples must seek to become like Christ, and disciples should be made in community.¹¹⁸ In *The Seven Deadly Sins of Small Group Ministry*, Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson lay out seven principles that must be in place for churches to have effective small group discipleship:

- 1) Ministry objectives must be clear.
- 2) Leadership must be deployed.
- 3) Strategies and tools for effective coaching structures must be available.
- 4) Leadership development must be ongoing.
- 5) “Open groups” that are inviting to believers and seekers should be encouraged.

¹¹⁵ Jeffrey Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 11.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 28.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 24.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 20-21.

- 6) Different types of groups that can reach different types of people should be developed.
- 7) People in the church should be connected through a well-designed assimilation process.¹¹⁹

By engaging people in God's word, developing community, and challenging individuals to reach out, small groups have been an effective method of making leaders and developing disciples.

Summary of Discipleship Snapshots

Throughout church history there have been many great examples of discipleship. The early church obediently followed Christ's commission, and example, and effectively made disciples. Later, the church used catechesis and various other forms to train Christians. Faithful church leaders, like Cyprian of Carthage and Ambrose of Milan, groups like the Benedictine monks, Humiliati, Mendicant Friars, Anabaptists, Pietists, and individuals like John Wesley, emphasized discipleship in their ministry structures. More recently the Sunday school and small group movements have allowed individuals to grow spiritually, while challenging them to reach out. Discipleship is what the church is all about and it has been done effectively throughout church history in different ways. By looking at discipleship biblically and historically, and by looking at the culture around us, the church of today can build a more effective model to reach the next generation for Christ.

¹¹⁹ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *The Seven Deadly Sins of Small Group Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), introduction.

CHAPTER FIVE

CURRENT DISCIPLESHIP METHODS IN CENTRAL VIRGINIA

In order to create an effective discipleship strategy for central VA, it is important to have a general idea of how pastors and church leaders are currently making disciples in central VA. This chapter contains the results from qualitative data that has been collected about discipleship in central VA. The primary sources of data for this chapter consist of 20 interviews with pastors and churches leaders in central VA. The main point of this chapter is simply to gain an understanding of how church leaders in central VA view discipleship and what the various forms of disciples are in their churches. The point of this chapter is not to evaluate the effectiveness of their forms, but simply understand what those forms are.

Based on the interviews, the first part of this chapter will consider the definitions of discipleship. The second part of this chapter will describe the forms of discipleship in central VA. The third part of this chapter will briefly consider what some church leaders view as the challenges facing discipleship in central VA. The fourth, and final, part of this chapter will discuss some of the lessons the pastors and church leaders have learned about discipleship throughout their lives and ministries.

Definitions and Understanding of Discipleship

When asked to define discipleship, many of the central VA church leaders had very similar definitions. The very first interviewee, Tim Geisland, defined discipleship as the “Followership of Christ”, but he also added that it is multifaceted.¹ While many of

¹ Tim Geisland. 2010. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. October 13. All further comments in this chapter from Geisland are from this same interview.

the definitions were similar, each seemed to emphasize different aspects of discipleship. Some focused on following Christ, while others on developing followers of Christ. All of the definitions combined help to paint a clearer picture of how discipleship is viewed, and each help to bring out the different aspects of discipleship.

One pastor defined discipleship very simply as, “moving people toward Jesus.”² Others said that discipleship is helping people cultivate the practices that help them to grow spiritually.³ Tracy King added that discipleship is “growing in and teaching” the things of God.⁴ While some see discipleship as simply helping others grow, a more complete definition also includes the growth of the individual that is doing the discipling. As noted in the earlier chapters, discipleship has to do with both following after Christ and making followers of Christ.

Discipleship begins with someone that is committed to Christ. Rod Dempsey defined a disciple as “someone who is committed to the person and mission of Christ.”⁵ An individual needs to first be committed to the person of Christ, but also to the mission of Christ – the mission of making disciples. While a few of the pastors interviewed might view discipleship as a program, a greater number of the leaders in central VA recognize that discipleship is a process. During the interviews, some very clearly vocalized that

² Brad Mullimax. 2011. Interview by author. Amherst, VA. January 13. All further comments in this chapter from Mullimax are from this same interview.

³ Alan Combs and Kevin Brooks. 2011. Interviews by author. Lynchburg, VA. January 7 and 13.

⁴ Tracy King. 2011. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. January 14. All further comments in this chapter from King are from this same interview.

⁵ Rod Dempsey. 2010. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. December 2. All further comments in this chapter from Geisland are from this same interview.

discipleship is not a program, but a process.⁶ There were also many others, who may not have specifically said that discipleship is a process, but certainly talked about it as a process.

After pointing out that discipleship is not a program, Tyler Scarlett said that programs can help, but it is ultimately the Holy Spirit that makes people more like Jesus. Rick Magee talked about discipleship as a process of moving people from infancy to adulthood spiritually.⁷ This does not happen overnight. Discipleship has to be a long term commitment by all of the people that are involved in the process. Dempsey said it has to be: 1) Intentional – be working at it, 2) Individual focus – not quantity but quality, and 3) Missional – connecting the person to the mission.

Tyler Scarlett, Woody Torrence, and Philip Watkins brought up the community aspect of discipleship. Scarlett said that discipleship is, “Teaching people to follow Jesus personally and in community.”⁸ Torrence went a little further and said that discipleship is about, “Covenanting together with others to become and make disciples.”⁹ Philip Watkins pointed out that discipleship takes place in a group setting as individuals imitate Christ and challenge others in the group to imitate Him as well. Watkins defended this idea by

⁶ Bryan Ferrell, Tyler Scarlett, Chris Dowd, Rod Dempsey. 2010-2011. Interviews by author. Lynchburg, VA. December 2,8, and January 6.

⁷ Rick Magee. 2011. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. January 10. All further comments in this chapter from Magee are from this same interview.

⁸ Tyler Scarlett, 2011. Interview by author. Forest, VA. January 6. All further comments in this chapter from Scarlett are from this same interview.

⁹ Woody Torrence. 2010. Interview by author, Lynchburg, VA. December 13. All further comments in this chapter from Torrence are from this same interview.

pointing to Jesus who had a group of twelve disciples, and within that group He was particularly close to three (Peter, James, and John).¹⁰

Interestingly, Chris Dowd and Tip Killingsworth were the only ones to bring up the idea of discipleship having to do with a serious lifestyle commitment and sacrifice. Dowd said discipleship has to do with following, but it also has to do with denying self, surrender, and picking up the cross.¹¹ Little seems to be said about denying self and picking up the cross in Western Christianity. Killingsworth pointed out that in the New Testament all believers were disciples. According to Killingsworth:

In our Christian culture, discipleship has come to be a higher level of commitment for Christians. They (*NT believers*) were devoted followers of Jesus. Discipleship wasn't an optional lifestyle for more highly committed Christians.¹²

Rick Ouimet, Nathan Smith, and Mark Fesmire brought up the importance of being an example, and learning to live and think like Jesus. Pouring into someone's life, so that he or she can see what it looks like to follow Christ, is an important aspect of discipleship. Ouimet said, "Discipleship is having an authentic relationship with Christ and living that out for others to see (warts and all)."¹³ Nathan Smith said that in its basic

¹⁰ Philip Watkins. 2010. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. October 28. All further comments in this chapter from Watkins are from this same interview.

