

Liberty University School of Divinity

**Developing an Effective Biblical Method for the
Rediscovery of Accountability in Christian Discipleship**

A Thesis Project Submitted to

The Faculty of Liberty University School of Divinity

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Ministry

By

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Liberty University School of Divinity

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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Thesis Title: Developing an Effective Biblical Method for the Rediscovery of Accountability in Christian Discipleship

The emphasis on individualism in Western society has undermined the importance of accountability in human relationships. Many individuals see themselves as their own moral authority and are accountable to no one else. This idea has infiltrated the Western evangelical church. Western church members demonstrate a low level of accountability to their local church by failing to remain committed and involved, and by living lifestyles incompatible with church teachings. In response, few churches practice any form of church discipline, or even communicate expectations to church members. The result is a culture of self-centered and uncommitted church members. This project will argue that the undermining of biblical accountability by Western culture can be combatted by the development and implementation of an effective Biblical strategy for drawing new believers into accountable relationships in the local church. The strategy will outline how accountability can be recovered through the communication of expectations with new members, and the establishment of vital accountable relationships within the context of small groups, mentorships, selfless service, and natural relationship building. Research for the project will involve current academic work on this subject and interviewing pastors or staff ministers of at least fifteen churches to determine present

ministry needs and current ministry methods. This project will give pastors and churches an excellent biblical tool for establishing accountable relationships with church members.

Abstract Length: 220 Words.

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INTRODUCTION

Electricity seemed to fill the air in the small Baptist church. It was the new pastor's first Sunday and the sanctuary was packed with smiling faces. As he stepped up to the pulpit and gazed over his new congregation, the pastor felt small before them. With around 200 in attendance, this was no megachurch, but the thought of shepherding each and every one of these strangers was intimidating. With nervous excitement, he preached his first message and it was well received. Just like that, the day was done.

On Monday, the real work began. The pastor believed one of his first important tasks was to make as many personal contacts as possible so as to get to know the people. Therefore, with the help of the church secretary, he began to pour through the membership roll, writing down names for visitation. The new pastor was shocked to learn that while there may have been 200 in Sunday's attendance, there were some 500 members on the roll. More than half the congregation was absent the day before. In fact, the staggering truth was that the majority of the previous day's absentees never came at all. Other than having their names on the roll, these members had long ceased to be involved in the church in any meaningful way.

Over the course of his first year, the new pastor visited most of these absentee members. While a few (less than fifty) were physically unable to come due to old age or poor health, most had no legitimate reason for their lack of participation in the life of the church. Reasons for their lack of involvement included everything from hectic schedules to exaggerated health issues to unresolved conflicts with fellow church members. The pastor was most alarmed to learn of so many members who had reneged on any commitment to Christ and had returned to lifestyles of sinful living. What should have been a firm commitment had, seemingly, evaporated.

For the most part, the pastor's visits to these wayward members did little to no good. Most were polite and quite a few expressed a desire to return to the church, but very few followed through. Generally, the inactive members exhibited a real lack of accountability to the church. In their minds, their level of involvement in church life was entirely a personal matter. As the pastor continued his new ministry he learned that besides an occasional friendly visit, any effort to hold wayward members accountable to reasonable expectations of church involvement and Christian living was seen as intrusive. Even the leadership of the church shied away from practicing oversight in the lives of believers. Furthermore, the church had established no formal plan for discipling new members and communicating expectations. The church was losing as many active members as it was gaining. Something needed to change.

The above scenario is not hypothetical. It was the experience of this writer in the first five years of his current pastoral ministry. Such an experience is common in Southern Baptist Churches. Thom Rainer reports that on any given Sunday, "only four out of ten Southern Baptists attend church services..."¹ He goes on to lament the fact that church membership has come to mean so little, that most civic organizations require more of their members.² As a result, there is a great disparity between the number of those listed on the membership roll and those who attend, participate, and practice their Christian faith in a healthy way.

Statement of the Problem

It is this writer's assertion that the individualistic values of Western culture have undermined a healthy sense of accountability in the American evangelical church. In an effort to

¹ Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 1999), 49.

² *Ibid.*, 49.

be seeker-sensitive, many churches have asked little, communicated little, and enforced little in the way of meaningful expectations of church members. As a result, many church members have viewed their relationship with their local church as a nonessential matter of personal preference. Since little has been expected, little has been given. When church members fail to hold even themselves accountable to the church, it is no wonder that they reach few others for Christ. It is no surprise then that “only 11 percent of Southern Baptist Churches are experiencing healthy growth.”³ The church must do more to recover accountability as a vital aspect of discipleship. This project will develop an effective Biblical strategy for establishing and maintaining a sense of accountability of believers to their local church. The strategy will be proactive, addressing the communication of expectations with new members, and establishing a clear path of discipleship. The project will produce a helpful tool for local churches, which, when implemented, will work for greater spiritual maturity in church members.

Statement of Limitations

Since this writer serves a rural Southern Baptist Church in Georgia, he desires to design a discipleship method that will be helpful to churches like his own. Therefore, research for this project will be confined to the survey of Southern Baptist churches in Georgia. The project will not attempt to address churches of other denominations or geographical areas.

The scope of this project will be further confined in that it will not attempt to survey all Southern Baptist Churches in Georgia or even all churches that utilize a discipleship method relative to this thesis. The project will, rather, identify and interview at least fifteen Southern

³ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dobson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 25.

Baptist Churches in Georgia which utilize some form of accountable discipleship method. Interview findings will be examined to determine current ministry methods and trends.

Since the interviews used for this project will contain questions which ask for the perceptions and opinions of church leaders and members, this project does not attempt to escape some level of subjectivity on the part of interview participants. Neither will the project avoid subjectivity on the part of this writer, who will evaluate interview responses. However, in asking for certain numerical data, such as the retention rates of new believers in interviewed churches, the project will achieve enough objectivity to produce sound conclusions which will result in an effective accountable discipleship plan.

The scope of the project will also be confined biblically, as it will focus on New Testament Scriptures. The reason for this is simple. The goal of this thesis is to develop a tool for New Testament Churches. While there is much biblical evidence for the importance of accountable discipleship in the Old Testament, the Scriptures which best bear on accountability in discipleship in the church are those Scriptures from the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles which are prescriptive for the Church.

Finally, while this writer believes the project will produce an effective method for recovering a sense of accountability in the local church, he does not guarantee any quantitative or qualitative result for any particular church or any particular member who participates in the method. Nevertheless, this writer is confident that the implementation of the discipleship method produced in this project will close the “back door” of the church and slow the anemic bleed of spiritually immature believers from healthy participation in the Body of Christ.

Theoretical Basis

This project has a sound theoretical basis biblically and historically. Quite simply, “in the New Testament world the group took priority over the individual.”⁴ Biblical culture, as well as most cultures around the world at that time were collectivist in nature, meaning that individuals saw themselves as part of a larger group, such as their blood family. They were fiercely loyal to the group and were accountable to it. Indeed, major life decisions, such as marriage and vocation, were rarely made from an individualistic mindset.

Indeed, this collectivist mindset appears to be God’s preferred method of relationship between individuals in the New Testament Church. From the earliest days of the Church, individual believers held themselves accountable to the larger body and its leaders. When they did not, God was displeased and expected church discipline to occur. One striking example is Acts 5:1-11, in which Ananias and Sapphira were dishonest in the way they reported their giving to the church, and thus were confronted by church leaders and subsequently struck down by God. In I Corinthians 5, Paul confronts the church at Corinth for not practicing discipline on a man who had committed sexual immorality. The importance of accountability is expressed both in Paul’s confronting the church and in his command for the church to confront the erring believer. In addition to these scriptural examples, the more detailed scriptural basis below details how accountable discipleship is taught thoroughly throughout the New Testament.

The collectivist mindset described above stands in stark contrast to the radical individualism of modern Western and particularly American society, which stresses the

⁴ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2009), 32.

importance of the individual over the group.⁵ Only in the last century has radical individualism become so ingrained in the mindset of American Christians that they shun appropriate accountability to other believers and to the church as a whole. Current churches that buck this trend and establish healthy accountable discipleship are producing more mature believers and are retaining new members at much higher rates.

Statement of Methodology

Since this project seeks to recover accountability in local church discipleship, the writer will begin in chapter One by defining both the terms “accountability,” and “discipleship.” The Bible, as well as scholarly books, journals, and theses will be sought to uncover how these terms are to be understood separately and in their relationship to each other within the framework of the local church. Chapter 1 will also reveal how the values of Western culture have contributed to the demise of accountability in local church life. In essence, this chapter will provide concrete definitions of key terms and will deepen the reader’s understanding of the problem.

In Chapter Two, the writer, having increased his knowledge of the topic through extensive scholarly reading and biblical study, will determine certain actions the local church may take to increase the new believer’s sense of accountability to his local church. At this juncture, the writer will interview leaders of at least fifteen Georgia Baptist Churches. The leaders will be questioned as to their church’s current practice of the accountability-building actions the writer has determined. This writer has opted to conduct interviews, rather than surveys, because he believes the interviews will yield a greater depth and larger quantity of information from the churches. The interviews will provide the writer concrete data for forming

⁵ Ibid., 4.

hard conclusions, but will also enable him to hear the interviewee's heart in real conversation. While the writer will use a prepared set of questions in order to get the information he needs, he will heed the warning of Booth, Colomb, and Williams to not allow the questions to rope in the interviewee too much. The writer will allow the interviewee to share freely in order to glean valuable information which goes beyond the scope of the question.⁶

Chapter Three will present findings from the interviews. The writer will attempt to show how interviewed churches are, through effective discipleship practices, helping believers gain a greater sense of accountability to the local church. The writer will compare statistical data from interviewed churches to that of churches in general to identify key differences. In this chapter the writer will seek to prove his point: that churches can implement effective strategies to overcome the undermining of accountability by Western culture.

In chapter four, the writer will present an effective biblical strategy for building a new believer's sense of accountability to his local church. Each component of the strategy will be discussed in relation to its definition and implementation.

Review of Literature

This project cannot be successful without taking examining the already present wisdom of seasoned church leaders and experts on issues relative to accountability and discipleship. Below is a review of some of the most useful sources this writer found with details on how they bear on the subject at hand. These sources, as well as the many others listed in the bibliography

⁶ Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research* 3d ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 82.

will be consulted throughout all stages of the project from the formation of the research tool to the construction of a sound discipleship method.

Jay Adams' *Handbook of Church Discipline* does not strive to be a detailed treatise on the subject from a scriptural nor theological standpoint, but serves as a practical guide for church leaders wishing to exercise discipline in the local congregation.⁷ The book contributes to this author's thesis by presenting a method for discipline which is built around the principles found in Matt 18:15-17.

Roger Walton's "Disciples Together: The Small Group as a Vehicle for Discipleship Formation,"⁸ is a fascinating and constructive critique of the small group as a component of Christian discipleship. The article applauds the small group as a means of building mutually meaningful relationships among believers that leads to personal spiritual growth and greater participation in the overall church. Walton warns, however, that most small groups lack true accountability. They affirm their members at the expense of biblical confrontation. They cater to individualistic concerns within the groups rather than hold their members to prescribed higher standards. The implication for this thesis is that while attachment to a small group is vital for forming a sense of accountability, churches must strive to create small groups that hold their members accountable to the larger church and to the principles of Scripture.

In *Essential Church: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts*, Thom and Sam Rainer do a great job exploring why so many eighteen to twenty-two-year-olds drop out of church. Their

⁷ Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974).

⁸ Roger Walton, "Disciples Together: The Small Group as a Vehicle for Discipleship Formation," *The Journal of Adult Theological Education* 8.2 (2011): 99-114.

findings are based on surveys in which young adults are asked various questions relevant to their decision to stay in church or to leave. *Essential Church* contributes to this thesis by verifying this writer's assertion that many people lack a sense of accountability to their local church and have not been disciplined in any such way to build that sense of accountability. Thom and Sam Rainer write, "...young people left the church because they were never truly disciplined...a simple church is a congregation designed around a straightforward and strategic process that moves people through the stages of spiritual growth."⁹

Jonathan Leeman's, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*,¹⁰ is as much at the heart of this writer's thesis as any other source. The book explores how Western culture, with its emphasis on individualism, has made love and submission mutually exclusive. Leeman charges that this dangerous trend has led to "antiauthoritarianism" and loose commitment of members to the local church. Churches must recover a more biblical definition of love that involves authority and oversight by the local church in the life of the believer. Leeman advocates establishing accountable relationships with new members from the start through such tools as new member courses and the signing of covenants. He advocates continual oversight of the believer by the church, which involves sound biblical teaching, parachurch ministries and corrective discipline.

⁹ Thom S. Rainer and Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2008), 161, 163.

¹⁰ Jonathan Leeman, *The Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2010).

As its title suggests, *Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow*, by Geiger, Kelley, and Nation, explores what makes Christian discipleship truly transformative. The word “transformative” refers to a change in the condition of the heart. The appetites of the believer change. His longing for God and for that which pleases God increases.¹¹ In exploring what makes discipleship truly transformative, the authors support this writer’s thesis by verifying that accountability is vital for transformation. Christians must engage in “interdependent” relationships with other believers. Vulnerability and transparency must be pillars of such a relationship.

Though written from a secular perspective, “The Influence of Emotions and Culture on Accountability and Governance” provides this author some worthwhile insight on the subject of accountability. This article, by S. Velayutham and M.H.B. Perera, argues that accountability flourishes more in “guilt cultures,” those cultures which rely on “an internalized conviction of sin.”¹² This is in contrast with “shame cultures,” which rely upon public sanctions for bad behavior. The person who is convicted internally of failure and who will be loved and nurtured by others upon confession of sin, will find it freeing to confess their wrongs to others. The implication for this thesis is that a healthy method of accountability for the local church would involve developing sensitivity to the Holy Spirit (internal conviction) and would involve love and nurture upon conviction.

¹¹ Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, and Philip Nation, *Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2012), 29.

¹² S. Velayutham and M.H.B. Perera, “The Influence of Emotions and Culture on Accountability and Governance,” *Corporate Governance* 4, no.1 (2004): 59.

Joseph Hellerman's, *When the Church Was a Family*, is a flagship among sources supporting this writer's thesis. Hellerman laments the influence of "radical individualism"¹³ in most Christian churches today. This influence has led to a "struggle to keep our people connected with one another in ongoing networks of mutual support and accountability."¹⁴ Hellerman asserts that while God saves people individually, He saves them to group. Salvation is, among other things, about entering into an accountable community. While the book agrees with the writer's thesis and offers powerful scriptural and historical evidence, it does not go far enough in offering a solution to the problem.

Church Discipline, by Jonathan Leeman, states that the true Gospel does not only focus on Jesus as Savior, but also focuses on Jesus as Lord of the believer's life. This same Gospel focuses on a "Spirit-given repentance, and the new covenant reality of the church."¹⁵ Affirmation of the true Gospel necessitates believers having a sense of accountability to the local church. While Leeman focuses more on corrective discipline throughout his book, he does devote some material to the need to establish accountability from the start of the relationship between the believer and the local church. He warns of the danger of practicing church discipline before "members recognize their general need to hold one another accountable..."¹⁶ He goes on to offer some general suggestions on establishing a sense of accountability, including teaching on the subject, organizing church documents, and communicating expectations to new members.

¹³ Hellerman, 4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵ Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 13.

¹⁶ Leeman, 67.

Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time, by Greg Ogden, is a treasure of a source for this writer's thesis. Ogden begins the book by confirming the validity of this writer's thesis. He acknowledges that accountability is greatly lacking in the church today. He rightly links the lack of accountability to the "disease of individualism and consumerism dominant in American society."¹⁷ Ogden, however, does not stop there. He goes on to present a simple but effective solution. He advocates the forming of discipleship "triads," or groups of three people.¹⁸ The groups focus on relational investment, transformation through biblical instruction, and reproduction. Through the forming of written covenants, a high degree of accountability is established. This book serves this writer's thesis by offering a possible way accountable relationships could be established from the start of a new believer's walk with Christ.

Andrew Burggraff's article, "Developing Discipleship Curriculum: Applying the Systems Approach Model for Designing Instruction by Dick, Carey, and Carey to the Construction of Church Discipleship Courses,"¹⁹ details a proper method for developing an effective discipleship curriculum as a teaching tool in the local church. Using the Systems Approach Model, the designer of such a course works through a ten-step process to develop a discipleship course which will arm the student with knowledge of true discipleship. The method promoted in this

¹⁷ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁹ Andrew Burggraff, "Developing Discipleship Curriculum: Applying the Systems Approach Model for Designing Instruction by Dick, Carey, and Carey to the Construction of Church Discipleship Courses," *Christian Education Journal: Series 3*, Volume 12, No. 2 (2015): 397-414.

article will assist this writer in developing the teaching component in accountable church relationships.

“The Family of Faith: the Place of Natural Mentoring in the Church’s Christian Formation of Adolescents,” by Jason Lanker, provides a helpful look at the value of mentoring in discipleship. Specifically, the article deals with mentoring relationships between adults and adolescents. Lanker does not advocate a mentoring program, since “formal, or assigned mentoring relationships simply show little significant impact in the lives of adolescents.”²⁰ Instead, he pushes for “natural mentoring,” or the encouragement and facilitation of gradual and natural mentoring relationships to develop over time. He suggests targeting senior adults as possible mentors. The church should design activities that would allow these adults and adolescents to spend time together and work together doing ministry. This article supports this writer’s assertion that mentoring relationships are vital for establishing accountability.

James Lang, in his article “An evaluation of a discipleship process addressing Christians’ inner life issues,” evaluates the “Immersion Experience” used in some discipleship groups.²¹ This experience is a series of modules designed to help participants address emotional issues and hurts in their lives which may be impeding their spiritual growth. The process creates a safe environment for believers to share private information and be encouraged by other believers. The takeaway for this writer is the importance of addressing emotional issues as a part of effective discipleship and accountability.

²⁰ Jason Lanker, “The family of faith the place of natural mentoring in the church’s Christian formation of adolescents,” *Christian Education Journal*: 7.2 (Fall 2010).

²¹ James Lang, “An Evaluation of a Discipleship Process addressing Christians’ Inner Life Issues,” *Christian Education Journal*: 12.2 (Fall 2015).

Rick Warren's now classic book, *The Purpose Driven Church* is a wealth of information which bears directly on this writer's thesis.²² Warren echoes the heart of this thesis that American individualism has undermined accountability as a vital part of discipleship. Warren goes on to offer his solution: "The Life Development Process." This highly structured approach to discipleship moves a person from being spiritually lost to being spiritually mature. Using a baseball diamond diagram, Warren maps out a journey of spiritual growth. A person has made it to first base when he has committed to membership after having responded to the Gospel, completed a membership course and signed a membership covenant. He has made it to second base after completing several spiritual maturity courses. Third base focuses on getting the believer plugged into ministry opportunities. Warren's plan offers a clear path of discipleship, and establishes accountability from the start through requiring signed covenants and communicating expectations. Believers are intentionally disciplined and are not left to fend for themselves.

Membership Matters, by Chuck Lawless, is an excellent resource on moving new believers from spiritual infancy to maturity by creating an environment of accountability.²³ The book is a strong endorsement for creating a new member class and offers practical help in doing so. Lawless backs up his praise of the new member class by offering detailed survey results from churches. New member classes should explain the mission and vision of the church and should communicate expectations to new church members. Lawless also offers advice on creating church covenants for new members to sign and advice on getting uninvolved church

²² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

²³ Chuck Lawless, *Membership Matters: Insight from Effective Churches on New Member Classes and Assimilation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

members to commit and serve more faithfully. Since this writer plans to incorporate a new member class in his plan, *Membership Matters* has much to offer.

Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them, by Thom S. Rainer, is an indispensable source for the development of this writer's thesis. Rainer's purpose was to probe the minds of the "formerly unchurched," those who have been won to Christ and have become active in a local church.²⁴ The book explores the reasons the formerly unchurched said they became active and committed. In doing so, the book verifies the claims of other sources in addressing what it takes to establish accountable relationships with believers. The book stresses the importance of new member classes, the communication of high expectations, the natural fostering of mentor relationships, and the need for small group ministries.

Scriptural Basis

This project is nothing if it is not scripturally sound. The Bible should inform the beliefs and practices of the church. In beginning this project, this writer has taken responsibility to examine the Scriptures to see whether there is a legitimate basis for a believer's accountability to the local church and to other believers and to what extent the local church, its leaders, and individual believers have oversight in the life of a believer. Below is a presentation of some key Scriptures on these important issues.

Acts 20:28

This passage establishes the responsibility of church leaders to watch over members of the church and to care for them as a shepherd would his flock of sheep. It is the Holy Spirit

²⁴ Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 19.

Himself who has commissioned “overseers.” The word can also be translated “guardians” and it is the word from which “bishop” is derived.²⁵ There is not a scripture that expresses more clearly the biblical expectation that believers will participate in accountable relationships. John MacArthur in his study bible notes for this verse stresses that any “church rule, which minimizes the biblical authority of elders in favor of a cultural, democratic process, is foreign to the NT.”²⁶

Hebrews 13:17

The Hebrew believers were instructed here to willingly and joyfully submit to the church elders over them. This is another example of the biblical expectation of accountability as a vital component of discipleship in the lives of all believers. This verse would serve well as a Scriptural backdrop in the instruction of new believers on their new relationship of accountability to the church.

“One Another” Passages

Scattered throughout the New Testament are passages in which believers are to be accountable to “one another” in various ways.²⁷ One example is Hebrews 3:12-13. Here the writer of Hebrews warns of the dangers of evil invading one’s heart, leading to a departing from the faith. In verse thirteen, the instruction is given to “exhort one another daily.” The word, “exhort” is the Greek, *παροικαλέω* (*parakaleō*) which has to do with admonishing one “to

²⁵ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 392.

²⁶ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 1672.

²⁷ John 13:34; Rom 12:10, 16; 15: 7, 14; Eph 5:21; Col 3:16; James 5:16 are examples.

pursue some course of conduct.”²⁸ This instruction to spur one another on is a perfect example of the accountability between believers that is taught in Scripture.

Another example is Ephesians 5:21, where believers are instructed to submit to one another “in the fear of God.” Making oneself accountable to other believers is based in one’s fear of God Himself. For Paul, this instruction introduces a larger section on relationships of authority and submission among Christians including wives for their husbands and children for their parents. The one another passages could be used as instruction on the necessity and practice of accountability in the local church.

A third example is James 5:16, in which believers are even instructed to confess their sins to one another. This verse teaches an important aspect of accountability that is not always seen in mentoring relationships: mutuality. Effective accountability can take place in discipleship relationships where one believer is not more spiritually mature than the other. Even if all individuals in the group are at the same spiritual level, they can help each other grow spiritually if there is mutual honesty. Confessing sins to one another should lead to support and strengthening toward repentance.

Matthew 18:15-17

In this familiar passage, Jesus both prescribes and gives a method for church discipline. The progressive steps for dealing with an erring brother involve individual accountability of one believer to another and corporate accountability of the believer to the whole assembly. This passage also reveals several key purposes for accountable relationships: to foster spiritual growth

²⁸ W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, Jr., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 217.

in the lives of individual believers; to healthily address sins in the lives of believers; and to foster community in the body of Christ (“If he hears you, you have gained your brother.”). This passage is key for developing both rationale and methodology in accountable relationships in the local church.

