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Abstract

The Dying Of The American Church: Five Biblical Principles For Revival

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The majority of churches in America continue to suffer a numerical plateau or a decline in church growth. As a result of disobedience to God to follow His commandments in the making of disciples, the church also suffers from a flat lined, virtually non-existent, adult conversion rate. People of the world who do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior are not being evangelized by the church using the first century process of discipleship and therefore, the numbers of conversions to Christ are dismal. The modern day American Church needs to return to the first century process of making disciples and utilize the examples set forth by Jesus Christ, and the early apostles, of the discipleship process. A major focus of the discipleship process that is needed is the understanding, and the return, to the utilization of the small group format found in the model of Jesus Christ and the early apostles. This is the vehicle that the church of America needs to invest in to accomplish the will of God. Five Biblical principles will be revealed to aid the church to become obedient to the commandments of God and begin to make disciples for Christ. The aim of this project is to move all Christians to repent and return to God, to follow His commandments, to allow His love to bring the church back to a place of obedience to Jesus and to develop healthy disciples for His kingdom and glory.

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CHAPTER ONE

Statement of the Problem

The American church is in crisis, and is slowly dying, as church growth has plateaued or declined. Daniel Sanchez states, “Approximately 80% of all churches in North America have reached a plateau or are declining.”¹ There are hundreds of thousands of churches in the United States of America that are in crisis. According to Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, “in 2007 there were 335,000 churches in America.”² In the United States of America, of the 335,000 churches, 80% of those churches are either in plateau or decline, which would bring a mathematical calculation of 268,000 churches in America would be either flat lined or declining. This is a staggeringly high number of churches in crisis. One major reason for the decline of church growth is found in lack of conversion of the lost to Jesus Christ. George Barna says, “The evangelical church in America is losing the battle to effectively bring Jesus Christ into the lives of the unsaved population....Since 1980, there has been no growth in the proportion of the adult population that can be classified as “born again” Christian.”³ Thousands of churches in America are in crisis due to their lack of conversion growth. Thom Rainer says, “So the church began its death march. Family by family the church declined. Of course, the membership of the church grew older. Those who once lived in the community represented the oldest of the members, and no younger families replace them.”⁴ Church decline leads to the ultimate death

¹Daniel R. Sanchez, *Church Planting Movements in North America* (Fort Worth, TX: Church Starting Network, 2007), 18.

² Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn From America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2007), 1.

³ George Barna, *Marketing The Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), 21.

⁴ Thom Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep yours Alive* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 26.

march for the church. George Barna says, “The actively churched are those who attend church regularly, usually once a month or more often. Based on our 2014 tracking data, this group represents 49 percent of the adult population.”⁵ This leaves fifty-one percent of American adults do not attend church even once a month. Thom and Joani Schultz state, “There’s no easy way to say this, but it needs to be said: The American Church is Broken.”⁶ A staggering statistic is offered by Steven Hewitt as he states, “From 1990 to 2000, the combined membership of all Protestant denominations in the U.S. declined by almost 5 million members (9.5 percent) while the U.S. population increased by 24 million (11 percent).”⁷ Even though the population increased substantially over this time frame, millions left the church. In relation to people leaving the church, many churches are actually closing their doors each year. According to Thumma, “Every year more than 4,000 of them close their doors forever...and four out of five Americans say they’re sure God exists and identify themselves with a faith group. But less than half of them even attend church.”⁸ According to T. Clegg and T. Bird, they state that fewer churches per 10,000 exist today than existed in 1920.”⁹ Obviously, the above information is a problem for the church of America and it leads to the revelation of another issue that is problematic for the church.

The church of America, as a whole, is not in the process of making disciples. According to George Barna, “My study of discipleship in America has been eye-opening. Almost every

⁵ George Barna and David Kinnaman, Editors, *Churchless: Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect with Them*. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 2014), 7.

⁶ Thom Schultz and Joani Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore: And How 4 Acts of Love Will Make your Church Irresistible* (Loveland, CO: Group. 2013), 5.

⁷ Steven Hewitt. “Why the church is dying in America.” *Christian Computing Magazine*. July, 2012. 4.

⁸ Scott Thumma, “A health Checkup of U.S. Churches” by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, (presentation, Future of the Church Summit from Group Publishing, Loveland, CO, October 22, 2012). 4.

⁹ T. Clegg and T. Bird, *Lost in America* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2001), 30.

church in our country has some type of discipleship program or set of activities, but stunningly few churches have a church of disciples.”¹⁰ The main reason leading to the failure of the making of disciples can be found in disobedience to follow the commandments of God and this is sin. Jesus, in the Great Commission, commands His disciples to “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”¹¹

He commands His church to first go into the world and share the gospel and baptize the new believers, which is the process of evangelizing. Next, Jesus commands His church to teach others and help them grow into the likeness of Christ, which is the process of discipleship. However, Rainer says, “The deceased church, somewhere in its history, forgot to act upon the Great Commission. So they stopped going. And making disciples. And baptizing them. And teaching them.”¹² Failure to follow the commandment of Jesus Christ in reaching others is sin. According to Walter Elwell, “In the biblical perspective, sin is not only an act of wrong doing but a state of alienation from God.”¹³ Being separated and alienated from God due to sin causes man to lose his focus on his responsibility to God. Thom Rainer makes this clear as he says, “One of the main reasons many Christians do not share their faith is simply explained by the word disobedience. Spiritual lethargy takes place when we fail to obey him. The problem for many Christians is that they are not growing spiritually, and lack of spiritual growth inevitably

¹⁰ George Barna, *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ*. (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 20.

¹¹ Matthew 28:19–20.

¹²Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, 41.

¹³Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 1103.

leads to a diminished desire to share Christ with others.”¹⁴ David Platt understands the need for obedience as he states, “First, from the outset you need to commit to believe whatever Jesus says...then second you need to commit to obey what you have heard. The gospel does not prompt you to mere reflection; the gospel requires a response...’What Shall I Do?’”¹⁵ The result of sin is that others are not being converted to Jesus Christ and as Jim Putman says, “Our churches make few converts.”¹⁶ According to Jon Tyson, “For a nation that has always prided itself on spiritual foundations, it becomes profoundly unsettling when nearly two-thirds of eighteen-to twenty-nine-year-olds with a Christian upbringing walk out of the church - perhaps never to return...59% of Millennials who grew up in the church have dropped out at some point.”¹⁷ This is a huge number that gives credible evidence that many of the youth of this generation did not receive conversion to Jesus Christ as they have dropped out and ceased attending church. Tyson also states that 70% of GenX and Millennials combined say they find God elsewhere other than church.¹⁸ Also, an interesting point of view of an atheist is offered by Larry Taunton as he states, “Christianity is something that if you really believed it, it would change your life and you would want to change the lives of others. I haven’t seen too much of

¹⁴ Thom S. Rainer, *the unchurched next door: Understanding Faith Stages as Keys to Sharing Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 217.

¹⁵ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Your Faith Back from the American Dream*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2010), 20-21.

¹⁶ Jim Putman, *Real-life discipleship: building churches that make disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 10.

¹⁷ Jon Tyson, *Sacred Roots: Why the Church Still Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 2013), 31.

¹⁸ Tyson, *Sacred Roots*, 73.

that.”¹⁹ Thus, it seems clear that the conversion growth rate in the church of America is virtually flat-lined.

Statement of Scope and Limitation

In this Thesis Project, this author includes the use of books, journal articles, Dissertations/Theses, and surveys, as well as a broad base of useful information obtained from this author’s personal experience in development and teaching, by making of disciples through small groups. However, it is imperative to make the point that although this information obtained is from a limited number of different church denominations (ten) in the southern region of the United States, it is not an indication that every church in America is in decline or dying, but it is reflective of the church of America as a whole. Though the facts and figures used are obtained through a small variety of churches located in the southern region, it can be taken as a projection of the problem in America.

Another area of limitation that requires addressing is found in the development of the small groups for the making of disciples of Jesus Christ. This author has chosen the model of Jesus Christ, which is the selection of twelve men who would walk, learn, and become leaders of disciples to serve God by serving others. Also, the model found in Acts 2, which is disciples living, learning, and growing in Christ in community, as a proven Biblical format; however, some may feel that the use of programs is another solution. Though this may be another way, it may not be the most effective way as stated by Greg Ogden, “The second cause of the low estate of discipleship is that we have tried to make disciples through programs.”²⁰ Though this author

¹⁹ Larry Alex Taunton, “Listening to young Atheists: Lessons for a Stronger Christianity,” *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2013.

²⁰ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 42.

has chosen the biblical format to small groups, it is not offered as the only manner but one of the most effective models for small groups.

Lastly, but of great importance, is found in the discussion of the church of Laodicea in this project. The church of Laodicea is one of the seven churches that received a direct message from Jesus Christ found in the Bible in the book of Revelation chapter 3. This message was that if this church did not repent of her sins, Jesus Christ was going to spew her out. It is this author's desire to show a strong connection between the church of Laodicea and the modern day American church in a prophetic manner. However, it is not the author's desire to prove that the church of Laodicea is absolutely a church of prophecy; she is offered up for serious consideration in this project as a prophetic church that can be found in the modern day church of the twenty-first century. Also, the church of Laodicea may have been one church in history; it is compared prophetically to the modern day church of America as a whole.

Theoretical Basis

The theoretical basis for this project is rooted deeply in the Word of God found as Jesus states, "And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven"²¹ Jesus spoke these words to Peter, a disciple and apostle of Jesus Christ. Through the disciples Jesus would build His "ekklesia," which is a Greek word which means, according to Timothy and Barbara Friberg and Neva Miller, "as the universal body of believers."²² The body of believers will be built by Jesus and Satan would not

²¹ Matthew 16:18–19.

²² Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Victoria, BC. Trafford Publishing), 2005. 137.

be able to prevent Him and the disciples from accomplishing this task. Interestingly, Jesus didn't say that Satan wouldn't try and stop this effort much like Satan would bruise the heel of Jesus at the Cross but then Jesus would crush his head. It is clear that Satan has tried to stop Jesus in building His disciples but the promise of Jesus is that Satan will not prevail and he hasn't. However, at this time in the twenty-first century, facts will be presented to demonstrate that the American church is declining and dying as Satan continues his strangle hold leaving the church to gasp for her breath. However, there is hope for the American church found in His promise.

Historical Basis

In this project, evidence will be offered through a close examination historically, of the decline, or slowly approaching death, of the American church. A once strong and proud institution of God is being systematically reduced to a shell of her once great stature. The reasons for the decline can be found in the fact that the American church is no longer in the business of making disciples or leaders of disciples. As stated by Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson, "If we don't develop people to be like Jesus, not only is our witness distorted, but also we can never hope to develop Christ like leaders."²³ Nor is the American church using the biblical examples given Christians as a vehicle to accomplish this task, as found in the small group development. As Jeffrey Arnold explains,

In Jesus' first-century world disciples were usually the students of a particular teacher, apprentices who learned all that their master could teach so that they could go on to become masters themselves. In addition to teaching the Jewish law and the traditions of Moses, the rabbis (or teacher) sought to train their disciples to live out their faith as obedient followers of God. A number of times during Jesus' ministry he, too, was called Rabbi. Observers felt that he had met the criteria necessary to be a disciple maker in the line of Moses. Like the Jewish rabbis, Jesus had gathered his own group of disciples and was training them.²⁴

²³ Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson, *On the verge: a journey into the apostolic future of the church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 70.

²⁴ Jeffrey Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 15.

The need for small groups is evident for the building of intimacy between God and His people. God's principle of growth is found in multiplication and the small group format facilitates this effort. Neil Cole states it in this manner,

We need systems that are practical and profound. They must be both simple and significant – significant enough to tap into the Christian's internal motivation, yet simple enough to be easily passed on from disciple to disciple and across cultural barriers. Such a system can strengthen the church and allow growth that is both qualitative and quantitative.²⁵

In this statement can be found the secret to the power of small groups – simple – significant – passed on from disciple to disciple – and growth.

It will be shown in connection with the Biblical Basis that small groups are an important way to connect people to the person of Jesus Christ. Small groups teach and minister to other brothers and sisters in Christ, and reach others who are lost in the darkness of this world so they may receive the plan of salvation. The small group is the vehicle that will take the church in the direction of obeying the commandments of God and being successful in allowing God to make new disciples, and leaders of disciples, through His disciples. According to William Beckham,

The strongest organizational unit in the world's history would appear to be that which we call a cell because it is a remorseless self-multiplier; is exceptionally difficult to destroy; can preserve its intensity of local life while vast organizations quickly wither when they are weakened at the center; can defy the power of governments; is the appropriate lever of prising open any status quo. Whether we take early Christianity or sixteenth century Calvinism or modern communism, this seems the appointed way by which a mere handful of people may open up a new chapter in the history of civilization.²⁶

A powerful statement on small groups and possibly one of the main reasons Jesus Christ chose this format to build His ekklesia.

²⁵ Neil Cole, *Organic Leadership: Leading Naturally Right Where You Are* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 261.

²⁶ William Beckham, William, *The Two Winged Church Will Fly* (Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 1993), 119.

This project will also look closely at the fact that leaders of disciples are not being developed because disciples are not being produced. Any organization without leadership will quickly die. A definition of a leader would be important to aid in the discussion of leadership. According to Michael Mitchell, “A leader is one who possesses a clear mission with an attendant vision, stands before others effectively conveying the messages, and efficiently supervises the actions needed to fulfill the mission.”²⁷ The vision that Mitchell speaks of, in the area of leaders in the church, are the pastors. They must take their vision from Jesus Christ as He commanded disciples to go and make disciples. Once this vision is captured, the leader will lead his church to reach the lost for Jesus and lift up others to become disciples. The church and its leaders need to feel the pulse of the church as it is feigning and step up to do something about it. Could changing the way the church is doing church be the answer? Neil Cole makes an interesting statement on this subject as he states, “Church begins with Jesus: who He is and what He has done. It is all about Jesus, and if it begins to be about something else, then it stops being the church as Jesus meant it to be...If only we return to our first love and let Jesus be our focus, then many will be drawn in. They will be compelled to gain Christ rather than attend a religious service.”²⁸ Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega and His church must always focus on Him and when other things change that focus away from Him, it no longer is church as Christ intended.

²⁷ Michael R. Mitchell, *Leading, Teaching, and Making Disciples: World-Class Christian Education in the church, School, and Home* (Bloomington, IN: CrossBooks, 2010), 20.

²⁸ Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 6.

Biblical Basis

There will be offered a strong foundation of Scripture to support the need for the church to produce disciples, and leaders of disciples, through small groups. One of the most important Scriptures and commandments of God found in His Word is, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen”²⁹ This is not simply an idea, or a very good suggestion, but a commandment of Jesus Christ to His disciples of His time and to all present day Christians to be in service to God by the making of His disciples. Important Scripture that is closely linked to the above mentioned scripture is found as Jesus tells His disciples that He will build His “ekklesia”, His people of God, and that can only mean through discipleship as He started with His disciples.³⁰ Through His disciples He would grow other disciples.

To begin examination of this subject, for one to be a maker of disciples, this project will look closely at the history of discipleship, what is a disciple, and how does one become a true disciple of Jesus Christ. Evangelism is closely related to the subject of discipleship. Jesus Christ was a great evangelical preacher and through His messages many got saved, or reborn, into the family of God. For many years church growth was the primary concern until focus was given to the area of evangelism. Also, this project will look at a Biblical model that is the most effective tool for the church in the producing of disciples, the history and development of the small groups. Jesus Christ was the example of the perfect person who chose the small group format, built them up into disciples that reflected His life, and sent them out to begin more small groups to do the same for others. It is clear through the study of the early church that they had no

²⁹ Matthew 28:19–20.

³⁰ Matthew 16:18.

church buildings but met in houses and at times temples. Paul can be seen clearly substantiating this position as he says, “you know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.”³¹

Theological Basis

The theological basis for this project is also rooted in the Word of God and is based in the principle of multiplication. Why did Jesus command His disciples to go and make more disciples? It springs forth from the Scripture, “And God blessed them and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply...”³² This is the commandment given to Adam and Eve but the principle is rooted from the same ideology for His disciples to go out and multiply the earth with more disciples for the glory of God. One can find the same philosophy in the Abrahamic Covenant as God states, “And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness.”³³ The New Testament, through the life of Paul, has much to say on this subject as Paul says, “And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”³⁴ In this Scripture alone gives evidence of multiplication for four generations. The disciple making process leads to the result of multiplication for the glory of God. According to Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey, “The life and ministry of Paul serves as a paradigm for the third

³¹ Acts 20:20.

³² Genesis 1:28.

³³ Genesis 15:5–6.

³⁴ 2 Timothy 2:2.

and final goal of the disciple maker: to multiply disciples to be disciple makers.”³⁵ The church is meant to grow but the modern day church is suffering and very little growth is occurring except that of transfer growth, where a person leaves one church and then joins another church. The growth God desires is that of conversion growth. This is experienced usually through the practice of discipleship and evangelism. The person is drawn by God through the Holy Spirit to the need of repentance of their sins and then someone is used by God to share the gospel story of Jesus Christ so the salvation process can happen. God makes this clear as He states, “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,”³⁶ and man can have his image of God restored in him by the process of salvation but that is only half the story. The words, “after our likeness” is a reference to the growth of the person that has been saved and that is taking on the likeness of Jesus Christ and that comes through discipleship. The disciples part in growth is only to love and minister to others who need Jesus. Jesus will grow His church. Jesus will grow His ekklesia. Cole states, “If our churches are falling apart and are not healthy, it is not because Jesus has done a poor job but because we have taken the task upon ourselves....The church is meant to grow. It should experience spiritual growth, and seeing new souls brought into the Kingdom of God is part of that.”³⁷ This project is rooted in the fact that God’s desire is to grow His people and build up His church through discipleship. John Koessler follows that thought with this statement, “God’s standard for the disciple’s life, then, is no less than Christ. He is the mark by which our spiritual maturity is measured and the aim of all our training. A primary reason that God has given believers spiritual gifts is to build the church up “until we all reach

³⁵ Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is...: How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 157.

³⁶ Genesis 1: 26.

³⁷ Cole, *Organic Church*, 9.

unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13).”³⁸

Description of Methodology

In this section, information will be communicated as to the content of each chapter of this project. The final phase of the project will include information that has been gathered through surveys that will illustrate the need for the church to refocus on the ways it has been doing church, as well as the need for the adherence to the commandments of God on making of disciples, and leaders of disciples, through an intense small group effort that will facilitate the above mentioned process.

Chapter Two will begin with a discussion of the connection of the church of Laodicea found in Revelation 3 and the modern day American church. It will begin with a close look at the church of Laodicea from a historical perspective and then from a prophetic perspective. There will be an examination of the characteristics that both of these churches share that will give insight into the problems of both of the churches. The attention will turn to the church of America in the present day condition and how the result of sin has contributed to the decline and slow death of this church. Not following the examples of the early apostles in the making of disciples and how this has been rooted in sin in the eyes of God is the focus of the remainder of this chapter. Jesus said that the gates of hell would not prevail against Him making His disciples but He didn't say that Satan wouldn't attempt to stop Him. Satan will attempt to rob man of becoming the new creatures of God, In Christ, through the discipleship process and it is clear that this is happening. Jerry Rankin makes this clear as he explains, “We need to recognize the

³⁸ John Koessler, *True Discipleship: The Art of Following Jesus* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2003), 41.

reality of spiritual warfare and that we have an enemy robbing us of a victorious life in order to deprive God of His glory in our lives.”³⁹

Chapter Three will discuss in depth the history, the development, and the multiplication of disciples through the process of discipleship. Also, in this chapter will be a discussion of the need of the small group format to be utilized as the vehicle that will be driven for the successful making of new disciples. A close look at the biblical example of small groups is imperative to understanding the function in the modern era. The small group format is steeped in history with evidence as a powerful tool for all endeavors especially that of discipleship. Jesus Christ used the format of small groups as an example to future man to use as a blueprint in an effective method to produce disciples. According to the book of Acts, the first century Christians met in the temple as well as the homes as Paul says, “And daily in the temple and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.”⁴⁰ This section will illustrate the history of the small groups, the need to begin small groups and the information necessary to be successful in multiplying the small groups to grow and continue to produce disciples.