¹¹ Chris Dowd. 2010. Interview by author. Forest, VA. December 8. All further comments in this chapter from Dowd are from this same interview.

¹² Tip Killingsworth. 2011. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. January 5. All further comments in this chapter from Killingsworth are from this same interview.

¹³ Rick Ouimet. Email with interview questions dated January 9, 2011, 10:21 PM. All further comments in this chapter from Ouimet are from this same interview.

form, discipleship is like mindedness in Christ; it is about becoming and being like Christ. He also added that in teaching and preaching an individual must be absolutely focused on Christ and through that disciple people.¹⁴ Along with Ouimet and Smith, Fesmire also noted that discipleship is about learning to live like Christ and “teaching people how to follow Jesus.”¹⁵

While there are a good number of churches in central VA that emphasize some sort of mentorship as a part of their discipleship forms, only Randy Kent brought up mentorship in his definition of discipleship. Kent said discipleship is about becoming a disciplined follower of Christ, which “usually involves some kind of mentorship.”¹⁶ Kent also believes that small groups are better than large groups for effective discipleship.

Tim Geisland, Tre Smith, and Ricky Ewing talked about transformation and reproduction in their definitions of discipleship. Geisland said, “If you are a disciple there are certain things in your life that should be evident: humility in submitting to leadership, studying the words of Jesus, doing what Jesus did, being changed (sanctification/transformation), *and* teaching others.” When people are changed, and they really become disciples, the gospel manifests itself in their love of God and love of others.¹⁷ Discipleship should lead to reproduction. Ewing believes that there is an

¹⁴ Nathan Smith. 2010. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. December 7. All further comments in this chapter from Nathan Smith are from this same interview.

¹⁵ Mark Fesmire. Email with interview questions dated January 13, 2011, 7:20 AM.

¹⁶ Randy Kent. 2011. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. January 13. All further comments in this chapter from Kent are from this same interview.

¹⁷ Tre Smith. 2011. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. January 10. All further comments in this chapter from Tre Smith are from this same interview.

important connection between discipleship and evangelism, and that discipleship should help produce evangelists.¹⁸

Forms of Discipleship

Based on the interviews with the church leaders in central VA, this section describes their forms of discipleship. The twenty churches have been separated into four different groups. Group one – “traditional churches”: Forest Baptist Church, Heritage United Methodist Church, Leesville Road Baptist Church, Pleasant View Baptist Church, Timberlake Baptist Church, and West Lynchburg Baptist Church. Group two – “churches in transition”: Heritage Baptist Church, Hyland Heights Baptist Church, Living Word Baptist Church, and Thomas Road Baptist Church. Group three – “non-traditional churches”: Blue Ridge Community Church Brentwood Church, Grace Evangelical Free, and Redeemer Presbyterian Church. Group four – newer churches: Bedrock Community Church, Hope Aglow Fellowship Church, Lynchburg Christian Fellowship, Mosaic Church, Oasis Church, and One Community Church.

Traditional Churches

Table 1 lists the forms of discipleship of the traditional churches in central VA.

Table 1. Traditional Churches and their Forms

Church	Forms of Discipleship
Forest Baptist Church	Sunday school, Bible studies (throughout the week), Sunday night fellowship groups (in home gatherings).

¹⁸ Ricky Ewing. 2011. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. January 13. All further comments in this chapter from Ewing are from this same interview.

Heritage United Methodist Church	Sunday school, confirmation class (6 graders) and mentorship for these teens, membership class (small group based 10 weeks), disciple Bible study (32 weeks), men's and women's Bible study groups.
Leesville Road Baptist Church	Sunday school, one-on-one discipleship for individuals who trust Christ.
Pleasant View Baptist Church	Sunday school, periodic home Bible studies, youth group (Wed. nights), AWANA for children, men's and women's Bible study (once a month), church planting.
Timberlake Baptist Church	Sunday school (also called "Fellowship groups"), pastoral internship, men's Bible study groups, women's Bible study groups, Saturday morning prayer, "Expositors Seminary" for young men.
West Lynchburg Baptist Church	Sunday school, ladies Bible study, prayer groups.

Tyler Scarlett recognizes that Forest Baptist Church is a fairly traditional church. Currently, their main avenue of discipleship is Sunday school. The Sunday school classes are separated by age groups and the teachers are carefully selected. Along with Sunday school, the church also offers various Bible studies that go on during the week. Recently, Forest Baptist did away with their Sunday night service, and instead added a time of fellowship in people's homes on Sunday evenings. They don't really call these small groups and don't foresee having traditional small groups in the near future. Scarlett doesn't want to develop a competition between Sunday school and small groups. The Sunday night fellowships are a good opportunity for church members to spend time together and discuss questions from the Sunday morning message, which are prepared ahead of time by the church. The fellowships were established because the church was

growing and they needed something that was not structured, but casual and edifying to the church.¹⁹

Heritage United Methodist Church also has Sunday school classes, but “they are a little insulated (harder for new people to join).”²⁰ Along with the Sunday school classes, they have small groups and men’s and women’s studies. A lot of discipleship takes place for the youth through the “confirmation class.” In the confirmation classes, youth are taught about the Christian faith and challenged to make it their own. The youth are also paired up with an older mentor that can help them develop their faith. The church also has a “Getting to know us” class, which is basically a 10 week membership class. In this class individuals are invited to commit to: prayer, attendance, the using of their gifts, serving, and witnessing.²¹ Heritage United also offers a “Disciple Bible study curriculum” that is produced by the Methodist church. This is a 32 week Bible study through the whole Bible.

At Leesville Road Baptist Church, Sunday school is the primary discipleship model.²² Intentional discipleship seems to be limited to only “one-on-one discipleship” for new individuals that get saved. Discipleship is something that seems important for new believers, but outside of Sunday school Leesville Road Baptist does not have any other forms of discipleship for their members.

¹⁹ Tyler Scarlett.

²⁰ Alan Combs. 2011. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. January 7. All further comments in this chapter from Combs are from this same interview.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Kevin Brooks. 2011. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. January 13. All further comments in this chapter from Brooks are from this same interview.