Galatians 6:1

This verse is important for this writer’s thesis for two reasons. First, it stresses the importance of spiritual maturity in the hearts of those who would mentor and hold others accountable. The verse says that “if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are *spiritual* restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.” (emphasis added) The word “spiritual” (Gk, πνευματικοί) denotes one who is walking in the Spirit and thus is “endowed with faith and tact to restore the lapsed and prevent further transgressions.”²⁹ Secondly, the verse reveals the restorative nature of proper accountable relationships: “You who are spiritual restore such a one...” These truths are vital for establishing the right kind of accountability in the local church.

Matthew 7:1-5

The same kind of emphasis on spiritual maturity and restoration is also expressed in Matthew 7:1-5. Here, Jesus commands us to “judge not,” and warns against seeking to remove a “speck” in another’s eye, while ignoring a “plank” in one’s own eye. The meaning behind Jesus’ hyperbole is evident: believers should not exhibit a hypocritical condemnation of another while ignoring their own greater moral failures. The problem with this passage is that many take it too

²⁹ Nolan B. Harmon, ed., *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 573.

far. The passage is often quoted as a prohibition against addressing another's failures and a banner for minding one's own business. Such an interpretation is erroneous. While Jesus does prohibit hypocritical condemnation, he does not prohibit analyzation or evaluation of the spiritual fruits of fellow believers.³⁰ In fact, verse 5 verifies that believers should lovingly seek to restore wayward believers, once they have dealt with their own known sins. Thus, once again, accountability is taught as a vital aspect of discipleship. This passage, along with Galatians 6:1 helps this writer in the development of training for those who would be used as spiritual mentors in discipleship relationships.

I Corinthians 12-14 and Romans 12:3-8

The research of Thom and Sam Rainer reveals that simply attending church functions in adolescence does not prevent the exodus of young adults from church life later on. Young people must actually get involved in the church and have responsibilities.³¹ This writer contends that the reestablishment of accountability in the local church must involve a process of discipleship that assists new believers in getting involved in the local church and using their spiritual gifts. For this reason, I Corinthians 12-14 and Romans 12:3-8 are crucial passages. These passages teach the identity and nature of spiritual gifts and should be a part of a new member's class, with the goal being that new believers are able to identify specific ways they can serve their local church.

³⁰ Craig Blomberg, *The New American Commentary: Matthew, Volume 22*, ed. David Dockery (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 127.

³¹ Rainer and Rainer, 85.

I Peter 5:1-6

Were there no other biblical passages sufficient for establishing a scriptural basis for accountability, this one alone is adequate. Verses 1-4 address church leadership. Elders are instructed to “shepherd the flock of God, which is among you, serving as overseers.”³² The words “shepherd” and “overseers” both speak of the responsibility of leaders to exercise spiritual guidance in the lives of believers. The same verses go on to describe the attitude and motivation of leaders as they shepherd, and are, thus, excellent material for the development of leaders in discipleship relationships. Verses 5-6 instruct the believers to “submit” themselves to their elders. The giving of this command implies a voluntary action on the part of the believer to place himself under the spiritual direction of another. This passage, is therefore, an excellent scriptural backdrop for this thesis in that it describes both sides of the discipleship relationship in the local church.

I Thessalonians 5:12-14

These verses may serve as a set of instructions for the establishment and carrying out of a proper discipleship relationship. The Thessalonian Christians are instructed in verse twelve to “recognize those who labor among you.” The word, “recognize” (Gk, οἶδα) suggests a fullness of knowledge that manifests itself in respect and honor.³³ That sentiment is spelled out in verse thirteen, where the words “esteem” and “love” are used to describe the attitude of the believer

³² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages are in the New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997).

³³ Vine, 347.

toward their Christian leaders. Leaders are described as those who are “over you” and “admonish” you. Their responsibility to the believer is one of oversight and encouragement.

Acts 2:42

This verse is not so much a command to be accountable as it is a snapshot of life in the Body of Christ when believers make themselves accountable to one another. The believers here “continued steadfastly” in receiving doctrinal teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. There was devotion on their part to corporate spiritual practices which fostered spiritual growth. The four practices mentioned above lend support to developing a framework for accountable relationships. Believers should receive doctrinal teaching; should build relationships through times of fellowship, and should pray with and for one another. The meaning of the phrase “breaking of bread” is debated by scholars, but most probably refers to the observance of communion (The Lord’s Supper).³⁴ Since, as Jonathan Leeman has written, the church “vouches for the credibility of a Christian’s profession through baptism and the Lord’s Supper,”³⁵ this practice alone has significance in the carrying out of accountability in the local church.

Matthew 16:15-20

In this mysterious passage, Jesus gives to Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The phrases that follow, “and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” shed light on the nature of the keys. The keys must

³⁴ John B. Polhill, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26, ed. David Dockery (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 119.

³⁵ Leeman, 45.

represent authority to “declare the judgment of heaven based on the principles of the Word.”³⁶ Peter, who is representative of any body of true believers, is granted authority by Christ to make declarations on whether a person is saved or lost spiritually. These declarations are based upon careful examination of a person’s life by fellow believers and church authorities. The church itself is not saving, nor condemning anyone, but is discerning what Heaven has already declared. This type of relationship between those who profess to be believers surely indicates accountable discipleship.

John 20:23

The context of this passage is an appearance of the resurrected Jesus to his disciples. After verifying his identity by showing them his hands and feet, Jesus then commissions the disciples in verse twenty-one: “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” He then pledges the Holy Spirit, which will come on the Day of Pentecost. Finally, in verse twenty-three, Jesus grants them authority to declare a person’s sins forgiven or retained: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” This no doubt corresponds to the authority of the church to bind and loose, as laid out in Matthew 16:19. The idea is not that the church itself forgives or does not forgive sins, but that the church takes the principles of God’s Word and makes declarations about a person’s spiritual status based on those principles. A modern application of this would be a church’s decision to admit or deny membership to an individual based on the spiritual fruit church authorities see in that individual’s life.³⁷ This passage verifies that believers are accountable to other believers and to the church as

³⁶ MacArthur, 1428.

³⁷ D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 656.

a whole. A church's process for making determinations on another's spiritual status is bound up in effective discipleship.

CHAPTER 1

THE RAZING OF ACCOUNTABILITY BY THE POSTMODERN WRECKING BALL

Introduction

This project is birthed from the recognition of a problem. After twenty-three years in the ministry, this writer has seen the lack of accountability church members have toward other believers and toward the church as a whole. He has also seen the negative effects this has had on the health and effectiveness of the local church. However, this project cannot hope to present a valid solution to the problem without first defining the problem itself. This chapter will do just that. In addition to defining the problem, the key terms “accountability,” and “discipleship” will also be defined. Providing these key definitions will bring the overall issue to clarity and help pave the way for a solution.

Part 1: What does Accountability Mean?

Discovering a definition of the word “accountability” is easy enough. One might look no further than a standard English dictionary. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example defines the word “accountable” as being answerable for “responsibilities and conduct.”¹ Similarly, The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines accountability as the “duty of having to give an explanation.”² Implied in both these definitions is the notion of responsibility individuals have toward higher authorities. Accountability, then, has to do with one’s recognition of

¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary Second Edition*. Volume 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)87.

² *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Burnt Mill: Longman Group Limited, 1978)7.

responsibility to accept and practice standards of thought and behavior which have been established by some form of higher authority.

For the Christian, that higher authority is God. Indeed, one cannot become a Christian without acknowledging the authority of God over his life. Since this writer's project concerns Southern Baptist Churches, it is helpful to note the Southern Baptist Convention's own statements concerning God as the ultimate authority. According to *the Baptist Faith & Message*, to which most Southern Baptist Churches in Georgia adhere, God, as the all-powerful Creator and Ruler of the Universe, as well as the possessor of perfect divine attributes, deserves the highest level of worship, devotion, and obedience from mankind.³ Thus, the Christian (and all mankind, for that matter) is accountable to God.

God has revealed Himself to man through the Holy Scriptures. Baptists believe in the divine and plenary inspiration of the Bible. God moved upon men to write the words of the Bible, and has ensured that they have done so without any error. The result is a body of Scripture that should be sought for instruction on all aspects of life. *The Baptist Faith and Message* regards the Bible as "the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried."⁴ This recognition of scriptural authority is backed by numerous biblical passages, such as 2 Timothy 3:16 and Hebrews 4:12. Thus, the believer is accountable to the Bible as his ultimate source of divine instruction.

Along with having a sense of accountability to God and to the Bible, the Christian should also demonstrate accountability to the local church. God has granted to the local church the

³ Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1971), 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

authority to oversee the Christian's journey of faith. A key passage which establishes this truth is Matthew 16:18-19. In this passage, Christ announces the establishment of His Church, that universal body of believers from all ages. He would found the Church upon the rock of Peter's confession in verse sixteen that Jesus is "Christ, the Son of the living God." Based upon the truth behind that confession, the truth that Jesus as the Son of God had come to purchase salvation with His blood, Christ would establish the Church. The word "church" (ἐκκλησία) literally means "called out ones," and refers to those who, beginning at Pentecost, were baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of believers.⁵

While the word "church" in this passage does refer to the universal body of believers, that universal body finds expression in local congregations of believers. In Matthew 16:18-19, Jesus grants to Peter, and by extension, the Church as a whole, the power to "bind and loose" *on earth*. Jesus has in mind a body of believers functioning on earth. One must ask, "where is the Church found on earth?" The Church is found in local congregations of believers who are functioning as Christ has commanded the body to do so. This writer has identified 9 characteristics of the church as expressed in the table below:

⁵ MacArthur, 1423.

Table 1.1. Characteristics of a Church

Characteristics of a Church	Scriptural References
1. A community of believers in Christ assembled together in the name of Christ	Matt. 18:20; I Cor. 5:4-5; I Cor. 11:12-19
2. A community of believers who are baptized	Acts 2:42
3. A community of believers who corporately and regularly engage in spiritual disciplines	Acts 2:42
4. A community that corporately observes the Lord's Supper	I Cor. 11:23-34
5. A community that is organized and committed to care for the physical and spiritual needs of others	Acts 2:42-43; Acts 6:1
6. A community that is committed to win others to Christ	Acts 2:47; 5:14; Acts 6:7; 16:5
7. A community that corporately appoints and is led by biblical leaders	Acts 6:1-7; 14:23; 15:20; I Cor. 12; I Tim. 4:14
8. A community that oversees the spiritual progress of its members	Acts 20:28/ I Peter 5:1-5
9. A community of believers practicing spiritual gifts for the benefit of others	I Cor. 12

A community of believers that is organized and committed to carry out these functions has become a church in the eyes of God. Thus, any local body of believers is an expression of the Universal Church and has the authority that Christ talked about in Matthew sixteen. Jesus uses two metaphors to describe this authority: that of keys and that of binding and loosing. Keys lock or unlock doors, denying or allowing entry. Binding and loosing has to do with restraining or setting free. Both metaphors must speak of salvation (locking or unlocking entry into Christ's Kingdom; binding or setting free from the power of sin). Thus, the church is given authority to declare, based on the truth that Peter acknowledged in his declaration, who is saved and who is lost. This does not mean that the church saves anyone or denies that salvation. The church, rather, has the authority to declare what has been determined in Heaven. The church, using the

Gospel for its guide, has been charged to examine the fruit of the lives of men to determine where they stand spiritually. This examination and determination constitutes oversight from the very beginning of a believer's journey. The church, in its commitment to win the lost, is faithful to declare the truth of the Gospel. Paul said to the Corinthian Christians, "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures..." (I Cor 15:3). People respond, making a declaration of their faith in Christ. The church examines that person and receives him into membership if it finds evidence that his declaration is genuine.

This oversight in the life of the believer continues long past the salvation experience. Indeed, it continues throughout the life of the believer. The scriptural basis provided in the introduction of this thesis highlights some of the many passages which demonstrate the oversight of the believer by the local church. One of the most striking examples is the many "one another" passages located in the New Testament. In all, there are fifty-six verses in the New Testament which use either the phrase "each other" or "one another."⁶ The passages, when viewed as a whole, provide a powerful description of the relationships that should exist between believers in the Body of Christ. One of those relationships is that of a teacher providing oversight to the disciple. The makeup of that relationship includes a number of facets, as described in the table below:

⁶ Gordon Ferguson, *The Power of Discipling* (BillERICA: Discipleship Publications International, 2001), 19.

Table 1.2. Oversight in the One-Another Passages

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Oversight Theme</i>
Hebrews 3:13; James 5:16	Confrontation of Sin
Hebrews 10:24	Exhortation
Romans 15:14	Instruction
Colossians 3:16	Admonishment
I Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11; Hebrews 3:13	Encouragement
James 5:16	Intercessory Prayer
I Peter 4:9	Hospitality

As to confrontation of sin, believers are strongly and regularly to encourage, warn, and rebuke one another. Hebrews 3:13 uses the word παρακαλεῖτε, translated “exhort” in some translations and “encourage” in others. This word includes warning and reproof⁷ Passages like this erase all question that believers should provide spiritual oversight throughout the lives of other believers.

Since one of the functions of the church is to oversee the spiritual progress of its members, believers should submit themselves to that oversight. Scripture is clear on this point. Ephesians 5:21 carries the instruction for believers to “submit to one another.” The word “submit” does not connote some kind of negative force or control over another, but a willing and humble yielding to another whom God has placed in authority. The point is clear. Believers grow spiritually by being placed under the spiritual care of other more seasoned Christians. There are official authorities in the church such as pastors and deacons, and there are non-official authorities such as a Christian friend who cares enough to meet and pray regularly with the believer. These authorities provide much-needed oversight in the life of the believer and can be very effective in facilitating spiritual growth in the believer’s life. Believers should see the value

⁷ David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), 263, Wordsearch databases.

in this oversight and should willingly submit to it. This involves committing oneself to regular participation in a local church, striving to meet the Scriptural expectations of believers established by that church, receiving regular instruction from the Word of God, and taking correction when it is offered. Believers should expect to be lovingly but firmly exhorted when they fail to meet healthy expectations such as regular church attendance, tithing, sexual purity, and possessing a spirit of unity and cooperation.

Part 2: What is Discipleship?

While the writer has been describing accountability as it has been designed to exist in the local church, he has also struck at the core of what is known as “discipleship.” Rod Dempsey, in his and Dave Early’s book *Disciple Making Is...*, carefully extracts biblical principles to form this definition of a disciple of Jesus Christ: “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.*”⁸

If a disciple is this committed follower of Christ, growing spiritually in community, then discipleship is the process by which this growth is taught, modeled, encouraged, and overseen. It is unsurprising that Dempsey is careful to include “in community” in his definition. Indeed, it is of necessity that he places it there, for discipleship can only happen in community, as the scriptures make clear. A prime example of this is the text of Acts 2:40-47, in which the believers of the early church are seen as sharing life together, hearing and practicing doctrine, praying, and

⁸ Dave Early and Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is...How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 28.

fellowshipping. It is in this environment that believers are encouraged in their faith, spurred on to greater growth, and held accountable in all this.

Discipleship, then, is the process through which one or more believers offer, support, encouragement, instruction, and accountability to another believer in order to bring that believer to a greater level of spiritual maturity. Accountability cannot be separated from the discipleship process. If churches want to fulfill the Great Commission and make disciples, then they must work to develop a sense of accountability on the part of the believer toward other believers in the church and toward the church as a whole.

Part 3: The Low Level of Accountability in the Local Church Today

Since the Scriptures are clear on the issue of accountability of believers to their local church, one might assume this accountability to be plentiful in churches today. This, however, is a wrong assumption. As a matter of fact, the lack of accountability of church members to their local church is a huge problem. The problem can be illustrated by highlighting a number of current issues in the evangelical church today.

First, fewer people see the local church as a necessary part of their spiritual growth process. According to Barna, the percentage of people who do is a sobering 17%.⁹ As a result, fewer people are joining the church and regularly attending it. According to church leadership expert Reggie McNeal, who wrote about the issue in 2003, the number of “churchless Christians” worldwide was at 112 million.¹⁰ The fact that so many people see themselves as

⁹ George Barna, as quoted in Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2010), 33.

¹⁰ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 5.

Christians, but see the church as optional or unnecessary, is very telling. Rainer's report that only forty percent of church members attend on any given Sunday comes back into play here.

Second, and unsurprisingly, the phenomenon of "church-hopping" is on the rise. Many believers routinely leave one church and go to another. They fail to remain committed to one local body over a long period of time. This writer recently encountered a woman who took great pride in the fact that she never joins any one church. She simply visits around and hears different preachers and participates in various activities she believes may benefit her spiritually. She saw it as a great strategy. She failed to recognize that such an approach robbed her of any real connection and accountability to other believers. According to a new study by the Pew Research Forum, forty-nine percent of U.S. adults have looked for a new place of worship, and about 41% of those did so for some other reason than that they moved to a new community.¹¹ The reasons included conflict with the church and its leadership, change in beliefs, or social reasons. Frequent church-hopping indicates a mindset that when things are less than perfect, the quick and easy solution is to simply go to another church. Any commitments to the previous church are seen as secondary to personal desires and preferences.

Third, many churches, perhaps fearful of declining membership and attendance, are expecting very little of their members, either as qualifications for membership or as standards for participation, service, and godly living. The mindset seems to be "if we expect less, more people will come. We must make it easier for them." Rainer, whose comment about churches requiring less of their members than civic organizations was referenced above, provides strong evidence

¹¹ "Choosing a New Church or House of Worship: Americans Look for Good Sermons, Warm Welcome," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, accessed October 6, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/choosing-a-new-church-or-house-of-worship/>.

for his claims. He reports that only 55.6% of nearly 300 churches surveyed required their members to be Christians.¹² What he means by this is that while most of these churches would hope their members to be Christians, nothing, such as a requirement to share a verbal testimony, is being done to verify it. Furthermore, among stagnate Southern Baptist Churches surveyed, nearly four out of ten did not require baptism as a prerequisite for membership. Church leaders and research groups have long agreed that roughly twenty percent of church members do eighty percent of the work, which means that many church members languish on the pew for years, simply attending services but never participating in any meaningful way. In this writer's experience, all three pastorates have experienced the same phenomenon: church members frequently fail to serve the church in any way and nothing is done strategically to hold them accountable and move them toward more active involvement. The same percentages hold true for financial giving. Many church members are not honoring the principle of the tithe. This writer determined ten percent of the average income of residents in the county where his church is located and discovered that this amount was four times the annual receipts of the church. Sadly, until recently, this writer's church had never communicated any giving expectation with new members. Summarily, church membership means little, other than to record a one-time profession of faith and baptism.

Fourth, church discipline is almost a thing of the past. Churches are not articulating expectations to church members and addressing members' failure to uphold those standards. In this writer's pastoral experience over a span of twenty years, the need to discipline church members has come up a number of times. In virtually every instance, proposed discipline was met with opposition, expressed in comments like, "Who are we to judge? We are all sinners;" or

¹² Rainer, *High Expectations*, 52.

“We just have to love and pray for him;” or “If we confront her with this issue, she will leave the church and we don’t want that!” Church leaders seemed to feel they did not have the right to exercise church discipline or to hold believers accountable to any standards of behavior or participation in church life.

The low level of accountability in the local church has had a disastrous effect. First, many churches are struggling numerically. Researchers have calculated that on any given Sunday, no more than twenty-six percent of Americans attend a Christian church.¹³ In 2010, more than twenty-five percent of American Christian congregations had less than fifty people in their pews. Also, fewer congregations are growing. The Southern Baptist Convention, after having decades of growth, saw their own growth halted and have experienced declining membership for nine years. The SBC lost 200,000 members in 2015.¹⁴ While there may be many reasons fewer people are becoming and staying members, the fact that fewer people have a sense of accountability to the local church affects these statistics.

Second, churches are in conflict. In a disturbing recent survey, two thirds of American congregations in 2010 experienced serious conflict in one of four key areas: worship, finances, leadership, or priorities.¹⁵ In this writer’s view, church conflict often happens as the result of petty power struggles when believers are focused on self-centered ambitions and a refusal to recognize proper authorities. Thus, once again, the lack of healthy accountability is a factor.

¹³ McNeal, 3.

¹⁴ Carol Pipes, “ACP: More Churches Reported; Baptisms Decline,” *Baptist Press*, accessed November 27, 2016, <http://www.bpnews.net/46989/acp-more-churches-reported-baptism-worship-numbers-decline>.

¹⁵ David A. Roozen, “A Decade of Change in American Congregations 2000-2010,” *Faith Communities: American Congregations 2010*, accessed November 28, 2016. http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/Decade%20of%20Change%20Final_0.pdf

Third, a lack of accountability in the local church has led to high levels of immorality in the personal lives of church members. As a case in point, consider the increasing acceptance of cohabitation. Research is proving a dramatic increase in cohabitation among couples in the United States.¹⁶ Churches are so desperate to get new couples, that cohabitation is often ignored in local congregations. Cohabiting couples may very well be the children or grandchildren of long-time faithful members. Rather than cause a disturbance, church leaders often allow cohabitation to go unchecked among their members. This sin is just one example of how church members with a low sense of accountability to the church and its teachings are embracing lifestyles of sin. To say this phenomenon undermines the credibility of the church in the community is an understatement.

Fourth, churches are losing evangelistic effectiveness. Careful thought on the lagging baptismal numbers of the Southern Baptist Convention illustrates the point. In 2015, the Southern Baptist Convention reported 295,212 baptisms.¹⁷ Considering that the total membership of the SBC is 15.3 million members, this means that it takes approximately fifty-three Baptist church members to win one soul to Christ. To put it sadly and simply, church members on the pew are not winning others to Christ. This, however, is to be expected when so many church members are fickle in their commitments to Christ and the church. Uncommitted members who do not do the easier things like attending church are not going to do the harder things like witnessing to others.

¹⁶ Bruce Wydick, "Grandma Was Right: Why Cohabitation Undermines Relational Satisfaction, But is Increasing Anyway," *Kyklos* 60, no. 4 (November, 2007): 617-645.

¹⁷ Pipes.

Part 4: How Western Culture Has Undermined Accountability in the Local Church

Since the Scriptures are so clear that the relationship between the believer and his local church should be marked by oversight and accountability, why is there so little of it in the church today? This writer contends that accountability has been severely undermined by Western, and particularly American, culture.

Understanding the problem requires a jog back to the period of the Enlightenment. This period of history, started in the seventeenth and continued throughout the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment was a great intellectual movement in which Western thinkers, emboldened by the Scientific Revolution, questioned the norms and beliefs of the past. Roman Catholic doctrines and even Christianity itself were called into question as scientific reason reigned supreme.¹⁸ The Enlightenment thinkers questioned the notion that truth is divinely revealed and pushed scientific discovery and empirical evidence as the means for discovering the one correct answer for any given question. That the founding fathers of this country were influenced by the Enlightenment is without question. Benjamin Franklin, was not only an ambassador and statesman, but also an inventor. As to his religion, most historians agree that he was a deist. Deism was a product of the Enlightenment, a belief that while reason suggests a divine Creator, that Creator cannot or chooses not to interfere in the affairs of man or in the natural course of things. Franklin was milder than some Deists. He did believe God sometimes intervenes, but his

¹⁸ Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 35.

overall beliefs in God were fueled by reason and not by Scripture or the dogmas of the Christian church.¹⁹

The founding fathers, in general, were “enlightened” thinkers and their work in forming the new American government reveals it. The Enlightenment elevated humanity, as many Enlightenment thinkers saw human beings as basically good and rational, and therefore quite capable of forming good governments.²⁰ The phrase, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” as three of the Creator-given rights to all of humanity, referenced in the Declaration of Independence, bears out this kind of Enlightenment thinking. The era of Enlightened thinking has also been called the Modern era.