It has been said that to know where one wants to go, one must know where they have been. A close examination of the history of the disciples and discipleship is necessary to gain a complete understanding of the value of Jesus’ commandment to make disciples. Also, understanding what a disciple is and what characteristics make up the person of a disciple, as well as what the work of a disciple is will also be explored. Then one can find the value in the need to become a disciple and the need to produce disciples. An examination of the difference between a follower of Jesus Christ and a disciple of Jesus Christ will be discussed in depth. A

³⁹ Jerry Rankin, *Spiritual Warfare: The Battle For God’s Glory* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 14.

⁴⁰ Acts 5:42.

follower is someone who shows great interest in a person or group of people and he or she is very attentive to what that this person or persons are doing. An example of this is in how someone follows a sports team. They follow closely the ranking and scores and how the team is doing in relationship to receiving the championship trophy. They may even have one or two people that play on that team that are their favorite players and they follow them closely also. A deep seated interest in those players or team makes this person a follower of them. However, a disciple of someone or something is a person that not only has a deep interest in that person or thing, but has such a deep interest it includes the desire to be like that person. A disciple desires to take on the characteristics and attributes of that person, become just like them, or as close as they can be. There are disciples of Jesus Christ as well as disciples of Satan. The disciple chooses the person that is attractive to them and then pursues them, to be like them. This was used in the Rabbinic training as well, as one can see that Paul was a disciple of Gamaliel and Jesus used the same format to develop His disciples.

Chapter Four will examine thoroughly the need for discipleship and small groups as well as an offering of a practical model of this author's personal ministry to obey God and make disciples using the small group format. Survey results will be examined to support the need for discipleship using small groups in the local church and the results will be weaved in with how the Christ United Ministry practices the daily discipleship making process.

Chapter Five will discuss the five Biblical Principles that are desperately needed for the revival of the church of America

1. Humility
2. Prayer
3. Seeking God

4. Repentance
5. Obedience

The above mentioned principles will be discussed in full to ensure the complete understanding of how American churches can be brought back to revival by the promises of Jesus Christ. God calls man to action in His Word as He says, “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”⁴¹ Will man become humble, pray, seek His face, and repent before God takes away the lampstand from the American church? Will man fall on his knees to the truth that the leaders of the American church have failed and will they repent standing in this truth? God knows.

Review of Literature

This Thesis Project has included many resources and Scriptures that give credible support to the condition of the American church, to the making of disciples, and the utilization of small groups as the vehicle to take the church into compliance with God’s commandments. The outline of this review consists of the following and will divide the literature into four categories: Biblical Text, Church of Laodicea – Historical and Prophetic, Discipleship, and Small Groups. The Biblical foundation on which this Thesis Project is built rests many of the commandments of God that were given to man. The focus will be on the commandments with many supporting Scriptures that will illustrate man’s disobedience to God and the consequences of this disobedience. The word that is central to all of these commandments is love.

⁴¹ 2 Chronicles 7:14.

Biblical Text

Major Scripture Commandments and Passages

Jesus makes the following statement, which is referred to as the Great Commandment, as He says, “Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment” Matthew 22:36–38. Jesus explains the commandment of God that man must love God with all his heart, soul, and might. It is interesting that God has a commandment that says man must love God in this way and doesn’t simply say man should love God. God demands a total and complete love from man. In the modern church, this is one reason for the dying of the church as man doesn’t possess this type of love. When one does not possess an emotion or interest for another is called apathy, and this has infected the church and her relationship with God. This disease is a contributing factor in a dying church. According to Douglas Groothuis, “Apatheism rests on a benign indifference; refusing to become passionate about one’s own beliefs or the beliefs of others....Apatheism seems to be, if not epidemic, at least a wide-spread toxin in the United States.”⁴² Also, in this Scripture one can see that Jesus explains that man must love his neighbor. His neighbor would be others that have been reborn into the family of God.

Jesus also explains another commandment, which is referred to as the New Commandment, as He says, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” John 13:34–35.

⁴² Douglas Groothuis. *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011). 150–151.

Man is to love others as Jesus has loved us and this would be the love for people who have not accepted the plan of salvation and are still lost to the world. An important point in this Scripture is Jesus telling man that he must love the way Jesus has loved and that is by dying. Man must love others to the point of death if necessary to extend that love to others.

Another Scripture, Acts 2:42–47, that will be of importance, is found in the writings of Luke, which is referred to as the Great Example, as he says,

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat, with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

This example is the importance of the interaction of life in community which facilitates the discipleship process so all can grow into the likeness of Christ. This process includes praying together, fellowshiping together, eating (communing) together, studying the Word together, and praying together. This draws all in the community closer to Jesus and closer to each other.

Paul is credited with an important Scripture, Ephesians 4:11-16, which is referred to as he Great Plan, as he says,

And he gave some, apostles; and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even, Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

In this plan is the importance of leaders building up Christians into true disciples for service to God and equipping each for their service to God and with each other to edify the body of Christ.

Paul also offers up a powerful Scripture, which is referred to as the Great Ambition, as he says, “Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus” Colossians 1:28. The burning ambition of Christians is the importance of the goal of lifting up others to the glory of God. This is not only each believers responsibility but this also brings the leadership of the church into direct view of making disciples for Christ so they can be presented to Him in perfection. A powerful Scripture is also found in His Word found in Ecclesiastes 12:13–14,

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

This Scripture gives guidance to man on the main reasons he should have great needs in keeping the commandments of God. Also, God shares in His Word⁴³ with man the reasons it is given for man to adhere to His commandments and not his own as this will lead to destruction.

Also, a major passage of Scripture that will be used in support of this project will be found in the book of Revelation in the discussion of the Church of Laodicea. Jesus gives a message to John for the angel of the church of Laodicea as He says,

And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing, and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

⁴³ Jeremiah 6:16.

To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

The church of Laodicea was one of the seven churches found in the book of Revelation that Jesus chose to send a message to in regards to their life and behavior as a church. There will be much discussion concerning the words chosen by Jesus to this church and how they reflect on the church of America in the modern age as well.

Discipleship

A major love Scripture found in Matthew is when Jesus is speaking to Peter and says, “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” Matthew 16:18. This Scripture will be utilized throughout this project in reference to the making of disciples. This is an important Scripture that man must understand as Jesus is still in the business of building up His people through the process of salvation and growth which is exactly what is involved in the process of discipleship.

A Biblical passage of Scripture that also will have an impact on this project are the last recorded words of Jesus Christ prior to His ascension as He tells His disciples to “Go” and make disciples of others.⁴⁴ This passage of Scripture will be heavily examined as it will be argued in this project that one reason for the dying of the American church is that she will not obey this commandment. A closely related Scripture of support is found as Jesus Christ explains to His disciples that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit and they will be witnesses to Him in all parts of the world.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Matthew 28: 19 – 20.

⁴⁵ Acts 1: 8.

There is a great need for discipleship and evangelism outside of the church walls and there are many scriptures that are included in this project on this subject as follows: in the book of Philippians⁴⁶ man needs to obey and allow God to work through him for others to see the light of God, in the book of Romans⁴⁷ man must be on mission for God preaching to others so they can find salvation, in the book of Mark⁴⁸ man should go and tell others all the things that Jesus does in love so they can be drawn to His love, again, in the book of Mark⁴⁹ to go into the world and preach the good news of Jesus Christ, and in the book of John⁵⁰ man is to share how God the Father has sent (mission) Jesus (Messiah) to this world for their salvation. There is an assortment of other scriptures on different topics found in this project such as; Love,⁵¹ Salvation,⁵² Discipleship,⁵³ Service,⁵⁴ Unity,⁵⁵ Edification,⁵⁶ Judgement,⁵⁷ and Community.⁵⁸

⁴⁶ Philippians 2:12–15.

⁴⁷ Romans 10:14–15.

⁴⁸ Mark 5:19.

⁴⁹ Mark 16:15.

⁵⁰ John 20:21.

⁵¹ John 3:16.

⁵² John 3:3.

⁵³ John 8:12, 31.

⁵⁴ John 12:26.

⁵⁵ John 17:21–25.

⁵⁶ Ephesians 4:12.

⁵⁷ Revelation 3:19.

⁵⁸ Acts 2:42–47.

Small Groups

The concept of the small group format found in the Bible is built on solid foundation. Though the small group format was not new at the time of Jesus, this was the format He chose to facilitate the process of making disciples and is known as the Jesus Model. As found in the Scriptures in the book of Luke,⁵⁹ as well as in the book of Matthew,⁶⁰ Jesus formed a small group of twelve disciples. Another passage of Scriptures that must be cited in this project for this subject is found in Acts 2:42–47 which is the Apostle Model of small groups to facilitate the process of making disciples. No doubt that the apostles utilized the same format that they had been taught by their Master Jesus as it was a successful model.

Many additional scriptures found in the Bible deal with the subject of small groups as they met many times in houses as well as the temples,⁶¹ house ministries are found in the small group format,⁶² a number of times the use of house churches is used in Scripture found in the book of Romans⁶³ and the book of 1 Corinthians.⁶⁴

The Church of Laodicea in History and Prophecy

A close examination of the health of the American church will be conducted in the Thesis Project as it relates to factors that may have caused not only the decline of the church but the slow process of the dying of the American church. An important point is that not every church in the United States of America is in decline or the process of slowly dying. Some churches in

⁵⁹ Luke 6:13.

⁶⁰ Matthew 10:1.

⁶¹ Acts 5:42.

⁶² Acts 16:40.

⁶³ Romans 16:3–5.

⁶⁴ 1 Corinthians 16:19.

America are very strong and vibrant as they enjoy the fruits of their labor, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to ensure a strong and healthy church. However, the overall facts speak directly to the American church as a whole.

One factor that will be examined in this project is the powerful connection between the Church of Laodicea found in Revelation 3 and the American Church of the present day. There are definite correlations between the churches and the many characteristics that they both share. Some resources that will have an impact on this subject from a historical perspective will begin with the fact that the Church of Laodicea actually was a church that existed. Some resources that will establish this fact are as follows: John McRay and his work called, "*Archaeology and The New Testament*," and George Eldon Ladd and his writings of "*A commentary on the Revelation of John*," and "*Revelation*," by Mitchell G. Reddish. Harold Willmington authored a book called "*Willmington's Guide to the Bible*" and along with William Barclay's "*The Revelation of John*" will reveal an interesting prophetic glimpse of the church of Laodicea and how she relates to the modern day church of America. A journal article on this subject that will prove to be valuable and beneficial is called "Laodicea and the seven churches" and is written by David Cashmore. Cashmore states, "There is an ethical core to prophecy, where the people of God – although prophetic words are also given to those outside God's people (Amos/Jonah) – are exhorted to live according the covenant with their God. If they do not, God will bring judgement."⁶⁵ This mirrors what is happening to the American church and judgement is beginning to be applied through the slow death of the church. Another journal article authored by Sherman E. Johnson called "*Laodicea and Its Neighbors*" gives credible and valuable information to the existence of the Church of Laodicea.

⁶⁵ David Cashmore, "Laodicea and the seven churches." *Stimulus* 12, no. 2 (May 2004): 16-20.

Discipleship

A major part of this project is how one needs to come to an understanding the process of discipleship and how the lack of discipleship in the church can have disastrous results for the church. There is actually a process of making disciples and when a church is not practicing this commandment it can cause a church to become apathetic or lukewarm.

A primary book that will be a major contribution to this project is the book authored by Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey called “*Disciple Making Is...*” and is a valuable resource on the complete understanding of the making of a disciple. Another resource that is of major value to this project is called “*Discipleship*” authored by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer’s book gives great information on all areas of discipleship, the cost of discipleship, the importance of being a disciple, and making other disciples and the great suffering in the event disciple making is not taken seriously by the church. “*Growing True Disciples*” authored by George Barna is a resource that not only gives useful survey information on a variety of different subjects, but also gives valuable information on the strategic process for producing disciples. A reason for the choosing this resource is to support the fact that the American church is not making disciples. Barna states, “Unfortunately, the twenty-first century church has many “followers” of Christ in the sense that I follow the Yankees: We dabble in Christianity....Discipleship is not a program. It is not a ministry. It is a life-long commitment to a lifestyle.”⁶⁶

“*Transforming Discipleship*” authored by Greg Ogden is a wonderful resource that helps illustrate the need for discipleship and how there is a problem with this issue in the American church. Ogden states, “If I were to choose one word to summarize the state of discipleship today, that word would be superficial. There appears to be a general lack of comprehension

⁶⁶ Barna, *Growing True Disciples*, 19.

among many who claim Jesus as Savior as to the implications of following him as Lord.”⁶⁷ This is a major problem for the American church and helps illustrate that the church needs to be reformed soon or face the wrath of God. A book authored by Dave Earley and David Wheeler called “*Evangelism Is...*” is another resource that has a major impact on this project as it is an inspiring work on the sharing of the gospel and how to help make others disciples for Jesus Christ. The authors give an exciting account of how true conversion is necessary, which is the first step in the making of disciples. The authors state, “True conversion not only has two sides, but it also impacts a person on three levels – intellect, emotion, and will. In order to experience true conversion, a person must know something, feel something, and do something.”⁶⁸ J.D. Greear authored a book called “*Gospel: Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary.*” and it is an impactful resource as he discusses man’s need for the love of God and how man can find the love and then love God back. An essential element in the process of true disciple making is love and without love, man has nothing. Greear states, “A Christianity that does not have as its primary focus the deepening of passions for God is a false Christianity, no matter how zealously it seeks conversion or how forcefully it advocates righteous behavior.”⁶⁹ A book called “*True Discipleship*” authored by John Koessler has valuable information in the area of discipleship and says, “Discipleship is not primarily a matter of what we do. It is an outgrowth of what we are.”⁷⁰ Koessler explains how true discipleship is a life changing faith that is lived out. A journal article that gives support and light to the issue of discipleship is found in

⁶⁷ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 22.

⁶⁸ Dave Earley and David Wheeler. 2010. *Evangelism Is...: How to Share Jesus with Passion and Confidence*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group.73.

⁶⁹ J. D. Greear, *Gospel: Recovering the Power that Made Christianity* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 11.

⁷⁰Koessler, John. *True Discipleship*. 2003. 12.

the writing of Christopher Beard, “Missional discipleship: Discerning spiritual-formation practices and goals within the missional movement.” This project offers the idea that the church is not in practice of making disciples and discipleship is the most important area of concern for the church to be successful in the eyes of God. Beard supports this theory as he explains, “Throughout the missional movement, leaders are identifying discipleship as the key to success not only for the missional movement, but the church as a whole. Discipleship is identified as the cornerstone of a renewal process that will restore growth, health, and relevance to the Western church that is struggling in its current context.”⁷¹

A number of resources will be valuable in looking at the early church as well as examining the modern day church in the effectiveness of discipleship. Two resources that will have a major impact on this project in the area of the church can be found in the writings of Neil Cole from his books called “*Organic Church*” and “*Church 3.0*.” Cole discusses how the American church is in great need of reformation and change as she needs to return to the early roots of her existence. Another book authored by Cole with Phil Helfer is called “*Church Transfusion*,” and is an important resource as it also discusses the need for change and how the church can accomplish this change. Alan Hirsch has written a book called “*Forgotten Ways*” which brings attention to the fact that the American church needs to change and return to her early roots and addresses the need to once again become a missional church. Hirsch states, “This book is written to help us identify its constituent elements and to help us to (re)activate it so that we might once again truly be a truly transformative Jesus movement in the West.” Hirsch also wrote a book that will be used called “*On the Verge*,” that was co-authored with Dave Ferguson and this resource also examines the need for the church to return to her early roots and

⁷¹ Christopher Beard, "Missional discipleship: discerning spiritual-formation practices and goals within the missional movement." *Missiology*, Apr 2015.

implement a paradigm shift to recover her apostolic movement. A resource that will contribute to this discussion is *“The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives,”* authored by Peter Scazzero. Scazzero states, “The roots of the problem lie in a faulty spirituality, stemming from a faulty biblical theology.” Also, Stephen A. Macchia authored the book called *“Becoming A Healthy Church: 10 Traits of a Vital Ministry.”* Macchia addresses a problem in the church of Laodicea as well as the American church as he states, “I have found that one of the greatest sins of the Christian church today is an independent spirit.” Both of these books discuss the characteristics of what a healthy church should look like as well as how to grow into a healthy church. Lastly, a thesis project that is an interesting work that has contributed to this project is called *“Addressing Apathy in the church: Moving people towards a biblical healthy discipleship model”* and is authored by Kevin Harold Brooks. This work addresses the apathy in the American church and the need to change as he reminds the readers of the apostles and their time with Christ. Brooks states, “These men lived in the daily presence of Christ and received first-hand instruction in the area of discipleship. Jesus taught them what it meant to follow Him and live in community with others. This information is crucial for the church today if the body of Christ is going to minister and grow effectively and healthy.”

Small Groups

Jesus Christ chose the small group format in the making of His disciples and the apostles followed Jesus in choosing the small group format after the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven. Small group format is not only an effective method for discipleship but also it comes from a Biblical example. The literature of small groups will contain the teachings by Jeffrey Arnold from his book called, *“The Big Book on Small Groups”* and he reveals a thorough study on the small group format. Also, Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey authored a book called

“*Leading Healthy, Growing, Multiplying, Small Groups*” and they give valuable and credible information on the small group formation but also the characteristics of what is needed from a leadership perspective. A resource written Ron Nicholas is called, “*Good Things Come In Small Groups: The Dynamics Of Good Group Life*” gives valuable information from an insider’s perspective on key ingredients of a small group, which are nurture, worship, community, and mission. Jesus had His small group of twelve⁷² and Jesus told his disciples the secret to being united, of one accord, and sharing the gospel so others will believe. The apostles’ kept with the same concept that worked so well for Jesus Christ. They formed small groups as seen in the book of Acts⁷³ as they lived in community being of one accord and sharing. What is the magic of the small group? According to Ron Nicholas,

Small groups are an integral part of just about any church’s life. As the parts relate to one another in an atmosphere of love and security, submitting to Christ’s leadership and to one another, the results can be powerful: the church grows and up builds itself in love. A network of all kinds of small groups within the church, doing various ministries, enables the church to grow and make a difference in the world.”⁷⁴

In this book, some of the words emphasized for growth and development of disciples are unity, security, peace, fellowship, love, and growth. Lastly, a powerful book authored by Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson called, “*Building A Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone,*” discusses the areas of community and leadership as they apply to the small groups. A close examination within this project will look at the history and the development of small groups.

⁷² John 17:21–26.

⁷³ Acts 2:42–47.

⁷⁴ Ron Nicholas, *Good Things Come In Small Groups: The Dynamics of Good Group Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 15.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DYING OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH

In this project, this author will argue that the dying of the American church is occurring because of two primary reasons: prophetic and disobedience (sin). This examination of the dying of a church of America begins with a close look at one element of the relationship between the church of America and the church of Laodicea as mentioned in the book of Revelation. It is not the author's desire to attempt to prove the prophetic connection between the church of Laodicea and the modern day church of America, it is offered up for serious consideration. Also, though the church of Laodicea was a church in history, there are many similarities and comparisons that can be drawn from the two churches using the churches of America as a whole. The other element of examination will be the dying of a church of America due to the disobedience to God in following His commandments which is sin.

The title of this chapter may come across to some people as somewhat sacrilegious; however, the information contained in this project will demonstrate that there is a true dying of the American church and if Christians do not awake and arise soon, the death of the American church is imminent.