At Pleasant View Baptist Church, Sunday school is the biggest form of discipleship. They also offer periodic in home Bible studies (small groups). The youth are disciplined Wednesday nights (Youth Pastor teaching). Children are disciplined through AWANA. Once a month they also have a men's and women's Bible study at the church. Currently, a lot of the discipleship is classroom and program based. Ricky Ewing believes that "mentoring is necessary" and large groups don't really work.²³ Ewing says people need more one-on-one accountability and consistency. Ewing also believes that small groups are a good way for people to interact and get their questions answered. This has led the church to start the home Bible studies. An additional form of discipleship at Pleasant View is church planting. They have helped plant some churches, including one near the campus of JMU.²⁴

Timberlake Baptist Church views everything they do as discipleship. According to Bryan Ferrell, "everything in body life...the pulpit, fellowship groups, any interaction within the church is all discipleship."²⁵ From a program approach they have Sunday school (fellowship groups), a pastoral internship for men that are considering full time ministry, Pastor led men's meetings (Monday, Wednesday, Friday), women's Bible study groups, and Saturday morning prayer time. Timberlake Baptist also offers "Expositors Seminary" a program that teaches young men to preach. Ferrell says that 2 Timothy 2:2 is a big part of their discipleship model. In the past they have tried different "programs and there was some fruit from it, but did not see individuals get excited about discipling

²³ Ricky Ewing.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Bryan Ferrell. 2011. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. January 6. All further comments in this chapter from Ferrell are from this same interview.

others.”²⁶ Instead, they decided to focus on starting men’s and ladies groups, with a primary focus on the men for leadership development. Rather than just plugging people into programs, Ferrell tries to communicate to the whole church their purpose to carry out the Great Commission.

The final church in this first group is West Lynchburg Baptist Church. Their primary form of discipleship is Sunday school and periodic Bible studies. Randy Kent admits that, “We don’t have an ongoing discipleship program.” Discipleship is one area that West Lynchburg is seeking to develop. They have some ladies groups that meet outside of Sunday school and also have some prayer groups, but overall West Lynchburg does not have many discipleship forms.

Churches in Transition:

Table 2 lists the forms of discipleship in the central VA churches that are currently in transition.

Table 2. Churches in Transition and their Forms

Church	Forms of Discipleship
Heritage Baptist Church	Adult Bible Fellowships (Sunday school), Wednesday night electives (classes on practical life issues and ministry), basic training (class for new believers), pastors and leaders target men for one-on-one relationships.
Hyland Heights Baptist Church	Adult Bible Fellowships (Sunday school), men’s and women’s Bible studies, new believers plugged in to mentorship relationships.

²⁶ Randy Kent.

Living Word Baptist Church	Sunday school, some small groups, mentorship for students interested in missions, leadership training, “cultivating relationships.”
Thomas Road Baptist Church	Adult Bible Communities (Sunday mornings), Monday night Freedom Groups, Tuesday women’s groups, midweek groups (Community outreach groups – meeting at the church, Geographic groups – meeting in the community), men’s groups.

This second group of churches is unique because these are historically traditional churches that are currently undergoing some sort of a transition and are re-evaluating how they disciple people. The first church in this group is Heritage Baptist Church. Nathan Smith admitted that, “we are in the process of re-focusing and evaluating why we do what we do.” A while back Heritage realized that they got “distracted from a united focus” on what discipleship should be. Recently they did a six week series to explain the vision, mission, and focus of the church. Currently Heritage has intentional ABF (Adult Bible Fellowships) which meet on Sunday mornings and have a small group dynamic. The main service is too big for people to connect personally, so the ABF’s help people move from a big circle to a smaller circle. ABF’s provide community, accountability, and relationships. Smith said that Heritage is not a small group church, but they are trying to modify their ABF’s to have some sort of a small group feel. Heritage also has Wednesday night elective classes that deal with practical life ministry and a “Basic Training” curriculum for new believers. Along with those formal forms of discipleship, the pastors meet and disciple the leaders under them.²⁷

²⁷ Nathan Smith.

Adult Bible Fellowship's (Sunday school) are also a big vehicle of discipleship for Hyland Heights Baptist Church. The ABF's exploded when the church re-focused about three years ago. The philosophy of these classes is very intentional. Hyland Heights uses the ABF's to move people closer to each other and closer to the Word of God. They believe that growth happens in community.²⁸ During the week, Hyland Heights has men's and women's Bible studies. Hyland Heights tries to appeal to different generations of people through various blended groups. In the coming weeks, they will have small groups meeting on Sunday nights in people's homes. For people who are a little more traditional, the pastor's small group will meet at church. In the last few years Hyland Heights has added a mentorship aspect to discipleship relationships for new believers. Magee says that mentorship relationships are a short term plan, while Sunday school and small groups are the long term plan for the whole body.

Living Word Baptist Church is another church in transition. It began as an independent fundamentalist Baptist church, with a typical Sunday school only model. Eventually, Living Word became Southern Baptist and has changed a lot in the last 7-10 years. Jason Suitt says that at one point Living Word went from a Sunday school model (which was successful) to a small group model. The decision was made based on a practical issue (had no space at the church), but after about a year the small groups didn't work. The church began an assessment process about a year and a half ago. Suitt says that they are currently not a Sunday school or Small group church, even though they provide opportunities for both. As a church they are "trying to cultivate relationships" and create environments where people can get involved. They have a mentorship

²⁸ Rick Magee. 2011. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. January 10. All further comments in this chapter from Magee are from this same interview.

program for students interested in missions. They are also training their leaders (one-on-one and periodic training days) to cultivate discipleship relationships with people.²⁹

The last church in this second group is Thomas Road Baptist Church. When Rod Dempsey first came to Thomas Road there were 19 fairly large adult Sunday school classes. The church has since added a lot of groups with an emphasis on “life transformation and leadership development.” Thomas Road has been moving away from “master teacher” model to a small group model by emphasizing their Adult Bible Communities and weekly groups. The ABC’s (Sunday morning) are currently a big form of discipleship. Thomas Road also has “Freedom Groups” (Monday night), women’s groups (Tuesdays), men’s groups, and midweek groups. Some of the midweek groups meet at the church and are “outreach style” groups, others are geographic groups that meet in the community.³⁰

Non-Traditional Churches

Table 3 lists the forms of discipleship in the non-traditional central VA churches.

Table 3. Non-Traditional Churches and their Forms

Church	Forms of Discipleship
Blue Ridge Community Church	Sunday school (for children), midsize Bible study groups for adults (30-80 people) – usually people will break up into smaller discussion groups during midsize meetings, some early morning prayer/study groups.
Brentwood Church	Teaching groups (Bible studies), serving teams, large groups meetings (for connection/relationship building),

²⁹ Jason Suitt. 2010. Interview by author. Lynchburg, VA. December 9. All further comments in this chapter from Suitt are from this same interview.