Where the Enlightenment thinkers got it wrong was by assuming that human reason can be completely objective and would lead to one empirical truth. A new wave of thinkers began to challenge the so-called truth that resulted from rationalistic thinking as being tainted by the political motives and preferences of the white elite. These challenges to modernist thinking gave rise to “postmodernism.” Whereas the modern era sought an empirical truth discovered by science and reason, postmodernism questioned whether there is an objective, universal truth at all. While postmodernism is often seen as a rejection of modernism, it really is modernism played out to its logical conclusion. Modernism elevated humanity in its ability to reason itself to objective truth. Postmodernism took it a step further, deifying the human being, as the definer

¹⁹ Charles L. Sanford, ed., *Benjamin Franklin and the American Character in Problems in American Civilization: Readings Selected by the Department of American Studies, Amherst College* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1955), 11.

²⁰ Richard E. Sullivan, Dennis Sherman, and John B. Harrison, *A Short History of Western Civilization*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994), 473.

of his own truth. Since one human being is not superior to another, and the ideas of human beings are different, truth becomes a relative construct of the individual.

While America may have started out a modern nation, it has become a postmodern one. The rise of the individual can be seen in notions of the American dream. The individual defines himself and carves out his own destiny. Think of heroes like Abraham Lincoln, who came from an obscure farm upbringing to become a defining United States President, or, more recently, Cassius Clay, Jr., who came up in a difficult time for Black Americans. Nevertheless, he became a boxing champion and, in the course of time, changed his religion and redefined himself as Muhammad Ali. The postmodern notion of the human being as a free moral agent has played right into the American dream: an individual can accomplish whatever he believes he can and he can be anything he wants to be. He lives in a free country and he is his own authority.

The postmodern mindset has a number of outgrowths. One is individualism, as has been described above. The individual is “principally obligated” to himself and spends his life seeking to advance himself.²¹ As such, the individual sees all attachments as negotiable, as some may prove to be less than personally advantageous. Jonathan Leeman has effectively argued that individualism leads to a romanticized view of love, one that stresses how others should affirm the individual’s sense of happiness and one that shuns being judged and held accountable by others.²²

Another outgrowth of postmodernism is consumerism. While the term “consumer” is often used neutrally to refer to customers who buy products, “consumerism” can have a different

²¹ Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense*, 44.

²² *Ibid.*, 46-50.

meaning. It can refer to a way of life, in which people are excessively preoccupied with consumption. The postmodern, since he is individualistic, begins to see all his relationships as products which should enrich his life in some way. Benjamin Barber has noted that consumerism is an inducer of childishness. He laments that American capitalism is “allied with vices which-although they serve consumerism-undermine democracy, responsibility, and citizenship.”²³

These mindsets can be clearly seen in the American Evangelical Church. Americans enter the church, having been immersed in a postmodern culture, rife with individualism and consumerism. These attitudes soon surface in the course of their relationship with the church. Thus, many of them do not take to accountability easily. This can be seen in such sobering statistics as that only one out of six adults in the church get involved in some type of accountable small group like Sunday School.²⁴

The consumeristic bent of many American church-goers can be seen in such facts as the constant critiquing of the worship services by attendees. Church-goers often compliment or criticize the sermon or the music on the way out of church and sit around the lunch table on Sundays making comments like, “I thought the preacher went too long today,” or “I just did not get anything out of that.” Church-goers seem to forget they should be focused on the examination of themselves rather than the quality of the “show.” As Gibbs and Bolger note, the church experience today has become a dance of producer and consumer. Individuals come to

²³Benjamin R. Barber, *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd, 2007), 5.

²⁴ Ogden, 26.

church as shoppers, seeing the worship experience as a product which should meet needs and take them to a higher spiritual plane.²⁵

The effects of the consumeristic mindset can also be seen in the fickleness of American church-goers in their commitment to any one church. This writer pastors in a small community where church-goers regularly move from one congregation to the next so they can “get more out of it.” Indeed, many Americans are unchurched altogether. While the United States adult population has grown by fifteen percent since 1991, the number of unchurched Americans has risen by ninety-two percent.²⁶ Further probing into the mindsets of these adults reveals they are very noncommittal, exhibiting such characteristics as refusal to join a political party and reluctance to marry.

The effects of individualism and consumerism on the American Evangelical church can further be seen in the unchecked moral compromise rampant in the lifestyles of many churchgoers. According to a study by Barna, thirty-six percent of born-again adults surveyed said that cohabitation is morally acceptable²⁷, and the frequency of adults attending or joining churches while cohabiting bears this out. While morally compromised lifestyles appear to be very frequent in the church, church discipline is rarely practiced. This must be so because the church has been impacted by the fallacy that it does not have the right exercise discipline over the believer. The church has become intimidated by the individual, who sees himself as king. David Wells, writing on the postmodern mindset notes how the postmodern self is autonomous,

²⁵ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005)137.

²⁶ “Number of Unchurched Adults Has Nearly Doubled Since 1991,” *Barna*, accessed October 25, 2016, <https://www.barna.com/research/number-of-unchurched-adults-has-nearly-doubled-since-1991/>.

²⁷ “Practical Outcomes Replace Biblical Principles as the Moral Standard,” *Barna*, accessed October 25, 2016, <https://www.barna.com/research/practical-outcomes-replace-biblical-principles-as-the-moral-standard/>.

having liberated itself from all outside rules and obligations.²⁸ He rejects the notion of church discipline and the church responds by leaving him alone.

The disastrous effect of American consumerism and individualism has been the production of a fat and lazy church, made up of members who know little of true Christian commitment, service, and accountability. However, all is not lost. A number of church leaders, seeing the trends, are calling the Church to a better view and practice of discipleship. The swing toward a more biblical practice of discipleship, with the formation of new and more healthy discipleship practices is, according to Alan Hirsch, one of the defining elements of the missional movement.²⁹ The preponderance of discipleship books, models, and methods speak to the awareness that change is needed in the church. The popularity of books such as David Platt's *Radical*, in which he seeks to rescue Christianity from the American Dream, are a testimony to the rising concern of poor discipleship and low accountability in the local church.³⁰ Similarly, Kyle Idleman's *Not a Fan* seeks to raise the understanding among American believers that Christianity is not about simply admiring Christ, but about following Him with wholehearted commitment.³¹ Books like Platt's and Idleman's highlight the growing concern that American Christians, having bought into an individualistic and consumeristic culture, have lost sight of what it truly means to follow Christ. Many local American churches have become little more than Christian clubs where members seek to be fed and pampered, only until they find something

²⁸ David Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 249.

²⁹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 123-24.

³⁰ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2013).

³¹ Kyle Idleman, *Not A Fan: Becoming a Completely Committed Follower of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

more appealing. Summarily, local churches must find ways to reorder the postmodern mindset and build a sense of accountability in the minds of new believers. Building this sense of accountability will keep the believer under the oversight of other believers and that of the church as whole so as he or she will grow to spiritual maturity.

CHAPTER 2

LOOKING FOR A SOLUTION: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH TOOL

Introduction

Thus far, this project has sought to describe a serious problem in the evangelical church. The project, however, cannot be successful if it does not present a solution. In this chapter, the project will turn in that direction. From the survey of literature written by knowledgeable leaders in the fields of accountability, postmodern culture, and discipleship, as well as empirical evidence on the state of the American Evangelical church, this writer will present several actions local churches can take to build accountability among their members. The chapter will demonstrate how a research tool has been formed to interview churches on how they may be conducting these actions and the effect it is having.

Introduction to the Research Tool

Part 1: Description of Interviewed Churches

This project began with pouring over a large body of literature on the subject of how effective discipleship may be done in the local church. The writer looked for common themes and methods presented by some of the world's greatest experts on discipleship. The writer sought to determine which of these methods work to overcome the postmodern mindset and draw the believer into a greater sense of accountability to other believers and to his local church. The writer then used this information to form a set of questions to be asked in interviews with church leaders in Baptist churches in Georgia. Leaders were sought from churches that are practicing the effective discipleship methods determined in the reading.

It is very important to this writer to determine an effective accountability-building discipleship plan that will work not only in larger urban or metropolitan churches but also in smaller, rural churches. Therefore, of the fifteen churches selected for interview, seven had 500 or less members. While these churches were not great in size, they were selected because the writer understood them to be practicing healthy discipleship in at least one area of ministry pertinent to this thesis.¹ All seven were located either in rural areas or in towns of less than 30,000 people. This writer felt this sampling of churches would offer great insight into how to do accountable discipleship in Georgia Baptist churches like his own.

The remainder of the churches interviewed were larger churches, some very large, the largest church having 19,881 members. The writer wanted to gain the insights of large churches that have crossed numerical hurdles and are ministering in the best-case scenario of having more resources and man-power with which to do ministry. Going into this project, the writer supposed that larger churches may have indeed grown over time *because* they are doing effective discipleship. Thus, their insights, as well as those of smaller churches, are invaluable in forming an effective accountability discipleship plan. Rick Warren calls the idea that smaller churches cannot learn from larger ones a myth. While methods and programs used by larger churches cannot simply be duplicated in the different context of the smaller church, still there may be a principle behind the method that transcends the size of the church.² Smaller churches should look for transcending principles which have proven effective and appropriate them in their smaller context. Charted below are the churches interviewed by size.

¹ The writer had personal knowledge of some of the churches and found out about others through ministry contacts and examination of church websites and statistical data published by the Georgia Baptist Mission Board.

² Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 66.

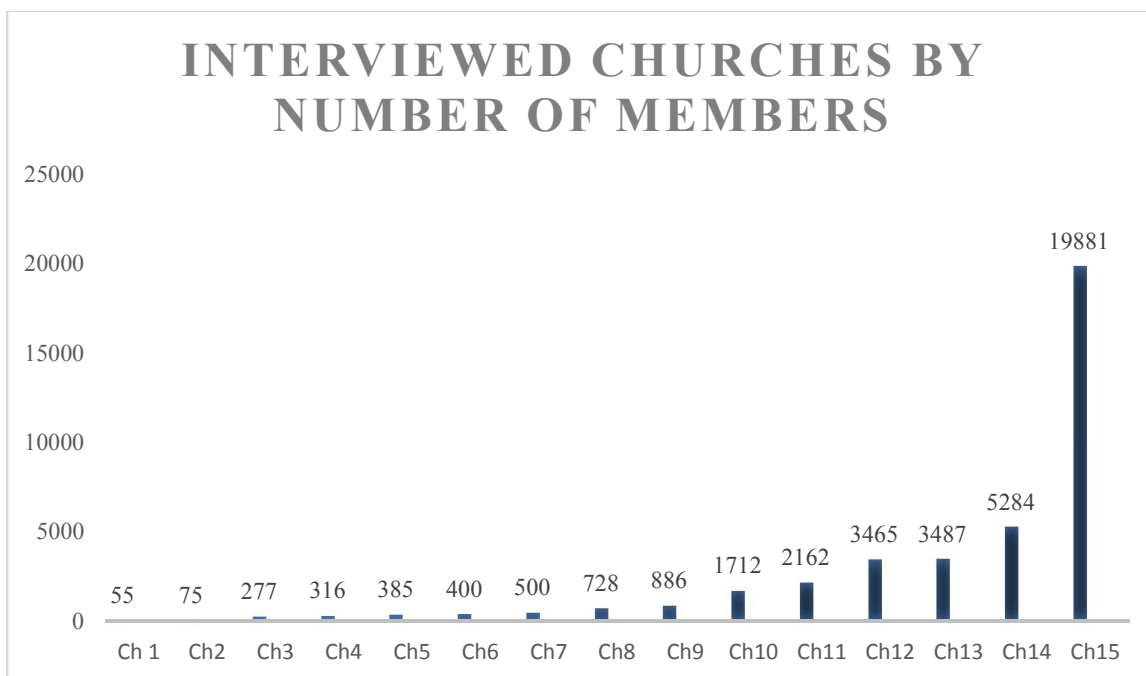


Figure 2.1. Interviewed Churches by Number of Members

It should further be noted that when it comes to style of worship, the interviewed churches exhibited some variety. Some of the churches were very traditional, using hymns played on pianos and organs. Others were more modern, utilizing praise bands and modern worship songs. Respectively, some churches had a more traditional format of activities and overall atmosphere, while others did not.

Similarly, the interviewed churches varied to some degree in style of church government. Thirteen of the churches were typically Southern Baptist with democratic governments and pastors and deacons for leaders, but one church was led by elders in addition to deacons and still another had a pastor but no deacons. Summarily, this writer followed the que of a number of church growth and discipleship experts who recognize that effective discipleship can be done in a variety of types or styles of churches. Ed Stetzer and David Putman speak to this issue in their book *Breaking the Missional Code*. They speak of the importance of contextualization: a church

should style its ministry with an understanding of its cultural context.³ Effective discipleship can be done in both traditional and non-traditional contexts. Stetzer and Putman highlight various types of churches as examples of effective missional churches. One of their examples is a large church with a traditional Southern Baptist Government and old-fashioned preaching. That same church was one of this writer's interviewees.

Part 2: Effective Discipleship Methods Discovered

The study of numerous sources on discipleship and accountability, as they relate to the local church, revealed some consistent themes. This writer discovered several key actions a church may take to improve a believer's level of accountability to the local church. The writer does not suggest the presentation of these methods as an exhaustive list. They are, rather, several common methods effective churches are using to better disciple believers. Together, these methods may be utilized to form a good plan to stem the tide of postmodernism and make believers more healthily accountable to other believers and to their local church.

Method 1: An Effective New Member Class

A definite recurring theme in the survey of literature for this project was the importance of having some kind of new member class for those coming into local church membership. *Membership Matters*, by Chuck Lawless is largely an affirmation of new member classes and how to do them. Lawless cites research which indicated that among 150 growing churches surveyed, seventy-three percent had a new member class.⁴ New member training is also a vital

³ Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 143.

⁴ Lawless, 19.

part of Rick Warren's "Life Development Process" at Saddleback Church.⁵ Still another example is Thom Rainer's *High Expectations*. Rainer's emphasis on the importance of new member classes can be seen in this key statement: "If a single major trend can be gleaned from this study, it would be the emergence of new member classes as a common ministry in the higher-expectation churches. Indeed, this trend is so significant that all of chapter 6 will be devoted to this growing phenomenon."⁶

However, not just any new member class will do. If the new member class is to be successful in helping to produce a more accountable member, then the class must address two critical issues. First, the class must address the expectations the church has for its members. This serves as an up-front communication to the new member that his church membership comes with responsibility. Communicated expectations might include church attendance, godly behavior outside the church, cooperation and unity, giving, and participation.

Secondly, the issue of involvement with accountability-rich discipleship groups must be addressed. The new member class must serve as a bridge to accountability groups such as Sunday School and other small groups, service opportunities in which the member learns to be more than a consumer, and mentorships. Indeed, the new member class should have a strategy by which to connect new members to these important opportunities.

Thus, the first section of this writer's interview included questions about possible new member classes churches might be conducting. The writer asked the interviewed church leader key questions about what kind of new member class or training was being offered, when it was

⁵ Warren, 144-145.

⁶ Rainer, *High Expectations*, 60.

offered during the week and for how many sessions, who taught the class, what curriculum (if any) was being used, whether or not the course addressed expectations, and whether or not the course was required for all new members. To ascertain a concrete measurement on the effectiveness of the course, the researcher also asked the interviewee for statistics on the percentage of members taking the course who remain active in church life at least one year later. For the purposes of this study, the writer defined “active” as attending at least once per week and participating in some activity, function, or service beyond the attendance of regular worship services. Since evidences of low accountability include dropping out and church-hopping, higher retention rates indicate that members are becoming more accountable. While not all the interviewed churches were prepared to offer retention rates, twelve of the fifteen could give strong estimates. Leaders of smaller churches could often do this by simply recounting in their heads the members who had joined in the last two years and how many of them were still active. Two larger churches had concrete numerical figures they had already been keeping for their own purposes. Lastly, the writer asked the church leader his/her opinion on whether the new member course had increased the commitment, involvement, and spiritual maturity of new members. While this question was subjective in nature, it gave the interviewee the opportunity to give powerful insight on whether or not the new member class was successful.

Method 2: Accountability-Rich Small Groups

The importance of small groups has long been touted by church growth experts as a means of reaching more people and keeping more people in the church. For Southern Baptist Churches, the normative small group expression is the Sunday School. This writer was schooled to believe that Sunday School is the key to winning and keeping people in the church. Ken Hemphill writes of meeting with the largest churches in Southern Baptist life and discovering

that 90% of them “were built on basic Sunday School principles and strategies.”⁷ Sunday School as an effective tool for church growth can be attributed to the fact that it organizes the church for outreach. Sunday School divides the church into groups, each group having a strategy to enlist new members through visitation, calls, or other means.

This project is more interested, however, in answering why Sunday School is an effective tool for *keeping* people. The answer lies in the power of the small group. Small groups can provide necessary accountability and help for a believer to get and stay connected to the church. Research has shown that people who are connected to a small group “attend worship more often, feel a stronger connection to the church, and give more time and money to the enterprise than those who do not belong to a small group.”⁸ The reason is simple. The small group provides an atmosphere where believers build relationships with other believers, are nurtured and cared for by other believers, are reached out to when they stumble, and are presented opportunities for further service in the church. For instance, in this writer’s church, each Sunday School class was asked to prepare a food box to be given to the poor at an upcoming community outreach event. Sunday School teachers encouraged class members to bring food. Thus, in each Sunday School class, members are encouraged to participate in giving and serving. In those same classes members are visited and called when sick and otherwise absent and confronted when they fall into sin. The Sunday School is providing a level of accountability to believers that mere attendance in worship service does not provide. Thus, this writer has concluded that a vital

⁷ Ken Hemphill, *Revitalizing the Sunday Morning Dinosaur: A Sunday School Growth Strategy for the 21st Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 25.

⁸ Walton, 99.

aspect of bolstering accountability in the local church is having some kind of effective small group ministry.

For this reason, the second section for questioning interviewees included questions relative to the church's small group ministry. Church leaders were asked if they had a small group ministry and were asked to describe how it works. Church leaders were also asked if they had a process for connecting new members to a small group. This question is rooted in the writer's belief that if churches could effectively get new members into a small group, then increased accountability to the church and subsequent spiritual growth is a given. Questions were also asked about the logistics of the small groups, i.e. when the groups meet, who teaches the groups, and the content of the small group meeting. By asking these questions, the writer sought to determine any noticeable trends that resulted in greater effectiveness.

Method 3: Mentorships

While small groups are a great start in providing accountability to believers, they may not go far enough in combating the postmodern mindset and recovering true accountability as a vital aspect of biblical discipleship. Robby Gallaty has noted that true accountability requires a relationship that involves confidentiality, confrontation, and compassion.⁹ Believers must share their lives with one another, ask one another hard questions, confess sins to one another in a safe environment, and invest so personally in one another that one believer has a profound spiritual impact on another. Small groups may be small, but they may still be too large for these elements to take place. For instance, a Sunday School class may only contain eight members, but that may still be too many for a believer to open up before and confess sins. The number may still be too

⁹ Robby Gallaty, *Growing Up: How to be a Disciple Who Makes Disciples* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2013), 41-45.

great for a teacher or leader to be able to personally invest in each life. For this reason, there must be a further breaking down into even smaller groups. Essentially, if a church wishes to build accountability in discipleship, it must foster relationships where mentors are personally investing in the lives of disciples. Some kind of mentorship must be utilized in the lives of new believers. Mentorships may not necessarily be one-on-one. As noted in the review of literature above, Greg Ogden suggests putting three people together: a mentor and two disciples.¹⁰ Gallaty actually opposes one-on-one discipleship relationships for the purpose that they can become counseling sessions and rarely reproduce.¹¹ Like Ogden, he proposes discipleship groups of three to five.

Believing mentorships to be an important aspect of discipleship, this writer purposed to ask church leaders if any type of mentorship was being done in their churches and the nature of such relationships. The writer asked how mentors were selected and trained, how they were paired with disciples and the nature of the relationship. Going into this project, the writer did not expect that many churches had a formal process for forming and facilitating mentorships, since he rarely heard of churches actually doing it. However, should he find that one or more of his interviewed churches were conducting mentorships, perhaps they can shed light on how these relationships can be used to build a believer's sense of accountability.

Method 4: Connection to Selfless Service

Since the effects of postmodern thinking include consumerism and individualism, this writer has concluded that churches must do something to get church members past the tendency

¹⁰ Ogden, 145.

¹¹ Gallaty, 48.

to sit and be ministered to. An attitude of selfish consumption works against a sense of accountability, because it places a man at the center of his own universe. He becomes his own servant and feels that others are beholden to him. It is not that a member is wrong for wanting to be ministered to. Certainly, every member should be blessed to hear sound preaching and teaching of the Word, and should have vital spiritual, emotional, and physical needs met by a loving church. However, each member should also understand his responsibility to serve in a selfless way, that others might also be ministered to. The focus of a member should not be upon himself. Selfless service opportunities may include working in the church nursery, driving the church bus, setting up or taking down equipment, serving food or cleaning up after meals, or participating in outreach events.

In this writer's view, selfless service reacquaints the believer with his responsibility to the higher purposes of God, the welfare of others, and obedience to other authorities, including that of the church. Selfless service reminds the believer that he is accountable to a greater whole: he is a member of the Body of Christ.

One would only have to look as far as the several strong Scriptural teachings on spiritual gifts to see the importance the Bible places on selfless service. Ephesians 4:11-12 is a prime example, in which Paul highlights that even leaders in the church are gifted and chosen "for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." The admonitions in Romans 12:6-8 for believers to exercise their spiritual gifts heartily is still another example. As Thabiti Anyabwile writes, A healthy committed church member receives and applies the grace of God by working to support the ministry of the local church and excels in

giving what he has already received from God to gospel work.¹² When churches are intentional about putting new members to work in selfless service, it draws the member out of the pew and out of himself. Therefore, selfless service strengthens the believer's sense of accountability and responsibility in the local church.

Selfless service also galvanizes the believer's commitment to Christ and His church by opening the believer up to challenges in ministry work which require trust in God, firm commitment, and help from others. A new believer, for instance, who is ridiculed on the street while handing out Gospel tracts, will, with the support of fellow believers, learn to take a strong stand for Christ and become even more committed to the church. Neil Cole speaks to this issue. He writes, "persecution solidifies commitment in a follower," and illustrates the point with the practice of Mormons sending out young missionaries on challenging and long-term witnessing assignments.¹³

Thus, this writer asked interviewees whether their churches utilized any formal process for connecting new believers to a place of service. If they answered yes, they were asked to describe that process. Several follow-up questions were aimed at measuring the impact serving had on the member's long-term commitment to the church. Interviewees were asked the percentage of new members who found a place of service, who remained active in the church one year later.