In the book of Revelation,¹ authored by the apostle John, he discusses seven churches, the recorded words of Jesus Christ to each angel of these churches, and characteristics of these churches. The seven churches mentioned are Laodicea, Ephesus, Philadelphia, Smyrna, Sardis, Thyatira, and Pergamos. Ephesus, of the seven churches, was the first church founded by Paul and then, under the influence from Ephesus, the Word of God was spread to the other cities and other churches were born.

¹ Revelation 2:1–3:22.

The Historical Church of Laodicea

The church of Laodicea existed historically and was located in the city of Laodicea located approximately ninety miles due east of Ephesus and approximately fifty miles southeast of the city of Philadelphia in Asia Minor. R. L. Overstreet states this data this way, “The seventh city on the circuitous Roman road in Asia Minor was Laodicea, about sixty miles southeast of Philadelphia and about one hundred miles east of Ephesus.”²

The city of Laodicea was built on an earlier site called Diospolis which meant City of Zeus. This city also laid claims to the deity of Zeus and a temple was constructed to Zeus. However, Mitchell Reddish makes it very clear on the origin of the city of Laodicea as he states, “Laodicea was established in the middle of the third century BC by the Seleucid king, Antiochus II, who named the city after his wife Laodice (whom he divorced soon after).”³ The two historic cities that are mentioned in the Bible, but not in the book of Revelation by name, that were the closest to Laodicea were the cities of Colossae, and Hierapolis. The city, as well as the church, of Laodicea was a very wealthy city. In the city of Laodicea, three major resources contributed to the wealth; a banking center, a large manufacturing center, and a large medical school. The medical school was famous and contributed to the overall wealth of the city and the church. George Ladd cites an important point as it relates to the school, as he says, “Laodicea was also the seat of a flourishing medical school which was particularly noted for its ear ointment and for “Phrygian powder” which was used in the manufacture of eye-salve.”⁴ Reddish confirms the previous statement but also adds a major point concerning the wealth of the city as he states,

² R. L. Overstreet, *The Temple of God in the Book of Revelation*. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166, no. 664 (2009): 446-462.

³ Mitchell G. Reddish, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. 2001), 79.

⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 64.

“Laodicea was famous for its banking industry, its textile production, and its medical school....During the first century AD, the city was economically prosperous. When an earthquake destroyed the city in AD 60, the city refused imperial assistance, instead opting to rebuild the city out of its own financial resources.”⁵ The city of Laodicea was situated near the banks of the Lycus River in the valley in close proximity to Colossae and Hierapolis. All three churches are supported by the Scriptures found in the book of Colossians, “To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colossae:....”⁶ and also Paul says, “For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis.”⁷ The city of Laodicea was located at the junction of three great roads that traversed Asia Minor.

One of the major areas for the city that presented itself as problematic was that in the condition of the city’s water supply. Historically, the city of Colossae, located approximately ten miles southeast of Laodicea, was known for its pure cold water supply, however, on the opposite side of the coin, the city of Hierapolis, located approximately five to six miles from Laodicea, was also known for its water but it was because of the medicinal qualities found in the hot waters of the city. The city of Laodicea had to receive its water through the aqueduct system from the city of Colossae and by the time the water was delivered it was not only lukewarm but it was the cause of illness from bacteria. John McRay has an interesting take on this subject as he believes that the sickness that the Laodiceans suffered was from the waters being bathed in prior to being sent through the aqueduct to Laodicea. John McRay states:

White mineral deposits collected over millennia around putrid warm springs at this resort town. Perhaps the sensuality of bathing in the spring waters infected residents of neighboring Laodicea and prompted the graphic warning of Revelation 3:16: to declare of

⁵ Reddish, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Revelation*, 79.

⁶ Colossians 1:2

⁷ Colossians 4:13.

the city's conduct, "because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of my mouth" (author's translation). Water piped into Laodicea by aqueduct from the south was so concentrated with minerals that the Roman engineers designed vents, capped by removable stones, so the aqueduct pipes could periodically be cleared of deposits.⁸

The earthquake devastated the entire region of the Lycus River Valley and there is evidence that the cities of Laodicea, Colossae, and Hierapolis were heavily damaged. However due to the wealth and resources found in the city of Laodicea, she was able to rebuild and again prosper without any help from others.

The church of Laodicea was the benefactor of the great wealth found in the city of Laodicea and was in need of nothing as Jesus states in the Scriptures of Revelation 3:17, "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing..."

According to D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer,

The claim of the Laodiceans is not merely that they need nothing, but that their wealth, moral as well as material, is entirely due to their own efforts. Their real condition is shown to be one of poverty, in spite of their money; nakedness, despite their abundance of cloth; blindness, though they have many physicians. This church, therefore, alone of all the seven, is called 'the pitiable one.'⁹

Jesus then tells them in Revelation 3:19, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent."¹⁰ Jesus states He loves them and though His words have been difficult to hear, He confirms that He does love them and they need to repent of their sins against God. William Barclay has an interesting take on this subject as he says,

Let us first take the word *rebuke*. The Greek is *elegchein* and it describes the kind of rebuke which compels a man to see the error of his ways. The rebuke of God is not so

⁸ John McRay, *Archaeology & The New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House Company, 1997), 248.

⁹D. Guthrie, ed. and J. A. Motyer, ed., *New Bible Commentary*. 3rd ed (Carmel, NY: B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 1287.

¹⁰ Revelation 3:19

much punishment as illumination...The discipline of God is not something which we should resent, but something for which we should be devoutly thankful.¹¹

Jesus is saying how much He loves them but due to their sin He will rebuke them and prior to any punishment, Jesus wants them to understand why they will receive chastisement. However, there is no indication recorded that the historical church of Laodicea ever truly saw their sin and no recorded documentation that this church ever repented from her sin against God. Therefore, there is much support for the fact that Laodicea was a real church that existed in a real city of history in Asia Minor.

The Prophetic Church of Laodicea

This author now turns the attention to the prophetic understanding of the discussion of the seven churches in Revelation with a focus on the church of Laodicea. The book of Revelation was written by the apostle John at approximately A. D. 95 – 100 and would be historically correct to understand that there were many established churches around the time of the writing of the book of Revelation. Of those churches, it is apparent that Paul birthed many of them and of those he did not give birth, he was certainly a heavy influence to those who began a church. Jesus Christ selected only seven of these churches to address through the apostle John in the book of Revelation. It is clear that the message from Jesus was directed literally to those seven historical churches and it is also clear that the same messages to these churches could be applicable to all churches in every age. However, Harold Willmington has an interesting take on this subject as he states the following:

The chronological purpose: that the characteristics of these churches serve as a prophetic preview of the seven great periods in Christendom from Pentecost to the rapture. A suggested outline of this predictive panorama may be seen as follows:

1. Ephesus (A.D. 30 – 300) – name means “desirable.” The Apostolic Church.

¹¹ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John, Volume 1 (Chapters 1 to 5)*. Revised Ed. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1976), 145 – 146.

2. Smyrna (100 – 313) – name means “myrrh.” The Martyr Church.
3. Pergamos (314 – 590) – name means marriage.” The Compromising Church.
4. Thyatira (590 – 1517) – name means “continual sacrifice.” The Roman Catholic Church.
5. Sardis (1517 – 1700) – name means “remnant.” The Reformation Church.
6. Philadelphia (1700 – 1900) – name means “brotherly love.” The Revival Church.
7. Laodicea (1900 – rapture) – name means “people’s rights.” The Worldly Church.”¹²

The worldly church is a name that should strike fear in all true believers of Jesus Christ as it resonates with the correlation of the true church of Jesus Christ becoming the compromised church of the world. The name Laodicea has been interpreted to mean a variety of different meanings. According to Jerry Falwell,

The church at Laodicea (rights of the people) is the church of insipid lukewarmness. It describes the moral condition of the church at the close of the church age. The people demand their rights with democracy and almost anarchy as the result¹³

Could this also be connected to the reasons that Paul spoke to Timothy as in the Scripture that states, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;”¹⁴

Jesus informs the church that due to their lukewarmness He will “spew” them out.¹⁵ The people of the church of Laodicea were not hot or cold for Jesus but only lukewarm. Martin

¹² Harold L. Willmington, *Willmington’s Guide to the Bible: Vol. 2 New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 278.

¹³ Jerry D. Falwell, ed., *Liberty Bible Commentary: The Old-time Gospel Hour Edition* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1983), 2666.

¹⁴ 2 Timothy 4:3.

¹⁵ Revelation 3:16.

Kiddle paints this picture as he states, “For better to be completely untouched by the flame of religion than to have only smouldering embers, half choked in ashes.”¹⁶

Jesus gives an invitation and a promise to the church of Laodicea as He states,

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.¹⁷

Jesus is clearly telling the church of Laodicea that they need to repent and return to God. If they do this they will receive this invitation and promise. Reddish states, “Although often understood in individualistic terms, this promise is perhaps best understood as a corporate promise addressed to the church.”¹⁸ Jesus says He is at the door and knocking so man will invite him into His church. If man chooses to refuse to allow Christ into His Church, there is a warning of judgement. According to the views of John Walvoord as he states;

Having concluded the messages to the seven churches culminating in the message to the church at Laodicea, the invitation becomes a personal one to all who will hear the words of warning. The prophetic foreshadowing provided in the seven churches as representative of churches found throughout the entire history of the church as special application in connection with the church at Laodicea. Under this point of view the state of this church is typical of the church of the last days and is therefore an exhortation to self-judgment and dedication to the will of God especially appropriate for the consideration in modern days.¹⁹

Walvoord also states, “The final message to the church at Laodicea is the crowning indictment, a warning against the danger of lukewarmness (3:15–16), of self-sufficiency, of being unconscious

¹⁶Martin Kiddle and M. K. Ross, *The Revelation of St. John* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1941), 58.

¹⁷ Revelation 3:20–22.

¹⁸ Reddish, *Revelation*, 83.

¹⁹John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary By John F. Walvoord* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), 97.

of desperate spiritual need. To contemporary churches each of these messages is amazingly relevant and pointed in its searching analysis of what our Lord sees as he stands in the midst of the lampstands.”²⁰ A warning of judgement of God on the church as God will take His hand off the church and usher in the seven year period called the Tribulation which follows the rapture of the church. According to Barclay, “It is in fact, God’s final punishment to leave a man alone. “Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone. (Hosea 4:17).”²¹

Jesus says to him that overcometh and man can overcometh his sin with the repentance which is the turning away from and then the turning to God for forgiveness of his sins. If man can do this, he then will sit with Jesus at the right hand of the Father, but if he chooses not to repent, the future doesn’t look so bright. This Scripture was given to the church of Laodicea as well as the other churches and this ties this church especially to the prophetic, as this message wasn’t simply given to this church but to all man and churches of the future. According to Barclay,

It generalizes the message of the letter. It means that their message was not confined to the people in the seven churches nineteen hundred years ago, but that through them the Spirit is speaking to every man in every generation. We have set these letters carefully against the local situations to which they were addressed; but their message is not local and temporary. It is eternal and in them the Spirit still speaks to us.²²

It is important to look at the big picture and understand that Jesus is speaking to all generations and not simply one localized body.

There is a definite correlation of the facts and truths concerning the church of Laodicea and the church of America. Merrill Tenney makes a strong comment on this subject as he states,

²⁰ Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 100.

²¹ Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 145.

²² Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 149.

“The letters to the seven churches close the section of Revelation that relates to the immediate present of the author. To what extent they forecast the development of the historic church may be debatable. The probability that they have a meaning for the church of all time is enhanced by one prominent fact: the increasing imminence of the Lord’s coming is reflected in His utterances of correction to these churches...”²³

Though this may be debatable there is a strong probability that the letters are speaking to future generations and not simply to a local church of that time.

The Present Condition of the American Church

The growth of the American church is an excellent place to begin this examination to understand the present condition. One would hope to find the American church flourishing with a strong foundation of growth; however, the facts do not prove this out. Research reveals that there are severe problems that exist in the American church as it is no longer experiencing growth, other than that of what is deemed “transfer growth.” Ken Sidey states it this way, “Perhaps church growth’s greatest challenge in North America comes from research that shows that more than 80 percent of all the growth taking place in growing churches comes through transfer, not conversion. The statistic strikes at the heart.”²⁴ Transfer growth not only is the largest area of growth for the church but it far outweighs any conversion growth in America. Though the decline of the church in America today is measured in numbers, the dying of the church is due to the lack of conversion growth. The church once was a growing organism and actually grew at an exponent rate until it went from approximately 120 people in the upper room to the state religion of the Roman Empire. The previous statement may seem oversimplified, however, not by much as Rodney Stark states, “I propose that there were a total of about a

²³ Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 68.

²⁴ Ken Sidey, "Church Growth Fine Tunes its Formulas," *Christianity Today*, (June 24, 1991), p. 46.

thousand Christians in the empire in the year 40.”²⁵ Alan Hirsch reports that at a seminar the question was asked how many Christians were there before Constantine came on the scene and how many after, and the answers were as follows; “100 A.D. as few as 25,000 Christians and 310 A.D. up to 20,000,000 Christians.”²⁶ It is obvious that the Christian community was growing strong. Stark also stated, “And it is generally agreed that by the year 350, Christians were in the majority – if barely – amounting to somewhat more than 30 million who were at least nominal Christians.”²⁷ As one looks to the historical data of Christianity the growth was predominantly achieved by conversion. Again, Stark’s opinion on the matter of conversion is,

Conversion is primarily about bringing one’s religious behavior into alignment with that of one’s friends and relatives, not about encountering attractive doctrines. Put more formally: people tend to convert to a religious group when their social ties to members outweigh their ties to outsiders who might oppose the conversion, and this often occurs before a convert knows much about what the group believes.²⁸

The correlation of the previous statements and data can be that if the majority of the American churches are either plateauing (flat lined) or in decline, the church cannot be experiencing conversion growth. The church must learn, or re-learn how to express the salvation story and reach out to others or the church will die. Benton Johnson, Dean Hoge, and Donald Luidens make their case on this subject as they explain:

“The underlying problem of the mainline churches cannot be solved by new programs of church development alone. That problem is the weakening of the spiritual conviction required to generate the enthusiasm and energy needed to sustain a vigorous communal

²⁵ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 155.

²⁶ Alan Hirsch, 2006. *The Forgotten Ways: reactivating the missional church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group), 18.

²⁷ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 156.

²⁸ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 68.

life. Somehow, in the course of the past century, these churches lost the will or the ability to teach the Christian faith.”²⁹

Obviously, the church is losing ground and the numbers are staggering due to the lack of passion and commitment to the teaching of the Christian faith which begins and ends with the person of Jesus Christ. This is a major reason that not only is the church in decline numerically but is slowly dying as lack of desire to the making of disciples for Jesus Christ. Barna adds, “Since 1980, there has been ‘no growth’ in the proportion of the adult population that can be classified as ‘born again’ Christian. The proportion of born again Christians has remained constant at 32% despite the fact that churches and para-church organizations have spent billions of dollars on evangelism. More than 10,000 hours of evangelistic television programming have been broadcast, in excess of 5,000 new Christian books have been published, and more than 1,000 radio stations carry Christian programming. Yet despite such widespread opportunities for exposure to the Gospel, there has been no discernable growth in the size of the Christian body.”³⁰ That is an amazing fact that seems bone chilling and reveals much about the church of America.

Another revealing fact that the church of America is in decline, and slowly dying, is offered by Carlson and Lueken as they state, “Every year more than 4,000 churches close their doors compared to approximately 1,000 new (and mostly very small) churches that start.”³¹ This statistic must break the heart of any and all Christians as the doors of approximately 4,000 churches close each year. That is 4,000 congregations that no longer worship together, pray together, fellowship together and the darkness fills the buildings that once heard the praises of

²⁹ Benton Johnson, Dean R Hoge and Donald A Luidens, "Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline." *First Things* 31, (March 1993): 13-18. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed July 5, 2016).

³⁰ Barna, *Marketing the Church*, 26.

³¹ Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken, *Renovation of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 40.

God. Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken also note that “half of all churches in the U.S. did not add any new members to their ranks between 2010 and 2012.”³² An incredible statistic as over half of the churches of America did not add one new member to the ranks in those years. This would mean that very few, if any, new converts of Jesus Christ were able to reject the darkness and come to the light for salvation. If those who did somehow receive conversion, they must not have been included in the rolls of the church for discipleship either.

People who go to church, and call themselves Christians, have serious issues understanding, and accepting Christianity today, which may be a reason for the decline in the church. According to Barna only six out of ten Christians believe the Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings,³³ which leaves four out of ten Christians that doubt the Word of God. Many Christians believe that Jesus was not sinless during His time on earth as thirty-seven percent believe that Jesus did commit sins.³⁴ Also, Barna’s research data shows that many Christians do not believe in the person of the Holy Spirit but only think of Him as a symbol as sixty-two percent of Christians believe this.³⁵ This is a major reason, that if Christians do not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, the sinlessness of Jesus Christ, and the person of the Holy Spirit, why they are no long attending a church that promotes this view, causing the slow death of the church. The problem stated clearly as Jonathan Falwell gives a simple understanding for solution as he says, “Church growth is really more of a matter of growing and developing

³² Ibid. 76–77.

³³ Barna, *Growing True Disciples*, 65.

³⁴ Barna, *Growing True Disciples*, 65.

³⁵ Barna, *Growing True Disciples*, 65.

disciples. The body will grow in quantity as it also intentionally develops each individual to reach their full potential in Christ.”³⁶

Shared Characteristics of the church of Laodicea and the church of America

The church of Laodicea has a number of characteristics that are amazingly similar to the characteristics of the Worldly church and/or the church of America in the modern era. A major characteristic can be found in the lukewarmness that was found in the church of Laodicea. Is this a characteristic of the church of America? According to Hal Lindsey it is, as he states, “Although this Laodicean lukewarmness is the predominant characteristic of the church age today, there are signs that the Philadelphian evangelistic fervor is reviving in these closing days of human history. That’s consistent with God’s pattern of always showering down grace before hurling blasts of judgment.”³⁷ He does confirm that a judgment is coming on the modern day American church which is the “spewing out” that Jesus spoke of, but interestingly he believes that there will be an evangelistic movement prior to the Great Tribulation. One thing for sure is what David Graves has said, “Our passion for Christ ought to lead to a healing (hot) for the spiritually sick, and refreshment (cold) for the spiritually weary. Our service for Christ should flow with fresh water of service and not a lukewarm apathy for the needs of others. Christ prefers us either hot or cold, but lukewarm behavior makes Him want to vomit.”³⁸ The word apathy means to have a lack of emotion, feeling or interest in a person or thing. Apathy breeds lukewarmness as the Christians of today, as well as yesteryear, are empty and emotionless as it

³⁶ Jonathan Falwell, Gen. Ed. *Innovatechurch: innovative leadership for the next generation church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 111.

³⁷ Hal Lindsey, *There’s A New World Coming: A Prophetic Odyssey* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House Publishers, 1973), 72.

³⁸ David E. Graves, “Jesus Speaks to Seven of His Churches, Part 2.” *Journal – Bible and Spade* (Second Run) – Volume – BSPADE 23: 3 (Summer, 2010). 9.

comes to a relationship with God and His mission. K. H. Brooks states, “The lack of overall health in the church as a whole at this particular time is due in part to the failure of the church to practice biblical discipleship and accountability. The apathy which exists in the church is evident not only in the members of the average church body but also among the staff including the pastor.”³⁹ If they are apathetic toward God, they will not take to heart the relationship nor the call to serve God in accordance with His Word. In the church of America, it is apparent that church members don’t even care enough to invite others to join them in church services. Rainer makes an interesting point as he says, “Only 21 percent of active churchgoers invite anyone to church in the course of a year. But only 2 percent of church members invite an unchurched person to church. Perhaps the evangelistic apathy so evident in many of our churches can be explained by a simple laziness on the part of church members in inviting others to church.”⁴⁰ The words of Jesus on the subject of service must be falling on deaf ears in many of the modern churches as they did on the historical church. Jesus says, “If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour.”⁴¹ If one doesn’t care about the Word of God and this relationship with God to serve others, this is a reason for the dying of the church. According to Barna, “How can you and your faith community serve the unchurched, motivated by nothing but love? The goal is to serve the churchless, not because it proves our spiritual self-worth, but because it’s the Jesus thing to do.”⁴²

³⁹ K. H. Brooks, (2014). *Addressing apathy in the church: Moving people towards a biblical healthy discipleship model* (Order No. 3636361). Available from Dissertations & Theses @ Liberty University. 1.