³⁰ Rod Dempsey.

	community groups.
Grace Evangelical Free Church	Bible studies (Sunday mornings and during the week), small groups, mentoring.
Redeemer Presbyterian Church	Sunday school, small groups, emphasize deeper one on one relationship's within the small groups, church planting.

Blue Ridge Community Church is the first church in the “non-traditional” grouping. Blue Ridge has a Sunday school program, but it is only designed for the children. Their primary form of discipleship for adults is the mid-size Bible study groups. These groups consist of 30-80 people and usually break up into smaller discussion groups during the meetings. Blue Ridge has seen many come to faith through these groups and begin to grow spiritually. Woody Torrence explained that traditional small groups have not worked at Blue Ridge. He says, “We’ve never had luck assigning people to groups, so we’re trying to do it organically.” Blue Ridge has had a hard time getting leaders and producing quality groups. Instead of being “program based”, they want to be principle based. The principles that seem important to them are evangelism, relationships, and prayer. One of the goals at Blue Ridge is for every believer to be involved with at least one other believer. Discipleship also takes place through different organic prayer and study groups that have sprung up. Blue Ridge has found that people come to church for many reasons, but stay because of the relationships.³¹

Brentwood Church has been developing a wide range of discipleship forms, and environments, that are intentional about developing people. Brentwood has teaching groups, which are short term small groups that only meet for 8 weeks. They also have community groups with the primary goal of seeking “life-change.” For Brentwood,

³¹ Woody Torrence.

community groups are the primary environment for discipleship relationships. These are “closed groups” that consist of married couples, or individuals of the same gender. Brentwood used to have “open groups”, but these were not consistent and were not as intentional. The “closed groups” have a clear purpose of spiritual growth and value intentional apprenticing and group multiplication. Brentwood also uses serving teams, project intersect, and mission trip to help disciple people. For college students, they have developed “College Life” which is a big meeting that breaks up into smaller groups. Brentwood tries to inspire the churched people to reach out to the un-churched people.³²

At Grace Evangelical Free Church small groups are the primary form of discipleship. Grace believes that small groups are extremely important in helping people grow in Christ likeness. There is also a heavy emphasis on cultivating mentoring relationships. Some of the mentoring relationships are short term and deal with specific issues, but others endure for years. The church as a whole has grown in their understanding of prayer and the part it plays in these relationships. Mark Fesmire says, “We pray for one another more often and more directly than we would have in the past.”³³

Redeemer Presbyterian Church has three levels of discipleship: celebration, congregation, and company of three. Celebration takes place during the Sunday morning worship gatherings. Congregation takes place in small groups where 5 to 13 people meet together. Company of three comes out of the small groups, where 2-3 people connect on a deeper level. Redeemer believes that, “discipleship does not take place in a vacuum,

³² Tim Geisland.

³³ Mark Fesmire. Email with interview questions dated January 13, 2011, 7:20 AM.

but in community.”³⁴ At Redeemer, they provide structure and tools, but emphasize organic and spirit lead ministry. They do have Sunday school, but it is primarily designed for children. Another form of discipleship for Redeemer is church planting. They were able to plant a new church in 2008.³⁵

Newer Churches

Table 4 lists the forms of discipleship in the newer central VA churches.

Table 4. Newer Churches and their Forms

Church	Forms of Discipleship
Bedrock Community Church	Mentoring, life groups (accomplish: missions, service, discipleship, and teaching).
Hope Aglow Fellowship Church	Sunday school, small group Bible studies, mentoring in large groups and on an individual basis, ministry involvement (special projects).
Lynchburg Christian Fellowship	Medium size journey groups (20-50 people), small groups (4-10 people), coaching (Sr. Elders building into Jr. Elders).
Mosaic Church	Saturday night service (includes time of discussion), “Doing life together.”
Oasis Church	Life groups, leadership development, emphasize interpersonal relationships.
One Community Church	Life groups and mentoring.

³⁴ Tre Smith.

³⁵ Ibid.

This last group of churches is “newer churches” that have developed in the last 2-5 years. The first church in this grouping is Bedrock Community Church that is very intentional about discipleship and strongly believes that:

Discipleship is not part of the process, it is the process. It’s not just classroom training, it’s going out and serving. Everything we do is a part of the process. Everything in the church is geared toward making disciples.³⁶

Practically speaking, they rely heavily on mentoring and life groups. The life groups are at the very core of who they are. Bedrock tries to get everyone involved in a small group and each group operates as a house church model. Each group worships, fellowships, ministers, serves, and disciples. For their curriculum, the groups either follow the sermons or study something they choose on their own. The goal of the groups is to multiply and eventually plant other churches once there are enough groups in any particular area. Chris Dowd says that Sunday mornings are simply corporate meetings of the life groups. Bedrock also emphasizes mentoring relationships within the church and the groups.

Hope Aglow Fellowship Church disciples people through their Sunday school, small groups, and Bible studies. They also try to involve individuals in different serving ministries at the church. They have periodic special projects, and consistent men’s and ladies gatherings. Tracy King says that Hope Aglow mentors in the large group and on an individual basis. They believe personal interaction plays a big role in discipleship.³⁷

Lynchburg Christian Fellowship, which meets on the Lynchburg College campus, uses groups and coaching to disciple people. Their journey groups consist of 4-10. The

³⁶ Chris Dowd.

³⁷ Tracy King.

people in the journey groups are strongly challenged to be contagious, build into others, and become disciplers within 12 months. Multiple journey groups make up an extended family (missional community of 20-50). Community service takes place through the missional communities. Coaching takes place on a more personal weekly or by-weekly level, where Sr. Elders build into Jr. Elders (leaders building into other leaders).³⁸

Rick Ouimet says that the best form of discipleship at Mosaic Church is “when we do life together and are intentional.”³⁹ According to Ouimet, Mosaic is being run as a large small group. They have a time for dialogue and debate during their Saturday night service. Ouimet says that, “Authentic change happens within three feet or less.” He wants to start another church when Mosaic reaches a certain size. Outside of the group discussion time and personal relationships, which are highly valued, Mosaic does not have structured discipleship forms.

Oasis Church has a very intentional roadmap for taking individual from being a “prospect to being a planter.” Their Sunday morning service is a “front door” into the church, but their small groups are the key to discipleship. Like Bedrock, Oasis runs their life groups like house churches. Life groups are their strategy for growth, and they feel that people are missing out on the heart of the church if they are not a part of a life group. Oasis also does a lot of discipleship through their leadership development structure. Ministry leaders are encouraged to have an apprentice. Interpersonal relationships are stressed at the church, and everyone is challenged to be helping someone in their growth. Oasis is developing a more organized women’s ministry to disciple women. The men at Oasis are being developed relationally. Oasis tried to disciple people through a “new

³⁸ Philip Watkins.