¹² Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What is a Healthy Church Member?* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 70.

¹³ Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 132.

Method 5: Natural Relationship Building

Jason Lanker, Professor of Christian Ministry Formation at John Brown University, writing on the importance of mentorships, warns against the tendency for churches to try to force mentoring relationships through some overly structured program.¹⁴ He notes that when churches arbitrarily assign mentees to mentors for short periods of time (three months or less) the relationship can actually do more harm than good. Deep connections take time to develop and do so best when they happen naturally.

This writer has seen the validity of Lanker's point when he remembers a particular family that came into the writer's church. The family started coming to special family-oriented events at the invitation of one of their friends who happened to be a member. In time, all five family members, including both parents and three teenage children, made professions of faith and were baptized. Because the family was a hard-working one outside the church, they were drawn to service-related opportunities in the church, like cooking and cleaning after meals. Because they were frequently there to help out, they began to naturally build relationships with others in the church family. This pastor, along with older deacons in the church, began unofficially mentoring the father and husband of this family. They engaged him in spiritual conversation, counseled him in spiritual challenges on his job, and oversaw him in his responsibilities in the church. This man grew spiritually and exhibited this growth by becoming more and more involved, quitting drinking, and changing certain ungodly attitudes. This growth was not the result of a church program, but, instead, an outgrowth of natural relationship building between he and other more

¹⁴ Lanker, 267.

seasoned believers. He readily accepted counsel from other men because he had come to love and respect them through natural friendships they had developed with him. He embraced accountability to these men as a result of natural friendships.

Still yet, this writer does not share Lanker's seeming opposition to structured mentor programs. Without some intentional plan and structured implementation, too much is left to chance. Some new believers will be mentored while others will not. Furthermore, without a definite plan that includes the training of mentors, some mentors may do more harm than good. Without a set standard for frequency of meetings, some mentoring relationships will fail to meet often enough or too often. Without guidelines on how the relationship should progress, some mentoring relationships may take an unhealthy turn. Relationships might become no more than casual friendships with little or no spiritual instruction, or could become overly dependent emotional attachments which do not result in the mentee's spiritual maturity. Consequently, as noted above, this writer this writer will seek to build a structured mentorship method.

With that said, this writer has concluded that churches must foster an atmosphere where discipleship relationships can develop naturally. This may involve an ongoing service opportunity into which the church funnels new believers, or a regular fellowship event designed to give opportunity for new believers to get to know more mature ones. This way, vital friendships can develop. With the right intentionality, opportunities for natural relationship-building can be used to draw believers into vital accountable discipleship relationships such as those mentioned above.

In section four of the interview, this writer asked church leaders what opportunities they might be utilizing to encourage the natural building of relationships. Anticipating that

interviewees might argue that any and all church activities and social events lead to the building of relationships, this writer explained that he was looking for opportunities that had been designed intentionally to connect new believers to more mature church members. The writer also anticipated that most churches would not have any kind of statistic that could measure the success of such events, so he opted to ask two subjective questions. The writer asked if the church leader had seen friendships develop naturally during the relationship-building opportunity and if the interviewee felt the opportunity overall had been effective in helping new believers build relationships.

Part 3: The Use of Annual Church Profiles as an Added Tool

While interviews with church leaders were most helpful in gaining insight into how accountability is strengthened in the local church, this writer needed access to some concrete numerical information on each church in order to form hard conclusions. Specifically, the writer wished to see numerical data on the number of people in each church enrolled in Sunday School and other small group ministries in relation to the total number of members of the church. While the writer anticipated that some interviewees could supply this information in the interview, he also anticipated that some would be unprepared to do so. After all, it is often church clerks and secretaries rather than pastors and staff ministers who compile such information.

To get this information, the writer turned to the “2015 Annual Report” of the Georgia Baptist Convention.¹⁵ Section IV of this report lists statistical data on all Georgia Baptist Churches reporting annually by way of the “Annual Church Profile.” This is a form each church

¹⁵ “Section IV: 2015 Statistics by Association,” *Awaken 2015: 2015 Annual Report Georgia Baptist Convention*, accessed July 6, 2016, <https://gabaptist.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2015-annual-report-section4.pdf>.

fills out annually to report vital numerical data from the previous church year. This writer found reports on fourteen of the fifteen churches he interviewed. The one church not included in the Book of Reports was excluded because it was a new church plant at the time the report was compiled. At the time this church was interviewed, their work had been going on for about one year. While they could not report one-year retention rates, the church had been conducting several of the above-mentioned discipleship methods and offered great insight on how the methods were working.

CHAPTER 3

HOW REAL CHURCHES ARE TEACHING BELIEVERS TO BE ACCOUNTABLE

Introduction

The applied research for this project has yielded much helpful information on how accountability can be recovered as a vital aspect of Christian discipleship in the local church. This chapter will present a number of key findings gleaned from the interview of fifteen churches. By comparing and compiling answers to key questions on various aspects of accountability-building actions, the writer looked for consensus on what is working, common themes and trends, and evidence of effectiveness. Numerical data was collected from the Annual Report of the Georgia Baptist Convention to add a layer of concrete evidence of the effect these accountability-building actions are having.

Part 1: Findings on New Member Classes

Since surveyed literature applauds the value of new member classes in establishing a greater sense of accountability in new members toward their local church, this writer wanted to see just how valuable they are in the churches he surveyed. Upon interviewing the churches, a number of important findings were discovered. These findings will assist the writer in creating an effective new member class as part of an overall strategy for building accountability in the local church.

Finding 1: Interviewed Churches Conducting a New Member Class See it as Effective

Of the fifteen churches interviewed, thirteen were conducting some type of new member training. Of the thirteen, 100% saw their new member training as effective in increasing the

knowledge, commitment, involvement and spiritual maturity of their members. While it was common for church leaders to indicate recent changes as a way of improving aspects of their new member training, not one indicated a desire to stop doing new member training. The graph below indicates the high number of interviewed churches conducting new member training and their positive view of it.

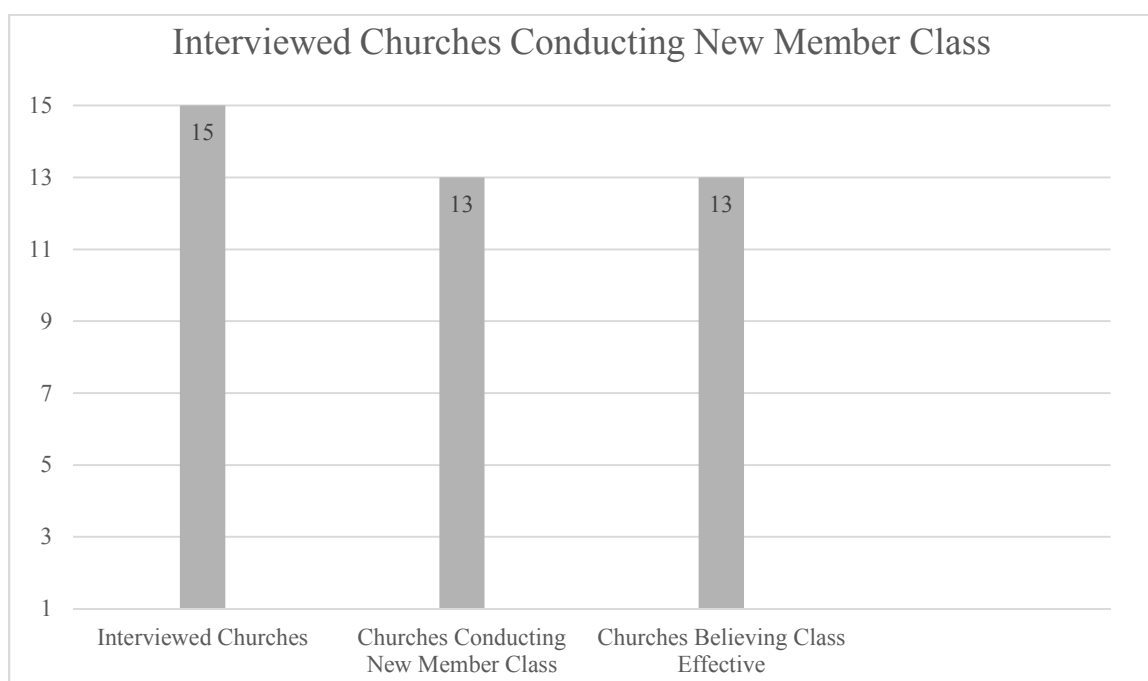


Figure 3.1. Number of Churches Conducting New Member Training and Their Assessment

This finding supports that of researches like Chuck Lawless who surveyed fifty-two churches conducting new member classes. Lawless found that fifty-one of the fifty-two churches “asserted that their churches are stronger because of their membership classes.”¹ While it is not uncommon for churches to encounter negativity toward new member classes, this negativity typically happens when the idea of a new member class is presented to a church that has never

¹ Lawless, 33.

done one. In this writer's own church, the presentation of a new member class was met with some fear on the part of several members. They worried that the church was making it too hard for members to come in and charged that a new member class sends the wrong message. "We do not want people to think they have to prove they are good enough before we allow them into our church," they said. Of course, such fears were unfounded and did not reflect the spirit of what this writer was attempting to do in forming a new member class. After this fear was expressed in the business meeting, this pastor explained that the new member class is not an attempt to have members "prove they are good enough to join this church." Rather, it is an opportunity to help new believers truly understand the Gospel and their decision for Christ, the nature and mission of the church they have just joined, and this church's expectations for its members. Several worried members abstained from voting, but the vast majority of those attending the meeting voted that the church begin the class. Several members expressed that the church should have done something like this a long time ago. Once the class began and early class graduates began testifying to how the class had helped them understand their salvation, the church, and other important issues, the church as a whole became very positive about the class.

Based upon the research findings for this project, as well as this writer's own experience, he is convinced that when churches create and implement a well-prepared new member class, they will find it effective for increasing the knowledge, commitment and spiritual maturity of their members. Furthermore, churches will find a new member class effective in establishing healthy accountability early on. In the next chapter, this writer will deal more with the structure and content of such classes, offering churches sound guidance on how they can begin such a class.

Finding 2: New Member Classes Should Be Required

Thom Rainer's research has concluded that churches that require new member classes have much higher retention rates than those that do not.² This fact alone should lead churches to strongly consider requiring a new member's class. This writer offers another reason for churches to require the course: doing so establishes accountability from the start. By requiring members to participate in a new member's class, the church asks the new member to submit to spiritual authorities from the start of his walk with Christ and/or his relationship with the church. In doing so, the church teaches the new member early on to obey the command set forth in Hebrews 13:17: "Obey those who rule over you and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account."

In contrast, churches that offer a new member course but do not require it are really sending the wrong message. When churches establish a pivotal class that fortifies the believer's understanding of salvation and church membership but do not require it, they unintentionally send the message that even the most crucial steps relative to spiritual growth and church membership are left to the discretion of the individual. When new members are given the option to skip the class, some will no doubt do so. In this writer's research one church offering a new member class but not requiring it reported that only a third of new members actually attended the class. This means that sixty-six percent of its members are coming into church membership without getting the key teaching the class offers. Churches that do not offer a new member class or do not require it are missing valuable opportunities not only to teach on aspects of accountability, but to require accountability from the start.

² Rainer, *High Expectations*, 105.

The graph below pictures critical data found in this writer's research on whether or not interviewed churches are offering new member classes and whether or not the classes are required.

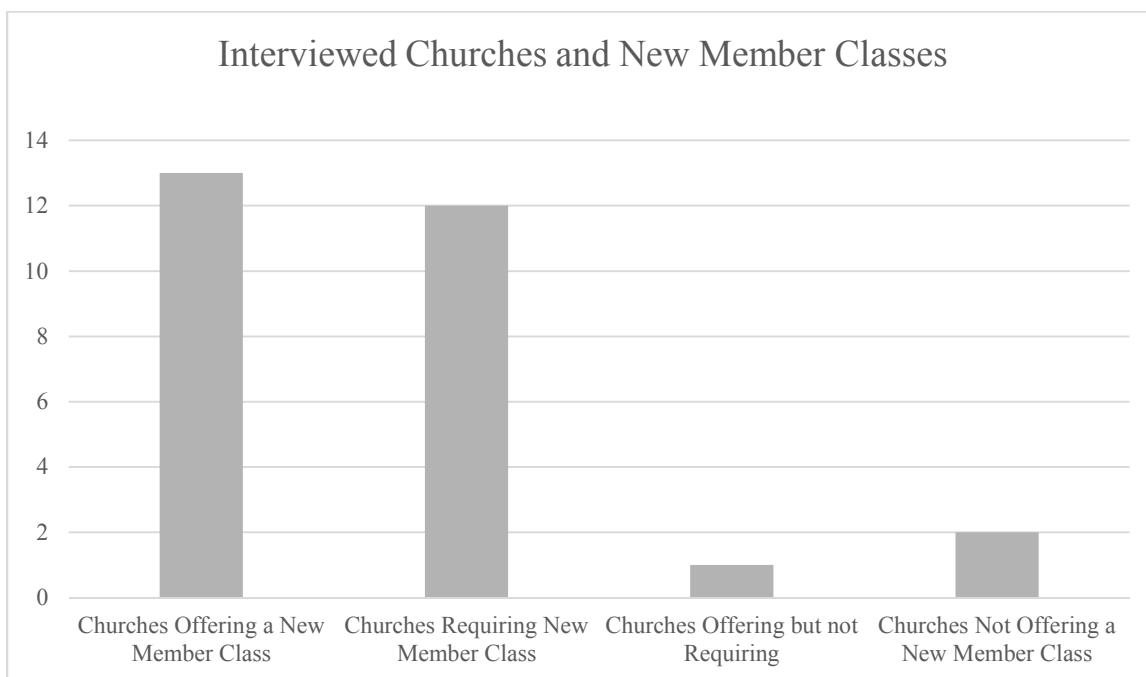


Figure 3.2. Interviewed Churches and New Member Classes

This writer was surprised to find that twelve of the fifteen churches interviewed required a new member class. This lines up with the research findings of Chuck Lawless that more churches are not only offering new member classes, but are making their classes mandatory.³ Churches are realizing the value of new member classes and are embracing their right and responsibility to require new members to receive vital instruction at the beginning of their walk with Christ and relationship with the local church.

³ Lawless, 22.

Finding 3: Churches Should Write their Own Material

Another surprising finding of this writer's research was the number of churches that had written their own material for their new member class. Of the thirteen interviewed churches, ten had opted to write some or all of their new member material, as opposed to using pre-written, purchased material.

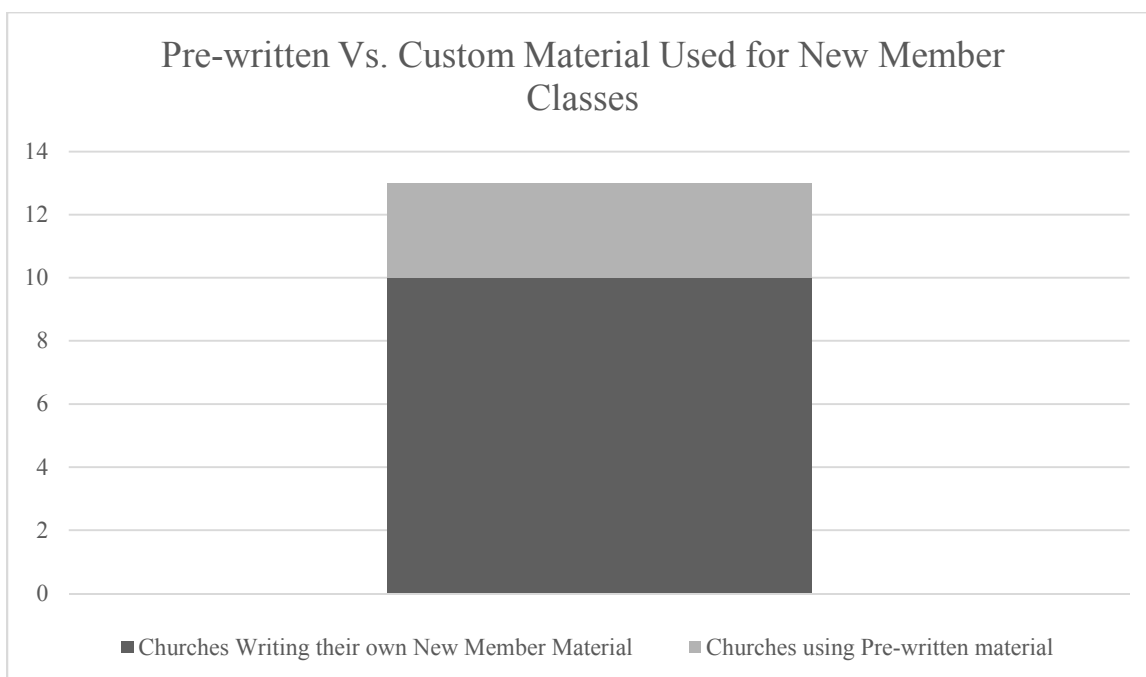


Figure 3.3. Choice of Custom Material over Pre-written

The interviews revealed the simple and obvious reason: by writing their own material, churches could teach the unique ideals, mission statement, government and expectations of their own church. It is akin to the difference between learning about people in general versus getting to know a specific individual. A believer's sense of accountability to his local church is bolstered when he is acquainted personally with that church. Quite simply, for a person to have an awareness of a church's standards and expectations, those expectations must be disclosed to

him. It is not enough for a church to use generic material, at least not exclusively. The church must communicate its uniqueness to the believer.

This writer's experience verifies this point. After the church's approval to begin a new member class, the writer went book shopping to select a material for the course. He chose a book by Ralph W. Hodge called *Taking the Next Step: A Guide for New Church Members*.⁴ The book is theologically solid and addresses several pertinent topics for a new believer, including the nature of salvation, the definition and function of a church, and the believer's involvement in his church using his spiritual gifts. Since the book is broken down into five chapters, this writer taught the course in five sessions, one hour each. After taking several members through the course, this writer concluded that while the material was solid, it was not personal and specific enough to acquaint the believer with this individual church. Thus, the writer sat down and wrote custom material which communicated exactly what this church wanted each new member to know and understand. Had he thought of it first, this writer would have named his new member class what another local church named theirs: "The Heart and Soul Class." A new member class should surely communicate to a new member the heart and soul of the church.

Finding 4: Churches Should Require Members to Sign a Membership Covenant

Right away, this writer admits that his church does not currently require members to sign a membership covenant in order to join the church. With the small controversy over requiring a new member class, this writer knew that requiring members to sign a covenant before joining

⁴ Ralph W. Hodge, *Taking the Next Step: A Guide for New Church Members* (Nashville: Groups Ministry Publishing/Convention Press, 1996).

was a step his church was not ready to take at the time. He was not even sure requiring members to sign a covenant was all that necessary. If they agreed to attend the class and then went forward with joining the church, was this not sign enough that they were committing to the church's expectations?

Going into this project, the writer expected that most churches selected for interview would have the same kinds of thoughts regarding covenant signing and that only a small number would require the actual signing of a covenant in order to join. The interviews, however, yielded a surprise. Of the thirteen churches conducting a New Member Class, ten required the signing of a covenant in order for the member to join the church. Church leaders felt it was not only important for members to hear the church's expectations, but to commit to them and indicate that commitment formally. Asking members to take this action draws them into a new level of accountability. Mark Dever and Paul Alexander are adamant about the necessity of requiring members to sign a church covenant. They write:

Requiring people to sign a church covenant lets them know that they will be expected not only to believe the statement of faith, but to live it out. It also lets them know how they will be expected to live it out-i.e., in clear ways that build up the corporate body and enhance the corporate testimony of the church in the community. Implementing a church covenant helps to correct the misperception that members can live in either isolated individualism or unrepented sin and still be members in good standing.⁵

The following graph illustrates the number of interviewed churches requiring the signing of covenants.

⁵ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005)62.

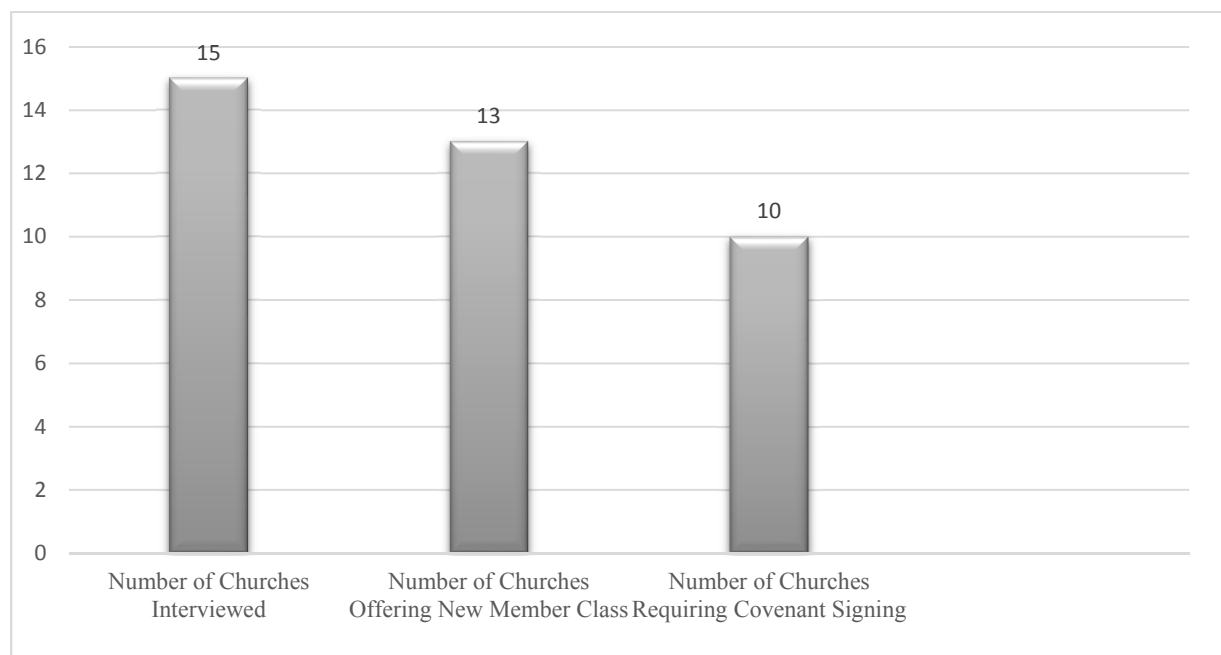


Figure 3.4. Interviewed Churches Requiring Covenant Signing

This sound justification for requiring the signing of a covenant strikes at the heart of how accountability can be recovered and practiced between believers and their church.