⁴⁰ Rainer, *The Unchurched Next Door*, 25.

⁴¹ John 12:26.

⁴² Barna and Kinnaman, *Churchless*, 186.

The second characteristic of the church of Laodicea shared with the church of America can be found in the area of disobedience to God. The sin of disobedience that is apparent in the church of Laodicea and the American church is one of self-sufficiency. The sin of self-centeredness leads one to think they are in the center and that they must take care of their needs and this leads man to self-sufficiency. However, the Bible reveals a different plan for man. Jesus begins and shows the church that what they believe is truly opposite from the truth. Jesus tells the angel of the church of Laodicea, “Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with good, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.”⁴³ Jesus is saying the exact words to the church of America as she stands in her obstinacy to God by her reliance on her riches and self-sufficiency due to self-centeredness. In the eyes of God, the church of Laodicea was in horrible shape as they were wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked, but to the church of Laodicea, they saw themselves as rich in money, self-sufficient, and in no need of Jesus Christ. How blind is the church of America as she refuses to see herself in the same sin? This sin is that of self-centeredness and a rejection of the reliance on God and a need to remain self-sufficient for their own pleasures and desires. According to Millard Erickson, “We need to look more closely at the human sin of self-centeredness. The essence of the sin does not lie in preferring ourselves to others, but in preferring some finite thing to the supreme value, God.”⁴⁴ Though both churches held to their position of self-centeredness and self-sufficiency, God in his Word shows man he needs to be dependent on God. The entire passage of Psalm 86 shows both churches their true need – the need to obey and trust God and remain reliant on Him. Man has great need to be dependent upon

⁴³ Revelation 3:17.

⁴⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. 2nd ed.(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 314.

God for everything from life, breath, love, forgiveness, and sustenance in all. A powerful Scripture found in Psalm 86 is one that illuminates the position of David which is diametrically opposed to both churches as he states in, “Bow down thine ear, O Lord, hear me: for I am poor and needy.”⁴⁵ In humility, David admits he is poor and needy where both churches feel they are rich and in need of nothing. Another Scripture that illuminates man’s need for reliance on God is found in the book of Proverbs, “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.”⁴⁶ Both of these Scriptures are found in the Old Testament and would have been accessible to the church of Laodicea but in their sin, they rejected the reliance on God and traded it for their own self-centeredness and self-sufficiency. Could this truly be an issue of idol worship? If both churches are self-centered and self-reliant it appears that the bigger issue is that “self” is the god and both churches have turned away from the true God. Through Moses, God spoke these words, “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”⁴⁷ It appears that both churches have gods before the true God and this is idol worship. Though idolatry is as old as man himself, the Bible speaks at great length against idolatry. Elwell speaks clearly on this subject as he states,

In the later history of Christianity, idolatry in the strict sense has continued to be opposed in the terms of the ancient biblical prohibitions. But the continuing danger has more commonly returned in the metaphorical sense delineated in the NT; it is the “worship” (i.e., the total dedication of a person) of that which is seen and tangible, the goals of covetousness, rather than the unseen spiritual being that is God.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Psalm 86:1.

⁴⁶ Proverbs 3:5.

⁴⁷ Exodus 20:2–3.

⁴⁸ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 589.

The third characteristic of the church of Laodicea is found in the area of compromise.

The Word of God found in Joshua says,

Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord. And if it seems evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.⁴⁹

To serve the Lord God Almighty, one must first surrender his will, bow, and obey the will of God. One must not compromise the Word of God but simply obey. This is a difficult concept for many in their walk with Jesus Christ. As the God of Self is the God of both churches, is it easier to understand that man won't bend his knee to the true God. One day all knees will bend and all men will bow before Him, "For it is written, 'As I live', saith the Lord, 'every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.'"⁵⁰ This may be a major reason for the dying of the church as man and his desire is to please his god, Self, and exchange the truth for a lie. In God's word, He states, "Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."⁵¹ Obviously, man is off the path of righteousness and on a path of destruction and this is very similar to the church of Laodicea. A major characteristic is both churches are in sin. James teaches this as he said, "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin."⁵²

The fourth characteristic that is similar appears to be the bowing of the church and her leaders, to the people, or congregants, and their desires and demands instead of the lifting up and

⁴⁹ Joshua 24:14–15.

⁵⁰ Romans 14:11.

⁵¹ Romans 1:25.

⁵² James 4:17.

the worship in obedience to the name of Jesus Christ. The church of Laodicea was completely self-sufficient and in need of nothing including the presence of Jesus Christ in their church and the worldly church appears to be self-sufficient with no need for the presence of Jesus Christ in their church. The worldly American Church seems to follow the need of the people and their desires and their rights much more than the need to obey and follow the commandments of God.

Pastors of today that have accepted leadership positions in churches of America have a tremendous responsibility and must know they are first called by God for service as well as have the courage to take a stand and lead their flock in accordance with God's Word. According to Scazzero, "The overall health of any church or ministry depends primarily on the emotional and spiritual health of its leadership. In fact, the key to successful spiritual leadership has much more to do with the leader's internal life than with the leader's expertise, gifts, or experience."⁵³

John MacArthur states this quite eloquently as he says,

In the ministry, pressure to compromise, to mitigate the message, and to avoid offending sinners will always exist. However, the preacher's job is to expose sin, to confront the lost with the hopelessness of their condition, and to offer the cure for their wretchedness in the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Doing those things will lead to confrontation and opposition. The courage to stand firm derives from a humble dependence on God's power.⁵⁴

If a pastor is a true called man of God, he will stand against this type of pressure and trust God to deliver him either through an acceptance of God's truth by the congregation or a removal by God's hand from that church. A truly called man of God will stand before God and will be completely dependent upon His power and not the approval of those who pay him money.

MacArthur continues on this point as he states, "A man of God must flee the evils associated

⁵³ Scazzero, Peter. 2010. *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 20.

⁵⁴ John MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005), 18.

with the love of money: various temptations, snares, harmful desires which lead to destruction, apostasy, and sorrow. Greed is the enemy. It will destroy the man of God, so he must run from it.”⁵⁵ As it is stated by God through Paul in Ephesians 6:10, “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.” God desires to call a man as His pastor for His church. Jeremiah 3:15, “And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.” According to Charles Spurgeon;

Now, all in a church cannot oversee, or rule – there must be some to be overseen and ruled; and we believe that the Holy Ghost appoints in the church of God some to act as overseers, while others are made willing to be watched over for their good. All are not called to labour in word and doctrine, or to be elders, or to exercise the office of a bishop; nor should all aspire to such works, since the gifts necessary are nowhere promised to all; but those should addict themselves to such important engagements who feel, like the apostle, that they have “received this ministry.”⁵⁶

However, it is noted in the Word of God found in Jeremiah that a man should not serve God in this capacity if he is not called by God. Jeremiah 23:32, “Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the Lord, and do tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore, they shall not profit this people at all, saith the Lord.” God is against any man who is not called by God and teaches false doctrine and lies to His people under the “calling” of God that truly he has not received. A pastor who is not called by God but a career pastor will succumb to the pressure and only preach what seems appropriate to that congregation. This is another reason that the church in America is dying due to compromise and greed.

The sad state of affairs in the American church is that many pastors are not truly called by God and many of those who are called by God are not standing strong in His power to lead

⁵⁵ John MacArthur, *Preaching: How to Preach Biblically* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005), 64.

⁵⁶ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students: Complete and Unabridged* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 22.

their flocks according to the Word of God. Could the Scripture of Paul found in 2 Timothy that says, “Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof from such turn away” still hold truth to man as he should recognize the fact the church only has a form of godliness but denies the power of God and he should turn away?⁵⁷ Graves also states clearly,

Throughout history there have been churches like these seven churches. The call extends to the Church today to hear the voice of the Spirit in a culture that summons the Church to compromise. The Church still struggles with formalism, idolatry, materialism, apathy, lack of love, persecution, and false teachers. As the Church awaits the Lord’s return, it must watch (Mt 24:52; Mk 13:35) and pray to be faithful to the Savior.⁵⁸

The church of America is in a desperate place in history and in the path of God’s judgment if something is not done soon. Willmington adds, “The church age: Little comment is needed to describe the sad state of Christendom as it exists today. Many groups which brazenly carry the name of Christian seem to prefer Communism to democracy, encourage immorality, support anarchy, downplay every important biblical doctrine, and ridicule Bible believers.”⁵⁹

The Dying of the American Church is Simple: Sin.

God tells man clearly what His purpose is for his life as He says, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”⁶⁰ Not keeping the commandments of God is called sin. W. E. Vine states that sin is, “the missing of the mark.”⁶¹ John actually calls sin an unlawful act, lawlessness, as he states,

⁵⁷ 2 Timothy 3:5.

⁵⁸ Graves, “Jesus Speaks to Seven of His Churches, Part 2,” 9.

⁵⁹ Willmington, *Willmington’s Guide to the Bible*, 286.

⁶⁰ Ecclesiastes 12:13.

⁶¹ W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, Jr. *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 576.

“Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.”⁶²

According to Elwell, “In the biblical perspective, sin is not only an act of wrongdoing but a state of alienation from God...It signifies the rupture of a personal relationship with God, a betrayal of the trust he places in us.”⁶³

God’s desire for man to have a relationship with Him is, and has always been, established on the keeping of His commandments. Jesus states clearly as He gives the Great Commandment, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”⁶⁴ MacArthur states this clearly as he says, “Love”...refers to a volitional love, not an emotional feeling. It is a love that is unrestricted, unrestrained, and unconditional. It should be interpreted in this passage in its broadest sense. It means love to everybody – love God, men, believers, and non-believers...the man of God is especially a lover of God. He longs for God...”⁶⁵ Man should desire to love God and in this love he should desire to know God; “that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;”⁶⁶ as well as long for God, “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?”⁶⁷ Man is also to love unconditionally his fellow man whom is considered a brother or sister in Christ. His neighbor is one who is of like

⁶² 1 John 3:4.

⁶³ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1103.

⁶⁴ Matthew 22:37–39.

⁶⁵ MacArthur, *Preaching*, 72.

⁶⁶ Philippians 3:10.

⁶⁷ Psalms 42:1–2.

mind and of one accord in his beliefs that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and God. Man is to love and care for his brother and sister and minister to them in ways that help build him up to the glory of God. Paul teaches that man is to minister to each of his brothers and sisters as he says, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”⁶⁸ Man is to be working to help his fellow man to grow in Christ. According to Henry Halley, “The one most important thing in life is our attitude toward God. Everything depends on that. Jesus is God incarnate. The one thing that he wants is that we love Him more than we love even our own life.”⁶⁹ To love the true God with everything within your soul and body is truly worship and He is worthy. Dr. Franklin Graham addressed this issue as he confirmed this statement with this author as he said, “America has turned its back on God. We see people everywhere who claim to know God but do not live for Him. The only thing that will turn this nation around will be a spiritual awakening, sparked and fanned into flame by the Holy Spirit of God.”⁷⁰ Sin is causing the American Christian, as well as the church, to turn away from God and to live for self over their God. Sin can be the reason for the loss of love for God and according to 2 John 9, “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.” Sin is the transgressing of God’s law and he who does this does not have God.

Another commandment of God is found as Jesus teaches a New Commandment as He says, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that

⁶⁸ Ephesians 2:10

⁶⁹ Henry H. Halley, *Halley’s Bible Handbook: An Abbreviated Bible Commentary. Revised Ed.*(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1965), 478.

⁷⁰ Franklin Graham, July 8, 2016, E-Mail message confirmation to author.

ye also love one another.”⁷¹ Jesus is clear on this commandment that man is to love one another as He loved man. Jesus Christ died on the cross for the opportunity for man to be forgiven of his sins. Man is to follow the example of Jesus Christ and be “willing” to die for another to His Glory. Jesus also says, “Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.”⁷² Love for God to serve man is essential in the relationship with God as seen in the example of Jesus Christ loving man and dying for him. To show love for God and to others who do not know Jesus Christ can be found in the desire and execution of evangelism. Joseph Stowell says, “Character-driven leaders are committed to building their enterprise with the ways of Jesus as the guiding light of their leadership competency.”⁷³ Jesus led His disciples to evangelize and share the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand. Pastors and leaders of the church are to be busy doing this and teaching disciples to go and make disciples but love is the driving force; the love for God as well as the love for others. According to Earley and Wheeler, “True evangelism does not require cumbersome programs. On the contrary, evangelism should be a natural (organic) expression of every believer...it organically initiates from the heart and soul of dedicated believers who are on mission with God to impact the unsaved world with the message of Christ.”⁷⁴ All Christians should be on mission for God with His message of love and salvation to the world. William Gould states, “When one is obedient to the call, he becomes truly an individual, for it is through Christ that he receives his true relation to God, to himself, and to his fellow men...We reach others through him. Christ heals a natural

⁷¹ John 13:34.

⁷² John 15:13.

⁷³ Joseph M. Stowell, *Redefining Leadership: Character-Driven Habits of Effective Leaders* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 50.

⁷⁴ Earley and Wheeler, *Evangelism Is*, 115.

breach that separates man from the world...If he takes Christ at his word; his reward is the fellowship of the church.”⁷⁵ Man reaching man to share the plan of salvation of God through Jesus Christ is the guts of this commandment.

If the love for God toward one another was truly the case in the church of America the data would reflect this; however, the data shows almost the complete opposite. Barna says, “The evangelical church in America is losing the battle to effectively bring Jesus Christ into the lives of the unsaved population...Since 1980, there has been no growth in the proportion of the adult population that can be classified as “born again” Christian.”⁷⁶ Being honest, Schultz states the truth about the church of America, “There’s no easy way to say this, but it needs to be said: The American Church is Broken.”⁷⁷ Rainer gives strong evidence to sin being the cause of the dying of the church as he states, “One of the main reasons many Christians do not share their faith is simply explained by the word disobedience. Spiritual lethargy takes place when we fail to obey him. The problem for many Christians is that they are not growing spiritually, and lack of spiritual growth inevitably leads to a diminished desire to share Christ with others.”⁷⁸

Lastly, is the church still in the business of making disciples? As seen in the previous data in this project, the early church may have grown to some 20,000,000 after three hundred years of existence. Also, it has been demonstrated that there is virtually no new conversion growth in the modern day church in America; so is the church really in the business of making disciples? Jesus was clear in the giving of the Great Commission to His disciples as He stated,

⁷⁵ William Blair Gould, *The Worldly Christian: Bonhoeffer on Discipleship* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967), 28.

⁷⁶ Barna, *Marketing the Church*, 21.

⁷⁷ Schultz and Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, 5.

⁷⁸ Rainer, *The Unchurched Next Door*, 217.

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”⁷⁹ Go into the world and share the gospel of Jesus Christ so others will find the plan of salvation and be reborn into the family of God. However, once the gospel message is received and accepted, man has the responsibility to aid that person to grow in Christ and this is what is called the process of discipleship. Falwell states the process of discipleship in this manner, “The process of making disciples is called discipleship and it looks like this: Discipleship is the process of guiding individual disciples to grow in spiritual maturity and to discover and use their gifts, talents and abilities in fulfillment of Christ’s mission.”⁸⁰ A Scripture that aids in the understanding of this process is found in Colossians 1:28-29, “Whom we preach warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.” The teaching of every man in all wisdom is the growing of His disciples so that they may be presented to Jesus in perfection.

Overwhelming research is evidence to the fact that the church of America is dying due to disobedience to God and this is sin. The historical church of Laodicea did die out and the modern day American church may experience the promise of Jesus Christ spewing her out if she doesn’t repent and return to God. She needs to return to her first love, repent of her sin, and fall back in love with God. Just as Jesus spoke to the angel of the church of Ephesus as He said,

⁷⁹ Matthew 28:19–20.

⁸⁰ Falwell, *innovatechurch*, 114.

“Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.”⁸¹ The church at Ephesus had left her first love, God, and Jesus was telling her to return. The church of America needs to return to her first love and repent of the sin against God and be humbled at the feet of Jesus for forgiveness.

In conclusion, data is overwhelming to the fact that love is an issue in the church of America. The lack of love for God as well as the love for neighbors and others is a contributing factor in the decline and the slow death of the church in America. Disobedience to God is sin and data shows that the church is in sin as she is not evangelizing, or sharing the good news to the lost, and to those she does convert, she doesn't have a discipleship plan in place to grow them into leaders to go and make disciples. There is hope for the church of America. Jesus said it so clearly as He spoke with Peter and said, “That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”⁸² Jesus is always, and continually, in the business of building His church, or people of God and even Satan will not prevent Jesus from accomplishing His work. Satan tried his best to stop Jesus when He was on this earth and Satan failed, and this time is no different. Satan will try and destroy the mission of Jesus to build His people and he will obviously cause many problems like the dying of the American church, but Jesus will prevail and He will be victorious. Jesus is victorious.

⁸¹ Revelation 2:4.

⁸² Matthew 16:18.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HISTORY OF DISCIPLESHIP/SMALL GROUPS

Discipleship is the key to victory for the church of America and for the glory of God.

Discipleship is a complex process that consists of many different elements and is best facilitated Biblically through the small group format. According to Bill Hull, “Discipleship means the state of being a disciple. In fact, the term discipleship has a nice ongoing feel – a sense of journey, the idea of becoming a disciple rather than having been made a disciple.”¹ In this chapter, this author will give a clear and concise understanding of discipleship as it has progressed through the years. The author will offer up three models of discipleship: Relational Model, Academic Model, Incarnational Model and also a look at the history of discipleship throughout the Bible and the years to follow, and conclude with a short historical glance into the history of small groups.

History of Discipleship

In the following examination of the facts, it is imperative that one understands that there needs to be a clear definition and explanation of terms. As one examines the history of discipleship, it will be abundantly clear that even in the first century, and every century that followed, there was a deep understanding for the need for discipleship. Also, included in the long history of discipleship, one will find that there are many different methods and models in which to disciple others. Heather Zempel states, “I would say that there are as many ways to do discipleship as there are people. C. S. Lewis said, “Let God be as unique with others as he was

¹ Bill Hull, *The Complete Book Of Discipleship: On Being And Making Followers Of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006), 35.

with you. That means there are billions of ways to do discipleship.”² In this project, the review of billions of methods of discipleship will not be possible but there will be a review of a number of the major methods most commonly utilized.

Discipleship cannot occur without disciples, so a strong definition of the word disciple would be needed at this point. According to Early and Dempsey, "A disciple is a person who has trusted Christ for salvation and has surrendered completely to Him. He or she is committed to practicing the spiritual disciplines in community and developing to their full potential for Christ and His mission."³ Though there are many definitions of this word today, this author would say that this is possibly the most comprehensive of all definitions. Jesus is the foundation on which one would look to as the best example of our disciple maker. So once a person becomes a disciple of Jesus, he would simply look to the process that Jesus used to make disciples and go forth to multiply, in Christ, that effort. Disciples then begin the process of making others disciples, creating leaders to make more disciples, and this would be the process of discipleship. A strong definition of the word discipleship can be found in the writings of Dempsey, as he states, "Discipleship is the process of guiding individual disciples to grow in spiritual maturity and to discover and use their gifts, talents and abilities in fulfillment of Christ's mission."⁴

An examination of the history of the Christian discipleship process will be discussed, as well as, is this still an appropriate plan for the church of the present day? This writing will look at the history of discipleship using the Biblical foundations, discipleship in the Gospels, the book

² Heather Zempel, *Models of Discipleship Throughout Church History*.
<http://discipleshipgroups.blogspot.com/2006/02/models-of-discipleship-throughout.html>. 2006. 1.