³⁹ Rick Ouimet. Email with interview questions dated January 9, 2011, 10:21 PM.

believers” class, but that did not sustain itself. Brad Mullimax says that relationships and groups have worked much better.

The final church in this group is One Community Church. One Community recently began to develop a more intentional life group strategy. The life groups at One Community are a major part of the spiritual development of believers. A big part of the life group ministry plan involves loving, serving and going. Another facet of their discipleship strategy is mentoring. One Community believes that Sunday school could be a good vehicle for discipleship, but it often lacks vision and methodology for building into member’s lives. Tip Killingsworth says that Sunday school classes can sometimes become miniature worship services using the unhelpful “sit still while I instill” methodology. In partnership with Brentwood Church, One Community is in the process of training new small group leaders in order to help people grow more effectively.⁴⁰

Discipleship Challenges in Central VA

While interviewing the church leaders in central VA about their definition and forms of discipleship, some also shared about the discipleship challenges in central VA. Mark Fesmire, Rod Dempsey, and Tyler Scarlett all mentioned the fact that central VA is still a somewhat traditional area. Fesmire said,

My sense is, and it is only that, that Central VA has in the past been fairly traditional. Most churches have looked to their program as accomplishing discipleship. By program I mean Church services like the worship service and Sunday school. Most often these are highly instructional in nature, and are not relational.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Tip Killingsworth.

⁴¹ Mark Fesmire. Email with interview questions dated January 13, 2011, 7:20 AM.

Dempsey also feels that central VA is still very traditional with the forms of the church. People in central VA are very familiar with the traditional feel of the church, and that is actually one of the reasons why Thomas Road has not gotten rid of their ABC's (Adult Bible Communities).⁴² Scarlett agrees that central VA is traditional, but also adds that institutions like Liberty University are helping to make discipleship more organic.

Another big challenge in central VA is the sheer amount of churches. This makes church hopping a big problem. Bryan Ferrell noted that because there are a lot of churches, people church hop a lot instead of being committed to a body of believers. For pastors, "this creates some challenges in church discipline and shepherding." Randy Kent sees denomination hopping as a bigger issue in central VA, than where he has served in the past. When people jump around from church to church, it is difficult for them to become a part of any discipleship process. Church hopping has the ability to create shallow, uncommitted believers that are internally focused rather than mission focused.

Some of the church leaders brought up the fact that it can be very difficult in central VA to know who is saved and who is lost. Rick Ouimet, who was saved and entered the ministry in Las Vegas, says:

You knew if you were making it as a Christian in Vegas, you were really making it. Here in the heart of the Bible belt, I find Christianity a joke. That's why I pastor a coffee house church.⁴³

⁴² Rod Dempsey.

⁴³ Rick Ouimet. Email with interview questions dated January 9, 2011, 10:21 PM.

Rick Magee says that, “A lot of people here know a little about the Bible – many don’t feel they are lost.” Many people in central VA know enough about the Bible to be dangerous. Some are clearly not walking with Jesus, but others are just babies in the faith that have never been developed. This presents a big challenge for churches that are trying to reach the lost and disciple the individuals in their communities.

Finally, a lot of people in central VA have been hurt by the church. Magee and Geisland both feel that there are a lot of people in central VA that have been “burned by the church.” Sometimes these people are called “de-churched” because they are familiar with the church and may have even been a part of the church in the past. These types of people do not think that the church is relevant and can be very difficult to disciple.

Reflections and Lessons on Discipleship

This final section summarizes the information covered by the interview question: What have you learned about discipleship? Each of the leaders had some lessons that they shared about discipleship based on their life and ministry. Many of the lessons shared had a lot in common with the definitions of discipleship. One of the biggest lessons that many leaders emphasized was the fact that discipleship is not a program or a class. Tim Geisland said,

I used to try to figure out the “best way” to disciple people, a step-by-step program that had a point of arrival. I have learned that there is no one best way. Discipleship is multifaceted. We cannot engineer discipleship through a series of events. Discipleship is a life-long process.

Tyler Scarlett also said that churches shouldn’t put their confidence into programs. He thinks that programs can actually be a stumbling block. Scarlett said that discipleship is

about people, it is about connecting people to people and connecting people to God. It's something that is much more organic. You need to be flexible and change as needed.⁴⁴

Woody Torrence also said that, programs don't seem to work. Discipleship needs to be more organic and principle driven. Randy Kent added that churches should be more dependent on the Holy Spirit than programs.

Alan Combs said that "discipleship takes time." It's not a quick fix process that happens overnight. It's a lifelong investment into the lives of people. Jason Suitt said that the Christian life is not an event, but a journey, and in this journey you need to be patient with people. Some of the leaders pointed out that this is a process that must be intentional. The church needs to help people buy into this process wholeheartedly in order for true life transformation to take place.⁴⁵

Nathan Smith, Rick Magee, Tre Smith, and Brad Mullimax, each in their own way, pointed out that there are generational differences when it comes to discipleship. The older generation of Christians in central VA relate very well to Sunday school. The younger generation is much more relational. Magee says:

You can't mesh everyone into one mold. Younger generations don't like sterile environments. We reach different generations differently. Some like Sunday schools, others like home groups. We try to drive all people to community.

This is one of the reasons why it is so important to contextualize the gospel and the process of discipleship. Ultimately, God is the one who makes disciples, but we need to contextualize our forms of discipleship. Tre Smith warns that churches need to stay away

⁴⁴ Tyler Scarlett.

⁴⁵ Philip Watkins.

from “one size fits all” models. God uses different models to reach different generations of people. Mullimax says he’s learned that time and location determines how we should make disciples. What works in a rural setting, may not work in an urban setting.

Discipleship has to be more personal and Spirit led.⁴⁶

Tip Killingsworth and Rod Dempsey both said that big pulpit preaching doesn’t really work effectively when it comes to discipleship. Killingsworth says that preaching generates excitement, but doesn’t multiply disciples. Dempsey says, “We have learned that discipleship is caught not taught; it has to be more relational and outward focused.”

Mark Fesmire has the same perspective. He says:

Discipleship is not a topic that is taught as much as it is experienced. You can learn something about it from a lecture, but it is experienced in the context of walking in the spiritual disciplines within a community of people.⁴⁷

Classroom instruction has not worked well for Oasis Church. Mullimax says that people usually lose interest quickly. Mentoring and leading by example seems to work better for equipping followers of Christ. Ricky Ewing believes that mentoring is necessary and should be consistent.