To understand the importance of this, it is helpful to examine the connection between accountability and formal commitment in the local church. When a believer makes a formal commitment to the beliefs and expectations that have been presented to him in new member training, he is, in essence, asking to be held accountable. By identifying with a local church, the believer should be making a statement to the church and its leaders that he will seek to meet the church's expectations for membership and is willing to be held accountable when he does not.⁶ If he is indeed making such a commitment, he should be willing to make that fact known in some tangible way. In the world of human relationships, when two people commit to each other in marriage, they stand before God and human witnesses and voice their commitments aloud.

⁶ Mark Dever, *What is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), 95.

Documents are signed and recorded in a local county courthouse, signifying their marriage and holding them accountable to it. When a man refuses to go through such legal proceedings and remarks that he “doesn’t need a piece of paper” to be committed to his significant other, he is regularly charged with “fear of commitment.” The point is simple. If a person is truly making a commitment, he should not be afraid to indicate it formally. Conversely, the formal indicator is proof that the person is accountable to his commitment.

Churches requiring new members to sign a membership covenant are asking their members to go beyond just listening to expectations. They are bringing their members to a place of firm commitment. This requirement honors the spirit of James 1:22 which instructs believers to “be doers of the word, and not hearers only.” One of the interviewed churches for this project required their members to go through four levels of new member training and sign a covenant at each level. Typically, the covenants contained a series of “I will” statements articulating what the new member should be willing to do as a way of being faithful to church expectations.

Several churches shared their membership covenants with this writer. The covenants called for formal commitment in a number of areas as expressed in the table below:

Table 3.1. Commitment Areas in New Member Covenants

Areas of Commitment Addressed in membership Covenants of Interviewed Churches
1. Protection of church unity
2. Praying for the growth of the church
3. Inviting others to attend the church
4. Faithful attendance
5. Regular giving/tithing
6. Godly behavior outside the church
7. Active service
8. Commitment to a Sunday School class or small group
9. Completion of further new member training
10. Following through with baptism

Finding 5: New Member Classes Should Bridge to Other Accountability-Building Methods

New Member Classes are a great first step in building a new believer's sense of accountability to other believers, but, as noted earlier, other accountability-building methods must be employed by the church to truly combat the postmodern mindset and draw the believer into healthy, accountable discipleship. A class, in and of itself, no matter how well-prepared and substantive, cannot accomplish these goals. The class, therefore, must serve as a bridge to other accountability-building avenues in the church.

For instance, instruction in the new member class should include strong encouragement to join a healthy small group where the believer can enter into vital accountable relationships. One interviewee reported to this writer that in the new member class of his church, the instructor passionately urges the new member to join a Sunday School class. He explains that if the believer truly wants to get to know people in the church, become a vital part of the church's work, and minister and be ministered to, then he must join a Sunday School Class. Sunday School in this church is the center of church life. When believers join the church, they are immediately enrolled in a Sunday School Class and the teacher of the class is instructed to reach out to them.

In the same church, during new member training, new members are given a list of service opportunities and are encouraged to check off preferred areas of service. Leaders of those service opportunities are then given their information so they may contact them and invite them in. Thus, new member training in this church not only draws the believer into accountability from the start, but serves as a bridge to other accountability-rich opportunities such as small groups and selfless service.

In all, this writer identified ten of the fifteen interviewed churches as using the new member class as a springboard to connect new believers to other opportunities where their sense of accountability to their local church can be strengthened. This determination was made by noting how many churches answered “yes” to the following questions: “Does your church have a formal process for connecting new members to a small group?;” “Does your church have a formal process for connecting new believers to a place of service?;” and “Does your church currently utilize any type of mentorship for new members?” Follow-up questions were asked to determine just what these churches were doing. The writer was looking for an intentional and defined process. For instance, one church indicated that in the case of new members finding opportunities to serve, a list of service opportunities is given during new member training. New members indicate in writing which areas of service they prefer and their names are given to leaders of those areas. Answers revealed that ten of fifteen churches were using the new member class to connect new members to small groups, service, and mentorships. The following table illustrates the use of new member classes in a defined process to connect new believers to small groups, service opportunities, and some type of mentorship relationship.

Table 3.2. Use of New Member Class to Connect to Small Groups, Service, and Mentorships

	Small Group	Service	Mentorship
Church 1			
Church 2			
Church 3	✓	✓	
Church 4	✓	✓	
Church 5	✓		
Church 6			
Church 7	✓		
Church 8		✓	
Church 9	✓	✓	
Church 10	✓	✓	
Church 11	✓	✓	
Church 12	✓	✓	
Church 13			
Church 14	✓	✓	
Church 15			

At this point, a word of caution should be given. Involving believers in mere classes and events, even several in a series, is not a guarantee that the postmodern mindset of new believers will be thwarted and accountability will be built. As a matter of fact, offering a smorgasbord of religious classes and activities to the believer can sometimes play into the postmodern mindset. As one who has been impacted by the postmodern mindset, the new believer is used to being a consumer. Thus, the church becomes the next purveyor of religious goods and services. Eugene Peterson laments this very fact in his *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. He warns that once of the most dangerous aspects of the world today is that spirituality can be achieved instantly.⁷ Discipleship, of necessity happens over a long period of time as the believer seeks God. It is only by the organic process of living in Christ with other believers that the consumeristic mindset of Western believers can be overcome. Therefore, the new member class

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 16.

should not only bridge to classes and events but opportunities for more organic discipleship through which accountability can be built. Aside from small group classes as noted above, churches may also use the new member class to emphasize and connect believers to ongoing service opportunities, mentorships, or other discipleship relationships where accountability can be strengthened. Neil Cole observes that while postmoderns are rejecting objective truth, they are hungry for relationship. He urges the church to focus on organic principles designed to build relationships.⁸

The above findings on new member classes reveal the clear importance these classes have in establishing accountability in the hearts of new members. An effective new member class confronts the believer, early on, with his responsibility to the church, its leaders, and to other believers. Churches not employing some form of new member training are missing out on a vital opportunity to clarify to the believer the church's doctrines and beliefs and establish expectations for membership.

Part 2: Findings on Small Groups

As noted in the previous chapter, small groups within the local church are a great way to provide an atmosphere for spiritual growth and direction for new believers. Disciples are best made in small groups in which believers are intentional about building Christ's kingdom in the hearts of their members.⁹ Unsurprisingly, small groups are a primary way to facilitate and strengthen biblical accountability among church members. Citing a number of key studies to support their claims, Holly Allen and Kristine Ross assert that "religious socialization in a

⁸ Neil Cole, *Church 3.0: Upgrades for the Future of the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 29.

⁹ Jeffrey Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 23.

subcommunity [small group] is an essential aspect of strong and sustainable religious commitment.”¹⁰ Therefore, this writer wanted to find how churches may be using small groups to strengthen accountability. A number of key findings were gleaned from this writer’s research.

Finding 1: Sunday School is the Dominant Small Group Ministry in Georgia Baptist Churches

Interviews with the fifteen churches revealed that fourteen were conducting what this writer defines as Sunday School: Sunday morning small group Bible study. A handful of churches (three) were calling their Sunday morning small groups something different, like “Life Groups,” or “Grace Groups.” In at least one of those cases, the church’s decision to use a different name reflects their understanding of a problem typical in Georgia Baptist churches: Sunday School, in many Georgia Baptist churches, has become a tired and declining gathering of classes where people sit and listen to a bible lesson and go home. What it has ceased to be is a body of small groups effectively reaching, assimilating, discipling, and holding believers accountable. The church mentioned above dropped the name “Sunday School” to draw their members away from the school or class mentality and toward an understanding that these small groups should be families of believers where discipleship, rich in accountability, is strong.

In this writer’s view, the fact that Sunday School is the dominant small group ministry for the interviewed churches and for Georgia Baptist churches as a whole is not inherently good or bad for building accountability. What determines its value is the level of health of the Sunday School in drawing believers into accountable relationships with other believers. Sunday School can be quite effective for building accountability, but it must be done properly. How Sunday

¹⁰ Holly Catterton Allen and Kristine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 128.

Schools can be effective in increasing a sense of accountability with believers will be discussed in the further findings below.

Finding 2: Accountability Can Be Built in Small Groups with an Effective “Care” Ministry

Georgia Baptists have long been taught the importance of ministry in Sunday School. It is not enough for people to gather and hear a lesson. Members of the class should reach out to each other, meet each other’s felt and spiritual needs, and hold each other accountable when sin or spiritual complacency develops. Keith Murdock, Minister of Adults at First Baptist Church in Duluth, Georgia, once wrote “there is no better ministry and assimilation tool than the Sunday School.”¹¹ He and other Georgia Baptist leaders have advocated for the employment of a “care” strategy within Sunday School classes which consists of intentional efforts to regularly contact sick members, absentee members, and members having any determinable needs the class can meet. A leader, called something like “Care Leader,” or “Ministry Coordinator” should be chosen to organize class efforts in reaching out to needy members. The leader may make contacts personally but should also enlist other members to join in the process of making contacts. This way, accountability runs both ways. Those ministering are held accountable as well as those being ministered to. Any effective small group will have some method for regular contact and support of its members.

Several of the fifteen interviewed churches revealed such a strategy. A leader in a large church in one of Georgia’s major cities teaches Sunday School classes to employ both care leaders and outreach leaders (those who lead efforts for evangelistic outreach) and minister regularly. Classes that become complacent in this are not given new members for enrollment.

¹¹ Keith Murdock, *Key Strategies for Healthy Sunday Schools: A Guide for Pastors, Sunday School Directors, Ministers of Education, and Sunday School Leaders*, ed. Steve Parr (Friendswood: Baxter Press, 2008), 41.

Names of new members are only referred to those classes faithfully ministering to one another. A second interviewed church was in the process of reworking its discipleship strategies for better effectiveness. One change included the placement of an outreach and care group leader in each class, a planned time in each class for ministry to be discussed, and a specific contact method involving mail, phone calls, and visits.

Finding 3: When Accountability is Weak in Sunday School, Churches May Consider Adding Additional Accountability-rich Small Groups

While Sunday School, with an effective care ministry, can build accountability in the local church, it may not go far enough in establishing accountability-rich small groups. The Sunday morning Sunday School experience can seem very structured and “school-like” to many believers. This feeling is heightened when believers go into classrooms with tables and chairs and podiums, books are brought in to take roll, and bells ring when time is up. In this type of environment, believers may not truly open up to other believers, friendships may develop only limitedly, and, consequently, accountability may develop slowly.

Therefore, churches should encourage additional small groups where the atmosphere is more relaxed, meeting time is not so constrained, and conversation among believers can flow more freely. These groups may consider meeting in homes for a more casual and intimate atmosphere. The groups need not be large. In fact, it may be better for them to remain small. Neil Cole advocates for groups of two or three believers to meet regularly for encouraging one another in the faith. He states that when two or three, rather than a large group, meet, community, accountability, and confidentiality are stronger.¹²

¹² Cole, 100-101.

Churches should not only encourage the formation of such groups, but should give regular guidance to the process. In one interview, a church leader showed this writer several excellent documents he had created for the guidance and facilitation of such intimate small groups. Included was a covenant in which believers signed their commitment to attend the group faithfully, study and memorize appropriate scriptures, and accept loving accountability from other believers in the group. Also included were training documents for those leading such groups and seeking to disciple other believers. In this same church, home groups eat together, study the Word and have a specific time for accountability. In this twenty- minute segment, men break off together with other men, women with women and believers ask personal questions about each other's lives and pray together. The church boasts 2200 in weekly worship attendance and 2100 attending life groups at the church and in homes. This church is doing an excellent job in using small groups to increase a sense of accountability in the lives of its members.

It is important that churches train leaders of small groups to create a safe environment where believers can share the personal truths of their lives without fear of such confidentialities being broken. Lang notes, "It is unfortunate that numerous believers have discovered many of their contacts in the Christian community are not safe, experiencing too revealing prayer requests, outright gossip, or judgmentalism."¹³ Believers will not make themselves accountable to others they cannot trust. Churches should guide leaders of small groups on what is appropriate versus inappropriate sharing within the group, and how participants are to be treated by other members.

¹³ Lang, 259.

Finding 4: Churches May Want to Consider Regular Redistribution of Small Group Participants and Leaders

This writer was surprised to learn from two interviewed churches that these churches, at least yearly, redistribute the participants and leaders of their Sunday Schools. One of the churches, in a small county-seat town with nearly 1400 enrolled in Sunday School, yearly looks at the number of participants in each class and redistributes the classes for optimal size and groupings of ages and stages of life. Built within this strategy is a plan for teachers to mentor at least one person in the class, allowing that person to teach once per month. The goal is to turn this person into a teacher of a new group. The result of all this is that a class that used to consist of forty-five to fifty-five year-olds might be redefined as a class servicing forty-five to fifty year-olds. Others above age fifty might be redirected to another class. Teachers may be swapped around from year to year. This approach is not without support. Ken Hemphill encourages flexibility in Sunday School organization, urging a Sunday School organization that grows with the church.¹⁴ If not redistribution, Georgia Baptist leaders are certainly taught to consider forming new groups to give believers more options and to spur new growth.¹⁵

How does this square, however, with the recovery of accountability to the local church? Surprisingly, it may square quite well. Accountability may actually be strengthened by the regular redistribution of small group participants and their leaders. First, plugging members into different groups which are all committed to the same mission reinforces a believer's accountability to the overall mission of the church. When believers remain in the same group for years on end, the group often becomes comfortable and stagnate. Loyalty and accountability to

¹⁴ Hemphill, 74.

¹⁵ Bill Gambrell, *Key Strategies for Healthy Sunday Schools*, 110-111.

the group may be high, but the group may begin to operate in a vacuum, forgetting that it is a part of a whole. Members may begin to turn inward, ministering to and keeping one another comfortable, but ceasing to draw in and disciple others and further participate in the greater mission of the church. Walton warns that this is how small groups can become unhealthy over time: believers can begin to focus on personal needs and preferences, with the support of a few close and familiar friends.¹⁶ Thus, individualism comes back into play and the kind of accountability that combats it is weakened.

When believers and their leaders are, at least periodically, placed into new groups, they are shaken out of their comfort zones, and are reacquainted with their accountability to the larger goals and purposes of the church, rather than those of a smaller group. They are also less likely to become territorial over certain rooms, curriculums, or other resources. Further, they are exposed to new teachings styles, a greater number of believers in the church, and are, thus, given greater opportunities to grow spiritually. By submitting to this process, they exercise a sense of accountability to the church and its expectations. The only drawback may be that believers can be disrupted in a developing relationship of accountability if he or she is suddenly moved to another class or group. All in all, this writer believes regular redistribution aids in producing greater accountability in the local church. The table below illustrates the pros and cons of redistribution.

¹⁶ Walton, 106.

Table 3.3. Pros and Cons of Redistribution of Participants and Leaders of Small Groups

Pros of Redistribution	Cons of Redistribution
Loyalty to the Church and its mission is emphasized rather than loyalty to a certain group	Accountable relationships may not have adequate time to deepen
Members meet and enter into accountable relationships with a greater number of members	A member's progress under an effective teacher/mentor may be suddenly disrupted
Members are less likely to become comfortable and complacent	
Members are less likely to become territorial, taking ownership over space and resources.	
There is greater opportunity for members to graduate to leadership	
Members are regularly exposed to new teaching styles and relationship dynamics fostering new spiritual growth	

Finding 5: The Word of God Must Be Central in Small Groups for the Building of Accountability

The immense importance of the Word of God in Christian discipleship should be no surprise. After all, 2 Timothy 3:16 teaches that Scripture is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”¹⁷ It is for this reason that believers in the early church “devoted themselves to the apostles teaching.”¹⁸ In writing on the missional church movement, Christopher Beard calls obedience to the Bible central to spiritual formation. He goes on to say that obedience to the Bible is linked tightly to Christian community.¹⁹ In essence, since community strikes at the core of Christian accountability, Scriptural teaching is

¹⁷ *English Standard Version.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Christopher Beard, “Missional Discipleship: Discerning Spiritual-Formation Practices and Goals Within the Missional Movement,” *Missiology: An International Review* 2015, Vol. 43 (2): 175-194.

fundamental to developing accountability. Not only will the faithful teaching of Scripture educate the believer on his accountability to other believers, but it will, in its general sense, bring the believer to greater spiritual maturity, enabling him to be more accountable to others. Since small groups generally meet regularly and are often a vital part of the believer's weekly and monthly faith experience, small group leaders should infuse faithful Bible teaching as part of the regular format for group meeting.

This writer's research found that every one of the interviewed churches placed primacy on the teaching of God's Word. There were a number of strong indicators of this. Two of the fifteen churches had implemented *The Gospel Project* as teaching material in some or all of their small groups.²⁰ This in-depth Bible study material is often used by Southern Baptist Churches when they want to dig deeper in the study of God's Word. It is a common complaint among pastors in this writer's association of Georgia Baptist Churches that Southern Baptist Sunday School material (*Lifeway*) material is somewhat shallow. *The Gospel Project* (also produced by *Lifeway*) is a great way for churches to lead small group participants into deeper, meatier Bible study. Three churches indicated tight controls over Bible study, including the use of church-approved Bible translations and the required approval of all teaching material by church leadership. Another church supplies each small group, on and off campus, with a plan for working through Bible texts using a series of steps. This ensures a focused Bible study and guards against groups becoming primarily social gatherings. The consistent commitment to the Word of God by the interviewed churches underscores its importance in spiritual formation, and, by extension, accountability.

²⁰ As an example of this ongoing published material, see, Ed Stetzer and Trevin Wax, eds., *The Gospel Project: Prophets and Kings*, Vol. 5, Fall 2016 (Nashville: Lifeway).

Part 3: Findings on Mentorships

There are numerous mentoring relationships found in the Scriptures, including that of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, and Paul and Timothy. In the latter, Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2, “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” Paul is essentially instructing Timothy to mentor others as he has been mentored. The potential for good mentoring relationships to bolster a sense of accountability in the life of a believer is great. Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, in their work *The Deliberate Church*, encourage mentorships for the purpose of leading believers to greater “conversation, encouragement, correction, accountability, and prayer.”²¹ However, this writer’s research revealed that mentoring is an underutilized method in most Georgia Baptist churches.

Finding 1: Mentorships are an Underutilized Method for Building Accountability in Most Georgia Baptist Churches

As stated above, this writer did not expect to find many of the interviewed churches utilizing mentorships and his expectation was accurate. Of the fifteen churches, five were not implementing any kind of mentoring relationships, and another six mentioned various forms of informal mentorships but had no real intentional strategy. Three of the churches used specific materials for the content of their mentorship meetings but none of these had a definite strategy for connecting all new believers to a mentorship. The one church that had an intentional strategy for connecting new members to mentorships utilizes its elders as mentors. In leadership meetings, new members are discussed by name and assigned to certain elders. The elders are asked to strive to meet once per week with the mentee. This church did not reveal any specific

²¹ Dever and Alexander, 37.

structure or material for the content of mentorship meetings. The following table presents the information gleaned from interviewed churches relative to mentorships. As a matter of explanation, the writer used the information gleaned from the interviews to determine objectively whether churches had a “formal” mentorship process. To determine this, the writer simply looked for answers in columns two through five to be other than “no.” When so, the church was marked “formal” in column one. Column two indicates whether the church had a formal process for assigning any members to mentorships. This could mean youth, collegiate adults, ladies, some other group in the church, or the church membership in general. Column three indicates whether churches had a formal process for assigning new members to a mentorship. Column four indicates whether the church had a specific curriculum or meeting plan. Column five indicates a set duration for the mentorship.

Table 3.4. Specifics on Mentorships Among Interviewed Churches

Church	1.Formal/Informal/ None	2.Formal Method for Assignment	3.Formal Assignment of New Members	4.Specific Curriculum or Meeting Plan	5.Set time length for mentorship
1	Formal	No	No	<i>Operation Timothy</i>	6 months to 1 year
2	None	No	No	No	No
3	Informal	No	No	No	No
4	Informal	No	No	No	No
5	None	No	No	No	No
6	Formal	Yes	No	<i>30 Discipleship Exercises</i>	Unending
7	None	No	No	No	No
8	Formal	Yes	Yes	No	No
9	Informal	No	No	No	No
10	Formal	Yes	No	<i>Disciple 6</i>	1 year
11	Informal	No	No	No	No
12	Informal	No	No	No	No
13	Informal	No	No	No	No
14	None	No	No	No	No
15	None	No	No	No	NO

Interview conversations with church leaders revealed that while many churches see mentorship as a positive concept, they do not have a developed process for involving new believers in a mentorship with more seasoned believers. The consistent weakness of Georgia Baptist Churches to facilitate mentorships reflects a powerful argument made by Alan Hirsch in his book *The Forgotten Ways*. Hirsch has effectively argued that Western churches have been highly influenced by Greek or Hellenistic understandings of knowledge. This kind of thinking says that if people “get the right ideas, they will simply change their behavior.”²² The Western Church operates under this mindset. Its answer is to offer a class for everything, and when there

²² Hirsch, 130.

is a weakness somewhere in the church's effectiveness, church leaders cart off to a conference to get new ideas, but then return home to an unchanged congregation. The Hellenistic idea of imparting knowledge to change behavior stands in stark contrast to the Hebraic form, in which "action-learning" is incorporated. In this model, people are involved in actions that will, in time, inform their thinking. This is where mentorships enter the picture. Since Jewish society of biblical times followed the Hebraic method, teachers often mentored students such as Jesus did with His disciples or Paul did with Timothy. Disciples were taught through personal example, direct involvement in ministry with supervision by the teacher, and one-on-one contact. Hence, mentorship. The reason so many churches fail to have a good mentorship method is that its dedication to the Hellenistic form of knowledge leads it to offer countless classes where knowledge is imparted, but few opportunities where mature believers are directly involving themselves in the lives of new believers through meetings for prayer and Bible study, and engagement in actual ministry. One of the great contributions this thesis may make to the field of discipleship is to offer churches a concrete way to take new members in and connect them to spiritually helpful mentorships in the early days of their walk with God and/or church membership.

Finding 2: Churches Need a More Exact Blueprint for Mentorship Meetings

The fact that only three interviewed churches revealed a specific material guide for mentorship meetings highlights the fact that even when mentorships are being conducted, churches may not be offering enough guidance to mentors on how to make their time with mentees effective. The writer would imagine that churches are encouraging mentors to pray with mentees and study Scripture, and there is much value in this, but churches should take it a step further by offering at least a flexible guide for mentorship meetings with Bible studies designed

to help the mentee grow spiritually. Churches should also actually train mentors to be effective. Training might involve the designing of a class for mentors, but might better consist of the mentor spending a year as a mentee. The research tool asked interviewees how mentors were selected and trained in their churches and answers varied wildly. Since so many of the churches conducted mentorships only informally, it is no surprise that most of the interviewed churches did not cite any specific mentorship training, nor material to guide mentorship meetings.

The writer tracked down the three materials that were mentioned by the churches and now offers a short evaluation on each one. First, a church cited use of *Thirty Discipleship Exercises* as a format for Bible study in its mentorships in which youth are mentored by adults.²³ This material, produced by the *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association* is a bible study guide specifically geared toward new believers who have made commitments at a crusade or evangelistic event. The material does an excellent job in presenting topics relative to new believers. Although the material states that it can be adapted and used for one-on-one discipleship, it is clearly aimed at small groups. While instructions are given on how to conduct and lead a “Discovery Group,” no instruction is given in the material on how to use it to do one-on-one discipleship. The usefulness of the material for mentorships, therefore, is relative to a church’s or a mentor’s ability to take a program designed for group study and adapt it.