³ Early and Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is*, 28.

⁴ Falwell and Dempsey, *Innovatechurch*. 114.

of Acts, the Epistles, and down through the centuries. Also, a close look at the vehicle that was chosen to drive this process, which was the small group format.

One of the most important themes that seem to be woven into the fabric of the history of Christian discipleship is that of "community." In each of the following areas of examination, one will find that community is a prevalent part of the discussion. Julie Gorman states,

True community is more than being together. A person does not develop trust in others simply by being in a group where members study together, pray together, and share a common group leader. Trust involves relatedness. Relatedness is more than presence although that is the beginning. To relate, one must know, and to know one must work at being open to trust.⁵

One will find that within community there are relationships built and grown in an intimate and loving manner. An example of this is found in the community of Jesus Christ and His disciples. Jesus utilized the small group format creating a community of disciples that lived together, and with the process of discipleship, they grew in intimate and loving relationship with Jesus Christ and with each other.

Models of Discipleship - Biblical Foundations

There are many different models of discipleship that have found their roots in the Bible. The Relational Model is a model found in the Bible and it is based on the relationship between Jesus and His disciples. According to Robert Coleman, "One cannot transform the world except as individuals in the world are transformed, and individuals cannot be changed except as they are molded in the hands of the Master."⁶ Jesus walked, taught, and lived life with His disciples under the umbrella of a relationship. This relationship falls under the theme of community. This

⁵ Julie Gorman, *Community That Is Christian: A Handbook On Small Groups* (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor, 1993), 43.

⁶ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 2nd. Ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Revel Publishing, 1993), 24.

community that Jesus built with His disciples was constructed on the sharing of every aspect of life. Through this Relational Model approach, Jesus would change the world. Some may feel that this relationship may have ended upon the death of Jesus, but this model continued in their day as well into the present day. One can see this relationship with the resurrected Jesus through the disciples in the book of Acts. Luke brings this to life right from the beginning of this book. This relationship can be seen so clearly as the disciples were living a daily relationship with Jesus Christ as well as with each other.⁷ This would be called a Relational Model of Discipleship. As stated by Zempel, "Within the Relational approach to discipleship, people grew in their relationship to Christ as they grew in their relationship to one another."⁸ People growing in, and with, a community of people as they grow together in Christ Jesus is the foundation of this approach. This model of discipleship seems to have lost its traction once there became a more institutional form of worship established under Constantine beginning around 312 A.D. However, this model has been extremely effective throughout history within the small group format of gatherings such as cell or community groups.

The second model of discipleship, the Academic Model, is a model that is offered in a systematic or academic approach. Many churches utilize this form, or model, of discipleship through the formation of Sunday school and other programs that encourage the expanding of the mind through study. Zempel states, "In the academic approach to discipleship, people were taught about Christ and grew in their relationship to him through a systematic, academic approach."⁹ Paul spoke of this model as he stated, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of

⁷ Acts 2.

⁸Zempel, *Models of Discipleship Throughout Church History*, 1.

⁹Zempel, *Models of Discipleship Throughout Church History*, 2.

this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."¹⁰ One can see the word "transformed" as a result of the renewing of a person's mind. Any time one is involved in the study of the Word, this would qualify as discipleship. One can also see this as Luke states, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."¹¹ Again, later in history, one finds the teachings of Pachomius. According to Edward Smither, "Pachomius is generally recognized as the father of cenobitic (community) monasticism.... Pachomius made scriptural teaching and memorization a vital part of the daily monastic program and encouraged his monks to read while following a Rule that had Scripture as its basis."¹² The academic model became very much a preferred manner with the invention of the printing press. As the Bible became more accessible to the average man, he began to read it and join groups with teachers to gain knowledge.

The third model is the Incarnational Model of Discipleship and this is based on the actions of Christians allowing Jesus to move in them to serve others. This model can be found in the more theologically liberal churches of the 20th Centuries. According to Zempel, "These churches espoused a belief that Jesus' call to action on behalf of the poor, sick, and oppressed was the channel by which we learned about him, became more like him, and grew in our relationship with him."¹³ Biblically, one sees the teachings of Jesus to care for those who are hungry, sick, or poor etc., but also, again, in the book of Acts one finds the disciples caring for others in this manner: "And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as

¹⁰ Romans 12:2.

¹¹ Acts 2:42.

¹² Edward L. Smither, *Augustine as Mentor. A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 41/51.

¹³ Ibid. 2.

every man had need."¹⁴ A central theme for those of this model demonstrate that caring for the less fortunate is how they grow in Christ and help others learn to grow in Jesus. Extending love to others is a wonderful way to show the love of Jesus and open the doors of a relationship to others. Once the lost person feels that a person really cares and loves them by their expressions of love, there can be a sharing of the gospel and an opportunity for others to find salvation in Christ. William Fay states, "Nonbelievers must hear the gospel an average of 7.6 times before they receive it. So if anyone walks away from you when you share the gospel with him, remember: the Word of God never returns void....Your obedience to share may bring this person to a turning point."¹⁵ So to have opportunities in the present day, many feel this is a model that will serve well for discipleship. Another area this model can be found is in the world missions. According to Scott Moreau, "Incarnational Mission: Just as Christ was incarnated as a person, so missionaries, it can be said, need to incarnate themselves into a new context. They cannot come as newborns, but they can learn the language and culture of their new context in such a way that they can behave like one who was born in that context."¹⁶

The above three models of discipleship serve as Biblical foundations that one can build upon to reach and aid others in their Christian growth. Though there are many other models found in the Bible, these mentioned above can serve to help others understand that there are historical and Biblical basis for discipleship. As one studies these models, it is apparent that to be involved in a discipleship program, one must first be a disciple. This comes to each of us through the word that seems to come out abundantly clear in these models, and that is

¹⁴ Acts 2:45.

¹⁵ William Fay and Linda Evans Shepherd, *Share Jesus Without Fear* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1999), 11.

¹⁶ Scott A. Moreau, Gary R. Corwin and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Publishing, 2004), 12.

"transformation." One must be transformed by the blood of Jesus to be a disciple, and then one's heart is transformed by the discipleship process as one grows into the likeness of Jesus.

Discipleship in the Gospels

To examine discipleship in the Gospels of the Bible, one would first need to examine the early leaders. The first Christian leader would be that of John the Baptist. Some might feel that one should begin with the person of Jesus but to illustrate how God wants to develop and send out His disciples, a close look at John will aid in this effort. As stated in His Word, "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."¹⁷ His ministry was active and alive as he was preaching and baptizing for the repentance of sins. An interesting point on the above Scripture is that the phrase "kingdom of heaven" is found only in the gospel of Matthew. The gospels of Mark and Luke use the phrase "kingdom of God" and most accept these terms to be used interchangeably but the phrase in Matthew was probably used this way as this gospel was written to the Jews and to say "God" may have been offensive so Matthew chose the word "heaven." The point was that John was speaking about the Messiah coming soon, so he was speaking as of a future event. This can be supported by the Scripture, which states, "John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: He shall baptize you with the Holy ghost and with fire."¹⁸

John the Baptist had disciples that followed him and participated in his ministry as supported by scripture, "Again the next day after John stood, and two of his disciples;"¹⁹

¹⁷ Matthew 3:1-2.

¹⁸ Luke 3:16.

¹⁹ John 1:35.

However, once Jesus began His ministry, the disciples of John left him and joined the ministry of Jesus. D. A. Carson states, “but in the light of John the Baptist’s self-perception as the forerunner of the Coming One, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of his disciples, those perhaps who understood him best, discerned that their master was constantly pointing beyond himself to another.”²⁰ In effect, God separated and sent them out to continue to grow under the leadership of Jesus Christ. Then we see that they are again sent, after the crucifixion, as they are now prepared to go into the world and serve God.

Now the attention must be placed squarely on the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist - suffered the temptation of Satan - and He began His ministry. The Scriptures support this as His Word says, "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."²¹ One can find a more descriptive statement of Jesus from His Word as it states, "And saying, the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel."²² Unlike John who spoke of a future event, Jesus states His kingdom is now. Jesus then begins to call his twelve disciples together for discipleship and training.

This must be understood that the disciples answered the call of God to repent and be saved. Once they were called, left their lives, families, and work, they entered into a community of God and into a community with each other. Though Jesus preached to many, His discipleship training was done in a small community of believers. From this understanding, one can see the Relational Model of Discipleship used by Jesus Christ for His disciples. For three and half years,

²⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According To John: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 154.

²¹ Matthew 4:17.

²² Mark 1:5.

the disciples walked, ate, talked, trained, and lived with the person of Jesus Christ. One can see the training and discipleship of Jesus to His disciples in many ways. Jesus encouraged Nathanael from the beginning, He loved John as He allowed him to lie on His chest, He tolerated the doubts of Thomas, and He rebuked Peter. Ultimately, Jesus was building eleven men to be ready to be sent out into the world. As He changed them, they would go out, with the power of the Holy Spirit, and change the world.

Jesus gave them and all Christians much needed information. Jesus was clear that His disciples needed to understand that God loved them and that they needed to love Him first! Jesus gives them the Great Commandment; "Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment."²³ It was clear that there needed to be love of God first and foremost! Love is essential to the life of a Christian. Jesus then gave His disciples another understanding of His teachings. This is found as Jesus gives them the New Commandment, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another."²⁴ According to Falwell and Dempsey, "Here Jesus takes love one step further. We are to love God. We are to love our neighbor. And in God's plan we are to love other brothers and sisters in Christ. Love is the central component in the kingdom of God. God loves us and sent His son. As a result we can love God."²⁵ The last recorded passage of Jesus to His disciples can be found in the Great Commission which states, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all

²³ Matthew 22:37–38.

²⁴ John 13:34–35.

²⁵ Falwell and Dempsey, *Innovatechurch*, 105.

things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen."²⁶ This is an amazing statement to His disciples, and to all disciples, that Jesus sends His disciples out on His mission!

Mission is a vital part of the discipleship process. One finds that God Himself is the author of missions. Jesus Incarnate was the first true missionary as He left heaven in submission to the Father, as He was "sent" to bring salvation to man. In the words of Jesus Christ Himself, one finds this truth as He states, "For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me."²⁷ Though God called and sent men like Abraham and Moses, one sees that Jesus is the first true missionary as He was sent by the Father from heaven and He accomplished His mission in the physical. Jesus is sent by the Father and gathers and builds disciples to be sent out on their mission. On His mission, He brought together other disciples (apostles) and brought them into a small community and developed them for their mission. An interesting point is found in the word "apostle." According to Elwell, "The biblical use of "apostle" is almost entirely confined to the NT, where it occurs seventy-nine times: ten in the Gospels, twenty-eight in Acts, thirty-eight in the epistles, and three in the Apocalypse. Our English word is a transliteration of the Greek *apostolos*, derived from *apostellein* (to send)."²⁸ In His Word Jesus states, "Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you."²⁹ Another interesting point for this discussion is found in the understanding of "*Missio Dei* which is Latin for "the sending of God"....In sum, *Missio Dei* is a comprehensive term encompassing everything God does in relation to the kingdom and

²⁶ Matthew 28:19–20.

²⁷ John 6:38.

²⁸ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 85.

²⁹ John 20:21.

everything the church is sent to do on earth."³⁰ It is clear in the Gospels that Jesus was sent by His Father on mission and Jesus sent His apostles on mission to the glory of God.

Discipleship in the book of Acts

The book of Acts is overflowing with historical evidence of Christian discipleship. One of the first passages that aid in the revelation of discipleship is found at the hand of God. Jesus has instructed His disciples to wait for the "promise of the Father." God sends His Holy Spirit to the men and women in the upper room empowering them to begin their mission for Christ. The resurrected Jesus Christ speaks to these disciples, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."³¹ One can clearly see that these disciples of Jesus Christ were to wait for the promise of God in the Holy Spirit to be "sent" to them. However, once they receive this promise they would become witnesses for Jesus Christ all over the earth. This Scripture, Acts 1: 8, is considered the map (geography) for all disciples to know they are to cover the world and it is one of the five Great Commissions discussed in the Bible.

One can clearly see the revelation of this promise as the disciples were gathered together in the upper room awaiting the promise of the Father. As found in His Word, "And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting."³² The disciples receive the outpouring of the promise of God and began their mission and their ministry. As they begin this mission, there is strong evidence of all of the

³⁰ Moreau, Corwin, and McGee, *Introducing World Missions*, 73.

³¹ Acts 1:8.

³² Acts 2:2.

disciples being of one accord and continued in the teaching of the Word of God, fellowshiping together, sharing meals together, and in prayers together. These people were following the same format that Jesus Christ led His disciples in their discipleship. They were learning, sharing life in fellowship and meals, and praying together; "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."³³ Again, one can see the theme of community within the Scriptures as the disciples lived life together and shared this life in every way. According to Scriptures, it is clear that the discipleship by God through the apostles to others was administered in both the temple and in the small family/community gatherings as seen in the words of Luke, "And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart."³⁴ Again, as seen in the discipleship of Jesus in the Gospels toward His apostles, now His apostles are forming small groups to administer the discipleship to others in small groups also.

Though this is an important point in the understanding of the history of Christian discipleship, its revelation of the effectiveness may be needed. They would go to the temple for the preaching, teaching, and exhorting others which is an important facet of the discipleship process. However, one may need to reflect on the definition of discipleship to refresh the memories to understand the other part the apostles were accomplishing at this time. Falwell and Dempsey state their definition of discipleship is, "Discipleship is the process of guiding

³³ Acts 2:42.

³⁴ Acts 2:46.

individual disciples to grow in spiritual maturity and to discover and use their gifts, talents and abilities in fulfillment of Christ's mission."³⁵

Discipleship is a process, so the need for temple was important, but so was the small house group. Arnold says, "Whether house churches were independent groups of believers or were part of larger churches is uncertain. It is likely, however, that small house fellowships were the building blocks of the church in each city or region."³⁶ In today's environment in America, the local New Testament church is important and should consist of small groups. There needed to be a certain element of intimacy between the members of the group to accomplish this task. The process of guiding individuals in spiritual growth in the praying together and confessing of sins together requires this intimacy. Also, the discovery and development of spiritual gifts, talents and abilities can be heightened under the more close and personal attention of others.

It is also very clear that this model of Christian discipleship pleased God. Twice in Acts 2, one can see God blessing the public preaching of Peter as God adds about three thousand souls to His church. Also, God adds daily to His church following the small house gathering descriptions from Scripture, "Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."³⁷

However, with the onset of this exciting time came much persecution of Christians. The book of Acts illustrates the persecution of Christians from the imprisonment of Peter and John, the killing and stoning of Stephen, and the Jews seeking to kill Saul to name but just a few. According to Stark, "During the summer of the year 64, the emperor Nero sometimes lit up his

³⁵ Falwell and Dempsey, *Innovate Church*, 112.

³⁶ Arnold, *The Big Book On Small Groups*, 18.

³⁷ Acts 2:47.

garden at night by setting fire to a few fully conscious Christians who had been covered with wax and then impaled high on poles forced up their rectums. Nero also had Christians killed by wild animals in the arena, and he even crucified a few."³⁸ As the persecutions continued, the house churches/gatherings also continued. According to Comiskey who writes, "In the early part of the 1st Century, the celebration/cell experience took place on a daily basis. However, due to persecution, as the history of Acts progresses, the celebration ceased to be a daily experience."³⁹ The small group/church gatherings were being persecuted but they were not dying out. They simply continued serving God by serving others by the continuing of the discipleship process. It appears that as those who hated the Christians of this time and wanted to destroy them all, this persecution may have actually made them stronger by forcing them to band together in strength. According to Rodney Buchanan, "The persecution eventually escalated to the place where the believers were driven underground. They were greatly dependent on each other and perhaps lived in closer relationships with each other than at any previous time."⁴⁰

Discipleship in the Epistles

It is clear how the theme of community reigns through the book of Acts and one can see that this theme continues in the writings of Paul in the Epistles. Paul burst on the scene in the book of Acts and became one of the greatest missionaries in the history of Christianity. He was one of the greatest church planters also. He either began most churches with his presence, or under his influence or teachings of disciples, that went out to begin their churches. According to

³⁸ Stark, *the Triumph of Christianity*, 137.

³⁹ Joel Comiskey, *The Joel Comiskey Group*.
<http://www.joelcomiskeygroup.com/articles/dissertation/History.html>. 2015.

⁴⁰ Rodney Buchanan, *History of Pre-Reformation Small Groups*, In Class Article used by Dr. Dempsey at Liberty University, 2015.

Cole, "To the Colossians, he writes a letter as the apostle of this expanding Asian network, but he also mentions that they, along with the Laodicean church, have never seen his face."⁴¹

The apostles obeyed Jesus Christ as He told them to wait on God to receive His power to go out and witness so others could believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. Churches were springing up all over the known world as the apostles engaged their disciples in the process of discipleship. However, one of the greatest, Paul, was apparently under the same discipleship process of Jesus Christ that the apostles underwent and it changed his life and the life of Christianity. Scripture records it this way, "For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ."⁴²

Persecution continued to reign against the early Christians, however, they continued to flourish and grow. Throughout the Epistles one can see that the house church continued in many cities, such as, Jerusalem, Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and Galatia to name but a few. Sometimes, there may be only one house church; however, as Paul greets them in his letters, one sees that he uses the plural of church. There were a number of house churches in a city such as in his letter to Galatia; "And all the brethren which are with me, unto the churches of Galatia."⁴³ To the many churches recognized in the Bible, one can see that Paul was a great church planter. However, he was a strong believer in the discipleship process set forth by Jesus Christ. One simply needs to look at the example of Jesus Christ to find the template of discipleship. Paul believed strongly that his disciples can look through him to Jesus Christ as their leader. Scriptures give strong support to this as it states, "Timothy who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall

⁴¹ Neil Cole, *Church 3.0: Upgrades for the future of the church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. 2010), 111.

⁴² Galatians 1:12.

⁴³ Galatians 1:2.

bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church."⁴⁴ This was a foundation on which he utilized in his discipleship process. One can find this in another Scripture; "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ."⁴⁵ There is sound advice found from the author of the book of Hebrews as he states, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever."⁴⁶ Not only does Jesus not change, the outcomes of discipleship, according to Dallas Willard, "that the nature of discipleship to Jesus and its outcomes does not change."⁴⁷

Again, one finds the theme of community being used in the Epistles is from the foundation and example of that community of Jesus Christ. A close look at what is called "The Great Plan," and "The Great Ambition," found in the book of Ephesians and in the book of Colossians is how God, through Paul, communicated the use of the roles of both leaders and the body. This is such an important area to understand that in the discipleship process, as in the Great Plan, one finds that God calls His pastors to equip the saints for service and He fits the body together with His children for growth.⁴⁸ This discipleship process for the body involves the discovery and development of their spiritual gifts. According to Dempsey, "This involves the disciple discovering and developing his or her gift and developing in the body (community) to their full potential."⁴⁹ Also, in the "Great Ambition," one finds that it is the ambition of the

⁴⁴ 1 Corinthians 4:17.

⁴⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:1.

⁴⁶ Hebrews 13:8.

⁴⁷ Dallas Willard, *Discipleship*. <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=134>. Article for the Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology, edited by Gerald McDermott, 2010. 5.

⁴⁸ Ephesians 4:11–16.