Tip Killingsworth and Bryan Ferrell both said that modeling discipleship is extremely important. Ferrell said that “you have to lead by example...you have to model discipleship in order for people to get it.” Killingsworth, in his own words, said basically the same thing, “Discipleship is about modeling, being an example and equipping.”

One of the most significant lessons on discipleship came from Chris Dowd who said:

⁴⁶ Brad Mullimax.

⁴⁷ Mark Fesmire. Email with interview questions dated January 13, 2011, 7:20 AM.

Discipleship models that I have been a part of in the past seemed to try to shape people to look like us. Instead we need to help people look like Jesus. Instead of fitting someone into a model we need to help them become like Jesus.

Ultimately, discipleship is about helping people become like Jesus. In the discipleship process, Christians need to set a good personal example, but most importantly point people to Jesus. This means that people have to spend time with Jesus, and then go out and show others how to be like Jesus.

CHAPTER SIX

TRANSFORMATIONAL DISCIPLESHIP STRATEGY FOR GOSPEL COMMUNITY CHURCH

This final chapter takes into consideration the information that has been developed in the previous five chapters. Chapter 6 introduces Gospel Community Church and proposes a contextualized discipleship strategy for GCC. This chapter reflects on how GCC can practically and effectively accomplish the Great Commission in central VA. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to develop a Biblical, intentional, missional, and gospel centered discipleship strategy for GCC.

History, Purpose, Vision, and Values

GCC is a church plant that was replanted in January of 2010. The church initially began in 2007 by gathering a core group and developing a basic vision and strategy. During that first year a worship team and core group was assembled, the vision and doctrine began to be developed, and the church began to reach out to people in the local community. From the very beginning, the passion of the church has been outreach and discipleship. In January of 2010, GCC refined their vision and moved to a new location (James River Conference Center). Although there have been some challenges along the way, God has been faithfully leading the church forward. GCC is continuing to grow spiritually and numerically, making it necessary to develop a more intentional discipleship strategy.

The purpose of GCC is ultimately to carry out the Great Commission: make disciples (followers) of Jesus Christ – baptizing and teaching them (Mathew 28:19-20). The vision of GCC is to teach and empower people to love God, to grow together in

Christ, and to reach out with the love of Christ (Luke 10:27, Hebrews 10:24-25, Matthew 22:36-38, Mark 12:30-31). GCC desires for people in their church family, and under their influence, to develop and maintain a daily relationship with God, grow in community with those inside the church, and reach out with the love of Christ to those outside the church: locally and globally. At GCC, individuals are encouraged to seek life-change by encountering God through prayer and Bible study, build authentic relationships with individuals in the church family, and reach out to the world by meeting spiritual and physical needs.

The values of GCC are:

- Love (Luke 10:27, John 13:34).
- Prayer (John 14:13-14, 1 Thess. 5:17).
- Community (Hebrews 10:24-25, Acts 4:32-35).
- Biblical teaching (1 Tim. 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:19-21).
- The Gospel (1 Cor. 15).
- Missional living (Matt. 28:19-20, Acts 2:46-47).
- Dependence on the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-19).

The Strategy

For GCC, discipleship is not simply a program. Discipleship is the overall purpose for which GCC exists. All of the gatherings, programs, and projects help GCC to make disciples in Lynchburg and around the world. GCC desires to have a strategy that is Biblical, intentional, missional, and gospel centered. The principles in God's Word serve as the foundation for the discipleship structure of GCC. Discipleship at GCC must

be intentional – every gathering, program, and project plays a specific role in the discipleship process. Discipleship should also be missional and gospel centered. Individuals should be challenged to fall in love with Jesus and become like Him. As the church conforms to Christ, this will lead individuals in the church to love, serve, and reach out to others. Finally, in order for the discipleship process at GCC to be accomplished effectively, it must take place in community. Based on these factors, the purpose, vision, and values of the church and the previous five chapters of this thesis GCC will seek to make disciples through: 1) large group gatherings, 2) small group gatherings and mentoring, 3) service and mission teams, and 4) intentional reproduction.