Another church cited use of *Operation Timothy*. This material is a series of books created by the organization known as the *Christian Business Men’s Connection*. Based on the Great Commission and the Scriptural relationship of Paul and Timothy, the program offers a format for men in small groups or one-on-one relationships to meet, study the Scriptures together

²³ *Thirty Discipleship Exercises: The Pathway to Christian Maturity* (Minneapolis: The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1998).

and pray. In one-on-one relationships, the “Paul” instructs the “Timothy” in practical ways through quality time spent together. This writer’s assessment of *Operation Timothy* is that it is a simple and effective format for Bible study and prayer that encourages strong and accountable discipleship relationships. Such a format will be presented in the last chapter of this thesis.

One other church cited use of a specific curriculum called *Disciple6*. This is a six-year discipleship experience created by Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.²⁴ The program is designed specifically for teenagers and this is the way the interviewed church was using it. *Disciple6* encourages groups of one discipler and around three disciples. The disciples commit to being discipled for at least one year. Groups meet regularly to discuss Bible study material participants have worked through at home. Leaders are encouraged to personally invest in the lives of the disciples, meeting with them and encouraging them regularly. Like *Operation Timothy*, this curriculum appears to address the need for guidance in mentor relationships, and offers churches a great discipleship resource for teenagers.

Summarily, churches cannot simply pair people up in mentor relationships and hope for the best. They must provide guidance and good material so that there will be a productive framework for mentorship meetings. Since the number of interviewed churches turned on to good material for mentorships was small, this writer draws the conclusion that many churches could benefit from this writer’s intended presentation of an effective and simple blueprint for time between mentor and mentee.

²⁴ Richard Ross, ed., *Disciple6: A Six-Year Curriculum for Making Teenage Disciples*, Leader’s Guide (Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015).

Part 4: Findings on Connection to Selfless Service

In Ephesians 4:11-13, Paul explains that the purpose of leadership in the local church is to prepare God's people for works of service, "for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Since this is true, it is of vital importance that churches provide oversight in and accountability to believers as they serve God in tangible ways in the local church. Stephen Macchia has put forth that whether or not believers are learning to serve is an indication of the effectiveness of leadership.²⁵ This writer set out to learn how interviewed churches might be connecting believers to selfless service. As a reminder, selfless service combats that consumeristic and individualistic mindset of postmodern believers and strengthens their sense of accountability to the local church.

Finding One: The New Member Class is an Effective Way to Connect New Church Members to a Place of Selfless Service

Research for this project revealed that nine of fifteen interviewed churches had a method for connecting believers to service opportunities. Eight of the nine churches used their new member class as part of their method. From church to church, strategies within the new member classes vary slightly. However, the general approach is to take opportunity at some point during the new member class to make the believer aware of service opportunities. Believers are then assisted in discovering which service opportunities might be right for them. Several churches do this by explaining spiritual gifts and administering a spiritual gifts inventory. Church leaders

²⁵ Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: 10 Traits of a Vital Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 123.

then seek to connect that believer to specific types of service. This usually involves making leaders in various areas of service aware of potential new servants.

Finding Two: Churches should be Cautious about Requiring Service

This thesis seeks ways to build the sense of accountability individual believers have toward their local church and other believers. The writer has already suggested that strong expectations should be clearly defined to new believers and that certain expectations, such as participation in a new member class and the signing of a new member covenant, should be required. Readers would, therefore, expect this writer to suggest that selfless service should be a requirement for all church members.

Research for this project, however, gives this writer pause in suggesting that service should be mandatory. Interviews with church leaders revealed that while nine of fifteen churches strongly emphasized the importance of service and had a method for connecting new members to it, only three churches required that members commit to a specific form of service as a condition of membership. The remaining six churches strongly emphasized service, communicated with believers about opportunities and helped believers understand their spiritual gifts, but allowed believers to freely choose when and how to serve. This writer believes this is a better approach for several reasons.

First, Scripture teaches that God loves a cheerful giver. Second Corinthians 9:7, before making that statement, says, “so let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly, or of necessity.” While the context indicates financial giving, it is not a compromise of the text to apply the principle to other forms of giving, such as that of rendering service in the Body of Christ. While the expectations of taking the new member class, signing a membership covenant,

and being baptized should be required as they are pivotal to a believer's understanding of salvation and church membership, the expectation of service involves a believer's giving and should be done voluntarily. God does not want gifts given under compulsion. Furthermore, a believer will only know the joy of giving if he does it with a willing heart.

Second, churches must be careful not to place new believers in places of service before they are spiritually mature enough and equipped to do the job effectively. Dever and Alexander sound this warning, urging a careful approach to giving new believers jobs in which they will have spiritual impact on the lives of other believers.²⁶ They suggest thoroughly explaining the Gospel to new members and allowing them time to demonstrate faithful attendance and adherence to the Gospel before giving them important positions in church life. Paul warns us in I Timothy 5:22 not to lay hands on anyone too hastily. Conversely, churches should not place such a priority on doing ministry with "excellence" that they must use professionals instead of average believers.²⁷ Churches must consistently involve new believers in places of service, giving them vital opportunities to grow spiritual and become attached to the church in ways that build accountability.

Part 5: Findings on Natural Relationship Building

As noted in the last chapter, churches wishing to build more accountability between believers and the church should provide an atmosphere in which natural, accountable friendships may develop between believers. The first four questions of the last section of the interview was devoted to determining what churches may be doing to fostering the natural building of

²⁶ Dever and Alexander, 105.

²⁷ Dave Browning, *Deliberate Simplicity: How the Church Does More by Doing Less* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 55-60.

relationships. Admittedly, this is hard to quantify since church leaders may argue that any and all church activities are potential environments for natural relationship building. However, this writer explained to interviewees that he was looking for intentional efforts on the church's part to bring more mature believers together with new believers and new church members. This may involve a special event, such as a banquet, in which mature believers are paired with new believers and encouraged to get to know one another. It might also involve an ongoing ministry in which mature believers are paired with new believers over an extended period of time for the purpose of doing ministry together. An example in this writer's church is the *Upward Basketball & Cheerleading Program*, in which mature believers are enlisted as head coaches and new believers are enlisted as assisted coaches. The hope is that natural relationships will develop between the two coaches and the more mature believer will impact the heart of the new believer.

Upon interviewing the fifteen churches, this writer found that only four of the fifteen churches indicated strategies that had been designed specifically to foster natural relationships between mature believers and new believers. The following table lists what the four churches said they were doing.

Table 3.5. Natural Relationship Methods among Interviewed Churches

Church 1	Coffee shop gatherings Bonfires twice monthly
Church 2	Ladies' Teas Men's Golf Mondays Church Softball
Church 3	Facility Setup and Teardown ministry (all new members asked to participate)
Church 4	Mature believers take new believers to lunch

While many other of the fifteen churches cited numerous fellowship activities in the church's calendar, only these four indicated the creation of events specifically designed to encourage the natural building of relationships between mature and new believers. This indicates that churches should be more intentional in their efforts here. Believers will be more apt to embrace accountability in the context of good relationships they have developed with other believers who have taken the time to care for them. In the next chapter, this writer will offer helpful solutions on how the church can be strategic in its efforts to encourage the natural building of friendships.

CHAPTER 4

ESTABLISHING AN EFFECTIVE METHOD FOR THE RECOVERY OF ACCOUNTABILITY

This project began by illustrating how accountability, as a vital aspect of Christian discipleship, has been undermined in the local church. The root culprit is a Western, postmodern society which has bred individualism and consumerism in the minds of people who come into our churches. The result is a very self-centered, non-committal, and antiauthoritarian approach to Christianity. Too many of today's church members are slack in their attendance, participation, jump from one church to the next, exhibit ungodly lifestyles outside the church, and resent any correction by other believers and church authorities.

Having examined a large body of literature by some of the best experts on discipleship and accountability, this writer went on to present five methods effective churches are using to combat the postmodern mindset and restore accountability in the minds of believers. Those methods are: an effective new member class; accountability-rich small groups; mentorships, connection to selfless service; and natural relationship building. The writer proceeded to interview fifteen churches that are practicing one or more of those methods. Effort was made to discern their effectiveness and glean from their examples how these methods may be effective in building a better sense of accountability believers have toward fellow believers and toward the church and its leaders as a whole.

Interviews with the fifteen churches yielded key findings for each discipleship method that will now be used to build an effective strategy local churches may employ to combat the

Western mindset and lead the believer to greater accountability and spiritual maturity as a whole. In essence, this method will contribute toward the making of disciples. Such is the whole business of the church. Rod Dempsey in *Disciple Making Is...* told a tale all too common. He came to faith in Christ at a young age and then quickly strayed away, in part, because the church of his youth had no plan of discipleship to help him grow in spiritual maturity. He says, “the church must be in the absolute middle of God’s global plan of making disciples.”¹ This writer seeks to offer such a plan that will result in better disciples who are more accountable to other believers, and to the church and its leaders as a whole.

Step 1: Establishing Accountability through an Effective New Member Class

A proper starting point for any church is to establish an effective new member class which communicates the heart and soul of the church. The church should keep in mind the importance of this exercise since it will work to establish a proper relationship with a new believer, which will have profound spiritual impact. Establishing accountability begins here.

Action 1: Cast the Vision

As has been noted previously, one of the major hurdles with new member classes is to present the initial idea to skeptical, traditionally-minded churches who have “never done it that way before.” Indeed, this writer faced this very challenge in his own place of ministry. This is where the senior pastor should come to the forefront and cast the vision for a more intentional and better way of doing discipleship in the local church. He should explain the true purposes of the new member class: to fully explain the Gospel, the mission, aims and ideals of the church, how the church functions, and to assist the new member in making vital connections with other church entities. This is not always an easy sell. It was not for this writer. However, the bleak

¹ Earley and Dempsey, 39.

picture of fickle and declining church membership cannot be changed if churches do not start doing a better job with discipleship, and churches will not do a better job without strong, visionary pastors calling for something better. As Aubrey Malphurs and Gordon Penfold have noted, the American Evangelical church needs a healthy dose of “revisioning” leadership.² Establishing new church members in relationships of greater accountability is one area where churches need to re-envision themselves and pastors should lead the charge. This writer is convinced that in spite of some uncertainty, his church heard his passion and decided to trust him and authorize the start of the new member class.

Action 2: Decide Who will Write the Lessons

As noted in the previous chapter, churches should write their own material so as to communicate the uniqueness and true heart of the church. This writer advocates that the senior pastor be at the center of the writing of the material. First, it is highly advisable that the pastor teach the new member class. As noted above, this helps to establish a relationship between the new member and pastor from the start. Therefore, to have the pastor lead in writing the course that he will teach only makes sense. Furthermore, the pastor should be at the top of the list of those in the church qualified to write biblically-sound material which expresses the beliefs, goals, and workings of the church. There may be times when the pastor has need for and could benefit from qualified help. The church may want to appoint a team of relevant members. Some possibilities might be an older member who understands the history of the church from a personal perspective; department leaders who may help write material that explains their respective ministries; members who may be teachers by vocation and can help with the grammar

² Aubrey Malphurs and Gordon E. Penfold, *Revision: The Key to Transforming Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 26-29.

and style of the document; and the church clerk who may be able to help with obtaining necessary church documents. The church should put together a “dream team” of competent members with godly character who can assist the pastor in producing high-quality new member material uniquely designed for the particular church.³

Action 3: Gather Necessary Documents

The new member class should communicate the heart and soul of the church. Therefore, the class writer(s) should consult documents relative to the beliefs, mission, and function of the church. The writer offers a small table listing some documents churches should consider retrieving.

Table 4.1: New Member Class Documents

1. Church Covenant
2. Constitution & Bylaws
3. Mission Statement
4. Church Directory/Names and Contact Info on Leaders
5. Department and Ministry Brochures
6. List of Volunteer positions and Job Descriptions

Action 4: Create the Material

Since the class will be designed for new believers and church members, care should be taken to write material that is simple, easy-to-understand, and thorough in giving the believer truth necessary to take vital first steps in establishing a proper accountable relationship with the

³ Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning: A New Model for Church and Ministry Leaders*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 221-223.

church. First, a lesson should be written which thoroughly explains the Gospel and how one comes to faith in Christ. For this writer's church, he wrote the first lesson and titled it "What It Means to be a Christian." The lesson is broken down into 4 points. In point 1, "our problem" is defined. Original sin is described and how it led to separation from God. Numerous scriptures are infused throughout the point.⁴

In point 2, "the solution" is given. Details are laid out concerning the life, ministry, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. The summary scripture of I Corinthians 15:3-4 is printed out in the lesson: "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures."

In point 3, treatment is given to what the believer's response should be to Christ's work of salvation. A three-step response is taught to the believer: believing the Gospel;⁵ repenting of sins; and following Christ. This is where the church has a tremendous opportunity to begin combatting the postmodern mindset and establishing a sense of accountability in the heart of the believer. The ideas of commitment and following are expounded upon, and Luke 9:23 is quoted, which goes as far as to say that the would-be disciple of Jesus must be willing to deny himself. These truths begin to lay the groundwork for divorcing the believer from the individualistic and consumeristic mindset that so characterizes the postmodern age.

⁴ Eph 2:1; Gen 3:17-19; Rom 5:12, 18; Rom 3:23; 6:23.

⁵ Special care is given to explain that belief is more than intellectual assent. The statement is given, "But the kind of the faith spoken of here is a trust of the heart which results in a commitment of one's life in Christ." This is just the kind of teaching that results in greater accountability.

In the final point of this lesson, “early steps of obedience” are suggested to the new member. It is here that baptism is explained, with scriptural support, and the believer is encouraged to talk further with the pastor about following through. Devotion to Bible reading, prayer, and church participation are all also briefly discussed. While these spiritual disciplines are vital to the believer’s life, they are only given brief treatment here. This writer’s church has opted to create a second class to come behind the new member class. This class is much longer and gives much more detailed teaching on topics that are introduced in the new member class. Salvation and the church are discussed in this second class, but lessons are added which deal with spiritual disciplines and theological subjects. More will be said about this second class below.

The new member class should also feature a lesson specifically designed to draw the new member into a healthy relationship with his local church. This writer’s church entitles this lesson simply, “What it Means to be a Member of Oak Hill Baptist Church.” The lesson begins with a discussion on the universal church, the Body of Christ, and how every believer is a member of that body. The lesson goes on to teach how the universal Body finds its expression in local bodies of believers, namely local churches. Several key Scriptures are a part of this discussion, including I Cor 12:13; Matt 16:18-19; and Acts 2:42.

The second section of this lesson focuses specifically on this writer’s local church, including its history, affiliations, mission, and government. Teaching the section on government gives the church an opportunity to be very clear with the believer on how decisions are made in the local church and to stress that all members are accountable to the church government. This is followed by a section in which expectations are clearly discussed. The section is entitled “What you can expect from Oak Hill and what we expect from you.” As has been shown in previous

chapters, it is of utmost importance that churches be clear on what they expect from believers. This is the church's opportunity to spell out what true biblical membership is all about, making it clear that these expectations will be upheld if membership is to remain valid. To see this lesson in its entirety, please refer to Appendices A and B.

Finally, special care should be given to name the class. The name should be simple and inviting, and should clearly express what the class is all about. This writer's church has opted to call the new member class the "First Things First" class as it deals with "first things" new believers and church members should understand and consider. As noted earlier, this writer's favorite title is being used by a neighbor church in his community. It is called the "Heart and Soul" class.

Action 5: Determine when the Class should be Offered and for How Long

This writer advocates for offering the new member class on Sunday mornings during the Sunday School hour. For one thing, this helps new members establish the habit of coming at this time, which will make it easier later to get involved in a Sunday School class. As Chuck Lawless notes, there are several other reasons to consider Sunday morning, including the fact that it is a day people are already coming and child care is available at the church on that day.⁶ However, churches should consider their own unique situation and determine a time that is best.

As to the number of sessions, this writer firmly believes that a required new member class should be short enough to be manageable for new members. Churches should remember that new believers are not instant spiritual champions. They have often not developed good

⁶ Lawless, 34.

spiritual habits as of yet and may find it very difficult to be required to come to a class that lasts many weeks. This writer's church began their new member class with five sessions but found that a number of new members had to miss one or more sessions and were often having to make them up in subsequent class offerings. Consequently, their membership status was in question for long periods of time. When the class was reformatted to just three sessions, new believers had a more manageable goal. This writer's research revealed that of the thirteen churches offering new member classes, all but two limited their classes to four sessions or less. Several church leaders relayed to this writer that their classes had originated as longer classes but had been trimmed down for the reasons mentioned above. In this writer's church the new member class consists of two major lessons as outlined above, taught over three sessions. Free discussion is encouraged and when time runs out, the teacher finds a good stopping point and picks up there in the next session.

Action 6: Promote the Class to New Members

As new members come into the church, it is important to positively and enthusiastically communicate the requirement to participate in the class and why. Gary McIntosh has noted, "Since studies have shown that people who attend an orientation or new members class are more committed, give more financially, and generally participate more fully in the church's activities, churches need to do a better job of communicating the offering of such a class and should expect or even require members to attend it."⁷ Churches should consider creating a simple and attractive informational card to hand to each new member. New members should be called and reminded of the upcoming class as time approaches. Healthy follow-up should also be exercised by the

⁷ Gary L. McIntosh, *Growing God's Church: How People Are Actually Coming to Faith Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 137.

class leader in the form of phone calls, texts, visits, or social media, especially if the new member is failing to attend. This is yet another way to establish accountability from the start. Finally, the church should open up the class to include any members who want to attend. This is both good for the seasoned member and good for the new member. A new member's class can strengthen a seasoned member's understanding of Christian and church life, and their presence in the class will help the new believer get to know more people.

Action 7: Use the Class to Make Vital Connections to Other Accountability-building Opportunities

It has been shown previously how important the new member class can be not only for establishing accountability but for continuing it and building it by connecting the believer to other accountability-rich avenues in the church. First, the new member should be connected to Sunday School and/or other vital small groups. This can be done in several ways. A simple passionate appeal in the new member class is a good place to start. The class leader should explain why small groups are important for building true Christian community. One of this writer's interviewed church leaders give such an appeal by saying, "Sunday School is everything in this church. If you really want to get to know people and become involved in the life of the church, you should think seriously about joining a Sunday School class." With the new member's consent, he/she is enrolled in a class and the class begins to reach out, inviting the new member in. Churches should take the time to create a succinct but thorough listing of Sunday School classes and small groups, with a brief but inviting description of each one. The new member should be assisted in making a preference and that particular class or group should be notified and supplied with the new member's contact information.

As to connection to service, a similar approach may be used. The church should make a list with brief descriptions of simple service-oriented ministries new believers can jump right

into. Opportunities for service which require more spiritual maturity or biblical knowledge should be held back until the believer has time to grow and discover his spiritual gifts. These opportunities, such as teaching, serving as a deacon, or leading children may be discussed at a later time, after the believer has had training on the discovery of his spiritual gifts, and has demonstrated faithfulness and godly behavior. This is a great topic for a second-tier class to follow the new member class, as will be discussed below.

Finally, the new member class should serve as a bridge to accountability-rich mentorships. While more will be said below about how to facilitate vital mentorships between seasoned and new believers, it suffices now to say that the new member class leader should explain to new believers opportunities for mentorships and seek the new member's permission to talk with him more about how mentorships work in the church. In some cases, the class leader should introduce the new member to mentor leaders and otherwise help him get connected to these important opportunities.

Action 8: Conclude the Class with the Signing of a Membership Covenant

In the previous chapter, a case was made for the importance of having new church members sign a membership covenant as a way of formally committing to the aims and ideals of the church. There is no more appropriate time for the signing of such a covenant than at the conclusion of the new member class, as the believer has just been explained the mission, core beliefs, and government structure of the church. By signing the covenant, the member agrees to be a healthy and productive member by honoring the covenant. Thus, the member is taking a concrete step toward becoming accountable to the church and its leaders.⁸

⁸ Heb 13:17.

Action 9: Continue New Member Training with a Second-Tier Discipleship Class

Since the new member class will be short in scope and duration, it will not be able to cover the many topics believers should grasp in their early walk with Christ. These topics include fundamental Christian doctrines, spiritual disciplines, gifts of the Holy Spirit, and many others. It is for this reason that churches should consider adding a deeper, longer-duration class. This writer's church has done this. It is not required but enthusiastically encouraged for all new members, especially new believers. It is not as imperative that this class be written in-house, and the magnitude and depth of it may make it expedient for the church to choose a well-written published work. This writer's church uses *Fundamentals of the Faith*,⁹ a thirteen-lesson course on doctrinal and practical issues relevant to new believers. It is offered twice-yearly and every new member is personally invited to sign up.

Step 2: Building Accountability through Small Groups

This thesis began with a Scriptural foundation that included the many “one another” passages in the New Testament that strike at the heart of accountability. Believers are to “through love serve one another;” “bear one another's burdens;” and “stir up one another to love and good works.”¹⁰ Neil Cole and Phil Helfer have noted that these are “admonitions that can only be carried out in relationships.”¹¹ Thus, accountability happens within the context of strong Christian relationships.

⁹ Grace Community Church, *Fundamentals of the Faith: 13 Lessons to Grow in the Grace & Knowledge of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009).

¹⁰ All three phrases taken from the ESV. Gal 5:13; 6:2; and Heb 10:24, respectively.

¹¹ Neil Cole and Phil Helfer, *Church Transfusion: Changing Your Church Organically from the Inside Out* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 19.

A first step for a church to foster these kinds of relationships is to establish a strong small group ministry. It is beyond the scope of this project to lay out a comprehensive guide to small groups. To offer instruction on the many aspects, goals, and components of effective Christian small groups is simply beyond the scope of this writer's thesis. The purpose of this project is, rather, to discuss the aspects of small group ministry related to building accountability in the life of the believer.

Consideration 1: The Need for True Christian Relationship

Accountability, and Christian discipleship as a whole, happens within the context of strong relationships between believers. Jesus' disciples did much more than simply show up to some hillsides to hear him preach. They walked with him, slept by his side, dined with him, and ministered alongside him. He invested into their lives. It began with their calling to leave their former careers and circumstances and follow this strange man with a new message (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; John 1:35-51). It continued through many days of miracles, teachings, and rejections of Jesus by the religious establishment. At one point, Jesus even washed the feet of the disciples as a display of his deep love for them and willingness to serve them (John 13:1-17). Jesus comforted the hearts of those men, challenged them to minister and live out their faith, and held them accountable when sin entered their hearts. While they struggled with fear and demoralization at his crucifixion, the disciples were emboldened at his resurrection and spent the rest of their lives spreading His good news. They had been profoundly impacted by this man with whom they had been in a powerful discipleship relationship for a three- year period.

The power of Christian relationship can be further seen in the example of the early church. Acts 2:40-47 speaks of a group of believers who were truly dedicated to one another.

They met daily with one another, worshipping and studying the Word, eating, sharing their material possessions and fellowshiping.