⁴⁹ Falwell and Dempsey, *Innovatechurch*, 108.

leaders to develop each and every disciple so that they be presented complete to Jesus.⁵⁰ If one follows the prescription of Paul on these areas, it is clear that discipleship must be directed to each individual person in the body of Christ to grow them to be complete and if this can be accomplished, the church as a whole will grow.

Discipleship Through The Centuries

As one looks at the history of Christian discipleship throughout the centuries, it would be advisable to begin with the ministry of Jesus Christ! As it has been examined in the above work, Jesus Christ is the example that everything must be compared with, and to. The theme of community that Jesus set forth in the first century is one that has continued throughout the centuries.

It would seem that as the community is the template for a strong discipleship, it has grown even stronger during periods of persecution. An important point on the understanding of community is according to Leith Anderson, "A community revolves around something shared: a neighborhood, business, political cause, medical issue, sport, and hobby."⁵¹ As Anderson stated, communities over the centuries shared a common interest in the area of political cause which was expressed in the manner of persecution. This would seem to draw them closer to God and closer to each other. One can see this clearly in the present day in the countries of China, North Korea, and Sudan to name but a few. However, the small communities are continuing to grow in strength and in numbers in the country of China which can be attributed to the power of God and His power found in each community. Again, Anderson states, "There were more martyrs for Jesus Christ in the twentieth century than in all the previous nineteen centuries combined. In the

⁵⁰ Colossians 1:28.

⁵¹ Leith Anderson, *The Jesus Revolution: Learning From Christ's First Followers* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), 20.

twenty-first century, there is persecution in Vietnam, North Korea, China, Sudan, and many other countries."⁵² So this has been with Christians for centuries but somehow God seems to turn persecution to His glory.

Another area that had an impact on the Christian and discipleship can be found in the year of 313, and the Roman Emperor Constantine. Though Constantine had many wonderful influences on and for Christians, he also had some negative effects. One effect that some may see as positive and some see as a negative is when Constantine elevated Christianity to a State Religion and this helped reduce the persecution against the Christians. Though many of this time thought this was a good thing, history shows that it also had negative effects. One of the negative effects can be found in how Constantine made some major changes within Christianity. According to Stark, "But Constantine's major contribution was to elevate the clergy to high levels of wealth, power, and status."⁵³ This feudalistic influence has lasted until the present day. Constantine also aided in the commissioning of the construction of many buildings of which one is the St. Peter's Basilica, along with many others. One of the major negative effects on Christian discipleship is that people began to leave the examples of Jesus in community, and came to focus on the buildings and hierarchical structure of the church instead of the intimate and loving need to grow in Christ.

This continued until the time of Reformation ushered in by Martin Luther. Though the Reformation had a huge impact in many different areas of Christianity, this author only wants to focus on that of discipleship. Again, in reflection to the above mentioned making of disciples, true Reformation began when Martin Luther became reborn into the family of God. God was working and in the process of discipleship with Martin Luther as he stumbled over the Scripture;

⁵² Ibid. 59.

⁵³ Stark, *the Triumph of Christianity*, 174.

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith as it is written, the just shall live by faith."⁵⁴ Martin Luther soon realized that the church couldn't save a person; it was only by faith in Jesus Christ. According to Stark, "Most radical of all, Luther proposed that salvation is God's gift, freely given, and is gained entirely by faith in Jesus as the redeemer."⁵⁵ It is amazing that Stark chose the words "gained entirely by faith in Jesus" as this is precisely what Luther stumbled onto. According to John Dillenberger, "human activity no longer has any part in the ultimate determination of man's destiny. Grace alone enables man to stand before the righteousness of God."⁵⁶ In a nutshell approach that is narrowed toward discipleship, Martin Luther stood against the church that wasn't concerned with the discipleship and growth of their congregations into the likeness of Jesus Christ but more focused on their money and power. In his way, Martin Luther was victorious in his stand to show the people that they must become disciples of Jesus Christ if they want to grow in His discipleship. Luther stood on both sides of the issue of small groups. He first came out in favor of small groups and the need for intimacy and growth found in small groups. This can be found in his sound teaching on the area of the priesthood of believers. However, for reasons that are not clear, Luther later in his life reversed his position. It is clear that one area of concern was expressed over the "earnest Christian" and the Anabaptist movement at the time. Regardless, Luther did move away from the promotion of the small group format for teaching.

⁵⁴ Romans 1:16–17.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 319.

⁵⁶ John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1962), xviii.

Any examination of the subject of history of Christian discipleship wouldn't be complete without a short discussion of two men. The first is Philip Jacob Spener who was a Lutheran pastor and a strong contributor to the small group format for training disciples in Pietism. The small group environment for discipleship was essential to Pietism. According to Buchanan, "His most important contribution was a reform of the practical life of the churches, which included the concept of small groups designed for spiritual growth."⁵⁷ Spener was a champion of having a covenant relationship within the small group for accountability to God and each other!

The second man that needs to be mentioned is that of John Wesley. Though Wesley was heavily influenced by the Puritans and Pietists, he was a giant of a man for God. He too followed in the footsteps of small groups that were laid out before him. However, he took this to another level in the development of what Wesley called, society, class, and bands. The larger groups being society and they separated into the class groups, and then a smaller group called bands came out of class groups. Each of these groups had a distinct usefulness and meaning. Along with Spener, Wesley held that the covenant relationship was tremendously important, on the corporate level but also to the individual.

Today, in American churches, the people are free to worship where and whom they choose as there was a rejection of a state church religion. Many American churches today strive to reach and teach their people to the glory of God. However, there is a noticeable breakdown in this line of communication. It is a known fact that over 80% of American churches are failing as they are either in a state of plateau or in decline.⁵⁸ One of the factors of decline is that the feudalistic foundation continues to remain in our American churches of today. The leaders today

⁵⁷ Buchanan, *History of Pre-Reformation Small Groups*, 8.

⁵⁸ Daniel R. Sanchez, *Church Planting Movements in North America* (Fort Worth, TX: Church Starting Network, 2007), 18.

continue to keep the people focused on themselves, their buildings and their religion. This continues to help keep the eyes of the people off of the person of Jesus Christ. If the eyes of the people are not on the person of Jesus Christ, one can bet that the hearts are far away from Him also. As one looks at the history of Christian discipleship, it is apparent that this theme of community is strong but yet very few churches utilize this method of discipleship.

History of Small Groups

A brief look at the history of small groups, or sometimes called cell groups, will provide valuable information to the understanding of how this vehicle can be the driving force of discipleship. Beckham makes a powerful statement concerning small groups as he says, “The strongest organizational unit in the world's history would appear to be that which we call a cell because it is a remorseless self-multiplier; is exceptionally difficult to destroy; can preserve its intensity of local life while vast organizations quickly wither when they are weakened at the center; can defy the power of governments; is the appropriate lever of prising open any status quo.”⁵⁹ One can see the power in the small group from the discussion of Jethro to Moses in the Old Testament⁶⁰ as well in the New Testament, especially in Acts.⁶¹ The small group is recorded many times as this served as the New Testament house church. Mallison states, “It is almost certain that every mention of a local church or meeting, whether for worship or fellowship, is in actual fact a reference to a church meeting in a house.”⁶² This can be seen in the book of Acts 12:12, as Mary, the mother of Mark, opens her house in Jerusalem as well as the service of Priscilla and Aquila as mentioned in the epistles. Frank Viola states, “One of the most striking

⁵⁹ Beckham, *The Two Winged Church Will Fly*, 119.

⁶⁰ Exodus 18:14–23.

⁶¹ Acts 2:42–47.

⁶² John Mallison, *Growing Christians in Small Groups* (Home bush West, N.S.W: ANZEA Publishers, 1989), 5.

marks of the early church was the absence of special religious buildings....In fact, the early church was the only religious group in the first century that met exclusively in the homes of its members.”⁶³ The early Christians lived in community as were the examples of the apostles in the book of Acts. Pat Hood states, “The early church lived in community and shared everything they had. Read the book of Acts. There was nothing easy or comfortable about the church being the church in a Christless culture.”⁶⁴ Living in community utilizing the small group format was not easy and it was an effective method of building disciples.

A major change that occurred in history that did have an effect upon the small groups that met as house churches found in the Bible is seen in the life of the Roman Emperor, Constantine. As previously discussed in this chapter, in the year 312 A.D. the Roman Emperor Constantine, being converted to the Christian faith, elevated Christianity the State Religion. According to Everett Ferguson, “Since there was one supreme God, Constantine felt there should be one earthly rule corresponding to the one divine rule. His mission was to overcome the demons of barbarians without the divisions within associated with polytheism.”⁶⁵ This ended many years of Christian persecution by the Roman government. One of the major public emphases was found in the building of many chapels/basilicas that gave Christians the opportunity to worship in public and not only in their houses. Ferguson states, “Perhaps the greatest outward show of favor for the church was Constantine’s extensive building program.”⁶⁶ In the building of the many

⁶³ Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing The Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Publishing, 2008), 86 – 87.

⁶⁴ Pat Hood, *The Sending Church: The Church Must Leave the Building* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 18.

⁶⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Church History, Volume One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 186.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 184.

structures for the Christians, it did reduce the small groups and replace the community church. This can be seen in history as well as into the present modern day worship of Christians.

There does seem to be a few voices in the wilderness that are calling out for the return to the first century small group format. Cole says, “Every Christian is a church planter, every home is a church, and every church building is a training center.”⁶⁷ It is apparent that Cole’s vision is that of returning to the small group format that was so effective in the process of discipleship in the early church. So if every Christian is a church planter, then it goes without saying that the Christian that plants the church would be the leader of that church. Jesus said in Matthew 16: 18, “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” The actual word used in this Scripture for the English word “church” is the Greek word *ekklesia*. This Greek word when one boils it down simply means the people of God. So Jesus is saying He will build His people of God and the gates of hell shall not prevail. Jesus is always building His people to transform them into His likeness. Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger say, “As a church leader, you partner with God to build the lives of people. If God has given you a clear process for making and maturing disciples, you must focus on the one thing in your church.”⁶⁸ Small groups are an effective way to build disciples.

One of the main reasons for the effectiveness of small groups can be found in the intimacy of community. A close knit group of people living, learning, and growing together in Christ. According to Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, “This is what God dreams for us and our churches. We are called to move into community, one at a time; on the basis of God’s identity as Three in One....We must find ways to answer that call by creating an expanding network of

⁶⁷ Cole, *Organic Church*, xxvi – xxvii.

⁶⁸ Thom Rainer S. and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning To God’s Process For Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 202.

small groups. That is the theological case. The evidence is overwhelming.”⁶⁹ It is clear that the small group must identify with the Triune God and living and growing in community is an important element in the discipleship process. Growing in Christ is important and to accomplish this, a small group must facilitate the growth in the knowledge of God’s Word. A disciple must be grounded in the word of God to walk the walk of a disciple and not faint. Arnold states, “Within a relationship-building framework, a primary task of the community of Christ is to know what God wants. So we must learn to read and apply God’s Word with integrity. Small group study is a human community’s effort to glean God-to-human truth through the help of the Holy Spirit.”⁷⁰ Another area of importance is found in the area of evangelizing. All disciples are commanded to go into the world and make disciples. The going process is the mission and making disciples cannot happen without evangelization. Evangelization is the proclaiming of the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. According to Arnold, “God also works in and through the life of a witness....Our response to God’s role in the process of evangelism is simple – obedience...God uses witnesses who are willing to reach out in humility, love and confidence.”⁷¹ A disciple must be trained to obey God and go out and make disciples. What better place to bring a person who has just received the good news of Jesus Christ and has been reborn but to a small group that teaches discipleship? In community, a person finds the intimacy to be open and honest and grows with each other. A new Christian would have many questions and may feel strange to be discussing them with strangers but once introduced to a small group, it would be a short time before the person finds the intimacy and security to be open. Judy Johnson states,

⁶⁹ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building A Church of Small Groups: a place where nobody stands alone* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 32.

⁷⁰ Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups*, 43.

⁷¹ Ibid. 168.

“One way to build a sense of togetherness and closeness is by being sensitive to members’ needs and joining together to meet these needs....Sharing what we are thinking and feeling can bind us together with a sense of having common experiences and feelings.”⁷² As disciples, what could be more common than the salvation experience and sharing of this experience only brings about intimacy and closeness that aids in the growth of disciples.

In conclusion, these are simply some of the reasons that small group format is effective and how the small group format facilitates the process of discipleship. A close knit group of people with common interests to grow in Christ and to make disciples is a powerful group. It does not surprise this author that these are some of the same reasons that Jesus Christ chose this format to the development of His disciples. Also, it is clear that the apostles followed in His footsteps and utilized the same small group format for the discipleship process that led to them sending disciples out into the world. The small group format was, and is, an effective vehicle for making disciples and the church needs to embrace this method once again.

⁷² Judy Johnson, *Good Things Come In Small Groups: The Dynamics Of Good Group Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 102 – 103.

CHAPTER FOUR

A PRACTICAL MODEL OF DISCIPLESHIP

A practical model of Christian discipleship for today can be found in this author's personal model. Since no churches in the area in which we live are obeying the commandment to make disciples, God called this ministry into existence for His glory. Gareth Icenogle states,

The small group is a generic form of human community that is trans-cultural, trans-generational and even transcendent. The call to human gathering in groups is a God-created (ontological) and God-directed (theological) ministry, birthed out of the very nature and purpose of God's being. God as Being exists in community. The natural and simple demonstration of God's communal image for humanity is the gathering of the small group.¹

Christ United Ministry, founded by this author, is an organism that is dedicated to the glory of Jesus Christ. Christ United Ministry has a website and it can be located at www.christunitedministry.com. It has a desire to become a national network of small group communities to offer many people the opportunity to find the love, care and intimacy of Jesus in, and through, others. As Jesus gave man the best example for discipleship, Christ United Ministry is dedicated to the making of disciples in, and for, Jesus Christ. In this chapter, detailed information on the process of making disciples utilizing the small group format will give clear understanding of the discipleship process in the modern age.

Small Group Format

The model of the small group format found in the book of Acts² is the model that Christ United Ministry operates as this group addresses every area of a person's life by example and word. In the Old Testament, though limited, one can find the use of small group format. The small group format is found in the area of delegation used by Moses under the guidance of

¹ Gareth Weldon Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrational Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 13.

² Acts 2:42–47.

Jethro. In Exodus,³ one sees clearly the forming of small groups in an attempt to best serve in a judicial capacity for the interests of man. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ uses the small group format in the choosing and ministry of His twelve and Icenogle makes a powerful statement as he says,

The small groups of men and women who responded to, lived with, loved the historical Jesus came together as a new community with the resurrected Christ. They shared His ongoing intimacy with Abba and learned the freedom of intimacy with one another. The gathered men and women came to understand and experience the community of Spirit, in whom the relationship between Jesus and Abba becomes the relationship of human community sharing with Jesus and Abba...Of this ongoing experience of sharing in the Spirit the new community comes to realize that when two or three or more human beings meet with Jesus, they are a microcosm of divine-human community, an ecclesia.⁴

It is clear in the book of Acts that they met not only in the temple but also house to house daily as they utilized the small group format. Also, a better example could not be found for the Christ United Ministry in the development of disciples than that of the same format used by Jesus Christ and the Apostles.

The Power of God

Christ United Ministry is always praying and watching for the power of God the Holy Spirit to draw a person to Himself through this ministry as we share the love and gospel of Jesus Christ with others. Jesus makes this point clearly as He says, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.”⁵ God must draw a man to Himself and under that power of the Holy Spirit that man will be convicted and stand in the truth. Earley and Dempsey state, “As we share the gospel, the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to convince the nonbeliever of his sin....He also convinces the nonbeliever of

³ Exodus 18:14–23.

⁴ Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations For Small Group Ministry*, 373.

⁵ John 6:44.

righteousness...the Holy Spirit also convinces the nonbeliever of judgement....Unless this work occurs, a nonbeliever does not, and cannot, experience salvation.”⁶ Once the person who is under conviction confesses he is a sinner and asks Jesus to forgive him of his sins by the blood shed at Calvary, then he is reborn into the family of God. A person must be reborn into the family of God by their faith in God offered by the blood of Jesus Christ. Paul gives a clear teaching of this process of faith and it only by faith alone that a man can receive the grace of God to be saved.⁷ To grasp the power of a discipleship process, one must first be a disciple. A person cannot become a disciple of Jesus Christ unless they have been reborn by faith. For a man to truly be saved he must possess a true faith in Jesus. According to Nate Herbst, “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Heb. 11:1). That literally means that you are so sure of God’s power that you live like it is and will be so, regardless of what the circumstances seem to dictate.”⁸

The Cost of Being a Disciple

Once they become brothers or sisters in Christ, they will embark on a lifetime discipleship journey with the ultimate goal of being slowly transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. At Christ United Ministry, it is taken very serious to discuss, at length, with this person the costs of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. David Watson and Paul Watson state, “The path to consistent obedience requires a great deal of discipline. Knowledge alone will not get one there.”⁹ A person must be willing to exercise discipline in their relationship with Jesus

⁶ Earley and Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is*, 32.

⁷ Ephesians 2:8–9.

⁸ Nate Herbst, *Great Commission Leadership: A workbook on Evangelism, Discipleship and Multiplying Christ-Like Multipliers* (Durango, CO: Master Plan Ministries, 2013), 32.

⁹ David Watson and Paul D. Watson, *Contagious Disciple Making: Leading Others on a Journey of Discovery* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2014), 68.

Christ if they desire to become a disciple of Jesus. Growth is not based on knowledge but of desire to obey. Steve Smith and Ying Kai say, “In some Christian ministry, we assess how mature a believer is based on how much he knows. But the New Testament assesses the maturity of a believer based on how much he obeys!”¹⁰ There is a cost of discipleship when one accepts and understands their role beginning with obedience. Christ United Ministry teaches that the cost of discipleship in Jesus is simple: It can cost a person everything – including their life. Luke quotes Jesus as saying, “So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.”¹¹ A person must be willing to sacrifice his possessions and even his family ties, if needed, to follow Jesus Christ. F.F. Bruce wrote, “The interests of God’s kingdom must be paramount with the followers of Jesus, and everything else must take second place to them, even family ties.”¹² Jesus also is quoted as saying, “And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.”¹³ So a cost to man to become a disciple is that he must deny himself and pick up his cross daily. The denial of self is powerful and difficult for many today. Jesus also says, “And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.”¹⁴ The pursuit of the cross must be the focus of a disciple of Jesus Christ. A person must be willing to deny himself and pick up the cross and follow Jesus Christ. Denial of self is a major issue for people in all ages but especially in the modern era as self seems to reign as god in many people’s lives. John Koessler explains,

¹⁰ Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *A Discipleship ReRevolution: T4T* (Monument, CO: WIG Take Resources, 2011), 79.

¹¹ Luke 14:33.

¹² F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 119.

¹³ Luke 9:23.

¹⁴ Luke 14:27.

“Those who answer the call to discipleship must do so thoughtfully. Christ is not looking for rash decisions that are made in the heat of the moment and then easily abandoned. Those who answer the call must know what Christ requires – He asks for everything.”¹⁵ Christ United Ministry stresses to each person to pray and make the commitment to follow Jesus Christ with all of their heart.

The Marks of Being a Disciple

Also, at Christ United Ministry, growth is imperative for a disciple in Jesus Christ. The teachings of the marks of a disciple are of major emphasis to aid others in their growth. This functions much like a road map so the disciples can ensure they are on the right path and when they find a problem they can openly discuss it to bring it to resolution. An important point is that discipleship is not a ministry or a program. As Koessler states, “Discipleship is not primarily a matter of what we do. It is an outgrowth of what we are.”¹⁶ Well defined marks of growth are an important element to a new disciple as well as to the teachers and leaders of disciples to ensure they are growing in Christ.