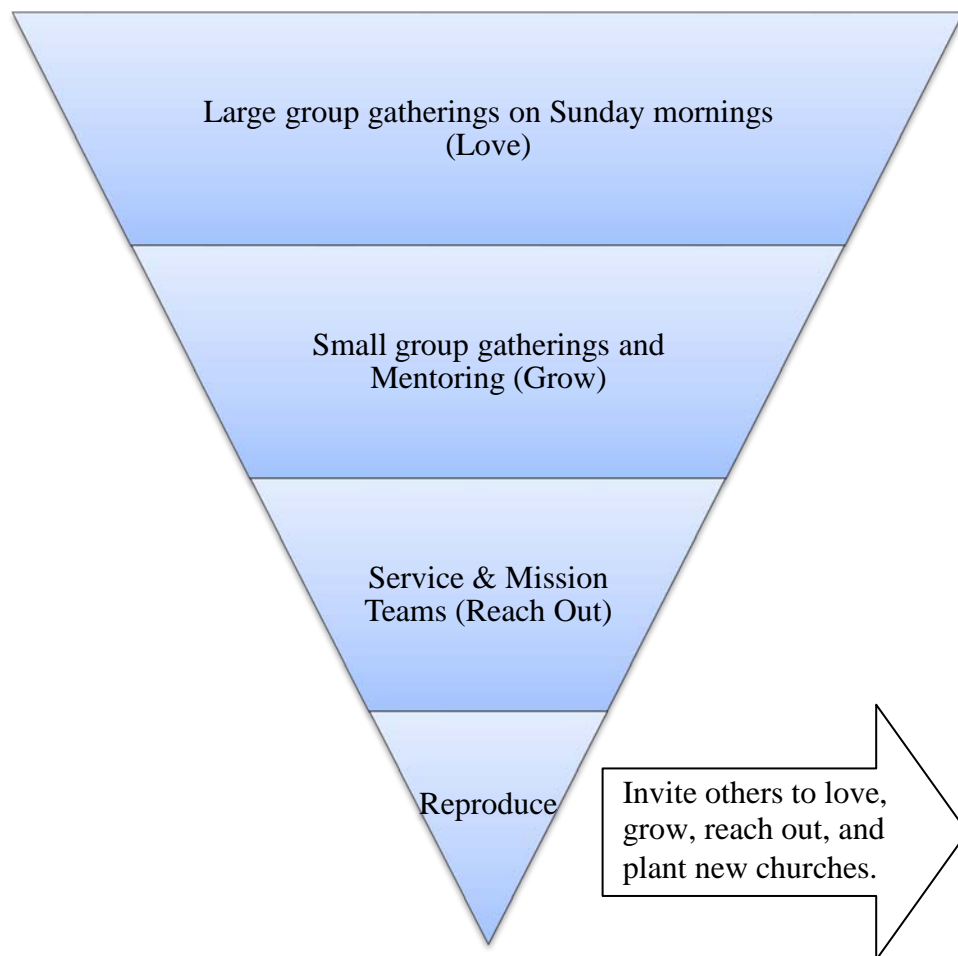


Figure 1. Gospel Community Church Discipleship Model

Large Group Gatherings – Sunday Mornings

Large group Sunday morning gatherings may not be the most effective avenue of discipleship, but that does not mean that Christians should stop meeting in larger groups. Every meeting, program, and gathering has the potential to encourage, challenge, and help people grow spiritually, especially if the gathering is centered on the Gospel. Aubrey Malphurs points out that although Jesus spent the majority of his time with His twelve disciples, the Gospel's also show Jesus ministering to large crowds.¹ Jesus spent time teaching the crowds about the Kingdom and healing those who were sick. There are also instances of the early church ministering to the crowds in the book of Acts. In Acts 2:14, Peter stood up and “addressed the crowd.” Later in Acts 8:6 Philip preached about Christ to the crowd in Samaria.²

Hebrews 10:24-25 says, “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Sunday mornings provide an opportunity for the whole church to gather together and celebrate the Gospel. It is a time for individuals to worship corporately, and to encourage and motivate each other. Sunday's are a time to be refreshed, filled up, and be sent out in order to be the missional church all week long. The large group Sunday morning gathering can also serve as a “front door” entrance for people that may be new to the church, or unfamiliar with Christianity.

The Sunday morning gatherings play an important part in the overall discipleship strategy of GCC. Sundays are a special time to celebrate the gospel and be re-connected

¹ Aubrey Malphurs, *Strategic Disciple Making: A Practical Tool for Successful Ministry*, 69.

² See also Acts 13:44-45 and 17:13.

to the whole body. Typically Sundays consist of corporate worship and Pastoral teaching through Bible. Occasionally, there are special times of prayer, worship, and communion together.³ At these large group gatherings the whole church is challenged and equipped to love God and love others. The Sunday morning gatherings also serve as one of the entry points for small groups, mentoring relationships, service teams, and mission teams. On Sunday's individuals are able to connect, and get plugged in, with the other discipleship structures of the church.

Small Group Gatherings and Mentoring

From the corporate, large group, meetings of the church individuals will be funneled, challenged, and invited to become involved in small groups. Small groups are a more intimate, and effective, setting for really getting to know people and helping them grow spiritually. Through small groups individuals can develop deeper relationship with each other and God, and also provide accountability for each other. Small groups provide opportunities for individuals to share life together more than just one day a week (Sunday). In the New Testament we see that the early church met predominantly in small and medium size groups.⁴ Malphurs says,

According to the book of Acts, the first believers came together in the private homes of individuals, such as Mary the mother of John (12:12), Lydia (16:40), Pricilla and Aquila (18:26), as well as others...For almost three hundred years the disciples met in homes, not in facilities constructed specifically for church meetings.⁵

³ Acts 2:42.

⁴ Acts 2:46, 8:3, and 20:20.

⁵ Malphurs, 69.

Church buildings became more prevalent in the post-Constantine era which led to less in-home meetings. Having looked at the discipleship snapshots (chapter four), it is evident that many individuals, and movement, throughout church history utilized some form of small groups to disciple people.

Since small group environments are important for fostering spiritual growth, GCC will seek to develop open groups that are inviting to outsiders. The primary purpose of the small groups at GCC is to help people grow together in Christ, but there are also many other important reasons to be involved in small groups. Small groups allow individuals to fellowship, connect with others, pray, study the Bible, hold each other accountable, and invite others into discipleship relationships. Along with Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, GCC believes that “open groups” are typically more inviting to seekers and believers should be encouraged to invite others into their community.⁶ In an area like Lynchburg, which is both diverse and at times traditional, GCC needs to develop different types of groups that can reach different types of people. Some groups may need to be more traditional and structured, while others can be more organic. All of the groups will be encouraged to be missional and to reach out to others with the love of Christ. The groups will be encouraged to hold each other accountable to grow spiritually and evangelize, to do evangelism and service projects together, and to pray for and invite friends.

Mentoring will be an important aspect of the small group structure. It will also be important for helping new believers grow in their new found faith. The leaders of the small groups will be mentored (coached) by the leadership team of GCC. The small group leaders will be encouraged to develop mentoring relationship with two to three key

⁶ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *The Seven Deadly Sins of Small Group Ministry*, introduction.

individuals in their groups. Today the church seems to function in a very fast paced world, Edward Smither believes that the church should slow down and “place more emphasis on quality relationship in which there is spiritual depth.”⁷ While developing key relationships, the small group leaders will challenge the rest of the group to form more intimate accountability relationships with each other. Everyone in the church will be encouraged to ask themselves, “Who is helping me grow spiritually?” and “Who am I helping to grow spiritually?” Mentoring will primarily take place through the small groups, but mentoring relationships will also be established for new believers. New Christians will be connected with a mature Christian in the church that can help them grow spiritually. New Christians will also be connected into a small group, preferably the one that their mentor is a part of.

Service and Mission Teams

Christians need to serve in order to grow. Many churches have Sunday school classes, small groups, and Bible studies, but few churches serve on a consistent basis. Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson believe that, “One of the most effective ways to reach people with the message of Jesus Christ today is through real and relevant acts of service.”⁸ Along with being a great way to reach people, GCC believes that servant evangelism is also an effective way to disciple people. Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Christians are created, and empowered by

⁷ Smither, *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders*, 258.

⁸ Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing Inc., 2004), 11.

God, to serve. One of the motivations for Christians to meet together is for them to stir one another to love and good works.⁹ In *The Externally Focused Church*, Rusaw and Swanson say that people learn from Scripture, but grow by serving others.¹⁰

When Christians serve they put themselves in positions where their faith can be stretched. Service also puts people “in real-world situations where their faith is on the line.”¹¹ Many people go to church their whole lives learning the Word of God but not acting on what they are learning. James warns about that in James 1:22 and 2:17. James says that Christians need to be doers of the word, because faith without works is dead. Service teams are a big part of the discipleship strategy at GCC. Some of these teams will come together as a result of the large group gatherings on Sunday mornings (as people sign up to serve at the connection table). Other teams will be formed through the small groups. Rusaw and Swanson say:

- Service gets small groups out of their comfort zones.
- Service causes groups to bond together in tighter relationships.
- Service is a vehicle for evangelistic opportunities.
- Service provides goodwill in the community.¹²

The teams will be invited to serve primarily on Saturday’s (Saturday Serve), but will also be challenged to look for, and adopt, service opportunities throughout the week.