It is in this kind of environment that accountability thrives. It is when the church becomes a family that accountability begins to happen between believers. Cole and Helfer sound the cry that the church is not called to be a business or institution, but a family, and within the context of family Christian growth really occurs.¹²

The writer lays all this as a foundational truth upon which to build small groups. If churches really want to lead believers into more healthy attitudes of accountability toward their churches and other believers, then they must do a good job of placing them into small groups of believers who care for one another like family. The challenge for many Georgia Baptist (and Southern Baptist, for that matter) churches is that Sunday School is firmly entrenched as the accepted and predominant small group expression for the church, and Sunday School often fails to be the family-like small group new believers truly need. It has for many churches, instead, become a once a week Bible lesson attended by a dwindling number of members. Keith Murdock, in *Key Strategies for Healthy Sunday Schools* calls attention to the chronic problem in many Sunday Schools of members who are not cared for. When they go weeks without attending and do not receive a contact from anyone in their class, they draw the conclusion that no one cares.¹³ This writer adds that not only are they not cared for, but they are not being held accountable. Accountability cannot be strengthened in the local church when the only small group ministry offered is merely a class and not a family.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Murdock, 41-42.

As stated previously, this writer is not opposed to using Sunday School as the small group ministry for the church, but church leadership must take steps to strengthen the caring aspect of Sunday School. Churches must remember, as Roger Walton has taught, that among purposes of Christian community is to “enable people to become aware of their own weaknesses and fantasies, practice serving and truth-telling, confront and confess sin and rely more and more on the grace of God made known in the cross. The practices are to form a people that by its life communicates the Gospel.”¹⁴

Consideration 2: The Need for a Simple Blueprint

To answer the challenges above, churches should consider developing a simple blueprint for all small groups, Sunday School or otherwise, to follow. The blueprint should communicate clearly the purposes of small groups, a breakdown of the basic elements of an effective small group meeting, and descriptions and responsibilities of small group leaders.

As to the purposes of small groups, one of this writer’s interviewed churches supplied the writer with a copy of the blueprint for their small groups and it was fortified with a clear statement of purposes for all “life groups.” Life Groups were defined as “intentional communities that embody a way of life that is centered on Jesus.” The mission of their life groups was defined as nurturing spiritual maturity, encouraging relational accountability and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The document went on to define key responsibilities of life group leaders, which work to accomplish the above mission. Words like “shepherd,”

¹⁴ Roger L. Walton, *Disciples Together: Discipleship Formation and the Role of Small Groups* (London: SCM Press, 2014), 35.

“nurture,” and “accountability” were used. Churches should consider writing out the purposes of their small groups in a simple document which can be given to each small group leader.

As to the basic element of an effective small group meeting, churches should think about how group time can be used properly to accomplish the set purposes that have been outlined. This writer proposes that churches keep in mind these elements: worship (through music, if someone can lead/play); study of God’s Word; prayer; and plans for ministry and outreach. The table below offers a sample outline for an effective small group meeting.

Table 4.2 Sample Small Group Meeting Outline

Element	Proposed Time Allotted
Worship	5-10 minutes
Prayer Time	5-10 minutes
Teaching of the Word	30 minutes to 1 Hour
Plans for Ministry and Outreach	5-10 minutes

This format can be adapted to fit particular small groups. For instance, in small groups that meet in homes, a time of fellowship, surrounding a meal might be added. In Sunday School classes, time constraints may demand the condensing of elements or elimination of musical worship. The idea is for churches to clearly communicate to small group leaders the kind of groups and group meetings the church sees as effective.

As to descriptions and responsibilities, it is imperative that churches have effective leaders who function healthily, administering and facilitating vital care to members. When this does not happen consistently, members, particularly new Christians, run adrift and their level of accountability to the local church virtually disappears. This writer proposes that churches

utilizing Sunday School for small groups implement an organized care ministry, led by care leaders. The care ministry involves staying in regular contact with members and meeting their needs as they are discovered. This writer proposes that churches enlist one care leader for every four individuals or couples in the group.¹⁵ This way, care leaders (often busy people) can easily keep up those under their care. The Sunday School teacher should communicate regularly with care leaders to learn of needs and to hold the care leaders accountable to their responsibilities. The Pastor (and/or other church leaders such as deacons) should, in turn, communicate regularly with Sunday School teachers. The church is bound to run into situations in which the care leaders are not fulfilling their responsibilities. This is where things may get a little tough. Ken Hemphill charges that in such situations, for the sake of the church and the health of its individual members, they should be removed.¹⁶ As to the actual responsibility of care leaders, this writer proposes teaching care leaders to do a number of things. First, the care leader should contact each member of the group once each week. He should ask how they are doing, ask for any prayer needs, and remind the member of upcoming group meetings. Second, the care leader should make an in-person contact (visit, lunch date, etc.) with any new person assigned to the group. Third, the care leader should acknowledge important days in the believer's life like birthdays, anniversaries, the deaths of family members, marriages, sicknesses, graduations, surgeries, the gain or loss of a job, or a tragedy. Fourth, the care leader should communicate with the class needs the group should know about. Care should be taken here to be sensitive to divulging embarrassing personal information. Fifth, the care leader should notify the pastor of

¹⁵ Murdock, 49.

¹⁶ Hemphill, 128.

any needs which may warrant his attention. Finally, the care leader should help the believer get connected to mentoring and service opportunities.

While care leaders should lead the effort in the care of believers, they should not be seen as solely responsible for making contacts. They should welcome and encourage other class members to join them in reaching out to other members. It is for this reason that the writer built in a “Plans for ministry and outreach” element to the proposed layout for small group meeting.¹⁷ This is a time given in each meeting for the class or group to discuss plans for reaching out and ministering to people in and outside the group.

Aside from clearly communicating responsibilities to care leaders, churches should also consider offering periodic training for these leaders on how to make loving phone calls, visits, and other contacts. These trainings should also address issues of propriety, such as confidentiality, respect of privacy, and knowing when to back off. It is this writer’s firm belief that an effective small group care ministry will go a long way in continuing and strengthening the accountability that was first introduced in the new member’s class.

Step 3: Strengthening Accountability through Mentorships

In their work, *As Iron Sharpens Iron*, Howard and Bill Hendricks define a mentor as “someone who functions to some extent as a father figure (in the best sense of the term), a man who fundamentally affects and influences the development of another, usually younger man.”¹⁸ Building on this definition, Malphurs and Penfold offer their own definition of mentor as “one

¹⁷ See Table 4.2.

¹⁸ Howard G. Hendricks and William Hendricks, *As Iron Sharpen Iron: Building Character in a Mentoring Relationship* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 17-18.

who promotes the development of life and ministry skills for a protégé, primarily by imparting wisdom and skill from lessons learned from the mentor's own life and ministry experience.¹⁹ Mentor relationships are numerous in the Scriptures. To name just one example, and a powerful one at that, Paul mentored Titus, who became one of the most impressive followers of Christ in the Bible. Paul refers to Titus in Titus 1:4 as his "true son in our common faith." Paul may have used this phrase not only to express affection for Titus, but also to indicate that he had led him to Christ.²⁰ While scriptural references to Titus are not prolific, the evidence that is presented of him in Scripture paints a picture of one of Paul's most loyal and devoted companions. Paul instilled into him a wealth of knowledge, which led to Titus becoming so spiritually mature that Paul was not afraid to trust him with the most difficult of ministry tasks. For instance, Titus was placed in a direct role of ministering to the difficult church in Corinth.²¹ This powerful relationship illustrates the immense value in mentoring.

If, as stated above, accountability is birthed in the context of Christian relationship, then mentoring picks up where the small group leaves off. Mentoring provides for a more focused approach to mature believers impacting the lives of new believers. It is for this reason that establishing a good mentoring ministry is this writer's next step for churches wishing to increase accountability in the hearts of new church members. In this writer's proposed method, there are two aspects to a good mentor ministry that may be established by local churches.

¹⁹ Malphurs and Penfold, 189.

²⁰ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, Jr., *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 34, 1,2 *Timothy Titus* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 272.

²¹ 2 Cor 7:6-7; 2 Cor 8:6-24.

Action 1: Raise Up a Team of “Encouragers”

As a first step in moving new believers toward mentorships, this writer proposes that a team of “encouragers” be developed. The writer chose the term “encourager” because the main purpose of this team is to come alongside and encourage new believers in the early days of their walk with Christ. Each new believer will be assigned an encourager who will take simple but impacting actions that will nudge the believer toward a deeper relationship with the church and toward spiritual maturity as a whole. Encouragers, for the first year of the new believer’s life, will assist new believers in a number of ways, expressed in the table below:

Table 4.3. Actions of the Encourager

1. Pray for the believer daily
2. Contact the believer once each week
3. Greet the believer at church/ offer to sit with the believer
4. Introduce the believer to others in the church
5. Assist the believer in finding locations on the campus
6. Offer assistance in connecting the believer to small groups, places of service, and mentorships
7. Invite the believer to events and opportunities in church life relevant to his spiritual growth. Be a resource person in gathering information/ be willing to attend events with the believer
8. Assist the believer in getting in a “D-Group” ²²
9. Be available to the believer for prayer, Bible study, and accountability

Believers should not have a say-so in whether or not they will have an encourager, but they will certainly have a say-so in how much ministry the encourager will be allowed to perform in their lives. If nothing else, encouragers can commit to pray for the believer. The believer does not even have to do they are doing this. Encouragers can also, at a minimum make it a point to greet the believer each time at church. As to all other actions, the encourager should gently offer

²² Gallaty, 33-49. This will be discussed in the next section.

assistance and minister to the level that believers are comfortable and receptive. Lanker's warning that relationships cannot be forced through an overly-structured program come back to mind here.²³ Still yet, if handled in the right way, an encouragers ministry may lead to very helpful relationships between mature and new believers.

This writer advocates a simple and direct approach to linking a new believer with an encourager. The pastor, or some spiritually mature, appointed leader of the Encouragers Ministry will, early on, select an appropriate encourager for the new believer. The church should work to have a number of encouragers trained, on hand, and ready for service. They should include males and females, young and old, and should be otherwise as diverse as possible, so that good matches can be made. Personalities and needs should be considered, and matches should be made between believers of the same gender. The pastor may wish to wait until after the new member class to make the match. This way, he will, at least in a small way, have gotten to know the new member a little better. Upon the encourager committing his willingness to serve, the pastor should then introduce the two. He may say something like this: "George, I want to introduce you to Bill. He is a faithful and godly man. I have asked Bill if he would be willing to come alongside and encourage you as you begin your journey here with us. He is going to pray for you daily, help you find your way around here, check on you from time to time to see how you are doing, and help you get connected in our church here. Is that okay with you?" This is a simple and non-threatening way to bring an encourager into a new believer's life.

Many would point out that an Encouragers Ministry like this does not go far enough in truly mentoring believers. Mentoring takes more than praying for a believer, sitting with him in

²³ Lanker, 267.

church and showing him around the building. Such is true. However, this is a good place to start in introducing the believer to the concept of other believers entering his life. Andy Stanley once said, “But without input, you will never be as good as you could be. We all do better when somebody is watching and evaluation.”²⁴ There is a great potential here for relationships which are casual and shallow at first, to deepen later as the encourager shows love and concern, is willing to listen, prays diligently, and offers helpful guidance.

For this reason, encouragers should be carefully chosen and trained. This writer now offers a simple table detailing necessary qualities for an encourager.

Table 4.4. Qualifications for an Encourager

Qualification	Scripture Reference
1. Spiritually Mature	I Tim. 3: 6
2. Has demonstrated faithfulness and consistency	Rom. 16:3-7
3. Has a servant heart and truly cares about people	John 13:1-17
4. Has been mentored by an encourager (if and when possible)	2 Tim. 2:2
5. Currently serving the church (preferably in an area of service in which the new believer may be involved)	Acts 17:10

Action 2: Begin Forming D-Groups

This writer was first introduced to D-Groups in an interview with a staff minister in a large urban church. He took the idea from Robby Gallaty’s book *Growing Up*. In the book, Gallaty tells the story of coming to true faith in Christ and growing in that faith after a long and troubled past. What really made the difference for him was the fact that several men over a

²⁴ Andy Stanley, *The Next Generation Leader* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 104.

period of years chose to mentor him. Indeed, he had prayed for a mentor. Among those who chose to meet with him regularly, pray with him and hold him accountable were David Platt and Mark Dever.²⁵ He goes on to tout the D-Group as the best approach to mentoring. The church leader this writer interviewed heartily agrees with Gallaty, noting that after a lot of trial and error in his church (mostly error) the D-Group had emerged as an effective way to do mentoring and discipleship.

To describe a D-Group, this writer will begin by simply defining the “D.” The “D” stands for “discipleship.” Thus, a D-Group is a small group designed to develop disciples. As opposed to other small groups like Sunday School classes and home groups, D-Groups are closed groups, gender-specific, and intentionally kept small. The ideal D-Group is three to five people. Members meet together weekly and discuss assigned Scripture readings. Accountability is a big concept in the D-Group. At each meeting, a time is given for participants to discuss the personal issues of their lives, confess sins to one another and pray for one another. In *Growing Up*, Gallaty describes the essentials for accountability: Confidentiality, Confrontation, Confession, and Compassion.²⁶ Leaders wishing to begin D-Groups in their churches would do well to read Gallaty’s book and use it as a teaching guide for the training of D-Group leaders. As a great companion to that material, this writer recommends Peter Scazzero’s *The Emotionally Healthy Church*. In that book, there is prime teaching on emotional issues within Christian relationships, that, when heeded, would work toward keeping D-Groups healthy. This writer is particularly struck by Scazzero’s material on “incarnational loving,” in which believers are given great

²⁵ Gallaty, 6-7.

²⁶ Ibid., 41-45.

wisdom on how to enter another believer's world, truly hear him out in conversations, and immerse oneself in his life in spiritually positive ways.²⁷

Summarily, healthy D-Groups will take accountability between believers to the next level. D-Groups meet for twelve to eighteen months, the goal being that after this period, members of the group will branch off and begin their own D-Groups. D-groups may be promoted in the new member class, through small groups, and by encouragers. Indeed, encouragers should seek to invite new members into D-Groups in which they are participating. A healthy church, seeking to recover accountability as a vital aspect of discipleship can fulfill the unanswered need in many churches for vital Christian mentorships. This can be effectively done through the use of encouragers and through the formation of D-Groups.

Step 4: Connect Believers to Selfless Service

It has been shown in the two previous chapters that churches can greatly increase the sense of accountability believers have toward their local church by connecting those believers to opportunities for selfless service in the Body of Christ. Selfless service reacquaints the believer with his responsibility to the higher purposes of God, the welfare of others, and obedience to other authorities including that of the church. Selfless service also galvanizes the believer's commitment to Christ and His Church by opening the believer up to challenges in ministry work which require trust in God, firm commitment, and help from others. Considering these truths, it is no wonder that connecting believers to opportunities to serve selflessly in the church is a great friend to the effort to build accountability. Indeed, serving is a great way for believers to grow in

²⁷ Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010)180-200.

their faith. Bill Donahue writes, “Too many of us believe that the only time we experience spiritual growth is during ‘spiritual activities’ like praying, worshipping at a church service, or reading the Bible. While these will help to catalyze your growth, they are insufficient by themselves to produce spiritual maturity. Without service, your growth will be stunted.”²⁸

While nine of the fifteen interviewed churches sought to acquaint new members with opportunities for service, usually through their new member classes, this writer did not find their methods, for the most part, to be very thorough. This writer seeks to present a more exact process for connecting new members to places of service.

Action 1: Create Early Service Opportunities for New Members

Many churches complain that more people do not get involved in ministry, but churches often leave little room for new members to get involved and begin serving. Nominating committees in traditional churches fill the same positions with the same tired people year after year, and those tired people have a tendency to be “territorial.” They do jobs in certain ways with comfortable and familiar helpers, and feel threatened when new members come in. In this writer’s own church, a new believer joined the church with a particular set of skills and wanted to serve. This pastor knew just the spot for him and talked with the leader of that department, who readily agreed to use him. After a few months of service, the new member stepped down, lamenting to the pastor, “I feel unwanted in that department. The leader has a certain way of doing things and would much rather do them himself. Most Sundays, he tells me flat out that he

²⁸ Bill Donahue, *The Irresistible Community: An Invitation to Life Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015), 133.

does not need me that day.” While the leader of that department took great pride in his work, he had no room to welcome a new member who needed to find a place of service.

Churches must make room for new members to serve. Church leaders, especially the Pastor, must communicate the importance of this. A climate must be created in which established members expect that new members will be welcomed into their areas of service. Established members should be trained on how to bring a new member in and, over time, teach that member how to do the job. It is a great day when a job can, with the blessing of church leadership, be completely handed over to a new member. A great model to follow is that of Jesus himself. The Gospels tell us how he trained his own disciples. The method is expressed in the table below.

Table 4.5. Jesus’ Method for Training Disciples for Service

I do, you watch	Matthew 5-7
I do, you assist	John 6:1-13
You do, I assist	Mark 9
You do, I watch	Luke 10:1-17
You do (and I am always here to help)	Matthew 28:18-20

This method can be vividly seen in this writer’s church with the *Upward Basketball & Cheerleading* Program. Several years ago, the league directors were a husband and wife team, two very long-time, dedicated church workers. They noticed that another couple, new members in the church, particularly enjoyed the program and coached each year. The directors invited them to step into leadership. In the first year of that process, the old directors did most of the

work, while the new members watched and assisted where they could. The following year, the roles reversed. The new members did most of the work, while the old directors assisted and watched. This year, the new members are the new league directors and are doing a wonderful job. They have implemented some helpful changes and have found their true niche in serving the church. Their involvement with this important work keeps them firmly involved with the church and fellow believers. Hence, accountability.

Churches should create an atmosphere where this kind of thing can and does happen often. Indeed the church should consider first making a list of opportunities for service that believers might move into quickly, in the early days of their involvement with the church. This may include ushering, parking duty, assisting in the nursery (with background check), kitchen preparation and cleanup, greeting and welcoming, grounds work, logistics, singing in the choir, cooking food for small groups, or singing in the choir, just to name a few. This list should contain short descriptions of each opportunity, pertinent contact information for leaders of those opportunities, and should be accompanied with a simple sign-up form which can be handed over to leaders. The best time to present this to the new member is during the new member class. The hope is that new members can get involved in a simple, yet meaningful way to serve very quickly in his relationship with the church.

Action 2: Offer Deeper Training for Service

One of the most fulfilling discoveries any new believer will make is to find what he is really gifted by God to do in the local body of believers. This comes by developing an understanding of his God-given personality, natural abilities, and spiritual gifts. Churches should come alongside and assist the believer by offering, in the first or second year of the

believer's walk with Christ, helpful and specialized training. An interviewed church of several hundred members had done an excellent job in creating a course for their members called "Employment." The course includes a scriptural foundation for serving, spiritual gifts assessments, personality and ability profiles, and a very helpful and detailed manual on ministry opportunities in that local church. The course concludes with a commitment card on which believers can indicate where they feel led to serve in the church. Churches should also consult sound published sources for more expert instruction. A prime example is Mels Carbonell's *How to Solve the People Puzzle*.²⁹

Any information gathered from new members should be forwarded on to appropriate leaders who may call them into service. Should, as in the case of this writer's church, a nominating committee for lay volunteers, names and commitment cards of new members should be forwarded to the committee. In this writer's church, the nominating committee, at the request of the pastor, made a list of all new members and prayerfully sought a place of service for each one.

Step 5: Provide and Atmosphere for the Development of Natural Relationships

It has already been noted that accountability thrives in the context of good Christian relationships. In the previous steps in this writer's method for recovering accountability, numerous suggestions have been made on how to draw believers into accountable relationships. Small groups, Encouragers Ministry, D-Groups, and Service opportunities all have great potential to foster positive relationships between believers where accountability can be

²⁹ Mels Carbonell, *How to Solve the People Puzzle: Understanding Personality Patterns*, (Blue Ridge, CA: Uniquely You Services, 2008).

strengthened. However, churches should understand that relationships cannot be forced. As surely as there are successes in the above-mentioned avenues for the development of relationships, there are also failures. Personalities sometimes clash. New believers do not always open up their lives to others, despite the church's best efforts. Seasoned believers sometimes push too hard and offend or fail to show the new believer enough love to make a connection.

It is this acknowledgement, in part, that leads this writer to include this section. Sometimes the best relationships in the church do not develop in the context of a program or plan, but naturally. For whatever reason, two believers simply hit it off and one has a profound impact over the life of the other. While churches cannot script this, predict it, or program it, they can work to establish an atmosphere where it can easily happen. In other words, churches can be intentional about nurturing development of natural relationships. This was a real weak area for churches interviewed by this writer. As indicated in the previous chapter, only four of fifteen churches were strategic in their efforts to foster natural relationship-building. This writer will now offer helpful suggestions on how churches can be more intentional in this area.

Action 1: Make Fellowship a Priority

The word “fellowship” refers to Acts 2:42, in which believers are said to have “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” The word “fellowship,” or *koinonia* in the Greek, refers to sharing together a life in God.³⁰ The early church, as pictured in the book of Acts was a community of believers who met together in

³⁰ Joseph A. Kornonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, eds., *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 557.

homes, ate together, worshipped together, and prayed together. Quite simply, the early church was a community in which believers spent time together in meaningful ways. Simply being together with like-minded fellow believers was meaningful. It is this writer's belief that early believers not only prayed and studied the Word, but they laughed and encouraged one another. They enjoyed each other's company. It is in this environment that relationships blossom naturally. Getting believers together for meaningful and enjoyable interaction should be a priority for churches. There does not always even have to be a Bible lesson or time of musical worship. This writer's church is committed to the teaching and preaching of the Word, worship, and evangelistic ministry. However, several times a year, the church gathers the whole body together for fun, loud events full of food and laughing. The annual Fall Festival, with its chili cook-off, rides, and spooky hay-rides is one such example. The writer has seen this huge event spark conversations between believers who previously did not know one another, and "break the ice" for new families seeking to get to know others. As believers plan it, prepare for it, and participate in it, they discover one another. Friendships develop.

Churches should work hard to make fellowship a priority. Believers should work together, eat together, pray together, have fun together, and evangelize together. In those many opportunities of sharing life together, natural friendships are bound to spark. Churches should be strategic about getting the *whole* church together often. Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross observe,

Adult church members may wonder what use infants are to congregational worship life (and thus place them out of sight and out of mind in a nursery) and young members may become frustrated with the seeming inflexibility of older people and desire to worship

away from these members of their body; however, just as it would hurt the physical body to detach limbs, it also damages the spiritual body when we disengage with one another.³¹

Thus, while churches cannot force relationships to happen, they can be strategic in creating an atmosphere where natural relationships are bound to develop.

Action 2: Use Service Opportunities Strategically

Churches often do things for the purpose of evangelism or for ministering to the Body. Churches often have the main purpose in mind, such as winning people to Jesus. Of course, this mission should be at the top of the church's list of priorities. However, there are often secondary reasons to conduct ministries, outreach events, and other services. When believers serve alongside one another, relationships naturally develop among them. Churches can be strategic about which believers are placed together. For instance, referring again to *Upward Basketball* in this writer's church, church leadership intentionally places mature believers as head coaches with novice believers, or even lost people, as assistant coaches. The two coaches have three months to work together weekly. In these environments, relationships develop naturally. Again, relationships cannot be forced. However, when churches are strategic in this way, they are creating an environment where something special can happen.