One of the first marks of a disciple after they have received salvation is found in the desire and need to be baptized. This is commanded by Jesus Christ in book of Matthew.¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes a powerful statement as he says, “The call of Christ and baptism leads Christians into a daily struggle against sin and Satan...The wounds inflicted this way and the scars a Christian carries away from the struggle are living signs of the community of the cross with Jesus.”¹⁸ Connecting with Jesus through water baptism helps the new disciple with

¹⁵ Koessler, *True Discipleship*, 27.

¹⁶ Ibid. 12.

¹⁷ Matthew 28:19.

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis, MN: First Fortress Press, 2003), 88.

inward strength and is an outward sign to the world that they have committed their life to Jesus and the struggle. Leon Morris contributes as he states, “Baptism by water also symbolizes the believer’s entrance into the sphere of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹ The new disciple is marked by water baptism which shows their decision of accepting the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus but at the same time it demonstrates the connection to God the Holy Spirit.

The second mark that is carefully watched for in the new disciple is found in the area of obedience. The second major area of the commandment of Jesus is found in Matthew.²⁰ Jesus is clear as He instructs and commands His disciples to teach new disciples to obey all that Jesus commanded them. Obedience is seen in a devoted relationship with Jesus Christ and the disciple desires to obey their Master Jesus. Koessler states, “Grace-rooted obedience recognizes that righteousness can only be received as a gift. It cannot be earned as a wage. My obedience is an expression of gratitude for that gift.”²¹ In love, man has a desire to seek the truth in obedience and seeks forgiveness where he falls short of God’s grace.

The third mark of a true disciple is one who is producing fruit as described by Jesus Christ in the book of John.²² The teaching of the truth that Jesus is the vine and the disciple is the branch is an important lesson. The new disciple receives all that they need from Jesus Christ to produce the fruit that is necessary to bring glory to God. According to Miles Stanford, “In the natural realm, the life that is already complete in the vine is increasingly supplied to the growing branches. The healthy condition of the branches is contingent on their abiding in their position

¹⁹ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 174.

²⁰ Matthew 28:20.

²¹ Koessler, *True Discipleship*, 16.

²² John 15:7–8.

in the vine.”²³ One of the most important fruits that a disciple can have produced through them by the Holy Spirit is that of love. It is in the accepting and following of the commandment of Jesus Christ as He says to love others as He has loved you.²⁴ The condition of the heart of a disciple must be that they are willing to die for this love for others as this is exactly what Jesus ultimately did for them. This love is the last mark that is constantly monitored to ensure the disciple is truly on the right path with Jesus. A disciple must know that God loved them first²⁵ and then possess the desire to love God and this mark will be shown to the world. If any of the above mentioned marks are missing or are weak, the disciple is moved to repent in humility so God can grow them in this area. Each of these marks demonstrate a loving relationship with Jesus and all fall short of the glory of God and the continual maintenance is imperative for a true disciple to walk in truth. Koessler states, “Our best hope is to take a good hard look at ourselves and determine which of the marks of discipleship are missing. If having a relationship with Christ is the key to being a true disciple, repentance is always the first step in that relationship.”²⁶ At Christ United Ministry, the disciples are taught to have an inward reflective heart and soul search daily to ensure they are as strong as possible in their relationship with Jesus Christ.

The Upward Movement Connection

This ministry is founded on the principles of the Bible with a strong understanding that mankind has great need to be connected to the Head of the church which is Jesus Christ. Earley and Wheeler state, “Our primary purpose is to glorify God and derive our greatest joy from Him. Yet there is more. Not only were we created for Gods’ glory, but we were saved to live for

²³ Miles J. Stanford, *The Complete Green Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 80.

²⁴ John 13:34–35.

²⁵ 1 John 4:19.

²⁶ Koessler, *True Discipleship*, 24.

God's glory."²⁷ This is an upward movement. Jesus says this in the Great Commandment, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."²⁸ Man cannot be a disciple for Christ and not possess this true love for God. David Benner states, "God's identification with his creation through the incarnation is the second installment of the Great Love Story....The Son came to reveal the character of the Father. The Son came to bring us back to the Father – back to love."²⁹ It is God's love for us that draws man to His love for salvation.

Once a person is reborn, they must grow in Christ and this can be done in accordance with His Word, "Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, 'If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed. And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'³⁰ The disciples must learn the Word of God and grow into His likeness. Donald Whitney says, "No Spiritual Discipline is more important than the intake of God's Word."³¹ Also, according to Neil Cole and Phil Helfer, "We believe that knowledge of the Scriptures is a necessary ingredient in the discipleship process."³² This can be found in the teachings of Paul as the pastor will equip the saints for service³³. Together the body of Christ is formed and knitted

²⁷ Earley and Wheeler, *Evangelism Is*, 13.

²⁸ Matthew 22:37.

²⁹ David G. Benner, *Surrender To Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 25.

³⁰ John 8:31–32.

³¹ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines For The Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), 28.

³² Neil Cole and Phil Helfer, *Church Transfusion: Changing Your Church Organically From the Inside Out* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 130.

³³ Ephesians 4:12.

together and this is found to be on a strong scriptural foundation from His Word.³⁴ Disciples grow with each other in this process. Earley and Dempsey state, “My job as a disciple maker is to get the new believer into an environment of mutual accountability and learning under the Word of God.”³⁵

The Inward Movement Connection

A disciple then must be connected to each of his/her brothers and sisters in Christ. Putman says, “An important value that needs to be supported and protected in our churches is relationship – relationship with the true God and relationship among believers. The church needs relationship, not just because it is the best way to teach but because our relationships are the evidence that what we preach is true.”³⁶ The next step is how the disciple must look inward. This is the Inward Movement and founded on the Scripture in His Word as Jesus says, “And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”³⁷ To love God is to be in an obedient relationship with Him and to love your neighbor is to be in relationship with them also. John Ortberg states, “God uses people to form people...we are rooted and our souls are nourished in the love of God and other people.”³⁸ Relationship with God and with God’s people is the key to love and growth.

³⁴ Ephesians 4:16.

³⁵ Earley and Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is*, 149.

³⁶ Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship*, 50.

³⁷ Matthew 22:39.

³⁸ John Ortberg, *The me I want to be: becoming God’s best version of you* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan., 2010), 182 – 183.

The Outward Movement Connection

Disciples must then be on mission with God and go seeking the lost. Again, love is the central theme here and this is the Outward Movement. Jesus gives a new commandment to His disciples as He says, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another, as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."³⁹ A disciple of Christ must carry this love for the lost in his heart. Luke is recorded saying, "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost."⁴⁰ A disciple of Jesus Christ should desire to imitate his Master, obey, and follow in His footsteps in seeking those who are lost and help them connect to the person of Jesus Christ. This is really the essence of Love. T. Clegg and T. Bird make an eloquent statement, "The essence of God's mission is extravagant love....The essence of God's love is to make a difference, by God's power, in the lives of other people, for now and for eternity."⁴¹ When all of the movements, Upward - Inward - and Outward are being exercised within the small group format of community, it is the belief of this author that the model of Jesus and the apostles is being followed and God will bless as He does in the Bible.

The Multiplication Movement Connection

The disciples participate together with others in the worshipping, fellowshiping, sharing of meals, communion, baptisms, devotions, Bible teachings, community outreach, and missions. This is the overall Christian discipleship process found at Christ United Ministry. Christ United Ministry always has her eyes open for God to reveal new leaders that God is building and creating for His glory. Gene Wilkes says, "Leadership begins when a God-revealed mission

³⁹ John 13:34.

⁴⁰ Luke 19:10.

⁴¹ Clegg and Bird, *Lost in America*, 20.

captures a person. This person turns leader as he becomes servant to the mission.”⁴² The ultimate goal of Christ United Ministry is found in God’s principles of the multiplication movement connection and that is to build new leaders to send out and make more disciples and in accordance with the Scriptures. Smith and Kai say it simply, “Leadership multiplication is the engine the Spirit uses to sustain a movement.”⁴³ This is a Biblical principle that many miss in today's world. If one will look closely at the example of Jesus Christ in His discipleship process, He began with twelve disciples, grew them up, and sent eleven of them out under the power of the Holy Spirit. They changed the world. The multiplication process was in effect and this is the true way that disciples of today need to focus the church’s attention. The world is growing exponentially and the church is failing. If there is a desire to catch up and bring glory to God, the multiplication process is the only way.

Obedience

Lastly, Christ United Ministry is built on the obedience to the commandment found in Matthew 28:19-20, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen." Obedience to all the commandments of God is essential to the journey with God. Earley and Dempsey state, “God demands absolute obedience to His commands.”⁴⁴ Jesus also says in John 14:15, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” As many today only give lip service

⁴² Gene C. Wilkes, *Jesus On Leadership: Discovering the secrets of servant leadership* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1998), 19.

⁴³ Smith and Kai, *T4T: A Discipleship ReRevolution*, 281.

⁴⁴ Earley and Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is*, 50.

to the commandments, Christ United Ministry is focused on the need to be obedient to God to receive the full blessings of God.

In conclusion, this ministry takes the word of God seriously and obedience is an important issue. Christians are to become disciples and then sent out to make disciples and understanding that a systematic approach is best as once a person is reborn into God's family, they must make a decision if they desire to become a disciple and what is the cost to them and their family. They also need to understand the marks of discipleship to stay on a strong growth path to maturity. To become a disciple, man must first become connected to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior which is the upward movement connection. Then, in obedience to the Scriptures, they must stand in the love for their neighbors, inward movement connection, and learn to reach out to the lost of this world which is the outward movement connection. In the doing of all of the above mentioned, they will be taught all that Jesus has commanded and this brings them into obedience to God.

CHAPTER FIVE

FIVE BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR REVIVAL

In this final chapter of this project, this author desires to connect the readers to the Biblical principles of God that will bring revival to a dying church in America. As it has been communicated, the need of the church to make disciples is of the utmost importance. Putman states, “Discipleship is so much more than just sharing the news about Jesus; it is also about teaching people to obey the commands Jesus gave us. Unfortunately, many churches have not taken this charge seriously, and they are experiencing significant problems.”¹ It is clear that the church of America is, and has been, in sin for a long time and she must repent of this sin to avoid imminent death. One of the most prayed prayers of many is found in 2 Chronicles 7:14 but for some reason, it hasn’t worked. America is still in trouble, her church is still in trouble, people are lost and in trouble, and many still pray this prayer. This author must confess that he also prayed this prayer for the church for years to no avail until God revealed a truth to him. Praying this prayer is only part of man’s responsibility and this is where it gets hard to swallow. God promises to heal this land if man will do the following steps: humble, seek, pray, and turn from their wicked ways.

Life of the American church lies in the first four Biblical principles of 2 Chronicles 7:14. It is imperative to realize that God opens this Scripture with the propositional word “If.” God, knowing man, is saying if man will do this, He will do that in return. There is no guarantee that man will respond to God in the way that will move God to accomplish His part. When God spoke through the Chronicler, saying “If my people, who are called by my name,” He was saying that Israel belonged to God as she was a nation with His name on her. Isaiah speaks to this issue

¹ Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship*, 21.

as he says that others were never called by His name but only Israel was called like this.² Also, Jeremiah speaks to the same issue as he states “we are your people,”³ and seeks God not to leave them. Christians are His people who have been saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, and this is the mark of ownership of God on them. God is also speaking to the Christians in America as, “my people who are called by my name,” as they read the Scripture found in 2 Chronicles. The church of America needs to cry out to God as Jeremiah did begging God not to leave them for they need His blessings. Falwell states, “Therefore, His requirement for national blessing was their seeking His face in true repentance (turn from their wicked ways). Only then could He remove their guilt and restore them to usefulness.”⁴ The church of America needs His blessing to restore her so that she can become useful to God again.

Humility

In the understanding that God is speaking to His people, the first challenge to man is “to humble themselves.” In the book of Micah it says, “To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”⁵ This Scripture illustrates that God demands man to be totally devoted to Him and humbleness is an important issue of that devotion. Humility is the first Biblical principle for a revival for the church of America. Vine’s Dictionary defines the word humble as “lowliness of mind.”⁶ It is important for man to understand that he is not to be proud in the eyes of God. It is used always in a good sense in the NT, metaphorically, to denote (a) “of low

² Isaiah 63:19.

³ Jeremiah 14:9.

⁴ Falwell, *Liberty Bible Commentary*, 810.

⁵ Micah 6:8.

⁶ Vine, Unger, and White Jr., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 314.

degree, brought low....”⁷ So man should also not be proud and haughty but also understand of how he is to be brought low before God, which is a good thing. Luke makes a statement of how those of low degree are exalted⁸ and Paul refers to the same as he says, “but condescend to men of low estate.”⁹ God is the Great I Am and this alone should bring man to his knees in humbleness, a low position, before God.

Man does make a conscious choice of allowing his heart to become humble for God. John Dickson makes a powerful statement on the issue of humility, which is the act of being humble as he explains, “Humility is the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself. More simply, you could say the humble person is marked by a willingness to hold power in service of others.”¹⁰ Humility is a choice. Man can stand in his own pride and power and attempt to continue to do what he believes is a good thing or he can choose to become humble at the feet of Jesus to understand His will. Once at the feet of Jesus, the overwhelming truth of who man is and what he has done is shown in the light of God – this leads man to the love of God. Benner expresses this as he says, “The humbling encounter with the depths of my sin leads to a love for God that is grounded in an appreciation for grace. And any genuine encounter with grace has the effect of deepening my love of others.”¹¹ It is by God’s grace that man can understand his failures and take the strength of God to stand up and continue his journey.

⁷ Ibid. 314.

⁸ Luke 1:52.

⁹ Romans 12:16.

¹⁰ John Dickson, *Humilitas: A Lost Key To Life, Love, and Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 24.

¹¹ Benner, *Surrender To Love*, 99.

Prayer

Prayer is God's way for man to be connected to Him and for God to be connected to man. S. D. Gordon states, "In its simplest analysis prayer – all prayer – has, must have, two parts. First, a God to give...just as certainly, there must be a second factor, a man to receive. Man's willingness is God's channel to the earth."¹² Many people in the world ask themselves, "What is the reason I'm here?" Some would want you to believe that this is a very complex and deep question, however, this author says that the answer is simple. Man was created to be in union with God. God desires man to enter into a deep, loving relationship with Himself found in the union with God. In possibly the most well-known of all Scriptures is John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." God created man in His image¹³ and man lost this image in the Garden of Eden due to sin.¹⁴ Since this time, man has been in need of a Savior for the forgiveness of his sins and to be restored to the union with God which can only happen through the salvation process. God knowing this great need of man sent His Son, Jesus, to this world to be man's Redeemer.¹⁵ Jesus Christ says no man can return to the Father but by Him.¹⁶ Man must be reborn into the family of God and this is by faith in the blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The journey is found in Jesus Christ who is the "Way" back to the Father and eternal life in heaven. Benner states, "The image of journeying with Jesus highlights the relational nature of

¹² S. D. Gordon, *Quiet Talks On Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Mercy Place, 2003), 10.

¹³ Genesis 1:26.

¹⁴ Genesis 3:6.

¹⁵ John 6:38.

¹⁶ John 14:6.

Christian spirituality....They are invited to follow Jesus – that is, travel with Jesus.”¹⁷ In this journey, one finds that the perfect love of Jesus Christ is the example for their life on earth. Daniel Lancaster states, “Prayer introduces learners to Jesus as the Holy One. He lived a holy life and died for us on the cross. God commands us to be saints as we follow Jesus.”¹⁸ As man’s example, Jesus taught His disciples, as well as all Christians, to pray. One of the most powerful Scriptures on this subject is found in Matthew 6:9–13, “After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.” The blueprint for connecting with the Father is found in the teachings of Jesus on prayer. Since it is clear that the church is not in obedience to God and not making disciples, an important part of this prayer is the need for forgiveness of our “debts” which are our sins. Elmer Towns says, “When you pray “Forgive us our debts,” you are praying as a child of the Father who has not lived up to your Father’s expectation. You are saying “I’m sorry” to your heavenly Father so you can have fellowship with Him again.”¹⁹

Sin weakens fellowship with God and causes a breach in the relationship and it is necessary for man to pray for the forgiveness of sin for that relationship to be restored. Some sins of man that have caused this disobedience to God are very strong sins that need powerful prayer. Elmer Towns addresses the issue of besetting sins that have plagued man to disobey God

¹⁷ Benner, *Surrender To Love*, 107.

¹⁸ Daniel B. Lancaster, *Making Radical Disciple* (Gardena, CA: T4T Press, 2011), 73.

¹⁹ Elmer L. Towns, *Praying The Lord’s Prayer For Spiritual Breakthrough: Daily Praying The Lord’s Prayer As A Pathway Into His Presence* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1997), 145.

as he says, “Besetting sins are habitual sinful behaviors or attitudes that victimize and enslave people....Any sin that can’t be broken with ordinary “willpower” can be termed a besetting sin.”²⁰

Prayer of man is the only way to be connected to God as man lives in the kingdom of Satan and yet to return to heaven. Jesus taught to pray that God’s Kingdom Come and His will be done which is calling on God in prayer for His Kingdom to reign here on earth. Gordon says, “Prayer is man giving God a footing on the contested territory of this earth. The man in full touch of purpose with God praying, insistently praying – that man is God’s footing on the enemy’s soil....And the Holy Spirit within that man, on the new spot, will insist on the enemy’s retreat in Jesus the Victor’s name. That is prayer.”²¹ When one couples this statement with the Scripture found in the book of James 4:7 as he says, “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you,” it is clear that there is power in prayer. Dave Earley says, “Spiritual work depends upon spiritual tools. No spiritual tool is as significant or powerful as prayer.”²²

Prayer is a spiritual tool that possesses great power. Spurgeon states, “If we are truly humble-minded we shall not venture down to the fight until the Lord of Hosts has clothed us with all power, and said to us, “Go in this thy might.”²³ The words, “clothed us with all power,” is an inspiring passage that moves the heart to know that God’s will can be done but only after one has prayed.

²⁰ Elmer L. Towns, *Fasting For Spiritual Break Through: A Guide To Nine Biblical Fasts* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996), 30.

²¹ Gordon, *Quiet Talks On Prayer*, 26.

²² Dave Earley, *Prayer: the Timeless Secret of High-Impact Leaders* (Chattanooga, TN: Living Ink Books, 2008), 2.

²³ Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 48.

God's desire is that His will be done so He does expect man to pray so that He can sustain man in his journey in this life. Paul taught in the book of Colossians that man is to be devoted to prayer²⁴ and also found in the book of 1 Thessalonians; Paul teaches that Christians should be continually praying.²⁵ Whitney states, "God expects every Christian to be devoted to prayer and to pray without ceasing."²⁶ It is clear that God expects man to pray and that there is power in prayer for man to find forgiveness and move God to restore man to righteousness but man must be devoted to God to pray in this manner.

Seeking God

Man must seek God which deepens the relationship between God and man. The relationship is deepened as man seeks and is guided by God into His truth. Due to the nature of man, God knew he would need assistance to find the power to seek God so He provides this help in the person of the Holy Spirit. John Walvoord states, "In addition to natural inability is the work of Satan blinding the hearts of the lost to the light of the gospel (2 Cor.4:4). The condition of man is hopeless apart from divine intervention."²⁷ This is evidenced in Scriptures as God draws man to Himself, for man would not seek God without God's power to aid him. Jesus speaks to this issue as He states in John 6:44, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day." Man, in his natural state does not possess the desire for the understanding of God's truth. John Walvoord adds, "Man in himself is utterly unable to understand the truth of God. The answer to the problem, therefore, is not found in any development of the natural man or cultivation of latent abilities, but is disclosed in the

²⁴ Colossians 4:2.

²⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

²⁶ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for The Christian L.I.F.E.*, 68.