Service is also important for assimilation; it helps new people and new Christians to get plugged into the church. Based on his experience at Mosaic Church in Los

⁹ Hebrews 10:24-25.

¹⁰ Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, 76.

¹¹ Ibid, 77-78.

¹² Ibid, 78.

Angeles, Erwin McManus says that, “If people begin to serve, they stick”¹³ McManus noticed that if people didn’t serve, they usually stopped being a part of the church within the first year. At GCC service is an important connection point for new believers and for seasoned believers that are interested in becoming a part of the church.

Along with service teams, GCC will also use mission teams to disciple people. Some of these teams will be sent to others States, while others overseas. GCC is currently in the process of organizing a short term trip to India in order to encourage local church leaders and plant churches. Serving teams teach people to love and serve others in their community, but mission trips teach people to think about people on a global scale. There is a big world that needs Jesus; Christians are called to reach out to the whole world and to disciple people locally, as well as globally.

Reproduce and Plant Churches

When Jesus made disciples, He didn’t stop at simply training them and letting them observe Him. Jesus sent them out to reproduce, and challenged them to make more disciples. There are also many examples of the early church multiplying, preaching to the lost, making disciples, and forming new groups of Christians.¹⁴ Throughout church history it is also evident that healthy discipleship movements were ones that did not just keep to themselves, but choose to multiply and make more disciples. GCC will seek to multiply healthy disciples on a one-on-one basis, through small group multiplication, and ultimately through church planting.

¹³ Erwin Raphael McManus, *An Unstoppable Force* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing Inc., 2001), 174.

¹⁴ Acts 2:47, 8:4, 16:5.

All Christians should look for opportunities to share the gospel with others and make disciples. Multiplication needs to begin on a one-on-one basis. Christians need to look for opportunities to build into others and give them a godly pattern to follow. The Apostle Paul was able to tell others on a number of occasions that they can follow him as he follows Christ.¹⁵ Paul also challenged Christians to reproduce themselves in others.¹⁶ Since discipleship and evangelism go hand in hand, Christians in the church will need to look for evangelistic opportunities and service opportunities. At GCC, mature Christians will be encouraged to find a group of three to five Christians that they can pour into and challenge on a deeper level.

The small groups at GCC will also be challenged to reproduce themselves. As the groups grow beyond ten to twelve people, they will be asked to begin thinking about starting a new group. GCC does not want the small groups to be internally focused, but rather externally focused and always thinking about the mission. The small groups should have a healthy desire to grow in order to reach more people in their community and help more people to grow in Christ. As the groups multiply, there may come a point when there are enough groups in a particular community to start a new church.

Being a church plant, GCC strongly believes in church planting and desires to plant churches in the near future. Ed Stetzer says that,

Church planting is essential. Without it Christianity will continue to decline in North America...without church planting, denominations will decline; but more important, the number of Christians will continue to decline.¹⁷

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 4:16, 11:1; Philippians 3:17.

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 2:2.

¹⁷ Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 5.

GCC strongly agrees with Stetzer that, “Without church planting, we will not fulfill the Great Commission.”¹⁸ Planting new and healthy churches is essential for making disciples here in the US and abroad. For people that may be opposed to church planting, Dr. Dave Early gives four reasons why it is important to plant new churches:

- 1) America has become a huge and important mission field.
- 2) America has more people, but fewer churches.
- 3) New churches adopt new methods and adapt new strategies for reaching people and ministering to them more effectively than existing churches.
- 4) New churches are amazingly more effective at reaching lost people than existing churches.¹⁹

In the next one to three years, GCC will be actively looking for ways to plant new churches in order to help reach people with the gospel message and make disciples.

Final Thoughts

Making disciples is not something that is optional for the church. Jesus gave His church the Great Commission and commanded for the whole body of Christ to be actively involved in the discipleship process – following Christ and making followers of Christ. The first chapter of this thesis described Christ’s mandate, presented the purpose of this project (to gain a deeper understanding of the Biblical mandate to make disciples

¹⁸ Ibid, 14.

¹⁹Dave Early, “The Desperate Need for New Churches,” *Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary*, July 17, 2006, <http://www.liberty.edu/media/1162/cmt/churchplanting/The%20Desperate%20Need%20for%20New%20Churches%20%20page.pdf> (accessed February 12, 2011).

and to design a contextualized strategy of discipleship for Gospel Community Church), and laid the foundation for the rest of the project. Chapters two through five:

- Examined the changing South, along with the history, culture, and characteristics of central VA.
- Explored the Biblical concept of discipleship and Christ's example of discipleship.
- Highlighted various snapshots of discipleship throughout church history.
- Summarized the views of discipleship and current forms of discipleship in central VA (data collected from 20 interviews of pastors and church leaders in central VA).

Bases on chapters one through five, chapter six introduced Gospel Community Church and presented a contextualized discipleship strategy for GCC. This final chapter reflected on how GCC can practically and effectively accomplish the Great Commission in central VA.

Biblically, Jesus didn't just give the command to makes discipleship, but He also set the example of healthy discipleship. While some, throughout church history, have seemingly ignored the discipleship mandate, others have effectively carried it out. The forms of discipleship may have changed during different time periods, but the principles of discipleship have remained the same. Effective discipleship has always been, and must continue to be, Biblical, intentional, missional, and gospel centered. The most effective forms of discipleship seem to take place in community and also have mentoring aspects. Effective forms of discipleship are outwardly focused and, along with meeting the needs of the body of Christ, these forms challenge people to reach out and service

others in the name of Christ. Taking into consideration the changing South, GCC's discipleship strategy is multifaceted. GCC will seek to disciple people through: 1) large group gatherings, 2) small group gatherings and mentoring, 3) service and mission teams, and 4) intentional reproduction (one-on-one and church planting). GCC will strive to use these forms in order to carry out the Great Commission and to fulfill the vision of the church "to teach and empower people to love God, to grow together in Christ, and to reach out with the love of Christ." The work developed in this thesis should challenge individuals, and churches, to study the culture around them and continue to look for effective ways to make disciples of all nations.

APPENDIX A

Questionnaire for Discipleship Interview

- 1) What is your educational and denominational background?
- 2) How long have you been involved in vocational ministry?
- 3) What is your understanding of discipleship?
- 4) What are the current forms of discipleship in your church?
- 5) Have these forms of discipleship changed? If yes, please explain how and why they have changed.
- 6) What have you learned about discipleship, what in your opinion has worked and what hasn't worked? Why?
- 7) How has discipleship been different in central VA then where you are from or where you have been trained?
- 8) What role does Sunday school classes or small groups play in your discipleship strategy and what percentage of your church body is currently involved in some sort of small group?

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