Action 3: Encourage Believers to Spend Time Together Outside Church

In an interesting book on the emerging church, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger describe how Christian community is being achieved in the postmodern context. Among the changes from the traditional church expression in America is the swing away from seeing church as a meeting at a certain place and time and toward seeing it as a community of believers doing life

³¹ Catterton and Ross, 115.

together.³² Some emerging churches cited in the book do not even have formal meetings at all. They, like the Pauline house church model before them, engage each other in continuous daily activity, supporting one another and doing life together.

This writer serves a traditional American church with its structures and meetings. It is not about to trade all that in for the type of emerging church experience talked about in *Emerging Churches*. Nevertheless, the Emerging Church Movement makes a valid point that the Western Church has become too identified with places and meetings. The term “church” (*ekklesia*) refers more to a called-out people than a meeting time and place.³³ While the meeting time and place is certain to continue in churches like this writer’s, leaders in such churches should encourage members to not only “come to church” but to “be the church” off-campus. Among other things, this may involve doing missions projects in the local community, taking short or long-term missions trips elsewhere, spending time together in social settings, volunteering in community events with one another, having gatherings in one another’s homes, and the list goes on. The more believers eat and sleep side by side, work together, and spend time together out there where real life happens, the more their relationships will deepen and true community, with accompanying accountability will happen.

³² Gibbs and Bolger, 99.

³³ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Western evangelical churches have a common problem. They are filled with selfish and fickle members who make and renege on their commitments, fail to live holy lives, and move from church to church. Many of them remain in spiritual infancy their entire lives. The writer has delved into the root of the problem: a postmodern culture rife with individualism and consumerism, both of which have infected the minds and hearts of would-be followers of Christ. These church members have, thus, shunned appropriate accountability to other believers and to the church as a whole. American churches, in their desperate attempt to keep these fickle believers, have acquiesced to their noncommittal nature by lowering the expectations of church membership and failing to provide accountable relationships necessary for true spiritual growth.

Through the examination of numerous sources written by respected church leaders in the fields of discipleship and accountability, the writer identified five ways churches may combat the postmodern mindset and restore accountability as a vital aspect of Christian discipleship: effective new member classes; accountability-rich small groups; healthy Christian mentorships; connection to selfless service; and natural relationship-building. The writer went on to conduct one-hour interviews on fifteen Georgia Baptist Churches that were conducting one or more of the five methods. The writer gleaned a wealth of information as church leaders of these fifteen churches poured out their hearts on how they are striving to do ministry in their local setting.

What has emerged from all this is a five-step method this writer has presented, that, when implemented, has great potential to restore and strengthen the accountability between believers and the local church and its leaders. This writer is confident this presentation will strengthen churches like his own and will result in much stronger congregations, full of better disciples.

Should this project contribute to making one true disciple for Christ somewhere, then this writer's work has been worth it all.

APPENDIX A

FIRST THINGS FIRST

LESSON 1: WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN

Introduction

We are so excited you have joined us for this class! You are taking part in our “First Things First” class because you have made the awesome decision to make Jesus the Lord of your life and you are becoming (or considering becoming) a member of Oak Hill Baptist Church. The purpose of this class is to help you understand your decision to make Jesus Lord and to acquaint you with Oak Hill Baptist Church as your new church home.

We are going to start with your decision to give your heart and life to Jesus Christ. This is what some people call “getting saved.” Jesus, in John 3 described it as being “born again.” He said to Nicodemus in verse 3 of that passage, “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

But what exactly does it mean to be born again? Nicodemus himself, a great Jewish teacher, had trouble understanding what Jesus was saying. He asked Jesus in verse 4, “How can a man be born when he is old?” He mistakenly thought Jesus was referring to somehow being physically reborn. In fact, Jesus was talking about a spiritual birth. This spiritual birth is necessary in order for us to be right with God.

Like Nicodemus, you may have had some trouble understanding the new birth. You may have walked forward in a church service with the desire for your life to change. The pastor may have prayed with you to ask Jesus into your heart. Now, you are in this class because people are saying you got saved. But what exactly did happen to you? If you have some questions and confusion, don’t worry. Many people do. We find that many church members, after they have been in the church for a long time, question what they did when they asked Jesus into their heart. They wonder if they are really saved. At Oak Hill, we have created this class to help clear up this confusion. We want you to understand clearly what it means to be saved or born again, and we want you to know without a doubt that you are saved.

I. OUR PROBLEM

We need the new birth because we have a serious problem, each and every one of us. The Bible says in Ephesians 2:1 that before Christ we are “dead in trespasses and sins.” The death described here is a spiritual death that results from our very nature. We are born with a sin nature. King David in the Bible once said, “For I was born a sinner-yes, from the moment my mother conceived me.” (NLT) Our sin nature is a

problem of the heart that has been handed down to us all the way from Adam, the first man created. He and his wife Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden by disobeying God. They believed the lies of the Serpent (Satan) and ate fruit from a tree God had forbidden them to eat of. Their wrong choice brought sin into a previously perfect world and everything drastically changed. The Earth itself changed as it fell under God's curse. In Genesis 3:17, the Lord said to Adam, "Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life...both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.... (19) In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground." The Earth became a violent place, full of death and hardship. Adam and Eve themselves changed. God had told them they would die if they ate of the fruit. Sure enough, once they disobeyed God, these previously timeless human beings began to age and die. But their death was not just physical. More importantly, it was spiritual. In their disobedience, they became sinful and that created a separation or estrangement between them and a holy God.

Adam set the pattern that all humanity would follow. The NLT Bible says, "When Adam sinned, sin entered the entire world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned...Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone." (Romans 5:12, 18)¹

So, we were all born with a sin nature, and this sin nature comes out in so many ways in our lives. We often like to fancy ourselves as good people. Maybe you have tried to live right and you have done the best you knew how. You might have even lived with a hope or belief that God will accept you just the way you are. In fairness to you, you may be a better person than your neighbor, or even some church people you know. But watch out! Just because you can find someone you think is morally worse than you (we all can), this doesn't make you right with God. The Bible says in Romans 3:23 that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We have all broken God's standards. None of us measure up to the standards of a holy and righteous God.

But this does not mean that all hope is lost! The fact that we are sinners does not mean that God does not love us or does not want to have a relationship with us. In fact, He does. But the fact that He loves us does not mean that He can just forget our sins. Sin deserves punishment and judgment. In fact, Romans 6:23 teaches us that the "wages of sin (what we earn for it) is death. Death means eternal separation from God in a real place called Hell. A righteous Judge as God is cannot allow sin to go unpunished. This creates a dilemma with seemingly no answer or resolution.

¹ Greg Laurie, ed., "How You Can Know God," in *New Believer's Bible, New Testament* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2006), A 12.

But God has provided a solution!

II. THE SOLUTION

God actually always had a plan to overcome our sin problem. That plan came to fruition when Jesus Christ came to the Earth to take the punishment of our sins for us. Jesus has existed from all eternity as God the Son. In fact, our God has three persons: Father, Son,

and Holy Spirit. We realize this may be very confusing right now, and we will study it much more deeply when you take our *Fundamentals* Class. Just know for now that our God is a much more complex being that we as humans are. We each are one person, but our one God has three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is one God in essence, but He exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God the Father's plan for our salvation from sin was that He would send His Son, Jesus, to die in our place as punishment for our sins. Jesus willingly accepted this role and offered Himself as a sacrifice. Romans 5:8 "But God demonstrated His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." To elaborate on that, Jesus Christ entered the world as a baby in the womb of a woman named Mary. He was born in a stable and laid in a feeding trough called a manger (Luke 2) and this is what we celebrate at Christmas time. He went on to live as a man, and at age 30, he began a public ministry which included teaching great spiritual truths about who He was as our Savior and performing great miracles. But the focus of his coming came about when he was arrested and executed for crimes he did not commit. The form of execution used on him was called "crucifixion," a horrible killing by hanging an individual on a wooden cross. After Jesus died a gruesome death on a Friday, he was buried in a tomb and his body lay there until Sunday. On Sunday morning, some women went to anoint His body with spices, and found angels waiting on them to declare that He had risen from the tomb. They found his tomb empty and proclaimed what they saw to His disciples. After this, Jesus appeared to over 500 witnesses before He ascended back to Heaven to be with the Father. Not only had He conquered our sins on the Cross, but He conquered death by rising again. In His resurrection, He verified to the world that He was everything He said He was: God the Son, and the Savior of the world. I Corinthians 15:3-4 says, "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures."

III. OUR RESPONSE

How do we respond to these truths? How does what Jesus did for us, apply to you personally?

- A. We must believe the Gospel- The Gospel (the good news) is the story about Jesus you have just read above. You must believe its truths. You must believe that you are a sinner in need of a savior, and you must believe that Christ truly is the Savior and that He has died for your sins. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” You are not saved because you have lived a good life or you are a decent person, or you have done some good deeds. It doesn’t work like that. You are saved when you believe the Gospel. This is what we call saving faith. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works (good stuff that you do), lest anyone should boast.” These verses make it plain that we are saved as a result of placing our faith in Jesus and what He has done for us on the Cross. But be careful here! The kind of faith described here is not just intellectual belief in Jesus. Many people believe that Jesus existed and that he died on the Cross. Even the Devil believes this! But the kind of faith spoken of here is a trust of the heart which results in a commitment of one’s life in Christ. You entrust your life to Christ. This results in an indwelling by the Holy Spirit (He comes to live in us) and that produces a new nature and a changed life.
- B. We must repent of our sins- A part of this heart commitment to Christ involves turning from the sinful ways in which we have lived before coming to faith in Christ. In Acts 2:38, Peter said “Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” To repent means to turn away from your sins. To turn TO Christ means to turn AWAY from the life we have previously lived without him. Jesus is on the spiritual opposite end of the spectrum from the sinful ways of this world. You cannot turn to Him without turning away from the sinful ways of the world. A person who professes to “get saved” but is not willing to turn away from sin is not exhibiting a true saving faith.

This does not mean, however, that you will not still struggle with various sins in your life. Getting saved does not mean we become instantly perfect. There are many sinful ways God will help us overcome and for some of them, it may take time as we learn to depend on Him and find our strength in Him to overcome temptation. Thank God he doesn’t throw us away when we sin! However, if we are truly believers, the Holy Spirit will convict our hearts each time we mess up and we will want to alter course.

- C. We must begin to follow Christ- The result of the heart commitment spoke of above is that we will become a disciple of Jesus. This means that we are making a choice to follow Jesus with our lives. He said in Luke 9:23, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.” When you become a Christian, please understand that you are doing more than praying a prayer, getting baptized and joining a church. You are choosing to

take up a life of following and serving Jesus. You are entering a new lifestyle in which Jesus is Lord of every aspect of your life. It will be an exciting life and a fulfilling life, but it will not always be an easy life. Becoming a Christian does not mean you will be comfortable or that everything will go wonderfully in your circumstances. Don't set yourself up for a let-down! You are entering a life of service to the King.

- IV. EARLY STEPS OF OBEDIENCE- As a new believer, there are several things you can and should do right away in order to get started right on your journey with Christ.
- a. Be baptized- In the Scriptures we have numerous examples of people being baptized. Jesus himself was baptized by John the Baptist (Matt. 3:13-17; John 1:13-16). After Jesus' resurrection, believers were baptized as a picture of the salvation they had received from Christ. An example of this is an Ethiopian Eunuch who was brought to the Lord by Philip. After hearing the Gospel and placing his faith in Christ, the Eunuch asked, "what hinders me from being baptized?" (8:36) Philip answered, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." (37) Baptism should always follow belief in Christ. This is the pattern we see in Scripture. In Acts 2:41, we read, "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized..." Please understand that baptism is not what saves us. We are saved when we accept by faith the Gospel and commit our lives to Christ. But baptism is a beautiful symbolic picture of salvation. The water represents our cleansing from sin and the lowering of a person into the water and back up represents the burial and resurrection of Christ, and a believer's death to the old life and resurrection to a new spiritual life. God commands believers to be baptized as a testimony of their faith. (Matt 28:19) This is one of the first ways that you witness publicly of your faith and follow Christ in obedience. Now that you are saved, we want to baptize you to the glory of God! This usually takes place in our baptistry at the church on Sunday mornings, but we can be flexible about time and place. Our pastor will discuss this with you further.
 - b. Begin to read your Bible regularly- In Psalm 119:105, we read, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Bible intake is pivotal to your growth as a new believer! Get a Bible, preferably one in a newer translation such as the New King James Version, or the New America Standard Version, and begin reading. Study Bibles are helpful because they have notes at the bottom which help to explain the verses. Begin by reading the Book of John. You will learn more about this in our *Fundamentals* class, but the key now is to get started. Don't worry if you don't understand everything. Just keep reading and God will open up your eyes to receive the truths you need right now.
 - c. Begin to pray regularly- Again, we will teach you more on this in our *Fundamentals* class, but for now just begin to talk to God from your heart. Try to include these elements in your prayers.
 - i. Adoration- Praise God for who He is

- ii. Thanksgiving- Name specific things God has done for you and thank Him for those.
 - iii. Confession- As the Holy Spirit convicts you of certain sins, confess those to God, ask His forgiveness, and commit to turn from those sins with His help
 - iv. Petition- Ask God to answer certain needs in your life, whatever they may be
 - v. Intercession- Pray for others by name, especially for their salvation.
- d. Get active in church- Fellowship and partnership with other believers is vital for your spiritual growth. You won't grow without it. Period. In the next session we are going to introduce you to our church and help you to discover how you can be a wonderful part of God's work here.

APPENDIX B

FIRST THINGS FIRST

LESSON 2: WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MEMBER OF OAK HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

Introduction

Now that we have given you a good introduction into what it means to be a Christian, we want to spend some time helping you understand what it means to be a member of our church. If you are in this class, either you have expressed a desire to unite with Oak Hill as a new member, or you are thinking about it. This is very exciting for us, as we love to have new members come into our church family! Our goal in this chapter is to help you understand more about membership at Oak Hill, and we hope this will assist you as you decide whether to go forward.

- I. AS A BELIEVER, YOU ARE PART OF THE BODY OF CHRIST. When speaking of the new birth in Christ, we often say, “I have been saved from my sins.” When Christ becomes the Lord of our lives, God does save us from our sin and the spiritual death it brings. God, however, has not only saved us *from* something, but He has also saved us *to* something. He has saved us *to* the body of believers on Earth known as the Church. I Cor. 12:13 says this: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body- whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free- and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.” Jesus Christ had promised in Matthew 16:18-19 that He would build His church on foundation of Peter’s confession that Jesus was the Son of the Living God (v. 16). The word “church” literally means “called out ones, and refers to those who, beginning at Pentecost, were baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of believers. This body of believers would, after His ascension to Heaven, continue the mission of Christ on Earth.

This body of believers is universal. It is made up of believers all over the world from all ages since Pentecost. However, the universal church finds its expression in local bodies of believers: In other words, local churches like Oak Hill Baptist. God means for Christians in all sorts of localities to come together for worship, instruction in the Word of God, spiritual support for one another, and to work together to do God’s work on Earth. We have an example of this in the Book of Acts 2, where believers, “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers....” (v. 42) Every believer should be a part of a local body of believers. God does not give us a choice in this. He said in Hebrews 10:24-25, “let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”

We are so glad that you are considering making Oak Hill Baptist your local body of believers. This is a wonderful place to find true community with other Christians, grow in your faith, and become involved in meaningful ways to serve God.

- II. AS A MEMBER OF OAK HILL BAPTIST CHURCH, YOU ARE PART OF A FAITHFUL LOCAL BODY OF BELIEVERS.
- a. Our history- Oak Hill Baptist Church was constituted in 1873 when a group of believers from Screven County began meeting together with the intention to establish a new church in this area. The church has always assembled on this campus, but the sanctuary and accompanying buildings have changed several times over the years. The present sanctuary was built in the 1960's. For generations, Oak Hill has been one of the strongest and most vibrant congregations in the area, with a reputation for strong community involvement and active mission work near and far.
 - b. Our affiliation- Oak Hill is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, a cooperation of over 40,000 Baptist Churches in the Southern United States. The SBC is not a ruling board, as each of its churches (including Oak Hill), govern their own affairs. The SBC is, however, a wonderful way for us to pool our resources with other churches and send missionaries all over the U.S. and the world to spread the Gospel. Oak Hill participates in Southern Baptist life through our local association of Baptist Churches (the Middle Baptist Association, our State Convention, and our national Convention with all its agencies and entities.
 - c. Our mission- Oak Hill's mission statement is pivotal. It defines what we are all about. All our activities and work here revolve around this mission statement. It is our desire that all our members know our mission statement frontward and backward. We do hope you come to know it by heart. **Our mission is to glorify God by reaching, equipping and ministering to people near and far.** This mission is based upon the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) and is the grounding for all we do.
 - d. Our government- At Oak Hill, we have established a form of church government that we believe is faithful to the Scriptures and affords us a healthy way of making decisions and conducting the Lord's business. We ask that all new members understand our church government and respect it, as not doing so brings confusion and strife. Oak Hill Baptist Church is...
 - i. Pastor-led: At Oak Hill, the Senior Pastor is seen as the leader of the church. He presides over all aspects of church life including the teaching/preaching of the Word, the conducting of worship services, and the establishment and carrying out of the current direction of the church in fulfilling its mission. All staff ministers and lay leaders work under the direction and supervision of the Pastor. (Ephesians 4:11-12) This, however, does afford the Pastor the right to be a dictator. He is accountable to God, the Church constitution and by-laws, and the will of the congregation in how he leads.

- ii. Deacon-served: Following the model of Acts 6, Oak Hill has appointed a number of men to be Deacons, or servants of God's people. Our deacons are not seen as a ruling board and do not preside over the Pastor as we do not see this as biblical. Instead, our deacons are servant-leaders. They lead by assisting the Pastor in caring for the felt needs of the people, presiding over operational affairs of church life, gathering necessary information and making recommendations for important church decisions.
 - iii. Committee-operated- Oak Hill conducts the bulk of its day to day ministry operations through committees and teams which have been elected by the church. These committees are approved once yearly.
 - iv. Congregationally-approved- At Oak Hill, the congregation has the final say in all matters of church life. Decisions are made at monthly business meetings by way of a democratic style of voting. Each member of Oak Hill is encouraged to attend business meetings and vote.
- III. WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM OAK HILL AND WHAT WE EXPECT FROM YOU- At Oak Hill, we take church membership very seriously. Here, church membership means much more than having a name on a book somewhere. It means being a vital part of an important work. We want all our members to know what you can expect from us and what we expect from you.
- a. What you can expect from us.
 - i. First, you can expect that we will teach you the Word of God- Paul told Timothy to "Preach the Word!" (2 Timothy 4:2) We place a priority here on the teaching and preaching of the Word of God
 - ii. Second, you can expect us help you grow in your faith-At Oak Hill, you will find many opportunities to help you grow as a believer. This class and our *Fundamentals of the Faith* Class will help you get started. Other opportunities will include Sunday School, special Bible studies, mission trips, and service opportunities.
 - iii. Third you can expect us to minister to you, meeting legitimate spiritual and other needs. You are becoming a part of a family. Please expect that we treat you like family. We will be present, supportive, and helpful when you have needs.
 - b. What we expect from you. Church membership carries with it some important responsibilities. We ask that all our church members take these responsibilities seriously.
 - i. Faithful attendance-We understand that no one can be here every single time the doors are open, but we do ask that our members faithfully and regularly attend church. We are not interested in gaining members who just want their names on our roll but never or rarely come and participate.
 - ii. Active Participation- Please read I Corinthians 12:12-31 This passage teaches that each member of the Body is important and has a function. We expect our members to function through active participation. We believe every member can do something! Even if you are physically

impaired in some way, there are important things you may can do in the work of the church. If not, then we should be actively ministering to you in your time of need and we intend to. As a part of this class, you will be given a listing of service opportunities and we ask that each member read those and prayerfully commit to begin helping out in some way. Later, when you take our *Fundamentals* class, you will learn more about finding and using your spiritual gifts.

- iii. Giving- Yes, we are going to talk about money here! We believe it is biblical that God's work be financed by the faithful giving of his people. Based on such passages as Malachi 3:8-10 (Please read now), we ask all our members to observe the principle of the tithe, which teaches that believers should give at least 10% of their earnings to God's work at their local church (the storehouse).
- iv. Contributing to Unity- At Oak Hill, we don't believe in bickering and fighting. You may come from a church where that is normal, but it is not normal here. We ask that all our members strive together for unity. There is wonderful prescription for that in Philippians 2. What are some things you believe that chapter teaches about unity in the church?

- v. Godly behavior outside the church- Please know that if you are member of our church, your behavior reflects Christ and our church. People are watching and we as believers should strive to have a godly witness before them. While we do not police our members, we do expect our members to behave according to the principles and ideals we stand for here. Behavior such as drunkenness, cohabitation, foul language, and fighting do not reflect the ideals of this church. When members engage in such activities, it places our church in the difficult position to exercise church discipline which could result in dismissal from church membership.
- vi. Participation in a Sunday School Class- In order for a believer to truly grow in his faith, it is important for that believer to begin to build relationships with other believers in a small group setting. At Oak Hill, that setting is our Sunday School. We ask that every new member find a Sunday School class. We have many good classes and we will assist you in finding one that is right for you.

- IV. HOW CAN YOU BECOME A MEMBER OF OAK HILL? If you are considering church membership, there are several ways to join. Please note which one fits your situation.
- a. By Baptism- for those who profess faith in Christ for the first time here, we bring them into church membership through believer's baptism (as discussed in Lesson 1). Baptism does not save us, but it professes our salvation to others through a beautiful pictorial symbol and seals us into membership of the local church. After coming forward in a regular worship service, the pastor will announce your decision to the church, you will attend at least the first lesson of this course, and then your baptism will be scheduled. Upon your baptism and completion of this course, your membership at Oak Hill will be established.
 - b. By Letter- This is for those who have already professed faith in Christ at another church and have been Scripturally baptized by immersion. This person may come forward in any regular worship service and announce their desire to have their membership moved to Oak Hill. The church will write their former church and make it known that they have united with our church so that church can take their name off their membership list. Upon completion of this class, their new membership at Oak Hill will be established.
 - c. By Statement of Faith- This is for those who have come to faith in Christ but have not established church membership in another church of like faith. If they have not already been Scripturally baptized by immersion, we will do that here. Upon baptism and completion of this course, their church membership will be established.

We know that this introduction to church membership may not answer all your questions! Indeed, it may create new ones. Please feel free during this class discussion to ask any questions you may have. We are truly blessed to have you here and hope you will go forward in making Oak Hill your new church home.

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6/15/2016

Jamie Archer

IRB Exemption 2532.061516: Rediscovering Accountability in Christian Discipleship:
Developing an Effective Biblical Method

Dear Jamie Archer,

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.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

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