²⁷ John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*. 3rd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1966), 110.

power of God as manifested in the work of the Holy Spirit.”²⁸ God moves on whomever He chooses but without God’s power, it is clear that man couldn’t seek Him. Charles Ryrie states, “The Spirit’s work is sovereign; he touches whom He wills to touch, just as the wind blows where it pleases (John 3:8). He works according to the sovereign purposes of God in His elective grace.”²⁹ God the Holy Spirit is submissive to the Father and moves in accordance to His will and man can only see the effects of the Holy Spirit much like the effects of the wind. According to Carson, “The point is that wind can be neither controlled nor understood by human beings....But that does not mean we cannot detect the wind’s effects. Where the Spirit works, the effects are undeniable and unmistakable.”³⁰ God, knowing man’s nature, aids him through the power of the Holy Spirit to seek God to draw closer and to grow in his relationship with God.

Jesus spoke to His disciples on the issue of seeking as He said in Matthew 6:33, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” Jesus chose the Greek word *zeteo* which means, according to Vine, “to seek or strive after, endeavor, to desire.”³¹ The Greek word also denotes that this seeking be a continual or constant seeking. Man, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is encouraged to be in the process of seeking God at all times with the desire to find the truth of God. Man must be seeking God with a desire to return to Him in obedience so that the church can again become effective servants of His to make disciples.

²⁸ Ibid. 110.

²⁹ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit. Revised and Expanded* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1997), 35.

³⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According To John*, 197.

³¹ Vine, Unger, and White, Jr, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 558.

Repentance

Man is repeatedly informed in the Bible of the need to repent. God loves His children but he will discipline them for disobedience as seen in the book of Revelation 3:19, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.” In the New Testament, there is a need for man to repent from the disbelief of the fact that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, in which, brings about salvation of one’s soul. Jesus clearly teaches the need for man to repent as He states in Matthew 4:17, “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Repentance, according to Walter Elwell, “meaning to turn back, away from, or toward”³² gives one a clear understanding that man must turn back or away from their old belief system and turn toward God to receive His truth that Jesus is the Messiah. Allen Myers adds, “Repentance may represent only regret or remorse over a past thought or action....but in its fullest sense it is a term for a complete change of orientation involving a judgment upon the past and a deliberate redirection for the future....As such it is the subjective human experience involved in conversion.”³³ Repentance is necessary for man to change his complete orientation of his life and turn away from sin and turn to God for forgiveness.

Though the aforementioned is on a personal basis for man, the Bible is clear that as a people of God, there is also a need for repentance as a whole. In the Scripture used for the premise of this section of the project, 2 Chronicles found in the Old Testament, Solomon is dedicating the temple to God. God makes promises to Solomon and mankind to be their God in good times and bad times – in times of obedience and in times of disobedience. According to Lawrence Richards, “Calling on God as a covenant-keeping Person, Solomon rehearsed some of

³² Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1012.

³³ Allen C. Myers, ed, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 880.

the promises God had given His people, speaking both of God's commitment to discipline Israel when she sinned and to forgive and restore when Israel returned to the Lord.”³⁴ God is clearly in the business of promising to love His people, personally and corporately. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck offer their insight on this issue as they state, “God then encouraged Solomon by the promise that if His judgment (by drought, locusts, or a plague) should fall on the nation for their sin, they need only turn to the Lord in earnest humility and repentance and they would find forgiveness and restoration.”³⁵ God is saying that they need only to turn to the Lord in repentance to find forgiveness and this must be the understanding for the church of America. Another example of a time when the people of God needed to repent, seek forgiveness of sins, and return to God can be found in the book of Nehemiah.³⁶ Nehemiah seeks God’s mercy and forgiveness for not only his sins, but the sins of his fathers, as well as the children of Israel. It is clear that when a person or a nation turns back to God in obedience to His commandments, He is merciful to forgive and restore them by His grace. Corporately, the church of America has great need to repent and turn back to God, away from her sins of apathy and apostasy, and return to obedience for His glory and for the churches blessings. God is expressly stating that man and the church has a great need for repentance as He says, “and turn from your wicked ways.”³⁷

³⁴ Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teacher’s Commentary: Explains and Applies The Scriptures In A Way That Will Help You Teach Any Lesson From Genesis To Revelation* (Colorado Springs, CO: Scripture Press Publications, 1987), 249.

³⁵ John F. Walvoord and Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 626.

³⁶ Nehemiah 1:1–11.

³⁷ 2 Chronicles 7:14.

Obedience

Jesus Christ alone is the one who has the authority to call and demand man to come to obedience. Bonhoeffer states, “Jesus is the Christ, he has authority to call and to demand obedience to his word. Jesus calls to discipleship, not as a teacher and a role model, but as the Christ, the Son of God.”³⁸ The area of obedience is and apparently has always been a struggle for mankind. One can go back to the beginning of the Bible to the book of Genesis and visit the story of Adam and Eve. Sin entered the world as Eve disobeyed God followed closely by her man, Adam. Following that account of the sin of disobedience, in the Bible are many stories of man standing in disobedience to God and His commandments. God is a loving God but He will chastise His children when they disobey as found in the book of Revelation, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.”³⁹ God calls mankind to obedience to His commandment, not for His power, but for man to live a life of love, joy, peace, and blessings of God. According to Watson and Watson, “It is clear from the words of Jesus and the writing of John that there can be no love for Christ without obedience to Christ...The Bible teaches that obedience to the commands and teachings of God has direct benefit to those who believe. Sometimes these benefits are to the corporate body of Christ. Other times the benefits are personal and individual.”⁴⁰ It is important to understand this point, man must love God and it is through this love that man desires to obey God. Man cannot manufacture this love for God as God loved man first. John makes this point as he says, “We love him, because he first loved us.”⁴¹ Man comes to this knowledge of love found only in Christ Jesus as John says, “Herein is

³⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 57.

³⁹ Revelation 3:19.

⁴⁰ Watson and Watson, *Contagious Disciple Making*, 40.

⁴¹ 1 John 4:19.

love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”⁴² Man comes to His love first in the plan of salvation offered by God only in His Son Jesus Christ and once received, Jesus Christ dwells in man’s heart. John makes this point as well as he says, “And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.”⁴³

Although John wrote the gospel of John to primarily the Jews, and ultimately the world, the works found in 1 John and his Epistles were written to stand against a radical and deviant form of Christianity called Gnosticism which taught that Jesus couldn’t be the Messiah and attacked the plan of salvation. John was telling the world the truth of Jesus, His love, and how God truly loved the world. According to Andreas Kostenberger, “John’s Gospel is an account of the life and ministry of Jesus...the Epistles deal with an early Gnostic threat to already established Christian communities.”⁴⁴ It is clear that not only did John stand against this form of false teaching; his desire was to share the love of God, in and through, Jesus Christ, with the world. Jesus teaches that man must be reborn into the family of God, abide in Him and obey the commandments of God. Jesus speaks of this as He says, “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.”⁴⁵ Merrill Tenney states, “The first and most important relationship which the disciples should maintain was with Jesus. In order to enforce its meaning, He used the allegory of the

⁴² 1 John 4:10.

⁴³ 1 John 4:16.

⁴⁴ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 205.

⁴⁵ John 15:5.

vine.”⁴⁶ Jesus continues as He says in the book of John, “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love.”⁴⁷

Elmer Town’s states, “...there is an indissoluble bond linking our love for Christ and our subsequent willingness to obey and keep His commandments.”⁴⁸ Obedience to the keeping of the commandments of God gives evidence that one has love for God.

Also, a man should serve God because he desires to obey Him. Moses spoke to this in Deuteronomy as he said, “Ye shall walk after the Lord your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him.”⁴⁹ Moses gives clear evidence that man must love God and through this love one will serve Him and keep His commandments. Whitney says, “Everything in that verse relates to obedience to God. In the midst of this cluster of commands on obedience is the mandate, “serve him.” We should serve the Lord because we want to obey Him.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

In this Thesis Project, it is clear that the American church is in real trouble. It has been offered for serious consideration that the prophetic message to the church of Laodicea can be equated to the church of the modern day church in America. Jesus Christ states that He will spew out the church due to her being lukewarm. It has been established that apathy of a church is a major cause for a church to become lukewarm. Apathy can kill a church. Apathy is

⁴⁶ Merrill C. Tenney, *John – The Gospel of belief: An Analytic Study Of The Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 226.

⁴⁷ John 15:10.

⁴⁸ Elmer L. Towns, *The Gospel Of John: Believe And Live: A Verse-By-Verse Bible Study Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revel Publishing, 1990), 276.

⁴⁹ Deuteronomy 13: 4.

⁵⁰ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines For The Christian Life*, 118.

basically a lack of feeling or emotion for something or someone. When a church loses interest in the church or in God, she becomes distant and lukewarm. The church, when lukewarm, is to disobey God and His commandments. Disobedience to the commandments of God has been established in this Thesis Project and repentance is necessary to return to God and His grace.

It is also apparent that the American church has been suffering for a number of years numerically but now she is in the process of a slow death. It has been established that the lack of conversion is one of the major factors to this process. According to the research data found in the Appendix's of this Thesis Project, evangelism is not being a tool used to reach those who do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Since evangelism is suffering, those who are not saved are not being converted to the faith in Christ Jesus. To become a disciple of Jesus Christ, one must be converted to faith in the plan of salvation offered only by the blood of Jesus Christ. If people are not taking this step and becoming saved, then they cannot be disciples of Jesus Christ. Since the church is not in the practice of making disciples, she is in disobedience to the commandment of God found in Matthew 28: 19 – 20, as Jesus commands His disciples, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” It is revealed in the research data in the Appendix's that the conversion rate is 5% of the growth rate and this is indicative of the lack of concern to obey the commandments of God to go into the world and make disciples.

Also, the research data reveals that Bible Study and Sunday school are basically the only two methods being utilized by the church to make disciples and since the conversion rate is so low, this is not working. Couple the low conversion with the fact that, according to the research data collected, the church has a very low missional outreach into the community on a weekly

basis to reach those who do not know the person of Jesus Christ. An amazingly stunning fact that came from this research is that no church, according to the pastors/leaders survey, has any discipleship training for their church other than Bible Study and Sunday school. There is absolutely no outreach into the community utilizing off-campus small group format discipleship training.

To summarize, very little, if any, outreach into the community evangelistically exists today which places a glaring light on the fact that few people are being converted and without conversion, people cannot become a disciple for Jesus Christ. Since people are not becoming disciples of Jesus Christ, new leaders are not being produced to go out into the world to make new disciples so the multiplication principle found in the Word of God seems to be slowing to a halt. There are many reasons for people to not be engaged in this process but the leading cause is simply sin. Disobedience to the commandments of God has been established as a factor in the slow process of the dying of the church in America.

There have been five biblical principles offered for the church of America to find revival and a new life with, and for, God. These are proven principles that the church must take into her heart and fall on her knees before God so that He can heal her. In the event the church of America chooses to ignore these principles, the process of the slow death will continue until it becomes too late. May God Bless America and May God Bless the Church of America.

Appendix A

Church Pastor or Leader Survey

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability and knowledge.

Please circle “Yes” or “No” as it pertains to you and your church.

1) You have received the call of God to preach/teach.

Yes No

2) The gospel of Jesus Christ and the plan of salvation are included in every sermon message you deliver.

Yes No

3) Your church is a healthy church.

Yes No

4) Under your leadership, your church has a strong growth rate.

Yes No

If Yes to #4:

a) Your growth rate is due to conversion.

Yes No

b) Your growth rate is due to transfer.

Yes No

5) Under your leadership, your church has plateaued or declined in attendance.

Yes No

6) You are a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Yes No

7) You lead others in your church to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

Yes No

8) Other than Sunday school or Bible Study, your church offers discipleship training.

Yes No

9) You feel the Holy Spirit is the authority of your church.

Yes No

10) You teach your church to use their spiritual gifts to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Yes No

11) Your church offers discipleship training through the off-campus small group format.

Yes No

12) Your church has a weekly missional effort to reach your community for Jesus Christ.

Yes No

13) You would support your church to have an off campus discipleship training through
small groups, if offered.

Yes No

14) Discipleship is the most important area of training for your congregation.

Yes No

15) You feel the need to repent from disobedience to the commandments of God.

Yes No

Appendix B

Congregants Survey

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability and knowledge.

Please circle the “Yes” or “No” as it pertains or relates to you or your church.

1) You know the difference between being a disciple of Jesus Christ and a follower of Jesus Christ.

Yes No

2) You are a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Yes No

3) You have received and accepted the plan of salvation offered in Jesus Christ.

Yes No

4) Other than Sunday school and Bible Study, your church offers discipleship training which you attend.

Yes No

5) If your church offers discipleship training, is it in a small group, off-campus format.

Yes No

6) Your church is a healthy church.

Yes No

7) Your church is a growing church because people are being saved and baptized.

Yes No

8) Your pastor preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ and the plan of salvation in every sermon message he preaches.

Yes No

9) You know and use your spiritual gifts to make disciples of others for Jesus Christ.

Yes No

10) You want to grow, or continue to grow, into a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Yes No

11) You have led one or more to salvation in Jesus Christ in the last six months.

Yes No

12) You are involved in helping the church to grow.

Yes No

13) Your church has a weekly mission effort to reach the lost in your community.

Yes No

14) Discipleship is the most important area of concern in your church.

Yes No

15) You need to repent from disobedience to the commandments of God.

Yes No

Appendix C

Evaluation of Surveys

In Appendix A, Church Pastor or Leader Survey, was conducted by surveying 20 pastors of ten different denominations. The denominations include two Cumberland Presbyterian Church pastors, two General Baptist Church Pastors, two Independent Baptist Church pastors, two Southern Baptist Church pastors, two Non-Denominational Church pastors, two United Methodist Church pastors, two United Presbyterian Church pastors, two Catholic Church priests, two Lutheran Evangelical Protestant Church pastors, and two Pentecostal Assemblies of God Church pastors. All of the above mentioned churches are located in the southern region of the United States and specially, in the State of Arkansas. All of the surveys were conducted anonymously and upon completion of the correlation of the research data, all survey forms were destroyed. There were a total of twenty (20) pastors/leaders that participated in this survey.

In Appendix B, Congregants Survey, the survey was conducted of willing participants who were members of one of the above named churches. Again, all of the surveys were conducted anonymously and upon completion of the correlation of the research data, all survey forms were destroyed. A total of one hundred and thirty eight (138) people participated in the congregant's survey.

In the Appendix A, pastor/leader survey, interestingly, only 90% of all surveyed confessed they felt that they were had the call of God on their life to pastor or lead their church. Also, only 70% of these pastors/leaders admitted that they actually preached the gospel of Jesus Christ during each weekly message or sermon. Interestingly, only 30% surveyed admitted that they felt that their church had a strong growth rate and out of those surveyed, only 5% believed that their growth rate was due to a strong conversion, (people accepting the plan of salvation

offered in the blood of Jesus Christ), rate where as 83% believe their growth rate was due to transfer growth, (people coming to their church from another church). The 30% surveyed in this category that believe their church is growing correlates well with the 70% of the pastors/leaders that believe that their church is either plateaued or in decline numerically.

An interesting result in the data shows that 95% of the pastors/leaders surveyed professed to be a disciple of Jesus Christ but only 85% believed that they were leading their churches in ways to make disciples. However, only 15% surveyed stated that their churches offer discipleship training to their congregants in a form other than Bible Study or Sunday school and, amazingly, 0% surveyed stated that their church even offered discipleship training in an off-campus small group format. However, 100% surveyed stated that they would support their church if they were to offer discipleship training in an off-campus small group format. Also, only 10% of the pastors/leaders surveyed stated that discipleship was the most important area of training for their congregation.

Only 20% of the pastors/leaders surveyed stated that their church actually participated in the church serving the community in a weekly missional effort to reach the lost. However, 95% surveyed stated that they felt that their church was being led by God the Holy Spirit and 80% surveyed do not believe their church was a healthy church. Stunningly, only 15% of the pastors/leaders surveyed believe they have a need to repent from disobedience to the commandments of God.

In the Appendix B, the congregant's survey, 119 out of the 138 respondents (86%) stated that they were disciples of Jesus Christ and 96% confessed to having received the plan of salvation offered in Jesus Christ. Also, 94% of the respondents stated that they believed that their church was growing due to people being saved and baptized at their church and 93% of the

respondents believed that their church was a healthy church. However, only 68% of those surveyed believe that their pastor preached the gospel message in his/her weekly sermon.

In the area of discipleship, 32% surveyed believed that their church offered discipleship training other than the weekly Bible Study and Sunday school and 27% surveyed believes that their church offers discipleship training in an off-campus small group format. Also, only 59% of those surveyed believe that discipleship training is the most important area of concern for their church and 100% surveyed stated that they wanted to grow, or continue to grow, as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Also, 72% of those surveyed stated that they have led someone to receiving the plan of salvation offered in Jesus Christ in the last six months.

Of those surveyed, 91% stated that they are active in helping their church to grow and 64% surveyed believe that their church has a weekly missional effort to reach the lost of their community. Also, 93% surveyed believe that their church is a healthy church and 59% believe that they need to repent of their sins of disobedience to the commandments of God.

In an effort to reconcile this data between the pastors/leaders and the congregants, it is imperative to compare this data. In the area of what they both believe as the gospel message being preached each week, the pastors/leaders (70%) and the congregants (68%) so they are in close agreement and in the area of a healthy church the pastors/leaders (80%) and the congregants (93%), but these are the only places there is a similar agreement.

In the area of a strong growth rate, the pastors/leaders stated it was weak and only 30% felt they had a strong growth rate whereas the congregation feels differently as they responded by stating that the growth rate was strong at 94%. The congregants believe that many people are being saved and baptized in their church but the pastors/leaders believe only 5% of their growth is from this area. In the area of church health, only 20% of the pastors/leaders surveyed believe

their church is healthy where 93% of the congregants responded feel their church is healthy. Also, only 30% of the pastors feel that their church is growing, however, interestingly, 94% believe their church is growing.

In the area of discipleship, only 10% of the pastors/leaders believe that discipleship is the most important area of training in their church where 59% of the congregants believe that discipleship is the most important area of training. Only 15% of the pastors/leaders believe that their church offers discipleship training for their church other than Bible Study and Sunday school where 32% of the congregants believe that their church offers discipleship training. In the area of the church offering off-campus small group format discipleship training, the pastors/leaders state 100% that they do not offer it but the congregants state amazingly that 32% feel they do offer it and 27% believe they have off-campus small group format discipleship training at their church.

In the area of a weekly missional effort by the church into the community to reach those who do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, only 15% of the pastors/leaders state that they have this in their church where 64% of the congregants believe that their church has this mission to reach those who do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. There is also a discrepancy when only 15% of the pastors feel they need to repent of their disobedience to the commandments of God but 59% of the congregation believes that they have a need to repent.

There is an apparent disconnect between what the pastors/leaders believe and what the congregation feels about their church. There could be many reasons for this disconnect but it is abundantly clear that this disconnect exists. The disconnect could not be more apparent as one looks at the data in the area of discipleship. A large majority of congregants and pastors/leaders profess to be disciples of Jesus Christ, however, the conversion rate of the churches surveyed is

5% and conversion is the first characteristic of a disciple. So it is apparent and clear that the church is not making new converts so new disciples are not being produced. Also, the data reveals that the majority of churches are not on mission to reach those who do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior so evangelism is suffering which is a leading reason that new disciples are not being converted to Christ. If new disciples are not being produced then new leaders of disciples are not being produced to reach more new disciples for Christ. It is clear that the American church is slowly dying due to disobedience to the commandments of God and absolutely clear that the commandment found in Matthew 28: 19 – 20 is a major commandment that is being disobeyed which is a leading cause to this slow death. The American church must repent, and follow the steps for revival and return to God for His power of healing on her.

Appendix D

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 9th, 2016

Stanley Mars
IRB Exemption 2609.090916: The Dying of the American Church: 5 Biblical Principles for Revival

Dear Stanley Mars,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:
 - (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and
 - (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.



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